

# MINDFULNESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Mirabai Bush**

*This paper explores the introduction of mindfulness into courses in higher education. Some of these courses are taught by Buddhist scholars; others are taught by scholars within other disciplines who themselves have a meditation practice. Those scholars included here represent a much larger number in diverse settings, including state universities, liberal arts colleges, Ivy League institutions, and historically black colleges. They teach in almost every discipline, including architecture, poetry, chemistry, economics, and law. The courses discussed in this paper are taught by Contemplative Practice Fellows, a programme of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The paper also places this movement into a short history of contemplative education and raises questions about its future impact on the academy.*

In this paper, I will explore the introduction of mindfulness into courses in higher education. Some of these courses are taught by Buddhist scholars; others are taught by scholars within other disciplines who themselves have a meditation practice. Those scholars included here represent a much larger number in diverse settings, including state universities, liberal arts colleges, Ivy League institutions, and historically black colleges. They teach in almost every discipline, including architecture, poetry, chemistry, economics, and law. The courses discussed in this paper are taught by Contemplative Practice Fellows, a programme of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.

These courses are part of a movement in higher education, inspired by John Dewey and William James to include 'first person' approaches to the study within the disciplines of science, humanities, and the arts as well as in the professional schools. Students are encouraged to engage directly in contemplative techniques, including mindfulness, and then step back and appraise their experience for meaning and significance. These methods are introduced not as a replacement for but as a complement to 'third-person' learning, the critical ability to observe, analyse, record and discuss a subject at a distance.

This movement is happening, not coincidentally, as the scientific research on mindfulness is expanding and producing results relevant to teaching, learning, and knowing. And the classroom context raises interesting questions that may not currently be at the forefront in the health and healing studies about the potential

of mindfulness for cognitive transformation. The Buddhist tradition has given us a set of practices for knowing the essential nature of mind. In order to do this, one needs a calm, stabilized mind. Educators are interested in the calming, quieting, focusing qualities of mindfulness that help students reduce stress and become more patient and present in the classroom, but they are also interested in how that calm stability can positively affect cognitive functions like attention, working memory, and long-term memory, and lead eventually toward understanding and wisdom. They honour the power of mindfulness to reduce suffering, but they are also focused on the work of the academy: students need to plan, set goals, set priorities, move back and forth among tasks. They need to think about the meaning of new information and connect it to what they already know. They need to create long-term memories that will be accessible during an exam many hours after acquiring the information (a true relief of suffering!). They need to explore interconnections and to extend their grasp of the verbal and visual dimensions of their work. They need to find meaning in these interconnections. They need to see clearly and cultivate insight. As Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics at Amherst College and now Director of the Center, says in *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*: 'The true goal of meditation is to achieve a way of directly experiencing the world and ourselves that is not imprisoned or distorted by mental habits or emotional desires. When free of these, we are opened to a richer exploration of reality that presents to us new insights into self and world.'

I first discovered mindfulness in 1970. I had taken a writing year after completing my PhD courses and oral exams in contemporary American literature, and I intended to spend two weeks in India before I began to write. In Delhi, I heard that there was a meditation course being offered to Westerners for the first time in Bodh Gayā. I had studied with some contemplative poet mentors—Robert Creeley, Robert Hass, and others—but I had never meditated, and I had not studied Buddhism. I thought it sounded interesting. The course lasted 10 days, and it affected me so profoundly that I stayed and practiced for two months and then remained in India for two years, meeting and practicing with other teachers as well.

When I co-founded the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society to explore the potential benefits of integrating contemplative practice and perspective into American life, we offered retreats and built programmes in law, business, environmentalism, social justice activism, and journalism. We also considered higher education, but I thought it an unlikely place for systemic societal change to happen, and I thought there would be tremendous resistance to offering practices from the religious traditions to students in secular institutions

As it turned out, there was much less resistance than we imagined, due partly to a partnership we developed with the American Council of Learned Societies, which administered fellowships that we designed called the Contemplative Practice Fellowships. Grantees agreed to develop and teach courses that integrated contemplative practice into their teaching. Over 12 years, 158 fellows were selected from more than 1000 applications. During the first years, many

professors simply introduced a few minutes of mindfulness at the beginning and end of class, but over the years, fellows learned from each other and from their students and deepened their own practice. Many courses now have seamlessly combined mindful awareness with the core teachings of the discipline itself, as when an architecture professor asks her students to be mindful of the light through the leaves of a tree as it falls on a building site over 24 hours.

These courses are part of a larger movement in higher education known as contemplative education. Before I describe the courses and the issues they present, I would like to give a short pre-history of contemplative higher education in America—specifically, what led to the Center’s programmes and to other courses within the arts, sciences, and humanities that include a mindfulness practice or cultivate a contemplative perspective.

**1890:** William James publishes *Principles of Psychology*, in which he describes four methods, including introspection, or his study of his own state of mind, and concludes with this quote which is included in every Power Point and website on contemplative education: ‘The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the 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.’

**1970s:** William James Hall, Harvard: After Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert leave the department that was inspired by William James and is housed in William James Hall, interest in expanded consciousness and new ways of knowing continues, encouraged in part by David McClelland, former Chair of the Social Relations Department, whose students then—Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*), Richie Davidson (University of Wisconsin, Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior and the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience), Cliff Saran (Shamatha Project, University of California at Davis), and Mark Epstein (*Thoughts without a Thinker*)—later become important research and thought leaders in the integration of mindfulness practice in the United States. Outside the classroom, David and his artist wife Mary, both Quakers with an interest in Thomas Merton and Eastern religions, host an ongoing conversation in their home about meditative practices and consciousness. A lifelong teacher, David wants to know, how can contemplative practices affect knowing and learning as well as healing, social relationships, and motivation? Among the diverse people who visited the McClelland’s big Cambridge house and joined voices with David’s students and other of us who lived there for stretches of time were Mexican poet Octavio Paz, author Harvey Cox, Insight Meditation teachers Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, Jon Kabat-Zinn (who was then starting his mindfulness clinic at University of Massachusetts), Zen master Seung Sahn, Kalu Rinpoche, Allen Ginsberg, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Richard Alpert, now Ram Dass, was also there.

**1974:** Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche founds the Naropa Institute (later Naropa University), based on Buddhist principles of contemplative education, with a summer session in Boulder. He hopes to create an institution where learning is 'infused with the experience of awareness, insight and compassion for oneself and others, honed through the practice of sitting meditation and other contemplative disciplines.' Not well known in the US at that time, Trungpa asks Ram Dass, who has a huge following after publishing *Be Here Now* in 1971, to teach at Naropa in order to attract students. The organizers expect between 300–500 people to take courses at the Institute. Instead, more than 1300 students flock to Boulder:

'Almost overnight, Boulder has become a magnet of learning and excitement and promise . . . The student body is made up of an astonishing assortment of college students, dropouts, scholars, scientists, artists, therapists, dancers, heads of departments, musicians, housewives, and on and on. The whole first week seems to be filled with a sort of joyous incredulity that Naropa is really happening' (*East West Journal*, September 1974).

**Fast Forward to 1995:** Charles Halpern, president of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Robert Lehman, president of The Fetzer Institute, initiate the Working Group on Contemplative Mind in Society and invite scholars to explore contemplative education in white papers:

*Robert Thurman, Columbia:* Realistic beliefs, helpful and skillful others, meditations and practices, all these can help by supporting the process of education. But the realistic understanding that liberates is the individual's own process and attainment. Since wisdom is the ultimate cause of awakening, of liberation from ignorance, then these disciplines and practices are educational in the classical sense. One person cannot awaken another. No God can awaken someone. No belief can awaken someone. No meditation can awaken someone. The individual's transformative understanding is their awakening.

Meditation fits in the traditional inner science curriculum at the highest level of the cultivation of wisdom: first learning wisdom, then reflective wisdom, then contemplative wisdom. Therefore, it is virtually indispensable if wisdom is to become fully transformative. The question then for academic, especially liberal arts, institutions, is not a question of adding a desirable frill to their vast smorgasbord of offerings. It is a matter of their effectively fulfilling their duty to provide a liberal, that is, a liberating and empowering, education.

*Brian Stock, University of Toronto:* We have to teach students what contemplative activity is all about. Among other things, they have to be instructed in reading meditative literature, not as they would read modern poems, plays, or novels, but as contemplatives read them, using texts as a means to an end and not considering them, as is the fashion in contemporary literary practice, as ends in themselves. They would also have to explore types of meditation that are unlike

the Judeo-Christian tradition in not requiring the presence of texts, images, or other sensory supports. Beyond that, teachers of the humanities would have to use the renewed interest in the contemplative life to begin an exploration of what we mean by 'the modern identity,' that is, as a means of tracing the various strands of what it means to be a human agent, a person, or a self. This implies broadening the discussion of ethics beyond the traditionally narrow confines of academic speculation and taking up a number of cultural connections: religious history, gender orientation, ecological considerations, etc.

*Steven Rockefeller, Middlebury College:* Meditation can improve the quality of life of those who choose to practice it under the guidance of competent teachers. When pursued seriously as a discipline, it can add a unique depth to democratic and ecological living. It can help people become free and fully human. By itself meditation does not impel human beings to social action, and it needs to be counterbalanced by a concern with social reconstruction and personal relationship. However, in a democratic ecological society that affirms life in the world and values social action and community, the practice of meditation can help to shape the direction of social action, contributing to an integration of the ethical and the political, the spiritual and the practical. The undergraduate college is one place where these issues should be thoughtfully explored.

**1997:** The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society is incorporated and partners with the American Council of Learned Societies to offer fellowships to academics who are interested in developing courses with a contemplative component. Advisors to the project include Carolyn Brown from the Library of Congress, Robert Thurman, Sharon Daloz Parks (Kennedy School of Government at Harvard), Francisco Varela (who introduced into neuroscience the concept of 'first person science,' in which observers examine their own conscious experience using scientifically verifiable methods, later key to the research on meditation) and members of the original Cambridge group: Daniel Goleman, Deborah Salter-Klimburg (Director of the Institute for Tibetan Art History at University of Vienna), Joseph Goldstein, and David McClelland. Although the Selection Committee is unsure that they will receive any proposals at all, 136 are submitted. The committee finds many of them extraordinary, creative, and rigorous, and they award the first 16 Contemplative Practice Fellowships to 'create curriculum in diverse disciplines that encompass and encourage the study of contemplation.' By 2010, there are 158 Fellows in more than 100 colleges and universities. Many are using mindfulness practices to enhance learning in the classroom.

The courses discussed below were taught by these fellows. Some were taught by Buddhist scholars and others by professors from other disciplines who were themselves practitioners or who invited local Buddhist teachers to lead practice for their students. Most adopted a definition of mindfulness inspired by Jon Kabat-Zinn: a way of being in which one is highly aware and focused on the reality

of the present moment, accepting and acknowledging it, without getting caught up in the thoughts that are about the situation or emotional reactions to the situation. There are other definitions and capacities explored by Georges Dreyfus, John Dunne, and other contributors to this volume, such as the ability of mindfulness to bring together various aspects of experience so as to lead to the clear comprehension of the nature of mental and bodily states. It is clear that the interest of the most experienced of these professors is not only in the spacious non-judging quietness that mindfulness develops but also in its central role in the cognitive process. They report changes that suggest cognitive transformation: increased concentration, greater capacity for synthetic thinking, conceptual flexibility, and an appreciation for a different type of intellectual process, distinct from the linear, analytical and product oriented processes so often valued in contemporary education.

The definitions of mindful learning and teaching are in process. Ellen Langer, part of the Williams James legacy at the Psychology Department at Harvard, addressed 'the power of mindful learning' in 1997. She described it as having three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. She states that the essence of mindfulness is flexible thinking. Dan Siegel, in *The Mindful Brain*, identifies the essential dimensions of mindful learning as openness to novelty, alertness to distinction, context sensitivity, multiple perspectives, and present orientation. He calls reflection the fourth 'R' of education, the skill that embeds self-knowing and empathy in the curriculum. Fellow Mary Rose O'Reilly, in *Radical Presence: Teaching as a Contemplative Practice*, says that it has to do with being awake, being there, being present, listening, creating a space for learning and for developing an inner life by your very attention to the moment.

The question of contemplative epistemology, or meditative knowing, is only beginning to be explored in the academy, but the approach includes a suspension of disbelief (and belief) in an attempt to 'know' reality through direct observation, by being fully present in the moment. It is, like the best of academic methods, an inquiry into the nature of things. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, educated both in Lhasa and at Oxford, said wisdom is 'immediate and nonconceptual insight which provides the basic inspiration for intellectual study.' Having seen clearly one's own mind, one has a natural desire to see how others experience reality.

So, what do these fellows bring to the contemporary classroom? At a meeting of the fellows in arts and architecture at Chautauqua in Boulder, we sat on Stickley wooden chairs, wrapped in quilts to keep warm as snow fell outside, and we asked the questions: What can meditation offer to the arts? How do you describe contemplative practices in arts education to others? What makes me a better contemplative teacher? Simple questions; complex answers. We were reminded of other words of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who once taught in Boulder: 'Art is based on the idea that first we see our universe very clearly and very precisely and very thoroughly.' Joanna Ziegler, who taught art history at Holy Cross, led us in a mindfulness practice, then projected a painting on the wall,

asked us to write briefly what we saw, and read the results. Every one was different. 'What is actually there? What are you bringing to it?' she asked. Look again. And again and again. An hour later, we were still peeling back the onion of our conditioned judgments. Her students do it for 13 weeks.

Amy Cheng, Professor of Studio Art at State University of New York at New Paltz, sees the inherent connection between the arts and mindfulness. 'Our ultimate goal in my course is to find the writing strategies that, like meditation, help us to tap the intuitive creative functions of the right brain: to think in complex images rather than in sequential order, to see the whole as well as the parts, to grasp interconnections, correspondences, resemblances, and nuances rather than the bits and pieces and linear, logical patterns.' Her students looked at three aspects of creativity in a meditative context:

- making something new, original, or unexpected;
- renewing or sustaining what already exists;
- healing and making things whole.

At Syracuse University, Anne Beffel teaches mindfulness within her course on Contemplative Arts and Society. It attracts students who aspire to cultivate creativity, wellbeing, and compassionate connections. They practice what they call paying attention and opening awareness to their connections with their surroundings and each other. They developed the Sitting Still Contemplative Video Project, which includes exercises designed specifically for developing close observation. As part of the Art in Odd Places festival in New York, the City Meditation Crew in white uniforms took their 'hey man, slow down' philosophy to Union Square, where they slowly constructed a giant mandala from discarded gum wrappers (in honour of Gandhi's birthday, October 2).

Performance art like the City Meditation Crew is, in some ways, the perfect Buddhist art form, particularly for this generation: here one moment, gone the next. Did I really see a man walking on a wire between those towers? At a recent summer session at Smith College on developing contemplative courses hosted by the Center for Contemplative Mind, performance artist Akim Funk Buddha presented Hip Hop Tea Ceremony, which he called a 'pray-formance.' Arising one moment, dissolving the next. And although we cannot always eliminate another's suffering (even as we remove causes of pain), we can stimulate imagination and inspire each other to move toward liberation. In a text recommended in Anne Beffel's course, Robert Thurman calls the Buddha's smile 'an original piece of performance art. Like an artist, a Buddha sees beauty in the world. His or her delight naturally flows into an expression that automatically shares that vision and delight with others.'<sup>1</sup>

Because many art and design students are particularly hard on themselves and tend to be perfectionists, Beffel stresses not judging, using Pema Chodren's phrase, being 'unconditionally friendly to oneself.' One student wrote: 'Before this class, I found myself often judging my work while I was creating. I had a hard time staying in the present moment and allowing myself to relax and enjoy the process.'

I worried about what others would think about my art. In this course, I realized that I have gotten away from what I believe to be true art: art that completes me as an artist. I wanted to get back to the stage where I didn't notice the judgmental opinions of others and simply did art for myself—connected and accepting.'

Another student wrote, 'I developed a daily practice based on the walking meditation, only with paint. Rather than focusing on the motion of the step of my feet, I focus on the movement of the brush. I paint with water back and forth on a small piece of wood. It allows me to solely focus on the relaxing repetition of painting without judging the outcome.' And others: 'To me, awareness is the feeling of seeing everything as though it were the first time and the last time, at the same time.' 'The acts of slowing down, looking around you, listening to someone, tasting a raisin, all these things are alternatives to violence... even though you might not necessarily be thinking 'this is non-violent,' you are acting in that way and it gives you an alternative....'

The most problematic place in the academy to introduce contemplative practices has been religion departments, where the concern has been that a professor who actually practices the religion he or she is teaching would not be sufficiently objective. Teaching such practices to students raises a further concern around proselytizing. These concerns go back to the birth of the modern academy, when enlightened thought and scientific method replaced the earlier monastic institutions. Some professors, however, have found ways based on critical inquiry and 'first person study' to engage students in the practices they are studying in their texts.

Harold Roth, a Taoist scholar, teaches at Brown University, where he has established the Contemplative Studies Initiative, a group of Brown faculty with diverse academic specializations who are united around a common interest in the study of contemplative states of mind, including the underlying philosophy, psychology, and phenomenology of human contemplative experience.

In Introduction to Contemplative Studies, he introduces students to a variety of contemplative experience from the Zen, Taoist, and Vipassanā traditions through both study of the texts and practice in what there is called a 'lab,' but which looks to other eyes like a meditation hall. Early each day, they transform the dance studio while the dancers are still sleeping and do their first-person lab work, meditation. During weeks five and six, they read *Embodied Mind* by Varela, Thompson, and Roach and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* and practice mindfulness of breath at the tip of the nose and in the diaphragm; in weeks seven and eight, they learn body scan and mindfulness of sensation, feeling, thought, and perception. They discuss their experience in relation to what they read in the text. Those students who choose a concentration in contemplative studies then take a total of 11 more multidisciplinary courses. Brown Medical School now also has a concentration in contemplative studies.

At Mount Holyoke, Professor Lawrence Fine taught Contemplative Practices and Religious Traditions. He covered five traditions, which he thought too many after he taught the course, which also requires contemplative reading and journal

writing. His own practices are Jewish and Buddhist. For Buddhist practice, he invited a local Zen priest to teach zazen and a Mount Holyoke alumnus who teaches at Insight Meditation Society to teach Vipassanā. The most exciting aspect of the course for him and for the students was the integration of academic study and contemplative practice. The integration presented him with these questions: How do you naturally and gracefully lead students in contemplative practices in an academic setting? How do you negotiate the different ‘presence’ you manifest in class, at least during certain moments? How do you move back and forth, wearing ‘different hats’? What exactly is the boundary between doing something that feels appropriate experientially, and doing something that feels devotional? How do you invite students to bring their whole selves to the course, and yet judge them by way of evaluation and grading? Those questions turned out to be what made the course challenging yet very rewarding. In a final report, he said, ‘For me, perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the course was the permission I gave myself to be more open, more informal, and more personal than I sometimes am as a teacher.’

At Bryn Mawr College, Michelle Francl, Professor of Chemistry, teaches *Quantum States of Being: Incorporating Contemplative Practices into the chemistry curriculum*. Her intention is to provide nascent scientists with another set of ways to reflect on their work in relation to the larger world. She teaches mindfulness of sound, a practice she calls Listening Out (listening in further and further concentric circles). ‘Start with the sounds closest to you—the student at the next desk rustling papers, the pumps chugging at the lab bench, the roar of the fume hoods. Slowly extend your awareness outward . . .’

In making the case for the importance of mindfulness, she wrote,

It has the potential not to merely produce scientists, but to allow scientists to engage in forming themselves. Science touches nearly everything we touch, the world therefore deserves scientists who do not see themselves solely as masters of nature, able to trick the natural world into doing their will, but as those who can listen attentively enough to the world to hear what needs to be done. The world cries out for reflective scientists, who can intentionally create a space in which to see their work in its full context—scientific, cultural, political and personal. Embedding these practices, then, not just in any course, but in a course that is seen as rigorous and fundamental to the discipline, lets students grow as scientists in a culture that acknowledges that such ways of seeing and relating to the world are useful for their work and not incongruent with what a scientist should be. (Michelle Francl).<sup>2</sup>

Science courses reveal the investigative nature of mindfulness practices. Arthur Zajonc, at Amherst, asks his students to bring their mindfulness to natural and manmade objects. ‘First study the physical object carefully: its shape, color, size, structural components, etc. If you have selected a paper clip, observe its shiny surface, the thickness of the wire of which it is made, its peculiar shape, and so on.

Then close your eyes and imagine it before yourself in detail. Can you call to mind the exact shape of the paper clip? If not, go back to the physical object again and make further observations, repeating this until you have a clear mental picture of the whole object . . . .’

At the University of Alberta, Canada, Political Science Professor David Kahane teaches *Citizenship for Democracy: Bringing Contemplation and Compassion into Community Service Learning*. He used mindfulness (*shamatha*) practice to help students explore habitual modes of engaging with injustice and suffering. Students write about their practice in their journals. The weaving together of mindfulness practice with the service learning context as well as the classroom made meditation ‘more richly interesting and instructive, as these contexts really challenged us to remain mindful and to notice how quickly activity, conversation, and complexity could draw us away from awareness of the present moment.’ He sees the ability of students to experience their own reactions authentically, without judgment, as the ground for learning. ‘This is a profound encouragement for students: to be learning, they don’t need to become someone else—smarter, calmer, more confident—but to experience what they are experiencing, with openness and kindness, and then to share what they see with others.’

Al Kaszniak teaches psychology at the University of Arizona. In 2010, he taught *The Psychology of Empathy and Compassion: Contemplative and Scientific Perspectives*, which integrated breath-focused mindful attention, mindful listening, and reflective journaling into the class. The reflective journaling is actually a mindfulness exercise:

- Before reading, do 10 minutes of breath-focused mindful attention.
- Don’t think about the reading—try to stay fully attentive to the breath.
- Allow this mindful attitude to remain as you read.
- After the reading and another breath-focused practice of 10 minutes, write no more than one page describing how the reading relates to your personal experience. Be specific.
- Describe anything you noticed about your experience during the reading.

As he proceeds through the semester, teaching about empathy and compassion from the perspective of both contemplative and scientific traditions, he introduces practices relevant to the session: mindful breathing when he teaches about attention, loving-kindness when he overviews the neuroscience of empathy. The final session met in a contemplative garden, where they practiced mindful attention and discussed how natural and built environments relate to the expression or inhibition of empathy and compassion.

At the American University, Paul Wapner is teaching *Practical Environmentalism*. He taught mindfulness and other contemplative practices to help students deal with the difficulties of environmental political action, where there are few victories in a battle against immense odds. He introduces mindfulness as a way for his students to reduce stress and be more fully in the classroom, to be aware of

their intentions for the course. Mindfulness practice also prepares students to discuss ‘the inner experience of political engagement.’

Many educators are concerned about the effects of technology and multitasking on their students. At the University of Washington, David Levy uses contemplative practices as a lens to observe and critique information practices, and in particular to investigate problems of information overload, the fragmentation of attention, and the busyness and speed of everyday life. The basic practice of the course is mindfulness: mindful sitting (attention to the breath) and walking (attention to the feet). Students then mindfully observed an information practice like texting or emailing, documented what they observed, and reflected on what they documented. They discovered, for example, that they tended to check email when they were anxious or bored and that reading email only exacerbated their anxiety.

Their practice became:

1. Observe your own patterns of behaviour, bringing attention to body, breath, emotions, etc.
2. Decide which dimensions of your experience you want to cultivate or minimize (clarity of attention, fatigue, anxiety, etc.).
3. Make conscious choices in order to cultivate some states and minimize others.

Allen Stairs engaged the study of mindfulness as subject matter. He taught a course in Multiple Perspectives on Vipassanā Meditation: Experience, Psychology, and Philosophy at the University of Maryland. He taught mindfulness during class sessions and invited a teacher from Insight Meditation community of Washington DC to teach also. The students read papers on the empirical study of meditation and explored connections between mindfulness and philosophical discussions of the ‘so-called problem of personal identity,’ including the philosopher Derek Parfit, whose work denies that there is an enduring self. They explored the theme that ‘however valuable the perspective recommended by mindfulness, it needs to be enriched by understanding the importance of ways of looking at ourselves that *do not* rest in the here and now.’ They also discussed whether our tendency to see ourselves in narrative terms makes a genuine contribution to our flourishing even if the narratives are not ‘true’ at the deeper level of metaphysics.

Light Carruyo, who teaches Sociology, Women’s Studies, and Latin American/Latina Studies at Vassar, introduced mindfulness to explore how it could help students confront difficult issues, which inevitably engage students’ experience as social and emotional beings. In teaching the course in the past, she had found that disregarding the personal and focusing on the text was ‘infinitely more manageable’ but limited the extent of the learning, so she was interested in the effects of mindfulness as part of a ‘healing form of critical inquiry.’ The mindfulness did increase awareness of emotion, and the discussions led to a dialogue between personal transformation and the transformation of the structures of inequality, a critical dialogue that is also alive and well in the civil society activist community.

The Center held three retreats with Joseph Goldstein for Yale Law School students. Although they were off campus and did not include aspects of law curriculum, they led us to appreciate the many ways in which mindfulness could benefit law education, including the themes of listening, the relationship between internal and external conflict, separation and connection, winning and non-winning. In 1999, Professor Len Riskin, then at the University of Missouri-Columbia Law School, based his course, *Understanding Conflict*, on these themes, integrating mindfulness, readings, and discussions. They discussed how mindfulness could help lawyers stay present with the suffering of clients, develop compassion and patience, and make better decisions. One student wrote, 'I think the most important thing the practice gives us is deliberation. I find I am less likely to jump to conclusions, the way your law professors try to get you to do. It's harder to push my buttons than it was before I started this practice. I'm cooler-headed and likely to see any issue from more angles, which is the key to solving legal problems.'

More recently, at Roger Williams University School of Law, David Zlotnick taught *Trial Advocacy: Integrating Mindfulness Theory and Practice*. He introduced mindfulness to help students stay in the moment and let go of the illusion of control, in order to improve their confidence and skills. He also exposed them to deeper practices of compassion and connectedness to teach them that there is a way to be a compassionate trial lawyer without losing effectiveness in the courtroom. One interesting practice was this: Students practiced mindfulness of being present. Then, without advance notice, the students had to redo a direct exam while blindfolded, which required them to put aside their notes and listen to the witness. Students found this exercise liberating and helpful. Later, after doing a mindfulness practice that focused on staying present with discomfort and moving through it, they did a simulated trial during which an attorney tried to frustrate the student with repeated objections (which the judge sustained). When the student lawyer began to get angry, a bell was rung with the instruction to try the mindfulness-of-anger practice. Students reported that the practice allowed them to let go of anger and return to the present moment with a clear mind so they could focus on the facts of the case.

Carolyn Jacobs, Dean of the School of Social Work at Smith, has introduced the first contemplative graduate certificate program for clinical social workers. 'Cultivating awareness,' she says, 'is crucial for clinical practice in a complex, global world. The capacity of the clinical social worker to pay attention to the dynamics of the clinical relationship can be enhanced by continuous self-reflection and contemplative practice.' The students learn mindfulness and mindful listening, in which the words of another person become the object of attention.

In most of these courses, the addition of mindfulness seems to illuminate the relevance of the academic disciplines to life outside the classroom. Here is one last example that seems particularly relevant as I write this in 2010. At Amherst College, Daniel Barbezat teaches a course in behavioural economics in which he uses awareness of thought and emotion to teach larger principles of economics. The course description begins with a quote from Ajahn Chah: '... we see that

there is actually nothing worth wanting; there is only arising and passing away, a being born followed by a dying. This is when the mind arrives at letting go, letting everything go according to its own nature. . . . And this knowing happiness means that we don't identify it as being ours.'

Barbazet first helps students develop one-pointed awareness and then guides them through meditations in which he evokes emotions like regret. He then asks them to explore the feeling of regret and shows how it is part of even small decisions—will I regret taking an umbrella today if it does not rain? How does that factor into my decision to take it or not? How does it factor into decisions about what I buy, from a chocolate bar (will I regret eating it because of the calories or will I regret not eating it because it is so delicious?) to a house? Being aware of arising thoughts and emotions becomes essential to making good economic decisions at every level, or at least to having more choices.

Economist and former head of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan recently said that he had made a mistake that led to the economic collapse of 2008, that he had thought people always act in their own self-interest so their behaviour did not need to be regulated. A lot of suffering was generated in the world through this mis-apprehension. Barbezat demonstrates to his students that we cannot know what our self-interest actually is unless we are mindfully self-aware. As we come to see the nature of desire and aversion, we realize that it can obscure wise self-interest. Some actions benefit us greatly in the short-term but harm us or others in the long-term, as happened to many in the economic collapse. True self-awareness also reveals our interconnection with others, so that we understand how our own self-interest is interdependent with the interest of others.

I hope these few examples, of which there are many more, begin to represent this accelerating movement in higher education, which, like mindfulness itself, has the potential for radical transformation. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, a part of the Center, is nourishing the work of its 600 members as they explore this terrain. At the very least, these courses raise many questions for both Dharma teachers and secular educators about the introduction of mindfulness in secular settings and in educational settings. Among these are:

The question of meditation experience for the teacher—how much is enough?

The question of academic value. What value does mindful engagement offer to each discipline, both epistemologically and pedagogically? Does it enhance the creative process, deepen students' engagement with the material, or lead to specific insights that would otherwise be unavailable ?

The question of language. This is an issue for any pedagogy, but it can be especially complex for one rooted in a wisdom tradition where value can be implicit. How do we translate this wisdom into the work of higher education?

Language deserves a paper of its own, but a few examples will begin to identify the issue. In studies of contemplative practices in their historical context, as in

a Religious Studies course on Buddhism, use of Pali and Sanskrit terms (*satori*, *śamatha*) with translations is of course appropriate. But in courses in which mindfulness has been introduced as a secular method for more effectively engaging the subject matter, teachers usually look for more accessible terms to define and to introduce practice, often grounded in the history or philosophy of their discipline. An architecture professor might quote C.S. Lewis, who said that a contemplative (or mindfully designed) building is 'larger on the inside than on the outside.' Or Mies van der Rohe, whose famous aphorisms, 'less is more' and 'God is in the details' make the practice of mindfulness seem like it should be a requirement for a degree in architecture. In art history and appreciation, some teachers refer to contemplative seeing, the mindful study of painting and sculpture, as 'beholding,' a familiar English word with connotations of appreciation and care, a way of being in which the senses are concretely engaged. Joanna Ziegler, who taught at Holy Cross College, traces the roots of beholding to philosophers including Plato and Heidegger, who defines true seeing as 'a reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences.' And she also calls on philosophical anthropologist Josef Pieper, who defines contemplation as 'visual perception prompted by loving acceptance.' Michelle Francl in her Chemistry course at Bryn Mawr, uses the phrase 'finding the bones of a problem' to describe a mindfulness exercise. Several science teachers, in teaching mindfulness of sound, call the practice 'listening out' to notice 'the acoustic ecology.' In his Advanced Trial Advocacy course at the Roger Williams School of Law, David Zlotnick called the mindfulness practice for the Cross Examination unit, 'Balancing Effort and Ease.' The practice for the Opening Statements unit (Finding the Story in the Case) he called 'Finding your Feet, Your Breath, and Your Posture.'

The language of neuroscience has introduced another vocabulary for discussing mindfulness in the classroom. Popular discussions of neuroplasticity, the ability of the human brain to change as a result of one's experience, have educated the general and the academic community about the role of disciplined practice in developing cognitive and emotional capacities. So teachers across disciplines refer to this research when discussing the benefits of mindfulness for deeper understanding of their subject matter.

There is the danger, of course, of reducing the full potential of mindful awareness when using more familiar words and phrases, yet another reason for the continual and deepening practice of those who teach it.

The question of instrumentalism. How do we teach students that cultivating mindfulness is likely to have certain beneficial outcomes while helping them to practice in the spirit of open exploration? There is no attainment and there is no non-attainment. Is it alright to give them a goal of academic attainment to motivate them and trust that it will lead to an understanding that the journey is the goal, that there is no place to go other than right where you are?

May the conversation that engages these questions and others be energetic, surprising, and fruitful!

## NOTES

1. Jacquelynn Bass, 2005, xiii.
2. Taken from a report on her Contemplative Practice Fellowship written in 2009.

## REFERENCES

- BAAS, J. 2005. *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern philosophy and western art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- EPSTEIN, M. 2004. *Thoughts without a thinker*. New York: Basic Books.
- GOLEMAN, D. 1995. *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- LANGER, E. 1997. *The power of mindful learning*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- O'REILLY, M. 1998. *Radical presence: Teaching as a contemplative practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- SIEGEL, D. 2007. *The mindful brain*. New York: Norton.
- VARELA, F., E. THOMPSON, and E. ROSCH. 1993. *Embodied mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- ZAJONC, A. 2010. *Meditation as contemplative inquiry*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.

**Mirabai Bush**, Senior Fellow, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society,  
38 Village Hill Road, Williamsburg, MA 01096, USA. Email: mirabai@  
contemplativemind.org

Copyright of Contemporary Buddhism is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.