

CULTIVATING MEDITATIVE AWARENESS (3 credits)

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Religions have their origins in someone's experience. We are speaking specifically about experience of the spiritual realms that unfold as meditative awareness deepens. Our species is "hard wired", genetically programmed with the potential to awaken meditative awareness – we have the brains for it! While this achievement is extremely difficult, it is always an open possibility for any human being to consciously cultivate. Meditative awareness is the empirical entrance into self-validating spiritual life that depends entirely on one's own exertion and effort and the timely guidance of a trusted teacher.

The beginning of this process is to gather and digest the information recorded by those who preceded us in the inquiry that seeks to answer such basic human questions as: who are we? How is it that we do what we do? How is it that we know? Where is the actual location or seat of awareness? What is the relationship between awareness and human achievement? Between awareness and happiness? Our primary text, Austin's Zen and the Brain, takes an empirical, scientific approach to the study of human awareness, and we will read and study selected passages from this tome to lend direction and focus to our inquiry.

Most of every class meeting will be spent learning and practicing methods and techniques that allow for the emergence of meditative awareness. One will learn to slow down and stop completely, to notice sound, posture, how the body feels, the fantastic shapes of thoughts that produce one's life experiences. One will learn to create a "watcher," to follow the breath clearly, precisely, and with a measure of constancy. One will become familiar with one's "fundamental note" by following the deliberate production of self-generated sound to the very bottom of a breath. One will learn to examine and relax every part of the body and let it fully rest, even as inner awareness comes alive like a colorful movie, complete with one's very own special effects. Students will learn to discern the subtle differences between such "movies" and actual non-dual meditative awareness.

This entire process involves learning to become still in order to focus and build concentration. Over time, concentration deepens until one becomes absorbed with the object of concentration to the exclusion of all distractions. As the experience of absorption deepens, a subtle spontaneous shift into the non-dual vantage point emerges. This is meditative awareness, or the state of knowing that exists prior to its division into a subject and an objective field of experience, which is the realm of discursive thinking and the world we ordinarily inhabit.

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Goals

Actual entry into meditative awareness is difficult to achieve. It is entirely unreasonable to expect the average person to accomplish this in the space of a fifteen-week course, although it can happen. Students in this course are being introduced to the necessary preparation and hard work one must undertake, the training needed to bring out-of-control discursive ideation into awareness and under some measure of control. However, during this preparatory phase, many goals and benefits are readily achievable that can directly impact a student's academic work, relationships, and maturation. Some are:

- * learning to become still and quiet
- * learning to focus
- * learning to concentrate for longer and longer periods of time
- * lowering of stress levels
- * easing of stress symptoms
- * taking complete responsibility for one's thoughts and behavior
- * achieving greater clarity of thought and awareness of emotional states.

Required and Suggested Reading List

1. Austin, J.A., M.D., Zen and the Brain – selections
2. Numerous hand-outs from selected texts

The Ground Rules

A letter grade will be issued at the end of the semester based upon the following criteria:

1. Attendance is absolutely crucial. Showing up really counts in this course!
2. One fifteen-page paper will be handed in at the last class. Its subject matter will derive from the materials we will study in class, and must be approved by the Instructor.
3. There will be “homework” every single day of the semester: a 10-minute exercise will be introduced early in the course, and the student is expected to fulfill this assignment and report honestly on it.
4. A personal journal will be kept that registers whether or not the student did the daily assigned exercise, and that also reflects how various texts and readings resonate, and how one responds to the various methods and techniques that are introduced. The student will learn to track and chart strata of awareness and take notice of what is internalized and what does not work. Journal entries should reflect the impact this course is having on one's other academic work, life experiences, and relationships. The Instructor will examine journals twice during the semester.
5. At semester's end, attendance at a 12-hour meditation retreat is mandatory. This “final exam,” while extremely challenging and rigorous, will test the student's fortitude, will, patience, and ability to call upon untapped reserves of energy and inner resolve.

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