

BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE CONTEMPLATIVE EDUCATION

Naropa Online Faculty Panel Discussions



Mahāpaṇḍita Nāropa

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CONTEMPLATIVE ASPECT OF NAROPA ONLINE LEARNING

by Jirka Hladiš¹

*Contemplation is not so much concerned about the mere acquisition of knowledge, but about learning that can transform us.*²

The Three-fold Prajñā

Naropa Online instructors follow an ancient Buddhist approach to learning called the Three Prajñās, or three stages of developing wisdom. The first stage is the *wisdom of hearing* which is simple, attentive listening to a lecture, reading a book, etc. This corresponds to a general Western learning model, and that is where it also usually stops. However, in a contemplative approach, this is only a first step. The next step is the second prajñā, the *wisdom of contemplation*. Here, the adept of contemplative learning takes the main notions from the hearing stage in his or her mind's focus and concentrates on them, methodically, in an effort to uncover the deeper meaning of the idea in question. This usually happens in a formal setting, when the students are required to devote specific time to such exercises, such as sitting in a secluded place, undisturbed. The third prajñā, and final level is called the *wisdom of meditation*. Here, the students are usually asked to drop altogether the discursive inquisitive mind, employed in the two previous stages, and just sit in a formal meditation posture, using one of many different meditation techniques. The idea here is that the actual wisdom of realization, which is the ultimate wisdom, will come to the surface of the adept's mind only when any attempts to manipulate it subside. This final wisdom, wisdom of meditation, is the only wisdom which is not temporal, which is internalized and becomes integral part of the student's personality. This is the goal of the Naropa University educational journey.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche,³ a distinguished Naropa online faculty, compares the process of the three prajñās to cooking a meal. The first stage, *hearing*, is likened to reading a cookbook. It is a necessary and important step in the cooking process, but certainly not enough to satisfy one's hunger. An analogy for the second stage, *contemplation*, is the process of cooking the meal, based on the knowledge acquired from the cookbook. We are much closer to the meal itself. It is not just reading a book, we deal with different ingredients, and we can even smell the future meal. The last stage, *meditation*, is compared to eating the meal, thus completing the three-stage process. This analogy clearly shows how important it is to go through all three levels, and how inadequate it is to attempt to educate students only through the first stage, which is what we generally find in Western academic institutions.

¹ **Jirka Hladiš**, has served the Naropa online community since its conception in spring 1999, first as Technology Instructional Designer and currently as Director of Online Curriculum Development. Jirka received an MA in Mechanical Engineering from Technical University, Prague, and an MA in Buddhist Studies, Naropa University.

² Bill Scheffel is a Naropa online instructor teaching *Shambhala Meditation Practicum*.

³ Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche has taught Naropa onsite courses since 1996. He is teaching two online classes: *Essentials of Buddhism: The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha*, and *Buddha Nature: The Nature of Enlightenment in the Uttaratantra and Mahāmudrā*.

Framing the educational process within the three-fold *prajñā* approach is integral to all Naropa online instructors. Many of them specifically teach this concept to their online students in the beginning of the online course; some of them use the concept automatically, implicitly. The level of hearing is typically a lecture, usually an audio talk, or a slide show, accompanied with lecture notes. Less frequently, the lecture is video based or text based. The level of contemplation is often done individually by the students in the form of various experiential exercises, based on instructors' instructions. The experiences from the exercises are usually posted and commented on in the journal tool, a private communication tool between the student and the instructor. Sometimes the discussions about the contemplations are shared among the students using the threaded discussion tool. Here is an example of this practice taken from an online course:

*Each class has an associated “contemplation.” A contemplation is neither active thinking nor analyzing, nor is it meditation. An example of a topic might be the first noble truth of suffering. To contemplate this topic, one brings it before one’s mind and looks at it. Imagine contemplating a wonderful day at the beach that you just had. You might turn your mind to it, thinking a little, but also basking in the imagery and the feeling of it. I will explain more about the difference between thinking, contemplating, and meditating (in Buddhism called the “three *prajñās*” or “ways of knowing”) in class one.*

Please take a minimum of ten minutes to perform each contemplation. When you are finished, write an entry in your journal. It is very important that you write in your journal before you talk or chat with others about it. I want to know what your experience has been. There is no right or wrong answer in relation to these entries. I will periodically review your journals.⁴

Meditation is first introduced to the students via the meditation instruction presentation devised by the instructor. This is usually a video, audio talk, or series of images showing the various details of body postures. Details of the particular mediation instructions are also included. Students are required to practice daily meditation for various lengths of time as an integral part of the course requirements. They have access to regular private or group meditation instructions throughout the semester, conducted in the journal and threaded discussion tools respectively. Here is an example of what a prompt might look like:

Practice sitting meditation at least two hours per week. One-half hour of sitting is required immediately before listening to the class lecture. Three individual online dialogues about your sitting practice are required with your meditation instructor during the course of the semester. Class group discussion of meditation

⁴ Reggie Ray in his *Buddhism: Way of Wisdom and Compassion* online course. Reggie also teaches *The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* online and is currently preparing another online course detailing the legacy of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

practice will also be conducted through the threaded discussion tool in Weeks 2, 5, 6, 9, 11 and 12.⁵

In some classes, the contemplative practice has a form of guided meditation, carried out when listening to the instructions from an audio file:

This talk is the first introduction to the guided meditations which will lace the remainder of the course. This talk, which is 35 minutes long, will ask the student to sit in meditation and pay attention individually to the sense perceptions, following the traditional abhidharma method. The student should begin this practicum with a small pad of paper and pencil or pen; a comfortable chair or cushion; a quiet space in which to contemplate without interruption while listening to the recorded instructions. Twice during this practicum the student will be asked to pause the audio and do investigations on his/her own for an unspecified amount of time. Then the student is to return to the audio for further instructions. Please allow at least 50 minutes for this practicum session.⁶

In some classes, the students are not asked to follow a unified meditation practice devised by the instructor. They can continue following whatever contemplative practice they have been doing. Only students new to the mediation practice would be given specific instruction. In some classes the contemplative practice is unified and required, but it does not have the form of a traditional sitting meditation. For example:

I would like you to develop a relationship with some special place in nature of your choosing for a minimum of 90 minutes per week. This place can be anything from a site in wild nature, to a busy inner city street corner, to a back yard garden. It would be a good idea to go there at different times of the day and in different weather conditions. While there, please do some journaling with the following questions as your guide:

- *How do you feel in this place? What states of mind arise in you here?*
- *What is “natural” or “unnatural” about this place? What is the “Spirit” of this place?*
- *What is the nature of your relationship with this place? How, if at all, do you experience healing in this place?*
- *Does this place “mirror” anything to you about yourself?*
- *How have other humans interacted with this place? What does this place need for healing? What, if anything, can be done to protect this place?*
- *What are the relationships that exist in this place?⁷*

⁵ Frank Berliner in his *Meditation Practicum I* online class. Frank also teaches a sequel to this course: *Meditation Practicum II*.

⁶ Judith Simmer-Brown in her *Buddhist Teachings on Mind and Emotions: The Abhidharma Tradition* online class.

⁷ Jed Swift in his *Ecopsychology* class. Jed also teaches *Transpersonal Service Learning* and *Master's Paper Online* classes for the low-residency Master of Arts in Transpersonal Psychology program.

Sometimes, beyond the instructions in the online class, the students are encouraged to explore meditation centers in their home cities and are offered assistance in locating them:

I would also like for everyone to attend at least one meditation session at a nearby Zen Center. The Great Mountain Zen Center, of which I am spiritual director, is located near Boulder, Colorado. You can get information by calling 720-890-1800 or you can check our website at www.gmzc.org. For those who live outside Colorado, send me your location and I will try to recommend a Zen Center you can visit.⁸

The Three Trainings

There is yet another traditional triple division, so called the Three Trainings. For the Buddhist practitioner, the path consists of *view*, *meditation* and *conduct*. We have covered view and meditation in discussing the three prajñās. The wisdom accumulated through mastering the view coupled with the experience and realization acquired in meditation is truly useful only if it is reflected in how we act in the world, how we relate to the people and the environment in our everyday life. Training in conduct is an integral part of contemplative education and many Naropa instructors have developed different strategies for incorporating it into their online courses:

While using traditional and contemporary texts, this class will also explore the nature of the individual journey one makes in order to engage social action from a contemplative ground. Community-based volunteer work anchors this ground, allowing us to experience our individual understanding of “sacred view” through a personal path of action. Students will be required to make their own arrangements for a weekly, volunteer community service commitment and to maintain an ongoing contemplative practice of their choice for the duration of the course. Students will have several weeks from the beginning of the semester during which to arrange their volunteer community service placement.⁹

Naropa Bow

The Naropa bow is a contemplative practice used universally in on-campus classes. Several instructors have introduced this notion to their online classes:

I would like to introduce you to a practice we have at Naropa University. It was started by the founder of Naropa, the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, Trungpa Rinpoche, and has become infused into the culture of Naropa. It is our practice to start and end classes and meetings with a bow. Whether the class is a

⁸ Shishin Wick in his *Intro to Zen Buddhism* online class.

⁹ Fleet Maull in his *Buddhism and Social Action* online class. Fleet also teaches *Integral Peacemaking* low residency/online certificate.

meditation class, a psychological experience class like a group process, or a theory class like research and statistics, we begin with a short bow and end with a short bow. The same is true with meetings at Naropa, from faculty meetings to business meetings. In my experience, the bow helps remind us of who we are to each other, who we might be, and why we are together. It helps to set a tone of respect and openness in classes and meetings and gives a foundation for our work together.¹⁰

It has become something of a tradition at Naropa University to begin classes and meetings with a bow. Although this ritual is by no means compulsory, it seems to have taken widespread hold at the university over the years. Many students and staff find themselves performing the bow countless times during their time at Naropa, and many take enjoyment and comfort in the growing familiarity that a ritual such as this one can provide when it is repeated often.

The bow we make to each other at Naropa is a way of acknowledging and honoring the qualities of warriorship that each of us has the capacity to express and to share with others.

The warrior whom we honor when we bow is someone who is brave enough to be a truly gentle person. So, in bowing to each other, we honor the inherent bravery, gentleness and wakeful intelligence that each of us can experience personally. We also honor Naropa as a place where the deepest purpose of our education is to cultivate these qualities and bring them to fuller expression in whatever field of learning we may choose.¹¹

¹⁰ John Davis in his *The Diamond Approach* online class. John also teaches *Transpersonal Psychology I: Background and Central Concepts* online class.

¹¹ Taken from the Naropa.edu website.

THE FIVE QUALITIES IN ONLINE DISCUSSION

by Richard Brown¹²

In the first couple of years of the MA in Contemplative Education program, one of the things that came up for us was about the quality of online discussion, trying to create a mindfulness practice and an evaluation practice around that. Because our program is for teachers and teachers are communicators, we wanted to pay attention to that.

So we have used the Five Qualities of Contemplative Education from the Naropa Mission Statement as a developing model for how to communicate online. We've done a lot of work on this, and I'd like to quickly go through these qualities with a few comments from students about how it's been to use this practice.

It's primarily a mindfulness practice in the beginning—being mindful of how we write online, the content, how we enter something, and what are the qualities of those experiences. Secondly, it's a process of extending beyond into those areas of communication that might be less familiar to us. So by being mindful of these Five Qualities, we get a sense of the territory of our communication. And all of this, obviously, is very flexible and very much on the spot. The notion is not that each time you post an entry in the online discussion, there has to be a perfect balance of the Five Qualities, but more a sense of, "Which areas am I shying away from, and in those areas that I'm dwelling, what might be my obstacles there?"

And I should say that these Five Qualities of online discussion practices are not just for the students, but also for the instructors. How do I usually respond? Is it in a habitual way? Am I limiting myself? Am I cutting myself off from contact with students because I'm only, for instance, responding in a completely intellectual way to Point A, Point B, and Point C? Or am I always in that fuzzy, warm realm of just connecting from the heart and I don't care about anything challenging in the communication? You know, "Where do I live?" So it's a mindfulness practice both for teachers and students.

Each of these Qualities is related to the five Buddha families, traditional to Tibetan Buddhism. Openness, the first one, is connected to the Buddha family called Buddha. Openness arises from sitting meditation, and is really at the heart of our education program. It's about Mindfulness, Awareness, Spaciousness, that sense of

¹² **Richard Brown**, B.A. Knox College, Graduate Study, Earlham School of Religion, Certificate in Elementary Education, Institute of Denver, M.A. Naropa University. Richard teaches *Buddhist Educational Heritage: The Five Qualities and the Ten Vidyas* and *Thesis Seminar II* online classes. In 1990, Richard founded the Department of Contemplative Education at Naropa University in Boulder, which includes a Masters in Contemplative Education and a Bachelors in Early Childhood Education. Richard applies Tibetan contemplative principles and practices to contemporary teaching and learning at all levels. He has been engaged internationally in the fields of holistic and spiritual education since the early '90's. Previously, Richard practiced as an educational therapist, a public elementary teacher, and a K-8 teacher in a Buddhist-inspired K-8 school. A practicing Buddhist since 1978, he helped found the Shotoku School at Shambhala Mountain Center, writes about contemplative parenting, and is involved with rites of passage for children.

meditative presence that we wish to bring into our personal lives, our professional lives as teachers, and our academic endeavors altogether.

Openness

When Sebo Ebbens¹³ and I were developing this approach, we thought that it's possible to look at Openness, the First Quality, both conceptually and from a practice point of view. In that way we could actually bring our critical intelligence to Openness and practice it in our online experience. So, as we sit down before the computer, we might pause, create some space and become present in the moment.

Some of the dimensions involved in Openness are: precise attention; letting go, not clinging to experience or concept; cultivating a sense of spaciousness; appreciating things as they are; experiencing without reference point, sensing of beginner's mind; accommodating ambiguity, not knowing; being able to rest in a sense of emptiness which is not apathetic or nihilistic, and in that place of emptiness allowing for the arising of insight. So these manifest in lots of different ways from that quality of Openness.

The nice thing about the Five Qualities, before I go into the next one, is that there are actually practices—self awareness, space awareness, loving kindness—which we do in our program, which gives the students an actual experiential understanding of these qualities rather than just an intellectual understanding. As the students go through the program, these Five Qualities are used in the core courses. Students' understanding of them as they practice them in online discussion for two years deepens and penetrates their learning experiences. By the last semester, we don't really need to talk about them anymore, as such.

Resourcefulness

The next quality is Resourcefulness. Resourcefulness is connected to the Ratna family. Resourcefulness is about many things. Fundamentally, it's an appreciation of the richness and sacredness of all knowledge and experience. So, personal experience is one of our resources. This is a key component of contemplative education, that we're bringing our personal experience together with our academic experience.

On a practical level, we're really encouraging students to include the richness of their emotional and everyday experience in online discussion. For example, if someone writes their entries, and it's all on an abstract level, we will come back and say, "What about your personal experience?" If their personal experience is on an objectified level, where they're reporting, and there's no real color or feel to that, we'll come back and say, "Where are you living in this? Where are the joy and the hurt and the depth of feeling in your life?" So how we do this in the practice very much depends on the individual situation. There's no recipe. It's very much the personal, teacher-student relationship.

¹³ Sebo Ebbens teaches *Compassionate Teaching* online class.

Resources are seen as who I am in my fullness, which ultimately extends far beyond what I understand as “me”. So from that perspective this quality also includes all the conventional academic resources, such as books, paints, performance spaces, etc.

Resourcefulness also involves cultivating generosity, receptivity, and genuineness; nurturing and caring for others and oneself in professional work, private lives, and online discussions; appreciating others in one’s own upbringing, and cultures in all their rich details and diversities. I believe Resourcefulness is synchronization with the natural rhythms of the world, on a micro and macro level. Because Ratna is associated with earth, there’s a sense of being in synchronization, in rhythm with the earth and all its manifestations.

Clarity

The third quality is Clarity, usually called Clarity of Intellect. This is about contributing our ideas and insights to the situation. It’s looking at conceptualization from a contemplative perspective rather than a conventional perspective. In the practice of this quality, words and concepts are seen as useful but limited abstractions, so that we’re not clinging to our ideas and thoughts as solid entities. There’s a notion of liberating ourselves from fixed thinking. We can develop a sense for when an idea—either on my part or on somebody else’s—has become incredibly rigid and solid. In discussion, how can we help ourselves and our students loosen the solidity around their ideas and concepts, to allow a fresh, creative expression of human, intellectual, emotional, and social experience. We want to cultivate the beginner’s mind that can come in and look at the situation and say, “Here is a useful abstraction of that situation *now*.”

Each week in our online courses, we’ll have discussion topics, but how we approach that topic is what we’re looking at here. Some of the dimensions of this quality that we explore in the class include: discrimination, inquisitiveness, being able to ask new questions, and posing different perspectives on the discussion topic. Opening to disagreement—not for the sake of disagreement itself, but when it is genuine—and offering good, logical arguments. We explore whether there is fear in the student that is impelling the argument or keeping them from disagreeing. How we challenge each other is part of the art of discussion. We don’t want to push too hard, nor ignore the issues. Is there a skillful way of being clear and direct without being aggressive?

So a lot of other things, practical things, come in, such as order, attention to detail, and thoroughness, perhaps more conventional academic protocols, so that there is not a sense of sloppiness, there is some order, rigor, good form, articulation, and all the rest. Those are some of the aspects of the quality of clear intellect.

Communication

The fourth one is Communication, which reflects compassion and heartfelt connection. This is the joyful, empathetic, passionate connection with our studies, our learning

community. It's that human delight that so often can be missing in formal communication—the playfulness, the online laughter, that sense of frivolity which is often so feared in academic institutions. Some of the aspects of that quality include: integrating joy, cheerfulness, and humor; including elements of beauty and delight; listening deeply and responding authentically; personalizing conceptual communication. It's one thing to communicate an idea, but another to make it personal—still another to make it a genuine, heartfelt communication.

Another important part of what we do in discussion is to develop content from personal passion and meaning. How we construct our classes as teachers is based on our passion. Do we share that passion with the content of our studies? Can we encourage our students to include their heart-felt connections within the context of the course?

Another part of Communication is nurturing authentic, beneficial relationships among students, creating human connections within the class. Do we allow for that? Do we do that as instructors? Do we depart a little bit from the stream of the online discussion long enough to make a personal connection in a written form that maybe we would edit out if we were more efficient and content focused?

Communication is also allowing, whenever possible, for dance, story, song, music, poetry, analogy, metaphor, etc., other forms of artistic expression, to be dimensions of online discussion.

Effective Action

The last quality is Effective Action. Because this is a teacher education program, we want all of what our teachers are studying to reflect in the practice of teaching. We want them to apply contemplative principles to their classroom experience. That's a lot of how we focus this quality, Action. How does it live in the world? Bring how your practice is living in the world into the discussion, so it's relating professional and practical aspects of teaching and learning, creating and employing and sharing online the skillful means, courses of actions, and methods that further our effectiveness in teaching situations. Are students really sharing how they're applying their studies? Are they bringing it to the online discussion in specific ways? That's what we're looking for here. Is this program having an effect on your life and the lives of your students, and how?

This quality involves a lot of paradoxes. The practice of exertion without striving, that if you push too hard and try to apply something in action, sometimes you get the opposite result of what you want. So how is it possible to affect things in the world without aggression? A lot of these paradoxes we're able to practice during our three week summer program. Our summers are really designed for the students to practice these things themselves, so that when we discuss something online like relaxation in activity, they've had that experience during the summer, so it's not just a conceptual understanding.

This quality is also about taking risks. Are you able to go through the fear of questioning something online? Are you always just agreeing? Am I, as a faculty member, always just supporting the students, or is there that edge of challenge? “I actually disagree with you in this case.” Do we do that? Do we do that too much? Are we alienating people because we’re pushing too much? How do I balance these qualities as an instructor?

There’s a sense in taking action in the world, and bringing that back, in a sense proclaiming it in the online discussion. This quality includes “taking your seat”—establishing your authority in a gentle but very straightforward way. And I think that’s what we want, that sense of gentle, effective authority.

To conclude, this online entry is from a woman who teaches in a Sunday school in a Buddhist monastery in Singapore. She’s not too strong in English, but she writes:

I was telling my friends that I was the youngest and most inexperienced person in this class, and all my classmates are very high caliber people. Many times I was wondering to myself whether what I had shared was childish and in accordance with the Five Qualities. The editing and many times re-reading what I had written (before posting out) could be very time consuming. On the other hand, it helps me to contemplate more on what it really is I want to express. This helps me to rethink my thoughts and search my heart more deeply. I searched out responses from the rest of you online as a way to determine whether I am on the right track. Thank you all, my dear friends, for giving me positive responses, and making this distant learning not so distant for me.

THE WISDOM OF HEARING, CONTEMPLATING, AND MEDITATING IN ONLINE LEARNING

by Frank Berliner¹⁴

I was asked to put together an online class teaching people Buddhist meditation back in the spring of 1999. John Cobb, who was president at the time, and Reggie Ray, who was head of the Buddhist studies department, both asked me to do that. And there was a lot of concern about attempting it.

Considering the Three Prajñās, I think there's much less room for error, actually, much less room for sloppiness in how one embodies or communicates the Three Prajñās online than there is in a real life situation. If we look at *Hearing*, *Contemplating*, and *Meditating* as reading the cookbook, cooking the meal, and enjoying the meal, then I would say that my fear was that I didn't want my students just to be eating menus.

I always begin every class by saying to the students that this is an experiment in online learning, and I consider it an ongoing experiment. And I use that word as a way of just constantly checking myself, checking what I'm doing, that I never give up that sense of vigilance about whether my students are just eating menus or not. Nor do I presume to know whether, in fact, at the end of it, they're really eating the meal. But I do feel that some good things and some genuine things happen in this process, and I wanted to talk about them a little bit.

Hearing

The First Prajñā is called Hearing. Often it's called Study. But there's a little bit of a difference, traditionally, between Hearing and Study. Hearing is a particular kind of Study, and I really focused on the word "Hearing" in terms of the first element of this class. I realized the talks that I gave—and I give a talk each week in the 15 weeks—had to be recorded and listened to online. Particularly in terms of giving students meditation instruction, I felt that it was important enough that there be talks, audios that students could hear just in terms of hearing the teachings of dharma. As far as actually giving meditation instruction, it had to be done through the spoken voice.

Transmission through spoken voice is one of the very foundations of how the dharma is taught, and has always been taught. And I felt that definitely could be made use of in the online medium very well.

¹⁴ **Frank Berliner** teaches the online classes *Meditation Practicum I* and *Meditation Practicum II*. Frank received his BA from Yale University and his MA from The Naropa Institute. He served as national administrative director of Shambhala Training, and for nine years as resident teacher of the Berkeley Shambhala Center. He is currently a core faculty member at Naropa, where he teaches Buddhist and Western humanistic psychology, and their applications to counseling and leadership. He is also a psychotherapist and organizational consultant in private practice, specializing in the art of communication, conflict resolution, and the use of meditation in relieving stress, deepening insight, and encouraging effective action. A senior student of Naropa's founder, he has practiced sitting meditation since 1973.

And there is a very intimate experience, I think, for students to sit down and listen to the voice, receive the instruction, and begin to practice it on their own. There's almost a built-in quality of non-distraction that can happen, in terms of the teacher transmitting it directly, and the student hearing it, and just starting to practice. Of course, a lot of that depends on how well it's transmitted. I have no presumptions about how I transmit it, but I think that the form itself is absolutely essential if meditation online is not going to be an oxymoron.

So that's the first point, that they actually hear it, and can put it into practice, and there's a quality of intimacy about that original receiving. And then of course they have readings that they do, and there are further teachings that I will give in their threaded discussion, where I'm actually writing things into the computer and they're reading it. But the spoken word is the foundation for all of that, and gives it a kind of grounded-ness, without which I think the whole experiment couldn't work. I feel that pretty strongly.

In terms of any teachers in the future who would do this, I would say to them that recording it and having it spoken... it's absolutely essential.

Contemplation

The element of Contemplation. Each week, after they listen to the talk, they're given a question to contemplate. This question generally draws from the theoretical material in the talk, but asks them to relate a particular aspect to their personal experience. This is the part that we call cooking the meal. And this appears in the threaded discussion part of the format.

This is a very interesting part. What's particularly interesting about it is that students speak from their personal experience. But it's an issue of not too tight, not too loose. Very often a student will respond in a heartfelt and insightful way to the question, and then another student who has not yet responded begins to piggyback on the insight of the first student. And they have conversations with each other before everyone has actually contributed their own contemplation.

Different classes have different levels of doing this. Some classes don't do it very much at all. Other classes seem to be almost frantic about confirming each others' insights. I had one class where it was happening so much, that I actually had to post in about the 5th or 6th week and say, "From now on you must post your own answer to the question for Contemplation before you comment on anyone else's post." And a couple of the students were totally freaked out about this. But we weathered that storm, and actually it improved the quality of the class.

The reason I'm mentioning all this in such detail is that the process of Contemplation needs solitude and intimacy in it first. Out of that, there can be a communication, a sense of community and sharing. But the cart can't be before the horse.

It's this balance that I'm always interested in with every class—that they don't try to artificially create a contemplative community before each of them has done their own work. Trying to guide them is challenging, and each class is different. Each class is a different organism.

I'm having the same issue with the class that I'm working with right now. They're constantly getting on and saying, "Oh, that was a great idea, which reminded me of this, and blah, blah, blah..." This time, for the week after Spring Break, I'm going to go on before the question is even posted and say: "This week, I would like everyone to post their answers without talking to anyone else about their answers; then wait until the very end of the week, and you can talk to each other. Then I want you to all post what it (felt) like to have to wait. What did it feel like to allow that much of a gap between your need to tell someone else how right-on they are, or how much it's like what you feel... just hang out in that space, not confirming and not being confirmed." Because that's a very powerful part of contemplative practice.

If we lean too much on each other, we can't go forward. So how do you constantly work with this balance between being alone and being together? This, to me, is very, very powerful, and in every class it comes up in a different way.

Another really great thing about online classes, in contrast to many of the classes that I teach at Naropa in real time, is that the online format allows shy people to really come out and express a lot of depth in answering the questions, and also have that quality of intimacy in communicating and exchanging with others in the online medium - people, who, in a class situation, would feel intimidated or shy, and would never say anything at all. The online medium requires that everyone post something each week. It also encourages everyone to really say what they need to say. They're not inhibited or frightened in ways that they would be in real time.

And I think that's fantastic. And that, I'm sure, doesn't apply just to my class. That's a very important component, which really allows a lot of expansion and relaxation for people when they're learning online.

So, right now we're studying the slogans of Atīśa, which is a very ancient but very up to date training in Mahayana Buddhism about working compassionately with your own mind and with other people. And the slogan that one particular person wrote about this week was: "In close meditation, be a child of illusion." It's a very beautiful slogan...

And this woman wrote (in her posting) "For some reason, this made me think of Stevie Nicks." Do you all know who Stevie Nicks is? And then she said, "I know that's a very tacky image for such a profound subject that we're studying, but somehow this is what came to me."

Immediately, three other people chimed in, "Oh yeah, Stevie Nicks, what a great thing..." And I was trying to figure out which students I wanted to answer this week, and I

decided, yes, that Stevie Nicks thing. I remember when I really loved Stevie Nicks. So I went back and got my Fleetwood Mac CD, Fleetwood Mac's Greatest Hits. And I put it on—I hadn't heard it for maybe 20 years. And it was the first song, "Rhiannon." I listened to the lyrics. I had to listen five times, because it's so hard to understand what she's actually singing about. But I just kept listening to it, and by the time I'd written all the lyrics down, I said, "Absolutely, this is the child of illusion all the way."

So I posted to this student, and said, "Fantastic intuition. I just listened to Stevie Nicks again. Here are all the lyrics to 'Rhiannon.'" And I wrote them all out. And she was so appreciative of that. I think I said something to her like, you know, "Keep being tacky. It's fantastic. Just go out of the box. Do not regard this 'sacred material' as being sacrosanct, so you can rely on just your beginner's mind, your first thought/best thought, as a way of cueing in to the magic of these teachings."

Another thing I do with my classes is that I end every talk by reading a poem. These poems are very wide ranging. Some of them are by Chogyam Trungpa, but most are by other poets—Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, Naruda, Rilke, W.H. Auden, William Butler Yeats—all poets I have loved over the years. I always try to pick a poem that illustrates what I think is the very essence of what I've been teaching. The students love the poems. They often ask me to post them online. The poems become part of the discussion. And that gives a very human, and playful, and artistic flavor to studying the dharma that really brings it alive. It enriches the notion of Contemplation.

Meditation

The Third Prajñā... The most important and the most profound, is Meditation, actually enjoying the meal. I will say right off the bat that practicing Meditation online by oneself can only be a beginning and an appetizer for any long-term journey that a student may be inspired to make with Meditation practice. In the Masters of Transpersonal Psychology online program, in which my current students are enrolled, come here for two weeks early every summer, and join together as a community. I get to meet them once or twice. Sherry Ellms¹⁵ works with them; John Davis works with them very intensively. And this is an absolutely essential component to their training, to come together in real time.

Beyond that, I give them a tremendous amount of encouragement to explore the dharma further, to look for their own teachers, and just give them the sense that this is the beginning of a journey, rather than that they've been given absolutely everything; that this is somehow a substitute for the long-term process of making one's mind one with the dharma. So I always try to hold that perspective, because I think it's very important.

The class plants a very good seed through that whole process.

The Meditation component, the most important aspect of it is a good relationship with the Meditation instructor. In this class, the online format is such that whereas the

¹⁵ Sherry Ellms teaches *Meditation for Social Change Leaders* hybrid residential/online class.

Contemplation is a group experience, the Meditation instruction is, three or four times a semester, a one on one experience that each student gets to have with their meditation instructor. The way they do that is by going into the journal function, and posting something that only their Meditation instructor reads.

This brings me to the point that the meditation instructors (who) work with me are the most important component. The necessity for having really good, well-trained, seasoned, experienced, sensitive meditation instructor is the absolute bottom line of this class.

I've been very, very fortunate over the five years that I've taught this class, 13 classes, to have been able to rely on a fairly small group of teaching assistants. I haven't had that much turnover. I would say altogether there's been a dozen teaching assistants total in that 5 years. A couple of them have done it almost the entire time. The loving kindness and knowledge that they bring to the interactions with students is the cornerstone of the class. It is what preserves the incorruptibility of the process. A lot of these students go on to continue communicating with their instructors after the class is over. Probably some of these students are going to have real life meditation instructor relationships with some of their instructors. This is what helps the appetizer to become a meal, and for the whole experience to keep going.

TEACHING ON CAMPUS AND ONLINE: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

by *Bobbie Louise Hawkins*¹⁶

I want to speak specifically to the issues of teaching on campus and the issues of teaching online, and where they are the same, and where they are not. Voicing has an extraordinary ability to carry information. The voice itself, in the resonance and the tempo of speech, carries information subliminally that is almost indescribable. It is that which is lost in the online experience.

On the other hand, as a writer, I depend on it that writing on the page carries a tempo and condition. When I was growing up, you were supposed to never let your lips move, and silently read. And it's always been clear to me that when you are reading, you are in fact hearing inside your head, and you often find yourself in conversation with the text that's being read inside your head.

Someone last summer (during the Summer Writing Program) said something very interesting. They said, before you can think, you must have words. You have the words, you learn the words, and then you think. And I loved that. I'm not terrified by the thought that words are what carry it.

Writing is the one integral skill within all the programs which are taught online. I really approve of it that students who are not themselves students of writing are, in fact, required to deal with the material in writing. The wonderful thing about writing is that when it goes onto the paper, it holds still, whereas thought constantly constellates. But what gets put on to paper can be rethought, and added to. And that, as quality of mind, is absolutely essential to me in any kind of conversation as to what qualifies as education and a learning process.

I once read that the ideal learning situation is when you are seeing the text at the same time you are hearing the text. It seems to me that if we could add that as a component in all the teaching classes online, so that all of the lectures are not only seen as text but the voice is there... I don't know how complex that would be, but at any given moment, those of us who are teaching could consider (that) as an additional informing source.

¹⁶ **Bobbie Louise Hawkins** teaches *Literature Seminar: The Feeling Tone and Practice of Fiction: Characterization/Monologue* online classes. Bobbie has written twelve books of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and performance monologues as well as a one-hour play for the PBS series, *The Listening Ear*. Flying Fish has a CD of her performance, "Live at the Great American Music Hall". In 1981 she participated in the "One World Poetry Festival" in Amsterdam and the same year was awarded a Fellowship in Literature from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Los Angeles Times said: "She excels at the short take, the oblique view, and the fundamental nugget of actuality". The New York Times wrote: "A superb impressionist, as well as a salty prose writer." She has performed her work at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Bottom Line, and Folk City in NYC, at The Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, at the Canterbury Festival and the Poetry Society in England where she worked with Apples and Snakes. In 1988 she was invited by Anne Waldman to oversee the Prose Track in the MFA Writing Program.

The big problem, of course, is that that would require lectures be transcribed, which is a really bloody piece of work.

I want to, in thinking of learning principles, go all the way back to Pestalozzi, who was one of the first persons who delineated what has been modern education since (it seems to me) the late 1800's. The principle was simple. It was a huge breakaway from rote as learning. The subject is the matter which is malleable, and which is what one utilizes in order to learn how to learn. The issue is learning how to learn, and that is not linear. It's a field process, so that it's constantly amoebic and constantly changing.

Alfred North Whitehead and William James, who were very practical, became involved as a part of their philosophizing in the issue of duration; that different principles, different ideas require their own length of time in order to become real, and that they require different lengths of time. When I read that, I was absolutely delighted, because my own sense is the time frame is different for every individual, and within any idea there are its component parts, and each of those has its duration. And very often, in the course of teaching, what functions as a confusion is simply the question of all of those durations not having clicked in yet, so that a person is understanding bits and pieces, as if each of those things exist individually.

We all have the experience of walking along the street, or reading a book, or whatever, and suddenly coming on the phrase or the thing that initiates a concept that suddenly lets you feel the furniture in your head moving. And now, you understand a thing five years ago and a thing you read yesterday, and an idea that's been floating like an amorphous mist in fact takes shape. Suddenly, those things relate to each other and become a reality. And that is education. That is the thing that, as teachers, we try constantly to get our hands on and send across.

There is an extraordinary inherent arrogance in the implication of teaching. It is as if someone knows something because we say so. And the reality is that is an old idea. That is the idea that persons are vessels to be filled, and we fill them... like here's a bit for you, and here's this, and here's this, and here's this... and that simply is not real. That is not what learning is.

Within the question of duration, there is also the question of tempo. And one of the major distinctions I have found in teaching on campus and teaching online is the extent to which the tempo is nailed down in a classroom. When you are teaching to people in a classroom, the tempo of address and the tempo of considering the topic belong to the timeframe of the classroom itself. And then, the class is over, and people walk out of the room. And what they were able to encompass within that is what got learned.

One of the great things about online learning is that that tempo is simply left open. You come into the thing, and I assume everyone does what I do, which is you don't open the class until its week, but then you leave all of the previous weeks open. So that as

a person is working on something, they go back, and it still exists in exactly the format that it first was presented. That is extraordinary.

Conversation is so taken for granted that when people say things that are extraordinary, they're taken as that moment's gift. And then we continue beyond them. Having the text available goes a long way to cure that conversational problem.

The tempo of learning is the tempo of being capable of hearing what is being said. Years ago, there was a great deal of research. The question was whether slow students and fast students learned more and better from slow teachers (or) fast teachers. What they came up with was students who were considered brighter seemed to be able to learn from almost anyone. Every time anything got said, it was taken as a point of departure for thought. The people who got left behind were the people who moved slowly. People who moved slowly had a difficult time learning from teachers who were fast.

Online, the question of how slow a student is and how fast a student is, how slow a teacher is and how fast a teacher is—that whole question is almost wiped out. Everyone can continue to assimilate at their own speed, and that includes all of those fractional bits which require different time frames to click into focus. Everyone online is given the chance to learn within a personal time frame.

Ed Sanders, one summer when we were still having our summers in the big white tent... said to the tent full of students, "At what time of day do you write what kind of thing best?" That was one of the most informing questions I've ever heard in my life.

Add that to this question of the information itself having time frames for reality, plus the individual recipient of that information having different time frames for learning, and you have to arrive at it that everyone in the world teaches themselves, and everyone in the world's learning process is absolutely unique and individual.

You have the received idea, which is the "topic," the "subject," the thing being expressed by the "teacher." Then you have the person who is the receiver of this. In this field that is their mind, all of their ramifications begin to work and they go beyond the topic.

You've got in a room full of students or in an online class full of students, every single one of those persons constellating faster than the expanding universe, all of them agreeing to coexist in the classroom or on the threaded discussion. The whole process is simply non-stop. The amazing thing is that any class should ever end at all.

That place where the so-called teacher and the so-called student go beyond the so-called topic is education. That place is the place we all long for.

One of the dilemmas as a teacher is the extent to which we have gone past percept into concept. The thing itself has solidified to some extent, and now we know it

as an entity rather than that thing that education is. We express it to students in this kind of bulk shape. They have to go through all of this sifting in order to make the thing palatable to their own three-dimensional field of thought, their own private, chosen vocabulary. An awful lot of education very often is not much more than transcribing what is being said to you, changing the vocabulary it's coming at you as into the vocabulary you would use if you were making the statement. When it's changed into that vocabulary which is personal to oneself, then oneself owns it.

The most interesting thing I find in learning—the thing that fascinates me more than anything—is the way we will grab a thing that we don't comprehend, that we know we need. You will see a book, you'll glance into it, the terminology of it is foreign and alien and strange, but you have to buy it. It sits for a while and you look into it every so often, and as you assimilate some of it, you understand more of it. And you still don't know why you needed it.

That's the advantage of having a mind as well as a brain, because over and over again, the brain wants to insist it is the goods. And the reality is the mind is cosmic. The mind is gigantic. And the mind is constantly back there, filling in gaps you didn't know existed.

You always live a serendipitous life, because you constantly find yourself in the places where you should be, and you never quite understand how you got there, and the way you got there is because your mind, quite simply, took you by the shoulders and walked you there. And the brain went along, insisting it knew what was going on all the time.

Learning is not passive. The teacher's job is not to tell the student in the old analogy of filling a vessel, but to participate with the student in the arousal of perception in both of the participants. I find that works on campus and online. It continues to be the same issue.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE TEACHING FOR RABBI ZALMAN

by *Sharron Szabo*¹⁷

The course I'm helping to facilitate is called "Recalibrating the Mind to Serve the Emerging Spirit." It's the teachings of our wonderful Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who's held the World Wisdom Seat at Naropa. Before we opened up the concept of online education, Rabbi Zalman had initiated the World Wisdom Lecture series—the first one or two where he was the main lecturer. As the series evolved, we had other faculty members be part of it.

There was a repository of incredible lectures videotaped... such a richness. I had the honor to assist Rabbi Zalman in that series from its beginning. In designing this course, I was able to transcribe the video tapes—and it is a horrendous process, no doubt about it. But now there are three choices when you log in to the online course. You could click to watch the video. Or we've isolated just the audio part, so one can just click on that. Thirdly, in transcribing the lectures, you have the text. And the text is infused with a lot of wonderful images, a little multimedia. I think my next evolution in this would be to start adding the music.

What a wonderful model it is in its setup. More than anything, it speaks to something very unique about Naropa. I've always used the expression that Naropa is a lighthouse in this world for contemplative education. And we hold so much. We have so much in our archives. So, if we think of a future in online education, and of our role in the world, we have not only an ability, we have a tremendous responsibility, particularly because the media is opening this up for us, the sharing of resources.

We're part of a global community when we're teaching online. We have the advantage of having the input be exchanged, and the growth and development that comes in that process, from a global world, which is what everyone else does in online education.

We are beginning to develop cells... small cells of this global community. Not only do we get the richness of exchange from people all over the world, but we get it from a range of ages and the perspectives of multiple professions... We have that seamlessness where, without exactly being visible to one another, people do come to be known in a certain way, and there's a greater freedom in doing that. We, as the teachers or facilitators, guide them in appropriate ways.

¹⁷ **Sharron Szabo**, M.A. Naropa University (1999), M.A. Case Western Reserve University (1983), B.S. The Oberlin Conservatory of Music (1968). Sharron has been teaching undergraduate courses related to the themes of the World Wisdom Lecture Series initiated by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi at Naropa University. Her professional background in education, music therapy and spirituality has led her to conduct national workshops on spirituality and the arts. Sharron is also one of the developers of the Cleveland Free-Net System (1987) which helped promote free, open access, global community computing. She has lectured nationally and internationally on the development of community designed information systems and the role of the arts in online environments.

At the heart of Naropa is a community. We're globally conscious. When we enter into the online world, we further that particular vision and pathway. And I think it's quite something.

In contemplative online education, the places we visit online, where we can be alone and where we can be together... Rabbi Zalman would really speak of this as our transpersonal sociology place or space. For example, through the practice of journal writing, we can integrate the parts of our learning experience and share how we're shifting within. And we have the wonderful kind of sacredness that is shared between teacher and student in the privacy of the journal module. As a community of learners, we come together in a more public way in our contributions to the threaded discussions.

What informs listening and contemplation? In our online world, we can explore and utilize the way images, text, and sounds intersect and create an experience. I encourage all of us to explore the avenues in which each week's coursework and structure can create a dynamic visual and sonic atmosphere. We might ask ourselves, "In what ways can the richness of our cultures, perhaps its music or poetry, support what is being said?" I ask that we attune to the ways media can help create sacred meditative space and experiences.

I want to say what a privilege this has been to be part of what I would call a Naropa legacy. Rabbi Zalman has been such a world wisdom teacher, leader, so dear to all of us, and his legacy is being left in so many ways. We have one example, and I hope we have many more to come.

CRITICAL THINKING, EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION, AND CONTEMPLATIVE EDUCATION ONLINE

by John Davis¹⁸

Before I begin, I have a short anecdote that might put some of this discussion in context. As I was preparing, I looked up some notes I had made on critical thinking and contemplative education in 1993. I found a handout I had used for a presentation. At the top, it had a title, my name, and my college affiliation. Then, it had my e-mail address, and in parentheses, it said “Internet.” I laughed out loud thinking that only a dozen years ago, we had to say what an e-mail address was. Can you believe how much has happened in 10 or 11 years in terms of the Internet? It’s astounding to me. I don’t have to explain what my e-mail address is anymore. Sometimes I have to spell it out for people, but I don’t need to explain it. So, it makes sense that we are coming together on this frontier of online education to compare notes and see where we are.

Three Types of Education

I will use a framework of three types of education with an eye to how the online environment supports or doesn’t support each of them. These three are critical thinking, experiential education, and contemplative education. Each is valued at Naropa, although in most of higher education, critical thinking is most highly regarded, there is a limited place for experiential education, and contemplative education is little known.

Critical thinking is based on the careful examination of information and the assumptions behind it. Critical thinking develops the ability to carry an argument from premise through data to conclusion and implications. It calls for integrating information from different sources and taking different perspectives on the same information. Critical thinking enables seeing relationships between a variety of observations, between observations and explanations, and between explanations. Perhaps the most important contribution of critical thinking is its role in integrating multiple arguments into a coherent perspective and examining issues from multiple perspectives. Elegant critical thinking helps to find the wisdom in each point of view as well as discriminating their limitations and fallacies. I think we can see how essential good critical thinking is in a multidimensional, diverse world.

However, in addition to the importance of critical thinking, we should recognize its own limitations and fallacies. In other words, good critical thinking should turn on itself, self-reflexively examining its own hidden assumptions. Such an examination reveals

¹⁸ **John Davis**, Ph.D., teaches *The Diamond Approach* and *Transpersonal Psychology I: Background and Central Concepts* online classes. John is a professor and director of the low-residency MA in Transpersonal Psychology at Naropa University. He is an ordained teacher of the Diamond Approach and is the author of *The Diamond Approach: An Introduction to the Teachings of A. H. Almaas*. He has also written book chapters and articles on transpersonal psychology, ecopsychology, wilderness rites of passage, stress management, and holistic health. In addition, John is on the faculty of the School of Lost Borders, a training facility for wilderness rites of passage guides. For more information, go to www.johnvdavis.com.

the largely unquestioned assumption that rational, intellectual thought is primary, that thinking is the highest form of inquiry. I would argue that critical thinking is limited to the extent that it relies solely on rational, intellectual processes. Without going into more detail here, I would also point out that critical thinking, by itself and in isolation, tends toward the technological and mechanistic. And at the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, it tends to be more linear, masculine, Eurocentric, and capitalist, and less oriented to the feminine, indigenous, and egalitarian. By itself, critical thinking is only one tool in the tool box.

My second category is experiential education, where we learn by doing. This means not simply “knowing about,” but knowing through direct encounter with the subject matter. Such experiential education means that the concepts being studied come alive within the learner in a personal way. Learning may lead to new insights and will almost certainly lead to a deeper understanding. Experiential education also means relating to the experience in an emotional, as well as a cognitive, way.

Finally, I include contemplative education in this framework - its meaning is an ongoing discussion at Naropa. I will simply suggest here that contemplative education aims for the full and optimal development of the learner. It is characterized by a willingness to encounter oneself and the world with a radical openness and not-knowing. Contemplative education makes room for curiosity, surprise, delight, transcendence, transformation, and authentic encounter with others and the world. While the methods of contemplative education range from quiet reflection to ecstatic ritual, it requires the willingness and capacity to be still, to quiet the mind’s usual labeling and categorizing, and to allow experience to unfold freely. It is inclusive of both critical thinking and experiential education, even as it brings a new dimension to the table. Through contemplation, the learner is drawn out of old ways of being into greater wakefulness, compassion, self-inquiry, embodiment, and service. It calls us to go beyond our familiar conceptual categories and rigid representations of self, others, and world, changing us in fundamental and profound ways.

Online Education

I came to online education curious and, I would say, cautiously optimistic. I didn’t know if it would work. It felt like a frontier to me, and I feel myself drawn to frontiers wherever they are. What I was reading twelve years ago sounded as if the internet was going to be important, if not revolutionary. For me, the best way to understand it was to get involved first-hand. I guess this is my own bent toward experiential education. So, I began developing a web page, and then I began integrating the internet and Web-based tools into some of my courses. I found these hybrids exciting and useful, and students responded well. Still, I was skeptical about going beyond what were essentially online textbooks and handbooks of exercises.

It wasn’t at all clear to me that we could do good critical thinking, experiential education, and especially contemplative education online. I knew that we could teach

programming; we could teach accounting; we could teach subjects that were heavily information driven. But, I wasn't sure we could teach online in a student-oriented way, in a human-centered way, and in an inspired—and inspiring—way. I wondered if the subtleties and aliveness of critical thinking could be translated into an online course? How in the world would one do experiential education in a medium that was so heavily text-driven and where we never actually “met” our students? And it seemed almost a joke to talk about the transformative qualities of contemplative inquiry through such technology. Nevertheless, it seemed worth checking it out.

At first, my questions were what is this, and can it work? Now, with answers to these, I have two new questions about online education. First: in terms of the three types of education, can we do as good a job in the online environment as we do in the on-campus environment? Second, what can we do better online, than on campus? What's going to emerge through the medium of online education that we haven't yet dreamed of? How will the medium massage the message (to borrow from Marshall MacLuhan)? Will the message, itself, begin to evolve?

To the first question, I think the strong answer is yes for all three types of education. We're still exploring how to do that best, of course, and there are some differences—both limitations and advantages—to teaching online.

Critical Thinking Online

It is clear to me that teaching critical thinking is not only possible, but perhaps more effective online than in a face-to-face classroom. I appreciate the ways in which an online course enables us to respond to multiple learning styles. In most of my courses, in addition to background reading, I offer an audio lecture and a text lecture. Others have done more with video and multimedia presentations than I have. Students have the option to listen, read, or both as many times as they wish. The more modalities we can provide to students, the better we can respond with different learning styles. The variety of learning styles we can respond to are not just cognitive, but the different styles of pacing and communication.

In my online courses, the depth of the discussion is vastly greater than what I find in on-campus courses. I think a lot of it has to do with the time available online. In a typical on-campus class we have less than 3 hours a week in class. In that time we do some gathering, some check-in, and a little bit of business. Maybe we sit silently for 5 or 10 minutes. I may talk for a bit, and then students and I engage in discussion. This is a standard paradigm in college and university courses. At the end of our three hours, everybody leaves. Once in a while, a student will come back, and we'll have a little more discussion, but basically we have about three hours a week together in a typical class. In the online environment, it's entirely possible for the course to be open all day long, all week long, and students really do take advantage of it.

Online, we can cast a broader net more easily, in terms of gathering information, theories, discussions, opinions, using the web, integrating the web into our courses. This is possible to do in an on-campus course, but it is more seamless in online courses.

The fact of needing to write down their thoughts helps many students to be more thoughtful, more clear, and more considered in their responses than they would if they were just speaking off the cuff. In online discussions, quieter or slower-processing students are drawn out more with less pressure to produce a quick response. Students who tend to dominate a discussion can still write as much as they wish, but their domination of the discussion is tempered because there is still room for everyone's input. As one student said, "I used to sit quietly in the back row of class, but online, there is no back row." Really, there are a lot of students who would sit in the back row and not say much all semester long, unless they were really forced or pulled out. But in the online environment, there's one row, and it's all the front row.

Online, we can easily share papers among all of us. This is an enormous support for critical thinking. In an on-campus class, students write their paper, they turn them in, and the teaching assistants and I get to read them, but it's just too much to then copy those papers and distribute them to everyone in class. In the online environment, however, everybody reads everybody's paper. If it's a large class, we break into small groups. Still, students are reading and responding to at least half a dozen other papers. They get multiple sources of feedback on their own work, and they get to go deeply into others' ideas and expressions. That's a useful learning process facilitated by the online environment that's difficult to do on-campus.

Experiential Education Online

We are learning how to teach highly experiential subject matter online, from meditation to ecopsychology. And, we can guide people online in learning meditation practices. Jed Swift, who teaches about human-nature relationships in his online ecopsychology course, assigns students a variety of nature-based experiential exercises and asks students to bring their experience back into the online classroom for discussion, comparison and contrast, and deeper exploration. I give detailed experiential exercises in each of my online courses, from solitary inquiries to group rituals in live chatrooms, and they continue to be highly effective and moving, both for students and for myself. These exercises elicit emotional resonance and depth, an edge of risk in self-disclosure, and bright, insightful, supportive commentary. Watching online students come to tears and laughter, as well as new understanding, is moving and not uncommon.

Experiential education, especially sharing experiences in class, brings intimacy and a sense of shared community into classes. I think this community of learners is an important dimension of education which derives from exploring shared experience. So many times, I have heard that online education cannot match the intimacy and personalness of a face-to-face class. It's ironic to me that, in many real ways, there is actually more intimacy in online courses. It's not just self-disclosure for the sake of self-

disclosure, but pertinent self-disclosure which leads to a deeper intimacy. A number of students have said that because there is a certain degree of anonymity, they feel safer to disclose things that are more personal and more pertinent to the course.

Contemplative Education Online

I feel this is the growing edge of online education at Naropa, and I feel we are doing it well. Students do come away from classes touched and moved in profound ways. They come away seeing themselves, others, and the world in fundamentally different ways. They are able to ask not just new questions, but new orders of questions. They are able to practice stepping out of a preoccupation with the content of their experience to explore the medium of experience in a more direct way. The integration of readings, lectures, analysis, experiential exercises, and focused discussion provides the groundwork for this transformation to take place.

It is true that we have a highly self-selected audience in our online courses. However, there is still a great range of learning styles and orientations. Some students take to the word-heavy online environment with comfort, some have to work extra hard without the nuances and richness of non-verbal cues of face-to-face communication. Some write volumes about their experience, some write a few lines, almost all struggle to write authentically without contrivance. Some readily grasp the irony of not-knowing as a foundation for understanding; some come to it more slowly. Yet, almost all students who come to these courses are able to expand their approach to understanding, regardless of personal styles or processing styles, and almost all report extraordinary personal change as a result.

One example of an advantage of an online course for contemplative education is the support for non-reactive presence. Contemplative education cultivates this, enabling us to be here in a fuller way, to listen to each other, and to let what we say to each other touch us without the reactivity that is so easy to get into, without going immediately into either a defensive posture or an overly accepting posture. It seems to me that reading and re-reading others' comments and being forced by the medium to consider my responses through the process of writing supports this kind of non-reactive presence in an online discussion. The time pressure, the sort of pressure cooker of a face-to-face discussion, tends to promote a more reactive kind of response. Other than this, I have yet to see much evidence that we can do contemplative education *better* online than in a face-to-face setting, but I am confident we can do it as well.

Cautions

Each of those advantages has a disadvantage. Contemplative online education is, in a practical sense, extremely labor-intensive. It is harder, in my experience, for students to slide by in an online course (not that this is disadvantage, of course), and the demand on my time is greater. The benefits of flexible timing often turn into a liability in the crush of busy-ness and everyday demands. It takes an extra commitment from students to engage

mindfulness practices and confront the automated and routinized qualities of their experience. It takes especially well-grounded, sensitive, and sharp teachers and teaching assistants to support contemplative education.

We use teaching assistants and meditation instructors heavily in our online classes, often with a ratio of 10:1 students to teaching assistants, and 5:1 students to meditation instructors. The disadvantage to having a class that's open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, is the workload for both students and faculty. I often feel it is hard to keep on top of the discussions in an online course, to track what's happening, to read each of the posts, and follow the discussions. Maybe it is because the range of information about class dynamics is restricted, and I feel I have to listen harder. I am still learning about my own relationship to the time commitment of an online course, and many students say the same thing.

In my online courses, I miss the spontaneity that happens in face-to-face interaction. The course material get set up in advance, pre-recorded lectures happen in a vacuum, and then the discussions happen. It is not as easy to bring in new ideas and materials on the fly. There is definitely spontaneity in the discussions, but I miss the wild energy of exchange which develops when we are together, everyone on the edge of their seats. This seems to be because writing is slower than speaking, and perhaps more so because our discussions are primarily asynchronous. We are sitting at our computers, composing, posting our replies, and then waiting hours or days for the next part of the exchange. I have experimented with live chats, but again the medium seems to constrain the discussion. On one hand, non-reactive presence which seems deeper in my online courses provides for greater depth; on the other, spontaneity provides for a kind of creative energy that is more difficult to find in the online courses.

While community does develop online, there are also risks in discussions. For example, I don't know how many times we've gotten tangled up around jokes. Face-to-face, you would see the body language, the gesture, the tone of voice; you would see our tongues in our cheeks. Most of us had the experience with an e-mail that you've sent in a joking way that wasn't taken as a joke, and then the whole communication unravels. I am not prone to emoticons, but here is a place they can be useful. ;-) Statements online can come with a kind of directness or finality that face-to-face communication would not have. More often, I have found students being nicer and "softer" online than in on-campus discussions. Rarely, but sometimes, I have felt online students have said something, or said it in a way, that was more provocative or dismissive than they would have in an on-campus class. We have had to deal with hurt feelings in online courses. But if these conflicts are handled well, they, too, can lead to deeper intimacy. All in all, I have found at least as much intimacy in online education.

I value sincere disagreement and conflict as a precursor to deeper community and understanding, and I am interested in the element of confrontation and honest dialogue among students. I am curious about the inter-related dimensions of respect, confrontation, honesty, community, and understanding in online courses. Can we use the

online environment to deepen genuine dialogue, even when it involves disagreement, while maintaining an atmosphere of respect? Are there ways this can happen more effectively and more deeply online?

Conclusion

What are the possibilities for integrating contemplative and transformative education into fairly conventional educational structures? What are the possibilities for online education? In particular, what are the possibilities for contemplative online education? These are the questions that brought me to Naropa initially and to online education at Naropa, specifically. While we are still learning, and while I feel we are just beginning to see the possibilities, I am confident in my optimism. It is clearly possible to teach critical thinking and experiential education online, and I genuinely feel we are demonstrating that contemplative education is also possible online.

There are things we can do now in print, audio, and video that we couldn't do before the advent of the printing press and recording equipment. There are going to be things that we can do in online education that we haven't yet imagined, and I'm really curious to see what those are going to be. In another dozen years, what will we find front-and-center that is just now on the horizon?

At the same time, the core of education remains the same. It arises from the intersection of the human condition and the human potential. It calls for unfolding and touching that human condition, promoting optimal experience and service, becoming as alive and present as we can be, and moving toward fulfilling our potential as human beings. Yet, while the essential task of education draws on these core human questions, its practice evolves, partly through the incorporation of new technology such as online education.

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF HEART AND MIND KNOWING

by Ana Perez-Chisti

I came to online education with great trepidation, being a 30-year in-class professor. And it was such a shocking shift for me. And, I felt, if it was a shock for me, what was it going to be for students? But, to my great surprise, I found amazing things do happen – on the level of mind and the level of heart. This is what I learned when I first began online teaching.

Let's begin with a story. In Sufism, there's a wonderful fool named Nasruddin. And Nasruddin is the quintessential master, but wears the guise of a fool. And he's with his students in front of his garden, in front of his house, because he lost his keys. And he's asking his students to help him look, but he's at the very far end of the garden. And the students said: "Well, master, where did you lose your keys?" And he said: "Oh, somewhere by the door, I think, somewhere by the door." And they all looked at each other, and they said: "Well, why are you way over there, in the far end of your garden?" And he says: "Because there's more light here." And that's exactly what I now feel about online learning. There's more light here.

As an online instructor, one thing you must do is assess your own mind. Epistemologically, you are evaluating your intellectual capacity and relational style. You must also discover whether you are truly self-motivated. Because in order to really make an online education successful for yourself and your students, you have to be motivated to show up without having somebody look at you to say "Are you there?" You may have to develop new strategies for showing up and it may feel unusual to do so.

And this links to contemplative education, which involves showing up with your skillful capacity, your mindful capacity, relating to other people's opinions, and laying out your opinions in a way that is tolerable and respectful of others. Meaning, you are really entering a field, in online education, which is socio-politically, religiously, and fundamentally a conceptually different field of thought, with everyone. Everyone is coming with something different. And not everyone is in the same playing field. I have undergraduate students and graduate students in my course. They are in very different playing fields, and their differences must be considered. So, if a graduate student starts showing off to an undergraduate by using language that is condemning, or condescending, then we're in a psychological "watch yourself" area. We have to bring mindfulness to the forefront. We have to bring respectful communication and ethics to the forefront. We also have to be able to accept each other, wherever we are in our individual journey. A wonderful attribute of online learning is building these interpersonal skills, even in virtual places.

Another consideration when teaching online is that students may attend from anywhere in the world. Each student, international or domestic, comes to online learning with different language base experiences. And we have to approach that, languaging it in English, differently than we would just reading someone's contribution for the week. So,

you see, there are some wonderful challenges with online learning that comes, not only for the professor, but for everyone in the classroom. And, by the way, we're in a mutual, cooperative, learning curve together because we don't know where anyone is yet when we begin. We learn that on the way. And we have to hold a great deal of respect and tolerance for that "on the way" type of experience.

So, that's the basic, intellectual epistemology for learning. Now, the heart epistemology for learning is quite extraordinary. And, I must confess, sometimes we do get very grumpy students. And they will complain, vigorously, online, not only to everybody in the class, but to the professor. And they'll tell you what to do, and what you're doing wrong and what you're doing right. And you kind of get used to it. And, you know, how you operate with the student who is very grumpy is with ultimate kindness. There is no other way, because that is the Buddhist teaching. Skillful means in verbalization is one of your keys for operating with someone who is grumpy.

At the same time, you find jewels. And the jewels are those students that come in and save the professor's bacon. They're the ones that go to the disgruntled student, and they say: hey, you know, we're all in this class together. And, what did you mean when you said this? Or, what were you trying to say? So, you find these jewels of students coming in at the apex of online learning; the cooperation to be a true community. This is the true ethos of online learning. I find this kind of communication more online than in the physical classroom. And this is where the heart really can kick in. Students are able to support each other, where they are, and where everyone is. Grumpy or not, it's okay. The interpersonal communication becomes sterling, eventually.

So you have 15 weeks, you've got a semester. You might start out rocky, but it will eventually become sterling. And we'll be able to really find a way to touch each other through something that we say. Now, the delicacy, on the psychological level, for me, is when somebody communicates something about their personal experience. For instance, I just had a woman on my online class whose child became very injured, and very sick, and had to communicate that to the class because she had to drop out. And it was amazing, the support she received from our class. Had she not received that support, she may not have been able to face the challenges that she did with her child in the same way.

And so we have some great skillful means, such as online learning, at the base of our great community here. And that's why I feel so honored to be a part of Naropa, because, in Naropa leading the way, and now having the experience, online, with so many individuals, experiences in their life, trying to find learning... squeeze in learning, should I say. Mothers who want to squeeze in developing themselves, fathers who want to squeeze in developing themselves, young people who are really looking for their journey to manifest and bring something successful toward themselves. It's so exciting to be able to provide this type of education. The confluence of this kind of meeting ground, what I call the quintessential online community, is a very successful test.

In my years of dealing with online communication, I have noticed something else. There have been times where students participate in online discussions and it is as if they never wrote a word in their life. At times, student writing is choppy and inconsistent - so erratic that no one can understand what the student is getting at. So, genuine, clarifying questions are asked to the student, and the student responds. At the very beginning, some of the students can't respond cohesively at all. But, by the end of the semester, with the support of their loving, online community, they began to express their heart in an incredibly clear, beautiful way. It is so impressive to me to see the community has the power to challenge and support individual members. In the discussion forum environment, the community of learners has the potential to strengthen each member's skill in clarity of writing by giving feedback and asking questions. The community can keep members accountable while simultaneously offering the kind of support that allows students to feel comfortable enough to really speak from their heart.

In an online learning community, you may never see the face of the constituents, but you may just feel their hearts thumping.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ONLINE EDUCATION

by *Andrew Wille*¹⁹

I first came to Boulder and Naropa four and a half years ago as a student in the MFA Writing and Poetics program. Previously, my background was in publishing. I worked as an editor at Little, Brown, in London. And, when the low residency MFA in Creative Writing was being developed, I was asked by Junior Burke, the director of the program, to develop a class on publishing, because it seemed a very natural extension of the desires of writers would be to get published. And so, that was how I first came to start teaching at Naropa, developing this class that imparts information, a lot of information, about the publishing culture to writers who want to get their books out into the world and extend whatever they're doing in their personal lives into meeting strangers through their writing.

The low residency MFA is a three-year program. Students usually take two classes online per regular semester. But, one of the wonderful features of the low residency program is that the students are able to participate in our long-established summer writing program. So, the residency is this great big structure that people are able to step right into and network with other students on campus, students in the undergraduate programs, and students who are attending the summer writing program for fun. There is an important balance between resident, low resident and online elements. I'm not sure that any of these things, in and of themselves, are sufficient. Perhaps it's time for some campus programs, throughout the world, to be thinking about ways in which online education can, in fact, strengthen their offering to students, because there are many ways in which online education is superior to the experience of the classroom.

One major difference with online education is that time and space are managed in a completely different way. It's a very non-linear environment. And so we have to put our head around that in some very fundamental, practical ways. And the things that really are most important are practical things because these are the things that people take for granted. And they think they can just slot this online experience into the rest of their life. And, in fact, that really is not the case.

The first thing I always ask, in the very first unit of my classes, is for students to describe their workspace. Where do you actually sit and do the work that you have to do every week? Where do you look into your class and read the lectures and participate in the threaded discussions? Are you sitting at a desk? Are you sitting in a coffee shop? Are you lying on the floor in the living room with your laptop balanced on your chest? And yes, people do that. And, if you're doing that, you're creating a problem for yourself. As you know, ergonomically, computers require particular designs. And the workspace we're at needs to be designed properly. So, I have some websites that I recommend students look at and take the advice of. Just silly things, like not sitting with a window behind you,

¹⁹ Andrew Wille teaches in both the on-campus Writing and Poetics department and in the low residency Creative Writing program.

as you're sitting at the computer screen, to be sure that you don't have an immediate reflection coming off your computer screen, is a very important thing to take on board. In addition, there are all sorts of posture suggestions and tips. There are adequate postures to be followed if you're going to be sitting at a computer for a long time every week. Do you need to buy an office chair? Do you need to buy a desk? Do you need to clear a space or make a room that will be your workspace? These are not things that can be dealt with any other way, other than people actually investing that serious time and effort.

Another important consideration is delivery - how we deliver education, knowledge, and how students deliver their information back to us. For example, I don't really like to think of online education as such, I prefer to use the old fashioned term of distance learning, because, fundamentally, distance learning embraces elements of online education, but it also embraces things that students in a classroom here in Boulder are doing. They're reading books, usually. They're having conversations. Whether it's in a classroom or in an online environment, it's still a conversation. Simply the word "online" can create a barrier between people that isn't necessarily a true one.

Continuing with practical things, I use PDFs in my courses rather than using the online lecture format to deliver course content. One of the things about my publishing class, for example, is that there are not really any textbooks on publishing that I wanted to use, typically because they were not particularly suited to Naropa students. So, I started to write lectures, and I found that the lectures were really long. I considered putting them into a spoken, audio form, but, at the time, my technical capacities were not so hot, and I have this notion that printed material is special. And I think that students do like to read material, on paper. So, rather forcing students to print off long pages of lecture notes, I created the lectures as PDFs and used my educator discount to buy Adobe InDesign. I had a very steep learning curve of my own, learning how to use Adobe InDesign. But it is a marvelous piece of equipment, piece of technology that teachers and students can use. In fact, some students ended up doing exactly this. So, rather than writing an essay, they would actually convert the information that they had to impart into an eight page presentation in this sort of PDF format. And that's quite revolutionary. It's beginning to force us to rethink the way in which we're communicating information. Do we have to rely on the old-fashioned five-paragraph essay as an adequate means to deliver knowledge? Some students have been using PowerPoint, for example, as a means to do class presentations, which is something else for us to think about.

Another practical concern is the issue of time. People who are doing a master's degree must seriously consider how they will schedule their time. If you've got children, you need to have an adequate form of childcare arranged. You need to be surrounded by supportive family members, partners, that are going to take your children and look after them for two or three hours every week, so that you can devote the time you need to make the most out of your studies. That's imperative. If you have a job, you probably need to take an afternoon off every couple of weeks in order to keep up with the work. If you've made the personal commitment, and the very large financial commitment to doing this, you need to be able to make the most of it, and it's imperative that you do. And

also, if you're one of these very go-getty people, such as we have many of in Boulder, who like to do lots of outdoor activities on the weekend, maybe you need to scale back on those as well. This is a two or three-year chunk of your life, a very special experience. And probably because it's Naropa, it will be one of the formative experiences of your whole life. So don't short-change it.

It's important to realize, though, that this experience can become addictive. I'm not sure if students know, but teachers can see how many minutes students spend online week-by-week. Of course, some people just log in and leave themselves logged in without cease, so it looks as if they're there all day everyday. But, people's posts are date stamped, and we know some of us *are* in there all day, everyday. And, although it's fun, it can possibly turn problematic in that it can become addictive. You do have the temptation to zap in and see if somebody's posted a response to that really witty little thread you made earlier. And then, of course, nobody does. So you're looking there every hour. And then the subject moves on, and nobody was interested in your wit, and you're crushed. The management of time becomes very important. Teachers and students must allot themselves prescribed amounts of time to be engaged with their online courses. It may also be prudent to name this issue in the syllabus and talk about in the curriculum.

The final point I'll make is the benefit of tracking changes and comments, functions of Microsoft Word, within a document. This is very easy to do and makes giving feedback very easy and direct. Fundamentally, it's like adding a Post-It note to an on-screen document. I'm surprised people don't use this more often. Many folks I have spoken to either hadn't heard of it or were confused about how it works when they came across it. It is definitely worth getting familiar with this function of Word because it's immensely useful.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE EDUCATION

by Jan Herrick

Last year, I arrived at graduation with my daughter. There was a small reception on the morning of graduation during which we had the opportunity to meet and greet some of the significant people from the university. I took the opportunity to introduce my daughter to Tom Coburn. He responded to me by saying: "It's so nice of you to be here for your daughter's graduation." My daughter Carrie immediately replied by saying: "No, no, I'm here for my mom! She is graduating."

It may have been an awkward moment then that is funny now, but that situation really expresses something important that needs to be noted. When you step back and take a look at the people who are in the so many of the Naropa programs, it's such a beautiful mix of people. There are many perspectives represented, from youth to grey haired maturity, numerous religious and national backgrounds, and all kinds of distinctions in between. And really, one gains so much more from an exposure to that mixture and the gifts each person brings to the overall experience.

I remember, when I was filling out my own application for the MATP program, one question asked: "Why do you want to do this?" And the only thing I could honestly put down was personal development. I had done another MA in the late 80s as a way to add to my credentials for work I was doing at the time. Applying to be part of the MATP program was something that was adding to what I had been doing and studying on my own for years, only now I discovered a name for it. And I wanted to be part of it. Knowing it was an online degree program was both comforting and intimidating at the same time. I have a history of being technologically challenged. I was the last person on the planet to purchase a microwave oven, and my knowledge of computers was limited to turning it on and checking my e-mail. But, the online format is very user friendly. It was even easy for me. I turned on the computer, got to the site, and although I was a little nervous at first, the site was easy to navigate.

Another thing that I would like to touch on is the anonymity the online format presents. Being just a little bit invisible gives a marvelous edge to those of us who are on the introverted end of the spectrum. If I had been doing this degree work in a real classroom situation, I probably would have been one of the last people to open my mouth. I would have ensconced myself in a seat in the back of the room, and it would have probably taken me the entire semester to move up to the middle, become visible and raise my hand. The online format gives everybody an equal playing field. Those of us who have to think about what we're going to say before we say it are allowed that opportunity.

I was doing a full time job for nearly the entire time I was working on my degree program. It became my practice at lunchtime to check in on the class to see if there was a question or issue that I could be pondering. By the end of the day, I would have had an opportunity to think about it a little bit before I got to the point of sitting down and writing a response online that evening. Checking in during the day was very, very helpful

to me. Yet, even with preparation, clicking on the send button might take a moment. As a precaution, write your response in a program on your computer first, then copy or transfer it to the discussion thread. Copying your work in this way also gives you an opportunity to really formulate and reread your thoughts before you post it. I learned this after I mistakenly posted something before I really meant for it to go.

I'd also like to say something about the community aspect of the whole online process. From the very first class that I took, I felt accepted and embraced by the rest of the group. The tone was set by everyone's willingness to put themselves out there. When you're willing to do that, you're going to get a lot back in return. If you're willing to only give a little bit that is what you will have returned to you. You may not understand how what you're saying will be accepted by someone else in the group, but, very often, the things that we say have a great deal of impact on others. The person you might least expect may find great meaning in a statement you make, or of an example you use from your own life situation. Unless you're willing to share how your work is reflected in your own life, you'll never be able to create real community. The online community was an amazing experience for me. I had some life-changing events occur in my personal life during my study at Naropa, and I really felt the support of my community of individuals online, some of whom have become my life-long friends. I know that I may not see them every week. I may not ever see them again, but I know that a connection was made. If I do have an opportunity to see and talk to them again, face-to-face, the friendship has already been established. It's extremely important, knowing that as life happens you have an online community to support you in and through the work you are doing.

Contemplative education is all about bringing your life and your study together. Why bother going through any of this if it's not going to take root and impact your life? If we were only doing this kind of work and study to get a job and make money, I don't think any of us would actually be here. This is not the kind of forum for that mindset. Somebody who seeks out contemplative education is not purely seeking the bottom line. They are willing to do the internal work that goes on, with the community in each class, and that community will be different and unique in each class and for each group of students. I truly valued the synchronicity of the moment, of who was in each class with me. I discovered that the people who were supposed to be there were there. It was quite profound, and to just let it be as it was became an amazing gift for which I am truly grateful.

I want to be sure to emphasize the concept of relating study to life. Every course we take can relate to our life situation, if we allow it to. That piece is so intrinsically important that I will share this one example. One of the courses that I took at the very end of my program was, ironically, one that I did not consider when selecting my electives. But the first choice, and then my second choice were both cancelled. As I was registering for this previously unconsidered class I thought: O.K., why am I here? I knew that there was something I was going to learn from this. I was taking the Diamond Approach. During the first week of the course, one person said that they were involved with hospice work. I kind of filed that bit of information in the back of my head

somewhere. But, a situation later arose in my personal life that brought up a need for me to investigate hospice and discuss death and dying. I wrote to that person in my class, individually via an e-mail for some advice. The response was: "Here's my phone number, call me." And, for over a week, I spoke to that individual nightly. It was extremely helpful to me and a deeply personal support in a difficult time.

It is important to set up a time and a place for study, a literal space, with desk, chair, and all the other stuff that makes a place special. One of the very first things that I remember hearing about was the bow. I think that it may have been in something I read. It wasn't something that I had done yet. So... here I am, at my computer, in my little home office room. O.K., do I bow to the computer? I'm not really sure what I should be doing. As funny as it sounds now out of context, I learned over time that when I entered that space of learning, my virtual classroom, it was truly a sacred space. Whether you're getting online to check into class to read, to post, or to participate in an online ritual, at the moment you enter, you enter a sacred space because you're holding that area for everybody else who joins you. That fact became very real for me, and bowing to that understanding became extremely important. In that context the bow made perfect sense.

It was often very late by the time I got online to check into class. The great thing is that most of the time you get to choose the time that is best for you, it doesn't matter what that time is. All I can say is thank God there were no web-cams around, because sometimes I'd be sitting at my computer in my pajamas. There is no dress requirement! We all arrive in class at a time and in a place that is most advantageous for us to work. So especially... when life happens, as it does all too often, the classroom is ready when we are. The classroom is at home. You don't have leave home, get in a car and drive somewhere and be gone for several hours. You are in your own house, or your apartment, or wherever you choose to be. If you have roommate or a family at home, in a way you are sharing your education with them, so you really need to put some boundaries on yourself, and negotiate some with them as well. Everybody has to have an understanding that when you enter your study area, it's sacred. You will need to figure out for yourself, as I did: What's going to be the best time? Am I going to fall asleep if I start at midnight? Do I need to commit to getting started by 9:00, or by 8:30? Is early morning best?

I hope that sharing some of my experiences as an online student will be helpful. I bow to all of you as you venture into the virtual classrooms of Naropa.

MEDITATION INSTRUCTION IN ONLINE EDUCATION

by Lee Worley²⁰

I started out in theater, so you can imagine that I have an organic and natural aversion to the online world. I think that may be one of the reasons why I've put some thought into it, since, you know, you have to do what comes along.

I came to Naropa in 1974, and never left, starting the Theater Studies BA in 1976, and developing a theater training built on contemplative, meditative, and Buddhist principles. I also got a MA in Buddhist Studies, through the blessings and benefits of being faculty at Naropa University. I'm very happy about that. And all that time, or, a lot of it anyway, I was working with a number of people, including Richard Brown, the head of the education program, to develop a contemplative view of how to train teachers, how to nurture teachers, and how to appreciate teaching and learning on the basis of a meditative mind. So, my thoughts are pretty much the outcome of all of those things.

What I'm going to talk about is the effort to create some guidelines so that when we're doing meditation instruction online, we have something other than our experience in working face-to-face to draw on. My initial effort was to try to create a view of how we work with meditation in the Masters in Education program -- a low residency, online, program. I'll begin by describing how it works.

We start in the summer, with a three-week intensive, which, up through this year, happened at the Shambhala Mountain Center in northern Colorado. It's very intimate. We work night and day, together in community, both studying and looking at our community responsibilities, our education responsibilities, and, in the first year, very much looking at ourselves: who are we? And, how are we as people, and as teachers? We meditate together for two hours a day. It's expected that everyone, regardless of what their personal spiritual practice is, will practice *shamatha*, basic meditation practice, together, morning and evening. We see this as not only a way to begin to have an understanding of who we are, but also as a way to have a community experience that is completely shared among all of us.

After that intensive three weeks, the students take courses online during the Fall and Spring semesters. But, the thing that happens in that summer session is an important, face to face, first relationship. Each student receives a meditation instructor, who meets several times with her students during the course of the three weeks and talks with them about her personal meditation experiences. By the end of three weeks, we know each other pretty well, as I'm sure you can imagine. When that journey continues online, a lot of intimacy has developed through the summer, both because the meditation instructor relationship continues, and also, through the whole community dialogue. In

²⁰ Lee Worley is a long-time Naropa faculty member whose career started in Theater Studies and moved into a broader performance department called Inter-Arts. Presently, Lee is teaching meditation with the Contemplative Education MA program.

the second summer, the group reunites for three weeks as a second year class, and is joined by a new first year class.

What has happened over time in our program is that our online courses have been opened up to people who are not program students. And, because we have a limited staff who are MA Education meditation instructors, I've created some guidelines to help people who don't know our program work with those students.

I have come up with a rubric that seems to be helping me have a sense of what I can and can't do with meditation online. I am not talking here about the person that I've already worked with, face to face, in the summer program, but the person who I've never seen, who I don't know, that decides to take an online education course.

To think about what the purpose of meditation is, I thought I would begin by reading this:

The purpose of meditation practice, especially in conjunction with the educational curriculum of a contemplative program, such as the MA in Contemplative Education, is to provide each student tools with which he or she can explore and examine who they are, and develop skills to discover the true nature of mind, and true compassion of heart, so that they can lessen discursive confusion and be of benefit to themselves and to those with whom they work, teach, or live.

One thing that serves as an organizing principle in Buddhism is called, "Outer, Inner, and Secret." In thinking about Outer, Inner, and Secret, with regard to online meditation, I will start with the Outer. The Outer is the easiest one. The Outer is the ability to describe the posture, how long a person should sit, and the various details and practical aspects of meditating. Those aren't too difficult, although we find in the Master's program that it is helpful to have a video of a student sitting in meditation posture, while a meditation instructor points out the various things to pay attention to. I think the most problematic part about the outer level is that a student may not know that they're in the wrong posture. It feels comfortable, so it must be right, even though in actuality the student might be tilting to the left or leaning too far forward. What very often happens is that people are holding the meditation posture much too rigidly, but they don't know that because they don't even know that they are tense. Online it's a problem, but it can be worked with if the meditation instructor asks the right questions and is able to stay with the questioning: Describe how you are sitting, is there any discomfort? Where is the discomfort? What does it feel like? After a half hour are you in any pain? And so on.

The Inner part of the meditation instruction, and also of the meditation practice, has to do with the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that the student has while meditating or as a result of having spent some time sitting on his cushion. This has a couple of pitfalls, although meditation instructors often report that the conversation online is better than one that they might have with a person in the room with them because there's a

kind of freedom to express yourself online. It provides a little bit of safety. You're not sitting there opposite the meditation instructor who is looking directly at you. You feel you can kind of open up. I find the problem with this is that, very often, you can open up, but the storyline that you've been telling yourself all your days is still your storyline. The observer isn't right there in the flesh to give you a little bit of feedback that you're basically deluding yourself about things. We can engage in wonderful conversations that are sort of mythological. I'm not even talking about the meditation instructor saying anything. It is a problem when you don't have a live person to mirror your own honesty as you do when they're looking right at you, seeing into you, experiencing you with all their senses.

Still, it is doable. I think the antidote to this problem is calm, patience, and really good listening skills on the part of the instructor, so that over time the student settles down and begins to feel that this situation is a trustworthy one, and that the way things really are is a perfectly acceptable thing to talk about. That it isn't necessary to glamorize one's stories about one's meditation. Also, I find that online meditation instruction can sometimes be a real help to the instructor, because you can ask the pointed question that face to face might feel just too harsh or too invasive. With the online interview, there's a lag time. The student can take in the question, and think about it, and reflect upon it. It's not quite so threatening. He or she can even decide more politely not to answer it, if indeed it was too harsh.

Finally there is the Secret level. This is the most difficult one, because the Secret level of meditation is the non-conceptual space, or emptiness, or openness, or vast mind, which reveals itself through continuing to do one's meditation practice. How do you "talk" about that? In fact, all talk about it is not it, and talk tends to obscure the very thing that it's talking about. An experience of that is so available when you are face-to-face because you're sitting and meditating together. You can both drop into that spaciousness. But when the student is on the computer, trying to think about how to describe a spacious moment that happened that morning in ordinary words and send these across the screen, across time and space to you—well, maybe it was an experience and maybe it wasn't. That is difficult because if it really was an experience of spaciousness then words cheapen it, and if it was just a thought about it, who's to know?

My temporary conclusion about this Secret level, is that, if we as meditation instructors do a good job recognizing and honoring the components of the Outer and the Inner, and have set up the relationship situation properly, then we can relax about it, and trust that good meditation practice is happening, and that, ultimately, each one of us has to learn for our self and rid our self of our own conceptual and cultural super-impositions, and the things that obstruct our own individual paths. So, really, there isn't any problem.

NGEDON SCHOOL ONLINE

by Phil Karl²¹

I've been a student of Chogyam Trungpa since 1977. I came to Naropa then and wound up studying in the M.A. Psychology program, and finished my degree in Contemplative... it was actually called Buddhist and Western Psychology, in '79. I've done a fair amount of both formal and informal study in Buddhism and meditation. And, about two and a half years ago, completed the traditional three-year meditation retreat, which is done in the Tibetan tradition. Professionally, I've worked in training and development for some 20 plus years. I ran a training division in an engineering firm. I also have worked as a contractor, doing training program design, educational design, for web-based, online training. I'm also adjunct faculty at Naropa.

I would like to give a brief overview of the Ngedon School. *Ngedon* is a Tibetan word that translates as "true meaning." I'll cover how the curriculum came to be somewhat re-tooled and re-designed to go into an online format, how that's working, and what we've learned. I'll also discuss the global issues of contemplative education, how I see online learning fitting with that, and if there may be other dimensions that need to be attached to make it a fuller experience.

The Ngedon School was started by Trungpa Rinpoche around 1983, with a number of his students, particularly those somewhat learned in Buddhist Studies, and experienced teachers, such as Judith Simmer-Brown and Reggie Ray. There are a number of other people who were involved. It was a live instruction, eight course curriculum, which was delivered through the Boulder Shambhala Center to quite a number of students over the years, and also had outlying programs. All over the U.S. and Europe, Ngedon School was operating, presenting a certain set of courses that were, essentially, focused on Buddhism and meditation.

In a traditional Tibetan perspective, there are three aspects to engaging path, which, you could say, are probably three aspects that are common to any contemplative, any spiritual, any meditative, path. And those are commonly referred to as *view*, *meditation*, and *conduct*, or activity. The view is the accurate, conceptual understanding of what you're doing. The meditative aspect is non-conceptual, introspective; you know what meditation is, basically. And the conduct or activity component is what comes out of that and how you handle yourself in the world as a person engaging that sort of path. So, Ngedon School was the view component. The people who attended Ngedon School were people who had been through fairly intensive training already. They had made commitments to their teacher, to their meditative path, and they had a certain contemplative component in their lives already.

²¹ Phil Karl is the director of education for the Ngedon School.

Ngedon School was really about delivering and furthering the teachings. It operated for about 22 years in Boulder, and in other places, as a live instruction program. And then, because of somewhat declining student enrollments, and a certain amount of instructor fatigue, the live program closed down and we decided to put it online. And we started having conversations trying to figure out just how we're going to do it. It seemed clear that we weren't going to be able to simply re-tool the live lectures, or just take the taped lectures and digitize them and put them online. We really had to re-design the program so that it fit with online environments, so that it would be comprehensible and very accessible to people. So we set about developing the courses, and they are in progress. We finished our second year of online instruction. Course five, in the eight course series, is currently under development. And we'll start up again in September.

The school involved a lecture, discussion groups, experiential exercises, various kinds of handouts, as well as reading assignments from textbooks, and a fair amount of interaction. And what we've found is that all of these things are possible. As for meditation instruction, you could call that an experiential exercise, it's a particular sort of thing. All of those seem to be working pretty well, in terms of how it's operating online.

Tangentially, Trungpa Rinpoche was very enthusiastic about the different kinds of media that we have available in this part of the world. In Tibet, the only kind of things they had were, basically, woodblock prints, so that they could print a certain, limited, amount of textual material and distribute it. It was almost always Dharma. It was almost always Buddha Dharma. He mentioned that when he came to the West and saw people taking printed materials, of one sort or another, and just throwing them on the floor and being disrespectful of them; it was a little shocking for him, because he'd been so conditioned to think of all printed material as being special.

When he came here, he picked up, very quickly, on the potential for recording his lectures. And he always insisted on it. He had some of his teachings filmed. And some of those films, in early, kind of grainy, black and white video, still survive. Much of that was transcribed, edited into books, published, and distributed. And it went from there. He was so effective in using these various media; I wondered how he would feel about the Internet, and how he might envision using it. I imagine he would see some pitfalls and also some real opportunity. And I think most of us do, too.

One thing that we've found that's a little troubling about the online program is that we lose probably 40% of our students within the first couple of classes. The material is a little steep, and there's about four hours or so of commitment per week, which is difficult for busy people. Once we get through about our second class, then we seem to have a pretty stabilized, and pretty reliable enrollment. We have students in Europe. We have a lady in the Black Forest, in Germany. We have somebody on a mountainside in Switzerland. We have someone in Australia. One of our regular discussion leaders, who functions as a T.A., we have several in the class, is in Cape Town, South Africa. We've got people all over North America with English as their first language, English as their second language... as long as they've got a command of the language, and a reasonable

internet connection, they seem to be able to do it. So we are a global enterprise with about 50 students, on a shoestring budget, frankly.

My sense is that Ngedon School works quite well. Part of why it works well and people are able to really engage the material, and, in some sense apply it, is in part because they already have something of a background. They have a commitment to a contemplative, meditative practice. And my experience in working with a lot of such training programs that instruct people in how to meditate and how to integrate it into their lives, it seems helpful for there to be some kind of face to face, residential component. My sense is that the low-res model is a good one, and that part of the reason that Ngedon School is working so well without that, is because people already have that component in their lives. So, clearly, there's a great deal of advantage to being able to present the conceptual component, the learning component, of the material. And you can actually get people to go through a certain amount of experiential stuff. But I also think that there's a real value in getting face to face, having that element built in to these kinds of programs.

CREATING COMMUNITY ONLINE

by Sherry Elms²²

I'm one of those people who drag their feet, quite strongly, into ever getting into anything online. And, I was appalled that Naropa was even thinking about teaching meditation online. I thought, now Naropa has gone down the tubes. And then, I have to practice what I preach, and, one of the things I tend to preach is to speak from your experience - don't project your negative things on to something else without having some awareness of your projections. So, I realized I was going to have to bite into this, and then I could criticize it later. But that didn't work. I'm a convert.

I've gone the full cycle of thinking it's the greatest since... whatever, and have come back down to realize that it is actually incredible. And one of the things that brought me to that realization was really thinking about the founder of the university, Trungpa Rinpoche. One of the reasons I was drawn to him as a teacher was his global vision of creating an enlightened society, that he wasn't simply interested in people going to a monastery and meditate and so forth; he really wanted something to happen, and the world to change. And I thought: Wouldn't this be amazing, if it could happen, that people could learn a contemplative practice, and people could understand contemplative education all over the planet? Even those who couldn't be here for whatever reason, but were hungry for this, could still have access to it? That has been my inspiration to try it.

When the Eco-Psychology track started, I was asked to develop a meditation class, Meditation for Social Change Leaders. I included an intensive three-day piece. In fact, meditation can happen online, and I have found that people tend to be much more revealing online than they are in person. What an honor that is, to be a part of that. It's taken me to deeper levels, and it made me realize that the world is so hungry for what we have to offer. For people who are not living here, in this vicinity, and, maybe, are feeling somewhat isolated in the way they view the world, maybe they don't find a lot of like-minded people around them – that feeling can serve as further inspiration to just jump in and give their whole heart into the teachings.

So that's been an incredible benefit. And I've also seen that you can be very experiential. One of the things I offer in the course is a tangerine meditation. You can bring a real tangerine to your computer, you can hear the words of Thich Nhat Hanh describing to you what it's like to eat a tangerine, and actually have your own experience of a distracted mind, and a fully present mind. And some people have reported that they thought they ate their first tangerine. And that was online, in front of their computer. It has been very inspiring, to get that feedback.

Another question I had in regard to teaching meditation online is whether it is possible to build an online sense of community, or sanga. I've found that the path of awareness - a meditation practice that is cleaning the lens of ourselves so that we can

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actually see others more clearly, so our speech can be more effective, our actions can have more accuracy - you can't do that alone. The path of awareness is not a solitary path. It has to be in community. And, that's the one thing, throughout Naropa, that I've heard. Students want community whether they're online students or regular resident program students. And I thought: How can that happen online? Because it's through community that one really defines who they are. You don't find out who you are on an island. Is the online community really able to help inform someone's true interdependence with others? As it turns out, it does.

Even before students arrive here, they had a couple of weeks online, and are so surprised to hear other people talking the way they talk: "Oh, somebody's really listening to me." I already felt this kind of vibration of community coming together, before the students arrived to meet each other. They refer to themselves as having welded, as opposed to bonded. Then the concern becomes "what happens to the community when the course ends?" Students ask us, "How do we stay in touch with each other? How do we get support for our practice? How to we continue?"

When we start our service learning projects, we help and support around maintaining our personal practice. Something we started this year is a place in the online forum called "the Well." From this noncurated, nongraded space, students and faculty are able to share resources and comments with each other about topics related to the course, personal integration, and to practice life. We're trying to get creative in how we design community spaces online, letting people know, in this case, that the Well is there for you, with wonderful resources. One student even said, "You can lead a student to the Well, but you can't make them drink." One of the first things we posted was an announcement that the instructor, Frank Berliner, had had a very serious automobile accident, and was really in difficult straits. The community support he got from that posting was phenomenal, and had nothing to do with any course that anybody was taking. It was off the structure. And it was really, incredibly, helpful to Frank, to have this support of the community. People jumped in really to give him comments and offer strength.

Another way we are incorporating online practice communities is through the use of a cyberspace group retreat. There's a practice week each semester at Naropa and this was a way for people to connect with what's going on here on campus, no matter where they were. We took the week around practice day - some programs here do that - the Religious Studies program and the Contemplative Psych program, take a whole week in the middle of each semester for practice. Through the structure of the Well, those who wanted to participate could send in their intention for the week. Maybe it was simply to be more present with their life, kinder to their spouse, and then how much they were going to practice that time. It could be very individualized. So students pushed their own edge, and it was realistic. Do just a little more of a concentrated practice. At this point, everybody has seen the intentions of everyone else. And the support there was wonderful because you've spoken to the community. You've said your commitment to somebody else and you're sort of accountable, and at the same time you also have something to

offer. So that was a wonderful exchange where people could reconnect with those that they had seen in the low residency portion, and really support and encourage each other in their practice. And we'll be continuing that.

Another thing students have done spontaneously to create community is choosing a meditation buddy. Students agree to practice at a particular time, like 10 am on Saturday, even though they are in different places. It has been very successful. One student this semester suggested we could even do a live chat room where we could schedule a time and those who wanted to participate could choose to practice together and then talk about that afterwards.

I am personally excited about developing ways in which educators can go beyond the typical online structure and integrate alternative methods to create community within their courses and programs. The greater and more cohesive the community is, the greater the opportunity for self-awareness and ultimately, the greater effect on the world. The hope is that the sense of belonging created in the online community and the connections that have been made will last long after the program has concluded. So we faculty put little jewels in the Well - quotations, readings, and those sorts of things. Students add their own inspirations and reflections. And soon, there is a meaningful exchange of comradery, support, and revelation which when combined, bring everyone together.