

## **The Teacher As Contemplative Observer** **Richard C. Brown**

*This article appeared in Educational Leadership published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, December 1998/January 1999.  
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One of my greatest revelations as a teacher of young children in a Buddhist-inspired school was that spiritual education is not about creating some kind of educational nirvana. It is about waking up to the sacredness of everyday learning.

Training teachers to experience sacredness, drawn from a Buddhist perspective, involves paying attention to our personal experience and integrating that with our teaching. Contemplative teaching begins by knowing and experiencing ourselves directly. We unlearn how we habitually think, sense and feel, so we can return to the present moment freshly and clearly. Maria Montessori (1972) said:

The adult must find within himself the still unknown error that prevents him from *seeing the child* as he is. (p.5)

Teaching methods and activities supplement our own natural intelligences, but do not substitute for genuine teaching encounters which engage our whole being and reflect who we are.

### **Contemplative Observation**

The Early Childhood Education faculty at The Naropa Institute educates undergraduates, most of whom become teachers and directors in a variety of non-sectarian preschools. We will soon begin an MA in Contemplative Education for teachers at any instructional level.

Over the past eight years, I have developed a practice called *contemplative observation*, an approach to sacred teaching based on Buddhist meditation. This method synchronizes the observer with the learning environment; awakens and clarifies the sense perceptions, thoughts, and emotions; and develops knowledge and compassion.

In contemplative observation, we observe not only what is happening in the environment, but also what is simultaneously occurring within ourselves, the observer. As Parker Palmer (1983) describes:

The knower who advances most rapidly toward the heart of truth is one who not only asks 'What is out there?' in each encounter with the world, but one who also asks 'What does this encounter reveal about me?' (p.60)

Observing in this way requires the disciplines of precise attention and descriptive recording of our inner and outer experiences. It differs from most forms of observing by focusing on both the observer and the observed. In our course sequence this practice precedes and enhances analytic, information-gathering observation techniques used later in our courses.

In the early stages of this practice, rather than seeking to observe prescribed phenomena in the classroom, the observer focuses randomly or intuitively. One student with several years of teaching experience commented:

There are two ways to observe. One is with something specific in mind that you are looking for and the other is just to look. I have spent many hours of observing by taking physical notes, mental notes, and following a format. I had forgotten what it was like to see without always looking for something. It really is a different story when you look just to look. I have become curious in a new way. I am curious about the children. I am curious about (the teachers), but even more I am curious about myself. I trust that I will see whatever there is to see because I'm not looking for something or trying to make something be there. CK '97

### **Rediscovering our Senses**

In the Tibetan contemplative traditions our six senses, including thought, are our natural gateways to knowing. Young children learn primarily through sensory experience. For example in our contemplative lab school the young children at snack time listen in stillness to the gong as the sound crescendos and dissolves. Direct experiences like this respect and deepen their sensory development.

Our teacher education program uses a variety of perceptual exercises to open our immediate senses before we observe and teach. One such exercise focuses on a selected sound. We listen to the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, for instance, focusing on the sound exactly as it is received by the ears. When we become aware that our attention has strayed, we notice where our attention has wandered, and we gently come back to the sound.

When students first experienced this exercise they responded, saying, "I never really listened to the sound of the leaves before."; "I realized how hard it is for me just to listen."; "My commentary mind is always interrupting;" and "It was like I could hear sounds in the water I had never heard; like a symphony."

Awakening the sense of hearing is useful when working with infants, toddlers and even older children. Good teachers can hear and intuitively respond to the underlying sounds - the pulse - of their classrooms. They can help older children untangle mixed verbal messages by pointing out the difference between the meaning of their words and what the sound to be conveys; "You're asking him to play, but the tone of your voice sounds angry."

Buddhist practitioners through the centuries have discovered that our sense perceptions are intertwined with our thoughts.

Actually, we do not see things completely as they are. Generally we perceive something, and then we look. Looking in this case is the act of imposing names and associations on things. Seeing things means accepting what they are, but looking means unnecessary effort to make sure that you are safe, that nothing is going to confuse your relationship to the world. (Trungpa, 1976, p. 65)

Contemplative observation helps us distinguish between our experience and our conceptual responses to that experience. At the sound of the gong at snack time, what does the teacher hear? Her "educated" mind might entangle the sound of the gong with some comment like "It's too soft" or "That child's not listening." Such thoughts constantly fill our minds, often interrupting our direct experience. Observation is about untangling our experiences.

To understand a child we have to watch him at play, study him in his different moods; we cannot project upon him our own prejudices, hopes and fears, or mold him to fit the pattern of our desires. (Krishnamurti, 1981, p.47)

If we trust our ears to listen to the sounds of a child talking and shuffling about in his seat, then we are present in that moment. When we attend to the sound, our mind apprehends the meaning, and our body or voice manifests a genuine response. That child is respected and heard.

### **Clarifying Intellect**

The Buddhist notion of the functioning of intellect seems closer to that of the other senses.

It seems that if you are purely looking for answers, then you don't perceive anything. In the proper use of intellect, you don't look for answers, you just see; you just take notes in your mind. And even then, you don't have the goal of collecting information you just relate to what is there as an expression of intelligence. (Trungpa, 1991, p. 65)

Educators tend to neglect the sensory experiences of maturing individuals in favor of cultivating the intellect. By separating intellect from the other senses and from the body itself, all our intelligences suffer. If our analytic intelligence, for example, is not joined with our expressive intelligence, then we cannot communicate well. If the education of children fosters learning through sense perceptions, then the maturing child will develop intellect naturally.

As we include more of ourselves in our observations, we might notice criticisms and judgments. We might find ourselves theorizing or speculating about some aspect of the educational approach or the environmental design. The problem is not with these concepts in themselves. Precise attention means to distinguish the elements of experience - knowing the difference between our ideas and our immediate experience. Here a student notices the "jumpy", impulsive experience of her mind, lets that go and returns to the observation:

...I start thinking about why for some children the (class) exercise is easier than for others. This brings me back to my difficulties with reading... I realize that my thoughts are a bit jumpy, and that one thought leads me to another without much space in between. I return to my observation. SM - '94

A key to contemplative observation and teaching is letting our reactivity go on the spot. We practice gently dropping our tendencies toward habit. If our "letting go" is not aggressive, then we gradually loosen the intertwined threads of our habitual perceptions, feelings, concepts, and dramas. We create space to experience and think freshly.

In this approach to observation we do not discount our previous experience and memories. We neither dismiss all the valuable theories and skills in management, development and methods nor ignore the important lessons from working with particular children. All intellectual skills such as speculation, theorizing, problem solving, and judging information are useful as long as they do not close us to the fullness and unexpectedness of the situation. Teachers who are stuck in some abstraction that doesn't reflect the present situation experience anxiety. Children can tell when teachers see a situation clearly.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

When we pay attention to our senses and thoughts, we open to our natural emotional faculties. Upon entering a learning environment, we experience a rich interconnected whole. The senses serve as receptors for that wholeness, transmitting the raw information of whatever we are drawn to, are repulsed by, or overlook. This invokes our emotional responses. Working with emotions is perhaps the most challenging dimension of contemplative education, because it often seems inconsistent with our ideals of compassionate and effective teaching. Here a student notices how her childhood experiences mix with her classroom observations:

The little girl who was previously laughing was now looking a little lost and alone. She stayed in the chair facing the back of it, on her knees... for almost ten minutes. I thought she must be feeling left [out]. I didn't like it... It occurs to me that this is what bothers me the most. Children sitting or standing alone without any focus or attention. I have a feeling of this from my own childhood. I am feeling it as I write this paper. I know children need to self-nurture and explore, but there was a sense of unease in my body watching these children. CS - '96

In this observation, the student acknowledges the thoughts, feelings and physical sensations related to her feelings of aloneness and how she experiences children who are seemingly doing nothing. If she were a teacher encountering that child, chances she would have a similar response. No matter how skilled she might become as a teacher, this feeling from her childhood may affect her interaction, possibly causing anxiety both in her and in the child. Children can be very sensitive to anything hidden.

We encourage students not to close off the raw sensation of emotional pain. In this observation, the student experiences confusion, fatigue, and sadness:

After a huge gulp, one child coughs. The teacher says to him, 'Oh, that's not a real cough. Are you pretending?' At this point I am beginning to be consumed by emotion and confusion... I feel exhausted and sad. I try to come back to simply being present but I am completely overwhelmed. I sit for a few moments trying to let all of the emotion go but I feel stuck. Finally, I allow myself to just feel what I am feeling. SK-'95

That pain is her personal connection to the situation and becomes the avenue for her compassion.

### **Compassion and Knowledge**

Too often new classroom teachers burn out or dry up in the confusing and overwhelming emotional complexity of teaching. Many teachers become impervious to feeling. The price of this is isolation from others and from the fullness of everyday experience. Our aim, however, is to educate teachers to relate fully and compassionately to others, such as in this student's description:

I notice that I seem to know what it feels like to hold that doll, to have a small being nestled to your chest as you look out into the world....The other little girls are trying on funny dresses, but this little girl is content to rock back and forth slowly, while feeding her child. I feel a warm burst in my chest, a small connection with this girl, and I sense within myself a desire to be held- and healed. AL '98

Contemplative observation invites us to be aware of our ways of knowing: our senses, our thought processes, and our emotions. As we sort out our experiences, our subtle anxieties begin to fall away and we gradually accept ourselves. When we are less concerned with ourselves, we have more energy, interest and dedication to others. Teaching becomes more selfless and effective:

Only as we allow ourselves to be known-- and thus cleansed of the prejudices and self-interests that distort the community of truth-- can we begin truly to know. (Palmer, p. 60)

In being fully present, we trust our responses, our ways of knowing that arise in the moment. This student paper reflects glimpses of this kind of sacred knowing and the seeds of compassion.

When I did my observation at a Montessori school, I was feeling a lot of pain on a physical level, in my back, head and neck. I wonder if the painful sensations I was experiencing had anything to do with the fact that I could feel the sensations of the children... As a child walks, she puts each foot down on the wooden floor, making a loud sound, it's like she's testing out the floor. 'How hard is it? How loud does my foot sound when it hits the floor?' All these questions I heard myself asking. Then it shifted for me, without noticing this change, I just started to feel it myself, how

the blocks felt as they stacked on top of the other; how the paint felt as it hit the paper; how the truck felt as it passed through the bridge. It was a no-mind experience, all in the realm of feeling. It was as if a veil had been lifted and I had been invited in. It really felt like a sacred world. HR-'95

In observation we practice noticing and letting go of the temptations to stabilize our experience and to protect against the newness of the observed moment. Paying attention to our uniqueness, we come to appreciate our particular knowledge and styles of teaching. We learn to use our educational knowledge without attachment and to experience afresh each learning moment. Contemplative observation is one method of teacher education that opens us to the sacredness of ordinary teaching and learning.

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