

# Mind and Muscle: Considering Weightlifting as a Contemplative Practice

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*Many contemplative practice traditions include a physical embodied component. Contemplative movement practices, sometimes referred to as somatic practices, are characterized by bodyfulness as the natural companion to mindfulness and encourage full and integrated awareness throughout the mind-body. Movement practices may include an expansion of physical capacities and attunement to bodily processes. The author explores conceptualizations of contemplative practices with a focus on movement practices, and proposes the expansion of these theories to include weightlifting. Although stereotypes about weightlifting may emphasize a hypermasculine focus on dominance and competition, the author represents weightlifting as a varied and nuanced activity that appeals to a broad range of practitioners for myriad reasons. Aspects of weightlifting are described and considered as a contemplative movement practice that encourages bodyfulness and mindfulness. The author uses contemplative theory to reflect upon personal contemplative movement practice through weightlifting and offers suggestions for enhancing the contemplative aspects of weightlifting.*

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The stereotypes about “touchy-feely” contemplative practices and grunting steroid-fueled weightlifting seem incompatible. Superficial misperceptions aside, the realities of the two practices have striking similarities. I propose that weightlifting can be a contemplative movement practice (CMP). As a clinical psychology associate professor, I have slowly come to this conclusion through both my personal and professional endeavors. In this article I will describe how weightlifting fits into theoretical conceptualizations of contemplative practice and how writers and entrepreneurs in popular culture have noted the overlap between mindfulness and weightlifting. I will share my personal and professional experiences and reflections on weightlifting as contemplative practice and offer suggestions for nurturing contemplation during weightlifting.

On the one hand, an overly broad argument could be made that any activity can be contemplative with the right mindset. However, I propose that despite common stereotypes and misperceptions, weightlifting and strength training are activities that are particularly well-suited to a contemplative approach. To my knowledge, this is the first article

to consider weightlifting as a CMP. Although mind-body duality continues to permeate much of modern life, weightlifting underscores the inherent interconnections between our physical, mental, emotional, social, and cultural selves. Weightlifting can offer a partial antidote for those engaged in office work and information economies who may become disconnected from their physical embodiedness. Discovering or rediscovering one's physical capacities, adding to these capacities, and seeing concrete physical results over time are part of the allure of lifting weights. At the same time that weightlifting may be a goal-driven practice more broadly, the moment-to-moment experience of the practice can be contemplative. Weightlifting can also be an interesting social experiment, as it may challenge cultural norms about gender roles, strength and weakness, and masculinity and femininity.

Stereotypes about those who engage in weightlifting include one-dimensional "gym rats" who spend all free time at the gym, hypermasculine "jocks" whose ultimate goal is domination in competition, "meatheads" whose pursuit of ever-larger muscles through the use of steroids is ultimately physically damaging, and oiled-up "bodybuilders" who pursue a Mr. Universe or Ms. Universe physique (e.g., Miller, 2009). In my experience, only a small percentage of people engaged in weightlifting fit these stereotypes. People may undertake weightlifting for a myriad of reasons, of which the following is only a partial list: as a form of physical therapy to recover from injury or illness; as fitness training to increase strength, flexibility, and coordination; as body sculpting to attain or enhance certain physical features; as a competitive sport; as a way to combat stress or depression; as a psychological exercise of discipline and body awareness; as a rebellion against perceptions of feminine weakness; as a social commentary counter to the idea of woman as victim or dependent. I will discuss some of these purposes of weightlifting as they relate to my experience and notions about contemplative practices.

### **A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPLATIVE MOVEMENT PRACTICES**

Discussions about how to characterize and understand contemplative practices as well as their benefits have been ongoing in the literature of many disciplines. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society offers the "Tree of Contemplative Practices" (Figure 1) as a useful tool for advancing this discussion. At its base, the tree sprouts from the roots of awareness and communion and connection. Definitions of mindfulness often touch on both of these contemplative aspects, emphasizing an awareness of the present moment with a curious, nonjudgmental observer stance and describing connection with self and others through a compassionate, kind, and loving regard and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, 2006; Williams & Penman, 2011).

Researchers have discovered psychological, emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits to contemplative practices. Meta-analyses suggest that mindfulness and meditation lead to decreases in everyday and clinical levels of stress, anxiety, and ruminative depressive thinking (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009, 2011; Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012).

Mindfulness components have been added to a range of traditional and emerging psychological treatment programs to good effect (e.g., Earles, Vernon, & Yetz, 2015). Meta-analyses have also found increased spirituality, empathy, and self-compassion resulting from mindfulness and meditation training (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009), as well as some improvement in attention and memory (Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012). Mindfulness and meditation may decrease blood pressure (Anderson, Liu, & Kryscio, 2008) and heart rate (Solberg et al., 2004) and improve immune system functioning, due potentially to their psychological and emotional benefits (Davidson et al., 2003; Jacobs et al., 2011).

Figure 1 depicts the roots of awareness and communion and connection flowing up and into different branches of contemplative practices. On the movement branch of the tree are qigong, t'ai chi ch'uan, aikido, dance, yoga, labyrinth walking, and walking meditation. Some CMPs, such as yoga, are emerging as a focus for researchers (e.g.,

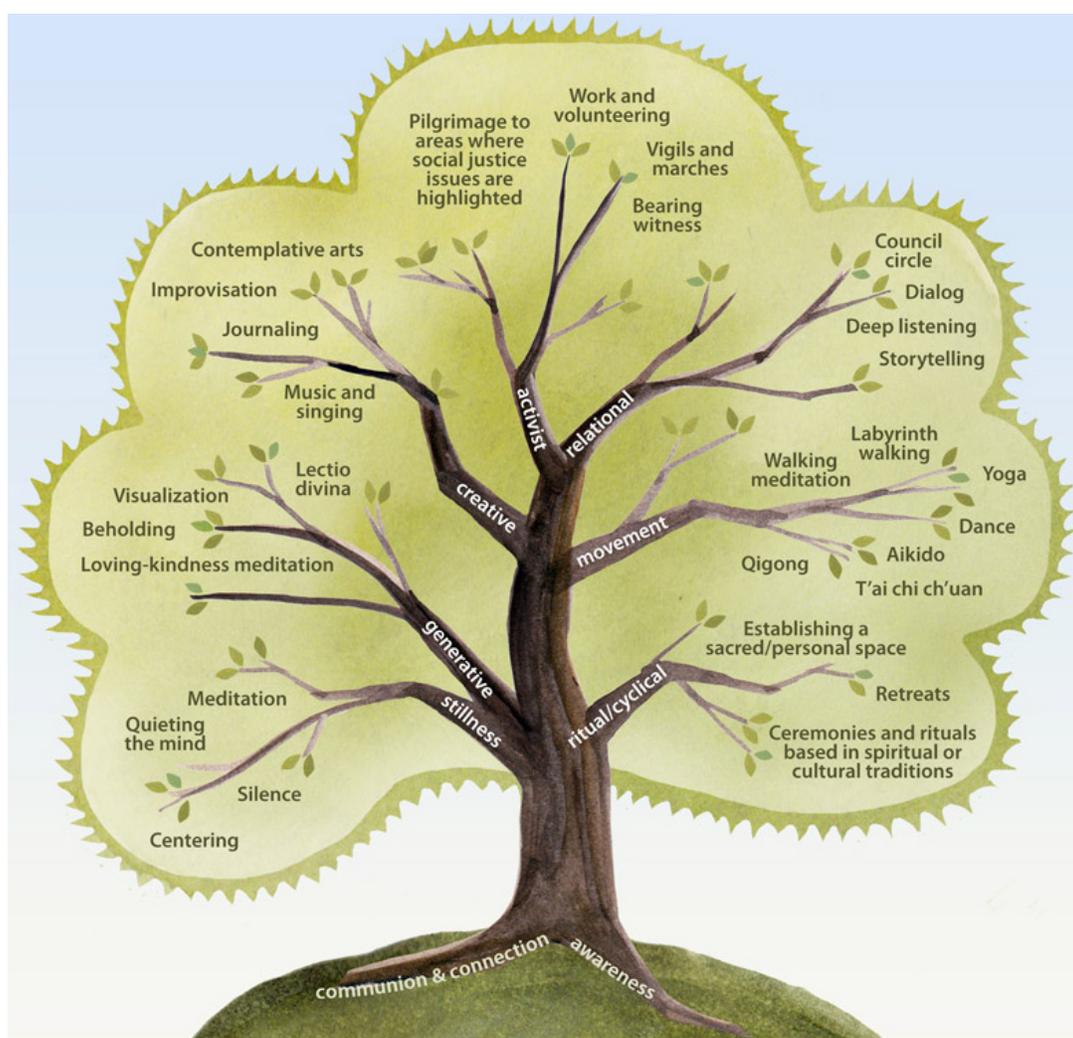


Figure 1. The tree of contemplative practices (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2014)

Büssing, Michalsen, Khalsa, Telles, & Sherman, 2012). I propose that weightlifting could be added to the movement branch and that like many such practices it is sufficiently multifaceted that it could also be characterized as existing on the activist, relational, and creative branches of contemplative practices.

CMPs, as their name implies, include a variety of activities that combine mental and physical awareness and connection. Theorists have applied varying terms to the process involved in such activities, but all emphasize similar aspects. Christine Caldwell (2014) has noted the dearth of language addressing body awareness and integration and proposes the term “bodyfulness” as “a state of being present and aware in the body—a deep state of somatic wakefulness—a state of profound occupation of the present moment, as it becomes explicit in flesh and nerve and bone” (p. 71). She suggests that our culture may not have a word for this concept because we so strongly prioritize the intellect over the body and marginalize and devalue physicality and physical labor. Caldwell posits that the pervasiveness of technology has contributed to “bodylessness” lifestyles and values. She describes bodyfulness this way:

Bodyfulness is at its heart a contemplative practice, and this distinguishes it from embodiment for this reason. Bodyfulness can be cultivated by conscious, disciplined activities that increase our capacity to first be embodied, then increasingly bodyful... Bodyfulness begins when the embodied self is held in a conscious, contemplative environment, coupled with a non-judgmental engagement with bodily processes, an acceptance and appreciation of one’s bodily nature, and an ethical and aesthetic orientation towards taking right actions so that a lessening of suffering and an increase in human potential may emerge. (Caldwell, 2014, p. 73)

Jessica Humphrey (2015) proposes a similar theoretical framework, describing movement traditions she refers to as “somatic practices.” She posits that “somatic practices are contemplative practices, and/or techniques for deepening and distributing contemplative practices in and throughout the/one’s body” (p.104). Humphrey goes on to detail the overlap between contemplative and somatic practices, providing a list of:

qualities, values, and foci that contemplative and somatic practices have in common:

- Subjective, first-person perspective and experience
- Development and study of awareness, attention, consciousness, and concentration
- Cultivation of attention to and awareness of breath and the present moment
- Embodied inquiry
- Sensory attunement
- Process-oriented

- Quieting of mental activity to allow the perception of more subtle aspects of experience
- Slowing and softening
- Reveals dialogue between the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind. (Humphrey, 2015, p. 106)

Humphrey describes the process whereby these practices encourage a melding of the mental and physical through dynamic integration, ultimately resulting in a more aware and cohesive intrapersonal system.

The theme of CMPs as integral to the health and development of the multifaceted whole person is echoed by Bai, Park, and Cohen (2016), who ably argue in favor of contemplative learning that addresses the whole person, the “mind-body-heart-soul-spirit” (p. 113). Bai et al. (2016) define martial arts as a contemplative practice that leads to wholeness and integration and describe the use of the body for translating thoughts into action.

Williams and Penman (2011) offer a similar perspective, stating that “if mind and body are one, then to treat the body as somehow separate from us is to perpetuate a profound sense of dislocation, right at the heart of our being” (p. 93). They describe body-scan meditations and mindfulness as a way to form connections within the self and move away from mind-body duality. Williams and Penman distinguish between “Doing” and “Being” modes, with the latter being mindful. They list seven characteristics of the modes:

- automatic pilot versus conscious choice;
- analyzing versus sensing;
- striving versus accepting;
- seeing thoughts as solid and real versus treating them as mental events;
- avoidance versus approaching;
- mental time travel versus remaining in the present moment; and
- depleting versus nourishing activities. (Williams & Penman, 2011, p. 37-43)

In my experience with weightlifting, I have found that it encourages Caldwell’s (2014) bodyfulness and Bai et al.’s (2016) integration, leads to Williams and Penman’s (2011) “Being” mode, and fits Humphrey’s (2015) descriptions of somatic practices. However, before describing this, I will briefly review parallel ideas that are emerging in popular culture of the overlap between contemplative practice and weightlifting.

## **WEIGHTLIFTING AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE IN POPULAR CULTURE**

The concept of mindfulness has gained widespread attention, with the “mindful revolution” capturing the cover of *Time* magazine in 2003 and 2014. Although to my knowledge researchers and scholars have not yet published theoretical or empirical work on potential links between weightlifting and contemplative practice, there is some mention of mindfulness in exercise and weightlifting on the internet and in popular media. In the *Huffington Post*, Amy Packham (2017) interviewed personal trainers about incorpo-

rating mindfulness into exercise and strength training and suggested a slow thoughtful approach to workouts, including a body-scan meditation beforehand and reflection time afterward; Chaunie Brusie (2017) argued in the *Washington Post* for using weightlifting as meditation; Himay Zepeda's (n.d.) blog argues that the cultivation of patience, "beginner's mind," and focus on the here and now required in weightlifting can lead to mindfulness; and several other bloggers have advocated the use of mindfulness to improve weightlifting performance (Deen, 2013; Presto, 2015; Silva, n.d.). Entrepreneurs have also proposed workout programs that include contemplative practice paired with strength training: Amy Clover's (2013) teaches beginning weightlifters to focus first on breath, then on a mantra, and finally on movement; Chris Willitts (<https://www.mindful-muscle.com>) advertises a strength-training program that includes "mindfulness meditation, rhythmic breathing, visualization, energy work, and focused intention"; and David Jack (n.d.), founder of ActivPrayer, advocates intention-infused exercise.

Although these emerging conversations about mindfulness as it relates to weightlifting are quite brief and informal, sometimes interweaving fitness slogans such as "no pain, no gain" that are decidedly not part of mindfulness, the emerging pattern suggests the same naturally occurring links between mindfulness and weightlifting that I have experienced and will describe.

### **MY EXPERIENCE OF WEIGHTLIFTING AS A CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE**

As a 44-year-old associate professor of clinical psychology and divorced mother of an amazing five-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son, I returned to weightlifting as part of my ongoing struggle to squeeze physical fitness activities into my overburdened schedule. My beloved professorial duties include little naturally occurring movement aside from some pacing and wild gesticulating at the front of the classroom, and activities with my children, although energetic, rarely involve a mindful focus on my own body. Demanding physical activities have sporadically been spurred by 5k and 10k running races as well as road riding, mountain biking, and spin classes, but walking my neighborhood with a dear friend or an audiobook has been my most consistent physical activity. Besides the occasional yoga class, much of my exercise might be characterized as escapist, distracted, or somewhat mindless.

I have encountered weightlifting in various guises over the years, such as strength training for sports in high school, physical therapy for minor strains and injuries, and an occasional supplement to cardiovascular fitness activities. I was surprised this past year to find that weightlifting offered me a way to understand my body and myself more fully and to learn about my own physiology in the context of science's ever-expanding knowledge about the human body. More importantly, it was an opportunity to reconnect with the different aspects of myself and to bring them together in what has become a contemplative practice. Not every session is a transcendental experience, nor is every weightlifter approaching the task in a mindful way, but weightlifting and contemplation naturally feed each other.

I was pleased to encounter the contemplative aspects of weightlifting. During a training session I find that, as the aforementioned bloggers have noted (Deen, 2013; Presto, 2015; Silva, n.d.), my lifting is best if I am firmly “in” my body and forgo chatting, people-watching, daydreaming, and excessive self-analysis. I can lift heavier weights with less chance of injuring myself when I am fully present in the moment; if I am anything less than fully mindful, my trainer immediately notes my worsened form and I feel that something is “off.” However, my use of mindful attention during weightlifting goes beyond just improving safety and performance; ideally, my body and mind are not merely synchronized but parts of a single unit, a state described by Caldwell (2014) as bodyfulness and Bai et al. (2016) as integration.

Bodyfulness may be sporadic for novice weightlifters. For all but the most kinesiologically gifted, the initial learning of physical activities includes mental and physical trial and error, interspersed with intellectual analysis of performance and followed by revised attempts. Thus weightlifting for beginners may largely be characterized by Williams and Penman’s (2011) “Doing” mode with brief sojourns into “Being” mode. We might consider weightlifting to have a developmental trajectory across sessions, becoming increasingly mindful and bodyful as the initial awkwardness of alien tasks evolves into familiarity, comfort, and confidence; there is also a natural rhythm or pattern of activity *during* sessions, with a mindful focus on the present during lifts and other mental activity occurring between sets. When I lift, bodyfulness is supported and enhanced by the demanding and focused nature of the task.

In tasks such as meditation, the mind has to catch itself wandering; in weightlifting, the physical feedback and sense of disharmony if one is not fully mindful and bodyful are immediate and palpable. Humphrey (2015) described this sensory attunement as one quality of somatic practices. Through attunement, the weightlifter becomes increasingly self-aware in body and mind and can actively explore aspects of the self and their interconnections, a process Humphrey calls embodied inquiry.

I was at first dismayed that weightlifting seemed to demand full conscious awareness of my own physical being during lifts and what I was prone to perceive, when reflecting between sets, as “difficulty” and “suffering.” This dismay has slowly evolved into my enjoyment (mostly) of an awareness of the workings and sensations of my body. This, too, suggests weightlifting, with its “development and study of awareness” (Humphrey, 2015, p. 104), as a somatic practice. Weightlifters quickly learn to perform a natural unprompted body scan before, during, and after lifts, since a broad yet specific awareness of the body and its workings is required. It becomes a habit for the lifter, when entering the gym, to tune in to the self and reflect on questions such as “What state is my body in today?” and then “How are my body and mind responding to the tasks I am attempting?”

One tension that may be present in many mindful and bodyful practices involves the degree to which the practitioner is goal-oriented about the practice. Those beginning a meditation or yoga practice may reflect on their performance and measure it against some goal or ideal. In many contemplative activities, this may be relatively sub-

jective and intuitive (e.g., a sense that one's mind has wandered less than usual during meditation or that a yoga pose feels more or less stiff or natural). Weightlifting includes a subjective sense of the form, grace, and ease of a lift as well as the objective fact of the numerical weight lifted for a specified number of reps. Obviously, practitioners of many CMPs have an overarching set of goals (e.g., the amount they plan to practice or the outcomes they hope will flow from the practice), and reflections about goals and performance may arise during practice; however, weightlifting has the added issue that setting up and executing one's lifts necessarily includes an awareness of the performance metrics of numerical weight and number of reps. Strategies to mitigate these potential distractions will be discussed below.

As my mindfulness practice has deepened, I have strived for a non-judging observer stance between lifts. Rather than labeling rapid breathing an unpleasant sensation and going on to judge it as a sign of being "out of shape," I can be curious about the ways my body adjusts to accomplish a more difficult workload. Rather than being frustrated when an old injury slows my anticipated activities, I can learn about the boundaries of that injury and the interconnections in my body, noticing the way other muscles are recruited in the task to help compensate. As Caldwell (2014) put it, "Bodyfulness begins when the embodied self is held in a conscious, contemplative environment, coupled with a non-judgmental engagement with bodily processes, an acceptance and appreciation of one's bodily nature" (p. 73).

My observer stance during training sessions is slowly extending itself from watching the workings of my body to attempting an open and accepting monitoring of the workings of my mind. Although the activity of my mind is necessarily quieted and focused during a lift, the times in between are ripe for mindful observation. We all have internal dialogues, and one occupational hazard of being a psychologist is my frequent analysis of my internal dialogue and consideration of how psychological theories might apply. If not for the task at hand, I could become caught up in a multi-layered frenzy of analysis—the "analyzing" part of Williams and Penman's (2011) "Doing" mode.

We all have chain reactions of thoughts and emotions; mindfulness practitioners attempt to observe and allow the initial thought without following down the chain or trying to suppress or control the thought. My friend and research collaborator Jeanne Yetz encourages her patients to "step out of the storm" of their swirling thoughts and simply watch them, the way they might watch clouds rolling by; similar analogies are common in the mindfulness world (see, e.g., Williams & Penman, 2011). I have observed clinical patients and students learning mindfulness practice struggle to take an observer stance; to some extent, this is human nature. There are stimuli that we all react to, and taking a mental step "out of the storm" before or during a reaction takes practice. Furthermore, negative thoughts and emotions are unpleasant, and it seems natural to try to avoid or control them—until we realize that this can actually increase their frequency, intensity, and duration (see, e.g., Amstadter & Vernon, 2008).

Contemplative weightlifting also calls on the practitioner to embrace self-directed loving-kindness and self-compassion. I can practice self-compassion when I am overly

fatigued and don't perform as usual. I can accept the current state of my body and be grateful for its capacities and gentle and encouraging with myself. Williams and Penman (2011) note the "striving versus accepting" dichotomy and that self-compassion is a natural foundation for acceptance. Weightlifting could be practiced in a disconnected or self-punishing manner, but such an approach often leads to a feeling of "wrongness" and possibly to injury. When one has learned to know the body and marvel at its complexities and capacities, acceptance and self-compassion seem to follow naturally: Humphrey (2015) refers to the "slowing and softening" that occurs during contemplative somatic practices, and Williams and Penman suggest that contemplative practice is a nourishing activity.

Along more philosophical and theological lines, I would argue that weightlifting also encourages a broader kind of self-reflection, and perhaps an even greater need for mindfulness and self-compassionate contemplative practice, by bringing us into direct contact with what humanistic and existential theorists have labeled the "givens" of life and existence. Psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (2002) listed these as death, isolation, meaning in life, and freedom, while James Bugental and Molly Sterling (1995) described awareness, embodiedness, finitude, actionability, autonomy, and our "separate but related" human status.

For example, weightlifting requires an acknowledgment of and immersion in our embodiedness, which is a simultaneously universal and unique experience; our bodies share a great deal with those of other humans but are also inherently individual. Like our fingerprints, our weightlifting styles, capacities, and approaches are ultimately ours alone. The length of bones, insertion points of muscles, past injuries, current strength and fitness, rest, nutrition, and health play varying roles. Depending on our weaknesses and injuries, the specter of our mortality may visit us during or after weightlifting sessions. Our "separate but related" status is also invoked as we learn from listening to and observing others (e.g., a coach, trainer or spotting partner) while knowing that, ultimately, each lift is an individual act for which we alone are responsible.

In describing bodyfulness, Caldwell (2014) notes that it includes "an ethical and aesthetic orientation towards taking right actions so that a lessening of suffering and an increase in human potential may emerge" (p. 73). When approached in a mindful fashion, weightlifting can be just such a contemplative practice.

## **BECOMING A CONTEMPLATIVE WEIGHTLIFTER**

Many activities, including movement activities, can be escapist, distracted, or somewhat mindless, and weightlifting is no exception. Novice lifters can become so caught up in self-monitoring of form and performance that they may miss the experience of bodyfulness. Intermediate and advanced weightlifters can slip into "automatic pilot" mode or find their focus drifting. While such potential downfalls are present for many forms of CMP, the raucous and lively gym setting where weightlifting often occurs can compound these difficulties: the loud and frequently frenetic music and environment of the gym can be a distraction, and the presence of others to maneuver around, observe,

and be observed by can lead to performance comparisons and fear of social evaluation. The presence of mirrors, although helpful in offering a visual point of reference to supplement kinesthetic experience, can heighten this fear.

I have found lessons from other contemplative practices helpful in structuring my weightlifting and adapting it to various environments to encourage a contemplative experience. For novice practitioners with more flexibility and resources, a quiet environment free of strong and potentially distracting stimuli, similar to the environments used for many yoga and meditation retreats, may be particularly helpful. For example, my former physical therapist, Dr. Clif Rizer, opens his office gym to me when no one else is present. I may also elect to go to my regular gym during relatively quiet times and avoid peak busy hours, and I have several friends who lift weights in the tranquil space of a patio, home exercise room, driveway, garage, or small community exercise room.

Environmental stimuli may seem less challenging as contemplative practice deepens and practitioners develop a gentle, non-judging awareness of the present moment. In the same way that meditators may bring awareness back to the breath or body after a loud unexpected noise, weightlifters may have the experience of engaging with the environment and then returning more fully to a state of bodyfulness repeatedly throughout practice. If this process is embraced as a natural part of one's CMP, environmental stimuli can be beneficially integrated into practice.

Like some other CMPs, weightlifting is typically performed with others (in this case for safety reasons, such as having a spotter). Although these people can present distractions, they can also set a contemplative tone for practice. Group contemplative classes often include suggestions for etiquette (e.g., arriving early, turning off one's phone, minimizing conversation, avoiding strong perfumes and colognes, showing respect for others); these can be incorporated into contemplative weightlifting as well.

There are also some relatively unique aspects of weightlifting as a CMP. The first is the way that weightlifters master specific movements early on and then continue working up to the edge of their capacity in each practice, so that there is a consistent increase in weight or number of reps or both. I propose that work at the edge of one's capacity inherently supports a bodyful state and that such work may be characteristic of weightlifting to a greater degree than other movement practices.

Weightlifting also includes preparation of the weights and thus the potential for repeated external focus on the numerical weight and the number of repetitions to be performed, but there are several ways to encourage a more continuous bodyful experience despite this. One is to minimize the lifter's role in weight setup. In a smaller or more private environment, a weightlifter could set up some or all lift stations prior to practice, the same way a meditator might set a timer. A trainer or lifting partner may set up weights to minimize interruptions. Another approach is to consider this rhythm of setup and lifting as part of a natural flow in and out of the bodyful parts of practice and approach setup in a contemplative fashion.

Although I don't think weightlifting is wholly unique in the mindful and bodyful issues that arise during its practice, I do consider it unique in the intensity, expression,

and constellation of these issues. Weightlifters can cultivate a contemplative lifting practice by attending to their environment, the structure of their practice, and their approach to practice. Weightlifting can also be combined with other contemplative practices to great effect. For example, the contemplative weightlifter may consider interspersing body-scan meditations and yoga poses in a purposeful and conscious manner throughout their practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

Popular misconceptions and stereotypes about weightlifting aside, diverse individuals lift weights for a myriad of physical, mental, emotional, social, and cultural reasons. Weightlifting may be practiced in a contemplative fashion, suggesting its consideration as a CMP. Theoretical conceptualizations of CMPs propose that somatic or movement practices encourage mindful and bodyful awareness and a state of wholeness and integration of many aspects of the self. Weightlifting fits smoothly into such theoretical conceptualizations of CMP and a range of trainers and entrepreneurs in popular culture have described areas of potential overlap between mindfulness and weightlifting.

I have shared my professional and personal experiences to illustrate how weightlifting and contemplation naturally feed each other, as the nature of weightlifting encourages—and nearly requires—bodyfulness, and the activity itself can provide an immediate feedback mechanism when contemplative focus drifts. I have argued that bodyfulness is enhanced by the demanding and focused nature of the task as weightlifters push their edge. I have suggested ways of approaching weightlifting to encourage a bodyful experience, including structuring one's environment and practice to minimize distractions and interruptions as well as accepting a flow in and out of mindful and bodyful experiencing during practice. As weightlifting is becoming more mainstream and less associated with hypermasculine and competitive stereotypes, there is the potential for new practitioners to fashion this practice in a variety of ways that nurture contemplation. Weightlifting and contemplation can inform and support one another and benefit the practitioner.

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