

Contemplative Social Justice Ethics

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In a culture where ambition, competition and busyness (and business) are valued, the usefulness of quiet contemplation may not be recognized. But there have been long, historically significant traditions of contemplation in many parts of the world. Contemplation occurs in many forms—as prayer, as meditation, as ritual dance and drumming, as times of deep community spirit, and even as martial arts. Those who practice the contemplative methods taught in these traditions may experience insights into themselves and into the nature of reality that they have never experienced before; they may experience connection with others and with nature that is more holistic; or they may develop intuition and skills useful for helping others.

This philosophy course focuses on this last outcome of contemplative practice: development of the ability to help others. In some traditions, altruism and active engagement in social justice are said to be the result of regular and consistent contemplative practice. We'll study five contemplative practice traditions in the course and discuss how they use contemplation in addressing social justice issues. We'll also study a western philosophical analysis of altruism to discuss whether, and how altruism, is possible.

The causes and effects of racism, poverty, disparities in educational opportunities, violence and incarceration need to be tackled at many levels by the government and by citizens. One level of active engagement occurs through non-profit social work organizations. Social work organizations are directly involved in helping people affected by these problems, and some of these non-profit organizations incorporate contemplative practices in their training of staff and in their programs for clients.

Fieldtrips to non-profit organizations that use contemplative practices and that address social justice problems are a required and essential part of the course. The course meets for a long period on Tuesday in order to make these fieldtrips possible. Students will work in teams of four people to focus on one of these non-profit organizations that will be visited; as a final project, the team will develop a "Googlepages" website describing the specific contemplative practice(s) used by the non-profit and how the non-profit applies contemplative practice in benefitting others. The following non-profit organizations will be visited:

Zen Mountain Monastery's National Prison Sangha Project, Woodstock, NY

Grafton Peace Pagoda, Grafton, NY

Oneness in Peace Center, Hudson, NY

Urban Grief Project (in-class talk by Lisa Good), Albany, NY

Audre Lord Project, Brooklyn, NY

Actual contemplative practice—using different traditional methods—is also a required and essential part of the course. During every class period, we will practice the contemplative methods used by the non-profit organizations visited, as well as contemplative methods used in the other traditions we'll be studying. We will learn most of the methods on the fieldtrips. The point of practicing contemplative methods is not to convert you to a particular religion or worldview. Instead, the point is to learn about contemplative methods from different traditions so that we may better understand the application of these methods in social justice work.

Course objectives

- 1) To study philosophical theories of altruism and engaged ethics
- 2) To study and practice several contemplative methods, thought by some to be useful in social work
- 3) To examine the relation between contemplative practice and active engagement in social justice
- 4) To understand how several social justice non-profit organizations apply contemplative practice in their work
- 5) To debate the philosophical question of the possibility of altruism

Course requirements

- 1) Completing the required reading assignments **before** class and participating in class discussion (worth 10% of final grade)
- 2) Midterm exam (20% of final grade)
- 3) Final exam (30%)
- 4) Team website about one of the non-profit organizations visited, which will include a jointly crafted homepage as well as 5-7 page papers from each member of the team (30%)
- 5) Postings to class blog (10%)

Required texts

- 1) *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*, Sallie B. King (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005)
- 2) *The Possibility of Altruism*, Thomas Nagel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978)
- 3) *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara A. Holmes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004)
- 4) *Jewish Meditation*, Aryeh Kaplan (NY: Schocken Books, 1985)
- 5) *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, Ibn 'Arabi (Anqa Press, 2008)
- 6) Additional readings assignments posted on Schaffer Library online reserve

Attendance policy

Because the class meets only once a week, more than one unexcused absence will result in a reduction of your final grade: for each unexcused absence over one, your final grade will go down 1/3 grade—e.g., from an A- to a B+ at your second unexcused absence, from a B+ to a B at your third unexcused absence, etc. **The fieldtrips are required**, so only extraordinary circumstances will count as an excused absence on fieldtrip days.

In addition to the required fieldtrips, there will be **optional** fieldtrips, which will not have any connection to your final grade. These fieldtrips will not be on Tuesday.

If you come to class late, you will disrupt the contemplative practices that we'll use to start the class. So please be on time. I will also need help bringing the cushions down to the classroom every day, and it would be great if some of you could come early to help me with the cushions.