

Teaching Students about Mindfulness and Modern Life

By Mark Dennis and Andrew O. Fort

“It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”

—Jean M. Twenge¹

Are your students often distracted, seemingly addicted to their phones? Have you noticed, as suggested in the quotation above, that anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental and emotional suffering have been rising steadily among the young people you teach, especially in the time of the coronavirus pandemic, which began during final editing of this article? While perhaps a slight exaggeration, we remain convinced that some of our students would more likely give up food, sleep, and even actual human contact than they would willingly agree to close that magical handheld portal to the cyberworld. It is in that world where they spend so many of their waking hours—often during class time—connecting, liking, friending, shopping, dating, and so on; and it is in that world, very different from the one most teachers grew up in, that they are forging their identities and building relationships. Indeed, one of the young students interviewed for Jean Twenge’s *Atlantic* article uses the “language of addiction,” saying, “I think we like our phones more than we like actual people.”²

In teaching mindfulness and meditation to our students at Texas Christian University (TCU), who are dealing with all the distractions that modern American life thrusts before them, we have asked them to do a digital awareness exercise during which they must avoid using digital devices. The results of this short-term “digital diet,” which we describe in the online supplements of this issue, were both fascinating and troubling. That mindfulness exercise is just one of many we ask our students to do in the class that is the subject of this article. Those exercises, many of which originated in Asian traditions, are meant to help them contemplate how modern “digital domination” affects their



Mindfulness and Modern Life class participants, spring 2020. Source: Photo by Andrew O. Fort.

minds, emotions, and relationships; but also—in highly practical terms—their ability to concentrate, think critically, and reflect deeply on their worlds, whether embodied or digital.

The article represents, moreover, the culmination of a decade’s work in the emerging field of Contemplative Studies (CS) through a focus on our cotaught course, now called Mindfulness and Modern Life. One of us (Andy Fort) is a specialist in South Asian religions, particularly classical Hindu thought, and the other (Mark Dennis) is a specialist in East Asian religions, particularly Japanese Buddhism. As long-standing practitioners of meditative exercises originating in Asia, we are perhaps more than usually sensitive to modern digital distraction (prevalent in Asia as well!).³ But both of us have devoted considerable time to this field since starting an initiative at TCU in 2012, and we consider ourselves part of a national CS “wave,” with our particular focus on contemplative pedagogy.

Andy’s early focus was trying to articulate a vision of the integral relationship between traditional liberal arts education and this emerging field, and he wrote an article on this topic, which includes reflections on the value of teaching and learning various ways of knowing offered by CS, classroom practices, and ethical issues raised by contemplative pedagogy.⁴ Those ethical issues include the ongoing secularization and commodification of contemplative practices in American society, processes that remove them from their ethically-grounded roots in Asian religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Hinduism. Although not the focus of this article, that process has been the subject of sometimes-heated debate within the CS community. The ethical issues also include what sorts of training and standards should be required to

teach mindfulness and other such contemplative practices to students.

In 2016, Andy followed that piece with an essay about starting a Contemplative Studies initiative in the Southwest, specifically at TCU in Fort Worth, Texas.⁵ He wrote the article as he was retiring, happy with the program’s trajectory and leaving it in the capable hands of Mark and the other members of the steering committee. Andy was then appointed a Green Distinguished Emeritus Tutor at TCU to continue work on the initiative, and one result was preparation of the course he and Mark have taught and that we describe below. Andy and Mark have submitted an article titled “Riding the Wave: Contemplative Studies Goes Mainstream” that will appear in the spring 2020 issue of *Athenaeum Review*, which describes the CS wave but also addresses the ethical issues noted just earlier.⁶

Background on Contemplative Studies Before describing the course and its ties to Asian contemplative practices, first we must offer a few brief definitions: While there is no agreed-upon definition of *contemplation*, it can be used as a cross-cultural umbrella term, referring to a broad array of ways of reflection and focusing attention, sometimes but certainly not always part of a religious tradition. There is a wide variety of contemplative practices: simply attending to the present moment, breathing and other kinds of “mindfulness” practices, reflective self-inquiry, observing nature, sitting or walking meditation, yogic postures, visualizations, silent prayer, group chanting, and many others. Most common today is what’s called “mindfulness,” founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the present-centered and nonjudgmental observation of one’s thoughts and feelings that emerged from Buddhist teachings but has often been, as noted already,



Class discussion. Source: Photo by Andrew O. Fort.

removed from its original context. However, aims can range from “simple” alleviation of anxiety and stress in this era of digital domination to pursuit of higher insight or wisdom. Indeed, many of these practices emerged from religiously based contemplative practices with roots in Asia, including Theravāda and Zen Buddhism, yoga, taichi, and many others. As noted above, mindfulness practices, rooted in Buddhist techniques of mental cultivation, have become, like yoga, widespread in our society and are being practiced in settings as varied as business, the military, sports, and health care.

Contemplative Studies is an inquiry into and critical reflection on the nature and significance of contemplative theory and practice, while *contemplative pedagogy* teaches about both contemplative theory and practice. The latter includes both discussing models of human flourishing in contemplative traditions and offering basic exercises from or suggestive of these traditions (such as breath counting or other forms of meditation that come out of Buddhist traditions). Thus, contemplative pedagogy fits naturally not only into the courses we teach, often with content tied to those Asian religious traditions, but also into courses unrelated to Buddhism or Hinduism in mathematics, physics, dance, and others where it is the mindfulness techniques themselves, not the content, that can be used by the teacher to create a welcoming, calm, and engaged classroom environment. Many of our students have benefited greatly from learning in this way, especially given the stress-filled worlds they inhabit, and we encourage you to try with your students some of the simple tips we offer in the online supplement, whether you teach history or economics, math or chemistry, dance or art. But in academia, we naturally need to be

able to intellectually justify contemplative pedagogy to our colleagues and demonstrate that it fits into, and even enhances, traditional liberal arts education, whether our students are in high school or college.

Contemplative pedagogy can be a powerful teaching technique because it taps into different ways of learning, which we call first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. In the common third-person educative style, an expert introduces “objective” or “neutral” information about the course material and shares knowledge (by readings, lecture, etc.) from a discipline. In a course that includes Contemplative Studies content, this would incorporate, for example, information and perspectives about the Asian cultures and traditions under study. This third-person approach is important but incomplete, as studies show students often do not deeply assimilate information when taught in this way. Contemplative pedagogy takes the additional step of providing the opportunity for the student’s subjective, or first-person, experience of relevant and appropriate contemplative practices—a different, and for many a deeper, way of understanding the material, from starting class with a simple breathing exercise or period of silence to walking a labyrinth or expressing gratitude to others. First-person exercises demonstrate the value of students being present to their own experience (mind and body) and encourage an increased understanding of both their own experience and subjectivity, as well as others’ perspectives through direct self-reflexive thought and writing. This inner, first-person exploration has proven especially valuable for our students whose locus of attention has been externalized through the ubiquity of social media, which relentlessly demands that attention. Put another

Additional Paths to Mindfulness

Editor’s Note

Readers particularly interested in this article might be interested in exploring other variants of mindfulness traditions and practices present in other world religions and spiritual belief systems. What follows are but two examples.

Mindfulness techniques have a rich heritage in contemplative Christianity dating back to the early followers of the faith. Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was a writer and Trappist monk at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. His writings include such classics as *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.

Merton is the author of more than seventy books that include poetry, personal journals, collections of letters, social criticism, and writings on peace, justice, and ecumenism. More information about this Christian mindfulness tradition and contemporary scholarship and practice is available from The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University (Louisville, KY) at <http://www.merton.org/>

Although there is debate about the origins of Sufism, this longtime variant of Islamic belief and practice focuses on an inward search for God utilizing mindfulness techniques. The International Association of Sufism (IAS), a nonprofit organization established in California in 1983, has been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and garnered other awards as well. Its mission is to introduce Sufism in all its varied forms to the public. For more information about Sufism, visit <http://www.ias.org/about/>

way, a critical first-person perspective makes one more “objective” in giving us the ability to recognize and acknowledge our own subjectivity by examining our own and others’ mental patterns and cultural heritage.

A fuller understanding of self and others is also enhanced by second-person, dialogical or intersubjective, experience: nonjudgmental, deep listening while interacting with others; group sharing (including disagreement and doubt); paired conversation; and peer questioning and support.⁷ This respectful consideration of the students’ own first- and the class’s second-person perspectives quickly builds trust and promotes the welcoming, calm, and engaged classroom environment described above; it also shows that we as teachers take seriously our students’ own experiences, valuing them in a way not often present in traditional education. Our own students have consistently affirmed the value they have derived from this pedagogical approach, noting how it is often lacking in their other courses.

In the academic context, all these elements work together to enrich classic liberal arts goals such as critical thinking, which include recognizing and critiquing our own beliefs and assumptions, as well as accurate and respectful understanding—and *informed* criticism—of others. It also includes learning in depth about our own and others’ historical and cultural conditioning; higher-order thinking of analysis, integration, and synthesis; and value and personal meaning clarification for ourselves and about society. Contemplative pedagogy also assists in reaching objectives beyond critical thinking that are central parts of liberal education. Evidence

Many students would welcome the opportunity to develop their philosophy of life and greater personal discipline—physical and mental—whether within a spiritual path or not.

shows that contemplative practices promote individual and social well-being by increasing students’ capacity to concentrate, relax, and regulate their emotions, and also to become more resilient, empathetic, and compassionate. These qualities are especially important given the speed of change, distraction, and (over)stimulation found in our society today. We also ask our students to question the narrowly focused and business-derived notion of “productivity” that has become more prominent in the “corporatized” version of American higher education and the overpraised, and largely false, notion of multitasking. Thus, these pedagogical techniques can be used as powerful tools to combat the mental health crisis identified by Jean Twenge and lead our students to the kind of “flourishing” that the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin seeks to promote.⁸

In all these ways, contemplative pedagogy assists in the classical liberal arts goal to “know thyself”: here, our students reflect critically upon their core values and psychological makeup. Moreover, contemplative reflection offers invaluable opportunities for them to gain insight into their sense of meaning and purpose, and more broadly into the “pursuit of wisdom,” however they construe it.⁹ Many students would

welcome the opportunity to develop their philosophy of life and greater personal discipline—physical and mental—whether within a spiritual path or not. Indeed, our students comment on how beneficial and moving the experience has been, often observing that they had had no other such opportunities to reflect deeply on themselves in this way in their college careers. We are confident that your own students would gain similar value from these sorts of practices.

Mindfulness and Modern Life

In this second half of the article, we describe our Honors College colloquium Mindfulness and Modern Life, with a twelve student limit which meets twice a week for an hour and a half. We focus on the course description, representative books and exercises, and student outcomes, and conclude with several student comments taken from their final course reflections. The course description begins:

What does it mean to live a mindful life today? What kind(s) of thinking and practice does such a life entail? How would it fit into a busy college student’s life? We will address these questions through both theory and practice in this course. We will range from traditional Buddhist ideas to modern science, from classic liberal arts reflection to contemporary mindfulness practices. We will consider how practice and reflection influence one another, and how we engage in personal relationships, society, and the natural world. Be prepared to explore (and challenge) common notions of self through our inquiry.

We explain to students our main objectives for the colloquium, writing, “Through short



A class discussion outside. Source: Photo by Mark Dennis.

reaction papers, various exercises, and a final reflection paper, you will be assessed on your ability to understand theory about and practice of mindfulness and related concepts, undertake a variety of contemplative practices, and comprehend multiple ways of mind–body knowing.” We also ask them to read critically and write effectively about contemplative theory and practice while undertaking some self-exploration (as existential inquiry is an inevitable component of the course). These course objectives serve as a springboard for explaining to students the value these techniques offer them as they try to navigate modern lives often filled with anxiety, stress, and isolation.

Students read a mix of mindfulness-related materials, ranging from Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Being Peace* (or *The Miracle of Mindfulness*) to Dan Harris’s *10% Happier*. The former is written by the well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk who has devoted his life to promoting peace, compassionate action, and socially engaged mindful awareness of the suffering of others, while the latter represents the best of the secularizing trend noted above: that is, taking mindfulness and meditation out of their Asian contexts and presenting them in a way that is comfortable to (mostly) Euro–Americans who are not interested in formally studying Buddhism or any of the other Asian religious traditions mentioned above. Our students also read Jeff Wilson’s *Mindful America*, which historicizes and critiques this process of secularized mindfulness, as well as Holly Rogers, MD’s *The Mindful Twenty-Something*, which Andy describes as being written (effectively!) in “Millenniaese.” It appeals to our students due to its numerous valuable exercises


and references to recent scientific studies of the benefits of these contemplative practices, befitting Rogers’s medical training. We also mix in podcasts, especially from Harris’s *10% Happier*,¹⁰ which include interviews of Asian contemplatives such as the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan teachers, but also renowned Western practitioners, musicians, scientists, and others—including neuroscientist Richard Davidson, who founded the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Healthy Minds and had been scheduled to visit TCU in March 2020 when the university closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.¹¹

As noted, students write two weekly short (250-word) reflections on these assignments and on their contemplative practice. After introducing several types of meditation early in the semester, we require students to practice at least ten minutes per day, though we encourage more. The resulting practice reflections are quite valuable—and revealing—as they track how their minds and bodies change over the course of the semester. Our students regularly comment on how these practices help them deal with their own particular set of challenges, whether it is generalized anxiety, stress, sleep issues, difficult relationships, or even more acute forms of suffering, such as divorce, death of loved ones, or a global pandemic.

We should note that while many of these exercises are sitting, often with eyes closed, we include walking meditations (good for those who are sleep-deprived) or observing beings in the natural world. A particularly powerful group meditation is the *metta*, or lovingkindness, exercise, originating from Buddhism. Here, we wish well-being with ongoing expansion (to self,

friend, neutral, enemy), saying silently, “May I [you, we, they, all] be well, happy, at peace.” It can be particularly useful both for self-compassion, which studies show is sorely needed throughout our culture, and to understand what motivates an enemy (individual or national) and how they are suffering.

Students are also asked to write longer reflection papers addressing the intersection of mindfulness with modern life: for instance, the “I Am That” paper asks them to engage in a two-week meditation contemplating the source of the “I” that they repeat constantly throughout a single day in thought and speech, which originated from similar reflection in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. They also must do a five-day exercise exploring one of the five basic Buddhist precepts each day. Then, after reading *Being Peace*, we also ask them to complete a socially engaged mindfulness paper that highlights the importance of these and related ethical teachings—nonharming, truthfulness, compassion, interconnection, and so on—that can translate inner exploration into outward action, a connection that is, we noted, often lacking in modern mindfulness teachings. We invite students to draw from their inner practice to address human suffering in its many guises, whether in Asian regions like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Burma, or in American society in the form of gun violence, racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia, and many other possibilities. The final essay, from which we’ve drawn some student comments, asks the class to reflect on the entire semester. After reviewing the syllabus and their weekly reflections, students address their own personal transformations, detailing their



TAIWAN: Nation-State or Province?

John Franklin Copper

In this newly revised and updated 7th edition of *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?* Copper examines Taiwan’s geography and history, society and culture, economy, political system and foreign and security policies in the context of Taiwan’s uncertain political status as either a sovereign nation or a province of the People’s Republic of China. Copper argues that Taiwan’s very rapid and successful democratization suggests Taiwan should be independent and separate from China, while economic links between Taiwan and China indicate the opposite. This revised and up-to-date textbook will be essential reading for students of Taiwan, China, US-China relations and democracy.

December 2019: 234x156: 354pp
Hb: 978-1-138-33775-6 | £110.00 / \$150.00
Pb: 978-1-138-33774-9 | £29.99 / \$39.95
eBook: 978-0-429-44219-3

To order or for more information, visit: www.routledge.com/9781138337749

struggles with mindfulness and meditation while living as college students in a fast-paced environment, but also the benefits noted above.

In their final papers, students often point also to the physical and emotional learning environment we seek to create through the pedagogical techniques mentioned above. These include always sitting in a circle, since it subverts, even in a small way, the assumptions regarding authority that prevail in third-person, lecture-heavy classes. The circle, moreover, is conducive to promoting the second-person sharing regarding assignments and contemplative practice that students note and fundamentally changes the classroom dynamic. In this regard, we generally devote the last fifteen to twenty minutes of class time to a “circle of discussion.”

On the first day of class, we explain to students the goals of the circle and its associated ritual. To each subsequent class, we bring a small stone—each stone is used in only one class—and instruct students to hold it reverently in one or both hands while they speak to the group. We do the same. When a member of the circle finishes speaking, he or she bows slowly to the group as thanks for mindfully listening—a central course practice. The rest of the group then bows slowly and deliberately to the speaker to thank her or him for sharing. Having completed the group bow, the speaker hands the stone to the next person until the circle is complete. We remind students they should gently devote their full attention to the speaker’s words and, when they notice their mind has wandered, bring it back to the sound of the speaker’s voice. Hanh calls this deep and compassionate listening.¹²

Generally, we introduce a broad topic for discussion that ties into the anxieties of modern student life: fear and isolation, but also more hopeful qualities, such as freedom, gratitude, authenticity, and interbeing, which can become part of their individual paths forward. For instance, Mark might discuss freedom through the lens of his training in Buddhism, which offers a path to freedom from suffering—the ineffable state of *nirvana*. But he would also likely talk about freedom in the context of other Asian religious traditions—Hinduism and Daoism, for instance—and also free speech, which is a central topic in his world religions course.

The semester concludes with the “circle of affirmation and gratitude,” wherein we identify the positive qualities that each student has brought to the circle throughout the semester. We start out by offering our own comments about individual students and then invite comments from the other students. Oftentimes, this final exercise can be quite moving, as the students have, through the circle, come to know each other well by listening deeply to each other throughout the semester. While these comments focus on personal qualities—kindness, mindful

listening, joyousness, openness, and so on—they often bring out rich interdisciplinary and experiential perspectives too. When all who feel inspired to speak about a particular student have finished, we give her or him one of the stones that was passed around in an earlier class as a way to remember the experience of feeling deeply connected to the group. We complete the circle with each student by reversing the bowing; that is, we bow as a group to the student and she or he then bows to us.

As noted earlier, this course emerged from our ongoing efforts to create a contemplative studies program at TCU that, while offering the opportunity to critically reflect on contemplative theory and practice, has a broader mission to make mindfulness and other such practices widely available on campus, and generally to help alleviate human suffering and promote human flourishing, especially among our students who are “drowning” in a sea of digital distraction. Laozi and Confucius from China, as well as the Buddha and the *rishis*, or seers, of India, delved deeply into the mind to investigate the nature of our perceived “self,” seeking to provide their own interpretations of a path for seekers to attain goodness, freedom, and flourishing. This course seeks to help each of our students discover, through mindfulness and other contemplative practices, their own path to attaining these qualities in the context of their harried and distracted modern lives. That is, although our students face the challenges endemic to the human condition identified in these Asian religious traditions millennia ago, they must also learn to develop tools to deal effectively with the powerful call of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat—distractions clearly lacking in the age of these great religious figures.

For more on the course readings, podcasts, and such, please see the online supplements for this issue. There, we also make available a fuller treatment of other assignments, along with the syllabus, course schedule, student reflections, and other materials—such as references to the fascinating guest speakers who have come to talk about topics like integrative medicine, mindfulness of animals, and mindful eating. If you are interested in learning more about TCU’s contemplative studies group, please visit our program website (see endnote 5). We welcome inquiries about how you might use these techniques with your own students. Mark’s email is m.dennis@tcu.edu ■

NOTES

1. Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017. She appears on the *PBS Newshour* in summer 2017 to discuss her findings. See, “Are Smartphones Making a Generation Unhappy?,” *PBS Newshour*, August 17, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y2hgoo5h>.

2. Ibid.
3. Andy started doing Transcendental Meditation in college forty-five years ago, and has been exploring the Time Space Knowledge (TSK) inquiry founded by Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche for twenty years. Mark began Zen meditation practice in 1987 while living in Japan and has been at it since.
4. Andrew O. Fort, “Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33 (2013): 23–32.
5. “Creating Contemplative Studies in the Southwest,” *International Journal of Dharma Studies* (2016): <https://tinyurl.com/sl94m9y>. Additional information on the TCU Contemplative Studies program is available at www.contemplativefrogs.com.
6. The *Athenaeum Review* is available at <https://athenaeumreview.org>.
7. In our course documents, we ask students to listen to this conversation between Thich Nhat Hanh and Oprah Winfrey about deep listening: <https://youtu.be/lyUxYflkhzo>.
8. For information on the University of Wisconsin’s Student Flourishing initiative, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/wv7pumb>.
9. For an excellent overview of these issues, see Barbara Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2008.
10. Dan Harris’s *10% Happier* podcast is available at <https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast>.
11. Scientific studies of aspects of contemplation, particularly in neuroscience, have recently increased dramatically. A good starting point is Matthieu Ricard, Antoine Lutz, and Richard J. Davidson, “Mind of the Meditator,” in *Scientific American* (2014): 311, 5: 38–45. A more advanced article is Antoine Lutz, Amishi Jha, John Dunne, and Clifford Saron, “Investigating the Phenomenological Matrix of Mindfulness-Related Practices from a Neurocognitive Perspective,” in *American Psychologist* (2015): 70, 7: 632–658. To review the research more broadly, one might start at the centers at Emory (<https://tinyurl.com/vsxcyac>), Virginia (<https://tinyurl.com/s8j8hxe>), Wisconsin (<http://centerhealthyminds.org/>), and Brown (<https://tinyurl.com/tm5sbr4>) universities, or the work of David Vago (<https://tinyurl.com/wowpdn9>) and Clifford Saron at UC Davis (<http://saronlab.ucdavis.edu>). The Mind and Life Institute (<https://www.mindandlife.org/>) is also pursuing this inquiry in a variety of ways. All accessed January 5, 2020.
12. We introduce students to this practice by showing in class the following clip from Oprah Winfrey’s *Super Soul Sunday*: <https://tinyurl.com/juwwoq8>.

MARK DENNIS is Professor of East Asian Religions at Texas Christian University. His published work addresses early Japanese Buddhism, modern Japanese literature, and contemplative pedagogy. He teaches courses in Buddhism, mindfulness, Daoism and Confucianism, and world religions, and he serves as Director of TCU’s Contemplative Studies program.

ANDREW O. FORT is Professor Emeritus of Asian Religions and Green Distinguished Emeritus Tutor at TCU. He has published extensively on aspects of Hindu thought (particularly Advaita Vedanta and Yoga) and issues concerning teaching, with a focus on contemplative pedagogy. He founded TCU’s Contemplative Studies initiative in 2012, and has been on the steering committee of the Contemplative Studies group at the American Academy of Religion.