

## Fall Retreat for Academics

November 13 – 16, 2008

Menla Mountain Retreat Center, Phoenicia, NY

*Sponsored by the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism*



The Center presented its third retreat for academics to twenty-nine participants representing twenty-four colleges and universities across North America. These retreats are designed to appeal to professors with a wide range of experience in contemplative practice, some of whom are currently teaching courses with a contemplative component and some who are exploring it for the future. A range of practices, including mindfulness, movement and inquiry, were taught to deepen the teachers' personal practice and to suggest ways of bringing these methods to the classroom.

The Center began offering retreats to professors after ten years of administering its fellowship program and finding that success in teaching from contemplative pedagogy is strongly related to the teachers' own depth of practice and comfort with the contemplative space within themselves. In the classroom, what is important is the presence of the teacher, and without it the pedagogy can be just another educational technology.

On Thursday evening the group drew a circle of intention for their work together over the next few days. In the ancient tradition of retreat, much of the time would be spent in silence, apart from instruction of practice and addressing questions that arise. For many participants, according to the evaluations received, the silence was the most interesting and important part of retreat, allowing them to settle into deep stillness and heighten their awareness of the present.

**Arthur Zajonc, Mirabai Bush and Sunanda Markus** taught the practices and **Sophia Awad Rice and Beth Wadham** provided support. **Stuart Sigman and Susan Burggraf** from Naropa University attended the retreat and participated in meetings with Center staff, including new executive director **Philip Snyder**, to discuss the organizations' overlapping agendas and their potential for collaborative projects.



The following departments and institutions were represented at the retreat:

English, Brooklyn College (NY)  
Communications, University of San Diego (CA)  
Art, Syracuse University (NY)  
Italian, Vassar College (NY)  
English, Millikin University (IL)  
Contemplative Education, Naropa University (CO)  
Nursing, UMASS Dartmouth (MA)  
Education, Montclair State University (NJ)  
Women's Studies, Vassar College (NY)  
Music, Long Island University (NY)  
Education, Fairmont State University (WV)  
Women's Studies, Mesa Community College (AZ)  
History, Bridgewater State University (MA)  
Music, Springfield College (MA)  
New Designs in Learning, Georgetown University (DC)  
Philosophy, St. Joseph's College (NY)  
Education, University at Albany (NY)  
Health Education, University of Wisconsin, La Crosse (WI)  
Teacher Preparation, University of Calgary (AB)  
Developmental Instruction, Bloomsburg University (PA)  
Creativity and Consciousness Studies, University of Michigan (MI)  
English, Vassar College (NY)  
History, Westfield State College (MA)



The retreat was organized around three themes. "Cultivating Attention," on Friday, offered mindfulness meditation and awareness practices; "Inquiry," on Saturday, brought insight practices using focused and open awareness, nature meditation, journaling and partner activities; and, on Sunday, "Living the Questions," invited discussion on how to bring contemplative practice into the

classroom and the campus. During all phases of the retreat, the teachers attempted to be sensitive to the needs of participants and meet them with clarity, presence and wisdom.

For participants, a strong sense of community emerged out of the connections formed in silence. The transition from silence to speaking has been refined over the previous retreats and now consists of a sequence of steps from silence to speaking, through free writing and sharing one's perceptions with a partner using a structured speaking and listening practice. The extraordinary quality of communication that this process supported was remarked upon by many participants at closing circle and in evaluations.

Small group conversations on Saturday evening addressed the relationship of practice to teaching, learning and knowing in higher education, and lively responses went on for hours. Hearing about one another's successes and challenges gave the participants a sense of shared effort, and gave many the

courage to “run up their flags” for practice in the academy and find their allies in their home institutions.

This was the first Center event to make use of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education’s web platform to distribute pre-retreat information, such as agenda, directions, and ride board, and support post-retreat follow-up. All participants who were not already members were offered a one-year complimentary Association membership and now share access to each other’s profiles and retreat community pages that post practices, forum questions, photos, poems, research and other references. Having a way to maintain ongoing conversations and share plans for the future using this resource made it much less wistful to say farewell at the end of the weekend. The Association has the capacity to strengthen the connections formed at events and bring new ones into being through opportunities for professional networking with other members.

