



# The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry

Issue No. 1 • 2014

# Responding to the Challenges of a Contemplative Curriculum

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*The undergraduate Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California, is one of a small number of undergraduate programs that offer a holistic, transformative, and integrative approach to psychology. One important dimension of the program's educational approach is the use of contemplative practices in the classroom. Drawing on the teaching experiences of four experienced faculty members, the author discusses the multiple educational purposes that contemplative pedagogies serve as well as the various strategies used to introduce and integrate these transformational pedagogies into the classroom. The author also discusses ways to maintain students' psychological safety, ensure instructors' contemplative competence, and maintain the separation of church and state.*

*Keywords: contemplation, meditation, mindfulness, higher education, undergraduate psychology, transformative learning, student-centered teaching, whole person pedagogy, curriculum development, course design, teacher training, church and state, transformation, consciousness, spirituality, creativity, interdisciplinary, holistic, integral, mind-body, experiential, sacred, soul, religious experience, literature, transpersonal studies*

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**T**he undergraduate Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California, is one of a small number of undergraduate programs that offer a holistic, transformative, and integrative approach to psychology. Established in 2003, the program grew out of a liberal arts curriculum created in 1994 and benefitted from the pioneering work of JFKU's Graduate School of Holistic Studies. I have been teaching in the program since 2003 and was its director for three years. One important dimension of our holistic approach is the use of contemplative practices in the classroom. We have had tremendous success with these practices, and our students have consistently reported significant benefits. This success can be attributed, I believe, not only to the power of the practices, but to our faculty's collective experience, knowledge, and skill in meeting the challenges that these practices pose. In this article I discuss the challenges we have faced and how we have responded to them. The main challenges include: when and how to introduce contemplations; how to integrate contemplations with more conventional pedagogies; how to maintain safety; how much instructor experience, knowledge, and skill are needed; and how to maintain separation of church and state.

Before addressing the challenges, I will define what we mean by the terms *holistic*, *transformative*, and *integrative*. By *holistic* we mean that we value the whole person—body, mind, heart, and spirit—and that we seek to understand and support individuals within the various relational contexts in which they live. We also study psychological phenomena, concepts, theories, methods, and findings within their diverse social, cultural, and epistemic contexts. Systems theory is one contemporary expression of our holistic approach, but so are different religious, spiritual, and postmodern philosophies that emphasize contextuality, relationality, and interdependence (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2009). By *transformative* we mean that our program seeks to catalyze profound learning, growth, and development in our students so that they can live to their fullest potential and can contribute in life-enhancing ways to their families, communities, workplaces, and the larger world. Because of our emphasis on holistic transformation, our approach to education is similar to that of Cranton (2000, 2006), Dirkx (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2009, 2012), Ferrer (Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2010), Gunnlaugson (2009), O’Sullivan (1999, 2012), Palmer (1983; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), Taylor (2009), Torosyan (2010), and Zajonc (2006; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), all of whom emphasize modes of transformative learning that include but go beyond the rational. Although the terms *holistic* and *integrative* are sometimes used synonymously, we often use them separately and distinctively (see Gunnlaugson, 2010, for a similar distinction). Generally, we use *integrative* to indicate that we teach multiple perspectives, including those that are not explicitly holistic or that critique holism. Our integrative program is pluralistic: we value mainstream as well as alternative and complementary approaches, such as somatic, transpersonal, humanistic, and planetary approaches. We are aligned with the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (2007) and are currently reviewing our program in light of the new guidelines released in August 2013.

The triad of holism, transformation, and integration informs the overall curriculum and many of the individual courses, to a greater or lesser extent. Many of our instructors use a wide range of teaching methods: from lecture, discussion, and debate, to experiential exercises, creative projects, oral presentations, and field work. About half of the instructors at our Pleasant Hill campus use contemplative exercises in their classes. I will discuss some of my own experiences with contemplation in the classroom and also convey the related and contrasting experiences of three other teachers in our program. Although I will be focusing on my experiences at JFKU, I will also draw on my experiences using contemplative practices at other schools, including UC Berkeley, St. Mary’s College of California, Naropa University, Oakland, and California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. Because my academic training is interdisciplinary, I have used contemplation in courses on psychology, literature, creativity, and religion, and it has been highly effective in all of

these disciplines (see Burack, 1999). I have been working with contemplative and meditative pedagogies for nearly two decades; two of my colleagues, Vernice Solimar and Susanne West, have each been using these pedagogies for 27 years; and a third colleague, Craig Chalquist, has been using them for eight years.

### **Multiple Purposes**

To fully understand the challenges posed by pedagogical uses of contemplative practices, it is important to understand the purposes for such use. These purposes are generally of three types: those that focus on the specific course learning outcomes; those that seek to cultivate particular cognitive, affective, and spiritual qualities in students; and those that aim to improve students' overall growth, well-being, and development. The purposes related to course learning outcomes include:

- increasing understanding of and insight into the subject matter;
- exploring particular issues or solving particular problems raised in the course;
- providing a holistic experience of course concepts, theories, methods, and findings;
- demonstrating the limits of a strictly rationalist, empirical perspective;
- exploring nondual philosophical, religious, and spiritual views as well as nondiscursive forms of knowing;
- relating the subject matter to the students' life experiences; and
- creating class solidarity through shared silence and reflection.

Purposes that aim at cultivating particular cognitive, affective, and spiritual capacities include:

- expanding and deepening consciousness and awareness;
- enhancing perception, attention, memory, reasoning, imaging, empathy, compassion, intuition, and creativity;
- consciously integrating the various forms of knowledge gained from the different faculties;
- accessing body-based sources of knowing and valuing; and
- clarifying and modulating emotions.

Broader purposes include:

- promoting overall growth and development;
- promoting overall health, well-being, and vitality;
- encouraging ecological consciousness and social conscience;
- enhancing self-awareness, knowledge, and confidence;
- supporting the quest for self-actualization, realization, and transcendence;
- developing effective approaches to life/work challenges;
- clarifying life direction and vocational path; and
- encouraging the contribution to local, national, and global transformation.

All of these purposes are student-centered. They are aimed at enhancing the student's learning and life (see also Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Zajonc, 2006; Zajonc, 2009; Hart, 2004; Hart, 2008; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008).

But there are also teacher-centered purposes which emerge from the instructor's vision and values. Among our faculty, the most important teacher-centered purpose is that we consider contemplative practices to be a necessary and powerful means of expressing our holistic or integrative orientation. Contemplative practices—as well as other experiential and creative practices and projects—are needed to engage the whole student. Throughout this essay, I will use the terms “contemplation” and “meditation” interchangeably. Walsh and Vaughn (1993B) define meditation as “a family of practices that train attention in order to bring mental processes under voluntary control and to cultivate specific mental qualities such as awareness, insight, concentration, equanimity, and love” (pp. 52-53). Some meditations focus and sustain attention on an outer or inner object (e.g., a thing, word, image, organ, etc.), while others direct attention more diffusely and flexibly to an outer or inner event (e.g., ambient sounds, inner stream of consciousness, dynamic process, etc.). The former are sometimes called “concentration” practices, while the latter are called “awareness” practices (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993B, p. 53; Kornfield, 1993, p. 56). Meditative attention can be fixed or fluid, focused or diffuse, hard or soft. I am aware that some communities do not use the words *contemplation* and *meditation* interchangeably. For example, some Buddhist communities consider contemplation (*samapati*) to be an early phase of meditative practice (*bhavana*), while some Christian communities consider contemplation (*contemplatio*) to be the last and final phase of meditative practice (*meditatio*) (Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, & Diener, 1991, p. 20; Underhill 1910, pp. 314, 328-357).

At JFKU, we see it as our responsibility to not limit higher education—whether public or private—to a strictly cognitive-intellectual enterprise. Higher education at its best necessarily promotes the development of students' perceptual, emotional, imaginative, intuitive, rational, ethical, and social capacities and engages the full range of their experiences and relationships, from the mundane to the extraordinary (see also Esbjorn-Hargens, 2010). Thus, higher education must include contemplative approaches. While contemplation is not a panacea, my colleagues and I have observed that it contributes significantly to meeting the educational purposes I mentioned. In my own course evaluations, students have consistently mentioned the integration of contemplative practices as one of the most valuable aspects of the courses. In our senior capstone course, nearly all of our students tell us they have been profoundly transformed at all levels by their educational journey.

### **When and How to Introduce Contemplations**

One of the most important challenges that I and my colleagues face is determining when and how to introduce contemplations in the classroom. We agree that the

key is to be mindfully flexible. No one contemplative approach or set of contemplative approaches fits all students, all classes, or all subject matters (see also Brady, 2007). My own decisions about what practices to use, when and how to introduce them, and when and how to modify them always depend on the subject matter and the particular group of students in the class. This ability to be flexible requires an intuitive sensitivity to students and a willingness to spontaneously modify one's pedagogical approach. I generally teach from a detailed outline but allow myself to modify it in accordance with student needs and interests. Many of our faculty also say that they are prepared to spontaneously drop, add, or modify a contemplative practice depending on class needs and dynamics.

At this point in my teaching career, I use some type and degree of contemplative practice in all my classes. I also try to introduce some form of reflection in the very first class session. After reviewing the syllabus, I invite students to silently reflect on what drew them to the class, and what they hope to get out of it. If it is a small class, I ask each student to introduce herself or himself and to say what drew them to the class and what they hope for. In a large class, instead of going around to every student, we break into smaller groups, and students introduce themselves to the members of their group.

Even if I only lead a 1-minute silent reflection on student aspirations for the course, the practice establishes the value of silence, solitude, and contemplation in the classroom. Almost inevitably, the silence deepens the felt sense of connection in the class and opens students' hearts and minds to one another and to the educational journey they are commencing together. An implicit message is also conveyed: there is value in connecting deeply with your own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions before sharing with others. A secondary message is that solitude can be achieved even in a group setting.

### **How to Integrate Contemplation with More Conventional Pedagogies**

In all of my university classes I integrate contemplative practices with more conventional pedagogies such as lecture, discussion, debate, oral presentation, and creative exploration. I accomplish this blending mainly through oscillation, moving back and forth between these different teaching modes. Sometimes, I begin with a more didactic approach and then invite students to contemplate one of the ideas or images that were discussed (see Burack, 1999). Other times, I invite students to first discover, through contemplation, their own view of an issue, and I then build the discussion or adapt the lecture around those initial insights.

Regardless of whether the contemplation precedes or follows a lecture or discussion, I often employ the following sequence. I begin with a silent meditation, usually on a question, a concept, an image, a text, or a personal experience. After the silent contemplation, I encourage students to do a minute or two of silent freewriting or freedrawing to record what they experienced during the contem-

plation. Next, I ask students to break up into pairs or small groups and to share, if they so choose, any aspect of what they experienced or the insights they gained from those experiences. Once the pairs or group sharings have concluded, I ask if anyone wants to share with the full class. This movement from inner experience to silent expression to various levels of interpersonal communication mirrors and reinforces the creative process of students. It also follows the trajectory of spiritual manifestation (or emanation) that is discussed in many traditions: the movement of silent, formless Spirit outward into, and as, the world of forms (see Burack, 2005A and 2005C; Wilber, 1977, 2006). Several of my colleagues also use this inside-out approach.

In more mainstream psychology courses, such as Social Psychology, I mainly use contemplative practices to help students connect course concepts, theories, methods, and findings to their own lives. Thus, in each Social Psychology class session I invite students to contemplate an experience that reflects the topic under consideration, e.g., cognitive dissonance, social attributions, or stereotypes. That experience can be their own personal experience, their observation of others' experiences, or their observation of broader societal phenomena. Inevitably the contemplation yields deeper and more surprising insights than if I simply asked the question in class and waited for responses. Often, students will report epiphanies that produce a significant shift in understanding or outlook. For example, in the unit on prejudice, many students are more able to see and own some of their prejudices and to notice the subtle ways in which their beliefs and biases enter into their perceptions and behavior. Many also decide to be more mindful about the attitudes and judgments they form of others—and to be more respectful toward individuals and groups who do not share their views and values.

In some courses I lead a contemplative exercise in the first session to find out students' initial holistic understanding of the course subject matter. This exercise produces a brief survey of the spectrum of perspectives present in the room, as well as a baseline from which to examine the subsequent impact of the course material on that spectrum of perspectives. In the first session of my course on humanistic psychology, for example, I invite students to reflect on their understanding of what it means to be a human being. I then lead a second contemplation to evoke their understanding of what it means to be a person. The nature of "human being" and of "person" is a central issue in the course. At the end of the course, I repeat the two contemplations, and students have a chance to discuss how their understandings of these concepts have evolved.

In my Transpersonal Psychology class I lead a wide variety of contemplations because one of the key course learning outcomes is understanding the nature of nonordinary experience. The more holistic the learning outcomes, the more that contemplative practices are needed. It also works the other way: teachers who

are inclined to use contemplation in their classes are also more inclined to include holistic course learning outcomes. In the Transpersonal Psychology course I introduce the following practices: breath meditation, body scan, mindfulness of sound, mindfulness of thoughts, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of sensations, mindful inquiry into one's field of awareness, visualizations, contemplation of dreams, contemplation of one's nonordinary experiences, as well as mantra meditations and chants (using sacred sounds, words, and phrases from different traditions). The practices often evoke nonordinary experiences, so the students gain a holistic understanding of the subject matter. At the beginning of the course I lead two different contemplations: one on the word "religious," and the other on the word "spiritual." Students discover and write down their personal associations (thoughts, sensations, images, feelings) with these words. I repeat these contemplations at the end of the course, so students can discover how their associations have changed.

In my course on sacred poetry, after a general discussion of a poem, students are invited to contemplate a related experience in their own lives. I have used such poems as William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud," Mary Oliver's "The Ponds," and Derek Wolcott's "Love After Love." We also contemplate key words, images, and symbols in the poems (see Burack, 1999). I illustrate the power of meditation to produce mental imagery by asking the students to close their eyes and simply listen to the poem being read aloud. Most discover that they can see and understand the poem better when they listen with their eyes closed as compared to reading along as the poem is read aloud. I also invite at least two readings of most poems to demonstrate that each person brings his or her own unique breath, understanding, experience, and voice to the poem and so makes the poem come alive in a unique way. The poem is not alive until it has been breathed—aloud or subvocally—into life. Leading a brief meditation before reading the poem aloud can deepen and diversify the ways the poem is then read and understood.

### **How to Maintain Safety**

Contemplative practices are powerful: they can create significant transformations—for good and for ill. It is of utmost importance that they be thoughtfully, sensitively, and skillfully introduced and that the safety and well-being of students be of paramount concern. My colleagues and I are in agreement that while brief, simple contemplations of ideas, texts, questions, or images can be effectively conducted by many teachers, the extensive use of contemplation in the classroom should be reserved for those teachers who are not only skilled in contemplation but who also have done extensive personal psychospiritual work and who have extensive psychospiritual knowledge. If contemplative practices are mishandled, damage can be done to students' psyches (see Wilber, 1993). That damage can be minor or major, temporary or permanent. Disturbing reactions can be triggered



when students have loose psychological boundaries or insufficient ego strength, or when the contemplations are too deep and prolonged or focus too intensively on students' unconscious material.

My colleagues and I have experienced no severe disturbances in our classrooms—and very few minor disturbances. This is probably because we take various measures to minimize the likelihood of such disturbances. The first measure is that we tell our students that all contemplations are voluntary. None is ever required. Indeed, before every contemplation that I lead, I tell the class that “As always, this practice is completely voluntary. Only participate if you feel comfortable and prepared to do so; there is no problem at all with not participating.” Students who do not participate are often encouraged to do some freewriting or to do whatever silent reflection they find beneficial. No student should ever feel compelled or subtly pressured to participate. Some instructors include in their syllabi a sentence stating that voluntary contemplations and other experiential exercises will be used to enhance student learning, exploration, and growth.

We encourage our students to rely on their own discernment, comfort, and values when deciding whether or not to participate. To minimize the sense of compulsion, I frame my contemplative instructions as invitations, not as commands. For example, instead of saying, “Close your eyes and take a few slow deep breaths,” I say, “I invite you to close your eyes and take a few slow deep breaths.” During the pairs and small group sharings, I tell students that they don't need to share at all and that if they want to share, they should only share what they feel comfortable sharing.

The question has been raised why we make contemplative exercises voluntary when university instructors regularly require students to participate in other emotionally challenging learning exercises, such as debates, field studies, and self-reflective papers. To begin with, I and most of my colleagues consider meditation to be, in part, a practice of freedom: one that is freely engaged in and that helps to liberate the practitioner (Goldstein, 2003). It would be contradictory to compel such a practice. Second, we do not want to override our students' sense of their own psychological limits. Contemplation has the power to create a level of self-intimacy that is greater than can be achieved through many conventional pedagogies. Some students may be intuitively aware that they are not emotionally prepared to enter the vast terrain of their inner landscape, so it would be both psychologically and ethically problematic to impel them to do so. Third, mandating contemplation would incite resentment and defiance in some students and perhaps permanently sour their openness to contemplative practice. If, instead, these students are given the unpressured opportunity to not participate, they might discover from their peers that they missed out on a valuable experience and so decide to participate in future contemplations. In fact, we often see this happen.

A second safety measure is the instruction to “stop doing the contemplation if you experience discomfort or agitation that you feel you cannot handle—and immediately open your eyes.” I also tell students that if they are having an especially difficult time to let me know right away. Although meditation is a powerful technique for working with difficult emotions (Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Goldstein, 2003; Goleman, 1997), the classroom setting generally does not permit an instructor to give the kind of personal attention needed to steer a student through a particularly troubling experience, so it is better for the student to simply come out of the meditation. When individual students tell me they want to attempt longer and more challenging meditations, I invite them to come to my office hours where I can give them the individual time and attention they deserve.

Some years ago Professor West had a student who became quite agitated. Professor West engaged the student in a calming and grounding conversation that helped the student regain her equilibrium. I have experienced only a few situations in which students were agitated to the point where they needed to stop the practice. The priority is usually to help the students to calm and ground themselves. Bringing them outside into nature or asking them to recall their phone number and address (and other mundane information) or inviting them to focus on familiar objects in their environment can help them to reconnect to their ordinary sense of self and world. There is great value in instructors sharing with one another their approaches for dealing with difficult contemplative experiences.

A third safety measure has to do with limiting the frequency, length, and type of contemplation. Our teachers are careful to balance contemplative practices with other pedagogical practices and not to allow the former to dominate classroom time. Generally, our face-to-face class sessions are 2.5 hours, and we almost never lead a contemplation for undergraduates that lasts longer than 15 or 20 minutes. The typical contemplation ranges from 2 to 10 minutes, and most are under 5 minutes. Even a one-minute breath meditation can do wonders to calm, clarify, and center students' minds and relax their bodies. Professor Chalquist usually does not introduce a contemplative practice until the third class session so that he can get to know students and see where everyone is at.

While our faculty members agree that we need to be careful not to trigger psychospiritual disturbances in class, we disagree as to what types of practices to exclude. Professor West, for example, refrains from doing any contemplations with undergraduates that focus on shadow material. All contemplative explorations of self are focused on positive dimensions of the students' personalities. In contrast, I and other instructors have found it safe and effective to work with less positive dimensions of students' psyches, including their inner critics. We concur with the growing body of literature that emphasizes the transformational value of students contemplating difficult emotions—their own and others (Baugher, forthcoming;

Dutro, 2008; Johnston Hurst, 2010; Konrad, 2010). Indeed, one could argue that many significant transformations arise from a willingness to bring the light of consciousness to difficult emotions and shadowy impulses. It is important, however, to recognize that some courses—such as those in the social sciences and humanities, and especially graduate courses in counseling, social work, and ministry—tend to draw students who are more interested in and prepared to engage in deep transformative work.

One of the ways I prepare students to meet their inner critic is to discuss the origins of the inner critic as well as lead a protective meditation. First, I explain the original protective intent and function behind the inner critic: it was a suffering and alienated part of the self that emerged to protect the self from external attacks by parents, siblings, or other significant others. Its “logic” was: “I’ll mimic and internalize their criticisms and keep you in line so that you don’t get hurt even worse by their attacks.” I suggest that one of the best ways of working with the inner critic is to bring compassionate awareness to it and try to see its original protective aim. Through compassion, understanding, and love, the critic can be tempered, transformed, and consciously integrated into the self. After explaining the dynamics of the inner critic, I introduce a protective meditation, inviting students to visualize themselves surrounded by a protective sphere of golden light. I suggest that they visualize the voices of the inner critic as arising from within but immediately passing through the protective shield of light—the shield lets out negative energy but doesn’t let it back in. They can then attend to the voices at a safe distance where the voices are unable to hurt them. Both Professor Chalquist and I invite our students to dialogue with their inner critics.

Occasionally, I also invite students to contemplate a difficult experience and see if the contemplation reveals any lessons or transformations that resulted from it. By inviting this reframing of the experience, students are frequently able to discover some positive life-enhancing benefit of the negative experience. Finding the positive in the negative is a little like the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold. To ensure student safety, I encourage them to not choose a very difficult or upsetting experience—only one that they feel prepared to work with in class for a few minutes. These contemplations have consistently been effective for helping students find the wisdom and compassion in their experiences of suffering, failure, despair, disillusion, illness, and loss.

Another measure used to promote safety is preceding a contemplative exploration with a brief grounding practice: inviting students to attend to their breath and body, or to sense their hands and feet, or to feel their connection to the ground through their feet. Professor West often follows a contemplative practice with a more discursive process—dialogue in dyads—that brings students into their prefrontal cortex and so returns them to the everyday experience of themselves and the world (see Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Hart, 2008).

A potential source of discomfort for students is the feeling that “this practice seemed to work well for everyone else but not for me.” I always tell students that responses to particular practices vary greatly, and that no one practice works well for everyone. I encourage them to give each practice their best effort, and if after trying the practice several times, they still don’t find it useful, to just let it go. The key thing is to discover what works and what doesn’t work for oneself. This pragmatic approach has proven effective for my students—and for me!

A final and very important safety measure is creating ground rules for sharing. I use the following rules:

- Everything personal that is shared should remain confidential and not be discussed outside of class.
- Whatever your dialogue partner or group members shared with you in confidence should not be shared with others in the class unless the person gives you permission to do so.
- Only give feedback to someone if he or she requests it.
- Try to be sensitive, supportive, and constructive when you are invited to give feedback.

### **How Much Instructor Experience, Knowledge, and Skill Are Needed**

All of these suggestions imply that instructors should have adequate experience, knowledge, and skill to effectively lead contemplations in the classroom. The issue of how much experience, knowledge, and skill are needed is subject to debate. My experience at JFKU and at other schools has been that instructors generally do not attempt to introduce contemplative practices unless they have adequate background. But if we are going to encourage wider use of contemplative practices in the classroom—which I am strongly in favor of—it is important that guidelines and training programs be established. For many years The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (I have been a member since 2010) has been offering retreats and training sessions to educators ([www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)). I encourage the Center to develop guidelines on this important matter.

I believe that the best preparation for leading contemplation is having one’s own contemplative practice and being committed to one’s own holistic growth and transformation. I recommend that instructors have at least two years of experience as regular meditators before leading classroom meditations that 1) tap deep personal issues, 2) are mentally complex or taxing, or 3) exceed a few minutes. It is probably okay for instructors with less experience to lead brief, simple contemplative exercises like those that focus for a couple minutes on the breath or on a concept, word, image, or text. Second, I recommend that instructors only lead contemplations that they understand and value; otherwise, they will not be able to lead them effectively. Third, instructors should genuinely value the contemplative

growth and holistic transformation of their students. Fourth, I recommend that instructors become as knowledgeable as possible about meditation, the psychological difficulties that can arise in meditative settings, and the various ways to address these difficulties. Although instructors are not expected to be therapists, our having some knowledge of the psychological dimensions of contemplation is quite useful and probably necessary. Fortunately, most of us have access to other campus resources, such as student support services. When difficulties arise in our classrooms that we cannot handle, we can and should reach out to professional staff in our campus counseling center, health clinic, or chaplaincy office. We need to be aware of the psychological and spiritual services available to our students, perhaps even identifying and getting to know professional staff who know how to work effectively with the kinds of spiritual emergencies that meditation can sometimes catalyze (S. Grof & C. Grof, 1989). Fifth, in order to create classroom environments that are open, safe, and supportive enough for our students to engage in contemplation and share their contemplative experiences, we need to develop strong emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills and become highly skilled group facilitators. In many ways, I agree with Carl Rogers (1980), who thought that three essential educator attitudes—genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard—powerfully facilitate the holistic growth of students.

### **How to Maintain Separation of Church and State**

One of the hot buttons around the use of contemplative practices in public universities is whether or not it infringes on the separation of church and state. This issue arises from the fact that most contemplative practices initially arose out of religious traditions. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution has two “religion clauses”: 1) the establishment clause (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”); and 2) the free expression clause (“Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise thereof [religion]”). The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that First Amendment does not bar the teaching of diverse religions when “such study” is “presented objectively as part of a secular program of education” (cited in Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, pp. 100-101). I recently contacted two constitutional law scholars—Erwin Chemerinsky, University of California, Irvine; and Geoffrey Stone, University of Chicago—and asked them if it is a violation of the First Amendment to experientially expose university students to a variety of religious practices—such as meditations, chants, prayers, and healing rituals—when the pedagogical intention is to give students an experiential understanding of these transformative practices, not to indoctrinate them. Chemerinsky and Stone said there is no violation of the First Amendment as long as 1) the purpose is nondenominational and 2) the approach is truly comparative and noncoercive (personal communications, October 24-30, 2013). JFKU law professor Peter Gabel expressed a similar view (personal communication, October 31, 2013).

Of course, a serious violation does arise when university teachers use contemplation or other transformational techniques to inculcate a particular religious, spiritual, or secular worldview. Of paramount importance is maintaining a pluralistic classroom free of coercion, indoctrination, dogmatism, and conversion (see Bryant, 2006; Bryant & Schwartz, 2006). This approach requires that the teacher be open, honest, fair, and self-aware. It also requires that diverse perspectives are considered with a sensitive and intelligent blend of appreciation and critique. In a contemplative, pluralistic classroom, no position should ever be the sole object of critique or appreciation. Every position has its strengths and limitations. Because students' worldviews—whether religious, spiritual, or secular—are so central to their sense of self, belonging, and well-being, the strengths and limits of various worldviews should be examined with care.

Most of the teachers in our B.A. Psychology program honor the separation of church and state by stressing to students that they are using contemplation for the various purposes I mentioned at the outset—none of which are aimed at inculcating a particular religious view, belief, practice, or life. Professor Solimar said she tells students that the practices are for exploring self, consciousness, and experience, particularly the various universal qualities of being, such as love, compassion, and insight. She favors contemplative inquiry and often invites students to reflect on their values, how they manifest those values in the world, and what blocks them from manifesting those values. She generally avoids using contemplations or chants that have divine names in them. However, when she teaches World Religions, she invites students to participate in practices from those traditions but modifies the meditation to make it available to more students. For example, when leading a meditation on unconditional love derived from Christianity that has Jesus as its focus, she invites students to substitute for Jesus whatever figure, image, or symbol of unconditional love resonates for them.

I teach courses on Jewish mysticism at a variety of universities—including public universities like UC Berkeley—and do lead contemplations and chants with divine names. I choose practices that are aimed at developing particular qualities of being, such as lovingkindness, forgiveness, healing, and sense of oneness, and I explain that these practices give students the opportunity to explore the experiential impact of key Kabbalistic methods of self-transformation and transcendence. I have never received a complaint about any of these practices. To the contrary, many students have found them profoundly beneficial, even life-transforming (Burack, 2008). For some of these students, the practices have brought them closer to their own religious tradition or have helped them pursue their unique spiritual path. In some cases, students have integrated Kabbalistic practices into their Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or nontraditional path.

One way that I maintain openness is using different languages to talk about and interpret contemplative experiences. Many others have also emphasized the

importance of deploying a range of terminologies when discussing contemplative, religious, and spiritual issues with different audiences (e.g., Astin, 2010; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). I encourage students to use whatever words and images they feel comfortable with. We discuss the fact that different cultures and individuals use different words and symbols for talking about their nonordinary experiences. One person might call the experiences *religious* or *godly*, while another calls them *spiritual*, while others call them *epiphanies*, or *moments of deep connection*, or *experiences of heightened vitality*. We also discuss the unfortunate fact that wars are waged over what to call these experiences and how to understand and value them. The history of religion reveals that nonordinary experiences which are considered fraudulent or heretical in one age may be considered authentic and even exemplary in another age—by the very same religious tradition (Armstrong, 1994). My students enjoy exploring the diverse concepts and values in particular word choices as well as examining how the interpretation of nonordinary experience is rooted in history, culture, and language even when the experience seems to largely transcend these worldly matters. We also consider premodern, modern, and postmodern interpretations of religious experience (e.g., Eliade, 1959; Lyotard, 1984; Griffin & Smith, 1990; Smith, 2003; Wilber, 2006). Professor Solimar said that she tries to use postmodern and transideational language that brings values back to the classroom and that refrains from religious terminology.

One important question is whether or not an instructor who is knowledgeable about and perhaps committed to one contemplative tradition can effectively, fairly, and legitimately present contemplative practices derived from other traditions. As I indicated, I believe that instructors need to both understand and value the contemplations they introduce in their classrooms. I do not present any contemplative practices that I am not knowledgeable about and competent with. Because I have immersed myself intellectually and experientially in the world's religions for two decades, I feel comfortable and able to lead a variety of meditations. In my Transpersonal Psychology class, for example, I lead one or two contemplative practices from each of the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Of course, I do not have expert knowledge in all of these traditions, but I value and am experienced with the contemplative practices I do lead. The issue of legitimacy is even more complex and problematic. I am aware that some religious, spiritual, or contemplative communities do not want "outsiders" or "non-members" to use or teach their practices. These communities often have legitimate concerns that their practices will be misunderstood and misappropriated. In any one community, there may be intense disagreements about whether or not to share spiritual practices with individuals who are not community members. These issues have become even more salient in light of the growing trend in America of individuals who practice nontraditional, nondenominational, interfaith, and integrative forms of spirituality

(Burack, 2005B, 2007; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Many practitioners of these new forms not only face the challenge of justifying the borrowing of practices from multiple traditions but also the challenge of integrating these practices in authentic, deep, and responsible ways (see Burack, 2005B, 2007).

Despite these and other challenges, I am hopeful that more and more teachers will come to see the value of using contemplative practices to facilitate not only the academic development and success of their students but also their holistic growth, well-being, and contribution to the world. The ancient Greeks believed that education was a bringing out (*educare*) of the soul. I believe that a holistic approach is needed to fully bring out the body-heart-mind-spirit of today's students—and I am convinced that such an approach must include a blend of conventional, creative, and contemplative methods.

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