



CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCES CENTER
UNIVERSITY *of* VIRGINIA



2024...

A year of new partnerships, new opportunities, and a new chapter

At the close of the year, we at the Contemplative Sciences Center extend our heartfelt gratitude to you—our community of partners, UVA students, alumni, and parents both on Grounds and beyond. Your continued support inspires our mission to foster connection, engage deeply with the study of contemplation, and undertake innovative, collaborative research to promote human flourishing.

This year has been one of remarkable milestones and transformative initiatives. We opened the Contemplative Commons to the public on the first day of classes, piloted weekly student activities, and hosted a variety of academic classes, research talks, and community events. These accomplishments represent just a glimpse of the progress we've made together.

Our leadership also evolved in 2024. Interim Executive Director Martin Davidson guided us through the first half of the year with vision and dedication. In the fall, we were delighted to announce the appointment of Kelly Crace as our new Executive Director, who will officially join us in January.

As often the case in our personal lives, our collective year was marked by moments of promise and success, as well as profound loss.

The Contemplative Sciences Center's journey began in 2012, inspired by board members Paul and Sonia Jones, who sought to bring the transformative benefits of Ashtanga yoga—taught by their teacher, Sharath Jois—to the UVA community. Since then, the center has offered daily Ashtanga yoga classes to students and the broader community.

Twelve years later, in 2024, Sharath Jois introduced a groundbreaking new yoga series, the Active Series, designed to be accessible to more people. In November, Sharath unveiled the series at the Contemplative Commons, as we also celebrated the center's 12-year history and the opening of the Contemplative Commons. Tragically, just days later, Sharath passed away suddenly while hiking. We were honored to host a funeral service for Sharath where his students from around the world could say their goodbyes and share in their grief with his family. The Ashtanga community and all who knew Sharath continue to mourn the loss of this great teacher.

As we look to 2025, we see it as both a culmination and a beginning. In Tibetan culture and others, the number 12 carries meaning referencing the completion of one cycle and the dawn of a new one. We are deeply grateful for the teachings of Sharath Jois and the countless individuals he inspired, including our own community. As we close one chapter and prepare to write the next, we remain committed to honoring his legacy while forging a path forward filled with promise and possibility.



The Contemplative Sciences Center hosted a dinner on November 7 to celebrate the start of programming at the Contemplative Commons and to honor Sharath Jois before the unveiling of the Ashtanga yoga [Active Series](#).



CONTEMPLATIVE COMMONS OPENS TO THE PUBLIC

Pilot programming for students and community

We have been buoyed by your enthusiasm for the Commons, confirming the vision we've held, that a central intentional space to gather could be an innovative place to curate new experiences of awe, connection, and cutting edge research. Not just another structure, but an environment that engages the UVA community and communities beyond, is filled with awe-inspiring art, and offers expansive experiences to explore the self and the world we inhabit. Here's a brief timeline and a bit of what we've been up to:

In March, staff moved in to the second floor of the Contemplative Commons as construction to other areas continued. The building reached substantial completion in late August and we opened the doors to the public on the first day of classes soon after on August 26.

As we developed and gauged operational needs, we began piloting activities in the Commons. These have included hosting:

- Nine academic courses
- The UVA Parents Council Reception, welcoming over 200 parents for the first time to the Contemplative Commons during Parents Weekend
- The Compassionate Care Initiative Retreat, a full day resiliency retreat rooted in self-care and self-compassion for first-year RN-BSN nursing students
- A CSC Research Open House with the Office of the Provost for faculty to inspire and facilitate cross-Grounds collaborations and inform partners about CSC research efforts
- The **Coastal Futures Festival**, an environmental arts festival created by UVA's Coastal Conservatory, a collaboration between artists, humanities scholars, and scientists with the Virginia Coastal Reserve, a long-term ecological research site supported by the National Science Foundation
- Pre-approved external events including the **2024 Brain Symposium**

and...

- Creating and holding weekly **contemplative drop-in classes** for students, offering them the opportunity to connect with peers while experiencing contemplative practices

- Holding the monthly [Salon Research Series](#)
- Teaching [Ashtanga Yoga](#) five days a week

You'll find more details about some of these activities below.



BRINGING THE COMMONS TO LIFE

This fall, we selected the first group of **Contemplative Commons Student Advisors (CCSA)** —13 UVA students who worked collectively to identify the needs of UVA students and address them through relevant and creative programming. In 2024 they engaged 600 peers while collecting data to help inform future planning. Programs included the Meditation from the Dell series to gather and support the UVA community for 15 minutes per week for guided reflection; contemplative drop-in classes offering the opportunity to connect with peers while experiencing new forms of contemplation such as reflective writing, gratitude meditations, yoga; and several unplugged sessions for students to engage or meditate without devices. In addition, CCSA developed a gratitude meditation and trained **3,993 incoming students** during Summer 2024 Orientation.

[Learn more.](#)



NINFEO

Inspiring Connection to Nature in our Midst

Over the course of the year, renowned artist Wolfgang Buttress completed his latest piece, NINFEO, an immersive sound, light, and sculptural experience housed in the Contemplative Commons. In late September, we welcomed him for the commissioning of the piece inspired by Monet's *Ninfee e Nuvole* and the *Villa di Liva* in Rome. The one-room installation contains 3,400 unique laser-etched illuminated crystal blocks depicting water lilies of the nearby Dell Pond. An infrared camera installed in the pond tracks the movement of fish, flora, and currents in the Dell and triggers a responsive light and sound system that infuses the installation, allowing for a contemplative interactive experience. The installation is typically accessible whenever the Commons is open.

[Learn more.](#)



CSC LAUNCHES RESEARCH LAB, CIRCL

CSC's research team launched **CIRCL the Contemplative Innovation + Research Co-Lab**, a dynamically experimental collaboratory in UVA's Contemplative Commons, and an interdisciplinary network of research faculty dedicated to investigating practices and experiences of human transformation.

The vision of CIRCL is to bring excellence, rigor, and teamwork to study how diverse contemplative practices and experiences work in bodies and minds, cultures and ecologies, and intersubjectively.

The work leverages cutting-edge research in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, arts, and technology at the intersections of lived experience, innovation, and application. To execute this vision, the CIRCL convenes interdisciplinary teams of scholars, scientists, artists, makers, and practitioners in collaboration with specialists in contemplative research to generate novel solutions to personal, social, and global challenges.

Over the past several months, the team has initiated several cross-Grounds partnerships with faculty including the Environmental Institute, Music, Anesthesiology, Architecture, Religious Studies, Engineering, and Psychology in studies that investigate nature connection. ***Other select research highlights include:***

- Holding monthly public dialogue **Salons** on research related to contemplation and flourishing with UVA and local community members. Centered on a single word, these gatherings bring together scholars, scientists, and practitioners from diverse perspectives to exchange ideas. To date, the Salons have included:
 - "**Contemplation**" with Michael Sheehy
 - "**Tulpa**" with Michael Lifshitz
 - "**Darkness**" with Kelsey Johnson
- Unveiling **Contemplative Currents**, an online magazine for public scholarship that advances contemplative knowing, practicing, and living.
- Michael Sheehy penned an article for the magazine *Psyche* about making the case for valuing contemplation in higher education and society more broadly. Read the article, "***What if We Learned Contemplation The Way We Learned Arts or Sports?***"
- Publishing several new articles in the **Journal of Contemplative Studies** examining various cultural perspectives including visual ethnography elicitation techniques to explore meditative experiences, psychoactive plants in South Asia, and Japanese tantric meditation.
- Adding 24 interviews to the ongoing series, "***What is Contemplation?***" which elicits diverse views on the definition of contemplation from leading scholars in Contemplative Studies.
- Convening an Open House for Research, with the Office of the Provost, to introduce faculty from across the University and encourage cross-Grounds collaborative research on many dimensions of contemplative practices and human flourishing.
- **Receiving Funding** from the Tiny Blue Dot Foundation which awarded a neuroscientific research project related to the "Science of Perception Box" to the CIRCL co-lab to study contemplative sleep practices, "Transformative Benefits of Contemplative Sleep Practices and a Novel Pathway to Deliver Benefits to the General Public."

Learn more about research efforts at the Contemplative Sciences Center.



COMPASSION IN ACTION: MEETING THE DALAI LAMA

In mid March, seventeen **Dalai Lama Fellows** convened in Dharamsala, India for an in-person meeting with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama to discuss the topic of compassionate leadership. For the Fellows, all leading social change projects around the world, it was a unique opportunity to seek the Dalai Lama's wisdom to integrate into their work. The Fellows were joined by staff and affiliates from UVA's Contemplative Sciences Center, the University of Colorado Boulder's Renée Crown Wellness Institute, Stanford University's Office of Religious & Spiritual Life and the Stanford Storytelling Project. Faculty from UVA's Batten School of Leadership & Public Policy and School of Medicine also joined the delegation.

[Learn more.](#)



FELLOWSHIP FLOURISHES

Energizing Presentations

In April, 16 fellows from the Citizen Leaders Fellowship presented their year-long projects at the first-ever public gathering in the Commons. Presentations were animated, persuasive, and creative. This year's projects addressed a range of challenges such as improving connection among student athletes, ensuring cultural food sovereignty at the International Residential College, and building an App to help transfer students navigate Grounds.

Over the course of the fellowship, students from the international, transfer, and student athlete communities learn leadership skills based upon compassion and self-awareness and create and implement projects that help solve pressing challenges within their communities. As with previous groups, this one includes students from diverse areas of the University, representing a range of sports, countries, and fields of study. Citizen Leaders Fellowship is run through a partnership with the Contemplative Sciences Center, the International Studies Office, and UVA Athletics.

[Learn more.](#)



COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS PROJECT STUDY PUBLISHED

Flourish Curriculum benefits students

The eight-year study on the Compassionate Schools Project (CSP) curriculum, *Flourish*, was published in the journal, *Prevention Science*. UVA researchers found the curriculum had positive impacts on students' self-efficacy, attention control, and behavior and that program effects were most extensive in schools serving high-poverty communities. *Flourish*, a groundbreaking social-emotional skills-based health and wellness curriculum implemented as a regular class in school, was evaluated in an unprecedented, randomized control trial involving 45 elementary schools.

[Learn more.](#)

More news: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has designated *Flourish: The Compassionate Schools Project Curriculum* as a Promising Program for Social and Emotional Learning. *Flourish* is one of 14 programs in the 2024 review cycle selected for inclusion in the CASEL Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs.

[Learn more.](#)

A few more highlights:

- "From Fear to Action: Thriving in a Changing Climate featuring Britt Wray" - We

partnered with UVA's Environmental Institute and Public Service Pathways to bring Britt Wray to UVA. Wray is an expert on the psychological impacts of the climate crisis especially among young people. In tandem with the event, CSC offered a contemplative nature walk, "A Nature Experience: Embodied Practice for Eco-Anxiety" and participated in a resource fair to help students navigate eco-anxiety while offering concrete ways to impact climate change.

- We rounded out the **2nd Annual Contemplative Research and Scholarship Speaker Series** with a talk by David Yaden on "What is a Psychedelic Experience? Measuring and Characterizing the Acute Subjective Effects." The series hosted leading scholars, scientists, and practitioner-teachers in the study of contemplative practices.
- Michael Sheehy and UVA partners spoke on two panels at the 12th annual **Tom Tom Festival**: "Psychedelics & Meditation" and "Science of Psychedelics."
- CSC students and staff held **Chill with Cavman: Yoga & Mindfulness** at the 4th year student Run with Jim event.
- Students partnered with The Morven Sustainability Lab for two **Student Days** at Morven Farm. The events were a break from university life, an opportunity to re-connect with nature, and to spend time decompressing.
- In the wake of the protest events that unfolded at UVA on in May, we held an online **Community Practice** as a space for contemplative pause and emotional processing aiming to help attendees honor and move through their authentic experiences.
- **Contemplation Under the Stars** - In the fall we partnered with UVA Rec to offer students a weekend retreat at Shenandoah National Park's Big Meadows campground. We studied the night sky engaging in contemplative star gazing and held a morning yoga practice.
- Students initiated and helped plan pre- and post-election events that allowed students spaces to decompress, move their bodies, and connect with peers over snacks and music.
- The Contemplative Sciences Center partnered with UVA's Karsh Institute to host a Student Dialogue Fellowship. Karsh's Good Life Political Project of Democracy and partners invited students from all backgrounds and with a diverse range of views and experiences to apply for the fellowship which convened multiple cohorts of UVA undergraduate and graduate students for a monthly dinner series in the fall of 2024.
- The Compassionate Schools Project's Alexis Harris was an invited panelist in the *Mainstreaming Mindfulness in Early Education* session at the Bhutan Innovation Forum.
- Over 800 people from around the world applied to be a part of the 2025 cohort of **Dalai Lama Fellows**. We'll announce the new fellows in the coming months.

Looking to 2025...

In the new year, we look forward to welcoming more of you to the Contemplative Commons as we expand our schedule of programmatic and research activities. Additional highlights:

- In January, we will welcome **Kelly Crace** as the new executive director of the Contemplative Sciences Center
- We will select and announce a new cohort of Dalai Lama Fellows in the spring.
- We've just selected the next group of 20 Citizen Leader Fellows and will be delighted to introduce them to you in January (stay tuned!).
- We will host 15 academic classes, an increase from 9 in fall 2024.
- Research endeavors will broaden: We will announce a new slate of Salons, studies, and gatherings.
- We will expand student programming based on data collected over the Fall 2024 semester. It will include sound baths, reflective writing workshops, and t'ai chi.
- In addition to continuing Meditation from the Dell, we will offer more programming tailored for the community.
- The Compassionate Schools Project will provide training and guidance to new school districts implementing the *Flourish* curriculum and Flourishing Students

groups.

- *There will be much more, so stay tuned!*

More of our year in pictures...



If you have any trouble viewing the slides, they can also be seen [here](#).

Slides : 1) Jim Ryan at "Chill with Cavman" after the 4th Year Run with Jim; 2) CASEL logo: International recognition for the Compassionate Schools Project's Flourish Curriculum designating it as an SEL Promising Program 3) The first Salon: "Contemplation" 4) A CIRCL slide reflects on the glass of the Contemplative Commons 4th floor during a Salon presentation 5) An embodied contemplative nature walk with Geoff Cox offered alongside the Britt Wray climate action talk. 6) A Group of Contemplative Commons Student Advisors 7) Sharath Jois teaching the Active Series 8) Citizen Leader Fellow, Geshani Bandara presenting her community project, encouraging artistic expression for international students. 9) Students star-gaze at the Contemplation under the Stars retreat 10) A group of Contemplative Sciences Center staff

Give here to support the Contemplative Sciences Center at UVA and programming opportunities at the Contemplative Commons.

GIVE



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