

“What is Contemplative Education?”

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Many people ask me, “What is Contemplative Education?” Undoubtedly, you, too, will be asked this very same question, and, over the course of your Naropa career, you will likely form your own answers. This morning, however, my presentation will shed some light on how Naropa, as an institution, understands “contemplative education,” and how we endeavor to teach, apply and practice this understanding.

Contemplative education has many definitions. Yet, they all point to a method of cultivating the mind -- a mind that is both spacious and precise. With a contemplative education, one is able to understand and grapple with the complexities of his or her life, from both an abstract and meta perspective, as well as being able to deploy the full force of one’s logic.

Put simply, contemplative education brings “intellect and intuition” together in a powerful educational unity. Integrating the thinking mind and the feeling heart, allows the students to reflect internally, connecting and dialoging with their own wisdom source. Contemplation is rigor of the heart and mind working together within the body. This unity is inclusive, compassionate, and deeply engaged, grounded in, and drawing inspiration and insight from, the wisdom of spiritual practice. This approach to learning captures the dialectic sparks of East and West working within; it’s the fusion of the two greatest learning philosophies in the history of higher education.

On the Web you will find this definition: “Contemplative education is learning infused with the experience of awareness, insight and compassion for oneself and others, honed through the practice of sitting meditation and other contemplative disciplines. The rigor of these disciplined practices prepares the mind to process information in new and, perhaps, unexpected ways. Contemplative practice unlocks the power of deep, inward observation, enabling the learner to tap into a wellspring of understanding, understanding pertaining to the nature of mind, self and other. An understanding, and

integrated approach, that has been largely overlooked by traditional, western education.”

One might then ask; ‘So Stuart, are you saying that Contemplative Education means self-reflection?’ My response is that self-reflection is important, and it is the first step in Contemplative education. However, it is not the act of contemplation alone that makes Contemplative education so unique. Informed by ancient Eastern educational philosophies, Contemplative education at Naropa joins a rigorous Western liberal arts training and a disciplined training of the heart, forming a contemplative education grounded in academic excellence and spiritual insight.

A friend of mine told me that I should make the following point clear to all of you: without the insight of contemplative practice, there would be no union between “intellect and intuition.” Think about that for a second... The fruits of spiritual practice are what breathes new life into our academic endeavors; it allows our unity of contemplative education to be so powerful. A spiritual practice is imperative for cultivating the mind, the heart and the body.

I wish I could tell you that you don’t have to practice; or one could say have an anchor. But, it’s so vitally important to developing the whole person that we cannot afford to neglect the practice. Neglecting our contemplative practices is just another way of adding confusion to the world. To make this point crystal clear, one needs to understand, the nature of the contemplative professor and/or teacher. Here at Naropa, each professor joins our contemplative tradition while also bringing innovation, creativity and uniqueness, grounded in a spiritual practice, thereby nurturing the overall strength and evolution of contemplative education itself.

Contemplative practice, when understood from an academic perspective, can be seen as a method of discovery attentive to mind itself, grounded in the immediacy of direct experience. This is distinct from personal discovery based on analytical reasoning. Rather, contemplative inquiry is rooted in experience and personal knowledge.

Analytical thinking can explain why something is the way it is, but the thing *itself* can only be experienced and discovered *a posteriori*.

In contemplative education, we bring the personal discovery aspect of contemplative practice together with other forms of inquiry that are based in the academic disciplines – the arts, sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the professions. When students and faculty fully engage in this diverse and integrated inquiry, there is deep learning. Students are able to approach complex academic situations while strongly grounded in personal experience, claiming their education on a passionate, open, and heartfelt level. Through this commitment academic excellence, one uses contemplative discovery as a tool on their spiritual path.

Grounded in academic excellence, one is able to shine the light of contemplative experience investigating life's big existential questions: Who am I? What does freedom mean? How do I lead a life worth living? How can I be of service to others? Such are the questions of one's spiritual path, and, when unified with contemplative inquiry, can be a profound inspiration to one's academic pursuit, breathing life and meaning into one's educational career.

In contrast, these questions, however, are very difficult to approach in a traditional educational curriculum because traditional studies overemphasize intellectual regurgitation without teaching the value of, or giving an opportunity to, experience the subject matter – both intellectually, as well as intuitively.

Naropa, transcending the belief that knowledge arises in the thinking mind only, invites students to embrace the immediacy of their interior lives as a means of fully integrating what they learn. And while these important topics may be void in traditional education, their deep mystery remains at the foundation of our very lives.

At Naropa we believe that if an education cannot tap into the power of this yearning, it leaves out the deeper essence and desires of the whole person, rendering their academic

pursuits hollow, empty of personal passion. This is whole person education.

Do you remember the Naropa Story? The wise old woman, she asked Naropa, “Do you understand the meaning of the words? Do you understand what those words truly mean?” My friends, this is true academic excellence! Elsewhere, people might talk about academic rigor, but, let me tell you, what they are referring to is not true rigor. Walt Whitman speaks to this in a poem, saying:

“Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun.... there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand.... nor look through the eyes of
the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.”

This poem points to the fruits of contemplative education: creativity, empathy, motivation, and insight. Working together, are the foundations of contemplative practice. When cultivated with a rigorous academic education these fruits provide true insight into the nature of self and the world. The result is a deep and personal understanding of the embodied relevancy that academic material has on one’s life.

Nourished by contemplative education, a Naropa student is able to develop a deep and powerful wisdom, pertaining not only to their curricular pursuits, but more importantly, into the very nature of life itself. This is more than meditation. Contemplative education is not solely traditional education with a course in meditation thrown in, but, rather, it is an approach that offers an entirely new way of understanding what it means to be educated in the modern world.

At Naropa, students wholeheartedly engage in mindfulness awareness practices in order to cultivate being present in the moment, ultimately deepening their academic study and educational experience. Woven into the fabric of the curriculum are practices that include: Sitting and Walking Meditation, T'ai – chi, Aikido, Yoga, Prayer, Chanting, Dance, Bodywork, Chinese brushstroke and Ikebana. These practices alter the very landscape of learning and teaching at Naropa and help to nurture our contemplative environment. However, the goal of a Naropa education is not to nurture the solitary contemplative only, but, also, to prepare students to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better. Not to add confusion to the world, but to put their wisdom and insight into practice through creative, helpful and effective action.

A Naropa education provides students with the necessary tools to engage with their community on both an intellectual and heartfelt level, able to enact true positive change. Ghandi said it best, "The best way to find yourself, is to lose yourself in the service of others." At Naropa, Service Learning is a continuation of one's personal meditative practice, bringing that practice out into the world to help others. Service, when used in a contemplative education framework, is a form of meditation leading to profound insight and positive transformation, both personally and globally.

Naropa University is fully dedicated to its mission of 'providing an education which reflects the interplay of discipline and delight, fully preparing its graduates both to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better.' Naropa accomplishes this feat by combining a rigorous academic education with contemplative meditative practice, so that a Naropa graduate is able to develop his or her own internal wisdom, and upon graduation shine that inner light out into the world in which they work. This form of compassionate service allows that very same insight and heart wisdom to flow through all one's deeds and actions, imbuing his or her own self, as well as everyone and everything he or she touches with the benefits of such service. Due to this contemplative personal work, a Naropa graduate affects positive change by bringing uniquely intelligent and powerful action and service into the world.