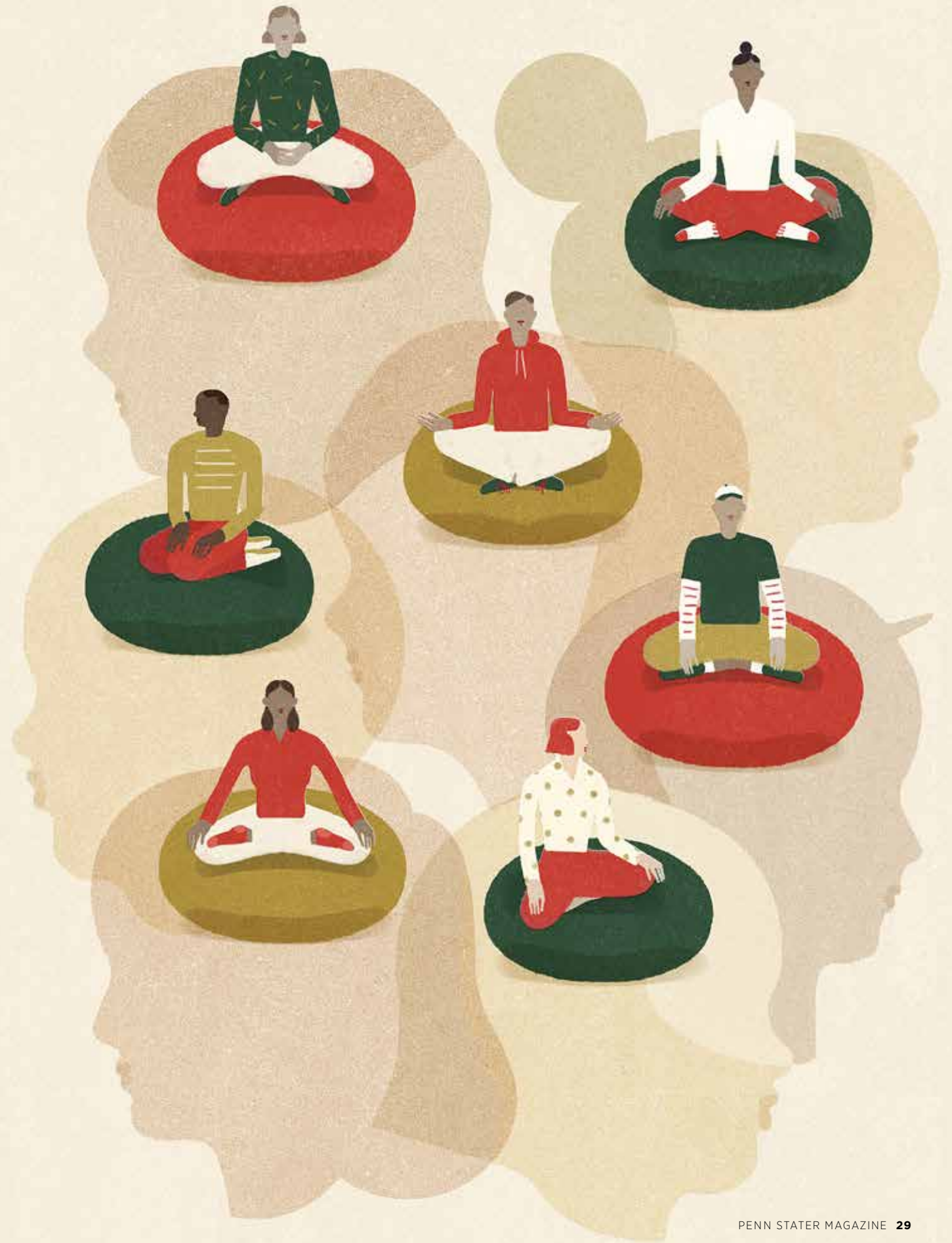


KIND HEARTS & CURIOUS MINDS

As Penn State's first-ever professor of caring and compassion, **ROB ROESER** is tasked with designing classes that meld the ancient practices of mindfulness and meditation with modern neuroscience. The goal is to help students become calmer and more focused—and ultimately, to be more engaged and caring citizens of the world.

BY **SAVITA IYER**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **GRACIA LAM**



ROB ROESER IS SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON

the floor of room 312 in University Park's Biobehavioral Health Building. It's early on a crisp February afternoon, and the sunlight streaming in through the windows illuminates the youthful features of the students—seven female and two male—attending HDFS 297: Art and Science of Compassion, a class designed and taught by Roeser, Penn State's Bennett Pierce Professor of Caring and Compassion.

Identical round, gray felt cushions sit on top of the chairs, which are arranged in a circle.

"Feel free to sit, stand, or lie for meditation, and to use the meditation cushion," Roeser says, "and if it doesn't work for you, we have another kind you can try."

Roeser himself remains cross-legged for the first 90 minutes of class without showing the least bit of discomfort. First, he guides his students through a deep breathing exercise—"You can close your eyes or keep them open with a softened gaze," he says—then leads them in a discussion on their homework assignment: extending care and compassion to strangers, an assignment that was preceded by one on extending the same to themselves and will be followed by an exercise on extending compassion to those "you feel may not deserve it." That will be the toughest exercise of the three, Roeser warns, but it is just as necessary because "as human beings, we can't survive a day on this planet without the love and care of other people." All mammals, he says, are defined by interdependence; they all want and need the same things. "I think most

people want to receive help when they're hurting," he says, "so if you want to be happy and you want others to be happy, practice compassion."

That, in essence, is the basis of a class in which most attending students are interested in entering such fields as medicine, counseling, and speech therapy, where empathy and compassion—the sensitivity to and engagement with suffering in oneself and others, with the aim of alleviating or preventing it—are desirable attributes for professional success. But Art and Science of Care and Compassion and Art and Science of Human Flourishing, another class co-created by Roeser, are open to undergraduate students from all disciplines. They've been designed, he says, to teach students skills that emphasize attention and awareness, that help regulate emotions, that encourage kindness to the self and to others. These skills, he says, can help students live a meaningful and fulfilling existence while they're in college, but will also serve them well, both personally and professionally, when they leave.

The classes are grounded in contemplative science, a discipline that

explores the effect of mental training—mindfulness, meditation, compassion practices—on individual and social flourishing and was pioneered in the late 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the University of Massachusetts's Center for Mindfulness. Thanks to the groundwork of professor emeritus Mark Greenberg, founder of Penn State's Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center and first holder of the Bennett Chair in Prevention Research in Human Development and Family Studies, Penn State is one of a small but growing number of schools incorporating mindfulness and compassion into the curriculum, to create what Roeser calls "post-modern education that incorporates pre-modern wisdom." He, Greenberg, and like-minded colleagues from the University of Virginia and the University of Wisconsin came together in 2016 to form the Student Flourishing Initiative, and their efforts gave rise to the two courses currently taught at Penn State.

The three universities and others have recently been looking to the empirical science backing the effectiveness of mindfulness and, increasingly, compassion as well, in large part due to rising concerns about student mental health. "Student anxiety, attentional distraction, financial worries, and social comparison in this age of new technologies are huge concerns, and campus counseling centers are overwhelmed," Roeser says. Teaching students how to dial back, slow down, and gain some perspective can go a long way toward stemming that tide "by instilling the strength and skills to prevent prob-

lems from increasing and tip things in the direction of health."

Put simply, "we want students to know that every day is actually an extraordinary day if you're there in the moment," says **Molly Countermine '12 PhD H&HD**, associate teaching professor of human development and family studies. She has taught Art and Science of Human Flourishing to incoming first-year students in the Learning Edge Academic Program (LEAP), which combines classes with out-of-class programming and peer-mentoring to help students in their transition to college. "We want to promote self-awareness and individual

well-being, as well as show the importance of connection to others."

But addressing university students' mental health is only part of the rationale for these unique courses.

"The original university developed in the context of the world's monastic tradition and had a mission to create knowledge for the realization of the self and for the good of the world," Roeser says. "Today, universities are highly specialized and highly focused on economic advancement. Students come to university to become specialists, and I'm not saying we don't need specialists; I'm saying we also need people who have a broader set of skills and attitudes

needed to address the pressing challenges of our time—climate change, social division, economic inequality. Addressing these issues and promoting individual flourishing at the same time in contemporary university education requires that we cultivate individuals who are mindful, generous, and altruistic, who have kind hearts and curious minds, and who are caring and engaged with the world."

In many ways, Art and Science of Care and Compassion feels like chicken soup for the students' soul—a class that gives them something they don't get elsewhere, but that is key to their university experience and



to bolstering their confidence. Back in room 312 BBH in February, the students seem to center themselves, and gain some perspective on their lives, as they freely discuss with Roeser and each other the issues they find tough to deal with. One mentions feeling low for not having had a significant other on Valentine's Day, but then dialing back with some of the practices learned in class, becoming aware that there must be plenty of

others in the same boat and even more—family, friends—to share messages of affection with. Other students agree. Roeser nods and smiles. He is a good listener, gentle and soft-spoken, his conversation sprinkled with expressions—and the occasional expletive—that resonate well with the students. He bolsters their personal experiences with examples from contemplative wisdom and physical science. He quotes from a

variety of sources: Hindu scriptures; Prince Siddhartha before he became the Buddha; Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver; Mahatma Gandhi. He references renowned psychologist Jean Piaget's work in the field of cognitive development, and he refers often to Kabat-Zinn. He breaks down the biology: Deep breathing, he says, resets the vagus nerve, which runs from the brain down to the abdomen, and it slows down the heart rate to relax the natural fight-or-flight response and make room for greater awareness. Roeser explains how regular meditation changes the function and structure of neurons in the brain and that "training-induced plasticity" encourages new forms of thinking, creating space for a different kind of awareness—even as he acknowledges that meditation is tough, "and the mind will do its thing, wandering hither and thither as we work to train it to focus on just one thing at a time, because that's what the mind does."

Kabat-Zinn's work may have been considered avant-garde at the outset, but since it first came on the scene, innumerable scientific studies have confirmed the positive effects of mindfulness and meditation in areas ranging from preventing anxiety and depression to quitting smoking and treating chronic pain.

Today, the concept of mindfulness is ubiquitous—it's a mainstay of modern life, commoditized via an array of gadgets and gizmos and phone apps. Kindergartners meditate, hedge fund managers attend Vipassana retreats, and the Dalai Lama is quoted on T-shirts and throw pillows. Roeser agrees that it's tough to stem the current tide of relatively simplistic "McMindfulness" references prevalent in our convenience-oriented culture. But he firmly believes that

mindfulness is a good thing, that all of us could benefit from greater awareness of ourselves relative to our surroundings and to those around us. "As both a classical spiritual practice and a secularized mental training practice, mindfulness may result in a variety of benefits in life—stress reduction, better relationships, better ability to concentrate," he says. "The key is to remember that mindfulness is not just about our own well-being, but a deep and heartfelt understanding that all others wish to be happy and not suffer. We awake through mindfulness to this shared responsibility and to insure we reach these common goals together and not at the expense of one another."

In addition to his Ph.D. in education and psychology and master's degrees in developmental psychology and social work, Roeser has practiced a variety of Hindu and Buddhist-based meditation techniques since his mid-20s. He has also studied religion and spirituality with priest and eco-activist Matthew Fox, and conducted research in India on spirituality, education, and human development. He taught a novel series of undergraduate courses melding Eastern contemplative practices with Western psychological traditions at Stanford and Portland State University, which laid the groundwork for the Art and Science of Human Flourishing course he developed for Penn State students. But it's the importance of empathy and compassion in the teachings of the Dalai Lama, as well as the latter's probing mind in physics, biology, and neuroscience that have perhaps had the greatest influence on Roeser's work and on his personal beliefs.

"When the Dalai Lama was a boy, he looked at the moon through a tele-

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scope, and he realized that unlike what the Tibetan scripture said, the moon was not self-luminous, it was reflecting the light of the sun," he recounts with a smile. "He was a young man then and was beginning to explore his interest in modern science and its relation to Buddhist understanding and teachings. Ultimately, he would initiate a long-term dialogue with scientists to try and come to a new understanding of matter, mind, and the nature of life."

Roeser first met the Dalai Lama in 2008, shortly after he took on the position of senior program coordinator at the then-Boulder, Colo.-based Mind and Life Institute, an organization founded in 1991 by the Dalai Lama, Chilean scientist Francisco Varela, and social entrepreneur R. Adam Engle to bring science and contemplative wisdom together. He's enjoyed many interactions with the spiritual leader, including one rather lengthy one on "educating the heart" and reimagining education as an "experience in flourishing." It set the wheels in motion for the Student Flourishing Initiative and laid the foundation for a set of new classes.

Today, a network of 10 universities, including Penn State, is working closely to devise new course offerings and broader university strategies along these lines. Ten Commonwealth campuses are currently working with Roeser's team to offer Art and Science of Human Flourishing. Elements of mindfulness are finding a space in other parts of H&HD as well. Sarah Kollat, an associate professor of

human development and family studies, has her undergraduate students stand at the front of the classroom, close or lower their eyes, and focus on their breathing for the first two to three minutes of every class. And Countermine now begins all her classes with what she calls "arrival practices" to get her students "present and settled." They might meditate, or she might read them a poem, and she says she's received overwhelmingly positive feedback—particularly from first-year students, many of whom have said in their evaluations that the class helped them find their footing in their first year of college.

Roeser has more classes in the works, including one based on the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. He would also like to introduce a course on the art and science of meditation, which would be an intense practical course for students who are ready for it. For students like sophomore Brooke Archambo, there's little doubt that more of her peers could benefit. Archambo says the sense of perspective she gained from Roeser's class is valuable as she's adjusted to taking classes online, and wondering what the future will hold. "I learned that we cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond," she says. "These lessons are incredibly relevant to our current situation and are helping me stay composed in unprecedented circumstances that we simply have no control over." ♥

Essential Reads for a Mindful Existence

The practice of mindfulness is a lifelong exercise, but in these tense and trying times, the following books recommended by Rob Roeser, Bennett Price Professor of Caring and Compassion, may be more useful than ever in finding inner peace and cultivating care and compassion for others.



Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World by His Holiness the Dalai Lama
The Dalai Lama's guide to improving human life at the individual, community, and global level outlines a set of ethics and principles for living in a shared world.

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Hard Times by Pema Chodron
Chodron—an American ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun—draws from traditional Buddhist wisdom to give readers the tools they need to overcome suffering and negativity.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life by Jon Kabat-Zinn
Kabat-Zinn's guide to cultivating mindfulness through introspective practices was first published in 1994 and brings together his main ideas on mindfulness-based stress reduction.

The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness by Rhonda V. Magee
University of San Francisco Law School professor Magee teaches mindfulness-based

stress reduction to lawyers and law students. In her book, she outlines how such practices can minimize the fears and anxieties that create divisions between communities.

Real Love: The Art of Mindful Connection by Sharon Salzberg
A *New York Times* bestselling author and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., Salzberg experienced turmoil and loss in her early childhood. This book includes mindfulness exercises and meditation techniques to help engage on a deeper level with personal experience and the experiences of others.