Contemplative Practices in Action

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Contemplative Practices in Action

Spirituality, Meditation, and Health

THOMAS G. PLANTE, PhD, EDITOR

Foreword by Huston Smith, PhD

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Foreword

If I ask myself why it is I who has been asked to write the Foreword to this important book, I suspect that it is because it is in line with my own book, *The World's Religions*, which is, like this one, ecumenically inclusive. In its 14 chapters, *Contemplative Practices in Action* introduces a broad array of contemplative practices drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. No faith or religion is accorded privileged status above others.

However, towering above the virtue (which I consider it to be) of ecumenism, is this book's persuasive conviction that the world's religions house inexhaustible resources for transforming and augmenting the human spirit, a conviction with which I concur.

There is another and somewhat more personal connection, however, which has to do with the fact that the Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation developed by the late Eknath Easwaran figures importantly in several chapters of *Contemplative Practices in Action*. Easwaran was a professor of English from Kerala, in South India, who came to this country on a Fulbright fellowship in 1959 and became a widely read and deeply respected teacher of meditation who lived out his days in an ashram in Northern California. I had the privilege of meeting him more than once and held him in high regard.

On several occasions, friends drove me to Easwaran's ashram to participate in the evening gatherings of the community that sprang up around him. After supper, residents would join their teacher to listen to his short homilies, ask questions about their spiritual practice, or simply sit quietly in the community's soothing, collective peace. Those evenings made me think of Mahatma Gandhi's ashram, where,

after their simple suppers, villagers would gather around their leader for brief prayer meetings. Gandhi always made sure those services included prayers and scriptural readings from all the great religious traditions, and so did Easwaran.

That is half of the story, and the book in hand tells the other half. Contemplative evenings with a great spiritual teacher are not ends in themselves. It would not be amiss to think of them as times when communicants recharge their batteries for the next day's work. The title of this book, *Contemplative Practices in Action*, splices the two halves together. Like Gandhi, like the Buddha, like all great spiritual teachers, Easwaran had no use for beliefs unless they generated actions. Doing, not saying, is what counts.

Welcome to this book, which ought not to leave any serious reader unchanged.

Huston Smith
Berkeley, California
January 2010

Preface

There has been a remarkable amount of interest in the relationship between science, faith, and contemplative practices such as meditation for centuries and perhaps especially in most recent years as new scientifically based research and clinical findings have appeared in the professional and popular press. In addition to the publication of high-quality scholarly articles and books, the popular news weeklies such as *Time* and *Newsweek* have published cover stories on this topic on multiple occasions in recent months and years. The professional, medical, and psychological community has responded with numerous conferences, articles, and scholarly activities that have greatly helped move this area of research and practice forward. In fact, our Spirituality and Health Institute (SHI) group here at Santa Clara University recently published an edited book on spirituality and health entitled *Spirit, Science, and Health: How the Spiritual Mind Fuels Physical Wellness* (2007, Greenwood). In this book, we examined a broad range of topics that highlight both research and practice in spirituality and health integration. In this book project, we would like to focus our attention on contemplative practices such as meditation among the various religious and spiritual traditions in efforts to improve health and well-being. Contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation have become very popular both in the general population as well as among health care professionals. However, mindfulness is just one of many contemplative practices that have been successfully used in various professional and nonprofessional health care outlets that also have adequate research support for their use in improving both psychological and physical health. Other contemplative approaches generally

have not entered the public or professional imagination. Our book project seeks to help to educate a wide audience in the various forms of contemplative practices used within a wider range of spiritual and religious traditions in achieving well-being, wisdom, and healing, most especially in these stressful times.

This book seeks to provide a scholarly and multidisciplinary approach on the topic of contemplative practices for the development of well-being, wisdom, healing, and stress management that includes state-of-the-art science, practice, and applications of contemplative practices in the professional workplace, educational settings, pastoral care, and medical, psychological, or other health care interventions. The chapters articulate current findings and practice in contemplative practices from a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions and from experts in the integration of contemplative practices and psychology, nursing, pastoral care, business, and so forth in order to achieve well-being.

In order to avoid some of the disadvantages of edited books, which sometimes feel fragmented, and to increase the flow between chapters, almost all of the contributors participated in a conference at Santa Clara University during October 2009 to present their research to each other and to the local professional health care community. The conference was cosponsored by Santa Clara University Center for Professional Development, the Ignatian Center, and generously funded by a Bannan grant and SHI. Furthermore, many of the contributors are members of SHI who meet regularly to discuss multidisciplinary research and practice in the area of spirituality and health. We hope that the conference and ongoing research institute activities have resulted in a more cohesive and seamless book.

Acknowledgments

Numerous people other than the author or editor assist in the development and completion of a book project. Some provide help in a direct and concrete manner while others provide help in less direct and more supportive ways. We would like to acknowledge the assistance of the many people who have helped in both ways and have contributed to the development of this project.

First, I would like to thank the many wonderful people at ABC-CLIO who have enthusiastically worked to publish this book (most especially my editor, Deborah Carvalko, for her interest in the project and her high level of professionalism). I would also like to thank the production staff as well.

Second, I would like to thank the Santa Clara University Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education (Fr. Kevin Quinn, SJ, Director, and Paul Woolley, Assistant Director) for funding and supporting our research institute and activities on campus, including this project and the associated October 2009 conference.

Third, special thanks to Professor Doug Oman at UC Berkeley, who provided thoughtful and detailed commentary on many of the chapters and supplied the prefaces to the three main parts of the book.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Lori, and son, Zach, for being who they are.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Contemplative Practices in Action

Thomas G. Plante, Adi Raz, and Doug Oman

Several decades ago in his book *The Meditative Mind*,[1] Daniel Goleman reviewed more than a dozen major Eastern and Western methods of contemplative practice, ranging from Christian hesychasm and Jewish Kaballah to Transcendental Meditation and Tibetan Buddhism. He reported that two major approaches or strategies to meditation were incorporated: One recurrent approach was concentration, that is, focused attention on a single object, such as the breath, a mantram, or a prayer. The other recurrent approach was mindfulness (the detached observation of one's thinking process). Sometimes concentration and mindfulness were used separately, and sometimes they were combined in various ways. Goleman argued that both mindfulness and concentrative meditation have been directed to a single objective, the retraining of attention, a skill that he believed "amplifies the effectiveness of any kind of activity" (p. 168). Goleman also reported that "the need for the meditator to retrain his attention, whether through concentration or mindfulness, is the single invariant ingredient in the recipe for altering consciousness of every meditation system" (p. 107). Nearly a century earlier, William James, one of the founders of modern psychology, had argued that "the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*" (p. 424).[2]

In modern health promotion, psychotherapy, and other human service interventions, these contemplative practices have largely been taken out of their religious and spiritual contexts and then secularized and repackaged.[3,4] For example, the health and mental health care community has incorporated mindfulness meditation in recent years with numerous books, workshops, conferences, and trainings being offered. Yoga studios can be found in many strip malls, and meditation workshops are offered by human resource departments in many diverse companies.[5]

The currently popular mindfulness meditation approach stems from Zen Buddhism and Hindu yogic practices, and it is a common misconception that only by borrowing from these Eastern traditions can one secure any benefits from contemplative practices. Many Christians and Jews, for example, who identify and engage with their religious tradition, are often not aware of the long history of contemplative practices within their own faith tradition. As many in our culture have become more familiar and comfortable with the Eastern contemplative practices, the Western practices have been largely ignored, even though they also often offer contemplative approaches that can provide effective stress management, well-being, and healing.[6,7]

All of the major religious and spiritual traditions have developed specific principles and techniques to help their members assimilate contemplative perspectives and behaviors aimed at fostering a fuller experience of wisdom, wholeness, and enlightenment.[1,7,8] Research studies have reported many physical and mental health benefits from regular contemplative practices, as well as confirming their stress management functions.[4,5,9,10] Benson,[11] for example, has documented that meditation helps to promote a "relaxation response." He argues that when meditation is associated with one's religious or spiritual convictions, it further enhances relaxation, leading to greater psychological and physical health benefits. Recent well-controlled research studies have further supported Benson's arguments, reporting advantages for spiritually based meditation over otherwise nearly identical secular forms of meditation.[12,13]

There are a number of books available on contemplative practices. However, almost all focus on one particular religious or spiritual tradition and most are practice oriented without solid research grounding. Usually, they highlight the Eastern traditions and overlook the Western ones. This is especially true among books that target the health and mental health care communities.[6,7]

The purpose of this book is to examine contemplative practices from a wide variety of both Eastern and Western religious and

spiritual traditions and to examine their commonalities and unique approaches to improved well-being, health, healing, wholeness, and stress management. Chapters are written by experts in their fields, most of whom are affiliated with the Spirituality and Health Institute at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California. Each chapter will discuss the state-of-the-art science, practice, and general applications of contemplative practices in the professional workplace, educational settings, pastoral care, and medical, psychological, or other health care environments. This book hopes to be inclusive in coverage of contemplative practices, and integrate science and practice in a balanced manner and from a variety of Eastern and Western sources.

This book will discuss several different contemplative approaches to stress management and achieving well-being. Some chapters highlight approaches from Western traditions while others highlight contemplative approaches from Eastern traditions. Others are integrative of both Western and Eastern traditions. Some are more closely connected to religious traditions and practices while others are not. Several chapters will highlight application to business and health care as well.

Oman (Chapter 2) has pointed out that four similar functions are performed in diverse ways by elements within many of the contemplative systems discussed in this book. Most approaches involve setting aside time for practices that reshape and train attention; most also include elements for centering oneself throughout the day, cultivating personal character strengths, and drawing inspiration and guidance from spiritual exemplars. Oman suggests using the phrase "integrated contemplative practice system" for systems of practice that encompass all four of these elements that are highlighted in this volume.

Sadly, it is impossible to include a discussion of every contemplative practice and practice system in one book. We cannot do justice to the numerous practice systems or isolated spiritual techniques that are not represented here. For example, the role of the rosary in the Roman Catholic tradition, shamanism, and the role of chanting in Hindu Bhakti traditions are just some of the many contemplative practices that are not presented here. Rather than presenting an exhaustive review of the contemplative practices among the various religious and spiritual traditions, our hope is to provide a helpful selection by leading figures in their respective fields to assist with stress management, healing, wholeness, and well-being. The contributors met for an all-day conference with university and health care community members during October 2009. This allowed all of the authors to listen to and consult with each other as well as with diverse professionals

in the local San Francisco Bay Area professional community in order to hopefully create a more thoughtful, seamless, and comprehensive book project. We hope that our efforts will encourage the reader to have a better understanding and appreciation of contemplative practices in action.

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PART ONE

INTEGRATED CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE *SYSTEMS*

PREFACE TO PART ONE

Part One, "Integrated Contemplative Practice Systems," focuses on systems of practice from both East and West that are well defined and sufficiently limited in scope that they can be undertaken in their entirety by a single individual. First, Oman's short introductory chapter offers a conceptual analysis and overview, unique in this volume, that describes four shared elements that are present in many of these practice systems. His chapter includes a table that shows the specific names used to describe these elements in each of the additional chapters in this section, as well as the names used in chapters in Part Two ("Contemplative Traditions").

Each of the remaining four chapters in this part examines a single contemplative practice system. Attention is directed in turn at Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Jazaieri and Shapiro), Passage Meditation (Flinders, Oman, Flinders, and Dreher), Centering Prayer (Ferguson), and repetition of a mantram or holy name (Bormann). Most of these practices can be undertaken within any major faith tradition, although Centering Prayer is essentially Christian. Bormann's mantram/holy name repetition practices were extracted from the Passage Meditation system by its developer, and contain only two of

the four elements described by Oman. But as Bormann points out, the mantram/holy name is noteworthy for its portability, power, and universality. It highlights powerful but oft-forgotten practices that can be found within each major faith tradition, and which can complement these traditions' better-known elements.

CHAPTER 2

Similarity in Diversity? Four Shared Functions of Integrative Contemplative Practice Systems

Doug Oman

The reader of this volume, impressed by the rich descriptions of many diverse systems of spiritual practice, may start to wonder, "What are the shared themes? What patterns emerge amidst this inspiring profusion of perspectives?" In this chapter, I sketch one possible answer—one way of characterizing shared themes and functions that appear in many different systems of practice. Along the way, I propose using the term *integrated contemplative practice* to describe systems of practice that meet a certain functional threshold.

Four common elements or themes can be found, I suggest, in most of the practice systems described in the next eight chapters. These commonalities exist even though some chapters describe *comprehensive and clearly defined systems*, whereas others present *instructively selected highlights* from venerable traditions. More specifically, the next four chapters in Part One examine well-defined systems of interrelated practices that are challenging, but can be undertaken by individuals in their entirety. Three systems partly or wholly transcend individual faith traditions (e.g., Mindfulness, Passage Meditation, Mantram), whereas the fourth (Christian-derived Centering Prayer) arose within a particular faith tradition. In contrast, all four chapters in Part Two explore venerable schools (yoga, Zen) or major traditions (Judaism, Islam)[1] that constitute storehouses of wisdom

accumulated over many centuries. Each of these schools or traditions, viewed in its entirety, has accumulated a richer repertoire of techniques than any one individual can fully implement.

One shared function of many spiritual practice systems was described in the 1980s by Daniel Goleman. He surveyed more than a dozen methods of meditation, both East and West, and reported that "the need for the meditator to retrain [his or her] attention . . . is the single invariant ingredient in the recipe . . . of every meditation system" (p. 107).[2] Indeed, it seems quite likely that almost all of the practices discussed in this book, when undertaken regularly over time, will affect—and may sometimes transform—how people habitually deploy their attention. But can we identify any specific and concrete forms of resemblance between traditions?

Several concrete resemblances can indeed be identified. Recently, my colleagues and I at the Spirituality and Health Institute (SHI) observed several elements in common between two paradigmatic systems of practice.[3,4] More specifically, we found four distinct functions that were each accomplished, in slightly different ways, by these two integrated contemplative practice systems: Passage Meditation (PM) (Flinders et al., this volume) and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Jazaieri and Shapiro, this volume).

Both PM and MBSR, we noted, require *setting aside time*—substantial time—approximately half an hour daily—for undertaking a powerful attention-training activity. For this purpose, PM and MBSR each use a form of sitting meditation. Similarly, PM and MBSR each recommend specific *mental centering/stabilizing practices* to be used throughout the day to stabilize and balance the mind in conditions of stress or boredom (PM uses mantram repetition, and MBSR uses informal mindfulness practices). These analogous elements do not perform functions that are fully identical matches—rather, to borrow a phrase from positive psychology, these analogous elements, and the precise functions they perform, may be said to share a "coherent resemblance" (p. 35).[5]

Table 2.1 shows that with few exceptions, variants of these four elements are prevalent not only in PM and MBSR, but in each set of contemplative practices covered in the next eight chapters. These four shared elements, or features, are as follows:

1. *Set-aside time*—time that is set aside regularly, usually daily, for a disciplined activity or exercise that has a comparatively

powerful effect on training attention.[2] Variants of sitting meditation are commonly used. Some systems in this book also use prescribed postures (e.g., yoga, Islam). Such attention training can support optimal performance in all spheres of life, since "attention is the first and often most effective line of defense in nearly every sphere of self-control" (p. 1172).[6] Most attention training fosters concentration, and "powerful concentration amplifies the effectiveness of any kind of activity" (p. 168).[2] The attention-training functions of meditation are supported by recent neuroimaging evidence.[7]

2. *Virtues and character strengths*—qualities of character and behavior, such as compassion, forgiveness, or fearlessness. In many systems, such qualities are to be cultivated throughout the day by making appropriate choices in thoughts, words, and actions. Typically, the recommended qualities involve subsets of six cross-culturally prevalent classes of virtues recently identified by positive psychologists—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.[5]
3. *Practices for centering/stabilizing that are usable throughout the day*—such as during occasions of stress, anxiety, or unstructured time. Examples include returning the mind to the breath (MBSR), or returning the mind to repeating a mantram or holy name.[8,9] Here, the contemporary word "center" (small *c*) is used to designate recovery of a sense of inner strength and balance. (This contrasts with the term "Centering Prayer," which designates a specific system of Christian-derived practices,[10] described elsewhere in this volume by Ferguson.)
4. *Spiritual models*—attending to individuals whose behavior reflects desired spiritual qualities—provide a unique resource for spiritual growth. Spiritual and religious educators have long viewed spirituality as primarily "caught, not taught" (p. 149),[11] since so much of human learning is social. Spiritual and religious traditions, and many of the practice systems described in this book, transmit words of revered or instructive spiritual models, such as Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, or various sages and saints.[12] Attending to spiritual models' words and actions can motivate sustained practice, and guide or inspire implementation of other spiritual practices (e.g., #1–#3).

Table 2.1. Presence and Naming of Features by Contemplative Practice Type

Practice System	1 Set-Aside (/Dedicated) Attention Training	2 Virtuous/Mindful Attitudes	3 Centering Practice Usable Throughout Day	4 Spiritual Models/ Exemplars[a]
Integrated Contemplative Practice Systems (Part One)				
Mindfulness (/Vipassana)[b]	Sitting meditation (on breath)	Mindfulness attitudes	Informal practices	Poetry
Passage Meditation[b]	Sitting meditation (on a passage)	Put others first; + additional	Mantram repetition	Passages; reading
Centering Prayer	Sitting meditation (with sacred word)	Implicit;[c] silence, solitude, service	Prayers: active; welcoming	Implicit[c]
Mantram[d]		Focus; slow	Mantram repetition	
Contemplative Traditions (Part Two)				
Judaism	Sabbath;[e] prayer; meditation	Implicit;[c] peace, calm, equanimity	Repeat verse (liturgy/ scripture)	Implicit;[c] teachers/ Rebbes[f]
Islam	Five daily prayers	Many (justice, gentleness, etc.)	Dhikr (remembrance); supplication	The Prophet/aḥādīth

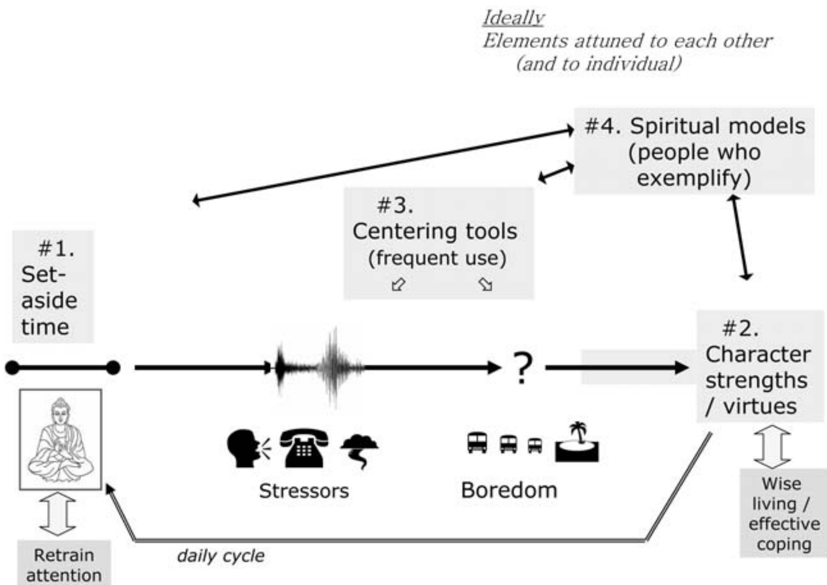
Yoga	Asanas +meditation	Yamas (truth, nonviolence, etc.)		Lineage of teacher
Zen	Sitting meditation (Zazen)	Brahma Viharas (compassion, etc.)	Mindfulness; letting go	Teaching stories; teacher
Others Combinations or Systems—Yours, Your Client's, or Your Student's				
1. _________				
2. _________				
3. _________				

Note: For a fuller explanation of each practice system, see corresponding chapter in this volume; lists of practices contained in each cell may be incomplete.
[a]The final column describes learning from traditional or prominent models, but most systems also encourage spiritual fellowship to foster learning from positive models in the local community.
[b]Mindfulness and Passage Meditation are the two paradigms used to develop the four categories.
[c]"Implicit" practice categories are typically enacted when an individual engages in traditional observance, especially communal worship. For example, Jewish and Christian services in synagogues and churches often include scripture readings about virtuous conduct and spiritual models such as Moses or Jesus.
[d]Mantram/holy name repetition as presented by Bormann lacks the full set of four elements that comprise an integral contemplative practice system, but it is extracted from such a system (Passage Meditation).
[e]The Sabbath cycle is weekly (not daily).
[f]See Silberman[25] on Rebbes as spiritual models.

Figure 2.1 shows how these four elements of practice can work together in concert to foster spiritual growth and related outcomes. In every system, these elements are intended for integration into one's daily and weekly routines of life,[13] through which they may gradually transform "character, conduct and consciousness" (p. 37).[14] As tools for retraining attention, they reinforce each other. They address multiple needs and opportunities that arise in the ordinary rhythms and textures of daily living. Like a well-designed course of instruction or a healthy physical exercise routine, they provide for periods of heightened intensity and immersion (#1, set-aside time), application of skills in diverse contexts (#2 character strengths and #3 centering/stabilizing), and overall guidance and inspiration (#4 spiritual models).

The model in Figure 2.1 suggests that these four elements function synergistically, by reinforcing each other. Like the nutritional contributions of complementary food groups,[15] these four types of practice together may generate greater benefits than obtainable separately from individual practices. Of course, the model in Figure 2.1 is far from complete in representing *all* of the psychological and spiritual processes that operate in real time. Other factors include an

Figure 2.1. Elements Function Dynamically in Concert.



individual's need for a valid and coherent worldview,[16] and the influence of spiritual fellowship.[11,17] For this reason, forms of "spiritual shopping" (p. 126)[18] that are blind, that incoherently mix and match incompatible elements from discordant practice traditions, will rarely be optimal. Spiritual benefits, one might hypothesize, are maximized when the elements interface and cohere harmoniously with each other, like pieces of a well-constructed musical instrument, or threads in a well-crafted tapestry. *How* to best evaluate the coherence of a set of practices is, of course, a perennially controversial and important issue—and one that cannot be resolved here.

Practical applications flow from recognizing the synergistic interrelation of elements in these four categories. For example, an individual could use the four categories as a checklist to review the completeness of his or her own practice, from the standpoint of the model in Figure 2.1. More broadly, the four elements might function as a checklist for a psychotherapist to help a client in reviewing his or her practice, or for an educator to lead students in reviewing or augmenting their own practices. To distinguish it from something less complete, my SHI colleagues and I propose that a system of practices that encompasses elements from all four categories should be designated an *integral contemplative practice system*.

In the practice systems examined in this book, centering activities (#3) are perhaps most commonly missing, or underemphasized in real-world implementations. A useful resource to redress this neglect is offered by Bormann's chapter (this volume). She highlights mantram/holy name repetition, a cross-culturally common practice that produces centering. When sought, variations of mantram repetition can be found in many faith traditions and practice systems, including several described in this volume.

For individuals who are interested or engaged in some form of spiritual practice—about 80 percent of U.S. adults, according to a recent national survey (p. 79)[19]—the following questions may prove practically beneficial:

1. Do I currently draw spiritual support, strength, and reinforcement through engaging in practices in each of the four categories listed earlier? That is, do I enjoy the spiritual support of an *integral contemplative practice*?
2. If not, can I expand my practice in ways that are personally appropriate and consistent with my tradition and beliefs?

3. How can I extend my practice in a way that is most harmonious and complementary to my existing practices?

Such questions may also be relevant to the growing roster of for-profit and nonprofit organizations seeking to systematically integrate spirituality into the workplace[20,21] (see also Delbecq, this volume, whose executive seminars have addressed all four elements).

Even beyond its relevance to spiritual practice, of course, many benefits can flow from identifying commonalities across faith traditions. Recognizing similarities may facilitate intercultural understanding, foster improved communication between human service professionals and diverse clients, and contribute to better education and health care. This chapter has described similarities in daily spiritual practices. Similarities also exist at other levels, ranging from the institutional[22] to the philosophical.[23] Comparatively few earlier writers, such as Walsh[24] and Easwaran,[14] have examined similarities in practices. Yet daily practice is at the core of applying spirituality to address real-world problems. Our analyses suggest that diverse faith traditions have recommended similarly integrated systems of contemplative practice. I encourage readers to consider how these four categories may apply to their own practices, and that of their clients, students, fellow congregants, and organizations, as well as to the practice systems described in the next eight chapters in this book.

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