

Cautionary Language for First-Person Courses

COURSE A

Is This is Good Time to be Involved in Mindfulness Practice?

Meditation involves a fair amount of time coming closer to our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. This can sometimes be uncomfortable, but there are also a number of resources available to support you. If you have a history of psychiatric issues, especially trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, you are encouraged to let DR. L know. It is worth discussing approaches in these contexts. Also, another mindfulness meditation expert, professor, and clinical psychologist who is available to discuss potential challenges with meditation is DR. B. She can be reached at EMAIL ADDRESS

Finally, some mindfulness movements (light yoga) will be done in class. The movement patterns are in the Class 1 folder on the Canvas website. If you have any physical limitations that may affect your ability to do the mindful movements, you are welcome to show these postures to your health professional to gain advice on which postures you may want to avoid. The mindful movements are not mandatory in this class, and you should always listen more closely to your body than to any words of the instructor offering postures.

COURSE B

On Contemplative Studies and Critical First-Person Methodologies

Contemplative Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary academic discipline that aims to investigate the history, discourses, and methods of cognitive, affective, and ethical self-transformation. This course introduces students to some of the contemplative practices, experiences, and discourses that can be found in historical and contemporary religious traditions, where they serve as means of transforming the practitioner's physical, cognitive, affective, and ethical faculties—and usually in relation to a specific conception of salvation. As a means of understanding these traditions, students in this course will employ third-person (“objective”), second-person (“intersubjective”), and critical first-person (“subjective” or “experiential”) methodologies.

Because this course includes experiential learning through critical first-person and intersubjective second-person perspectives, it is essential to reflect upon the potential difficulties of bringing this data to bear on our understanding of contemplative traditions. *Critically* engaging these practices and traditions from first-person perspectives requires being aware of the unquestioned assumptions, biases, opinions, and motives that could potentially distort our understanding of our own experience. It is also particularly important to reflect upon how and why the appropriation or reconceptualization of contemplative practices and experiences from other cultural contexts can lead to an ungrounded and uncritical romanticism. Because we are seeking to acquire a nuanced understanding of contemplative practices, discourses, and experiences, claims from personal experience carry no *unique* weight or authority in this course, just as members of religious traditions within their own cultural contexts often critically interrogate experience-based claims.

Note on Contemplative Practices and Mental Health

By enrolling in this class, you agree to take responsibility for your own physical and mental well being by recognizing the limitations of these contemplative practices and the limits of your own physical, mental, and emotional faculties.

Final Disclaimers

The promotion of particular religious beliefs or practices is not an objective of this course or its labs. Rather, we will investigate contemplative traditions through critical first-person methodologies in order to better understand the potential importance, relevance, and value these traditions have had and continue to have for communities of human beings both within and beyond religious traditions. Should you become unable or unwilling to engage in the experiential learning dimension of this course, alternate assignments will be arranged.

COURSE C

Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation

COURSE PEDAGOGY

This is the _____th version of a course on Buddhist Meditation that I initially developed under an American Council of Learned Societies Contemplative Practice Fellowship, one hundred and fifty of which have been awarded to American college and university teachers. The course combines the traditional “third-person” learning of a weekly two and one-half hour seminar with the novel “first-person” learning of a Meditation Laboratory.

The point of the Meditation Laboratory is not to convert anyone to Buddhism: I *never* require that you believe in anything, Buddhist or otherwise. All I ask is that you approach the experience with an open mind and simply observe what is happening while you are meditating.

Western academy is dominated by what we might call “third-person” learning. We observe, analyze, record, 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 to this: in Public Speaking, in Studio Art, Theatre, and sometimes in Music, Environmental Studies and other disciplines, students combine academic study with direct first-hand experience of what they are studying. But in general in the Humanities we tend to value “third-person” learning at the expense of all other forms. Despite this, I have found that when students are called upon, for example, to reflect on what a *haiku* poem means to them, that they derive a deeper understanding of it. And when students are challenged to apply Confucian ethical theories to problems in their own lives, they gain a much greater appreciation of what it means to be truly humane from a Confucian perspective.

This Buddhist Meditation course is an example of what we 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 various truths of the tradition. There is an important place for this form of “committed” first-person learning in our private lives, but we should be careful to not require that kind of commitment in a secular university. By contrast, in the “critical first-person learning” about Buddhist meditation we do in this course, the need to believe is removed. We will read and analyze a variety of texts on Buddhist meditation (“third-person learning”); we will observe how our minds and bodies work while trying out a variety of simple meditation techniques derived from these texts (“first-person learning”); and we will critically discuss these texts in light of our experiences in the meditation laboratory. You will also be asked to keep a note-card journal on which you will record brief comments or observations at the end of every lab session.

The Meditations Labs are an important element in this dual aspect pedagogy, However if, for health reasons there is a student who is *unable* to participate in the Meditation Laboratory, I will be happy to make arrangements for doing alternate work of equivalent value. This will often take the form of doing the recommended readings in our course each week, in addition to the required readings