

**Bringing Meditation to the Community: The Applied Meditation Studies Program  
at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, Glenside, PA., USA**

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*Meditation is not to escape from society, but to come back  
to ourselves and see what is going on. Once there is seeing,  
there must be acting. With mindfulness,  
we know what to do and what not to do to help.*

*--Thich Nhat Hanh*

The Won Institute of Graduate Studies opened its doors in 2002 in Glenside, Pennsylvania with the mission “to provide quality graduate-level professional education and training in the practical applications of spirituality and the healing arts for the well-being of individuals and society.”<sup>1</sup> It is a small, quasi-experimental school, with only 6 full-time faculty and total enrollment of about 75 students. The Institute includes as its goals excellence in teaching, learning and research; to become a center in the United States for education and research in Won Buddhism; to develop as a center for education and research in the professional application of meditative and contemplative practices; to educate students to become qualified acupuncture practitioners; and, to create an institutional environment committed to excellence and integration of assessment into Institute policies and practices. It is the third goal of the Institute, that is, “to develop as a center for education and research in the professional application of meditative and contemplative practices” that is the focus of the program in Applied Meditative Studies and that will be the focus of this paper.

The Applied Meditation program, leading to an accredited Master’s degree (MAMS) is the only program of its kind in the nation (and perhaps the world) that prepares individuals to bring meditation into the community and that offers them a degree qualification in this field. The Institute also offers an abbreviated course of study leading to a certificate in Applied Meditation Studies for students who do not wish to pursue the entire program. The program emphasizes the practice of meditation grounded in a deep, non-sectarian understanding of the foundations of Buddhist thought and Buddhist psychology. Our students come from a variety of professions, including education, music, nursing, mental health, medicine, business and others. Many, though not all, enter the program with well-developed meditation practices already established. The goal of the program is to graduate individuals prepared and able to design and implement meditation programs for a wide range of institutions in society. The program stresses the creativity of the students and the philosophy that meditation grounded in ethics and wisdom offers innumerable benefits to all individuals. We are especially interested in encouraging the

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<sup>1</sup> The Won Institute of Graduate Studies Catalogue, 2010, p. 6.

teaching of meditation to populations that generally are not exposed to the practice of meditation in their regular lives. While the more commonly understood meaning of “socially engaged Buddhism” stresses the involvement of Buddhists in the world of politics, economics, ecological and social issues, there is a secondary sense of the term that points to the contribution that can be made through direct practice with individuals. As Donald Rothberg has written, “...it may be in making more available to the larger society a sense of socially engaged spiritual practice that socially engaged Buddhists will make their greatest contribution. In developing further and making more accessible the practice of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, socially engaged Buddhists can help respond to immediate suffering as well as to deeper structural problems, and complement the resources of other traditions and approaches.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense of the term “socially-engaged Buddhism” that our program is designed to make a contribution towards the improvement of individual’s lives.

This is a two-year program (33 credits) for those students choosing to pursue their studies full-time. As noted above, we also offer an 18-credit certificate program which requires a public presentation but does not require the practicum. So far our students have designed and implemented meditation programs for parent and child groups (together), for adolescent high school students in an alternative school, for disadvantaged children in after-school programs and for corporate America. We have students in the process of bringing meditation to homeless individuals in Philadelphia and military veterans. Of course, we continue to work with students who bring meditation into areas of mental health, a flourishing territory in the U.S. for the introduction of meditation as an adjunct to traditional treatment. Our program provides a broad examination and study of Buddhist thought and practice, which includes the reading and examination of suttas, the regular practice of meditation, a close exploration of Buddhist psychology as well as a year-long practicum in which students design (semester 1) and then implement (semester 2) their program for introducing meditation to a population that is new to the practice. It is the departmental as well as the Institute’s philosophy, that the applications of meditation extend as far as human culture, including its potential application as a teaching tool, as an aid to conflict resolution, as a supplement to hospital and/or hospice care, in the business world, in politics, in consumer education and more. There is increasing scientific research to suggest that meditation has deep and lasting effects on the practitioner’s cardiovascular and central nervous systems, brain function and overall physical health.<sup>3</sup> By relaxing the body and calming the mind, meditation effectively diminishes the harmful effects of tension, stress and disquiet.

The remainder of this paper will present an overview of the program as well as report on the completed projects and in-progress projects of our current student body. I will examine some of the difficulties we have encountered in attempting to introduce meditation to the general population and how the program has and continues to adjust to the obstacles we have met. It has been our great privilege to have the opportunity of working with enthusiastic, committed and highly motivated students who perceive the untapped potential of meditation for both the individual and society as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup>Rothberg, D. p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, “Mindfulness Meditation Training Changes Brain Structure in Eight Weeks”, Science Daily, Jan. 21, 2011.

## **Overview of Program in Applied Meditation Studies**

The 33-credit program leading to a Master's in Applied Meditation Studies (MAMS) is designed as a two-year fulltime program, though many of our students extend the length of time they complete the program for personal, i.e. family and work-related, reasons. All courses are offered evenings and weekends as the program is designed primarily for working professionals who are already established in their careers. With regard to knowledge-based objectives, our students are expected to gain a theoretical understanding of both the Buddha's system of meditation and of various other systems of meditation developed both within and outside Buddhism; to develop a theoretical understanding of the foundational teachings of the Buddha, and the history and development of Buddhist perspectives and teachings; and to understand how meditation affects the physical, emotional and mental aspects of human beings. In terms of skills, we expect our students to become skilled in the practice of meditation; to be able to assess individuals' prior experience and meditative needs in order to design appropriate training; to demonstrate the ability to train others in meditative practice; to develop the ability to provide ongoing consultation regarding meditative practice; and to be able to design and deliver meditation-oriented programs in, and appropriate to, a variety of settings. This last goal is the "bottom-line" expectation, i.e. that students gain the ability and confidence to bring meditation into the community and to segments of the population which otherwise would probably not be exposed to meditation and its application to their lives.

## **Description of Program**

As noted above, the MAMS degree consists of 33 credits of coursework, meditation and practicum. Students take four semesters of sitting meditation, a 50-minute practice session with little or no meditation instruction. For meditation instruction, the students take 2 three-hour courses, Meditation I and II. In these courses the students practice meditation with the instructor present for approximately 1½ hours, followed by a didactic period in which they analyze and discuss the Anapanasatti Sutta (Meditation I) and the Satipatanna Sutta (Meditation II). During their first year, they also take a course entitled "Applications of Meditation to the Individual and Society", which introduces them to some of the ways in which meditation is currently being applied in social institutions. During this course they learn about the application of meditation in prisons (and they watch two excellent videos on this subject: "Doing Time and Doing Vipassana" about the introduction of meditation into India prisons and "The Dhamma Brothers" about the introduction of meditation into a prison in the US), as well as how meditation is being used in hospice care, mental health settings, alcohol abuse programs, and others. In addition, during the first year the students take a course entitled "What the Buddha Taught", that explores the central teachings of Siddhattha Gotama and the foundational suttas of classical Buddhism. The year is rounded out with two semesters of moving meditation taught by a Won Buddhist Tai Chi master.

During the second year, students continue with both sitting and moving meditation. In addition they take a course in Buddhist Psychology, which looks at all aspects of the Buddhist perspective on human behavior and interaction and they take a course in Teaching Meditation as well. During the summer, and for the following summer, students attend a summer retreat – either one that the department offers

consisting of 30 hours of meditation during a one week period, or another retreat of their own choosing taking place outside of the Institute but has been approved by the department faculty. They are required to attend a minimum of four “Sunday Sanctuaries” – each a three-hour meditation and discussion session on Sunday mornings. Finally, it is during the second (or final) year of the program that students develop their practicum project, which consists of the design and implementation of a program in meditation with a specific population in mind. It is in this final project that students will demonstrate their ability to synthesize the material they have been studying. This project will culminate in a public presentation, for faculty, students and anyone from the community who wishes to attend, of their project and their assessment of the project. This presentation helps the student evaluate and put into perspective the work they have done in the field.

The program aims to be intensive, providing grounding in Buddhist theory, but with the ultimate goal of training practitioners who will use their skills to bring meditation into the community. Glenside, Pennsylvania is a suburb of Philadelphia, a city of 1½ million people, with diverse populations of rich and poor, well-educated and under-educated, religious and atheistic. The program does not proselytize for any particular school of Buddhist thought, though it does view meditation as a practice grounded in wisdom and theory. In this way we differentiate ourselves from some programs that use meditation solely as a technique for relaxation and stress reduction.

## **Completed Projects**

### ***Bringing Meditation to an Alternative High School***

Our student G. was a school guidance counselor at an alternative high school in Philadelphia who had begun a second career after retiring from the local police force. Prior to entering the program, G. had discovered meditation independently, having done some reading in Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (Jon Kabat-Zinn) and had initially offered an elective in meditation to the students at his school. When he enrolled at the Won Institute, he had the express interest in learning more about meditation and finding ways to incorporate meditation practice into his deeply troubled students lives.

An alternative high school is a learning center for children who have not been able to succeed in regular high school classes. Some of these children have serious addictions, including alcohol, marijuana and even heroin. They may come from homes in which their parents or parent are seriously addicted and impaired in their ability to provide guidance to the child. These are children with police records, hospital admissions (for suicide and/or depression) and poor academic histories.

G. had found that there was some interest in meditation in his school among both students and teachers. One of his initial ideas was to move his efforts from a student-only approach to a whole-school approach. With that in mind, he initiated meditation for the staff, believing that there would be more support for the student meditation sessions if the staff understood and participated in meditation themselves. He started staff meditation sessions twice a week, Tuesday mornings before classes began and Thursday afternoons after school had adjourned. He also continued to offer his initial elective meditation class, which includes sitting meditation, walking meditation, yoga, body scan, and small group discussion. Then he added one “pull-out” group (meaning that some students were “pulled out” of their regular class session to participate) consisting of 8 – 12 students on Thursday mornings. Understanding that students may need time and gentle exposure to

be open to learning meditation skills, he developed a program called “Mindful Minute”, in the homerooms in order to introduce students to meditation. For 1 – 3 weeks, G. practiced in the classroom with the teacher present and then he turned over the “mindful minute” to the teachers to incorporate into their day. Most recently, at the request of the students, he added an ongoing Check-in/Home room. Students are making a commitment to come to his room each morning and sit in meditation at the start of the day for approximately 15 minutes or longer. This program was initiated to meet a need expressed by the students and has been progressing well. There are five committed meditators attending this special homeroom each day. As evidence of their involvement, the students showed up one morning when G. was unable to attend (they had not been advised that he wouldn’t be there). As it turns out, however, the five meditating students went in to the classroom anyway, set up the cushions, meditated on their own, put the cushions away and went to their next period class without an issue.

Finally, G. recently wrote and was the recipient of a \$1000. award for the meditation program at his school. He used the grant proceeds to buy meditation cushions as he had been using old couch cushions that he had brought from his home. Staff members at the school donated as well to this purchase.

### ***Bringing Meditation to Acupuncture Students***

In 2010, one of our students, who is also a Won Buddhist Minister, was commuting to our program from Houston, Texas. She decided to develop a meditation program based on the Satipatthana Sutta for students at a local college, the American College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in Houston. The American College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine is a post-baccalaureate academic institution that trains individuals as healthcare practitioners based on the theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The school is committed to providing the local community with affordable healthcare through its clinic while promoting the integration of TCM into mainstream Western medicine. This student was also interested in exploring methods of meditation other than what she herself had trained in, i.e. Won Buddhist meditation. She had been captivated by the examination of the Satipatthana Sutta in her meditation class and decided to use it as the foundation of her program with the acupuncture students at ACAOM.

Very briefly, Rev. S. developed 14 steps of practice based on the Satipatthana Sutta. These steps consisted of: present moment awareness with breathing, full attention in activities, observing the reality of the body, releasing the notion of “my body”, immediate knowing of whatever appears, waking up the senses, moment to moment contemplation, direct awareness of mind, letting go, the five hindrances, insight into no-self, right meditation and changing one’s way of life. Each step was explored through a combination of presentation (what the student called “narration”), sitting meditation, sometimes walking meditation and sharing. Rev. S. also remained cognizant of a wish to adapt Won Buddhism to American culture so that more Americans might be interested in exploring the possibilities that Won Buddhism offers. With that in mind, she surveyed Won Buddhist ministers from among 20 Won Buddhist temples in order to elucidate if and how meditation is being taught at those temples around the country. One of her findings was that 77% of the ministers she surveyed did not think that Won Buddhist meditation was well-structured for Westerners. It was a hope for her that in adapting the

Satipatthana Sutta through the lens of Won Buddhism she might develop a method of teaching meditation that would both appeal to Westerners and interest them in further discovering the possibilities inherent in Won Buddhism. At the end of 10 weeks, participants in the program reported that they could understand and experience greater tranquility and present-moment awareness.

## **Current Projects**

### ***Meditation with Military Veterans***

One of our current projects has been designed by our oldest student, a veteran himself, who has had concerns about the mental health of veterans and the scarcity of services available for men who have served their country and now are suffering the scars that military service left on their psyches. The program is called “Meditation in Transition” and is a 24-week program, divided into three stages of 8 weeks each. Each meeting will include meditation as well as a period of discussion focused around a topic chosen by the student, or “guide”.

Stage One introduces the practice of meditation. Members will meet once a week with the “guide” (student) and will learn the basic concept of focusing on the breath. They will also be introduced to journaling as a method of record-keeping that will follow them throughout the 24 week program. Groups will be limited to six individuals in order to insure that individual attention can be provided to each participant.

Stage Two builds on the first stage by introducing more advanced meditation skills. These skills include concentration, alert poise, identifying difficulties, investigating with curiosity, etc. Discussion will focus on clarifying awareness as well as on expressing feelings and recognizing their patterns.

In Stage Three, the “guide” will lead the participants in discussion (in addition to continued meditation) for the purpose of identifying individual aspirations that participants have been unaware of or unable to actualize. This program is built upon the assumption that veterans often have abandoned their wishes and dreams and live compromised and unfulfilled lives. As the student says in the brochure he designed as a tool for recruiting veterans to his program, “The gist of the MIT program for each person is to decisively ‘take on my life – come hell or high water!’ And to do this with the intent to Envision and Realize the maximum possibilities each member can identify.”

This program is now in the recruitment stage. As we have a special “veterans clinic” in the acupuncture clinic at the Won Institute, this student is taking advantage of the already available veteran population as an avenue for offering his program. He is “hanging around” the clinic, meeting and talking informally with the men (there have only been men attending the clinic so far) and building relationships as a means to interesting them in starting this new endeavor.

### ***Meditation with the Homeless***

S. is one of our Korean students who decided to create her practicum around bringing meditation to the homeless. She located a site at St. Vincent’s Hospital, one of the first hospitals in Philadelphia, opening its doors in 1875. The hospital’s mission is to make available a “community of caregivers dedicated to bringing God’s healing love to all and committed to compassion and excellence in the delivery of a continuum of

wholistic care.”<sup>4</sup> In the health center, all visitors and guests are homeless individuals. They come to the center to receive their meals and sometimes their welfare checks and health care. The clinic offers regular health care checkups, foot massage, and other services as needed. Volunteers are trained by the health center to offer services as well.

Through a personal contact, S. was able to arrange to offer meditation classes for the homeless at St. Vincent’s. She developed an eight-week program consisting of walking meditation, sitting meditation, sharing feelings and emotions and offering tea. Initially she had a low turnout because the weather on the first day of her program was clear and sunny. She had been advised that on days of good weather many of the regular visitors would not show up, as they enjoyed being outside and watching the world go by; however, she recruited interested individuals from whoever was there and started her program with six people. After meditation S. introduced the participants to a Korean-style tea service, which she felt was enthusiastically enjoyed!

Three weeks later S. led her second meditation session at St. Vincent’s. Two participants who had attended the first session returned for the second session and three individuals came for the first time. One of the homeless men reported to her that he had been looking forward to the meditation all week. S. discovered for herself at the second session that she needed to set aside her preoccupation with the participants’ “homelessness” and simply relate to them as human beings experiencing their own forms of suffering. Once again the one-hour session consisted of sitting meditation, walking meditation, discussion and tea. She introduced the participants to the concept of present-moment awareness and they compared the experience of “mindful” walking to their usual “unmindful” walking. Other topics for future meetings include the four postures, full attention, consideration of body parts, consideration of the four elements and awareness of all sensations. With ten sessions planned altogether, the group decided together to meet on a monthly basis for the remainder of the sessions. We will have to wait for the final report!

### **Difficulties Encountered in the Practicum Program**

The major difficulty we have encountered in implementing programs of meditation in the community is the problem of time. We have learned that convincing the community that it is worth their while to try meditation can take more time than previously anticipated and may not fit into the rigid semester time frame that an academic program establishes. To this end, we have opted for flexibility and support for continued effort.

For example, in 2010 we had a student who entered the program with the hopes of establishing meditation groups for mothers and children together. T. owned her own thriving business at the time, offering music education to the community which included groups for mothers and children singing, dancing, and otherwise making music together. It was her hope to develop meditation groups along the same lines.

The student developed an 8-week program for mothers and children to meditate together. A talented and resourceful young woman, T. was creative in her approach, developed eye-catching and inspiring marketing materials, and scouted out a number of possible venues for her group. However, she was unable to generate enrollment for any of the groups she offered. It was a very discouraging and difficult time for her as she

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<sup>4</sup> [www.saintvincenthealth.com](http://www.saintvincenthealth.com)

struggled to get a first group off the ground. As a result, by the end of the semester and her expected graduation, T. had a wonderful program “on the books” but had been unable to actualize it in the real world. We graduated her anyway, appreciating the hard work she had put in to develop this idea.

Then something unexpected occurred. Shortly after graduation, we started receiving emails at the Institute inquiring about meditation groups for parents and children. Some folks had apparently heard that we were offering such a group and they were seeking additional information. We happily relayed the inquiries to our student and within about one month she had started her first group consisting of four parent/child pairs. The world has its own schedule!

In addition to the time issue, as the instructor and mentor to the practicum students I have had to repeatedly remind students to “do less”. Our students tend to be bright, committed, and enthusiastic, and sometimes have difficulty adjusting their expectations to the population being served. Since many of the projects target populations with no prior experience with meditation, I believe that it is essential for our students to begin small and build on success. They need to speak the language of the population they are serving as well as adapt their program to what is realistic for the individuals involved. This often means that the goals we set in the practicum are repeatedly revised so that they are not overwhelming for the individuals involved. I find myself saying the same words over and over, “Do less, do less, do less...”

In conclusion, in this paper I have presented an overview of the Applied Meditation Studies Program at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, including examples of some of our students’ projects for taking meditation out into the world. The Applied Meditation Studies Program is continually growing and changing. This current year we have five new students with their own unique and exciting ideas for bringing meditation into the community. We have an incoming student who has been working with court-ordered men with anger issues. He hopes to develop a program on meditation for anger-management. Another new student is interested in bringing meditation into the corporate world.

We are excited to be doing this work, and hope that in describing our work to others we might inspire other programs like ours. There are so many possibilities, so many populations who could benefit from meditation. Our students intuitively seem to know this, and are constrained only by the limited range any human being struggles with. If only we could do more!



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