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Let's Be Buddhists for the Next Few Weeks! Costs and Benefits of Making Students Explore Buddhism From the Inside

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the risks and rewards of integrating theory and practice in the study of yoga and meditation in college classes. It focuses on a case study of my Yoga, Mindfulness, and Indian Philosophy course. The course combines hatha yoga and meditation practice with the study of those practices and their origins. We use yoga and meditation to relieve stress and anxiety. We study Buddhist and Hindu worldviews. We examine ethical issues in the ways that yoga and meditation are appropriated and removed from their religious contexts (including the ways we use them in the course itself), we reflect on the ways in which our practice differs from traditional practices, we assess different types of contemporary practice, and we weigh the benefits and the costs of our Western embrace of yoga and meditation.

KEYWORDS

yoga, meditation, mindfulness, stress, anxiety, Buddhist philosophy, trauma-sensitive approaches to meditation, cultural appropriation, Buddhist pedagogies

The Indian religious and philosophical traditions were brought to the West with an invitation to experiment and to experience: Try for yourself! See if it works for you! Don't blindly obey but verify for yourself. It's in this spirit that I introduce Buddhist meditation to the students in my Yoga, Mindfulness, and Indian Philosophy course: Try this on. See how it fits. Play with it.

I created the course because I wanted to address my students' suffering. I teach at Stonehill College, a Congregation of Holy Cross college of 2500 students outside Boston. Our students are mostly traditional undergraduates, New Englanders, upper-middle class, and culturally Catholic. Until a few years ago, they seemed like a reasonably happy bunch. In recent years, I have become increasingly worried about them as I've watched each incoming class struggle more and more with stress, anxiety, body image, and depression. My hunch was that students would

benefit from meditation and yoga practice, so I wanted to create a course that used yoga and mindfulness to help students figure out how to better cope with the stress and anxiety of living in our modern world. I am a long-term yoga practitioner, but I don't teach yoga myself, so I recruited my colleague Kristy Donnelly Kuhn to help me teach the class.

But I had two problems. First, I didn't want the course to lack rigor and intellectual content and just be a form of self-help. Second, I have ethical concerns about how we in the West have appropriated and commercialized yoga and meditation. We have reduced Buddhism to stress relief and mindfulness apps, and we meditate to become more effective business and military leaders, oblivious to the tensions between our own goals and Buddhist teachings about greed and violence. Given all that, could I with integrity encourage the students to use meditation for stress relief? How different are contemporary uses of meditation and mindfulness from "real" Buddhist practice? Can we use these techniques and still be sufficiently respectful to the religious and philosophical traditions involved?

I still struggle with these ethical questions. But I decided to make that very struggle the centerpiece of the course, using it to ensure that the course has serious intellectual and philosophical content. The course combines hatha yoga and meditation practice with the study of those practices and their origins. We study Buddhist and Hindu worldviews. We examine the ethical issues I just mentioned, we reflect on the ways in which our practice differs from traditional practice, we assess different types of contemporary practice, and we weigh the benefits and the costs of our Western embrace of yoga and meditation.

The class is half on Buddhism and half on Hinduism. For the Buddhist portion of the course, we read a brief overview of Buddhism and some classical sutras, Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1975), and the Dalai Lama's *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999). We also watch Bill Moyers' (1993) special about Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, and we read about the Buddhist roots of MBSR. We examine the Dalai Lama's critique of anger (1999), contrasting it with Kristin Neff's call for fierce self-compassion (2018). We end with Ron Purser and David Loy on *McMindfulness* (2013) and discussions of cultural appropriation in Bhanu Bhatnagar's *Who Owns Yoga?* (2014) and Tejal Patel and Jesal Parikh's podcast *Yoga is Dead* (2019-2020).

Throughout our discussions, I encourage the students to articulate how the views we are studying challenge and are challenged by their own views and to notice when they feel threatened or insulted by the materials. I stress the need to stick to the principle of charity even when that happens. I encourage them to initially bracket their own views and "be Buddhist," but to also jot down their reactions and think more about them later.

If things go well, the students get a good sense of traditional Buddhism. They understand that meditation was important for monks and nuns but not for lay Buddhists in the past. They see that Buddhist meditation aims at developing compassion and seeing reality as it is. All that prepares them for comparing traditional Buddhism to the uses of meditation in MBSR and other types of contemporary mindfulness practice, and developing an informed view about the ethical issues involved.

We do a five to ten minute seated meditation in the beginning of each class. During the first few weeks, we do breathing meditation. In yoga class, we alternate between seated meditations and using the yoga sequences as a moving meditation. The students pay attention to their breathing and to the movement, lose focus, and regain it again. We practice, reflect, and discuss. They quickly realize how difficult it is to pay attention, and they are relieved when they realize that the rest of the class struggles too. They argue about whether background music helps or whether the room should be quiet, and they share stories about their successes and failures. We use the Hindu notion of the Atman as a witness to help them observe their thoughts instead of getting caught up in them. I encourage anyone with a religious practice to compare this practice to their own. Is it like prayer? Is it anything like saying the Rosary? From the beginning, I encourage students to experiment and find ways that work better for themselves, while also carefully noticing when they make significant changes to the practice or to its meaning. We experiment with relaxation techniques like listening to music and coloring, and we compare those to meditation.

Halfway through the semester, we introduce loving-kindness meditation. This is before we discuss compassion in class, and it comes as a pleasant surprise for my students who at that point usually feel like they have spent an eternity discussing unpleasant ideas about detachment from the world, their loved ones, and their own self. We start with a shortened version

of loving-kindness meditation—students focus on themselves, a loved one, and then the whole world. *May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be loved.* Here too, we practice, reflect, and then discuss. We consider character development: *Can you change your character?* For instance, can you make yourself more compassionate? Or is our character fixed? If you can change, how do you do that? We look at some of the recent data from Singer and Bolz (2013) and others which suggests that loving-kindness meditation can help us change. After a couple of weeks, we expand the loving-kindness meditation, sending our thoughts to somebody neutral, and then to someone we dislike. We discuss the purpose of this sort of meditation, and we compare it to forgiveness in the Christian tradition. We consider the difficulties we encounter in sending good wishes to people we don't like, and we come up with "improved" and more honest mantras. "*May you be happy, may you be healthy, oh, damn it, May you be eaten by wild dogs,*" was especially popular last semester.

I present all these types of meditation and relaxation practices for students to try out, reflect on, and discuss, and I see them understanding the Buddhist and Hindu traditions better as they do. I ask them to give a fair chance to each approach that we play with, but I also invite them to alter the practice when needed. I encourage them to experiment with these and other techniques for calming down, to figure out what works better for them. I mention the *Visuddhimagga* and its claim that different types of people need different types of meditation. Students experiment, letting the loving-kindness meditation turn into a prayer to God or realizing that counting the breath works much better than simply focusing on breathing in and out. They share their results and experiment more.

Assessment of the course is still in the early stages, as is the study of mindfulness-based techniques in the world beyond my classroom, and it faces some of the same challenges (for example, excessive reliance on self-reports). My impression so far is that the integration of meditation and yoga practice can enhance student learning in three important areas: First, they get better at self-care. My students report getting better at noticing to how they are doing and at self-regulation (for example, using their breathing to calm down or using meditation to go to sleep). They say they come out of the meditation sessions feeling much calmer than when they arrived and that this calm lasts throughout much of the day. They notice ways in which their own thinking makes their suffering worse and ways in which they can try to adjust their thinking, and sometimes they even manage to make such adjustments. They realize that self-care isn't a one-time fix but a lifelong practice involving much backsliding, and they get basic tools to use and practice in how to use them. For many of my students, this type of self-awareness and self-work is entirely new. They can't master it in a semester, but it's a start.

Second, the practice can enhance students' understanding of the theoretical content of the course. Meditation, in particular, provides them with a direct experience in which they seem to stand outside of themselves, watching thoughts and feelings race around with no sense that they are actively generating any of them. This helps them make sense of the Buddhist and Hindu views that our thoughts, feelings, and ego are not our self, as well as of the related idea that they are not as important as we tend to think. That in turn helps students understand Hinduism and Buddhism better and it increases the chance that they regard them as serious options rather than exotic oddities.

Finally, integrating the practice motivates them to study Buddhism and Hinduism. Students are initially unaware of the origins of yoga and mindfulness—I always have at least one student in the class say that they had no idea that yoga had anything to do with Hinduism or India. They quickly become troubled by the ways in which the practices seem to have been corrupted, distorted, and just plain appropriated. But because they notice how valuable the practices can be as self-care tools, they are also reluctant to say that we shouldn't use them. Students generally conclude that, at a minimum, responsible use of these techniques requires a good understanding of their religious and cultural roots, thus creating an obligation for themselves to learn more. This semester, a student initially defended her mother who is teaching mindfulness to grade school kids. But she and her friends in the class concluded that her mom wasn't doing it right, and now she plans to teach her mom about Buddhism and to convince her to include it in her teaching.

Students come to this class from different religious commitments and backgrounds and with different mental health challenges. Part of the challenge for the instructor is to work with all that. But with a deeply personal class like this one, a class which requires students to experiment with different religious practices and to look deeply into their own hearts and minds, it is also essential to ensure that students know what they are getting themselves into before the course starts. In particular, students with serious philosophical and religious objections to the practice, and students with a history of trauma, should think twice before enrolling.

I have little experience dealing with students who have serious philosophical and religious objections to meditation and yoga practice. None of my students have expressed discomfort with participating in the practice or have asked to opt out. This is partly because of the student population at my college. Virtually all my students are at least mildly curious about Buddhist and Hindu traditions and they don't see exploring different religious traditions as a threat to their own faith. Meditation and yoga might *bore* them, but other than that, they have nothing against participating in those practices. When I mention that some Christians have spiritual objections to yoga and Buddhist meditation, they just roll their eyes. But I live in the Northeast and my students are generally vaguely Catholic and on the liberal end of Catholicism. Some work with very different student populations.

To ensure that students can make an informed decision about the class, I make sure that the course description and any advertising for the course highlights the practice component. We also need to check that this type of course is not the only course given for fulfilling a general education requirement. With appropriate information given beforehand and other course options available, students who have serious concerns about spiritual dangers from the practice have been able to avoid my course, which is good for them and for the course.

In teaching a course like this, we must also be aware of how students' history of trauma and PTSD can affect their ability to participate safely in meditation practice. David Treleaven (2018, [2019](#)) has done important work on this issue. Here are the highlights:

- Meditation sometimes triggers flashbacks for people with PTSD.
- Focusing on the breath is especially likely to be a trigger so it may be better for this population to use other anchors for attention.

Let's not overreact. Meditation can be helpful for students struggling with anxiety and trauma. But we need to put safeguards in place so that we don't ask a student with PTSD to meditate in class without either of us being aware that it can trigger flashbacks. Here are the safeguards I have put in place, using Treleaven's recommendations: I email the students after registration and explain that meditation and yoga practice will be a regular part of the course and that we are happy to help them adapt the practice so that it works for them. I explain that while meditation and yoga are often helpful to people struggling with mental health issues, trauma survivors with PTSD should be aware that meditation can trigger flashbacks. I repeat all this the first few times we meditate in class, and I provide choices when I guide the students in meditation practice. I invite students to use anchors beside their breath, like sounds or the sensation of their feet on the floor. I offer these options upfront and as equally valid options for everybody. *Try them on. See which works better for you.* I try to reduce the shame associated with not "doing meditation well" by talking about how common it is to struggle. I share stories about my own difficulties with meditation, and I repeatedly invite and encourage students to speak to me or to the yoga instructor if anything doesn't feel right with their practice.

This may sound like an excessive level of caution. As far as I know, I have only had one student who was dealing with PTSD. But trauma and PTSD are all too common. I have probably worked with several students with PTSD over the years—they just didn't disclose that information to me. Furthermore, inclusive practices like those outlined here are helpful for my other students as well. They regularly express surprise and relief when I tell them to adapt the practice to their needs instead of struggling to sit or move exactly right or to follow a script to the letter. They benefit from having permission to adapt the practice and from seeing alternative approaches as just alternatives, and not as inferior options for those who are bad at meditation.

A final thought. One of the most important parts of the "let's be Buddhists for a few weeks" type of teaching is to respect the intellectual integrity of the students. I ask them to bracket their own views and to try to understand the worldviews that we are exploring from the inside as much as possible. I challenge them to articulate how a philosophically-savvy Buddhist might critique their own way of life and their religious beliefs. But later, I let them remove those brackets, and I encourage them to critically examine the views and commitments that they have immersed themselves in throughout the course of

the semester, and I help them develop the strongest possible arguments for what they actually believe. If this means that they argue that greed is good, that meditation is a waste of time, or that there is no such thing as cultural appropriation, then I swallow hard and help them do it better.

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