

## Contemplative Studies: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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**Abstract:** A decade ago the *Teachers College Record* (108.9 [2006]) published a special issue on “Contemplative Practices and Education,” which included Harold Roth’s seminal article “Contemplative Studies: Prospects for a New Field.” Since that time, the field has developed, diversified, and become more critically aware. Addressing “frequently asked questions,” the present article provides a baseline for understanding this emerging interdisciplinary field, including its expressions in “contemplative pedagogy” and “contemplative science.”

### **What is Contemplative Studies?**

Contemplative Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including the possible relevance and application to a wide variety of undertakings. Generally speaking, Contemplative Studies has three primary defining characteristics, namely, practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development. It may employ first-person, second-person, and third-person approaches, although “critical first-person discourse” is a defining characteristic. There are some parallels and overlapping concerns with other fields of inquiry, such as consciousness studies, mysticism studies, neuroscience, psychology, Religious Studies, and so forth. This exciting, controversial and potentially subversive field also includes contemplative pedagogy, which is a new experimental and experiential approach to teaching and learning informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice.

### **When and how was Contemplative Studies formed?**

The socio-historical contexts of and cultural influences on the field are complex. It appears that the name itself was first coined by Harold Roth of Brown University in the early 2000s, especially in the context of the Brown Contemplative Studies Initiative. During this time, “Contemplative Studies” also became used to identify programs at Emory University and Rice University, among others. Other key influences included the projects of Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the Mind & Life Institute. The name has increasingly become used for the larger field, the “contemplative movement,” with the establishment of the bi-annual International Symposium for Contemplative Studies (2012-2018), which was organized by the Mind & Life Institute. The selection of this name partially occurred through the indirect influence of the Contemplative Studies Unit of the American Academy of Religion.

### **Which disciplinary approaches are relevant for studying contemplative practice and contemplative experience?**

As Contemplative Studies emphasizes interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, almost any discipline-specific approach may be utilized and applied, although clinical psychology and neuroscience are currently being privileged. Broadly and inclusively conceived, Contemplative Studies recognizes potential contributions from the sciences, humanities, and creative arts. At present, the most

developed and sophisticated research is coming out of cultural studies, history, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and Religious Studies. There are also some emerging approaches based in cognitive science, comparative philosophy, consciousness studies, and philosophy of mind. The field is especially in need of engagement from kinesiology, ethnic studies, performance studies, and somatics.

### **What makes Contemplative Studies distinctive?**

The field of Contemplative Studies is composed of diverse individuals with diverse approaches and commitments. Generally speaking, Contemplative Studies has three primary, defining characteristics, namely, practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development. Critical subjectivity, or “critical first-person discourse,” is particularly significant. The field makes space for and encourages direct personal experience with contemplative practice. Overcoming what B. Alan Wallace has labelled “the taboo of subjectivity,” this approach is *critical* in both senses of the word. It is essential *and* reflective. Members of the field generally aspire to avoid apologetics, confessionalism, dogmatism, protectionism, and similar tendencies. Specifically, while Contemplative Studies makes space for direct, personal experience with contemplative practice, contemplative experience is open to critical investigation and even to public discussion. Ideally, this involves the larger dialogic community bringing attention to unquestioned assumptions, ingrained opinions, and unrecognized tendencies. In the context of Contemplative Studies, critical subjectivity and *inter*-subjectivity may thus require reflection on colonialist, missionary, and Orientalist legacies, and perhaps resistance to and subversion of neo-colonialist agendas (e.g., cognitive imperialism, spiritual capitalism, spiritual colonialism). Thus, exploration of contemplative experience may involve first-person, second-person, and third-person discourse. While direct personal experience with contemplative practice is generally understood as a defining characteristic of Contemplative Studies, individuals may also study and conduct research from a purely third-person perspective. In fact, the field needs more ethnographic, historical, and literary studies.

### **Isn't Contemplative Studies just hidden religious indoctrination and covert proselytization?**

Serious and sophisticated scholars and educators, including those utilizing contemplative pedagogy, attempt to avoid privileging any particular worldview or tradition. In its most prominent and influential expressions, Contemplative Studies also tends to be a secular or quasi-secular undertaking. It involves the critical investigation of contemplative practice and contemplative experience from a more neutral or objective (apparently “non-committed”) perspective. That said, major representatives are Buddhist adherents or Buddhist sympathizers, and they often unknowingly utilize Buddhist concepts and frameworks. Beyond these Buddhocentric tendencies, it is also possible to engage religiously-committed and tradition-based contemplative practice from an ecumenical, inclusive, and pluralistic perspective. This might involve inter-contemplative and inter-monastic dialogue. Given the emphasis on critical subjectivity, any claims or unrecognized tendencies are open to discussion, reflection, and modification.

### **Is Contemplative Studies the same as the “study of contemplation”?**

While there is some connection to “contemplation” broadly conceived, Contemplative Studies uses “contemplative practice” as a larger umbrella category for a wide variety of approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like. This technical usage is sometimes surprising to individuals familiar with or located within religious traditions, especially the contemplative expressions of Christianity.

## **Why is Contemplative Studies growing so rapidly now?**

The emergence and development of Contemplative Studies is a complex topic. This is not to mention the guiding inspirations and motivations among the diverse members of the field. Briefly stated, Contemplative Studies is primarily developing because of an increased interest in contemplative practice, especially its potentially beneficial and transformative effects. Contemplative Studies also encourages the exploration of human being and identity in its various expressions, including embodied, kinesthetic, and lived dimensions. This includes the consideration of *practice* beyond theory and consciousness beyond rationality and intellectualism. It includes embodied and lived dimensions of human being and personhood. Many participants are also dissatisfied with perceived deficiencies of contemporary education systems and the larger society. Associated scholars and educators frequently see great potential in contemplative practice for helping individuals, improving education, and reforming society, especially with respect to social justice issues.

## **What is the difference between Contemplative Studies and “spirituality as an academic discipline”?**

“Spirituality as an academic discipline” tends to refer to the study, practice, and application of Christian spirituality. At least in its current and dominant expressions, it is Christocentric. While Contemplative Studies could ideally include such scholars, it aspires to avoid privileging any particular worldview or tradition. That said, there are some shared interests and concerns, such as contemplative practice and contemplative experience. From a certain perspective, there also might be some connections with critical adherence, lived religion, interreligious dialogue, and even comparative theology. However, many, perhaps most, members of Contemplative Studies generally conceive of it or wish to conceive of it as a “secular,” “objective,” and/or “scientific” undertaking, as explicitly “not religious.” This relates to various subtexts, including hybrid spirituality, public education, and the separation of church and state in the United States.

## **What is contemplative practice?**

As understood within Contemplative Studies, “contemplative practice” is a larger umbrella category; it encompasses approaches and practices more commonly referred to as “meditation,” “prayer,” and cognate disciplines. It approximates a wide variety of tradition-specific technical terms. Contemplative practice, in turn, refers to various approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like. Possible connective strands or family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. Such practices include not only religiously-committed and tradition-based methods, but also ecumenical, spiritualist and secular ones. Recognizing but even going beyond modern movement awareness practices, members of Contemplative Studies tend to understand “contemplative practice” in terms of a specific approach, an approach that may be applied to and expressed in almost any activity. This includes art, dance, music, photography, research, teaching, theatre, walking, writing, and so forth. One major issue in Contemplative Studies centers on the degree to which formal meditation is assumed or required.

## **Is contemplative practice synonymous with meditation?**

“Contemplative practice” is generally understood as a larger umbrella category that encompasses “meditation.” This is done for a number of reasons. First, meditation is often taken to imply seated

postures and is often reduced to Buddhist meditation. While a more sophisticated understanding of meditation recognizes diversity and variety, including with respect to postures, methods, purposes, and traditions, “contemplative practice” allows consideration of a much larger set of approaches and practices. Second, “meditation,” as derived from the Latin *meditatio* (“to think over”/“to consider”), has a specific historical meaning in Christian contemplative practice: It generally refers to reflection on specific topics. This stands in contrast to “contemplation,” as derived from the Latin *contemplatio* (“to look at”/“to observe”), which generally refers to maintaining silent awareness of God. Thus, in technical usage, “contemplative prayer” is closer to “meditation” as utilized as a comparative category. “Contemplative practice” in turn includes not only meditation and contemplative prayer more strictly defined, but also various practices (e.g., dance, martial arts, movement awareness practices) that might otherwise be neglected or excluded. The category also assists one in avoiding the reduction of practice to mere technique.

### **What is contemplative experience?**

“Contemplative experience” refers to the types of experiences that occur within the parameters of contemplative practice, are associated with particular contemplative practices, and/or are deemed significant by contemplatives and their associated communities. It approximates a wide variety of tradition-specific technical terms. Contemplative Studies is interested in the entire spectrum of contemplative experience. These “varieties of contemplative experience” range from more “ordinary” or “mundane” experiences (e.g., boredom) to more “extraordinary” or “anomalous” ones (e.g., absorption). While the latter are most often emphasized, the field recognizes the importance of documenting the various experiences that occur during contemplative practice. Attention must also be given to individual-specific, method-specific and tradition-specific experiences that are elevated or emphasized. One of the more controversial considerations focuses on “dark nights” and “spiritual emergencies,” that is, adverse or difficult experiences.

### **Is contemplative experience synonymous with mystical experience?**

While there is some overlap between these and other types of subjective experience (e.g., altered states of consciousness, anomalous experiences), they are distinct. “Contemplative experience” refers to the types of experiences that occur within the parameters of contemplative practice, are associated with particular contemplative practices, and/or are deemed significant by contemplatives and their associated communities. “Mystical experience” refers to experiences of that which a given individual or community identifies as sacred or ultimately real. Mystical experiences are generally located within specific religious communities and traditions, and they would thus be a sub-category of religious experience. However, there are “non-religious” or “trans-tradition” mystical experiences, such as disappearing into Nature. Thus, mystical experiences might occur within the context of contemplative practice, but they would be more “extraordinary states.” In addition, many individuals incorrectly understand meditation as a method for inducing mystical experiences. The relationship between meditation and mysticism in different contexts and traditions is extremely complicated.

### **What is contemplative pedagogy?**

Contemplative pedagogy refers to an approach to teaching and learning informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice. It is an emerging experiential and experimental educational methodology that explores contemplative practice and contemplative experience, especially with respect to their relevance and application to education and perhaps to larger existential and socio-political issues. It most often emphasizes and addresses the three defining characteristics of

Contemplative Studies, namely, practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development. Contemplative pedagogy may be expressed in three primary ways, namely, teaching and learning informed by personal contemplative practice, formal in-class contemplative exercises, and/or actual courses in Contemplative Studies. Contemplative pedagogy is currently being used throughout various fields and in every level of the American educational system. Various teaching centers in the United States are also beginning to explore and support contemplative pedagogy. Some of these include the Center for Excellence in Teaching (University of Southern California), Center for Teaching (Vanderbilt University), and Teaching and Learning Center (Wake Forest University).

### **Is contemplative pedagogy synonymous with Contemplative Studies?**

Contemplative Studies encompasses contemplative pedagogy; contemplative pedagogy is one expression of Contemplative Studies, perhaps, albeit, an essential one. While many representatives of and participants in Contemplative Studies utilize contemplative pedagogy, these are distinct, if related. For example, one might simply research contemplative practice or contemplative experience without teaching it, or one might engage in and teach contemplative practice without formally researching it.

### **Can contemplative pedagogy only be employed in certain disciplines?**

As the Contemplative Practice Fellowship Program (1997-2009) facilitated by Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the American Council of Learned Societies makes clear, contemplative pedagogy has been and may be used in almost any discipline or curricular context. This involves contemplative educators reflecting on the most appropriate approaches, introducing discipline-specific exercises, and often designing their own courses. Courses have been offered in art, business, chemistry, economics, education, history, law, literature, music, nursing, philosophy, physics, psychology, Religious Studies, and so forth.

### **How does one utilize contemplative pedagogy in a classroom setting?**

This depends on one's particular subject, interests and objectives. There are many examples of discipline-specific approaches, classes, and relevant exercises. Attentiveness to academic values, appropriate pedagogy, course design, student interests, learning objectives, and institutional contexts is essential. Many contemplative educators begin with their own contemplative inquiry and apply this to course design and pedagogical practice. Such an approach often leads to greater attentiveness, clarity and intentionality with respect to teaching and learning. Another common, initial and foundational methodology involves observing five minutes of silence at the beginning of a given class or designing "slower" learning exercises (e.g., "beholding" a painting for 10 minutes). With respect to the former, most serious and sophisticated contemplative educators make in-class meditation practice, especially outside of courses in Contemplative Studies as such, optional or voluntary. In any case, this contemplative approach to teaching and learning makes space for direct personal experience with contemplative practice on the part of students.

### **What precautions should be taken for ensuring beneficial and effective results?**

It is important to reflect on one's own affinities, competencies, commitments, and preparation. One should not teach anything with which does not have direct and ideally long-term experience. This guideline might include various forms of experimentation outside of the classroom *before* introducing a given exercise to students. Aspiring contemplative educators might also need more formal training. If formal contemplative practice is involved, it is also important to have various support networks.

These include supportive colleagues, local mentors, associated communities, as well as relationships with the Office of Mission and Ministry and Counseling Services. One should only employ contemplative pedagogy after critical investigation and in responsible ways, with the latter depending on the former and open to community discussion.

### **What is the difference between contemplative pedagogy and “spirituality in education”?**

While there is some overlap and shared concerns, especially among certain segments of contemplative education, these pedagogical approaches and educational movements are distinct. The same is true with respect to the “mindfulness in education” movement. “Spirituality in education” tends to emphasize the exploration of personal meaning and purpose, especially from a theological perspective and with respect to “spiritual matters.” This often resembles “spiritual formation.” Contemplative pedagogy is different. While practitioners often address character development, values, and questions of meaning and purpose, other topics and considerations are possible. For example, one might simply aspire to have students be more present in class discussions, develop deeper engagement with a given topic, or address issues of stress in academic life.

### **What is contemplative science?**

“Contemplative science” technically refers to the neuroscientific study of meditation and accompanying areas of research. While it primarily utilizes neuroimaging techniques and other technological measurements to record and analyze biochemical and psychophysiological changes that occur in “meditation,” contemplative science is also connected to cognitive science, consciousness studies, philosophy of mind, and psychology. Historically speaking, the emergence of contemplative science is rooted in the collaboration between the Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela (1946-2001) and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Mind & Life Institute in 1990. That is, “contemplative science,” as expressed in its foundational project and as currently conceived, is basically Buddho-neuroscience, specifically the neuroscientific study of (Tibetan) Buddhist meditation. At the same time, the person probably most responsible for the rise of “contemplative science,” at least as a designation for a larger approach, is B. Alan Wallace (b. 1950), specifically through his publication of *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Science Converge* (2007).

### **Is contemplative science synonymous with Contemplative Studies?**

Contemplative Studies encompasses contemplative science; contemplative science is one expression of Contemplative Studies. That being said, the neuroscientific study of meditation is one of the most prominent and influential approaches, and some representatives would prefer to privilege contemplative science. This is partially due to the history of the field, issues of funding and politics, as well as the accompanying aspiration to be “scientific.” The latter includes attempts to legitimize the field through supposed scientific validation of the benefits of meditation. The privileging of contemplative science no longer seems viable given the Mind & Life Institute’s decision to call their conference the International Symposium for Contemplative Studies, which is one of the major gatherings for the field.

### **Is there scientific proof for the benefits of contemplative practice?**

Generally speaking, though not unproblematically, scientific studies of “relaxation techniques” confirm that they result in various states of relaxation. From a clinical or therapeutic perspective, they may thus be used as self-care and stress-management techniques, as a form of preventative medicine.

As “stress” is considered a major source of disease, and as relaxation is one factor in counteracting stress, relaxation-centered meditation generally leads to greater health and resilience to disease. Hypothetically, this may also include increased feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and wellness, or at least satisfy some of the preconditions for such psychological conditions. Thus, such research is intricately tied to clinical interests and therapeutic applications, including with respect to the treatment of addiction, anxiety, chronic pain, depression, insomnia, and other conditions. While current research does appear to support these general claims, there are various issues and problems, especially with respect to unqualified statements about “meditation” in general. In addition to considering particular methods, applications, and outcomes, more attention needs to be given to *specific* studies. Two major literature reviews (2007; 2014) prepared for the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services conclude that there are methodological problems and inconclusive results. Firm conclusions on the effects of meditation practices in healthcare cannot be drawn based on the available evidence.

### **Why is Buddhism privileged in Contemplative Studies?**

This is a complex question, with various layers. The most straightforward response is that it is tied to the history of the field and its current demographics. The field largely emerged through the influence of the Mind & Life Institute, with its emphasis on the scientific study of Buddhist mediation. In addition to being MLI associates, most of the major representatives of the field are Buddhist adherents or sympathizers. A deeper response involves the Western engagement with and construction of Buddhism. This includes viewing Buddhism as unique among (non)religions for its apparent lack of doctrinal rigidity and religious dogmatism as well as its supposed compatibility with science. From a more critical perspective, each of these views are problematic and possibly rooted in Buddhist religious adherence or at least enculturation.

### **Why is Christianity excluded from Contemplative Studies?**

This too is a complex question. In addition to the deep connections of the field with Buddhism, it relates to the history of Christianity as the dominant religious tradition in the United States and the Western engagement with “Asian religions.” There tends to be an unspoken or unrecognized anti-Christianity bias at work in much of Contemplative Studies. This relates to the construction of both “religion” in general and “Christianity” in particular. The latter includes concern for its strong theistic and Christocentric elements. Such patterns are especially surprising to Christian contemplatives given the diversity, depth, sophistication, and profundity of Christian contemplative practice. However, for most members of Contemplative Studies, such practices are more difficult to engage because they are less easily decontextualized and reconceptualized.

### **What is the place of religious traditions in Contemplative Studies?**

Contemplative Studies generally conceives of itself as a secular or quasi-secular field of inquiry. While there are various spiritualist engagements and expressions, many representatives and participants aim to conceptualize it as “secular,” “objective,” and/or “scientific” undertaking, as explicitly “not religious.” That being said, religious traditions are often conceptualized as “wisdom traditions” that supply “resources” or “materials” to the field in the form of “spiritual classics” and “contemplative exercises.” In the process, the informing views and commitments are often framed as “trappings.” Thus, the ethics and politics of appropriation, including the connection to colonialist, missionary, and Orientalist legacies, require deeper reflection.

## **Can one be a religious adherent and still participate in Contemplative Studies?**

As a whole, the field neither explicitly includes nor excludes religious adherence and participation. Outside of the elevation of a very small group of religious leaders, especially prominent Buddhist teachers, most members of the field tend to view religious adherence as optional or irrelevant. The field is selectively ecumenical and inclusive. One question that arises centers on the place of religiously-committed and tradition-based contemplative practice. The field has yet to find a way to include diverse “critical adherent perspectives,” especially from individuals who are unwilling “to go with the program.” The involvement of professional contemplatives and contemplative communities, of members of contemplative traditions, is currently underdeveloped. The field might benefit from inter-contemplative and inter-monastic dialogue. A more dynamic and inclusive approach might also welcome members of “under-represented contemplative traditions,” including Confucianism, Daoism, indigenous religions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, and Sikhism.

## **Who are some of the major representatives of Contemplative Studies?**

Some major representatives include Daniel Barbezat (Amherst College; Center for Contemplative Mind in Society), Mirabai Bush (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society), Richard Davidson (University of Wisconsin, Madison), John Dunne (University of Wisconsin, Madison), David Germano (University of Virginia), Fran Grace (University of Redlands), Anne Klein (Rice University), Louis Komjathy (The Underground University), Harold Roth (Brown University), Edward Sarath (University of Michigan), Clifford Saron (University of California, Davis), Judith Simmer-Brown (Naropa University), B. Alan Wallace (Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies), and Arthur Zajonc (Amherst College; Mind & Life Institute).

## **What are some of the major organizations and research centers?**

The two most prominent organizations are the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (Northampton, Massachusetts) and the Mind & Life Institute (Hadley, Massachusetts). The former includes the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, while the latter organizes the bi-annual International Symposium for Contemplative Studies. Other related organizations and centers include the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine (Massachusetts General Hospital); Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (University of Wisconsin, Madison); Center for Mind and Brain (University of California, Davis); Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society (University of Massachusetts Medical School); Contemplative Sciences Center (University of Virginia); Contemplative Studies Unit of the American Academy of Religion; Fetzer Institute; Garrison Institute; Mindfulness in Education Network; and Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies.

## **What are some of the major academic programs?**

The three most prominent, developed, and influential programs are probably those associated with Brown University, Naropa University, and the University of Virginia. The Brown Contemplative Studies Initiative has been especially influential through the work of its director, Harold Roth. Each of these programs aims to be interdisciplinary with broad curricular involvement. Programs have also been created or are currently being developed at the California Institute of Integral Studies, Centre College, Emory University, Evergreen State College, New York University, Oregon State University, Ramapo College, Rice University, Syracuse University, Texas Christian University, University of



British Columbia, University of Michigan, University of Redlands, University of Wisconsin, Madison, The Underground University, and Vanderbilt University, among others.

### **What are some of the major contributions of Contemplative Studies?**

Contemplative Studies is contributing to a deeper understanding of contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including from embodied and lived perspectives. Contemplative Studies employs an approach to research and education that includes practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development. Many members would point to “critical first-person discourse” as a hallmark. Working to overcome what B. Alan Wallace refers to as “the taboo of subjectivity,” Contemplative Studies makes space for the investigation of contemplative practice through direct, personal experience. It thus challenges the denial of embodied experience in much academic discourse. From a Religious Studies perspective, it also brings the issue of religious adherence into high relief. For participants, Contemplative Studies, especially in the form of contemplative pedagogy, may assist in deeper inquiry, greater awareness, and stronger presence.

### **What are some of the major limitations of Contemplative Studies?**

At present, Contemplative Studies often lacks sophistication in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches. Perhaps paradoxically, one also finds some deficiencies with respect to critical subjectivity, specifically the investigation of unquestioned assumptions, uninformed opinions, and unrecognized biases. There is a problematic privileging of Buddhism, clinical psychology, and neuroscience, specifically in the form of Buddho-neuroscience. This may be understood as “Buddhocentric Contemplative Studies.” Another major limitation involves the appropriative agendas of hybrid spiritualists who often use decontextualized and reconceptualized practices in neo-colonial ways. A more complete decolonial and postcolonial approach would include “critical adherent discourse,” with individuals from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds given voice. Such considerations might extend to issues of middle-class escapism and white privilege.

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