

The Contemplating Teacher: Taking the Long View

Lee Worley

5/2/05

When we observe the communication between parent and child or between a teacher and a student we readily see that relationship is fundamental to learning. Beyond these primary relationships, there are numbers of interlocking relationships that either help or hinder learning: between the student and other students, teacher and other teachers, the class and its teacher and both class and teacher with the space, time and environment. Widening the circle even further, we see the effect of other relationships such as that between teacher and parents, student and her parents, teachers and administrators and, of course, that of teacher and student to the lesson itself. Relationship, or the lack of it, really matters.

Perhaps it is the very obviousness of this truism that obscures its importance. Without taking time here to investigate why relationship has been so marginalized, ignored or left to chance in our teaching and learning arenas, I propose to discuss one approach to healing these rifts and returning the heart connection to the learning process. It is called “contemplative education” and it begins with the most intimate of relationships – relationship with oneself.

“Contemplative education” is becoming an increasingly popular term in higher education in the United States. This doesn’t surprise me. Thirty years ago Chogyam Trungpa, a Tibetan meditation master who had been transplanted to this country, identified what wasn’t working in our educational system and as a consequence founded Naropa Institute. He perceived that education must speak to and train the whole person, body, mind and spirit and also train the body, mind and spirit’s relationship to its environment on as broad a scale as possible. This was true then and now and will continue to be true as we move further into the 21st century. It remains true despite innovations in computer technology or other devices that may pop up. Surprisingly it has taken American education some time to acknowledge this need for an education that transcends factual

information within discreet areas of expertise and instead focuses on radically transforming the whole being and his or her world. Foundations such as the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and Fetzer Institute have recently begun to proclaim that, "...a fully democratic society requires a system of higher education which trains students in reflective insight as well as critical thinking."¹

This is learning that includes reflection as well as analysis, focus on personal growth as well as skill mastery, developing tolerance for ambiguity, openness to reframing, imagination as a way of understanding as important as rational argument.²

While the mainstream may take time to catch up, at Naropa University and elsewhere this approach is gaining attention. The question is, how can we deliver such an education?

What comes up urgently and often in discussions at Naropa is a need to find a language to explain what we mean by contemplative education. How can we teach it or market it if we can't talk about it, describe it, label it? How do we even know what it is if we can't explain it in our catalogue and web pages? Some of us who were around Naropa in its early days have doubts about this categorizing and labeling process. Thirty years ago when we brought our raw recruit minds to the task of creating this educational model, we didn't call it "contemplative education," and we didn't call Naropa a university. For the most part we were a bunch of disaffected teachers, philosophers and artists who had begun to meditate, or were at least thinking about doing so, and who were intrigued to explore what meditative mind might bring to the ways we approach our art forms or academic disciplines. Most importantly, we were interested to know if there was a way to alter both our minds and education for the better.

In retrospect, I think it fortunate that in the mid-seventies we had so little in the way of resources. There was no way to get important quickly. No money, no space, no skillful marketing department, and very few students. We had time to explore the meditative mind, to work with things simply: body as body, thoughts as thoughts, space as whatever

¹ The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, www.contemplativemind.org.

² Marilyn McEntyre, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA as quoted in Survey of Transformative and Spiritual Dimensions of Higher Education published by the Fetzer Institute, www.contemplativemind.org/resources/pubs/fetzer_report.pdf p. 14, c.2004

space it was we had, making things up as we went along as only beginners can. Without the pressure to create learning experiences designed to help students pass tests, we gave our experience to our students and they, in turn, tuned in to meditation and dropped out of the competitive learning game, generously giving their experience back to us. No recipe can replace this trial and error approach to learning. Naropa University's 30-year history of struggle and perseverance by faculty who sacrificed comfort and recognition in favor of their meditation practice cannot be overlooked in the development of its contemplative message.

I suggest, as others have, that delivering a contemplative education begins with having a contemplative teacher, a contemplative educator. As Naropa University assumes a place within the academy, it has a responsibility to share its discoveries and heritage. Starting with the development of the teacher is good news since it means not having to rely on a supportive administration or special academic content, the perfect space, or parental permission to convey a contemplative message. Modeling this message in body and speech - how you listen and what you notice, may be more trustworthy than any philosophical frame. Of course there are techniques that offer support to the contemplative teacher. Listening to the sound of a bell or gong, keeping a clean room, creating a shrine alcove, pausing between activities, bowing before and after class, rearranging the desks, and alternating physical with mental activity help facilitate a contemplative message, but contemplative education is not a costume or a theory. These same techniques could benefit any teaching situation, or they could simply be recipe ideas. Without testing them in the fire of the contemplative mind they remain rather awkward, maybe even weird and will soon be abandoned by the teacher who isn't doing the necessary "inner work."

THE CONTEMPLATING TEACHER

If we begin to think of the meaning of "contemplative" as an active verb, the contemplative teacher is one who contemplates things. Experiment with an adjective and you get: the contemplating teacher, the contemplating education. Contemplative implies deep listening, deep hearing, deep questioning, considering, consideration, bringing the

whole body and mind to bear on the moment. Stripped of the somewhat cloister-like or “spiritual” connotations of the word “contemplative,” the contemplating teacher is none other than one who is able to fully attend to the student, the subject, and the moment at hand, warmly and without fear. There’s nothing unique here.

“My religion is kindness,” the Dalai Lama replies, when asked about his religion. A contemplating teacher is, above all, a kind teacher. Buddhism teaches that kindness, or *maitri* or *metta*, begins with being kind to oneself. Not theoretically, but actually, when we are good to ourselves, we manifest goodness and are naturally good to other beings. How can we learn this? Or rather, how do we know when we are *not* being good to ourselves? Is good-to-self the chocolate we allow after a hard day? The early morning jog around the block? Is it getting sick so we can take a day off? Do we really know when we are being kind to our body, mind and spirit? Basic goodness, or *bodhicitta*, the fundamental goodness that supports life is not easy for Westerners to accept as the nature of things. We can cite lots of historical reasons why this is so, of course. In *Shambhala: the Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Chogyam Trungpa says,

Having never developed sympathy or gentleness towards themselves, they cannot experience harmony or peace within themselves, and therefore, what they project to others is also inharmonious and confused. Instead of appreciating our lives, we often take our existence for granted or we find it depressing and burdensome.³

MEDITATION

The first task of the contemplating teacher is to uncover in both her body and mind an unshakeable conviction that goodness is basic, intrinsic, firm. This will not come just through rewiring our conceptual frames. Nor will it come through a course of psychiatric probing although this may accompany the uncovering work that we do with ourselves. We need to actually sit down, stop doing stuff and begin to take a look at what goes on in what we call “our mind.” In Buddhism, this is called meditation.

We need to meditate. What Buddhists call meditation or *formless* practice is called contemplation in some Catholic traditions, while the word meditation refers to meditating

³ Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* p. 35

on *something*. My Tibetan teacher, the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche calls Buddhism a “science of mind.”

Meditation means to become familiarized with something, a pattern or an experience. Meditation is basically a method to develop realization and to familiarize oneself with one’s own basic nature of mind. Thus, the meditation practice—whatever practice we do—should be something that helps us develop our mental strength, the strength of mindfulness, the strength of inner peace, and the strength to deal with the negative disturbing emotions of our mind.⁴

Meditation (or contemplation) is a tool of inquiry into this most personal of experiences: who am I? To develop kindness to myself, I need to take a good long look at what I call “myself” so I can begin to appreciate the blessing of having a body and a mind, the working basis for loving and uplifting our world.

Sometimes meditation also is connected with achieving a higher state of mind by entering into a trance or absorption state of some kind. But here we are talking about a completely different concept of meditation: unconditional meditation, without any object or idea in mind. In the Shambhala tradition meditation is simply training our state of being so that our mind and body can be synchronized. Through the practice of meditation, we can learn to be without deception, to be fully genuine and alive.⁵

Are there ways other than meditating to accomplish this radical shift from outward doing to inward attending? Some say no. My feeling is that since meditation is simple, without much contrivance or need for expensive equipment and since it can be done by anyone, anywhere, why seek further? But, it takes time. As teachers we already know that for students to learn something takes time. We understand that without repetition and integration the lesson will not stick. Why should we expect that our own learning curve is more accelerated than that of our students? What makes us think that we can apply a quick fix to becoming kind to ourselves? We might be kinder to our students by behaving in ways that support this message of patience. We need to spend time practicing. Life takes time!

⁴ Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, *Shamatha* p.9

⁵ CTR, *Shambhala* p. 37

ASPIRATION

The teacher need not wait until meditative mind has brought about a transformation to enter the classroom. With practice, “me first” transforms into “we” and eventually becomes, “all beings are my guests.” Remarkably, the earnest efforts that the meditator puts into the development of a meditation practice begin to flavor his or her manifestation in the world right away.

When Naropa Institute started in 1976, most faculty members were just beginning to experiment with a meditation practice. Meditation had not had time to work its magic in and on us. However, we were very committed to it and to Naropa’s flourishing in the United States. As a new contemplating teacher, it is fruitful if a few moments of aspirational contemplation precede daily meditation practice. Be honest about this. It is better to state as an aspiration the hope that meditating will enable you to tolerate Jamie’s completely off the wall interruptions today than to waste time theorizing about a better world down the line. Why do you want to be this contemplative teacher *today*? What do you hope to achieve for yourself and for those you teach *today*? The aspiration could be something quite different next time you sit down. Our MA Education students report that after only four weeks of daily meditation at their first summer intensive they are able to manifest differently (and get different results) in their classrooms. However, this is only a beginning to a contemplative life.

Aspiring and meditating are the base and the ground and never become *passé*, but these alone do not make a contemplative teacher. Once we leave the meditation cushion and enter daily activity the pressures of modern life will easily and quickly toss our contemplating mind overboard and we’re back to business as usual. I call it “knee-jerk reactivity.” This won’t always be the case, but it is true for *a long time*. Part of becoming kind to self is becoming more relaxed about your imperfections and backslidings in this area. When you lovingly accept even the worst parts of your psyche you can begin to identify yourself as a contemplative educator. And even this acceptance is fleeting and fickle and must be trained over and over again.

SPACE AWARENESS

Luckily there are some other useful tools for those of us who must face the pressures of the day-to-day while we slowly grow into our contemplative manifestation.

The first tool that always comes to my mind in this regard is space. I was fortunate to have trained in a technique called “space awareness” by my teacher Chogyam Trungpa. Like meditation, space awareness needs to be consistently practiced to be effective, but its results begin to affect one relatively quickly. Why? Because it is not as much an elimination of habitual patterns or a retraining process as it is a simple matter of recognition. Space has been with us all along. We wouldn’t be alive without it and yet we never notice it. Begin to notice it and your world will become more spacious. Obvious, isn’t it?

There are several things that space awareness can accomplish if you give it a chance. All of these will move you in the direction of becoming a contemplating teacher. To begin, direct your attention to visual space and practice seeing *everything* that your open eyes take in. Don’t discriminate. This page you are presently reading is no more important than the wall beyond it. Let what exists at the periphery of your vision be equal to the words you are looking at. Eventually it becomes possible to see everything your eyes are seeing all at the same time. You can practice this while you meditate. Let everything in front of your open eyes just be there. In the beginning you may either feel like a zombie or too open and vulnerable. We do a great deal of fending off by the way we use our eyes. However, the quality of non-discrimination that this exercise fosters has implications for non-discrimination in the classroom as well as for taking in both the details of students and the totality of the moment, including but not limited to, individual physical forms.

Once you have trained in this visual awareness, begin practicing space awareness with your other senses. Let the open eyes be accompanied by open ears, nose, tongue, body. Feel everything you are feeling. Feel inside and outside yourself. Feel your body in relation to the walls around you, or if you are outside, feel your being in relation to the vastness of open space: space above your head all the way to the sun, space below your

feet down into the core of the earth. Feel space extending out in all directions, radiating out from you. From your perspective you are the Center of the Universe. Become a little dot in the midst of the galaxy; stretching how much space you are the center of.

One result of this practice is an increased awareness of the oneness of things. When you can hold the whole classroom space in your awareness, you experience the harmony, the rhythm or the dance of it. You are part of the interplay as are things. This builds tremendous confidence and takes pressure off of you as the focal point both for you and your students. You begin to meet them, and they you, somewhere in a middle land between you. You share the dance of communication, of learning – a place where we *are* all one.

A more subtle side to this practice is that as you become aware of the space around your body, it begins to define your body. Just as the “ground” space in painting reveals the “figure,” so the awareness of the space around you begins to define your body space. In the theater this is called “presence.” Actors know that presence is crucial on the stage. Without this ingredient a performer, however intelligent, can easily be overlooked by the audience. Conventional theater wisdom used to say that presence was just something you were born with, that some of us have it and some of us don’t. Not true. Presence means you are physically aware of your body/mind. Consequently, the more you are present in your body, the more presence you have. The more you are aware of the space around your body, the more it serves to create a definition, a container, for that body. A “present” teacher has a better chance of holding the attention of his or her audience of students.

This exercise can also be practiced while meditating, perhaps at the start of a session by taking a moment to expand your awareness in all directions as far as you can. However, since meditation is done in a sitting posture, generally this is less effective for total body presence than, say, expanding awareness while taking a walk, a shower, or even while standing in front of your class. In the beginning the exercise may make you feel uneasy. We tend to spend much of our time living in our heads so becoming aware of the rest of this thing we call “our body” (and generally immediately dismiss) disturbs us. As

teachers, we sometimes hide much of our bodies behind desks. When we lecture, we have the mask of the lectern, and on-line we can be invisible altogether. I do hope that the body as a tool for communication is not obsolete. So much can be said with it that can't be nuanced any other way. Students and young people in general need the reassurance of "body-ness" in their lives to inspire them to wholesomeness. A contemplating teacher is one who thinks deeply with the whole body and is not afraid to let that body interact with space.

Chogyam Trungpa coined a saying for his Mudra Theater Group, "You are your own mudra." Mudra means sign or symbol. A stop sign could be considered a mudra, that red, six-sided thing with the letters S T O P means you should stop your car. Buddha is portrayed using different hand mudras: listening, teaching, and touching the earth. Each one tells a story of one of Buddha's manifestations. Indian classical dance drama is performed with a series of hand gestures which are called mudras. Mudra, in the context of Trungpa's theater, meant that your being, your very presence is your mudra. You are your own mudra, sign or symbol of yourself. Contemplating this will support your aspiration to become a contemplative teacher. Students may forget the lesson plan in a few months but learn far more important lessons by experiencing your mudra.

As each student is also the sign or symbol of him or herself, your recognition and acceptance of this empowers the student, enabling her to accept who she is, not getting confused by the world's suggestions that she is not really anything until she is "grown up," gets all "A's," smokes cigarettes, graduates, or becomes rich and famous. By becoming more confident that she is fundamentally fine, she will be more likely to allow others to see her. She learns to appreciate herself now, as she is.

None of us are what we once were or what we will later become. Just look at a snapshot of yourself as a child. Can you really say *that* is the same person as you? We try to prepare our students to become good, educated citizens of the world. Yet is the world we are preparing them for the world we entered? Was our preparation adequate for the experiences we met in the world? Will the world they enter be the same one as the one

we see today? All is uncertain, both the past and the future. What do we, as educators, have to offer? In theater language, I would say that our job is to support them in being fully alive—body, mind, spirit in this very moment. They need to have the tools to improvise, unafraid of life as it shows up. They and each moment are in a dialogue, a dance, and their confidence in themselves as good partners needs our support, nurturance, patience and recognition. Despite the seemingly counter-productive smoke screens students sometimes adopt, there shines a light. We must meet it with our own. Mudra to mudra. This is now-ness: the living, fleeting moments. We must allow NOW to be more precious than past regrets or future goals for our students, of course, but before we can do that, it must be true for ourselves.

SLOWING DOWN

These practices can be aids that enable the aspiring contemplating teacher to slow down. Slowing down is not the goal, but without such slowing down, nothing contemplative will ever emerge. Yet there seems to be so much we must do. We race along barely keeping up with the workload. The very idea of slowing down goes against reason in this busy time of our lives. However, our meditation practice suggests to us that we, in fact, have time to “do nothing.” We begin to feel supported by space that at first seemed to be only the nothingness between things. By getting in touch with our body and noticing when our mind has raced ahead and left body behind, slowing down starts to occur all by itself. Speed doesn’t mean going quickly; it means that the mind is going faster than the body can keep up with. Slowing down doesn’t mean becoming dull witted, rather that body and mind are both going at the same pace. A music teacher in our MA program reported:

I breathed in the energy of my students as they entered the room. I knew the lesson I had planned failed yesterday with 4th period. So we began with a bow. Then, with frantic energy, I began teaching dotted sixteenth notes. I could feel the attention of the entire room. I had matched their energy and they were with me. I literally ran around the room touching shoulders, tapping heads and loving sixteenth notes. Staying awake to the space, I knew we had become a community. Each eye was on me. Hands were in the air to solve the next rhythm. The rhythms got harder and harder. Back slapping, high fives student to student, and glowing faces were all the “criteria” I needed to recognize learning was taking place. Building on this energy, I slowed the pace moving to the next activity.

Community had been established. The class moved together in harmony with mind and body exhibiting a passion for learning.⁶

Slowing down can also mean going at a slower pace. Our teachers report that with the help of meditation practice, burn out is less frequent.

Today I had a beautiful experience of slowing down. This afternoon I took my class on a fall walk. I asked the children to look for signs of fall and winter coming and to collect at least five different types of leaves. I explained that we would be walking slower than normal because we needed to be on the lookout for treasures. As we set off I asked that the children not pass me by. I set a slow and steady pace, pausing to notice leaves or a bird chirping. The kids seemed to really notice and feel this energy and take on the slower pace without hesitation. It was a lovely afternoon and I enjoyed the time as much as the children did.⁷

MISCONCEPTIONS AND HESITATIONS

Some confusions inevitably seem to arise when discussing contemplative education. The first is that this is too “easy,” that a contemplative education lacks rigor. Why this reaction? Perhaps because it suggests that our Western academic paradigm of competition, success versus failure, aggression to self and others, factual accumulation, and the elevation of intellect over emotional intuitive power are the “best” ways. Teachers who, as students, were trained in “acing” exams, accepting humiliating comments on papers until they “learned” what would please, and who were measured against other students’ performances or learning styles unconsciously confuse these abuses with what it takes to learn. As a young Buddhist Studies student, the first exam I took was an oral one-on-one exam. Although I had studied hard, I was nervous, unable to answer the question. My teacher then took me through a series of questions, building up the logic based on my responses, leading me from simple foundations to more complex understandings until, voila, I understood and was able to answer his original question. It was a shock to realize that the teacher wanted me to understand the material, not simply to judge me negatively for my inability to answer correctly.

A contemplative teaching approach requires me to become more responsible, even interested in my students’ errors. I must ask myself: What have I failed to convey that

⁶ From a report by JC a MA Contemplative Education student. 2001

⁷ From a report by DA a MA Contemplative Education student. 2001

needs to be communicated for this student to understand the material I am presenting? It doesn't always work, but many times, as in my case with the Buddhist teacher, it is not that the student doesn't "know" the answer but that the pressure of the moment has created panic, or the development of the logic hasn't been articulated clearly enough so that the student can feel it personally. Fear and self-doubt may be clouding the student's mind. If I see my students as inherently wise, the burden falls to me to bring forth that wisdom. Isn't that what the word "education" means?

Students are increasingly taught to live in their heads and to ignore the wisdom of the body as inferior. To have a consistent meditation practice is a rigorous task. It is totally rigorous, even scary to include your body in your understanding of how things are. Without the wisdom of the body, its rhythms and its speeds we may think many things, but we will never heal the great dualistic rifts that are tearing our global nest apart.

Some teachers assume that students are lacking something and that our job is to point out this insufficiency and correct it if we can. Recently I was told by a student that a particular teacher never gives a grade higher than C on a first paper. The students are expected to consult with this teacher, find out what needs improvement, and incorporate it into the next paper which, if properly done, may receive a B. A's are withheld until the very end of the course. While this may be an effective way of getting what you want, my student's cynicism when she told me about the method suggests that the real message is, "do it my way" or be penalized. An alternative approach might be to see each individual student as worthy of an A until such time as disproved.

Another confusion is that "contemplative" is often equated with "calm." Even if we are enthusiastic about meditation as a path to a more wholesome educational approach, we may mistake becoming more relaxed as teachers with being "contemplative." A laid back teacher isn't the same thing as a contemplative teacher. At times intensity will serve students better. Sometimes a strong response, a strong opinion, (not hostile, but given with a full heart) contains or evokes more of a teaching moment than a gentle smile. A student who comes to class in tears may evoke a discussion that is richer than the agenda

for the day. A contemplative teacher is willing to lean into the situations which come up in the classroom fearlessly and without self-preservation.

Timothy Walker in 'Elemental Wisdom in Teacher Training'⁸ addresses this issue of emotional volatility in the teaching relationship:

True communication between teacher and student does not mean that there is always peace and harmony. On the contrary, differences of opinion, struggles, rebelliousness, and conflict are what put good communication to the test. The neurotic approach is to avoid conflict and ignore differences at whatever cost because there is fear of losing contact. The result is a superficial relationship based on half-truths, lies and meaningless communication designed to maintain the veneer of friendliness.⁹

IMPROVISATION AND TENDER HEART

Meditative awareness or mindfulness of the total space means that there is no bias toward the pleasant at the expense of the nitty-gritty. Once the thorny moment has passed, the contemplative teacher knows how to let it go and move on or integrate it with whatever arises next. In theatrical terms, this is known as improvisation. A contemplative education works to prepare students for a world that will call upon them to improvise. Your improvising mudra can give students the courage to meet their world with the same freshness and non-attachment as you have.

A contemplative approach to teaching does not imply that the content of the class has to change. Any material can be presented in a genuine, gentle and spacious way. Engaging the students is our first responsibility as educators and the contemplating approach provides students with the room to connect rather than the need to defend against engagement. In the Shambhala tradition, "the tender heart of sadness" refers to our ability to relate with one another. This tender heart is nothing other than the loving kindness that we first cultivate in ourselves and then extend to others unconditionally. This tenderness is a fearless recognition that each one, teacher and student, is alone. Though collaboration with fellow contemplatives is preferable, this may not always be possible. If we wait for

⁸ Quoted by Richard Brown in "Communication" an on-line lecture to the MA Education students, 2004,
⁹ 'Elemental Wisdom in Teacher Training' Timothy Walker Ph.D. in Educational Foundations, Dalhousie University School of Education, March 1995 c. Timothy R. Walker, 1995 p. 36

such a situation to appear we may wait a long time. Hopefully, our fearless leadership to move in this direction, coupled with the good results it evokes, will bring others to seek out this aspiration and these methods. The courage to change and develop our tender hearts is a contemplative path.

Because of our practice on the meditation cushion and our willingness to be with our own heart and mind, we develop good contemplative habits that will help us be present in our classrooms without the restless wanting to be somewhere else. Chaos can be accepted with steadiness; confusion can be met with gladness. By learning to stay with the vicissitudes of our own minds through our meditation practice we learn how to offer this gift of staying with situations to our students, our families, our school board, and our nation. I heard a young movie star who was a high school drop out say on a TV talk show that the teachers that had meant something to her were those who “wanted to be there.” This too defines the contemplative educator.

Teaching tools can be learned, but the mind and heart that use them only come through developing loving kindness toward ourselves and the willingness to share the tender heart of sadness and aloneness with others. Cultivation of this presence will inevitably suggest tools for contemplative learning that will be the most effective ones for the moment. And, should they fail to have the desired effect, this same loving kindness and fearless confidence allows us to drop the day so that we relate to tomorrow with a fresh start. Practicing with sincerity and the aspiration to become kind is contemplative action. Taking the long view is taking a contemplative view.