Selected Contemplative Exercises to integrate into your courses\(^1\)

*Photo contemplation:* “The experience of contemplative seeing is not about fossilizing or reifying. I ask them to look in the faces of everyone in a photograph, particularly the people who are smiling, and I ask, ‘What terror might lurk behind those smiles?’ I am hoping that my students and I will go beyond mere analysis to something much deeper, compassionate understanding. And for that, we have to see our own faces in the photograph too . . . The focus is less on what a person has done and more on the subversive question Toni Morrison asks in *The Bluest Eye:* ‘Why?’” This innovative approach connects the students directly to the material of the course and establishes the means for them to more deeply understand their connection with these past events.”

*Preliminary Hearing* (to use to help students deal with a stressful situation, perhaps a test): Play soothing sounds, perhaps classical or slow-tempo music to feel calming effects. Add to this relaxing component awareness of the sound and vibration of the notes, the feelings that the music brings up within you, and other sensations that are happening in the moment as you listen. As you become aware of thoughts arising, gently bring your attention back to the music. Breathe.

*Silent reactions:* “When we returned to the seminar room [after watching a powerful film], it seemed that the students were also powerfully moved. They took their seats around the table and waited for me to open the discussion. Nothing that came to me seemed right. Words seemed to trivialize what we had just experienced, and the quieter we became, the more I could hear. So I didn’t speak. Fine, I thought, I can’t do it, so one of the students will open the conversation. No one did. We sat there in silence. Time passed, and passed. When the hour was over, we got up and walked out in silence. On the evaluations at the end of the semester, every student said that this had been the most powerful class: by not speaking and just experiencing their own thoughts and emotions, they had learned so much about the film and themselves.”

*Mindful Eating:* Either bring food or encourage students to bring their lunch/breakfast and before eating, sit together in silence for a few minutes and then do an eating meditation. “This brings meditation into the ordinary actions of the day and can be especially revealing to students, who most often eat in a rush amid a clamor of voices, music, and other sounds. We began by remembering those who are hungry and the farmworkers who grew and harvested the food. I taught them mindful eating practice with a raisin: bringing awareness to the color, shape, smell, texture of the raisin in your hand; then putting it into your mouth, not chewing yet, noticing taste, noticing your body respond, noticing your thoughts and emotions, your desire to chew, to swallow; then chewing, swallowing, and noticing all the sensations. At the end we reflected on the earth. Earth brings us into life and nourishes us. Earth takes us back again. We are born and we die with every breath. We tried to keep that awareness as we ate sandwiches and salads.”

*Meditative Listening:* This may be a helpful exercise for any new topic you are introducing. For example, one could bring in sounds from a period of history or a place to animal you may be studying. I have used sounds from a babbling brook at Auschwitz concentration camp before introducing the topic of the Holocaust. I allowed them to sit in silence and just mindfully listen to the sounds. This can be done to a famous speech, place (check this site,
https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=1117693 for different regions of the world) or to introduce an animal, etc (check https://www.macaulaylibrary.org/).

Mindful listening dyad—Find a question relevant to classroom discussion and have students form pairs. One student talks and answers the question for about 2-3 minutes and the other student gifts their full attention to that talking student. Switch. Process with class. (more information on this exercise is on pg. 144 of the Contemplative Practices book)

The Here and Now writing practice: “I asked them to just write what was happening here and now, paying attention to what they were seeing, hearing, touching, and thinking, and letting go of any other ideas or memories. At first they were to begin each sentence, and later each paragraph, with “Here and now.” And they were to keep writing until the time was up.”

Focused reading and writing exercise: “I fold the papers and pass them out, and we sit and do silent breathing practice to just be there.” On each paper is a provocative quote from some sacred tradition or you can use your discipline as well (I have used this when introducing a new theorist to allow for their own first receptions of the theorist before content and the ideas of others are offered). Then the students open the paper and read the quote. “Don’t try to figure out the meaning,” she says, “just stay with words.” They read it aloud together and stay with the words for some minutes. Then they turn to a partner and discuss their first sense of what they have read. After the reading and sharing, the focused and deep reading is allowed to percolate and produce associations and insights. They then return to mindfulness practice, followed by freewriting for one page about the meaning. “I encourage them to do this with any of their assignments, to bring personal integration into their writing.” The integration of the writing with the careful reading allows students to explore and anchor what they have discovered.

Compassionate breathing exercise: “Although it is often easy to feel compassion for others who are sick or troubled, it can be harder to feel it for people who are threatening or problematic. In the practice, you can bring one of these persons to mind, breathing in and out, feeling connected. Breathe in what you want to avoid, imagining it as heavy, thick, and hot. Breathe out to the other whatever you want to keep for yourself—happiness, joy, ease, peace, and imagining it as light, bright, and cool. The practice helps us grow larger hearts, and it opens our minds.”

Breathing Exercise:• Sitting in your chairs, body relaxed and spine erect, eyes closed, follow the sound of the gong or singing bowl as it reverberates and hums in space. • Follow the ebbing of the sound into silence. • Rest in that silence. • If thoughts arise, simply observe them. • Do the same for any bodily sensations or emotions: simply witness them. • If you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts, return to the awareness of your breath. Anchoring your attention in your breath breaks the compulsiveness of thought. • Return to rest in silence. • Witness and welcome, without getting caught in whatever arises. • Simply notice the mental chatter, the resistance to what is. • The meditation ends with a sound of the gong or the bowl.

Focused movement: Setting two bowls of water at a distance of several yards from one another and placing a spoon in each, Dilley has her students carry a spoonful of water from one bowl to the other. Along the way, they are encouraged to experiment—moving the spoon up and down and around, looking away, moving backward, lowering or raising their center of gravity—all the
while exploring the elastic relationship between mindfulness and awareness. Dilley also adds other bowls, and other actors and dancers, so that individuals must remain aware of not only how their own bodies and spoons move through space but also the bodies and spoons of those around them.

*Reflective art:* Allowing students to draw or work with art materials allows for another medium of expression. Before introducing a topic like pathology or depression for example I have student draw it. Using soft materials (watercolors and chalk pastels) seems to help with more abstract ideas.

*Lectio Divina:* In the Christian tradition contemplative reading is known as *lectio divina* (“divine reading,” in Latin). Through a process of close, contemplative reading, the simple words on the page become clearer and more meaningful. It brings greater understanding and connection, something easily missed by a superficial, quick reading. Departing somewhat more from the traditional form, David G. Haskell, Associate Professor of Biology and Environmental Science at the University of the South, in his course on “Food and Hunger: Contemplation and Action,” introduced a modification of Basil Pennington’s *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998) for reading short essays on hunger and food in class. In a circle of students, he reminds them that it will be necessary to project their voices and assures them that it is all right to stumble or pass to a neighbor; in initial stages of group work, it is important that students feel comfortable and know that they can have the freedom to hesitate or even opt out. This provides a sense of freedom that allows them to embrace fear rather than ball up and fight it.

The instructions for his exercise are as follows:

- Sit quietly and relax our minds and bodies for one minute.
- Read aloud, slowly, the entire text, each of us reading one or two sentences, “passing along” the reading to the left to the next reader.
- One minute of silence and reflection.
- One of us reads aloud the short passage that we have chosen in advance.
- Another minute of silence and reflection
- We share a word or short phrase in response to the reading—just give voice to the word without explanation or discussion
- Another person reads the short passage again
- One minute of silence and reflection
- We share longer responses to the text—a sentence or two. We listen attentively to one another without correcting or disputing.
- Another person reads the short passage one last time, followed by another minute of silence.

---