

# Meditation, Improvisation, and Paradigmatic Change: Integrity of Practice as Key to Individual and Collective Transformation

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*Both contemplation and improvisation were central in previous eras of their respective knowledge traditions—contemplation in the Western intellectual tradition, improvisation in the Western musical tradition—yet in more recent times have been viewed as anomalous. This essay explores parallels between the two epistemologies, arguing that integrity of practice is key to progress in accepting and integrating them in higher education formats. I draw upon my experience as long-time practitioner and educational innovator in both areas, viewing the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies curriculum at the University of Michigan, the first curriculum of its kind at a mainstream academic institution, as a prominent site where systematic approaches to both meditation and improvisation come together. Examining the processes as part of a synergistic framework highlights the potential for optimal discipline, rigor, theory-practice balance, and personal creative latitude—keys to progressive contemplative inroads in the 21st century academy—to be upheld in both.*

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**I** consider the advent of contemplative studies to be among the most exciting developments in my academic career and am truly optimistic about what the future holds for the field. In this article I reflect on an aspect of this work—what I call “integrity of practice”—that I believe has not received the attention it warrants, in hopes of illuminating issues that will help this area progress. By *integrity of practice* I am talking about effectiveness and regularity of practice, integration of direct experience and theoretical grounding, and other considerations that are commonly associated with optimal contemplative development. I argue that greater attention to this area will not only promote this growth in individual students and faculty; it will also allow for new kinds of advocacy that will help contemplative studies assume a more central place in our educational systems. This will in turn fuel the broader transformation of creativity and consciousness in society at large that I believe needs to take place if humanity is to address the most pressing challenges of our times.

## My Story

I have had the unique opportunity to advocate for the integration of two marginalized process domains—improvisation and meditation—in my academic career. My work in improvisation includes forging inroads for classical musicians to restore this previously central process to their musical tradition as well as expanding the horizons of jazz education to embrace the global, transidiomatic melding that has been important to the jazz tradition but has eluded academic jazz studies. My work in meditation includes not only integrating the process into various kinds of coursework, but also the design of what appears to be the first degree program at a mainstream institution with a significant contemplative-studies component: the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies at the University of Michigan. In that the BFACJS is where improvisation and meditation come together, developing this model has been a fertile source of insights into parallels between advocacy of the two processes that may shed important light on steps to further progress.

To begin, it is instructive to note that both forms of process marginalization represent deviations from the respective knowledge traditions in which they originate. It is common knowledge that Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart, and most of the great icons in the European classical tradition were, like their contemporary counterparts in jazz, improvisers as well as composers and performers. Less well known is a parallel kind of epistemological contradiction, wherein the systems of rational, logical thought and analysis that are attributed largely to ancient Greek and Roman schools of philosophy, and which the academic world regards as close to its roots, are but part of an exploratory scope whereby thinkers utilized contemplative methodologies to transcend the realm of ordinary mental functioning and penetrate to more silent and subtle intuitive ways of knowing. Showing that “a profound difference exists between the representations which the ancients made of *philosophia* and the representation which is usually made of philosophy today,” Pierre Hadot (2002) illuminates the dietary, discursive, meditative, and contemplative practices among the ancients that were “intended to effect a modification and transformation in the subject who practiced them” (p. 2). Thus, while there is “no denying the extraordinary ability of the ancient philosophers to develop theoretical reflection on the most subtle problems of the theory of knowledge, logic, or physics” (Hadot, 2002, p. 6), which may be categorized as third-person knowing, it is also important to recognize that this was complemented—and arguably underpinned—by interior, first-person engagement. Were the prior centrality of improvisation and meditation to be placed front and center in educational discourse, I believe much greater receptivity would be found.

It is also interesting to note, then, that improvisation reentered the academy in recent decades through the modernist, tradition-specific framework of jazz that is consistent with the tradition-specific framework of European classical mu-

sic that has long served as a backdrop in the field. Meditation, on the other hand, began its reentry even more recently through a postmodern, transtraditional orientation corresponding to that which prevails in overall liberal arts culture. And inasmuch as both process streams entail their own kinds of rigor and systematization that are important to development over time, this sheds light on their respective imbalances. Jazz improvisation pedagogy has privileged the tradition-specific over the transtraditional exploratory thrust that was of equal prominence in the evolution of the lineage (Collier, 1994, 1996; Metheny, 2001), while meditation pedagogy has subordinated tradition-specific grounding with a more flexible approach that in part enables adaptability to individual faculty and student needs and interests. The point is not that one orientation is preferable to the other but that both are important and that integrity of practice will be optimal when a better balance is achieved. I propose what I call “systematic” approaches to improvisation and meditation study as key to this balance and integrity (Sarath, 2013).

### **Systematic Approaches to Improvisation and Meditation**

By *systematic* I mean situating the respective processes within a matrix of other related processes as well as connecting them with theoretical, historical, and philosophical inquiry. Systematic improvisation includes multiple approaches to improvisation (e.g., style-specific, as in jazz, Hindustani, or Baroque styles; or stylistically open, or free, where no style parameters are set forth in advance), composition, performance, and various kinds of theoretical inquiry (harmonic analysis, historical, aesthetic, cognitive studies, and personal reflection). Lingering notions of improvisation as an undisciplined, whimsical, “anything-goes” kind of activity are thus dispelled and replaced by a rigorous framework of study and practice that—while certainly including robust, exploratory play—encompasses a wide spectrum of study. Inherent in this spectrum is the interplay between the emulative and exploratory process functions that pertains to the two poles (tradition-specific and transtraditional) noted above: emulative activity reinforces normative knowledge and promotes skill development within a field; exploratory activity extends the boundaries of a field. While creativity is often seen in terms of a largely exploratory thrust, both are essential. “It is difficult to see how a person can be creative,” states Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1996), “without being both traditional and conservative, and rebellious and iconoclastic” (p.71).

Systematic meditation includes a range of contemplative methodologies—which might include silent sitting meditation and contemplative approaches to reading, writing, movement, and nature communion—as well as theoretical, historical, and philosophical inquiry. Inherent in the systematic spectrum are what I have termed *formal* and *nonformal* approaches (Sarath, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2013). Key to formal engagement is tradition-specific grounding and access to the wide array of resources—systematic instruction, advanced programs, retreats, com-

munities of practitioners, theoretical/cultural backdrop—these traditions offer. Nonformal engagement entails rendering a wide array of activities of everyday life as vehicles for contemplative experience and growth. While every individual will arrive at the portion of the formal-nonformal continuum that suits their needs, I suggest that many will benefit from silent sitting meditation as a kind of anchor that supports the full range of psycho-somatic-emotional engagement.

Common to both systematic improvisation and contemplative approaches are a number of criteria that are key to the integrity of practice and may enable more compelling arguments for their advocacy. One is a link between theory and practice. Just as jazz musicians combine rigorous analytical and technical grounding with robust improvisatory creativity, contemplative development can also be enhanced through similar integration of analysis and direct experience. And just as the jazz tradition places a high premium on grounding in the rich cultural foundations in which the music evolved, contemplative traditions also have rich cultural roots, exposure to which can render practice more meaningful. Another aspect of the theoretical spectrum involves scientific research on the neurocognitive dimensions of practice (Andresen, 2000; Travis, Arenander, & DuBois, 2004; Davidson, 2004). Although this kind of research in improvisation is in a far more embryonic stage than its counterpart in meditation, with even qualitative improvisation research arguably still in its infancy, familiarity with this will eventually be as important a part of the theoretical spectrum as it is in meditation. As I have pointed out elsewhere, not only does this grounding enhance practice by placing it within a broader spectrum of considerations, it makes possible integral threads that may be woven from practice to wide-ranging intellectual areas (Sarath, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2013). Direct access to profound noetic states, in other words, enlivens deep receptivity to theoretical connections inextricably linked to the experience, thus enabling entirely new levels of third-person, intellectual threads to be sewn to first-person, contemplative experience. Inasmuch as the theoretical continuum associated with contemplative education spans both unconventional (facets of transcendent experience and development) and conventional (cognitive, cultural, historical, and philosophical) terrain, this expanded range of integration not only enhances student achievement but enables more compelling kinds of advocacy.

In addition to the above benefits, students also gain from systematic approaches a foundation that helps them navigate the ups and downs that are commonly part of creative and contemplative development over time (Goldberg, 2010; Lesser, 1999; Forman, 2004). Musicians and meditators alike often go through gray or hazy periods where it seems like little or nothing is happening, and even times of turbulence and frustration, only to ultimately break through to new levels. Grounding in systematic practice can help keep practitioners on track and aware of the possibility that, even if exterior signs are elusive, significant strides

are being made internally which may manifest externally at any moment, instead of concluding that the time has come to discontinue practice or seek a new one. Furthermore, the array of distractions to sustained, disciplined practice in any field is great in today's world. Where music and spirituality may be unique is in their respective smorgasbords of tantalizing possibilities—in other words, the overwhelming morass of musical and spiritual streams—that constantly invite new lines of exploration, possibly at the expense of sustained grounding. In my view, the cultivation of capacities to navigate meaningful and critically robust pathways through the glut of possibilities—with those of spiritual life perhaps most challenging—is among the most pressing educational aims of our times. While genuine integration of diverse influences within reasonable balance is arguably part of a healthy growth trajectory, systematic grounding may help keep this from succumbing to superficial skimming. Just as the evolution of a personal musical voice and direction of sufficient depth enables organic melding of diverse influences as opposed to surface conglomeration, the establishment of a firm contemplative foundation may similarly enable diverse exposure to be genuinely assimilated rather than crudely piecemealed.

Systematic grounding is also essential to higher-stage development in the contemplative realm, in that it provides a theoretical framework that dispels confusion surrounding preliminary glimpses of such stages. Expanded perceptual phenomena, transformations in perception of self, and other facets characteristic of this development call for the wisdom of others who have walked these pathways. Daniel Brown's taxonomy of cross-cultural parallels between these stages in diverse contemplative traditions (Wilber, 2000) underscores this point, illuminating the universality of this growth to human nature.

Ken Wilber (2006), one of the foremost exponents of contemplative practice and development, expands the range of resources that may be helpful for this growth in his emphasis on the importance of dealing with the *shadow*—the repository of repressed anxieties and emotions in the psyche—for fullest development. While he reminds us that meditation in itself is often not sufficient to neutralize these facets, it can be a powerful tool that helps one recognize them. Closely related is the issue of enhanced critical inquiry capacities. Liberation from ordinary attachments, in other words, provides an expanded vantage point from which individuals may fathom lingering shadow patterns and begin to address them. As awareness expands and qualities such as oneness and compassion evolve, new ways of understanding and addressing not only individual problems but societal and global ones begin to unfold. Surface manifestations are seen as the result of underlying tendencies that previously may have eluded awareness.

In my estimation, however, the very critical faculties whose cultivation is associated with individual contemplative development have arguably not manifested in

the collective contemplative studies movement, particularly as it pertains to integrity of practice, to nearly the extent that is possible. I believe a stronger commitment to such inquiry would reveal a number of limiting patterns, the rectification of which could open up entirely new vistas in the field, and, by extension, overall education and society at large. I offer the following observations, therefore, with the intention not to denigrate the important gains made in the field of contemplative education to date but simply to urge that the all-important attention that is being devoted to outreach—advocacy of contemplative practice and studies in the overall academy—be complemented by equally energized “inreach” activity where the field takes time to pause and reflect on patterns that are limiting to progress and which may be self-induced.

### **Areas of Contemplative Education Warranting Critical Attention**

First is the severing within and between practice and theory, with limiting ramifications for both. By *theory* I refer to a range of considerations that includes the mechanics of practice, models of mind or consciousness and developmental stages, historical and cultural connections, and philosophical foundations of practice. Ideally, the theoretical spectrum integrates this range in a coherent scheme where the different components inform each other, which in turn directly impacts practice. When I suggest a split has occurred within and between theory and practice, therefore, I do not dismiss existing contemplative education coursework that includes rich and rigorous theoretical aspects, but rather suggest that the range of integration within this work often falls short of what is possible. That conversation around this point in literature and conferences is limited underscores my contention that self-critical attention has been subordinate in the field.

Let me begin with what might be called the “mechanics of practice,” an area inextricably linked to integrity of practice. While the most commonly practiced form of meditation in contemplative education circles appears to be mindfulness, with respectful mention made of other forms, very little discourse occurs in which contrasting kinds of practices are viewed in terms of their commonalities and differences. I would think that this kind of consideration might be invaluable not only for the heightened awareness it could spawn of the range of practices available, but for the newfound insights into—and, possibly, appreciation of—their own practices, including those sustained for many years, individuals might gain from this cross-traditional investigation.

This might also dispel confusion that ultimately detracts from effectiveness of practice. As an example: I have noticed through the years a tendency for mantra meditation to be described as a “concentration” technique in contemplative education circles in order to distinguish it from mindfulness. An article by Shapiro, Brown, and Astin in the November 2011 *Teachers College Record* is among the notable examples. Having received formal instruction in two mantra-based prac-

tices, one of which I have sustained for over 40 years, I believe I can speak with some authority in declaring this characterization erroneous. Whereas the term *concentration* suggests that one aims to focus on the mantra and repeat it clearly and in intact form throughout the meditation, correct mantra practice is based not in concentration of any kind but rather in an effortless letting-go into the process. One is instructed not to focus on the mantra but simply to allow one's awareness to be easily with it. This will often mean that the mantra changes form, sometimes radically, or even disappears completely. A profoundly deep and clear meditation may be had with but one or not even a single iteration of the mantra. In episodes of pure consciousness, mantra and thought alike are transcended in an experience of contentless, radiant wakefulness—or awareness of nothing but awareness itself (Alexander, 1990; Forman, 1990). In my personal practice, a period of mantra meditation that establishes this backdrop of pure consciousness is followed by a process called *sanyama*, which is based in Patanjali's yoga sutras as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and involves a kind of penetration to the faintest, most delicate fabric of the silent transcendental field. I think of this as "meditation within meditation," where, after basking in a pristine emptiness that is also a radiant fullness, one fathoms a kind of subtle, primordial dynamism within the silence. This dynamism within silence, moreover, is key to the transformational power of collective practice I will mention below; when groups of meditators penetrate to this core, an intersubjective field effect is enlivened that may generate a harmonizing influence in the environment. While a far more in-depth discussion of the elaborate mechanics of both individual and collective practice in this framework is of course possible, most important at the moment is the principle of effortlessness that allows practitioners to dive deep within their own consciousness.

Therefore, while potential discrepancies surrounding the notion of concentration may at first glance seem trivial, I believe collective discourse on the mechanics of practice might reveal it to be pivotal to the contemplative education enterprise. Even slight excess in effort elicited through notions such as concentration and focus may introduce enough mental activity to confine awareness to surface dimensions of consciousness and undermine effectiveness of practice. Imagine taking Amtrak east from Chicago: a relatively infinitesimal switch involving a few feet of track might determine whether the train goes to Miami or Montreal. Theoretical correlates, exemplifying the importance of linking this realm to practice, also come into play, in that the reason for effortlessness instead of concentration as procedural guide is that the true nature of the relativistic self, or the conscious mind, is the transcendent Self that is its source. All that is needed for the connection with the source to be realized is a letting-go into wholeness, not the imposing of additional mental activity—which is the result of concentration—in order to force the expansion of a structure that is inherently narrow into some new form. The effortless dissolution of the relativistic self reveals its true essence

as the radiant and expansive ocean of Self—upon the experience of which one realizes that this exquisite wholeness is the primordial ground from which day-to-day experience, and corresponding educational systems, have deviated. Indeed, the meaning of the notion of effortlessness—and even contemplation, when pure consciousness is the basis—may change when conceived from this deep state.

Might practitioners of mindfulness and other forms of meditation benefit as much from this dialogue as mantra meditators, in that the issue of effortlessness is important in their practice as well? I believe that in many cases this may be so, supporting my contention that systematic engagement unites practice and theory in general, and the various theoretical areas in particular, into a synergistic and coherent framework that promotes optimal effectiveness and growth.

Another aspect of the theoretical continuum that I believe has been compromised has to do with the mystical or spiritual dimensions of contemplative traditions. Two reasons for this general aversion might be cited. One is the secular nature of the conventional academy, with many contemplative pedagogues wrestling with challenges to even bringing meditation into the classroom in the first place, let alone mystical discourse that might be even more problematic for their less enthusiastic colleagues. A second reason, however, and one that also warrants critical consideration, is the prevailing secularization in Western conceptions of Buddhism that in my view has clearly prevailed in contemplative education. Indeed, this may be one reason why Buddhist practices and ideas seem to be inordinately represented in the contemplative studies field. But why Buddhist secularization as opposed to that of some other lineage?

A primary reason may be a misunderstanding of the doctrine of *annata*, or *anatman*, which translates roughly as “no self” and is often misconstrued as “no soul,” meaning that, in contrast to almost all other wisdom traditions, there is no transcendent dimension of consciousness. *Anatta* properly understood, however, refers to the illusory and ever-changing nature of the personal self, not the absence of an eternal, transcendent Self. Therefore, when Owen Flanagan (2002) argues that Buddhism is unique among the world’s wisdom traditions in the coherence between its view of the human being “and the way science says we ought to see our selves and our place in the world” (p. 208), he operates from highly questionable assumptions about both Buddhism and science. Asserting that “there are no souls, or non-physical minds” or dimensions of consciousness that would transmigrate in the reincarnation process, or “divine beings,” or any of the other “supernatural concepts that have no philosophical warrant,” (pp. vii-viii) he dismisses important Buddhist tenets, all of which call for a more expansive conception of *annata*. This thinking also appears oblivious to the important wave of empirical research in consciousness studies that strongly suggests the emergence of a new science that is not constrained by materialist/reductionist boundaries. The Division

of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia Medical School, for example, has conducted research that strongly suggests the survival of consciousness after bodily death, with numerous and compelling cases in support of reincarnation (Kelly et al., 2007). University of Arizona psychologist Gary Schwartz (2011) has done work that strongly supports the existence of discarnate energy intelligences with whom human consciousness can communicate, which is remarkably consistent with Buddhist and other worldviews. The Society for Scientific Exploration, Institute of the Noetic Sciences, and Scientific and Medical Network are among the professional organizations that have been formed to provide safe havens for scientists interested in this work, the literature on which is by now extensive.

Unfortunately, to cite another shortcoming, contemplative studies and consciousness studies have remained distanced from one another, which is consistent with the split between theory and practice in contemplative education noted above. Both emergent disciplines could gain considerably from a merging. Whereas contemplative studies, even with compromised integrity of practice, may be reasonably characterized as practice-oriented with theoretical investigation subordinate, consciousness studies may be conversely described as research-oriented with practice subordinate. In attempts to bridge this gulf, Joseph Subbiondo, President of the California Institute of Integral Studies, and I have formed what is tentatively called the Consortium for Consciousness Studies in Higher Education (CCSHE). The contemplative/consciousness studies alliance may offer considerable benefits to contemplative education, because consciousness, particularly when understood from an integral perspective, provides a new means for talking about spiritual and mystical terrain that at once invites engagement among diverse spiritual pathways as well as new kinds of conversations with science. I believe the union between spirituality and science is key to humanity confronting the challenges of our times and taking its next evolutionary strides and that this must take place in our educational systems if it is to manifest in society. The merging of contemplative and consciousness studies could significantly contribute to this transformation.

In closing I would like to cite a core principle—nonduality—as a kind of organizing catalyst.

### **Closing Thoughts: Nonduality, Nonlocality, Sustainability, and Change**

Few would deny that unprecedented change is needed in our educational and societal systems if there is to be much optimism about the future. The question, however, is what kind and degree of change are needed, and, for contemplative educators, what role the field might play in this change. I would like to propose that looking at this as a continuum that extends from horizontal to vertical change will help answer these questions. Horizontal change, the most limited kind of

reform, entails the embellishment of conventional learning models with contemplative practices, which, while bringing an array of enhancements, falls short of what is needed. In other words, as long as the current foundation remains intact, conventional tendencies to approach knowledge and human development as largely an objective, exterior affair will remain in place.

Change of a somewhat more vertical nature will entail the emergence of programs and curricular models in contemplative studies that provide students with more substantive grounding in this important educational modality. Now, small pockets embody a more complete kind of growth. The abovementioned BFA in Jazz and Contemplative Studies may be exemplary of this in uniting the first-second-third person spectrum atop its improvisation-meditation foundations.

Fully vertical transformation, however, which in my view is where educational reform needs to set its sights, entails not only the wholesale transformation of all of education, but a delving deep into the conceptual and praxial roots of contemplative traditions, which, when combined with the best of conventional learning, will provide an adequate foundation for a new educational and societal paradigm. That at the basis of most of these traditions is some conception of nonduality—the inextricable link between consciousness and the cosmic wholeness—underscores the magnitude of the shift I am talking about, for now the biggest questions about the nature and purpose of the cosmos and human existence and the mystical ramifications inherent in this inquiry come to the fore. At the same time, this could give rise to an extraordinarily rich and exciting vision of education, from which not only new classroom methodologies are spawned but new approaches to the daunting challenges of our world might extend.

Among the most exciting examples of this, in my mind, is the idea that collective meditation may radiate harmonizing influences in the environment. The basic idea is that consciousness is not only an individual phenomenon but intersubjective in nature, and that—taken in its fullest ramifications—this intersubjective field is a facet of the nondual cosmic source. When individuals penetrate to the deepest dimensions of individual consciousness they enliven the collective and its transformative properties. Empirical studies suggest that accident rates, violence, and illness may be decreased significantly through large group practice (Sharma and Clark; 1998; Orme-Johnson *et. al.* 1988). Oates (2002) has even proposed this as an antidote to terrorism.

Integrity of practice is central to the further exploration and development of this possibility, for at least two reasons. First, if it is to be successfully implemented, participants must engage in effective practice whereby the self dissolves into the oceanic Self at its, and everyone's, source. Second, a conceptual backdrop that is receptive to premises such as nonduality and nonlocality must be established if the fullest ramifications of the ideas are to be explored. Contemplative traditions provide rich accounts of these precepts, and the emergent spectrum of research

into consciousness has begun to yield empirical findings that, at the very least, are highly compatible with the nonduality thesis. Any discussion of sustainability, which in my experience has been conspicuously scarce in contemplative education circles, without corresponding inquiry into the nondual relationship between human consciousness and the cosmic wholeness, will be limited. In placing these precepts front and center and allowing them to inform the day-to-day practice that is the locus of this exciting movement, the field of contemplative studies has the potential to play a leadership role in an unprecedented educational and societal transformation that is urgently needed in our world.

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