

**Syllabus for Boston College Seminar TH527/TM544
 “Meditation, Service and Social Action” Spring 2011**

Devlin Hall 117, Tuesdays 4:30-7:00

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Goal of the course

To enter students into a process in which their study of meditation theory, their own growing meditation experience, critical reflection on faith-based social activists’ writings, and their practice of social service mutually inform each other, helping them to freshly appropriate their own spiritualities as a basis for service and social action throughout their lives. By engaging meditation practices from Buddhist traditions that have been made accessible to people of other spiritual traditions, this course also becomes a deep inter-religious learning and exercise in applied comparative theology.

Content and Method

Based on readings in Tibetan Buddhist meditation theory, supported by weekly meditation instruction and the students’ own daily meditation practice, students will explore Buddhist understandings of awareness and its capacities for calm attention, impartial love, compassion, and fuller presence to self and others. The meditations have been adapted from Tibetan traditions to be doable by people of all backgrounds and faiths. The purpose of the meditations is to give students knowledge of Buddhist contemplative methods, to see what comparative light they shed on students’ own spiritual traditions and formation, and to explore how the students’ developing contemplative experience may inform their understanding of service to others, social ethics and social action. Each week, along with their reading in meditation theory, students will also read short passages on related themes from texts by spiritually based social activists—from among Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Michael Himes, Henri Nouwen, Paul Knitter, Evelyn Underhill, Parker Palmer, Mary Oliver, Ram Dass, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Mohandas Gandhi and others. Later in the course students will study two books from among those social activists --to explore how their views of social justice, service and social change may inform the students’ developing understanding of compassion and wisdom in action. Students will write weekly (about 3 pages) on *specific* ways that their reading and meditation practice inform each other and inform their lives in relation to spirituality, social service and social action. Midterm and final papers are based on weekly writing.

Caveats: If you are currently in psychotherapy, be sure to check whether your therapist thinks that meditation training might pose a problem for your therapy, and if so, you should not take this class. Do *not* take the class if you suffer from PTSD or severe trauma. Meditation may be appropriate for some trauma patients, but only when introduced by a qualified therapist within the full context of individual therapeutic work, not as part of an academic course.

To purchase at BC bookstore: *Awakening through Love* by John Makransky (meditations in this book are orally guided on the CD by the same title; also available on MP3 at: foundationforactivecompassion.org/audios-videos-texts), *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton, *How Can I Help* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. A collection of short writings by social activists noted above is provided on the Blackboard Vista course-site as weekly supplementary reading. A list of further books by faith-based social activists appears at the end of this syllabus, all on reserve at O'Neil.

Requirements:

Day-long meditation retreat at Amherst College, February 4, 2012. TH527/TM544 students should attend all day if possible (we will set up a carpool).

Weekly writing assignment (20 % of final grade, demonstrated by quality of your weekly class participation) – Students are to do weekly reading in assigned texts, daily meditation based on class instruction, and weekly writing about both. The weekly writing will not be regularly collected, but is to support active class participation. Students will develop their weekly writing into midterm and final papers. In preparation for each class, students should write weekly three or four pages on the following four points:

(1) Point to a passage in *Awakening through Love* (ATL) that significantly informed your own learning in connection with your goals for this course. Read that passage in class and explain how so. Also bring to class any questions you have about the reading.

(2) Identify a passage assigned in ATL that informs a specific part of your meditation practice or is informed by your meditation practice, and explain how so.

(3) For much of the course, reading is assigned in a Buddhist text (*Awakening through Love*) and several non-Buddhist texts: Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* and further supplementary readings. Each week, identify a short passage in one of the non-Buddhist texts that was highlighted for you by the Buddhist reading or by your meditation practice, and explain specifically how so.

(4) Each week explain one specific way that your class reading and practice of daily meditation inform your understanding of relationship, service work, or work for social change. If you are (or have been) engaged in a specific form of social service, try to relate the reading and meditation to it in a specific way that you can share in class, usually by giving a specific example. In connection with that, you can also note a specific way that the reading and meditation are shifting your perspective on your own religious understanding and spiritual life, or on how you are present to self and others in daily life.

Attendance: Only one unexcused absence is permitted. If you must be absent for any reason, notify the professor before that class and submit your assignment for the missed class by e-mail to professor as soon as possible.

Papers—Please note: papers are only accepted late for extenuating circumstances pre-arranged with the professor. If a paper is late without pre-arrangement, it is not accepted (except in case of emergency).

Mid-term Paper- undergrads 10 pages, grad students 10-12 pages, double spaced (40% of final grade). Develop your weekly writing into a mid-term paper. Reflect on what you've learned in the first half of the term by selecting the best insights from your weekly writings, reflecting much further on them with further quotes from the readings, then re-writing them into an essay numbered in three parts corresponding to any three of the four points of the weekly assignment. The mid-term paper is due on or before March 24th in class or under my office door by 3 PM.

Final Paper- undergrad 10-12 pages, grad. 11-12 pages double spaced (40% of final grade). Like mid-term paper except you should focus especially on the second half of the term, incorporating insights derived from your readings in social change activists, further reflecting on them, giving further quotes.

Final paper due on or before May 12th by 2:00 PM under my office door (not by e-mail).

Weekly Assignments:

--**January 20—Introduction to goals, methods, requirements of the course**

--**January 27- Buddhist understandings of compassion and wisdom in diverse traditions through history**—read two articles on course website by Makransky:

“Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions” (focusing on Buddhist concepts, practices and cultural adaptations, in *Theological Studies* June 2003, pp. 334-361), and “Compassion in Buddhist Psychology” (in *Compassion and Wisdom in Psychotherapy*, ed. by Germer and Siegal, 2011). *Do mindfulness meditation daily as instructed in class.* Writing assignment: please respond to the first two questions of the weekly assignment, with respect to BOTH articles assigned.

--**February 3- Receptivity to the Power of Love for Contemplation and Service**

Study *Awakening through Love (ATL)* introduction and chapter 1. Read Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chapters 3, 10, 11. On course website, study supplementary readings by Michael Himes, Paul Knitter, Parker Palmer. Do usual weekly writing assignment, responding to all four points.

--**February 10- Natural Wisdom, Deep Presence**

Study ATL chapter 2. Read Merton, *New Seeds*, chapters 1, 2, 4, and 18. On coursesite read passages by Merton, Underhill, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. Do the usual weekly writing assignment.

--**February 17- Loving Communion with Others**

Study ATL chapter 3. Read Merton, *New Seeds* chapter 6. On coursesite read passages by James Martin S.J., Khyentse Rinpoche, Hafiz.

--**February 24- Seeing through Social Habits of “Stranger” and “Enemy”**

Study ATL chapter 4. Read Merton, *New Seeds* chapters 5 and 7. On coursesite read passages from Michael Himes, Henri Nouwen, Martin Luther King.

--**March 3- Pure Perception (Sacramental Vision) and Service**

Study ATL chapter 5. Read Merton, *New Seeds*, chapters 8, 9, 22, 24. On coursesite: read passages from James Martin S.J., Mary Oliver, Dorothy Day.

--**March 10- Spring Vacation** —no class.

--**March 17, 24- Compassion for Self, for Others, and Social Service**

Study ATL chapter 6. Read Merton, *New Seeds*, chapter 10. On coursesite: Read passages by Henri Nouwen and Martin Luther King.

Midterm paper due March 24 in class.

--**March 31- Integrating Contemplative Experience with Life, Service and Activism**
Study ATL chapter 7. Read Merton, *New Seeds* chapter 16, 37. On coursesite read passages by Dorothy Day, Parker Palmer and Rumi.

--**April 7, 14—Deep Listening, “Helping Prison,” Social Action, Burnout**
Study *How Can I Help* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman chapters 2, 4 and 5 for April 7; study chapters 6, 7 and 8 for week 14. Continue to explore how your ongoing meditation practice informs and is informed by those readings.

--**April 21—Easter Weekend, no class**

--**April 28, May 5—Light from Leading Social Activists on Contemplation and Service** --Read and discuss two modern social activists in relation to your continuing meditation practice and your prior readings. Study *two* books selected from the list of social activist writings below. Purchase or order them by March 2nd, and inform the professor of your choices.

Final paper is due on or before Thursday May 12, 2:00 PM under prof’s office door (not by e-mail).

Writings by Modern Social Activists to be discussed April 28, May 5: study two books by faith based social activists chosen from the list below. Starred items (*) are on sale at BC bookstore in small quantities, or **order** from Amazon.com *by March 3rd*. All books are also available on reserve at O’Neil:

- **Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King.
- A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. by James Washington.
- **Doing the Truth in Love* by Michael Himes
- Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* edited by R. Ellsberg
- Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen
- I and Thou* by Martin Buber
- Abraham Joshua Heschel: *God in Search of Man, or Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.*
- New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton
- Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* ed. by Lawrence Cunningham
- **Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott
- **Without Buddha I could not be Christian* by Paul Knitter
- *The Active Life* by Parker Palmer
- **Keeping the Peace: Mindfulness and Public Service* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- **The World We Have* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- Love in Action* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- **Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* by M.K. Gandhi
- The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. by Raghavan Iyer, 978-0-19-563208-8.
- **Ethics for a New Millenium* by the 14th Dalai Lama
- **The Voice of Hope* by Aung San Suu Kyi