Contemplative Practices in Teacher Education

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Contemplation is a form of self-learning that helps students deal with the stresses of life and makes teaching a joy and delight.

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being.

—Thomas Merton, 1972

In this paper we will address the question of how contemplation and other spiritual practices can be integrated into higher education and teacher education in a manner that is respectful of people's spiritual and religious beliefs. Contemplation is defined here as “ beholding, often with a sense of awe and wonder, where we become one with what we are seeing.”

Why Contemplation and Spiritual Practices In the Curriculum?

Our main argument for including contemplation and spiritual practices in the curriculum is that they offer an opportunity to make our education truly holistic. Although we give lip service to educating the whole human being, in fact much of our education system is limited to head learning. One could argue that even this form of learning is very limited and in many cases our elementary schools focus only on the acquisition of a few basic skills and factual recall. This form of learning is driven by primarily an economic agenda. We constantly hear the mantra that

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students need to be trained so that they can compete and participate in the global economy. This narrow vision of education has played a role in the corporate corruption that we see today. With the emphasis on individual achievement and test scores our system is basically one of student competition. Our students today are rarely exposed to the larger vision of what it means to be a human being inhabiting the earth and the cosmos.

This was not always the case. Pierre Hadot, the French philosopher, makes the case (2002, 65) that ancient philosophy was not just an intellectual exercise but was primarily a spiritual practice: "To live in a philosophical way meant, above all, to turn toward intellectual and spiritual life, carrying out a conversion which involved "the whole soul" — which is to say the whole of moral life." Philosophy then could be called an education of the soul. Hadot describes various spiritual exercises and forms of contemplation that Greek philosophers pursued in their work. One form practiced by Pyrrho involved self-talk; another was simply being silent, a form that Socrates practiced.

The stoics liked to practice an expansion of the soul into the cosmos; they would contemplate on the stars. Marcus Aurelius (Hadot 2002, 204) wrote:

To embrace the paths of the stars in our gaze, as if they were carrying us along in their revolutions, and constantly to think of the transformations of the elements into one another — such representations purify us of the stains of terrestrial life.

We believe that the Greek academy and the ancient Buddhist University of Nalanda can help us find a new vision of the modern university. Nalanda was founded in the 5th Century BC in what is now northern India and at one point it had 10,000 students and 1500 professors. At Nalanda meditation was practiced along with scholarship as the university contained both libraries and meditation halls. The senior author had the opportunity to visit the ruins of Nalanda in 1993 and you can still see the outline of these halls and the libraries.

Contemplation in Teaching

Since 1988 the first author has required students in two of his graduate courses to meditate. These are courses for experienced teachers in the area of holistic education. The courses are not required but electives in the program. The rationale for this process is based on several principles in an attempt to move away from just "head" learning to reaching the whole person.

One important reason for requiring meditation is that it can be a form of self-learning. For example, vipassana meditation is based on the notion that we can learn and grow by simply mindfully watching our own experience. As we notice our own thoughts and agendas, we can gain deeper insight into ourselves and the nature of experience. In this context, meditation is a form of inquiry. In contrast, the model for much of learning at the university level is that the professor and the text are the authority and the student must learn from these authorities. Meditation provides one alternative to this model and instead recognizes that we can learn from ourselves and our own experience.

Another reason for engaging in contemplation is that it allows students to deal with the stresses in their lives. Research indicates that meditation is an effective tool in enhancing physical and mental well being (Benson 1976; Walsh 1999; Murphy and Donovan 1997) and given the pressures that students face today this aspect of meditation should not be overlooked. The vast majority of students in classes taught by the senior author have seen the positive effects of contemplative practice in simply being able to address stressful events that come up in their lives. For example, consider the comments of a secondary school vice-principal who faced many stressful events during the day. He wrote in his journal that as the pressures of his job increase he finds the "need to engage in meditation more frequently."

Finally, from the perspective of teacher education, meditation is important to how we approach teaching. If teaching is ego-based it can become a frustrating series of mini-battles with students. The classroom becomes focused around the issue of control. If we teach from our original self (e.g., our Buddha nature), teaching becomes a fulfilling and enriching experience. Robert Griffin (1977, 79) summarizes this very well:

You do not feel set off against them [the students] or competitive with them. You see your-
self in students and them in you. You move easily, are more relaxed, and seem less threatening to students. You are less compulsive, less rigid in your thoughts and actions. You are not so tense. You do not seem to be in a grim win-or-lose contest when teaching.

When we teach mostly from our egos, our work inevitably becomes tense and frustrating; conversely, when we teach from the original Self our work can become an act of joy and delight. Teaching from this deeper place, we experience connections with our students and our colleagues. The rationale for Self-based teaching has been explained in other contexts (Miller 1993; 1994; 1995).

Introducing Meditation to Teachers

Students are introduced to six different types of meditation which include meditation on the breath, lovingkindness (sending thoughts of peace and wellness to self and others), mantra, movement (e.g., walking), visualization, and contemplation on poetry or sacred texts (Miller 1994; in press). Some students work out their own forms and integrate meditation within their own spiritual or religious practices. Although sitting meditation is encouraged, some students do movement meditation. For example, one student swam every day from a meditative stance. Whatever form students choose, meditation can be seen as letting go of the calculating mind and opening to the listening mind that tends to be characterized by a relaxed alertness. Once the students have settled on a method they are encouraged to work up to about 30 minutes a day of meditation practice. As already mentioned, the senior author also introduces students to the Buddhist lovingkindness meditation where thoughts of well-being are sent to oneself and others. Each class begins with this meditation and students are encouraged to begin or end their own individual meditation with it. Finally, students are also introduced to mindfulness practice which is being present in the moment in daily life. This means focusing on what we are doing without falling into automatic pilot where we can function without awareness. Mindfulness can lead to deep attention or what Csikzentmihalyi (1990) calls the flow experience.

To date over 1200 students have been introduced to meditation practice in these courses. Only two students have asked not to do the assignment; one student had been sexually abused a year before and did not feel comfortable with the practice. The other student was a Christian fundamentalist. Thus far, in informal feedback, a small fraction of the students have described initial ambivalence, but there has not been a student who has reported an overall negative experience with the practice during the course. Most of the students are women (80%) in their 30s or 40s. While most of the students come from Ontario, but there have also been students from Brazil, China, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Jamaica, Lebanon, Japan, Kenya, Korea, and Malta. Students come from a variety of religious backgrounds including Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Judaism, Muslim, and Native American. The majority, though, are Christian with Catholicism being the largest denomination.

Students are required to keep a journal which focuses on how the process of meditation is going (e.g., how the concentration and focus are going, how the body is feeling, etc.). The journals also focus on how meditation has affected them. Some of the themes (Miller and Nozawa 2002) included

- Giving themselves permission to be alone and enjoy their own company
- Increased listening capacities
- Feeling increased energy
- Being less reactive to situations and generally experiencing greater calm and clarity.

A few years ago we completed a study that involved interviewing students who had continued with their meditation practice. The study focused on the following questions.

- What is the nature of your meditation practice? (e.g., type and frequency)
- Have you engaged in any meditation instruction since the class?
- What have been the effects of your practice on your personal and professional life?
- Have you experienced any difficulties or problems with the practice?
Letters were sent out to 182 former students asking if they would be interested in participating in an interview related to these questions. Because the research project involved a face-to-face interview, the study was limited to former students living in the Toronto area. From this group 40 letters were returned because the students had moved. In the end 21 former students (17 women and 4 men) agreed to participate. Of the 21, eleven were teachers at the elementary or secondary level, four were teaching at the post-secondary level, four were administrators, and two were consultants.

The participants were interviewed by the second author. The interview lasted between 30 and one and 90 minutes. To supplement the information gathered from the questions above, the following material was also collected: (a) meditation journals from the course, (b) summary reflections on the meditation submitted as part of the course, and (c) the interviewer’s reflections on the interviews.

At the time of our study, only one of the 21 students had discontinued meditation practices. All the others were continuing with it at least two years after they had taken the courses, and most of our sample were still practicing meditation at least four years later. Sixty-two percent of the students reported that meditation helped them become more relaxed and calm in their work and their personal life. Many of these teachers stated that they were less reactive to troublesome situations in the classroom (Miller and Nozawa 2002). Although the study is in no way definitive because the sample was small and consisted of a self-selected group of voluntary participants, the findings are congruent with the general research on meditation cited earlier (Benson 1976; Walsh 1999).

We would like to now to present profiles of three of these students and have chosen students who come from different backgrounds in terms of culture and religion to demonstrate how contemplation can be introduced to people from various religious and spiritual backgrounds.

**Sally**

Now retired, Sally was a principal at a public elementary school from K-6 for four years when she took part in the study. A quarter of the school’s population were special needs students. She felt that “the job of the principal is to reflect and that principal should be calm, as once she loses it, everybody else has permission to lose it.”

She started meditating using a simple form of breathing in my class. She did it when she felt stressed. She said: “When I move into a meditative state, I feel a little energy, or I feel something in my brain that happens, in my body that happens. And I’m there. And I’m aware of this shift.” Three times a week, she also was practicing Reiki, which is a form of meditation for her. She first learned it in order to handle children who were out of control through touch.

She described herself as a very intense person and the meditation helped soften the intensity. One person at another school said that she was lighter, and calmer. She works toward that softer and calmer nature in her role and tries to see things in terms of community. She based much of her work as principal in a holistic perspective. Sally comments that “The issues of connections, balance, and inclusion and voice.... It’s through those holistic education principles that I see the school, and how I see the teachers and the children.”

There was a teacher on the staff who is Buddhist who had a strong impact on Sally and the school. He chairs the junior division meetings and serves tea there. There is emphasis on simply being present, an important Buddhist practice, at these meetings.

It always starts with a calmness, there is no agenda.... It’s just being there and being together. It’s not team-building, it’s just kind of being together, it doesn’t have a name.... I think the way that people treat each other is so important here. We adapt to change, and embrace change, we don’t resist — we look for being present to everything.

Sally does not believe in putting a label on herself when it comes to her spiritual beliefs. She has had many different influences in her life. One book that had an important impact on her life was Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*. Some of the literature in leadership has also been important, particularly *The Tao of Leadership* and Daniel Goleman’s *Primal Leadership*. Her husband has also been a significant influence in her life.
She is convinced that that meditation is very important for leaders. She realized how important it is for people to see that leaders can cope with difficult situations.

It takes long time for people to get calm, but they won’t get calm if the leader isn’t calm.... It makes you more creative in your problem solving; for example, out-of-box thinking. And it makes you more equitable. You see the staff as real individuals, real human beings.

She tries to get consensus with her staff rather than laying a decision on the group. “We just talk it out and see what they want to do.... We don’t have to make decision right away, and we let everybody be included....”

In her personal life she feels that the meditation allowed her to cope with very heavy demands of being a mother of three, a wife, a graduate student, and a principal. It made a difference in softening her at home and in her personal life.

My husband said to me on Saturday, “You’re really anxious, you should meditate.... That’s provided the balance for us in a relationship.... We kind of sort stuff out in terms of problem-solving in a gentler way within.

She feels that finding time for meditation is a challenge. Going home in the car, she let meditation and a contemplative state of mind sift through what happened in the day. She also listens to her favorite Bruce Springsteen CDs, such as “If I Should Fall Behind” or “Tougher Than the Rest,” which has ideals and values that she believes in. She uses them just like a mantra.

I was crying .... if one of the teachers falls behind, let’s walk in stride, it is hard to see your footsteps. And you walk through life, and sometimes life is hard. And so if I should fall behind, reach down, wait for me, and I’ll wait for you.... That gave me that image of people all moving through life together, and if someone drops back or gets lost, then people reach down to bring that person forward.

She is humbled when she sees how the music reflects reality.

Diane

Diane is from Panama where she was raised as a Catholic, a religion that she still practices. She worked as a teacher for 11 years in her home country and in Canada she taught Spanish for four years. Now as the general manager of a very big international company, she meets a lot of agents and brokers every day and travels all over Canada and the USA. She is also completing her graduate degree in the field of second language acquisition and teaching.

Before meditation was introduced in the course, she was a very busy woman, running from one place to the other. She said that she never paid any attention to anything more than fifteen minutes. Diane says: “I even cry when I believe that I missed so much of my kids’ time when they were babies. I don’t really remember that well, because I was on the move all the time.”

Since the class, she has been meditating every day for 25 to 30 minutes using visualization and breathing exercises, which she says made a tremendous change in her life. She feels the need to be mindful and to care about people, nature, and everything around her. She says that she now honors everything that gives her life and everything that lives. She says she learned to even appreciate the experience of how the air moves her hair.

...the impact on me is very powerful. I remember one day that I just watched my kids. I watched them sleeping, I observed them, for so long. I looked at their eyes, nose, hair...they look like angels.... Sometimes I just sit down outside and look at the skies ...[and] I remember that everything is grace.

She describes her change as coming from the inside and how mindfulness has affected her.

I hear sounds that I never heard. I hear the animals; I listen to everything that is there, that I never paid attention to before. I touch and feel.... I know that I’m living and I don’t have a word to express what this means to me really.

When she sees people on the subway she does the loving-kindness meditation. She said: “When I see each person in the subway, I look at them and pray
for them. And I see a brother and a sister, and a family everywhere."

She talks about the change in her professional life as a teacher and a manager.

And in the classrooms ... I'm not there just to give a lesson. I'm there to give love, and to care. And I know that they see me, more than a teacher now. They have a mother, friend, someone to trust them....

She mentions that how she listens to others has changed.

I used to talk non-stop, not even listening to others.... I have learned to hear. I listen to my students. Now I know who has a grandfather here and who doesn't.... But it's so important for me now to just sit down with my students.... Whatever they want to tell, if it makes them feel good and relaxed.

She says that the transition from a hectic woman to a peaceful one was hard at the beginning yet, she kept the practice because she is convinced of its positive benefit. She does not regret the change at all.

Nadia

Nadia comes from a Muslim country, Kuwait. When she was living in England during the Gulf War in 1991 she volunteered to teach people in her own Kuwaiti community. She also taught family and friends when they needed help. Since she came to Canada, she has taught ESL to people in her community. Now she is focusing on studying the piano and music theory.

She uses walking and breathing meditation, repeats mantras, and tries to bring mindfulness into daily life. Much of her practice focuses on mindfulness and she has found it very helpful in practicing the piano. Nadia comments:

The mindfulness really helps, because it is simple and can be an integral part of whatever I'm doing, even cooking. I do the cutting; I focus on the smell of the vegetable. It brings me joy, even when I wash the dishes; it makes me happier when I focus. I drift off, of course, but then I bring myself back.

In her personal life, she points out that her family was influenced by her meditation practices since she and her husband learned mindfulness together. She said, "My husband was enlightened by many of the things I learned and passed on to him. He helps me a lot in his own way.... We learned mindfulness together. He easily incorporates it in his daily activity."

Her husband said that she is changing a lot from what she used to be. She used to worry a lot and now she is trying to focus on the moment rather than being absent-minded and anxious. When she went back to Kuwait, a few of her family members noted that she seemed more relaxed and happier.

It changed my life a lot in many ways from the inside. I know I'm less anxious and worried, and whenever I let my mind work in the future or in the past, I get upset again and down, and then I have to bring myself back. When I'm thinking of the past or the future ... I can simply bring myself to the present with a few breaths, breathing deeply, and then focusing on the moment and just doing it without letting thought distract me; that's very helpful for me.

Nadia is more mindful now, and she finds it easier to be present. She reminds herself whenever her mind drifts off to come back to the present. The more she becomes mindful, the easier it gets to include mindfulness in her daily activities. She thinks that it is our nature to be in the moment as young children are naturally mindful. As people get older, they change because of many factors, such as trying to meet the expectations of others.

She explains that an element of the practice is simplicity, which we cannot complicate by using a lot of words. The next comment describes that the important lesson is in the experience itself:

I don't need to even describe it, that's the good part. We understand it and we do it. Quieting the mind, actually, is very important. I don't think we have to, though. It's not, "have to," because that's what brought me to trouble in the first place. If any thought comes in, you don't force it out, you let it smoothly go out. It's not having to or forcing something.
What she says relates to accepting what seem to be obstacles. She talks about accepting herself:

It’s OK…. That’s one of the things I’m beginning to tell myself. It’s a very powerful thing for me. When I make a mistake, I am very critical about myself, and this is what I’m changing, and I know it’s in the process. I’m telling myself it is OK when I make mistakes.

She adds that allowing ourselves to be who we are can be difficult. “Sometimes we need permission from others to allow ourselves to rest and be who we are. This is very difficult.” Meditation seems to help in the process of accepting ourselves.

Finally, Nadia comments on the relation between her faith and the mindfulness practice.

In Islam, there are many instructions that Muslims are encouraged to do. For example, when we want to enter a room, it’s encouraged to enter with the right foot first, and say a kind of short prayer…. I believe that these little prayers and acts are a way to stay present, to be mindful of what we’re doing. So, I think that mindfulness is an integral part of any religion.

For Nadia, then, meditation and mindfulness support religious practices.

Conclusion

This research describes one way teachers can go beyond the narrow vision of the human being that dominates today’s educational rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, the ancients in Greece and India had a broader vision of the academy; however, we need to find a holistic vision that is appropriate for our time and the pluralistic nature of the world community. There are many ways that a broader and more inclusive approach to learning can be restored to the academy and we have offered just one in this paper. We encourage professors and teaching assistants to explore other forms of contemplation and holistic learning. Our small sample findings and case studies indicate that contemplation and spiritual practices can be offered in a non-dogmatic way in public institutions and deepen the educational experience.

References