My name is Joseph Siddiqii. I work as a part-time professor in the Department of Studio Arts, teaching painting and drawing, and I've been doing that for the past 18 years. Outside of being an artist, which has been my professional career, and outside of teaching, which has been my vocation, I've also had a deep personal interest in mindfulness and meditation and philosophy. I really see that stuff as integral to my life as an artist and to teaching. I would say that my interests in meditation are sort of linked to the early Buddhist teachings. And for the past eight years, I've been seriously studying the theory and practice in the Theravada tradition, following a monk from Sri Lanka.

I've been going on silent retreats and doing weekly study sessions, learning about the theory and all that. And I've also been doing a lot of the secular mindfulness courses that were offered at Concordia.

There was an eight-week mindful self-compassion program, a 13-week mindfulness for resilience program, and a 10-week mindfulness for resilience national teacher training course, which I did over the past two or three years. So I've been looking for ways to sort of talk about mindfulness, attention, noticing with my students in a way that's secular, but at the same time brings the spirit of the more kind of deeper side that I've been exploring.

And most of this really came to the forefront during the pandemic. It was when I started teaching online that I saw a huge, excuse me, a huge spike in the anxiety of the students. They were, I think they weren't ready to all of a sudden be isolated, to be cut off from everyone, and to have the whole, I guess it was the, in that moment people realized that things that they had taken for granted as being permanent, solid for sure, were not. Everything was up in the air, nothing was guaranteed, and that loss of certainty and being cut off from their usual entertainments and ways of escaping their anxiety, they were just left alone with their fear. So very difficult for them to engage in a painting project or their drawing project because they were blocked. They had a lot of, you know, what am I supposed to do? What's going to become of me? At the same time, I could feel that they wanted to do things. They just didn't know how to get past this fear. So I wanted to help them with that. And I thought if only they, you know, had a bit of this mindfulness training, it would help them at least look at their situation from another perspective. Rather than want to fear, it would maybe look at it with a bit of curiosity, a little openness, a little more confidence.

So it was really during that time that I looked for ways to talk to my students about mindfulness in the classroom.

And then over the past five years, I've tried different methods from actually doing mindfulness meditation with them, sitting, you know, guiding them through a practice, doing walking meditation, doing guided compassion, loving kindness meditations, to more sort of philosophical inquiries, where it's we're not sort of doing a formal meditation, but the questions that I'm asking and the kind of conversation that we're talking about, and to just a sort of way of being in the classroom, which is more open, a little more sort of unconventional, in the sense that I'm not, say, reacting in the way that they typically see a teacher react.

And that's causing them to question their own reactions and look at things a little different. So I'm trying all these different ways of bringing this what we're calling contemplative practice and pedagogy into the classroom. Can you say more about when you say how a teacher would normally react versus how a student would normally react in the classroom? Sure. So I was actually talking to one of my former students a couple of weeks ago. And one of the things they said to me that they found different is usually when they typically in their classes, there's a lot of pressure to produce, produce, produce, produce. And so they themselves feel this pressure on themselves that they should be constantly producing, producing,

producing.

Whereas my approach is more slow.

I'm kind of looking at what they did, talking to them about it, pulling out salient points, which I think, isn't this interesting that you did it this way? What do you think is developing over here? How do you see this moving forward?

And so to go slow and to actually look at what's there and to contemplate it is something that for them, they weren't really used to. Also, they feel that they're expecting me to come in and judge to basically come in, this is working, this isn't working, this is good, this isn't good, this is right, this is wrong, do this, do that as a kind of authority, which maybe they get in some of their other classes. And the question they asked is, what do you think I should do? Look at my painting, what should I do? And they're used to the teacher telling them what to do, do this, do that, do this, do that.

Next. Whereas I'll come in, I'll say, well, what do you think you should do?

I don't know. Why are you asking me? What would you like to do? Why are you doing this?

Why are you here? What's your goal? I said, well, I don't know. You're the teacher, you tell me.

Some of them are like that. And for those students, I'll sort of go in a little deeper and say, well, do you think it's really up to someone else to tell you what to do in your art? Do you think that's what it is to be an artist to have somebody do this course in high school and college? You just found out what your teacher wanted and you did what your teacher wanted. And now you're coming to this class and you're saying, what does the teacher want? Let me do that. And I'm saying the teacher isn't asking for anything specific, the teacher is interested in what you want. And then maybe for the first time, you have to ask yourself, what do I want?

Why am I here? Why am I getting a BFA? Why am I taking a painting class? So maybe those questions, you haven't asked those questions before. And that's why you've flustered.

Other times, maybe, you know, I'll say to a student, what do you think? And they'll be like, all of a sudden, so happy. They'll be so happy that I asked, they like, I given them permission. And then they'll tell me what they think and what they would really like to do. And they were just, in a way, waiting to be given permission. And once they're given permission, you know, you can, you can be in charge, you can lead the way. They're very happy to do that. So there's kind of those two, those who embrace the personal freedom, and really run with it, and others who have always followed an authority. And once they're given the personal freedom, they're, well, they have to do the work that's required in order to be autonomous. Well, that particular term contemplative pedagogy, I only came across that through this faculty interest group that I'm working with, with the Center for Teaching and Learning. When we sort of got together, we were a group of faculty members who were interested in meditation and mindfulness, and the group came around a term called contemplative pedagogy, and contemplative practices.

So prior to that, I would have called that mindfulness and meditation. Those were the kind of the words that I use.

And so these different terms, I mean, I've tried to kind of define them for myself and what they mean.

I would say the way I'm kind of seeing it now, contemplative pedagogy, contemplative practice is more of a, for me anyway, this kind of academic term that we use to talk about secular mindfulness used in educational settings.

And in the secular approach to mindfulness, the contemplative practice, there's a clear sort of subject-object distinction, like, I'm going to observe something, I'm going to contemplate something, I'm going to contemplate, you know, my body, I'm going to contemplate my thought, I'm going to contemplate my feeling, I'm going to contemplate my object.

So there's me and my thing. And there's that kind of distinction between me, the subject, and my object, my body, my thought, my feelings as some kind of separate thing.

And that's very helpful because it keeps, in a way, it keeps the subject, keeps me in a safe place. I'm not really the one under the microscope. It's this other aspect of myself.

And I'm contemplating it. So the way that I'm going to use it and try and talk about it with my students to make that distinction is more inward facing.

So there isn't this distinction between me and my body. I am my body.

I am my feeling. I am all of my thoughts, all of the things that, all the content of my mind and my mind are the same thing.

So as that kind of, when that's happening, one is meditating.

If I'm seeing this as thing that I'm observing as other, I would say I'm contemplating.

Whereas if I am the thing and there's no distinction, there's no boundary, I would say I'm in a meditation.

So those kinds of terms and distinctions I kind of made sort of more recently by working with different people with, say, the Buddhist monks and then the professional mindfulness teachers who have the credentials and all that from these various programs and from reading academic papers and research papers and kind of seeing the different approaches.

That's how I'm thinking about it.

And then when I'm in the classroom, I'm talking to my students.

Of course, the students, because they know I'm an artist, they're always asking me about my work, about the practice.

They're curious about what I do, because I'm talking to them about painting, but then they want to know, well, what do you do? How did you do this?

What's your story? So of course, I bring this up and I talk to them about it. And it's more, I think, a kind of attitude I can have in the classroom.

Like when things are like the students are getting a little rowdy, for example, I prefer the classroom to be a little quieter, everyone's working, but sometimes they get a little rowdy.

So I have to have the capacity to allow that to happen, because I know that they have a certain pent up energy, they've got to kind of blow off some steam. And so I

just let it happen, even though within myself, I feel uncomfortable with the level of rowdiness that's happening.

But I don't tell people to be quiet. I just watch what's happening, make sure it doesn't get out of hand.

And it rarely ever does. It kind of crescendos.

And they can also see that I'm there and I'm paying attention and I'm going about my business talking to one student or another student. I'm not concerned.

And so they can kind of, you know, dissipate whatever energy they need to dissipate, and then they calm down and then they get into their work. So for me, I can see that having that capacity to hold uncomfortable feelings allows the students to find their own way to be grounded, doesn't have to be the way I do it, they find their own way. And then them seeing me do that, I think shows them that being quiet has a great advantage, that there's something there that's more steady and stable than just being, you know, dramatic all the time with the classes.

I wouldn't, I think, at this point say to a student who was coming in and had, say, difficult dealing with this difficult emotion, they come to the okay, just connect with whatever's really going on for you right now. Except I wouldn't do that, because they're not practitioners of this practice, you know, this mindfulness and mindfulness practitioners, they don't have that skill. And it is a skill to do that.

They're not prepared. They don't have the theoretical understanding, the knowledge to help them make a logical understanding of what is going on. They don't have any of those tools, any of that stuff. And to say just be with the way things are is to take advice out of context. Yes, that is good advice in the right context. But if you take those words, and you put them in the wrong context, those are actually not helpful at all. Because what's this student going to do? They're going to panic. They're not going to calm down. This is not going to work. So I would say if, and this happens all the time, student comes to the classroom, and they've got a lot going on.

And, you know, I'm always kind of humbled by how much the students carry, like, some of them have like tremendous burdens that they're carrying, I can't believe, and they're young. And it's like, they're still there. And they're still and it's like, wow, they're so like, brave and courageous, carrying the things that they do.

So it's more when they come to class, I would say let's, you know, it's gonna take me a few minutes to set up before we have our opening talk. Why don't you take the time to set up and do what you'd like to do? And usually after, I don't know, two or three months, and I have the students for eight months, so that's a fairly long period of time. They'll come, some will come a little later. Some will come and they'll like read. Some will come and they're knitting, knitting has become fairly popular. Some will come and they'll just be on their phone.

That's fine too. Some will come and they'll immediately start drawing, some will come, they'll set up and they'll just sit there. But what I noticed is they each kind of go into their little world. Maybe there'll be a couple who will chat and their friends and that's their way of doing it. But mostly everybody's going and find their own way to relax and chill out.

And then when I can kind of see that that's, you know, everyone's settled in, then I'll say, okay, let's have our talk. And rather than saying, why don't you connect with whatever's going on for you? You know, it's a little bit more like, let's just take a moment.

You know, maybe you can feel your body sitting in the chair right now, you can feel your breath.

Just take a moment to relax yourself, quiet down, something more like that.

And even then, you know, there may be some days where I'm more prepared than other days. And if I'm at my own capacity, and I have to be able to notice that too, if I'm not in a position to take on too much, then I give myself more space too.

I simply don't, you know, sort of push for things that I know I can't handle.

You know, and if I need, for the most part, when I'm showing up to class, I mean, you know, really good spirits and I'm well prepared and I'm there to give. But sometimes, you know, because the way things are at life, just before class, something happens. But the day before something's happened, I've got a lot on my mind.

And I'm distracted. So I also, you know, during those times, I give myself, I guess, the freedom to just be in my safe space.

You know, I don't have to take on more. And I think the students also recognize and can respect that because they can see I'm just a human being, just like everyone else. I don't have like some superpower as a teacher to always be super available all the time. You know, I also suffer and have pain and all that, and sometimes need to be, you know, more in a kind of quiet space.

But it's, you know, it's a good, I always have seemed to have good relationships with the students so that they, I can recognize them, they can recognize me. And even the students that, you know, occasionally have a student have a conflict with, I can always see that that conflict isn't not really personal. On me, it's something else that's going on in school.

And still, even with those students, I find is there's always a kind of respect that's going right.

So if it's introduced in the classroom, automatically, there's this question, well, am I going to get graded on this? If I participate, if I don't participate, how am I going to be? How's this going to affect my grade? Like, that should never be a thing. You know, it's not got nothing to do with grading. It's got nothing to do with you doing it. You know, A version, B version, C version, like, so that's where I think in order to do this kind of work, you already need to be fairly kind of well and happy, you could say.

If you're not in a place where you're well supported, and you're fairly relaxed, probably you don't want to do this kind of work, you know, you need to, say, get your house in order first.

So it's kind of funny, because people think, well, I'm stressed out, I'm anxious, I've got all these problems, I'll do some mindfulness, and I'll figure it out. But in fact, I kind of have to figure it out.

And then I'll do some mindfulness in order to sort of go on this kind of deeper quest. But the mindfulness isn't going to solve your problems, mindfulness is just going to make your problems clearer, like, it's going to make it more, it's going to accentuate things.

And maybe that's not what the students need in that moment. Maybe they need, you know, maybe the best thing for them in a way is to just come and take a break from

all their pressures and have a bit of an escape.

Like, maybe that's healthy, too. Do their art project, you're really into their school project, you know, take a bit of a, like, focus their mind and get away from whatever's really painful, maybe that's the best thing for them.

So there should have, they should have that space, that choice, if they want to basically keep their head down, because for them, it's the best thing they should be allowed to do.