



Contemplative Retreat for Educators

November 17-20, 2011, at the Garrison Institute, Garrison, NY

Report by Carrie Bergman

Direct experience with contemplative practices is a prerequisite for the development of a contemplative pedagogy. A thorough understanding of, and critical engagement with, contemplative methods allows educators to more fully appreciate how to best integrate traditional curricula with these integrative approaches.

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has hosted annual retreats since 2008 in order to support educators' direct engagement with contemplative practices. That these "academic retreats" provide dedicated time for personal reflection and inquiry distinguishes them from Contemplative Mind's summer sessions on contemplative curriculum development (which focus on course development and innovating pedagogical methods) and the annual ACMHE member conferences (which allow colleagues to present the results of their work). The annual retreats for educators were created out of recognition for the need to offer a gathering expressly focused on deep engagement with contemplative practices, as this provides the foundation on which subsequent work must be built. Additionally, as Contemplative Mind's summer sessions and conferences do not reserve time for extended contemplative practice, the annual retreats function as a sort of laboratory for investigation and reflection on the contemplative methods developed and discussed at the summer sessions and conferences.



The 2011 retreat was hosted from Thursday, November 17th through Sunday, November 20th at the Garrison Institute, located on the Hudson River north of New York City.

A former Capuchin monastery, Garrison is a stately red-brick complex overlooking the river. The Institute's scenic grounds afford many ways to spend time in nature, through gardens, trails, benches, and a labyrinth. Our retreat group of 23 educators from secondary schools, colleges, and universities in the US, Canada, and the UK met in the nave of the meditation hall, a grand space with ornate high ceilings and stained glass windows.

Anna Neiman Passalacqua, a yoga teacher from Northampton, MA, led yoga practice in the meditation hall. Due to popular demand, the number of yoga sessions offered per day gradually increased throughout the retreat.

Arthur Zajonc, Director of the Center and Professor of Physics at Amherst College, and Mirabai Bush, the Center's founding Director and current Associate Director, shared responsibility as the primary retreat leaders, leading participants through practices, including:

- **Mindfulness meditation:** the classic silent sitting practice where one focuses on the physical sensation of breathing and continually corrects one's wandering attention, gently bringing it back to the focal point;
- **Mindful eating:** careful and deliberate attention is paid to the eating of a single raisin, generating a surprising amount of enjoyment from such a small act, and bringing deeper awareness to subsequent mealtimes;
- **Four-part bell sound meditation:** Arthur's attentive practice which uses the sound of a meditation bell, and a memory of that sound, as the object of meditation to relax and focus the mind;
- **Eurythmy:** a movement practice led by Arthur, created by Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, consisting of a short series of gentle, repeated motions;
- **Transitioning into and out of silence: freewriting, dialog and mindful listening:** we entered a period of silence on Friday evening. To assist with the transition back to speaking the following day, participants first wrote privately about their experiences in silence and then shared stories with a dialog partner, allowing them to be listened to deeply, and to listen attentively to their partner, in turn.
- **Shakuhachi music and mindful awareness of sound:** during the period of silence, New York-based performer and Zen practitioner Aaron Shragge performed traditional and improvised pieces on the bamboo flute as a focus for our meditation;
- **Labyrinth:** participants walked mindfully in procession through Garrison's new outdoor labyrinth;
- **Walking meditation and time in nature:** participants were able to explore Garrison's park-like grounds, trails, and gardens during sessions of meditation on natural beauty and meditation on the sensations of walking;
- **Loving-Kindness:** in a powerful session at the close of the retreat, participants faced each other silently while Mirabai offered a series of phrases:

*This person is just like me, in a body, going through life.
This person was once a little child, a little vulnerable child, just like me.
This person has had happy times in her life, just like me.
This person has loved someone, just like me.
His heart has been broken, just like mine.
This person has also been sad in his life, just like me.
This person has been disappointed by life, just like me.
This person has been hurt by someone, just like me.
This person has been confused by life, just like me.
This person has done some things that he or she regrets, just like me.
This person has known physical pain and suffering, just like me.
This person wishes to be safe, and healthy, and loved, just like me.*

*I wish you strength and support in your life, so that you can do the things
that are right for you to do.
I wish that you be happy, because I know you want to be happy, just like me.
I wish that you may be free from all pain and suffering, because I know that
you are a fellow human being, just like me.*

*(And now, in whatever way feels appropriate, thank your partner for being
there for you.)*



Participants remarked that they expected the retreat to offer "time to focus and rejuvenate with others with similar interests" and to "renew and revitalize [their] meditation practice" as well as "new ways to approach contemplation in the context of learning and teaching in the classroom." We were happy to learn from the retreat evaluations that these expectations were met. Participants also emphasized the value of silence and personal sharing during the retreat.

Our 2012 Retreat for Educators will again take place at Garrison, from October 18th through the 21st; learn more at contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/retreats.html.