Meditation *and the* Classroom

Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies

EDITED BY

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Mindfulness and Contemplative Practice in Art and Religion

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Teaching courses on sacred art in the great traditions of the world provides an excellent opportunity to introduce contemplative pedagogy, for it harmonizes with the sacred environment of the artist and with the culture in which the sacred art is enjoyed. For example, in the course The Dialogue of Art and Religion, students learn about Russian Orthodox icons, Himalayan Buddhist *thangkas*, and Navajo sandpaintings through studying cultural and social history, religion, formal visual analysis, and creative processes. I define this interdisciplinary teaching as a form of comparative visual studies. I normally teach this class to eighteen or twenty first-year students. Students also learn about related practices of prayer and meditation that are central to sacred traditions through practice and sustained reading and discussion.

Given the diversity of these artistic traditions, there is no single way to describe their contemplative practices. The Latin *contemplari* means to observe, consider, or gaze attentively. This definition gives clues about a way to introduce a kind of generic contemplative practice that includes four basic postures of sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. Broadly understood as methods to develop concentration, deepen understanding and insight, and to cultivate awareness and compassion, these practices can have a profound impact on a student's experience both in college and beyond. While diverse contemplative practices are rooted in the world's religious traditions, I often tell parents and students that the application of these more generic practices in a secular educational context can enhance the educational experience in unique ways. Specifically, teaching students techniques of awareness, concentration, and ways of disciplining their attention is absolutely essential in our era of fragmentation,

ever-increasing speed, multitasking, and continuously interrupted attention. In my class students learn to refine their perceptual and observational skills. They are encouraged to take chances and to foster attitudes such as curiosity and wonder, rather than cynicism about the world in which we live. This chapter outlines five simple techniques that I introduce to students in this course. Each description includes notes about the relative value of introducing that particular practice.

1. The Bow. On the first day of class after all students have arrived, I introduce "the bow" before undertaking any other introductory comments.[1] I ask all of the students to sit up straight, to place their hands on their thighs and both feet on the floor, and to soften their gaze toward the center of the room. Arranging the classroom in a circle makes this exercise more meaningful, but it is possible to do it in a larger lecture-style classroom as well. After everyone has stopped moving, I simply bow my head and upper torso toward the table and invite them to do the same. I then talk about what this means in two ways: starting that first day, I ask the students to be fully present in class and to cultivate an attitude of respect for others and the material that we will be studying. We end the class with the same gesture. Over time, this collective bow becomes a profound symbol of presence and respect in the classroom.

2. Six Points of Posture. A few classes later, I suggest that the students might find it helpful to practice the "six points of posture" as they bow.[2] This exercise adds greatly to their initial concentration when they arrive in class. Many students feel self-conscious and awkward the first few times they try this, but they have repeatedly told me that over time it helps them to feel connected to the class. To establish a stable *seat*, I ask students to sit near the edge of the chair. The *legs* should be neither crossed nor stretched out, and the feet are directly under the knees. The *hands* are placed palms down on the thighs. The *torso* is relaxed, and the spine should be straight, tilting neither to the front nor back, left nor right. The *eyes* are kept open, gazing down at a spot about three to four feet in front of the student. The *lips and mouth* should be slightly open, tongue resting against the upper palate behind the teeth.

3. Mindful Breathing and Sitting Meditation. Sitting in this posture, mindful breathing and sitting meditation help to relax and focus the mind. None of us can prevent stressful situations in life, but we can begin to learn how to control our reactions to these situations. I also tell students that many religious traditions teach methods of working with the breath as part of prayer and meditation.[3]

Adopting the six points of posture, I ask students to bring attention to the breathing. Sometimes we observe the sensations of the breath moving in the abdomen, the diaphragm, or the lungs. Sometimes we focus on the light touch of air as it enters the nostrils. Sometimes we count the breath: on the exhalation, one; next exhalation, two; and all the way to ten or twenty-one. Then we start

again at one. I remind students that depending upon their state of mind, their attention may wander. If so, they should name what it wanders to and come back to the breathing and counting. For instance, if a student is worried about an upcoming test, I might advise that person simply to acknowledge "I'm anxious," or "I'll think about that later"; and then to return to the breath. While every person's mind can seem impossible to tame, at moments we are able to rest in a quiet and calm state that is refreshing. If a group seems especially engaged by this kind of breath meditation, I urge them to look dispassionately at the reactions and habits of the mind. Once they have practiced focusing on the breathing, I suggest that they experiment by using sensations, sounds, or watching thoughts as the point of concentration.

4. Beholding. After experimenting with a series of eye exercises that help students to become aware of how they can focus their vision, students are ready to learn how to view icons, *thangkas*, and sandpaintings. I teach them how to "behold," to experience these works of art firsthand. When it is possible, I invite students to pick up a work of art, to hold it in their hands and look closely. If they cannot touch it, then we get as close as possible in order to examine the object. Sometimes this results in an experience of tremendous intimacy; at other times students are awed by what they see. Beholding is a counter both to the usual two-second walk-by experience that characterizes much museum looking and to the analytical dissection of a work of art. My own love of Buddhist *thangkas* and Islamic manuscripts and calligraphy, for example, has grown from this kind of sustained beholding. Taking students to museums and bringing actual works of art to class helps to make this a more vivid encounter for the students.

5. Contour Portraits. Learning to look at works of art *with regard* can be a new and profound experience for students who take so much of visual culture for granted. I teach the students blind contour drawing with their classmates as a way to learn how to observe with an attitude of deep respect.[4] Contour drawing involves trying to focus the attention, to merge touch and sight. The practice is to move the eye along with the pencil, keeping the body relaxed, and not looking at the paper. The most difficult part of the exercise for most students is to resist worrying about the outcome. Students work in pairs, where one student is the "artist," the other the "model." Then they reverse roles. Usually I start with one-minute timed portraits. Depending upon student engagement with the exercise, I may repeat it several times, with students changing partners and lengthening the amount of time for each round. Cultivating respect for one another through this exercise, I hope to awaken a greater sense of regard for the art we study.

Over the past few years my students have spoken about the way mindfulness exercises help to foster an atmosphere of respect in the classroom. They often

note how these practices have effectively brought the class together as a whole, and how they help to ease general anxiety about classroom performance. When courses actively create a respectful environment, students learn to listen, write, and argue persuasively from a position of civility, which helps them to become principled community members. Perhaps most significantly, contemplative practice fosters development of what Martin Buber called "I-Thou" relationships, where other people, events, and things are treated as subjects and not merely as objects for use or enjoyment.[5] Most of us live, most of the time, in a narrow band of existence where we are surrounded by "I," "me," and "mine," and we suffer from this narrow focus. I have wondered how to help students become more present to themselves, to others, and to the greater world. As a teacher, how can I ignite passion in my students for this kind of presence in their own lives? This is precisely the work of contemplative pedagogy: it is about waking up and being present to our lives—here and now.

NOTES

1. Chögyam Trungpa wrote briefly about the bow in *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala, 1984), 138–40.
2. See Pema Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 15–16.
3. The practical use of mindfulness outlined here is extrapolated from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1990). For a useful overview of approaches from Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, see Marcia Z. Nelson, *Come and Sit* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths, 2001). On working with the breath, see Richard Rosen, *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).
4. Kimon Nicolaides, *The Natural Way to Draw: A Working Plan for Art Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).
5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958).