

University of Victoria
School of Environmental Studies

Mindfulness, Sustainability, and Social Change
ES 407 – Spring 2021

Territorial Acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen-speaking peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. The process of colonization is ongoing as are resistances to it. It is my aspiration that this course can support processes of decolonization.

Prof: Dr. James Rowe

E-mail: jkrowe@uvic.ca

Office Hours: Thursdays 3-5 pm. [Sign up sheet here](#)

Teaching Assistant: Ellen Trottier

E-mail: ellen.trottier@gmail.com

We are living in a mindfulness zeitgeist. The mainstreaming of mindfulness – what *Time Magazine* calls the “mindful revolution” – is being powered by research documenting the physical and mental health benefits of meditation. While this research is growing exponentially, the political potential of mindfulness has received little attention. And yet, more and more social justice organizations are using mind-body practices to support their work. This development, and what it portends for the future of activism and politics, is a central theme of this course.

The popular turn to mindfulness, which is generally presented as a secular practice, is nonetheless sparking growing interest in Buddhism. Despite having influenced the work of major thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, Buddhist philosophy has been largely neglected in Euro-American theorizations of political change. This gap has been limiting since Buddhist philosophy holds crucial political insights. The primary one focused on in this class is that existential fear and anxiety, such as a fear of death, are far more determinative of political outcomes than most Euro-American thinking has accounted for.

This course is organized around the premise that ecological and social problems have existential drivers that conventional forms of politics (legislation, protest etc....) are not always able to address. If this premise is accurate then strategies that work on the existential plane (fears, affects, habits, values) are required to effectively address problems such as wealth concentration, climate change, colonial dispossession, and white supremacy. Mindfulness meditation is fast emerging in the Euro-Americas as a key such strategy.

A second premise guiding our study, however, is that mindfulness practices alone are not sufficient for addressing complex socio-ecological problematics. A key question we will be examining is how mindfulness practices articulate with, transform, and are transformed by conventional forms of political engagement, be they legislative or grassroots. What are the key components of a mindful politics or a mindful society?

In this course we will critically examine mindfulness practices like meditation, and the theories underpinning them, evaluating their current and potential contributions to personal and political transformations. This examination will involve review of current research on the physical, psychological, ecological, and social benefits of mindfulness practices.

This course also contains a two-pronged experiential component. Firstly, students will be introduced to a variety of meditative techniques, and regular practice of these techniques is built into the assignment structure of the class. Secondly students are asked to plan and undertake a political intervention that integrates mindfulness practices into the planning process. Ongoing reflection on the effects of personal meditative practice, and its applications in political organization, will assist in our collective examination of the potential and limits of a mindful politics.

Particular learning objectives of this course include:

- improving your abilities to read and write critically and analytically, and communicate effectively
- deepening your understanding of how subjective transformation impacts social transformation and vice versa
- learning, practicing, and reflecting upon different mindfulness techniques so to facilitate the regularization of daily practice
- gaining experience taking strategic and reflective collective action
- developing a clearer sense of personal values and purpose

Course Structure

This is a seminar course, which means that although I will contribute a lecture in most classes, much of our class time will be spent in large and small group discussion. This has direct implications for how you prepare for classes. It is essential that students complete and consider the readings before class. In a seminar class, the difference between good classes with stimulating discussions and boring, irrelevant ones rests primarily with how well the class members have prepared. In other words: you—collectively and individually—are responsible for making the class interesting, challenging and relevant to your own interests. I will do my best to facilitate discussion to help with this, will provide more general intellectual context and guidance as desired and appropriate, and will insist upon sustained and focused engagement with course material. Beyond that, the responsibility—and the benefits—are yours.

Course Requirements

This course is reading and writing intensive. You should be prepared to do both every week. It is standard university policy that students should expect to do two hours of preparation for each hour of class time, so you should expect to do six hours of preparation for this class each week. The requirements for the course are as follows:

1. Class Participation: 10% of final mark

Class participation is taken seriously. Your participation is evaluated based on a number of different factors. Attendance, preparation, and participation in discussions are important. If you miss class more than once or are consistently unprepared for class discussions, your mark will suffer. There is no way to make up for missed classes, but absences with a legitimate excuse will not be penalized. Importantly, your contributions to class discussions, whether in small or large groups, will not be measured in relation to their quantity, but their *quality*. Constructive participation requires not only having something to say about the issues, but also listening well to other people's questions and arguments, responding to them sensitively and effectively, and contributing in a way that advances the group's understanding of the issues. In a large group, it is as important to know when not to intervene as when to contribute. In

practice, students who attend regularly and make an effort to participate as much as reasonable find that their participation mark raises their overall mark. *If at any time during the course of the semester you are unsure of or have questions about your mark for class participation, please feel free to come and see me so that we can clarify it.*

2. Reading Quizzes: 10% of final mark

There will be 3 periodic pop quizzes to ensure you are keeping up with course readings. The quizzes will not be devilishly detailed. If you've done the week's readings, you should have no problem answering the questions. Only your two top quizzes will be counted. I will be giving three in case you miss one. There will be no make-up quizzes offered (except under exceptional circumstances).

3. Précis assignment: 20% of final mark

This précis will be approximately 1000 words long. It is due on Wednesday February 10. The purpose of the précis is to unpack the main argument of one of the readings – a selection of eligible readings will be posted on Brightspace. You will find more detail about the writing expectations for the class later in this document and I am always happy to respond to questions in class.

4. Political Action Assignment: 30% of final mark

This assignment will be undertaken in groups. Evaluation will be based on two components. Firstly a 2000-2500-word strategy document composed by your group and describing the proposed action is due on March 10 (worth 15%). Secondly groups will make a 10-12 minute presentation at the end of semester (worth 15%). This assignment, and its constituent parts, will be discussed regularly throughout the semester. Guidelines for the strategy document and presentation will be relayed in class and posted on Brightspace.

4.5 Alternative assignment in lieu of the Political Action Project: 30% of final mark. Due March 31st.

Group work can be additionally challenging in the online environment, largely due to Zoom fatigue. For this reason I'd like to offer an alternative assignment that you would complete solo: a review essay. The review essay assignment will ask you to write a critical review of three recent books in light of the material covered in this class. The three books are *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (by Resmaa Menakem); *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (by Staci Haines); and *The Trauma of Everyday Life* (by Mark Epstein). You will need to order these books yourself. You will develop a review of the three books, drawing from at least five of the other assigned readings in the class. The review will be between 3000-4000 words. More guidance for this alternative assignment will be made available via Brightspace.

5. Meditation Journal and Critical Reflection Paper: 30%

Students are asked to maintain a meditation journal throughout the semester. This will remain private and will not be submitted for evaluation. But it will serve as 'first-person data' to be drawn from in the critical reflection paper. This assignment asks you to critically reflect upon the effects of personal mindfulness practice. It also asks you to reflect upon how mindfulness theory and practice affected the conception, planning, organization, and execution of the political action assignment. Finally, the journal is also an opportunity to reflect on group process, and the different challenges and opportunities it brings.

After completing your daily 10-minute meditation, set aside 2 minutes to journal. The basic questions to ask yourself are: How am I feeling physically? What is my mood? Beyond that, take time to reflect on how everything is unfolding for you this term: in this class, your other classes, life in general. You might want to experiment with bringing to mind something you are grateful for in your life. This can be a very nourishing daily practice. Please also write down thoughts that are arising about your political action assignment and group process. Consistent journaling throughout the semester is integral to successfully completing the critical reflection paper (you are also likely to find it personally revealing and fulfilling).

For the critical reflection paper students are asked to substantially reference course readings. The paper will be approximately 2750 words long and is due on April 16. Specific guidelines for the paper will be relayed in class and posted on Brightspace.

Key Dates

Précis: February 10

Strategy document: March 10

Political Action Presentations: April 7

Critical Reflection Papers: April 16

Reading quizzes: Only the 8-ball knows.

ALWAYS KEEP A COPY FOR YOURSELF OF ANY WRITTEN WORK SUBMITTED

Policy on Late Papers

Late papers are strongly discouraged. Nonetheless, at times situations do arise where they are unavoidable. If you anticipate you may have difficulty meeting a due date, let me know as far ahead of time as possible, preferably by e-mail, and indicate when you think you can have the paper completed. Given that you know due dates well ahead of time, simply running out of time or having a lot of work due at the same time is not an adequate excuse. *It is absolutely crucial that you communicate with me about possible late papers, and if you think there is any chance the paper won't be in by the end of term you must go through proper procedures to get a formal extension.* This is for your own protection: if you don't communicate with me, there is nothing I can do to help you complete the coursework or negotiate University regulations.

Course Readings

All course readings are available online.

It is *very* important that you do the required reading *before* class, as the lectures and discussions will build on, rather than repeating, the information contained in the readings. Class time is also your opportunity to ask questions about anything you find confusing, problematic, or provocative in the readings for the week. Our discussions will be better, you will learn more, and class will be more interesting if you've done the readings ahead of time.

Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change; be sure to pay attention to announcements during classes and to check your e-mail account regularly.

Introduction to Course

Wednesday January 13:

Key themes: What this class is all about, what its ambitions are; expectations for the class and how best to prepare for and participate in class.

Mindfulness and Social Change: Making the connections (Part 1)

Wednesday January 20:

Kornfield, Jack. *Meditation for Beginners*, pp. 1-24; 87-90 (2008).
Rowe, James. "Toilet Paper as Terror Management," *The Arrow* (2020).
King Jr., Martin Luther. Selections from "The Drum Major Instinct" (February 4, 1968).

Introduction to Community Organizing

Wednesday January 27:

Guest Lecturer: Ellen Trottier

Gibbs, Peter and Anna McClean. *Organizing: People, Power, Change*, pp. 7-16; pp. 56-72, pp. 92-93 (2017)
Ganz, Marshall. "Leading Change: Leadership, Organization, and Social Movements," in Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana eds., *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, pp. 509-543 (2009).

What is Mindfulness, What are its Roots, and Why is it Currently a Growth Industry?

Wednesday February 3:

Kornfield, Jack. *Meditation for Beginners*, pp. 25-55 (2008).
Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, pp.1-12; and 43-74 (2014).

The Power of Setting and Embodying Intentions

Wednesday February 10:

Bays, Jan Chozen. *The Vow-Powered Life: A Simple Method for Living with Purpose*, pp. xi-43; and pp. 64-85 (2015).

Mindfulness and Social Change (Part 2): Improving Organizational Effectiveness

Wednesday February 24:

Gass, Robert and Judith Ansara. "Managing your triggers toolkit: practices for being resilient in challenging circumstances" (2015).
Hayward, Karen and Jeremy. "Discovering Basic Goodness," from *Sacred World*, pp.1-13 (1998).
Ikeda, Mushim Patricia. "I Vow Not to Burn Out," *The Lion's Roar* (2016).

Mindfulness and Sustainability

Wednesday March 3:

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Love Letter to the Earth*, pp. 8-30, pp. 62-72, pp. 121-123 (2013).
Ericson, Torgeir et al., "Mindfulness and Sustainability," *Ecological Economics*, 104, pp. 73-79 (2014).
Kasser, Tim. "Values and the Next Generation," *Solutions*, 3(3) (May 30, 2012).
Westendorf, Matt. "Why Mindfulness Works for Nonprofits, Not Just Fortune 500 Companies" (2014).

Mindfulness, Racialized Trauma, and Racial Justice

Wednesday March 10:

Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, pp. ix-xx, pp. 3-26, pp. 57-86 (2017).
Rowe, James. "Baldwin and Buddhism: Death Denial, White Supremacy, and the Promise of Racial Justice," *The Arrow* (2020).

Mindful Movements for Social and Ecological Justice (Part 1)

Wednesday March 17:

No formal class held. Time devoted to making collective progress on the political action assignments, or individual progress on your book review alternative. I will be available during class time for meetings about either the political action assignments or your book reviews.

Mindfulness and Social Change (Part 3): Embodying Liberatory Values and Investigating "Call-Out" Culture

Wednesday March 24:

Lee, Frances. "Why I've Started to Fear My Fellow Social Justice Activists," *Yes!* (2017).
brown, adrienne maree. *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, pp. 33-77 (2020).

The Dangers (and Possibilities?) of Neoliberal Mindfulness

Wednesday March 31:

Kornfield, Jack. *Meditation for Beginners*, pp. 57-69, pp. 83-86 (2008).
Purser, Ron. *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, pp. 7-45, pp. 241-262 (2019).

Mindful Movements for Social and Ecological Justice (Part 2)

Wednesday April 7:

Group Presentations

Guidelines on Assessed Work

Précis Assignments

The purpose of a précis is to present a focused analysis of the argument that is made in a particular text. It should be relatively brief (precise!), but present a clear identification and analysis of the central—*most* important—argument made by the article. Because it is short (approx.1000 words), you will not have the space to simply summarize, you must go right to the heart of the article and analyze its most important argument. This means that you must make a judgment about what it most important. To

arrive at this judgment, think through the author's purpose in writing very carefully: what is he or she trying to convince you of? Why is he/she writing? This is the most difficult, and important, part of the précis: It is absolutely vital that you represent the author's argument as accurately and persuasively as possible, otherwise your response to it will be based on misinformation or misinterpretation.

Once you've analyzed this core argument, the précis should develop your own critical response to it. (Remember that critique is not always negative, only questioning, thoughtful and engaged.) This response might take the form of a disagreement with part or all of it, a further elaboration of it, or an explanation of how it relates to and helps deepen our understanding of class themes.

What follows are a few questions that might help to focus your readings; I would suggest that your précis work through them in order.

1. What is the overall argument of the text? What is the **author's** argument or purpose in writing? Why is it important or significant? (You need to be sure your précis contains a defensible statement of the central argument of the text in order to demonstrate that you understand it well enough to critically engage it.)

2. What do **you** take to be the most important *aspect* of the author's argument? Why do you think it is important or interesting or troublesome or problematic? (This is your critical perspective and where you do your critical analysis. You need to explain your response to the text persuasively. It usually must be focused on only one element of the text because you don't have space to delve into more than this.)

3. What are the **implications** of your critique? Why does it matter? (This is where you explain to your reader the significance of your analysis both in relation to the author's argument and in general. Why should the reader care about either the analysis you have presented or the author's argument?)

These are obviously large questions, and you only have a short space. This is the challenge of the précis—you need to work to be precise and focused in your reading and writing, and you need to make judgments about and arguments for why your critical perspective is important. You will be amazed at how differently people will understand the same text. This is why you need to not only state clearly what you think the text is arguing, but also provide some analysis and evidence as to why the reader should believe your statement.

My general criteria for evaluation of written work:

1. Scope: Does the paper tackle a subject that is appropriate to its length, or does it try to cover too much, rendering the argument too vague, imprecise, or general to be persuasive?

2. Focus: Does the paper forward a well-developed and focused argument? By the conclusion of the paper, is it clear what the author intended to convince the reader of?

3. Quality of argument: Is the argument persuasive? Is it well organized and supported by appropriate evidence and explanation? Is it attentive to the complexity of the issues involved, and does it qualify its claims to match the quality of evidence presented in support of them? Does the argument contain evidence of original, independent thought? Does it show signs of wide reading and thoughtfulness?

4. Representation of texts/arguments. Evidence: Does the paper accurately represent the texts or positions in question? Does it provide effective and convincing support (textual reference and analysis) for its position? Is the reading of the texts a plausible one? (In other words, it is NOT enough just to throw in a bunch of page numbers or quotations, you need to analyze these references and show how they support the particular analysis you are making of a text.) Is the argument supported by an appropriate range of and depth of research?

5. Writing: Is the paper as clearly and effectively written as possible? Is it written so that it is accessible to its intended audience? Don't get tangled up in language. The most consistent problem in student writing is that the student assumes that the reader knows more about the subject than s/he does, and so leaves out crucial details or parts of the argument. Your reader may know more about the text or issue than you do, but s/he cannot read your mind, so you need to explain your own thoughts, ideas and

analysis of the author(s) you are writing about as clearly as possible. You should assume that your audience is intelligent but not necessarily an expert in what you are writing about. Say things as clearly and as simply as you can -- you can't hide confused thoughts in big words, you'll only confuse yourself and your reader further.

Strategy Document, Critical Reflection, and Final Presentation Guidelines will be distributed via Brightspace

Grading Policy

The following correlation of letter grade and numerical score will be used in the class. Final grades will be recorded as percentages.

Grades	Percentage *	Description
A+ A A-	90 – 100 85 – 89 80 – 84	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
B+ B B-	77 – 79 73 – 76 70 – 72	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
C+ C	65 – 69 60 – 64	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
D	50 – 59	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
F	0 – 49	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.
N	0 – 49	Did not write examination or complete course requirements by the end of term or session; no supplemental.

Diversity

The University of Victoria is committed to fostering inclusive practices in and out of the classroom. As your instructor, I am also highly committed to inclusionary principles that not only tolerate differences in race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, first language, country of origin, ability, etc. but that welcome these differences as enriching to all members of this course and the wider community. Your diverse positions, identities and experiences will inform much-needed diversity in class discussions.

The School of Environmental Studies at UVic recognizes that the discipline of environmental studies has historically been overwhelmingly white, resulting in what Dorceta Taylor calls the “[Green Insiders Club](#).” This white colonial dominance has significantly weakened the discipline and the broader environmental movement it contributes to. We are committed to undoing and unlearning these colonial practices by re-shaping our collective and individual decision-making using a decolonial and racial justice lens to amplify, work with, and learn from traditionally marginalized perspectives and experience. If you feel that this vision is not being actualized please send your feedback to Laurel Currie (laurelc@uvic.ca).

Accessibility Statement

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Resource Centre for Students with a Disability (RCSD) as soon as possible. The RCSD staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations <http://rcsd.uvic.ca/>. The sooner you let us know your needs the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Course Evaluations

I value your feedback on this course. Towards the end of term, as in all other courses at UVic, you will have the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey regarding your learning experience (CES). The survey provides vital feedback to me regarding the course and my teaching, as well as helping the School improve the overall program for students in the future. When it is time for you to complete the survey you will receive an email inviting you to do so. Please ensure that your current email address is listed in MyPage (<http://uvic.ca/mypage>) . If you do not receive an email invitation, you can go directly to <http://ces.uvic.ca>. You will need to use your UVic netlink ID to access the survey, which can be done on your laptop, tablet, or mobile device. I will remind you and provide you with more detailed information nearer the time but please keep your ideas for constructive feedback in mind throughout the course.

NOTE: The University of Victoria is committed to promoting, providing and protecting a positive and safe learning and working environment for all its members. Student evaluation forms now include questions on the respect shown by the instructor for students, particularly those of diverse origins, orientation and physical abilities.