

“Tell Me, How Can I Explain?”: Using 8th-Century Chinese Poetry to Meditate Responsibly in 21st-Century Classrooms

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Abstract: Mindfulness and meditation are common buzzwords in education today, but mindfulness for mindfulness’ sake can do more harm than good. This unit uses the poetry of Han-shan, a semi-legendary Buddhist poet-monk of 8th century China, to introduce meditation in a trauma-informed way while reviewing key literary concepts. Students are introduced to the basics of neuroscience and mindfulness and an overview of this mysterious poet’s biography, and then engage in a series of targeted explorations of his poetry with an emphasis on building fluency and practicing mindfulness within a supportive classroom context, concentrating on this deceptively simple poetry as the focus of their meditative practice.

Keywords: Poetry, Mindfulness, Mental Health, Trauma-Informed Instruction, Meditation, Chinese History, Chan Buddhism

Unit Content

Introduction & Teaching Context

Students in the School District of Philadelphia are in particular need of mental and behavioral health supports. Many of the most popular supports use the framing of mindfulness meditation; however, students who are experiencing trauma may find these tools ineffective or actively harmful if not used carefully. This curriculum offers a trauma-informed approach to this practice, through a window to a literature and culture that is quite distant from what Philadelphia students are likely to encounter in their daily lives or elsewhere in the current ELA curriculum.

In October 2023, a blog post from two officials with the School District of Philadelphia trumpeted the School District’s commitment to “more consistent access to mental health and behavioral health services and great social-emotional supports” (Banks et al., 2023). Unfortunately, these supports existed almost exclusively in the form of contracts with apps that students could choose to access, including an online program known as “Kooth.” Kooth provides students with limited digital access to counseling and a self-paced “Inner Vibe” app that purports to support students in mindfulness and meditation. Kooth may not be a wholly ineffective service; at minimum, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services offered the organization three million dollars to provide its services free to school districts across the state (Hill, 2023). Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that a series of apps can address the mental health challenges of students in a district where more than 20% of young people expressed that they had seriously considered suicide within the past year and over 60% described recognized Adverse Childhood Experiences (School District of Philadelphia: Office of Research and Evaluation & School District of Philadelphia: Office of Student Health Services, 2023). Prior to the pandemic, students and nonprofit organizations were already rallying outside the central offices of the School District of Philadelphia to demand better mental health services for students within schools (The Notebook, 2020). In 2024, as the young people who were then about to lose their

chance at 8th grade graduations prepare to earn high school diplomas, services for students remain slim.

I teach at Vaux Big Picture High School, an open-enrollment, catchment-based neighborhood high school. A higher than usual proportion of students here express concern about their own mental health, due in no small part to the endemic violence and poverty in the immediate area. Eleven times in the past four years a student has been shot during the school year, three fatally. Four of those shootings occurred at or immediately after dismissal, within two blocks of the school, and were witnessed by many students and staff. Our students require additional academic support delivered with an awareness of this persistent trauma. 31% of the current student body requires an individualized educational plan, and less than 20% of our incoming 9th graders read at a 5th grade level or above.

At the same time, I teach at a school with a rich and storied history, where many students' parents and grandparents (and my own godfather) tell fond stories of the Vaux of the 1950s, '60s, and even the renowned chess team of the '80s. My previous TIP units have closely explored this history, prompting students to study and add to oral histories of Black education in Philadelphia or to act as compensatory historians publicizing the achievements of early Black medical professionals. When I applied for this Teacher's Institute of Philadelphia seminar, one of my primary goals was to step outside of continually offering "mirrors" to my students and to also provide "windows" into histories and traditions outside of north Philadelphia. A trainer in trauma-informed instruction told me once that trauma "makes people's worlds feel smaller," and in this course I am seeking ways to expand my students' worlds (Women Against Abuse, personal communication, March 8th, 2024).

This unit is designed as a short opening study for students at a period of major transition (such as the start of 9th or of 12th grade), introducing a number of reading skills with short, manageable texts while also integrating stress reduction and personal goal setting for young people at a key point in their lives.

Rationale & Alignment

Poetry engages the brain in ways that prose may not (Liu et al., 2015) and can be aligned to mindfulness and meditation practices (Kempton, 2020). Poetry, especially short poems rich in meaning, can provide an opportunity for teachers to explore student interest and expand student engagement with new voices outside of a required curriculum. In this unit, I have chosen to emphasize the "Cold Mountain" poems of "Han-shan," a quasi-legendary figure of 8th Century China. These reflective and descriptive poems appealed to me to share with my students precisely because they may have been written by a collective of poets over an extended period of time, in the name of someone who may or may not have ever existed as an individual. In a sense it is poetry in a pure form, unconnected to biographical research or confessional voices, that can challenge students to engage with just the language and ideas.

Mindfulness in the Classroom

Particularly in our "post-pandemic" world, teachers, parents and administrators are paying new attention to student mental health. Even before 2020, however, educators and

entrepreneurs were alert to the possibilities of mindfulness and meditation in the classroom as a way to help students manage the stress of their daily lives. Jon Kabat-Zinn developed the “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” training group program in 1979, a secularized form of meditation practice that quickly moved from its initial application in hospitals to other arenas. Researchers in 2016 applied Kabat-Zinn’s program to eighth graders and found consistent, significant impact in students’ self-reported stress and anxiety levels. Writing in *The Guardian* in 2014, one commentator proposed that “mindfulness will come to be seen as vital for dealing with the complexity of our information-rich lives,” (Bunting 2014), even as a government group in the United Kingdom was actively researching applications of mindfulness in the educational and criminal justice systems. In the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, many school systems have begun exploring “mindfulness” as a response to students’ grief, trauma, behavioral issues, or chronic absenteeism (The Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, 2023).

Especially as used in educational spaces, “mindfulness” is a relatively catchall term that has been largely divorced from its spiritual and cultural roots in meditation and specifically East Asian traditions. In fact, much of modern mindfulness education takes an explicitly neuroscientific approach, relying on brain science to argue for its presence in the classroom. The MindUp curriculum, widely used and even more widely imitated, encourages teachers to educate students about the structure of their brains, framing the prefrontal cortex as an “upstairs brain,” and helping young people recognize when they have “flipped their lid” and are operating primarily from a place of stress and instinct. Scholastic Inc. even sells licensed posters from MindUp, “Getting to Know and Love Your Brain,” with the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex neatly labeled and with language encouraging students to “breathe” and “think it out.”

Recent research undercuts previous ideas that regular, novice meditation can actually alter brain structure (Holzel et al., 2011; Kral et al., 2022) but also supports meditation and mindfulness as an intervention for young people both emotionally and academically. Loving-kindness meditation, a practice focused on cultivating universal care and compassion for all living things, was not only effective in student stress reduction but also increased students’ self-compassion (Liu et al., 2023). A broad meta-analysis found that mindfulness may be more effective for younger students than for high schoolers, but paradoxically, that may be because adolescents are already more attuned to their own emotions and more likely to recognize that stress reduction after a meditation session is not the same as a permanent solution to whatever is causing them stress in the first place (Porter et al., 2022). Nor are the benefits exclusively emotional. A study (Valosek et al., 2021) that explicitly compared classroom mindfulness meditation to a similar daily period of sustained silent reading found that meditation had a greater impact on high school students’ academic performance in English Language Arts class (blasphemous as that may seem to this career English teacher!).

Mindfulness-based meditation advocates would seem to have a robust backing of research to support their claims of both emotional and academic impact. However, a common problem in educational research, and one visible in several of the studies cited so far, appears when an intervention designed and delivered in a classroom by extensively-trained external professionals is then pushed out as a panacea to teachers. Unsurprisingly, the “magic bullet” that produced higher engagement and better test scores when delivered by a “special guest” while the normal classroom teacher managed behavior is rarely as effective when it is simply one more

thing on the classroom teacher's to-do list. Lynn and Basso's (2023) research comparing the impacts of functional vs. compassionate meditation cueing (that is, prompting meditators with simple directions on how to be meditating vs. specific loving-kindness thoughts) offers some reassurance that an engaged teacher can provide some of the benefits of mindfulness to students without decades of monastic training. Scripts, videos, and whole curricula are easily accessible online. At the same time, however, mindfulness must be approached cautiously, particularly in classrooms such as mine, where many students are likely to have experienced both acute and chronic traumatic stress.

Trauma-Informed Mindfulness

Meditation is not in and of itself a cure-all. Poorly implemented mindfulness can cause a number of negative mental health impacts that teachers may be poorly prepared to deal with in a classroom environment. Writing on the interactions of mindfulness training, urban education, and neuroscience in 2016, Choudhury and Moses emphasized that mindfulness and meditation are not the answer to systemic racism, underfunded schools, discrimination against LGBTQIA+ students, or any other significant social ill. While neuroplasticity and training children to recognize and manage their own internal climate can become "a mechanism of hope" (p. 593), a bastardized, bootstrapping meditation practice that blames poverty on a lack of mindfulness has no place in any school.

At the same time, a number of studies and personal anecdotes have highlighted the potential negative effects (especially at the start) of mindfulness training and meditation practice. As an educator in a space where the majority of my students have experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Events and may be experiencing complex post-traumatic stress disorder as well, I see mindfulness as a powerful tool to help students begin healing. Like any powerful tool, however, it can cause injury if misused.

A 2021 (Goldberg et al.) study of primarily adults found that nearly half of new meditators described spikes in anxiety, a sense of reliving traumatic experiences, or bothersome emotional sensitivity following a meditation session. Far from being strengthened or centered, these individuals felt overwhelmed and shaken by their experiences. Granted, such experiences may be ultimately therapeutic, and 90% of participants in the study stated that they were glad to have meditated despite their grief and anxiety. Nevertheless, a classroom teacher initiating secular, potentially-mandatory mindfulness practices with students may not be equipped to help young people manage their negative emotions. This is especially true in the very classrooms (overcrowded, underfunded, still reeling from pandemic and economic disruptions) where mindfulness is most likely to be suggested as an intervention. A survey of volunteer college students found that recent experience of trauma, and especially recent experience of trauma during which the victim felt helpless, predicted negative emotions after meditation, including traumatic reexperiencing and difficulties maintaining attention (Zhu et al., 2019). Researchers noted that the ongoing nature of the PTSD symptoms, rather than just recent trauma exposure, was the deciding factor. Specifically, they posited that if facilitators offered meditators greater control of their experience and a personalized view of mindfulness practice, traumatic re-experiences could be minimized (Zhu et al., 2019).

As with many classroom interventions, research suggests that the best practice for a teacher is to avoid extremes on either end, to maintain flexibility, and to assume that a student for whom the intervention is not working is being honest, not willfully defiant. Especially for students with past and complex trauma, it's key to frame meditation as neither controlling nor surrendering to your thoughts. Meditation that positions people to "control" negative thoughts or experiences is not helpful and can exacerbate feelings of disgust and anxiety (Tiffet et al., 2021). At the same time, mindfulness practice that relies too much on just "experiencing" inner realities can trap students in a mental minefield; writing about the role of trauma-informed meditation, Compson (2014) warns, "There is no 'just sitting with whatever is happening' if whatever is happening is a hijack by the survival brain" (p. 285). Students need explicit and thoughtful guidance, before, during, and after mindfulness practice, in entering what Compson calls a "resilient" zone and using meditation as a way to ground rather than fracture their identity (Lawrenz & Murphy, 2022). A concentration meditation practice, where the meditator brings their focus to a single object such as a word, physical object, or their breath, provides grounding (Mosonic 2024); this curriculum suggests poetry as such an object.

Mindfulness can get taught and marketed as a secular life-hack, divorced from spiritual and philosophical roots. But if meditation is meant to take you "beyond the intellect" (1548), some form of spirituality often comes in perforce. Kempton (2020) proposes "meaning-making" as an alternative way to approach the spiritual aspects of this issue, and what is poetry but meaning-making or, in Wordsworth's phrase, "emotion recollected in tranquility?" Poetry can be an "in" that supports trauma-informed meditation practices (as can literacy in general, but poems have the advantage of being both short and often philosophically aligned to meditation goals). Trauma-informed meditation requires student control, clear facilitator explanations, student choice, and facilitator flexibility (Stromberg, 2023). I posit that using poetry as a focus in the classroom can provide a common and academically supported experience for students while still allowing for trauma-informed mindfulness.

The act of creating poetry has neuroscientific impacts not unlike what one might be looking for from meditation (Liu et al., 2015). Brain scans of both expert and novice poets during the acts of composition and revision found a complex mental process whereby the areas of the brain responsible for control and conscious thought were deliberately disengaged during the creation of a poem and re-engaged during revision. More experienced poets were quicker to toggle between a more contemplative and more evaluative state of mind. At the same time, other brain-scan research has found that first-time meditators may engage the more verbal and self-aware parts of their brain *more* in early meditation; this more engaged mind might undercut the meditative goal in first-time meditators (Śliwowski et al., 2023). Poetry reading and writing may be a way to "trick" the novice meditating brain into calm.

Mary Kempton (2020) proposes poetry as a secular focus for explicitly Buddhist meditation, partly by analyzing the use of poetry in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy programs. Using poetry that addressed key themes of uncertainty, acceptance/self-compassion, and nature, program facilitators guided participants into mindfulness practices. Kempton's article more deeply explores differences between the secular poems used in a few key programs and contrasts them with Buddhist poetry that is more comfortable with abstract concepts and with the paradox of change. Kempton further theorizes

that introducing students to poetry that engages more explicitly with spiritual ideas might inoculate participants against the adverse effects of meditation already discussed.

Poetry as both vehicle and demonstration of enlightenment has a history in Buddhist tradition. Certainly, the poetry of many Buddhist poet-monks is as effective at expressing spiritual ideas as it is at conveying rich metaphor and vivid description. Current Buddhist thinkers such as Guo Jun offer observations that are themselves quite close to poems: “Thinking crowds the mind. We think that when we relax we’re not being proactive or productive. But this is not necessarily the case. Thinking crowds the mind. It becomes like a sky full of clouds. As a result, the sun cannot shine. There is no brightness or light” (2013). Hui-neng, a key figure of early Chinese Buddhism, was legendarily an illiterate would-be acolyte entrusted with only janitorial duties until he dictated a poem that demonstrated his sudden enlightenment. At first hesitant because of Hui-neng’s low status, the then-leader of Chan Buddhism approached Hui-neng in secret and then declared him his heir.

Chan Buddhism, distinguished partly by an emphasis on immediate experience and sudden enlightenment, may align particularly well with poetry that purports to capture a moment in time. Poetry can be a guidance and a scaffold to help people access the philosophy and ideas of meditation despite inexperienced or unaware instructors. Below, I’ll propose mindfulness-informed lessons based on the work of one particular poet, whose work rewards close meditative and literary analysis and whose biography is likely to tickle students’ fancy: Han-shan, whose name simply means the same “Cold Mountain” where he reportedly painted his poetry on rocks and trees.

Han-shan’s Cold Mountain Poems

Historical Context

What follows is an extremely brief and shallow history of the development of what became known as Chan Buddhism, the particular form of Buddhism that most likely inspired this poet, and which is more commonly known in English-speaking countries by its Japanese name: Zen. Now the largest recognized religion in China (Pew Research Center, 2023), Buddhism first arrived there around 206 B.C.E. and spread in some sense piecemeal, influenced by a variety of documents and teachings whose relationships to each other were not always clear (Rouzer, 2016). By 68 C.E. Buddhism was widespread, no longer a “foreign” religion, but still considered to conflict in many ways with China’s dominant philosophy of Confucianism. Though Buddhism was a religion of the gentry in the south of China, Buddhists in the north faced persecution (O’Brien, 2019). Some of the conflict originated in the disconnect between a Confucianist emphasis on filial and social responsibility and a Buddhist call for asceticism, celibacy, and meditative retreat.

Guo Jun (2013), a current master of Chan Buddhism, points out that Buddhism’s birthplace of India had a long tradition of wandering ascetics supported by charity, as well as a climate that made long-term homelessness survivable, whereas China had neither. The development of Buddhist monasteries that maintained themselves through agriculture neatly

solved the conundrum of how monks in China were to survive, while also aligning practicing Buddhist monks much more with the laboring agricultural classes than the aristocratic elites. This may have contributed to the monks' suspicion not only of physical luxury but also of self-indulgent philosophizing; in Jun's words, "In Chan, your life is your practice. They meditated while they broke ground and sowed seeds. They meditated weeding and watering and tending their crops" (2013). This present, practical, and ongoing meditation will be clearly seen in many of the Cold Mountain poems.

The arrival of the quasi-legendary Bodhidharma, an Indian Buddhist monk of the early 5th century C.E, kickstarted the development of what would become Chan Buddhism in China. Bodhidharma has a largely legendary biography layered with myth and hagiography. The Shaolin Temple at Zhengzhou (Western China) is recognized as the first monastery of this school, and it was here that Bodhidharma, upon his arrival, seated himself in a cave facing a wall for nine years of silent, unsleeping meditation. Guo Jun (2013), speaking much more recently, emphasizes the presentness of meditation in this tradition, sharing a reflection that could be at home in any classroom mindfulness routine: "Wisdom is experiential. In Chan, we say it comes from returning again and again to the present moment. It comes from the experience of always returning. It comes from living this, from experiencing it for yourself." Within Chan meditation there is a mindfulness of time passing or not passing, of space both within and without the body, of action and of detail.

Legend recounts an unbroken transmission of the wisdom of this newer, more meditative school from Bodhidharma to a final patriarch, Hui-neng, described earlier as the monk who proved his fitness to the writing of sacred texts by engaging in an impromptu poetry contest. Current writers recognize that Chan Buddhism, like most religions, developed its formal doctrines through a messy period of conflict and debate (App, 2018). The most intense schism concerned the question of how enlightenment arrives, whether gradually or through a moment of sudden understanding. This debate was still resolving as Han-shan began his writing.

Following (or possibly contemporary with) Han-shan's active period, poetry became closely connected to Buddhist meditation. A common figure emerged called the *shiseng*, or poet-monk, who pursues enlightenment through the creation of poetry and focuses on the power of the perfect couplet. This meditative approach to poetry also influenced a gradual shift to an aesthetics of poetry for poetry's sake (instead of as an illustration of excellence that helped you pass the high-stakes exams which characterized Chinese bureaucracy) (Mazanec 2019). Poetry was not only aligned with Chan Buddhism, it embodied it: the complementary and balanced structure, the implicit meanings that demanded deep focus, the allusions that emphasized the interconnectivity of all, and the moment of sudden inspiration or turn at the end of the poem. Egan (2010) calls poetry the "selfless" realm of thought and idea removed from individualism, and Han-shan is in many ways a self-less poet.

A "biography" of Han-shan

The name Han-shan simply means "Cold Mountain," and no other name is known for the poet who left his writings painted on rocks and trees around Cold Mountain. What little scholars are willing to propose regarding the poet Han-shan is drawn from one possibly apocryphal story and from his poems. It has been variously proposed that he was one man, a collection of monks

(Pulleyblank 1978), one monk at one time whose identity was adopted by others later in homage (Jinhua 2003), and a bodhisattva with supernatural powers (Rouzer, 2016).

His lifetime might have spanned as long as 680-800 C.E., or he may have died around 680 at an unknown age (Rouzer, 2016). Two key stories describe his life, one from a 10th-century *Comprehensive Records of the Taiping Era* and one in a preface to his poems that was published in the 12th century. In both of these stories Han-shan is something of a trickster archetype, an irreverent hermit who lives in the mountains, wanders down to the monastery to challenge and educate when the mood or hunger takes him, and writes his poetry on rocks and trees. The preface, which is the closest thing we have to a biography, describes how a would-be disciple encountered Han-shan and his friend Shih-te as lowly laborers at a monastery, having been sent to seek them by a miracle-working monk named Fenggan. When this disciple, a high-ranking official named Luqiu Yin, approached and bowed to Han-shan and Shih-te, they laughed at him, chided him for failing to recognize Fenggan as a bodhisattva, and fled to the mountain. When Luqiu Yin pursued them with gifts of food and clean clothes, Han-shan dismissed his messengers as “thieves” or “bandits,” declared, “Each of you should exert himself to the utmost,” and disappeared into a cave, closing it behind him. Luqiu Yin then found the rocks and trees around this magical cavern covered in Han-shan’s poetry, and collected the poems for posterity.

Biographical details from the poems offer a less fanciful but equally unverifiable tale, and furthermore describe a life that is either extraordinarily eventful or the work of a poet adopting various personas to comment on different aspects of his society. A student-friendly graphic novel by Sean Michael Wilson, *Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums* (2015), assembles some 40 oblique poetic references and almost a millennium of documented theorizing into a short, coherent biography as follows: Han-Shan was a well-born young man, wealthy enough to engage in genteel pursuits like hunting, charioting, and the bow (although this would conflict with poems where he describes hoeing in the fields with a book in his hand). He was a soldier in the west, earning no recognition, and then began a laborious process of pursuing an official government position.

Wilson’s graphic novel does an effective job of introducing to students the extremely high-stakes, difficult written and spoken exams that were required for government advancement in T’ang-dynasty China. Several of Han-shan’s poems describe failure and despair related to these exams, though others imply that he achieved some form of position at some point. Wilson and other authors combine these ideas with a period of civil unrest in China in 755 C.E. to propose that Han-shan’s patron was on the losing side of an eight-year civil war, and that this forced Han-shan to flee to the country with his wife and child. (This neatly solves the dilemma of how one man could write biographically about both urban and rural lifestyles.) After an unsuccessful and unenjoyable period of agricultural life, Han-shan leaves for Cold Cliff or Cold Mountain, there to become a hermit and, eventually, a Buddhist icon.

It is far beyond the scope of this curriculum to offer an in-depth historiography of Han-shan’s poetry and its impact over the course of the centuries, but in general he (or they) seem to have been seen more as writers of religious texts than of poems of immense literary merit. Han-shan became well known in America through Gary Snyder’s 1969 *Riprap And Cold Mountain Poems*, a publication of his own poetry and of his translations of the poems. The vivid details, sly

humor, and contempt for hypocrisy that are easy to find in Han-shan's work attracted the attention of the Beat Poets, and Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* is dedicated to Han-shan.

These short, comprehensible poems nevertheless comprise rich examples of allusion, intertextuality, metaphor, imagery, and irony, to say nothing of Buddhist philosophy. A variety of translations are available both in print and online, allowing students to access multiple wordings of the same ideas. The intrinsic structure of such poetry, which emphasizes couplets rhyming on even numbered lines in the original language, further reinforces the balance that the poet(s) discuss (Egan 2010). Though the rhyme may not survive most translations, the carefully structured parallelism both within and across poems is accessible to students.

Teaching Strategies

Specific Poems & Analysis

The Cold Mountain poems were for many years treated as predominantly religious, rather than literary, texts. They are nonetheless rich examples of many key literary concepts. By exploring these poems from a perspective of meditation and mindfulness as well as literary excellence, students can gain both confidence in poetry analysis and, hopefully, a model for quiet reflection and presentness. The short analyses below will identify suggested poems to highlight sensory details, metaphor and symbolism, connotation and allusion, and structure and parallelism.

Identifying the poems is a bit problematic. Unlike, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, the ordering assigned to the poems is inconsistent across collections, and the opening lines differ just enough across translations to be equally unhelpful. The opening lines and numbers discussed here come from Robert G. Henricks' translation, but for each I have also provided a version from Red Pine and, where possible, from Wilson's graphic novel, which uses the translations and numberings of J.P. Seaton.

Poems to Teach Sensory Details

A key aspect of descriptive writing and of poetry is a focus on sensory details: what the writer wants the reader to imagine seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling. At the same time, a quiet awareness of what one is experiencing through one's senses, while trying to not engage mentally with specific thoughts, can be an entry to a meditative state. Poetry that emphasizes sensory details is an especially auspicious place to begin for two reasons. First, the concrete nature of this kind of reflection helps students visualize what they are reading, often a skill lacking in less confident readers. Secondly, the concrete nature of this kind of description mimics the "grounding" sometimes recommended for people re-experiencing trauma; a sample script to help someone reorient themselves might go something like, "Name five things you can see...four you can hear...three things you can touch with your body right now..." Close reading and visualization of these poems builds students' reading and meditation skills while keeping them grounded.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
Poem 15 Father and mother left me plenty of books, Fields and gardens- I long now for nothing more. My wife works the shuttle- her loom goes creak! creak! Our son is at play -his mouth babbles wa! wa! Clapping my hands, I urge the flowers to dance; Propping my chin, I listen to the birds sing. Who can come and admire [this scene]? The woodcutters always pass by.	Poem 21 My parents stayed busy enough I don't want anyone's land my wife clacks away at her loom our baby gurgles and coos I clap and urge the flowers to dance prop up my chin and listen to birds who comes to commend me woodcutters often stop by.	Poem XXI My father and mother were frugal, hard workers. The grain fields, the vegetable plots, they left me are as good as any man's. My wife keeps the loom click-clacking, and my boy can goo-goo with the best. I just clap time for the flowers as they dance, or sit chin in hand and listen to the birds sing. And who should come by from time to time to sigh their admiration? The woodcutters quite often do!

Both Henricks and Red Pine annotate this poem noting that the “woodcutters” are representative of a natural, simple life, while also being transitional figures who go between urban and rural life. Annotations also note that the word which Henricks translates as “left” can also mean “read,” and the phrase Red Pine translates as “stayed busy” can also mean “teach the classics.” In all three versions of the poem, however, a clear picture is created of someone who is content to sit, to watch, and to listen, and in so doing, gains the respect and even envy of others.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine
Poem 134 Last night I dreamed I went back home And saw my wife in the midst of weaving at her loom. She halted the shuttle, as though she had just had a thought,	Poem 137 Last night I dreamt I went home and saw my wife at her loom she stopped the shuttle as if in thought then raised it as if without strength

<p>Then she lifted the shuttle; it was as though she had lost all her strength.</p> <p>I called to her- she turned to look; Her response a blank stare- she didn't recognize me.</p> <p>It must be we've been apart now so many years That my temple hair is not its old color.</p>	<p>I called and she turned to look she looked but didn't know me</p> <p>I guess we'd been apart too many years and my temples weren't their old color</p>
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This poem, conflicted and mournful, offers another example of precise sensory details and description and demonstrates for students their importance in creating mood.

Two other poems, presented below, go more deeply into the descriptions of nature that students and teachers might expect from poetry.

<p>From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i>, trans Robert G. Henricks</p>	<p>From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i>, trans Red Pine</p>
<p>Poem 154</p> <p>Han-shan has many hidden wonders; Climbers are always struck with awe.</p> <p>When the moon shines, the waters are clear and bright; When the wind blows, grasses rustle and sigh.</p> <p>Withered plums, the snow becomes their blossoms; Branchless trees have clouds filling in for their leaves.</p> <p>Touched by rain, it's transformed -- all fresh and alive; If it's not a clear day, you cannot ascend.</p>	<p>Poem 157</p> <p>Cold Mountain has so many wonders climbers all get scared</p> <p>water shimmers in the moonlight plants rustle in the wind</p> <p>withered plum trees bloom with snow snags grow leaves of clouds</p> <p>touched by rain they all revive unless it's clear you can't get through</p>

These poems are notable in both the Red Pine and G. Henricks' translations for containing no annotations; it seems two different translators believed there was nothing more to say about these short, enthusiastic descriptions of how the mountain itself revives not only the

worn vegetation but, it's clearly implied, the soul of the poet, who can only ascend when the day is clear.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
<p>Poem 295</p> <p>I've been wanting to go to that eastern cliff, To the present - for innumerable years.</p> <p>So yesterday I came and climbed up through the vines, But halfway there, I was hampered by mist and wind.</p> <p>The path was narrow -- with my clothes on it was hard to advance; The moss was sticky -- my shoes could not go on.</p> <p>So I stay at the base of this red cinnamon tree, Where with white clouds for my pillow, I sleep.</p>	<p>Poem 9</p> <p>I longed to visit the eastern cliff countless years until today</p> <p>I finally grabbed a vine and climbed but halfway there met mist and wind</p> <p>the trail was too narrow for clothes the moss too slick for shoes</p> <p>I stopped beneath this cinnamon tree and slept with a cloud for a pillow</p>	<p>Poem 6</p> <p>I always wanted to go to East Cliff, more years than I can remember, until today I just grabbed a vine and started up. Halfway up wind and a heavy mist closed in, and the narrow path tugged at my shirt: it was hard to get on. The slickery mud under the moss on the rocks gave way, and I couldn't keep going. So here I stay, under this cinnamon tree, white clouds for my pillow, I'll just take a nap.</p>

Although the sensory details are as strong here as in the other poem (“slickery” mud, for example), this is also suggested by both Henricks and Red Pine as a poem of allegory. Han-Shan is trying to climb but held back by his belongings (“clothes”), and is impeded by forces that limit his vision and make his progress more difficult than he expected.

At the same time, Bright Cliff is a real cliff, less than two miles east from Cold Mountain, and in an area famous for its cinnamon trees. Certainly, the average high school student will not need to imagine themselves on a spiritual quest to appreciate a poem that can end with “I’ll just take a nap.”

Poems to Teach Metaphor & Symbolism

A natural next step, after students have enjoyed the sensory details of Han-Shan’s poetry, is to appreciate the deeper meanings that such sensory details can have through symbolism and metaphor. If the poems above are poems about reality with a possible deeper meaning, the poems that follow are more explicitly using reality as a teaching tool.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
<p>Poem 9</p> <p>People ask the way to Han-shan, But there are no roads that get through.</p> <p>In the summer, the ice not yet melted, And though the sun comes up, the fog is still thick and dense.</p> <p>How has someone like me arrived? My mind and yours are not the same.</p> <p>If your mind, sir, were like mine, You too could come right to the center.</p>	<p>Poem 15</p> <p>People ask the way to Cold Mountain but roads don’t reach Cold Mountain</p> <p>in summer the ice doesn’t melt and the morning fog is too dense</p> <p>how did someone like me arrive our minds are not the same</p> <p>if they were the same you would be here</p>	<p>Poem 9</p> <p>People ask about the Cold Mountain way: plain roads don’t get through to Cold Mountain.</p> <p>Middle of the summer, and the ice still hasn’t melted. Sunrise, and the mist would blind a hidden dragon.</p> <p>So, how could a man like me get here? My heart is not the same as yours, dear sir . . .</p> <p>If your heart were like mine, you’d be here already.</p>

As Red Pine coyly points out in his annotations, there is in fact an accessible, if narrow, road to Cold Mountain, and it is rarely snowed in -- “but then, this poem is about a different mountain” (Red Pine, 2000, p.46). This is a poem about discovering Chan (or Zen) enlightenment through recognizing the knowledge that is in you already, not by futilely seeking a nonexistent road.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
<p>Poem 38</p> <p>I once observed a wise gentleman, Broad in knowledge, noble in spirit -he was simply without compare.</p> <p>No sooner selected for office than his fine reputation spread throughout the whole land; His five--character poetic lines surpassed those of all other men. As an official, he governed and transformed, excelling his seniors in age; His conduct, right and correct, could not be maintained by the young coming on.</p> <p>Yet all of a sudden, he coveted wealth and rank and riches and women;</p> <p>When the tiles are broken and the ice melted, you can't set them out on display</p>	<p>Poem 42</p> <p>I met a brilliant scholar once learned and shrewd without peer</p> <p>his examination fame echoed through the realm his regulated verse surpassed that of others his judgments excelled all those of the past how could he follow in someone else's dust</p> <p>now rich and honored he chases wealth and beauty</p> <p>what can you say about broken tiles or melted ice</p>	<p>Poem 18</p> <p>I once met, face to face, a scholar, a truly brilliant man, perfect in his erudition, sparkling, shocking, a mind beyond compare.</p> <p>Chosen by examination, his name was bruited on high, even his quatrains were better than all other men's. Once in office his decisions were beyond the finest cases of all the Ancient Sages. He would travel in no other's dust.</p> <p>Then of a sudden his heart, his nature, flagged and burned. Wealth and honor? Cowries are cunts, and money too . . . Strung together they can be read, "nobility."</p> <p>When roof tiles are shattered, and ice melts away . . . What is there? What is there left to say?</p>

Henricks' translation points out that "Ice melted, tiles broken" is a 4-character Chinese phrase to mean something is ruined beyond repair. This is a poem that might particularly benefit from students comparing translations; the line about "traveling in someone else's dust," for example, implies a literal and arrogant insistence on being first in the Seaton translation. Red Pine makes it clearer that it is a metaphor for the scholar as forging new ground, wiser than his ancestors, and Henricks does not allow the metaphor of dust and travel to enter in his translation at all. This is also a poem to allow students to draw inferences about what is considered

important in Chan Buddhism, based on the poet’s clear attitude towards the rich and respected noble.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
Poem 51 My mind is like the autumn moon; An emerald lake -pure, clean, and bright. There is nothing with which it compares; Tell me, how can I explain?	Poem 5 My mind is like the autumn moon clear and bright in a pool of jade nothing can compare what more can I say	Poem 4 My mind’s the autumn moon, shining in the blue-green pool, reflecting glistening, clear and pure . . . There’s nothing to compare it to, what else can I say?

Besides being a perfect example of an extended simile, this poem embodies deeper symbols common in Buddhist poetry, as Charles Egan points out in his introduction to *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (2010). The autumn moon, round and bright, is both a symbol of family, due to its associations with holidays such as the New Year, and a metaphor for wisdom in the Chan Buddhist *Platform Sutra*. The clear jade lake is a reminder of a commonly used metaphor for enlightenment, that of “still water.” According to an early Chinese translation of Buddhist ideas, if the mind before enlightenment is disturbed by wind above and currents below, the mind after enlightenment is a calm mirror, revealing truth.

Once students have been exposed to a baseline comprehension of poetry through sensory details and then to the deeper meanings of symbolism and metaphor, it is time to help them appreciate the rich philosophical and historical context of the poems by unpacking the allusions scattered throughout. It’s important to help students understand that these are not allusions they would be expected to recognize today, but that would have been known to Han-shan’s readers; when they begin to create their own poetry, they can lean into common knowledge and definitions of wisdom in their writing just as this poet did.

Poems to teach Connotation and Allusion

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma</i>
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		<i>Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
<p>Poem 300</p> <p>Born thirty years ago; I've been constantly roaming about -one thousand, ten thousand li.</p> <p>I've walked by rivers where the green grasses merged, Entered the borders where red dust kicked up.</p> <p>Refining drugs, in vain I sought to become an immortal; I read books and wrote poems on historical themes.</p> <p>But today I've come home to Han-shan To pillow my head on the stream and wash out my ears.</p>	<p>Poem 131</p> <p>Born thirty years ago I've traveled countless miles along rivers where the green rushes swayed to the frontier where the red dust swirled</p> <p>I've made elixirs and tried to become immortal I've read the classics and written odes</p> <p>and now I've retired to Cold Mountain to lie in a stream and wash out my ears</p>	<p>I was born just thirty years ago, but I've wandered a million miles already.</p> <p>Along the River through the green grass on the banks, out to the borderlands, where the red dust roils.</p> <p>Chewed herbs, cooked up alchemical elixirs, trying to become an Immortal.</p> <p>Read all the Writings, chanted the Histories aloud, trying to learn them all by heart . . .</p> <p>Today I'm on my way home to Cold Mountain. There, I'll bed down in the creek, just to wash out my ears.</p>

Students can understand and appreciate this poem merely as another recounting of the poet attempting many paths in life before finding his spiritual home, and might skim over the odd last couplet. However, Henricks points out that this is an allusion to several historical dialogues, one including a would-be recluse who meant to say “Pillow my head on rocks and wash out my mouth in the stream” and instead swapped his phrases to say “Wash my mouth with rocks and pillow my head on the stream.” Another recluse, Hsu Yu, was offered an empire and found the idea so disgusting that he swiftly went to wash it out of his ears. Of course, today students might think of the old practice of washing one’s mouth out with soap after saying, not hearing, poor language.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
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<p>Poem 45</p> <p>Now all things have their use, And in using them, each has what is fit.</p> <p>If in using something, you use what is out of place, It will be totally lacking, and what's more, completely deficient.</p> <p>A round chisel with a square handle; How sad! In vain it was made.</p> <p>To use Hua--liu to catch mice Can't compare with using a lame cat!</p>	<p>Poem 49</p> <p>Things all have their uses and each use has its place</p> <p>but if a use gets lost it's absent and deficient too</p> <p>a round hole and square handle such things alas won't work</p> <p>a racehorse used to catch a rat will never match a crippled cat</p>	<p>Poem 27</p> <p>Every single thing has uses; when you use it, use it right.</p> <p>Use it the way it's not intended, first it wanes and then it drains!</p> <p>A round hole for a square handle is pretty sad, just an empty failure.</p> <p>The most glorious warhorse ever sat can't match a crippled kitty in a race to catch a rat.</p>
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This is a more straightforward allusion, and one that two of the translators chose to drop rather than annotate. Hua-liu was a famously swift horse of King Mu of the Chou, ruling until 946 B.C. The round chisel with a square handle was also a common allusion at the time, no different from today's "square peg in a round hole." This poem is highlighting for readers the relativity of values and the impossibility of making objective determinations of value.

<p>From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i>, trans Robert G. Henricks</p>	<p>From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i>, trans Red Pine</p>
<p>Poem 111</p> <p>When I was young, I'd take the classics along when I hoed; Originally I planned to live together with my older brother.</p> <p>But because I met with criticism from the other generation, I was, even more, treated coldly by my own wife.</p> <p>I have abandoned, rejected the realm of red dust;</p>	<p>Poem 111</p> <p>I carried books and a hoe in my youth when I lived with my older brothers</p> <p>somehow I met their reproach I was even disdained by my wife</p> <p>so I left the world of red dust behind all I do now is wander and read</p> <p>who'll spare a dipper of water to save a poor fish in a rut</p>

<p>Constantly I roam about with the books I love to read.</p> <p>Who can lend me a dipper of water To revive and retrieve the fish that's caught in the rut?</p>	
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Again, the poet ends his poem with a reference to a story his audience would have known: Chuang-tzu, a Chinese philosopher, tells a parable of seeing a fish dying in a rut by the road. The fish begs for water, and the philosopher blithely promises to visit two kings and have them change the course of a river to flow to the fish. The fish, of course, angrily points out that a dipperful of water would save him now whereas an immense irrigation project will come far too late to help. The poet wants to meet his modest and urgent needs for peace, not the riches and glory promised by the “realm of red dust.”

Finally, I have included poems that demonstrate the importance of parallelism in Han-shan's poetry. Though translators emphasize that much of the elegance of these rigid forms and carefully constructed couplets is untranslatable, the juxtaposition of ideas and images survives.

Poems to teach Structure & Parallelism

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
<p>Poem 101</p> <p>As I reflect on the days of my youth; For hunting, I'd head off to the high plains.</p> <p>“State messenger”- this post was not my design. “Immortal” -that isn't even worth mentioning!</p> <p>On and on I'd race my white horse; Shout out the hares, release the green hawks.</p>	<p>Poem 101</p> <p>I recall the days of my youth off hunting near Pingling an envoy's job wasn't my wish I didn't think much of immortals</p> <p>I rode a white horse like the wind chased hares and loosed a falcon</p> <p>suddenly now with no home who'll show an old man pity</p>	<p>Poem 39</p> <p>I seek in my mind for the days of my youth, when I rode to the hunt at Ping-ling.</p> <p>Imperial envoy was a post far beneath me, nor would I have wanted an Immortal's fame!</p> <p>From a winged steed, my white stallion, I loosed falcons upon hares . . .</p>

<p>Unaware [of how it came to be]- my life now greatly a shambles, in ruins. White--haired and old- -- who will take pity on me?</p>		<p>Unconscious, I was, as the <i>now</i> stooped to conquer. Yet who in all the world, besides myself, could judge me one worth pity</p>
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This poem, as both Henricks and Red Pine point out, implies a wealthy or even noble youth for the man who would become Han-shan. The four stanzas of the poem, in Henricks' translation, contrast the images of youth with age, and compare the young man to the hares, hawks and horses sprinting above, before and beneath him.

<p>From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i>, trans Robert G. Henricks</p>	<p>From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i>, trans Red Pine</p>	<p>From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i>, trans J.P. Seaton</p>
<p>Poem 7</p> <p>I first was a student of books and swords, And secondly met with a wise sagely lord.</p> <p>In the East I protected, but my service received no reward; In the West I attacked, but my strength got me no honor.</p> <p>I studied literature and I studied war; I studied war and I studied literature.</p> <p>Today I'm already old; What's left of my life isn't worthy of note.</p>	<p>Poem 14</p> <p>A master of the brush and the sword met three illustrious lords</p> <p>in the East his advice was ignored in the West his valor wasn't honored</p> <p>he mastered the brush and the sword he mastered the sword and the brush</p> <p>today now that he's old what's left isn't worth saying</p>	<p>Poem 8</p> <p>Master of the sword and brush, I met three brilliant and virtuous rulers.</p> <p>In the East they got my letters, but they were not pleased. In the West I strove in battles for them, but all to no reward.</p> <p>Mastered the brush and mastered the sword . . .</p> <p>Today? I'm old of a sudden What's left of my life is not worth a word.</p>

All three translators emphasize the parallelism of these poems, creating rhyme and rhythm that gradually breaks down as surely as the poet’s attempts at worldly success.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine
Poem 113 My writing and judgment were perfect- they were not weak; But they detested my looks, so I did not receive an appointment. By the Examinations Board twisted and broken; They “washed away the dirt and looked for the scabs and scars.” Certain it is that it’s all related to fate; Still this winter again I’ll try and see. After all, with a blind boy shooting at the eye of a sparrow, A chance hit is also not hard.	Poem 113 My writing and judgment aren’t that bad but an unfit body receives no post examiners expose me with a jerk they wash away the dirt and search for my sores of course it depends on Heaven’s Will but this year I’ll try once more a blind man who shoots for a sparrow’s eye just might score a hit

The China of the early T’ang dynasty, when Han-shan most likely lived, was one where “selection examinations” could determine the whole course of a person’s life. These examinations assessed both applicant’s writing and judgment but also their speech, and it was in writing about such examinations that one previous philosopher complained that the assessors even looked for scabs and scars as reasons to dismiss someone. In this poem, there is a sudden turn after the second stanza, and this hopeful cheerfulness parallels and contrasts with the despair earlier.

From <i>The Poetry of Han-Shan</i> , trans Robert G. Henricks	From <i>The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain</i> , trans Red Pine	From <i>Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han Shan and Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums</i> , trans J.P. Seaton
Poem 220	Poem 218	Poem 83

<p>When people of this age see Han-shan, They all say, “This is some nut!”</p> <p>“His face- not fit to be seen by human eyes; His body wrapped only in cotton- fur robes.”</p> <p>But my words they don’t understand, And their words are things that I wouldn’t say!</p> <p>My response to these visitors is, “You too can come look at Han-shan!”</p>	<p>People who meet Cold Mountain they all say he’s crazy</p> <p>his face isn’t worth a glance his body is covered in rags</p> <p>they don’t understand my words their words I won’t speak</p> <p>this is for those to come <i>visit Cold Mountain sometime</i></p>	<p>When people meet Han Shan, they all say he’s crazy, face not worth a second look, body wrapped in rags . . .</p> <p>They haven’t got a clue when I start talking; I wouldn’t say what they say.</p> <p>But I leave this message for those who come looking for me: “You could try to make it to Cold Mountain.”</p>
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Henricks points out that the word for “look” here is the same used to describe how Bodhidharma looked in meditation at one wall for nine years. The poet uses the parallelism here to contrast his own certainty and understanding with the false knowledge of the society he has left behind.

Reading Interventionist Practices

Fluency, or the act of reading without conscious decoding and a clear flow, is vital to reading comprehension and a common gap in upper-level students (Rasinski et al., 2005). One reason the poetry of Han-shan makes such an excellent introduction for high school students is that the vocabulary is straightforward and likely to be within students’ knowledge already, allowing them to focus on prosody and understanding. Working in an alternative high school with a high percentage of students reading well below grade level, Josephs and Jolivette (2016) found that peer-mediated, repeated reading fluency practice had a measurable impact on students’ comprehension and engagement. In this case, peers took turns reading to one another, timing one another, and correcting each other and repeating correct words. Although I have not designed my classroom activities with that level of formality, I have designed a daily poetry engagement routine that builds on fluency by modeling and reinforcing accurate and fluent reading.

Repeated reading for fluency building coupled with previewing key vocabulary has likewise helped students in high school improve their reading comprehension (Hawkins et al., 2011; Josephs & Jolivette, 2016). By carefully reviewing vocabulary during the teacher-read part

of each poem instruction, teachers can build a routine in students that can be applied to future and more difficult texts.

Classroom Activities

Note: Due to extended time for student internships, in my teaching context I see students for 75 minutes three days a week and 50 minutes once a week. These 8 lessons, designed for two normal weeks of school, reflect that breakdown, with 6 lessons scheduled at 75 minutes and 2 at 50.

Lesson 1: Neuroscience, meditation & poetry

Essential Question: What is meditation, and what is its impact on my body and brain?

Key Sources:

- [Meditation Directions](#)
- [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\): Impact on brain, body and behaviour](#)
- [The Cognitive Neuroscience in Mindfulness Meditation](#)
- Poem 51 - “My mind is like...”

Preparation: (15 min)

Warm-Up: How easy is it for you to remain calm in difficult situations? What helps or hinders you in that goal?

Begin by asking students to respond to this quote from Guo Jun, Chan master (2013):

“It is true that relaxation may appear to be simple. But it is not necessarily easy. How do we relax? By coming back to the breath. By coming back to the present moment. Stop brooding over the past and worrying about the future. The past is gone and the future is always unknown and uncertain. Breathe. One breath at a time. Relax.”

With eyes open, guide students through a short example such as [Square or Box Breathing](#).

Demonstration: (15 min)

Share with students the key facts underpinning this unit:

- Close reading improves your literacy skills.
- Meditation and paying attention to your breath has a rich history in multiple cultures & religions. The Buddhist term most often used is Prāṇāyāma, better known today as “breathwork.”
- Our autonomic nervous systems has two branches: sympathetic and parasympathetic. When we’re in danger or under stress, our sympathetic nervous system kicks into high gear to put us in a “fight or flight” response. All of our other systems, digestion,

breathing, etc, either shut down temporarily or speed up to help us fight or escape the threat. What is supposed to happen is that our body returns to a “rest and digest” mode after the danger is passed, but when you are dealing with chronic stress, your body never returns to this state and can’t sustain that long-term.

- Breathing is the one aspect of our autonomic nervous system that we *can* control. You cannot slow down your heartbeat or tell your stomach it’s safe to digest food, but you can regulate your breathing to activate your parasympathetic nervous system and give your body a chance to recover.

Application: (15 min)

[Complete ACES & Resilience quiz](#), and lead students in short discussion. ACES can contribute to your chronic physical and emotional stress, and your resilience factors help you recognize that and recover from it.

Collaboration (20 min)

Complete three read-alouds of “My mind is like..”: first with only the teacher, then twice as choral read alouds. Focus on the entire class getting pronunciation & prosody correct when reading aloud.

Ask students to self-assess -- how often do they feel the kind of peace described in this poem? What brings them to this point?

As a class: Develop norms for meditating “safely.” What will it look like in our classroom to engage with this level of quiet and inner reflection? How will we lean into our emotional strengths while giving ourselves time to get better?

Evaluation: Exit Ticket (10 min)

Give your own definition of how you think meditation might interact with *your* brain.

Lesson 2: History of Han-Shan & role of poetry in Chan Buddhism

Essential Question: How did Buddhism & meditation arrive in China? How does poetry embody these ideals?

Key Sources:

- [COLD MOUNTAIN](#) (Suggested minutes: 4:25-11:30)
- [Learning, Growing, Changing - Dead Prez](#)
- [A History of Buddhism in China](#)
- [Investigating the Life of Chinese Literature's Most Mysterious Poet](#)
- [The Hermit Han-Shan](#)
- 4-10 copies of *Cold Mountain: The Legend of Han-Shan & Shih Te, the Original Dharma Bums* by Sean Wilson & Akiko Shimojima (Pt 1.)

Preparation (10 min)

Warm-Up: What are three current songs that you are listening to that are really speaking to your heart? Why?

Play & share the lyrics of [Learning Growing Changing](#) by Dead Prez, explaining that this is a 2010s' hip hop song that includes a short summary of Buddhist ideas.

Demonstration: (10 min)

On a whiteboard or chart paper, create a space for students to add the facts they will gather through their exploration of Han-Shan. Begin by adding, before class or as you lecture, some basic facts:

- At the time we are studying, China was under the control of the Tang dynasty, an imperial dynasty that lasted almost 300 years from 618-907 C.E.
- Buddhism had come to China from India much earlier, in the 1st century, but spread slowly.
- In the year 500, an Indian sage named Bodhidharma came to China and founded the Ch'an or Zen school of Buddhism.
- By the early 700s, the T'ang dynasty saw a flourishing of the arts, and Buddhist monasteries, poetry, and philosophy flourished as well.
- However by the 800s rebellions were spreading, in 845 there was a widespread persecution of Buddhists, and the dynasty collapsed into independent kingdoms in 907.
- Amidst all of this, our mysterious hermit poet grew up, chose to leave society, and wrote his poetry. You will now gather what information you can on his life and thoughts.

Collaboration (20 min)

Separate students into at least four groups to “jigsaw” a history of Han-shan by using three resources: the Mike Hazzard documentary, the “investigating..” article from online, the hermit article, and the graphic novel. Allow time to share out information.

Evaluation: Exit Ticket. What sort of poetry do you expect from Han-shan when we begin reading tomorrow? What elements of meditative practice do you expect to see there?

Lesson 3: Poems focused on nature & peace

Skills Emphasis: Sensory Details

Essential Question: How do sensory details help you practice both your reading visualization and your own mental grounding?

Key Sources:

[D Garcia TIP 2024 Draft 2](#) - Link to segment on sensory details

[Meditation Is Easier Than You Think](#)

Preparation:

Warm-Up: Grounding Exercise

Sit quietly for 2-3 minutes before you begin your warm-up today. Then, name five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch, two you can smell and one you can taste, and describe your feelings on them if you have time.

Demonstration: (10 minutes)

Sensory details: When an author clearly describes what you can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell.

Key to establishing mood and creating a sense of realism

Especially important in poetry in order to create a moment in time, but also key in our exploration of meditation because we are trying to be fully present.

Collaboration: (35 min)

For the next four days, establish a routine of poetry engagement that also gives students a chance to practice fluency. For each poem, practice the following routine, taking about 10-15 minutes per poem.

- 1) The teacher reads all two or three translations of the poem aloud to the class, while students annotate for the skill focus (in this case, sensory details.)
- 2) The class chorally reads one translation of the poem, continuing their annotation, with the teacher assisting.
- 3) Students select one translation to read aloud to their partner, and then their partner reads one translation back to them.
- 4) Together, students write briefly on the **impact** of the skill focus (sensory details): Does it improve their understanding of the poem? Does it help them visualize the world more clearly?

Application: (10 min)

Revisit the meditative norms developed on day 1, and address a potential misconception about what meditation needs to look or sound like using [this](#) video. If time allows, revisit the box-breathing or the grounding exercise from the warm-up.

Evaluation: (10 min)

Now individually, students write on the meditative impact of the poem. What does it mean to be present in this moment of poetry? How do you still your mind to experience what the poet is describing?

Especially if teaching this unit early in the year, as I do, the short writings at the end of each lesson serve as a useful pre-assessment for any required constructed responses in state or local testing, and is a good place to introduce any structure or strategies expected for those.

Lesson 4: Poems Focused on Society

Skills emphasis: Metaphor & symbolism

Preparation: (10 minutes)

Warm-Up: What are four things in nature -- animals, plants, weather, water features, etc -- that could represent your personality? What part of you do these things represent?

Demonstration (10 min)

Briefly review the definitions of simile, metaphor, & symbolism. Be especially sure to address any confusion of the difference between a metaphor and a symbol -- one is used to compare two things, and one is a concrete object in the story or poem that also carries deeper meaning. Revisit the “My mind is like...” poem discussed on day 1, this time emphasizing not only the quiet mood but also the Buddhist & Chinese connotations of the images in the poem.

Collaboration: (35 min)

For each poem, practice the following routine, taking about 10-15 minutes per poem.

- 1) The teacher reads all two or three translations of the poem aloud to the class, while students annotate for the skill focus (in this case, metaphor, simile & symbolism)
- 2) The class chorally reads one translation of the poem, continuing their annotation, with the teacher assisting.
- 3) Students select one translation to read aloud to their partner, and then their partner reads one translation back to them.
- 4) Together, students write briefly on the **impact** of the skill focus (metaphor & symbolism): Does it improve their understanding of the poem? Does it help them identify the themes or deeper meanings of the poem?

Application: (10 min)

Revisit the meditative norms developed on day 1, then try a basic breathwork meditation as guided [here](#).

Evaluation: (10 min)

Now individually, students write on the meditative impact of the poem. What does it mean to be present in this moment of poetry? How do the metaphors and symbols deepen your understanding of the poet’s ideas?

Lesson 5: Poems focused on personal choices & relationships

Skills emphasis: allusion

Essential Question: How does allusion & shared references deepen our understanding of a poem?

Preparation: (10 minutes)

Warm-Up: Doodle (no words, no labels!) a miniature vision board for what you hope for out of the next ten years.

Share your vision with at least two classmates and ask them to label it. This isn't an art test, but how clear was your vision? How easy is it to understand?

Demonstration: (10 minutes)

Allusion: A reference to something the writer and audience are both familiar with, in order to compare or draw an idea to mind; an indirect reference to a work. Examples include "Chocolate is my Kryptonite" (an allusion to Superman comics), "I'm the Romeo to your Juliet," (allusion to Shakespeare), or, at least in spring 2024, "You're Drake to my Kendrick" (allusion to hip-hop battle occurring through diss tracks at the time I am piloting this curriculum). Give students a clear definition and several examples, then focus on students developing some of their own to demonstrate understanding and help each other.

Before beginning the poems, give students explicit definitions of the allusions mentioned: the race horse Hua-liu, the recluse offered a kingdom who washed out his ears in disgust at the offer, or the parable of the dying fish offered a diverted river in the future when what he needed was a single cup of water now.

Collaboration: (35 min)

For each poem, practice the following routine, taking about 10-15 minutes per poem.

- 1) The teacher reads all two or three translations of the poem aloud to the class, while students annotate for the skill focus (in this case, allusion)
- 2) The class chorally reads one translation of the poem, continuing their annotation, with the teacher assisting.
- 3) Students select one translation to read aloud to their partner, and then their partner reads one translation back to them.
- 4) Together, students write briefly on the **impact** of the skill focus (allusion): Does it improve their understanding of the poem? Does it help them better understand what the author is implying, or do the translations without the allusions work just as well?

Application: (10 min)

Revisit the meditative norms developed on day 1, then take students through a loving-kindness meditation such as the one modeled [here](#)

Evaluation: (10 min)

Now individually, students write on the meditative impact of the poem. What does it mean to be present in this moment of poetry? How do the allusions help you, or not help you, in engaging with the ideas of the poem?

Lesson 6: Collaborative poetry making

Essential Question: How do you decide when a poem has made its point?

Key Sources:

<https://terebess.hu/zen/chang/HanshanPoems.pdf>

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chinese/HanShan.php>

Preparation: (10 minutes)

Warm-Up: Are you a poet? Why or why not? What defines being a poet? What defines poetry?

Collaboration: (30 minutes)

It's best to complete this activity on large paper, such as chart or butcher paper, or to plan to add multiple pieces of paper to one common wall or bulletin board.

Allow students five to ten minutes to scan a collection of Han-shan's poems (either by sharing the links or by printing out a sampling before class). Students should identify at least 5 lines, from at least 3 different poems, that speak to them, and write these lines down.

Either by rotating through stations to chart paper, gathering around multiple pieces of butcher paper, or writing one line on paper and passing it to a peer, students will combine their own chosen lines of Han-shan's poetry to create new poems. For the first 7 minutes, challenge students to write only Han-shan's lines, not add their own; for the second 7 minutes, students may add their own writing; for the last 7, challenge students to add lines, from Han-shan or their own mind, that will "match" the line before in some key way: rhyme, number of syllables, or imagery.

Application: (10 minutes)

Review the meditation norms. Remind students that Han-shan's poetry was written on rocks and trees, a visual medium much closer to what they have just been doing than books on a shelf. Take students through a guided mountain-visualization such as this [one](#).

Lesson 7: Poems focused on wisdom

Skills emphasis: parallelism & structure

Essential Question: How does the structure of poetry improve your understanding of it?

Who do you want to be in society or community?

Preparation: (10 minutes)

Warm-Up:

Select one of the “class poems” we created yesterday. Rewrite the poem in one of three ways:

- 1) So that it rhymes OR
- 2) So that each line begins with the same letter OR
- 3) So that each line contains the same number of syllables

Demonstration: (10 minutes)

Parallelism in literature is the repetition of sentence structure, relying on the same grammatical structure to underscore a point or add a pleasant cadence to the prose.

In Chan Buddhist poetry, the parallelism of poetry is even more important because it embodies the balance of the universe.

Similarly, almost all poetry from this period emphasizes couplets, pairing ideas and rhymes together. As originally written, most of these Han-shan poems would have been five character octets: five syllables per line, with eight total lines, following an ABCB rhyme structure. If you really want to challenge yourself, go for this plan!

Collaboration: (35 min)

For each poem, practice the following routine, taking about 10-15 minutes per poem.

- 1) The teacher reads all two or three translations of the poem aloud to the class, while students annotate for the skill focus (in this case, parallelism)
- 2) The class chorally reads one translation of the poem, continuing their annotation, with the teacher assisting.
- 3) Students select one translation to read aloud to their partner, and then their partner reads one translation back to them.
- 4) Together, students write briefly on the **impact** of the skill focus (parallelism): Does it improve their understanding of the poem? Does it help them better dissect the themes or ideas the author is suggesting?

Application: (10 min)

Review the meditation norms from day 1. Guide students through a short focused meditation such as this [one](#).

Evaluation: (10 min)

Now individually, students write on the meditative impact of the poem. What does it mean to be present in this moment of poetry? How do the parallel images or statements of the poem emphasize the poet's ideas?

Lesson 8: Poetry response & individual goal setting

Essential Question: What is your own role as a poet? As a reflective and contemplative person?

Preparation: (10 minutes)

You have been engaging in at least a slight meditative practice at least every other day for two weeks now. To what extent do you think it's helped? To what extent do you want to continue?

Demonstration: (10 minutes)

Review vocabulary: sensory details, metaphor, symbolism, allusion, parallelism & structure

Application: (10 min)

Set specific goals for your own poems: What elements will you include? What structures will you follow (rhyme, syllable, acrostic, etc)?

Collaboration (30 min)

Working together, students will compose at least 2 short poems that meet their own criteria.

Evaluation: (10 min)

Identify three things about these practices of meditation and of poetry that you would like to continue as you go forward into the school year, and why.

Annotated Bibliography

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Appendix

Standards

Pennsylvania Core Standards Addressed

CC.1.3.11–12.A Determine and analyze the relationship between two or more themes or central ideas of a text, including the development and interaction of the themes; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.11–12.D Evaluate how an author’s point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.1.3.11–12.E Evaluate the structure of texts including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the texts relate to each other and the whole.

CC.1.3.11–12.F Evaluate how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts

Pennsylvania Career Ready Skills Addressed

Evaluate behaviors in relation to the impact on self and others.

Explain how empathy and perspective taking foster relationship building.

Interact with others demonstrating respect, cooperation, and acceptance.

Explain how expressive communication strategies can affect others.

Evaluate how societal conventions may influence the perspectives of individuals.