

# An Introduction to Contemplative Learning and Inquiry across Disciplines

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## Background of Contemplative Perspectives

We are delighted that the long awaited academic window for writing this book has finally opened! The good news is that contemplative approaches to higher education are beginning to emerge across a wide cross section of disciplines and fields from the work of scholar-practitioners who are pushing the boundaries of traditional theories and practices of post-secondary instruction and learning. As well, scholar-practitioners are finding ways in which long-established contemplative theories and practices can optimally fit into or be shaped by existing academic disciplines. This is not entirely surprising. Thinkers such as Pierre Hadot (1995) and Michel Foucault (2001) have noted the convergence and divergence of contemplative and academic traditions in the past; Foucault and many others have extensively documented the “Cartesian moment,” a turn in the history of Western thought where contemplative practices, as part of care of the self in context of community and cosmos were divorced from academic pursuits. While contemplative practices have been foundational to wisdom traditions throughout various cultural periods, more recently these practices are being reexamined across different context(s) of learning, particularly in mainstream North American institutions of higher education. Many scholars are finding it increasingly necessary to incorporate the rigors of contemplative practice within academic contexts, discovering that contemplative process and method is well equipped to enhance, deepen, and broaden academic thought and praxis across disciplines. As well, as the essays in this volume make clear,

contemplative practices help focus the mind, offer the dispassionately reflective capacities of mindfulness, reduce stress, create and uncover meaning, insight and wisdom, as well as facilitate awareness of both inner and outer worlds and our fruitful engagements in them. Among the most significant contributions is that these practices help students and instructors deepen their awareness of and engagement with self, others, and the world.

In the past decade, several academic conferences and a growing educational literature have focused on contemplative approaches to instruction, learning, and knowing. As an example, the following conferences in recent years have either exclusively focused on or featured presentations about contemplative approaches to instruction and learning: Contemplative Pedagogy in Higher Education (Amherst College, May 2003), Contemplative Practices and Education: Making Peace in Ourselves and in the World (Teachers College, 2005), Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education (San Francisco, 2007), Mindful Learners: The Uses of Contemplative Practice in the Classroom (CUNY, 2006), Creativity, Consciousness, and the Academy: Bridging Interior and Exterior Realms of Teaching, Learning, and Research (University of Michigan, 2006), Developmental Issues in Contemplative Education (Garrison Institute, 2008), The Contemplative Heart of Higher Education, First Annual Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (Amherst College, Massachusetts, 2009), and The Contemplative Academy, Second Annual Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference (Amherst College, 2010).

In addition to institutions that were founded upon contemplative principles, such as the California Institute for Integral Studies, JFK University, Maharishi University, and Naropa University, all of which are accredited up through the graduate level, mainstream institutions such as Brown University and the University of Michigan have implemented contemplative curricula. The Rocky Mountain Contemplative Higher Education Network based in Colorado offers programs for academics interested in contemplative approaches to education as does the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CCMS) in Massachusetts, which has hosted annual contemplative retreats for contemplative curriculum development and issued over 130 individual fellowships for U.S. academics across North American campuses to develop courses that employ contemplative practices and more recently monthly Webinars. The creation by the CCMS of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education provided a national network to further promote this work. Finally, *Teachers College Record* (September, 2006) devoted an entire issue to the topic of contemplative education, and journal articles on contemplative approaches to instruction have appeared in other academic journals.<sup>1</sup> This research represents an acknowledgment that scholars wish to include and are including

contemplative practices and the study of contemplation as legitimate elements in a number of academic disciplines beyond the confines of humanities and religious studies.

Traditionally, contemplatives were masterful at observing their experience, capable also of observing and interpreting signs and patterns distilled from contemplative engagement in the natural world. What signs are we reading in this current burgeoning interest and activity around contemplative ways of knowing in the academy? How are we *reading the world* and in turn, interpreting one another differently from a sustained engagement with the subtle phenomena of perception and consciousness? How might contemplative practice, both traditionally and re-conceived, address the hunger and search for re-balancing the pervasive modern habits of production and consumption without sufficient awareness of its psycho-social-environmental impacts—all habit structures in which our North American culture has been mired? How might traditionally conceived notions of contemplative practitioners engage more fully with the academic and surrounding communities, ecologies, and more-than-human worlds—in turn inspiring new ethics of engagement and activism?

We read the above-mentioned proliferation of contemplative approaches to studies, instruction, and learning in higher education as a poignant sign that the current life-world situation of our time is one that needs to regain a measure of dynamic balance, wisdom, and intelligence capable of embodying sustaining and sustainable alternative courses for the future. Our current academic world, characterized by increasing complexity, connectedness, and change, is increasingly asking for curricular and pedagogical approaches that effectively address these realities. Meanwhile, we note from personal teaching experience in the academy and the research literature (Astin, 2004; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009; Lindholm, 2007; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010) that scholar-practitioners and students are looking for meaning, are interested in spiritual issues, and are looking for effective means and opportunities to explore these within their academic pursuits. Moreover, in pursuit of broadening epistemic boundaries and new knowledge, the academic community is finding contemplative approaches useful in this endeavor.

Yet in spite of the above-mentioned developments and issues, a peer-reviewed volume of current scholar-practitioners' accounts of contemplative learning and inquiry has not yet been published, until now. As we originally shared with our invited authors, we interpret this omission as an occasion and call for this book. Given what we feel is a growing collectively held view that contemplative approaches to learning and teaching will contribute significantly to the field of higher education at large, we have envisioned this book as a response to the timely need for providing an overview of the current landscape

of contemplative instruction, pedagogy, and curriculum from the perspectives of leading researchers and practitioners across departments and institutions in North America.

This volume brings together a range of contemplative academic voices that draw upon diverse contexts. Our intention is to raise awareness of the applicability of contemplative studies as a watershed field, capable of informing, enriching, and sustaining the many disciplines and instructional contexts that comprise the field of higher education. In effect, this book will be the first to comprehensively map out current academic voices and perspectives on contemplative approaches to learning and inquiry through featured writings on the details, experiences, challenges, and promise of contemplative approaches. Additionally, this book explores key theoretical aspects of contemplative learning, outlining current approaches and blind spots within various contexts and the emerging field as a whole.

We anticipate the primary readership of this book will be faculty across disciplines, teacher educators, researchers, students, consultants, and others with an interest in contemplative approaches to higher education. We also hope the book will act as a resource that will serve university educators and teachers looking for innovative and comprehensive solutions to challenges they face. Finally, we look forward to this book being adopted for curricula relating to innovative approaches to higher education.

### Characteristics of Contemplative Learning and Inquiry

To date, scholar-practitioners have taken inspiration for the investigation of contemplation from the world wisdom traditions (Buddhist, Vedantic, Taoist, Quaker, Christian, Sufi, ancient Greek, etc.) as well as perspectives in new branches of scientific thought (i.e., neurophenomenology, cognitive science, etc.), social sciences and the humanities (positive psychology, perennial philosophy, art studies, environmental studies, ethics and moral education), business (learning organizations, leadership studies), among others—each advocating approaches to teaching and learning that affirm the significance of cultivating individual and collective forms of enhanced intelligence, wisdom and well being with our students through contemplative ways of knowing.

To the extent that most if not all higher educational settings have at least an implicit or tacit contemplative dimension, we begin with the foundational assumption that any course can be taught with a contemplative orientation. Whether in the form of aspiring to hold the creative tensions of multiple perspectives or polarities in a conversation from a place of equanimity; sitting

a few minutes in engaged silence with one's class, supporting, enacting, and drawing from the intersubjective field of learning; listening from and being the relationship with one's students; engaging in contemplative practices with one's students before, during, and after class; occasioning situations that attend to the class subject in relation to the dynamics of our richly dimensioned inner lives (cognitively, somatically, aesthetically, emotionally, spiritually) and outer world, contemplative approaches to teaching and learning are informed by the needs for wholeness, integration, interrelatedness, completion, and unity.

In working toward transforming disengaged forms of academic analysis and disenchanting and instrumental habits of mind and life, the project of cultivating contemplative capacities of presence, discernment, and equanimity with one's students, colleagues, and communities becomes a significant offering for our time. At the same time, we might inquire into the distinguishing features or capacities of contemplative inquiry and what commonalities or differences might exist for engagement across academic disciplines. Several contemplative capacities or features have been noted by scholars: focused, nonconceptual attention; a witnessing mindfulness; presencing; suspension of assumptions and judgments; discernment; a broader or deeper sense of connection with others and one's surroundings and a concomitant expanded sense of self; empathy and compassion; respect; intimacy; an increased sense of wholeness and integration; a deeper sense of engagement and participation.

Emerging from this range of considerations is what might be called a transdisciplinary praxis of contemplation: an integration of the theoretical understandings of contemplation and its roles in a (post)modern, secular, and pluralistic society and the experimental, experiential practice of contemplative methodologies developed out the rigorous and scholarly interplay of various historical contemplative traditions, contemporary scientific research, the arts and humanities, health sciences, and organizational management and leadership. It seems reasonable that addressing the usefulness and issues of contemplative education in a transdisciplinary fashion allows for broader and more diverse epistemic perspectives; at the same time, a transdisciplinary approach offers greater possibilities for enriching the field of contemplative education. We already have a growing body of literature to support new and varied tributaries, such as the ones mentioned above. With time, these will add significantly to the common watershed of contemplative theory and practice, creating both a comprehensive knowledge base in theory and a diverse set of practices that can respond to changing circumstances and evolving needs not previously present or known, connecting the lived realities of our students and communities in ways that meaningfully address real and current issues. The academy in its diversity can contribute much to and advance a field once held to be

the province of the wisdom traditions and monastic orders. This collection of essays allows us to identify common needs and challenges, as well as the diverse perspectives and approaches which can allow us to develop meaningful and responsive curricular and pedagogical practices in contemplative education.

Among the important contributions we seek to make in this volume to the evolution of this praxis is an enlivened self-critical sensibility, whereby this still-young field reflects on its patterns, tendencies, assumptions, and hidden ideologies that, over time, may inhibit progress. The fact that many key questions that contemplative educators have wrestled with from the inception of this movement remain as elusive as ever underscores this need.

What exactly does—or perhaps more aptly given the wide range of activities that might be deemed contemplative—does not, constitute contemplative practice? To what degree, if any, are contemplative forms of knowing different, connected to, or emergent from somatic, sensory, rational, and emotional ways of knowing? How are contemplative forms of learning a part of transformative learning? Who is qualified to teach these practices? What curricular and pedagogical approaches are best suited to a comprehensive understanding and practice of contemplation? If contemplative practices are to be integrated in credit-bearing coursework, how are they to be assessed? Is the effectiveness of contemplative practice compromised when these methodologies are extricated from the traditions in which they have originated and evolved and adapted to academic classrooms? Contemplative practices have traditionally been situated within spiritual and moral philosophies—how necessary is such an integration? Are we prepared to accept and respond to with possibly powerful and sudden transformations or disruptions—positive or negative, physical, psychological, or existential-spiritual—which contemplative practices might bring.

While it is neither the intention nor within the scope of this volume to articulate definitive responses to all of these questions, we believe the extent to which they are acknowledged within this collection of essays represents significant strides forward in the contemplative education conversation. We are also happy to see in the following pages what might be reasonably characterized as a newfound depth in this conversation, marked by the intersection of intellectual rigor, spiritual richness, and pedagogical innovation—all of which are essential to the integrity and progress of the field. That, moreover, within this paradigm-expanding thrust sophisticated work is being done in the intersubjective dimension—arguably a new dimension of contemplative studies—adds to our enthusiasm for the project. Such a praxis of contemplative education serves in helping students develop, through contemplative practices, a deeper awareness of self, others, and the world, and through that a deeper sense of purpose, place, and connection with others, as well as surrounding communities, ecologies, and greater cosmos.

## Overview of the Book

This book offers an overview of the current landscape of contemplative instruction, pedagogy, and curriculum from a variety of perspectives across disciplines. Our hope is that this book will act as a resource to serve a broader range of university instructors looking for contemplative solutions to the teaching and learning challenges we face.

### *Part I: Contemplative Studies: A New Academic Discipline*

In this opening section, we examine a wide cross section of the work being done in the field as well as the benefits and challenges that accompany the introduction of this field into the academy. Arthur Zajonc begins by situating contemplative education within the largely objective/exterior orientation of the conventional academy. Deborah Orr fills an important gap in delineating philosophical underpinnings for this work from the perspectives of several contemplative traditions. Mara Adelman brings us back to the day-to-day realities of many students and faculty, often characterized by a morass of turbulence and information overload, and illustrates the practical benefits that contemplative methodologies offer to these challenges. John Miller reminds us that it is nothing less than the innermost being of our students that is being touched by this kind of pedagogy. David Lee Kaiser and Saratid Sakulku offer an interesting comparison between U.S. and Thai perspectives and approaches to contemplative learning and teaching. Harold Roth closes this section with a pedagogical framework he has evolved over many years of working with contemplative methodologies in the classroom.

### *Part I: Domain Specific Perspectives*

In this section, we encounter the perspectives of contemplative educators who approach this domain through the lens of particular fields of study. David Kahane shares insights from his work with students in a political science class and how contemplative practices both bring to awareness tendencies to remain oblivious to, as well as enliven compassion for, the suffering of distant strangers. Elise Young approaches history from a contemplative vantage point, drawing from Buddhist and African traditions to show the process of historicizing to be a kind of contemplative pathway. Daniel Barbezat uses contemplative practices in his economics teaching to help students become more aware of prevailing patterns that mediate desire and fulfillment. Nancy Waring chronicles the integration of mindfulness practice with conventional academic discourse in an innovative class she has created and reflects on the further curricular inroads

that have been opened up from this work at her institution. David Levy recounts his experience in an information technology class, where in addition to silent, sitting meditation, he devises an innovative, contemplative approach to the process of email. Finally, Alfred Kasniak shares insights into contemplative experience and pedagogy from the perspective of cognitive sciences.

*Part III: Contemplating Change: Individual and Collective Transformation in Contemplative Education Environments*

In this section, we encounter a variety of perspectives on the transformative nature of this work, which we will see manifests not only in the experience of individuals on the contemplative path but also on collective scales. Diana Denton provides a candid portrayal of resistance to the furthering of this work from academic colleagues, and also articulates capacities for transforming this resistance into openings for expansive levels of feeling and understanding. John Baugher similarly explores the capacity for negative emotions to be transformed into positive experiences and pathways for individual and collective growth. Daniel Vokey reminds us of the potential for compromising the depth inherent in the contemplative domain as we introduce contemplative education into an academic world that is not predicated on interior growth. Richard Brown invites us to consider the transformative spaces and moments that arise in contemplative teaching and how they may be harnessed by mindful, creative educators for profound growth. Heesoon Bai, Avraham Cohen, Tom Culham, Sean Park, Shahar Rabi, Charles Scott, and Saskia Tait provide personalized reflections on various dimensions of contemplative experience and development, with reflections into the underlying nature of experience and reality—notably the *Dao*-field as an overarching stratum of consciousness, as posited in Daoism and many contemplative lineages—that are not commonly broached in academic contemplative discourse. In so doing, they set the stage for a consideration of possible new vistas for the field in the final section of the book.

*Part IV: New Frontiers of Contemplative Learning and Instruction*

Having considered a range of perspectives and approaches to contemplative education that might reasonably be characterized as normative in nature, the question naturally arises—what might the future evolution of the field entail? In this section, several possible responses to this question begin to come into view, common to all of which is an interest in the intersubjective realm. If, as is customary in contemplative education circles, conventional education might be viewed as third-person-oriented due to its exterior/objective emphasis, with contemplative practices bringing into the mix a first-person, interior/subjective

dimension, the intersubjective domain deals with second-person, interactive, relational experience and development. Within the second-person realm, furthermore, the notion of a collective, field aspect of consciousness that may be enlivened in various types of interaction poses important ramifications not only for new classroom instructional approaches, but connections between the higher educational world and investigations into the non-dual nature of human consciousness and reality. Inasmuch as the notions of underlying interconnect-edness and non-duality are posited by most of the world's wisdom traditions, this facet might be seen as a catalyst for deepening grounding between particu-lar disciplines and the contemplative traditions that inform and inspire them but which in actuality often occupy the periphery of thinking and practice. It is one thing to engage in contemplative practice with the primary intentions of stress release and perhaps sharpening of cognitive faculties. It is quite another for contemplative instruction to be driven by a deeper non-dual relational understanding of learning and teaching.

At the same time, the second-person perspective—particularly when con-strued as “writ large” to also include cutting-edge contemporary developments in intersubjective interaction—may feed back insights to these traditional ideas, thus exemplifying aspects of an “integral” approach in which age-old precepts and new explorations coexist and coevolve.

Within this expansive perspective, Olen Gunnlaugson delineates three approaches to intersubjectivity and their ramifications for a new vision of leadership. Charles Scott draws from the work of Martin Buber and other contemplative sources important insights for pedagogical application of inter-subjective approaches. Joanne Gozawa characterizes intersubjectivity in terms of an overarching “environment” that includes not only individuals but broader dimensions, physical and non-physical (e.g., archetypal influences), of an edu-cational space. Edward W. Sarath, examining contemplative education through an integral lens, views the second-person, intersubjective domain as a key gate-way to an entirely new educational worldview that both sheds critical light on the current contemplative project and suggests openings for future progress in the field. The final contribution is a conversation about intersubjectivity and the dynamics of collective fields between editor Olen Gunnlaugson and Chris Bache, author of *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness* and *Dark Night, Early Dawn: Steps to a Deep Ecology of Mind*.

### Closing Reflections

It is difficult to imagine a more compelling response to the legacy of appeals for educational reform that—particularly in light of the circumstances of today's world—are issued with an ever-increasing crescendo than the integration of

contemplative study and practice in the higher education. Our hope is that this collection of essays at once serves as a summing up and, indeed, a celebration of the accomplishments made so far. Our intent is that the book establishes criteria by which further strides are to be measured, and that it also provides a glimpse of future possibilities that will be pursued by those contemplative scholar-practitioners who are positioned, inclined, and equipped as ground-breakers. The sheer volume of activity in this emerging field being pursued, the groundswell of interest in the current generation of students, the conductivity of the field toward first-rate scholarship as well as cutting-edge pedagogical innovation: these are signs that the field of contemplative studies in higher education is here to stay. What remains to be seen is what forms and directions the discipline takes as it evolves, and the extent to which growth is, on one hand, confined to horizontal expansion of the prevailing contemplative studies paradigm as opposed to, on the other, vertical transformation in which it becomes grounded in entirely new underpinnings.

While our inclination is to promote thinking and discourse that favors the second of these, it has been our distinct pleasure and honor to have had a chance to play a part in the evolution of this project in its early stages. No work is closer to the heart of what education is ideally all about.

We would like to express our appreciation for all the support and diligent work of the editorial staff at SUNY Press. Thanks to Nancy Ellegate who shepherded the book through the various stages of production and the editorial and marketing team she coordinated: Our thanks to Jenn Bennett and Kate McDonnell of SUNY Press, and Sue Morreale and Sharon Green at Partners Composition.

### Dedication

We dedicate this book to those intrepid and daring souls who, in exploring the rich landscape of contemplative practice in their work and lives, have called and are currently calling into question and parting company with a whole range of educational conventions that have unwittingly compromised or marginalized the human journey of learning, growing, healing, and evolving course of development. Without your humanizing visions and wisdom, none of this project could have been possible.

### Note

1. Other journals include the *American Journal of Education*, *Educational Theory*, *Journal of Transformative Education*, *Educational Leadership*, *Educational Insights*,

*Paideusis, Journal of Philosophy of Education, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Liberal Education, Innovative Higher Education, English Journal, Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning, Educational Psychologist, Social Work Education, New Directions for Community Colleges, New Directions for Teaching & Learning, Encounter, Reflective Practice, Music Educators Journal, Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, Trumpeter, and International Journal of Lifelong Education* among others.

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