

ciples of listening & speaking; do a check-in; and reflect on a 'third thing' (poem or image). More recently, since reading The Heart of Higher Education (Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, with Megan Scribner), we have 'morphed' into a more self-organised community of practice on the theme, 'Integrated education for compassionate action in an interconnected world'. This conversation circle is providing a space to explore the practice of integrated education in teaching and research in a more intentional way. It is still early days but we think that the trust which has developed through the earlier work has helped create an environment which is conducive to creative experimentation."

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## REFLECTIONS

Bringing Mindfulness into Higher Education  
by **Richard S. Ellis**

The benefits of meditation are apparent to everyone who practices this ancient technique. Meditation calms the mind and brings equanimity. It enables us to connect with the wisdom of our bodies and the wisdom of the present moment. It also helps us cope with pain, reduce stress, and alleviate suffering. Mindfulness is the insight gained from meditation. It is the calm and direct awareness of what is happening in the present moment, in your body, in your mind, and in the world around you. By focusing your attention on the present moment, mindfulness cultivates wakefulness and wisdom.

After meditating regularly for a number of years, I decided to introduce meditation and the benefits of mindfulness to the students I teach in the

Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Starting five or six years ago and continuing into the present, I have begun each class with a short meditation exercise, which I do without using the language of meditation and which I make clear is completely voluntary. With small variations here are my instructions.

*If you would like to participate, then I invite you to close your eyes, sit up straight in the chair, and start breathing slowly. There is no need to do anything except relax and breathe. Give yourself this gift. As you become aware of your breath, start to feel present.*

I also discuss issues of stress with the students. I know that the combination of meditation and discussion is working. For example, in the 20 course evaluations in an undergraduate course that I taught during the fall semester of 2012, 10 students commented favorably on the meditation exercise or remarked that I had created a low-stress learning environment. "I thought the meditation sessions were helpful and helped me to focus better during class," wrote one student. Another remarked, "Overall, even though this class is one of the more difficult ones, it was by far my least stressful."

During the spring semester of 2013 I wanted to expand my effort to bring mindfulness into higher education. First I spoke with my Department Head, Michael Lavine, and with two Associate Deans in my college, all of whom strongly supported me in this endeavor. Their expressions of support inspired me to organize a group of graduate

students in my department with whom I met once a week to discuss issues of stress and to meditate together, cultivating the mindfulness that can heal that stress. I could see in their faces that our discussions were having a profound impact. These graduate students, having grown up, like me, in a culture of competition and overwork, welcomed the wisdom of mindfulness, which teaches that the pressures of academic life are unavoidable but that stress can end.

In their evaluations all the graduate students who participated indicated that they found the weekly meetings extremely helpful. One student elaborated on this when he wrote, "At these meetings, I have been able to practice and explore mindfulness meditation under the tutelage of a knowledgeable and experienced mentor, Professor Ellis. I find the meditation calming, and the short discussions the group engages in prior to meditating are always lively and thoughtful."

During the fall semester of 2013 I was joined by my friend and colleague, Jonathan Machta, a professor in the Department of Physics at UMass Amherst. Jon helped me organize weekly meditation sessions with graduate students both in my department and in his department. We are excited about the possibility of sharing the benefits of mindfulness with more people at the university. We look forward to helping them experience, as we have, how mindfulness can heal the suffering caused by the pressures of academic life and can transform that suffering into insight and wisdom.

*Biography of Richard S. Ellis*

Richard S. Ellis is a professor of mathematics and an adjunct professor of Judaic studies at the Uni-

versity of Massachusetts Amherst. Jewish spirituality and the wisdom about pain, suffering, and healing that chronic headaches have revealed are the subjects of his book, [Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation](#), which was published in 2011. To find out more about the book, visit the website at <http://RichardSEllis.com>. Richard has published numerous papers in mathematics and related areas and is the author of two math books. He has also published poetry and articles on the Torah, literature, art, and anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and he has taught courses on the Torah and literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the Jewish Community of Amherst, and the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning. Information about Richard's work and interests is available at <http://www.math.umass.edu/~rsellis>.



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