

Riding the Wave

Contemplative Studies Goes Mainstream

Mark Dennis

Professor of East Asian Religions
Texas Christian University

Andrew O. Fort

Professor of South Asian Religions emeritus
Texas Christian University

The Wave

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE. TURN ON THE TV NEWS OR peruse the magazine rack in the supermarket checkout aisle. Meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and other such “Eastern” practices have entered the American mainstream. Glossy magazine covers bombard us with images of slim, attractive, and, most often, white women chanting “Om” or twisting themselves in yoga poses with promises of better health and relationships, a clearer mind, and even mind-blowing sex.¹ A search on Amazon yields more than 60,000 titles for “meditation,” 50,000 for “yoga,” and 40,000 for “mindfulness.” Indeed, Google, Aetna, and other major American companies have embraced some constellation of these practices, and American universities, such as Brown, Virginia, and Wisconsin have well-established Contemplative Studies programs with substantial budgets and associated faculty, while others, like TCU, have programs in earlier stages of development.

“Mindfulness” practices have even seeped into our campus cafeteria run by the French multinational Sodexo. It maintains the “mindful Sodexo” web site with dropdown menus for “mindful eating” and “mindful living”; the latter includes a section dedicated to, for instance, “mindful kids.” The site also offers viewers the opportunity to vote for one of four “Make It Mindful Tacos,”² with the winner to be offered in Sodexo-managed cafeterias throughout the country. The company’s TCU website describes its “mindful menu” as follows: “Mindful offerings meet stringent nutritional criteria based on the

1 For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Jeff Wilson’s *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2014). See in particular Chapter 5: “Marketing Mindfulness: How is Mindfulness Turned into a Commercial Product?”

2 When we started the article, the contest was still open. But the “Chicken Avocado & Mango Taco!” was declared the winner before we went to print. See: www.mindful.sodexo.com/winner.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Each meal part is limited in calories, has fewer than 30% of calories as fat, fewer than 10% of calories as saturated fat, and is restricted in sodium and cholesterol. Look for the Mindful icon to indulge in the healthy and delicious items offered at each meal.”

As we describe below, this presentation of mindfulness on magazine covers, in cafeterias, and elsewhere is a far cry from its roots in early Buddhist mental cultivation practices, as is true with many other contemplative practices that have become popular in the United States and that are the subject of this article. We often liken Americans’ growing interest in these practices to a massive wave that we, as “surfers,” are riding. And the wave’s energy seems to be increasing, flooding us with the sorts of images and promises mentioned above. In the essay below, readers will note our struggle to stay “balanced on the board.” Although we are convinced that contemplative practices have benefited many Americans, including our students, we are also wary of this sort of appropriation and hype—we’re hard-pressed to believe that a large multinational has any genuine interest in, or skill for, providing us with mindful tacos—especially galling to we Texans! Indeed, one might see the wave as a money-making opportunity that some have skillfully exploited by removing these practices from their original cultural contexts and repackaging and selling them for sometimes quite high prices and fees. This commodification and general “secularizing” of contemplative practices raises important ethical questions, for scholars *and* participants, especially when purveyors, often with little if any training, simply slap “mindfulness” on a book cover, an exercise routine, or a taco recipe, often promising benefits that cannot be reliably delivered while downplaying or ignoring the risks, whether financial, physical, or psychological. We return to these concerns below.

Beneath the Wave

The source of this wave seems complex. As college professors, we have witnessed a surge of interest in contemplative practices among our millennial (born between 1981 and 1994) and iGen or Generation Z (born in 1995 or afterward) students who have grown up swimming—or drowning—in a sea of digital domination, having never experienced a time when smart phones and social media were not ubiquitous. Some scholars argue that a marked increase in negative mental states among young people, especially depression and anxiety, are likely related to these changes. We see, for instance, the apparent paradox of students who, despite having large numbers of Facebook “friends,” feel disconnected and isolated, anxious and depressed.

In a 2017 *Atlantic* article titled “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?,” Jean M. Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, cites statistics showing a spike that started in 2011 in rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among iGen teens, which she links to their growing tendency to interact through social media instead of face-to-face, and to trying to cope with cyberbullying, especially prevalent among girls, and the constant fear of missing out—so called FOMO.³ Twenge notes that some of the teens she interviewed use “the language of addiction” to describe their relationship with their phones, quoting one young girl’s musing about her generation’s addiction to technology: “I think we like our phones more than we like actual people.” Twenge concludes, “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”⁴

In an earlier *Atlantic* article—“Is Google Making us Stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains”—Nicholas Carr explores the negative effects of our increasing reliance on the internet more broadly.⁵ That article became the basis for his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain*,⁶ which served as TCU’s “Common Reading” for first-year students in 2012. Carr argues that these changes are, in fact, rewiring our brains in such a way as to hinder our ability to maintain concentration and to think deeply and critically, a trend that we have witnessed among our own students.

W.W. Norton’s description of the book offers a good summary of some key points:

Building on the insights of thinkers from Plato to McLuhan, Carr makes a convincing case that every information technology carries an intellectual ethic—a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge and intelligence. He explains how the printed book served to focus our attention, promoting deep and creative thought. In stark contrast, the Internet encourages the rapid, distracted sampling of small bits of information from many sources. Its ethic is that of the industrialist, an ethic of speed and efficiency, of optimized production and consumption—and now the Net is remaking us in its own image. We are becoming ever more adept at scanning and skimming, but what we are losing is our capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection.⁷

This description of the ethic behind and consequences of this technological change leads us back to Contemplative Studies and its attendant practices, which are meant, in part, to promote “concentration, contemplation, and reflection.” It also resonates with accounts in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and elsewhere of the ongoing commodification of higher education that has led many students to imagine themselves being consumers or customers. In this

3 Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017. She appears on the PBS Newshour in summer 2017 to discuss her findings. See, “Are smartphones making a generation unhappy?”, PBS Newshour, August 17, 2017: www.pbs.org/newshour/show/smartphones-making-generation-unhappy.

4 Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

5 See Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868.

6 We asked students to read an excerpt from the book in our Honors colloquium titled “A Contemplative Life: Reflecting on Self and World,” which we co-taught in spring semester 2019. See: Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

7 See books.wwnorton.com/books/The-Shallows.

business-oriented model, students, and often their parents, see themselves to be purchasing a product or service meant to help them acquire readily marketable skills and credentials. This reimagining of higher education has thereby shifted, in important ways, the relationship between student and teacher, recasting understanding of and expectations for a college education in the “Time is money” metaphor that is the lifeblood of commerce; this orientation seems to drive our students’ behavior, contributing further to their stress and anxiety. And while these trends make some sense when viewed through the lens of soaring tuition costs, the Great Recession, and other factors, it has come at the expense of what University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson calls a “real education,” which “is humanities-based and it’s oriented around the prospect of getting to know yourself, figuring out who you are and what you really want to do with your life.”⁸

8 For the interview, see www.pbs.org/newshour/show/author-argues-colleges-more-training-than-transformation#story; for the transcript, see www.pbs.org/newshour/show/author-argues-colleges-more-training-than-transformation#transcript.

That is, this emerging model of higher education tends to ignore traditional liberal arts critical inquiry that has focused on “knowing thyself.” In the traditional model, teachers and students grapple with the “big questions” that emerge from this basic goal: What does it mean to be human? What is the value of human and all life? What are truth and reality? What is the nature of the self, and what do we owe others? These are the sorts of liberal arts questions that fit well within the contemplative-infused education that we describe below. In this regard, Andy observes that contemplative pedagogy can “call into question the contemporary instrumentalist focus on ‘productivity’ in and beyond college life. Critical reflection offers opportunities to gain insight into one’s sense of meaning and purpose, and more broadly into the ‘pursuit of wisdom,’ or inquiry into what it means to be human.”⁹

9 See, “Creating contemplative studies in the Southwest: theory and practice,” *International Journal of Dharma Studies* (2016) 4:13: 1-15.

As such, we see contemplative study and practice as offering students and teachers alike a set of tools to critically reflect upon and, even, to resist this instrumentalism and commodification while helping enhance the classroom environment. These practices can also both help students deal with the negative mental states Twenge identifies and facilitate conversations about deeper questions concerning meaning and purpose, which are, according to a landmark study by Barbara Walvoord, significant to many undergraduates enrolled in Religious Studies courses like we teach.¹⁰ Walvoord describes a “great divide” between the expectations of teachers and students in such classes: the former tend to focus on the history, key texts, and doctrines of a religious tradition like Buddhism or Christianity, while many of the latter want to grapple with questions investigating their own sense of “spirituality,” which they may take to represent a movement away from institutional religion and toward an exploration of both their interior world and the pursuit of some notion of the transcendent in their outer worlds.

10 Barbara E. Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

As suggested above, our students increasingly describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”¹¹ Indeed, Matthieu Ricard, dubbed the “happiest man in the world,” tells NPR journalist Krista Tippett in an on-air interview: “Spirituality, for me, if you look at the roots, means something to do with the mind, dealing precisely with the mind and the way you experience the world.”¹² While students may understand the term in different ways, many would concur with the sentiments of Ricard, a French monk in one of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, that spirituality involves investigating the relationship between the mind and our experience of the world, whether the natural or built environment, face-to-face human interactions, and now even relationships forged in cyberspace through social media. In addition, many of these students seem to associate spirituality with an individual sense of the transcendent, believing that by forging a deep connection with it, however conceived, they will be able to lead more meaningful, genuine, and connected lives, concerns often neglected in the business-oriented American university.

The appeal of these practices is expressed wonderfully in “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana,” a film that documents the benefits prisoners received by participating in a ten-day Buddhist Vipassana meditation program in New Delhi’s notorious Tihar prison. As the film opens, the camera lens pans to several inmates staring back at the camera from behind the iron bars that keep them locked inside their prison cells, while the narrator tells viewers:

We are all prisoners, undergoing a life sentence, imprisoned by our own minds. We are all seeking parole, being hostages of our anger, fear, desire. Is there anyone who doesn’t crave at one point or another to take something that is not his? Is there anyone who doesn’t wish, at least once, to hurt the one who hurts him? It is a thin line that separates us from these people, who stare at us from inside this cage.¹³

13 Eilona Ariel and Ayelet Menahemi, “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana,” Karuna Films, 1997.

The film shows how this type of Buddhist meditation practice offers these inmates a path to mental and spiritual freedom from the metaphorical prison of their own minds, regardless of how long they remain locked inside their concrete and steel cages. The narrator’s comments express a fundamental Buddhist tenet that has attracted us and other spiritual seekers to its path: that is, while each of us may be imprisoned in some way by our own mind, these techniques of mental cultivation, which are part of the purview of Contemplative Studies, offer a way to use the mind, the very thing that binds us, to investigate itself and thereby slowly free itself from the negative mental states we all experience, whether anger, greed, and delusion (the “three poisons” of Buddhism), or those identified by Twenge as being particularly prevalent among young people: anxiety, depression, and FOMO.

14 For instance, in fall 2018 our friend and TCU Contemplative Studies steering committee member Chuck Dunning started "Let's Talk," a program developed at Cornell University offering confidential, walk-in counseling sessions to students. Another friend from the TCU Counseling Center, Matt Johnson, offers several six-week meditation and mindful courses each semester to help students deal with stress and anxiety. Other colleagues are involved in these efforts in other ways: for instance, Jane Torgerson, M.D., who directs TCU's student health services center, completed a two-year program in integrative medicine at the University of Arizona that was started by Dr. Andrew Weil. Having passed the board certification in integrative medicine, she is now licensed to include these healing modalities into her practice with students.

By engaging in these sorts of mental cultivation, we can gradually alter how we experience the world, to return to Ricard's description of spirituality, with fascinating and hopeful implications for understanding and engaging our physical and social environments, including our relationships with other sentient beings and the natural and built environments, including the classroom. Recognizing these benefits and the adverse effects of digital domination, faculty and staff in American higher education have been bringing contemplative practices on to campus as one among several approaches to promote student flourishing. Those approaches include offering courses to ease the transition to college, increasing the availability of mental health services, creating wellness programs, and developing formal contemplative studies programs like those we describe below.¹⁴

Wave and Water

We now should more formally introduce the concept of "Contemplative Studies." The field naturally coalesces around "contemplation," which, Andy has written, "refers to ways of knowing and focusing attention, often but certainly not always part of a religious tradition. It includes a wide variety of practices: sitting or walking meditation, various other kinds of 'mindfulness' practices, yogic postures, visualizations, silent prayer and group chanting, reflective self-inquiry, observing nature, and many others."¹⁵

Louis Komjathy is one of the leading figures in the field and is a practitioner and scholar of Daoism; he taught contemplative classes at the University of San Diego (USD).¹⁶ He describes Contemplative Studies as:

an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including the possible relevance and application to a wide variety of undertakings.

Contemplative Studies has some connection to other fields of inquiry such as consciousness studies, mysticism studies, neuroscience, psychology, religious studies, and so forth. The field of Contemplative Studies is in an embryonic or formative phase, and its parameters are still being established.

15 Andy has written two articles discussing Contemplative Studies, the Liberal Arts, and TCU's Contemplative Studies program. See Andrew O. Fort, "Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2013: 23-32, and "Creating contemplative studies in the Southwest: theory and practice," *International Journal of Dharma Studies* (2016) 4.13: 1-15, which was mentioned in footnote 9.

16 He is one of the founding directors of the Contemplative Studies group at the American Academy of Religion, the main academic body for scholars of religion, and makes presentations on the value of contemplative practice in a liberal arts setting and consults with programs like ours.

One approach emphasizes the development of awareness or mindfulness in each and every area of inquiry, including teaching and learning within an academic community. From this perspective, contemplative practice might contain art, dance, movement awareness, and so forth.

A more narrowly-focused and religious studies approach seeks to map the entire breadth and depth of contemplative practice as documented within and transmitted by religious adherents and communities.

In either case, Contemplative Studies recognizes the importance of both third-person and critical first-person approaches; it makes space for direct personal experience with specific forms of practice. In this way, it challenges the denial of embodied experience within academic discourse and brings the issue of religious adherence in religious studies into high relief.¹⁷

As mentioned above, Komjathy and many other contemplative educators argue that both the default mode of teaching, what we call third-person or “objective” lecture and analysis, and the less commonly utilized first-person, interior “experiential” practice, are essential elements of the field. He also observes that even our field’s primary methodology tends to focus on the former, particularly neuroscientific study of Buddhist meditative practices, especially Japanese zazen, Theravada Vipassana, and different sorts of Tibetan Buddhist meditation. That is, researchers use fMRI, EEG, and other scientific tools and methods to measure changes in meditators’ brains,¹⁸ but have sometimes neglected their “religious contexts and larger soteriological systems.” Whether those religious contexts are Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, Hindu, or others, each offers practitioners sophisticated contemplative practices with unique soteriological goals linked with a broader set of ethical principles.

In presentations on and off campus, we explain the pedagogical value of incorporating the perspectives of these “persons” in the classroom but also add the second-person, or interpersonal and dialogic investigation, wherein students sit with us in a circle to engage in mindful, “deep listening” and peer inquiry into each other’s first-person experience with a particular contemplative practice.¹⁹

Komjathy visited the TCU campus in fall 2013 to help us think through how to develop our own program based on his vision of a “contemplative university,” which would offer students an education “infused with attentiveness, awareness, interiority, silence and presence. Here, faculty and students would explore their deeper values, commitments and callings through contemplative inquiry.”²⁰

17 See www.sandiego.edu/cas/contemplative-studies.

18 For an excellent introduction to scientific studies of contemplative practices, see “Chapter 4: The Research Behind our Teaching,” in Holly Rogers, M.D. and Margaret Maytan, M.D., *Mindfulness for the Next Generation: Helping Emerging Adults Manage Stress and Lead Healthier Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Please see also the following episodes of the 10% Happier podcast: #29: “Dr. Richard Davidson,” Aug 10, 2016; #61: “Dr. Judson Brewer, Using Mindfulness to Beat Addiction,” February 15, 2017; #75: “Jon Kabat-Zinn, Creator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction,” May 03, 2017; #98: “Daniel Goleman, Dr. Richard Davidson, ‘Altered Traits,’” September 8, 2017; #112: “Dr. David Vago, This Is Your Brain on Meditation,” December 6, 2017; #156: “Shawn Achor, The Science Behind Gratitude; #159,” October 10, 2018: “Judson Brewer, Unwinding Anxiety,” October 31, 2018; #172: “Mark Epstein, Combining Buddhism and Western Psychotherapy,” January 30, 2019.

19 Key elements of mindfulness are deep and compassionate listening as well as loving speech, which Thich Nhat Hanh describes in the short clip with Oprah Winfrey that appears below. These practices call upon us to remain fully present to the voice, face, and emotions of another person, not to interrupt his or her speech, and not to rehearse how we will respond, refute, and so on. And when we do respond, we do so with *metta*, or “loving kindness.” See the clip at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyUxYfIkzhzo.

20 See www.sandiego.edu/community-government/events/detail.php?_focus=70079.

Contemplative Studies programs from Madison, Wisconsin to Fort Worth, Texas!

21 Naropa was founded in 1974 by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa and is a non-sectarian and ecumenical liberal arts institution with about 1,000 students, more than half of whom are graduate students.

22 Brown University's Contemplative Studies program was started in 2007 by Hal Roth, a Religious Studies professor who specializes in Chinese Religious Thought and the comparative study of contemplative practice and experience. See www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/concentrating-contemplative-studies.

23 Davidson joined the University of Wisconsin in 1984 and established "the university's first lab focused on emotion and the brain, called the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience." See centerhealthyminds.org/about/overview.

24 Richard Davidson's personal web site can be found at: www.richardjdavidson.com.

25 See Matthieu Ricard, Antoine Lutz, Richard J. Davidson, "Neuroscience Reveals the Secrets of Meditation's Benefits: Contemplative practices that extend back thousands of years show a multitude of benefits for both body and mind," *Scientific American*, November 1, 2014.

We see in established Contemplative Studies programs various admixtures of traditional liberal arts with associated foregrounding of the search for meaning and purpose often combined with the scientific study of the benefits of contemplative practices. Those programs include the Buddhist-inspired Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado and large public and private universities, such as those at Brown University, the University of Wisconsin, and others. These programs are instructive because they are "riding the wave" in different ways, reflecting their distinct founding histories: Naropa was founded by a Tibetan Buddhist teacher,²¹ Brown's Contemplative Studies program by a religious studies scholar,²² and Wisconsin's program by a neuroscientist.

We will expand on Wisconsin's Center to give the flavor of such programs. The University of Wisconsin's Center for Healthy Minds was founded in 2008 by the neuroscientist Richard Davidson,²³ who has maintained a decades-long friendship with the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.²⁴ Davidson has developed an international reputation for his studies of the effects of meditation on the brain and our emotional well-being; indeed, Matthieu Ricard, mentioned above, has served not only as one of his subjects but also as a collaborator on an article about these effects appearing in *Scientific American*.²⁵ The center's web site describes its mission as follows:

What if our world were a kinder, wiser, more compassionate place? A place where we exercise our minds just like we exercise our bodies? A place where transforming your mind not only improves your own well-being, but cascades to the well-being of others in your community and around the globe?

We're making this vision a reality at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Faced with mental and physical health challenges at a global scale, we conduct rigorous scientific research to bring new insights and tools aimed at improving the well-being of people of all backgrounds and ages.

Our research, rooted in neuroscience, comes down to one basic question: *What constitutes a healthy mind?*

While the center was founded by a scientist, it has added faculty from the Liberal Arts, including John Dunne, Mark's professor

of classical Tibetan language, who holds the Center's Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities. Dunne's work focuses on Buddhist philosophy and the ongoing dialogue between contemplative practices and cognitive science.

Surf's Up in Texas!

Andy started the TCU Contemplative Studies program in 2012 and Mark, who had served as a steering committee member, took over as director in January 2017 with Andy's retirement. Thus, like the Contemplative Studies programs at USD and Brown University, ours has been founded and led by scholars trained in Religious Studies. Even so, the academic disciplines of our steering committee and campus allies have been quite diverse, including faculty and staff from Anthropology, Biology, Business, Counseling, Dance, English, the Medical School, Nursing, Philosophy, Psychology, Science & Engineering, Interdisciplinary Studies, Student Services, and others.

Our September 2012 inaugural event was a workshop titled "What is Contemplative Studies, and what is its place at TCU?"²⁶ Since that inaugural event, we have been organizing five or six events each semester, including short meditation sessions and a longer student meditation retreat, panel presentations, film screenings, a poetry contest, and social justice-oriented programming, such as a *metta*, or loving-kindness, meditation for TCU's DACA students and a panel focused on the intersection of contemplative practices and the LGBTQ community. And each semester we have invited a major speaker, such as those mentioned above, including Louis Komjathy, John Dunne, Barbara Dilley, Judith Simmer-Brown, and others.

We helped our colleague and steering committee member Blake Hestir, a professor in the Philosophy Department, organize the 2020 Moore Symposium. The two-day symposium on well-being, intended to be held in March before the COVID pandemic intervened, was to offer talks, workshops, and classroom visits by scholars from both the liberal arts and sciences, including Richard Davidson's keynote address. We are hoping that this seminal event, now tentatively rescheduled for 2021, will mark a pivotal moment in our program's development as we seek to create a contemplation-infused university that would offer students the opportunity to know themselves better and to flourish through a rich array of courses and eventually the chance to minor in courses including contemplative theory and practice.

²⁶ That workshop—sponsored by the university's Koehler Center for Instruction, Innovation, & Engagement—included presentations by us and by our Texas A&M colleague Donnalee Dox, who serves as the Director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Religious Studies and Head of the Department of Performance Studies. In addition to the ongoing support of the Koehler Center, we have been pleased by the interest and support we have received from colleagues, administrators, and programs from across the institution, including the Liberal Arts College, Honors College, Child Development Institute, Business School, Nursing, Fine Arts, hard sciences, and our new medical school.

Deep sea diving

We have reflected often on this contemplative “wave” and its trajectory. Indeed, at the November 2018 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado, we were asked by Chris Ahn, then Senior Acquisitions Editor for Asian Studies and Religious Studies at SUNY Press, where we envisioned *Contemplative Studies* thirty years hence. Ahn has been working with well-known figures in the field to create a *Contemplative Studies* book series at the press, which offers a robust list of titles in Asian studies, religious studies, and other fields. While we were naturally uncertain about such a distant future, we expressed our optimism that contemplative practices will have become by then mainstream, to recall our title, and so will not be seen as strange or exotic. Rather, contemplative education and the mindful classroom will have become normalized simply as “education.”

Spurred on by that question, we have also reflected on the limits of the *wave*, which, like all metaphors, obscures just as it reveals. It is certainly true that *Contemplative Studies* has been propelled forward like a massive wave and that we, with our friends and colleagues, can imagine ourselves as surfers on a warm, sunny day off the beautiful Maui coast. It’s an enticing image to see ourselves one with the board carried along atop the crystal blue ocean water in the warm sunshine. But we need to remain mindful of how that image can limit our understanding of a complex phenomenon and, at a minimum, supplement it with other images. For instance, contemplative practices aim to go deeper: that is, to plumb the depths of our own minds. Thus, we could imagine a diver going deep beneath the ocean waves in search of sunken or hidden treasure.

Indeed, “Ocean of Wisdom,” the most common English translation of the title “Dalai Lama,” suggests just such spiritual depth. The current Dalai Lama, the fourteenth, has, in fact, played a key role in the development of *Contemplative Studies* because of his keen interest in the intersection of meditation and the hard sciences. He has encouraged Matthieu Ricard and others from his tradition to volunteer for scientific studies like those being conducted by Richard Davidson and his colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds. The Dalai Lama is also a co-founder, with Francisco Varela and R. Adam Engle, of the Mind & Life Institute, which fosters ongoing conversation about the science behind these practices while promoting human flourishing.²⁷ And much like the visions of contemplative practice articulated above, the Mind & Life Institute’s mission is to “alleviate suffering and promote flourishing by integrating science with contemplative practice and wisdom traditions.”

We could, naturally, deploy other metaphors for “the wave”; we might liken contemplative practices to one of the many tools on a Swiss army knife to promote human flourishing, together with exercise,

²⁷ For more information on the Mind & Life Institute, please see www.mindandlife.org.

healthy eating, and so on. Since they are so diverse, moreover, we might imagine them as the Swiss Army knife itself—each tool, or practice, being useful for a particular purpose. Or, we could come ashore and imagine the current state of Contemplative Studies as helping construct a land-based “habitat for humanity.” That is, we might think of these programs as creating the foundation for a multi-use building that will, in the not-too-distant future, house scientists and their labs, wellness centers and meditation rooms, the liberal arts educators like us, but also, likely, other groups with whom we may take issue, such as the purveyors of mindful tacos or those improving sniper skills.

Although “riding the wave” may bring to mind blissfully surfing in the Hawaii sunshine on the water’s surface, this appealing image may also help perpetuate the slick hype with which we began. Thus, we have tried to remain slightly skeptical and “balanced atop our boards,” reminding our audiences, whether students or faculty, community members or magazine readers, of the full picture. Those glossy magazines covered with slim, attractive white women chanting “Om” often fail to mention how these practices are deeply embedded in the cosmologies of religious traditions with sophisticated ethical teachings aimed at developing wisdom about self and world. These goals resonate naturally with finding one’s *spiritual* purpose in the context of traditional liberal arts inquiry—quite different from the entrepreneurial *spirit* that has secularized and repackaged them to make money.

While reservations about the mindfulness wave would be better addressed more fully in another essay, we would be remiss in not mentioning that many of these entrepreneurs also fail to point out, moreover, that the practices don’t work for everyone nor warn their audiences about the potential risks of meditation, especially when done intensively. Investigating the mind can open us up to deep and sometimes quite painful emotional and spiritual states. Although we have regularly and successfully used short meditation, mindfulness, and other contemplative practices in class with our students, longer periods of meditation, like the ten-day Vipassana retreats mentioned above, can be much more challenging and require proper care and supervision. Willoughby Britton and Jared Lindahl, professors in Brown’s Contemplative Studies program, have tried to add some well-needed critical reflection on this relentless positivity, bringing attention to those whose mental and emotional states have been harmed through such intensive practice.²⁸ There are also ongoing discussions on the matter of credentialing teachers and the ethics of non-experts teaching any contemplative practices or trying to teach a sampler of meditation without experience of most kinds.²⁹

Despite these important caveats, we are still in favor of the contemplative wave and so, in the spirit of that image, we invite you to grab your surfboard and join us!³⁰ A

28 See the following episode of Dan Harris’s 10% Happier podcast: #79: “Willoughby Britton, Jared Lindahl—Does Meditation Have a Dark Side?” May 24, 2017.

29 See Fort 2013, 29–31.

30 If you’d like to know more about the TCU program, the “Contemplative Frogs,” please check out our web site at www.contemplativefrogs.com. And please contact Mark at m.dennis@tcu.edu if you’d like to be added to our mailing list.