Contemplative Practices in Contemporary Societies
Religious Studies (RELS) 312
Spring 2014

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Office hours: T/Th 11:00-12:30 and by appointment

Meeting time: T/Th 9:35-10:50
Meeting place: TBA

Core area: Language, Philosophy & Culture
Fulfills International and Cultural Diversity

Prerequisites: Junior or Senior Classification, or approval of instructor.

Catalog course description:
Interdisciplinary approach to examining contemplative practices: origins in philosophy and religious traditions, goals and techniques of contemplation, contemplation in relation to cultural and social problems or needs.

Objectives
- Introduce students to ways people in modern societies practice contemplation.
- Answer the question: What values do modern societies place on solitude, introspection, and contemplation?
- Analyze philosophical, religious, and epistemological underpinnings for contemplative practices.
- Consider cultural contexts in which contemplation is practiced, and how contemplation is valued or devalued in those contexts.
- Explore what mental and physical capacities contemplative practices develop and how those capacities serve or do not serve living in the modern world.

Design of the course
- Component 1. Develop skills in observation. Students will analyze the culture around them for diverse ways people define and practice contemplation.
- Component 2. Introduce students to research in the emerging field of contemplative studies and analyze this research.
- Component 3. Apply knowledge by engaging in a contemplative practice (optional) and analyzing contemplative practices in writing.

Learning outcomes
- Develop personal and social responsibility for living in a diverse world by analyzing diverse approaches to the concept of an "inner life."
- Develop intellectual and practical skills essential for all learning by exploring cognitive resources cultivated in contemplative practices.
- Develop ability to apply critical first-person analysis as well as third-person analysis to observations of modern culture and society.
- Develop mental flexibility required for reflection and critical thinking by evaluating disciplinary approaches to a topic.

Required activities:
• Three short papers that synthesize course material and tie course material to final paper. These papers form the basis for your final paper. 100 points each (minimum 3 pages)
• Final paper: case study of a modern contemplative practice or issue related to contemplative practices based on the three short papers. 100 points (minimum 10 pages)
• Ten in-class writing exercises in response to the day’s questions. 100 points (10 points each)

Required Texts
• All other assigned readings available in eLearning (http://mediamatrix.tamu.edu)
• Visual material available on Mediamatrix (http://mediamatrix.tamu.edu)

Grading scale:
A=450-500 Exceptional ability to conceptualize and present ideas; effort beyond meeting basic criteria; you have sought out new ideas and information; your work is thorough and original; your work shows initiative and imagination; there are few to no errors in your written work; overall your work shows a trajectory of development and growth. You have exceeded expectations for research, writing, or speaking at the upper division level in a Research 1 university.
B=400-449 Solid work; meets basic requirements; evident language competency; few errors; you are able to engage but generally do not go beyond information and ideas readily accessible through class, readings, and discussions. Your research, writing, and speaking are commensurate with upper division standing in a Research 1 university.
C=350-399 Marginal work; writing assignments and discussions demonstrate limited ability or effort to engage ideas and information; written assignments have many errors (sentence structure, spelling, grammar, etc.) and/or are underprepared. Your research, writing, and speaking are slightly below expectations for students with upper division standing in a Research 1 university and should be improved with additional effort.
D=300-349 Quantity and quality of work falls far below the expectations of upper division students in a Research 1 university. You are either not expending enough effort or you need help to accomplish the work required.
F=below 300 Usually the result of missing work, missed classes, lack of preparation, inattention, unwillingness to engage, etc.

Writing Assignments:
In-class writing
• Over the course of the semester, 15-20 minutes of 10 class sessions will be devoted to in-class writing and small-group discussion of what you have written. In-class writings are your reflections on questions posed in the previous class. In-class writing days may not be announced in advance. You must be present to write. See Student Rule 7 http://studentrules.tamu.edu/rule07

Short papers
• In each of these three papers, synthesize and analyze the class work we have done in relation to the contemplative practice or topic you have chosen to research. Short papers may include questions you have, aspects of the material that interest you, reflections on the place of contemplation in modern culture, etc. These papers allow you to explore the topic you have chosen for your final paper. You may incorporate material from these papers in your final paper.

See next page
Final Paper

- Case study of a modern, contemplative practice. Lectures, discussions, and readings provide models for developing a line of inquiry.
- Find a modern, contemplative practice that interests you or an issue in contemplative studies you find interesting.
- Develop a line of inquiry for your investigation: the religious, medical, or other context for the practice, how the practice itself works (specific techniques involved in the practice), major proponents of the practice and how they have written about contemplation; how the practice has been used in modern culture; the experiential goals of the practice; the neurobiology of the practice or other physiological approaches to the practice. You may work individually or in teams.
- Students are encouraged to apply the research methods of their major disciplines to their research in this core curriculum course. Students may consider, for example: sociological aspects of meditation retreats, contemplation from a psychological perspective, the history of a particular contemplative tradition, the rhetorical presentation of meditative experience, philosophical issues such as cultivating compassion as an ethical act or the cultural politics of transferring contemplative practices across religious and cultural borders.
- Ethnographic projects are acceptable. Please see Dr. Dox for guidance if you want to do ethnographic (participant-observation) research.
- Scientific studies of contemplative practice are acceptable. These might include, for example: neurological correlates to contemplative states, or contemplation in palliative or preventative health care.
- OPTIONAL PRACTICUM COMPONENT. Critical first-person analysis of contemplative practice is acceptable. You may wish to try the practice you are researching. If you would like to put your research into practice (a critical first-person approach), please see Dr. Dox.

Participation

- To get the most out of this class, participate mindfully in class discussion and be present for all in-class writing as well as completing the short papers and research papers.
- See University Student Rules for attendance expectations http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07

Course Policies

Students With Disabilities
The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact Disability Services, in Cain Hall, Room B118, or call 845-1637. For additional information visit http://disability.tamu.edu.

Course Materials/Copyright Statements
The handouts used in this course are copyrighted (all materials generated for this class, including syllabi, quizzes, exams, essay questions, in-class materials, review sheets). Because these are copyrighted, you do not have the right to copy the handouts without permission.

Plagiarism
As commonly defined, plagiarism consists of passing off as one's own the ideas, words, writings, etc., which belong to another. In accordance with the definition, you are committing plagiarism if you copy the work of another person and turn it in as your own, even if you should have the permission of the person. Plagiarism is one of the worst academic sins, for the plagiarist destroys the trust among colleagues without which research cannot be safely communicated. If you have any questions regarding plagiarism, please consult the latest issue of the Texas A&M University Student Rules, under the section "Scholastic Dishonesty. KNOW THE CODE: http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu:

"An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do."

Attendance
The A&M policy on attendance and excused absences will be followed. See (http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07)
COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1
Overview of course structure, expectations and goals; discussion of the short papers, in-class writing, and final paper/projects.

Discussion: What do we mean by “contemplative” and “contemplative practice”? Where do we find contemplative practices in modern life?

Assignment: Begin observing the world around you for evidence of contemplative practices (see list of suggestions). Consider the context in which you observe a contemplative practice.

Unit 1. Practicing Contemplation in the Modern World

Week 2
Introduction to the study of contemplative practices and the practice of contemplation. What are the issues in contemplative studies? The interdisciplinary methods involved in contemplative studies. First and third person analysis. Real world applications of research on contemplation (psychology, medicine, education, wellbeing).

Discussion: Contemplation and modern life: what did you observe during the week?

Readings

Week 3
Subjective experience (an “inner life”) and the problem of consciousness in the Western tradition. The history of an “inner life” in the Western intellectual tradition. What value do we place on subjective experience in modern culture? What is the role of subjective experience in the construction of knowledge? What do we mean by “consciousness”?

Reading

Week 4
Living in a wired world.
Headphones: the desire for solitude or isolation? The phenomenon the MP3 player and life on a soundtrack. Multitasking, simulation, and sensory stimulation.

Reading
Week 5
Silence and solitude.
How do people find solitude? Is solitude necessary?
Is silence possible in an interconnected world? Is silence necessary?
The Zen 'monkey mind.'
Is contemplation an antidote to modern life? Or a hindrance?

Reading
- In *Trances, Computers, and Private Spaces* 176-193
- In *Contemplation Nation*, Michele Gossman, “Contemplative Practice in a Frantic World”, 183-188.

Short Paper #1 due

**Unit 2. Contemplation in Religious Traditions and Non-religious Contexts**

Week 6
Contemplation in a religious tradition: Buddhism

Reading

Week 7
Contemplation in a religious tradition: Christianity

Reading

Week 8
Contemplation in a non-religious context: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

Reading
Week 9
Contemplation and Embodiment: Sufi Dance and Hatha Yoga
How are mental and physical capacities integrated in meditation? What practices facilitate that integration? How are the arts (dance, music, visual art) contemplative?

Reading

Film:
- *Dances of Ecstasy*

Short paper #2 due

*Unit 3. Contemplation in Modern Practice*

Week 10
Medical uses of mindfulness, contemplation, meditation: cancer research, pain management; stress reduction, inflammation and immune responses; increased life expectancy (affect on telomeres).

Reading

Week 11
Contemplation in business and education for performance: increased productivity, focus and concentration, sleep, feeling of overall well-being, mental flexibility and collaboration enhanced, cognition.

Contemplation and business: Analysis of Chade-Meng Tan’s *Search Inside Yourself*

Reading

Week 12
Therapeutic applications: talking vs. “emptying the mind”; contemplation and psychology.
Reading
- In Contemplation Nation, Deborah Rozelle, “Contemplative Practice and Healing Trauma,” 259-292.

Week 13
Social uses of contemplation: prisons, law, education.
Contemplation and politics: analysis of Congressman Tim Ryan’s Mindful Nation

Documentary film
- Jenny Phillips, The Dhamma Brothers: 100 Hours of Silence

Reading
- Tim Ryan, Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance and Recapture the American Spirit (Hay House, 2012) 91-158.

In-class discussion of research projects (working in small groups)
In-class contemplative practice (music and meditation)

Week 14
Review and Questions: mystical experiences, the impossibility of introspection, self-knowledge as a goal of contemplation, relaxation and stress reduction, the line between religious and secular.

Reading

In-class discussion of research projects (working in small groups)
In-class contemplative practice (meditative poetry)

Short paper #3 due

Unit 4. Student research presentations

Final exam week
Student research: Individual and team presentations

Final papers due.
Below is a list of contemplative practices and organizations in the U.S. that support research on contemplative practices and contemplation.

**Contemplative Practices**
Vipassana  
Centering Prayer  
Contemplative Prayer  
Integral Yoga  
Kriya Yoga  
Hatha Yoga  
Sufism  
Transcendental Meditation  
The Relaxation Response  
T'ai Chi  
Qi Gong  
Martial arts as mediation  
Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction  
Mantram  
Shamanism  
Passage Meditation

**Research Organizations**
Fetzer Institute  
Mind and Life Institute  
Contemplative Mind in Higher Education  
Garrison Institute  
Center for Mindfulness in Health Care  
Stanford Center for Compassion Research and Education (CCARE)  
UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center  
Spirit Rock Meditation Center