

The Virtues of the New Contemplative Studies

Gordon Bermant

Lecturer, Department of Psychology and the
Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program

University of Pennsylvania

Spirituality, Religion & Health Interest
Group

September 5, 2012

Purpose: to convene academics and others to foster and disseminate

- Contemplative basic science
- Contemplative clinical science
- Contemplative philosophy and humanities
- Contemplative education
- Related areas of contemplative practice

Organizer Mind & Life Institute (MA)

Sample of Co-sponsors:

- Brown U. Contemplative Studies
- Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education
- Center for Integrative Medicine, Wake Forest Baptist Health
- U.C. Davis Center for Mind and Brain
- Emory Collaborative for Contemplative Studies
- Naropa University
- Prevention Research Center, Penn State
- Other universities: UCB, UCLA, UNC, Miami, Arizona
- Contemplative Outreach (Centering Prayer)

Organization

Didactic

- Keynote addresses (4)
- Master lectures (3 blocks, 9 headings, 18 presentations)
- Papers and panels (4 blocks, 10 locations, 37 presentations)
- Posters (3 blocks, 122 posters)

Practice

- Yoga (7AM)
 - R.Freeman/M.Taylor, Yoga Workshop
- Guided meditation (8-8:30AM)
 - Br. David Steindl-Rast
 - Barry Kerzin
 - Sharon Salzburg

Keynote speakers & themes

- Jon Kabat-Zinn: Emerging confluence of Research and “Activism:” The extraordinary growth of mindfulness studies and applications
- Richard Davidson: The emergence of contemplative neuroscience
- Marsha Linehan: Dialectical behavior therapy: a mindfulness-based behavior therapy
- Diana Chapman Walsh: Contemplative tradition in education and leadership

Master lectures

- **Neuroscience and Humanities**
 - Meditation, neuroscience, and contemplative experience
 - Avoiding bias in the Buddhism-neuroscience dialogue(Saron and Bitbol)
- **Neuroscience and contemplative practice**
 - Cultivating compassion in the Christian contemplative tradition
 - Empathy and compassion practice(T. Singer and Salzberg)

Master lectures

- **Neuroscience and education**

- Meditation, attention, and neuroscience in the military
- Reflections on contemplative practice: the Mind and Life perspective

(Jha and Zajonc)

- **Education and humanities**

- Western contemplative tradition in higher education
- Contemplative practices in higher education: integration and challenge

(Stock and Roth)

Master lectures

- **Education**

- Contemplative practices in education leadership

(Panel: McCartney, Murphy, Jacobs)

- **Education and basic social science/Positive psychology**

- Applied mindfulness interventions with parents and teachers
- Positive emotion, social connections, and Loving-kindness meditation

(Greenberg, Fredrickson)

Master lectures

- **Clinical science and contemplative practice**
 - Mindfulness training to prevent perinatal depression
 - Issues in bringing meditation practice into clinical settings

(Dimidjian, Halifax)

- **Clinical science and humanities**
 - Mindfulness, suffering, and cognition
 - Mindfulness and cognition from the perspective of Buddhist scholarship

(Teasdale, Dunne)

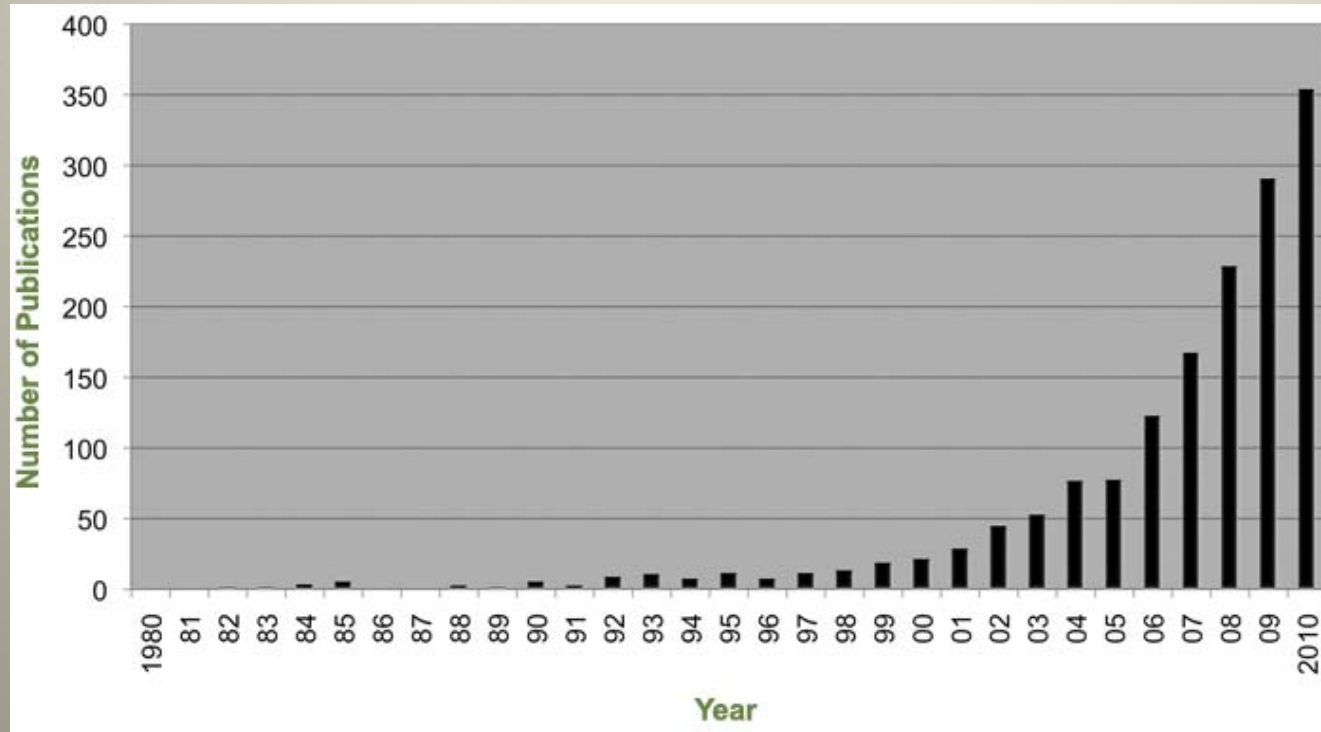
Master lectures

- **Contemplative practice: Yoga**
 - Yoga research
 - Yoga practice
 - Yoga Scholarship

(Cohen, Freeman, Phillips)

Keynote themes in four nutshells

1: Jon Kabat-Zinn



Growth is good, but there are risks, including predominance of specialization and “expertise.” These should be resisted, in favor of furthering the common goal of relieving suffering and promoting well-being

Keynote themes in four nutshells

2: Richie Davidson

- Major ideas in emerging contemplative neuroscience:
- **Neuroplasticity**
 - brain changes in response to experience
 - This is the foundation of transformation
- **Epigenetics**
 - Outer and inner environments (including cognition/emotion) affect gene expression
- **Neurally-inspired behavioral interventions**
 - Interventions based on contemplative practice can target brain areas with greater duration and benefit than any known pharmacological intervention
- **Transformation of traits through transformation of states**
 - “ASC” of the old days become “ATC” in the emerging field
- **Scientists should practice** (“we are proud to practice”, from 2011 speech)
 - a synthesized epistemology of first-person and third-person perspectives

Keynote themes in four nutshell

3: Marsha Linehan

- The seamless web of her Zen practice and her psychological profession
 - Just became roshi
- Her Dialectical Behavior Therapy is a synthesis of radical acceptance and skillful means
- Mindfulness practice is at the core
 - *Noticing* non-judgmentally
 - An active acceptance, not resignation
 - “unrivaled entering into reality as it exists”
- Therapists must themselves practice mindfulness meditation
- Evaluation must proceed by traditional means

Keynote themes in four nutshell

4: Diana Chapman Walsh

- Ignorance is the root of suffering and, when recognized, the basis of enlightenment
- Contemplative leadership follows an epistemology of love (Zajonc) based on
 - Respect for the other, gentleness, vulnerability, and participation
 - Avoids the traps of hero image and defensive leadership
 - Comprehends the relationship between power and love:

Power and Love

Martin Luther King

- “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

Themes in papers and panels using Wordle

Wordle based on the titles of 44
abstracts that covered individual
presentations and some group
presentations.



Note the prevalence of “compassion.” There are 17 instances.

Themes in posters using Wordle

Wordle based on the titles of 122
posters

Using wordles this way

- Perhaps an obvious difference between the two wordles can start an interesting exploration
- The relative absence of “compassion” but presence of “self-compassion” in the poster titles led me to explore a bit more
- There was too much going on at the meeting to sense such a possibility or trend at the time
- I’ll return to this a little later

The virtues of contemplative studies as demonstrated in this conference

- Willingness to move across religious/secular boundaries without undue concern
- Acceptance of *practice (ritual)* and *experience (consciousness)* as fundamental rather than data to be explained by science
- From this acceptance, a prescription for scientists and therapists to practice what they study (Davidson and Linehan keynotes)
- Remarkable openness to interdisciplinary collaboration and theory-building (e.g. Walsh keynote)

Beyond keynote themes

Brief examples

Self-compassion

Kirsten Neff, U.Texas Austin

Neff as presenter, plus 5
instances in the posters

3-minute video from the web

Dr. Kristin Neff
University of Texas at Austin
Author of Self-Compassion

www.Self-Compassion.org

Being with dying

Anthony Back, M.D., Roshi Dr. Joan
Halifax

- Compassionate Silence in the Patient–Clinician Encounter:A Contemplative Approach
- Anthony L. Back, M.D., Susan M. Bauer-Wu, Ph.D., R.N., Cynda H. Rushton, Ph.D., R.N.,³ and Joan Halifax, Ph.D.
- Journal of Palliative Medicine, 2009

Typology of silences

- Awkward silence
 - Clinician's uncertainty, or perhaps masked distractedness
- Invitational silence
 - Evidencing clinician's intention to give patient time to think and feel about what has just been said
- Compassionate silence
 - Recognizing a shared feeling
 - Active generation of compassion from clinician to patient

Assumptions about silences

- Creating wholesome silence is the clinician's responsibility
- Contemplative practice facilitates the skill of creating compassionate silence
- An instrumental approach to silence is more likely to fail (become awkward) than an approach arising from within the clinician's intention for patient's wellbeing

Their definition of compassion

- “the active generation of a personal intention for a good outcome (generally to reduce suffering) that is described in contemplative practices in both Buddhist and Christian traditions.”
- Sources in these traditions are given:

- Halifax, Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death
- Chodron, Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion
- Vreeland: An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life
- Merton & Hahn: Contemplative Prayer

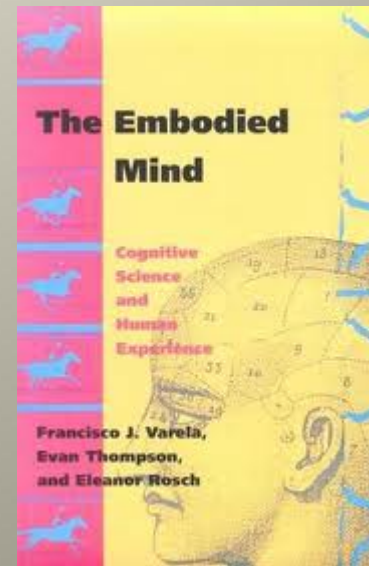
Avoiding bias in the dialogue among participants in the new contemplative studies

- The conference emphasized the dialogue between Buddhism and neuroscience
- The *neuropsychology* introduced by Francisco Varela and now championed by Evan Thompson creates a dynamic field for both scientific and experiential growth

Francisco Varela (1946-2001): the inspiration of the new contemplative studies

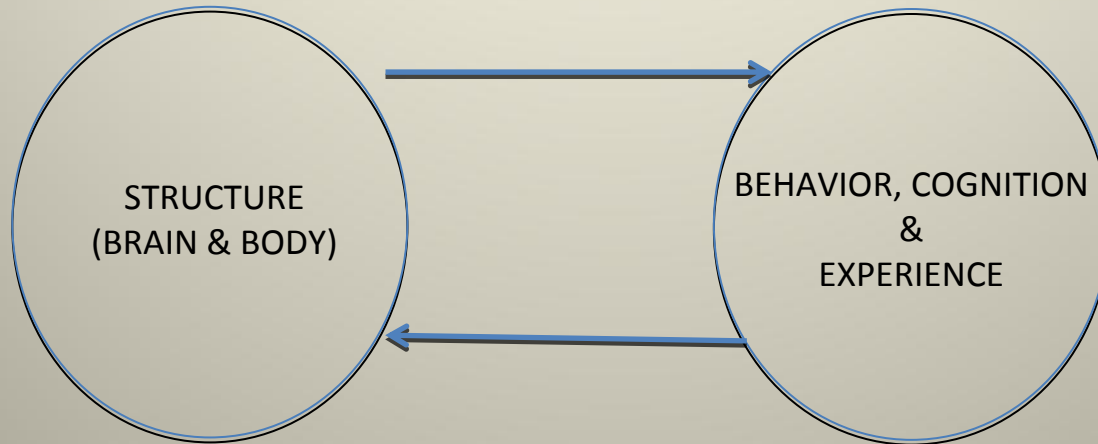


Varela,
Thompson &
Rosch (1991)



Embodiment₃ Profound interdependence from structure to the mind of the reflective scientist: the world as *enacted*

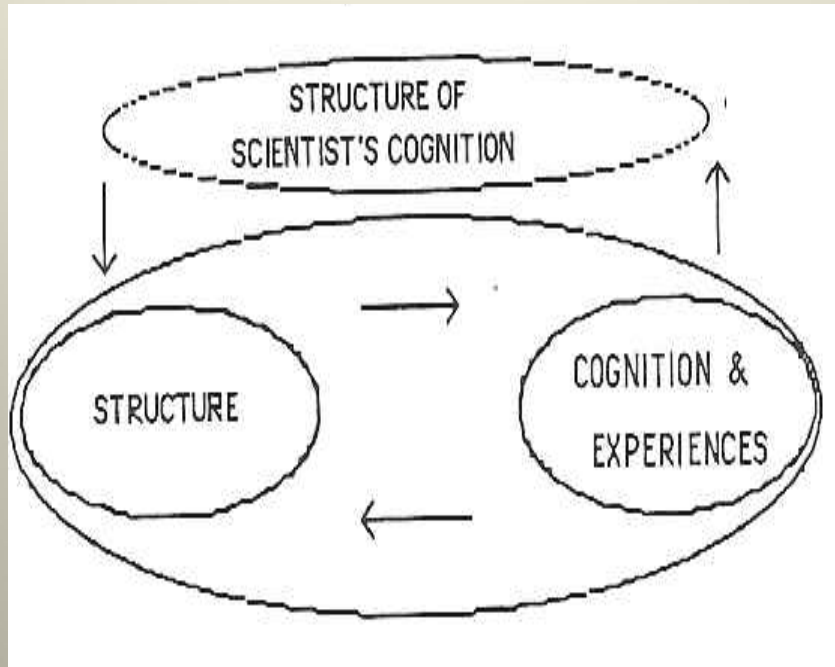
Step 1:



Interdependence or mutual specification of structure and behavior/cognition/experience

Embodiment₃ : Interdependence/mutual specification

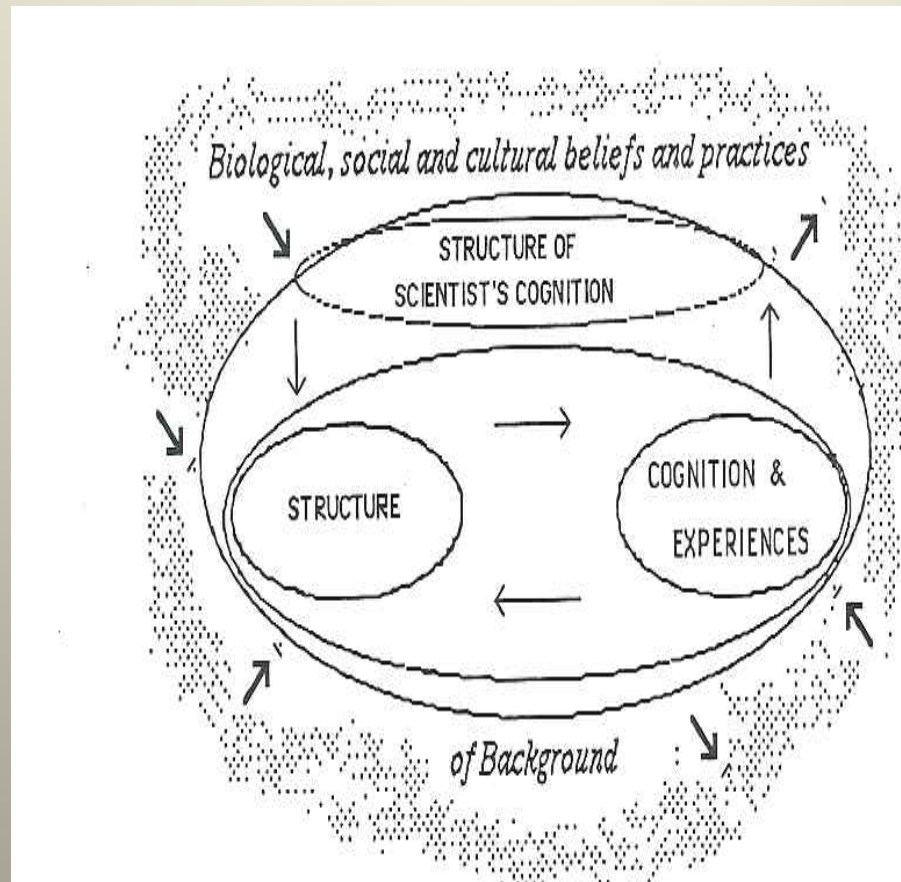
Step 2:



Interdependence of scientific description and our own cognitive structure

Embodiment₃ : Interdependence/mutual specification

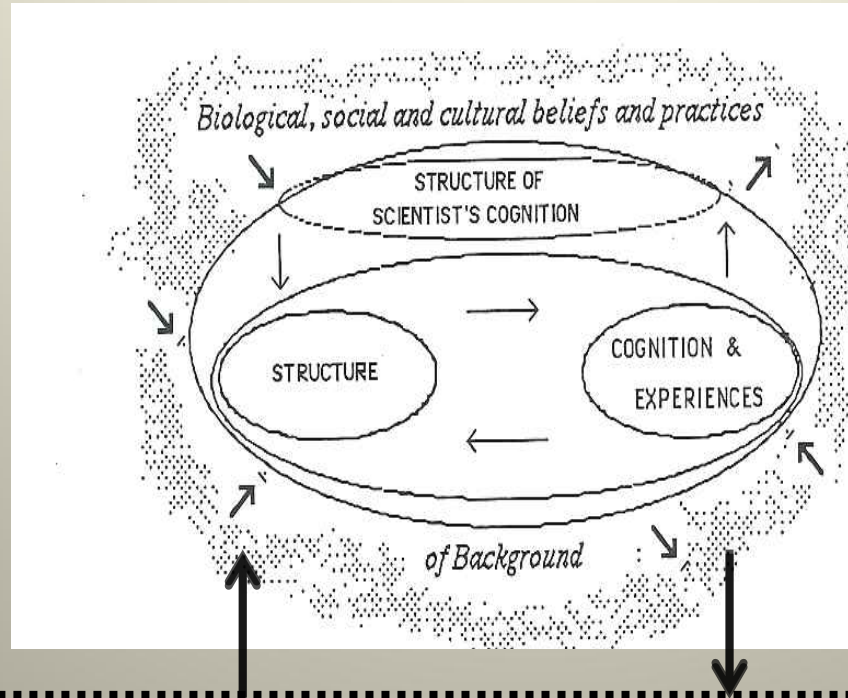
Step 3:



Interdependence of reflection [the scientist's cognition] and the background of biological, social, and cultural beliefs and practices

Embodiment₃ : Interdependence/mutual specification

Step 4:



Philosophical thoughts of a supposedly embodied person

Interdependency of the background and embodiment

The world inhabits awareness, and
awareness inhabits the world.

A deep appreciation of this
interdependence is the beginning,
and also the aspiration, of the new
contemplative studies.

Looking forward:

There remain many open questions about lack of bias among different belief systems and between them and what is frequently taken to be the “scientific world view.”

The new contemplative studies do not provide a panacea for closed-mindedness.

But they do point to an open door.

Thank you