

*Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health.* By Thomas G. Plante (ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010. 261 pages. \$44.95.

In a world with increasing pressures, people are turning to various sources to find some sense of peace and vitality in their lives. One of the growing areas of public interest in alleviating this stress is contemplative practice. In the edited book *Contemplative Practices in Action* the authors offer an overview of specific practices from Eastern and Western religious traditions that help to foster well-being. Comprised of researchers and practitioners from such diverse fields as nursing, psychology, business, historical theology, and information studies, this book seeks to explore these practices in order “to examine their commonalities and unique approaches to improved well-being, healing, wholeness, and stress management” (3).

*Contemplative Practices in Action* is divided into three parts. The first part, Chapters 2-6, is directed towards systems that are more comprehensive and integrative in scope. While Chapter 2 asserts some of the common themes and patterns among contemplative approaches, the next four chapters provide details of specific systems of practice that include Mindfulness, Passage Meditation, Centering Prayer, and Mantram Repetition. Addressing the historical contexts, methods for engaging the practice, empirical research relating to each, and where the specific practice is being used, these chapters offer an insightful overview of each of these systems.

Part II, which includes Chapters 7-10 and is entitled “Contemplative Traditions,” studies specific practice traditions that have been transmitted in the Jewish, Islamic, Yoga, and Zen lineages. Following a similar format as the chapters in Part I, these authors discuss not only the religious contexts within which these practices have evolved, but also some of the dimensions for how they are engaged. Each chapter also presents an overview of the empirical research, if any, on the effects of these practices for health and well-being. A few of these chapters also discuss how these practices are being used contemporarily as well as the possible directions that researchers might pursue in relation to them in the future.

The final part of this book focuses on how certain contemplative practices are being applied in specific settings. Chapter 11 provides an overview of a Jesuit-based seminar on spirituality in business leadership. Chapter 12 explores the uses of energy enhancing practices, such as music and dance, to deal with chronic pain. Finally, Chapter 13 investigates how three Christian practices—lamentation, intercession, and pilgrimage—may be used to address suffering. This third part of the book is therefore directed towards helping the reader to see how specific contemplative practices may be used in relation to concrete applications.

The strengths of this book are numerous. First, a diverse range of practices from various religious traditions helps to provide a robust introduction to the breadth of contemplative approaches. Unlike other texts that seek to accomplish similar goals with only a superficial survey, this book addresses depth by exploring the religious contexts and histories from which these practices have evolved. The common format that many of these chapters follow is yet another strength as it allows the reader to make comparisons more easily across them, and it minimizes the fragmentation that edited texts sometimes have. Readers will also find, at the end of each chapter, a wealth of resources to turn to for further reading and exploration.

However, some questions may be raised as to why the specific practices and religious traditions that were highlighted were chosen. In the opening pages, the editor and two other authors write, “Sadly, it is impossible to include a discussion of every contemplative practice and practice system in one book. We cannot do justice to the numerous practice systems or isolated spiritual techniques that are not represented here” (3). While this is true, I still find myself asking why three full chapters (5, 11, and 13) were given to practices and applications from the Christian tradition and none to native or aboriginal spiritualities. Of course, decisions such as these are never easy to make and we can only hope that future resources will continue to expand upon the research and reflections that these authors have so well provided.

Overall, I highly recommend this book to practitioners and researchers alike. Practitioners will appreciate the details with which the practices are discussed, while researchers will benefit from the endnotes and the brief discussions of the current state of research for each system. This book is also well written, cohesively integrated, and a rich source of wisdom for those interested in the intersection of contemplative practices and the fostering of personal well-being.

Eric J. Kyle  
Claremont School of Theology