**The Mindful Teacher as the Foundation of Contemplative Pedagogy**

Richard C. Brown, Professor, Contemplative Education, Naropa University


Contemplative pedagogy flourishes when it is the interplay of the mindful presence of the teacher with effective instructional methods. Much has been written about “best practices” in contemplative education, but the personal presence of the teacher is an important foundation demonstrating that curricular implementation and subject mastery alone are not enough. Contemplative pedagogy demands that the teacher engage fearlessly in a dynamic relationship with the learning process on both personal and professional levels. Presence is not accidental; it is cultivated through meditative practices that open and clarify the heart and mind of the teacher, facilitate communication, sharpen the intellect, and foster creativity.

Yet, effective contemplative pedagogy requires more than the teacher’s meditative practice. Many teachers who meditate or practice other contemplative disciplines struggle to marry their mindfulness meditation to their teaching. Quiet sessions on a meditation cushion can contrast sharply with the complex dynamics of the classroom. Experienced contemplative practitioners develop clarity and stability of mind, but how can such qualities be transferred skillfully into the classroom?
This exploration will focus on how the development of inner meditative discipline gradually progresses into outer contemplative pedagogy. Using mindfulness meditation as an illustration, we will explore how that practice develops skills that can gradually infuse teaching presence and instruction, and become the basis of effective contemplative teaching.

**Meditation as a Foundation for Contemplative Pedagogy**

There are, of course, many different meditative practices, but in this essay, sitting meditation with its mindful focus on breathing will be considered the foundation. This form of meditation develops certain qualities relevant to academic pursuits, including being present in the moment, clarity of thought, and emotional equanimity. Many forms of breath meditation exist, but for this purpose we will explore the form used by many, but not all, of the faculty at Naropa University. Drawing from the Buddhist tradition of *shamatha-vipashyana* (mindfulness and awareness), meditation at Naropa is taught not as religious practice but as a “first-person” method for self-discovery and learning.¹ In our training of contemplative teachers, we begin with a foundation of mindfulness developing into heightened awareness as a foundation for a variety of contemplative pedagogies for the classroom.

This form of meditation has three dimensions – posture, breath, and working with distractions. The sitting posture in meditation is upright, still, open, and solidly grounded. The posture is firm and contained, and yet the body is receptive to inner experiences and to the environment. The eyes, ears, and all the senses are alert, but passive. This balance between a contained form and openness to experience is a principle throughout meditation that makes the practice relevant for dealing with everyday life and teaching.
For instance, form and openness is a powerful balance in the contemplative teacher. Strong, confident teacher presence that is also open and receptive to students, makes for dynamic and trustworthy learning relationships.

The second dimension of meditation is mindfulness of breathing. Attention is focused on ordinary breathing; no special breath techniques are involved. Attention on the breath seems to have a naturally calming effect. Taking a deep breath or two has become a common centering practice in sports and as a response to stress in everyday life. For the teacher in the classroom, a few focused breaths can have the same effect, especially when combined with a well-aligned, upright posture. Focusing on the breath as it is makes an easier transition to using breath awareness as a tool while teaching.

The third dimension, closely related to breath awareness, is working with distractions. When attention to breathing wanders in meditation, the instruction is to briefly notice where the attention has strayed and come back to mindful breathing. For instance, we might notice that our attention has strayed to thinking about some intriguing question, planning a conversation with a colleague, or perhaps simply daydreaming. Interestingly, we are taught that in meditation we do not instantly return our attention to breathing. Instead we take a quick moment to notice what has captured our attention. In this way we become aware of the habits of our mind. The meditation session, however, is not the time to analyze these patterns. We simply notice, let go, and, without judgment, return our attention to the breathing. Contemplation, reflection, or analysis of our habitual patterns is a separate practice. Thus, we develop “familiarity” (one translation of “meditation”\(^2\)) with our habits of attention. As our meditation practice deepens, we find ourselves returning to the present moment more naturally and frequently.
Noticing wandering mind and bringing it back to awareness of breathing is at the heart of the practice, but is easier said than done. Our natural emotional and conceptual vitality tend to complicate this very simple focus. For instance, during meditation when our attention to breathing has been absent for a while, we may have a tendency to castigate ourselves for being undisciplined, to criticize the practice itself as being impossibly difficult, or to conclude that this was not the most conducive circumstance for meditation. When we notice ourselves being critical, judgmental, or analytical, we gently let that go and return to breath awareness. We cultivate the skills of being precise, open, and unattached no matter what our state of mind.

The meditative ability to notice when our attention has strayed and to gracefully and readily come back to the matters of the present moment is very useful while teaching. With practice contemplative teachers develop facility and ease with the natural vacillations in our attention. As our compassion towards our own patterns deepens, our attention remains more constantly present. These calming and synchronizing practices seem to foster equanimity and ease the danger of burnout.

**Applications of Meditation in Teaching**

How can mindfulness-awareness practice be useful in developing contemplative pedagogy? Moving from mindfulness on the meditation cushion to mindfulness in the classroom takes a lot of practice. One way to begin this transition is to bring tangible reminders of mindfulness practice into the classroom. A particular object placed on our desks or somewhere in the classroom can serve as a reminder of mindfulness while we are teaching. A small piece of driftwood or a stone collected on a retreat could serve as a reminder to notice, let go, and wake up to the present moment. If our classroom culture is
open to the notion that we are exploring mindfulness, then the purpose of the object might be shared with the class. If not, it can remain a silent personal reminder.

The meditation posture itself suggests that being mindful of our body, uncommon in academic teaching, can also aid in the transition. There is little appreciation of mindfulness of body as an enhancement to our teaching. While teaching we might even forget we even have bodies. But just as in meditation, when our physical bodies are upright, receptive, and present, we are more able to directly contact our inner resources and be more responsive to our students. Thinking and communicating are often more creative and fluid.

We can strengthen our physical presence while teaching by noticing our sense of touch. Taking a moment to feel the weight of our bodies in our chairs or the texture of the book we are holding can bring us back into the present moment. The practices of mindful standing or walking are also useful. Similar to sitting meditation, in walking or standing meditation our focus is on our feet touching the floor. When our attention strays, we gently return our attention to the direct sensory experience of touch. In teaching these practices can center and stabilize us. Mindfully walking en route to our classrooms is a wonderful way to ground ourselves before teaching; likewise with some thought we can find moments for standing meditation throughout the teaching day. For example, while students are taking a few minutes to discuss a question with the person next to them, the teacher can do standing meditation, unbeknownst to anyone.

For the contemplative teacher, the breath can also have meaning as a reminder of a meditative state of mind. Breathing is the perfect metaphor for a basic premise of contemplative pedagogy: interconnectedness, or “interbeing,” as Vietnamese Zen master
Thich Nhat Hahn calls it. Our inner experience is directly related to all that exists “outside” of us. When we are aware of the interconnectedness between our personal presence and the learning experiences of the students, our teaching becomes more deeply synchronized. Noticing our breathing during teaching can remind us of interbeing and becomes a way to soften any sense of separation we may feel from our students. We begin to meet them more directly with greater openness and compassion. Spending a moment or two noticing our breathing can center and connect us with the shared learning environment. A contemplative student-teacher wrote:

*I have noticed that [meditation] has a profound impact on my disposition and focus. I am calmer and more encouraging in one-on-one encounters. I find that I am a better listener because I don’t have so many random thoughts bouncing around inside my skull. My students seem to respond positively to this by not holding their bodies as tensely and making more eye contact with me. They also seem to allow themselves to take more academic risks, venturing educated guesses....*

**Relating with Thoughts and Emotions**

Another basic application of meditation practice is developing clarity about how our minds function during teaching. The meditative mind is less apt to mindlessly run through old thought patterns. Just as in meditation, when we notice we have lost our awareness of our thoughts while teaching, we could non-judgmentally take a breath or two and resume more mindfully. Mindfulness of our thoughts promotes a more creative inner dialog. What we are teaching becomes more dynamic in our own minds and, thus, fresher for our students. Even when we are teaching the same old material, we can be more present with it, rather than mindlessly rummaging through the same old thoughts.
As instructors lecturing passionately about our subjects, we can even forget that we are actually communicating with students. When we are mindful of our thoughts and speech during teaching, and at the same time are aware of interconnectedness with our students, then we can more easily notice how they are responding to classroom dynamics. Thus, we can tailor our pedagogies to meet the students’ needs in the moment.

As we loosen our grasp on our conceptual activity, common concerns that arise among new meditators are the fears that we may lose our train of thought, that we may become so disconnected that we cut off communication with our students, that too much openness will not leave time to cover the material, or that we will look like doddering fools. With practice we develop more grace and confidence in the practice of mixing focused mind with spacious mind. This inner/outer awareness furthers the development of a more creative, suppler mind.

It is not just our thinking processes that can separate us from a deeper learning relationship with our students. Emotional reactivity is also at play. Highly educated instructors are often loath to admit that their emotional responses can negatively affect their students’ learning experiences. Indeed, many would maintain that emotions should play no role in teaching, with the possible exception of the enthusiasm and joy for the subject. However, emotions are always active in human experience, from extremely subtle feelings to stormy outbursts. Emotions are most clearly apparent in communications with individual students in or outside of class, but they also appear in every dimension of education. For example, when we read a student paper, we can feel delight, confusion, or irritation.
In meditative practice we do not reject our emotions, even when they are troublesome—they are an indispensable and valuable resource. As we mindfully meditate we become familiar with our emotions--notice and touch the feeling, gently let go, and return to breathing. Gradually we become accustomed to the arising of feelings and notice how we respond emotionally. For example, one morning’s meditation might be preoccupied by a situation involving a student, and we notice emotionally charged thoughts as they rehearse possible scenarios. We return to breathing, but the charge of the situation may remain very strong. The thoughts and accompanying emotions keep returning. As we patiently keep coming back to the breathing, we begin to see how our thoughts and feelings are intertwined. Gradually we become aware of the distinctions between the two and the tangle begins to loosen. We begin to notice more precisely how irritation toward the situation is affecting our thinking and communication. It is often found that when encountering a similar situation while teaching, teacher responses are more balanced. Learning to experience emotions directly and to express them moderately and compassionately is a key element in contemplative education. A contemplative student-teacher wrote:

*I find myself reacting less to aggression and disruption from students, as well as having more space for their difficult reactions and emotions.... It is not so much that the specifics of meditation create a specific way of being. It is more that the entire process, sitting each day, simply all of it, has contributed in allowing a tiny bit more space in my awareness so I can stop and notice my reactions. I can then consciously make a choice, or at least be aware of the possibility of making a choice, as to how I want to act.*
Challenging situations could be viewed not as distractions, but as opportunities for insight and deepening our teaching. For example, in a class discussion, a student might question our deeply held ideas. When we are unaware of our emotional responses, we tend to unconsciously limit discussion and the exploration of ideas. From a mindful perspective, we could notice our attachment to the idea and whatever emotions are associated with it. Thus, we are not so easily blind-sided by the unconscious entwinement of thoughts and emotions. They become a less potent complication or disruption. Whether we react defensively or are pleased by the courage of the student, our inner awareness allows us to be more fully present and open in the discussion. Mindfulness does not necessarily mean that we would change our ideas or approach; only that we are better able to tolerate ambiguity, paradox, and utilize tension creatively. Communication with others seems easier and more straightforward, and empathy is stronger. We could become both clearer about our inner life and also kinder to ourselves. Within a new sense of ease, fresh perspectives can often arise.

**Wait Time**

How do these inner meditative skills more fully manifest in observable pedagogical practice? When we examine one established pedagogical method, Wait Time, we can see how mindfulness enhances a time-honored pedagogy. Wait Time was developed in the 1970’s, and since then it has been studied and expanded upon. In the Wait Time method, the teacher pauses three seconds after asking a question to the class before selecting a student to respond. Studies found that when Wait Time is used, more students are poised to respond to the question and that higher-order thinking skills improve. This assures that more than just the quick-thinking students are being engaged
in class discussion; the practice also helps the students who leap quickly to respond by giving them more time to reflect. The second part of the Wait Time method involves the teacher allowing three seconds after a chosen student has finished responding. These studies showed that often after the pause, the same student would frequently offer an additional, deeper, and more thoughtful response. Thus, the outcomes of Wait Time indicate that it could be a contemplative pedagogical method. However, any “contemplative” method can be perverted. Without contemplative experience we teachers might just be biding our time during the three-second pause. Our physical presence might be projecting blankness or discomfort, or we might be mindlessly solidifying our own notions of the “correct” response. The presence of the teacher during the three seconds communicates a great deal to the students about how that time is used.

Wait Time can become a contemplative method when the teacher uses the three seconds for a brief awareness practice. A variety of such practices can be done quickly. Standing meditation allows us to notice our body, feel the floor beneath, and relax. It could be a time when we become aware of what we expect the students to say, and we let that go of that expectation. It could be three seconds in which we notice our emotional state, and use the time to synchronize with our emotional tone. If our feelings seem too strong and might impede the discussion, we could modulate them. The pause could be a time to simply make a silent connection with our students. In general, Wait Time can be a pause during which we open freshly to ourselves and the class, and prepare to meet the responses with unbiased eyes and ears.

*I have really been observing how I use time.... Wait Time, silence, pauses.... just watching myself and my students. I find that as I experiment with infusing spaces of time around*
questions and directions, before and after answers and within transitions, the whole rhythm of the room changes. It feels more fluid, less solid.\textsuperscript{11}

To get the best results from the Wait Time approach, contemplative or otherwise, the teacher needs to prepare the students. When they understand how to use the three-second pause as a time for reflection or contemplation of the question, they are less likely to become impatient. I have found that most students quickly become comfortable with the brief silence and use it beneficially.

Of course, there are times when it is best not to wait--times we must jump in or interrupt the discussion. But being able to pause is an important skill for teachers. Pausing during teaching is not easy to learn, but practicing silence and stillness in our daily meditation practice can give us the experience and the courage to pause before responding in a classroom setting. From those moments of stillness, we can choose the skillful means necessary for that situation. Something new and unexpected may arise in the gap, or our habitual or learned responses may become fresher, more appropriate. Embodied pauses can enliven learning both for teachers and students and, indeed, for the sake of the subject itself.

**The Mindfulness Bell and Pauses**

There are other teaching methods that more directly involve the students in contemplative pauses. The mindfulness bell, used by Thich Nhat Hanh in his teaching, has been adapted for contemplative classroom practice.\textsuperscript{12} At predetermined intervals throughout the class period, typically ten to twenty minutes, a small bell is sounded. Class lectures or discussions pause and everyone listens to the sound of the bell. When the gong can no longer be heard (two to three seconds), learning activities resume with
the person who was last speaking. The standard instruction for what to do during the pause is similar to meditation: simply listen to the sound of the bell. When thoughts or emotions arise while listening, return to the sound itself. I use the mindfulness bell regularly in my classes and find that students adjust easily to the rhythm when it is used consistently. I notice that the tempo of the class settles and students appreciate the gaps.

We can also use pauses in the middle of a class at our discretion to create openness in the atmosphere. This can be particularly helpful when the discussion becomes heated or greatly intensified. Parker Palmer describes using periods of silence in his teaching “when the words start to tumble out upon each other and the problem we are trying to unravel is getting more tangled.” It is important to mention that using pauses in this way is not intended to silence students or to shut down the emotional intensity. We use such pauses to notice our breathing as a way of modulating our strong feelings, not suppressing them. Where appropriate, students could be asked to do the same, or just feel their physical presence on their chairs or follow a few breaths.

*These gaps can come in any form and at any time; they need not be anything extraordinary. A gap between my own words, between and within an exchange with another, a gap between direct instruction and practice, between classes…. I notice that if I am mindful, the gaps continually present themselves.*

As mindfulness and awareness deepen we can gradually extend our inner skills to create more overt contemplative learning environments. Pauses in discussions may improve the pacing, rhythms, and transitions of class periods and semesters. The same principles begin to enhance content presentation, curriculum and learning environment design. We contemplative teachers find that mindfulness-based strategies sharpen the
students’ mastery of content while deepening and personalizing their learning experience. At its best the journey toward contemplative pedagogy begins and always returns to the discipline of the mindful teacher.


2 bhavana, literally “familiarity,” is the term in Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Ibid.


4 All quotations are taken from student journals from the M.A. Contemplative Education department, Naropa University. Student initials and dates indicate contributors. DG 08


6 MKH, ’09.


11 JG, 08.


14 DG, 08.