



Buddhist Meditation: Traditional and Modern Contexts (FSEM)

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In my FSEM, Buddhist Meditation: Traditional and Modern Contexts, I have students complete a series of "contemplative journal" assignments. For each of these assignments, the students have to do a particular meditation practice for 15-20 minutes a day for five days. After each meditation session, they record some thoughts about the experience. Then, at the end of the five days, they write a final, one-page reflection on the experience as a whole. The meditations that the students practice are drawn from Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living* and are methods taught at hospitals and medical centers around the United States as part of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program.

My main purpose for including this assignment in the course was that I thought it would be beneficial if the students had some firsthand experience of meditation practices. This experience would give them a deeper appreciation and understanding of the readings on both traditional Buddhist meditations as well as meditation practices used today in a variety of secular settings. I felt it would also contribute to class discussions, as students would be able to draw from some of their own experiences in talking about and analyzing class topics and readings. On another level, I thought this assignment would also be useful as a means of having students simply take some time out of their busy first quarter at DU and engage in practices that often help people to relax and feel less stressed. These practices also have a tendency to open up space for students to step back from their day-to-day affairs and take a broader view of their lives, including their relationship with their own thoughts and emotions. This kind of reflection is at the core of a liberal arts education, but something that often gets lost in the everyday grind of assignments, exams, extracurricular activities, and social life. That being said, I do not expect that all students will experience benefits such as relaxation and a sense of calm. Such experiences are certainly not necessary to complete the assignment successfully and as such are not an element of the grading rubric.

As I state in the rubric for the assignment, two of the main things that I am looking for in these assignments are (1) the clarity and thoroughness of your descriptions, and (2) the degree of self-reflection and insight. Since this is a journal exercise, I make it clear that I am

more concerned with their thoughts than with the mechanics of their writing, though mechanics do count for a small portion (10%) of their grade on the assignment. With these criteria in mind, I will now look at two examples for this assignment, one from Cora (the stronger piece) and one from Betsy (the weaker piece).

Cora's assignment did well in both of the areas mentioned above: thoroughness of descriptions and degree of self-reflection. In her daily entries she gave detailed descriptions of her experience. During one session she writes:

Today I went outside to meditate. Surprisingly I found it easier to tune out outside distractions rather than the voices and door sounds I heard yesterday while inside... Like yesterday I was slightly distracted by trying to evaluate what I was doing in order to write it down later.

In her final reflection, too, she used specific examples from her meditation experience to reflect on the experience and the impact it had. For example, she notes that

my mindset going into the practice each day definitely influenced my ability to concentrate throughout. The days when I started off less distracted I found I was capable of relaxing much quicker and going deeper into a state of calm breathing. However, if I started the exercise feeling stressed with scattered thoughts, I discovered it was hard to stop thinking about classes, homework, and all the other things I was worrying about.

Betsy also gave detailed reports in her daily entries. Her first entry even has some narrative flourishes:

After a long day of classes and time spent on homework it was nice to take some time just to breathe. I had been slumped over my laptop for a few hours so the adjustment in posture was very nice. I could almost feel my cells getting happier as they received the oxygen from each in breath and were able to fully function with my spine in alignment.

However, her final reflection expresses more general laudations of meditation than specific reflections based on her experiences throughout the week. She offers statements like

I never foresaw the incredibly major impact taking time to meditate has had on me," and "I found this meditation challenge to be highly beneficial and I feel that I really have been truly benefited by it.

These kinds of remarks are found throughout the reflection, and I felt they were not adequately balanced with specific insights or with a critical analysis of the experience that looked at its successes as well as its difficulties. When I read this type of writing, I begin to wonder if the student thinks that I will respond better (especially in terms of a positive grade) if they give an overwhelmingly positive account of their experience. I do not doubt that there are some students who do have very positive experiences through this assignment (and many do), but I think it would be quite rare to have an unambiguously positive

experience without any difficulties or challenges. More to the point, reflections such as this do not demonstrate much depth of reflection.

Cora's piece is also generally positive, but she gives a more nuanced and self-reflexive perspective on her experience. She begins her reflection by writing,

Meditating this past week was an interesting experience and much different than I initially expected. As someone who is generally self-critical, I had troubles letting go and not judging my meditation experience, which is something I expected would be easier to overcome. My mind was constantly trying to make sure I was not thinking, which in turn led to more thinking and evaluating.

Later she writes, "I did not see an improvement throughout the week; my experience was linked more importantly to my feelings that day." To me, Cora's writing demonstrates a more thoughtful appraisal of her experience, tied to the particular benefits and challenges that she describes.

In light of these two students' writing and my evaluation of them, I think I could revise the instructions to emphasize the fact that I am looking for a critical evaluation of their experience which includes both challenges as well as successes in their practice. I am not looking for basic statements of how great meditation is. In fact, they are free to not enjoy the practice or to feel as though they have not gotten much benefit from it, they just have to support these conclusions with thoughtful reflections on their experience of the practice.

In student evaluations of the course, the contemplative practices and journal assignments receive overwhelmingly positive comments. Students often express that they wish the course included more such activities. I have also found that the assignments do in fact contribute to class discussions, with students comparing written accounts of meditation to their own experiences and appreciating some of the subtle distinctions between different meditation practices and their various goals.