



**The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
Fall Retreat for Academics
November 11 – 14, 2010
Garrison Institute, Garrison NY**
by Beth Wadham, Academic Associate

For its sixth retreat for educators, the Center partnered with the Garrison Institute to offer three days of practice and exploration in a setting particularly well designed for contemplation. The Capuchin Franciscan monastery was restored and renovated in 2002 to provide retreat facilities for traditional (Buddhist, Christian) and secular groups. The group of 46 professors that gathered for the weekend hailed from the US, Canada, UK, Japan and Australia, and represented a wide range of experience with contemplative practice, personally and in their classrooms. At opening circle they all expressed openness to sharing the reflective space and practicing together.

Over the days that followed, Arthur Zajonc and Mirabai Bush offered introductions to mindfulness-based practices and contemplative inquiry techniques that can be used in classroom settings. Mirabai emphasized at the first session that what is most important is that educators practice themselves, to focus their own awareness and develop their own responsiveness, capacities that are critical for teaching and learning. While examples of what others have done are helpful in exploring possibilities, practice brings an awareness that applies to everything we are called upon to do in our lives and is part of way of living and being that is relaxed and alert.

On the first morning the group explored sitting and stilling practices alternating with mindful walking. The winding pathways overlooking the Hudson River offered a particularly welcome setting in which to practice this tradition, drawn from Asian and



Western monasticism, in which one becomes conscious of all the sensations that arise through the simple movements. At the morning's end, the group prepared for and entered a time of silent practice, which they would share through the next 30 hours. Silent practice also derives from monastic traditions and, in secular application, has value for quieting the mental activity that goes along with conversation, allowing greater access to inner perception. It is a challenging practice, however, especially during activities such as meals, when sociability is often in the foreground. The thoughts and feelings that arise during the time one is dedicated to silence are an opportunity to notice what's going on outside and inside and to cultivate a sharper awareness of the whole environment.

In the afternoon, Arthur Zajonc introduced exercises that extend contemplative awareness to include contemplative inquiry. The four-stage process, which alternates between focused and open attention, explores how ways of knowing

can be extended beyond the discursive, logical inference of ratiocination to include introspective methods that lead to new discoveries and insight. Throughout the period of silent practice, Arthur and Mirabai responded to written questions submitted by the participants. They addressed questions about the ethical foundations of practice, how to create a personal practice, and why mindfulness takes so much effort.

By the second day of silence, the sitting meditation sessions had become very still. The contemplative exercises that Mirabai and Arthur guided felt more refined, and participants took up the opportunities to look inward and to explore nature with greater focus and engagement. When the time came to break the silence in the afternoon, Mirabai suggested that "silence is the beginning of mindful speaking." Practice with silence develops the ability to ask oneself, before speaking, "Is this helpful? Is this true?" One may find one doesn't need to say so much. As a way back into the speaking world, participants first wrote for five minutes, finishing the prompt, "During the time spent in silence, I learned that..." before turning to a partner to engage in mindful listening practice. The speaker spoke for five minutes as the listener listened without interruption and then related back to the speaker what he or she heard.

The final evening of the retreat was given to conversation, as the educators spoke in small groups about the relationship of contemplative practice to teaching, learning and knowing. Sharing their experience and questions and offering their ideas to help one another, the participants found many points of convergence and recognition. These supportive and stimulating conversations, many of which continued during breakfast on the final morning, are a wonderful feature of these contemplative gatherings. Somehow, it always seems that just the right people have come.



At the closing circle, many participants shared how they were able to find very particular personal and professional value in their retreat experience.

The following institutions and departments were represented at the retreat:

Institution

Smith College
 Grand Valley State University
 Keene State College
 Manhattanville College
 Millikin University
 Keene State College
 University of Massachusetts
 Keene State College
 University of Saskatchewan
 Northwest School
 Keene State College
 Westover School
 Parsons New School for Design
 Keene State College
 Goucher College
 Vassar College
 Hachinohe University, Japan
 University of Massachusetts
 Illinois State University
 Penn State University Wilkes-Barre
 Keene State College
 Montclair State University
 Lehigh University
 SUNY Old Westbury

Department

Religious Life
 Classics
 Education
 Sociology and Anthropology
 English
 Health Sciences
 Education
 Economics and Political Science
 Veterinary Biomedical Sciences
 Math
 Education
 History
 Constructed Environments
 Environmental Studies
 Chemistry
 Italian
 Education
 Education
 English
 Academic Affairs/ English
 Psychology
 Curriculum and Teaching
 English
 Psychology

Naropa University
University of Michigan
Mercy College
Independent
Johns Hopkins University
University of Huddersfield
Queen's University
Minnesota State University Moorhead
University of San Diego
Ontario Institute for Studies in
Education
Colgate University
Washington University
Vassar College
University of North Carolina
Vassar College
DePaul University
Bloomsburg University
Keene State College
Vassar College
Emily Carr University of Art and Design
Middlebury College

President
Psychology
Social and Behavioral Sciences
Education
Theatre Arts and Studies
Drama
Philosophy
Social Work
Ethnic Studies

Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Educational Studies
English
Earth Science and Geography
English
Political Science
Center for New Learning
Developmental Instruction
Professional & Graduate Studies
English
Critical and Cultural Studies
Writing

