

“The Empirical Directive”

ROTH Standard Course Disclaimer 1999-2010

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 twenty of which have been awarded to American college and university teachers during the past seven years. 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.

The modern 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.