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MIRROR IN THE CLASSROOM

Integrating Contemplative Practices

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Many university students, especially those studying Religion today, display a hunger to integrate critical scholarship with constructive ways of knowing and encountering reality. This integration activates students' imaginations and takes seriously students' own embodied experiences, experiences students consider just as important as course contents in lectures and readings. Course catalogs may contain class offerings that actively integrate embodied contemplative practices to promote mindfulness for stress reduction—this includes mindfulness health, wellness, and productivity—but these classes do not go far enough for those students who want to expand and refine how they know the world and what they can come to know in general, who want knowledge that may support their needs to shape the world to come. Teaching in a manner that integrates scholarship and engaged experiences requires students to be more than empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge but to be individuals seeking to variously change themselves through learning.

Parker J. Palmer in his book *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (1993) states

> The way we teach depends on the way we think people know; we cannot amend our pedagogy until our epistemology is transformed. If teaching is reformed in our time, it will not be the result of snappier teaching techniques. It will happen because we are amid a far-reaching intellectual and spiritual revision of reality and how we know it.
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> *(1993, xvii)*

DOI: 10.4324/9781032685304-13

Palmer is correct that changing teaching in our time for the better is more than just incorporating nifty teaching tricks and newfangled assessment strategies; it requires revising how teachers know and how students know, all in service of transforming the world.

For over a decade, each semester I have asked myself a set of questions as I design my syllabi. Why do Religious Studies teachers bracket practice and the practitioner from classrooms? While Religious Studies classes explore embodiment, meditation, mind, bodies, mind-body, and so forth as subjects of study, how can we integrate cognitive concepts with embodied experiences in the Religious Studies classroom?

The ways students know are important, but equally important are the ways professors know because how they know determines how they teach. What are the effects of a teacher knowing and presenting herself as a scholar studying religious traditions from a scholarly perspective, as a practitioner belonging to a spiritual tradition and community, or as a scholar-practitioner who studies but also belongs to a religious community and tradition? Obviously, the pure practitioner does not belong in a classroom as a professor, for they do not have the academic skills and certifications to study and teach, as opposed to the scholar and scholar-practitioner who have academic dispositions. Jeffrey J. Kripal claims that one's personal religious experiences and professional scholarship are not mutually exclusive; they deeply inform one another and so understanding one side requires understanding the other (2007). The study of religion can lead to a deep-seated, honest union of the personal and professional, but this requires a deep transformation. There is also another category of scholars I call the devout-scholar, professors who position themselves between the scholar and the scholar-practitioner. I will return to this category after contextualizing my own position as a scholar-practitioner.

I identify as a scholar-practitioner within the realm of Hindu *śākta* (Goddess) tantra (Sravana Borkataky-Varma forthcoming). There exist various kinds of practitioners; some focus on rituals, others develop profound connections with specific texts, some work closely with a guru, while others seek knowledge independently. Likewise, being a scholar is not limited to those with academic degrees; a scholar is anyone devoted to learning and interacting with primary texts, oral commentaries, and secondary literature.

In The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader 2005), Russell T. McCutcheon defines an insider scholar as one who writes from within the tradition they examine, while defining outsider scholars as those who position themselves outside that tradition. Outsiders refrain from converting to the traditions they study and do not discuss their practices or identities if they are current or former adherents. They strive for objective analysis of their subjects. McCutcheon acknowledges that both perspectives have played a role in the history of Religious Studies but contends that contemporary Religious Studies should be defined from the outsider's point of view.

McCutcheon's perspective hinges not on personal identity but on the academic choices scholars make. He suggests that religious identity should be set aside in scholarly work. This does not imply that a Christian cannot teach Christianity, or a Buddhist cannot teach Buddhism, but rather that all scholars—regardless of whether they are insiders or outsiders—should approach their teaching and write from an outsider perspective. McCutcheon famously asserts that a scholar should embody a critical stance rather than a caretaker role. Although I concur that the classroom should not serve as a pulpit, I believe McCutcheon's argument is somewhat incomplete. For instance, among feminist scholars, women are not required to ignore their femininity, nor are Black studies professors, if Black, asked to set aside their racial identity. Therefore, it seems inconsistent to expect a religious individual to bracket their spirituality. This expectation carries an implicit white, male Protestant bias that assumes a separation between religious and secular life. Many Hindus do not draw such distinctions, as the division itself is rooted in Protestant thought.

The outsider perspective also has its drawbacks. It may not be feasible to entirely separate the insider perspective; even if unintentionally, scholars function as insiders while teaching and reflect their insider status when writing. An integrated approach that blends insider and outsider perspectives, and scholar and practitioner identities, may be more beneficial for the pursuit of scholarly insight and the development of trustworthy knowledge. Such an approach is more authentic and holistic, honoring the traditions, the communities involved, and the preconceptions made while transmitting teachings from course texts.

There exists, however, another academic stance that warrants more exploration—scholars who are not practitioners yet possess a deep reverence, even an affection, for a tradition that does not encapsulate their identity and for communities they do not belong to. I refer to these individuals as "devout-scholars." While they may not use this term, I am acquainted with several. Devout-scholars do not undergo initiation into a religious path or lineage, yet they cultivate strong reverential ties to places of worship they study or encounter in their fieldwork. They may have respectful relationships with a guru, faith leader, or community, without being formal members of that tradition. One colleague, whom I regard as a devout-scholar, likens himself to a "hang around" in motorcycle culture or an "honored guest" in esoteric groups; he feels connected to and welcomed by communities that he is not, nor will he ever be, a part of, and feels compelled to support and protect them. Although he humorously mentions that he "prays to gods he does not believe in," his devout nature is sincere, and he genuinely engages in prayer. Incorporating devout scholars into the discussion of scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners reveals even deeper complexities.

When I write and teach, I cannot set aside my tradition; I was born into it through my family. My choice to take initiation was not motivated by

scholarly intent. Instead, my scholarship naturally evolved as I navigated my life within my tradition. Nonetheless, I do not uncritically endorse it; I engage critically and analytically with my tradition and its practices. While I identify as a scholar, I do not always adhere to what is conventionally regarded as a scholarly perspective. Embracing my identities as a scholar, practitioner, and scholar-practitioner, I take pride in the complexity and richness of my intersectional experience.

My position in the classroom was refined when I taught a course at Harvard Divinity School (HDS) in the fall of 2021 titled "Arousing Cosmic Energy in the Subtle Body: The Scholar-Practitioner Model." Let me describe the class a bit in order to demonstrate my position. We met face-to-face twice a week. Tuesday's classes were dedicated to discussing scholarly work about the subtle body, the non-physical or imaginal body, in Hindu and Buddhist traditions (I will have more to say about the subtle body below). On Thursdays, we met in the Williams Chapel, a space dedicated to spiritual life at HDS for over a hundred years. Before each class, we moved the furniture and arranged meditation cushions. The entire class sat on the floor unless they needed to sit on a chair for health reasons. Tuesday's readings were selected from Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Thursday classes were for practice using guided meditation sessions drawing upon Hindu *Śākta* (goddess) Tantra and Buddhist Vajrayāna (Tibetan Buddhism) practices for co-creating and co-constructing a *maṇḍala* and engaging in a *maṇḍala* practice. Students constructed their own *maṇḍalas* as they saw appropriate, and they deployed their individual mandalas in these group meditation sessions. They explored the function of a *maṇḍala* in a ritual space in Hindu and Buddhist traditions via class discussions based on readings, and then they constructed a *maṇḍala* and a *maṇḍala* practice using the contents of their own faith or non-denominational spiritual tradition. In other words, students were not required to adopt a pre-designed Hindu or a Buddhist *maṇḍala*.

The class via the syllabus explicitly required students to practice every day outside of class and to submit a daily response recording in which they reflected upon their daily practice. Responses took different forms such as written texts, audio files, or visual creations, and sometimes a combination of all three. They were usually quite substantial. Occasionally reflections recorded the natural ebb and flow of being in practice, including "I did not practice today" or "I sat down to practice but then got distracted." The responses created accountability, requiring students to practice regularly, reflect upon their practice, and engage in what they experienced in practice.

I decided, considering the personal nature of these assignments, that I would not grade the students. They would self-grade. I could not possibly grade their honesty, accountability, and intent to practice as scholar-practitioners. Response journals became resources for students to self-assess at the end of the semester before they assigned themselves a grade.

During the fall 2021 academic session, close to 2000 submissions were recorded by 33 masters in divinity (MDiv) or master's in theological studies students (MTS) and a few PhD students. My experience of teaching this class was so deeply transformational that a year later I decided to put together this volume. A year later, in the fall of 2022 and then again in 2023, I reread all the entries in order to refresh my memory and to see if there were any patterns. This time I read all the entries for each individual one at a time rather than reading all the different student responses for any given day while I was teaching the class. Reading the trajectories of responses, I noticed students engaging the two poles of experiences, kataphatic knowing and apophatic knowing, as theorized by Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the American Trappist monk, mystic, poet, social activist, and scholar of comparative religion (1970). Kataphatic knowing is knowing through images and words; apophatic knowing is knowing through silence and symbols. Similar ideas of thinking and knowing in Hindu traditions are discussed in the emic category of *Nirguṇa* (without form) and *Saguṇa* (with form). Additionally, consider if there is a kind of learning that is over and beyond images, words, silence, and symbols. I believe there is. This type of learning and receiving knowledge is often unintelligible. Take, for example, *śruti* (heard) transmission in Vedic literature. *Śruti* works are considered to have been received and transmitted directly from *brahmāṇḍa* (cosmos) to the earthly sages who transmitted them further. People across ages and into the present times report experiencing receiving knowledge in ways they cannot comprehend: They simply feel it in their bodies. More often than not, these occurrences are explained using terms like precognitive dreams, download, entered a portal, and so forth. For example, in recent times Elizabeth G. Krohn has written about her precognitive dreams in *Changed in a Flash* (Elizabeth G. Krohn and Jeffrey J. Kripal 2018). Considering that students engage knowledge through a wide modality of ways, the question that arises is what can professors do to encourage students to engage in each of these forms? For instance, how can a professor encourage those students with a predilection for knowledge emerging from emptiness to engage knowledge emerging from language and symbols?

In light of my students' varied responses and reactions to course contents and activities, I began to wonder what it meant to lead a class as a scholar-practitioner or a devout-scholar and how practices rooted in either religious or spiritual traditions could and should be integrated into college courses. In other words, I encouraged students, to the best of their abilities, to approach the class and their lives during the semester as scholar-practitioners. But how should a professor integrate practices into a course and what would be the effects on the students, the instructor, and even the institution? To consider these questions, I need to explain a bit more about the contents of the class.

Course Design

The course drew upon rich scholarship on tantra, the subtle body, and *maṇḍala*. Many scholars have defined Hindu tantra, including Douglas Brooks (1990), David Kinsley (1997), David Gordon White (2000), André Padoux (2002, 2017), Hillary Peter Rodrigues (2003), Prem Saran (2008), and Hugh B. Urban (2009). I consider any ritual space, philosophical thought, or text, to be tantric—to belong to the religions of tantra—if that space/thought/text contains one or more of the following four elements: (1) If it engages instead of rejecting the human body and body fluids; (2) if it activates subtle esoteric anatomy (*cakras*, *nāḍīs*, *kuṇḍalinī* energy, and so on) that catalyzes engagement with the divine and dissolves binaries such as sacred/profane, birth/death, beauty/ugliness, and so forth; (3) if it engages esoteric language and symbols (mantra, mandala, yantra) that transcend microcosm and macrocosm by demonstrating that the divine macrocosm (divinity) resides within the microcosm of all beings; and (4) if it deploys any or all these features in service of liberation while living. Through the semester students were encouraged to engage with the principles of tantra.

The use of maṇḍalas in student practices required participants to connect with a different aspect of their being, transcending their physical existence. Students tap into their subtle bodies, which embody a complex ontology reflected in both Western and Eastern traditions (Simon P. Cox 2022). During the first three centuries of the common era, the West saw the convergence of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophies that gave rise to the concept of the subtle body, often termed the "ethereal" (aitherodes), "pneumatic" (pneumatikos), or "astral" (astroeides) body (Dod E. R. Dodds 1963, 313; Sravana Borkataky-Varma and Anya Foxen forthcoming). This subtle body serves as a bridging mechanism, allowing the immaterial soul to influence its material form and the surrounding world. For Neo-Platonists, Hermeticists, and Gnostics, on the other hand, the subtle body became a tool for the soul to elevate itself toward divinity, rather than merely impacting the material realm as previously stated. The ochema pneuma, or "spirit vehicle," could transport the soul through celestial realms, surpassing the astral level and returning it to its divine origin (John F. Finamore 1985, 1).

South Asian esoteric traditions outline the existence of three bodies: *Kāraṇa śarīra* (the causal body), *sthūla śarīra* (the gross body), and *sukṣma śarīra* (the subtle or refined body), alongside the liṅga śarīra. According to Indian yogic and Tantric teachings, the inner structure of the subtle body is articulated in various manifestations. A prevalent framework appears in the ancient Hindu scriptures, specifically the Upaniṣads (700–400 BCE), which describe a series of five "bodies" viewed as progressively refined entities transitioning from the most material to the most ethereal (Hugh Urban 2022, 6). The Taittirīya Upaniṣad (fourth or fifth century BCE) identifies these bodies

as the "food body" or physical form (*annamaya*), the breath body (*prāṇamaya*), the mental body (*manomaya*), the intellectual body (*vijñānamaya*), and the bliss body (*ānandamaya*) (Patrick Olivelle 2008, 177). Vedānta philosophers further evolve this notion into the idea of five "sheaths" (*kośas*). Among these, the widely recognized—albeit somewhat misinterpreted due to a complex East-West exchange—has been the system of cakras, also known as the "circles" or "wheels" of energy aligned along the spinal column. Vital energy flows through nodes or "knots" (*granthīs*) that circulate through both the universe and the physical body. The cakras are typically visualized as either wheels or lotuses, each characterized by different numbers of petals and colors.

Maṇḍalas are complex, and their meaning and use are dictated by varied approaches. In Buddhist Tantra Vajrayāna, a *maṇḍala* is a sacred diagram. "Practitioners ritualistically view and deploy a *maṇḍala* to transcend their microcosm, to actively engage with the macrocosm. Some consider that macrocosm to be the cosmos" (Sravana Borkataky-Varma 2022). The *maṇḍala* is the perfected realm of the deity attuned to the microcosmic world of practitioners' psychological states, but the mandala is also a depiction of the cosmos. A maṇḍala practice transforms and translocates the cosmos so that it is centered on the practitioner. This power of transportability confers empowerment over reality through insight. Hence, a *maṇḍala* can be considered a type of cosmogram.

In the Hindu tantra, there is also the use of yantras (symbolic figures, also contraptions). A yantra, in comparison to a *maṇḍala*, is made of simpler linear diagrams of concentric configurations (Madhu Khanna 2016). The center (*bindu* or drop) is the most important; from it, the full yantra emanates. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* (1000–1400 CE) establishes the importance of yantra in ritual space: "As the body to the soul, oil to the lamp, a yantra is to the deity" (Arthur Avalon 1965, 154). The most popular yantra, also the most globally transmitted, is the Śrīyantra or the Śrīcakra, born from the Śrīvidyā school of Hindu Śākta Tantra, goddess Tantra. The end goal for yantra is the same as *maṇḍala*: Practitioners realize their essential self and the universe to be empty of inherent existence, a mere construction, *māyā* (illusion), and this is a realization of gnostic truth. We now return to the class and the pedagogy.

The title "Arousing Cosmic Energy in the Subtle Body: The Scholar-Practitioner Model" itself requires some unpacking. Students engaged in practices that deploy the subtle body—the imaginal body akin to a Western soul that can move throughout the physical and non-physical world while affecting the physical and non-physical world—in order to perfect the self and transform the self from limited to unlimited. In this class, students acted as scholar-practitioners: They critically interrogated course materials but also put the contents into practice to explore them experientially. With each

passing week, students engaged and progressively went deeper into their personal *maṇḍala* practice that they had created to understand and embody the content. A year later when I started reading the submissions in their entirety, I saw patterns running throughout. Students were able to engage physical and subtle bodies, alternating between them, grasping subtle distinctions. Also, students described altered relationships with space and spaces, including plants, water bodies, people, and animals. Below are a few examples from students' testimonies (written permission has been taken from each student) starting with entries on the body.

Student #9 writes:

> I find body scans very challenging in the sense that I almost never get all the way through. I stall out at some point because I get distracted by thoughts. When I start at the top of my head, it's actually quite rare that I even get as far as my shoulders. I have wondered if there is some kind of significance to this, someway that I've internalized the concept of 'living in my head' and have erected some kind of barrier that cuts me off from being more in touch with my body (September 20, 2021).
>
> I saw energy billowing out the top [of my head] sort of like the branches of a tree fanning out (October 9, 2021).

Student #34 writes:

> each time God has brushed me
> they left so many marks I cannot
> decipher
> how can I find
> reverence
> when my inner cosmology
> orients itself around pain? (October 6, 2021)
> I do not want to be a house
> whose windows only glow
> from flashing of passing cars (October 27, 2021)

Student #8 writes: "At one point I imagined myself floating above my apartment building, but like a balloon, used a rope to bring my spirit back down and into my body" (September 19, 2021). Student #10 stated, "Pain in the heart is a very literal experience, all my energy and attention flows into this chasmic chamber" (September 23, 2021).

Students reflected on their bodies and described how their relationship with their bodies changed by considering space. As students' relationship with their bodies changed, their relationship with space evolved into finding new meaning and depths. Students became more and more aware of their

relationship to spaces and their interactions with other spatial cohabitants. Student #4 writes, "All dissolved into an orb at my heart center – I feel the sense of small universes inside of bigger ones or big things inside of small locations – flexibility of spatial parameters/sense of size" (September 14, 2021). Student #27 reports, "But there was one moment during the meditation while I was building my little glowy forcefield around myself, that clicked for a second. It felt like gravity changed. […] And I was, like witnessing myself in an energetic way" (September 11, 2021).

> I was very aware of my heartbeat today. I could really feel it like it would come in waves. […]. There would be an intense feeling of it, like in my fingers. And then my whole body like the life force, like rushing through me.
>
> *(September 14, 2021)*

Student #8 writes:

> While walking by the river, soaking in the moon with the full Charles riverbank symphony of night sounds. Toward the end of my meditation, I met a rabbit. I stopped on the path and we stood there together for a long moment. I've been compared to a bunny my whole life – a soft, comfort-seeking creature that's highly sensitive and knows how to move quickly. But standing there with my full three rings exalted, I realized it's a form I think I've shed. Stepping into womanhood. I'm not really quite so much of a bunny anymore. Not a rabbit at all. Maybe instead, something with wings.
>
> *(September 20, 2021)*

Student #10 writes:

> I realized that all my ancestors are in the Earth, so when I touch the Earth some part of the Earth is touching them. I realized that I feel conflicted. I want to know my family, but I have grievances with some of them. I don't know how to honor them if I don't know if they were honorable. And I was filled with love and grief and stillness.
>
> *(September 10, 2021)*

As students advanced in their visualization practices, they became more attuned to the subtle somatic sensations they experienced during the process. This heightened awareness led them to interpret their experiences naturally, following organic pathways shaped by those very experiences. Some students began to reconceptualize their bodies as conscious agents with their own knowing capabilities. Rather than merely reflecting on their evolving experiences of embodiment arising from the visualization techniques, students felt

compelled to explore their imagination and engage in profound reflection. Many students pursued active and interactive experiments with these practices, often with the specific goal of discovering or accessing new depths of understanding, both regarding themselves and the world around them.

Student responses revealed shifting understandings of their selves, but they also reported shifts in engaging and interpreting the texts they studied for class. Throughout the semester, as the class went on more and more students were eager to integrate practices into their daily lives. They felt the practices paired with the assigned readings brought a "deeper meaning" to their relationship with self as well as with others and brought more beauty into their surroundings. In other words, the pedagogy chosen for this class showed success because the students were experiencing analogs to the texts, and those analog experiences were challenging and enhancing their interpretations of the texts. Their perceptual facilities, interior and exterior, altered, leading to expanded abilities for interpreting textual and visual images. However, the work of integrating praxis into the classroom requires multiple forms of knowledge and careful pedagogy on the part of the professor.

Conclusion

Returning to the questions and concerns that started this chapter, I have some tentative solutions. In the nineteenth century, the study of religion was steeped in the so-called Abrahamic Religions so that non-Abrahamic religions were interpreted through the Abrahamic interpretive prism. We don't do that anymore, or at least we try not to do this anymore. The Study of Religions today includes a wide range of traditional religions but also what is considered metaphysical religions. It is now common for scholars to work with non-reductive paradigms and try to understand these traditions from within their own truth claims. However, standard pedagogy in the field has not evolved accordingly: It continues to draw from particularly Western secularized epistemologies. However, the broader and more varied landscape of human experience suggests that standard pedagogical approaches are too limited for students to deeply learn about a variety of religions and forms of religious experience. Consequently, embodied experiences should not be ignored but should be included in classrooms. Students should be encouraged to explore the embodied aspects of religions not by practicing religions in the classroom but by experimenting with their own bodies and using their own bodies. This is an inclusion of embodied experience in the classroom.

Secondly, how might a scholar-practitioner or a devout-scholar integrate practices into a course? Bracketing practice and practitioner perspectives from the classroom is a long-standing practice in the history of studying religions in

part out of concern about proselytization. Therefore, as professors, we must remember that the classroom is not a pulpit. However, one can still be creative and bring selective practices into the classroom not only for the appreciation of the assigned readings but also for a deeper understanding of the content and the context. For example, an instructor could play a mantra while students sit in silence and stillness. Carefully integrating certain practices in the classroom will have profound effects on students both in terms of understanding aspects of the tradition they are studying and in terms of cultivating the desire to continue learning about the contents after the semester ends.

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