

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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TRANS-RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON COMPASSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICS AND VIRTUE IN REAL WORLD BEHAVIORS



MANGALAM RESEARCH CENTER
FOR BUDDHIST LANGUAGES

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Contemplative Practice – Christian and Buddhist Perspectives
“Trans-religious Perspectives on Compassion: Implications for Ethics and Virtue in Real World Behaviors”

Andrew Dreitcer, MDiv, PhD

The focus of Dreitcer’s work on teaching life applications of the current dialogue gave special relevance to the story he shared of his own social context. He was the fourth generation in his family to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister in rural Indiana, and served there for seventeen years while also involved in progressive social justice issues. He attended Yale Divinity School while not believing in God, had a formative stay at the Monastery Taizé in France, and then connected with Buddhism through Spirit Rock Meditation Center. His involvement in the science-Buddhism dialogue was sparked by the combined roles of neuroscience and faith in his experiences around the sickness and death of his wife—also a pastor—from glioblastoma, and how she was able to preach brilliantly even as she increasingly lost brain function in the last months of her life.

His academic focus is on spiritual formation, defined as the practices, approaches, and sensibilities that serve in the cultivation and formation of a spiritual tradition’s goals for this life or the next, as well as systematic theology and historical Biblical hermeneutics. He has been influenced by Benedictine and Ignatian practice traditions, Jesus prayer, Centering prayer, and “gazing” or appreciation of nature, all contemplative in orientation “because I wanted an experience of a felt presence somehow.”

Given the extraordinary cultural and religious diversity of Claremont School of Theology (a United Methodist Progressive Seminary, which includes an Islamic graduate school and is partnered with Buddhist and Jewish Rabbinical schools) he addresses multiple different spiritual formation paths in his current teaching position, which leads to the challenge he articulated as: How can my contemplative practice-based teaching further each student’s spiritual formation in ways that stay true to each one’s traditions or aspirations?” He finds the solution in a process he sees as analogous to the model of the science-Buddhism dialogue: In the context of the traditional Christian focus on discernment processes—experimental ways of examining interior life—he offers science as another source of data for discernment. He tries to cast the concepts in ordinary secular language, but guiding his students to “re-enchant” them in the context of their own traditions. The process of redirecting them to the resources of their own traditions develops a “contemplative spiritual literacy”—expanding their understanding of meditation, for example, beyond the watered-down practice taught at the YMCA. He expressed the hope that observations from this meeting would prime useful ideas to bring back into this teaching.

He explained the general flow of a spiritual life formation exercise: first, entering into a practice as fully as possible; then stepping back to observe the experience, describe it, and reflect on it, which he related to Claire Petitmengin’s description of phenomenological observation; and finally, asking what invitation or implications that experience offers for one’s life or one’s role as a spiritual leader. When working on spiritual leadership formation, the flow involves further processes of analysis: examining

the motivation for practicing, the nature of one's "contemplative capacities," and what Dreitcer termed "stances toward the stuff" that comes up in practice.

He illustrated the process by directing the question "Why do you practice?" to the participants, noting that he had never asked this question of a group so embedded in practice and that his students usually echoed the popular arguments for stress reduction, or a sense of peace and calm. At the same time he presented a heuristic list of possible answers, ranging from personal wellbeing to movement toward a 'next' existence or afterlife. The participants responded with their own reasons for practicing, citing a reduction of misery, the beauty of the experience, a sense of freedom or of belonging, enactment of intention, curiosity, generating meaning or purpose, exploring the depth of emotional experience, answering some indescribable longing, and for its effect on interpersonal relations. Many of their own responses were congruent with Buddhist teaching, and they also noted how they believed others within traditionally Buddhist cultures would have answered: to decrease self-grasping (for the benefit of others); appreciation of the karmic conditions that allow for practice, felt as responsibility; the orientation produced by a defining experience of renunciation; and aspiring to a deeper way of knowing, which was felt to be a soteriological preview, or what Dreitcer compared to a "foretaste of heaven" in Christian tradition.

His description of processes then moved on to the analysis of contemplative capacities and he offered as examples: awareness, attention, interest, inclination, aspiration, intention, action, imagination, emotions/feelings, relationship, somatic/physical sensation, meaning/value-forming, expectation, release. His students are tasked with analyzing their experience of each capacity listed, and exploring them in the language of their own traditions. He noted that terminology is critical: "rumination" as currently used in psychology is very different from the rumination of the *Lectio Divina* which implies contemplation of a text in a way that fills one with God's presence. David McMahan commented that it would be very interesting to apply this process in a non-religious context to explore the implicit assumptions around a desire for meaning or self-cultivation within secularism, which is itself a tradition.

Finally, Dreitcer explained the process of surfacing "stances toward the stuff" that comes up, or identifying how to deal with the thoughts, feelings, images, and sensations that run through awareness during a practice. Tradition offers two approaches, each with many methods: either clearing it or understanding and cultivating a relationship with it.

Emphasizing that his use of language was heuristic, avoiding associations with particular traditions to function generically, he invited discussion. David Germano observed that Dreitcer's challenge in addressing spiritual formation in such a diverse group is a microcosm of the challenge of public education more generally: given the cultural and religious diversity of student bodies, and how meaning is embedded in our social networks and interactions with our environment, how do educators teach beyond the specific techniques of, for example, cultivating empathy or managing attention, to support students in learning to participate in a meaningful world? Bill Waldron noted that the challenge relates to commonalities in the role of contemplative life in human flourishing, and finding a balance between a scientific (and potentially reductionist) view of those commonalities and the exclusive specificity of specific traditions. This is a challenge, he said, at the planetary level, and relates also to bringing sciences and humanities together.

Dreiter then invited the group to enter into a particular contemplative practice as defined by one tradition, and to observe their experience as he played a recording of energetic gospel music. Participants shared a variety of responses, and Michael Lifshitz referred to an ethnographic analysis by Tanya Luhrmann and Julia Cassaniti, comparing differences in somatic interpretations of spiritual experience in Thai Buddhist and American Evangelical Christian practices. Dreiter then asked the group to consider whether their experience of the music could be described as contemplative, which opened a discussion on the definition of contemplative experience.

David Germano offered examples of Tibetan musical traditions such as work songs that occur in secular contexts, which could be as powerfully affecting as their ritual music practices. He also queried the label “contemplative” in the context of a so-called contemplative experience he had designed for an art museum, contrasted with passing through an exhibit in a typically brief, cursory, transactional manner. Linda Heuman expressed concern at how transformative cultural experiences of art, music, and theatre—once part of normal human faculties of educated people, whether contemplative or not—are declining, with mindfulness being offered as a replacement. Cliff Saron noted the importance of her point for designing controls for mindfulness research, given that artistic and cultural experience is always to some extent contemplative. This relates also to the critique of isolating mindfulness and meditation from soteriological goals, given the many possible kinds of meaningful intent other than religious. Martijn van Beek described a study of mindfulness that used a reading group (listening to audio recordings of novels together, followed by discussion) as an active control. Both groups showed generally identical results but drop-out rates were higher for those practicing mindfulness, and the reading group continued for a year beyond the study. He compared this to Dreiter’s work insofar as it used forms available within the culture rather than introducing foreign practices.

Other examples such as flow experience were put forward, and the presence of effort versus surrendering was considered, leading to the consideration that any practice might be contemplative given appropriate framing. Jack Petranker argued for a narrower definition involving contemplative inquiry and self-awareness. McMahan noted that they were rehashing distinctions between mystical, numinous, and ecstatic experience that the field of comparative religions had discussed in depth, and that he would reserve the term “contemplative” for a category that involved cultivating insight or calm. Germano added that this is a determination very much situated in cultural context, the history of the term, and the immediate purpose, noting that fundraising for a yoga program was easier when it was labeled “contemplative.”

Dreiter returned to the example of the gospel music and described his own experiences at the church where he had recorded it, noting that the felt presence of intimacy with something beyond himself that was both personally and socially transformative was comparable to what he had experienced in the practice of monastic singing. Although the theological and liturgical stances and styles of those two contexts were widely divergent, he found a kind of interior silence in both that opened a sense of hope and freedom which for him defined contemplative practice. He recognized contemplative practice also as a cultural necessity that gave voice to hope in circumstances of social struggle, which resonated for him personally in a way that practicing in an upper-middle class, white church would not.

Finally, he offered for comparison with Buddhist tradition a detailed description of Christian compassion-forming practices, including Ignatian meditations on the life of Christ that involve reliving the story in imagination, and the culmination of Jesus Prayer in the retreat called the Contemplation to Attain Love, which interrogates how you can express your unique identification with Jesus in action in the real world, highlighting relational intimacy.