

Mysticism

REL 480 / Spring 2015
Phillips Exeter Academy
Mr. Prescott



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COURSE DESCRIPTION

What we are about to explore has many names. It has been called the mystical tradition, the perennial tradition, the direct path, the path of the heart, the journey to (and with) the Beloved, the practice of yoga, the unique self development, and the contemplative tradition. Aldous Huxley, who wrote *Brave New World*, called this exploration “the science, not of the personal ego, but that of the eternal Self in the depth of particular, individualized selves, and identical with, or at least akin to, the divine Ground.” What these traditions share is the understanding that there can be an integration between the self and whatever we might call Ultimate Reality or God or Spirit, and that this union is in part realized through a path of spiritual practice.

There is no possible way to make a comprehensive study of all these traditions in one term, and there is no need for us to. The main goal here is to locate various paths within the religious traditions, and to begin to understand what is meant by “spiritual practice” (or what are now also called “consciousness practices” by mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat Zinn and others, who take a completely secular and equally interesting approach). You may already have something along these lines – a prayer life or yoga practice, for example – or you may not. Either way is fine.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS, EVALUATION, AND POLICIES

I. Required Text(s): (1) Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure: An Introduction to the World’s Sacred and Mystical Writings*, (2) Jan Chozen Bays, M.D., *How to Train a Wild Elephant: And Other Adventures in Mindfulness*; (3) other readings will be handed out in class, which will include the teachings of the Buddha, the Hindu scriptures, several of the Christian mystics, the Jewish mystical path known as the Kabbalah, the Sufi poets, the psychologist Carl Jung, several Western philosophers (including Plato, Kant, and William James), and recent research in neuroscience.

II. Evaluation

i. Classroom Preparation/Participation – In most ways this will be a typical Harkness class, and you’re all familiar with the program there – bringing questions and observations to class based on careful reading, stepping back to look at the bigger picture of our study as we move along, listening to and drawing out your classmates, and in general forming a community of inquiry into our subject. The class will also make time for meditation and other kinds of group and individual practice. If we try something as a group (Sufi dancing, chanting, etc.), your participation is always optional.

ii. Notebook – Please keep a journal of your experiences and ideas in class. This will be for your use only, but please bring it to class every day. **A 1-2 page typed reflection will be due every Friday**, which should draw from your entries in this journal, what we have read or discussed in class, or what has otherwise occurred during your week that relates to our topic.

iii. Final Project – This will take the form of a 3-4 page essay, due during exam period. While not a full meditation in length, you will be asked to reflect on your understanding of our topic and how you now see it (perhaps differently from the beginning of the term). You will be expected to draw from your journal when writing this essay.

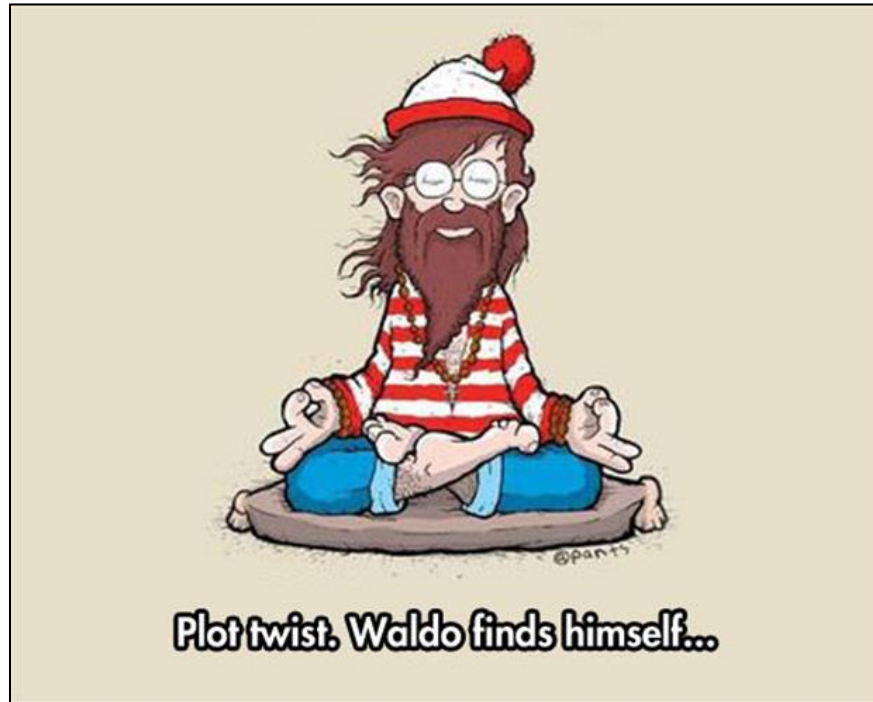
iv. Late Work – If you feel that you will be unable to complete an assignment by the due date, please speak to me in advance about the possibility of an extension (*at least* 48 hours, barring an extreme circumstance). It is **unacceptable** to wait until the due date to ask for an extension. *All late assignments will be marked down one full letter grade for each day of lateness.* Also, please note that plagiarism is unacceptable, rarely successful, and will result in the severest of consequences.

v. Grading Philosophy – A short note on grades: I do not grade on a curve but according to standards derived from my own teaching experience. Students start in the middle (B-/C+) and work their way up or down. “A” work stands out in all respects, not just meets the requirements: it is cogent, complete, and accurate, showing the ability to use what you know, not just regurgitate it; “B” work is excellent as far as it goes but is less complete; “C” work is acceptable, but less complete, increasingly inaccurate or careless; “D” work is severely deficient and often inaccurate. I will be happy to discuss with you at anytime the consistency with which I have applied these standards, but not about the standards themselves.

III. Religious Observances – Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that fall during the term. Should you have a religious observance that conflicts with participation in the course, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss appropriate accommodations.

IV. Disabilities – Students with learning, physical, or psychiatric disabilities who may require disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to see me as soon as possible to discuss your particular needs. All discussions will remain confidential, though I may consult Student Health Services to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

V. Illness – As noted above under Classroom Preparation/Participation, regular attendance is essential if one is to succeed in this course. However, I recognize illness is an unavoidable part of any academic year. If you will not be able to attend class due to illness, **it is the student’s responsibility** to e-mail me so that appropriate plans can be made to make up missed work. Failure to do could potentially harm one’s grade.



PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE OF READINGS

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25 – COURSE INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

- No assigned readings

THURSDAY, MARCH 26 – PHILOSOPHY OF THE DAO

- Read: Alan Watts, "The Philosophy of the Dao," in *The Way of Zen*, pp. 3-9.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "Just Three Breaths," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 76-79.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27 – INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS

- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "Introduction," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 3-18.

TUESDAY, MARCH 31 – SCRIPTURES OF INDIA: RIG VEDA & THE UPANISHADS

- Read: Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure*, Preface and pp. 3-8.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

THURSDAY, APRIL 2 – SCRIPTURES OF INDIA: UPANISHADS

- Read: Eknath Easwaran, "Introduction," in *The Upanishads*, pp. 13-35.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "Notice Trees," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 83-86.

FRIDAY, APRIL 3 – SCRIPTURES OF INDIA: UPANISHADS

- Read: Eknath Easwaran, "Introduction," in *The Upanishads*, pp. 35-47.

MONDAY, APRIL 6 – SCRIPTURES OF INDIA: CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD

- Read: Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Upanishads*, selections (handout)
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8 – SCRIPTURES OF INDIA: BHAGAVAD GITA

- Read: Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure*, pp. 9-19.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, “Filler Words,” in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 25-28.

THURSDAY, APRIL 9 – INTRODUCTION TO CHANT WITH RANDY ARMSTRONG

- No assigned readings. Class will meet at the Wicks Room in Phillips Church.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10 – THE BUDDHA’S BRAIN PART I

- Read: Rick Harrison and Richard Mendius, “The Evolution of Suffering,” in *Buddha’s Brain*, pp. 23-48.

TUESDAY, APRIL 14 – THE BUDDHA’S BRAIN PART II

- Read: Rick Harrison and Richard Mendius, “The First and Second Dart,” in *Buddha’s Brain*, pp. 49-65.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

THURSDAY, APRIL 16 – PLATO AND THE WESTERN TRADITION

- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, “Rest Your Hands,” in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 87-90.

FRIDAY, APRIL 17 – BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES: THE DHAMMAPADA

- Read: Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure*, pp. 49-57.

MONDAY, APRIL 20 – BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES: THE LOTUS SUTRA

- Read: Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic*, pp. 112-117.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22 – MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

- Read: David Abram, “Philosophy on the Way to Ecology: A Technical Introduction to the Inquiry,” in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 32-53.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, “Impatience,” in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 182-185.

THURSDAY, APRIL 23 – ECOLOGICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

- Read: David Abram, “Philosophy on the Way to Ecology: A Technical Introduction to the Inquiry,” in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 53-73.

FRIDAY, APRIL 24 – INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION

- No assigned readings. Class will meet in the Wicks Room at Phillips Church.

MONDAY, APRIL 27 – IMPROV WORKSHOP IN LATIN STUDY (7:00 PM)

TUESDAY, APRIL 28 – RELEASE TIME

- Class will not meet. Instead, please attend either Monday night's workshop or Tuesday night's performance
- Due: 1-2 page reflection (via e-mail)

TUESDAY, APRIL 28 – IMPROV PERFORMANCE IN ASSEMBLY HALL (7:00 PM)

THURSDAY, APRIL 30 – PRINCIPAL'S DAY

FRIDAY, MAY 1 – BODY IN FLOW

- Read: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Body Flow," in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, pp. 94-116.

SATURDAY, MAY 2 – METIC

- No assigned readings

MONDAY, MAY 4 – SUFISM: THE POETRY OF RUMI

- Read: Jonathan Star, "Introduction," in *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved*, pp. xi-xix.
- Read: Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure*, pp. 107-108, 110-113, and 120.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 – SUFISM: THE POETRY OF RUMI

- Read: Coleman Barks, trans, *The Essential Rumi*, selections (handout)
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "A Media Fast," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 64-67.

THURSDAY, MAY 7 – SUFISM: THE POETRY OF HAFEZ

- Read: Jonathan Star, *The Inner Treasure*, pp. 121-129.

FRIDAY, MAY 8 – THE NARROW ROAD TO THE INTERIOR

- Read: Sam Hamill, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Essential Basho*, pp. ix-xi, xiv-xv, xxi-xxii.
- Read: Basho, "The Narrow Road to the Interior," in *The Essential Basho*, trans. Sam Hamill, pp. 3-4, 20, 24-25, 30, 33, and 35-36.

TUESDAY, MAY 12 – HAIKU COMPOSITIONS

- Read: Basho, "Selected Haiku," in *The Essential Basho*, trans. Sam Hamill, selections.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection and haiku compositions
- Note: Luncheon in the Latin Study with Yoga Teacher.

THURSDAY, MAY 14 – EVOCATIVE OBJECTS

- Read: Sherry Turkle, "What Makes an Object Evocative?" in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle, pp. 307-326.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "Secret Acts of Virtue," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. 72-75.

FRIDAY, MAY 15 – OBJECTS OF MEDITATION AND NEW VISION

- Read: Nancy Rosenblum, "Chinese Scholar Rocks," in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle, pp. 252-258.
- Read: Robert P. Crease, "Foucault's Pendulum," in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle, pp. 286-294.

MONDAY, MAY 18 – OUR MEDITATIVE OBJECTS

- No assigned readings
- Due: 2 page reflection (object-oriented)

WEDNESDAY, MAY 20 – SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, selections.
- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "XXXX," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. XX-XX.

THURSDAY, MAY 21 – MEDITATIVE PRACTICE: YOGA

- No assigned readings. Class will meet in the Wicks Room at Phillips Church.

FRIDAY, MAY 22 – SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, selections.

TUESDAY, MAY 26 – THE MATRIX AND MINDFULNESS

- Read: Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Seeing, Believing, Touching, Truth," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, pp. 41-52.
- Due: 1-2 page reflection

THURSDAY, MAY 28 – THE MATRIX AND MINDFULNESS

- Read: Jan Chozen Bays, "XXXX," in *How to Train a Wild Elephant*, pp. XX-XX.

FRIDAY, MAY 29 – RELEASE TIME

- Work on final papers