

## Chapter 1

# Approaching Contemplative Practice

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Contemplative practice refers to various approaches, disciplines, and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like. Often the purview of ascetics and monastics, contemplative practice in a modern context has become embraced by people of every possible persuasion and social location. There are now contemplatives and contemplative communities that are both rooted in and independent of more encompassing religious traditions. Informed by the academic study of religion, with particular attention to contemplative practice and contemplative experience, this book is a comparative sourcebook on meditation and contemplative prayer. In using these categories, the volume draws attention, albeit somewhat obliquely, to the diverse tradition-specific technical terms approximated by “contemplative practice.” In the pages that follow, we explore and expound the nuances of tradition-based and religiously-committed contemplative practice. By engaging contemplative literature, the technical writings on contemplative practice, and by understanding contemplative traditions, the contemplative strains or dimensions of religious traditions, we encounter important insights into not only the transformative effects of dedicated and prolonged practice but also lived religiosity as expressed in contemplative ways of life. One might, in turn, reflect on the characteristics of a “contemplative approach” to being and aliveness.

There are a variety of ways to approach contemplative practice and contemplative experience. In this chapter, I provide a representative overview of theoretical and methodological issues in the emerging, interdisciplinary field of contemplative studies, especially from the perspective of the comparative, cross-cultural, and multidisciplinary study of religion. In the next chapter, I examine some tradition-based issues and perspectives. This chapter in turn covers “contemplative practice” as a comparative category and contemplative studies as an emerging interdisciplinary academic field. With respect to the latter, I give particular attention to a Contextualist approach as well as reflect on the contributions and limitations of empirical approaches, especially concerning the relative merits of neuroscience and neuroimaging technologies. Finally, I identify and discuss key issues in the study and practice of religiously-committed and tradition-based contemplative practice and contemplative experience.

## Contemplative Practice

“Contemplative practice” is a more-encompassing comparative category, with some rough equivalence to “meditation.”<sup>1</sup> However, unlike “meditation,” which sometimes implies seated postures and which is often reduced to Buddhist meditation, “contemplative practice” functions as a larger umbrella category. In terms of religious traditions, it encompasses meditation and contemplative prayer. As such, it challenges one to investigate religious practice from a nuanced and comprehensive perspective; it also requires reflection on the heuristic value and relationship among “meditation,” “prayer,” and “ritual,” among other comparative categories. Moreover, as Jensine Andresen asks, “Heuristically, is it more useful to distinguish categories such as ‘meditation’ and ‘prayer’ in terms of method, or in terms of goal?” (2000, 20). At the same time, there are “secular” forms of contemplative practice, and interdisciplinary academic programs are being formed that include art, dance, movement awareness, music, photography, theater, and so forth. Possible connective strands or family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose (cf. Roth 2006, 1789, 1793). From my perspective, definitional parameters should be explored and discussed rather than rigidly defined.

“Contemplative practice” thus encompasses meditation and certain forms of prayer. Here some confusion may arise because “prayer” is often equated with petitionary or penitential forms and because the meaning of “meditation” and “contemplation” differs according to context (see also Underwood 2005). It is important to recognize that there are many forms of prayer, including petition, invocation, thanksgiving (praise or adoration), dedication, supplication, intercession, confession, penitence, and benediction (Gill 2005, 7367–68; see also Heiler 1932; Phillips 1965). Although fluid definitionally as a comparative category, “prayer” may be defined in terms of its devotional, relational, and communicative characteristics. However, these may also be present in contemplative practice, so prayer may become meditation and meditation may become prayer. As one member of a local Seattle mosque told me concerning Islamic prayer, “If Salat does not involve inner silence and awareness of Allah’s presence, it is not true Salat.” However, in other forms of contemplative practice, subject-object distinctions are not utilized or disappear. For example, in Daoist apophatic meditation and Sōtō Zen meditation, the practitioner is that which might be worshipped or given devotion in dualistic prayer.

In religious studies, “meditation” serves as a comparative category, usually without a strict definition; in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, “meditation” and “contemplation” have more technical meanings. Etymologically speaking, “meditation” and “contemplation” relate to the Latin *meditatio* (to think over or to consider) and *contemplatio* (to look at or to observe), respectively. In Catholic monastic contexts and Catholic-influenced forms of contemplative practice, the terms most often relate to types of prayer, with prayer having four aspects or stages: (1) prayerful or holy reading (*lectio divina*); (2) meditation or reflection on specific topics (*meditatio*); (3) an inward, silent, or vocal response to God’s message or presence (*oratio*); and (4) maintaining silent awareness of God (*contemplatio*). Christian “contemplative prayer” is thus roughly synonymous with “meditation” as utilized as a comparative category. “Contemplative practice” thus includes meditation and contemplative prayer more strictly defined.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the comparative study of religion and the scientific study of meditation,<sup>3</sup> various attempts have been made to define meditation, especially through reflection on Buddhist practices. Some theoretically informed, comparative, and nuanced definitions include the following:

Using attentional mechanisms as the basis for the definition, we may state that *meditation refers to a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a nonanalytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought.* (Shapiro and Walsh 1984, 6; italics in original)

Meditation may be conceptualized as a process of attentional restructuring wherein the mind can be trained both in concentration, the ability to rest undisturbed on a single object, and in mindfulness, the ability to observe its own moment-to-moment nature, to pay attention undistractedly to a series of changing objects. This perceptual retraining allows a finely honed investigation of the rapidly changing self-concepts that perpetuate the sense of self. (Epstein and Lieff 1986, 58)

Perhaps, then, it is not too bold to claim that in its broadest sense, meditation is associated with the process of increasing self-awareness. . . . A caveat should be raised, however. Although research on meditation may necessitate a working definition of sorts, attempts to craft a precise definition of meditation threaten to limit the phenomena artificially and to obscure the subtlest nuances of its practice. . . . According to the discursive/non-discursive schema [advocated in this chapter], the crucial difference between meditation and prayer is that the former is non-discursive while the latter is discursive. (Andresen 2000, 21)

Reservations concerning the relative merit of definitions have also been expressed:

In the experimental [quantitative scientific] literature, meditation has many meanings. It has been defined in terms of certain physiological variables, for example, as a certain meditation pattern, measured by EEG; by certain changes in arousal; by more specific autonomic variables; and by a certain pattern of muscular tensions/relaxation. Others have defined meditation more in terms of attention deployment, related cognitive control mechanisms, or ego control mechanisms. Still others have defined meditation more as a process of therapy, with resultant significant changes in affective and trait variables.

There is little agreement on: how to define meditation, what should be measured, and what the most useful measuring instruments may be. Research on meditation is still in an embryonic state. No doubt, the slow process of data accretion will advance our knowledge of meditation so that we may better know what sort of data to collect. Yet, the present state of meditation research is largely wasteful; some consensual criteria must be used to establish which kinds of data are most useful to collect. The two most fundamental questions in meditation research should be: (a) What are the most important variables of meditation and how may they be operationally defined and

measured? (b) How are these variables related to each other? (Brown 1977, 236–37; cf. Murphy et al. 1999, 2)

Each of these definitions provides some insight into the defining characteristics of “meditation” as a comparative category. They are also informed by concentration on specific religious traditions and methods: Southern Buddhist Vipassanā in the case of Shapiro and Tibetan Buddhist meditation in the case of Andresen. One notices some general agreement, specifically with respect to developing attention and awareness. However, the theoretical move to emphasize “nonanalytical” or “nondiscursive” forms of consciousness seems problematic. If one adheres to a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to the study of contemplative practice, then certain methods appear to develop attention and awareness through analytical and discursive faculties. Some examples include Hindu mantric practices, the Ignatian spiritual exercises and Examen, as well as early Pure Land visualization (see ch. 2 herein).

There is thus diversity within religious traditions and within the academic study of meditation in establishing definitional parameters for prayer, meditation, and contemplative practice. As mentioned, my own approach attempts to be more phenomenological and inclusive. It aims to identify types of practices with strong family resemblances. The latter include seated postures, attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. In terms of religious studies, one might also include theological and soteriological concerns, which are discussed later.

With respect to understanding the apparent diversity of contemplative practice, an interpretive framework based on cartographies and typologies may be helpful. Based on my own comparative research and teaching, I would identify at least the following types of contemplative practices.<sup>4</sup> Alchemical methods, which include certain Tantric and Yogic practices, are complex physiological techniques, usually involving stage-based training aimed at self-transformation and/or divinization.

1. Alchemical	13. Mantic
2. Apophatic	14. Mantric
3. Attentional	15. Mediumistic
4. Communal	16. Mystical
5. Concentrative	17. Quietistic
6. Devotional	18. Respiratory
7. Dualistic	19. Secular
8. Ecstatic	20. Solitary
9. Enstatic	21. Therapeutic
10. Ergotropic	22. Trophotropic
11. Kataphatic	23. Unitive
12. Kinesthetic	24. Visualization <sup>6</sup>

Figure 1.1. Major Types of Contemplative Practice

Apophatic techniques emphasize nonconceptual and contentless states of consciousness, often with an implied skepticism concerning linguistic and intellectual categories. Attentional (mindfulness) methods emphasize open awareness or observation of phenomena without discrimination. Communal techniques are those practiced by a group or community within a communal framework. Concentrative practices emphasize focused consciousness; they may be “with support” (objects as aides) or “without support” (objectless). Devotional techniques involve affective adoration of or focus on a specific person or object. Dualistic practices emphasize an unbridgeable distinction between the adherent and the sacred; they tend to conceptualize practice in terms of relationships. Ecstatic techniques are those through which practitioners go beyond or outside of themselves; this usually involves higher levels of physiological activity (ergotropic) and assumes a transcendent view of the sacred. In contrast, enstatic methods are those through which practitioners go inward and gain an expanded sense of interior space; this usually involves lower levels of physiological activity (trophotropic) and assumes an immanent view of the sacred.<sup>5</sup> Ergotropic methods involve hyper-arousal; these are techniques characterized by high levels of physiological activity, with different senses activated in different types of ergotropic contemplative practices. Kataphatic practices emphasize conceptual and content-based states of consciousness, which usually include optimism concerning linguistic and intellectual categories. Kinesthetic methods involve physical movement. Mantic techniques are characterized by a divinational, magical, or prophetic dimension; they may involve invocations and ritual. Mantric practices utilize a sound, syllable, or phrase that are usually considered sacred or efficacious. Some *mantra*-based techniques consider the sacred as vibratory in nature, and mantric methods may be invocational, concentrative, petitional, reverential, and so forth. Mediumistic techniques are those through which adherents enter altered states wherein a god or spirit takes possession of them (voluntary possession); they involve divine communication or channeling. Mystical practices emphasize mystical experience, or experience of the sacred as defined by the individual practitioner or community. Quietistic techniques are characterized by nonconceptual, contentless awareness, with silence, stillness, and emptiness being primary. Respiratory methods focus on inhalation and exhalation or utilize breath-control techniques; there is awareness of respiration or conscious patterning of the breath. Secular forms are nonreligious practices, which are usually appropriated from religious traditions, purged of religious content, and reconceptualized according to modern materialistic, medicalized, and/or psychologized worldviews (secularized and domesticated). They are often framed in terms of a “science”/“religion” distinction, with efficacy defined in terms of quantitative and technological measurements. Solitary techniques are practiced by an individual in solitude or isolation. Therapeutic methods emphasize health benefits, and they may involve health maintenance or recovery. The latter are remedial; they are meant to heal or alleviate discomfort. Trophotropic practices involve hyperquiescence/hypoarousal; these are techniques characterized by low levels of physiological activity, with a strong deemphasis on sensory, emotional, and intellectual engagement. Unitive practices emphasize a distinction between the adherent and the sacred that may be transcended or overcome through practice; the culmination is complete identification or union of the practitioner with the sacred. Finally, visualization methods are imaginative exercises involving complex visual content. The perceptive reader will note that these typologies are not cognates. Some emphasize psychological dimensions, while others emphasize conceptual, physiological, or social ones. The point is to map contemplative practice and contemplative experience in as comprehensive, nuanced, and inclusive way as possible.

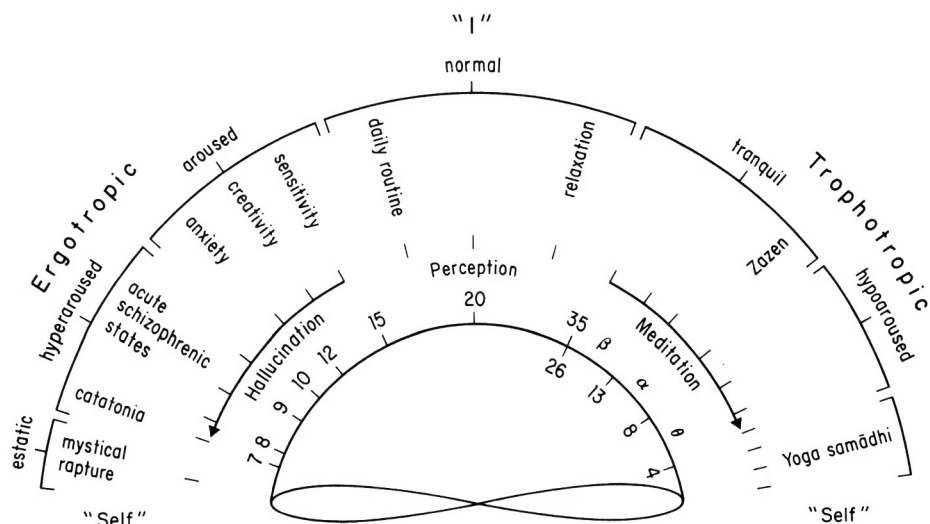


Figure 1.2. Roland Fischer's Cartography of Meditative and Mystical States<sup>6</sup>  
 Source: Fischer 1971.

Some of these interpretive categories also form dyads or pairs: apophatic/kataphatic, communal/solitary, ecstatic/enstatic, ergotropic/trophotropic, and so forth. However, many fully developed contemplative systems may alternate between apparently exclusive or antithetical tendencies. There is also overlap among categories. For example, devotional practices tend to be dualistic, ergotropic, and kataphatic, while apophatic techniques tend to be quietistic, trophotropic, and unitive.

Centering Prayer (Christianity)	Quaker prayer (Christianity)
Deity yoga (Buddhism)	Relaxation Response (Mind-Body Medicine)
Ignatian prayer (Christianity)	Remembrance (Islam)
Internal alchemy (Daoism)	Teresian prayer (Christianity)
Kirtan (Hinduism)	Transcendental Meditation™ (TM™) (Hinduism)
Kriya Yoga (Hinduism)	Vipassanā (Buddhism)
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Mind-Body Medicine)	Zazen (Buddhism)

Figure 1.3. Some Major Contemplative Practices with Global Distribution in the Modern World

We may, in turn, consider some specific examples. In Sōtō Zen practice, most frequently referred to as “silent illumination” (Chn.: *mozhao*) or “just sitting” (Jpn.: *shikan taza*), the practitioner aims to enter a state of silence and emptiness. This practice is nonconceptual and contentless. In terms of the aforementioned categories, it is apophatic, quietistic, trophotropic, and possibly unitive. It may be solitary and/or communal. In contrast, Dominican prayer, as expressed in the *Novem modi orandi sancti Dominici* (Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic; see ch. 11 herein), involves various exercises during which the contemplative identifies with Jesus Christ. It is devotional, dualistic, ergotropic, kinesthetic, and kataphatic. Finally, the Relaxation Response (see ch. 13 herein), a secularized and medicalized version of Transcendental Meditation™ (TM™), involves focusing one’s attention on a chosen word or phrase. It is attentional, concentrative, mantric, secular, and therapeutic.

As this cartography indicates, there is often overlap between “contemplative practice” and “contemplative experience” (see ch. 2 herein). Strictly speaking, we may define the latter as types of experiences that occur during contemplative practice, especially experiences deemed relevant, significant, or efficacious by the practitioner or community. In the case of contemplative practice, there is often a strong emphasis on associated experiences. For example, if one practices apophatic meditation, one should presumably enter a trophotropic state. Moreover, here one finds a potential overlap with other forms of “religious experience,” especially mystical experience. As discussed later and in the next chapter, the relationship between contemplative practices and mystical experience is a complex one, and one that varies depending on specific practitioners, communities, and traditions. Some emphasize the importance of mystical experience, at least as byproducts and/or indicators of successful training, while others dismiss any concern for “extraordinary experiences” as distraction.

## Contemplative Studies

Contemplative studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field. It is closely associated with other fields of inquiry such as consciousness studies, mysticism studies, neuroscience, psychology, religious studies, and so forth. Contemplative studies provides a framework for the investigation of contemplative practice and contemplative experience,<sup>7</sup> considered inclusively and comprehensively, as well as for the application of contemplative practice to academic life and university culture. The latter includes the possible contribution of “contemplative pedagogy” to teaching and learning.

The field of contemplative studies is in an embryonic or formative phase, and its parameters are still being established. 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, literature, movement awareness, music, theater, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> A more narrowly focused and religious studies–oriented approach seeks to map the entire breadth and depth of contemplative practice and contemplative experience 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. Can one fully understand contemplative practice without practicing? Can one fully understand Hindu contemplative practice without being rooted in a Hindu worldview?

As an emerging field, contemplative studies, specifically expressed as a lived commitment to contemplative practice and its application to daily life, began with a series of interreligious conferences.<sup>9</sup> Some of these events included Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action (Rothko Chapel; February 27, 1971; Ibish and Marculescu 1977), The Gethsemani Encounter (Abbey of Gethsemani; July 22–26, 1996; Mitchell and Wiseman 2003), and Purity of Heart and Contemplation Symposium (Camaldoli Hermitage; June 25–July 1, 2000; Barnhart and Wong 2001). These gatherings brought adherents together to explore contemplative practice from a religiously-committed and lived perspective. At the same time, more scientifically inclined and quantitative researchers began exploring meditation in terms of physiology, psychology, and eventually consciousness studies and neuroscience. Much of that early research focused on Vipassanā and Transcendental Meditation (TM), while more contemporary research privileges Tibetan Buddhism. The latter is partially the result of the Dalai Lama's support and participation. This type of research and the application of contemplative practice to contemporary social problems led to the establishment of various independent organizations, including the Fetzer Institute (1962), Mind and Life Institute (MLI; 1990), Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind; 1991)—including its Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE)—and Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies (SBICS; 2003), among others.<sup>10</sup> These organizations frequently sponsor independent conferences on meditation and consciousness as well as the relevance of such research to contemporary social problems. Interestingly, there has also been a more recent movement to introduce contemplative practice into university education, to develop a contemplative pedagogy, and to institute contemplative studies programs. Among the latter, Brown University, California Institute of Integral Studies, Emory University, Naropa University, Rice University, University of Michigan, University of Redlands, and University of Virginia are most prominent. The growing subfield of contemplative pedagogy has been particularly well documented in a variety of recent publications: “Contemplative Studies: Prospects for a New Field” (Roth 2006), *The Heart of Learning* (Glazer 1999), *Contemplative Teaching and Learning (New Directions for Community Colleges 151 [Fall 2010])*, *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy in Religious Studies* (Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011), *Contemplative Studies in Higher Education (New Directions for Teaching and Learning 134 [Summer 2013])*, and the special issue of *Buddhist-Christian Studies 33* (2013).<sup>11</sup>

Returning to contemplative studies as a field, Harold Roth, Director of the interdisciplinary Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, describes it as follows:

A new field of academic endeavor devoted to the critical study of contemplative states of experience is developing in North America. It focuses on the many ways human beings have found, across cultures and across time, to concentrate, broaden and deepen conscious awareness. Contemplative studies is the rubric under which this research and teaching can be organized. In the field of contemplative studies we attempt to:

1. *Identify the varieties of contemplative experiences of which human beings are capable;*
2. *Find meaningful scientific explanations for them;*



3. *Cultivate first-person knowledge of them;*
4. *Critically access their nature and significance.*

That is, we study the underlying philosophy, psychology and phenomenology of human contemplative experience through a combination of traditional third-person approaches and more innovative, critical first-person approaches. In other words, we study contemplative experience from the following perspectives:

1. *Science, particularly psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science and clinical medicine;*
2. *The humanities, exploring the contemplative dimensions of literature, philosophy and religion;*
3. *The creative arts, focusing on the study of the role of contemplation in both the creation and the appreciation of the visual and fine arts, creative writing and in the various performing arts of dance, drama and music.* (Roth 2008, 19–20, italics in original; see also Roth 2006, especially 1794)

Here one notices a number of distinctive parameters. First, Roth emphasizes “contemplative experience” over “contemplative practice.” Perhaps the former presupposes the latter, but there is an interpretive issue here, which parallels earlier academic studies of mysticism. The emphasis on contemplative experience might simply suggest that it involves an experiential understanding and internal investigation of contemplative practice. Second, Roth, like others in contemplative studies (see, e.g., De Wit 1991; Varela and Shear 1999; Ferrer and Sherman 2008; Thompson 2010), includes “critical first-person approaches.” This means that disciplined subjective experience, based in systematic investigation and reflectivity, is legitimate. Such a theoretical stance challenges the “taboo of subjectivity” at work in much of academic discourse (see Wallace 2000)<sup>12</sup> and potentially makes space for autobiographical accounts as primary source material and evidential support. The latter has also played a primary role in recent studies of mystical experience (see, e.g., Forman 1999, 20; Paper 2004, 1–3). However, Roth, like many in religious studies, hesitates to include what I would call “critical adherent perspectives” (Roth’s “committed first-person perspectives” [2006, 1793]).<sup>13</sup> This carryover from Enlightenment sensibilities and positivistic science, including the problematic notion of the disinterested and “objective” observer, is challenged not only by religious adherence but also by postmodernism and postcolonialism. Let me be clear: I do not advocate and do not support apologetics, confessionalism, dogmatism, evangelism, indoctrination, or proselytization in academia. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the tendency to objectify “the other” should be inhibited (cf. Roth 2008). The idea that religious adherents cannot be committed, reflective, and open is outdated and does not hold up to critical scrutiny. I am not advocating privileging the adherent either. My perspective is that the contemporary American—and arguably global—context of religious pluralism and multiculturalism requires the serious researcher of religion to include adherent voices in the study, teaching, and learning of religious traditions. To do otherwise is to become a dogmatist oneself, mostly likely under the implied hegemony of secular materialism and scientific reductionism.<sup>14</sup>

These comments of course express and evidence a specific social and institutional locatedness. As a professor at a church-affiliated (“sectarian”) university, I can make space for theological and

adherent perspectives without, presumably, jeopardizing my power, authority, or livelihood. This is not the case for others involved in religious studies, especially those at secular liberal arts and public research universities. In any case, contemplative studies involves interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and multiperspectival commitments. While neuroscience, sometimes under the guise of “contemplative science,” is currently being privileged, contemplative studies actually encompasses various theoretical and methodological approaches. In this way, it might parallel other subfields of religious studies. Again, this is not to reduce contemplative practice to religiously-committed forms. At the same time and as discussed later, it challenges those of us in religious studies to investigate the ways in which contemplative practice expresses and is located in specific religious communities and traditions.

Concerning the present volume and the study of religiously-committed forms of contemplative practice, we may identify a variety of interpretive approaches, namely, anthropological, comparative, experiential/experimental, historical, textual, philosophical, theological, as well as psychological and neuroscientific (cf. McGinn 1991, 265–343; Komjathy 2012). The most developed of these include comparative, historical, textual, and neuroscientific approaches, and there is, of course, overlap. On the most basic level, a comparative approach investigates the similarities and differences among contemplative practices. It also includes developing more comprehensive interpretive frameworks, like the cartography presented earlier (see fig. 1.1). From my perspective, this approach utilizes

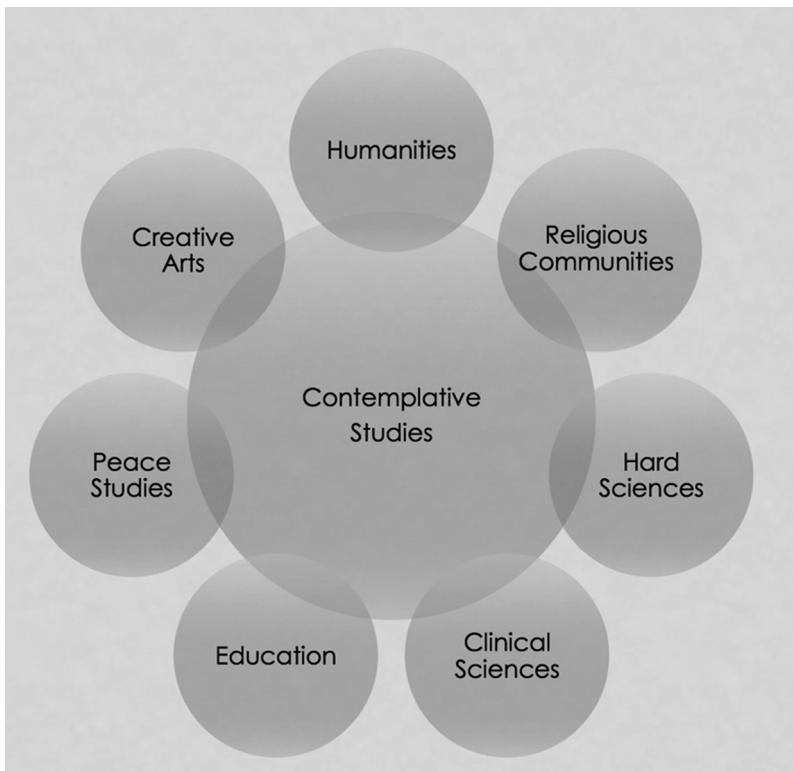


Figure 1.4. Contemplative Studies as Interdisciplinary Field

theoretical and methodological insights derived from and applicable to religious studies. Historical approaches emphasize cultural, historical, religious, and social contexts. An example would be to locate the *Novem modi orandi sancti Dominici* (Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic) within medieval Spain, Roman Catholicism, and the emerging Order of Preachers. This would include biographical information on Domingo de Guzmán Garcés (St. Dominic, 1170–1221), the founder of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans). A textual approach employs close textual analysis to reconstruct and interpret contemplative practice. At the most advanced levels, it involves annotated translation of primary sources. The present volume primarily utilizes a combination of comparative, historical, and textual approaches.

Neuroscientific approaches most frequently utilize modern neuroimaging technology to map the human brain and corresponding states of consciousness. In a parallel fashion, psychological approaches frame the study of contemplative practice in terms of emotional, intellectual, and, at times, spiritual development. Humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have been especially interested in meditation. One can imagine a multitude of anthropological approaches. More conventionally, fieldwork could be conducted on specific contemplatives and contemplative communities; here there is overlap with the study of asceticism and monasticism. One might also engage in participant-observation, wherein one would live and practice within a specific contemplative context. In this way, it might overlap with an experiential approach, in which one gains direct experience of the contemplative practice under consideration. A philosophical approach would identify and debate major issues related to contemplative practice and contemplative experience; this type of approach might parallel concerns over epistemology expressed in earlier studies of mysticism. It might fall into the category of the “philosophy of religion,” specifically the “philosophy of religious practice” (see, e.g., Schilbrack 2004). Given the emergence of neuroscience as an academic discipline, psychological and philosophical positions could be evaluated through certain empirical and experimental studies. Finally, a theological approach would seek to understand the ways in which contemplative practice might inform and clarify communion with the sacred. In this way, one might see a connection between contemplative studies and spirituality as an academic discipline. From a religiously-committed perspective, one could argue that theology informs contemplative practice and contemplative practice embodies theology. Perhaps contemplation is applied theology and theology is theoretical contemplation.<sup>15</sup>

In the following pages, I provide specific details on comparative, historical, textual, psychological, and neuroscientific approaches to contemplative studies. I also discuss major interpretive issues in contemplative studies, in the interdisciplinary study of contemplative practice and contemplative experience, as I understand them.

## Context and Locatedness

One might begin thinking about contemplative practice by shifting the frame slightly toward the study of mysticism. I offer this perspective neither to equate contemplative practice with mystical experience nor to suggest any necessary connection between the phenomena (see further on).<sup>16</sup> Rather, it is because one often finds a similar naïveté in contemplative studies as was expressed in early studies of mysticism, and because few writers on contemplative practice seem familiar with parallel debates and resulting insights from research on mysticism.

Early studies of and philosophical views concerning mystical experience evidence various underlying unquestioned assumptions and biased perspectives. Among these, one of the most prominent and influential was a commitment to Perennial Philosophy, or the belief that the diversity of religions simply represents different interpretations of the same, ultimate reality. Major early proponents of Perennial Philosophy include Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), Huston Smith (b. 1919), and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998). This view remains central outside of elite academic discourse communities, especially among popular writers, nonspecialists, and the larger public. One may summarize Perennial Philosophy as follows: the “divine” is unitary in nature (monotheism or monism); consciousness is unmediated; and mystical experience is the experience of the same reality with different *interpretations* superimposed onto that reality. These views have been challenged from various theoretical positions, including consciousness studies, historicism, literary studies, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and theology (see, e.g., Katz 1978a, 1983a; Paper 2005). With respect to the latter, advocates of Perennial Philosophy most often express, knowingly or unknowingly, a normative monistic theology, or the belief that there is one impersonal reality beyond human comprehension and conceptualization. While Perennial Philosophy may be theologically convincing, experientially valid, or socially agreeable to many, it simply does not hold up to critical scrutiny. Careful study of religious traditions, including the diversity of contemplative practice, mystical experience, and theological discourse, reveals equally convincing, mutually exclusive accounts of “reality.” Especially in terms of mystical experiences, and as expressed in the writings of mystics themselves, it would seem that there are many “realities.” That is, theologically speaking the academic study of religion seems to provide more support for a normative polytheistic theology, or at least a normative pluralistic stance. In any case, totalizing interpretations, like Perennial Philosophy, involve colonialism and domestication.

It is not my intention to review the entirety of this debate here, even though there are many parallel, interpretive issues, especially concerning the nature of consciousness and human ways of experiencing (see later discussion). However, the emergence of a Contextualist approach to mysticism, and contemplative practice by extension, deserves consideration. Contextualism was partially formulated as a challenge to Perennialism, with its naïve view of human consciousness and experience, often superficial and selective reading of primary texts (in translation), and unquestioned belief in a single divine source that exists beyond the confines of religious beliefs and characterizations.

As the name implies, Contextualism emphasizes the importance of context for understanding any mystic or mystical system. In its nascent form, a Contextualist approach to mysticism was advocated by Gershom Scholem in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1995 [1941]):

The point I should like to make is this—that there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena. There is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism and so on. . . . History rather shows that the great mystics were faithful adherents of the great religions. (5–6)

Experiences and phenomena defined as “mystical” do not occur and cannot be understood outside of a given religious tradition and/or sociocultural context. Even in the case of modern, “trans-

tradition” forms of mystical experience, a worldview and informing system are still involved. As Scholem’s pioneering and still standard account of Jewish mysticism reveals, there are complex doctrinal and historical factors that, at least partially, determine a given mystic’s experiences as well as the recognized significance of such events.

The Contextualist approach became more fully developed by Steven Katz and his colleagues and is most well known through two volumes edited by Katz (1978a, 1983a; see also Berger and Luckmann 1966; Berger 1990). Throughout these volumes, emphasis is placed on the sociocultural and religio-historical aspects of mystical experiences, specifically the diverse and anterior forms of mysticism as expressions of *different religious traditions with different conceptions of the sacred*. In addition, Contextualist theorists of mysticism often emphasize the relationship between “experience” and “interpretation,” both within and beyond the originary event itself:

When I speak of “interpretation” here I mean to refer to the standard accounts of the subject which attempt to investigate what the mystic had to say *about* his experience. This interpretative enterprise is, of course, carried on at several different removes and in several different ways. Among these are: (a) the first-person report of the mystic; (b) the mystic’s “interpretation” of his own experience at some later, more reflective, and mediated, stage; (c) the “interpretation” of third persons within the same tradition (Christians on Christian mysticism); (d) the process of interpretation by third persons in other traditions (Buddhists on Christianity); and so on. (Katz 1978b, 23; see also Smart 1965; Sharf 1998; Komjathy 2012)

It is important to consider both the ways in which “experience” is, at least partially, determined by one’s worldview and social location as well as subsequent interpretations by diverse discourse communities and contexts of reception. At least on some level, interpretation may be involved throughout the entire process of *experiencing*, particularly with respect to anticipated outcomes (see later discussion).

Because of the apparently overdetermined characteristics of “experience,” Contextualism, which is also referred to as Constructivism due to this point, *assumes* a very specific view of human consciousness:

*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. . . . The significance of these considerations is that forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be, i.e. on what will be experienced, and rule out in advance what is ‘inexperiencable’ in the particular given, concrete, context. (Katz 1978b, 26–27, italics in original; see also Gimello 1983; Gill 1984)

Claiming parallelism between ordinary human consciousness and mystical forms of consciousness, Katz argues that *every* experience is conditioned and determined by both the limited nature of the

human mind and enculturation into a given religious tradition. Human consciousness, whether mystical or not, is mediated by epistemological categories and enculturated beliefs, which are at work before, during, and after the experience (27). From a Contextualist perspective, this is so much the case that deconditioning (e.g., the Daoist emphasis on forgetting and emptying) is really only reconditioning (57; cf. Evans 1989, 54).

While the Constructivist view of consciousness is problematic and has been challenged from a variety of perspectives (see, e.g., Komjathy 2007 and later discussion in this chapter),<sup>17</sup> few serious and conscientious researchers of mysticism would take issue with the Contextualist “plea for the recognition of differences” (Katz 1978b, 25) and the importance of being attentive to relevant historical, cultural, and religious factors, the lifeworld of a given mystic if you will. This includes recognizing the ways in which consciousness and experience are conditioned: from social and religious enculturation to interpersonal relationships and personal habituation. It also involves identifying various elements of any worldview, such as the way in which metaphor conditions perception (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). A Contextualist approach could, of course, move in many directions: from an analysis of the larger socioeconomic and political context to a narrower focus on the religious tradition. Both involve attentiveness to historical issues.

The intellectual naïveté and interpretive waywardness of early studies of mystical experience, which were challenged and clarified by more sophisticated research, seem to have migrated to engagement with meditation. One of the most ubiquitous of these assumptions relates to Perennial Philosophy. For example, in his foreword to the recent *The Experience of Meditation* (2006), Ken Wilber, a prominent representative of transpersonal psychology, claims,

There is little question that meditative or contemplative practice has been at the heart of virtually all of the great wisdom traditions [*sic*], East and West, North and South. And while the myths and dogmas [*sic*] of these religions vary enormously—and categorically disagree with each other on virtually every major issue—the contemplative practices in each of these traditions tend to have an astonishingly similar outlook. (xii)

Here one may simply note the excessive degree of qualification in Wilber’s comments. In a parallel manner, though with slightly more nuance, Jonathan Shear, the volume’s editor, suggests,

There is also wide agreement about the nature of many of the experiences of the deepest levels of inner awareness. In particular they [meditation traditions] all emphasize that successful meditation can enable the mind to leave behind all of its ordinary activities of thinking and perceiving . . . and settle so deeply within its own nature that it reaches its own source in a state of *absolute, pure silence*. This state is quite unique. For it has no content in it at all . . . not even, indeed, any time or space in which such things could be located. (Shear 2006, xviii, italics in original; see also xviii–xix; cf. xvi)<sup>18</sup>

Shear’s construction of contemplative practice and contemplative experience parallels that of Robert Forman with respect to mystical experience. In fact, Shear seems to be equating the “deepest levels of inner awareness” with Forman’s notion of a Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) (see Forman 1990), also referred to variously as Absolute Unitary Being (AUB; D’Aquili and Newberg 1999,

198–203) and Ultimate Pure Being (UPB; Austin 2006, 7, 10, 393). Such claims evidence a specific philosophical, and arguably theological, commitment. They are not phenomenological. In previous work, I have suggested that Forman’s reduction of “mystical experience” to trophotropic (i.e., hypoaroused/hyperquiescent) types unjustifiably privileges specific traditions over others (see Komjathy 2007). Interestingly, the exclusions involve some of the most well-known and influential mystical experiences in the Roman Catholic tradition. In a parallel ordering of consciousness and experience, neuroscientists (the “hard side” of consciousness studies) frequently identify one form of mystical consciousness as the pinnacle of human consciousness. This too is not phenomenological, as it is based on specific constructions. A more nuanced understanding of the entire spectrum of contemplative practice would recognize that there are various ergotropic forms, including corresponding experiences with high degrees of visual and/or auditory content. As is discussed later, neuroimaging of contemplative practice and mystical experience should not arbitrarily limit the “data set.” The spectrum of contemplative practice also reveals radically different psychologies and views of consciousness, which should be considered in neuroscientific studies and interpretations.

Given the theoretical sophistication and heuristic viability of Contextualism, especially its requirement of close textual analysis and systematic comprehension, one may say that it is *absolutely essential* to locate religiously-committed forms of contemplative practice in their given religious traditions and soteriological systems.<sup>19</sup> For present purposes, we may say that contemplative practice, like mystical experience, is socially located. Every type of contemplative practice is informed by specific worldviews and larger frameworks. As discussed later, this is equally true of modern “secular” or “nonreligious” forms of contemplative practice. Considering contemplative practice related to religious traditions, it is essential to understand those traditions, including the informing worldviews and soteriological systems. In this respect, Andresen and Forman’s map of different aspects of religious traditions and corresponding research trajectories may be utilized to develop a more comprehensive interpretative framework for understanding contemplative practice.

As we can see from figure 1.5 on page 18, a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of contemplative practice and contemplative experience would be attentive to subjective experience, doctrinal analysis, scientific research, and social expression. Transcending the limitations and problematic privileging of a “scientific approach” in this model, we may work toward developing an interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary approach that recognizes and investigates informing worldviews, social dimensions, subjective experience, as well as biological, physiological, and neuroscientific dimensions (see also ch. 2 herein). It is essential to locate contemplative practices within their larger frameworks. Careful study of contemplative practice reveals diversity and complexity, both practically and theologically.

In terms of religious studies, what I am advocating is understanding and studying contemplative practice in a comprehensive and integrated way. As expressed in the present volume, this involves close textual reading and historical contextualization, including an attempt to understand the given contemplative practice in terms of its informing worldviews, associated religious tradition, and soteriological system. Though experiential understanding and contemporary adherent perspectives may have a place,<sup>20</sup> the methodology is, first and foremost, historical reconstruction and textual analysis. On a more general interpretive level, one may ask how the contemplative practice embodies the corresponding religious tradition and soteriological system. That is, the contemplative practices presented herein are simultaneously informed by

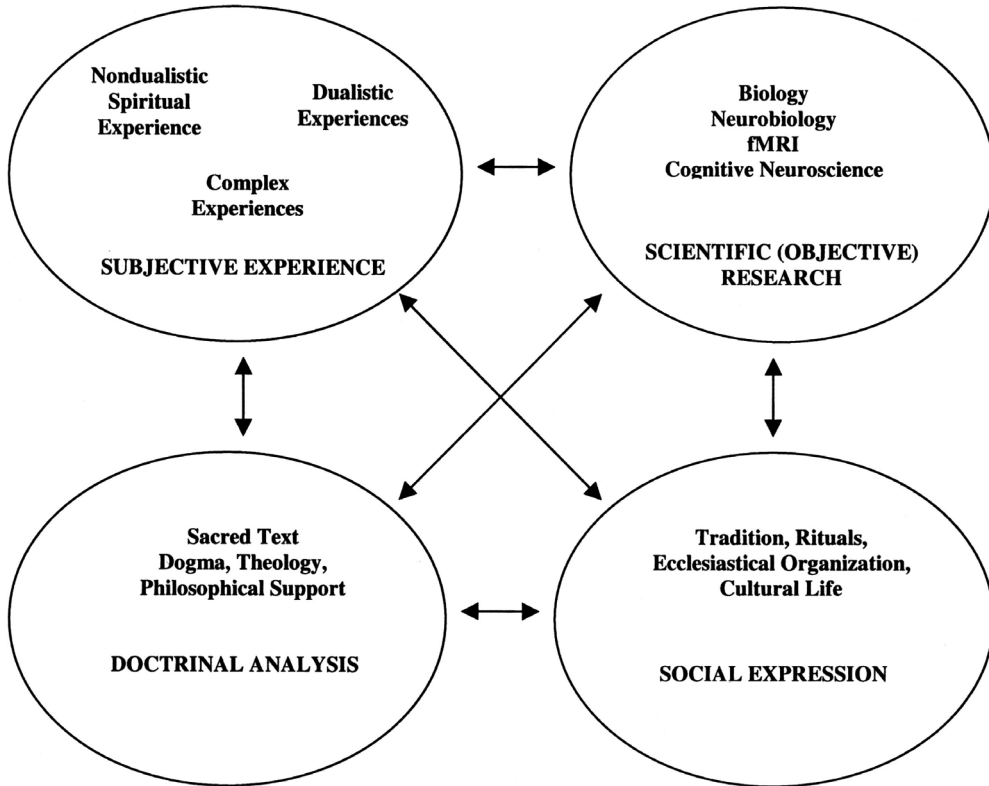


Figure 1.5. Four Aspects of the Study of Religion  
 Source: Andresen and Forman 2000.

and expressions of a larger framework. One might, in turn, consider other dimensions related to contemplative practice, namely, architecture, art, asceticism, community, diet, ethics, material culture, monasticism, mystical experience, place, ritual, scripture, and so forth (see ch. 2 herein).

Let us briefly examine the ways in which a Contextualist approach would account for contemplative practice by examining one specific example. Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of Sōtō Zen (Chn.: Caodong Chan) in Japan, advocated a form of contemplative practice known as “just sitting” (*shikan taza*), which refined the earlier Chan meditation practice of “silent illumination” (*mozhao*). Both practices evidence influence from classical Daoist apophatic meditation, especially as expressed in the *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) and *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang). Conventionally speaking, *shikan taza* practice involves emptying and stilling the mind of excess intellectual and emotional activity. As expressed in Dōgen’s “Zazen-gi” (Rules for Zazen), “Sit solidly in samādhi and think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Non-thinking. This is the art of zazen” (Tanahashi 1985, 30). In studying this practice, a Contextualist approach might first examine Dōgen’s life, his biographical background.



One finds that Dōgen was ordained as a Tendai monk, studied under Eisai (founder of Rinzai Zen) in Japan, and traveled to China with Myozen, one of Eisai's senior disciples. During his visit to China, Dōgen met and received Dharma transmission from Rujing (Jpn.: Nyojo; 1163–1228), an ordained monk of the Caodong lineage of Chan Buddhism. From these biographical and historical details, one could seek to understand the ways in which Dōgen was located in Chan Buddhism in general and in the Caodong lineage in particular. Moreover, from Dōgen's extant writings, especially his *Shobogenzo* (Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye), we know that he lived and taught at a variety of Japanese Zen mountain monasteries throughout his life. That is, his contemplative practice was informed by and benefited from living in secluded and natural landscapes, which Dōgen saw as supporting and expressing the condition of enlightenment. He also wrote some famous essays on monastic life, including "Tenzo kyōkun" (Instructions for the Cook) and "Jūundō-shiki" (Regulations for the Auxiliary Cloud Hall). These and other writings reveal that, for Dōgen and early members of Sōtō Zen, *shikan taza* was a solitary and communal monastic practice. It was informed by daily monastic discipline, including conduct guidelines and work assignments, as well as applied to various duties. Moreover, Dōgen's contemplative practice was located in and expressed a Zen Buddhist soteriology, which identified spiritual realization as the ultimate purpose of human existence. A thorough understanding of this soteriology would have to address Dōgen's views on karma and reincarnation as well as potential Daoist and Shinto influences. For example, in his "Sansui-kyō" (Mountains and Waters Sutra), Dōgen seems to express a perspective informed by a panethnic mystical experience, wherein he has dissolved into Nature and the local landscape. These and other context-specific details lead to larger interpretive questions. In order to attain the "practice-realization" that Dōgen envisions, does one need to become a monastic? Is a secluded, natural place necessary? What role do the monastic community, monastic regulations, and monastic life play in this contemplative practice? Does one need a master, and should one study the teachings and writings of Zen masters? Taking a more sociopolitical position, one might even ask if "just sitting" was a way for Dōgen to escape the politics of his time, both in the Tendai order and the larger Kamakura (1185–1333) society. Some sources also indicate that Dōgen may have fallen into despair late in life; corresponding to his quasi-exile in Echizen Province (present-day Fukui prefecture) in 1243, "he fell into a depression that had been building up through the external pressures and animosities of the dark times he was going through. The year that he spent in Kippō-ji [Yoshimine-dera] marked a low point of his life" (Dumoulin 1990, 62).<sup>21</sup> If this was indeed the case, was *shikan taza* a psychological coping mechanism? Does Buddhist meditation lead to a dissociative state? That is, a Contextualist approach could be informed by historical, psychological and sociological perspectives.

While some individuals (e.g., Michael Murphy, Ken Wilber) would like to extract contemplative practices from their informing soteriological systems and religious traditions in order to create a universal form of spirituality or wisdom philosophy, others (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Keating) understand these and additional dimensions, such as community and place, as essential and interdependent. Of course many in the former camp would characterize the latter as "sectarians," "dogmatists," or "ideologues," as limiting "human potential" and "human spiritual evolution." But these individuals could just as easily respond with labels such as "spiritual colonialists" and "New Age capitalists." As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, there are contributions and limitations of community and tradition, whether religious or other. But the point of the present section is to highlight the ways in which contemplative practice is always

socially located. For example, in the course of my life I have met a variety of Daoist contemplatives and hermits, both in mainland China and in North America. These Daoist practitioners usually have a variety of parallel characteristics: rejection of the dominant social order (mundane reality); acceptance of Daoist eremitic religious models; and a larger conception of community, which encompasses actual Daoist communities and simultaneously transcends notions of temporality and physicality. The latter suggests that the “Daoist body,” the community of Daoists, is not limited by geographical proximity, historical contemporaneity, or physical embodiment. In fact, many of these Daoists claim to have had encounters with immortals, spirit beings, and disembodied teachers. Thinking about social location, there is an underlying exchange with both the larger society and an invisible network of participation. At the same time, their physical seclusion is informed by religious precedents and models as well as by influential scriptures. Often this involves loose affiliations with a temple or monastic community, including veneration by the latter.

Individuals advocating modern secularized, spiritualized, or therapeutic forms of contemplative practice more often than not present them as transcending the limitations of “institutionalized religion,” as being free of this and similar “problems.”<sup>22</sup> However, as mentioned, every contemplative practice utilizes a specific worldview and locates the practitioner in a larger system. Prominent, “nondenominational” contemplative practices include Focusing (Eugene Gendlin), Integrative Restoration (iRest; Richard Miller), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Jon Kabat-Zinn), Relaxation Response (Herbert Benson), and so forth. One interesting detail is that most of these methods derive from religiously-committed and tradition-based contemplative practices: iRest from Hindu Yoga Nidra; MBSR from Theravāda Buddhist Vipassanā; and the Relaxation Response from Transcendental Meditation (TM), itself a modified Hindu practice. The “originators” of the modern modifications do not seem to see a problem with their own increase in power, wealth, and cultural capital. There are, however, ethical and political issues involved, including the question of ownership and distribution of benefit, as, for instance, in Bikram Choudhury’s (b. 1946) trademarking of a series of Hatha Yoga postures into so-called Bikram Yoga<sup>®</sup>™ (Hot Yoga; now the Bikram Yoga Franchise).

In any case, here we are primarily concerned with analyzing such practices from a Contextualist perspective. One example will suffice. In *The Relaxation Response* (1975), Herbert Benson (b. 1935), the eventual founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute and now the director emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, discusses his discovery of the “relaxation response” (see ch. 13 herein). This is both a specific method developed by Benson as well as a corresponding physiological state. As a stress-reduction and self-care technique, the Relaxation Response is a secularized and medicalized Hindu *mantra* practice that was modified from Transcendental Meditation. Benson and his colleagues developed the particular Relaxation Response method, which conventionally involves constant repetition of a self-selected word or phrase. In one section of the book Benson recommends “ONE” (130).<sup>23</sup> However, according to Benson,

It is important to remember that there is not a single method that is unique in eliciting the Relaxation Response. . . . we believe it is not necessary to use the specific method and specific *secret*, personal sound taught by Transcendental Meditation. *Tests at the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory of Harvard have shown that a similar technique used*

*with any sound or phrase or prayer or mantra brings forth the same physiologic changes noted during Transcendental Meditation.* (128, italics in original)

So, the Relaxation Response as a method is “trans-religious.” Whether religious, spiritual, or “nonreligious,” individuals may apparently benefit from the practice. The primary purpose of meditation practice in Benson’s view is to elicit the physiological condition known as the “relaxation response.” This is a hypometabolic (trophotropic), or restful, state, in which there is decreased activity of the sympathetic nervous system; the relaxation response is the opposite of the so-called fight-or-flight response. There are, in turn, various “scientifically proven” medical benefits. Throughout *The Relaxation Response*, Benson also repeatedly emphasizes the scientific nature of his approach as well as the various scientific studies that validate it.

With this background in place, we may now locate the Relaxation Response in its larger sociohistorical, “religious,” and “soteriological” context. First, as a cardiologist (MD) and as someone working within an allopathic (Western biomedical) paradigm, Benson seeks to justify the efficacy of the Relaxation Response through empirical and experimental data. This is partially due to the resistance and conservative nature of the American allopathic medical establishment, especially in the 1970s and 1980s before the emergence of so-called traditional, alternative, and complementary medicine. That is, Benson, like Jon Kabat-Zinn, was attempting to establish a new branch of medicine, eventually called “Mind-Body Medicine.” Second, the publication of *The Relaxation Response* emerged during a time of both interest in and criticism of Maharishi Mahesh (1918–2008) and his Transcendental Meditation movement. This included various attempts by Maharishi to provide scientific validation through TM-sponsored research on the practice. In that context, representatives were claiming that TM had special benefits that might justify the exorbitant fees charged by Maharishi and the TM organization. Contrasting the Relaxation Response with the so-called fight-or-flight response also locates Benson and practitioners of RR in a Darwinian evolutionary struggle for survival of the fittest. More pertinent to the present volume is the informing worldview and system of the Relaxation Response itself. Practitioners of the Relaxation Response technique are located in an allopathic medical and science-based framework. In particular, meditation practice is framed in terms of the corresponding physiological response, namely, the Relaxation Response. Here the worldview of Mind-Body Medicine suggests that states of consciousness have specific physiological characteristics, and that health and disease also have physiological correlates. In particular, stress causes various forms of disease. By practicing the Relaxation Response method, one can decrease stress and avoid disease. Utilizing an implied materialistic view of self, namely, self as biological organism, the Relaxation Response defines human existence in terms of medical health and the avoidance of disease. Simultaneously, it reduces both contemplative practice and contemplative experience to physiology. As long as one remains in this framework, within an allopathic and secular materialist framework, the Relaxation Response makes sense. However, if one believes that human experience and existence cannot be reduced to physiology, and that scientific validation is neither necessary nor sufficient, then one discovers various deficiencies. What if the chosen sound is not simply sound but also invocation? What role does community play in “wellness”? What if direct personal experience is privileged over scientific measurement and technological certification?<sup>24</sup> As discussed in more detail later, there are contributions and limitations to a psychobiological and neuroscientific approach to contemplative studies.

To summarize, contemplative practice always occurs within a specific context. There is always an informing worldview and discourse community involved. In the case of religiously-committed forms of contemplative practice, adherents practice prescribed methods within the parameters of a religious tradition and soteriological system. The corresponding system includes distinctive views of self, religious concerns, theological commitments, and additional forms of religiosity. The more-encompassing training regimen may involve such undertakings as asceticism, dietetics, ethics, monasticism, ritual, and so forth. To locate contemplative practice in this way, to approach contemplative practice in a comprehensive and nuanced way, in an interdisciplinary way, inhibits the tendency to isolate contemplative practice and/or to reduce contemplative practice to mere technique or experience. It also requires one not to privilege any particular interpretive approach (e.g., neuroscience).

### Psychology, Consciousness Studies, and Neuroscience

In the previous section of this chapter, I emphasized some potential trajectories for an interdisciplinary approach to contemplative practice and contemplative studies, especially one rooted in religious studies. Such an approach would apply theory and method derived from anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, theology, as well as psychology and neuroscience to the study of contemplative practice and contemplative experience. An interdisciplinary approach would, of course, also have to be informed by the careful study and nuanced understanding of religiously-committed and tradition-based forms of meditation and contemplative prayer. That is, it should not simply superimpose theory onto “data”; the voices of contemplatives and religious communities also should be included.

As mentioned, modern research on contemplative practice, or “meditation,” has been dominated by psychological and neuroscientific approaches, particularly through empirical and experimental (“objective”) studies. Given the prominence of these approaches, we should consider the contributions and limitations of psychology, consciousness studies, and neuroscience to contemplative studies. Although some members of these disciplines might object, I would suggest that the associative grouping is justified. Each area overlaps with the others, and each one investigates dimensions of human consciousness, mental life, and behavior on some level.

The modern field of psychology is diverse and vast. For present purposes, we are most interested in those areas that have examined contemplative practice and that are most clearly applicable to contemplative studies. This is, of course, open to interpretation. From my perspective, there are two relatively accepted approaches and two emerging and less familiar ones. The former include humanistic and transpersonal psychology,<sup>25</sup> while the latter consist of tradition-specific and contemplative psychology.<sup>26</sup> There is overlap among humanistic, transpersonal, and contemplative psychology, and between contemplative and tradition-specific psychology. These psychological approaches tend to relate to both existentialism and developmental psychology, with “human development” being framed to include “spiritual dimensions.” Partly as a critique of the emphasis on pathology in conventional psychology, especially in the forms of psychoanalysis and behaviorism and partly as a response to the existentialist search for meaning and purpose, humanistic psychology emerged in the 1950s.<sup>27</sup> Two prominent early representatives include Carl Rogers (1902–1987) and Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). The influence of phenomenology and existentialism is obvious in