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A Transdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Buddhist Studies

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A Transdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Buddhist Studies

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Abstract

The widespread application of mindfulness and its association with an understanding of Buddhism as therapeutic plays a role in enthusiasm for courses on Buddhism in post-secondary institutions. This essay documents how two University of Toronto Buddhist Studies programs teach about Buddhism's role in healing practices globally, while also attending to student demands for compassionate educational environments. I propose that these programs offer a transdisciplinary model of studying Buddhist traditions that is designed to enrich student interest with an academic framework sensitive to diverse Buddhist communities, cultures, and histories.

Introduction

“BPMH is the foundation of my hopes for the future. It taught me to transform suffering into meaning.”

– Julie, BPMH alumna¹

The widespread application of mindfulness and its association with a commitment to Buddhism as therapeutic in popular culture plays an important role in student enthusiasm for courses on Buddhism in post-secondary institutions. At the University of Toronto, the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health (BPMH) undergraduate minor and the Engaging Education in Buddhist Studies (EEBS) initiative are two intertwined programs focused on the study of Buddhism that are distinguished by their pedagogical attention to student well-being. In this essay, I review data on mental health among post-secondary students and consider research on the impact that instructors and curricular design can have on student flourishing. Students are demanding a robust integration of support for well-being across the curriculum, and this is reflected in scholarship on how curricular design plays a role in student experience. Drawing on pedagogical and Buddhist Studies research to contextualize the voices of students, instructors, and program assessors, I share data on the broad effects of this curriculum on students. In speaking about the impact of these University of Toronto programs, student testimonials describe improved

¹ All student testimonials, unless otherwise specified, come from anonymous surveys and student letters received in 2022 and 2023. Pseudonyms have been applied to some student voices for ease of reading. I also draw on letters of appraisal submitted by scholars, scientists, and community members in 2023-24 and compiled into the BPMH Program Support Dossier; the collection is available online and cited as Frances Garrett, Students, and Program Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier” (PATH Blog, 2024). I thank Kizz Prusia and Michael Ium for thoughtful feedback and editorial work on drafts of this essay, and Michael Ium for contributing information about two courses he taught as a postdoc at University of Toronto. I am also grateful to CJBS editor Chris Jensen and an anonymous reviewer for their generous, detailed, and astute feedback.

research and critical thinking skills, a transformational opportunity for interdisciplinary inquiry, enhanced academic performance across the curriculum, an understanding of the value of lived experience to intellectual inquiry, an enriched sense of social belonging and civic responsibility, opportunities relevant to post-graduation professional life, and a fundamental improvement of overall well-being. I propose that BPMH and EEBS offer a transdisciplinary model of studying Buddhist traditions that is carefully designed to meet and enrich student interest with an academic framework sensitive to diverse Buddhist communities, cultures, and histories.

The Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health Program

The Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health program was founded in 2006 as an undergraduate minor at the University of Toronto's New College. The impetus for the program arose organically and with strong community support. In 2003, a new course, "Socially Engaged Buddhism," was taught by Buddhist Studies scholar Henry Shiu and funded by the Buddhist Education Foundation of Canada (BEFC).² This was followed by a second course, "The Healing Mind: Theories and Applications of Buddhist Psychology," taught by psychologist and Buddhist practitioner Tony Toneatto. Given that New College considered itself a space for innovative academic programs at the University, in 2006 it developed a proposal to create an undergraduate minor.³ In the program's early years, the BEFC

² "The Buddhist Education Foundation of Canada is a charity incorporated in 2001 with the objectives of raising and accumulating funds for the purposes of funding Buddhism and related courses, Buddhist studies programs, and chairs and centres for Buddhist studies in Canadian universities." buddhistedufoundation.com

³ Colleges at the University of Toronto are administrative bodies and physical sites that offer student residential and registrarial homes, and that may host academic programs.

continued to sponsor courses, funded primarily by Chinese Buddhist donors in Toronto and Hong Kong.

Since its founding, the BPMH program has experienced dramatic growth. Beginning with 34 undergraduates, enrolment in the minor has grown almost 900%, with over 300 students registered in 2024. Beyond those formally signed up for the minor, in 2023-24 over 1,400 students completed the program's core courses, which regularly have long waiting lists. In 2025-26, despite restrictions on the program described below, BPMH courses still enrol over 1,000 students. At the University of Toronto's downtown campus, 40% of courses on Buddhism are taught in BPMH, and BPMH courses host more than twice the number of students than courses on Buddhism in the Religion department.⁴ Measured by enrolment, BPMH has been an unqualified success, and its numbers show that it has for many years been the primary site for the study of Buddhism at the university and the largest Buddhist Studies program in North America. This essay will explore reasons for the program's robust popularity, using qualitative data from students and faculty as well as my own personal observations as Program Director since 2021. I will also consider the program's relationship to Buddhist Studies, drawing on recent scholarship on that field's particular style in North America and its critical turn toward decolonization, localization, and other types of methodological diversification.

⁴ Between 2019 and 2024, enrolment in Buddhism courses in the Department for the Study of Religion grew by 300%; the second-year introduction to Buddhism course, for example, had 46 students in 2020 and 200 in 2024 (with 100 on the waiting list). Even with this remarkable growth, the numbers in Religion are still much smaller than overall numbers in BPMH courses.

A defining characteristic of the BPMH program is its deeply transdisciplinary curriculum.⁵ According to Henry Shiu, the founding of the program was itself “a strategic response to the emerging nexus between Buddhist principles and contemporary psychological disciplines.”⁶ According to its online description, training in BPMH allows students to “acquire an understanding of how Buddhist traditions have interacted with and contributed to global and diverse understandings of consciousness, mental health and illness, and determinants of physical health.”⁷ BPMH has taken as its focus an “Indra’s Net” of interactions between Buddhism, psychology, and health, understanding these not as separate items in a list or disparate fields of study, but as interconnecting domains. Today, this area of research and teaching is sometimes known under the titles Contemplative Studies or Contemplative Science, and it is also associated with the fast-growing academic field of Buddhism and healing or “Buddhist medicine.” This essay will outline the distinctive shape of one of the oldest undergraduate programs in this still-developing area of study.

BPMH courses explore intersections of research between scientists, academics, health practitioners, and contemplative traditions. Students choose from courses in Buddhist studies, cognitive science, medical anthropology, philosophy, psychology of religion, psychology, and

⁵ On the distinction between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work, see Dunne’s 2016 Mind and Life Master Lecture at John D. Dunne, “The Transdisciplinary Study of Contemplative Practices: Challenges and Opportunities” (YouTube: Mind and Life, 2016).

⁶ Frances Garrett, Students, and Program Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier,” *PATH Blog*, 2024, <https://pathuoft.net/program-support-dossier/>. The Dossier is a collection of letters of assessment and support collected in 2023-24 from current and former program faculty, local and international scientists, and community members who have been affiliated with the program or know its work. Because the Dossier is a living document, page numbers are not included here; however, citations can be easily searched in Garrett, Students, and Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

⁷ “Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health,” New College, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.newcollege.utoronto.ca/programs/bpmh/>.

sociological, historical, or political analyses of health. This multidisciplinary approach is reflected in the BPMH student body, which is drawn from across the university. Enrolment data shows that the programs with which BPMH shares the most students are Psychology, Philosophy, Environment, Human Biology, Cognitive Science, Equity & Solidarity, Sociology, Mathematics, and Religion (listed in order of number of students, most to least); among those enrolled in the minor, slightly over half are majors in the Sciences & Social Sciences.

Students recognize the value of transdisciplinary training as they construct their four- or five-year undergraduate careers. Chloe Gauthier, a fourth-year student of Psychology and Buddhist Studies, explains that in the BPMH minor, she “gained crucial insight into the broader purpose of research: the production of trustworthy knowledge which can be applied for the betterment of humanity.” She notes further that the program “equips students with the skills necessary to conduct meaningful, rigorous, and ethical scientific inquiry that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries.” The BPMH program is recognized as influential not only in its rigorous attention to emerging transdisciplinary research, but also in its pedagogical integration of “experiential” investigation with academic study. Zindel Segal, a pioneering mindfulness researcher and clinical psychologist at the University of Toronto, explains that BPMH’s integrated model allows students to “leverage experiential learning [. . .] to extend this knowledge beyond themselves and understand how it can be scaled.”⁸ I explore the significance and impact of this type of learning below.

The only program of its kind in Canada and one of the oldest in North America, BPMH has developed an international reputation among scholars of Buddhist Studies and researchers who work in the area of Contemplative Science and related fields. According to John Dunne, Buddhist Studies scholar, Distinguished Professor of Contemplative Humanities,

⁸ Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

and Co-Director of the Student Flourishing Initiative at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, BPMH is an “outstanding example” of “close collaborations between research psychologists and Buddhist Studies scholars that have produced what is now many years of outstanding research on the impacts and mechanisms of mindfulness and other contemplative practices.”⁹ For Michael Sheehy, Buddhist Studies scholar and Director of Scholarship at the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia, BPMH is an important epicenter for the rapidly growing field of Contemplative Science and a key member of the Flourishing Academic Network (FAN, described below).¹⁰ Neuroscientist Norman Farb concurs that “the BPMH provides a foundation from which a new generation of thought-leaders in these and related fields is emerging.”¹¹ For many in the field, BPMH is one of the top undergraduate programs globally for this exploding area of research.

One reason for the program’s popularity may be found in its vibrant community. Energetic student groups provide peer support and mentoring through academic events and community programming throughout the year. BPMH organizes regular public events, hosting over 1,300 local and international participants in 2022-23, for example, and its YouTube channel content has well over 41,000 views. These events bring diverse perspectives to campus: speakers in recent years have included Michael Yellow Bird, Mustafa Abdelrahman, Linda Thai, Brother Phap Huu, Yuria Celidwen, Marisela Gomez, Kaira Jewel Lingo, Ofosu Jones-Quartey, Liz Pang, Joe Reilly, Larry Ward, and others. The program sponsors The Contemplative Science Podcast, hosted by philosopher Mark Miller and reaching tens of thousands of listeners globally, and it conducts monthly meetings of its EASE Lab (“Embodiment, Attention, Sensation,

⁹ Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

¹⁰ Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

¹¹ Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

Engagement”),¹² a network of Contemplative Science researchers across the University of Toronto. Hundreds of testimonials have shown how important this co-curricular community is not only to students’ academic lives and professional development, but also to their overall well-being. Indeed, a critical factor in the program’s popularity, according to students and alumni, is its explicit focus on student community, to which I now turn.

Why Instructors Should Learn about Student Health

More than a decade ago, Maclean’s Education published a report on “The mental health crisis on campus” that tracked Canadian students’ experiences of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideation, and that described the impact of “the stress of moving away from home, academic demands, social pressures, parents’ expectations, and a looming recognition of the tough job market awaiting them.”¹³ By 2022, a follow-up Maclean’s article reported that “34% of Ontario high school students indicated moderate to serious psychological distress,”¹⁴ while an article in *Inside Higher Ed* that same year reported that “nearly 9 in 10 students believe

¹² “Embodiment, Attention, Sensation, Engagement Lab,” EASE Lab, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://easelab.ca/>.

¹³ Kate Lunau, “The Mental Health Crisis on Campus,” *Maclean’s Education*, September 5, 2012, <https://macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/the-mental-health-crisis-on-campus/>.

¹⁴ Sarah Treleaven, “Inside the Mental Health Crisis at Canadian Universities,” *Maclean’s Education*, November 14, 2022, <https://macleans.ca/education/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-at-canadian-universities/>. According to an Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey Mental Health and Well-Being Report, “Suicidal ideation is currently the highest on record for this survey since CAMH began monitoring it in 2001.” Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, “Suicidal Ideation at Record Levels among Ontario Students,” *Cision*, Nov 23, 2020, <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/suicidal-ideation-at-record-levels-among-ontario-students>.

there is a mental health crisis on college campuses,” with 70% of students saying they were “experiencing emotional distress or anxiety.”¹⁵ In the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many experienced a loss of support networks and an increasing threat (or reality) of chronic illness. For some, the campus experience itself is a major stressor and flexible models of online learning provided relief. Although more research is needed on student health trends, there is widely held perception that students are in crisis.

Universities are struggling to respond adequately to this increasing attention to students in crisis. The 2022 Maclean’s report notes that students seeking help have been frustrated by “inaccessible, disparate, opaque, discriminatory and inadequate” experiences with campus support, which may result in lengthy wait times to see a counsellor, the additional burden of mandatory sick notes, and mandated leave policies.¹⁶ Their frustrations are shared by university stakeholders, although opinions differ on the issue of responsibility. A 2020 editorial in *Queen’s Journal*, a student-run newspaper at Queen’s University in Ontario, called for province-wide supports to help ensure that students “no longer have to factor available mental health services into their decisions when choosing where they are going to study.”¹⁷ But calls for government intervention rarely

¹⁵ Some data suggests that overall population suicide rates decreased by 32% in Canada in 2020. Maria Carrasco, “Variants Fuel Decline in Student Mental Health,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/13/students-are-more-stressed-now-last-january>; McIntyre RS, Lui LM, and Rosenblat JD, “Suicide Reduction in Canada During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons Informing National Prevention Strategies for Suicide Reduction,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 114 (2021).

¹⁶ Treleaven, “Inside the Mental Health Crisis at Canadian Universities.”

¹⁷ Editorial Board, “Provincial Governments Support Students When They Invest in Mental Health,” *Queen’s Journal*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.queensjournal.ca/provincial-governments-support-students-when-they-invest-in-mental-health/>.

address issues that are created or perpetuated by university policies or personnel.

The need for student support is stark at the University of Toronto. Public documents record over 20 suicides or suicide attempts on the downtown campus since 2017.¹⁸ Students describe long wait times and bureaucratic barriers to access to mental health care at the University, as well as experiences of insensitivity, discrimination, hyper-policing in crisis response, and other forms of psychological (and sometimes physical) violence.¹⁹ The Maclean's report describes incidents where University of Toronto students who called a crisis line were handcuffed and taken into custody by responding police. After a series of deaths by suicide in public buildings on campus in 2019-20—and the ensuing media storm—the University of Toronto established a Task Force on Student Mental Health,

¹⁸ The number of student deaths by suicide occurring off campus is not publicly available from the University. See <https://www.campusafety.utoronto.ca/annual-reports>; TVO Today staff, "The Mental-Health Cost of Success at Post-Secondary School," *TVO Today*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.tvo.org/article/the-mental-health-cost-of-success-at-post-secondary-school>; Joe Friesen, "University of Toronto Installs Safety Barriers after Third Student Suicide in 18 Months," *The Globe and Mail*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-university-of-toronto-installs-safety-barriers-after-third-student/>.

¹⁹ Muriel Draaisma and Ali Chiasson, "U of T Students Demand Change in Wake of Suicide on Campus," *CBC News*, Sep 30, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/students-university-of-toronto-uoftthrive-uoftears-student-suicide-1.5303564>; Sania Ali, "U of T Students Seeking More Mental Health Supports," *Rabble.ca*, June 22, 2022, <https://rabble.ca/health/u-of-t-students-seeking-more-mental-health-supports/>; Noshin Talukdar, "U of T Needs to Address the Intersections of Mental Health and Antiracism," *The Varsity*, November 20, 2022, <https://thevarsity.ca/2022/11/20/opinion-u-of-t-needs-to-address-the-intersections-of-mental-health-and-antiracism/>; Treleaven, "Inside the Mental Health Crisis at Canadian Universities;" Melissa Mancini and Ioanna Roumeliotis, "'It's Literally Life or Death': Students Say University of Toronto Dragging Feet on Mental Health Services," *CBC News*, Nov 20, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/student-suicides-mental-health-support-1.5363242>.

which reviewed existing services and made recommendations. It proposed, among other developments, the creation of a “culture of caring” at the University.²⁰ Many students claim that this goal has not been met.

In my classrooms in 2020, I saw how deeply affected students were by the deaths of their peers. Some were moved to pursue mental health service reform via student activism. In 2020-21, University of Toronto student Jan Lim collected stories from students about their experiences with health services at the University. These anonymous testimonials were published on a website, “University of Toronto Student Mental Health Research,” and assembled into an Adverse Events Report published in 2022 on the “Not Alone” website, which Lim says was “created to provide Canadian university students and alumni with a platform to share their compilations of adverse experiences that have occurred as a result of their institutions’ policies and practices surrounding student mental wellness.”²¹ Lim’s report documents first-hand experiences with involuntary psychiatric admission, inaccessible services or inordinate delays with accessing services, and lack of support for assault survivors. Powerful statements also address anxiety, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation that many relate directly to their experiences as students at the University of Toronto, as well as harmful experiences with staff, professors, and teaching assistants. The testimonials are chilling.

²⁰ Rahul Kalvapalle, “‘We’re Here for You’: How U of T Is Supporting Students’ Mental Health—Now and in the Future,” *U of T News*, September 21, 2022, <https://utsc.utoronto.ca/news-events/our-community/were-here-you-how-u-t-supporting-students-mental-health-now-and-future>.

²¹ Ali, “U of T Students Seeking More Mental Health Supports,” Jan Lim, “Not Alone,” archived at the Wayback Machine, January 16, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240116163929/https://notalone.ca/>; “Uoft Student Mental Health Research,” <https://janlim1999.wixsite.com/uoftstudentmh/stories>.

As I learned of these events and began to investigate institutional data and broader issues relating to student life, I was moved to radically transform my teaching practice. Research on how universities address student mental health offers useful analyses of both problem areas and potential solutions. One line of research indicates that interventions that focus mainly on addressing the needs of individuals—such as by increasing the number of practitioners in a campus health centre—may in some cases further “pathologize and stigmatize students experiencing mental health stressors.”²² In a recent article analysing how mental health is framed in higher education contexts, Kate Parizeau explains that moving away from physiological explanations towards a bio-psycho-social framework reveals how student health is strongly influenced by structural, relational, and environmental factors.²³ Issues shaping student life are often structural or systemic and may include academic stress, financial pressure, discrimination, interpersonal issues, and lack of access to healthcare or other necessary supports. If a growing number of deaths by suicide is seen to point solely to a “mental health crisis on campus,” moreover, this draws attention away from social, political, economic, or educational pressures that impact student life.

By surveying instructors’ attitudes toward student health at an unnamed university in Ontario, Parizeau’s work also considers the impact of classroom micro-climates created by instructors. “Many instructors characterized students with mental health concerns as problems, obstacles to classroom management, or as less intellectually capable than others,” she writes.²⁴ Her research shows a troubling set of negative stereotypes and

²² Kate Parizeau, “Uneven Learning Landscapes Ahead: Instructor Perspectives on Undergraduate Student Mental Health,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 52, no. 2 (2022); L. J. Peake and B. Mullings, “Critical Reflections on Mental and Emotional Distress in the Academy,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 15, no. 2 (2016).

²³ Parizeau, “Uneven Learning Landscapes Ahead.”

²⁴ Parizeau, “Uneven Learning Landscapes Ahead,” 71.

discriminatory attitudes toward students. Although many instructors in Parizeau's study were aware of human rights and accessibility issues, and related forms of training available at the university, the majority did not participate in that training. In fact, many in this study complained about the work required to support students, leaving that work disproportionately in the hands of instructors facing systemic obstacles themselves, such as women, racialized instructors, or those working on limited-term contracts.²⁵

Parizeau's research indicates that most instructors see mental health issues from a biomedical and physiological framework. Many therefore suggest that their "lack of psychiatric training" prevents them from assisting students—"I am a professor, not a counsellor," is a refrain I have also heard from my own colleagues. In Parizeau's analysis, ignorance of non-medical contributors to health facilitates negative stereotypes, and as disability studies scholars have also explained, this kind of instructor behaviour blocks many students from full access to education.²⁶ Parizeau shows that "imagining mental health as a biomedical phenomenon implies that there will be acute interventions within the medical system that can "fix" or "cure" mental health issues, rather than understanding mental health stressors as potentially protracted and complex social phenomena" that can be addressed in many different contexts.²⁷ Although

²⁵ "Perceiving mental health concerns as external to higher education is also discriminatory in Ontario, given the legislative requirement to create accessible educational systems for people with all disabilities, including mental health conditions." Increased instructor workload required to address student mental health concerns has been addressed by other studies, which also show how this work is not acknowledged institutionally. Parizeau, "Uneven Learning Landscapes Ahead."

²⁶ For example, see Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (Verso, 1995); Katie Rose Guest Pryal, *A Light in the Tower: A New Reckoning with Mental Health in Higher Education* (University Press of Kansas, 2024).

²⁷ Parizeau, "Uneven Learning Landscapes Ahead," 74.

ample research makes it clear that (and how) instructors can play a critical role in supporting students, the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes limits the potential benefits that individual instructors and higher education institutions can offer to all students.

Regardless of how Buddhist Studies scholars may feel about popularized applications of mindfulness and their affiliation (or not) with Buddhist traditions, we cannot ignore the fact that many students are drawn to courses on Buddhism precisely because of its global association with therapeutic practice. This is nothing new: as historians of Buddhism and medicine have shown, “health and healing have indeed been integral to Buddhism’s popularity” for the last 2,500 years.²⁸ Our university administration itself encourages students (and faculty) to practice mindfulness, and yet few students are provided with any academic context for that practice. This is the broad domain of the BPMH program, which aims to integrate course content and pedagogical approach to help students think critically about well-being and distress, or health and illness, using transdisciplinary methods that are historically and culturally diverse. Over the span of several years of their undergraduate career, BPMH students participate in a program of learning that often starts with their own enthusiasm for mindfulness or Buddhist practice (as they understand it) and that then nuances and enriches their interest with an academic framework sensitive to a diversity of Buddhist communities, cultures, and histories. In addition to deepening their academic understanding of Buddhism, surveys and testimonials suggest that what students also find valuable about their work in the BPMH program is progress they make in research and critical thinking skills *together with* a fundamental improvement in their overall well-being. In the following pages, I will consider how the

²⁸ Kin Cheung et al., *Buddhism and Healing in the Modern World* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2024.).

program's curriculum aligns with research and policy on the importance of student well-being to educational experience.

Attention to student well-being across the curriculum

In 2020 the Mental Health Commission of Canada released a first-ever set of guidelines for universities, "Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students."²⁹ The report notes that "post-secondary institutions have a unique opportunity to advance knowledge and disseminate evidence-informed best practices" relevant to student well-being.³⁰ The guidelines suggest that a university should "establish a supportive, safe, and inclusive environment that contributes to an institutional culture that is conducive to student mental health and well-being."³¹ The learning environment should involve peer mentorship, be culturally appropriate and accessible, and establish "a culture that recognizes that the entire post-secondary community is responsible for the mental health and well-being of its members and that mental health affects learning."³² The report recommends specifically that an emphasis on mental health and well-being be in place at all levels of the institution: universities should "embed an understanding and commitment to mental health and well-being across all disciplines and curricula."³³

²⁹ Technical Committee for Mental Health and Well-being for Post-Secondary Students, "Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students (CSA Z2003)," (Standards Council of Canada Group, 2020), <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/national-standard-for-mental-health-and-well-being-for-post-secondary-students/>.

³⁰ Technical Committee, "Mental Wealth and Well-Being," 36.

³¹ Technical Committee, "Mental Wealth and Well-Being," 28.

³² Technical Committee, "Mental Wealth and Well-Being," 46.

³³ Technical Committee, "Mental Wealth and Well-Being," 36.

These recommendations are in line with students' own demands. According to one fourth-year political science student at the University of Ottawa, "The university likes to depoliticize mental health and make it more of a wellness issue," thereby ignoring the plethora of social and systemic factors known to impact student life.³⁴ Writing in response to the recent series of suicides on campus, University of Toronto alumnus Aloysius Wong asked that universities stop "outsourcing the responsibility of care."³⁵ Some university instructors are hearing these students, developing classroom practices that prioritise trust, well-being, and compassionate engagement, for example. In an influential 2019 essay, Catherine Denial popularised a "pedagogy of kindness," which "asks us to apply compassion in every situation we can."³⁶ She explains that "To extend kindness means recognizing that our students possess innate humanity, which directly undermines the transactional educational model to which too many of our institutions lean, if not cleave."³⁷

The last few years have seen an expansion of research across the disciplines on the importance of compassionate regard for students. In a

³⁴ Treleaven, "Inside the Mental Health Crisis at Canadian Universities."

³⁵ Aloysius Wong, "The Varsity Blues: Four Suicides and Four Years Later, I Revisit What Happened at the University of Toronto," *The Otter*, Feb 20, 2023.

³⁶ Catherine J. Denial, "A Pedagogy of Kindness," *Hybrid Pedagogy* 15 August 2019, <https://hybridpedagogy.org/pedagogy-of-kindness/>.

³⁷ Denial, "A Pedagogy of Kindness." Relational pedagogy is another model that emphasises student well-being through intentional cultivation of positive relationships between instructors and students, among students themselves, and for students and their learning environments. See Flora Lu and Emily Murai, *Critical Campus Sustainabilities: Bridging Social Justice and the Environment in Higher Education*, Sustainable Development Goals Series (Springer Cham, 2023); J. Aspelin, "Teaching as a Way of Bonding: A Contribution to the Relational Theory of Teaching," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53, no. 6 (2020); A. Hickey and S. Riddle, "Relational Pedagogy and the Role of Informality in Renegotiating Learning and Teaching Encounters," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 30, no. 5 (2021).

2021 essay in *Times Higher Education*, University of Toronto scientist Fiona Rawle discussed research on how centring compassion, care, and connection in teaching can improve student learning and well-being.³⁸ A comprehensive, longitudinal study published in a 2022 issue of *Mindfulness*, “Can the Academic and Experiential Study of Flourishing Improve Flourishing in College Students? A Multi-University Study,” examined how a course called “Art and Science of Human Flourishing,” taught at several universities across the U.S., strengthened skills, perspectives, and behaviours associated with well-being.³⁹ A 2023 article by University of Toronto’s Nicole Spiegelaar shared her work with pedagogies supporting student well-being, showing an increase in “sense of coherence, change agency, cognitive and affective restoration, nature connectedness, nature relatedness, social connectedness, and pro-environmental values.”⁴⁰ A 2023 article in *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* summarizes research about embedding “mental health literacy” directly into the curriculum—rather than solely in optional extra-curricular activities.⁴¹ These new approaches to teaching are a welcome corrective in university environments that many students experience as unwelcoming or even

³⁸ Fiona Rawle, “A Pedagogy of Kindness: The Cornerstone for Student Learning and Well-being,” *Times Higher Education*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/pedagogy-kindness-cornerstone-student-learning-and-wellness>.

³⁹ Matthew J Hirshberg et al., “Can the Academic and Experiential Study of Flourishing Improve Flourishing in College Students? A Multi-University Study,” *Mindfulness* 13, no. 9 (2022).

⁴⁰ Nicole Spiegelaar, “Sustainability Pedagogy: Understanding, Exploring and Internalizing Nature’s Complexity and Coherence,” *Environmental Psychology* 13 (2023).

⁴¹ C. Zaza and R. C. Yeung, “It’s Time to Bring Mental Health Literacy Education into the Postsecondary Curriculum,” *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 14, no. 1 (2023). See also Aaron Langille and Victoria Kannen, “Profs Teaching Online Need to Focus on Increasing Their Compassion toward Students,” *University Affairs* Nov 16 2020; Airdre Grant and Sharon Pittaway, eds., *Enacting a Pedagogy of Kindness: A Guide for Practitioners in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2024); Denial, “A Pedagogy of Kindness.”; *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2024).

hostile—and yet they are not without criticism. Although some of this research shows awareness of the importance of “cultural sensitivity,” for example, few authors reference the body of literature concerned with the epistemic violence or “psychiatric imperialism” inherent in promoting frameworks such as “mental health literacy,” whereby “culturally meaningful modes of interpreting human conditions of suffering and distress are displaced by new ‘regimes of truth’, introducing new lexicons and professionalized roles and interventions.”⁴²

In 2021, I was invited to join the Flourishing Academic Network (FAN), a group of faculty members, student affairs professionals, and community partners across the U.S. and Canada partnering to advance student well-being in higher education through teaching practices, research, and systems change.⁴³ Members of FAN share the view that post-secondary classrooms are important sites for academic, social-emotional, and professional development. Many FAN members have received broad and concrete support for student flourishing initiatives from high administrative levels at their institutions, and some have raised tens or hundreds of millions of dollars from philanthropists who see the value of supporting student well-being. As one of the founding members of FAN, the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health program sits squarely in the centre of a rapidly growing movement of individuals and institutions working to transform higher education, with Buddhist epistemologies, cultures, and

⁴² C. Watters, “Three Challenges to a Life Course Approach in Global Mental Health: Epistemic Violence, Temporality and Forced Migration,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sociocultural Perspectives on Global Mental Health*, ed. R. White, S. Jain, D. Orr, and U Read (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-39510-8_12.

⁴³ Currently, FAN partner institutions include Brown University, Denison University, Duke University, Georgetown University, the JED Foundation, Johns Hopkins University, Pennsylvania State University, Stanford University, Texas Christian University, and the Universities of California, Berkeley, California, Los Angeles, Colorado Boulder, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Notre Dame, San Francisco, Toronto, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin-Madison, plus City University of New York.

histories forming critical curricular counterpoints to neoliberal models of health and distress that dominate most university spaces.

A curriculum of “experiential learning” in Buddhist Studies

Much of the research cited above describes the impact of individual courses on student well-being. Far beyond a single course, by contrast, BPMH is an integrated curriculum spanning several years, incorporating academic work with associated communities of students, faculty, and members of the public. I now turn to look briefly at a few of the program’s core courses, as well as examples of other courses popular among BPMH students that are supported by the initiative called Engaging Education in Buddhist Studies (EEBS). I will also consider how this integrated program may be contextualized within Buddhist Studies in North America, which José I. Cabezón, in his 2020 American Academy of Religion Presidential Address, characterizes as having a “highly interpretive, discursively open, theoretically informed, intertextual, and dialogical style” that is now far “less solipsistic than Buddhist Studies once was.”⁴⁴

To fulfil requirements of the undergraduate minor program, BPMH students are asked to complete a second-year course called “Buddhism and Psychology,” plus four courses selected from a core list (see the Appendix), and three courses from a list of options in other departments around the university. Taught in recent years by Alex Djedovic, a philosopher and historian of science, “Buddhism and Psychology” is “an interdisciplinary ground for encounters between science, philosophy, religion, mental health, and sapiential projects.”⁴⁵ Djedovic exposes students to

⁴⁴ José I. Cabezón, “2020 AAR Presidential Address: The Study of Buddhism and the AAR,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 3 (2021), 793–818.

⁴⁵ Garrett, Students, and Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

“promises and pitfalls” in the encounter of psychology and Buddhism and points of convergence and disconnection between scientific and contemplative methods, focusing on presentations of mindfulness and its roles in therapeutic discourses and practices, intercultural exchange, and Buddhist modernism.

Other core courses take a variety of perspectives on cognate topics. Eleanor Weisbaum, a mindfulness researcher cross-appointed to the Temerty Faculty of Medicine’s Department of Psychiatry and the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, teaches a third-year course, “Buddhist Perspectives on Current Social Issues,” in which students consider global Buddhist responses to social, political, and environmental issues such as climate justice, systemic racism, and mental health. Weisbaum’s fourth-year “Mindfulness Meditation: Science & Research” examines theoretical and empirical bases for the application of mindfulness in healthcare, education, and beyond, as students review methodological, statistical, and interpretive advances and limitations in scientific literature on mindfulness. In a course taught by Michel Ferrari, Professor of Applied Psychology & Human Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, students draw on narrative analyses, experiential experimentation, and historical and philosophical studies. Other core courses include Melanie Viglas’ “Exploring Mindful Awareness,” in which students dive deeply into meditation practices with careful guidance over a semester, and philosopher Mark Miller’s exploration of how meditation influences the predictive mechanisms of the brain. BPMH student Chloe Gauthier observed that neuroscientist Paul Whissell’s popular “Meditation and the Body” course, which enrolls hundreds of students each year and regularly has a

long waiting list, “is the only time I have witnessed a room of over 100 students applaud at the end of a three-hour lecture.”⁴⁶

Beyond the core, students may select from a list of eligible courses from other units, some of which have been supported by the EEBS initiative.⁴⁷ EEBS allows instructors to devote resources and attention to new and often experimental models of teaching Buddhist Studies. Drawing on research on embodied, arts-based, community-engaged, anti-oppressive, or contemplative pedagogies, the EEBS team has explored classroom applications of a wide range of activities, including contemplative or ritual exercises, art-making, dance and movement, and philosophical or creative writing. Examples of EEBS-supported activities in recent years include an inquiry-driven sand-mandala workshop on Tibetan Buddhist ritual offerings, iconography, and symbolism; a *torma* (offering cake) sculpting workshop on material practice and object worship; several multi-week breath practice modules; phenomenological writing modules facilitating sustained close exploration of perception and experience; a deep listening module; a multi-week “contemplative seeing” photography workshop; a sculpture module related to Buddhist traditions of geomancy and reciprocity; poetry writing modules; and modules on Buddhist cārya dance

⁴⁶ Chloe Gauthier, “Opinion: Why U of T Must Save Its Groundbreaking Mindfulness Program,” *The Varsity*, May 19, 2024, <https://thevarsity.ca/2024/05/19/opinion-why-u-of-t-must-save-its-groundbreaking-mindfulness-program/>.

⁴⁷ Funded by The Khyentse Foundation and The Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation for Buddhist Studies, since 2019 EEBS has supported teaching, communication, connection, and research. The EEBS team created two podcasts, *The Circled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education* and *Buddhist Studies Footnotes*, and now supports *The Contemplative Science Podcast*. EEBS also created the Teaching Buddhism website (teachingbuddhism.net) and teaching materials on two YouTube channels, @hocentreforbuddhiststudies4808 and @BPMH_UofT. The project supported “Teaching Resources for Buddhism, race and racism,” co-directed by Adeana McNicholl and Ann Gleig. Some of this work is described in Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg, “Buddhist Studies in the United States: New Turns and Future Directions,” *Religious Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2024).

and other movement practices. Informed by religious studies, philosophical, or art historical perspectives on diverse Buddhist practices across cultures and throughout history, these activities aim to provide students with a deep, sensitive, and memorable “hands-on” understanding of the richness of contemplative, ritual, devotional, and scholastic dimensions of Buddhist lives and histories. Exploring the contours of Buddhist traditions with a diversity of classroom exercises, the EEBS initiative’s approach to “experiential learning” incorporates much more than “meditation,” thereby moving away from an (Orientalist) privileging of “internal” subjective or psychological experience over communal, devotional, or ritual practices in the Buddhist world.

In addition to enhancing course-specific academic learning goals, the EEBS initiative aims to deepen student engagement inside and outside the classroom. Three popular EEBS-supported courses that exemplify this approach are “Biohacking Breath,” “Touching the Earth,” and “Histories of Buddhist Meditation,” all third-year courses taught over the years by a rotation of Buddhist Studies scholars in the Department for the Study of Religion. For my own versions of “Biohacking Breath” in 2020 and 2022, for example, alongside readings on transnational historical, cultural, religious, and healing contexts of breath/wind practices in Asian and North American contexts, students learned basic breath and movement practices with the guidance of qualified teacher-practitioners. For two five-week periods, they were asked to practice a minimum of 15 minutes, five days a week, keeping a log of their work and filling out periodic questionnaires reflecting on their work. In Michael Ium’s 2023 iteration of “Touching the Earth” (a course on Buddhism and the environment), a three-part project began with a short essay for which students chose a contemplative, embodied, or ritual practice and described its historical and cultural context, purpose, key terms, methods and techniques; they then kept a journal describing their participant-observer experience with the practice in the context of textual expositions and academic analyses. In Ium’s

2024 “Histories of Buddhist Meditation,” students selected from practices such as earth/clay *kasina*, walking meditation, body scan, recitation, or visualization (although one performed Salah prostrations, and another did *zikr/du‘ā* praises to Allah). In journals documenting their work with these practices, students reported feeling distracted, self-conscious, or worried about proper form or “doing it right”—but many also described feeling grounded, serene, or quieted. One observed that “The 75 minutes of walking was really an amazing aspect of the course. Not only did it provide hands-on experience, but I felt like my mind was clearly refreshed and I could understand my assignments.” Student feedback suggested that in addition to meeting course-specific academic outcomes, such as deeper understanding of the nature and potential effects of contemplative or embodied work, in some cases these projects enhanced their ability to manage schoolwork. Students in these courses engaged in what Contemplative Science scholars call meta-reflective “first-person” research, critically considering and closely interrogating their experience of coursework. One student summed up the benefits well: “What I found surprising with the actual practice of meditation is that it gave me a holistic interpretation of the course. The theoretical readings and the actual process together gave me insight into my personal life and my academic life.”⁴⁸

In 2016, contributors to *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions* made a strong case for rethinking how Buddhist Studies is taught, with essays by instructors who were stepping beyond textually and doctrinally dominated presentations of Buddhist traditions.⁴⁹ In 2020, Cabezón described North American Buddhist Studies

⁴⁸ My own version of the “Histories of Buddhist Meditation” course is described at Frances Garrett and Sophie Chase, “‘Deep Listening’ in Buddhist Studies: Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic,” *Religions* 12, no. 387 (2021).

⁴⁹ Todd Lewis and Gary deAngelis, eds., *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, AAR Teaching Religious Studies (Oxford Academic, 2016).

as having “a style that sees methodological diversity as an advantage—that is not fearful of different approaches, including normative (ethical, philosophical, theological) ones.”⁵⁰ A 2024 essay by Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg, “Buddhist Studies in the United States: New Turns and Future Directions,” further draws out key trends in the field of Buddhist Studies today. They suggest that the field has by now largely shifted toward “a commitment to demographic diversity; destabilization of the binary division between scholar and practitioner with a corresponding engagement of emic scholarship; methodological diversification beyond textual approaches and the embrace of critical theories that analyze gender, race, and class; and a focus on what Buddhists do, feel, and make rather than Buddhism as an abstract philosophy or set of doctrines.”⁵¹ These commitments efficiently describe the contours of BPMH and EEBS curricular and co-curricular design, much of which engages scholarship on Buddhist racial justice work, Buddhist responses to ecological disruption and climate crisis, or the work of contemporary Asian and Black Buddhists, for example, and which may draw on feminist, anticolonial, queer studies, contemplative, or anti-oppressive pedagogical methods. The approaches described in this essay—both in terms of curricular focus and pedagogical strategy—differentiate this methodologically diverse work from an older, less nimble style of education in Buddhist Studies often still dominating Religious Studies departments beholden to conservative disciplinary boundaries or colonial histories.⁵² I will expand on this below, but first: a

⁵⁰ Cabezón, “2020 AAR Presidential Address,” 816.

⁵¹ Gleig and Langenberg, “Buddhist Studies in the United States,” 97.

⁵² Just recently, a colleague in Religious Studies told to me that “students aren’t learning about Buddhism” unless a course is organized around the study of “texts.” I am not suggesting that there is no place for text-historical or philological research in Buddhist Studies (which is the type of research that I have most often done myself), but rather that other types of critical scholarship and teaching are now well established in the field. In

brief description of how the BPMH program also engages the field of Contemplative Studies/Contemplative Science.

Methodological diversity in teaching Buddhist Studies

Undergraduate and graduate teaching and research in Contemplative Studies or Contemplative Science have grown rapidly across North America over the last several decades. Courses on Contemplative Studies or Contemplative Science are taught in Religious Studies departments (and elsewhere) across the U.S. and Canada; the International Society of Contemplative Research website lists 31 North American degree programs in the field; and research in the area is regularly and robustly funded by major national granting bodies. A 2022 article by John Dunne traces the development of the moniker “Contemplative Science,” its connections to Buddhist Studies, and its exponential expansion as a research field (as well as important critiques of the field).⁵³ It was in the context of the field’s early history that the BPMH program originated almost two decades ago, inspired by the then-nascent interest in scientific research on

addition to sources already cited, also see Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Donald S. Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Sharon A. Suh, “‘We Interrupt Your Regularly Scheduled Programming to Bring You This Very Important Public Service Announcement’: Aka Buddhism as Usual in the Academy,” in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. Emily McCrae and George Yancy (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli, eds., *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States*, Suny Series in Buddhism and American Culture Series (State University of New York Press, 2015).

⁵³ John D. Dunne, “Contemplative Science and Buddhist Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Practice*, ed. Kevin Trainor and Paula Arai (2022).

contemplative practices and a growing interest in models of teaching best suited to the field.

Many in Contemplative Studies or Contemplative Science take an approach to research and teaching that respects both “third-person” or “objective” analysis, as well as what is referred to as “first-person” critical investigation oriented to “experience,” a framework promoted early in the field’s development. Of course, introspective critical inquiry is nothing new—in other disciplines, it can manifest as meta-reflective or phenomenological writing, for example, and these instructional approaches have long histories in classrooms of Philosophy, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and more. Some propose a third component in “second-person” inquiry, which Fort and Dennis describe as “interpersonal and dialogic investigation.”⁵⁴ Yuria Celidwen, Indigenous scholar and postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology of the University of California, Berkeley, argues that an emphasis on “second-person” relational work is critical to more expansive and anticolonial approaches in Contemplative Science.⁵⁵ Contemplative Science has also been critiqued for silencing the voices and experiences of Asian Buddhist intellectuals and practitioners, and for being overly individualistic and “neurocentric.”⁵⁶ Today,

⁵⁴ Andrew O. Fort and Mark Dennis. “Riding the Wave: Contemplative Studies Goes Mainstream” *Athenaeum Review*, no. 4 (2020).

⁵⁵ Yuria Celidwen and Devin Zuckerman. “What Is Contemplation? An Interview with Yuria Celidwen.” *Contemplative Currents* (2024).

⁵⁶ For more on these critiques, see John D. Dunne, “Contemplative Science and Buddhist Science” and David McMahan and Erik Braun, eds., *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Ira Helderman’s research demonstrates how the world of mental health clinicians who draw on Buddhism can be similarly insensitive to colonial dynamics shaping their practice; Ira Helderman, *Prescribing the Dharma: Psychotherapists, Buddhist Traditions, and Defining Religion* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2019). Historians of science and disability studies scholars have shown how work in positive psychology, some of which references Buddhism, also lacks attention to

the BPMH and EEBS curricula are designed to address these critiques directly.

Adopting a Contemplative Science paradigm to teaching means that the BPMH curriculum trains students in (third-person) qualitative and quantitative research, scientific and humanistic literacy, and writing skills, and it integrates those approaches with (first-person) critical analysis of contemplative, anti-oppressive, or embodied practices, as well as (second-person) relational exercises like deep listening or community engagement. Student feedback corroborates how valuable this training is to their education overall. While most confirm that their scientific literacy improves in BPMH courses, for example, many also write about how much they value the embedding of science into broader contexts. Lydia, a fourth-year majoring in Physiology, Psychology, and Immunology wrote that her BPMH courses “made me view science in a completely different way.” Students are hungry for engagement with broader humanistic questions about the culturally and historically constructed nature of scientific discourse and practice. They learn not only to use an analytical lens to see how contemplative practices may influence health, but also to interrogate what health is—when not medicalized as mental health and illness, well-being and distress are seen as embedded in intersecting historical, cultural, and social contexts (as are notions of the mind and body).⁵⁷ Coursework and co-curricular activities together reveal ideological and ethnocentric bases of an individualistic understanding of well-being, and

political, social, or economic inequalities. See Laura Van Beveren et al., “A Critical Perspective on Mental Health News in Six European Countries: How Are ‘Mental Health/Illness’ and ‘Mental Health Literacy’ Rhetorically Constructed?,” *Qualitative Health Research* 30, no. 9 (2020); Mark Solovey and Deborah Weinstein, “Living Well: Histories of Well-Being and Human Flourishing,” *J Hist Behav Sci* 55 (2019).

⁵⁷ Beveren et al., “A Critical Perspective on Mental Health News in Six European Countries: How Are “Mental Health/Illness” and “Mental Health Literacy” Rhetorically Constructed?.”

pedagogical approaches that target meta-cognitive and reflective learning allow students to deeply examine how research emerges in and shapes their own lives, selves, bodies, and communities. As fourth-year student Chloe Gauthier put it, BPMH is “revolutionary in its approach to understanding and addressing mental health concerns [. . .] [because it] recognizes the interconnectedness of the scientific method and lived experience.” Student feedback confirms that this approach has a powerful personal impact. Xinran, a third-year student majoring in Religion and Philosophy wrote, for example, that “courses in the BPMH program have offered more insight to healing than all the other courses I’ve taken at U of T combined,” and a second-year Economics major explained that, “no other counselling or mental health services has helped me as much as has my perception of life learnt” in the BPMH program. Beyond the classroom, the legacy of the BPMH program, writes HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Principal of University of Toronto’s Emmanuel College, “is not only that it supports mental well-being of students when they are in the program, it also has ripple effects that reach out through graduates of the program to build mental, spiritual and emotional well-being in the public at large.” One alumnus explained how the program “enabled me to incorporate teachings of empathy and well-being” in their career as a teacher, for example.⁵⁸

In his assessment of the program, Tony Scott, a former BPMH instructor and Buddhist Studies scholar, concurs that the program helps students understand “the social and political factors that affect mental health in this society.” He explains moreover that “by bringing the politics back into the study of Buddhism, by recognizing the importance of the body, and by valuing the subjectivity of the student, the BPMH program is a critical and irreplaceable step in the decolonization of the study

⁵⁸ Student and faculty voices in this paragraph are from Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

of Buddhism in the academy.”⁵⁹ In 2021, with support from Scott, then a graduate Teaching Fellow in my department, I designed an “Introduction to Buddhism” course with some of these ideas in mind. Discarding the introductory textbook, the course presented Buddhist traditions through and with the body. The semester started with Zenju Earthlyn Manuel’s *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality & Gender*, Malory Nye’s “Decolonizing the Study of Religion,” selections from Cheah’s *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*, and Kimmerer LaMothe’s “What Bodies Know About Religion and the Study of It.”⁶⁰ Subsequent units focused on the study of Buddhist perspectives on reading and reciting texts; ethics and sexuality; ritual through music and dance; and art in the Asian Buddhist diaspora. Discarding the textbook made space for contemporary Buddhist voices (not only voices from classical Buddhist literature) and a diverse community of experts. In addition to short writing projects focused on thematic units, students participated in four-week workshops on dance, recitation, or walking. The objective here was not to require the performance of “religious” practice, but rather to use cognate activities to encourage deep thinking about how we learn and know with our bodies—that is, what it means to know as *embodied* (not simply cognitive) individuals and communities, and how experiences of embodiment are shaped by cultural and political forces. As in the model of “Biohacking Breath” and other EEBS courses described above, each of these “experiential learning” units were accompanied by

⁵⁹ Garrett et al., “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

⁶⁰ Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness : Awakening through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Simon and Schuster, 2015); Malory Nye, “Decolonizing the Study of Religion,” *Open Library of Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2019); Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*; Kimmerer LaMothe, “What Bodies Know About Religion and the Study of It,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008).

additional study resources,⁶¹ and students were asked to integrate those resources in a series of writing assignments. In identifying readings, videos, and audio materials for this course, Tony Scott and I assembled a set of resources that was significantly less dominated by the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied experts prominent in most introductory courses in the field. In addition to studying Buddhist histories, cultures, literatures, and practices, students also learned how to recognize systems of exploitation and power, how to identify “white epistemologies,” how their own “decolonial autobiographies” might affect their understanding of religion, and how certain presentations of Buddhism—in particular, popular presentations of meditation—may promote white supremacist ideologies.

Of course, not all BPMH/EEBS instructors teach using the same methods. But over several years of integrated coursework and extra-curricular engagement in these programs, students receive diverse learning opportunities with a recurring focus on anti-oppressive, antiracist, and anticolonial approaches, and this seems to be a significant factor in how students find meaning in the BPMH and EEBS curricula. As I have discussed elsewhere, a large body of research shows how anti-oppressive and trauma-aware teaching methods help students “see the nuanced

⁶¹ Resources included Boreth Ly, “Buddhist Walking Meditations and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia,” *positions* 20, no. 1 (2012); Ming-liang Tsai, “Walker” (Taiwan 2012); Teng-Kuan Ng, “Pedestrian Dharma: Slowness and Seeing in Tsai Ming-Liang’s Walker,” *Religions* 9, no. 7 (2018); Tanatchaporn Kittikong, “Choreographing the Site of Impermanence: Performing Body with Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation in Movement-Based Performance,” *Dance Movement & Spiritualities* 2, no. 1 (2015); Sharon A. Suh, “Buddhist Meditation as Strategic Embodiment: An Optative Reflection,” in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy Schlund-Vials (Fordham University Press, 2017); Cuilan Liu, “Reciting, Chanting, and Singing: The Codification of Music in Buddhist Canon Law,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 46, no. 4 (2018). Also see Adeana McNicholl and Ann Gleig, “Teaching Race and Racism in Buddhist Studies,” The Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies, <https://teachingbuddhism.net/teaching-race-and-racism/>; Rima Vesely-Flad, “Buddhism and Black Embodiment,” *Oxford Bibliographies* (2022).

workings of power and privilege in their own lives and the lives of others,” and how “contemplative pedagogies, moreover, can orient course design toward relational and non-divisive practices that help to build compassionate and connected learning communities.”⁶² Student survey responses from BPMH and EEBS-supported courses commonly emphasize how much they value learning shaped by principles such as collaboration and empowerment, situated in a framework of social justice, ethical action, and community connection. Katia, a fourth-year student majoring in Cognitive Science wrote, for example, “Another big focus of the [BPMH] courses I have taken has been seeing how our actions impact society at large and how we can more effectively contribute to society”—she explained further that “I have transferred my learning from my BPMH programs to all other aspects of my life.” Farah, a fifth-year student, wrote that the BPMH program “inspires students to take action on their own campus.”

Beyond reporting that involvement in the program enhances their academic success,⁶³ professional development, and sense of belonging, empowerment, and civic responsibility, as described above, students and instructors alike describe the BPMH program as personally transformational. Lauren Brown, Program Coordinator at the Division of Student Life, reports that “Each week I meet students who are engaged in the BPMH minor, and they speak of how life changing their learning has been.”⁶⁴ I have received dozens of anonymously shared testimonials with similar

⁶² Garrett and Chase, ““Deep Listening” in Buddhist Studies,” 10.

⁶³ The academic effects include grade increases. One student explained, “I have improved my marks and understanding of content due to guidance and skills developed through the BPMH program.” Another wrote “I have seen an increase in my marks all around. My average this semester is about 5-10% higher than previous semesters.”

⁶⁴ Garrett, Students, and Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

messages from current and former students, as in this representative selection:

- I cannot stress how instrumental this program has been in turning me into the student and person I am today.
- I am confident in saying that it has forever changed my life for the better.
- I met my closest friends in that program.
- This was the formative program of my time at U of T.
- This program has changed my life. Without it I would not have been the person I am. Without it I would have never been able to even survive U of T.
- This program helped get me through one of the most difficult times in my life.
- I didn't know that university didn't have to be about suffering until I joined this program. The things I have been taught will last with me for my whole life.
- The BPMH Program contains some of my best memories at U of T.
- I would have never ended up at the University of Toronto if it wasn't for the BPMH minor degree program.
- I am proud to be a student at this University solely because of the person I have become by listening to my fellow BPMH professors and students.

- I can attest to the profound impact of this program on my professional and personal life. It was nothing less than game-changing.

Broad recognition and looking ahead

Although the qualitative data shared above does not constitute formal statistical or comparative analysis, I find it significant that over three years of surveying BPMH/EEBS students, holding focus groups, and reviewing course feedback, including many opportunities for anonymous feedback, negative or critical sentiments are extraordinarily rare. The student voices shared in this essay are typical of hundreds of testimonials and survey responses collected since 2022. Why do these programs have such a resoundingly positive impact on so many students? Instructor attitudes, curricular design, and the creation of a strong community supported by integrated academic and pedagogical approaches seem to be major factors. Buddhist Studies scholar Jennifer Bright explains that students in the program are “co-creating communities of care, mutual respect, and inclusion—important attributes for the well-being of individuals and society.” Norman Farb notes that the program offers students a way to “find and engage with a vibrant university community,” and he cites the many events, podcasts, and workshops organized by the program, which “show rather than just tell students that we care about them and their development.” Tony Scott writes that “In my own class and from what I have heard from students in the program, the classes they took in BPMH were the first or even the only classes at the University of Toronto where they

felt valued, where they felt they were more than just numbers, and where they were no longer isolated from their instructors and peers.”⁶⁵

In the twenty years since the founding of the BPMH program, the research landscape has changed dramatically. There are now tens of thousands of articles on the health benefits of mindfulness (as well as a smaller but growing body of research on adverse experiences with meditation), the vast majority of which are written by psychologists, neuroscientists, or clinicians. An important complement to these studies comes from historians and ethnographers of what is sometimes referred to as “Buddhist medicine”—scholars who work with Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese or South-east Asian sources on how Buddhism has for millennia been deeply intertwined with medical theories and healing practices, and how issues of modernity and globalization continue to reshape boundaries between “religion” and “medicine.” This field of research has also exploded in the last twenty years, and it makes clear how Buddhist ideas and practices are, and have always been, “routine health care” in much of the world, as Kin Cheung, Susannah Deane, and Pierce Salguero document in *Buddhism and Healing in the Modern World*. They explain that today,

worldwide, Buddhist notions of well-being sit alongside and are entangled with biomedical, scientific, and New Age concepts of mind, body, health, illness, and healing. As a result, people often find themselves navigating multiple explanatory frameworks and treatment options—as well as shifting configurations of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity—in nuanced and complex ways in their search for health and healing.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Student and faculty voices in this paragraph and the next are from Garrett, Students, and Assessors, “BPMH Program Support Dossier.”

⁶⁶ Cheung, et al, eds. *Buddhism and Healing in the Modern World*, 2.

Transdisciplinary and culturally sensitive curricula that intertwine course content and teaching method, such as BPMH and EEBS, give students a conceptual vocabulary and embodied grammar to think newly about the richness and complexity of “therapeutic” phenomena they see everywhere around them, on the streets of Toronto, the global highways of the internet, or in their home regions (international students make up nearly a third of University of Toronto undergraduates).

In 2019, the BPMH program was scheduled to undergo its regular University of Toronto Quality Assurance Process (UTQAP) review, which involves a self-study and external review. Given pandemic delays, a review process that normally takes a year took over four years, and in summer 2023 the University of Toronto’s Dean of Arts & Science commissioned a Working Group to investigate opportunities to support the BPMH program, as the concluding step of the UTQAP review. In fall 2023, the group released a one-page report recommending that the program be closed. Students mobilized swiftly after this startling announcement, starting a “Protect the BPMH Program” petition that quickly topped 2,000 signatures.⁶⁷ Local and international press quickly took an interest in the story. I continue to receive passionate and well-argued testimonials from past and present students as well as letters of support from international scientists, scholars, and community members, some of which are cited in the current essay. At the time of writing, although BPMH classrooms continue to fill and waiting lists are long, the program’s future is still uncertain.

⁶⁷ The process has been documented on a student blog at <https://pathuoft.net/blog/>. Also see Frances Garrett, “Like Rocks and Mountains: A Contemplative Science Program under Threat,” *Contemplative Currents* (2024).

Appendix: BPMH Core Courses, 2024**BPM100H1: The Art & Science of Flourishing**

Perspectives from the sciences and humanities about flourishing across diverse cultures and contexts, and how wellbeing and distress are social, cultural, political, spiritual, ecological, and historical phenomena.

BPM214H1: Socially Engaged Buddhism

How Socially Engaged Buddhism has developed in response to global conversations on systemic oppression, climate justice, equity, decolonization, and trauma.

BPM232H1: Buddhism and Psychology

On the encounter between Buddhism and psychology, exploring how scientists, psychologists, and Buddhist reformers reinterpret Buddhism as “science” and how Buddhist practices are transformed and promoted by modern psychology.

JNR301H1: The History of Buddhist Meditation

Historical, cultural, and textual contexts for Buddhist contemplative practices.

BPM330H1: Mindfulness-Informed Interventions for Mental Health

Study of mindfulness from historical, societal, structural, cultural, professional, and personal perspectives, considering Buddhist foundations and concepts of embodied mind.

BPM332H1: Buddhism and Psychotherapy

Interdisciplinary study of cross-cultural therapies and theories of the mind.

BPM334H1: Science of Wisdom

Conceptual and contemplative interdisciplinary exploration of global “wisdom traditions.”

BPM335H1: Meditation and the Body

Exploration of research on how mindfulness affects brain activity, brain structure, neurochemistry, and other psychobiological processes.

BPM338H1: Exploring Mindful Awareness

Mindfulness as a systematic investigation of subjective experience, with a survey of classic and contemporary literature.

BPM381H1: Buddhist Perspectives on Current Social Issues

Buddhist perspectives on issues such as climate justice, systemic racism, burnout, and mental health in sectors of society including healthcare, education, and business.

BPM339H1: Mind, Consciousness, and the Self

Interdisciplinary study of mind, consciousness, and the self, placing Buddhist traditions in dialogue with theories of the mind in psychology.

BPM432H1: Advanced Research in Meditation, Psychology and Neuroscience

Preparation for advanced research on meditation by studying theories, tools and techniques in the field.

BPM433H1: Advanced Exploration of Buddhist Psychology and Practice

How Buddhist teachings are set in conversation with contemporary scientific research on topics such as suffering, wellbeing, and compassion.

BPM438H1: Mindfulness Meditation: Science and Research

Theoretical and empirical bases of mindfulness-based interventions and applications in healthcare settings and beyond. Students build scientific literacy skills through the assessment, critique, and discussion of scientific research.

Additional courses required to fulfil minor are taken in cognate units: Anthropology, Cognitive Science, East Asian Studies, Centre for Ethics, History, History of Philosophy, Science, and Technology, Human Biology, Health Studies, Centre for Indigenous Studies, School of the Environment, Sexual Diversity Studies, Philosophy, Psychology, Study of Religion, Sociology.

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