

The University of Western Ontario
Faculty of Information and Media Studies

Syllabus

FIMS 9605: Contemplation and Mindfulness in the Information Age

Course Information

Instructor: Dr. Ajit Pyati

Time: Tuesdays, 1:30 – 4:20 pm

Place: NCB 293

Office Hours: Thursdays, 11 am – 12 pm and by appointment

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Course Description

This course explores the increasing growth and popularity of contemplation and mindfulness practices within the context of the globalized information society. The exploration is sociological, theoretical, and experiential in nature. Topics include information overload and distraction, meditation app culture, capitalism and mindfulness, secularization of contemplative practices, the Eastern roots of mindfulness, and contemplation and its role in activist movements.

Learning Outcomes (based on OCAV's Graduate Degree Level Expectations: <http://oucqa.ca/framework/appendix-1/>):

By taking this course, students will be able to:

- articulate foundational concepts in the study of contemplation and mindfulness (1. Depth and breadth of knowledge)
- experientially analyze the effects of contemplative practices on themselves, with potential implications for both their personal and professional lives (4. Professional capacity/autonomy; 6. Awareness of limits of knowledge)
- apply knowledge from the study of contemplative practices to their own subject interests and disciplinary concerns (2. Research and scholarship; 3. Level of application of knowledge)
- critically analyze the phenomena of contemplative practices in the information age, including their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (2. Research and scholarship; 3. Level of application of knowledge)

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

Support Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western: <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Course Requirements

Paper #1: 15% (due May 24)

Paper #2: 15% (due June 21)

Final Paper/Project Preview: 5% (due July 5)

Final Paper/Project: 30% (due August 9)

Contemplative practice summaries: 10% (due each week)

Presentation: 15% (dates TBD)

Participation: 10% (ongoing)

Assignment Details

Contemplative Practice Summaries

Since this course deals with a topic that is highly experiential in nature, students are required to take part in a contemplative practice throughout the course. This practice can be anything that the student wishes to undertake. On the last page of this syllabus I have provided a list of different contemplative practices one could pursue with different centres and groups at Western and in London. Please feel free to consult me if you have any questions or need feedback about what types of practice(s) you might want to pursue.

Based on the contemplative practice chosen for the semester, students are required to write up short (1 to 1.5 page single-spaced) weekly reflections on their practice. Print copies of these summaries are due at the beginning of each class. . By the end of the semester, these reflections will amount to a type of “contemplative practice journal” that students can use for greater insight and understanding.

Reaction Papers

Two papers (15% each) in the range of 5 to 6 double-spaced pages will be due, with one due in the first half of the course and the other in the second half. These papers are meant to be thoughtful and critical reflections on and analyses of key topics and ideas you find compelling in the course readings. Papers can address themes and readings for a particular week, and/or can also integrate readings across a range of weeks. Rather than a summary of the readings, I am looking for critical thinking, synthesis, and strong analytical writing in these reaction papers. The following is the criteria for evaluating reaction papers:

- Identification of key themes, arguments, and ideas from selected readings
- Well-articulated reflections and arguments about key themes and issues
- Clarity and quality of writing, including style and grammar

Final Paper

A final paper in the range of 12 to 15 double-spaced pages (exclusive of references) will be due at the end of the course. The paper is meant to be an exercise in integrating key ideas and themes from the course with the disciplinary and particular subject interests of students. Thus the final paper will allow students to deepen connections between their own specific interests and relevant themes from the course.

The final paper preview can be in the range of 1 to 2 double-spaced pages, and should give a brief overview of your plan for the final paper, along with a list of 7 to 10 readings you might use.

*Note: For MLIS students, there is an option to do an alternative final project, since the MLIS program is not a thesis-based program. Please consult with me well beforehand in case you want to go down a project-based route, and we can identify an appropriate final project for you. A final project preview will be due the same time as the final paper preview.

Presentation

The student presentation (approximately 30 to 40 minutes) follows and focuses on the previous week's topic. A major goal of this exercise is to supplement the course topics and readings with examples of current events, issues, and themes that pertain to the student's disciplinary and/or professional area of interest. It should focus on a few key themes from the readings and expand on them, through the use of appropriate examples. The presentation is meant to be an exercise in leading the class in a thoughtful and stimulating manner. As such, it should be informative, substantive, and lively. The student leader(s) needs to distribute a 1

page outline (double-sided) of the discussion to the class, which should include at least 2-3 additional readings/resources that complement and add to the knowledge of the week's topic. Use of presentation slides, overheads or other teaching aids will be useful. The student(s) should also post all presentation materials on the course website on the day of the presentation and provide a print copy of their slides (if using them) to the instructor before the presentation begins.

The student presentation grade is based on:

1. Content (What): Evidence of detailed exploration of topic and use of pertinent examples
2. Style (How): Style of presentation, ability to engage audience, clarity of presentation.
3. Tangibles: Quality of handout, presentation materials, and additional readings

Attendance and Participation

Prompt attendance for the full class and active participation in discussion at all classes is required. Please come to class having read all the required readings, and be ready to discuss and engage with them in class. A concepts-based and experiential course such as this one *requires* constructive and engaged participation. Please think of your preparation and participation for this course as a way to enhance the overall class experience for all participants.

Weekly Readings and Topics (all readings are available on the course website):

Week 1, May 10: Introduction

What do we mean by contemplation? How can we define mindfulness? What is meditation? Why are these topics pertinent to the information age?

In-class reading:

“What is Mindfulness?” in Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go there you are: mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York, NY: Hachette, pp. 3-7

Week 2, May 17: Information Overload

Toffler, A. (1970). *Future shock*. New York: Random House.
-“Information Overload,” pp. 311-315

Powers, William. (2010). *Hamlet's blackberry: Building a good life in the digital age*. New York, NY: Harper.
-Introduction, pp. 1-6

-Chapter 1: "Busy, Very Busy," pp. 9-19

Levy, D.M. (2016). *Mindful tech*. New Haven, CT: Yale.

-Chapter 1: "Falling in the Fountain," pp. 1-13

Shirky, C. (June 4, 2010). "Does the internet make you smarter?" *Wall Street Journal*.

Carr, N. (June 5, 2010). "Does the internet make you dumber?" *Wall Street Journal*.

Week 3, May 24: Disconnection

Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming conversation: the power of talk in a digital age*. New York: Penguin.

-"The Empathy Diaries," pp. 3-19

-"Self-Reflection," pp. 79-99

-"The End of Forgetting," pp. 337-362

Week 4, May 31: Defining Contemplation and Mindfulness

Merton, T. (1971). *Contemplation in a world of action*, T. Merton. New York: Doubleday.

-"Contemplation in a world of action," pp. 157-165

Merton, T. (2013). "The contemplative life in the modern world," in *Thomas Merton: Selected essays*. P.F. O'Connell (Ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, pp. 225-231

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Bantam.

-Chapter 2, "The foundations of mindfulness practice: attitudes and commitment," pp. 19-38

Week 5, June 7: Meditation, Health, and Evidence

Tang, Y, B.K. Holzel, and M.I. Posner (April 2015). The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation. *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience*, pp. 213-225

Levy, D.M. et al. (2012). The effects of mindfulness meditation training on multitasking in a high-stress information environment. Paper from *Graphics Interface Conference 2012*, Toronto, 28-30 May 2012.

Grant, A. (October 9, 2015). "Can we end the meditation madness?" *New York Times*.

Farias, M. (May 21, 2015). "Meditation is touted as a cure for mental instability but can it actually be bad for you?" *The Independent*

Week 6, June 14: Contemplation and Technology – Part I

Levy, D.M. (2016). *Mindful tech*. New Haven, CT: Yale.

-Chapter 2, "Observing Our Online Lives," pp. 17-26

-Chapter 3, "Attention, Emotions, and the Body," pp. 27-41

-Chapter 4, "Exercise 1: Observing Email," pp. 42-66

** Kindly do the observing email exercise during the week leading up to this week's class. Give yourself an opportunity to do the practice at least 2 to 3 times in the week. You can use the log I give you. Please come to class prepared to discuss and share your experiences doing this practice. If you'd like, you can make observing email your contemplative practice for this week's journaling activity.

Week 7, June 21: Contemplation and Technology – Part II

Levy, D.M. (2016). *Mindful tech*. New Haven, CT: Yale.

-Chapter 5, "Focused Email," pp. 67-83

** Kindly do the focused email exercise during the week leading up to this week's class. Give yourself an opportunity to do the practice at least 2 to 3 times in the week. You can use the log I give you. Please come to class prepared to discuss and share your experiences doing this practice. If you'd like, you can make focused email your contemplative practice for this week's journaling activity.

** **Week 8: No Class, Research Week**

Week 9, July 5: Buddhist Roots of Mindfulness

Nhat Hanh, T. (1998). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching*. New York: Broadway Books.

-Chapters 1-3, pp. 3-11

-Chapter 11, "Right Mindfulness," pp. 64-83

Coleman, J. W. (2002). *The new Buddhism: The western transformation of an ancient tradition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

-Chapter 3, "Western Flower: The Growth of the New Buddhism," pp. 55-90

-Chapter 7, "The New Buddhism Takes Shape," pp. 217-230

Week 10, July 12: Yoga in the Information Society

DeMichelis, E. (2008). "Modern yoga: history and forms," in M. Singleton and J. Byrne (eds.), *Yoga in the modern world: contemporary perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 17-35

Liberman, K. (2008). "The reflexivity of the authenticity of hatha yoga," in M. Singleton and J. Byrne (eds.), *Yoga in the modern world: contemporary perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 100-116

Jain, A.R. (2014). Who is to say modern yoga practitioners have it all wrong? On Hindu origins and yogaphobia. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82(2), pp. 427-471

Week 11, July 19: Mindfulness and Capitalism

Purser, R. and D. Loy (July 1, 2013). "Beyond McMindfulness," *Huffington Post*

Carrette, J. and R. King (2005). *Selling spirituality: the silent takeover of religion*. New York: Routledge.

- "Introduction," pp. 1-29

- Chapter 4: "Selling the soul: the business of spirituality," pp. 132-137

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- "Introduction," pp. 1-4

Selections (TBD) from:

Wilson, J. (2014). *Mindful America: the mutual transformation of Buddhist meditation and American culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Week 12, July 26: The Pursuit of "Happiness"

Tan, C-M. (2012). *Search inside yourself: The unexpected path to achieving success, happiness, and world peace*. New York: Harper Collins.

- "Introduction: Searching Inside Yourself," pp. 1-8

- "Learning Optimism, Unlearning Pessimism," pp. 153-155

Ehrenreich, B. (2009). *Bright-sided: how positive thinking is undermining America*. New York: Picador.

- Introduction, pp. 1-13

- Chapter 6: Positive psychology: the science of happiness, pp. 147-176

Hamman, B. (November 14, 2015). "How to pick a meditation app," *New York Times*.

Video:

"All it takes is 10 mindful minutes," TED Talk by Andy Puddicombe (founder of *Headspace*), November 2012:
https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes?language=en

Week 13, August 2: Contemplative Education

Readings:

Merton, T. (2013). "Learning to live," in *Thomas Merton: Selected essays*. P.F. O'Connell (Ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, pp. 433-441

Barbezat, D.P. and Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chapter 1: "Transformation and renewal in higher education," pp. 3-20

Chapter 3: "Contemplative pedagogy in practice," pp. 39-66

Levy, D.M. (2007). No time to think: reflections on information technology and contemplative scholarship. *Ethics and information technology* (9): 237-249

Week 14, August 9: Contemplation, Social Change, and Activism

Merton, T. (1973). "Marxism and monastic perspectives," in *The Asian journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, pp. 326-343.

Macy, J. and Johnstone, C. (2012). *Active hope: how to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

-Chapter 1: "Three Stories of our Time," pp. 13-33

Levy, D.M. (2016). *Mindful tech*. New Haven, CT: Yale.

- Chapter 10: Broadening and deepening the conversation, pp. 182-184

Carrette, J. and R. King (2005). *Selling spirituality: the silent takeover of religion*. New York: Routledge.

- "Conclusion: Spirituality and Resistance," pp. 169-182