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## **Address on Contemplative Education**

By Anne Z. Parker PhD

I am honored to be asked to step into the shoes of our awesome President for this address. That formal sounding phrase does not quite capture what I feel – a sense of delight to have this conversation with you, a conversation about the heart of Naropa’s contemplative education.

Welcome! I know you have been welcomed quite a bit over these three days of Orientation, but one can never be welcomed too much. I particularly want to welcome you and the inner and outer journeys it took to arrive here. I also want to honor all of the traditions, lineages, and heritages that you bring with you

So we are going to have a conversation about **What is Contemplative Education**. First let’s ground our conversation by offering thanks to the land, this place where we will study and learn and that will be a great teacher for us. Thanks to the first peoples of this place who have cared for this land over millennia. Thanks also to their present day descendants who care for it still. Thanks to our ancestors and families and welcome to us who will study and learn here and care for this land and place. Okay now let’s call out all the names of the places you are from!

[Call out]

In this conversation we are going to explore what contemplative education means and the notion of contemplative practice that underlies it. I thought about using visuals for this talk. I love visual learning, but I decided not to use any. I decided that today we would tune in together to the “inner net” (pointing to heart) together instead. I am going to ask a lot of questions. Remember there are no right answers to these questions, only your answers.

I expect that there as many definitions of and brilliant insights about contemplative educational and contemplative practice as there are people in this room. That is as it should be. We may have many ways of speaking about this, and yet we will share much, often below the level of words. We have all

been drawn to study this and, in fact, to co-create what it means. Reflect for a moment: What is your definition of contemplative education? Now speak to one person beside you and share your definitions. Next we will share some of what you heard.

[Reflect, Discuss with neighbor, Share in whole group]

Contemplative education and practice are based on our genuine direct perception. There are many forms of contemplative practice that can be woven into a contemplative education such as yoga, t'ai chi, brushstroke, flower arranging, sitting meditation, non-violent communication, and so many more techniques. With all of them we can test what is true for us. Here in this conversation we will test or perhaps taste what we are discussing in a short form of meditation.

In the tradition of the founder of Naropa Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, that is the whole Tibetan tradition including all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, a three part process of learning is often discussed. The three part sequence includes: Hearing, Contemplation and Meditation. To me this means that we first hear something, a teaching, some idea or information. Then we digest or chew it over within the context of our own perceptions and thoughts. Finally we suspend attention to thought, rest with the breath, and simply meditate. We will now try a taste of this. I will offer a definition of **contemplative practice**, we will pause to contemplate it, then I will ring the bell and we will meditate.

So let us consider three definitions of contemplative practice that we often use here at Naropa:

1. "Deep Listening to Self and Other" /Contemplate/ [Bell] Meditate
2. "Mindfulness Awareness"/ Contemplate/[Bell] Meditate
3. "Presence"/ Contemplate/[Bell] Meditate

Following this experience let's share some thoughts and perceptions. (Audience shares). Now we will continue our conversation and periodically I will ring the bell so we can stop and digest and then meditate with what we are learning.

A Naropa University contemplative education seeks to prepare us to "meet the world as it is and change it for the better". To me this is all one connected idea, however for the purposes of exploring its meaning we will discuss the first part: "meeting the world as it is". I feel, personally, the contemplative practice

is one of the greatest gifts we can gather in our life time. It gives us the tools to meet ourselves as we are.

So why for you is contemplative practice useful, or how will it be part of your life and education?

[Reflect, Discuss with neighbor, Share in whole group]

Wonderful thoughts! Yes it is such a key to compassion, inner sustainability and a key to sanity.

Now, how does contemplative practice relate to your discipline? Some of you have chosen your majors but other have not yet. If not, select an area of learning that you are passionate about to consider.

[Reflect, Discuss with neighbor, Share in whole group]

Okay now some more questions? Will talking about c contemplative education and practice be enough? No it is experiential. Studying at Naropa and not trying out a contemplative practice is kind of like sex without the organism, we need to feel. Our fabulous colleague Robert Spellman in Visual Arts once talked about encountering a student who has made it through their whole Naropa education without actually trying out contemplative practice. He told this story to offer at metaphor of what that was like. Imagine you are going on a two week walking trip across the beautiful landscape of Tuscany in Italy. You head off and later I meet you after a week, half way through. I ask you “How is the land and the walking. “Fabulous” you say “just absolutely beautiful”. “How is the food” I ask. “Oh I’m fine, I am eating my granola bars” you say. “What! This is Italy; the food is fabulous Mange Mange (Eat! Eat!)” I exclaim. So you can see in this metaphor going to Naropa and not trying on contemplative practice is like walking through Tuscany and not trying the food! There are a lot of wonderful things cooking at Naropa .Try them!

[BELL]

So, is contemplative practice invisible? Will we work hard at this and no one in the culture around us can see it or value it? Sometimes in this culture it seems invisible but really it is not. Many years ago in the 1970’s I was just getting my meditation practice up and running, trying to set aside a time each morning to meditate. At that time I was living out in central Australia studying ethobotany with the Aboriginal communities there. One day I woke up late. I was supposed to meet some elder women and talk about plants with them. They had come from far off to meet me. I decided to skip the meditation and

got very fussy organizing my plant presses notes, books tape recorder etc. I walked out to meet them. They were sitting on the ground near my neighbors' hose. As I approached and got within 15 feet I could feel it. Everyone one could see I had not cleaned my mind, as if I had pea soup all down my shirt or had forgotten to brush my teeth after eating blueberries, it was obvious to everyone. Not a word was spoken and no judgment was passed. I could just feel it. So I walked to them and sat in the circle in silence and did my meditation. When I was done, still not word spoken, everyone nodded and we all got up to go look at plants. I feel we all can see each other. We can strengthen that here at Naropa and in our larger culture, we can learn to see each other better, and thus support this important work of being human.

[BELL]

Will people in our family or among or friends think this contemplative education is weird? They might, but our culture is changing. There is much more awareness of the value of contemplative education and contemplative practice. In the 1980's I was in graduate school at the University of Oregon. Five of us graduate students who were TAs shared one office. We got to know each other well. One of the senior PhD students from that office, Herschel, was invited to be one of only 10 Geography PhD graduates to present his dissertation research at the American Association of Geography's annual conference. I went to his talk. He was so calm, clear and present, more so than any of the other dissertation presenters. I went up to him afterwards and said "That was so wonderful, what did you do?" He replied "I did what I always do." "What is that?" I asked. "I went at lunch time down the hall to the map room (where maps were stored) and locked the door and meditated during lunch" he replied. How funny - we had shared the office for a year and I didn't know that. Meanwhile each day at lunch I went to the most remote corner of the gym where no one could see me and I meditated there. We would never have dreamed of telling our professors, they would have thought we were nuts or flaky. Now times have changed, people know the value of contemplative practices and meditation. Especially here at Naropa you can really explore this realm.

Does contemplative practice (s) need to be part of a spiritual or even religious path? My answer is No, Yes and Yes, No, meaning that we each have our own path. For some people it is helpful to sit in the forest with the trees to support their contemplative practice. For others talking with friends is ideal. Others prefer a group and structured trainings. We each find our own way. And it is always good to keep an eye on power and self empowerment along the way.

Will contemplative practice protect us from all suffering or conflict? No, I feel. It can be away to understand suffering and see its nature. Will the people at Naropa University be perfect because they meditate? No. We are training in meeting reality as it is and reality is everywhere and anywhere. We're learning the keys to anywhere. Conflict and challenge can be a key to our learning. What about when you reach your darkest depths, as we do at times as part of the path of being human, how will contemplative practice show up there? I feel that is it visceral, your body knows. There is language to hint at this. For me some words from traditions I have studied with remind me of this, although is it really a felt sense. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there is the bodhisattva vow, the vow to serve all life for all lifetimes. In the European mystery tradition there is a saying "No matter how dark the path the initiate will find the way" that reminds us that the darkness is part of the path. Contemplative practice prepares us for the whole journey of being human.

[BELL]

Okay Now let's look at the second part of "meeting the world as it is and changing it for the better", the changing for the better part. What us the relationship of contemplative education and service to the world?

[Reflect, Discuss with neighbor, Share in whole group]

How do you feel called to serve? We will simply contemplate and meditate on this question

[BELL]

What is the relationship to land, the earth and all of life round us?

[BELL]

There is urgent work to find social and ecological justice, balance our climate and so many more tasks ahead of us. What other tools besides contemplative practice will you need? Let's call them out to the room

[Call out]

What kind of future do we want to call forth, to co-create?

[BELL]

I would like to read you my favorite quote on this from the Book *Presence* by Senge, Jawoski, Flowers and Scharmer:

“Jonas Salk. The inventor of the polio vaccine, spoke of tapping into the continually, unfolding “dynamism” of the universe...that I can guide by the choices I make.” He felt that this ability had enabled him to reject common wisdom and develop a vaccine that eventually saved millions of lives.

We’ve come to believe that the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s pre-conceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and, as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of “letting come”. Of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping a situation can move from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future”

So as we conclude I would like to say that I see contemplative practice and contemplative education as lifelong endeavors. To paraphrase our President from his lecture in the fall “You’ve got to get a contemplative practice - get one!” There is so much more to say on all this! Do you have any questions?

So I welcome all of your creativity. gifts, heart, and brilliance to meeting the world as it is and changing it for the better!

Take a moment to thank your conversation partners! May you continue to enjoy the conversations today, next week, throughout the semester and during your whole time at Naropa University

Thank you!

[BELL]