

## Teaching Contemplative Traditions: A Workshop

Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University

March 25-27, 2011

**Abstract:** We propose to offer a workshop in spring 2011 on critical pedagogy related to teaching contemplative traditions in liberal arts university settings, primarily for those in the Southwest region of the American Academy of Religion. The purpose will be to converse about philosophical, methodological and pedagogical issues raised in teaching such courses and offering relevant and appropriate exercises, to share practices and methods that will enhance student learning, and to create a supportive network of teachers in the region for an ongoing discussion about teaching contemplative traditions.

Andrew Fort of Texas Christian University will be the organizer and Louis Komjathy of University of San Diego the facilitator. Marc Ellis, Director, Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University in Waco, has offered their meeting facilities at no cost, though we need funds for lodging and food. We plan to gather 12-15 people at various stages of their careers and with different levels of experience in dealing with contemplative teaching.

We currently have a number of participants tentatively committed, including William Barnard, SMU; Alejandro Chaoul, University of Texas Medical School; Elaine Craddock, Southwestern University; Mark Dennis, TCU; Ann Gleig, Rice University; Ruben Habito, SMU; Gardner Harris, UT Austin; Stacy Patty, Lubbock Christian University; Bruce Sullivan, Northern Arizona University; Claire Villareal, Rice; and Lola Williamson, Millsaps College.

**Student learning impact:** The aim is for students to better understand the range of worldviews and practices of the world's contemplative traditions through critical inquiry, both historical-analytical and personal. By study and practice, they will learn about, reflect on, and gain insight into techniques of contemplation and attentiveness in these diverse traditions. Both understanding other worldviews accurately and increased exploration and awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions are important goals of liberal arts inquiry. In addition, students will gain greater ability to critically appraise the nature of religious experience, and consciousness more generally.

**Project goals:** Our primary goal during the workshop is to increase our understanding and insight into how to effectively teach about contemplative traditions in liberal arts university settings. As shown in the workshop outline below, we will do this through conversations about philosophical, methodological and pedagogical issues raised in teaching such courses and offering relevant and appropriate exercises, and by sharing practices and methods that will enhance student learning. Over the longer term, our goal is to create a supportive network of teachers in (and beyond) the region for ongoing discussion about teaching contemplative traditions. We believe this workshop could be a model easily transported to and adapted by other groups (particularly in other AAR regions).

With the experience of attending this workshop and then ideally teaching such courses, participants would become resources as facilitators elsewhere.

**Project rationale:** As seen in the formation of a contemplative studies consultation at the AAR and numerous recent publications (such as the forthcoming SUNY Press book *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy in Religious Studies*), academic interest in contemplative studies (in both the humanities and sciences) is increasing. Thus, this workshop will be valuable in raising awareness of a variety of relevant issues and providing an opening for ongoing conversation and support among those interested but not yet well-trained in the topic. One result will be an increased ability to explain and justify such courses to the university at large. Numerous colleagues also report anecdotal student interest in contemplative traditions, both as historical phenomena and personal resources.

**Readings:** See attached bibliography. We expect participants to prepare for the workshop by reading a number of articles or book chapters; for example, Csikszentmihalyi (1990), de Wit (1991), Grace/Simmer-Brown (forthcoming), Roth (2006), and Wallace (2007).

## WORKSHOP OUTLINE

A packet of readings will be sent beforehand.

Participants arrive by 5:30 pm Friday afternoon.

Dinner (introductions of participants, background and interests): 6-7:30 pm

Outline of agenda for weekend (facilitator and organizer): 7:30-8:30 pm

Saturday morning: breakfast, 8-9 am

Session 1: 9-noon (with a break) Terminology and categories.

What is a contemplative tradition or path, and what is central to it? What are "meditation," "contemplation," "concentration," "prayer," or "reflection?" What of the terms "spiritual" vs. "religious?" Likewise, what are "experience," "awareness," and "consciousness," How similar are tradition-based terms like "yoga," "dhyana," "samadhi," "satori," etc.?

Lunch and break (noon-1:30)

Session 2: 1:30-3 Covering material: pragmatically and theoretically.

How many traditions are possible to cover, and how much comparison among them? Examples: Hindu: Advaita/TM, Yoga, bhakti/ISKCON

Buddhist: Theravada/vipassana, the immeasurables, Pure Land/Tibetan visualizations, Zen sitting/koans

Christian: Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer, Catholic stations of cross/Dominican, St. Ignatius, Protestant prayer, Quaker

Modern: techniqueless, humanistic psychology, Ram Dass, T. Merton, T. Hanh, 12 step

Jewish kabbalah, Muslim dhikr, Daoist meditation

Session 3: 3:30-5:30 Contemplative practices in the classroom: ethical concerns

How legitimate is it to use the exercises outside of their originally intended context? Put another way, how do we confront the issue of “spiritual tourism or colonialism?” How familiar does one need to be with a tradition to teach it (insider/outsider issues)? How does one justify the appropriateness of such exercises in the classroom (public/private, liberal arts, student interest in spiritual growth)? How to deal with the influence of our therapeutic culture?

Dinner and discussion: 7-9pm Sharing experience (start in small groups)

What contemplative/experiential exercises do participants currently use in their courses? Are they in or outside of class? What do they see as the merits/strengths and limitations/drawbacks?

Sunday: breakfast 8-8:30

Session 4: 8:45-noon (with break) Practical syllabus and classroom issues (Participants may share relevant syllabi).

How does one balance course material? How much religious/historical context? How much primary text? How much practice (and how much in vs. outside class)? How much in-class discussion (with professor or in groups)? How many guest speakers? What about opting out options?

What are the course requirements: texts, attendance/participation/journals, homework, papers (reaction or research)/exams, student presentations, films/web. What are the rubrics for grading/evaluation?

The above issues will certainly take up all the time allotted. However, it is worth mentioning other, generally theoretical, matters which will weave in and out of our discussions. These include:

How does one discuss the nature of experience (pure vs. mediated), and its relationship to interpretation or doctrine?

What of the nature of ultimate reality, and how does one experience it (union/identity, communion/encounter, or otherwise)?

How does one discuss and analyze “altered states of consciousness”, or communicate in and about such states?

What are the various paths and practices of contemplative traditions?

How do contemplative or “mystical” traditions relate to the broader tradition and cultural context? What is the importance of social aspects of contemplative traditions? What about the influence of modernity: ecumenism, individualism, psychology (personal growth vs. ego as delusion), science, neuroscience?

**Evaluation:** I intend to ask the participants to fill out a form including the following questions:

Please list the three most valuable things you learned in this workshop about how to effectively teach about contemplative traditions in liberal arts university settings. (Note: they might be philosophical, methodological or pedagogical issues raised in teaching such courses, or useful and appropriate exercises or other practices and methods that will enhance student learning).

What were the most effective elements of the workshop (please list at least two)? What would most improve the workshop (please list two recommendations).

Do you intend to teach a course utilizing material from this workshop? Please offer specifics about how the workshop will influence the course.

Who at your university will you share aspects of this workshop with (within or beyond your department)? At other universities? Would you be interested in being a facilitator of a similar workshop? Would you be willing to be a resource in other ways (please give specifics)?

Will this workshop affect your research agenda in any way? Do you plan to write on something related to the workshop topics?

Expected outcomes include a panel presentation at the next AAR regional meeting and additional workshops which could take a variety of forms (ideally including a more extended one in the region), I also expect the development of courses on contemplative traditions at various institutions, and an ongoing network of those involved in teaching such courses.

**AAR GRANT BUDGET REQUEST (starts at "Additional Funding Request")**

**STIPEND** (facilitator)

**Covered by Wabash**

**TRAVEL:** (facilitator)  
(participants)

own cost

(based on round trip from San Diego to DFW),  
**covered by Wabash**

**LODGING:** (participants)

(based on mostly double rooms for 17 people for 2 nights at \$75 per night), **covered by Wabash**

**MEETING SPACE**

donated

**ADDITIONAL FUNDING REQUEST:**

**LODGING**

additional cost of 16 single rooms for 2 nights at \$75 per room

**FOOD**

meals for two days

**SUPPLIES**

(copying etc.)

**TOTAL REQUEST FROM AAR**

**TOTAL FUNDING NEEDED**