

**Creating Contemplative Studies in the Southwest:  
Theory and Practice (6/15)  
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Contemplative Studies is an emerging field in many disciplines, and it is a particularly natural fit for the comparative, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary study of religion, my area of training. Numerous universities throughout the country, including those in the apparently “traditional” Southwest, are beginning to explore contemplative studies and how it can enhance liberal arts education in a wide variety of fields. I will cover this topic in two ways: first I will offer a short history of the development of the Contemplative Studies (CS) initiative at my university, Texas Christian University, and briefly in the wider region. I then will discuss some of the assumptions and theoretical underpinning for this initiative, indicating the value of contemplative pedagogy in academia and Religious Studies in particular.

Before turning to the first agenda, contemplative studies at TCU, let me make a brief comment on the second--contemplative study and practice in the liberal arts setting--to indicate the argument of this essay. Few would question the traditional detached “third-person” study of contemplative traditions as part of a curriculum, or more broadly the importance of introducing students to profound and long-standing knowledge present in various cultures and texts. But more have reservations about the worth of “first person” contemplative practice, and I want to argue its value for those in the liberal arts, as enhancing insight into and critical reflection about both self and others in their social and historical location.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have discussed this more extensively in my article “Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33 (2013), 23-32. Concerning the definition of “liberal arts,” there I write: “Liberal arts’ or ‘liberal education’ has many qualities and purposes (overall, to provide the tools to inquire into the multi-level nature of human being and the universe), but the ones most relevant here include (1) reflective self-awareness, recognizing and critiquing one’s beliefs and assumptions; (2) respectful and empathetic understanding of others (what I call ‘mental migration’ into other worldviews); (3) understanding that humans are socially and culturally conditioned, existing in and shaped by historical contexts; and (4) learning about various ways of thinking or modes of inquiry.” Effective contemplative pedagogy would address each of these goals.

## Part I: Starting a program in the region and at TCU

Now to some history about the development of Contemplative Studies at TCU and in the Southwest region. After reading about and speaking with some “fellow travelers” interested in this emerging field, significantly prompted by the preparation for and publication of the book *Meditation and the Classroom*,<sup>2</sup> I organized two workshops for scholars in the Southwest (the first held at Baylor University in 2011 and the second at Rice University in 2012), both led by Louis Komjathy of the University of San Diego, a co-founder of the Contemplative Studies group of the American Academy of Religions (AAR). The first, funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning about Religion and an AAR regional development grant, explored the interest in and knowledge about Contemplative Studies in the region, and began a discussion of pedagogical issues relating to teaching contemplative studies in liberal arts settings. The enthusiasm produced by this meeting generated a second one, also funded by the Wabash Center. We expanded and deepened the earlier conversation to enhance our abilities to think critically and teach effectively about traditions of contemplation,<sup>3</sup> to develop best practices for “contemplative pedagogy,” and to better articulate, on and beyond our campuses, how courses on or using contemplative practices contribute to a liberal arts curriculum.

One outcome was a commitment by a number of participants to look into the development of Contemplative Studies on their respective campuses. To that end, I began conversations about this topic at TCU in the spring of 2012 with a variety of faculty and the director of our Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). We decided to launch a faculty/staff interest group in the fall of 2012, with monthly discussion meetings (including education, practice, and sharing) and one major event with an outside speaker per semester, a structure we continue

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<sup>2</sup> Edited by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Including meetings with the staff of the integrative medicine program of the MD Anderson Cancer Center and the director of the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

today. We formed a steering committee, which included two members from the department of Religion, and one each from Anthropology, Modern Dance, Psychology and Student Development Services, all of whom have some form of contemplative practice, and we meet at semester beginning and end to review the prior semester's efforts and plan for next term.<sup>4</sup> We were and are committed to interdisciplinary approaches.

Our first event, announced through email and informal networks, as well as promoted and supported by the CTE staff, was a panel discussion titled "What is Contemplative Studies, and what is its place at TCU?" The panel included short presentations by me and another TCU religion professor, Mark Dennis, and a third by Donnalee Dox, performance studies professor and director of the Religious Studies interdisciplinary program at Texas A&M. This was followed by a brainstorming session to see what was possible and desirable at TCU. Twenty five faculty and staff attended. In addition to introducing CS, we began relationship building and networking, finalized topics for the next meetings and committed to a spring event co-sponsored with TCU's Nursing School. One of the most interesting outcomes was the extent of interest shown by faculty and staff in personal practice, and conversely, how few had any such practice.

As mentioned above, our subsequent small group meetings have generally included both discussion and a shared group practice. Over the last three years, these meetings have included discussions of Contemplative Studies as an emerging discipline, the roles of contemplative theory and practice in teaching and research, their relationship with the traditional goals of liberal arts education, and their place in student development, broadly conceived. Other topics discussed include definitions of key terms in contemplative studies, ethical issues in teaching contemplative exercises in class, contemplation in a digital

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<sup>4</sup> The steering committee considered the eventual possibilities of secretarial help, office space, website, and university or other funding through grants and fundraising for a free standing program, but none of these were deemed necessary to begin, or have been pursued since. As will be noted later, we have used departmental, college, and university funding for speakers and materials such as flyers for events or to publicize upcoming courses with a contemplative component in the next semester.

era, the role of embodiment (physical and cultural) and the environment on contemplation, how to build interdisciplinary and cross-campus relationships, and personal practices of faculty and staff. We have held lecture style presentations on various aspects of contemplation, from long standing Asian religious traditions to modern psychology.<sup>5</sup> We have made sure to spend some time focusing on Christian contemplation, given TCU's heritage and student population, as well as dispelling the misimpression that contemplative practices are exclusively "Eastern."<sup>6</sup>

We also discussed specific classroom practices which would be useful and effective in any course: exercises like sitting in silence or watching the breath for five or ten minutes at the beginning of class, being present when walking across campus or eating a meal, or a bodily awareness practice.<sup>7</sup> We held faculty and student panels on personal contemplative practices, movie nights (including the films *Kumare*,<sup>8</sup> *Samsara*,<sup>9</sup> and *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana*<sup>10</sup>),

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<sup>5</sup> One of the most successful presentations was a talk by a psychology professor on the cognitive neuroscience behind meditation, which included a Powerpoint illustrating anatomical changes that occur to the brain during meditation. A student then offered a well-researched and entertaining presentation on brain states during surfing and meditation. Over 70 students, faculty, and staff attended, listened, and practiced both silent and focused meditations.

<sup>6</sup> For example, a member of TCU's Student Development Services organized a panel on contemplative practices in contemporary Christianity. Speakers discussed the tradition of labyrinth building, the practice of centering prayer, integrating Asian practices like *mantra* chanting or Zen sitting with Christian contemplation, and more generally harmonizing the "secular," "spiritual" and "religious." In the question and answer period that followed, there was an interesting tension between some students whose views about our Calvinist fallen nature conflicted with the speakers' emphasis on the presence of God's love which they found in contemplation.

We have also sponsored a conversation on Contemplation and Christian Ethics with a Brite Divinity School professor and a member of our steering committee.

<sup>7</sup> In the upper level Buddhism course, we include *tonglen* breathing and *metta* (loving kindness) meditations. For more ideas about practices, one might consult various articles in *Meditation and the Classroom* or *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* by Mirabai Bush and Daniel Barbezat (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> *Kumare* (<http://kumaremovie.com>) is about an Ivy-educated Indian-American filmmaker (Vikram Gandhi) who took on the persona of a Hindu *guru* and taught a group of

labyrinth walks,<sup>11</sup> a contemplative poetry competition co-sponsored with the TCU literary magazine, and various contemplative movement exercises in (and outside of) a dance studio.

In addition to integrating contemplative exercises in their own classes, steering committee members also led exercises in other faculty members' classes (from Business to Philosophy to Media Ethics) and made presentations to departmental faculty meetings. There are weekly meditation sessions sponsored by our Office of Religious and Spiritual life and Brite Divinity School, and a member of the Counseling Center also leads two five-session meetings for students in which he introduces a variety of contemplative practices to address stress, anxiety, and sleep issues.

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followers in Phoenix. They embraced him as a true spiritual teacher, to an extent which surprised and even alarmed Gandhi, and taught him a great deal about himself as well.

<sup>9</sup> We screened *Samsara* (<http://barakasamsara.com>) as part of both a weekly global cinema program at TCU and the Sociology and Anthropology Department's Sustainability Film Series. Filmed over five years and in twenty-five countries by Ron Fricke (director of photography for the 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi* and director of the 1992 film *Baraka*), *Samsara* moves vividly but wordlessly from sacred grounds and natural wonders to disaster zones and meatpacking factories.

Due to multiple sponsors, around 120 people, both from and beyond TCU attended, and in the discussion after the film (c. 40 remained), many students described how moved they were and how many thoughts were provoked (about scenes from sex work to *mandala* making) during the viewing.

<sup>10</sup> *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkxSyv5R1sg>) shows how Kiran Bedi, the former Inspector General of Prisons in New Delhi, worked to transform the notorious Tihar Prison by teaching inmates the traditional Buddhist meditation practice of *vipassana*.

<sup>11</sup> Over Easter weekend 2014, a temporary labyrinth was created on campus. Labyrinths as occasions for calm focus and reflection have a long history, of course, both within and beyond religious traditions (see, for example, <http://labyrinthociety.org>). This project was organized and led by a professor of Anthropology, assisted by staff from our Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and Fort Worth church community members. The labyrinth was placed within a circular array of sculptured rocks in the center of campus affectionately known as Froghenge. Both faculty and students shared poignant writings about their experience walking the labyrinth, and the TCU student newspaper, the Skiff, covered it online and in its graduation issue (<http://www.tcu360.com/campus/2014/04/32243.labyrinth-built-froghenge-help-students-find-peace-serenity>.)

## Major semester events at TCU

I now list the major events we have presented as examples and suggestions for CS presentations elsewhere. As mentioned above, we held a workshop titled “Wellness and Contemplative Practice in Health Care and Higher Education,” co-organized with our College of Nursing in spring 2013. It addressed the ongoing effects of stress and “multitasking” in contemporary life, and offered possibilities to maximize wellness and help cultivate physical, mental, and emotional balance, both personally and in the local surroundings.

The speakers were Elissa Epel, professor of psychiatry at UC San Francisco and Alejandro Chaoul, professor in the Integrative Medicine Center at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. They shared about their work (the role of stress in aging focusing on telomeres, *yoga* and meditation with cancer patients), and then discussed some of the methodological issues, both in humanities and science, that they see their work raising.<sup>12</sup>

In fall 2013, Louis Komjathy, both the co-founder of the Contemplative Studies group in the American Academy of Religion and a Daoist priest, led a workshop on “Imagining the Contemplative University,” exploring university education and campus community life in relation to contemplative practice and experience from a multi-disciplinary and diverse curricular perspective. That evening Prof. Komjathy spoke on “Studying What One Practices, Practicing What One Studies: A Daoist Professor’s Perspective.” He pointed out that being an adherent of a religious tradition while working in the field of Religious Studies raises a host of issues, and brings forth a variety of reactions, positive *and* negative. He emphasized the potential contributions of the scholar-practitioner to the academic study of religion in general and Daoism in particular, and shared

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<sup>12</sup> These issues include how accountable are members of the modern scientific community to the traditions from which mindfulness and *yoga* arose (whether to use traditional terminology and acknowledge the roles of community and ethical behavior in practice) or how financing and the larger socio-economic environment condition their work (issues of class/race/gender and access/cost).

his own experiences of being both while working in an academic context where social scientific and secular materialist perspectives dominate.

In spring 2014, our major event, co-sponsored with TCU's College of Liberal Arts, was a presentation by Ruben Habito, a long time Jesuit priest and now a Zen master, as well as Professor of World Religions and Spirituality at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology and Guiding Teacher at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas. He first spoke at a luncheon and class at TCU's affiliated Brite Divinity School, then to faculty, students, and community members on "Christian Contemplation and Buddhist Practice---The Spiritual Exercises and Zen," discussing his life journey and new book *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises*, which considers the relationship between Zen meditation and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. He eloquently articulated the experience of sitting quietly with full attention bringing forth profound feelings of love and unity, within or without God.

In fall 2014 we hosted the well-known contemplative movement educator and former president of Naropa University, Barbara Dilley. About 50 participants attended each of two workshops exploring the relationship of dance and contemplative movement in theory and practice. This was particularly helpful preparation for the course we taught on contemplative movement and reflection, to be discussed shortly.

In addition to bringing in major speakers, it is noteworthy that during fall 2014 alone, TCU faculty gave five CS-related conference presentations off campus. This shows that our CS initiative has catalyzed not just offering informative events, but also research interest among the steering committee's faculty members. One faculty member gave a paper at an Ecomusicologies conference in Asheville, NC referencing course meditations titled "From Hearing to Caring: The Role of Listening in Place-Based Pedagogy." Another delivered a paper on our viewing and discussion of the film *Samsara* ("Contemplating 'Samsara': Film as Medium for Promoting Mindfulness and Meditative Reflection") to the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture in Leuven, Belgium. Both papers are currently being prepared for publication. A

third presented a poster on “Creating Contemplative Studies in the Southwest” for the recent International Symposium for Contemplative Studies (organized by the Mind and Life Institute) in Boston. And I presented two papers, which are further developed in this article, at a contemplative studies conference before, and another during, the American Academy of Religion meetings in San Diego.

I should also note that over the years, we have received funds from an array of sources: our center for teaching excellence, various undergraduate departments (especially the Religion Dept.), the liberal arts college (known as AddRan), the university’s Global Citizenship program, our Center for International Studies, the Asian Studies program and our affiliated divinity school (Brite).

### **The first Contemplative Studies Course At TCU**

Let me now turn to the most sustained and concentrated manifestation of our initiative at TCU thus far: our first curricular effort, formally titled *Mindbodyness: Contemplative Movement and Reflection*, co-taught in spring 2015 by a professor of modern dance (Susan Douglas Roberts) and me.<sup>13</sup> As an upper level directed study without core credit, it drew only nine students, but that modest number and the enthusiasm of the participants were actually very beneficial for this pilot effort.

The course, held in a dance studio, met twice a week for 80 minutes. In most cases, the first half of the class was a contemplative movement practice led by my colleague (at different times, the movement included some combination of lying, sitting, and standing; walking, both straight and in circles/while turning; students moving solo, paired, or as a group; practicing various breathing styles; proceeding as an animal; and other actions). This was followed by journaling and conversation, and then we turned to lecture and discussion about some aspect of “mindbodyness,” with reference to the day’s reading.

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<sup>13</sup> The syllabus can be found at <http://personal.tcu.edu/afort/fall15/Mindbodyness%20syl%203.16.15.pdf>

The course was loosely divided into units: first we considered definitional and theoretical issues in contemplative studies, then various conceptions of mind and body in the modern West and in traditional Asia (including Indian Yoga, *taijiquan*, and Tibetan and Zen Buddhism; we also discussed Native American traditions). Some ideas were introduced by me, and others by an array of TCU faculty and off campus guests, including a highly appreciated visit from Judith Simmer-Brown of Naropa University.<sup>14</sup> As the semester continued, students were assigned an increasing number of exercises, including week long practices of mindfulness meditation and the five basic Buddhist precepts. There were also day long exercises of silence and being aware of “digital attachment,” a practice of contemplative walking (beginning with John Francis’s TED talk on silently “walking the earth”),<sup>15</sup> and a labyrinth walk. Near the course end, we read Jeff Wilson’s recent *Mindful America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), which raised important issues of cultural adaptation, appropriation and commodification that the class participants found quite thought provoking.

The course concluded with a final contemplative project by each student, which included both movement and reflection (indoor and out). Some examples were slow walking amid Frohenge, the circular array of sculptured rocks in the center of campus; circling a building while looking at it closely and carefully; being present with trees as witnesses and elders; listening to “singing bowls;” staying aware while doing repetitive motion; being with a partner with eyes open then moving in concert with one’s eyes closed; slow rolling while attending to all parts of the body; walking a mini-labyrinth; and expressing gratitude to the body from feet to head while walking.

In class and in anonymous semester end feedback, students expressed great appreciation for the course as providing new and different ways of knowing mind and body and their connection, both theoretically and on a “real,

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to leading the Mindbodyness class, she taught my Buddhism (and another world religion) class, led a seminar in contemplative writing for twenty five faculty and staff, and offered a public lecture on “Tibetan Buddhism: From Fringe to Fashion.”

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/john\\_francis\\_walks\\_the\\_earth](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_francis_walks_the_earth)

experiential” level. They especially valued learning what guest teacher Alejandro Chaoul called “meditation pills,” tools to quiet and center themselves during the daily rush of university life.<sup>16</sup> There was a striking emphasis on how much they welcomed and integrated simple and practical self-care skills of focused breathing and being present; this was especially important for and appreciated by the many seniors with an uncertain future after graduation. One said, beautifully, “this course became a refuge rather than a requirement.”

But students also expressed frustration with the workload, both the amount of writing (weekly short papers, plus responses to the meditation exercises and the final project) and out of class practice, feeling (justifiably in retrospect) that we required too much in too concentrated a time. They and especially we also felt that there was insufficient time to adequately address all the material introduced in class. We will plan 2 two hour classes a week next time.

### **Summary Reflections**

Here are my impressions of the development of TCU’s Contemplative Studies initiative so far. I believe that our greatest success has been the creation of an interdisciplinary and highly collegial steering committee, which has stimulated reflection and enthusiasm among its members and become a core group which, as shown above, has brought attention to contemplative studies to a wide variety of university constituencies. There is no question that the university at large has a greater awareness of, and openness to, the benefits of contemplative inquiry than three years ago, during which time we have drawn the attendance of hundreds of faculty, staff, and students, many repeatedly. As just described, our efforts took successful curricular form for the first time last semester. We have also begun to have a greater engagement with members of our associated Divinity School (Brite). Finally, through the generosity of an array

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of finding cues for brief respite or quiet time in daily life became a course theme, reinforced by other visitors.

of university sources, we have also had the opportunity to bring in some leading figures in this emerging movement, thus putting TCU on the map for CS.

Although we have reached hundreds of students (often with the strategic use of extra credit), perhaps our greatest disappointment has been the inability to create a self-sustaining student group which would originate student focused activities. Because of this, and students dealing with a curriculum full of requirements, we have had limited curricular success, but are heartened by the commitment and enthusiasm of the students who enrolled in the Mindbodyness course. We would also like to get more regular involvement by a larger number of faculty in the sciences, including health sciences. Still, we have begun well and plan to continue to expand our influence (carefully, documenting the value for faculty and students at each step), especially ongoing conversations about the role and benefits of CS at TCU and in the academy generally.

## **Part II: Enhancing liberal arts education through Contemplative Studies**

I now turn to the second part of this essay, expanding on my thinking about the rationale for the broader principles underlying our program, particularly how Contemplative Studies can enrich the liberal arts. Thinking this through is especially important given the skepticism about CS in some quarters of academia. In this section then, I want to focus on justifying CS as a powerful and effective enhancement of liberal arts education.

One of the key assumptions behind the development of our initiative is that there are a wide variety of ways of knowing oneself and the world, and contemplative study and reflection is an important, and today often underappreciated, way to investigate and understand human existence. As a number of writers have pointed out, most university learning occurs through “third person” objective study, which is certainly important and valuable, but contemplative learning adds “first person” direct experience as a way to gain a more accurate (and “lived”) understanding of both one’s own and others’

worldviews and practices, about which one can then critically reflect.<sup>17</sup> It can also provide the opportunity to contemplate the validity of the possibility of “objective” third person study.<sup>18</sup>

Further, since contemplative inquiry has been important to many people in a large number of cultures, there are, naturally, diverse contemplative traditions and experiences, and we should teach, to the extent appropriate to the class and our training, how this variety is understood and explained by practitioners. This is part of a need for many academics to better appreciate that adherents or “insiders” of contemplative traditions themselves have a long history of critical analysis and argument about the nature of reality and the value of various introspective states, so we should attend to and communicate both the description of the states and the arguments.<sup>19</sup> When done well, contemplative pedagogy can in fact be particularly effective in simultaneously increasing students’ self-knowledge in and of their historical location along with their awareness of the breadth and depth of the understandings of those in other cultures and times. Such comprehension will lead to the classic liberal arts goals of more insight into and critical reflection on both self and other.

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<sup>17</sup> In addition to those scholars mentioned earlier, Harold Roth has been particularly eloquent and effective in writing about and developing such study. See, for example, his essay in *Meditation and the Classroom*. Through his leadership, Brown University now has a multidisciplinary CS initiative which considers the underlying philosophy, psychology, and phenomenology of human contemplative experience across cultures and times through a combination of these third person and first person approaches, both utilizing systematic investigation and ongoing critical reflection:

<http://www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies>.

For more resources, one can also consult the Contemplative Studies page on Louis Komjathy’s website at the University of San Diego:

[http://home.sandiego.edu/~komjathy/Homepage\\_of\\_Louis\\_Komjathy/Contemplative\\_Studies.html](http://home.sandiego.edu/~komjathy/Homepage_of_Louis_Komjathy/Contemplative_Studies.html)

<sup>18</sup> On this issue, one might consult Jorge Ferrer’s work on “participatory spirituality.” See, for example, Ferrer, J. N., & Sherman, J. H, eds. *The participatory turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Given the breadth of traditions, no single source could cover this matter. However, one might consult colleagues or other specialists in specific traditions, and look at Louis Komjathy’s recent *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

It is also important to note that students themselves have urged us to develop contemplative methods in the classroom. Any teacher can observe that today's university students feel over-committed, over-worked, and overwhelmed. When first given the opportunity to meditate, many often think of such a practice as just one more daily task to complete. Yet many of us have seen that once students actually engage in meditation or other contemplative activity, they realize both how the exercises bring greater self-understanding and how useful they can be to their everyday life by reducing stress, improving mood, and bringing rest,<sup>20</sup> which sometimes leads to hunger for more.<sup>21</sup> As Fran Grace has discussed,<sup>22</sup> various empirical studies have begun to show that contemplative pedagogy provides an antidote to the anxiety, distraction, and academic pressure so many students feel, and there are measureable improvements in variables for mental, physical and emotional well-being. This, as well as academic improvement, is discussed in a very interesting study of the spiritual life of college students, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*,<sup>23</sup> The authors point out that while "knowing thyself" is understood to be central to liberal arts education, developing answers to meaning and purpose questions or discovering students' own beliefs and values gets little attention, especially when they are nervous about their future and finances in a difficult economy. In a seven-year (2003-10) study, the authors found that over their

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<sup>20</sup> See the comments by the Mindbodyness course participants above. Another good example of a course which illustrates the value of contemplative pedagogy is "The Blue Pearl: The Efficacy of Teaching Mindfulness Practices to College Students," by Deborah J. Haynes, Katie Irvine, and Mindy Bridges, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33 (2013): 63-82.

<sup>21</sup> That is, some students also look, with various degrees of urgency, for a non-neuroscientific explanation of unusual or "mystical" experiences, such as those described by Barbara Ehrenreich in her recent *Living With a Wild God* (New York: Hachette, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> See her article in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14:2 (April 2011): 99-124. See also Chapter 2 of Bush and Barbezat's *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education*.

<sup>23</sup> By A. and H. Astin and J. Lindblom (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

college careers, students became more personally spiritual and less formally religious, more caring, tolerant, and globally aware, and these qualities enhanced other “traditional” college outcomes: improved academics/GPA, leadership skills, psychological well-being and life satisfaction. One significant factor assisting this growth is meditation/reflection or any “inner work” that increased self-awareness. They write that contemplative practices “are among the most powerful tools at our disposal for enhancing students’ spiritual development (148).”

It bears repeating that the capacity to focus attention is particularly important given students’ immersion in technology, social media and other ongoing diversions of modern life.<sup>24</sup> Contemplative exercise raises awareness of everyday distractedness and the limits of the (overpraised) notion of multitasking, thus demonstrating the value of silence and quiet alertness so much a part of most contemplative traditions. It can also call into question the contemporary instrumentalist focus on “productivity” in and beyond work life. This focus points to trends in mainstream culture where meditation, and in particular various conceptions of “mindfulness,” has become widespread in health care, corporations, and even the military.<sup>25</sup> One hears of mindful leadership, parenting, therapy, sex, and marksmanship. Jeff Wilson’s recent book *Mindful America*<sup>26</sup> offers an excellent analysis of this cultural development. As his and others’ writings demonstrate, academics are uniquely placed to add historical awareness and critical analysis to such practices.<sup>27</sup>

With students in mind then, let me again emphasize the benefits of

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<sup>24</sup>A good introduction to this topic can be found in Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2011).

<sup>25</sup> For a good popular example of this phenomenon, see the TV journalist Dan Harris’s *10% Happier* (New York: It Books, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> David McMahan’s work has been particularly significant here. See his *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

contemplative practice for liberal education.<sup>28</sup> As contemplation enhances the ability to concentrate and introspect, it increases the depth, quality, and strength of attention and mental discipline, as well as emotional control and awareness of body-mind interaction.<sup>29</sup> It gives students the opportunity to reflect on and analyze “first person” experience—their own *and* others—in a classroom setting (for both peer and professor feedback). They can gain insight into how their perspective has been shaped and see new possibilities, both noticing and going beyond prior thought patterns. Finally, contemplative exercises offer students the opportunity to critically reflect on the meaning and value questions that they feel are too often ignored in the classroom, even or especially by professors in Religious Studies.<sup>30</sup>

### **Contemplative Studies and Religious Studies**

This leads me to a greater focus on how contemplative study and practice are especially useful in my home discipline of Religious Studies, where students are often for the first time introduced to long-standing and widely spread worldviews still insufficiently known in contemporary America. Religion

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<sup>28</sup> For a more extended argument, see “CS and the Liberal Arts,” esp. pp. 25-26.

<sup>29</sup> Scientific studies of aspects of contemplation, particularly in neuroscience, have recently increased dramatically. To review the research one might start at the centers at Emory (<http://www.emory.edu/ECCS/research/index.html>), Virginia (<http://www.uvacontemplation.org/list/research>), and Brown (<http://www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/research>) Universities, or the work of David Vago at Harvard (<http://davidvago.bwh.harvard.edu/>), and Clifford Saron at UC Davis (<http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu/labs/Saron>).

A particularly insightful investigation of the relation of Buddhism and neuroscience by the philosopher of mind Evan Thompson has recently appeared. See *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Student interest in the pursuit of questions about meaning and purpose, and the “great divide” they feel between their academic (critical analysis focused) and personal lives is explored at length in Barbara Walvoord’s *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). She shows that many students want to develop or deepen their philosophy or life, within or outside a particular “spiritual path.”

professors can and should introduce students to the importance of a fuller understanding of the historical and cultural context of these worldviews, and how these perspectives influence human experience and interpretation—theirs and ours. Student understandings can then be enhanced by first-hand experience (as “participant-observers”) of some basic exercises in various traditions (religious and modern secular) that have specialized in such “first person” inquiry. Responsible adaptation of methods drawn from those traditions enriches the liberal arts classroom, and different kinds of knowing can increase the capacity for critical analysis.<sup>31</sup> That is, in evaluating what contemplative thinkers say, it is valuable to observe and analyze what and how we ourselves experience (“think about our thinking while we are thinking”), and compare and contrast that (even at an elementary level) with others’ experience. To offer some brief examples: practicing mindfulness meditation or following (or not) the five basic Buddhist precepts for a week can illumine both the Buddhist tradition and the student’s own mental patterns,<sup>32</sup> as can movement practices in a dance department (as explored in the course discussed above), attending to art in a museum (vs. venerating an image in a church or temple),<sup>33</sup> or contemplative walking (which could be usefully compared with “jogging” or “a stroll”) in an anthropology course on Native American traditions. And while there has never been a single kind of *yoga* practice, one could also usefully contrast classical Hindu Patanjala Yoga with modern postural *yoga* exercise.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For a brief overview of some of the ethical issues raised by contemplative pedagogy in the undergraduate classroom, see my “Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts”, pp. 29-30.

<sup>32</sup> For more on this, see my “Buddhist Practices in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *Meditation and the Classroom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> A good illustration of different ways of knowing in this context is to note how many objects originally meant to be contemplated and venerated “religiously” are now regarded primarily as historical artifacts or “works of art,” to be viewed with a detached respect and perhaps to help create intercultural understanding and harmony.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Stuart Sarbacker’s excellent chapter in *Meditation and the Classroom*, “Reflections on Theory and Practice: The Case of Modern Yoga,” 147-53.

Reflections on such theory and practice draw attention to what and how we study “religion(s)” and contemplative traditions, and illumine how differing issues and perspectives are important in different worldviews and models of reality. In sum, contemplative inquiry thus opens possibilities for critical thinking about both philosophical arguments and one’s own and others’ mental processes and contents. It can challenge prevailing theories, whether scientific, sectarian, or postmodern. Finally, by opening alternative views of human being and flourishing, contemplative study and practice offers new models and possibilities for thinking and living, thus addressing questions of meaning that arise for students, and all humans.

So this is the promise of CS. There is, of course, need for more critical reflection on, and assessment of, the nature and significance of contemplation in general and contemplative pedagogy in particular, as I will indicate in the final section below.

### **Bringing sufficient critique to contemplative studies**

Turning to a greater emphasis on critique of this emerging discipline, I am especially concerned about the importance of recognizing the specific time, place, and context of both any contemplative tradition *and* of its study, that is, the awareness of their and our historical locatedness. As Louis Komjathy and others have shown, historically, virtually all contemplative practice and experience has been religiously committed and tradition-based, and part of a path with a goal of transcending (or profoundly deepening insight into) this life.<sup>35</sup> Worldviews are comprehensive (including an integrated array of myths, rituals, doctrines, and ethics) and held by communities. When studying contemplative traditions, it is crucial to attend to how one’s experience is shaped by one’s cosmology (modern science vs. *karma* and *samsara* vs. heaven and hell), ideas of self (ego self,

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<sup>35</sup> This is extensively discussed in Komjathy’s *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer*.

*atman*, soul) and ultimate reality (*brahman*, *Dao*, God or multiverse). What is the view of human embodiment and physiology? What are the associated ethical rules and prerequisites to contemplative practice, if any? The social institutions? Perhaps most important as it shapes these questions, what are the goals (liberation/salvation<sup>36</sup> vs. happiness and stress reduction)?

One of the merits of Religious Studies training is the awareness that all traditions change over time. Still, it is worth being reminded—and reminding others—that modern global awareness and comparative interests inevitably condition our thinking. This shows up in the definitions of “contemplation” itself; some focus on meditation and Asian religious traditions, others include prayer and scriptural study or certain kinds of movement, music, or painting, still others include any focused attention or mindful awareness.<sup>37</sup> A modern pluralistic understanding is clearly seen in the common use of highly abstract and non-tradition specific terms like “pure experience,” “spirituality” or “wisdom traditions.” How does one negotiate the tension between the irreducible differences in historic contemplative traditions and today’s common search for commonalities or “universals?” What in contemplation is “secular,” what “spiritual” and what “religious?” And how should we deal with the modern concerns with race, class, and gender? Since contemporary traditions and worldviews are also inevitably in particular sociocultural locations, today’s adherents always have interests and commitments, whether in theology, humanistic psychology, or natural science. Are these recognized and acknowledged? Having a position is inevitable, not a problem; the problem is not identifying or inquiring into one’s position.

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<sup>36</sup> In which case, the proximate experience might be called diverse names like Krishna-*prema*, discerning God’s grace, *samadhi*, or *satori*.

<sup>37</sup> In general, I use “contemplation” as a cross-cultural umbrella term, referring to a broad array of ways of knowing and focusing attention, often but certainly not always part of a religious tradition. It includes a wide variety of practices: sitting or walking meditation, simple attending to the present, breathing and other kinds of “mindfulness” practices, yogic postures, visualizations, silent prayer and group chanting, reflective self-inquiry, observing nature, and many others.

Further, most people who are being exposed to aspects of longstanding and complex contemplative traditions are not interested in and would not consider studying or practicing Asian religions in their ancient forms. But those of us who do face the question of how we should understand and address the high degree of appropriation, decontextualization, and commodification of most contemplative traditions today. An extended discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but to mention some examples now under investigation: what, in the contemporary context, is “mindfulness,” “yoga,” or “Tantra,” and how do these relate to earlier historical manifestations?<sup>38</sup> Few practitioners today understand the originating traditions, have a holistic or prolonged practice, and submit to spiritual direction. Many in our therapeutically inclined culture are far more interested in the development, not cessation, of the ego self. While such studies are unlikely to be read by non-academics, Religious Studies scholars are uniquely positioned to note and describe an array of issues here.

To conclude, I firmly believe that contemplative studies can make an important new contribution to liberal education in broadening the ways of knowing available to students—but scholars, in and beyond Religious Studies, have an equally important job to keep to the critical inquiry and analysis that has long been at the heart of the liberal arts.

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<sup>38</sup> Regarding the latter two, David Gordon White’s work is highly illuminating. See, for example, his introduction to *Yoga in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) and *Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).