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## MINDFUL ANTI-OPPRESSION PEDAGOGY

On November 24, 2014, at 8:00 p.m. Central Time, officials in St. Louis, Missouri, announced that a grand jury would not indict Officer Darren Wilson, a White police officer, in the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager. Outrage, anger, and despair erupted throughout the United States. I, too, felt grief and fury in the very depth of my being. As a professor in higher education, I wondered how I was going to address this event in my courses: what were the best ways to engage in a thoughtful, critical, and caring dialogue about race relations when tensions were running so high throughout the country? It seems to me that these fraught moments are when our capacity for such dialogue so often fails us, but they are precisely the moments when we need to learn better ways of being with one another.

I entered my classroom the following morning heartsick and furious. I teach Women's Studies courses and so, of course, the grand jury's decision and its implications were highly relevant subjects for our class. We had begun the semester with discussions of the events in Ferguson, and after discussing how different bodies are raced and gendered in inequitable ways, it was time to revisit the subject. I felt unprepared to teach that day because my emotions were so raw, but my yoga and meditation practice have taught me that often such vulnerability opens a space for authentic human connection and deeper wisdom. My feminism, meanwhile, has taught me that it is my responsibility as a White anti-racist advocate to confront these issues of institutionalized racism and gendered violence in order to help students learn how to analyze and interrupt them.

So I started class by sharing the heaviness of my heart and asked students what they felt. That was the pattern in all four of my classes throughout the day: I opened with a simple, honest, and nonjudgmental description of what

I was feeling and asked them how they were. Many of my students, particularly students of color, clearly needed to express their feelings of anger, frustration, pain, and deep grief. Some students of color hollowly expressed their realization that “the system did not fail them because it was never designed to protect them” as people of color. One Black man, who rarely spoke in large group discussions, asked the class if we thought a genocide of Black men is happening. A woman of color expressed her deep fear for all the Black men in her life and her sense of powerlessness to protect them. In a later class, a young Black man asked how he was supposed to deal with police officers when he has to fear for his life in every moment of every encounter with police. Many White students expressed outrage as well. They critiqued the injustice of the verdict and condemned the deep pattern of racial profiling and police brutality against Black men. Others were notably silent, though I have learned over the years not to assume that I know what the silence means. One White man, a former police officer himself, said that while he felt that in some cases the injustice was clear, in the case of the death of Michael Brown, the facts were not so clear. “If you take race out of it,” he said, “Wilson might have been truly fearing for his life.” Of course, the feminist framework I teach in my classes insists that race cannot be taken out of this equation, because racial and gendered dynamics created the situation in the first place.

But his perspective, along with those of all the other students in the room, were simply a microcosm of what is happening in our communities throughout the United States at this historical moment. Nothing that was said in my classes has not been said in the broader, public conversations about police brutality, the failure of the criminal justice system, racial profiling, and the killing of Black youth in the United States. The raw emotions and the tensions were palpable in the classroom throughout the day.

The challenge for us as anti-oppression educators is to help students learn how to deeply and productively engage in these hard conversations, unpack the learned ideologies that produce inequalities in society, and learn more equitable and empowering ways of relating to one another. Fraught social issues such as the killing of Michael Brown, and the long history of deaths of young Black men that it continues, provide relevant and necessary examples to examine in social justice classes. But how to do so with intellectual nuance, analytical vigor, historical context, and empathy and compassion is still a challenge. Some students reiterate stereotypical ideas that make the conversation even more painful for those who are directly affected by the issue, while the pain and fierce fury of the latter sometimes overwhelms and seems out of place to those students who are not placing the situation within its trenchant historical context. The stakes for learning how to navigate these conversations are high, because the students in our classrooms will be shaping our societies for years to come. If they do not learn the skills in our courses, I am not sure where they will learn them.

When I was new to teaching Women’s Studies courses, I struggled with how to best address instances like this one, which are all-too-common in diversity classrooms. When students inevitably make statements that are uninformed or stereotypical, I would either challenge certain comments directly in a way that often shamed the student into shutting down and refusing to learn more, or I would challenge them so indirectly that students did not realize I was trying to trouble the assumptions made. As a cisgendered woman living in a society that often shames women, I do not find shaming to be a useful or a kind pedagogical challenge, nor is direct conflict my best operational mode (Bordo 1996). But the indirect approach was also ineffective, since students often missed the point and failed to deeply examine their belief systems.

Over the next fifteen years, as I became more experienced at teaching, I grew more adept at challenging students’ deeply held ideologies without alienating them from the learning process—a balance that I believe is critical for anti-oppression courses. Too much discomfort and students will simply disengage, which is not a helpful pedagogical strategy. But some discomfort is necessary, because inequalities have become normalized. It is also not enough to simply learn *about* oppression. We have to literally *unlearn* oppression: examine our role in it, dismantle deeply held ideologies, and create alternative, more empowering, ways of relating to one another. In order to achieve this outcome, students need to not merely learn the subject matter as objective content but also examine it as a social system in which *we all participate*. That participation occurs not just at the level of external behaviors but also at the level of our internal thoughts and feelings and in our ways of relating to one another. This deep inquiry often produces some necessary discomfort, but in order for it to be effective, we need to offer our students the requisite tools with which to process through that inquiry.

Though anti-oppression pedagogy highly values critical self-reflection of ideologies, power, and privilege, it often stops short of the deep reflection that mindfulness has to offer. Over the past fifteen years, I have watched many Women’s Studies students become empowered intellectually and politically, only to still express self-denigrating sentiments, end up in abusive relationships, or have disordered relationships to food and their bodies. My own rather rocky path to wholeness illustrated to me that feminism, while profoundly empowering, was not enough. It sometimes failed to reach the deepest layers of self or provide all of the tools I needed to bring my feminist empowerment to a more integrated level. Those tools came to me through my yoga and meditation practice. But neither were the mindfulness tools alone enough, as too often in the Western world they remained apolitical at best or reinforced privilege and inequality, at worst. Eventually, I realized that I had to integrate feminist praxis with mindfulness in order to access the full benefits of each. The combination has proven very invaluable to my social justice teaching. This book outlines those insights, offering a model for a mindful anti-oppression pedagogy.

## Some Foundational Definitions

Since this project hinges on several terms that are themselves worthy of their own lengthy discussions, I will start with some brief definitions. These concepts will be further developed throughout the following chapters.

By *feminism*, I mean an intersectional analysis of systems of oppression that examines how race, gender, class, ethnicity, and ability, along with sexual and national identities, work together to position us in complex power dynamics with one another. This form of feminism sees oppression as operating through social institutions, such as the government, the media, the educational systems, and so on. It seeks to cultivate empowerment for members of marginalized groups. The form of feminism I invoke here is a way of asking questions and a set of values, rather than a set of foregone conclusions. It does not see men and women as monolithic categories nor does it see the male/female binary as the only options for gender. Instead, this form of feminism addresses how other aspects of identity (race, religion, sexuality, class, national location, ability) shape gendered experiences.

*Feminist pedagogy* builds on this definition of feminism to inform teaching practices that educate the whole student. This model of pedagogy sees students and teachers as co-creators of knowledge and the classroom space as a site of knowledge production. Self-reflection is a central feature of this feminist pedagogy. Because my teaching has been in Women's Studies courses, my specific examples will come from feminist pedagogy. However, throughout the book, I argue that the mindfulness model I offer can enhance anti-oppression pedagogy in general, including critical pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and queer pedagogy. I will outline these different frameworks later in this chapter.

*Oppression* is a system of power that subordinates some groups in order to over-empower others. It also refers to the painful and violent effects of oppression, both on individuals and on collectives. *Anti-oppression* will be used throughout this book to refer to the process of unlearning the tools of oppression and dismantling inequitable systems. For the purposes of flow, I will use the terms diversity and social justice interchangeably with anti-oppression. Obviously, all of these terms are more nuanced and differentiated, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this project. Classes such as Women's and Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, LGBT/Queer Studies, Multicultural Education, and Sociology teach about anti-oppression.

By *mindfulness*, I mean the process by which we become more self-aware through particular practices. I will refer to these activities interchangeably as either mindfulness or contemplative practices. Some techniques are already regularly used in academic classrooms, while many are not yet widely recognized as valid academic skills. In the former category lie journaling, volunteering, storytelling, dance, and dialogue. In the latter category lie meditation, yoga, visualization, bearing witness,

contemplative arts, Aikido, deep listening, and centering practices. The Tree of Contemplative Practices designed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society nicely depicts the interconnected array of activities that fall under the heading of contemplative practices (see Figure 1.1). Some come from particular religious or cultural traditions and, therefore, raise questions of cultural appropriation and religious belief systems, which I will discuss further in Chapter 6. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on secular mindfulness practices that are designed to cultivate self-awareness, embodiment, balance, clarity, and compassion. A further delineation of these techniques comes later in this chapter. First, though, I will speak to the value of integrating these practices into the college classroom.

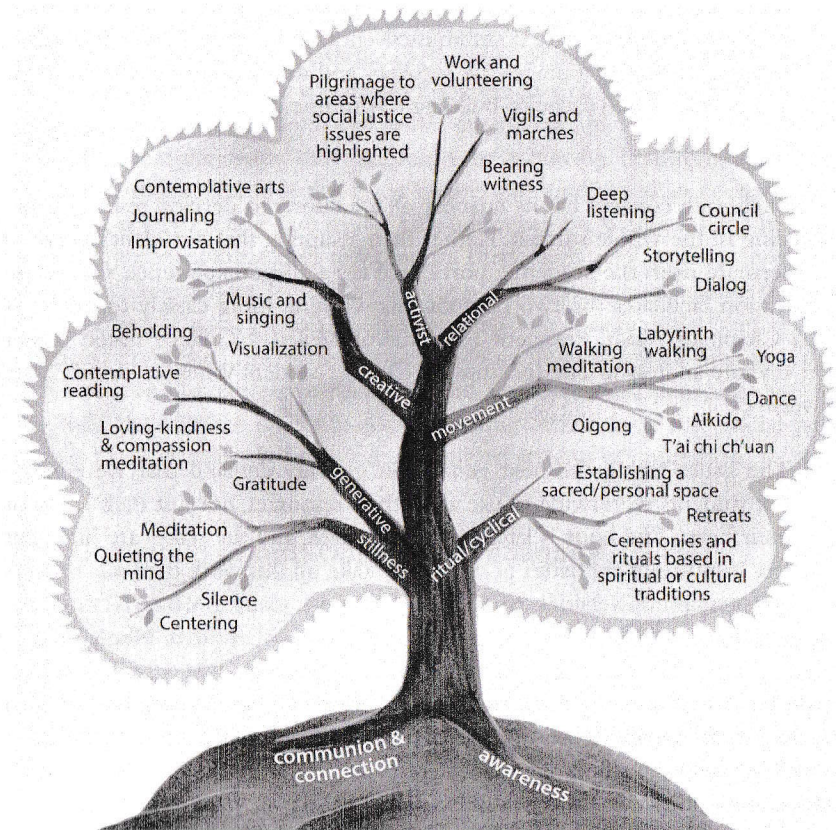


FIGURE 1.1 The Tree of Contemplative Practices

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## Educating the Whole Student

Over the past ten years, mindfulness initiatives have become more common, more visible, and more coordinated throughout U.S. colleges and universities (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2008). Increasingly, higher education is recognizing the value of integrated student learning. Some call it holistic education, which, according to Ron Miller, is “based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace” (1997, 1). Mark Nepo, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The Book of Awakening* uses the term “transformational education,” which is

understood as educating the whole person by integrating the inner and outer life, by actualizing individual and global awakening, and by participating in compassionate communities—[it] has become a quiet but sturdy movement that encourages the recovery and development of the academy as a liberating and capacity-building environment.

(2010, vii)

Though each concept has its nuances, all are efforts to develop resiliency and well-being in the whole student. Rather than assuming that a student’s personal life is separate from the academic portion of her college experience, this vision of education facilitates the two components working more closely together. As Diana Chapman Walsh, President Emeritus of Wellesley College noted in her 2005 keynote address to The Institute on College Student Values at Florida State University,

The issues facing the next generation globally demand that we educate our students worldwide to use all of their resources, not just their mind or their heart. The hour is late, the work is hard, and the stakes are high, but few institutions are better positioned to take up this work than our nation’s colleges and universities.

(qtd. in Nepo 2010, v)

Rather than the more traditional silo model of higher education, in which academic study remains separate from student affairs, this trend speaks to the need to not only intentionally integrate students’ college experience but also to teach students how and why that integration is critical to their own well-being and that of their communities (Awbrey and Dana 2006; Palmer and Zajonc 2010). Women’s Studies, of course, has long recognized the need for this integration. Women’s Centers, often housed within student affairs at universities, have forged strong interdependent relationships with academic Women’s Studies departments.

Similar relationships exist between Ethnic Studies departments and Multicultural Student Services offices and between Queer Studies academic departments and LGBTQ resources centers in Student Affairs. These mutually supportive partnerships provide valuable models for more holistic higher education.

Truly transformational learning, though, requires an even more fundamental integration. Feminist scholar bell hooks has called for an “engaged pedagogy,” which she suggests goes further than either critical or feminist pedagogy because it emphasizes well-being and calls for “radical openness,” “discernment,” and “care of the soul” (1994, 15–16; 2010, 8–10). This well-being involves a knowledge of oneself and an accountability for one’s actions, as well as a deep self-care, for both students and professors. Teachers, hooks argues, must be self-actualized if they are to help empower students. Engaged pedagogy is an education for how to live in the world. Discussions of holistic learning have come much further since the publication of her groundbreaking book *Teaching to Transgress* in 1994. However, the specifics that explain *how* to educate on the level of mind, body, and spirit are still up for discussion, which is where this book enters the conversation. All of these levels are critical, I argue, for social justice classrooms.

While there are many different routes to achieving holistic education and integrated student learning, this book focuses on mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy as a promising path to not only educating the whole student but, more specifically, contributing skill sets that are particularly *vital* in diversity courses. I will first define what I mean by anti-oppression pedagogy, arguing that most forms of emancipatory teaching and learning can benefit from contemplative practices. I will then discuss the benefits of mindfulness, outline important parallels between contemplative pedagogy and anti-oppressive pedagogy, and then conclude the chapter with tips for integrating mindfulness into social justice courses in order to better help students unlearn systems of oppression.

## Basic Principles of Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

Most social justice courses use some variation of what I will call anti-oppression pedagogy, the most well-known forms of which are critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and queer pedagogy. Each form has its unique history and dimensions, but there are some common components of each. My foundation is in feminist pedagogy, but I use the broader anti-oppression framework because mindfulness can effectively be integrated into a variety of forms of emancipatory pedagogies. It is worth establishing some of their commonalities and differences before outlining how mindfulness can enhance them.

Critical pedagogy seeks to bring radical politics to educational systems. Reflected most prominently in the work of Henry Giroux, Michelle Fine, bell hooks, Paolo Freire, Stanley Aronowitz, and Maxine Green, this pedagogy argues

for the emancipatory potential of democratic learning to better the situation for disenfranchised groups. Its roots lie in James Dewey's ideas that progressive education should engage community-building and that interaction with one's environment is part of knowledge production (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 3). These ideas were placed within a more radical framework when combined with the work of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and The Frankfurt School (Giroux 2003a). The first two analyzed power and knowledge; Gramsci to argue that hegemony is a more effective way of achieving domination than is outright force. Through hegemony, Gramsci argued, individuals are conditioned to adopt the interests of the ruling class, even when they work against their own self-interest (Gramsci 1971). However, hegemony is always partial, opening clear fissures for resistance (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 3). Foucault (1980) questioned the "regimes of truth" that were legitimated through institutionalized forms of knowledge production. He, like others, recognized the educational system as a site of power knowledge, but he did not see power as merely oppressive. For Foucault, power is generative as well as repressive; it produces as well as dominates. Moreover, since power is everywhere, according to Foucault, so is resistance. Critical pedagogy also draws on the critique of rational knowledge and capitalist production (both material and cultural) articulated by The Frankfurt School.

Among the other central founders of critical pedagogy is the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) centered questions of culture, power, and oppression within traditional models of schooling. Freire developed a model of pedagogy focused on grassroots activism, agency, and democratic, active learning. Another Brazilian, Augusto Boal, situated Freire's ideas within the context of theatre and performance to incorporate participant interaction and community reflection (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 6; Boal 1993).

This heterogeneous theoretical base produced a few basic tenets for critical pedagogy. First, critical pedagogy seeks to empower disenfranchised groups to democratically participate in their educational process. Central to this *conscientization* is a critique of the repressive nature of traditional learning and classroom structures (Freire 1970). Many of these theorists argued that education masquerades under the guise of objectivity and neutrality that masks the underlying power dynamics (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 11). By validating the personal experiences of marginalized groups and enabling more democratic educational spaces, this pedagogy helps schools become sites of struggle over knowledge.

Second, critical pedagogy argues that schools traditionally work against the interests of most students who are hegemonically conditioned to adopt the interests of the elite ruling class. This component challenges the myth of equal opportunity to education and instead argues that schools reproduce vastly inequitable class hierarchies (Giroux 2003b). Critical pedagogy also acknowledges that the material conditions and lived experiences of the students and teacher directly shape how and what they can know.

Rather than seeing knowledge as objective "Truth," critical pedagogy argues that knowledge is historically produced and culturally located. Students are thus encouraged to situate themselves and their experiences within historical socio-political power dynamics and to understand those dynamics as both socially produced and changeable (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 12). This social agency is practiced both by empowering students and by revealing the fissures, gaps, contradictions, and ideologies that are embedded in knowledge production, thereby opening space for resistance. This critique is an ongoing process, since hegemony and the production of power/knowledge are also ongoing processes.

This latter component opens the door to uncertainty, undermining the emphasis on rationality and Truth that so often pervades more traditional education. "In opposition to traditional theories of education that serve to reinforce certainty, conformity, and technical control of knowledge and power, critical pedagogy embraces a dialectical view of knowledge that functions to unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large" (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 12). It thus emphasizes the interdependence and relationality of systems and individuals, domination and liberation, theory and praxis, students and teacher.

Finally, though no less importantly, critical pedagogy centers a theory of resistance, to explain why disenfranchised groups often do not succeed in traditional educational systems that marginalize them. This resistance also opens the possibility for an oppositional consciousness, in which students actively resist their dehumanization and develop counter-hegemonic alternatives that center marginalized voices (Freire 2000). These alternatives are partly made possible by the praxis that encourages students to apply critique, analysis, and questioning to their everyday lives (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003).

While critical pedagogy contributes a great deal to emancipatory learning, it has also come under some critique, most notably from feminist and critical race theorists. The majority of influential founders of critical pedagogy were men, so some of the critiques stem from a sense that they only superficially challenge the hegemony of patriarchy (Luke 1992). A deeper criticism surrounds their reification of the Enlightenment privileging of cognitive, rational knowledge (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003). Feminists have staunchly argued for the importance of personal stories, biographies, and the situated nature of each individual's knowledge and experience (Darder, Baltodano and Torres 2003). Gender needs to be a category of analysis so that women and girls are included in both the content and process of education. These scholars focused on nonhierarchical learning spaces, multiple perspectives, and providing students with tools for self-empowerment (Rendón 2014).

The feminist intersectionality framework that I adopt throughout this book emerged in the context of these debates. Intersectionality argues that matrices of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national location need to be addressed, not only

to challenge dominant forms of education but also to center the histories and perspectives of disenfranchised groups (Crenshaw 1991). In fact, some feminist critical race theorists have argued that important insights can emerge from the perspectives of those on the margins. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), for instance, offered the concept of “the outsider within” to explain how people from marginalized groups see the exclusionary practices of social institutions, because even when they are on the “inside,” they are still marginalized by the paradigms that Other them. Those perspectives offer invaluable insights into how dominant educational systems can be deconstructed. With intersectionality, there is a greater emphasis on uncertainty, open-endedness, and relational knowledge (Luke and Gore 1992).

Feminist teaching practices draw on prominent feminist theory that argues for situated knowledges and examines the standpoint (or sitpoint) of all perspectives (Haraway 1988, Harding 2003; Garland-Thomson 2005). Because the body is such a central issue in feminism, with a focus on issues such as body image and beauty, reproductive justice, and violence against women, it makes sense that feminist pedagogy would examine the embodiment of learning, including how different bodies are constructed in the classroom (Wilcox 2009; Weller 1991). Feminist pedagogy recognizes the power dynamics in the classroom and seeks to share power between all participants (Luke and Gore 1992).

This form of pedagogy also seeks to empower students to create social change by catalyzing their agency. Here, “empowerment means not only helping students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage necessary to change the social order where necessary” (McLaren quoted in Gore 1992, 57). Gore (1992) raises concerns about the extraordinary abilities attributed to teachers in this notion of empowerment. If power is something that is exercised, not a form of property in a zero-sum game, then empowerment in this context would need to be context-specific and grounded in particular practices (Gore 1992).

Critical race theorists expressed a similar critique of critical pedagogy, not only pointing out that many of the founding leaders were White, but also that the pedagogy failed to center the perspectives of the subordinate groups themselves, who were often communities of color (hooks 1994; Allen 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006; Brown-Jeffery and Cooper 2011). Anti-racist pedagogy challenges the foundation of the Western educational system as one historically grounded in White male supremacy. It troubles claims of universality and detached “objectivity” to instead argue for historically situated knowledges from multiple perspectives. In anti-racist pedagogy, like in feminist pedagogy, students are challenged to learn and unlearn paradigms at deep cognitive and affective levels—what I call our very sense of self—which is why deep emotions are often triggered in these classrooms (Wagner 2005; Blakeney 2005). Because traditional learning is seen to reinforce structures of domination, the *process* of learning how to think

critically from an anti-racist perspective is critical (Wagner 2005; ARPAC 2014). This process is made explicit, for instance, by preparing students at the beginning of class that deeply held ideologies will be challenged and that students will be asked to take risks that will likely be unsettling. Anti-racist pedagogy, like feminist pedagogy, challenges participants to examine how their own identities position them in relation to the material they are learning and to the other participants in the classroom.

Queer pedagogy takes up some similar principles by positioning the identities of both teachers and student in power dynamics and by challenging the heteronormative frameworks of traditional education (Luhmann 1998). A queer pedagogy explores gender performativity as it is related to sexual identity and sees both as fluid and dynamic, rather than static, and challenges assimilationist frameworks (Halberstam 2003). Like the term queer itself, a queer pedagogy deconstructs the very frameworks through which we presume to know and works toward more radical alternatives (Britzman 1995; Winans 2006).

The scholar Kevin Kumashiro distinguishes between four major threads of working against oppression: “education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society” (2002, 31). Many of the models of pedagogy discussed thus far include components of these different ways to challenge oppression. Many diversity classes, for instance, include information about marginalized groups and narratives told in the voices of marginalized groups, so as to more fully teach about the “Other” and to challenge the erasure of marginalized groups’ experiences that so often pervade traditional forms of education. When marginalized groups see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are validated in important ways. But, of course, these first two methods that Kumashiro describes have their limits, since they do not fundamentally question the paradigms that marginalize and Other in the first place. Forms of pedagogy that teach students how this privileging and Othering operate and what its consequences are go further toward dismantling the systems, particularly if students are taught the tools with which to interrupt the process. They can then develop the skill sets to create alternative, more emancipatory ways of relating to one another. I argue that mindfulness is an important component of this last step because it takes us beyond the cognitive into embodied transformation, at both the individual and the collective levels.

Though there are important differences between all of these forms of pedagogy, they do have some basic commonalities: 1. learning is politicized; 2. educational systems are recognized as both sites of oppression and sites of resistance; 3. students are taught to apply the concepts to their everyday lives and the sociopolitical power dynamics in which they live; 4. objective “Truth” claims are challenged as forms of domination; 5. knowledge is instead understood as historically and culturally specific; 6. teachers and students participate in knowledge construction; 7. the process of learning is as important as the content of learning, if not more so;

8. democratic participation is highly valued; 9. awareness and consciousness-raising is critical; 10. multiple perspectives are highlighted, often centering the experiences of marginalized groups; and 11. students are encouraged to use their learning process to actively transform society in socially just ways. Many of these forms of pedagogy examine how and where they may be complicit in the very systems they are trying to dismantle. Of course, each form of pedagogy defines some of these tenets in particular ways and centers certain aspects of identity in its mission (gender, race, class, sexuality). In doing so, each brings important dimensions to the conversation.

I believe that mindfulness offers a valuable contribution to each of these types of pedagogy. Therefore, despite the nuances in each form discussed above, I will use the umbrella term “anti-oppression pedagogy” to include all of them. Further scholarship in this area can explore the specific ways mindfulness can be integrated in the unique strategies of each form of pedagogy. But as one of the first texts in this field, this book is interested in establishing the foundation of intersections between mindfulness and anti-oppression pedagogy, explaining how and why mindfulness provides critical methods for students to unlearn oppression, and offering teachers “action” tips for implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom.

### Parallels between Mindful Learning and Anti-Oppression Pedagogy

Recent efforts in contemplative education make important strides toward fulfilling hooks’ call to “educate the whole student” but sometimes without the explicit social justice consciousness that is integral to anti-oppression pedagogy. However, anti-oppression pedagogy does not always help students fully *embody* their learning. In Women’s Studies courses, for instance, students cultivate social awareness and feminist political consciousness. They learn how to apply the concepts from class to their own lives and the world around them. They also develop leadership, advocacy, and empowerment skills. But all of these tools have their limits if student cannot fully *embody* them. To really integrate these lessons, they need to be absorbed into our very selves, not merely learned at the level of the intellect or political consciousness.

Mindful education is one valuable way to help students fully integrate and embody the lessons of anti-oppression pedagogy. In fact, the very practice of mindfulness is a fundamental catalyst for transformation. Like feminism, mindfulness is more about process than it is about product. If, as Audre Lorde said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” then we need to learn new ways of being in the world. Integrating mindful learning into anti-oppression pedagogy lets us do just that. Contemplative practices, when integrated into the college classroom, can help students develop the ability to critically self-reflect (Barbezat

and Bush 2014). They can also offer students the tools to remain present—and *embodied*—in the classroom, an idea I will examine more fully in Chapter 2.

Growing research demonstrates the vast benefits of mindfulness. Recent advances in Western neuroscience have supported what ancient yogis and meditators have long known: that mindfulness has extensive emotional, psychological, and physiological benefits. Regular mindfulness practice strengthens the immune system and eases stress. It can ease anxiety and depression, while increasing concentration and awareness (Davis and Hayes 2012; *Free the Mind* 2012; Wadlinger and Isaacowitz 2011; Williams and Penman 2011). Meditation, yoga, and *pranayama* (yogic breathing) have also been shown to decrease the effects of trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Emerson and Hopper 2011; Van Der Kolk 2014).

Mindfulness, then, can enhance the overall well-being of college students. It offers students tools that they can use anytime and anywhere to ease their anxiety and stress, which can be particularly helpful during semester crunch. Some studies indicate that regular mindfulness practice increases academic performance and enhances students’ ability to relate to others (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Brown University 2014; Shapiro et al. 2011). Given the personal identity development trajectories common for most traditionally aged college students, the proven benefits to emotional intelligence also makes mindfulness particularly helpful in college. It can enable students to establish healthy life skills that can serve them long after graduation (Goleman 1994). Even if the seed does not fully take root during the college years, once students learn about mindfulness, they may be more likely to access it later in life when they find they are in need of its benefits.

However, mindfulness practices are not just dropped willy-nilly into a syllabus but are instead integrated into a pedagogy that seeks to deepen introspection and inquiry. As such, they nicely compliment more traditional modes of learning, while also enhancing students’ deeper self-awareness. In fact, this type of learning recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge. In her groundbreaking book *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Ellen J. Langer distinguishes between Intelligence and Mindful Learning (1997). The former, she argues, entails a linear process of stable categories, objective facts, and learned skills that correspond to reality and moves toward resolutions. Mindfulness, on the other hand, values multiple perspectives, encourages the participant to experience control by shifting between these perspectives, and sees knowledge as fluid. Skills and information are neither inherently good nor bad; instead, the knower is encouraged to step back and reflect on solutions and outcomes to determine deeper meaning within context (Langer 1997, 110).

Though she is careful to distinguish her discussion of mindful learning from the broad-based contemporary use of the term mindfulness, her work has been influential in the field of contemplative pedagogy. Langer suggests that mindful learning generates psychological states that enable several qualities: “(1) openness to novelty;

(2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; (5) orientation in the present” (1997, 23). Scholar Laura A. Rendón makes a similar distinction between knowledge and wisdom. The former, she suggests, values rationality, detached objectivity and facts about the outer world but without *application* to life. Wisdom, on the other hand, “arises from personal communion and reflection on life” (2014, 90). It emphasizes self-reflection on the inner life and cultivates self-awareness. It begins with the personal space, but then expands to integrate a social responsibility (Rendón 2014, 90).

Mindful learning, then, parallels a basic tenet of anti-oppression pedagogy that recognizes all knowledge as culturally constructed and partial. Who we are shapes what we know. One goal of anti-oppression pedagogy is to make that lens visible and to try to step outside it. Both forms of learning value the *process* of inquiry as much as the results. Both, then, allow what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls “living the questions.” In his classic book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke writes, “Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (1993, 12).

Contemplative pedagogy invites student to actively situate themselves within the content of their courses and apply the concepts to their own lives, another clear parallel with anti-oppression pedagogy. As such, it takes experiential learning to a different level, one that integrates the mind and body with a more holistic value system. As Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, current and founding director of the Center for Contemplative Mind and Society (respectively) define it, contemplative pedagogy has a few basic goals:

1. Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability.
2. Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material.
3. Compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspect of education.
4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight. (Barbezat and Bush 2014, 11)

Contemplative practices focus on the present moment, helping students cultivate clarity about their internal experiences in any given moment. When used in an academic setting, mindfulness practices have proven to increase students’ concentration, deepen their understanding, increase their emotional intelligence, sustain emotional regulation, and develop their creativity (Barbezat and Bush 2014, 22–32; Goleman 1994).

More and more educators are integrating various contemplative practices into the university classroom in order to help students cultivate presence and self-reflection.

Contemplative pedagogy uses practices that enable deep introspection into meaning, ethics, purpose, and values. They encourage reflection on our internal experience as well as our interdependence with others. Like much anti-oppression pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy challenges the objectivism and empiricism of traditional learning, suggesting that there is much more to learn than a privileging of rational knowledge and scientific methods allow. Without discounting the value of the former, contemplative pedagogy reveals the rich potential of introspection that helps cultivate the depth of our hearts with an eye toward greater sustainability. As Barbezat and Bush write, “[C]ontemplative pedagogy does not supplant or detract from rigorous analytical inquiry . . . rather, they can augment and enhance, and even transform, traditional modes of teaching and learning” (2014, 84). Just as traditional analytical education trains students how to question and perceive in nuanced ways, contemplative pedagogy helps students cultivate a nuanced discernment of their own experience. When it comes to learning about oppression, I argue, one without the other is ultimately ineffective to both understanding how oppression operates and to unlearning it.

### Why Mindfulness Is Critical in Courses That Teach about Diversity

Courses that deal with oppression and diversity can greatly benefit from contemplative practices because they can help us unlearn the conditioned responses that uphold systems of oppression. Diversity classes are not just objective studies of content. They also teach self-reflective processes that invite students to examine how systems of oppression affect them and what their roles might be within those systems. Feminist and other diversity classrooms counter a one-dimensional privileging of cognition to highlight an “embodied reflexivity” in which participants learn to reflect on their own ideologies and experiences, question their ways of thinking, and imagine alternatives (Lather 1991, 48).

Contemplative practices enable students to cultivate emotional intelligence, learn to sit with difficult emotions, recognize deeply entrenched narratives they use to interpret the world, cultivate compassion for other people, and become more intentional about how they respond in any given moment. All of these abilities can transform dialogues about power, oppression, and privilege from intense reactionary debates into more relational, empathic, and reflective experiences. By integrating mindfulness into our social justice courses, we can help students learn how to navigate fraught situations in intentional, more compassionate ways. This ability is crucial not only in the academic social justice classroom but also in our broader society.



Oppression leaves its mark on our hearts, bodies, and spirits. Numerous writings by feminists, people of color, LGBT communities, colonized peoples, and people living in poverty have attested to the debilitating effects of oppression on people's very sense of self. It marks all of us, albeit in different ways, whether we are members of dominant groups or of marginalized groups. Indeed, intersectional feminist theory teaches us that while some people fit neatly in the category of "oppressor" or "oppressed," most of us hold identities across these different groups, so that we are at times marginalized and at other times privileged.

For those of us who are marginalized, the violence of oppression wounds and exhausts us. We expend a great deal of energy everyday enduring the microaggressions of oppression, while the macroaggressions may leave a powerfully traumatic mark on us. Oppression can also ooze into our very sense of self through the internalization of negative cultural messages about our group. The consequences of oppression include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and anger.

Oppression takes a different toll on those in the dominant groups. Though we do not suffer the same kinds of microaggressions and internalized oppression, we also do not get to live into our full humanity. While dominant groups certainly benefit from the privileges we receive, we are also disconnected from others by that very privilege. Many of my students experience a certain amount of dismay and pain when they realize that they accrue daily privileges at the expense of their classmates and community members in marginalized groups. Though some people, obviously, revel in their privilege, I believe that far more people would prefer to dismantle systems of oppression even when they benefit from them. They are often unaware of the deep and difficult work this will entail on their part, but many of my students want a more equitable world, at least theoretically.

The tricky part lies in the fact that we cannot deconstruct oppression on merely theoretical grounds. Of course, we have to engage in social transformation at the collective, societal, and institutional levels, but we also have to do it at the level of the individual. We have to get down and dirty with the hard work on ourselves and in our communities. Since oppression insinuates itself into our lived experiences and our very sense of selves, that is where some of the work lies. Anti-oppression pedagogy demands accountability for our own roles in systems of oppression, whatever those roles might be. But I find that students often feel at a loss about what to do with the intense feelings that arise or how to interrupt deeply entrenched patterns in themselves and others. Recognizing them is a first step, but I have long felt that an entire set of tools are missing from the tool belts we provide students.

Fortunately, mindfulness can help fill that gap by deepening our self-awareness on an embodied level. Rather than merely seeing patterns of oppression in the society around us or even in our external behaviors, we can begin to recognize *how* they have insinuated themselves into our selves, bodies, and spirits. We can learn to recognize the effects in our rapid heartbeat, our anger, our deep

shame or sadness. We can start to recognize how we want to lash out as a defense mechanism that both protects us from external threats and gives us something to focus on besides our pain. While there is a time and place when such lashing out is a necessary survival mechanism, with deeper reflection we might find that that behavior does not serve us in every moment. Mindfulness allows us to be more intentional in our choices. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will outline some of the most critical benefits that mindfulness can bring to anti-oppression pedagogy.

### The Ultimate in Applied Learning

Anti-oppression pedagogy centers around active and applied learning. Knowledge is not a static product to be absorbed by the student but rather a dynamic process in which teachers and student co-participate. The sum of what can be created in the collective process is often greater than anything that could have been produced by any one person. While there are, of course, fundamental concepts to be studied, anti-oppression pedagogy also focuses on the power dynamics of knowledge production: who has historically been excluded from that process, what gaps have resulted from those exclusions, and how understanding is altered when multiple voices are included.

Mindfulness is the penultimate form of applied learning, since it cannot be understood in the abstract. *It must be practiced.* The richness of the learning process lies in working with whatever arises, rather than from expecting prescribed or forgone conclusions. Brown University's Contemplative Studies Initiative calls this skill "critical first person inquiry" or the ability to experience something with an open mind and then step back and study the experience (Brown University 2014). This kind of engagement recognizes that learning is not merely intellectual and knowledge is not something "out there," removed from us. What mindfulness practices can bring to anti-oppression pedagogy is a more deeply *embodied* sense of this process. Just as feminist thought teaches students to analyze conventions long taken for granted, yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness practices invite students "to investigate what we assume to be true through a series of experiments, so that we may relinquish what we have been told and come to our own firsthand understanding about the nature of reality, the world, and ourselves" (Miller 2010, 23). When contemplative pedagogy is combined with feminist analysis, it offers the possibility of embodying wisdom.

Mindful learning, like anti-oppression pedagogy, teaches students an "appreciation of the conditional, or context-dependent, nature of the work and the value of uncertainty" (Langer 1997, 15). In social justice classrooms, students learn that generalizations need to be contextualized in the specificity of identity locations. For instance, though sexism and patriarchy absolutely exist, not all men have power over all women. Men of color, for instance, are marginalized in ways

that White women are not and are often oppressed by White women. Mindful education encourages students to see knowledge as conditional and to examine how different perspectives offer different insights. Looking at something from a variety of perspectives not only helps students get a more well-rounded comprehension of the issue; it also helps them see that all perspectives are partial. Each has its place and each is incomplete.

Mindful learning also helps students learn to trust their own authority, because they get to test it out and examine how well a practice or theory works for them. As Langer (1997) suggests, when conditional and context-dependent learning is valued, it becomes more possible to generate alternatives, because there is a greater openness to possibility and a greater willingness to step off the beaten path.

### Cultivating the Discernment to Interrupt Learned Storylines

Most contemplative practices enhance clear seeing and focus, while also enabling an ability to think on one's feet in the moment. They cultivate an ability to see things from multiple perspectives, something that is critical in anti-oppression courses. By developing compassion and empathy, they also strengthen mental and emotional health. These latter aspects of contemplative pedagogy are critical for anti-oppression classrooms, given the emotional and psychological toll oppression takes on everyone, most especially members of marginalized groups. His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself has stated that in "analytic meditation, one brings about inner change through systematic investigation and analysis. In this way we can properly use our human intelligence, our capacity for reason and analysis, to contribute to our happiness and satisfaction" (qtd. in Barbezat and Bush 2014, 84). The combination, I suggest, creates more empowering and sustainable tools for students to not only unlearn oppression but to cultivate more humane ways of relating to one another.

One of the key gifts of mindfulness is that it uncovers the mental chatter that is always present in our minds. While the exact content of that chatter differs from person to person, most of us believe our inner monologues to be "Truth" and, therefore, base our behaviors and actions on them. Mindfulness teaches us to *discern* the difference between our thoughts and our being. As Daniel J. Siegel writes in his book, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*,

Discernment is a form of disidentification from the activity of your own mind: as you become aware of sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts, you come to see these activities of the mind as waves on the surface of the mental sea.

(2007, 19)

This process enables us to "disentangle" from "the chatter of the mind" by recognizing that we are bigger than our thoughts. Our thoughts and emotions are a part of us, but they are not the totality of us (Siegel 2007, 19). When we can recognize that distinction, we can bring a more analytical lens to the chatter in our minds, discern where it comes from, and make more intentional choices about how we want to be in the world. This discernment helps prevent practitioners from drowning in the sea of their emotions.

This skill becomes particularly important for interrupting systems of oppression because much of our chatter is shaped by learned ideologies. Beliefs about ourselves and others are socially produced, as are the power hierarchies that result from them. For most students, these ideologies are so normalized that they just take them for granted. Even those who are from marginalized groups, while they may recognize their oppression, may nevertheless lack the awareness to accurately name what is happening. Mindfulness can help students learn to minimize the damaging effects of oppressive ideologies on their sense of self and learn to interrupt the systems at both individual and structural levels. Similarly, students who are members of dominant groups in society are taught not to see the privileges they receive. Often they have learned a sense of superiority and entitlement that remains invisible to them. This is how systems of oppression work: when privileged students come to our classes unaware of the benefits they receive that are denied those of marginalized groups, that is the oppressive system working the way it is designed to work. Intersectional feminism reveals this process to be even more complicated, since many of us receive benefits in some ways and are oppressed in others, which manifests in similarly complex dynamics in the classroom.

Our job as teachers is to help our students develop an awareness of this process so that they can learn to interrupt the system. Most anti-oppression teachers make this the central tenet of our classes. We generally do a good job of revealing inequitable power dynamics throughout society and the ideologies that fuel them. But these learned ideologies operate at more than merely an intellectual level, so analytical awareness is not enough. Oppressive ideologies insinuate themselves into our very selves, which means that they inevitably inform that mental chatter I mentioned earlier. While many writers discuss the kinds of life experiences that inform our mental narratives, it stands to reason that some of those narratives are shaped by the oppressive ideologies that so deeply influence society and the construction of identity. Women's Studies critics, for instance, have long noted that ideologies of beauty and the devaluation of women have detrimental effect on women. Women's Studies courses help students develop media literacy and understand the effects of those portrayals on women's self-esteem and body image. This is a critical step in the unlearning process. But these ideologies so deeply inform many women's internal self-talk. It takes the capacity to recognize that negative mental chatter and the skills to

interrupt it if we are to truly unearth the seeds of oppression. That means, for most of us, reworking our very wiring.

The good news is that mindfulness can help us do just that. Leading contemplative neuroscientist Dr. Richard Davidson, the William James and Vilas Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, has used developments in MRI technology to measure the effects of meditation on the brain. His work reveals that, unlike previously thought, the adult brain actually has a great deal of plasticity, which means that deep cognitive changes can still occur throughout adulthood (Davidson and Begley 2012; *Free the Mind* 2012). While much of this research focuses on conditions such as PTSD and depression, on the one hand, or compassion and empathy, on the other, it reveals that deeply ingrained pathways that have become automatic can, indeed, be interrupted. They can be reworked not just on a one-time basis but in more sustainable ways. This plasticity could prove valuable in social justice classes, since oppressive ideologies that inform practices and behaviors are learned and deeply ingrained. If the storylines we repeatedly narrate to ourselves are laced with oppressive ideologies—and I argue that they inevitably are—then the ability to pause those storylines and even rewrite them can go a long way toward creating a more just world. Thus, while Davidson and his colleagues do not necessarily apply their findings about adult neuroplasticity to issues of oppression, I think they offer profound possibilities for our work as social justice teachers. This work reveals that we can choose to feed the part of ourselves that can create more empowering worlds—such as our compassion and kindness—by engaging in regular mindfulness practice. Let me reiterate here that I am *not* saying that we can “choose not to be affected by oppression.” That, of course, is not possible. But we can claim some degree of agency about how deeply oppression erodes our sense of self and rework how our self relates to others. When combined with structural change, these steps can take us a long way toward creating a more just world.

### Deepening Self-Reflection

Feminist and anti-oppression pedagogy mark self-reflection as a central ingredient for a transformational learning process. In this context, self-reflection usually means examining our own positionality in society, our role(s) in power systems, and an evaluation of how issues affect our personal lives. It involves questioning how we both uphold and can interrupt power systems. The reflection that contemplative pedagogy allows is an internal one that explores an individual’s emotional, physiological, *and* cognitive responses. As such, it provides an added dimension to the analytical and structural analysis emphasized in anti-oppression pedagogy. If students are to really reflect on their roles in systems of oppression, they need to cultivate the tools for recognizing and understanding their internal and external reactions to that growing awareness. Like holding a camera,

our positionality frames what we can and cannot immediately see. The critical self-reflection tools cultivated in mindfulness, combined with a feminist analytical understanding, helps us see that who we are shapes what we know, but it also helps us expand the lens of what we can see. This reflexivity helps students examine how their beliefs, values, and emotions affect them, enabling students “to critically analyze dominant belief systems, recognize how others have imposed limiting beliefs on them, and liberate themselves from those negative views” (Rendón 2014, 102).

I argue that mindfulness is a critical and often missing component in this self-reflection. Mindfulness invites us to reflect not only on what we are thinking but also on what we are feeling. By teaching practitioners to be more fully present in the moment, they become much more familiar with their personal responses, feelings, and thoughts. Mindfulness practices take a variety of forms, all of which develop the introspection through which we recognize, understand, and befriend our patterns. In doing so, we learn a great deal about ourselves. We become familiar with how we respond to various matters, how those responses feel in our bodies, and how they tend to manifest in our external behaviors. Just as anti-oppression pedagogy teaches how to recognize patterns in society, mindfulness teaches us how to recognize patterns in ourselves, including the mental tapes that play and the embodied effects they have. We begin to see not only what happens in our intellects but also how it rests in our bodies: what triggers our fears, resentments, and insecurities. We begin to see how we respond to those emotions: how they manifest in our bodies (rapid heartbeat, cold sweats, panic) and how we typically react to them (do we shut down or lash out?).

Mindful learning does not assume that students will take things for granted but instead invites them to engage in experiential inquiry. Contemplative practices help students cultivate the *Witness*, which allows one to be fully in an experience and simultaneously bigger than it. Rather than being entirely consumed by an experience, students are invited to have an experience and then step back and reflect upon it. As such, mindfulness takes the self-reflection that is at the heart of feminist pedagogy a step deeper. Rather than taking a teacher’s word for it, students are expected to try it themselves and see what happens.

Much like feminism requires us to reflect on our own process and consider what did and did not work, mindfulness teaches us to work with whatever arises for us. There is not an ideal goal; instead, whatever resistance, avoidance, joy, or thoughts, or preoccupations arise as we meditate is precisely what we need to reflect upon. They lead us to the internal work we need to do. The *Witness* teaches us to accept our emotions, be with them in the present but also to be bigger than they are. It creates a distance between our basic selves and whatever we are feeling in the moment. This distance is not the same as disassociation, because we are still fully feeling our responses, but we also recognize that they *need not consume us* because they are only *a part of us*.

This mindful embodied learning is a crucial component to anti-oppression pedagogy because it teaches us how to meet our responses with clarity and compassion. Only then can we begin to unlearn these deeply embedded responses. Creating a more just society requires institutional and collective change, but it also requires the individual work of unlearning the messages internalized in an oppressive society and relearning more compassionate ways of being with ourselves and others. That work cannot be done at a merely analytical level. It **MUST** be done at the level of our hearts, bodies, *and* our minds.

### Create a Gap between Reaction and Response

One of my yoga teachers calls this tool the “holy pause.” In that pause, students can learn to accept their reactions—whatever they may be—and then thoughtfully decide how and whether to engage them. Those of us who teach about diversity issues have likely had the experience of students blurting out a statement that, intentionally or not, reinforces racism, sexism, homophobia, or some other “ism.” These outbursts occur because students have learned oppressive messages from society and may not recognize how deeply those messages shape their ways of thinking. Even if they do recognize the deep ideologies, they likely will not be able to unlearn those heavily reinforced messages overnight. Indeed, given how effectively systems of oppression work, I think we should be surprised if these moments do not occur in our classroom, rather than discouraged when they do.

When these outbursts happen, the other students in the room tend to “react” back. Students might get defensive and lash out; they might become hurt and shut down; they might look to the teacher to “interrupt the moment.” The level of trust and community that has been established in the class will shape how effectively the other students handle the situation. The teacher is in the position of turning the situation into a “teachable moment” that validates the responses of the students who are angry and hurt but also reaches the student who blurted the statement out. I see these kinds of situations as key opportunities for mindfulness to enhance anti-oppression pedagogy, because these moments in our classrooms also occur in our broader communities—the former is a microcosm of the latter. Helping students learn how to navigate these moments in successful ways in the classroom provides them with invaluable tools they can continue to utilize throughout their life.

Mindfulness lets us become very self-aware of what is arising for us and allows us the time to: 1. accept what we are feeling; 2. discern the situation with some clarity; and 3. determine more intentionally how we want to respond. These are crucial steps in developing more compassionate and effective social change efforts that are strategic rather than reactionary. Mindfulness creates an internal self-reflection that enables a pause between our gut reactions and our external responses. In other words, as we recognize our reactions, we also become more

capable of deciding more intentionally how we might want to respond. While our automatic responses have their place and are sometimes necessary survival mechanisms, they do not always serve us. Mindfulness can help us more effectively choose what will be helpful to us and to the situation in any given moment.

### Understanding the Responses of Others

When we befriend and understand our own responses, we have a better framework for understanding those of others. When mindful awareness is situated within a feminist analysis of sociopolitical power dynamics, we have a more comprehensive and sensitive way to understand **WHY** people respond the way they do. We can see their reactions as *the inevitable by-products of living in an oppressive society*. This understanding does not mean we excuse people’s hurtful behaviors, but it does help us learn to see how systems of oppression work through and on individuals.

This brings a couple different layers of insight into the classroom. It can prevent the easy dismissal of the reactions from oppressed groups because their classmates can situate their responses within histories of oppression. For instance, women are often accused of “overreacting” to a particular sexist comment, while people of color are often accused of being too sensitive if they get angry at a comment that they experience as racist. To the classmate who just said it, it seems like a simple comment that is being blown out of proportion, so they blame the victim and reduce the significance of the comment. That situation can be reframed if we as teachers help students understand that for the member of the marginalized group, this is the thousandth time such a microaggression has occurred, so it acts like pouring lemon juice on an open wound which never gets the chance to heal because it keeps getting poked.

For the member of the marginalized group, it can be helpful to understand that their classmate is speaking from years of accumulated acculturation into systems of oppression. That does not excuse their behavior, but it does help situate it. This realization can be particularly helpful when the microaggression comes from a person they considered their ally. Perhaps this person is well-intentioned and has done a great deal of work building trust and trying to unlearn oppression. Nevertheless, they will likely reproduce systems of oppression at some point, albeit unwittingly. Depending on the level of violence of this infraction, the marginalized person might need to sever relationships with the person. But it might also be possible to recognize that the individual is a product of his/her/zir culture and that his/her/zir unlearning process is likely a lifelong process that will involve a great many mistakes. Rather than ignoring the mistake on one hand or writing them off on the other, mindfulness offers another option: holding each other accountable and having a hard conversation about why the microaggression was hurtful.

We cannot hope to have our allies unlearn their own privilege if we do not work on unlearning ours. We must start with ourselves, do our own work (whatever it is), before we can expect others to do their work. At the same time, however, I do not think it is helpful to rank oppressions. Instead, we all need to do the work simultaneously. We can learn to have more compassion for our allies who slip and fall when we recognize the myriad of ways we slip and fall, participating in microaggressions even when we strive not to do so. As a White, Western, middle-class woman, there are all sorts of ways I participate in oppression, even when I struggle daily to unlearn and interrupt my privilege. As a queer woman, I am also marginalized in many ways. Recognizing my power, privilege, and marginalization allows me to do my work and to have more compassion for others who are doing theirs. When I am mindful of the moments when I inadvertently uphold oppression, I have more compassion for those people who inadvertently marginalize me. That does not mean I do not get angry, challenge them, or hold them accountable. But it does prevent me from demonizing them, because I recognize that we are all in this together. This context helps us relate to people in more compassionate ways and helps us develop responses that neither oversimplify nor demonize the reactions of others.

Mindfulness, then, helps us strengthen our capacity for compassion. Davidson's now famous studies with Buddhist monks reveal that even when exposed to extremely disturbing stimuli, they had the ability to activate the parts of their brain responsible for compassion and empathy (Davidson 2012). Further studies by Davidson and his team indicate that compassion meditation in particular can regulate emotions and intentionally stimulate the parts of our brain responsible for kindness and compassion. Studies have shown that consistency of practice is more important than length of practice, which means that even a daily practice of ten to twenty minutes can provide positive results. (Moore et al. 2012; Ricard 2006).

One central component to mindfulness is a nonjudgmental acceptance of what is. Practitioners learn to accept their reactions, whatever they may be, as a first step toward befriending ourselves. In the context of anti-oppression pedagogy, it is important to note that *accepting our responses is not the same thing as accepting oppression*. Instead, it is a way of validating our own experiences and feelings, rather than perpetuating the violence of oppression by condemning our own reactions. Mindfulness enables us to gradually understand and befriend our experiences, which can actually serve as a tool to counter oppression. We can learn to meet ourselves with compassion, which can help heal the deep wounds of oppression. When we can meet ourselves with deep kindness and compassion, we can also more fully empathize with others, which counters the separation and Othering that uphold oppressive systems.

## Tips for Integrating Mindfulness into Social Justice Courses

Since this book is focused on the praxis of integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy, each chapter will include practical tips for doing so. In this chapter, I will address some of the responses one can expect when beginning this process of integration.

### **1. Colleagues and Students May Meet These Steps with Skepticism**

Our colleagues in more traditional disciplines will likely scoff at mindfulness as a pedagogical tool. Its growing popularity in the West, with the scientific evidence that attests to its benefits, is certainly granting it increasing credibility. Still, we may find we need to “justify” or validate our use of it in our classroom.

Similar doubts may come from social justice colleagues and students, who see it as detracting from the “real” social justice work. They may squirm impatiently as we lead a meditation or a breath exercise, wishing we would get to the “more important” social analysis. Be prepared to sit with these reactions, explain what mindfulness offers social justice work, and invite them to give it a try.

### **2. Social Justice Colleagues May Dismiss Mindfulness Practices as a Way of “Protecting” Students From Doing the Hard Work of Facing Their Own Racism, Sexism, Classism, or Homophobia**

As self-reflective teachers and mindfulness practitioners, it is important to carefully consider these concerns. Ask ourselves honestly if mindfulness practices are deflecting or deepening this work. Like any pedagogical tool, they can be used in a variety of ways, some of which are counter-productive to social justice goals.

However, as we will see throughout this book, when used in particular ways, mindfulness techniques can help students and teachers do the work of unlearning oppression in deeper, more embodied, ways. They also enhance emotional intelligence and resilience for our students, which are critical benefits for supporting them in continuing the work of unlearning oppression long after the end of a semester's class or even a four-year-degree.

### **3. The Language of Acceptance and Compassion that Informs Mindfulness Will Be Seen by Some Social Justice Colleagues as “Watering Down” the Importance of “Fighting” against Systematic Violence**

I have had more than one colleague express hesitance that mindfulness will simply “coddle” privileged students and dismiss the pain and anger of marginalized students. These are legitimate concerns that anyone utilizing contemplative practices

in the classroom needs to consider. However, I would argue that, when done properly, it does precisely the opposite. As Musial notes, “caring is not about coddling students, it is about being completely present with individuals” and meeting them where they are (2012, 221). I was initially disheartened when I heard that response from my social justice colleagues, but I have come to accept that we may simply disagree about the best ways to reach a common goal. I believe that mindfulness provides a deeply needed seed for sustainability in our efforts toward social change. Mindfulness offers the tools for students to learn to support themselves and one another in the experience of any emotion—anger, frustration, sadness, guilt, fear—and can help them stay present together as they work through those complex discussions in the classroom.

Emphasizing compassion and peace does not preclude battling oppression or dismantling systems. The language of compassion and peace I use here comes from socially engaged mindfulness activists from a variety of traditions, including the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Tibetan leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the nonviolent philosophy of Mohatma Gandhi, the feminism of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, along with centuries of yogi and meditation scholars, many of whom addressed the inequalities of society. Drawing on both feminist pedagogy scholars and yoga philosophy, Jennifer Musial calls it a “heart-centered” pedagogy (2012, 215). Indeed, I arrived at this approach because it was a more sustainable for me. After years of teaching Women’s Studies courses in the academy, I found the approach of “fighting” oppression without the complementary ingredient of compassion and healing left me feeling like I was doing more violence to myself and others—constantly challenging without having the capacity to rebuild more equitable and socially just alternatives. I see social justice, mindfulness, and anti-oppression pedagogy as supporting each other as we seek to create empowering alternatives and support our students in doing this work for the rest of their lives.

#### **4. Talking About Oppression May Be Seen as Disturbing the “Peace” of Mindfulness Spaces**

Some mindfulness colleagues may express frustration that we are bringing critique and social issues into the supposedly “peaceful” realm of meditation and yoga. They might bristle at being challenged on their privilege. This accusation is nothing new for those of us who do this work. What is unique about this context is that too often these practices are seen as “escapes” from life that should remain removed from critical analysis. While I do believe that there are some ways of being that require modes of inquiry other than intellectual critique, I also believe that mindfulness spaces need to address social justice concerns if they are truly to live up to their potential. As Rendón writes, “When all we do is focus our self-awareness without a concomitant emphasis on social consciousness and

action, what remains is a self-serving, individual blindness to world needs” (2014, 9). For instance, those of us who discuss racism, sexism, or homophobia in yoga studios are often accused of being disruptive, as though these issues are not already in those spaces and too often are not named. The claim that the yoga studio is people’s “escape” from the harsh realities of life does not hold when U.S. yoga studios are so predominantly White, heteronormative, and middle- to-upper class. More and more activists, including the Yoga and Body Image Coalition, an organization in which I am member, are raising these conversations in order to make those spaces more inclusive and more informed. The integration of mindfulness and social justice is a dialectical and mutually transformative process.

#### **5. Some Students Will Dislike Some of the Practices**

No mindfulness practice is a silver bullet that will meet all the needs of every student. We should be skeptical of anything that claims otherwise. It is helpful to prepare students ahead of time that some practices will resonate with them more than others and to create spaces to discuss what did and did not work for students after each practice. That also means integrating a range of practices so that hopefully something will resonate with each student. Alternatively, a class might focus on one or two particular practices so as to develop depth and consistency throughout the semester. In the latter case, students should be informed of that expectation at the very beginning of the semester, in time for them to drop the class if they are unable to participate in the practices for any reason. It is also incumbent on the professor to work with students to make the practices accessible for everyone if they are required for the class; that may mean offering alternatives for some students.

#### **6. The Pressure to Place Content over Process in Limited Class Time**

This is a tricky one, often informed by our own internalized paradigms as teachers that the content is actually more important than this “out-of-the-box” mindfulness practice. Our students and colleagues cannot be expected to accept the value of these practices if we doubt them ourselves (believing in their value is not the same thing as suggesting that they are silver-bullet, universal fixes). So we must try to resist the urge to cut mindfulness practices in favor of devoting more class time to content. (I myself have been guilty of doing this, but when I do, the mindfulness practices do not have their desired effect.)

The best way of countering the content-over-practice paradigm is to clearly articulate the value of the process itself. Explain why and how you are using mindfulness in the classroom and why it brings such valuable contributions to social justice work. Help students see that often, the “resistance” that arises in doing the practices is precisely the material we need to work with, just as the

“resistance” that arises in working against power and privilege often highlights the exact power dynamics we are trying to dismantle. The teacher can facilitate reflective discussions about the process itself, thereby modeling the experiential process.

Unlearning oppression in the college classroom usually produces some intense discussions, and I believe that teachers have an ethical responsibility to prepare students for the affective rawness that can emerge through this kind of pedagogy and to provide them with tools to handle it. Class discussions can flow more effectively if participants are able to recognize, understand, and be accountable for their own reactions. Contemplative practices offer the tools to do just that. When learned and practiced effectively, mindfulness also offers more compassionate alternatives to the ways that people often engage the challenging conversations about diversity. As such, I believe they are a necessary addition to diversity classrooms. Neither anti-oppression pedagogy nor contemplative education are enough on their own, but their integration can provide a powerful recipe for enabling social transformation through the learning—and unlearning—process.

### Mindfulness Practices

Each chapter will include at least one specific mindfulness practice related. This first one focuses on developing more general mindful awareness, as we first need that before we can move it into the more complicated and fraught context of anti-oppression work.

### Mindfulness Check-In

*Read the directions over first before starting so that you do not have to interrupt your inward focus to read. If it would make it easier for you to have a guided meditation, you can record yourself reading the directions or use the MP3 of this meditation on my web site. Have a notebook and pen handy for the follow-up reflection activity.*

Find a quiet space where you can sit with minimal distraction for 5–7 minutes. Dim the lights, light a candle (or use a battery operated one if candles are not allowed), turn off the music, silence your cell phone, and minimize any other noises.

Take a good seat. You might want to sit up on some blankets or a cushion so that your pelvis tilts slightly forward and your knees angle down a bit. Alternatively, you can sit on a chair, making sure your feet are flat on the ground and only your lower spine is resting against the back of the chair. Your palms can be open or closed, resting gently on your upper thighs or knees.

Take a few deep breaths. Feel the breath move all the way through your lungs and into your belly as you inhale. Exhale from your belly through your lungs and out your mouth. As you breathe three or four times, imagine your breath wiping away all the thoughts of the day and bringing your attention to the here and now.

Now let your breath return to normal.

Once you feel fairly present, turn your attention inward. What are you feeling right now? Can you detect the emotions that are swirling through you? Do you notice worry? Excitement? Anger? Joy? Fear?

Where do you notice the emotions in your body? Do they rest in your heart? Your head? Tension in your shoulders? A fluttering in your belly? See if you can find them in your body. Do they have color or texture? Are they cool and blue or fiery and rough?

Try to familiarize yourself with your emotions and how your body holds them. Most importantly, try not to judge them. You are allowed to feel whatever you feel. At this point, we are just trying to recognize them. We'll work more with them later.

Try not to get caught up in the storyline of thoughts. Just notice the thoughts and let them go, like a leaf floating by on a river. Take note of the emotion behind the thought and then let it go.

As we move toward the close of our meditation, take 4–5 deep, cleansing breaths. With each breath, gradually move your attention back outward, maybe gently inviting some movement back into your fingers and toes. When you are ready, open your eyes.

### Journal Reflection

Allow yourself to sit quietly for a moment, digesting your experience and returning to the outer world. Then journal for a few minutes to record your experience. What did you notice about your emotions: color, texture, location. If none of that stood out to you and your observations were to merely name the emotions, that's OK, too. Jot that down.

Where do you think some of these emotions come from? Here it is OK for you to follow your thoughts. Unlike in meditation, where we want to stay with the visceral emotions, in your journal, it would be helpful for you to discern where some of the emotions come from. For instance, if you noticed a solid knot in your belly during your meditation, in your journal, you might explore what is causing that feeling.

### Simple Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness

1. Declare the classroom a “Cell phone-free space.” Students are not to check their cell phones during the class. While many faculty members have this rule anyway, the purpose here is to prevent distractions and multitasking that can impede full presence.
2. Pause and breathe in between each comment. Rather than the usual non-stop flow of a class discussion, implement a “pause and breathe” pattern. Students

are to listen to the speaker, then turn inward, breathe, and reflect on what the person said. Only then can the hands go up for the next comment.

- Journal: add a journaling piece to the previous step. Have students jot down a few notes about their initial reactions to whatever was just said. The idea here is not for them to write down thoughts, but rather felt sense: the emotions that arise, what is happening in their body, their gut reactions.

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## 2

## BRINGING THE BODY BACK IN

*You can't dominate a people without separating them from each other and from themselves. The more people get plugged back into their bodies, each other, the more impossible [it] will be for us to be dominated and occupied. That is the work right now.*

—Eve Ensler (2013)

Mindful education not only echoes many of the principles of anti-oppression pedagogy, it also deepens them by bringing an embodied layer into the learning process. More precisely, it highlights the embodied layer that is always present for us but that often remains buried deep below our thinking mind. The legacy of the Western mind/body dualism places much greater emphasis on the intellect than on most other aspects of our being. As we saw in Chapter 1, trends toward holistic learning call for a more well-rounded and inclusive education (Brown University 2011; Palmer and Zajonc with Scribner 2010; Shapiro, Brown and Astin 2008). As important as these calls are, they still tend to refer to student lives inside and outside the classroom, rather than to workings of power and ideology inside and outside the individual and between the individual and the collective. While much education seeks to be transformative, social justice courses, in particular, urge participants to "walk the talk," which means that our belief systems inform our choices. We also teach students how to collectively organize, so that they learn how groups and individuals make change in their communities. Mindful anti-oppression pedagogy posits that there is yet another layer of change that is necessary: one that is embodied and that requires learning to turn within in order to effectively transform both ourselves and the larger collective.

Reclaiming embodiment is critical for well-being, resilience, and the ability to make healthy and informed choices in life. Resilience, in the words of yoga