

## **Guidelines for Contemplative Discussions**

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*These guidelines were originated and compiled by Richard C. Brown, the MA Contemplative Education faculty and students in 2001. They were modified and expanded by John Davis in MA Transpersonal Psychology in 2003. They were further refined in 2004 and again in 2006. They are grouped in the areas of personal participation, whole class practices, and online discussions. There are many overlaps among these categories. These guidelines are open-ended and evolving.*

### **Personal Individual Practice During Discussion**

These are mindfulness awareness practices for individuals during discussions and class activities altogether. They are intended to be brief, not to intrude on class activities, and to enhance those activities, rather than distract from them.

1. Practice being aware of your mind, your body, your breath, and your immediate environment during a discussion.
2. Draw your inspiration for listening and engaging in the discussion from various parts of your whole being, not just your thoughts.
3. Notice the formation of your thoughts as you listen. Try holding those ideas without jumping in. How do they change as you hold them? What happens when you don't share them at all?
4. Spend a few moments doing 'micro-movements' - making the tiniest physical actions and muscular movements. (From Barbara Dilley)
5. Be aware of your emotional energy periodically during the discussion whether you are speaking or listening. Notice how this affects your participation and your state of mind.
6. Examine the beliefs, assumptions, and concepts without being judgmental. When you do find judgments arising, take responsibility for them. Do your best to reflect upon them without aggression, or set them aside to work with them later to identify their sources and consequences.
7. Practice appreciating the wisdom and insight of each offering (without necessarily giving up your own views or suppressing dissent).
8. Practice expanding your discussion styles. For instance, if your speaking is lean and concise, try communicating in a more elaborate or flowery way.
9. Be mindful of how often you contribute to the discussion compared to others. If you tend to contribute frequently to discussions, try holding back and experiencing the

aliveness of your thoughts without expressing them. (From Parker Palmer)

10. If it is more difficult for you to contribute to discussions, check into the sources of your hesitation.

Are you concerned about being “wrong”?

How much is it a carry-over from the past?

11. Embrace any resistance to participation with kindness and then let go.

12. Appreciate “beginner’s-mind” questions.

13. Remember that probably you are not the only one holding a particular question.

14. Remember that expressing yourself is a gift to the group. Be bold!

### **Whole Class Practices**

The whole group may utilize these practices intentionally or selectively during class discussions.

1. After a long period of discussion, have a period of movement. This could be as simple as standing and stretching.

2. During a long period of discussion, whether face-to-face or online, ring a mindfulness bell every 15 minutes. In a live discussion, all speaking ceases while everyone listens to the sound for as long as it can be heard. When the sound has faded away, the person who was speaking resumes. (From Thich Nhat Hanh)

3. Appreciate gaps during discussions. As you and others speak, allow space and gaps to occur. Notice any anxiety, impatience, or tension that arises during those open moments. Try to experience the tension for a moment without rushing to fill the space. Notice any feelings of competition or irritation with others.

4. Questions can be posed without needing answers. Practice holding the questions posed by others or yourself without needing to supply an immediate response.

5. Appreciate the interplay of seriousness logical exchange with spontaneous playfulness and humor. Notice how it feels to be serious and playful.

6. Allow room for different textures in discussions. Think of diversity in discussion styles as analogous to biodiversity in a healthy ecosystem. Examples include cool, careful, fiery, tender, intimate, bold, expansive, etc.

7. Trust disagreement and doubt. Do not artificially work for agreement, but value non-aggressive differences and direct feedback.

8. Let go of preconceived outcomes for the discussion or for your contribution. Notice

your resistance to dissolving preconceived goals. Allow the discussion to emerge in ways that are original, creative, surprising, and adventurous.

9. Consciously limit the number of times each class member contributes during a given discussion to two or three. This tends to open the space for discussion to those who are normally quiet.

### **Online Discussion Practices**

These mindfulness awareness practices are particularly for students' personal practice during online course discussion.

1. When reading online discussion material, take a few minutes periodically to relax your eyes. Let your focus shift back and forth from far (e.g., the horizon) to near (about 6 inches way).
2. Don't try to read all the postings in one sitting. Give each entry its due. Pause between reading each one to reflect and to experience your feelings.
3. Feel the presence of your body in the chair and your fingers on the keyboard.
4. Do not be too quick to post your written response. Compose, take a break, and re-read what you have written, as if through the eyes of your classmates.
5. Be concise, but not terse. Remember that there is a lot of copy to be read by everyone.
6. Remember that personal feelings in the online environment are at least as vulnerable as in face-to-face discussions, sometimes even more so.
7. Practice courtesy and compassion along with sincerity and directness.