Course Description

One of the fundamental metaphors for human life and self-transformation is the journey or the path. It should not be surprising that contemplative traditions across times and cultures also employ this literary metaphor to describe the stages, states, and traits of contemplative development. Imbued with imagery of daring ascents, fiery obstacles, and the taming of the various dimensions of the uncultivated self, this genre of literature offers both concise and expansive introductions to the theory, practice, and anticipated end goals of the contemplative life. Furthermore, the study of path structures allow us to carefully compare the relationship between specific cognitive, affective, and somatic practices, their resultant states and traits of human experience, and the meaning and value ascribed to them.

This course begins with a theoretical overview to the study of “paths” from humanistic and psychological perspectives. We will introduce one of the key debates that will guide our examination of specific paths, as well as our comparisons of various paths across traditions: Do contemplative paths reflect universal structures of human experience that are discovered through practice? Or, do contemplative paths shape culturally-specific dimensions of human experience that are constructed through practice? This debate is as old as some of the earliest contemplative traditions, and continues to raise critical issues for the humanistic, psychological, and scientific study of contemplative practices. Along the way, we will also investigate select dimensions of the contemplative path in the laboratory of our own experience.
Course Objectives

• to adopt a multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival approach to the study of stages of the path literature
• to discern the relationship between motivations, world-views, practices, experiences, character traits, behaviors, and goals within a given contemplative system
• to compare these dimensions of the contemplative path across traditions in order to illuminate each tradition as well as key debates in the study of contemplative traditions
• to apply these skills in an original research project investigating one or more contemplative paths from historical, comparative, or psychological perspectives
• to develop a personal philosophy for living and a toolkit of contemplative practices based upon the issues raised in and strategies provided by contemplative traditions past and present

Assessment

• participation in class discussions, activities, & labs (15%)
• take-home reading guides and in-class quizzes (15%)
• critical first-person reflection journal (5 entries) (10%) [due: 9/18, 10/9, 10/30; 11/18; 12/11]
• three short essays (2-3 pages) (30%) [due 10/16, 11/4, 11/20]
• research paper (10-12 pages) (30%)
  o abstract & annotated bibliography (5%) [due 11/24]
  o research presentation (10%) [week 14 or 15]
  o final paper (15%) [due 12/19]

Required Texts

• Shechen Rabjam, The Great Medicine that Conquers Clinging to the Notion of Reality: Steps in Meditation on the Enlightened Mind (Shambhala, 2007)
• readings on electronic reserve and the course canvas site

Suggested Texts

• Bhikkhu Bodhi, In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (Wisdom, 2005)
Schedule of Classes and Assigned Readings

§I. Preparing for the Path: Theories, Methods, and Debates

Week 1: Introduction
H 9/10: Introduction to the Course, to Contemplation, and to Paths

Week 2: “Path” as a Conceptual Metaphor and Literary Trope
M 9/14: LAB: Expectations, Goals, and Conceptions of Progress
T 9/15: Orientation through Body and Place
   read: Lakoff and Johnson, selections from *Metaphors We Live By*; Tuan, *Topophilia*, Ch. 3: “Common Psychological Structures and Responses” [25 pages]
H 9/17: “Path” and “Way” in the Contemplative Psychology of Hans de Wit

Week 3: Psychological Approaches to the Study of Contemplative Path Schemas
M 9/21: LAB: Ānāpānasati: Keeping the Breath in Mind
   read: Ajahn Chan, *On Meditation*, pp. 11-16 [5 pages]
T 9/22: Attributional Approaches to the Study of Path Schemas
H 9/24: Debates Concerning Experience
   read: Katz, selections from “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”; Forman, selections from “Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting” [35 pages]

§II. Comparisons Within Traditions: Buddhist Stages of the Path Literature

Week 4: Fundamentals of Buddhism: Theory and Practice
M 9/28: LAB: Satipatthāna: The Establishment of Mindfulness
   read: Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, pp. 281-290 [9 pages]
T 9/29: The Life and Teachings of the Buddha
   read: Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, pp. 54-67; 239-250 [24 pages]
H 10/1: Paths and Fruitions according to the Pāli Nikayas
   read: Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, pp. 281-295; 373-381; 392-406 [28 pages]
F 10/2: Pir Zia Inayat-Khan lecture: Sufi Chivalry (optional, see Canvas)
S 10/3: Pir Zia Inayat-Khan workshop: Sufi Meditation (optional, see Canvas)
Week 5: Stages of Concentration and Insight

M 10/5: LAB: Noting and Labeling

T 10/6: Relationships between Concentration and Insight in Early Buddhism

H 10/8: The Stages of Insight according to *The Path of Purification* and its Commentaries
   read: Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, vii-xv (Table of Contents); Nanarama, *The Seven Stages of Purification and the Insight Knowledges*, Chs. 5-7 [30 pages]

Week 6: Stages, Paths, Grounds, and Fruitions in Theravada and Mahāyāna Buddhism

M 10/12: Fall Weekend Holiday NO LAB

T 10/13: The Insight Knowledges, Paths, and Fruitions

H 10/15: The Perfections, Paths, and Grounds of the Bodhisattva

Week 7: The Stages of the Path (*Lam Rim*) Genre of Tibetan Literature

M 10/19: LAB: Shamatha from Tibetan Perspectives

T 10/20: Tsongkhapa’s Stages of the Mahāyāna Path

H 10/22: Training in Compassion and Altruism

Week 8: The Stages of the Path (*Lam Rim*) Genre of Tibetan Literature

M 10/26: LAB: Tonglen: Giving and Taking
   read: Rabjam, *The Great Medicine*, Ch. 6 [9 pages]

T 10/27: Training in the Nyingma View
   read: Rabjam, *The Great Medicine*, Ch. 7-12 [46 pages]
Conceptions of Path & Goal: The Sudden vs. Gradual Debate


Week 9: Theoretical Issues in Paths and Results

M 11/2: LAB: Dzogchen: The Great Perfection
read: Khenchen Palden Sherap, Pointing out the Nature of Mind, Chs. 5, 14-16 [13 pages]

T 11/3: Discussion: Development or Discovery?

H 11/5: Transition: A Comparative Theory of Interiority

§III. Comparisons Across Traditions: Path Structures in Abrahamic Traditions

Week 10: The Inner Landscape: Environmental Imagery in Orthodox and Catholic Christianities

M 11/9: LAB: The Three Doorways of the Present Moment
read: Laird, Into the Silent Land, pp. 52-69 [17 pages]

T 11/10: Mountain and Desert as Metaphors for the Contemplative Path
read: Lane, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes, Ch. 3; Burton-Christie, “The Place of the Heart: Geography and Spirituality in the Life of Antony” [37 pages]

H 11/12: Darkness and Light on the Way up the Mountain

Week 11: Models of Contemplative Ascent in Christianity and Sufism

M 11/16: LAB: Silence, Watchfulness, Recitation, and Stillness
read: Laird, Into the Silent Land, pp. 36-42 [6 pages]

T 11/17: Climbing Ladders
read: Ware, “Introduction to The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” pp. 1-16, 43-58; Hilton, The Ladder of Perfection, vii-xv (ToC) [40 pages]

H 11/19: Inner Silence and Inner Images as Signs of Progress in Sufism
Week 12
M 11/23: American Academy of Religion Conference NO LAB
   read: research your final paper
T 11/24: American Academy of Religion Conference NO CLASS
   read: research your final paper
H 11/26: Thanksgiving Holiday NO CLASS

§IV. Blazing New Paths

Week 13: The Influence of Contemplative Paths on Modern Psychology
M 11/30: LAB: TBA
T 12/1: The Neuroscience of Contemplative Practices and Experiences (W. Britton + J. Davis)
   read: Davis and Vago, “Can Enlightenment Be Traced to Specific Neural Correlates?”;
   Lumma, Kok, & Singer, “Is Meditation Always Relaxing?”; Wilber, “The Spectrum of
   Development, Part I,” pp. 65-83; Wilber, various maps and charts; [25 pages]
H 12/3: Individual research meetings with Dr. Lindahl

Week 14: Conclusions
M 12/7: NO LAB
T 12/8: Final Discussion
   read: none, work on final paper
H 12/10: Presentations of Student Research

Week 15: Reading Period
M 12/14: Presentations of Student Research
T 12/15: Presentations of Student Research
H 12/17: NO CLASS (work on final paper)
Course Policies and Perspectives

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.

On Attendance & Participation

This course places a central importance and value on intersubjective second-person approaches to learning. Consequently, attendance in class and participation in class discussions and group activities is absolutely essential. In order to be able to participate in these discussions and activities, you must come to class prepared—that is, you are expected to carefully read any assigned materials and bring those materials with you to class, and you are expected to carefully and thoroughly complete all assignments on time. If you bring a laptop computer, it is expected that you will use it only for class-related activities such as accessing assigned texts and note-taking.

Because participation factors into your final grade, each unexcused absence will have an effect on this portion of your grade. Missing more than four class sessions throughout the semester will result in the forfeiture of the entirety of your participation grade. Missing six or more class sessions will result in failure of the course. Because of their central importance to the course and because there are comparatively few of them, missing one of the practice labs counts for two absences. Please be particularly punctual when arriving to contemplative practice labs!

On Late Work

Out of fairness to your classmates, and because managing your time wisely and accomplishing academic work punctually are essential skills to cultivate, assignments handed in past the due date will be penalized. The self-reflection journal and papers will be assessed a grade reduction of one letter grade per day late. With proper documentation, certain exceptions will be approved (e.g., athletics, approved extra-curricular activities, serious illness, funerals). If you anticipate needing to hand in an assignment late, please let me know in advance. No exceptions will be granted for work-related obligations.
On Plagiarism

Plagiarism—the passing off of someone else’s ideas and/or writing as your own—is a serious academic offense and will not be tolerated in this class. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will receive a failing grade. Violations of academic honesty will also be reported to the Case Administrator of the Academic Code. If you are unsure how to properly cite a source in your writing, please see me or consult a tutor at the Writing Center.

Resources

Writing Center

The Writing Center is located at J. Walter Wilson Room 213, where you will find a well-trained crew of tutors ready to assist you with your papers for this class. The Writing Center is open Monday – Thursday, 2pm – 8pm. They can assist you in the pre-writing process as well as in revising an existing draft. Please be sure that you bring a copy of the assignment and a copy of any work you have started. Schedule your sessions online at http://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/writing-center/appointments/appointments

Accessibilities Services

Any student needing academic accommodations on account of a disability should contact the Student and Employees Accessibilities Services (SEAS) office by email (SEAS@brown.edu) or phone (401-863-9588) to request a SEAS Registration form and Documentation Guidelines.

Counseling and Psychological Services

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is open by appointment M-F 8am-4pm during the summer to provide any counseling you might need. Please call 401-863-3476 to make an appointment. For an emergency drop-in session, please go directly to office at J. Walter Wilson Room 516 or call the number listed above.

The various chaplains of Brown University are also available for counsel. Their contact information can be found at http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/spiritual-life/chaplains/about/people

Additionally, please feel free to talk with me if you are trying to figure out what services you need or how to obtain those services.

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. 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.