

Spring 2019:

Student 1:

The most impactful lesson I have taken away from our course on contemplative living has been a shift in how I mentally process my relation to the world and its people. This began at the very start of the semester when we were taught the *metta* meditation. This practice of sending out love and kindness has stuck with me for the entire semester because of its alignment with my personal sense of compassion and my desire to serve others and act out of love. By dwelling on someone else's wellbeing, I have expanded my heart's capacity for empathy. I feel much less self-centered after practicing this meditation and am more aware of what I can do for others to eliminate their sufferings.

My increased compassion throughout the course has made me especially interested in the topic of digital awareness that we have studied as I can clearly see its detrimental effects on mental health. I am extremely saddened to see how much weight teenagers attribute to their social media followings. Personally, I have witnessed how the social pressures of having the right amount of likes and witty-enough captions can harm the mental well-being of impressionable young people. My sister often texts me to ask if her photos are the right level of artsy without being too edited and ask me to get on social media to like her posts if I have not yet done so. It is very upsetting to me how much these social measurements of popularity can take a toll on one's anxiety.

I have found a great sense of happiness in authentic conversations with friends who share my indifference to social media since studying mindfulness and have developed a stronger sense of purpose for my self during this season of uncertainty and unknowns as graduation quickly approaches. I have a great gratitude for the beauties found in nature and have heightened my appreciation for the world by intentionally engaging each of my senses as I experience new settings. I have found direction in living my life mindfully by listening deeply to others and responding with genuine compassion. By engaging in a mindful life, I hope to spread a sense of peace to my anxiety-ridden peers and replace their sense of suffering with happiness and appreciation for the present moment.

Student 2:

As I reminisce over the course of the semester, I am filled with emotions like gratitude and joy... Candidly speaking, *A Contemplative Life* was the absolute best class I have taken at TCU.

What stayed consistent throughout the semester was my obsession with 4-7-8 breath (authors' note: 4-7-8 refers to inhaling deeply while counting to 4; holding the breath counting to 7; and exhaling counting to 8). Every week, I wrote about this technique in my reflection because of the benefits it has provided me with. This technique has calmed my headaches, curbed my hunger, and allowed me to relax considering stressful situations I have encountered during school. It has proved beneficial in countless ways and I know it will continue to be an integral part of my lifestyle.

Metta meditation was the most impactful mindfulness practice I did this year. I am grateful I was taught this meditation because I know it has made me a more gentle, patient person. In

instances where I feel angry and frustrated towards someone, I bring myself back to this practice. When I take a moment to wish that person wellness and happiness, it alleviates my negative feelings and I can move on with my day. For instance, I have been in a group project for the entire semester and one of my teammates never comes to class or team meetings. I have used *Metta* multiple times to calm myself and help refocus my attention. I hope to take this lesson with me going forward and use it in the working environment after college.

Overall, I cannot begin to express the amount of gratitude I feel for the ability to have taken this class. For many reasons, it was a major player in why this why I was successful this semester. This was the first college class I have taken that cultivated building relationships with both my peers and my professors. Having the open-dialogue style format, as well as sitting in the circle, allowed for unencumbered conversation and discussion of each day's topics. It fostered an environment where everyone felt comfortable to share raw thoughts and feelings which ultimately gave the class a chance to get to know everyone on a deeper level.

Student 3:

This semester has been one of intense emotions and hard lessons. I have experienced both profound highs and lows over the last four months and very few things have remained consistent in a meaningful way. Throughout this unpredictable semester, one of the bastions of support I had was this class and the meditation practice it cemented in me.

The high point, on the final day of class, during the affirmation circle,¹ was one of the few moments in my life where I was filled (in a very woo-woo way) with gratitude and profundity.

While resilience helped me handle my personal tragedy, the lesson of gratitude is more likely to impact me in times both good and bad. I have a tendency to move through life quickly, always attempting to pack as much information, entertainment, and experiences into every waking moment. However, taking the time to sit back and recognize the world I am living in, and then to be grateful for it, is a profound change in my perspective. I have learned this semester that life is not always about the quantity of experience, it is also about the quality – and quality experiences abound constantly. I have found a deepened skill to observe the

¹ Authors' note: The semester concludes with the final circle referred to as 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 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 disciplinary 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 had been 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 to the student and she or he then bows to us.

blueness of the sky or freshness of the air as a result of this class, for which I will always be grateful.

Student 4:

I was living exactly how Dan Harris describes, in which many of us are forever caught in the what's next and how do I get there, perpetually planning. I've seen stress manifest itself in so many different ways in my life: decreased appetite, muscle tension, and lowered immune system. As a student, there are times when I've felt like stress culture is a trend in college, meaning that if you aren't stressed then you aren't trying hard enough or won't succeed. To be honest, I've fed into this culture complaining about my stress and disregarding my current state for future successes, but what kind of life is that. It wasn't until this course that I began to work towards self-care in tangible ways.

My last takeaway from the course was my increased compassion for others and the human experience we are all living. Although each person's life is unique in their own way, we all are deeply similar in the way we experience suffering and human connectivity.

Something that was invaluable to me in this course was our group discussions on different themes aka "the circle." I have never had such thought provoking and in-depth discussions before in a classroom setting or even in life. Each thought that was shared by others was intentional and raw with what their beliefs were on the topic. Additionally, hearing my classmate's insights helped me to increase my knowledge and beliefs about the topic.

Student 5:

After keeping up with the practices learned in this class and engaging with classmates on a deep level, I can say that I am much better equipped to handle the stress and anxiety that I encounter on a daily basis and I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this special type of course at TCU.

An exercise from class that greatly impacted me and helped me to realize that life is not all about what I can achieve and list on my resume was the digital awareness exercise. I took this exercise seriously and started out with the mindset that it would help me focus better on schoolwork, but it quickly began to take on a new meaning. From the number of hours I spent on my phone prior to this exercise, it was immensely clear that something needed to be done about my use of both social media and my phone generally when in the presence of other people. So, I took to deleting social media from my phone and using mindfulness as a tool to be aware of each time I reached for my phone when I was having a conversation with someone. It was incredibly difficult at first, but over time, I started to not miss social media and began to notice that I was reaching for my phone less and less during social interactions. I am still continuing this today and hope to carry it on into the future, since it was so impactful and beneficial to my mental health.

Overall, this class has been immensely beneficial for me and I wish that there were more classes like this offered in college. Aside from the benefits I have discussed, I am also appreciative of having a space to listen and talk freely, learning from classmates and professors in a low-stakes environment.

Student 6:

After the first week, I knew the class was going to be enriching. It was refreshing to be in a class in which I looked forward to the readings. I dog-eared, underlined, and highlighted almost every sentence of *Being Peace*, had to pause and reflect after nearly every page while reading *Mindful America* and *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*, laughed out loud reading *10% Happier*, and revamped my meditation practice after reading *The Mindful Twenty-Something: Life Skills to Handle Stress... and Everything Else*.

Nevertheless, the key to the wonderful discussion was the small class size. The size allowed us to be vulnerable and get to know one another. At the risk of sounding woo-woo, by the end of the course, I could feel the interdependent energy between everyone in our class. We developed an incredible sangha over the course of four months, and that is something that will be impactful for the rest of our lives.

Looking back at my reflections I came up with three different aspects of mindfulness that I have found particularly beneficial. I recognize that mindfulness helps me eliminate worry, communicate compassionately, and be more present focused.

Student 7:

I got exactly what I wanted out of the class. My stress levels reduced. I developed the ability to recognize anxiety and take a step back from it rather than letting it take over my thoughts. I realized that there was truly no reason to feel undue anxiety over the homework that I would inevitably finish on time, the dirty laundry that I would clean when I could, or the tasks I had to complete at work.

Even in moments of acute stress, such as before major graduate school interviews, I was able to find a sense of calm by focusing on my breath and employing the 4-7-8 technique. People around me even noticed and commented upon this change. My mom told me that I seemed much calmer and less anxious, even noting that I was much more enjoyable to be around. The amount of things I had to do did not change, but the way I approached those things did. I was pleased to realize that meditation did, in fact, reduce stress for me.

In addition, I felt a lessening of the pressures I feel to uphold a certain version of myself or to “find” myself. Through the “I am That” exercise, I recognized that the Western notion of the self is merely a construction. We all change constantly, and that is acceptable and natural. There is no need to tirelessly search for an enduring definition of who I am and what that means. Rather, I simply need to exist in the moment. This message could not have been more timely, given that I was going through my senior year, which is fraught with discussions about the future and what and who you are going to be. While I observed as friends around me grappled with the harrowing search for identity, I was able to step back and simply acknowledge that I just needed to live in the moment rather than figuring out every minute detail of what I would supposedly be in a time that I cannot predict.

However, the greatest change has less to do with myself and more to do with others

around me. As the barriers of the self dissolved, I started to feel more and more connected with the people around me. Through loving-kindness meditation, I was able to practice giving love and support to people who I commonly struggled giving it to. This practice made it so much easier to do the same thing throughout the day. When someone made a sharp comment to me, honked at me on the freeway, or got angry with me, I found myself stepping back and wishing them the best. I started to consider the way that their suffering might have contributed to their behavior towards me.

I have developed a compassion for the fact that everyone around me has an inner life that is equally as complex, troubling, and distressing as my own—sometimes even more than my own. I have also developed a greater awareness of inter-being. I feel more connected to everyone because of our common humanity.... This awareness directly impacts how I relate to others. I extend more kindnesses and offer more leeway to the people I interact with. I smile more, with the intention to make others around me feel happier. I have become a more active listener, as I am more present when speaking to others and more aware of the richness of their own lives. I point out the beautiful things I notice about each day to others with the hopes of helping them to see the world in the new way I am seeing it. I lash out less as others because I have less anxiety pent up inside of me.

This class did more than teach me about the scientific benefits of meditation. It changed how I exist in the world, and most importantly altered how I relate to others. I cherished the small class that grew so close over the course of the semester, and I cannot say thank you enough to the professors who cared more about us as people than as students. I intend to continue practicing daily meditation regardless of the fact that it is no longer a requirement, and I know that I will try my best to be more mindful on a daily basis.

Earlier semesters

Student 8:

However, there are two major topics that I know will follow me outside of this classroom and into my day-to-day life. The first is a refreshed outlook on self-care while the second is an interest in holistic, mind-body-spirit centered medicine... This semester, I have lost count of the number of people who have told me that I seem so “calm.”

I walked into this class with life experiences that have urged me to find a way to take better care of my mental health. I was frankly sick of being consumed by anxiety and of letting circumstances dictate my attitude. The culture that we live in had brewed within me a “need” to be perfect, and I struggled with feelings of inadequacy. Part of my interest in this class came from a hope that it could provide me with the tools to overcome my struggles. After a semester of immersion into mindfulness and meditative practices, I can honestly say that I have seen myself transform. I have been equipped with methods to combat dissatisfaction and stress, and I have an understanding of the benefits of these practices.

Student 9:

I strongly believe every college student could benefit from meditation in some way whether they are a student, an athlete, the president of a club, or have a job outside of classes. I also

learned a lot from our mindfulness exercises. They opened my eyes to my dependency on technology and other distractions in my life. They made me really think about my actions—breathing, walking, eating, cleaning my apartment, etc. I do think I have become more intentional in my actions since I began trying out these mindfulness practices. They also helped me stay positive during stressful weeks of this semester and clear my mind of all the other clutter and outside thoughts that distract me from the more important parts of my week.

I also learned a lot through our analysis of movies and their relationships to Buddhism and our “I Am That” paper. This class forced us to think about subjects that are more removed from our everyday thoughts. What is the “I?” How are all of our individual “I’s” related? I enjoyed hearing everyone’s opinions and sorting through all of this insight into forming my own view of the “I” and its relationship to the world.

Student 10:

Lastly, in addition to realizing my need for rest and experiencing the joy of mindful living, I realized the power of affirmation. My favorite class of the entire semester was the final class period. We sat in a circle and affirmed each person one-by-one. This final circle of affirmation was one of the most powerful things I have ever experienced. People felt so moved, so loved, and so seen. People felt known in ways they did not know themselves. People felt unique, special, gifted, and good. Personally, I left the circle of affirmation astounded by the power of both roles—the giver of affirmation and the receiver of affirmation. Encouraging words do not appear to be a powerful force. Yet, they do something drastic inside the person who gives them and receives them. When giving affirmation, I felt incredibly honored to express the light I see in others. It was a joy to share goodness and kindness. On the other hand, when receiving affirmation, I felt so humbled by the praise from others. I could not believe that other people—some whom I did not know very well—saw the light in me. I will hold onto the stone I received from the circle of affirmation for a lifetime, and I will always strive to remember the goodness people saw in me when I cannot see it in myself.

Student 11:

This course took me on a journey of self-discovery that has changed the way that I look at our culture and the world around me.

If I am being honest, when I first heard that we were required to meditate every day, I dreaded the idea and thought, “There’s no way I will actually do that.” I decided to give it a chance though, and I could not be happier that I did. I fell in love with the practice. Whether it was sitting by the Trinity River and observing the wildlife or sending positive energy to those that we love and hate through loving kindness meditations, I benefitted from every single one. By allowing myself time for internal contemplation and stillness, I saw tangible benefits to meditation, such as better sleep, a longer attention span, and lower stress levels.

Finally, my favorite assignments from this class were the This I Believe and the I am That papers. It is very rare to have the opportunity to take a class that focuses so much on personal development. Not only did we practice meditation to improve our bodies and

minds, but we also explored and articulated our personal code of ethics as well as a detailed description of what makes up who we are with the two papers. I loved seeing how my personal beliefs intermingled with my proclaimed religious beliefs, and it was interesting to see the similarities and the differences.

Student 12:

When I first read about both the mindfulness and precepts exercises, I was skeptical about doing them to say the least. Especially with the precepts, I didn't expect to gain much from these exercises. The opposite turned out to be true. They required me to not only be mindful during the day, but also reflect at the end of the day on how my actions influenced the world around me. These both turned out to be positive additions to my life.

I could make a long list of everything that I'll take with me forward, but to sum it up in a few words: I've learned to be a better person. Honestly, that's all I could ask for from a class in my last semester of college.

Student 13:

I have learned so much about mindfulness in this class, but perhaps more importantly I have learned about myself, my impact on others, and the importance of learning from my peers.

Even better, I found meditating in a group was an incredibly profound and unlike anything else experience. The energy that circulated the room made me feel like every single person was connected no matter if they were sitting right by my side or across the room. It is not something that can be put into words, but it is an incredibly unique and special experience. This group energy positively affected our in-class meditation, but it also facilitated deep and amazing conversations.

Our last class quickly became my favorite class after partaking in the affirmation circle. It was so rewarding to see what everyone thought of one another and have one final connective moment with our peers who we have grown so close to over the course of the semester. I learned a lot about myself in the short moments I was put in the hot seat. I rarely think twice about the way I present myself or the way I come across to others, but it touched my heart to learn the way I affect people. I have always known that I approach life with a certain sense of intense passion, but to learn that others can recognize that within me is an absolutely wonderful feeling.

Student 14:

Until I took this course, I never truly understood the hugely impactful, beneficial, and positive role that mindfulness could play in my life. Utilizing mindfulness and meditation practices has helped me better relate with others and understand myself at a much more profound level. I feel that I am so much more appreciative of even the simplest pleasures of life, and I am grateful for a university that supports contemplative studies in order to help students reduce stress and increase connection with others.