



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Article

How to Cite: Simmer-Brown, Judith. 2019. Contemplative Teaching and Learning: Opportunities for Asian Studies. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 26(1), pp. 5–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.291>

Published: 19 June 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *ASIANetwork Exchange*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

ASIANetwork Exchange is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

Contemplative Teaching and Learning: Opportunities for Asian Studies

Keynote Address, 2018 ASIANetwork Conference

Judith Simmer-Brown

Naropa University, US
jsb@naropa.edu

Contemplative education is a contemporary movement in higher education that builds upon the epistemological work of cognitive scientists in conversation with contemplative traditions of Asia, integrating critical subjectivity into the classroom. This article traces the development of this movement, identifying key innovators who are from the field of Asian Studies, and outlining the theoretical basis of first-person inquiry in learning. Sample findings of meditation science support the impact of these innovations, showing why contemplative pedagogy is beneficial for students. In addition, the author surveys pedagogies for introducing mindfulness, contemplation, and compassion practices into the curriculum in rudimentary and more complex ways, giving examples of best practices for the undergraduate professor. A bibliography of additional readings and sources is included, for further information.

Keywords: Contemplative education; meditation science; pedagogy; first-person inquiry; critical subjectivity; mindfulness

I speak to you as one of the proponents of the contemplative education movement in higher education that pre-dates the phenomenon of the mindfulness revolution in mainstream American culture. Contemplative education employs mindfulness in the classroom, but also adapts a variety of contemplative practices—contemplation, awareness, and compassion meditation—to the secular university setting in order to enhance learning and empower students' discovery of their own inherent wisdom. The success of these methods has increasingly been supported by meditation science, including neuroscience and social science research.

A number of American and international colleges and universities now have courses, programs, and even degrees in contemplative education. These programs include those at large research universities, like the University of Virginia's Center for Contemplative Science, or the BFA in Contemplative Jazz at the University of Michigan. Elite private universities and colleges like Emory, Rice, Vanderbilt, and Wake Forest have active programs in contemplative education. Brown University has an undergraduate major in Contemplative Studies; Simon Fraser in Canada has a graduate education program titled Contemplative Inquiry; my own Naropa University is an entire institution dedicated to contemplative education in every department and degree-granting program.¹

In these institutions of higher education, contemplative teaching and learning may surface at the initiative of individual faculty members, or they may exist in more curricular, co-curricular, or extra-curricular ways. That is, some universities have single courses in mindful learning or add-on elective activities for existing courses. For other universities, mindfulness has become an integral part of student services programs or university mental health centers, sometimes connected with suicide prevention initiatives as at Colorado State University. Contemplative learning has also become part of a full-blown academic discipline called Contemplative Studies, a collaboration between disparate academic fields, with an emphasis on science, social science, and the humanities of meditation.

¹ A more complete listing of majors and degree-granting programs can be found at the website for the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), <http://www.contemplativemind.org/resources/study>.

“Contemplative education” is a term originally coined at Naropa University in the late 1980s to refer to the adaptation of Asian and western contemplative practices to non-sectarian university classrooms to enhance learning for our students. The term was recommended to Naropa administration in 1986 by a Religious Studies professor on our accreditation team, and from that point on, Naropa University has used this moniker to describe our pioneering educational approach. At Naropa, we employ mindfulness and awareness pedagogies in every department, customized for almost every course. Faculty are asked to engage in personal contemplative development as part of criteria for promotion, and faculty development funding supports training in contemplative pedagogies and approaches. Naropa’s Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education (CACE) gives regular in-service workshops to hone faculty skills in contemplative teaching.²

In the early 1990s, the vision of contemplative education was taken up by the Nathan E. Cummings Foundation that funded fellowships for faculty adapting contemplative practice methods for the university classroom. Naropa faculty were involved from the beginning and eventually the organization, called Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, was founded by Mirabai Bush in Amherst, Massachusetts.³ That organization continues with training, annual conferences, and an online journal with a focus on higher education under the banner of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education.⁴ ACMHE is the premier academic society dedicated to fostering mindfulness and awareness pedagogies in higher education.

At Naropa University, contemplative education was deeply influenced by two primary sources. The first was our founder, Tibetan meditation master and polymath, Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose inaugural address in 1974 expressed the aspiration to “relight the pilot light” of American higher education.⁵ A traditionally

² For more information, see the Center’s website, <http://www.naropa.edu/academics/cace/index.php>.

³ After initial funding from the Nathan E. Cummings Foundation, the Center was launched at Fetzer Institute in 1995 with support from both foundations. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/history>.

⁴ Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education has produced two important books on contemplative teaching: Barbezat and Bush. 2014, and Zajonc. 2009. <http://www.contemplativemind.org>.

⁵ Chogyam Trungpa, “Opening Convocation,” Unpublished Transcript, June 1974, 2. Boulder:

trained Tibetan lama and abbot, Rinpoche had fled his homeland in 1959 at the age of 19 with a band of monastics and lay followers, barely escaping with his life.⁶ Subsequently, as a Spalding Fellow for five years at Oxford University in England in the 1960s, Rinpoche developed an appreciation and respect for western models of higher education. However, he lamented that universities were endowed with extensive libraries, laboratories, and classrooms that celebrated knowledge, but he observed that the inner-wisdom dimension of education had been lost, extinguishing what he called “the pilot light.” In his opening address, he encouraged Naropa faculty to experiment with ways to engage students with their own inner wisdom while they study western academic disciplines, and proclaimed, “Let East meet West, and the sparks will fly!”⁷

Early Naropa faculty members came from a variety of academic disciplines. As relatively new meditators in the late 1970s, we were interested in the application of our practice in our academic teaching. In my case, I had been a graduate student in Buddhist studies and Sanskrit in a doctoral program that discouraged any personal practice or discussion of meditation. Simultaneously, I was a Zen practitioner in a lineage that discouraged any study or intellectual speculation. My fellow graduate students would whisper about having received teachings from this or that Asian Buddhist lineage-holder. In Marin County out hoeing lettuce in the fields at Green Gulch Zen Center, students would sidle up to me and whisper, “Have you read the Lankavatara-sutra?” In my own personal experience, joining study AND practice of Buddhism was a powerful experience. As a young professor, I longed to bring my excitement about discoveries of the mind—not just the intellect—to my classes. As a Naropa faculty member in the late 1970s, I found myself in an environment where we were encouraged to experiment with adapting aspects of our meditation training

Naropa University Archives. This address can also be seen on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldC-Mi7oYzQ>.

⁶ His account of the escape has been published in Chogyam Trungpa's autobiography, *Born in Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000). A later account elaborates this journey: Grant MacLean, *From Lion's Jaws: Chogyam Trungpa's Epic Escape to the West* (Halifax: Mountain Press, 2016).

⁷ Reed Bye, “The Founding Vision of Naropa University: ‘Let East Meet West and the Sparks Will Fly.’” In *Recalling Chogyam Trungpa*, edited by Fabrice Midal. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 143.

to a nonsectarian, pluralistic classroom, removing the religious or “faith-based” elements, and applying the science of mind we had discovered in our mindfulness practice. Our students gravitated to Naropa because they too were interested in what they would discover in combining mind-training with academic study.

A second, more latent influence on the development of Naropa’s contemplative education approach came from an early faculty member, Chilean philosopher of science, Francisco Varela (1946–2001). In the late 1970s, he led summer programs funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation that investigated “cognitive science,” or what we mean by “knowing” in a way that honors the subjective.⁸ Francisco was a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner similarly experimenting with how his meditation experience accorded with his scientific training. Eventually he wrote about “first-person inquiry,” a kind of critical subjectivity that valorizes the wisdom born within personal experience.⁹ It is distinguished from opinion, reaction, or impulse by the development of disciplined reflexivity, the ability to focus and clarify the mind of the kind found in meditation training. Francisco’s writings on first-person inquiry eventually powerfully impacted Naropa leadership’s ability to articulate our pedagogical approach based on three modes of inquiry:

- A) Third-person inquiry refers to traditional academic methods, including studies of the discoveries of others—philosophers, scientists, historians, mathematicians, and artists—who have lived in other times and places, employing a variety of methods of inquiry, and whose work has created the foundation for ongoing inquiry and study. Third-person inquiry involves critical thinking and traditional objective research methods, and is the primary methodology employed in our higher-education institutions.

⁸ This was a precursor for the book Varela co-authored with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch entitled, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

⁹ Francisco Varela, “Present-time Consciousness,” in Francisco J. Varela and Jonathan Shear, eds., *View From Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness* (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1999), 111–140.

- B) Second-person inquiry, often called intersubjective or experiential education, involves learning through interacting or doing, such as in-field education, service learning, dialogue or group process in the performing arts, psychology, anthropology, or study-abroad environments. Colleges such as Prescott, Black Mountain, Sterling, and Warren Wilson place an experiential emphasis central in their curricula with its growth in popularity since the 1970s: many other universities have strong experiential programs in the sciences and social sciences. The Association for Experiential Education is a consortium of institutions emphasizing second-person inquiry.
- C) First-person inquiry places emphasis on the wisdom within one's own personal experience, in the form of personal, nonverbal insight cultivated through specific meditative and artistic disciplines. It is distinguished from mere opinion or reaction by its critical subjectivity, and it grows in power and illumination through training in focusing the mind and cultivating non-conceptual insight. What makes this inquiry critical is its ability to step outside of habitual patterns of thought with an emphasis on present-moment awareness and clear cognition, an experience that William James called "noetic."¹⁰ This form of inquiry has long been suspect in western academic circles, maligned for its mere subjectivity, irrationality, and non-veridicality.

At Naropa University, what we call contemplative education is a blend of all three modes of inquiry on equal footing, each benefiting from the others. Because each mode illuminates aspects missed by the other forms of inquiry, the weaving of three modes of inquiry brings the greatest dimensionality and perspective to academic learning.

What does cultivation of first-person inquiry look like? Right now, take a moment and let go of thinking about this article and the ideas it contains. Instead, sit with

¹⁰ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 293.

upright but relaxed posture, focusing your attention on your own breathing. Pay attention to breath moving into your nostrils, filling your lungs; then identify with your breathing as your lungs gently empty and the breath expands out into the room. Keep a steady but gentle focus on this rhythm of breath moving in, moving out. At the same time, let your attention include the feeling of your body weight pressing into your chair, your feet on the floor, while following the rhythm of breathing. When thoughts come up, distracting you from this present-moment experience, notice them and let them go, coming back to this very moment of embodied experience. Continue in this way for five minutes.

While this is just a taste of mind training, this exercise gives an immediate, first-person introduction to critical subjectivity. The mind settles into present-moment experience and gently returns to that experience in a direct, simple way. The attitude is that thoughts may come and may go, but attention is placed on sense perceptions, the embodied feeling of being right here. After some time of paying attention in this way, a gentle lucidity dawns that carries over to life experience and knowing. Sustained training in present-moment awareness provides a context for all other dimensions, including thought, emotion, and sense perceptions, as well as a fresh, subjective dimension that brings confidence.

The valorization of first-person inquiry led Francisco Varela to landmark innovations in cognitive science. In 1987 with entrepreneur Adam Engle, he eventually inaugurated a series of dialogues with Tibetan meditation master, His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama, on the relationship between Buddhism and the sciences.¹¹ Their shared view was that science and Buddhism were different portals through which it is possible to understand the true nature of the universe and of knowing, and that a collaboration between the two would benefit the future of our global society. This interdisciplinary conversation expanded to include many conversation partners, fostering new areas of research and inquiry that eventually gave birth to Mind and Life Institute (MLI), now over twenty years old.¹² By 2013, MLI had hosted

¹¹ These early dialogues were documented in Jeremy Hayward, *Gentle Bridges: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on the Sciences of Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

¹² See <https://www.mindandlife.org> for the rich array of international conferences, events, research

twenty-seven dialogues with the Dalai Lama, published eleven books, and envisioned an entirely new research agenda on the interface of science and Buddhism. These dialogues have evolved into a new robust international interdisciplinary field called Contemplative Studies, a collaboration among neuroscience, social science, and the arts and humanities to study the mind and knowing.¹³ The organization is based in Charlottesville, Virginia, awards millions of dollars of research funding in this new field, and sponsors a series of symposia, research conferences, and ongoing dialogues.

Crucial Role of Asian Studies

To date, leading pioneers who have developed this field of Contemplative Studies and Contemplative Education include a number of Asian Studies specialists: two Daoism scholars, Hal Roth from Brown University and Louis Komjathy from the University of San Diego; Japanese specialists Erin McCarthy of St. Lawrence University and Mark Dennis from Texas Christian University; Tom Coburn from Naropa University (now at Brown University) and Andy Fort from Texas Christian University, both of whose specialties are South Asian religions; and Tibetologists Anne Klein from Rice University, David Germano from the University of Virginia, and John Dunne from the University of Wisconsin.

It is no mere accident that Asian Studies has had an important role in the field of Contemplative Studies. Some Asian Studies scholars have provided the foundation for the development of Contemplative Studies, and have brought innovation and insight into the application of mindfulness in the classroom. They have provided leadership in several important ways. The most important leadership area is that of theoretical framework or worldview. The valorization of critical first-person inquiry has been controversial in western academia, shaped by limited veridical intellectual models of knowing. Hal Roth from Brown University argues that western academia has been dominated by Eurocentrism (he calls it ethnocentrism) that has, for historical reasons, discounted inner knowing and non-conceptual wisdom since the

publications, and activities of Mind and Life Institute.

¹³ For an overview of the field of Contemplative Studies, see Louis Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

Enlightenment. He argues that many Asian traditions have different models for the mind, drawn from mystical traditions that suggest that when “cognitive categories are stripped away ... genuine intuitive knowledge and clear cognition can develop, yielding an experience that is truly noetic.”¹⁴ While these modes are not traditionally limited to Asia, western intellectual methods have gradually eliminated those that include the personal subjective.

Roth’s observation builds on the critique leveled by B. Alan Wallace, an Asian Studies scholar and Tibetan translator whose investigations of the interface between Buddhism and science have supported a foundation for the dialogues of the Mind and Life Institute. Wallace’s book, *The Taboo of Subjectivity*, suggests that scientific materialism, a dogmatic degeneration of the original scientific impulse, has openly suppressed the study of subjective states of mind to the detriment of western intellectual history. He is concerned that science and western intellectual history have denied “the validity, and even the very existence, of their personal, inner life.”¹⁵ He labels this stance as “psychological immaturity,” and develops an argument that this stance is an intolerant belief system, a derivation from Protestant religious fervor disguised as science.

Neglecting the mind, or consciousness as Wallace calls it, has held genuine scientific discovery and related philosophic reflection hostage, limiting the development of a fully reflective knowledge in western intellectual culture. He finds an exception in the work of philosopher William James, whose writings speak of the value of mind cultivation, and the development of trained subjectivity. James writes:

...whether the attention come by grace of genius or dint of will, the longer one does attend to a topic the more mastery of it one has. And the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the

¹⁴ Hal Roth, “Contemplative Studies: Can It Flourish in the Religious Studies Classroom?” in Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 25.

¹⁵ B. Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161.

very root of judgment, character, and will. [...] An education which should improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.¹⁶

James held that the maximum time an observer can sustain attention on a fixed object is three seconds; Wallace shows how Buddhist meditation masters violate the “three-second rule” in their training, sustaining attention for much longer periods of time, “many tens of minutes,” developing stability and clarity that ensure the development of knowledge unparalleled in modern western scientific lore.¹⁷ His argument for a different kind of knowing—first-person knowing—opens possibilities for many new discoveries, conversation partners, and fields of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Of course, there is no consistent perspective in Asian Studies that centralizes the subjective, as has been shown over the development of the field: The same can be acknowledged about oversimplifications of western intellectual culture. Gone are the days when Hajime Nakamura’s original text of *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, which made sweeping generalizations concerning commonalities between diverse Asian cultures and perspectives, could be considered authoritative.¹⁸ Still, the intellectual history of western Europe and North America has been deeply influenced by the growth of scientific materialism that marginalized the inner life. Much can be learned from the contrast with the developed high cultures of Asia.

The contemporary phenomenon of contemplative higher education aims to bring these neglected subjective dimensions of human experience into western intellectual and scientific discourse. It is my hope that more Asian Studies scholars will contribute to this exciting conversation.

¹⁶ William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1890/1950), 424.

¹⁷ Wallace, 99–100.

¹⁸ Nakamura’s book was initially written in 1947, just after the war. In his subsequent edition in 1964, he seems to have anticipated the work of Edward Said (1935–2003), admitting to generalizations about both “Eastern” and “Western” peoples.

Contemplative Teaching and Learning

William James' special interest was the application of the development of the inner life in educational settings. What happens when mind training becomes foundational in the curricula of K-12 schools or universities? How does this change teaching and learning?

Contemplative education builds upon critical subjectivity, adapted from Buddhist meditation, Daoist reflection, yogic awareness, and other such contemplative disciplines, many from traditional Asian contemplative practices. When the mind is trained in sustained attention, measurable benefits for learning have been identified by science and classical meditation texts. While the majority of scientific studies of mindfulness have focused on health, productivity, and well-being, scientific research has supported the many benefits to learning that mindfulness can bring.

A summary of important scientific discoveries sheds light on the promise of mindfulness in education: University of Miami neuroscientist Amishi Jha has found that mindfulness practice increases attention span and improves memory.¹⁹ Technische Universität München researcher Britta Holzel has shown that mindfulness regulates emotions and enhances perspective-taking.²⁰ University of Toronto neuroscientist Norman Farb has found that mindfulness decreases self-centeredness.²¹ University of Wisconsin neuroscientist Richie Davidson has associated mindfulness training with prosocial behaviors like kindness. Mindful teachers in K-12 settings have increased well-being and lowered stress²² and can create more conducive learning environments in their classrooms.²³ Research on awareness and compassion pedagogies are in their

¹⁹ Amishi Jha et. al., "Examining the Protective Effects of Mindfulness Training on Working Memory Capacity and Affective Experience," *Emotion* 2010, Vol. 10, No. 1, 54–64.

²⁰ Britta Holzel et. al., "Mindfulness Practice Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Gray Matter Density," *Psychiatry Res.* 2011, Jan. 30: 191(1): 36–43.

²¹ Norman Farb et. al., "Mindfulness Meditation Training Alters Cortical Representations of Interoceptive Attention," *Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 8(1), 15–26.

²² Lisa Flook and Laura Pinger, "Lessons from Creating a Kindness Curriculum," <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/lessons-from-creating-a-kindness-curriculum>.

²³ Patricia A. Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

infancy, but in the next decade much more will be known about a fuller range of contemplative pedagogies.

How can these benefits be brought into our universities and classrooms? I'd like to suggest four levels of engagement with critical first-person inquiry in the form of mindfulness, awareness, and compassion practices.

1. Mindful Teachers

On the most basic level, contemplative learning begins with the teacher or professor. University of Virginia educational researcher, Tish Jennings, has studied mindful teachers and has found that even when there is no change in the curriculum, schedule, or pedagogies, the mindful teacher creates an educational environment more conducive to learning in the K-12 classroom.²⁴ Many schools, colleges, and universities may be averse to bringing mindfulness or contemplative pedagogy into the curriculum for a variety of reasons. We need not wait until they are convinced; we can benefit our students through our own personal mindfulness training right now. A mindful teacher is a present teacher, not absorbed only in the content of a prepared lecture, or just going through the motions. Being present means showing up for the students, seeing what is occurring right now in the present moment, listening to them, and meeting them. A classroom with a present teacher is an electric classroom, even though nothing else about it will be changed. A mindful teacher is contagious in a conventional classroom, influencing the ability of students themselves to be more present, appreciative, and resonant with what is happening in the learning environment.

We may feel inspired to teach mindfulness to our students. It is important, however, to teach what we know and only what we know. Just as we have received academic training in our disciplines, mindfulness or contemplative training has importance and integrity that must be guarded. A weekend workshop on mindfulness does not train us to be mindfulness teachers; we need to practice daily

²⁴ Ibid., Chapter One.

and intensively in retreat, and we need to be trained in the challenges of teaching mindfulness successfully. A few years ago, an academic acquaintance proclaimed proudly to me that he was now a certified mindfulness teacher—he had received a certificate from an online training course that did not require any actual mindfulness practice! That would be like substituting reading a cookbook for actual cooking, reading an anatomy book for performing surgery, or getting an advanced degree in an eight-week online course.

2. Creation of a Community Learning Environment

Once we have shown up in the classroom, we can provide structures that encourage the students to show up as well. Some examples might be helpful in supporting a more personal learning environment:

- a. **Arrangement of the furniture in the classroom.** If it is possible, arrange the seats so that students can see one another and the instructor. This radically changes the quality of interactions in the university classroom. A circle or semi-circle brings students into visibility with each other and discourages hiding behind the computer or slumping down in the back row. This also encourages students to speak with one another rather than only with the instructor. In lecture halls with fixed desks, we may need to be more imaginative, encouraging exchange with a student nearby or developing brief standing groups around the fringes of our classrooms.
- b. **Beginnings and Endings.** When we begin or end our classes with a reflective moment, our students know they are being asked to show up personally, just as we are. This may mean taking a moment for a personal check-in, or for a few minutes of mindfulness meditation, or for reflective writing at the beginning or end of class. This opens the channel of first-person inquiry that primes students for learning, and for acknowledging what they have learned. At Naropa University, we begin and end every

class with a quiet group bow, respectfully acknowledging the presence of everyone in the room and signaling our appreciation for the inherent bravery, gentleness, and wakeful intelligence that each of us can experience personally.

- c. **Pacing.** As our classes unfold, attention to the pace and flow of elements can radically change our students' learning experiences. Contemplative teaching slows down the pace of the classroom, respecting what environmentalist David Orr calls "slow knowledge."²⁵ Orr argues that while contemporary culture values "fast knowledge," it is slow knowledge that contains the secret of genuine understanding and adaptation to variables of life. "Given the complexity of the world and the depth of our human frailties, true knowledge takes time, and it always will."²⁶ Contemplative learning follows the natural rhythm of deep knowing in order to benefit our students' journeys.

It is now well-known that most students "check out" after even twenty minutes of uninterrupted lecture; thus it's important to punctuate our presentations with activities that engage visual, auditory, reading-and-writing, and kinesthetic experiences (VARK), already well-documented in higher-education literature.²⁷ In order to specifically enhance first-person inquiry, the professor might also employ the "wait time" strategy that slows down the pace of student responses and encourages more reflective contemplation of questions and responses. This method allows a wider range of participation from our more reticent students, and brings greater depth to classroom discussions.²⁸ Other ways of punctuating class activities might include reflective writing, dyadic exchanges, periods of mindfulness, observation

²⁵ David Orr, "Slow Knowledge," *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1996.

²⁶ Ibid., 702.

²⁷ Neil D. Fleming and Colleen Mills, "Not Another Inventory, Rather A Catalyst for Reflection," *To Improve the Academy*, Vol. 11, 1992, 137.

²⁸ A contemplative application of the classic "wait time" strategy is described in Richard C. Brown, "Transitions and Rhythms in Higher Education Instruction," *Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across Disciplines*, Gunnlaugson, O. Bai, H. Sarath, E. & Scott, C., eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 271–286.

activities, and contemplative embodiment exercises. At Naropa University, we sometimes use the method employed by Vietnamese master, Thich Nhat Hanh, called “the mindfulness bell” as a regular part of classes and administrative meetings, intermittently introducing moments of mindful breathing, then returning to the present. As his community reports, the sound of the bell “reinforces the sanity of stopping from time to time to return to ourselves. When we resume our activity, we are usually a little calmer, clearer, and more aware.”²⁹

3. Contemplative Pedagogies

In 2006, colleague Andy Fort and I presented papers on contemplative teaching to the “Teaching Religion” section at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Washington, DC. The hall was packed with religious studies professors who historically have been opposed to anything that has looked like religious practice in the classroom. But many of them, especially those who teach Asian religions, had already begun experimenting with bringing first-person inquiry into their classrooms in the form of learning activities or moments of mindfulness that had changed their classes in palpable ways. I was surprised and delighted—until then, I had thought Naropa University was alone in its pursuit of first-person inquiry.

An academic publisher approached two of us, religious studies professor Fran Grace from Redlands University³⁰ and me, asking us to compile a collection of essays on contemplative pedagogies, and our book was born, *Meditation and the Classroom*, published by SUNY, the first of its kind in higher education.³¹ In it, twenty-six contributors shared how they bring first-person inquiry into their classrooms, and why. Since the publication of our book, we have participated in conferences, training,

²⁹ This practice has been introduced by Thich Nhat Hanh in contexts from community gatherings to international peace summits, bringing greater mindfulness to sometimes fraught situations. For further information about this practice, see <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/2016/03/the-bell-of-mindfulness>.

³⁰ Fran Grace is a Christian contemplative who has pioneered contemplative education courses at her university. Formerly, she co-chaired the Teaching Religion section of American Academy of Religion. <http://www.redlands.edu/study/schools-and-centers/college-of-arts-and-sciences/undergraduate-studies/religious-studies/meet-our-faculty/frances-grace/>.

³¹ Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

and workshops, and have met many like ourselves who have developed their own methods for engaging the inherent wisdom of our students.

The pedagogies we have encountered fall into six categories: 1) awareness or contemplation exercises that elicit reflection on the meaning of a text or historical event; 2) observation exercises, encouraging nonjudgmental witnessing and describing, with a phenomenological perspective; 3) working with narrative, especially delving into a personal experience, going beyond the merely habitual way of seeing the narrative in order to discover new layers of meaning; 4) academic skills—reading and writing—with greater reliance on reflection and insight combined with critical tools; 5) creative process, drawing on discoveries in the process of artistic disciplines, both personal and ensemble; and 6) dialogue, intersubjective discoveries in dyadic exchange and group discussion.

The professors with whom we have worked have developed approaches appropriate to their course material and methodologies, and the possibilities are endless. This represents a creative moment of thinking how to draw critical subjectivity into learning in our varieties of academic disciplines and courses. In my own courses, I rely on contemplative reading and academic writing, especially in courses in which we study a sacred text. But I also have found tremendous benefit in dialogue practice and in observation practices and journaling.³² There are many creative solutions.

Some cautions are warranted as we develop new pedagogies for our classrooms. The first is a reminder about the ethical responsibilities of contemplative teaching. It's important that we not coerce our students, and that we always offer alternative methods of fulfilling assignments. It's important that we teach what we know and no more. If we are not qualified to lead mindfulness, awareness, or compassion practices, we can find someone who is: eventually, we need to seek the necessary training and certification to ensure we know what we are doing when we introduce these practices. We also need to be careful not to appropriate practices and contemplations

³² Judith Simmer-Brown, "'Listening Dangerously': The Inner Dimensions of Dialogue Training," *The Intersubjective Turn: Theoretical Approaches to Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across the Disciplines*, edited by Olen Gunnlaugson, Charles Scott, Heesoon Bai, and Edward W. Sarath. Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 2017, 235–248.

without responsibly crediting their historical and cultural sources, with transparency about how we have adapted these to our classrooms.³³

In addition, as we develop our contemplative classrooms, it's best to acknowledge our individual and group socio-cultural locations, in order to genuinely embody the diversity of our experiences. Mainstream mindfulness has been appropriated by whiteness in ways that are increasingly recognized; in order to adapt contemplative practices to diverse contexts, we can unpack privilege, power, and potential oppression in order to reframe pedagogies and practices that do not privilege stillness, silence, and specific postures that marginalize some.³⁴

4. Complete Curriculum Innovation

It is possible to completely renovate courses and entire curricula to integrate first-person inquiry and reflexive learning. In some universities this will be difficult, but the radical implications of contemplative teaching and learning are far-reaching. Renovation may mean re-evaluating course methodology, openly integrating insider and outsider perspectives in the very foundation of the course. For example, in my early Indian Buddhism text courses, I juxtapose classical readings that are from emic insider perspectives with etic scholarly sources, contemplating with my students the relationship between these two and the benefits of each.

This change will also entail changing assignments, class activities, learning goals, and grading rubrics. I integrate critical subjectivity into classroom exercises as well as academic writing assignments, employing the use of journaling, in-class writing assignments, and dialogue activities. For decades, I have used a grading rubric that evaluates students' ability to employ the critical first-person voice in their writing and classroom presentations. In other words, for my Naropa classroom, critical subjectivity is intrinsic to the learning process, not a value-added option.

³³ Judith Simmer-Brown, "Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations of Contemplative Teaching," *Meditation and the Classroom*, Simmer-Brown and Grace, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 107–120.

³⁴ Carla Sherrell and Judith Simmer-Brown, "Structural Spiritual Bypassing in the Contemporary Mindfulness Movement," *Social Justice, Inner Work, and Contemplative Practice: Lessons & Directions for Multiple Fields*, edited by Sheryl Petty. Initiative for Contemplation, Equity and Action (CEAI), *Contemplative Mind and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 2017, 75–94.

I have had the honor of serving as coach to a number of faculty from a variety of disciplines, helping them adapt their courses to contemplative methods. One Asian history professor from a small women's college protested at first, even while she hired me as her coach. She insisted her Vietnam War history course would never be a good candidate for adaptation; her department would object, her subject matter was too fixed, her academic methods were too steeped in historiography. Together we were able to identify a way to renovate her course; she adapted the course to juxtapose insider and outsider perspectives, tracing the experience of the war through American military accounts alongside accounts of Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns, disciples of meditation master Thich Nhat Hanh. With this, she was able to bring into her course mindful breathing and walking, and the writings of members of the School for Youth in Social Service. She reported that her students found the inner dimensions of the course brought profound learning.

Another professor from a large Canadian university adapted a political science class on social justice ethics to include compassion practices related to very specific contemporary issues like racism, climate change, and gun control. He brought in new readings and class activities, asking the students to journal about their concerns, the effect of their compassion practice, and their experience of empowerment or disempowerment from their studies. He found a remarkable shift in student experiences when these practices were incorporated, and has since won several Canadian awards for teaching.³⁵

The western university emerged in the 11th and 12th centuries in Italy, France, and England as a system of higher education deeply influenced by the cloister, monastery, and church. Likely, these early universities were influenced by Roman and Muslim classical models. Throughout its evolution, the university has evolved away from a merely faith-based body of knowledge, eventually developing more critical and objective forms of investigation. Perhaps contemplative education is retrieving some of the sacred pedagogies that were lost, without returning to

³⁵ David Kahane, "Learning about Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice: The Place of Contemplative Pedagogy," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning: Special Issue on Internationalizing the Curriculum in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

the more dogmatic aspects of the curriculum. The influence of Asian culture and religion on contemplative learning may restore some of the richness of the original educational journey of cultivating wisdom within.

The great Sufi poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207–1273) spoke of two kinds of knowledge, reflecting on what we have perhaps lost:

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired,
as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts
from books and from what the teacher says,
collecting information from the traditional sciences
as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world.
You get ranked ahead or behind others
in regard to your competence in retaining
information. You stroll with this intelligence
in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more
marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one
already completed and preserved inside you.
A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence
does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid,
and it doesn't move from outside to inside
through conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead
from within you, moving out.³⁶

³⁶ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, tr., *This Longing: Poetry, Teaching Stories, and Letters of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 36.

Competing Interests

The author is a founding faculty member of Naropa University, and has served as a reviewer and a program planning committee member for both the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and Mind and Life Institute.

Additional Readings and Sources

- Barbezat, Daniel P.**, and **Mirabai Bush**. 2014. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, Richard C.** 2014. "Transitions and Rhythms in Higher Education Instruction," *Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across Disciplines*. Gunnlaugson, O., Bai, H. Sarath, E. & Scott, C. (eds.), 271–286. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bye, Reed**. 2005. "The Founding Vision of Naropa University: 'Let East Meet West and the Sparks Will Fly.'" In *Recalling Chogyam Trungpa*, edited by Fabrice Midal. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Initiative for Contemplation, Equity and Action (CEAI)**. July 2017. *Contemplative Mind and Society*, 1(1): 75–94.
- James, William**. 1890/1950. *Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover.
- James, William**. 1958. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: New American Library.
- Jennings, Patricia A.** 2015. *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Komjathy, Louis**. 2018. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119156734>
- Orr, David**. 1996. "Slow Knowledge." In *Conservation Biology*, 10(3).
- Sherrell, Carla** and **Judith Simmer-Brown**. "Structural Spiritual Bypassing in the Contemporary Mindfulness Movement." In *Social Justice, Inner Work, and Contemplative Practice: Lessons & Directions for Multiple Fields*, edited by Sheryl Petty. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1996.10030699.x>

- Simmer-Brown, Judith.** 2017. "Listening Dangerously': The Inner Dimensions of Dialogue Training," *The Intersubjective Turn: Theoretical Approaches to Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across the Disciplines*. Edited by Olen Gunnlaugson, Charles Scott, Heesoon Bai, and Edward W. Sarath. 235–248. Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Simmer-Brown, Judith, and Fran Grace** (eds.), 2011. *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Varela, Francisco J.** 1999. "Present-time Consciousness." In Francisco J. Varela and Jonathan Shear (eds.), *View From Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*, 111–140. Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic.
- Varela, Francisco J.** 2017. Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262529365.001.0001>
- Wallace, B. Alan.** 2000. *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zajonc, Arthur.** 2009. *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*. Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.

How to cite this article: Simmer-Brown, Judith. 2019. Contemplative Teaching and Learning: Opportunities for Asian Studies. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 26(1), pp. 5–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.291>

Published: 19 June 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



ASIANetwork Exchange is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS