

Contemplative Modes of Inquiry in Liberal Arts Education

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More than a century ago, William James foreshadowed the growth of contemplative higher education with his claim that “the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is *compos sui* [i.e., master of him or herself] if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*.” [20] In the past few decades, colleges and universities have increasingly seen the value of using contemplative or meditative approaches alongside traditional pedagogical approaches in many areas of the curriculum. The use of this pedagogy is evident throughout **Naropa University**, a Buddhist-inspired contemplative liberal arts institution founded in 1970 in Boulder, Colorado, and at smaller scales in entire departments or particular courses across the country. (See the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society for **example syllabi**.) In order to introduce others to this burgeoning movement, this brief essay will outline a taxonomy of contemplative methods relevant to pedagogy in the liberal arts.

Because they involve an inward focus, contemplative modes of inquiry result in greater self-awareness, greater capacity to focus attention, and greater capacity to expand attention without losing precision or focus—in other words, “the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again.” Brad Sullivan’s essay in *LiberalArtsOnline* on the educational role of cultivating attention, “**Liberal Arts Education and the Cultivation of Attention**,” points to the value of embedding the training of attention in liberal arts curricula. Traditional modes of inquiry in the liberal arts, such as analytical and critical thinking, require intellectual engagement with text, laboratory experimentation, and so on. Due to their inward focus, contemplative pedagogical methods can enrich and complement the disciplinary modes of inquiry already used in the liberal arts by enhancing the learner’s personal connection with the subject matter. In many areas of academic inquiry, contemplative practices have been found to enhance attention, creativity, open-mindedness, the ability to hold paradox, and compassionate civic engagement. Moreover, they specifically encourage such mental skills and habits as

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sustained and focused attention, open-mindedness, suspension of judgment, compassionate listening, and a sense of awe.

Contemplative Methods and their Educational Benefits

In order to derive the most educational benefit from contemplative techniques, it is important to understand the developmental sequence involved in learning contemplative modes of inquiry. The basic technique of sustaining and focusing attention is the foundational skill (called “mindfulness”) on which other contemplative practices rest. Simply put, mindfulness cultivates awareness of one’s own experience as it unfolds from moment to moment. The basic technique of mindfulness is to rest in silence and to notice whatever arises in experience. This technique fosters an attitude of equanimity toward all that occurs, including thoughts, emotions, memories, plans, bodily sensations, sounds, and other perceptions. The student is asked to sit calmly in a stable, upright posture, and to rest attention on, for example, the breath. When thoughts proliferate to the point of distraction, the technique is to notice this and return attention to the breath. Other variations of this technique for attending to inner experience include simply noticing the contact of the feet with the ground while walking, or how one’s hands feel in a particular moment, or closing the eyes and noticing and releasing tension in the face. All such mindfulness techniques are intended to result in relaxed yet focused awareness (see works by Jon Kabat-Zinn [13]).

Table 1 presents an array of contemplative methods and the educational outcomes they cultivate. After beginning with mindfulness, a student can be introduced to one or more of these methods, such as cultivating compassion, opening the mind, or suspending judgment. For example, the method of opening to panoramic awareness expands the attentional focus and relaxes the mind. The point of this practice is to achieve the quality of a relaxed and open frame of mind that seems to come quite naturally, for instance, when sitting on the beach. This particular technique is best done frequently in short spurts rather than long stretches. Its contribution to education is the creativity and open-mindedness to experience and ideas that often happen during vacations, other times of deep relaxation, or even in the aftermath of being startled. The good news is that one can cultivate this state of mind without the beach.

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Contemplative Modes	Educational Benefits	Authors for Further Information (see reference list for specific titles)
Contemplative (reflective) reading	nuanced processing text at deep levels of meaning (i.e., careful close reading)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Abram • Sakyong Mipham, Rinpoche
reflective reading	open attentive engagement with/in the visual or auditory arts; engaging the ineffable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christopher Dustin and Joanna Ziegler • Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche • Deborah J. Haynes
suspending assumption and judgement	careful listening; avoiding preconception (e.g., stereotyping); dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edmund Husserl • Parker Palmer • David Bohm
cultivating compassion	perspective taking; valuing diversity; anti-racist attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ken McLeod • Sakyong Mipham, Rinpoche
whole-hearted (devoted) commitment to learning	deep engagement and intimacy with object of study; intellectual humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evelyn Fox Keller
opening to panoramic awareness, i.e., wide distribution of attention	seeing the big picture; open-mindedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lama Surya Das • Chögyal Namkhai Norbu • Brother Lawrence
authentic spontaneity, e.g., playful mind	creativity; enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche • Thinley Norbu

Table 1. Contemplative Methods that Build on Mindfulness Training and their Respective Educational Benefits

Contemplative Modes of Inquiry

When using contemplative methods in an academic setting, it is important that the particular method is appropriate to the course's pedagogical goals. One simple approach is to devote a few minutes at the beginning of class for students to sit in silence. This experience can result in deeper and enhanced engagement with academic material, compassionate engagement with social issues, and greater open-mindedness and creativity. In our experience, this typically leads to an increasingly nuanced and complete understanding of the topic at hand.

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On the other hand, contemplative methods can be more specifically embedded in academic work as a *contemplative mode of inquiry*, though these embedded methods are most helpful if students have already had some experience of looking inward in silence. For example, the reflective close reading techniques derived from *lectio divina* can be used to deeply examine short sections of important text. As the student's engagement with the material deepens, contemplative reading naturally reveals the reader's own personal lived experience relevant to the text. Likewise, the practices of "contemplative seeing" [6] and contemplative approaches to making art [10] facilitate the deepening of direct nonconceptual encounters within the visual world of art history and art-making.

More generally, it is important to consider what place contemplative modes of inquiry might have in the array of approaches used in the liberal arts to investigate a topic. For example, it is standard educational practice to inquire into the nature of water using field methods in geology, laboratory methods in chemistry, medical approaches to hydration and dehydration, poetic and other artistic inquiry regarding aesthetic qualities, historical or political methods, and statistical economic methods among many others. What do contemplative methods add to this list? Contemplative methods examine direct, unmediated experience with water, engagement with its wetness and looking into the states of mind that water evokes. This can be done through meditation in the presence of water (bodies of still or moving water, the sound of rain or waterfall, etc.) or by using mental imagery of water instead of direct perception, to examine the impact of water's qualities on the mind. Suspending assumption and judgment invites new appreciation for interdependencies between water and those things that interact with water. Compassion practices can introduce an investigation of the human need for water and the experience of its lack on human relationships and well-being. Whole-hearted commitment to learning, opening to panoramic awareness, and authentic spontaneity lead the learner to discover potentially novel interdisciplinary synergies pertaining to water.

What lies at the heart of all contemplative modes of inquiry is a direct intimate encounter with the subject matter shorn of opinion and expectation. Contemplative methods cultivate states of mind that are receptive, relaxed, ready, and even playful; the level of engagement in academic tasks (e.g., studying, writing) is therefore deep and affectively charged with motivation, and even awe.

Applications

To highlight the richness that comes with combining contemplative methods with standard modes of inquiry, we will describe two of our courses that embed contemplative modes of inquiry in standard psychology courses.

Psychology of Perception Course

In an introductory psychology course on perception, students are trained to notice their own perceptual phenomena as a laboratory technique, in addition to exploring standard scientific findings about the nature of sensory processing in mind and brain. The ever-present, ongoing stream of sensations provides a convenient basis for contemplative inquiry into sensory experience. This contemplative methodology enriches the course by juxtaposing the standard scientific inquiry (third-person methods) with contemplative inquiry (first-person methods). Rather than the sometimes impersonal approach that many learners experience in science education, this contemplative investigation allows greater personal involvement in the study of sensory function. It has become clear, from using this approach over six semesters, that training enables students to quickly become adept at voluntarily directing their attention toward sensations. It helps to start simply, such as focusing attention on only one sense modality at a time. Within bodily sensation, for example, students are instructed to place their attention on the sole of their left foot. After a slow, verbally guided sequence of shifting attention from sensations in one body part to another, students realize that paying attention opens up an enriched world of experience. Similar guided observations in other sense modalities such as hearing and sight make it evident that, taken together, our senses supply a vast array of sensory experience each moment that often goes unnoticed. Students come to appreciate the extent to which their usual conscious awareness of sensations is drastically restricted. Such observations and inferences provide experiential insight into the research and theory standard in this field.

Social Psychology Course

An intermediate-level social psychology course juxtaposes a contemplative inquiry lab with results of standard empirical research. This course has been offered as part of an undergraduate psychology curriculum in a secular liberal arts college setting where contemplative methods are not used in any other courses. After being introduced to the basic techniques of cultivating attention by noticing sensations of

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their hands at rest and looking inward at experience as non-judgmentally as possible, students are asked to use this skill akin to the way a biologist might use a microscope. The key is to sustain attention to inner experience despite a distracting social situation. For example, one assignment asks students to compare and contrast their findings from a two-part exercise designed to juxtapose the results of a contemplative experiment with standard methods of self-report on the topic of social identity. There are three parts to this exercise: Part 1 asks students to write brief descriptions of their opinions (i.e., thoughts and feelings) about two social roles that are important to them (e.g., student, daughter). Part 2 invites students to choose two to three brief live occasions in a social situation when they are active in that social role (for example, while on the phone with a parent, while talking with the registrar, while doing a weekly reading assignment). Students then are asked to write about their moment-to-moment experience as it unfolds over a couple of minutes. Part 3 asks students to write an essay comparing and contrasting the insights gained from the first two parts of the exercise. In Part 1, students typically use summarizing or general language that minimizes vividness and complexity when describing their experience. In other words, their verbal report usually centers around a basic opinion about the quality of the relationship or the overall quality of their experience in that role. In Part 2, the contemplative component, students typically use richer and more varied language when describing their experience—indicated by their use of more conditional phrases and an indication that they are aware of the momentary, changing, and variable nature of their experience of this social role. The final part of this assignment asks students to compare and contrast insights gained from the self-report and contemplative exercises. This allows students to juxtapose how they tend to generalize their experience in everyday conversation with how experience actually unfolds over time.

Discussion and Conclusions

The emerging field of contemplative higher education has already grown to include a great variety of approaches. With this article, we have outlined a taxonomy of contemplative methods relevant to higher education. In order to fully develop a taxonomy that reflects the richness of the field, a thorough dialogue among educators with experience in contemplative education is essential.

In keeping with our university's contemplative mission, for the past thirty-two years, Naropa faculty in all disciplines have used contemplative pedagogical methods in diverse and

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creative ways. Some courses focus on training in contemplative methods themselves, along with related contemplative theory derived from world wisdom traditions. Other courses embed contemplative modes of inquiry within traditional liberal arts courses, as exemplified by the perception and social psychology courses described above. In addition to courses that employ contemplative pedagogy, the techniques described above are useful to both students and instructors in settings beyond the classroom. Many college students today have learned meditation or other contemplative practices in the context of co-curricular pursuits such as athletics, theater, stress reduction, or in the context of a spiritual or religious community. Students often find that the benefits of practicing meditation or contemplation can go beyond the particular learning context and aid in academic work. Likewise, instructors can use mindfulness and allied techniques in preparing for class so as to best meet the students where they are and take advantage of teachable moments as they present themselves.

Since many educators are interested in the growing field of contemplative pedagogy, it is crucial to develop a language and conceptual framework useful for dialogue both within and between disciplines. Toward this end, we offer a rudimentary taxonomy of contemplative methods and their educational outcomes. Overall, contemplative practices contribute to the goals of academic excellence, so there is a growing need for educational outcome measures to assess their impact. We are beginning to develop such measures addressing the diverse methods and outcomes discussed above.

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