Meditation & Mindfulness:
Traditional & Neuroscientific Perspectives
Fall 2023 – University of California, Berkeley

PSYCH 198, 2 Units

Time & place: TBD

Undergraduate Facilitators:
laradabundo@berkeley.edu
amisha.sethi@berkeley.edu

Faculty sponsor: David E. Presti (presti@berkeley.edu)

Contact information: Over the course of the semester, please email Laura with logistical questions. For excused absence requests, please fill out this form and email Amisha with other attendance concerns.

CLASS DESCRIPTION:

Meditation can help us to develop qualities such as patience, concentration, insight, and compassion. Ultimately, it can support us in living more fulfilling lives and bringing greater benefit to those around us. Modern scientific research has demonstrated that meditation can increase life satisfaction, slow cellular aging, bolster the immune system, strengthen attentional ability, improve symptoms of depression and anxiety, increase kindness and helping behaviors, combat chronic pain, and encourage healthy patterns of sleep.

In this course, we will bring together scholarly inquiry with applied practice—dealing both with the scientific study of the brain and mind, and with the direct observation of subjective mental experience. We will first survey the scientific literature on meditation and similar practices, looking at their effects from multiple angles: psychological, neurobiological / physiological, and social. We will also discuss traditional methods and perspectives on meditation.
In addition to our academic study of the subject, we will engage in an integrative program of meditative practice and study together. This will include techniques of meditation and concentration, yogic practices of breath and body, creative reflection, academic readings, and group discussions. Near the beginning and end of the class, we will offer brief surveys to collect data about the effects of the course.

For those with no experience, this class is intended to be an introduction to meditation and yogic techniques and a springboard for further practice. For those with existing experience, it is presented as a context in which to deepen one’s practice in community and to explore new methods.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

This class will meet for 1.5 hours each session, twice per week. As it is an interactive and participatory course, attendance is required! To be counted as present, students must fill out the sign-in sheet for each class. If you have questions regarding this process, please contact our facilitation team—we are happy to help.

There will be readings assigned each week, along with a short reflection writing assignment. The readings serve to deepen your conceptual understanding of the subject matter; the reflection writings are intended to encourage exploration and assist you to incorporate the material into your life. Additionally, we ask that you maintain a daily practice of the mind-training techniques and other exercises for roughly a half-hour each day. This combination allows for the integration of direct personal experience with scientific and theoretical knowledge. The regularity of short, daily practice helps to “wire in” new habits neurologically and to stabilize potential benefits.

You will only be required to purchase one item for this class, a sitting cushion that you can dedicate to your meditation practice. This will likely cost roughly $10-$30, depending on the type of cushion. If you cannot afford this cost, please reach out to the facilitators and they can provide you one.

**Please note:** At the beginning and end of the course, we will distribute a few simple assessments in class that measure psychological well-being, stress levels, general feelings about your life, and certain dimensions of meditation experience. These assessments allow you to get a sense of your own learning and cognitive changes over the course of the semester, and help us to measure the effects of the program. Yet, you are at choice—if you would prefer not to take the assessments, you may opt out. In that case, because you still need to meet the total assignment-hours required for academic credit, you will instead...
be assigned readings and a short essay.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**
- Learn about different traditions and styles of meditation.
- Unpack the scientific literature related to meditation and its potential benefits.
- Review relevant principles of neurobiology and psychology, and discuss physiological processes/correlates.
- Practice training your mind with meditation for increased concentration, resilience, kindness, and better health.
- Learn about & practice yogic techniques and breath exercises.
- Gain an understanding of the study of mystical experience, and read texts from mystics through time.
- Engage written reflections and creative assignments to integrate the new information in ways that are directly applicable to your life.

It is our hope that this class helps you to discover greater inner resources, develop increased resilience, and learn skills that reduce stress. We will ground this all in modern scientific literature, ancient tradition, and psychobiological perspectives. Above all, the final goal is that the course helps you to live a more satisfying and meaningful life.

**Reading Assignments / Articles Discussed in Class (to be drawn from list below):**


Lazar, S. W., Kerrb, C. E., Wasserman, R. H., Gray, J. R., Greved, D. N., Treadway, M. T., … & Fischl,
Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness. *Neuroreport, 16*(17), 1893–1897


**GRADING:**

Grades will be based on attendance, class participation, and the completion of weekly practice, reading, and reflection assignments. There will be one final assignment, about which more details will be given in class. For late assignments, 10% of the total assignment value will be deducted for each day past the due date. Practice logs will not be accepted late under any circumstances. Our class will be graded “Pass / Non-Pass.” The boundary between Pass and Non-Pass will be set at 70%, in accordance with UC Berkeley’s general guideline.

Attendance is central to this course—**more than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade.** If you would like us to excuse an absence, please contact Amisha through this [form](#). In order for the absence to be excused, the form must be filled out before the beginning of the class that you will be missing. Because we will be engaged in group sessions of practice, moving through the course together,
it is important to arrive on time! Entering during the session will disturb other students as well as the instructors, so we will stop accepting late arrivals 15 minutes after the start of the class.

I have read and understand that for late assignments, 10% of the total assignment value will be deducted for each day that it is turned in beyond the due date. Practice logs will not be accepted late under any circumstances.

Name:  Signature:  Date:

__________________________

I have read and understand that more than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for this course. I have read and understand that arriving more than 15 minutes late to any class will count as an unexcused absence.

Name:  Signature:  Date:

__________________________

**Accommodation of disabilities:** Please let Laura know if you need accommodations for any physical, psychological, or learning disability.

I have read and understand that if I have DSP accommodations, I need to inform my instructors within the first week of class (or within the first week of receiving accommodations).

Name:  Signature:  Date:

__________________________

The grading breakdown is below:
Weekly Practice Logs (Homework): 40%
Reading & Reflection Assignments: 40%
Assessments: 20%
**Total 100%**

This class is Pass/No pass. (The boundary between pass and no pass will be 70%, in accordance with UC Berkeley's recommendation.)

I have read and understand the above description of how this course will be graded.

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**Honor Code:** The student community at UC Berkeley has adopted the following Honor Code: “As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others.” In the context of this course, the honor code means that students are asked to be respectful and kind to their fellows and to submit only their own work.

**TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE**

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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 1</strong></td>
<td>Course logistics, introduction to meditation practice. Primer on scientific literature: contemplative methods, human-nature connectedness, environmental sustainability, &amp; well-being. (Initial assessments.)</td>
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<td><strong>Week 2</strong></td>
<td>Why meditate? Benefits for self and others.</td>
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<td><strong>Week 3</strong></td>
<td>Theme One: Foundations</td>
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<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Theme Two: Compassion and Care</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Theme Three: Concentration</td>
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<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Theme Four: Body and Breath</td>
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<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Theme Five: Environment and Society</td>
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<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Theme Six: What is the Mind?</td>
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<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Theme Seven: Mysticism</td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Theme Eight: Integrating the Practice in Daily Life</td>
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<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Follow-up assessments, review of literature, class discussion.</td>
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<td>Week 12</td>
<td>Community discussion, group practice, reflection on course material.</td>
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<td>Week 13</td>
<td>Final session: group practice, creative reflection, Q &amp; A time</td>
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