

**“Contemplative Liberal Arts Education:
A View from Naropa’s Undergraduate Curriculum”
Transcript of an Address to New Students**

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**Naropa University
August 19, 2008**

Good morning. So, I know you all just bowed before I came in, right? I’m actually going to ask you to do this again, but it’s a different bow. We have a custom at Naropa that when you graduate, as you walk across the stage, just before I hand you your diploma, we have a ritual where we bow in front of each other one at a time. We bow, I hand you your diploma (actually, it’s your diploma case), then I pass you on to the president who shakes your hand. So I like the idea that we begin this four-year relationship or this three-year or two-year relationship or however long it’s going to take you to finish your degree, with an *opening* bow, and we will not close it today, because we will do that when you graduate.

So, please... [silence, bow].

I’ve got about 15 minutes to talk with you about contemplative education. As I was driving in to work this morning, this book that’s several years old... the title came to mind. It’s something like, *If you Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him*. Those of us who are part of another generation, part of the new age movement, probably remember the book. What it means is, be careful of people who claim to be experts. So what you’re going to get in the next 15 minutes is one faculty member’s view, my view, of what I think we’re doing with contemplative education here at Naropa. And I hope that it will make some sense to you, and I hope it will have some traction for you, as you meet other faculty and as you start taking courses.

So use the perspective I’m about to share as a starting point, not as an end point. Use it as an opportunity to think through what contemplative education might be like through your particular lens, through your world view, what you come to understand and learn and come to experience here at Naropa University.

With that in mind I’d like to start by reading one of the sentences from the University’s Mission Statement: “A Naropa education, reflecting the interplay of discipline and delight, prepares its graduates both to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better.”

“Discipline and delight,” I love that concept. The notion that we’re going to put into play both chaos, uncertainty and creativity – those are some elements of delight – and bodies of knowledge, disciplined or systematic ways of learning that are both contemporary and more traditional ... that’s an exciting educational goal. It says that we’re going to play with ideas *and* emotions, our personal experiences, and the scholarship and the wisdom of the ages.

“To meet the world as it is.” What could that possibly mean – “to meet the world as it is”? It means I think, in part, to come to understand yourselves very deeply, what *you* bring to every situation. And to understand the *situations* you find yourselves in.

Let’s stop a moment and ask what it is that you bring to *this* situation, our time together in this large room this morning. Ask yourselves: “Where is this moment, this 9:18 on a Tuesday morning in mid-August, where is this moment in my life?” I’m not going to ask you to raise your hand. This is your own internal work at the moment. Who are you... now? Sitting on a seat, some on a hard surface. Some of you have taken your shoes off, some of you are wearing tight shoes, some of you are daydreaming... It’s OK. I can tell which ones. [laughter] “To meet the world as it is” is in part to meet the world knowing who you are. It’s also to understand the dynamics, the pressures, the historical circumstances that give rise to the situations and life circumstance we all find ourselves in, that each of us finds ourselves in at this present moment.

So part of a Naropa education will provide you with experiences and teachings to help you go through what we call a personal journey. Meditation courses are certainly one of the ways in which you will learn to slow down that internal conversation that is always there with us, the rush to the next moment, the reflecting on the past moment, the worrying about whether you got “it” right or whatever. Instead, part of a Naropa education is to help you be right here in the moment where you actually are.

I can’t tell you how many times I leave the house in the morning and I click on the remote to close the garage door and I go half a block and I ask myself, “did I close the garage door?” That’s because I wasn’t really there when I closed the garage door. I was already somewhere else. My mind and my body were in two different places.

So, where are you right now? And it’s okay if your mind’s not really here. You have to own that. Acknowledge that. You have to experience what it means for you to have an inner dialogue, and a physiological experience in which you are *wherever* you are.

Meditation courses; courses in embodied practice like tai chi, yoga; aesthetics courses where you get to experience the visual and other arts ... these are just some of the ways you will learn to cultivate being in the present. Also, in various

ways these courses are attempts for you to come to learn deeply about your passions, your commitments, your fears, your aspirations, who you are in the world and who you want to be.

This is the first plank of Naropa's contemplative education. Cutting through the stories we tell about ourselves by accepting them, understanding them, knowing when they surface in our daily lives, and how they prevent us from living in the present situation and how they produce a disconnection between where our bodies and minds are. This first plank of Naropa's education is for you to learn about your own minds.

But ... and here's an irony or twist ... this is not about you. I don't believe this journey is about you. Contemplative education isn't about you feeling good about yourself. This is about a journey that begins with you, but is ultimately outwardly focused.

And so let me introduce the second plank or facet of Naropa's contemplative education. As I indicated quoting from the University's mission statement, the faculty and I hope "to prepare you to meet the world as it is." There is poverty out there. There is pain. There is also amazing creativity and founts of knowledge. There is love and compassion. The goal of Naropa's education, in terms of moving from yourself to cultivating an understanding of the world, is to give you the analytical tools, the contact skills, the writing skills, the research skills, as well as the skills of human compassion, to see the world as it actually is in all of its manifestations and in all of its dynamics and patterns, to cut through fantasy or at least to understand what the fantasies are that we carry around with us socially, culturally, globally. To meet the world as it is.

What is unique about Naropa's education is that these two planks are not separated, they are not separable. As you come to understand yourself more deeply, you are confronted with a realization that there is a world of difference "out there." In your core courses, the general education courses that all incoming students take, you are asked to complete the Diversity Seminar. The goal is at least two-fold: to enable you to position yourself, your life story, in relationship to that of other people in your community and across communities. The second goal is for you to have a vocabulary and a way of relating to others. What produces their life circumstances? How can you begin to make sense of the economic, the cultural, the media forces that bring people together ... or separate them ... and that give people a sense of their identity and their likely path in the world?

That's the second plank of contemplative education: you and your relationship with the world.

But for me all of this is heading to the third plank, the third dream and facet of a Naropa education. And that is: "to change the world for the better." Wow, think

on that: the goal of a Naropa education isn't simply to have you understand yourself ... or even understand others. We're hoping, no we're aiming, to educate you to make a difference in the world.

Now there are a lot of places out there that claim to be teaching people how to be empowered, to go out there and affect change. But if you've begun with yourself – as you do at Naropa, learning who you are – then when you begin to face the challenge of “how *can* I change the world?” “what part can I play?” *then* you start formulating a response with a great deal of humility. A great deal of uncertainty, because what you think will make the world a better place may not be what those people or that group or that organization or that movement or that issue will respond to. It's crucial that you be capable of judging what difference in the world you see for yourself and what the world wants, or needs, from you.

And so while Naropa will provide you with the tools to work with others to make a difference in the world – whether it's through your writing, whether it's through your performing arts, whether it's through your understanding of psychology and group process, your advocacy for environmental issues... whatever the particular tools you bring together in your education – I can assure you that we are not training you to be foot soldiers for any kind of movement that has an agenda. To change the world for the better in part means understanding what the world is asking of you.

Now, the truth is, I don't know what that is. I don't know what your situation is. I don't know what part of the world you want to make a difference in. That's what this journey is about. Begin with yourself. Open up to the reality of the world. And in the process of learning to live with yourself and your relationship to the world, begin to ask the very humble question, “What difference *can* I make?” Other questions you might consider: “What would it mean to make a difference?” “And what would it mean for a difference to be made that's not my own agenda, that's not my own story?” That's a tall task; it's an immense task.

You'll begin answering these kinds of key questions with what are called the core courses. Over the course of the first year, you will take a course called the Contemplative Practices Seminar. Everyone is required to take it. The reason for that is because we need to invite you to go deeply into your own mental and emotional process. You will have the opportunity over the next several years to take additional courses in meditation, other contemplative arts, but we begin the first year with this seminar to orient you to the world's wisdom traditions about what it means to be a human being, to slow down the inner chatter and to begin just sitting and being with yourself.

Another course you will take during the first year is the Diversity Seminar. The Diversity Seminar is in part a course about the history, the sociology, the politics, the geopolitics of American society, American multiculturalism. There will be some reference to the larger global world because we are not an isolated

container. The purpose of the course is to help you begin thinking about the world as you will encounter it. This is a world that is not completely of your own making – it's a world that has patterns, dynamics, injustices as well as some wonderful accomplishments. And so the goal of the diversity seminar is to help you begin to situate yourself in relationship to others. You will learn about differences – differences between people – and how to be in relationship to those who are different.

In your second year you'll take the Civic Engagement Seminar, in which the goal, as I indicated in that three part process, is to move you out into the world. Here's where you'll get to ask those questions: "What *can* I do in the world?" "What skills do I need?" As part of this course, you might involve yourself in a volunteer group; you might serve as a peer mentor in one of the middle schools we are affiliated with; you might go to a homeless shelter and see what use you can be. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what setting you select. You'll be drawn to whatever context outside Naropa makes sense to you. And the goal of the Civic Engagement Seminar is for you to begin addressing who you can be in a world of difference, where you can try to make a difference.

Those are the three core seminars.

I'm hoping that, in the rest of your coursework here at Naropa, you will ask yourself: "How does this course contribute to my understanding of myself, my understanding of the other, my understanding of how to make a difference in the world?" And each course, I would say, will balance those three dimensions of the Naropa education differently. In some courses there will be very little discussion about how you can make a difference in the world – the focus will primarily be on you. In other courses, there's very little overt contemplative or meditative practice; you might be expected to focus more on some discipline or body of knowledge.

The key here is that there isn't a checklist – it's not "oh, this course checks off that aspect of contemplative education." No, these are different pieces of a larger puzzle – they each contribute to a larger puzzle. So instead of thinking of the triad (personal exploration, the world as it is, making a difference in the world) as a set of categories to place the rest of your courses in, think of it as a framework that prompts an inner dialogue you're involved in. Actually, it's an inner dialogue and it's a dialogue with Naropa – your faculty, peers in your classes, and others. The dialogue addresses these questions: "How does this course help me on my path to understand myself?" "What contribution does this course, this set of experiences, this assignment, etc. make in helping me understand the world around me?" "As a result of this piece of my overall education, how am I better able to make the difference I want to make in the world?" The burden is on you. We'll provide you with the clay, the tools, the experiences. You need to examine and integrate these three aspects of your education. Keep these three themes, these three ideas, alive during the course of your work at Naropa.

And if you're not getting it, if you're not sure at any given moment what the answer is, well first off, that's ok, that's good, because the answers will take a lifetime. But second, that's what your faculty are here for. That's what office hours are for. For those of you who've not been in college or university before, or perhaps you've taken time off or come directly from high school, university is very different from high school. Your relationship with your faculty members outside the classroom is just as important as what you do inside the classroom. That's why faculty have office hours. Make use of them. Hunt your faculty down. Meet with your advising staff also. All these folks are here to help you figure out – both in the classroom and outside – how to make sense of your Naropa education. If you have been invited to join with a mentoring group this year, please, please participate. I know it will be really easy to sleep in late on a Friday morning when your mentor wants to get together with the group over coffee. Please, please make use of that wonderful resource. This is another opportunity for you to become intentional about building your Naropa education.

Usually I do a more lighthearted talk. For some reason this morning, this is what I'm bringing to the situation today. This is a real important journey. There's a lot at stake for you. There's a lot at stake for Naropa to get this right. And so I guess the final person you should know you could come to speak with about this is me. My office is on the second floor of the Lincoln Building. Elizabeth is my gatekeeper. That doesn't mean that she keeps me in, that means that she keeps you out. [nervous laughter] No, no, that's not true. It's just that she schedules my life. I want to hear from you, whether you're one of my mentees or protégés or not. I'd like to know when things are going well, but I'm also here when things are not going well. I mean, if you didn't get a good grade on a particular assignment, don't come to me about that. But the bigger questions, like "What is this Naropa thing all about?" I'd really like to hear from you because ultimately it's my responsibility to make sure that this vision that I've articulated permeates the curriculum, permeates the program that you are studying.

Alright, I've taken up about 18 minutes of your time. Any thoughts? Any questions, any challenges, any reactions? I'll be happy to answer a few questions. [Inaudible; question-and-answers]

Well, thank you for listening.

Good luck. Stay in touch.