

Meditation, Social Change, and Undergraduate Education

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This article argues that meditation guided by a competent teacher can be a positive influence in contemporary American society and even a force for progressive social change. A number of critical issues requiring further study are identified, including the need for a better understanding of meditation from the perspective of developmental psychology and of the relation between meditation and psychotherapy. The article proposes that American educational institutions can benefit from a deeper appreciation of the contemplative dimension of life. Special attention is given to how the American undergraduate college can provide students with opportunities to learn about and experience various forms of meditation. The role of teachers, chaplains, psychological counselors, and health care professionals in introducing meditation to students is discussed.

Over the past three decades, there has been a rediscovery in Western culture of the value of meditation and contemplative prayer. It is the purpose of this article to explore ways in which the American undergraduate college can provide students with opportunities for understanding and experiencing the meditative and contemplative disciplines developed by different cultures and religions. Because this inquiry is prompted in large measure by the belief that meditation can be a positive social influence and even a force for progressive social change, it is useful at the outset to present briefly an understanding of the nature of constructive change.

DIRECTIONS FOR CREATIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

One way to characterize the most promising social movements in America today is to view them as part of a threefold development that involves (1) a deepening commitment to democratic social values, including human rights and peace, (2) an ecological reconstruction of how people think and live, and (3) a fresh spiritual awakening to the immanence of the sacred in the world.

The efforts to renew and strengthen American democracy include the struggle to achieve gender equality and the protection of minority rights, the promotion of tolerance and celebration of diversity, the empowerment of people to participate in the making of decisions that impact them, the spread of industrial democracy, a new emphasis on the importance of community life and I-thou relationship, and promotion of international cooperation in pursuit of poverty eradication, human rights, economic opportunity, environmental conservation, and peace.

The ecological revolution is founded on new scientific discoveries in astronomy, biology, cosmology, ecology, physics, and psychology. It emphasizes holistic, global, and long-term thinking, and it is guided by a new moral awareness expressed in the imperative: respect and care for the whole community of life. This means restoration of ecosystems, protection of biodiversity, a new eco-economics, sustainable ways of living, and subordinating the principle of national sovereignty to a concern for the global common good.

The contemporary spiritual awakening, to which reference has been made, involves a new sense of wonder in the face of the mystery and beauty of the natural world and a rediscovery of the sacred. It entails a realization of the sacredness of one's own life and of all life. It involves an integration of the sacred and the secular, spiritual life and everyday life. It recognizes that ultimate meaning is found in community and by developing a compassionate, democratic, and ecological self that is inclusive, expanding to embrace all life.

The values associated with democracy, ecology, and spirituality can be understood as interrelated dimensions of a new, emerging social consciousness. The concern is to join and integrate the exercise of power and search for material progress on the one hand with the quest for ethical and spiritual wisdom on the other. The general objectives are to build community in the midst of diversity, heal the Earth, and improve the quality of life for all.

There are two fundamental ways to advance social change. One involves reconstructing institutions and the social environment that shape the way people think, behave, and interact. The other involves focusing on individuals and working to transform their awareness, attitudes, and values. Both are necessary. The two ways can and should complement and reinforce each other.

MEDITATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Can meditation produce transformations of consciousness in individuals consistent with the changes in values, social habits, and institutions inspired by creative democracy and the environmental movement? Can meditation

help people realize the democratic-ecological self? Can meditation expand and deepen ethical concern and awareness of the sacred? Could meditation add a unique quality and depth to democratic-ecological living? In short, should Americans include meditation and contemplative disciplines in their vision of the way to individual freedom, authentic community, and fulfillment? The answer is a qualified yes.

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the American experiment with meditation is just beginning, and there is much that Americans have yet to learn about the nature of meditation and its potential as an instrument of growth and transformation in a democratic-ecological context. The experience of Americans to date indicates that it is not a substitute for the learning and psychosocial development that comes in and through living and working with others. It is not a substitute for searching rational inquiry and critical reflection. As a general rule, it is a mistake to think that it can or should be used with Westerners to address the problems in personality development for which psychotherapy has been developed. However, there is much evidence that suggests that under the guidance of well-trained, experienced, and responsible teachers, meditation can be of benefit to many people when they are ready for it, helping them to grow in unique ways and to promote creative social change.

There are, of course, many different meditative and contemplative disciplines, and the kind of practice that is appropriate for any one individual will depend on a person's stage in the human life cycle and on his or her special needs and abilities. The most basic forms of meditation involve techniques of concentration that bring calm and clarity to the body-mind. Many of the more advanced forms are designed to help a person to move beyond a narrow atomistic sense of self and to develop a sense of identification with others and belonging to the larger community of being. Moreover, in a number of religions, meditation and contemplative prayer are practiced as a transformative spiritual discipline that can ready a person for the experience of enlightenment or union with God.

It has been experimentally documented that certain forms of meditation may improve physical health. There are meditation practices that can be used to improve athletic and artistic performance. Contemplative disciplines may help some people become less frenetic and more centered, more aware of the goodness and beauty of their own being, more appreciative of the intrinsic value of other beings, more responsive to suffering, more attentive and mindful, and more open to I-thou relationship and meaning. When meditation effects a transcendence of ego-centered awareness, it deepens consciousness of the sacred.

The full significance of meditation is missed if it is viewed just as a technique—that is, solely as a means to ends beyond itself, such as health, social change, or even enlightenment. Contemplation is a form of human activity

that possesses its own inherent value, and it may involve a beautiful experience that is a fulfillment complete in itself. In this sense, it is an end in itself. If American society were to understand and accept this notion, this alone would cause a beneficial change of attitude regarding the place of contemplation in culture. Furthermore, the full benefits of meditation only follow upon wholehearted engagement with the discipline, and this requires that the practitioner view it as an end and not just as a means.

There is also very limited value in thinking about meditation as an isolated practice. The larger intellectual, moral, and spiritual environment in which meditation is done influences the way people understand and approach it and the effect that it has. In some cultures, for example, meditation has been used to reinforce and implement philosophies of quietism or of world denial and extreme asceticism. However, there are also many examples of meditation having been associated with a world-affirming ethical mysticism and even revolutionary social change. In addition, the physical environment in which meditation is practiced is important, especially for beginners, because it may be more or less conducive to concentration and because it may also encourage certain values and attitudes. In American culture, the challenge is to set the practice of meditation in the context of a worldview that affirms a healthy balance between inwardness and activism, concentration and going forth into relationship, and quiet contemplation and social responsibility.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND MEDITATION

The modern secular university is centrally concerned with scientific research and the arts of critical rational reflection. The university trains the teachers who form the faculties of undergraduate institutions, and the influence of the university is the dominant force shaping undergraduate education. The central mission of the undergraduate college is to train and nurture the growth of the human mind, especially the powers of critical reason.

There are, of course, many dimensions to a liberal arts education. There are courses that emphasize the human imagination, explore the art of appreciation, and nurture creative self-expression through the arts. Undergraduate schools have their athletic programs and a great variety of extracurricular activities that evolve to reflect changing student interests. There are numerous opportunities for off-campus and overseas study. Up through the Second World War, most colleges required attendance at chapel, reflecting a concern to shape the moral and religious sensibilities of students, but required chapel has been abandoned in the vast majority of colleges. Today, moral education occurs primarily in and through

enforcement on campus of codes of conduct that emphasize respect for persons and diversity and not cheating on exams and papers. Recognizing the many pressures on undergraduates and their emotional needs, most schools have introduced opportunities for short-term psychological counseling.

Even though are these diverse offerings, which reflect at least some concern with the whole person and with the diversity of human interests and talents, the strong emphasis remains on critical reason, and especially on methods of knowledge that have a practical bearing. Critical reason is one of the finest flowers of Western civilization. Its cultivation and exercise are essential to the development of independence of mind and a healthy democratic society, and to the practice of caring for the Earth. That undergraduate education should emphasize the experimental method of knowledge and the arts of critical reflection is not to be questioned.

A question can be raised about whether the education of the undergraduate college in America today fails to put science and discursive reason in proper perspective and whether it tends to encourage a character orientation that is too head-centered (as distinct from heart-centered), more interested in information than appreciation, more concerned about the knowledge that is power than wisdom and ethical values, more oriented toward I-it than I-thou, more skilled at striving for future ends than living a fulfilling life in the present. It is a question of balance.

This is a complex issue for which there is no simple answer, and the university and college by themselves cannot solve this problem. However, a fresh appreciation for contemplative experience may be one element in a larger strategy for dealing with the issue. Two hundred years ago, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the founder of the modern liberal Christian tradition, leveled a criticism that addresses this question. He noted that every person is born with a capacity to experience directly the mystery, wonder, and beauty of the world, which is essential to human well-being, and a sense of the joy and meaning of life. However, he lamented that this capacity is “crushed out” of children in the course of their education by the modern “rage for calculating and explaining” under the leadership of “the discreet and practical men” who dominate society. “In everything there must be design and aim; something has always to be performed, and if the spirit can no more serve, the body must be exercised. Work and play, but no quiet, submissive contemplation,” wrote Schleiermacher (1958, 124–30).

In general, American schools at all levels reflect the bias that Schleiermacher criticizes. In the early grades, the best way to address this imbalance is a new emphasis on the arts, and a concern on the part of teachers to respect and nurture the sense of wonder in children as essential to their well-being. In the American college, along with strengthened programs in the arts and related fields, students can benefit from greater opportunities to study and experience the meditative and contemplative disciplines.

STRATEGIES FOR ACQUAINTING STUDENTS WITH THE NATURE AND PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

NEED FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING

First of all, meditation needs to be demythologized in the American mind so that people have a rational understanding of what it is and what it can and cannot do. On the one hand, the majority of Americans still view meditation suspiciously as something of a weird Eastern practice that is essentially passive, self-centered, and otherworldly. On the other hand, there are those who think of it as a cure-all or as a shortcut to enlightenment and bliss that enables a person to leapfrog whole developmental stages. The truth about meditation should be carefully researched and studied in the university and college so that Americans can develop an informed understanding of its history, varied nature, proper uses, and social value. To what extent is it possible for contemporary laypeople to take advantage of the contemplative disciplines that have been developed by men and women living cloistered lives in monasteries and nunneries? How are the effects of contemplative practice to be understood in relation to the transformations of consciousness essential to promoting moral democracy, sustainable development, international cooperation, and peace?

MEDITATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

More work is needed on the relations between psychology and contemplative science. How is the Western idea of developmental stages related to the developmental stages envisioned by contemplative psychologies and philosophies? Does the contemplative understanding of spiritual development alter or expand the vision of Western psychology, and, if so, how? Is it possible to construct an idea of universal human developmental stages that integrates Western science and contemplative science?

New research is needed on the effects of meditation on human growth and mental illness at each stage in the life cycle. For example, what forms of meditation may be helpful to adolescents? What risks and dangers are involved when college-aged students engage in various forms of meditation? A recent study has warned that a person who has failed to develop a strong sense of self is not fit to engage in contemplative disciplines designed to help the practitioner realize the truth of no-self, and that if such a person pursues these disciplines, there is a risk of pathological consequences (see Engler, 1986). This caution should be taken very seriously. In what situations is psychotherapy rather than meditation the most appropriate method of healing and growth? In what situations can a meditative discipline be used to complement psychotherapy? In what situations should a person

turn to meditative disciplines rather than psychotherapy for growth and transformation?

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND SOCIAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS

Religion, psychology, and sociology departments have a special role to play in pursuing research and teaching regarding the history, methods, and social significance of meditation and contemplative prayer.

The American interest in meditation in recent decades has been closely related to the explosion of interest in Asian religions that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. This fascination with Asian religions was to a large degree fueled by a hunger for transformative experience among a new generation of young people who found traditional forms of Christianity and Judaism too focused on doctrine and law, and out of touch with the living truth. Traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism seemed to offer Americans spiritual disciplines in the form of meditative practices that could open the door to liberating experiences and enlightenment.

Prior to the 1960s, very few Americans had ever actually practiced meditation even though an interest in Asian religions had been slowly developing since the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago. However, during the 1960s, this changed. All over America, small groups, largely made up of young people, began training with teachers from India, Japan, Tibet, and other parts of Asia. A few of these teachers were Americans who had gone overseas to be trained. For the first time, it was possible for an average American to receive formal training in a variety of Eastern meditative disciplines in the United States. Among those who turned East were a number of men and women who chose academic careers. As a result of all these factors, a vast new literature on meditation practice in Asia has been generated.

The fascination with Eastern meditation stirred fresh interest in traditions of contemplative prayer, meditation, and mysticism in Christianity and Judaism. Efforts have been made by Christian and Jewish scholars to retrieve lost traditions of contemplative practice. Over the last 25 years, much work has been done in this field. In the 1960s, it was almost impossible for a layperson to find a minister, priest, or rabbi who could or would instruct him or her in contemplative prayer. This, at least, was my experience as a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and it is one reason why I joined Philip Kapleau's Zen Center in Rochester, New York. Today, however, the situation has changed considerably. Books on Christian and Jewish contemplative practice are readily available, and if a person seeks instruction in this spiritual discipline, he or she can find a teacher within the Christian or Jewish community. The meeting of Eastern and Western religious traditions that occurred toward the end of the 20th

century marks a major moment in the development of American spiritual life.

As a result of these developments, most religion departments offer courses that include some exploration of various aspects of the history of meditation and contemplative disciplines. The most concentrated study of meditation often goes on within the framework of the psychology of religion, which has been especially concerned with the study of religious experience and mysticism. In psychology departments, which are commonly dominated by faculty trained in physiological psychology as distinct from personality development, there is often little, if any, attention given to meditation. Psychology departments could do much more in this field, including a more serious study of transpersonal psychology and psychology of religion. In general, the social sciences have done little research on meditation, and this needs to be encouraged.

THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION IN ACADEMIC COURSES

The discussion of academic coursework related to meditation raises an important question. Should a religion department instructor in an academic course be permitted or even encouraged to offer students opportunities to practice some form of meditation related to a tradition or traditions under study?

A number of professors are doing this today, some by taking a class to visit a Zen center or Christian monastery, for example. This is a delicate issue in a secular university or college, for the fear is always there that a religion department professor may cross the line and get into religious indoctrination or begin to play the role of a guru with students. However, as long as that is not the case and as long as the person teaching a meditative practice has the training to do so, the exercises in meditation are introductory in nature, and substantial academic study forms the core of the course, such practical introductions to meditation will probably be accepted. They should be viewed as quite appropriate for the simple reason that it is very difficult to understand and appreciate the nature of an activity that one has never directly experienced.

Should an instructor be permitted to offer a course, the chief objective of which is to train students in the art and practice of some meditative discipline? Should students get academic credit for undergoing actual training in meditation at a meditation center outside the college? As a general rule, the answer to these two questions should be no, but some exceptions to this rule could be made. For example, it might be appropriate to give course credit for a period of training at a meditation center in the case of a college that has a one-month Winter Term (4-1-4 semester schedule) designed in part to permit off-campus learning in a variety of practical endeavors. If

academic credit is to be awarded for a stay at a meditation center, some appropriate written critical reflection on the experience should be required. Along the same lines, a college might adopt a curriculum in which each student is permitted to take a few courses for credit toward the bachelor of arts degree that are to be centered on practical learning, with meditation practice as one of many options. A mechanism for evaluating the psychological fitness of students for such courses would, of course, have to be established.

Education in American colleges commonly suffers from a failure to connect information and experience, theory and practice, and ideas and solutions to real problems. Much that goes on in the classroom is abstract and unrelated to the living experience of the students. Consequently, much of it is not retained beyond the examination period. It is never digested and integrated into a student's real understanding so as to produce growth and wisdom. One remedy to this problem is to find new imaginative ways for students to learn by doing.

Because there are opportunities for abuse of authority and influence in the case of leading students in the practice of meditation, guidelines for this kind of situation should be developed, including identification of the kinds of meditation that are appropriate for use with undergraduates in an academic course. The existence of such guidelines would go far in avoiding problems and in diffusing apprehension and criticism. This could be the subject for a conference, or it could be made the focus of a session at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

THE ROLE OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS, PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELORS, AND CHAPLAINS

Students can also be introduced to meditation by health care professionals and psychological counselors on campus or in and through a college program of extracurricular activities. As the medical and counseling professions integrate meditation into their understanding of preventive medicine and resources to deal with stress and anxiety, it will become natural for college health centers to provide information and even instruction in meditation. College chaplains are also in a position to offer and lead workshops on meditation, but few of them are trained in this field, which is of little interest to most theological seminaries.

Another approach involves an academic department or a chaplain's office establishing a program of visiting speakers and teachers in the field of meditation. Such programs require special funding, including travel expenses and an honorarium for visitors. However, even with an annual budget of a few thousand dollars, a meaningful program can be started.

Strong on-campus leadership is essential if the program is to be successful in involving students.

ORGANIZING AND LEADING ON-CAMPUS MEDITATION GROUPS

My own experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s at Middlebury College taught me that if students who have been introduced to meditation at a workshop are to continue to practice, it requires the leadership of a committed faculty or staff member and an appropriate space. I occasionally offered workshops in basic Zen meditation at the college, and 25 to 50 interested students would attend. Particularly for a beginner, it is very helpful to have a group to sit with. After each workshop, some would want to join such a group. Finding an appropriate space is difficult. Student activity space is always limited, and the competition for it is often intense. Setting up a large public room by moving aside furniture and bringing in cushions for each meditation session is not a very satisfactory arrangement. I finally secured a basement room in a dormitory for the exclusive use of the meditation group. It was set up with cushions and opened by campus security every morning at 6:30 and locked at 11 p.m. to discourage abuse of the space (which occurred on a few occasions). As long as I sat on a regular schedule with the students, participation remained strong, and students would sit on their own from time to time. When my administrative duties at the college made it impossible for me to continue this involvement, the group gradually disbanded. The meditation room at Middlebury lasted for three years.

In summary, if students are to learn and practice meditation on campus beyond introductory workshops, the three essentials are (1) a faculty or staff person with appropriate training who will organize and lead a group; (2) a space that is permanently committed to this purpose; and (3) a regular schedule for group practice. It is not realistic to expect that a faculty or staff person will continue to lead a student meditation group on a purely voluntary basis indefinitely. It is a demanding responsibility and often requires the commitment of evening hours. Some compensation is necessary unless a staff person, such as a college chaplain or a student counselor, understands it to be part of his or her job description. Ideally, students would be offered a variety of appropriate introductory meditative disciplines to choose from, and a college meditation room would be designed so that it can be used by groups pursuing different traditions. Such a space should also be open for faculty and staff use.

With these needs in mind, I proposed to Middlebury College in 1982 creation of an interfaith center that would include a permanent meditation space and a director who would develop an appropriate program. The idea for this Interfaith Center was strongly influenced by Chapel House at

Colgate University. The proposal was supported by about 20 faculty and staff, but it was never implemented. The college administration was not convinced that the facility would be well used by students, and meditation did not seem an important need to the administration, which had had no experience with it. There was also the problem of raising the money to build, maintain, and staff an interfaith center.

Chapel House is a nondenominational retreat center established to make available to laypeople an opportunity for contemplative experience. It sits on the edge of the Colgate University campus and is open to students, faculty, and staff. However, Chapel House does not make a major effort to involve students. Its outreach is minimal. It distributes a mailing to entering students, but it does not have a regular program of workshops and lectures for students. The facility, which includes some overnight accommodations and an extensive library, is set up primarily for use by individuals who are expected to decide for themselves how they wish to use their time at the House.

The Director estimates that about one-third of Colgate students visit Chapel House during their four years. The Director, who teaches Buddhist Studies, does bring his college students to the House to do Buddhist meditation as part of their coursework. Very few faculty and staff use the facility. Because group discussions and meetings are not encouraged, the College chaplains seldom use the House. The majority of visitors to Chapel House are from off-campus and have no connection to the University. The House was founded through the generosity of the same donor who established the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. In contrast to Chapel House, the Interfaith Center proposed for Middlebury College would have as its central mission campus outreach and involvement of students, faculty, and staff.¹

MEDITATION TIME AND SPACE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

Another way that meditation can be introduced on the college campus is by faculty and staff practicing it with administration support. This support could involve a policy of allowing staff time for meditation during the work day and creation of a space or spaces for it in buildings where people are working. A college administration would only do this if convinced of a real demand and that job performance and morale would be enhanced.

In conclusion, meditation can improve the quality of life of those who choose to practice it under the guidance of competent teachers. When pursued seriously as a discipline, it can add a unique depth to democratic and ecological living. It can help people become free and fully human. By itself, meditation does not impel human beings to social action, and it needs to be counterbalanced by a concern with social reconstruction and personal

relationship. However, in a democratic-ecological society that affirms life in the world and values social action and community, the practice of meditation can help to shape the direction of social action, contributing to an integration of the ethical and the political, the spiritual and the practical. The undergraduate college is one place where these issues should be thoughtfully explored.

Note

- 1 The information on Chapel House reflects the situation in the 1980s and early 1990s.

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What can you expect of meditation practice, and how soon? That's a very hard question to answer, as research on the topic is still in its infancy. But here I try to inspire you by sharing the ways how meditation changed my life. There is a popular concept out there that it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to master a skill. This comes from Malcolm Gladwell's famous book *Outliers: Education Changes the World of Our Students*. It's not a trivial thing, to decide to go to university. For one thing, it's expensive, both in terms of tuition and student fees, and in the income you lose by not working full-time. There's also no guarantee that you'll get that promised higher paying job, with greater job security. Tools for Changing the World. Having concluded that education should help students develop the skills they need to best take action in the world, I think we must also consider what we, as educators, think these skills should be. In doing this, I also feel we must be respectful of the wishes of our students and communities, and consider what is most beneficial for our society. *Meditation, Social Change, and Undergraduate Education*. September 2006 • Teachers College Record. This article argues that meditation guided by a competent teacher can be a positive influence in contemporary American society and even a force for progressive social change. A number of critical issues requiring further study are identified, including the need for a better understanding of meditation from the perspective of developmental psychology and of the relation between meditation and [Show full abstract] psychotherapy. The article proposes that American educational institutions can benefit from a deeper appreciation of the contemplative dimension of life.