

Inner to Outer: The Development of Contemplative Pedagogy

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Contemplative pedagogy is not easily defined due to the enormous complexity involved in the intersection of spirituality with learning. It can be broadly said to be a synthesis of the aware presence of the teacher, and effective instructional methods that cultivate depth in learning. The teacher's personal transformative practices are essential to the development of contemplative pedagogy. Intellectual understanding and skillful curricular implementation are not sufficient. Without a personal practice, the teacher may not be able to go beyond a conceptual understanding of contemplative education, thus, the likelihood of solidifying contemplative experience, which is contrary to its dynamic, in-the-moment nature.

Contemplative pedagogy draws deeply and broadly from multiple human dimensions. It has a strong intellectual component, but that is balanced with other resources. At the same time personal contemplative practice alone does not seem to be sufficient for the development of contemplative pedagogy. Many teachers who meditate or practice other contemplative disciplines have struggled to discover how they can improve their teaching. Quiet sessions on the meditation cushion can contrast sharply with the complex dynamics of the classroom. Experienced contemplative practitioners develop clarity and stability of mind, but how can such qualities be transferred skillfully into the classroom?

When I hold things too tightly; when I am too stingy with the time around things, it feels like the atmosphere/space in the room is a solid form of matter, rigid and confining. When I hold things too loosely; when I am not aware of the time around things, it feels like the atmosphere is in a gaseous state, disconnected and unpredictable. But when I am intuitive and mindful of the time around things, not too much and not too little, then the atmosphere seems to "flow" like a liquid. It's dynamic, but rhythmic. It's supportive and buoyant at the same time. There's a gentle buffer around things, could it be less threatening? - A contemplative teacher JG SP08

Meditation as a Foundation for Contemplative Pedagogy

This exploration will focus on the gradual development of contemplative inner discipline and its progression to outer pedagogy. Using the practice of meditation as an illustration, we will explore how those skills can gradually infuse our teaching presence and instruction, and become the basis of effective contemplative teaching. We will also look at how we can reinforce those skills.

There are, of course, many different contemplative practices, but sitting meditation with its focus on the breath could be considered the quintessential practice. This form of meditation develops certain basic contemplative qualities relevant to academic pursuits, including being present in the moment, clarity of thought, and emotional equanimity. Many forms of breath meditation exist, but for this purpose we will explore the form used by many, but not all, of the faculty at Naropa University. Examination of the practice of meditation can provide some basic clues to the foundational characteristics of contemplative pedagogy.

Meditation has three dimensions – posture, breath, and working with distractions. The posture in meditation is upright, still, and open. The physical presence is experienced as solidly grounded, yet upright. The body is firm, contained, and yet receptive to inner experiences and the environment. The eyes, ears, and all the senses are open, but passive. This tension in the posture between containment and openness is a principle throughout meditation that makes the practice very relevant training for dealing with everyday life and teaching. For instance, containment and openness is a powerful balance in the teacher: a strong, confident physical presence that is also open and receptive to the students.

The second dimension of meditation is mindfulness of the breath. The attention is focused on our ordinary breathing. Because no special breath techniques are involved, the transition to using breath awareness in daily life is much easier. Attention to breathing seems to have a naturally calming effect. Taking a deep breath or two has become a common centering practice in sports and in response to stress in everyday life. For the teacher in the classroom a few focused breaths can have the same effect, especially when combined with a well-aligned, upright posture.

The third dimension, closely related to breath awareness, is working with distractions from mindfulness of the breath. When attention wanders, the instruction is to briefly notice where the attention has strayed and to start over –coming back to noticing our breathing. Noticing wandering mind and bringing it back to awareness of breathing is at the heart of the practice, but is easier said than done. Our natural emotional and conceptual vitality tend to complicate this very simple focus. For instance, during meditation when our attention to breathing has been absent for a while, we may have a tendency to castigate ourselves for being undisciplined, to criticize the practice itself as being impossibly difficult, or to conclude that this was not the most conducive time or circumstances for meditation. Meditation instruction emphasizes the importance of being non-judgmental and gentle to ourselves in working with distractions. When we notice ourselves being critical or analytical, we gently let that go and return to breath awareness. Thus, cultivating the skill of being open, present, and unattached no matter what our state of mind.

At the same time, the instructions are to be mindful of where our attention has wandered. For instance, we might notice during sitting meditation that our attention has strayed to thinking about some intriguing question, planning a conversation with a colleague, or perhaps to simply daydreaming. We are taught not to instantly return our attention to breathing. Instead we take a quick moment to notice what we have been paying attention to. In this way we become aware of the habits of our mind. The meditation session is not the time to analyze these patterns, just to simply notice, let go, and, without judgment, return our attention to the breath. Contemplation, reflection, or analysis of our habitual patterns is a separate practice. Thus, we develop “familiarity”, one translation of “meditation”, with our habits of attention. As meditation practice deepens, the discipline of returning to the present moment happens more naturally and frequently.

Common concerns that arise as we loosen our grasp on our conceptual mind is the fear that we may lose our train of thought, that we may become so spacious that we cut off connections with our students, that too much spaciousness won't leave time to cover the material, or that we will look like a doddering fool. With practice we develop more grace and confidence in the practice of mixing focused mind with spacious mind.

Basic Implications of Meditation

What are the foundations for contemplative pedagogy that can be derived from basic meditation practice? The meditation posture itself, suggests mindfulness of body. Being mindful of our bodies while teaching is uncommon in academia. We tend to forget we even have a body, and have little appreciation for its relevance as an enhancement to our teaching. A full exploration of the importance of awareness of our bodies and sense perceptions in contemplative pedagogy, goes beyond the scope of this exploration. However, just as in meditation, when our physical bodies are upright, receptive, and present, there is much more direct contact our inner resources and responsiveness to our students. When our teaching and thinking are embodied, communication is often more creative, fluid and connected.

Ways of strengthening our sense of physical presence while teaching begin with noticing our sense of touch. Taking a moment to feel the weight of our bodies in our chair or the texture of the book we are holding, can bring us back into the present moment. The more formal practices of standing or walking meditation, focus our awareness on the contact of our feet with the floor. And just as in sitting meditation, when our attention strays, we gently return our attention to the direct sensory experience of touch. These exercises can center us and have a stabilizing influence on our thought and emotions. Both standing and walking meditation are effective and easily used practices for teachers. Using walking meditation in route to our classroom is a wonderful way to ground ourselves before teaching. Likewise a few moments for standing meditation can easily be found throughout the teaching day. For example, while students are taking a few minutes to discuss a question with the person next to them, the teacher can take time to do standing meditation, unbeknownst to anyone.

I have noticed that [meditation] has a profound impact on my disposition and focus. I am calmer and more encouraging in one-on-one encounters. I find that I am a better listener because I don't have so many random thoughts bouncing around inside my skull. My students seem to respond positively to this by not holding their bodies as tensely and making more eye contact with me. They also seem to allow themselves to take more academic risks, venturing educated guesses when they are not sure of an answer. - A contemplative teacher DG FAo8

The breath, as the main focus of meditation, is also easily accessible during teaching. When the classroom discussion becomes snarled or has lost focus, just as in meditation, the teacher can breathe and let go of the confusion. Returning to some basic point of departure, the discussion can be clarified. For the contemplative teacher, the breath can also have a profound meaning as a reminder of a meditative state of mind. Breathing is the perfect metaphor for a basic premise of contemplative pedagogy: interconnectedness,

or “inter-being,” as Thich Nhat Hahn calls it.¹ Our inner experience is directly related to all that exists “outside” of us. When we are aware of the interconnectedness between our personal presence and the learning experiences of the students, our teaching becomes more deeply synchronized. Noticing our breathing during teaching can remind us of “inter-being” and becomes a way to soften any sense of separation we may feel from our students. We begin to meet them more directly and with greater openness. Spending a moment or two noticing our breathing can center and connect us with the shared learning environment.

Another basic implication for pedagogy arising from meditation practice is a general understanding and clarity about how our mind functions during teaching. Instructors lecturing passionately about their subjects can forget that we are actually communicating with our students. We can become so enthralled with our own thoughts and explorations that we sometimes fail to notice that we may have lost our students. Our own internal logics, while familiar to us, may not be clear to our students. When we are mindful of our thoughts and speech during teaching and at the same time aware of the interconnectedness with our students, then we can more easily notice how they are responding to classroom dynamics. This inner/outer awareness furthers the development of a more supple mind.

Furthermore, awareness of our thoughts promotes a more creative inner dialog. When we are aware of our thoughts, we tend not to mindlessly run through old thought patterns. The meditative mind is less attached to the familiar thought grooves. So, when we are teaching the same old material, we can be more present with it. We encounter those ideas within a more spacious and formative context of mind. What we are teaching becomes more dynamic in our own minds and, thus, fresher for our students. Of course, it is easy to lapse into mindless speech and thought. Thus, the “fresh start” principle of meditation becomes essential. Just as in meditation, when we notice we have lost our awareness of our thoughts while teaching, we could simply take a breath or two and begin again more mindfully.

As I sit in meditation – an inherently personal pursuit – I am developing the awareness to see situations and events with greater clarity. This awareness is slowly expanding to include all aspects of my experience whether I am on my cushion meditating or in my classroom teaching. And it is this awareness that affords me the opportunity to act instead of react to whatever life presents me with. As this awareness practice slowly brightens ... it is becoming harder and harder to hide from delusions, self-deceptions, and false understandings. – A contemplative teacher DH’09

The transition of awareness of thought from the cushion to the classroom takes a lot of practice. It is very important to be non-judgmental and gentle with ourselves in the process. When we do so, our attention will naturally return to the present moment without needless discursive commentary. Awareness practice while teaching does involve a small

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 83-102.

investment of time. But in exchange there seems to be greater creativity, efficiency of thought, and contact to students.

One way to bridge the transition is to bring into the classroom tangible reminders of awareness practice. A particular object placed on our desk or somewhere in the classroom can serve as a reminder of the practice of meditation while we are teaching. A small piece of driftwood, or a stone collected on a retreat could serve the purpose of reminding us to wake up to the present moment. If a particular classroom culture is open to the notion that the instructor is exploring contemplative pedagogy, then the purpose of the object might be shared with the class. If not shared, it can remain a personal reminder.

Working with Emotions

It is not just our thinking processes that can separate us from a deeper learning relationship with our students. Emotional reactivity is also at play. Highly educated instructors are often loath to admit that their emotional responses can negatively affect their students learning experiences. Indeed, many would maintain that emotions should play no role in teaching, with the possible exception of the enthusiasm and joy for the subject. However, from the Buddhist contemplative perspective emotions are always active in human experience. These can range from extremely subtle feelings to stormy outbursts. There is always some feeling response to whatever we encounter. Emotions are most clearly apparent in communications with individual students in or outside of class, but they also appear in every dimension of education, for example, when we read a student paper.

The practice in contemplative education is not to reject our emotions, even when they are troublesome. Emotions are understood to be an indispensable and valuable resource and, as such, are a primary dimension of contemplative pedagogy. As we mindfully meditate we become familiar with our emotions – notice, touch the feeling, gently let go, and return to breathing. Thus, we become accustomed to the arising of feelings and how we respond emotionally. For example, one morning's meditation might be preoccupied by a situation involving a student. While sitting we might notice our emotionally charged thoughts as they run through the situation and possible scenarios. We return to breathing, but the charge of the situation may be very strong that morning. The thoughts and accompanying emotions keep returning. As we patiently keep coming back to the breath, we begin to see how our thoughts and feeling are intertwined. Gradually we become aware of the distinctions between the two and the tangle begins to loosen. We begin to notice more precisely how our irritation toward the situation is affecting our thinking and communication. It is often found that when encountering a similar situation while teaching, our responses are more balanced. Learning to experience emotions directly and express them moderately and compassionately is a key element in contemplative education.

I find myself reacting less to aggression and disruption from students, as well as having more space for their difficult reactions and emotions... It is not so much that the specifics of meditation create a specific way of being. It is more that the entire process, sitting each day, simply all of it, has contributed in allowing a tiny bit more space in my

awareness so I can stop and notice my reactions. I can then consciously make a choice, or at least be aware of the possibility of making a choice, as to how I want to act. - A contemplative teacher. Monica '09

At this basic level of contemplative pedagogy, the teacher works actively with what arises in the classroom as an opportunity for practice. Challenging situations are not seen as a failure, but as further opportunity for insight and deepening our teaching. For example, in a class discussion, a student might question one of our deeply held ideas. From a practice perspective, we would notice our attachment to that idea and whatever emotions are associated with that. Whether we react defensively or are excited by the courage of the student, our inner awareness allows us to be more fully present and open to the discussion. When we are unaware of our emotional responses, we tend to unconsciously limit discussion and the exploration of ideas.

Acknowledging the importance of emotions in learning is basic to contemplative education. When we extend this awareness practice to the class as a whole it is important, as Palmer writes, that classes not be turned into “therapy groups”. Understanding the educational role of emotional experience is vital. Meditation trains us in knowing the difference between the purely physical energy of an emotion and its conceptual accompaniments. When we, as teachers, have clarity in this, then the richness of emotional experience deepens and enlivens learning. “Indeed, our feelings may be more vital to truth than our minds, since our minds strive to analyze and divide things while our feeling reach for relatedness.”²

Emotional awareness does not necessarily mean that we would change our ideas or approach. Contemplative teachers seem better able to tolerate ambiguity, paradox and utilize tension creatively. Emotional equanimity, clarity of mind, and the relaxation of the tensions of teaching is a common result. Communication with others seems easier and more straightforward, and empathy is stronger. We become both clearer about our inner life and also kinder to ourselves. Because we are mindful and familiar with our thoughts and emotions, we are not so easily blind-sided by them. Through practice, their entwinement becomes a less potent complication or disruption. For instance, the irritation and circular thinking often associated with a seemingly insoluble issue, often relaxes more easily. Within a new sense of ease, fresh perspectives often arise.

To be clear, these personal teacher practices are not necessarily named and communicated to the students. One of these practices, for example, is “mindful speech”. There are many forms of this practice ranging from mindfulness of the act of speaking itself, to being intentional about the words one chooses to speak. In these practices the students would not necessarily know that the teacher is using a contemplative practice. The same would be the case if the teacher were engaged in “deep listening”, a practice

² Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education As A Spiritual Journey*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins. 1993). P. 81.

that also has many forms. Such presence practices are profoundly effective whether the teacher is lecturing, engaged in class discussion, or monitoring an exam.

Wait Time

How do these inner meditative skills more fully manifest in pedagogical practice? When we examine one established pedagogical method, Wait Time, we can explore how they enhance this effective pedagogy. Wait Time is an excellent example of how proven pedagogies can be improved by using contemplative skills. The method was developed in the '70's.³ Since then it has been studied⁴ and expanded upon⁵. In the Wait Time method the teacher pauses three seconds after asking a question to the class. Studies found that when Wait Time is used more students are poised to respond to the question and that higher order thinking skills improve. This assures that not only the quickest students are being engaged in class discussion. The practice helps even the students who leap quickly to a response by giving them more time to reflect. The second part of the Wait Time method involves the teacher allowing three seconds after a chosen student has finished responding. Studies showed that often after the pause, the same student would frequently offer an additional, deeper, and more thoughtful response.

Wait Time does require the teacher to prepare the students for this practice. Students need to understand how to use the pause as a time for reflection or contemplation of the question. I have found that when the practice is clear to them, most students quickly become comfortable with the brief silence and use it beneficially.

I think some of my curiosity about this has rubbed off onto my students. Sometimes I feel like I get more of their attention (on me or on the subject or the activity) because the silent moments of wait time create questions in their minds, anticipation, a wondering about what will come next. Without the time between things, around things, there's no time to become curious, no anticipation, just one thing after another. - A contemplative teacher JG SP08

³ Mary Budd Rowe. "Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables, their Influence in Language, Logic and Fate Control." Paper presented at the National Association for Research in Science Teaching, Chicago, IL, 1972.

⁴ Robert J. Stahl, *Using "Think-Time" Behaviors To Promote Information Processing, Learning, and On-Task Participation: An Instructional Module.* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 1990).

Kenneth Tobin, "The Role of Wait Time in Higher Cognitive Level Learning." *REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH* 57 (Spring 1987): 69-95.

⁵ G. Claxton, "Thinking at the Edge: Developing Soft Creativity." *CAMBRIDGE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION*, 36(3) (2006): 351-362.

Without contemplative experience we might just be biding our time. Our physical presence might be projecting blankness or discomfort, or we might be mindlessly solidifying our own notions of the “correct” response. The presence of the teacher during the three seconds communicate a great deal to the students about how that time is used.

Wait Time becomes a *contemplative* method when the teacher uses the three seconds for a brief awareness practice. As a contemplating teacher, we might use those seconds to quickly notice our state of body and mind and to relax, center, or ground ourselves. It could be three seconds in which we notice and synchronize with our emotional state. It might be that we become aware of what we expect the students will say and let that go. In general it is a pause during which we open with fresh eyes to ourselves and the class, and prepare to meet the responses with unbiased eyes and ears.

I have really been observing how I use time.... wait time, silence, pauses.... just watching myself and my students. I find that as I experiment with infusing spaces of time around questions and directions, before and after answers and within transitions, the whole rhythm of the room changes. It feels more fluid, less solid. - A contemplative teacher JG SP08

Of course, there are times when it’s best not to wait, times to jump in, or interrupt the discussion. But having the skill to pause is an important one for teachers. Pausing during teaching is not easy to learn. But practicing silence and stillness in our daily meditation practice, can give us the experience and the courage to pause before responding in a classroom setting. From those moments of stillness, we can choose the skillful means necessary for that situation. Something new and unexpected may arise in the gap, or our habitual or learned responses may become fresher. Embodied pauses enlivens learning both for teachers and students and, indeed, for the subject itself.

The Mindfulness Bell and Pauses

There are other contemplative teaching methods that directly involve the class in contemplative practice. The mindfulness bell, used by Thich Nhat Hanh in his teaching, has been adapted for contemplative classroom practice. At regular intervals throughout the class period, typically ten to twenty minutes, a small bell is sounded. Everyone stops what they are doing and listens to the sound. When the gong can no longer be heard, classroom activities resume with the person who was last speaking.

Suggestions as to what students should do during these pauses vary. The standard instruction, similar to meditation, is simply to listen to the sound of the bell. When thoughts or emotions arise during the listening process, return to the sound itself. I use the mindfulness bell regularly in my classes and find that students adjust easily to the rhythm when it is used consistently. I notice that the tempo of the class settles and students appreciate the gaps.

As teachers we can also use pauses at our discretion to create space in the middle of a class. This can be particularly helpful when the discussion becomes heated or greatly intensified. Parker Palmer used periods of silence in his teaching, “when the words start

to tumble out upon each other and the problem we are trying to unravel is getting more tangled.”⁶ (Palmer. 80.) It is important to mention that using pauses in this way is not intended to shut down the emotional intensity. We, as teachers, could use such pauses to notice our breathing as a way of modulating our feelings, not suppressing them. Where appropriate, students could be asked to do the same. In less advanced contemplative classrooms, students could just feel their physical presence on their chairs, or simply follow a few breaths.

These gaps can come in any form and at any time; they need not be anything extraordinary. A gap between my own words, between and within an exchange with another, a gap between direct instruction and practice, between classes.... I notice that if I am mindful, the gaps continually present themselves. – A contemplative teacher DG FA08

As our awareness deepens, we are gradually able to create a more overt contemplative learning environment: improving the pacing, rhythm, and transitions of the class. Drawing from a broader field of contemplative resources, we can create contemplative approaches to study, assignments, grading, and examination strategies. We can eventually enhance content presentation, curriculum and learning environment design. All of this has the intention of sharpening the students’ mastery of content, while deepening and personalizing their learning experience. The journey toward aware and disciplined inner experience and their manifestation in teaching defines a contemplative teacher, not the classroom practices, *per se*.

⁶ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education As A Spiritual Journey*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins. 1993). P. 80.