

# Contemplative Environmental Studies: Pedagogy for Self and Planet

**Paul Wapner**  
*American University*

*Environmental problems are among the most profound challenges humanity has ever faced. How can we best educate students in this moment of environmental intensification? What skills, virtues, and sensibilities do they need to investigate, appreciate, and respond to environmental degradation? This article makes the case for adding contemplative practices to the pedagogical toolbox. It explains the connection between our internal lives and environmental degradation, and how contemplative practices can unlock faculties for advancing environmental inquiry and engagement. It describes how contemplative practices can, for instance, help students analyze the causes of environmental harm by enabling them to notice internal grasping, and fashion appropriate responses by short-circuiting reactivity and attachment to specific outcomes. The article also argues that, while contemplative practices can help students (and professors) better address environmental issues, environmental engagement can also benefit the contemplative life. Climate change, mass extinction, and other environmental dilemmas represent novel challenges to our species and thus addressing them may open new chambers in the heart whose exploration can deepen one's contemplative experience. In addition to pointing out the benefits, the article also notes limitations of using contemplative practices to expand environmental studies.*

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**H**umans have always had trouble living lightly on the planet. The first farmers of ancient Mesopotamia used irrigation methods that led to soil salinization; the Romans practiced forms of metallurgy that polluted the waters; and the Mayans deforested and overworked so much land that they could not produce enough food for their growing numbers. In his book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond (2004) catalogues whole societies in the past that overshot the carrying capacity of the land and thus vanished from the Earth. Living ecologically sound lives appears to be a perennial challenge.

Something new has emerged over the past century that has fundamentally upgraded the intensity and scope of our environmental difficulties (McNeill 2001; McKibben 2011). Massive increases in human population, affluence, and technological capacity have conspired to remake humanity into a planetwide ecological force in its own right. Today, humanity's signature is everywhere. We mine the Earth's

crust, fish its oceans, reroute rivers, fly through and pollute the sky, and otherwise inflict ourselves deeply into and across the planet—and do so with increasing power. As a result, today we are not simply tinkering with the Earth's ecological features or pressing the conditions that support human societies in particular places, but altering the fundamental organic infrastructure that supports all life on Earth. We see this most expressively in global environmental dilemmas such as ozone depletion, climate change, and loss of biological diversity, but also in regional contexts in the form of fresh water scarcity; increased toxic contamination of air, water, and soil; and resource exhaustion. Humanity is no longer one species among many but is now the dominant species on the Earth, largely responsible for the planet's ecological fate. Many have noted this by designating the current geological epoch as the Anthropocene: the age of humans.

How do we best educate our students in light of our environmental predicament? What skills do they need in order to investigate, appreciate, and respond to the degradation of the Earth's life support system? How do we work with students to develop a meaningful understanding of this, and prepare them for living in a world where massive environmental decay is the *modus operandi*? What should pedagogy look like in the Anthropocene?

In many ways, higher education is already doing a relatively fine job, especially given the short amount of time since colleges and universities have chosen to focus on environmental dilemmas. Environmental studies is a growing, multidisciplinary line of inquiry that includes the natural and social sciences, arts, and humanities; and programs are sprouting up at universities around the world focused on various aspects of ecology, sustainability, and environmental affairs. Our students are thus learning about the biophysical, sociological, political, economic, philosophical, and artistic dimensions of environmental challenges—to name just a few. And, in the best cases, they are developing such knowledge into a personal understanding of the global environmental problematique and translating it into technological, political, economic, and social skills aimed at addressing our most pressing problems.

For all its virtues, however, environmental studies still needs to grow, and this article makes the case for growth in a particular direction. It calls for including contemplative practices—journaling, meditation, yoga, and other techniques for self-reflection and concentration—in the classroom to help students (and professors) negotiate their way deeper into environmental challenges. Environmental problems are among the most profound issues humanity has ever had to confront. They call into question not simply our technological, economic, and political capabilities, but also our fundamental understanding of who we are as a species and how we fit into the broader, more-than-human world. As I hope to show, contemplative practices can help awaken and cultivate the ability to bring one's whole self to environmental challenges. Students (and professors) are complex beings with bodies and hearts as well as minds. Contemplative practices offer ways of bringing whole-person education to environmental studies.

In the following, I make the case for contemplative environmental studies by relating my experience with utilizing contemplative practices in the classroom. I teach Global Environmental Politics. This involves explaining the causes of environmental harm and exploring meaningful ways of responding. Over the past decade, I have introduced various contemplative practices to deepen students' appreciation for the profundity of environmental challenges and find ways for them to connect more holistically and personally with the discipline. In doing so, I have made many mistakes. Sometimes I was overly zealous, other times too timid; in some classes I could not always hear the needs of my students, while in others I too easily jettisoned practices when I sensed resistance; and in every instance I struggled to be as skillful a steward of education as I could be. Through it all, I also learned a lot about myself as a teacher, the nature of environmental study, and, perhaps most importantly, productive ways of engaging environmental issues. In this essay, I relate parts of the journey. In doing so, I should say at the outset that contemplative practices have not solved all my teaching challenges and certainly have not laid out a singular path to environmental well-being. They have, however, made teaching more meaningful and opened up powerful pathways for students to care about, study more intensely, and take action to advance a more just, more humane, and greener world.

## I

Introducing contemplative practices into the classroom is not simply a pedagogical choice. In truth, it is a vocational one. I went into academia because I wanted to live a life of inquiry and share the experience of intellectual exploration. The universe is a big place. What better way to spend one's time than to use each day to understand another corner of it and talk meaningfully about this with others? I also entered the academy to figure out how best to respond to environmental degradation. I was floored as an undergraduate student that so few people seemed to be "figuring out" how to solve environmental dilemmas. Yes, many people were trying to protect the environment, but it seemed like they were working without a broad blueprint or guiding insight. The academy promised a place where I could put my head to the grindstone and answer the environmental problematique.

Through the years, intellectual engagement has certainly excited me. There are few joys more powerful than riding thought into new terrain and seeing the world in new ways. The life of the mind is a powerful and exhilarating dimension of human experience. Furthermore, trying to understand and respond to environmental issues has been fundamentally important in my life. I cannot imagine living without spending significant amounts of time and energy engaged with cracking environmental dilemmas. However, whether it is age or insight, I have also seen the confines of such endeavors.

Like others, I have learned the limitations of intellectual life. Knowledge is not simply the accumulation of facts, development of theories, or processing of analysis. It also involves extrarational capabilities that go beyond the intellect. These include intuitive flashes of insight, emotional upwellings, inarticulate but expansive senses of awareness, and compassionate sensitivities. Too often, academia belittles these ways of knowing, shunning them as the merely subjective dimension of human experience. Furthermore, academia's exclusive focus on the rational mind ironically curbs possibilities for knowledge to the degree that it circumscribes education to information and privileges erudition. In doing so, it brackets inquiry into the relationship between knowledge and wisdom, and thereby dismisses a key context for exercising the intellect or amassing facts, models, concepts, and ideas. Over the years, like others, I have come to see that extrarational capabilities need not be excised from our academic endeavors. In fact, they can fortify our academic efforts by expanding understanding about what counts as knowledge and enlarging the parameters of our methodologies. As I will explain in a moment, contemplative practices have provided necessary modalities for doing so.

I have also seen the limitations of trying to find the "answer" to environmental issues. There are, of course, engineers, policy makers, and practitioners of all sorts who are developing ways to avoid particular instances of environmental harm. These are important efforts. But it is also clear that addressing humanity's place on Earth, or understanding how we can live genuinely ecologically-sound lives, or building more just and sustainable regimes are not simply puzzles in search of solutions, but perennial challenges that assume different contexts at various historical moments. Put differently, environmental problems are not simply technical dilemmas, but existential conundrums. They demand and engage our entire sense of self and species. I have thus come to see my desire to "solve" the environmental dilemma as hubristic. Answering it is like solving life itself. There is no resolution; there are only responses and engagements that can make it more or less meaningful. One of the reasons I enjoy contemplative practices—both personally and in the classroom—is that they can lift one out of a singular problem-solving mentality and open up expansive orientations for responding to environmental challenges. Responding—and thus taking on responsibility for environmental dilemmas—is to live conscientiously, and this demands more than so-called academic understanding.

Introducing contemplative practices into the classroom is vocational for another reason. Like perhaps many, I have often felt that I live parallel lives. On the one hand is my professional career as an academic. This involves research, teaching, publishing, and being a responsible and contributing member of my university. It also includes building the larger discipline of environmental studies and playing the role of a public intellectual that can bring scholarly insight to environmental

affairs. On the other hand is my personal, interior life. This involves what many would call my “practice” (which is just a shorthand word for contemplative engagement). I am a longtime yoga practitioner and have had a steady, daily sitting meditation practice for years. I am actively involved in a Buddhist *sangha* (community) and spend much of my time reading, thinking, writing, and conversing about the quality of the inner life. For years, I kept these two lives separate from each other. To be sure, I would certainly talk about interior explorations with students and colleagues, and I would write largely from my heart when publishing scholarly work, but when it would come to meditation, yoga, or my various forays into the spiritual dimensions of life, I found myself hesitant. While I would not hide my practice, neither would I advertise it. I was, to use Parker Palmer’s (2009) phrase, a “divided self.” Bringing contemplative practices into the classroom, then, is a type of coming out or, more accurately, coming full circle. It allows me to share what I most care about and what I take to be the foundation of the information, concern, and analysis I teach.

I should add that by bringing contemplative practices to the academy I also feel that I am enabling the university itself to come full circle and assume a less divided identity. Colleges and universities originally emerged out of monasteries, madrassas, yeshivas, and other places of religious learning. Higher education, as such, involved retreating from the world of commerce, material productiveness, family life, and political engagement to reflect on the fundamental meanings of life and work out one’s destiny with diligence and in community. While such schools were certainly tools of political power, and served economic and social interests, at their core was at least an intention to facilitate a person’s journey through life in relation to “transcendental value” (Dworkin, 2013, p. 12). Practices, texts, teachers, and communal experience paved the way for one to contemplate fundamentals and to go through one’s days in sustained reflection about the ultimate storylines of the cosmos. Monasteries, madrassas, and so forth were, then, places of interior investigation and discovery. The inner life was given special privilege—even if, at times, it was dictatorially imprinted upon—and cultivated as an important component of a meaningful life.

Today’s colleges and universities continue this tradition to the degree that they prize the so-called “life of the mind.” Indeed, universities are fundamentally about ideas and the cultivation of critical thinking. Much of higher education is animated by a commitment to educate students’ minds for the sheer sake of expanding their appreciation for the many dimensions of life and ushering them into a civilizational celebration of human knowledge and achievement. Yet we would be blind if we didn’t notice how this core mission has shrunk within the academy and how its purpose is constantly being questioned. Reflection and internal development for their own sake are often assuaged in academic curricula, strategic

plans, and university goals, especially as professionalism, corporate sponsorship of research, a commercial spirit, and governmental imperatives are increasingly influencing the academy. With such diminishment, the places of personal reflection, wonder, and inner growth have become attenuated. More and more, universities are schools of professional training and socialization rather than contemplation.

One would not want to exaggerate the consequences of using contemplative practices in the academy, but doing so is at least a gesture toward reinstilling or at least bolstering the self-reflective, pondering dimension of higher education. To be sure, introducing contemplative pedagogies is not an effort to turn universities into monasteries. There were good reasons why colleges and universities *grew out of* religious schools of learning. Rather, it is simply to sharpen the authentic pursuit of understanding and provide an expansive set of tools for doing so. Contemplative practices can thus reopen questions of what counts as knowledge, the purpose of education, and the place of the self in scholarly inquiry. As such, they can serve partly to reintegrate the various elements of higher education's historical identity.

## II

For years I have taught a course titled International Environmental Politics. The class introduces students to the litany of environmental problems and studies how the international community is largely failing to respond in effective ways. The course, like many similar ones taught around the world, is a downer. Few smile as we progressively move through ozone depletion, mass extinction, climate change, and all the rest. In fact, students have renamed the course "Introduction to Doom," for each week we study yet another assault on life.

Students take the course not to get overwhelmed but to figure out how to change things. They want desperately to know how the international political system works so they can identify the key levers of power to shift environmental affairs. I share, of course, their interest, and I work along with them to find such insight. What is abundantly clear from such inquiry, however, is that we always look "out there" to find the political steering wheel. That is, we repeatedly search the array of international institutions, nation-states, corporations, development strategies, and technological movements for political succor. Rarely do we look inside, as it were. Seldom do we entertain the idea that there is an "inner ecology" as much as an outer one, and that the former may also play a role in global environmental degradation.

What does it mean to turn inward to understand environmental affairs? What are the internal steering wheels and how can one get a handle on them? For one thing, such turning provides an invitation to explore the capillary level of environmental harm. Environmental problems arise because corporations seek profits over collective welfare, states compete over natural resources, most peo-



ple believe that the natural world is here for the taking, and few of us can generate the moral fortitude to extend concern to those living at the receiving end of environmental harm. But, along with all of this, environmental problems are also more simply the result of people consuming too much stuff and not caring about the consequences of their material intake. If people consumed less, our ecological woes might not disappear, but they would certainly diminish. A turn inward helps us get a handle on this dimension of the issue. It allows us to identify and focus upon the fundamental impulse to want material things. What is it that impels us to crave something? What is it that moves us toward greater accumulation? What is the quality of our material desire? Inwardly-directed contemplation enables us to see some of the dynamics involved and begin to question how much we need to be instrumentalized by them. (This is not to say that all material consumption is bad or that the concept of consumption itself is fundamentally at odds with environmental sustainability. Rather, it simply suggests that casting some light on our own internal hunger can help unpack the juggernaut of consumption and lead to insight about different forms or experiences of material engagement.)

A second benefit of turning inward is less about analyzing the causes of environmental harm and more about how we can respond. Too much environmental activism is reactionary in the sense that it often responds to immediate circumstances. Many activists, for instance, find themselves angered and lash out as they learn of environmental assaults. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with anger. It is, after all, a human emotion, and, moreover, it can be an important indicator that something is unjust, exploitative, or hurtful. But it can also be a dangerous weapon. Quick-tempered anger can sometimes blind one to creative and appropriate responses as one is caught in the fury of the moment. Furthermore, if widely practiced it can lead to polarization, as stakeholders square off across an “us/them” divide.

Many contemplative practices aim not to get rid of anger per se, but to slow down the reaction process. The famous remark “Don’t just do something, sit there!” captures the gist of this. The idea of many contemplative modalities is to bring the practitioner to the present moment in a way that absorbs an immediate stimulus into one’s broader experience. The result is that one then has a wide array of internal resources with which to respond and, more particularly, a moment of calm within which anger can be understood and, ideally, turned into discernment and then appropriate action. To be sure, such contemplative practices are not panaceas that can dial up the perfect response. But they can help to create more space within which to make skillful judgments.

Along with this, some contemplative practices can also relieve activists and others of an unproductive sense of urgency associated with environmental campaigns and thus enable people to engage with issues over the long run. Many environmentalists suffer from burnout. They invest themselves so fully in a particular issue or work so tirelessly and frenetically on a set of contemporary challenges

that after losing a few battles they find it hard to go on. The landscape is littered with former activists who have left the battlegrounds to go home to spend time (sometimes the rest of their lives) licking their wounds. A turn inward does not alleviate burnout but can offer a sense of perspective on what is at stake.

Joanna Macy (2012) recommends certain practices that help provide a wider timeframe for activism. Taking the longer view lets one see that environmental engagement is not a series of battles but a way of life, and one filled with a combination of sorrow, joy, disappointment, and achievement. Macy suggests, for instance, remembering that life on earth is roughly 3.5 million years old. In geological time, this may not seem like much. In terms of tomorrow's environmental action, it is light years. Macy also suggests that contemplative practices, such as certain meditation techniques or exercises that allow us to reflect on whales, tortoises, and other "old" species, can enable us to feel an affinity for the long duration of life, and this can provide some breathing room for our environmental efforts. (Such an affinity can also change our perspective when someone insists that we "act our age.") It is important to understand that Macy is not saying, "Slow down, don't worry, in the grand scheme of things all will be okay." Rather, she is simply reminding us that our lives are part of a larger process and that, when we align our efforts accordingly, we can sustain ourselves through campaign after campaign.

There is an additional element to the long view. Many activists get caught up in a specific environmental campaign and feel that their efforts are meaningless unless the campaign is successful. This, of course, is reasonable enough. There are real objectives out there, and environmental protection feeds on actual goal-oriented action. Contemplative practices that instill a sense of the long view allow one to distinguish effort from achievement. Now, this may seem perverse. Why shouldn't I get attached to the goals of my efforts? This is a complicated question, but the short answer is that such attachment breeds a contingent sense of well-being. It suggests that I will only be satisfied, happy, or enriched if I achieve a certain state of affairs. However, this is often impossible. It doesn't take much to notice that environmentalists, for all their beautiful and hugely important efforts, have lost more battles than they've won. By concentrating on a particular outcome rather than one's effort, one's anticipations can only get squashed in moments of campaign defeat. Certain contemplative practices can help separate commitment from attachment to victory and thus assist in developing more skillful activists.

In short, inward contemplation can offer resources for cultivating a richer interior life and, in so doing, assist environmental efforts. Everyone knows that one's inner life affects one's outer engagements. In the most basic way, if I am angry, I tend to see an unpleasant world and bring such a sensibility to my actions. Alternatively, if I am feeling joyful, I tend to see a more promising world and bring this to my engagements. In the same way, contemplative practices can help us untangle the internal dynamics that animate our efforts. In these ways, coming to



know oneself more fully—or, pejoratively, “working on oneself”—is a boost to environmental efforts. Environmentalism needs a turn inward.

On the flipside, contemplation also needs environmental engagement. One reason people care about environmental issues is because things like freshwater scarcity, climate change, and loss of biological diversity are not simply outer phenomena but also occurrences that get inside of us. They breed feelings of loss, sadness, lamentation, and so forth. (Similarly, positive environmental experiences generate sentiments of joy and awe.) This simply underlines the two-way relationship between our external and internal lives. At a higher level of abstraction, however, it also clues us into the more general interior/exterior relationship.

We often talk as though contemplative practices and insights into our internal lives are completely free from the social world. Meditation, yoga, journaling, prayer, and so forth are frequently presented as avenues into the “absolute” dimension of life—and thus as trans-social and transhistorical. It is as if, once we close our eyes or focus mindfully on bodily movement, we enter a boundless world that resonates with the ultimate elements of life itself. But we know that this isn’t true. In fact, the very techniques we use to “go inside”—particular forms of meditation, movement, and so forth—are themselves sociohistorically constructed. They were devised by people at certain times and in certain places, and they have this character no matter how profound the experiences they produce may feel. Indeed, the very sense of self that contemplative practices aim to activate is itself a sociohistorical construction. There is no inside that is completely separate from the outside world.

But this is all theoretical. Coming back to environmental issues, this suggests that our own spiritual development, our own cultivation of a contemplative life, is partly dependent on environmental conditions. And this is where the real rub of contemplative environmental studies can assume even greater significance. We live at a time of extreme environmental degradation. If nothing else, climate change confronts us with the most challenging of predicaments. Today, everything frozen on Earth is melting; record-breaking wildfires and droughts are scorching the land; intensified storms are wreaking havoc throughout the globe; and innumerable species are at risk or already extinct due to anthropogenic climate change. Witnessing this—coming to know it in an intimate and engaged way—is a profound experience. And this can provide grist for the spiritual mill. Climate change is arguably opening up chambers within the human heart that have never existed or been explored before. The idea that our species is causing the massive ecological deprivation, for instance, can generate feelings that no human beings may have ever experienced before. The profound sadness that can accompany deep awareness of climate change, the sense of love for all that is at risk and disappearing, the visceral feeling of interdependence that is emerging as we watch

our fellow humans and other-than-human companions suffer in the face of climate change, and our feelings of awe as we generate collective efforts to combat climate change—the depth to which these are felt and the quality of that experience may be unique to our time. This suggests that environmental problems can be tools of contemplative practice. They can be invitations to get to know ourselves in deeper ways and to strengthen our interior experience. Put differently, environmental issues are not simply dilemmas that we must confront externally or soldier through. They are also opportunities for growth and self-knowledge. They are avenues toward more sensitive and aware selves. The human spirit may actually expand and deepen in the ecological age. At least this is one element of the contemplative/environmental interface.

To summarize: a contemplative orientation to environmental studies offers an invitation to see our inner evolution as connected to the well-being of the Earth. It allows us to come to know ourselves more insightfully and enlarge our consciousness more expansively when challenged, by thinking about the Earth and our place in it and by acting in the service of environmental protection. It goes further, however, by advancing the proposition that our fellow humans, other creatures, and the Earth as a whole are best served when we indeed engage in such inner work and come to the task of environmental protection from a place honed by contemplative practice. That is, we advance environmental well-being most successfully when we possess (and continually develop) an appreciation for the complicated nature and richness of our inner lives.

### III

I use contemplative practices in quite a number of courses. I use them most consistently, however, in two classes that I have been teaching over the years: *Contemplation and Political Change* and *Contemplative Sustainable Design*. Let me describe both of these and the practices I employ.

*Contemplation and Political Change* investigates the nature of political action. How can one most effectively bring about meaningful change? Does it come from altering structures of power—governmental policies, international organizations, social institutions—or one's own outlook and behavior? The question is a perennial one, but I try to approach it in a way that allows students to feel its resonance in their own lives and at this particular historical moment. I do this by tying it to environmental concern. The course's fundamental inquiry, then, is: how can I best make the world a greener, more just, and more sustainable place?

Students practice three kinds of change. First, they work for external, institutional change. Here I require them to write three letters to the editors of newspapers or magazines, meet with officials, and lobby their congressional rep-

representatives to advance a particular political goal. (Living in Washington, DC, students can easily make appointments and meet with congressional legislative aids or even, at times, representatives themselves.) Second, I ask students to adopt lifestyle changes that are in line with their political aspirations. This may involve altering one's diet, walking to the university rather than traveling by a fossil-fueled machine, or consuming less stuff. In this case, I ask students to alter their lives for a specific, circumscribed period of time (usually two weeks). This allows them to make and stick with a commitment (rather than attempt to change things "forever" and thus have to excuse themselves for lapses in commitment). Third, and most abstractly, I ask students to alter their personal understanding of the challenge they are addressing. Here the idea is that, since students will not "solve" a problem like climate change, loss of biological diversity, or freshwater scarcity during the semester, they need to come to terms with stymied efforts. How does one do that? Do they throw up their arms and become cynical, do they simply put their shoulder to the grindstone and keep trying, do they see other avenues toward which to devote their efforts, or do they adopt a different outlook altogether? The challenge in this third dimension is to explore how our ideas and understandings can also play a role in political change.

Along with these strategies, we engage with contemplative practices. As a class, we practice community tuning, meditation, yoga, and journaling. I start each class with a check-in. This involves going around and hearing briefly from each person about what is most alive for them at the moment. At the beginning of the semester, students usually share an exciting or disappointing experience; midway through, they begin to talk about immediate emotions or sensations that are currently animating their moment-to-moment experience; by the end, most feel safe enough to share as honestly as possible. The check-in is so regular that students come to expect it and, over the semester, find increasingly more skillful ways of listening to each other and sharing more deeply. One of the goals of the practice is to enable us to appreciate each other's experiences without trying to fix another person. Another goal is to gain a sense of where the class as a whole is on a particular day. The check-in, in other words, helps "tune" the class.

At various points in a class, we do sitting meditation. This is a challenging practice to share. In the beginning of the semester, we simply close our eyes together and explore the sensation of doing so. As the semester progresses, I give additional instruction that allows students to investigate their internal experience in different ways and at different depths. The main form of meditation is simply mindfulness. I invite students to watch themselves. This involves bringing awareness to our bodies, thoughts, breath, and awareness itself. For most of the semester, meditation is a form of concentration. We work with the wandering mind and find ways of bringing it back to a particular focus. To help students overcome a sense of self-consciousness, we practice by sitting in a circle but facing outward,

away from the center of the room. This way students don't feel that others are looking at or judging them. It also allows those uncomfortable with closing their eyes to participate.

We also practice yoga. Usually, this comes at the second half of each session. About halfway through a class period, we will take a break in which students change their clothes and rearrange the room so we can put down mats or simply make space. (Most students do not have mats and thus practice simply on the carpet.) Most of the yoga involves postures known as *asanas*. I introduce different poses and eventually work toward a series of postures that students can experiment and begin to feel comfortable with. I emphasize how the body is a faculty for knowing and introduce yoga as a form of inquiry. This involves not simply coming to know the body and toning it for greater sensitivity but also integrating the knowing mind into its material vessel. Furthermore, yoga powerfully shifts the intellectual quality of the class and invites students into an alternative approach to inquiry.

A final regular practice is journaling. Students are required to keep a journal and write entries four days a week. I assign *The Book of Awakening* (Nepo, 2011) to provide daily, voluntary prompts for each entry. The journal is a place of freewriting. Students can write whatever they want. This often includes personal things that they may wish to keep confidential. (In these cases, I ask students to indicate with yellow stickies those parts of the journal that I should not read.) The purpose of the journal is to give students the feeling of a steady practice and allow course material to surface in personal ways. Put differently, the journal provides a way for students to personalize their education. It serves to tell them first that their own thoughts and feelings are valued and second that those thoughts and so forth are part of the educational experience. They learn that they can write themselves into insight and understanding. Journaling is a form of integrative learning.

I use tuning, meditation, yoga, and journaling for at least three broad purposes. First, the practices cultivate concentration. Students arrive in class having had various experiences in their day and animated by issues tied to the larger arcs in their lives. It is difficult to organize oneself and transition to the classroom; it is challenging to be immediately present to what is happening in class. The practices help us individually and as a class to "arrive" and attend to the material at hand. They work against the distracted mind that is encouraged by cellphones, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Allowing students to share their immediate experience, focus on their breath, mindfully move and experience their body, and self-reflectively express themselves through freewriting works to induce concentration.

The practices also help students confront uncomfortable (political) realities. If economics is the dismal science, environmental studies is the horrific one. Environmental degradation involves gross injustices and ghastly ecological tragedies.

Often these are hard to look at and even harder to analyze and develop responses to. Each of the contemplative practices I use in class helps students turn their gaze toward such difficulties. For example, by learning of others' hardships, trying to focus on the present moment, no matter how painful, and experiencing soreness as they position their bodies in different asanas, students learn ways of facing the seemingly unfaceable. The practices assist students in, to use dance choreographer Liz Lerman's phrase, "turning discomfort into inquiry."<sup>1</sup> And as students learn to do this with their own sensate and emotional experience they can do so with environmental challenges as well.

A third benefit of the practices is to promote flexibility. Yoga obviously does this for the body. Throughout the semester students experience increasing levels of suppleness, and this can often teach them to let go of preconceived boundaries to their bodies. By extension, and along with the other practices, it can also help them to let go of conceptual restrictions. All of us suffer from what could be called "hardening of the categories." This is our attachment to certain viewpoints or assumptions that then color our experience—including our engagement with environmental affairs. Contemplative practices can soften the edges of our categories and open up broader views and understandings. This can be especially helpful for environmental studies insofar as it can inspire creative thinking and a sense that no problem is forever set in stone.

Along with this is the opportunity to work with resistance. In yoga, one consistently comes up against bodily edges—hamstrings that won't budge, backs that won't bend, and stiff shoulders. In tuning, people have to listen to unpleasant things; meditation offers the chance for internal discomfort to surface; and journaling often uncovers painful states that many wish to avoid. How does one approach such edges? In addition to turning them into sources of inquiry, one can also learn ways of engaging them. For instance, does one barrel through resistances, or pull back, or dwell on their interface? As one comes to know his or her habits through contemplative practices, one can apply lessons learned to environmental political affairs. Every environmental political campaign, at some point, meets resistance. Rarely does everyone agree on a given strategy of change. Contemplative practice allows students to come to such situations with internal resources that can help them navigate the realities of political opposition and even confrontation.

While I am aware of some of the rewards of the contemplative practices I use in class, I also know that their consequences are hard to predict. They may have the effects I just mentioned, but then again, they may not. Moreover, I am sure they influence students' lives beyond my intentions. I say this because I, myself, continue to learn about practice. So many times I find myself redefining the ben-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://danceexchange.org/toolbox/foundation9980.html?Line=6>

efits I receive from contemplative practices. So often I come to understand and appreciate another dimension of practice. Thus, it makes sense that, over time, students will do so as well—beyond anything I, as their teacher, say or anticipate. In this sense, I often see introducing yoga, meditation, and so forth as simply a node in a student’s (hopefully) long engagement with contemplative practices. Most students will not sustain the practices I introduce in a linear fashion but will probably circle back to them as different acquaintances in their lives reintroduce forms of contemplative inquiry or as they themselves seek such development.

#### IV

The effects contemplative practices have on students are not only hard to predict but occasionally can backfire or, more accurately, create resistance. Let’s face it: bringing practices to the classroom is a risk. Students come expecting to be talked at or to engage in seminar-like discussions. They are unprepared to do things like close their eyes, move their bodies, share intimate struggles, and personally self-reflect in the context of academic study. Contemplative exercises can thus come off as flaky, corny, or even religious. When this happens, students can close up and refuse to avail themselves of the pedagogical possibilities. I found this a few times. It happened most profoundly while I was teaching the course *Contemplative Sustainable Design*.

*Contemplative Sustainable Design* is a three-week summer course that I occasionally teach at the Lama Foundation in the mountains of northern New Mexico. The Lama Foundation is an ecumenical spiritual community that hosts retreats and serves as a place where many people over the years have sought personal awakening. Students sleep in tents and share some community responsibilities while building solar-powered straw-bale structures and learning about global environmental affairs. For two summers, the course went beautifully. Students enjoyed living close to the land, gaining building skills, sharing deeply through contemplative practices, and interfacing with the Lama community. However, in the third year, things hit a rough spot. About a week into the course, some students felt that there was an overemphasis on contemplative practices and that the experience was aiming to make them “spiritual.” About half the students felt like they were being indoctrinated into meditation, yoga, and other practices, and expressed this in no uncertain terms to me.

Like other teachers, I am particularly sensitive to student experience. I want everyone to feel as though they are learning things of significance and in ways that feel life-affirming. Thus, it hurt when students expressed dissatisfaction with the course. At first, the experience made me reflect simply on dynamics of the



course: what could I change to smooth things out? But soon I started doubting the entire wisdom of using contemplative practices in an academic setting. I remember feeling that the course was a mistake and that the whole effort to integrate contemplation into the academy is misguided.

For all the pain, the experience proved to be an extraordinary learning experience for the students and especially for me. When students first approached me with complaints, I set aside designated time and allowed each to speak as honestly as they could. Each worked to find words to express their discomfort and connect their disappointment with the course to their life goals. I worked to practice deep listening without reacting. I tried to really hear them—to look beyond my hurt and see the discussion less as an attack on the course or me, and more as an insightful conversation in which real issues could surface. I tried my hardest to listen in a way that made them feel heard (and to really hear). Over the next few days, we unpacked the conversation and tried to integrate it into the course material. For my part, I learned that, as a teacher, I have a huge urge to be liked. I want to present material that is interesting to students and to do so in a way that puts me in a favorable light. This was an important insight. It helped me see how, in my life more generally, I strive to be a “pleaser”—one who can make others happy.

When my students expressed unhappiness, I was forced to think about the purpose of education and my particular role in it. Among other things, I came to see that the classroom is not about being liked or even making students comfortable. It is about learning, and some learning can be painful—for both the teacher and student. I began to notice the degree to which I partially “perform” in class. I saw levels of inauthenticity as I cooked up ways of presenting material or discussing issues that aimed not only to elicit insight from students but also to display pedagogical talent on my part. It was a rude awakening. I tried to milk the insight by taking my own advice to turn discomfort into inquiry.

Now, I relate this incident not to bring attention to my insufficiencies as a teacher and my luck at having rebounded in a productive way. Rather, I think it reveals something about contemplative pedagogy. Accurately or not, many associate contemplative practices with religious traditions, and this can scare students insofar as many hold personal spiritual or religious sentiments—even atheism—in protective ways. Contemplative exercises rub up against such sentiments and, because the academy is conventionally not a place to explore or discuss our most personal beliefs, students can feel threatened and uncomfortable. This is almost unavoidable. Furthermore, contemplative practices may seem anti-intellectual and thus trite to many students. The cost of higher education is so expensive these days that students may feel contemplative practices are a waste of their educational time. This is especially the case when the effects of the practices are hard to gauge and difficult to communicate on term papers, examinations, and other measures of academic facility.

These concerns relate to a more general dimension of contemplative pedagogy. No matter if students are excited, scared, or indifferent to contemplative exercises, practices can open space for vulnerabilities. By going beyond the purely rational mind, they expose raw parts of ourselves that may not always be welcomed. And, since few of us are trained academically to work with the expression of vulnerability (either our own or that of our students) in a classroom setting, this opens up new educational terrain. In the face of such difficulty, many of us may be tempted to discard the whole effort—to go back to being intellectual talking heads who can take control of the classroom by lording our knowledge over that of our students. As I learned, this would be a mistake. The forms of uneasiness that can accompany the use of contemplative practices *themselves* provide pedagogical value. They introduce a type of wildness into the classroom where people can feel their edges and learn themselves into new understandings and, by extension, ways of being in the world.

The promises and difficulties of contemplative teaching bring into high relief the fine line between our roles as teachers and the experience of our wider lives. For many of us, the line serves partially as a divide between professional and personal life. Contemplative pedagogy invites us to attenuate the boundary. It suggests that we can live with greater integration by arriving in the classroom as whole as possible, thus facilitating whole-person education. This is especially important in environmental studies. Sadly, no one knows how best to address environmental challenges; environmental studies, in this sense, is a collective endeavor in which students and professors work together to understand and to conceptually and practically forge a livable future. Such an enterprise requires tapping the whole panoply of human capabilities. Contemplative practices can enliven capacities that are often underappreciated in academia and enlist them in the necessary and noble effort to create a more just, peaceful, economically viable, and ecologically sound world.

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