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Keeping Mindfulness Buddhist: An Experiment in Collaborative Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

In this article, we offer a critical reflection on a collaborative experience designing and co-teaching an honors course on mindfulness. Our primary intention was to re-frame students' unexamined assumptions that conceptualize both mindfulness and honors education as "doing more": more exercises for psychological benefits, and more work for higher grades. To accomplish this, we intentionally emphasized mindfulness's roots in Buddhist thought and practices, critically juxtaposing them to contemporary secular developments. At the same time, we also presented the study of philosophy, ethics and religious studies as forms of experiential learning in the context of a liberal arts education.

Carroll University's HON294 "Topics in Honors: Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies" is a course designed to fulfill an institutional general education graduation requirement and an Honors program course requirement. The course was developed as part of the Honors Program restructuring, functioning as an open sandbox aimed at fostering pedagogical innovation and creativity, whilst facilitating faculty's involvement with Honors. As such, it provides ample flexibility in terms of content and design – with the sole requirement that a course satisfies the university's general education learning outcomes. These were the ideal platform and the optimal student audience (Honors) to experiment with a novel approach to teaching Buddhist Studies at our institution. We therefore designed a pilot course that we first taught in Spring 2023 and, after implementing some minor adjustments to the original format in response to students' feedback from the previous year, we re-ran it in Spring 2024. The course proved highly successful with Honors students, and we are now using it as a roadmap to propose a regular general education course offering open to all students at Carroll University on the study and practice of mindfulness.

Both of us had been grappling with questions about the relevance of our scholarship and work (in Philosophy and Religious Studies, in general, and in Buddhist Studies, in particular), especially at an institution like ours. Carroll is a small, private, comprehensive university rooted in a liberal arts heritage. Most of our students pursue professional tracks (Kinesiology and Exercise Science, Nursing and Pre-Physical Therapy are our most popular programs). The majority, then, only take classes in Philosophy and Religious Studies to fulfill a general education graduation requirement – something that is also true for most institutions of higher education in North America, and that, in turn, is reflective of an increased emphasis on market relevance, and thus STEM and business programs, as the only viable options for students and their families, as well as for colleges and universities. Over time, we have grown acutely aware of the

constraints that such an institutional and systemic environment places on students and scholars/educators alike.

We therefore decided to draw from our combined expertise and experiences, and reorient our work in the classroom (teaching humanities as part of a general education curriculum) to try and make it as meaningful to our students as possible right here, right now, whilst still upholding our responsibility to teach our disciplines and provide opportunities to develop the core skills emphasized in our general education curriculum. We therefore sought to disrupt the more conventionally utilitarian approach to education (akin to the pedagogical fallacy that Adam Gopnik called “the causal catastrophe”)¹ in favor of an intentional and mindful commitment to our students’ present intellectual, professional, and emotional wellbeing.

To accomplish this, we drew inspiration from a range of sources on the positive impact of mindfulness practices in higher education and various experiments on how to integrate them into the curriculum.² We

¹ Adam Gopnik “How to Raise a Prodigy” (*The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/how-to-raise-a-prodigy>). When our interactions with a child are primarily, if not solely, focused on the outcome that we intend them to have on the future adult, we fall into the causal fallacy: we treat our actions in the present as causally instrumental to a future ideal result with no regard for what may be needed in the present, or for the child’s needs.

² See, for example: Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2014); Jeffrey Greeson *et al.* “A Randomized Controlled Trial of Koru: A Mindfulness Program for College Students and Other Emerging Adults” (*Journal of American College Health* 62, no. 4, 2014: 222-234); Patricia Jennings *Mindfulness for Teachers* (Norton and Co, 2015); Anna Lännström “Let’s Be Buddhists for the Next Few Weeks! Costs and Benefits of Making Students Explore Buddhism from the Inside” (*The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 2, no. 1, 2021: <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabashcenter.v2i1.1921>); Laurie Santos *et al.* “Benefits of a Psychoeducational Happiness Course on University Student Mental Well-Being Both Before and during a Covid-19 Lockdown” (*Health Psychology*

also drew from our respective stores of professional knowledge and experience working with Carroll's student population: Pascale's expertise in Buddhist Studies, her recent research and book on mindfulness aimed at the general public, and her twelve years of teaching Honors courses;³ and Massimo's work re-imagining Carroll's Honors education and its community, as the director of the Honors program, and his work designing and leading collaborative multidisciplinary workshops.⁴ Eventually, we designed a course on mindfulness that integrates rigorous scholarly approaches with a practical component and that implements a collaborative teaching and learning model. To this end (and also to circumvent the administrative challenges associated with scheduling two faculty to teach the same course, as well as issues of credit load and matters of labor equity), we offered two sections of the same class scheduled twice a week, on the same days, at the same time, in adjacent classrooms. One day a week, half of the groups, randomly chosen, met with Pascale and the other half with Massimo, and the other day of the week, we met with both sections together and we led the class together, collaboratively. Finally, to

Open, 2021: 12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055102921999291>); Laurie Santos *et al.* "Teaching Well-Being at Scale: An Intervention Study" (*Plos One* 16 (2021): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249193>); Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace *Meditation in the Classroom* (SUNY Press, 2011); Meena Srinivasan *Teach, Breathe, Learn* (Parallax Press, 2014). On mindfulness in Honors education see, among others: Gary Bischof *et al.* "Mental Health Matters" (*Honors in Practice* 16, 2020: 228-30); Lisa Coleman and Anne Dotter "On the Value of Being in the Moment in Honors Education" (*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 21, no. 2, 2020: 19-24); Maureen Kelleher "Mental Health Needs in the Honors Community: Beyond Good Intentions" (*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 18, no. 2, 2017: 29-37); Annie Lampman "A Mindfulness-Based Honors Education" (*Honors in Practice* 19, 2023: 132-34); Eric Owens and Michael Giazconi "Honors Students in Crisis" (*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 5, no. 1, 2010: 37-42).

³ Pascale Engelmajer *365 Ways to Live Mindfully* (John Murray Learning, 2022).

⁴ On the orientation and culture of Carroll University's Honors program see: Massimo Rondolino "Regime Change as Opportunity" (*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 24, no. 1, 2023: 25-31).

facilitate student interaction, promote a collaborative ethos, and foster community across both sections, we further created small groups of 4-5 students each, mixing students from each section.

We decided to focus on mindfulness for this course for two main reasons. On the one hand, the well documented benefits on overall well-being (especially to counter the increased impact of stress and anxiety on our students) made mindfulness an ideal subject for a practical course in Philosophy and Religious Studies.⁵ On the other hand, we felt compelled to redress the pervasive notion (a notion that our students also share) that mindfulness is ahistorical and value-neutral.⁶

Mindfulness is conventionally and broadly understood as the practice of paying attention to our experience of the present moment, sensations, emotions and events, in a self-aware way that actively suspends any judgement on what we are experiencing and observing.⁷ As such, it is not exclusive to Buddhism. Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (Greek *phrónēsis*) and the stoic practice of attention (Greek *prosochē*) are examples

⁵ See, for example, Judson Brewer *Unwinding Anxiety* (Avery, 2021), Russ Harris *The Happiness Trap* (Trumpeter, 2008), and Amishi Jha *Peak Mind* (Harper One, 2021), which we use in our course. On the mental illness epidemic among teens and college students see Graham Davey *The Anxiety Epidemic* (Robinson, 2018), Lisa Damour *Under Pressure* (Ballantine Books, 2019), and, despite issues with his methodology, Jonathan Haidt *The Anxious Generation* (Penguin Press, 2024).

⁶ On this topic see, among others, Satinder Dhiman *The Routledge Companion to Mindfulness at Work* (Routledge, 2020); Mario Poceski “Mindfulness, Cultural Appropriation, and the Global Diffusion of Buddhist Contemplative Practices” (*International Journal for the Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization*, 7, June 2020: 1-15); and Ronald Purser, David Forbes and Adam Burke *Handbook of Mindfulness* (Springer, 2016).

⁷ See, among others, Jon Kabat-Zinn “An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients Based on the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results” (*General Hospital Psychiatry* 4, no. 1, 1982: 33-47). For a discussion of the development of therapeutic mindfulness practices see, in particular, Ira Helderman *Prescribing the Dharma* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

of two historically highly influential Ancient Mediterranean traditions that also advocate for actively paying attention: in a very specific way, in the present, with objective calm. Yet, if we chart the historical development of contemporary secular mindfulness, we can see clearly that it did not arise in a cultural or ideological vacuum, nor did it grow out of an interest in ancient Greek or Roman (or Medieval European Christian) thought. Instead, the practice of mindfulness as it is used in the contemporary world has its roots in the West's encounter with Asian religious traditions, especially with Buddhism.⁸

As Thupten Jinpa argues, secular mindfulness and Buddhist mindfulness may be related but are not the same thing.⁹ Secular mindfulness is only concerned with one's own wellbeing and happiness here and now. Buddhist mindfulness, in turn, is characterized by a specific ethical framework and its two paramount virtues: compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*prajñā/paññā*).¹⁰ Buddhist mindfulness, therefore, is the activity that allows us to develop wisdom and put compassion into practice. Secular mindfulness, instead, does not dictate or even recommend any values to

⁸ For a discussion of the North American encounter with, and appropriation of Buddhism see, for example, Nalika Gajaweera "Mindfulness and Meditation in the United States" (*The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, edited by Ann Gleig and Mitchell A. Oxford University Press, 2024: 303–321); and Jeff Wilson *Mindful America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ Thupten Jinpa "The Question of Mindfulness' Connection with Ethics and Compassion" (*Current Opinion in Psychology* 28, 2019: 71–75).

¹⁰ Note that also for Aristotle and the Stoics *what* we apply our mindfulness to is as critical to the attainment of enduring wellbeing as *how* we do it. This, in turn, should be the virtue whose practice will eventually (and unerringly) help us attain the highest human good (Greek *eudaimonia*). On the topic of Buddhism as a form of virtue ethics see, famously, Damien Keown *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); for a contrasting view see, among others, Paul Williams "Is Buddhist ethics virtue ethics?" (in *Destroying Mara Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown*, edited by John Powers and Charles Prebish, Snow Lion Publications, 2010: 113–140).

its practitioners. It is devoid of an ethical framework and its purpose is to achieve relief from mundane afflictions, not to transform them. Within a capitalist logic, mindfulness becomes a product to be sold on the market for a profit, and a tool to create, hook and retain a customer base.¹¹

In light of these considerations, we intentionally designed our course as a historically and doctrinally grounded, cross-cultural exploration of three fundamental questions: what is mindfulness? (how do we define it); according to whom? (who decides which definition is the correct one); and at whose cost? (who benefits from this definition and at whose cost? After all, unless we assume infinite resources, one's benefit necessarily comes at someone else's cost).

In the first part of the course, we engaged with an exploration of the classical Buddhist concept and practice of *smṛti/sati* by reading and discussing first the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and then excerpts from Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. We supplemented the study of these classical sources with critical readings by Rupert Gethin, Paul Williams, and Pascale, as well as a sample of contemporary Buddhist perspectives, like Jack Kornfield.

Overall, students found these texts and their discussion very challenging, and have often expressed (implicitly and explicitly) that, as non-Buddhists, they struggled to appreciate the validity of claims that the texts make about the efficacy of the guarding of awareness, or of the practices of *śamatha/samatha* and *vipaśyanā/vipassana*. In their feedback, most students articulated a surpassingly deep appreciation for the Buddhist understanding of samsaric existence as *duḥkha/dukkha*, although they also found the notion of rebirth, the law of karma, and Buddhist soteriology

¹¹ On Buddhism as capitalism's perfect ideological supplement see Slavoj Žižek *Event* (Melville House, 2014). On the neoliberal commercialization and use of mindfulness, see the controversial Ronald Purser *McMindfulness* (Repeater, 2019). For a historical perspective on the power dynamics and politics associated with the medicalization of mindfulness, see Wakoh Shannon Hickey *Mind Cure* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

intriguing but ultimately untenable. This, in itself, is not problematic, as the goal in our class was not to teach Buddhism but to teach about Buddhism. Nevertheless, it reflects a pervasive attitude among our students towards “other” people’s beliefs and practices (as opposed to their own for the majority Midwestern, Christian and Euro-Americans) that prevented most of them from fully engaging with the role and function of mindfulness in the Buddhist world, within the logic of Buddhist values, aspirations, and goals. Throughout the semester, as well as in their final course evaluations, students expressed a genuine appreciation for the historical-cultural origin of contemporary mindfulness practices, and for having had the possibility of exploring their Buddhist doctrinal and soteriological framework. Nevertheless, most found this first part of the course heavy, challenging and somewhat alienating, because its content and orientation were more scholarly and more traditionally based in Buddhist Studies.

At the semester mid-point, we engaged with Thupten Jinpa’s critical reflection on the ethical incommensurability of secular and Buddhist mindfulness as a way to transition to the second part of the course, in which we explored a selection of contemporary secular mindfulness practices as they are found in popular sources aimed at the general non-specialist public. We read excerpts from the works of Judson Brewer, Russ Harris and Amishi Jah (who we mentioned above) and Laurie Santos—none of whom refer to Buddhism in any depth in their discussions of mindfulness and wellbeing.¹² We also discussed works by bell hooks, Oliver Burkeman and Kristin Neff—who more overtly acknowledge and

¹² We also asked students to complete the first two weeks of Santos’s Yale Happiness Course on coursera.org.

consider Buddhist values and practices.¹³ We then worked with our students to identify parallels and distinctive features among these approaches, and then between the Buddhist arguments for *sati* and its practices and each individual non-Buddhist approach to mindfulness, and, finally, secular mindfulness as a whole.¹⁴

Most students openly identified this second part of the course as their favorite. Several remarked that it had a significant impact on their thinking and on their overall responses to emotions and social interactions. The feedback that students provided us clearly shows how they greatly valued discovering, examining critically and collaboratively, and practicing in class and in their own time, tools to work through anxiety and stress—especially those that provide practical solutions for dealing with feeling stressed about being stressed, like Harris’s defusion strategy. Many explicitly identified hooks and Neff as the most inspiring sources, in that they helped students discover new ways to be self-compassionate. Others found in Harris and Burkeman practical guidelines to improve daily habits and learn how to pay greater attention to the connection between their physical sensations and the emotions they experience. For example, Harris provides strategies for becoming more mindful of one’s true values and how to implement them more intentionally, and Burkeman suggests checking where one is *really* at and what one is *really* doing, in the present moment.

¹³ bell hooks *All About Love* (Harper Collins, 2000); Oliver Burkeman *Four Thousand Weeks* (Picador, 2023); Kristin Neff “The Difference between Self-compassion and Self-esteem” (TEDX, February 6, 2013. Video, 19 min. <https://self-compassion.org/>); Kristin Neff *Self-Compassion* (William Morrow, 2015).

¹⁴ On teaching discourse comparison in the undergraduate curriculum see also Oliver Freiburger “Relevance in Three Dimensions: Teaching Religion with the Comparative Method” (*Teaching Theology & Religion* 27, no. 3, 2024: 90–94) and Massimo Rondolino “Teaching the Critical Comparative Study of Religion as Engaged Global Citizenship” (*Teaching Theology & Religion* 27, no. 3, 2024: 75–80).

Throughout the semester, we also asked students to read Pascale's highly accessible and lighthearted, yet historically and doctrinally grounded, introduction to mindfulness. Each week, students were assigned a specific chapter from the book on which they had to write a journal entry. This could take the form of a self-reflective, critical discussion of their active practice of one of the many prompts, or an engaged response to any of the various biographical profiles, quotations, short stories and teachings from a plurality of Buddhist traditions contained within each chapter. Together with regular in-class short mindfulness exercises with which we opened and closed every class meeting (e.g. breathing exercises, body scan, walking meditation, mindful writing, wisdom circle), these journaling exercises offered opportunities to all students (and us) to engage in an affective, embodied study of mindfulness and its impact—thus also complementing the more traditionally Western academic approach, based on the critical reading and discussion of texts.

Students' feedback on the course was overall very positive and encouraging. It ranged from the least enthusiastic comment (in which a student noted how they were already familiar with most of what we covered) to a deep appreciation for the opportunity to learn about what mindfulness "actually" is ("it depends who you ask"), its history (especially its Buddhist roots), and the measurable benefits of its practice. It is important to note, though, that not all students enjoyed or benefited equally from all the mindfulness practices covered during the course. Body scan was a class favorite, most students appreciated the "wisdom circle" mindful collaborative model, whilst only some found mindful writing and journaling

to be helpful (although those who did find it useful were very open and vocal about it).¹⁵

In the mid-term exam (a take-home essay) and at the final exit interview (a 10-15 minutes individual cumulative oral exam on the entire course with the two of us), we asked all students to address the following prompt: which one, in your view, is the best definition of mindfulness and which one is the worst, why, according to whom, and to whose benefit? Surprisingly, both in the 2023 and the 2024 classes, students largely identified the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the article by Thupten Jinpa as the two sources that arguably offered the best definition of mindfulness. Most explained how the sutta gives a specific template for how to practice bringing non-judgmental attention to the present moment (seeing the body as body, sensations as sensation, feelings as feelings, and the mind as mind), further doing so by overtly articulating its ultimate end (*nirvāṇa*) and ethical framework (the noble eightfold path). Jinpa, in his opening paragraph, lists eight definitions of mindfulness and quotes from both Buddhist and secular thinkers. According to many students, he proposes a value neutral definition, which he then proceeds to problematize.

To our surprise, more than half of all students in each iteration of the course agreed on Śāntideva offering the worst definition, and they did so with a fairly consistent rationale. Crucially, this did not rest on the particular format in which he defined mindfulness in chapters five and eight, nor their wording. Rather, students took issue with what they perceived as the exceedingly stringent views that characterize Śāntideva's arguments on the practice of mindfulness: the manifest misogyny; the unsavory descriptions of the human body; the frequent chastising of fellow

¹⁵ Our "wisdom circle" is adapted from the deliberative dialogue, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving process we learned from Nurturing Diversity Partners (a racial justice and equity organization in Milwaukee) and Nikki Mirghafori and Marc Lesser's "Mindful Leadership Training" at Spirit Rock.

monks and their flawed behavior; his focus on male monastics as sole audience; and the (often implied) insistence that a monk's path is the only right way to successfully practice and perfect mindfulness. Most students who argued this also contended that though they did appreciate the culturally and ideologically instantiated character of Śāntideva's writing, they also found that it was the very trait that made it virtually impossible to translate his argument for mindfulness across cultural and ideological boundaries—something that they did not find to be as pronounced (and therefore also not cross-culturally incommensurable) in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

Based on our interactions with the 2023 and 2024 students and their formal and informal feedback, we can confidently say that their experience with our approach to teaching mindfulness critically clearly reflects their personal preferences and learning styles, more than the efficacy (or lack thereof) of our course design (i.e. the explicit focus on the critical assessment of mindfulness in historical and ideological perspective, and our intentionally practical, mindful and collaborative approach). Students expressed a deep appreciation for the perceived value and beneficial impact of working collaboratively as a form of mindfulness practice. In particular, they noted how the brief structured opening and closing mindful thinking, mindful writing and mindful speaking activities helped them focus on their current thoughts and feelings, eventually becoming aware of what was on their minds during each class.

Most importantly for us, more than the positive response to our experiment in keeping Buddhism intentionally and critically central to discourses about mindfulness and its practice, or the success of our experiment in making Philosophy and Buddhist Studies courses relevant to our students' present lives, we were surprised by the overwhelming positive response students had to our team-teaching model and our insistence on overtly and intentionally collaborative teaching and learning. In our view,

this clearly demonstrates the positive impact of practicing mindfulness in conversation with others. In so doing, we were successful, for two consecutive years, in bringing everyone in our course to cultivate together, in the present moment, an awareness of themselves (their thoughts, feelings, and bodies), of other people, and of their surrounding environment. We actively sought to model collaborative teaching in front of our students regardless of whether we were engaging with half of the class on our own (frequently referring to what the other had said in previous weeks, or how they might be able to address a new question students asked) or we were co-teaching the same class (calling on each other whenever insights from the perspective of the other's expertise would be most helpful, or openly debating and eventually agreeing to disagree when students' questions could not be easily and conclusively answered).

Teaching in this way certainly kept us constantly (if compassionately) on our toes. Crucially, this approach facilitated interpersonal connection within and across small student groups, as well as between us and students, individually and as a class. It brought students to open up to each other and to us, even about things that most admitted they would not usually share. It ultimately made the classroom experience more human, arguably more humane, and mindfully relevant to our present experiences.

We believe that the mindful collaborative approach that we implemented was a determining factor in facilitating this change, particularly compared to our experience teaching other courses in Philosophy and Religious Studies within our institution's general education curriculum. Not only did this make the classroom more dynamic, but it further facilitated students' engagement with the material, its cultural relevance, and real-life impact.

Overall, these two experiences have shown us that integrating mindfulness in the classroom can have a transformative impact on

students' engagement and learning. In particular, we suggest that this was so because we did not exclusively adopt mindfulness as a tool for individual wellbeing, but as an approach to the cultivation of critical inquiry into the study of Buddhist texts, arguments, and worldviews, and their cross-cultural appropriation.

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Notes on the Contributors

Pascale Engelmajer is Professor of Religious Studies at Carroll University. She researches and publishes widely on Buddhism, with a focus on ancient Buddhist conceptualizations of motherhood and mothering. One of her latest publications in English on this topic is “Like a Mother Her Only Child: Mothering in the Pāli Canon”, *Open Theology* 2020; 6: 88–103. More recently, she published the book *365 Ways to Live Mindfully* (John Murray Press, 2023), in which she offers an accessible and lighthearted, yet historically and doctrinally grounded, introduction to mindfulness and its modern applications.

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Massimo Rondolino is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Carroll University. His main research area is the study of the dynamics of legitimation which underscore religious communities’ use of hagiographical narratives. He is also a strong advocate for trans-disciplinary equitable collaboration, which he helped integrate into the American Academy of Religion as co-founder of its Comparative Hagiology Seminar. As director of Carroll University’s Honors Center, between 2019 and 2023 he reshaped the

honors program as an equitable, mindful community rooted in student-faculty shared governance and a transdisciplinary curriculum.

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