Introduction to the Practices

The chapters in part 2 present examples of contemplative practices being used in higher education classrooms. Many of the courses were taught by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society’s contemplative practice fellows; we drew from their insightful fellowship reports and presentations. Only teachers in four-year institutions were eligible for the fellowships, so we do not have examples of contemplative courses in community colleges. Excellent courses in community colleges do exist; some are discussed in Contemplative Teaching and Learning (2010), edited by Keith Kroll, first published as a special issue of New Directions for Community Colleges. We also haven’t presented examples of every practice, but we hope that those we do discuss will provide an overview and stimulate creative new methods for your courses.

INTRODUCING PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM

Contemplative practices, though quite varied, have much in common. They all cultivate greater focus; some lead to insight, wisdom, and compassion. Although here we stress the specific, instrumental use of these practices in courses, we recognize their potential for profound transformation in ourselves and our students. They are vehicles for students to gain insight and wisdom far beyond what
they learn in our courses. When we teach these practices, we are planting seeds; we can trust that they will grow and flourish long after students leave the academy.

The following guidelines may be useful for those who are designing and teaching a contemplative course:

- Plan the structure of the exercise but hold it lightly, more like a structured improvisation, so that you can be present in the moment with student responses.
- Frame the exercises skillfully. Choose appropriate language, timing, context, and other factors so that students are open to learn and have the space to discover their own responses.
- Have a clear pedagogical purpose for the practice, so that you can lead the session toward the goal and properly assess its impact.
- Provide an opportunity for students to opt out during any exercise so that they feel safe in exploring it.
- Allow students time after the exercise to reflect on and write about their experience.
- Explain the purpose of the practice in the course so that students understand how it is affecting their learning.

Along with these reminders for facilitating the practices, Professor Gurleen Grewal of the University of San Francisco has offered some helpful suggestions for conducting practices in the classroom to support and increase the efficacy of the many practices:

- After a long period of discussion, provide the opportunity for some mindful movement. Have students get up and stretch or walk quietly around the room.
- Appreciate gaps during discussions. As you and others speak, allow spaces and gaps to occur. Notice any anxiety, impatience, or tension that arises during these open moments—or feelings of competition or irritation with others.
- Appreciate the interplay of serious logical exchange with spontaneous playfulness and humor.
- Practice holding the questions posed by others or yourself without needing to supply an immediate response.
• Allow room for different textures in discussions: cool, careful, fiery, tender, intimate, bold, expansive. Think of diversity in discussion styles as analogous to biodiversity in a healthy ecosystem.
• Trust disagreement and doubt. Do not artificially work for agreement, but value nonaggressive differences and direct feedback.
• Let go of preconceived outcomes for the discussion or for your contribution. Notice your resistance to dissolving preconceived goals. Allow the discussion to emerge in ways that are original, creative, surprising, and adventurous.
• If you are generally vocal in class, allow space for those who are silent to speak. Practice courtesy and compassion as well as directness.

We hope that these guidelines and suggestions will help in designing your course, whether you use the practices that follow or create your own.

PERSONAL PRACTICE
The heart of the contemplative course is practice. Like any other skill or subject matter, we have to know it well before we can teach it to others. With contemplative practices, it is even more important to be soundly grounded in the practice, since practice affects not only how students inquire and learn but also how teachers teach and how they act in the world. We practice to be fully present in the moment, listen deeply, refrain from judgment while exercising discernment, and act from our deepest source of knowing. The teacher’s presence is the heart of teaching.

We can encourage students to strengthen their attention, sustain their commitment, cultivate equanimity and openness, realize insights, and appreciate interconnection only if we are on that path of awakening ourselves. Students have excellent radar. They will be listening for the humility, clarity, and calm that are integral to contemplative awareness. They notice the quality of our interactions. If we are not embodying contemplative qualities, why should they practice?

In contemplative teaching, the principles of contemplative practice guide the pedagogy: seeing things as they are, being open to new ideas, appreciating the contribution of silence to learning, valuing each human voice, honoring the constantly changing nature of ideas. To design a contemplative course, you need these capacities. You will cultivate them through practice.
Your experience will also guide you when students encounter difficulties with practice—the usual struggles with distraction, doubt, sleepiness, and lack of motivation, as well as the uncovering of repressed memories and ideas.

This is not to say that you need to be enlightened or be a saint to introduce practice into your course, but that you need to have a practice that is fairly well grounded and to be committed to making it an important part of your life.

**Beginning and Cultivating a Practice**

Choose the practice that seems right for you, whatever it might be. You may focus on one or include several techniques, combining yoga with meditation or contemplative reading with walking the labyrinth. You might start with a book of instructions or an audio series, but eventually most people need a teacher to guide them past the beginning stages. If you are interested in introducing yoga postures in your classroom, it is very important to have studied with a mature yoga teacher and have learned the potential dangers of postures not performed correctly.

Try to commit to regular, perhaps daily, practice sessions. If you cannot sustain a regular schedule, persevere as best you can. As with most other activities that have not yet become familiar and routine, it's common to postpone engagement with contemplative practice because circumstances are not perfect. It's easy to make excuses about lacking materials, supplies, or adequate time and space ("If only I had a nice meditation cushion or a dedicated yoga room and an hour free after work—then I could really do this"). If your mind sounds like this, try to use the situation as an opportunity to face your discomfort. Begin your practice. Really, you probably already have everything you need!

You can make things easier for yourself by committing to brief but regular sessions. For example, if you decide to take up a silent meditation practice, it is perfectly fine to begin with just a few minutes per session. After you've become accustomed to your short sitting periods, honestly and gently assess how that amount of time is serving you, and increase your practice time if it feels right to do so.

Feeling twinges of guilt or self-indulgence when you're beginning a practice is common. For many of us, time is precious, and we face many demands from family, friends, and work. In those moments when you question your priorities, remember that contemplative practices are not distractions or diversions from daily activities but opportunities to get in touch with what is deeply meaningful.
to us. Have we lost the ability to be at peace in our moments of rest? Cluttered
schedules not only constrict the time we have, but also manipulate our under-
standing of value and worth. It is crucial to remember the simple value and beauty
of life as it is, not as it is used. The simple awareness cultivated by contemplative
practices can bring us back in touch with this beauty, enriching our interactions
with others.

Here are some suggestions for supporting a regular practice:

- Find a space for practice, however small, in your home or office, where you
can reflect, be quiet, go inside, and get centered. Identify it as a place of inspira-
tion with a flower, a candle, a photo, or any other object sacred to you. Over
time, the space will support your practice. When you sit or do yoga there, you
will be supported by your intention and reminded of other times you have
practiced.

- Keep a “practice journal” of your thoughts, experiences, and questions. If you
attend workshops or retreats, take notes on what is said; if you read a good
book, write down what moves you. Then, when you feel bored or discouraged,
reread your journal to connect to your practice and your intentions for undertak-
ing it in the first place.

- Join a local community of practitioners at a studio, meditation center, house
of worship, or your university. Regular meetings with others help keep practice
consistent in your daily life.

- Spend time outdoors. Slowing down to observe the natural world can help
order your priorities and is an easy way to reengage your senses.

- If you are able to get away, a retreat can invigorate your practice or deepen an
already strong one. Retreat centers are usually simple places with few distrac-
tions. You can also “retreat” at home, which will present you with the interest-
ing challenge of focusing on your practice while being surrounded by familiar
distractions.

Guidance

Contemplative practices are not always peaceful and stress free. In fact, while
some may be more gentle and others more rigorous, all practices are intended
to be somewhat challenging. Learning often happens through coping with
difficulties, and the contemplative path can be intense, radically transforming your sense of self and identity. While this could be a largely peaceful and pleasant process, it is quite common to experience ups and downs, and most contemplative traditions recognize that difficult periods may need to be worked through. In such times, the guidance of a teacher, spiritual director, counselor or other guide can be very helpful.

Resources
The following resources combined with those at the end of each practice chapter are a place to begin: