

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 8 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2004



Faculty Forum: A Novel Pedagogy of Meditation in the University

Brown faculty have much to share with colleagues about the innovations they have introduced into their classrooms.

The "Faculty Forum" is a regular feature of The Teaching Exchange and we hope that YOU will be inspired by these ideas to share yours in the next Teaching Exchange.

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I have just finished teaching the fourth iteration of a course on Buddhist Meditation that incorporates a unique pedagogy. I initially developed the course under an ACLS Contemplative Practice Fellowship, one hundred of which have been awarded to American college and university teachers during the past six years. In addition to a two and one-half hour seminar in the Q hour, I ask my students to participate in a meditation laboratory in the B hour.

The course is divided into three geographical units in which we deal with: 1. Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in India (and Southeast Asia); 2. Chan Buddhism in China ; and 3. Zen Buddhism in Japan . In each unit we read primary texts in translation that deal with various aspects of meditative and monastic practice and normative texts of each of the traditions. In the Meditation Lab or Practicum, we actually try out a variety of concentration techniques related to the meditative traditions we are studying in the weekly seminar. For example, when we study Theravada Buddhism we will try their practices sitting while counting breaths, or paying attention to the feeling of the breath on the nose, or following the rise and fall of the belly while breathing. While studying Chan and Zen, we might try the practice of

"just sitting" while paying complete attention to everything that arises and passes away within our consciousness or we might try concentrating on a problem (kōan) like Hakuin's famous "What is the sound of One Hand Clapping?"

The point of the meditation practicum is not to convert anyone to Buddhism: I never require that students believe in anything, Buddhist or otherwise. All I ask is that the students approach the experience with an open mind and simply observe what is happening while they are meditating. Then they can have a deeper appreciation of what the experiences are that underlie the texts they are reading. So, for example, when the Mahasatipattana sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), an ancient Indian text, says that the meditator should be mindful of breath while in-breathing and out-breathing, students don't just understand this as mere words, but rather have a direct understanding of the experience that underlies these words. Students have told me in course-end evaluations that this adds a whole new dimension to their learning experience.

The modern Western Academy is dominated by what we might call "third-person" learning. We observe, analyze, record, and discuss a whole variety of subjects at a distance, as something "out there," as if they were solely objects and our own subjectivity that is viewing them doesn't exist. Certainly there are exceptions: in Public Speaking one both reads books about it and actually practices it; in Studio Art, a course wouldn't go very far if students didn't have the chance to practice on paper or canvas what they are being taught; the same is true for many courses in music: theory is appreciated so much more by actually playing the music that exemplifies it. The experimental sciences are all about applying "third-person" learning in controlled laboratory settings; and at least in Physics, the effect of the subjectivity of the observer who sets up the experiments is known to be an integral part of the results.

In many of the Humanities we tend to value "third-person" learning at the expense of all other forms. Yet do we not find that when students are called upon, for example, to reflect on what a famous poem means to them, that they derive a deeper understanding of its meaning? Or when students are challenged to apply ethical theories to problems in their own lives that they learn useful tools and see the relevance of these formerly abstract theories?

I view my Buddhist Meditation course as an experiment in what I would call "critical first-person learning." I say "critical" because in many forms of first-person learning in

the contexts of religion, one must suspend critical judgment and believe in the truth of the tradition they are embracing. There is an important place for this form of "committed" first-person learning, but we should be careful to not require that kind of commitment from any of our students in a secular university. But why not allow them to get some first-hand experience of the practice of meditation in a totally secular context, in which the need to believe is removed, in which they only need to be willing to conduct simple observations in the only laboratory we always carry along with us wherever we go: our minds? Judging by student reaction to the first two versions of the course and by the continuing student interest in the new one, this may be a pedagogy whose time has arrived. I certainly think it deserves a place alongside traditional "third-person" learning.