

## Education Life

### The Inner Scholar



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

**THINK, DRAW** Robert Spellman, third from left, begins his art class at Naropa University in Boulder, Colo., with meditation.

By CLAIRE DEDERER  
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TO hear Thomas B. Coburn, president of Naropa University, explain the theory of contemplative education is to grasp a simple concept. The Buddhist-inspired teaching that goes on at this small college, he says, is aimed at giving students "a critical perspective on their inner lives."



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

**THE DAY'S RESULTS** Students display their work in Robert Spellman's art class.

To see it in action is something else entirely.

At a recent session of "The Contemplative Practice," one of Naropa's required core courses, the Buddhist scholar Judith Simmer-Brown set up a makeshift stage at the front of the classroom. She asked each student to stand on one side of the stage, bow (there's a lot of bowing at Naropa), and walk silently to the middle of the stage. Each person stood there, without moving, laughing, smiling, speaking or making expressive faces. The goal was to look every person in the eye. The exercise is designed to develop mindfulness.

A few students rushed through the process, wild-eyed with anxiety. Others stood stock still and made eye contact. Like many of the things asked of those who study here, Dr. Simmer-Brown's exercise looked easy but was actually quite difficult.

Scott Parker Mast is a 37-year-old professional musician who graduated from the university's contemplative psychology program. He says a Naropa education is as serious as you make it: "If your homework is to go spend some time being authentic with yourself, you can take that to heart and go for it, or not. How's the instructor going to know better? If you make the most of that kind of education, it's going to be an incredible opportunity. If you don't, it can just be super fluffy."

Contemplative education has defined this Boulder, Colo., college since it began life as the Naropa Institute in 1974. That summer, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche — a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who made his way to the United States by way of Oxford — founded the institute to integrate Eastern and Western studies. He invited artists from all over the country; the artists invited their buddies, and the gathering ended up with a head count of 2,500. Many of the participants decided to stay in Boulder, including the poet Allen Ginsberg. He was co-founder of Naropa's writing program, the elegiacally named [Jack Kerouac](#) School of Disembodied Poetics, later that year.

The college has gone through transformations since then. It was awarded top-level accreditation in 1986. It now charges \$20,738 in tuition and has a student body of 1,083, in three locations. The original campus, in downtown Boulder, is a shady green square where students — some barefoot, some dreadlocked, many proudly scruffy — attend classes in a cluster of buildings that includes wooden clapboard cottages. Two campuses sit on the outskirts of town in office-park-like settings, slightly mitigated by prayer flags rippling in the breeze and students meditating on the front lawns.

One thing has never changed, though: the emphasis on contemplation. In addition to fulfilling the traditional requirements of a major, students participate in Eastern practices like yoga, sitting meditation, Japanese flower arrangement, tai chi, Chinese brush painting and aikido.

The university offers programs in a range of subjects, including environmental studies, visual arts and peace studies, which teaches conflict resolution. The most popular major is psychology, and many Naropa students go on to work as therapists.

The notion of contemplative education plays out in different ways. Psychology students, for instance, develop intuition and empathy through meditation and journal-writing. They study traditional Western ideas — Gestalt, Jung, family systems, statistics — along with Tibetan medicine.

Writing majors attend workshops where they critique one another's work and read the classics — along with Ginsberg. They are encouraged to follow his Zenlike dictum, "First thought, best thought."

Students write poems based on a collection of Chinese characters in a class taught by Steven Taylor, who performed for a time with the seminal '60s band the Fugs. (The Naropa faculty is full of beatniks and rebels living out their second acts.)

All this unconventional study is conducted with great seriousness and purpose, which is not to say humorlessness. Here, for instance, is what Robert Spellman, an art teacher, told one class about meditation: "If we set an intention of becoming a good, holy meditator, and we're not aware of that intention, we're going to become a certain kind of jerk."

Mr. Spellman seems to embody Naropa's balance between the alternative and the traditional. A painter whose still lifes are shown in local galleries, he walked into his classroom looking like the tweediest, most patrician Yankee ever. Then he unlaced his brown oxfords, folded up his khakied legs, adjusted his button-down collar, and proceeded to meditate for 20 minutes.

The students in his class meditated alongside. When they were done, they engaged him in a lively discussion. "Most classes I've been in, attendance is not just showing

up physically, but showing up as a whole being," says Tiffani Parrish, a 21-year-old double major in writing and poetics and traditional Eastern arts.

The university has a reputation in Boulder as expensively flaky. But it attracts a fairly academic student. While SATs are not required, this year's incoming class has a 3.0 high school grade point average. Each applicant must write three essays and participate in an hourlong interview. Ninety-five percent of Naropa students say the university was their first choice.

Its educational model is difficult to find elsewhere in the United States. There are other colleges that teach meditation. Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa, was founded by the inventor of Transcendental Meditation. And there are other universities founded by Buddhists: Soka University of America in Orange County, Calif., and University of the West in Rosemead, Calif.

But Naropa isn't tied to a single religious tradition. Rather, it embraces a flexible, nondenominational approach to spiritual life. The university calls itself Buddhist-inspired rather than Buddhist; its goal from the very beginning was to bring together elements of Eastern and Western philosophy. Says Dr. Coburn, "The founder used to say, 'Let East meet West and watch the sparks fly.' It's harder for the sparks to fly when you have just a single wisdom tradition."

Naropa's approach could seep into the mainstream as individual teachers at various universities integrate contemplative approaches into their classrooms. Ed Sarath at the [University of Michigan](#) uses meditation in his jazz improvisation classes. [Peter Schneider](#) asks his environmental design students at the [University of Colorado](#) to try breathing meditation. The [Dalai Lama](#) is a new professor at Emory [article, next page].

This summer, Naropa was host of its first Contemplative Pedagogy Seminar, which was attended by 14 educators from across the continent.

"These teachers can go back into their schools and be resources for the students there who need this," Dr. Coburn says. "I'm not saying we want to subvert the mainstream." He pauses. "But it is a kind of guerilla warfare."

*Claire Dederer is a writer in Boulder, Colo.*

