MEDITATION AND HOLISTIC CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF FIVE TEACHERS’ MEDITATION PRACTICES TO THE PEDAGOGICAL PROCESS

by

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Abstract
This qualitative study examines how five teachers’ meditation practices have an impact on their pedagogy. The teachers’ spiritual practice of mindfulness meditation shapes their understanding of themselves and their students, generating a holistic contemplative pedagogy. While there has been a growing body of literature on meditation, contemplation and holistic education, this research brings these fields into a more in-depth, detailed conversation.

Teachers gain knowledge from their lived experience in the profession, which works to benefit their mindfulness practice. The study reveals that the experiential practice of mindfulness meditation can help teachers access their thoughts and feelings better, and create a more benevolent engagement with students. Meditation helps the teachers transcend and recast negative emotions. Through mindfulness, they become more loving and respectful of both themselves and their students, all while providing them a safer space in which to thrive.

The practice of meditation, then, mirrors the practice of teaching. Mindfulness meditation helps shape a holistic contemplative pedagogy, which enhances teachers’ understandings of their profession and the lives of students in a contemporary moment of change. The dissertation, therefore, contributes to a wider field of inquiry into the benefits of mindfulness meditation, not only in education, but also in the human sciences more broadly.
Acknowledgements

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. iii

**CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................ 1
  I. Origins and Transformations of the Term Pedagogy ....................................................................... 3
  II. Holistic Education, Holistic Pedagogy .......................................................................................... 6
  III. Contemplative Pedagogy ........................................................................................................... 10
  IV. The Need for Holistic Contemplative Pedagogy ....................................................................... 17
  V. My Own Journey ......................................................................................................................... 29

**CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW: HOLISTIC CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY** ........... 39
  I. Pedagogy in the Context of Education: Critical and Contemplative Approaches ..................... 41
  II. Holistic Education ....................................................................................................................... 46
      A. Spirituality ................................................................................................................................. 51
      B. Community and Global Connections .................................................................................... 54
      C. Criticisms of Holism and Holistic Approaches ..................................................................... 56
      D. The Perennial Philosophy ........................................................................................................ 57
  III. The Historical Buddha .............................................................................................................. 62
  IV. Mindfulness from Past to Present .............................................................................................. 68
      A. Contemplation .......................................................................................................................... 76
      B. Contemplative Educator ......................................................................................................... 78
      C. Loving-kindness ...................................................................................................................... 83

**CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY** ......................................................................................... 87
  I. Phenomenological Methods: van Manen and Bruner ................................................................. 87
  II. Narrative Construction ................................................................................................................ 90
  III. Teacher-Participants ................................................................................................................ 92
  III. Ethics .......................................................................................................................................... 94
  IV. Sources of Data Collection ....................................................................................................... 95
  V. Interviews ...................................................................................................................................... 95
  VI. Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................ 99
  VII. Rationale for Methodology ...................................................................................................... 100
III. Meditation ................................................................. 176
   A. Vipassana .............................................................. 178
   B. Contemplation ........................................................ 180
   C. Meditation and Teaching ........................................ 181
IV. Summarizing Diane’s Story ........................................ 195

CHAPTER EIGHT JENNIFER .................................................. 197
I. Introducing Myself .................................................... 197
II. School ........................................................................ 199
III. Meditation ............................................................... 200
   A. Vipassana ............................................................... 203
   B. Teaching and Meditation ......................................... 205
IV. Summarizing My Story ................................................ 226

CHAPTER NINE REFLECTIONS OF THIS JOURNEY .................. 227
I. Meditation ................................................................. 234
II. Mindfulness: A Spiritual Self-Exploration ...................... 240
III. Contemplation ........................................................ 246
IV. Mindfulness Meditation and Holistic Contemplative Pedagogy ................................................ 250
   A. Loving-kindness .................................................... 255
      1. Respect .............................................................. 256
      2. Love ................................................................ 260
      3. Safety and a nurturing environment .................. 264
V. Contemplating Teaching: Paradoxes and Tensions ............ 271
VI. Contemplating Teaching ............................................. 278
VII. Closing Remarks .................................................... 284

REFERENCES .................................................................... 296
List of Appendices

Appendix A Interview Questions................................................................. 286
Appendix B Practical Considerations for This Research Study................................. 289
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

We live and work in an extraordinary time, where spiritual practices from around the world intermingle to support the needs and demands of the twenty-first century. As Janet L. Miller (2006) notes, we live in a time of global flows, transnational connections and transcultutural interactions. As a result, multiple knowledges, philosophies and spiritual practices from both ancient and contemporary cultures are increasingly available to us in the West (Cajete, 1994; Martin, 2008; John Miller, 2014).

One of the key areas of these global flows has been the knowledge about and practice of mindfulness or vipassana. This contemplative meditation practice encourages self-exploration to generate insight, love and peace of mind. It encourages wholesome attitudes, thoughts and behaviour (Dali Lama & Ekman, 2008; Goenka, 2002; Rosenberg, 1999, Wallace, 2011), and assists in the liberation from negative and harmful habits and patterns of conditioning (M. Batchelor, 2007; Humphreys, 1968; Olendzki, 2010; Wallace, 2006).

Meditation itself is not new, but research in the area of mindfulness meditation has rapidly accelerated over the last three decades (Baer, 2013; K. Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007; Dryden & Still, 2006), especially in psychology (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005; Germer, 2009) and the mind sciences more broadly (Lopez, 2012; Wallace, 2012). As my own research demonstrates, it is increasingly being taken up in education. While a wide range of texts in pedagogical theory explore mindfulness and both holistic and contemplative pedagogies, my research puts these often-discrete texts into conversation. In so doing, I synthesize their key ideas

1 To maintain fluidity for reading, I will refer to mindfulness/vipassana as mindfulness or meditation from this point on, unless otherwise specified.
and themes to create a foundation for my specific focus—the need for and effects of adopting what I term a holistic contemplative pedagogy, a pedagogy that speaks to both integration and love to support more meaningful educational relationships.

This research study explores the relationship of mindfulness meditation to five teachers’ holistic principles and contemplative teaching practices. In each case, they theorize, embody and demonstrate a holistic contemplative pedagogy in action. By focusing on the experiences of these five teachers in Toronto—including myself as the researcher—the research study offers a qualitative inquiry into personal approaches to meditation. It examines how these approaches affect the pedagogical process, and how meditation can assist educators to meet the increasing challenges of a contemporary public education. It contributes to pedagogical theory by including teachers’ organic spirituality as the intuitive dimension, a way of knowing being and conducting themselves when engaging with their students.

Certain foundational terms are central to this project. As a result, it is important to identify them at the outset. Doing so does more than show how the terms have evolved historically. It also helps clarify how I envision a holistic a contemplative pedagogy and how I make a case for its increasing value and necessity in contemporary education.

First, I provide a brief history on the key transformations of the term “pedagogy.” This historical overview then leads to a discussion of the principles of and spiritual dimensions to the terms “holistic education” or “holistic pedagogy.” I then explain how they inform my use of the more specific term holistic contemplative pedagogy. Indeed a holistic contemplative pedagogy is increasingly worthwhile for teachers to adopt, given the numerous tensions having an impact on current conventional and mainstream public education (i.e., the role of standardized testing, curriculum policies, school structures and the diminished capacity of professional teachers as
contributing factors). The length of this section of the Introduction should indicate the wide variety of these issues defining students, teachers, classrooms and curriculum.

I posit a holistic contemplative pedagogy may enable teachers to respond better to these challenges. Certainly, the teachers’ narratives in later chapters echo elements of my own journey to mindfulness meditation and an engagement with it. Because my journey led to the inception of this thesis, I conclude the Introduction with it, before outlining the specific order and substance of the chapters that follow.

I. Origins and Transformations of the Term Pedagogy

Originating from the ancient Greek word *paidaγογεύ*, pedagogy refers to leading the child with thought and care through his or her educational journey (van Manen, 1994). The Classical Greek roots of pedagogy included “childhood and leadership” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 6) and the leading children reasonably in an appropriate or wholesome direction. The teacher’s conduct, as a result, was integral to the pedagogical exchange. Hamilton explains that historically,² the word pedagogy implied the teacher would be responsible for nurturing and guiding a young child honourably throughout his or her early years in education, emphasizing a more structured or disciplined form of instruction for adolescents in the latter years of the educational journey.

This understanding of the term continued until roughly 1500-1650, when the popularization of printed books enabled the meaning of pedagogy to take on other dimensions, including linking it to the development of curriculum. “Pedagogy” as a term became considerably more formal, coalescing the process of adopting new ideas designed to teach large

²David Hamilton (2009) notes that historically the “pedagogue” (a term rarely used today), such as teacher or educator, was one who maintained a longstanding relationship with his or her student over the course of many years. This teacher and pedagogy, would be responsible for how and where to lead the child.
populations of children (Hamilton, 2009). This vision of pedagogy, then, had more in common with a formalized curricula or syllabus, and was applied to discussions of what should be taught in schools to large cohorts of children. As a result, the concept began to serve as a powerful “social mechanism” of “instructional technology for disciplining other people’s children” (p. 7).

In their extensive review of historical and contemporary discourses on education in North America, William Pinar, William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery and Peter Tubman (2004) trace shifting trends in curriculum development. A reconceptualization of curriculum that occurred between 1970 and 1979 (pp. 186-239) called for a more humanistic, organic approach to the act of teaching, which, by extension, had an impact on the concept of pedagogy. Some of these changes can be seen in Paul Klohr’s work, listed here:

1) A holistic organic view is taken of humankind and his or her relation to nature; 2) the individual becomes the chief agent in the construction of knowledge; s/he is a culture creator as well as a culture bearer; 3) the curriculum theorist draws heavily on his/her own experiential base as method; 4) curriculum theorizing recognizes as major resources the preconscious realms of experience; 5) the foundational roots of their theorizing lie in existential philosophy, phenomenology and radical psychoanalysis, also drawing on humanistic reconceptualizations of such cognate fields as sociology, anthropology and political science; 6) personal liberty and the attainment of higher levels of consciousness become central values in the curriculum process; 7) diversity and pluralism are celebrated in both social ends; 8) reconceptualization of supporting political-social operations is basic; and 9) new language forms are generated to translate fresh meanings—metaphors for example. (Klohr, 1974 as cited in Pinar et al., 2004, p. 224)

Pinar et al. (2004) outline the varieties of philosophies that inform pedagogy in more contemporary educational curriculum theories and discourse, as provided by the example of Klohr above. Yet David Hamilton (2009) points out the terms pedagogy and education often have been “blurred in translation” in both the past and present (p. 5). This blurring is evident when the discourse on education involves children’s learning and schooling, and when the word education is used a synonymously for schooling; for example, author Mike Rose (in his book
Why School) writes about a national education system but refers to an institutionalized school system. Similarly, the five teachers of my research study often use the words “education,” “schooling,” “learning” and “teaching” in parallel ways.

In their recent review on the perspectives of pedagogy, Dennis Thiessen, Elizabeth Campbell, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, Sarfaroz Niyozov, Sardar Anwaruddin, Carl Cooke and Lia Gladstone (2013) build on these earlier works, but view pedagogy as more multidimensional. Here, pedagogy can include content, knowledge, teacher expertise and approaches to educating students on delicate and controversial matters like politics and anti-oppression. The term pedagogy becomes compatible with “teaching”—and that which what the teacher deems relevant and appropriate to teach. These authors argue that the term pedagogy is more than blurred with other concepts like curriculum; it is also “fragmented” (p. 2). They also suggest that readers tend to invest their own meanings in understanding the term (p. 2).

Even this brief historical overview shows the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations underpinning the concept of pedagogy, and how it can be expressed through curriculum theory and praxis. In theory and praxis, pedagogy represents the complete educational journey for both students and their educators or teachers (Brunner, 1996; Dewey, 1938; Palmer, 2007). Now, pedagogy can refer to a practice or method of teaching (praxis), a theory of teaching, a philosophy/psychology/sociology of education, a theory of education itself, the content in educational settings, or, on a more nuanced level, the values, integrity or wholesome qualities the educator brings to the pedagogical process when engaging with her or his students.

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3 The word educator and teacher will be used interchangeably from this point on unless otherwise specified.
This last and more nuanced aspect of pedagogy informs the focus of my research. The question of what outlook, values and qualities the educator brings to the pedagogical exchange shapes the foundation for how the four teachers and I employ both holistic and contemplative principles to our pedagogy. As a result, the adjective “holistic” needs to be unpacked, specifically for how it can modify the practices of both contemporary pedagogy and education.

II. Holistic Education, Holistic Pedagogy

Although John Miller has not used the term holistic pedagogy, he has been instrumental in defining and clarifying the concept of a holistic education (J. P. Miller, 2007). Like the term pedagogy, the adjective “holistic,” when applied to education, can take on multiple meanings. Miller posits the need for a holistic curriculum based on the underlying principle of human and universal integration. As a term, “holistic” implies the ability to not merely recognize all elements of a situation, but also to connect and integrate those elements in practise. Holistic refers to the integration of wholes, a drawing together of various parts in the effort to unite, yoke or integrate (J. P. Miller, 2007). John Miller posits that a web of relationships supports integration in the holistic education curriculum. This integration is shaped by three major principles: i) balance, the why and what of a philosophy for holistic education; ii) inclusion, the means of practicing to teach in a holistic manner; and iii) connection. Holistic education or pedagogy aims to reassemble wholeness from a largely fragmented schooling system. In so doing, it recognizes significant aspects like the spiritual dimension of the human experience in education. The three basic educational orientations of the holistic curriculum are: transmission,
where the learner acquires a skill through accumulation of knowledge and repetitive practice; transaction, or the cognitively more interactive learning-teaching exchange between the educator and learner using inquiry-based problem solving procedures for knowledge synthesis; and comprehension; and transformation, where learning “acknowledges the wholeness of the child.” These three basic orientations guide John Miller’s concept of holistic education (J. P. Miller, 2007 pp. 10-11). The curriculum and child are no longer seen as separate, but “connected” (J. P. Miller, 2007 p.11); learning transcends the conventional means of acquiring knowledge and comprehension.

Ron Miller (2004) provides a map for pedagogy through his holistic paradigm compliments John Miller’s (2007) outline of the basic principles for holistic education. Ron Miller’s map provides five basic paths to learning. 5 Of particular relevance to my research has been his second path: the where the pedagogical exchange is inspired and supported by the learner’s motivation and exploration of the world. Ron Miller’s other paths also echo what the teachers in my study describe. For example, R. Miller’s third path speaks to the need for meaningful interaction between and amongst members of a particular place or community. Also, the path of critical pedagogy supports the direction for responsible political education to socially reconstruct and transform the social environment to prevent social injustices. Finally, the last path, “spiritual developmentalism,” recognizes a spiritual dimension to education based on the interconnected nature of human experience, one that seeks wholeness rather than fragmentation.

5 Ron Miller (2004) has provided a map of holistic educational paths of learning, outlining what he deems to be five models of learning that have influenced and shaped holistic pedagogy. Transmission is the first path led by the teacher, as the one who largely directs and controls teaching, as in the case of Pestalozzi’s epistemology for educating young children grounded in his experiences in nature. A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School is an example of the second path, focusing on the psychological development of the child. The third path is exemplified by the Reggio Emilia approach to educating young children. Critical pedagogy forms the fourth path in R. Miller’s map of holistic education that supports the direction for responsible political education to socially reconstruct and transform the social environment to prevent social injustices. An example of this is Paulo Freire’s work, “Spiritual Developmentalism,” which recognizes a spiritual dimension to education as in Maria Montessori’s method or Waldorf education or Richard Brown’s (2014) work in the area of contemplative pedagogy.
Ron Miller’s paradigm has been influential in the field of holistic education in North America and elsewhere. Here, Sirous Mahmoudi, Ebrahim Jafari, Hasan Nasrabadi, and Mohammad Liaghatdar (2012) also have contributed to the discourse of holistic education/pedagogy by defining their four pillars: “learning to learn, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be” (p. 182). Their four pillars highlight and synthesize the basic principles of holistic education articulated earlier by J. P. Miller (1993; 2007) and R. Miller (2000; 2003; 2004). The four pillars Mahmoudi et al. define emphasize that education should serve and nourish human development. In doing so, education honours the maturing child as an individual person. Central to the pedagogical exchange here is the experiential aspect of learning and teaching, which aspires toward a vision of wholeness and integration, but which also recognizes and values multiple ways of knowing (Mahmoudi et al., 2012).

Like John Miller and Ron Miller, Mahmoudi et al. (2012) view holistic education as holding an inherent understanding of wholeness or completeness within a life, a life that exists as a web of integrated connections. These connections include the individual rippling outward to include communities and the larger world. These models also implicitly value people as

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6 Mahmoudi et al., (2012) presents six basic theoretical perspectives informing contemporary holistic education. These six include: a perennial philosophy; indigenous worldviews; life philosophy; ecological worldview; systems theory; and feminist thought. As well, they provide a summary of the conceptualization of wholeness by outlining various dimensions of the integrated whole:

i) The whole person includes elements that support integration, namely: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of humaneness.

ii) Wholeness in community (e.g., family, school and town), which focuses on the quality of relationships amongst its members.

iii) Wholeness in society speaks to the economic climate of countries that govern people, quality of life, supportive of or unsupportive of their overall well-being and happiness.

iv) Wholeness of the planet speaks to the global responsibility of all countries toward the preservation and sustainability of the planet.

v) The holistic whole relates to the spiritual source of our identity, giving our lives and education context in the human existence.
fundamentally spiritual beings. In my study, and in many of the teacher-participants’ narratives, holistic education emphasizes relationships as a key part of the pedagogical exchange.

Ron Miller’s holistic paradigm also supports the understanding and sanctity of wholeness as an intuitive, powerful force that can integrate the individual in an incorporeal manner (R. Miller, 2003). As R. Miller describes it, this is a spiritually informed sensibility that “transcends all our beliefs,” and both our “partial perspectives” and “cultural ideological imperatives,” to form a “spiritual worldview,” one that recognizes that “the ultimate transcendence of violence is a realm of wholeness, absolute inclusiveness and unconditional love that reveals the limitations of all our temporal strivings” (p. 30). Metaphorically speaking, the threat of violence, or more generally, threats of conflict, can be seen as factors shaping the five teachers’ experiences, creating a variety of injustices big and small that occur daily in conventional and mainstream education, and which the teachers’ narratives show can be abetted, if not “transcended,” by a more contemplative and holistic stance.

Like the teachers in this study, Ron Miller (2003) sees the need for summoning of a “spiritually informed understanding” that can enable us to appreciate our individual expressions as unique and seeking interrelatedness with all else. This spiritual understanding can serve as a transformational catalyst towards harmony, wholeness or unity, especially in a classroom. This “spiritual awakening” can occur as something organic that need not necessarily be rooted in conventional religious beliefs. He envisions this awakening as the summoning of love for all people that the individual human being is capable of experiencing and expressing. The process of spiritual awakening, then, is the effort to break with our selfishness (R. Miller, 2003) self-centeredness and ideological impasses. The holistic educational paradigms that these and other
educators (Kessler, 2000; Krishnamurti, 2003; Lin, 2006) describe all embrace a more contemplative approach towards education, which I explore in more detail next.

**III. Contemplative Pedagogy**

The term “contemplative pedagogy” is relatively more recent. Though it is a newer moniker than “holistic,” “contemplative pedagogy” can be seen as the integration of two meditation principles, here defined by John Miller and Richard Brown: “The aware presence of the teacher” and the “effective instructional methods that cultivate depth in learning,” which work together to show that a “contemplative pedagogy draws deeply and broadly from multiple human dimensions [with a] strong intellectual component” (R. Brown 2014). Brown believes that the teacher’s transformative practices—mindfulness meditation—enable meditation to anchor a contemplative pedagogy.

By employing spiritual practices like mindfulness meditation, contemplative pedagogy can help germinate the seeds of one’s inherent spiritual nature (Teilhard de Chardin 1960), both to live life harmoniously (Welwood, 1992) and to experience the interconnectedness of reality as expressed by holistic educators like John Miller (2007) and Ron Miller (2000). Like Ron Miller, John Welwood (1992) points out contemplative practice need not be associated with “religious observances, traditions or other worldly pursuits” (p. xix). He further remarks that often buried in great spiritual traditions are ways to unite the worldly with spiritual life. In other words, a vertical search for insight and wisdom through in-depth contemplative meditative practice bears fruit more when it intersects with the real world—that is, a more horizontal and reverberating expansion in meaningful engaged pedagogy, or in the act of exploring how to live with “dignity and compassion” with oneself, others and the world at large (Welwood, 1992, xix).
The teachers in this study each embody these principles in action. Their narratives demonstrate that they see meditation as a specifically spiritual engagement, one that supports them and encourages them to engage in more benevolent manner with themselves and others. It aids them in modeling both respect and compassion for their students by honouring their students as separate but related human beings. While the teachers nurture their own spiritual essence through their solitary meditation practice, it is their engagement in the pedagogical process that reveals their natural spirituality; i.e., contemplation in action.

Donald Rothberg (2011) details the act of contemplation well in the following passage:

Contemplation [as in meditation] has its conceptual origins in a strong separation of contemplation and action [embedded] in Western philosophical and religious traditions […] There are numerous resonances, of history and meaning, which condition us to continue that separation when we speak of contemplative traditions “entering the mainstream” at the current time. This separation certainly is problematic […]

The dominant Western philosophical and religious traditions of the last 2500 years, stemming especially from ancient Greek traditions, have rested on this separation. The spiritual (or “contemplative”) realm is distinguished from the political or practical realm (the activity or action of praxis in polis), with the former often seen as timeless, absolute, and other-worldly, and the latter understood as time-bound, historical, contingent and this worldly. (As cited by Rothberg, 2011, p. 112)

I agree with Rothberg, who notes that the opposition of contemplation and action is spurious, at least when experiencing it as a dimension of one’s own holistic contemplative stance. The five teachers practice mindfulness, in part, to be more engaged and benevolent educators, whose unconditional acceptance of others does not differentiate between self and other. Yet when one becomes too caught up with one’s self or attached to this image of self that is supported by ideas, policies, and the role’s image, tensions arise, illuminating the paradoxes involved in teaching.

As indicated by the participants in this study, teaching can be paradoxical. It threatens to spin out of control, or support harmony and peace. Rothberg’s understanding of contemplation
can be a useful model to apply to teachers grappling with this paradox. Contemplation can be part of the pedagogical exchange, an action that yields a positive regard for one’s self and one’s students. Depending on the situation, it can ease tensions, encourage inclusivity or make connections. The teachers in this study, by their active and engaged presences in their classrooms, embody and illustrate a contemplative pedagogy. Their ongoing mindfulness meditation practice outside of the classroom supports an understanding that teacher, student and subject matter in classrooms are *relational*; they are dependent on and connected to a larger spiritual whole. Their philosophies on education, and how they engage in pedagogical relationships with their students, unite a contemplative approach with a holistic one.

In my research here, I combine “contemplative” and “holistic” approaches to reinterpret pedagogy, and I do so based on the voices and narratives of the teachers I interviewed. All of the teachers in this study, including me, embrace mindfulness meditation as a contemplative spiritual practice that supports us in our lives as both teachers and human beings. Mindfulness enables the teachers to relate with others through mind-body (Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009) and spiritual (Ferrer, 2002) connections. In holistic education, this contemplative practice of pedagogy assists the teachers to develop their own character of will. In this study, the direct intuitive knowing of reality is represented by one’s capacity as a human being to intuit how to direct one’s will to action. As one strives to engage with thoughtful consideration in the world, one moves toward a more intuitive way of knowing and being, both in and with this world.

Thus, an ongoing mindfulness practice reinforces the character of will by germinating the seeds of insight and love, which can bloom into wisdom and compassion for one’s self and others (Zajonc, 2009). In the pedagogical exchange, these seeds of insight and love, when

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Intuitive knowing can also be expressed as intuition, in which there is a direct, unmediated apprehension of reality, which can be known immediately. This moment embraces the self and other and does not require rationalization or abstract reasoning to be understood (Asenjo, 2010 p. 201).
germinated, flourish into kindness and generosity of spirit through action. They add merit to the teachers’ intentions and understandings of their personal practice (the noun), as it connects to a more fully engaged teaching practise (the verb), which honours themselves and their students. In this regard, the act of contemplation in teaching yokes the teachers with their students in a unique pedagogical exchange, and works to ground and define a holistic contemplative pedagogy. That is why I link the two terms, “contemplative” and “holistic” together.

The term holistic contemplative pedagogy has not been previously used in the literature, but has been implicit in the discourses of both “holistic” (J. P. Miller, 2007; R. Miller, 2003; Mahmoudi et. al., 2012) and “contemplative” (Bai et al., 2009; Rome & Martin, 2011; Zajonc, 2009). The above examples of research support the processes of integration on both an intra- and inter-personal level, which in turn the teachers in this study detail through their work and lives. After reviewing the data in this research, I saw the need to combine the two terms, for together, they provide a more complete picture of the relationship between participants’ meditation practices and the pedagogical process as a whole. The teachers’ holistic teaching principles and their contemplative spiritual practice of meditation intersect to create examples of a holistic contemplative pedagogy in action.

When using the phrase “holistic contemplative educator,” I refer to an educator who feels addressed by his or her students. She or he possesses the personal intention and commitment to teach students with kindness, insight and intelligence. The teacher constructs meaningful pedagogical relationships that are mutually beneficial, particularly so for the student. These relationships take into account much more than the curriculum. They seek to see students, and be seen themselves, as whole and well-rounded people.
In this research study, the five teachers identify mindfulness as their primary personal spiritual meditation practice, one that dates back to the historical figure Siddhattha Gotama. Mindfulness as a practice originates in the foundations originally attributed to the historical Buddha (W. Hart, 1987; Olendzki, 2005; Wallace, 2011). The participants understand this practice as an inner self-exploratory science, revealing psychological and somatic features of the meditative process. They experience it in both concentrative and expansive forms of heightened consciousness. Initially, they would attempt to focus their attention on their breath, and then they would expand breathing with body and mind while paying attention to their emotions, thoughts and physical sensations. In this process and with nuanced awareness, the teachers in this study wholesomely mirror and observe a variety of phenomena without attachment to or identification with these phenomena. Mindfulness meditation informs their understanding of the world and as such, also directs their teaching practices.

Mindfulness meditation includes contemplation as a conceptualizing process, one that includes imagining, suffusing and self-questioning. In turn, contemplation in a mindfulness practice strengthens links between meditation and the teachers’ pedagogy. The teachers see mindfulness practice as an embodied spiritual practice that recognizes the commonality and connectedness of all humanity. We all suffer big and small losses in our lives, and so we value

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8 The foundations of mindfulness have been translated by Nanamoli & Bodhi (2005) in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (pp.145-153), which provide the basic guidelines for mindfulness. The first foundation has one initially pay attention to the breath, then follow it through the body and the physical sensations that accompany it. The second foundation guides the practitioner to focus on her feelings whatever they may be, pleasurable, un-pleasurable or indifferent. The third foundation or application brings attention to the mind the rambling thoughts, images that come and go. One watches and observes them run rampant here, there, everywhere while experiencing the incessant proliferation without affiliation. In the last foundation or application, the meditator brings meditative awareness to the all the contents of the mind, anything and everything that fills up one’s attention in meditation. By using the breath to anchor the mind and the body, one can reign in the roaming mind.

For other descriptions on the foundations or applications of mindfulness, see Olendzki (2005 pp. 254-257) and Wallace (2011). These meditation practices emphasizes development of mindfulness and cultivation of insight or *vipassana.*
benevolent human relationships in the effort to be less selfish, balancing insight with love.

Indeed, by combining the data from this study with my own ongoing meditation practice, I have come to understand mindfulness more deeply (Goldstein, 2013; Olendzki, 2005; Rosenberg, 1999; Wallace, 2011). Throughout this study, I use the words “mindfulness” and “meditation” interchangeably, and do so deliberately to mark their interconnectedness.

The five teachers in this study all regard mindfulness as lifelong personal journey of self-exploration and discovery. Engaged mindfulness in everyday life occurs in the capacity to be completely aware, albeit for generally small snippets at a time. Reflection, observation, attention and non-attachment to the changing “I” experience (Epstein, 1988) in mindfulness meditation all support the teachers’ practise in being thoughtful, attentive, caring and kind when engaging with teaching and living. They are careful and thoughtful in how they approach their students, when dealing with delicate matters, in how they use their tone of their voice and language in the classroom, and by how they use their knowledge and intuition to engage in respectful meaningful pedagogy.

Through my own practice of meditation over the last twelve years, I have come to appreciate that with breath awareness (breathing with the body and mind), I can stay attuned to my senses while residing in a place of buoyant calm and tranquility. There are many times I do not achieve a prolonged state of clam; I often experience boredom, mental agitation or incessant chatter in my mind. Yet my ongoing practice has brought a certain flowing calmness to my meditation. I have also come to know that as long as I am the observer watching, there is a sense of separateness. Yet when the observer within me quietly disappears in a state of equipoise, there is a fusion. This moment of contact or fusion (Puhakka, 2000) means my awareness absorbs a more pristine quality and my mind remains quiet with spaciousness in my breath and body. In
this state or stream of consciousness, I have a more nuanced sense of awareness; mental agitation diminishes, and I experience mental agility, flexibility and freedom. In this meditative state of awareness, I make an effort to garner self-knowledge, and a clearer comprehension of phenomena in my mind, all while contemplating.

By paying close attention to the variegated thinking, images, textures of physical sensations and feelings that arise or disappear, the meditating practitioner perseveres to cultivate beneficial states of mind to support wholesomeness in attitudes, ideas and action to cultivate integrity – *sila* (Wallace, 2012). It is with this embodied intra-personal understanding and presence that one engages with others and the world at large. It has been noted that integrity (*sila*) combined with calm equipoise (*samadhi*) and wisdom/insight (*panna*) can reveal itself and support transformation for the better (Goddard, 1930; Humphreys, 1968; Olendzki, 2010; Wallace, 2012).

I posit that through this convergence, one can discover the wisdom of love (hooks, 2000a; Salzberg, 1995), something that is more often missing from pedagogical relationships. In this study, the teachers’ mindfulness practices strive to cultivate a loving, kind attitude of serenity and insight. Mindfulness allows for the teachers an opportunity to experience and contemplate kindness, unconditional love, goodwill and peacefulness⁹ (Goldstein, 2013; Kornfield, 2008). These wholesome contemplations in the process of mindfulness are not often emphasized in more contemporary definitions found in the psychological literature of mindfulness (Albrecht, 2012).

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⁹ In classical mindfulness meditation these contemplations are also known as the four limitless qualities of the heart—*Brahama Viharas* (Olendzki, 2005, p. 294) also known as the four immeasurables (Wallace, 2011 p. 5).

The four qualities or virtues are: a) loving-kindness (*metta*), where boundless love is imagined rippling outward to all beings, which I have interpreted as kindness. b) Compassion (*karuna*), where one is aware and sensitive to the pain and suffering of another and in doing so, wants to alleviate it; I refer to this as unconditional love. c) Appreciative joy (*muditā*) is a mind’s ability to feel truly happy for the joys and successes of others. This I refer to as goodwill towards others, diminishing jealousy and envy. d) Equanimity (*upekkha*) is a quality of being at peace with oneself without attachment to an outcome or expectation. I have expressed this as peacefulness.
Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Lopez, 2012, Sternberg, 2000; Wallace, 2012) or in the more current wave of mainstream mindfulness (Wilson, 2014). Yet for the teachers in this study, they are central to accessing insight into the wisdom of love and its capacity to support benevolent thought and action in pedagogical relationships.

IV. The Need for Holistic Contemplative Pedagogy

I have been employed as a professional teacher for over 16 years, but my work and familiarity with public education in Ontario began more than 30 years ago. Over the years I have watched the curriculum subtly change its focus and emphasis. My initial introduction to public education in Toronto was in 1965 as a grade four student, where I found music, fine and dramatic arts, and physical education occupying an almost equal status to other subjects like arithmetic, reading and writing. Fast forward to 2014: music, art and physical education struggle to stay afloat in many public schools, let alone receive equal status. As Pasi Sahlberg (2011) points out, relegating subject matter like fine arts, drama, music and physical education as unimportant in contemporary education not only devalues the subject matter, but also and often devalues those who teach these subjects. Similarly, I have watched cultural heritage programming, including the opportunities to learn other languages, virtually vanish from after-school programming. The decline in full-time music and physical education teachers (some reassigned to half time positions), school librarian positions, and class time for arts, music and physical education has left an imbalance in conventional curriculum subject matter. As Ungerleider (2003) points out, we are “ambushed by factoids and assaulted with data” (p. 106). He regards the current status of education as an overcrowding of a narrow curriculum, while Sahlberg (2011) sees it creating a harmful imbalance with a bias in favour of particular subject matter.
Concurrently, I have also witnessed how psychological services in schools have become overly zealous with psycho-educational testing and the negative labeling of students. I work in a school where three years ago close to one-third of the student population was designated as having special needs. By this designation, they were seen as not achieving the expected academic standards. In many cases, they were labeled as having social adjustment issues or “learning disabled”. What is wrong with this picture? Special education has becoming a growing industry for some school boards financially strapped for cash, for “[a]ttaching funding to students with particular characteristics creates powerful incentives to label” students (Ungerleider, 2003, p. 138)—and without careful consideration of the long-term negative consequences for those who have been labeled.

At a recent symposium on urban education, Gillian Parekh (2014) talked about the flawed methods used at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to access data on special education. She observed that these methods privilege some groups while negatively labeling disenfranchised groups, including many marginalized minority children. To complicate matters, given that counseling and social support services are often provided by one individual for a cluster of schools, children and teaching staff are not well, let alone adequately, served.

Among other issues like differing philosophies of and approaches to teaching, I see the above problems as contributing to the general public’s growing apathy toward public education over the last decade (Ungerleider, 2006). I have observed how this apathy has shifted into loud and vocal discontent (Apple, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Delpit, 2006, K. Robinson, 2010), resulting in the creation of a number of alternative schools (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Sherman, 2012) often housed within larger conventional or mainstream schools. While good intention may

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10 Special education in this context refers to children who are identified with special needs and not those with notable exceptions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, physical, hearing, visual, neurological, or genetic impairments and or speech pathologies.
guide the alternative schools, which can temporarily satisfy needs of some families and children, they nevertheless create more problems and divisiveness among teachers, administrators and parents; more importantly, they can actually be a disservice to the very students they aim to support (Gordon & Zinga, 2012).

In my years in education, I have also watched how the near-insatiable craving for standardized testing and preoccupation with specified learning narrows the intention of education while fuelling political rhetoric that schools are failing. Supporting my observations, Ravitch (2013) and Grumet (2006) argue that the new business model of policy and practice in public education is driven by the economic push to trade public schooling for a market system. Michael Apple (2001) has earlier argued that educational literacy in its various forms serves the current political and economic climate by favouring those who dominate, exploit and claim the right to “name the world.” These glaringly obvious observations speak to the need for a more holistic contemplative pedagogical approach to bring balance to mainstream public education, in the effort to empower students to manage their own lives in an unpredictable future.

Having acknowledged the above issues and forces, some educational historians argue that conventional teaching practices and curriculum in North American public schools are outdated (Ravitch, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011; Sherman, 2012) and not commensurate with needs of the time nor the children (Kohl & Oppenhiem, 2012; Korten, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2001). Others speak to the more pressing need to live more harmoniously and peacefully with oneself and others in a rapidly changing and burgeoning global world (Lanteri, 2001; Lin, 2006; Slaughter, 2000). The more recent scholarship in contemplative practices in education (Boyce, 2011; Bush, 2011; T. Hart, 2004; Jennings, 2010; Zajonc, 2006; 2009) maintains that current conventional or mainstream education is bereft of a holistic contemplative approach to education in general. I
now want to look more closely at two educational challenges in greater depth, for they have an impact on the need for a more holistic approach—standardized curriculum practices/testing and the resulting loss of a personal connection for teachers to address students’ unique individual needs (i.e., rather than presuming these needs can be met by standardized, one-size-fits-all “solutions”).

As Herbert Kohl and Tom Oppenheim (2012), Kenneth Robinson (2010) and Neil Postman (1996) have argued, curriculum and pedagogy based on an Enlightenment model of education is fragmented and disconnected—and not serving the needs of many children today, particularly those in public schools. The Enlightenment model was developed in an economic and intellectual climate where curriculum was “ordered and organized” to enable children to move through the education system with the promise of future employment (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 6). Yet the recent global economic turmoil, coupled with rapid advancements in technology, indicates that we are rapidly shifting toward chaos more than order, with many unknowns (Amundson, Mills, & Smith, 2014). For example, the need for flexibility, seen in embracing the possibility of dual careers (or more) during an adult lifetime, is becoming a reality for a growing number of people. These rapid changes put a tremendous amount of pressure on families, childcare services (Amundson et al., 2014), teachers and students; these changes also pose challenges for a scrambling public education as to its future direction.

There is also no guarantee that public education based on standardized testing and competition will guarantee future employment for many, though this model may currently serve a privileged elite (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010). Pankaj Mishra (2004) has indicated earlier that a rigid curriculum may be advantageous for elites outside North America who have openly embraced globalization that supports a Western consumer lifestyle. Yet this work does
not support those who are less advantaged and marginalized, maintaining class divisions widening the gap between the rich and the poor, and perpetuating the culture of poverty (Ravitch, 2013, Ungerleider, 2003; 2004).

Adding complexity to the debate on standardized testing, Zander Sherman (2012) maintains the modern agenda to approach schooling is through benchmarking, where countries adopt a “standardized school system and compete against each other economically,” and students’ “tests have been collected, their scores graded *en masse* with the final result representing (supposedly) the country’s overall level of education” (p. 269). Sherman further claims that the testing frenzy is associated with the notion that the country with the highest grade or the best school is an “educational success” and “synonymous with economic success—that is a top-scoring student or a top-scoring country is the one that makes the most money” (Sherman, 2012, p. 269). Yet this is not necessarily so. Indeed, some critics argue that standardized testing is no more than a massive effort to create an economic working class (Apple, 2001; Ravitch, 2013, Sherman, 2012).

Nevertheless, standardized testing in a variety of forms has become the norm for many public schools, certainly so in Ontario and North America over the last decade (Ravitch, 2013; Sherman, 2012). Some of the teachers in my study look at standard tests by the Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO), which focuses on mathematics, reading and writing, as too prescriptive and not suitable for all children because the tests fail to adequately inform students of their overall capacity and motivation for learning. Moreover, standardized tests fail to recognize the talents, strengths and interests that many children have in areas like the arts (Gardner, 1999; Sahlberg, 2011), media technology (Khol & Oppenheim, 2012) and vocational aptitude (Rose, 2009). This failure to recognize a range of capacities compromises authentic
learning opportunities for students and undermines the principles of democratic education. Moreover, it is difficult to know how this type of assessment can inform teachers’ teaching, planning and objectives for a yearlong curriculum that supports a truly integrated educational practice.

To further complicate matters, some educators (Neill 2008; Shulha & Wilson, 2009; Volante, 2007) question the reliability and validity of EQAO tests, challenging the accuracy of reported results because students are “taught more explicitly how to write the test” (Neill, 2008 p. 34). Other problems with these tests include scorer bias and its influence on test scores, as well as test content, which may satisfy the discriminating factor for overall test analysis, but does not accurately reflect student evaluation and influence over time (i.e., tests that are repeatedly taken every three years and over time will likely produce improvements in test scores). Amidst the chaos of standardized testing, the big question remains unanswered for many educators, including myself and one of the teachers in this study: for what purpose and at what cost are EQAO tests being administered, and for whose benefit, especially in a time of uncertainty with little guarantee of anything especially future employment for the masses (Frey & Osborne, 2013, K. Robinson, 2010)?

Approaching standardized testing more formally in the form of intelligence tests, Keith Stanovich (2009) argues that standardized tests like EQAOs, which measure cognitive efficiency and facts, do not assess an individual's intuitive wisdom or ability to exercise sound judgment by making appropriate decisions. This view also points to conventional or mainstream education’s imbalance in teaching specific subject matter to access specific information through a hierarchical learning and assessment model. In so doing, it bypasses alternate ways of learning, knowing and understanding that tap into the creative webbing of connections (Brice Heath &
Greene, 2012; Goleman, 2003; Noddings & Shore, 1984; D. Siegel, 2013), a practice that many students use to make sense and meaning of things. This is certainly one place where, as the teachers in this study illustrate, a more holistic approach to teaching and learning can support and enhance mainstream education.

Other practices in education reveal fragmentation and tension in that, for example, teaching policies are often disconnected from the reality of day-to-day life in schools. For example, Léonie Rennie, Grady Venville, and John Wallace (2012) point out that tension and difficulties arise in trying to deliver a flexible curriculum within the rigid structure of schools. While acknowledging the flexibility of curriculum, they also raise the issue of curriculum volume and content in the “continuing pressures for revision of curriculum,” one in which “some educators argue for a more humanist meaningful curriculum” (Rennie et al., 2012, p. 14).

Diane Ravitch (2013), Mike Rose (2009), Sandra Stein (2004), and Charles Ungerleider (2003), and some of the teachers in this study, indicate that many policy makers have never taught in schools and possess little or no familiarity of the day-to-day issues of running schools. Additionally, many do not take the time to understand current issues around child and adolescent maturation (Carlsson-Paige, 2001; Kessler, 2000; D. Siegel, 2013) in the more contemporary context of their mandatory educational journey. Having to deliver a mandated curriculum in a designated time frame and enforce particular policies arbitrarily or artificially strains the pedagogical relationship for both teachers and the students for which they are responsible, which has been supported by Shulha & Wilson (2009) and Rennie, Venville, and Wallace (2012).

These factors also speak—and contribute—to the loss of a connection between the teaching policies and practices in schools with the work, experience and knowledge of actual teachers. Policies and practices have become overly preoccupied with teachers' skills and
punitive accountability for teaching, which do not produce consistently desired conventional academic results, nor do they contribute toward meaningful learning for students (Fullan, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011). Moreover, Fullan, Ravitch and Sahlberg independently argue that this trend not only undermines teachers’ credibility, but also demonstrates little respect for their professional experience, expertise and intuition when it comes to teaching to the individual strengths and or overall capacity of their students.

Another punitive demonstration that speaks to the disconnection between teachers, families and students is the overall fragmentation of education, which locally was most evident in the 2012 political strife in Ontario, where teachers were subjected to negative press with the passing of Bill 115, Putting Students First Act, 2012. This bill fuelled tension, dissent and outright hostility between politicians, school boards, educational administrators, parents, teachers and children—both the bill and wider public discourse on it wounded everyone involved. The trend to weaken the public education system in Ontario, however, dates back to the period 1995-2003, when the Conservative government of that time “introduced some structural changes (e.g., reducing the number of school districts, establishing an assessment agency)” and “substantially reduced the public education budget,” which meant they “generally engaged in a running battle with the teachers in the province” (Fullan, 2009 p. 106). Bill 115 only added to, and worsened, this trend.

This overview of certain challenges affecting the wider public educational system, and more specific local contexts of the five teachers in my study indicate; teaching (like a number of other professions) is not immune to the trends and changes of rapidly changing global economy (Amundson, Mills & Smith, 2014). This economy has increased workloads dramatically; (Ravitch, 2013; Slaughter 2000; Ungerleider, 2003). Generally speaking, there is enormous
pressure to handle these increased workloads. This adds additional and complex challenges to a
teacher’s work life, and which appears to be morphing new norms for teachers and students alike
in this rapidly changing world (Amundson, Mills & Smith, 2014). American historian Diane
Ravitch (2013, 2010) claims that North American public school teachers and students are caught
in the hoax of what she refers to as “the reign of error.” Where Ravitch once was in favour of
standardized testing for accountability, she now questions its validity and purpose, especially
after reviewing various educational reform policies in the United States; some of which are
entertained and copied in Canada (Fullan, 2009; Sherman, 2012). Critical of the recent national
sweeping educational reform policies there, she points out that private foundations and
corporations direct and manage these reforms. They, in other words, claim the right and
knowledge to define and lead educational reform (Apple, 1992). An example of this is evident in
the Common Core State Standards, an American Federal program funded by the Gates
Foundation as cited by Ravitch (2013). She posits this untested program, created with minimal
teacher input, claims that by using standards-based reforms for education, one will be able to
predict from kindergarten whether or not a student is academic and professionally ready to meet
the future. I join Ravitch and Grumet (2006) in asking: is this the direction that public education
is heading, and is this a direction we want, or should head?

If it is, then teachers will face enormous challenges dealing with changing paradigms in
the curriculum and pedagogy, politics, economics, structure of schooling and, the more recently,
rapid changes in technology. In their article "How Google Is Changing Your Brain" (2013), the
late Daniel Wegner and Adrian Ward point out that information from the Internet arrives much
more quickly than our memory is able to retrieve, examine and process. The advent of the
information age has created vast volumes of information, establishing what they refer to as
“intermind.” On the upside, “intermind” can be regarded as an amalgamation of many minds that gives teachers and students quick and easy access to information. On the downside, people know less about the world around them and, more importantly, less about themselves as human beings.

While technology brings people of the world together through Instagramming, hashtagging, blogging, texting and tweeting, it has also, and paradoxically, created a loss of opportunity for the individual’s more solitary modes of thought and contemplation. As Richard Slaughter (2000) affirms; “Modern technologies do little or nothing to assist people in solving the perennial problems of human existence—meaning, purpose, soulful work [as uncovered in human interaction in a holistic pedagogical exchange], rites of passage [and] death” (p. 46).

It is here where the contemplative practice of meditation offers teachers the opportunity to slow down, pause and create the metaphoric space to cultivate positive intention for the benefit of their students. The practice of daily meditation enables the recognition and development of intimacy. Teaching is a relational act, and by developing intimacy with oneself in solitary meditation practice, teachers can become better able to recognize and understand the importance of intimate connections with their students. These connections include trust and care to help create a more harmonious classroom (Kessler, 2000; Noddings & Shore, 1984; Palmer, 2007), one that is commensurate with a holistic approach to teaching.

Looking at education through a psychoanalytic lens, Deborah Britzman notes that problems in education can be impossible to solve when too little attention is given to the emotional and psychological relationships between teachers and students in the teaching-learning process (Dean’s Graduate Student Research Conference, University of Toronto, 2012). There is merit in Britzman’s willingness to address emotional conflicts “in social policy, in institutional life, in cultural practices, and in studies of religion, social violence, and war” (Britzman, 2011, p.
83)—all of which effect the pedagogical exchange. She further maintains that teachers must
know themselves before getting in front of students for whom, and to whom, they have a
responsibility—and I would add, influence over. This view echoes the spirited attitude the
historical Buddha practiced through contemplative mindfulness: self-exploration in the effort to
engage more benevolently, wisely and peacefully with others. Accordingly, the teachers in this
study engage in mindfulness meditation, which guides their spirited holistic contemplative
pedagogy.

“Education functions, at least in secular societies, as a text that says something about the
things society considers sacred” (Gordon, 1988, in Pinar et al., 2004, p. 4). From my experience,
education is never neutral. While education should empower us socially and politically, it should
also support us to engage responsibly; but where does this responsibility begin? Does it begin
with the teacher, the institution or the governing policy that mandates the education for the
masses? One of the questions I asked the teachers I interviewed was to explain what teaching,
educating and learning meant to them. I also asked if teachers should be concerned with issues
beyond academics, and whether they ever experienced tension between their roles as educators
and as individuals (and if so, how they managed these tensions). These questions point to a
guiding paradox of teaching: does the teacher lead the child, and if so, where to and for what
purpose?

The teachers in this study aspire to teach from heart with authenticity. John Miller (1993)
argues that neglecting to teach from within one’s inner being hinders authentic education:
“A[uthenticity means being true to ourselves. This does not mean being enslaved by our egos,
but being fully present in the Self. From our Self we find that teaching becomes truly satisfying”
(p. 35). In this study, the inner spirit of teachers supports them to engage in understanding of the
teaching-learning process—a process that Fred Korthangen, Younghee Kim and William Green (2013) refer to as “core reflection,” or authentically teaching from the inside out. Authenticity can also be expressed as teaching from the “heart” in genuine meaningful situations (Kim & Greene, 2013, p. 176).

In support of this pedagogy of practice, Zajonc (2009) states that a school or a classroom is an ideal place to cultivate the human capacity for inner peace, harmony and care; I would add wisdom. For a teacher who takes the time to explore her inner landscape can better work from a position of confidence and balance to support her students with not only intelligent teaching, but also with genuine care for students’ learning and well-being. This centered position enables teachers to share meaningful knowledge with their students and be more open and curious when faced with challenges or conflicts. One way that teachers can delve into the depths of their inner landscape is through a practice of mindfulness meditation (J. P. Miller, 2014; Zajonc, 2009).

Ultimately, this research proposes that mindfulness meditation enhances the pedagogical relationships between teachers and their students. Meditation is by no means a panacea for all the ailments of education and the unpredictable conflicts that arise in classrooms, but this practice clearly provides several benefits for the teachers in this study. It generates a safe container to view the paradoxes and challenges of day-to-day teaching, which can ameliorate some of the tensions that lead to lingering destructive feelings, entrenched ideologies and general misunderstandings (Dali Lama & Ekman, 2008; Dali Lama, 2011). Mindfulness meditation can also help reshape for the better the relationship teachers have to the act and profession of teaching. As Mark Leary (2004) explains:

Over time meditation affects the self’s normal mode of operation—not just during meditation itself but also during the rest of one’s day. With less unnecessary self-

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11 To keep the reading fluid from this point, the pronoun “her” will be used to represent the genders.
chatter, the person is not always planning, thinking about problems, worrying about what needs to be done. As a result the person’s normal emotional state is less aroused and more calm, and less likely to be pushed over the edge by frustrations and hassles. (p. 51)

One way that the teachers in this study manage the fragmentation, disconnection, tensions and paradoxes of teaching is through their ongoing mindfulness practice. As I explore next, it is both a profession and practice I share, and one that has not only shaped my research, but my history as a person and educator invested in improving the larger purpose of education.

V. My Own Journey

I have worked as a public school teacher in Toronto for the past 16 years. I know that teaching can be as mentally and physically demanding as it can be rewarding and revitalizing. For the past 10 years as a teacher and, more recently, as a doctoral candidate, I have been cultivating a personal meditation practice that has supported me personally and professionally. My interest in the relationship between meditation and teaching began while I was teaching at an inner city school with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), where I facilitated a weekly hatha yoga practice for colleagues. My own journey through meditation provides a context and motivation for the trajectory of my research.

In 2006, the K–8 school where I was employed became one of the first model schools for a large board initiative designed to address poverty, culture shock and violence in the community, as well as their effects on students.\(^\text{12}\) While academic achievement remained a major goal for the school, other priorities were expanded to include equity, community engagement and

\(^\text{12}\) In 2006, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) launched its first three model schools with the aim of meeting the needs of inner city students, many of whom live in poverty. Programs and services in these designated schools are designed to build academic success, enhance parent and community engagement, and provide financial stability for the school. To date, there are 158 model schools committed to innovative teaching and learning, support services for students, research and program assessment. (TDSB, 2014b).
inclusiveness. Students were tested for free for hearing and vision problems, and provided with eyeglasses and hearing aids at minimal cost. Nutrition workshops and community dining programs for children and parents were available, too. The rationale behind these initiatives was to level the playing field for students: increasing access to resources and services would foster self-esteem and boost achievement scores in reading and mathematics. Overall, my colleagues and I were working in a heavily programmed school with many well-intentioned initiatives designed to support students and their families, but we were not clear what the end result was—or was meant to be.

Late in the fall of that same year, I began to notice that the pressure of curriculum demands, along with mandates from the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) were creating a divisive and negative atmosphere among the administrators, teachers, students and parents/guardians. Curriculum delivery and pedagogical approaches for those of us involved in OFIP training became increasingly onerous, mechanical and linear, often leaving us teachers confused and fatigued. This initiative followed two years of intense literacy and numeracy training sessions and workshops, which had been designed to boost EQAO scores and grade averages at the school. Additionally, the students at the school were subject to other forms of standardized testing because of the special funding that the school received from outside sources.

It seemed to me that we were jumping endless hoops with no end in sight. As professionals, we were determined to follow the latest trends in teaching, such as direct instruction, discovery learning or any method deemed “best teaching practice” by the school board or current administration. During this time, my personal seated meditation practice started, and took root.
My personal yoga practice had included a formal seated meditation following the asana segment. I then began meditating for an hour each week. Finding this experience calming both physically and mentally, I read Larry Rosenberg’s *Breath by Breath*, followed by Joseph Goldstein’s *The Experience of Insight*. I started adding shorter meditation sittings for approximately 25 minutes in the morning before work, which made me more sensitively aware. In spite of the fast-paced chaotic days that often greeted me physically, I found a new sense of calm while engaging with students and parents—even, at times, humour in the darkest and more restrictive moments of teaching. I discovered an uncanny ability to hold the some of the tensions and paradoxes that teaching presents with a new sense of appreciation, insight and calm.

This burgeoning practice of meditation encouraged my capacity for self-awareness, and did so quite differently from my previous forms of self-reflection and journaling. The resultant clarity was encouraging. It prompted me to sit diligently in meditation, allowing opportunities to view teaching and students in a new light. During my early morning meditations, and before I went to school, I would sit and witness the parade of thoughts that crossed my mind, the multitude of sensations that roamed through my body and the fluctuation of emotions and thoughts that accompanied them. While engaging with my students and colleagues, I paid particular attention to the feeling tones that would rise, pass and linger. I began noticing the thoughts that crossed my mind and which would become attached to some of these feeling tones.

In 2007, I facilitated a weekly hatha yoga (both *asana* and *pranayama*) practice for my colleagues. The practice concluded with us lying supine on the floor with the Gayatri mantra (an ancient Hindu verse) playing softly in the background. Many of my colleagues told me this experience was nourishing and calming. They noted the rhythmic and repetitive echoing of the verse and music allowed them the opportunity to still the body and slow down the mind chatter.
No one understood the meaning of the words in this verse (including myself at the time), but it seemed to slow down the attempt to cognitively conceptualize meaning and instead, simply experience the music and sound of the each word as it echoed. As my personal silent meditation practice deepened, I would often contemplate the intention, values and purpose of what I was doing. While I believe I had always been a reflective educator and person, something I believe that is natural to most people, the experience of reflection in meditation, as in mirroring, brought a new kind of clarity and a heightened level of conscious attentiveness. With this nuanced level of consciousness, I contemplated the benefits and drawbacks of schooling for the children in my care. In the process of becoming more committed to my daily practice of meditation, I wondered if it could be investigated further as a more formal contribution for colleagues and teachers’ personal development. This prompted my return to graduate school and the birth of this thesis.

Between 2008 and 2012, the model schools grew to 158. Now, however, they appear to exist in name only, with little funding for transformative initiatives. Over the past two years, and due to serious fiscal and management problems at the TDSB (coupled with strained relations with the provincial government), funding for the model school programs has diminished. The unpredictable storms in education are ongoing, and children, teachers, parents and school administrators are left to deal with the aftermath. In 2009, the public school where I was employed was closed as part of a major community and revitalization plan. Following three years of closure and turmoil, the school re-opened in the fall of 2012. Once considered a darling of the Board because of public esteem for its initiatives, the school is now demonized for having gobbled up too much money in revitalization with under-enrolment. What I glean from this change is that nothing is permanent, not even a warm feeling toward something. Life keeps on rolling, and with it comes changes in attitudes, thinking and feelings.
As my practice evolved and gained depth, I realized that in this rapidly changing world, meditation offers me the opportunity to pause and put some distance between me and the onslaught of life’s events. It pulls me out of the storm, offering me a bird’s eye view of unfolding events. I attempt to carry this perspective with me into the classroom and attempt to speak, listen and act with care when I engage with others. Rather than narrowing my focus, it has added breadth to my pedagogy. By studying the life and times of Buddha, I have also gained a better appreciation of the historical and ontological underpinnings of mindfulness, which, in turn, has supported me with this research. I draw parallels to John Miller’s understanding that meditation is an intuitively healing “calling card,” and an opportunity for timeless learning (2006; 2014). In addition to my own meditation practice, I participated in a number of educational programs and retreats over the course of my doctoral studies, which afforded me a fuller experiential understanding of the practice of meditation in different settings and from several perspectives. (I detail these resources in Appendix B.)

Throughout this project, then, I will touch on the role my own experiences have played in echoing the teachers (or less often, differing from them). Overall, this study posits that the benevolent practice of mindfulness meditation is a means of cultivating clarity, and both insight (wisdom) and unconditional love (compassion). Insight in pedagogy can be expressed as authentic knowing or intuiting, in which the character of the will and intuition or the teacher’s connection between her immediate awareness is recognized and immersed intuitively with “our quest for meaning and our immediate apprehensions” (Noddings and Shore, 1984, p. 42). This intuition is a kind and loving spiritedness that allows for greater or more poignant contact with reality, as the teachers in this study strive for with their students.
Such intuition grounds the teachers' holistic contemplative pedagogy. It assists them to respond to the daily challenges and dilemmas they face as educators. Mindfulness also allows for in-depth personal exploration of existential questions. Why am I suffering? Why am I confused? How can I gain clarity and end suffering or dissatisfaction (Goenka, 2002; Goddard, 1930; Olendzki, 2010)? Through willful intention, mindfulness practice heightens self-awareness; it balances the intellect with compassion. Meditation supports a state of transcendence that can deepen meaning for teachers. Their solitary meditation practice enables them to not only love and become attuned to themselves, but also to be loving, kind and accepting of their students in a more engaged pedagogy. Throughout their individual stories, and corroborated by contemplative educators like Barry Boyce (2011), Sid Brown (2008) and bell hooks (2000a), my research reveals the clear pedagogical and personal benefits of this practice to teachers, students and teaching.

This Introduction, then, sets the context for the wider study, claiming that mindfulness meditation and holistic contemplative pedagogy support teachers to better face challenges in the contemporary pedagogical exchange. Based on the principles of holistic pedagogy, I submit that mindfulness provides the teachers a way for benevolent self-exploration, self-development and improvement. In turn, the practice contributes towards teachers building more caring, thoughtful meaningful relationships with their students. Mindfulness can help teachers manage some of the tensions and imperfections of day-to-day teaching. The main question guiding my research study is: what forms the relationship between a teacher’s meditation practice and her or his pedagogy?

More specifically, I ask the following overarching questions:

1. Do teachers' interactions with their students during the school day demonstrate a connection to their personal meditation practice?
2. If there is a connection, how does it manifest itself?

3. What are the physiological, psychological, emotional, spiritual and cognitive effects of this connection?

4. Does this connection offer teachers ways of understanding, teaching and relating to students that differ from what they had known and or done before?

These four major questions in turn generated additional questions, which are listed in full in Appendix A. These additional questions, however, focused on three basic areas: first, the nature of teachers’ meditation practices, with the emphasis on mindfulness (or, as some teachers refer to it, vipassana); second, the teachers’ personal teaching philosophies, or insights into teaching, including their practical knowledge and lived experience as educators; and third, the relationship between mindfulness meditation and teaching or holistic contemplative pedagogy.

In relation to education, I see mindfulness as connected to ethos—a Greek word for character, defined as “the characteristic spirit or attitudes of a community, people, or system” (Concise Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 2005). The concept of ethos made known by ancient Greeks referred to one’s perceived credibility or character and how it could influence the pedagogical relationship (Haskins, 2000). In this study, I understand how the ethos of a classroom is connected to the synergy of a teachers embodied meditation practice and holistic pedagogy. I see the triad of wholesome or decent behaviour, such as thoughts and actions in contemplation garnered from meditative insight and lived experience as educators contributing to the love and respect they have for their students.

The recent interest in mindfulness meditation in the West has seen a flood of research in the area of stress reduction in clinical psychotherapy (Germer, R. Siegel, & Fulton, 2005) and more recently in teacher education (Soloway, 2011). Attention to meditation has also been made
popular by the Dali Lama and his interest in science (Lopez, 2008), as well as the initial work of Kabat-Zinn (1990) in ameliorating stress. The work of Lanteri (2008) and Goleman (2003) on emotional intelligence and the work of Daniel Siegel (2007, 2014) in neuroscience have highlighted the practice of mindfulness in education. Despite recent research in the area of contemplative practice and teachers’ practical knowledge (Im, 2010), however, there has not been a sustained focus on self-exploration through insight meditation as a foundation for a holistic contemplative pedagogy, and how this could contribute to the personal development of teachers' wisdom and compassion in their pedagogy.

Thus, this thesis contributes to the expansion and synthesis of this significant discourse in the fields of education and pedagogy specifically. It also, and more directly for the space of classrooms, presents mindfulness as a spiritual meditation practice that increases teachers' capacity for kindness and love for their students. Although the size of the study is small, the qualitative nature of the research allows an opportunity to shed some light on the meditative process and its relationship to teaching with more subtlety. In so doing, I aim to help clarify the ambiguity around the very term, mindfulness.

Common to the five teachers in my study (myself included) is the understanding that like meditation, teaching is a spiritually engaging act. By embedding my research in Ferrer’s (2002) participatory spiritual knowing, I posit that the solitary practice of meditation moves beyond the individual to the classroom, thereby broadening its value in the pedagogical process (Bache, 2008; S. Brown, 2008; P. Robinson, 2004). By referring to the teachings of the historical Buddha, I invite the mutual exploration and contribution of Eastern contemplative practice to a Western educational context. Although mindfulness has shown benefits in terms of stress reduction and academic success, its primary aim for the teachers in this study is intended to
support benevolent thought and action (Boyce, 2011; Olendzki, 2010; Rothberg, 2011), both of which are mutually responsive to their needs as well as to the needs of others, especially students. As such, the convergence of holistic principles and mindfulness meditation can support a more holistic contemplative pedagogy in mainstream education—and in the process, restore balance and harmony to a system gone askew.

The structure of this thesis builds on these guiding objectives, starting with the next chapter. Here, I review and connect the literature on this cross-disciplinary project in greater depth. Given that mindfulness as a meditation practice has been typically framed and interpreted within a Western approach, often ignoring its Indo-yogic roots, this chapter, in part, serves to outline the principles the Eightfold Path and its relationship to the practice of mindfulness/vipassana in the Indo-Yogic cosmology of the historical Buddha. Not surprisingly, much of this research entails a more developed inquiry into the terms “mindfulness” and “contemplation,” as processes in meditation that lead to focusing on emotional balance and the self in relation to meditation.

Chapter Three outlines the qualitative methodology I define and employ in researching and analyzing the teachers' experiences of meditation. Then, the following five chapters represent the data gathered from each of the participants, data then assembled into individual narratives for each teacher. Here I chronicle both the uniquely personal and sometimes shared ways that the teachers’ teaching philosophies, experiential knowledge and classroom experiences connect to their ongoing meditation practice and inform their holistic contemplative pedagogy. The links between their lived experience as teachers and their holistic contemplative pedagogy conclude the study in Chapter Nine, “Reflections of this Journey.”
My research here speaks to the experiential nature of mindfulness as a spiritual process in self-exploration and personal development, one that is important for human connection and understanding. It also speaks to the connections that teachers make between meditation and pedagogy, and how they come to understand and intuit the benefits of meditation in relationship to both teaching and their world. It situates this work against and within wider debates on pedagogy and how to address the needs of our contemporary students and teachers better in a climate of global change. With these aims in mind, I share the stories of five teachers and our efforts to bring greater integrity and love to our teaching, so that we may create a more balanced and harmonious education for our students.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW:
HOLISTIC CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY

Over the last 40 years, the practice of mindfulness meditation has been gaining momentum in the West, embraced by many laypersons (S. Batchelor, 1994; S. Brown, 2008; Goenka, 2002; Wallace, 2011). Although garnering more attention in mainstream education and pedagogical circles, the practice of meditation as a means of intuiting wisdom, understanding and love (hooks, 2000b, 2006) has not been as openly embraced as a means for facilitating teachers' personal growth and development (J. P. Miller, 2014; Zajonc, 2006; 2009).

Supported by the five teachers’ experiential understanding of meditation, professional knowledge as educators and insight into mainstream conventional education, I lay the theoretical foundation for my research in this chapter. Not only am I reviewing a body of literature; I am also gathering and connecting these sources to put them in conversation with each other. There are three main segments to my research: first, the teachers’ primary meditation practice of mindfulness, including contemplation; second, the teachers’ teaching philosophies and practices, as ground for their holistic contemplative pedagogy; and third, the relationship between meditation and pedagogy.

I situate this work in the holistic paradigm (J. P. Miller 2007; R. Miller 2003; 2004) and in contemplative practices (R. Brown, 2014; J. P. Miller, 2014) within education. In particular, Ferrer's (2002) theoretical framework on participatory human spirituality has been useful. From this foundation, I advocate for a more holistic contemplative pedagogy in conventional education.
This view emerges from my personal teaching pedagogy, my own mindfulness practice, and from what I have come to understand about education through my lived experiences as both teacher and researcher. Most importantly, I foreground the contribution of the other teachers’ experiential professional knowledge as educators and their insights into mainstream or conventional education and meditation, which are as central to this thesis as the theoretical and critical materials I discuss here.

My research also locates within the current context of primarily public education and teaching in North America (Ravit, 2013; Sherman, 2012; Ungerleidger, 2003), and more pointedly, in Toronto, Ontario. Given this geographical focus, I make connections between the teachers’ personal philosophies and insights into teaching in relation the current education politics of time (Banu, 2004; Fullan, 2009; Giroux, 2004; Ravtich, 2013; Ungerleider; 2006). I also included teachers’ practical knowledge and lived experience as educators (van Manen, 1977; 1997), their practices of meditation (Goenka, 2002; W. Hart 1987; Rosenberg, 1999; Wallace, 2006; Trungpa, 1970, 1995) and their holistic approaches to educating their students (Kessler, 2000; J. P. Miller, 2007; 2014; R. Miller, 2003; 2000; 2004).

I begin this chapter by returning to and engaging in greater depth with the topic of pedagogy, by reviewing both critical and contemplative approaches to it. From here I turn to the origins and guiding principles of select examples of holistic education and the role spirituality may play. Then I discuss recent criticisms of holistic education, including the concept of a perennial philosophy and Ferrer’s (2002) transpersonal participatory human spirituality as the new relaxed perennial philosophy.

After outlining these discourses, “The Historical Buddha” section details the Buddha’s four truths for the wise, a section on Indo-Yogic Philosophy, and how both contribute to
contemplative approaches. I review the recent literature on mindfulness, which paves the way for a discussion of *vipassana* and emotional balance. I conclude the chapter by examining the literature on contemplation, highlighting the qualities of the contemplative educator, the self and the contemplative practice of loving-kindness.

I. **Pedagogy in the Context of Education: Critical and Contemplative Approaches**

   Curriculum theory and pedagogy have been referred to as the complete educational journey for educators and students (Brunner, 1996; Dewey, 1938; Palmer, 2007). If curriculum theory provides the conceptual model that governs subject content, then pedagogy is the enactment of the theory. Today, curriculum theory includes philosophies, processes, actions and associations in education that contribute to a wide range of pedagogical relationships. It includes the attitude and wholesome presence that the teacher brings to her pedagogy. Pedagogy, then, is the dynamic, artful manner in which teachers make education come alive for their students (Murphy, 1996). The pedagogical process involves the active, sensitive engagement of teacher and student in the educational journey.

   Since Jean Piaget’s (1969; 1973) account of child development and Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (Reiber & Carton, 1987), teaching pedagogy in the North American context has branched in numerous directions. While Vygotsky emphasized the importance of language and communication in the teaching-learning process, Bruner (1986) added the importance of addressing mutual reference points between the educator and learner, including shared context and assumptions. Today, a multitude of lenses on pedagogy have entered the academy: holistic (R. Miller, 2004; J. P. Miller, 2007) and contemplative pedagogies, as in engaged mindfulness (Bai et al., 2009; Smalley & Winston 2010; Jennings & Rome, 2011);
historical, political, and critical pedagogies (Apple, 1992; Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2007); aesthetic pedagogies (Beattie, 2006); cultural pedagogies (Kanu, 2006); and radical, revolutionizing and hip hop pedagogies (Thiessen et al., 2013). I focus first on critical pedagogy, in which critical theorists like McLaren (2007), Giroux (2000), and Apple (1992) examine curriculum and pedagogy through a socio-economic, political lens.

These critics discuss the hidden curriculum through which educational institutions surreptitiously convey attitudes, beliefs and values to maintain the status quo of the dominant prevailing culture. As Michael Apple (1992, 2001) and Lisa Delpit (2006) note, this hidden curriculum propagates the hegemonic practices and ideology of the existing powers that manage, control and deliver education content and pedagogy. Those who view education from this lens question complacency. They advocate for political and economic change to support not only diversity, but also subtle differences within diverse populations. They recognize the need for equity among all students, particularly those who are marginalized.

As Giroux (2004) points out, neo-liberal corporate culture has infiltrated many public spaces, including education. The institution of education seems to be up for sale for those who have the money and power to inculcate educational policy and mandates (Grumet, 2006; Ravitch, 2013; Sherman; 2012). Giroux argues that pedagogy has become commensurate with teaching for the purpose of artificial standardization. Instead of teaching from the basis of experience and an intuitive place of knowing, one that supports the best interest of students, teachers are increasingly forced to adhere to teaching and assessment methods that support a rigid and over-inflated curriculum (Ravitch, 2013; Ungerleider 2003).

Here in Ontario, Michael Fullan’s (2009) observation of belittling teachers can be seen all too well. Ranu Basu (2004) explains how the conservative ideology of a failing education system
was rationalized in Ontario in the 1990s during the Common Sense Revolution—a time that divided administrators, teachers, parents and the community at large:

Dominant ideologies of what constitute a “good society” and what leads to “good planning” serve to legitimize governing policy paradigms, where legitimation can be defined as the process whereby those in power gain acceptance for themselves in the eyes of those who are governed by them. However, in order to gain acceptance or to make people believe that a decision is indeed justified, a necessary part of legitimization—rationalizations or strategies based on power, are presented as rationality [...].

The changes examined during the Common Sense Revolution, a period of significant economic and political reform introduced by the Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservative government in the 1990s [...] traces the slow and steady construction of a failing and inefficient public education system [...] The rationalization of restructuring was driven by a perceived need to improve the efficiency of the public sector while cutting costs and simultaneously by the need to increase educational standards, improve outcomes, and ensure accountability in order to remain globally competitive in a knowledge based market economy. (Basu p. 621)

This type of educational reform, when coupled with rapid changes in technology, often leaves teachers ensnared in bureaucratic educational policies and mandates (Neill, 2008), which contradict their teaching sensibilities, experience and knowledge of how best to serve the needs of the students in their care (Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990; Carlsson-Paige, 2001; Rose, 2009).

As Carlsson-Paige (2001) astutely observes

From their first days of life children are trying to make sense of things. They actively engage with the world around them, exploring, manipulating, interacting, with everything and everyone within reach [...] These explorations and experiments involve a child’s thoughts and feeling as one inseparable whole, mind and heart work effortlessly in the early years as children actively create meaning from their experience [...] But unfortunately much of school curriculum requires children to meet the demands of tasks that do not build on their previous understanding of the world and the emphasis on right answers begins to separate children from themselves. (pp. 21-22)

The five teachers in this study all see it as essential that they nourish and nurture the minds and hearts of their students. Over the course of their lives as professional educators, they
have come to notice the divide between mind, body and spirit in conventional education. In the effort to bridge this divide, they engage in a more holistic contemplative manner when engaging with their students.

Contemplative practices like mindfulness meditation, when combined with teachers’ intuitive knowing and experience, support their pedagogy as contemplative no less. This approach to educating students also helps teachers reconnect with themselves by rekindling the kindness and generosity of spirit that lies within. In doing so, the teacher is better able to support meaningful teaching-learning exchanges for children; they can acknowledge children’s varied capacities for making meaning of the world through subject matter, capacities that are often excluded from conventional schooling—and children, like adults, construct meaning for that which cannot be mandated.

Stories of the contemplative Buddha convey that the mind is a powerful source of insight and proliferating thought (S. Batchelor, 2004). Sitting with one’s thoughts, without attaching them to the thinker (Epstein, 1995), questioning and contemplating ideas, and then engaging with them in the world—these acts teach the power of love (hooks, 2000a) and compassion (Burtt, 1982; Salzberg, 1995). These forms of love and compassion can awaken the teacher to commit herself to the pedagogical exchange with her students, even when what is mandated and expected contradicts her own experience and wisdom. As Sharon Salzberg says: “Love can uproot fear, anger or guilt because it has a greater power” (1995, p. 29).

American philosopher Edwin Burtt (1892-1989) articulated some of the early scope and reach of these teachings to North America, centuries after their emergence in India:

Given its initial push by Gautama’s dynamic personality [his teachings] spread rapidly. In a little more than two centuries after Buddha’s death […] his influence [through emperor Asoka […] swept thought large areas of India [and] Ceylon and other neighboring regions […] For a millennium it was a powerful force in
molding religious, moral, artistic, educational and social life of India. (1982, p. 23)

The Buddha advocated a simple way to keep oneself in balance, which included the practice of meditation. One could sit and contemplate the appropriate way for existing in and engaging with benevolence in the larger world (M. Batchelor, 2010; Burtt, 1985; Salzberg, 1995). With practice, and by being kind to one’s self during the act of meditation, a teacher can adopt this practice and observe negative energy, transforming it into something positive (Dali Lama & Ekman, 2008; Kornfield, 2008). Contemplation can awaken a larger presence of love within, which the meditating teacher can use to support her students with kindness and care. Teachers can learn from meditation as they learn to face the external tensions, rapid changes and repeated challenges of the profession.

Work by contemplative educators such as Sid Brown (2008), Tobin Hart (2009), John Miller (2006, 2007), and Ed O’Sullivan (2001) each stress the importance for educators in aligning their pedagogy with their philosophy of life. Developing pedagogy is a creative and interactive process between teacher and student, and between learning and knowledge. Contemplative pedagogy requires that the teacher be able to articulate doubts while maintaining a conscious alertness to the affective dimension of the teaching-learning process (Palmer, 2007). This ability shows a teacher’s true insight and inner strength, rather than mere professional power or a will to dominate the pedagogical process (Delpit, 2006; Palmer, 2003).

In my research study, the participants’ personal philosophies on education and their meditation practices shape their pedagogies. As educators, they bear a sense of responsibility for their students, and they attempt to stay sensitive to their students’ needs so that they can appreciate the students’ experiences in the pedagogical exchange. As a result, their pedagogical interactions tend to become more spontaneous, less systematic or standardized, and more often,
form interactions that are “driven by intuitive” as well as “immediate, informal, local, personal or unsystematic forms of knowledge,” which is “something [that speaks to the] pedagogical essence of good teaching” (van Manen, 1991, p. 193).

In this pedagogical model, then, a dynamic and multifaceted integration of art, science and embodied knowledge generates the expertise of the teacher. It reflects an understanding of education as the ongoing maturation of the child both inside and outside of school. It speaks to the power of the contemplative practice of meditation, which adds greater insight to the act of teaching. Guided by principles of holistic education, contemplative pedagogy can restore balance to a disconnected and fragmented educational system.

II. Holistic Education

The meaning of “holistic,” because it is used often, deserves some unpacking—all the more so given that it is so central to my research. Originating from Greek word *holon*, "holistic" as a term refers to living things and social communities as both part of and whole simultaneously (Koestler, 1967). A *holon* is a self-evolving system or phenomenon whose parts or sub-wholes exist in a paradoxical manner between chaos and order (Koestler, 1967). *Holons* are comprised of matter, energy and information, which range from the smallest imaginable particle to the gigantic universe (Koestler, 1967).

One manifestation of a *holon*, then, would be the teacher, students and classroom, which would in turn interact with other *holons* like the school, school board, governments and community “where [one] thing is balanced against [another] thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey, & Bentley, 1949, p. 108). A *holon* can also occur at a more intimate transactional level where words, ideas, sounds and feelings generated in teaching and learning between the teacher
and student bring about “a mutual understanding of differences to mutual advantage” (Dewey, & Bentley, 1949, p. v). These various interactions ground teaching. In holistic education, then, the educational process becomes a dynamic, interrelated set of relationships that inspires movement toward both integrity and integration.

The most commonly referenced origins of holistic approaches to education in North America can be traced back to the 1830’s vision of transcendentalist scholars like Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and Fuller (J. P. Miller, 2011), but they date further back to principles of holistic living and ecology defined—and lived—first by Indigenous peoples (Arrows, Cajete, & Lee, 2010; Cajete, 1994). With roots in diverse and ancient spiritual traditions, holistic education today has come to express a dynamic adaptability, one that increasingly has been taken up in the present by theorists of pedagogy.

For example, Gregory Cajete posits that the interconnectedness of all life in nature makes it essential for the human mind to ensure survival of the world and planet—a goal, he argues, that education can further. This view acknowledges that the universe is a relational and dynamic work in progress, revealing diversity, change and divine unity. Holistic education, in this rendering, emerges from a pedagogy of connections that uncover the complex interconnectedness between inter- and intra-personal relationships, communities, nature and the planet at large (Korten, 2006).

These views, so central to holistic pedagogy, are not new to current educational discourse (Krishnamurti, 1953). Yet, in the late 1970s, there was a cultural paradigm shift that linked holistic education to a broader vision of humanity and the significance of education (Forbes, 1996). The work of Ron Miller (2004) speaks more directly to this shift, as he describes it here:

I argue that schooling in the modern age—every facet of it—is saturated with [a] reductionist worldview […] the very notion of curriculum itself—represents an
objectification of human experience, an abbreviation of the life world according to particular ideological imperatives; the world is parcelled into subjects and departments for mechanized interpretation and consumption. Pedagogical methods—involving everything [...] reflect a materialist view of human learning and development [...] Learning is seen as a product rather than a process, an outcome which is desired. (pp. 383-384)

While my study does not necessarily address specific teaching practices or methodologies, it speaks more to the five teachers’ understanding of holistic and their personal philosophies that are commensurate with their work. The teachers here see the inter-connectedness of human beings, and value their own basic human integrity and that of their students. They see it as their responsibility to educate and empower their students to become more wholesome and engaged global citizens.

Shifting from the more formal pedagogical applications of holistic pedagogy to the principles that guide holistic education, humanist educators such as Carl Rogers (1969) and John Holt (Forbes, 1996; Patterson, 1987) offer western psychology a new perspective with which to understand and investigate the human mind and interior life in relation to existence and education. This shift from the traditional behavioural science, which was conventionally compartmentalized and measured (Forbes, 1996), to one that is more exploratory, brought a new organic-sense, embodied-like experience of learning and knowing for the individual. This in turn helped pave the way for the notion of holism (J. P. Miller, 2007), wholism or whole earth ideas (Forbes, 1996), which searched for deeper meaning of purpose to education, focusing not only on intra- and inter-personal integration, but also on international and earth connections as well (Cajete, 1994; Korten, 2006).

The bridging of humanistic thought with both spiritual and social/global awareness supports a holistic contemplative pedagogy (J. Miller, 2007; Noddings & Shore, 1987). It privileges a transpersonal awareness in which consciousness in not conceptualized, but rather,
formed by an experiential knowing steeped in authentic contact (Puhakka, 2000, p. 16). I want to now trace some of the key foundational thinkers who have generated models for a more contemporary holistic approach.

Following World War I, Rudolph Steiner sought to articulate a pedagogy that balanced thought, feeling and the will to education (Childs, 1996). His creation of the Waldorf school was designed to provide an educational journey for children from Kindergarten to Grade 12 through three basic pedagogical cycles of seven years each (Pope, 2002). These cycles were designed to follow development of the maturing child. The educator would play a nurturing role during the first pedagogical cycle (prior to age 7), where she would support the child through imaginary play by emphasizing oral communication through singing, and by engaging with nature, using natural products and materials in educational exploration. The idea behind this practice was to encourage and foster the curiosity of a child to bloom, as well as create the opportunity and freedom for children to explore and discover themselves and their natural world.

Steiner’s second cycle for children between the ages of 7 and 14 years focused more on instructing children through more multi-sensory yet disciplined pedagogy that, ideally, tapped into children’s “imagination or feeling intelligence” (Pope, 2002, p. 5). Learning during the last pedagogical phase, for students 14 years and older, was designed to be more complex and rigorous, emphasizing training and the acquisition of specific skills that could be used for future employment.

In 1907, physician Maria Montessori built on this work to develop a similar methodological pedagogy for working with preschool and elementary children with disabilities, specifically those at her Casa dei Bambini in Italy (Pope, 2002). Aligned with the philosophies of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, she created a pedagogical practice for educating young children that
included the use of sensorial materials with a complimentary curriculum (Montessori, 1967). Her more constructivist pedagogical approach was designed to fuel children’s intelligence by encouraging them to use their imagination, develop their rational thinking skills and build their spiritual awareness.

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) developed the Reggio Emilia, a pedagogical approach to educating preschool children following the aftermath of World War II. Guided by his instincts for social justice (New, 2007) his ideas, like Montessori’s, were founded in social constructivism, drawing on the works of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner (Pope, 2002). His pedagogy required a component of a more deeply involved parent and community to complete the full education of children.

These pedagogical approaches have been labeled as both progressive (Ron Miller, 2000, 2004) and holistic forms of education (John Miller, 2007). They address particular teaching methodologies designed to respond to the fuller educational needs of the child, including social skills, emotional needs and responsible citizenship. If we view them as a single and shared approach overall, they all work toward sustaining the well-being of children within their respective communities.

Holistic pedagogies have roots in a variety of disciplines, including education, philosophy, psychology, sociology, ecological awareness (Cajete, 1994) and spiritual traditions (Forbes & Martin, 2004) that can include mindfulness meditation (Goldstein, 2013; J. P. Miller, 2014). Holistic pedagogies overall inspire a more thoughtful and caring approach to and practice of the education of children and adolescents. John Miller (2007, 2010) observes that since the Industrial Revolution, and much to our detriment, human life has become compartmentalized, standardized and fragmented. He posits that the principles of holistic education aim to re-
integrate wholeness in our relationships. Emphasizing a multitude of interwoven relationships including interpersonal, intrapersonal, intuitive, mind-body, subject, and community, I draw from this body of work and posit that love acts as the language that connects hearts, and minds in education (hooks, 2000a; Lin, 2006; Zajonc, 2006).

A holistic contemplative pedagogy inspires educators to teach to students’ intellects, and it also aims to empower children to take control of their lives so that they may live more contentedly and responsibly in the larger world (Lin, 2006; Palmer, 2003; Rose, 2009; Kohl & Oppenheim, 2012). According to John Miller (2007), the principles that guide the dynamism of a holistic approach to education emphasize wholeness and the whole. Holistic contemplative education, then, can also be seen as a spiritual process. It helps create an evolving, dynamic and organic classroom, in which members work together for a deeper sense of meaning, awareness and connectedness. Indeed, it is worth examining several factors in more depth that contribute to my understanding of a specifically holistic contemplative pedagogy: the role of spirituality, the role of community and global connections, criticisms of holistic education and the concept of the perennial philosophy.

A. Spirituality

As some practitioners and theorists have posited, the practice of mindfulness meditation gives spirituality form. David Tacey (2004) states:

Spirit is successfully contained by symbolic forms, and spirit is ‘at home’ [often] in religious tradition. In unstable times, [or times of uncertainty] the symbolic forms are experienced as constraining, limiting or anachronistic, and spirit struggles to break free from tradition. Ours is a critical unstable period in which spirit frequently reverts to informal or non-religious expressions and is therefore hard to see, discern or measure. (pp. 31-32)
Each of the teachers I interviewed (and I, too) share this view, which proposes that mindfulness meditation acts as a map to awaken and guide the teachers’ spiritual nature.

Njoki Wane and Eric Ritskes (2011) have noted that spirituality is often backgrounded in education, but it can provide new avenues for learning and ways of knowing. They see spirituality, learning and knowledge as interwoven, and when cultivated, can strengthen connections in the pedagogical exchange:

Spirituality is understood to be the determination that the mind produces, known as the power of the will to refine our human behaviours through our own positive thoughts, words and action [and] creates positive productivity for self or others. [It] is the goodness, the love and the compassion for all humanity in its various levels both tragic and optimistic circumstances [...] Spirituality is intuitive and can be found in small acts of kindness [...] Spirituality is woven through all life and is not just what happens occasionally. It is something that characterizes the relationship of an individual to the universe [...] spirituality is a force that is dynamic and resides everywhere and in everything and to be spiritual is to maintain awareness of this dynamism as it moves through around our being. (Wane, 2011 p. 78)

In my research, spirituality exists as an organic inspiration that flows freely from one’s bodhichitta (defined as head and heart) with an intuitive sensibility (Chödrön, 2001). This sensibility is not always understood or explained cognitively; it encompasses all our senses, our being, and as such, is part of a larger force or energy that surrounds us. It inspires authentic thought, love and action, the latter of which reveals wholesomeness as wisdom.

In my own life and practice, I perceive spirituality as the living transformation of something sacred, not in the sense of other-worldly, but in the very magic of here and now. Spiritual fruit is born from of the balanced yoking of love with the intellect. Organic spirituality is germinated through the teachers’ greater contact with reality, and through their commitment to be loving, kind and nurturing towards their students. In other words, the existential search for depth for meaning in mindfulness meditation becomes known horizontally, or through the
dynamic webbing in the classroom or school made visible through the way the teachers engage with their students daily.

As the individual narratives discuss in more depth, this study sees holistic contemplative pedagogy as representing the integrative and relational efforts of the teacher to align education with the fundamental realities of life. As J.P. Miller states: “Spirituality [is] a sense of the awe and reverence for life that arises from our relatedness to something that is both wonderful and mysterious” (J. P. Miller, 2007, p. 4). It is nurtured and embodied through the contemplative practice of meditation in solitary or in active engagement as in a classroom. Spirituality speaks to the heart of the educator’s core being, where teaching emanates from a place of insight and love.

Spiritual connections through holistic contemplative pedagogy aim to support the integrated development of the whole child (J. P. Miller, 2010). Rachael Kessler (2000) held the view that quality education should support and nurture the development of children’s hearts, spirits and creative energies. Her metaphor of “the soul of education” brings attention to the importance of embodied learning and knowledge in nurturing good health and well-being. The educator needs to know and understand herself first before she can participate in a pedagogical exchange that encourages embodied learning. In this view, self-observation in the practice of mindfulness can support educators to work better with her students as whole human beings.

Contemplative practices and mind-body techniques like breath awareness or breathing with the body and mind (Analyo, 2006; Goldstein, 2013; Rosenberg; 1999) can cultivate the kind of spiritual embodied awareness so valuable to the meditating educator (Dolan, 2007; Wallace, 2011). Embodied learning supports that integrated ways of knowing in mind-body connections can come from attending to the physical body, including the senses (Bai, Scott & Donald, 2009; 13)

13 The term “whole child” here relates to all aspect of development including social, emotional, physical, rational, intuitive and spiritual (J. P. Miller, 2010).
Welwood, 2000), as well as the mind (W. Hart, 1987; Wallace, 2006). Mindfulness meditation helps the teachers in this study connect with the experiences of unfolding moments, enabling them to make connections with mood, feelings, physical sensations and thoughts. This awareness encourages a more all-encompassing way of knowing and learning in the classroom, which in turn helps guide both students and teachers to more meaningful relationships, too. As such, spiritual awareness is not only solitary, but can also be found in and through communities, including a community space like the classroom (Cajete, 1994; Ferrer, 2002, Zajonc, 2009).

**B. Community and Global Connections**

Holistic teaching can support a wider social spiritual network of students making meaningful connections between their learning at school and their larger communities (DeSouza Rocha 2003). By extension, advocates of holistic education argue for the corresponding need for institutional transformation in education. This approach promotes more responsible participation in both the local and global communities (Krishnamurti, 1953, Noddings, 2003). For example, those who are actively engaged in the work of economic transformation argue that transitioning away from a corporate global economy managed by a wealthy few to a more equitable and shared system of community-led local economies (Korten, 2006; Schumacher, 1989) will better serve the needs of many. The holistic teacher’s philosophy, values and worldview, if she shares this perspective, will influence her pedagogy, especially which aspects of the curriculum she will deliver, and how.

Some holistic educators believe that conventional education neglects fundamental teaching in the areas of peace, spirituality, ecology and equality, both locally and internationally (Arrows, Cajete & Lee, 2010; Lantieri, 2001; Lin, 2006). They argue for the need to enhance and integrate other forms of intelligence: emotional or moral forms (Goleman, 2003), as well as
spiritual and ecological forms (Berry, 1999; Cajete, 2011). Bringing these intelligences, plural, into the classroom acknowledges the inter-relationships and interdependence of human, animal and plant life (Cajete, 2011) for the well-being of all.

The late Thomas Berry (1999) was outspoken in reminding educational institutions of their responsibility to educate students to appreciate, not exploit, the world they inhabit. Drawing from Merton’s call, and with its own strong commitment to community and earth connections, holistic education taps into what Cajete (2011) calls our “inherent spiritual knowledge” or to paraphrase Charles Taylor (1991), the process by which our spiritual intuition awakens when we become consciously aware of the world (pp. 101-102). This spiritual, more intuitive knowing and awareness evolves from the teacher’s heart of being, her dynamic grounded self (Noddings & Shore, 1984). Spiritual awareness or a sense of spirituality comes from one’s experience of the integration of inner life with an active engagement with the outer world to support insight and integrity.

Psychologically, the holistic paradigm, by definition, in advocating for the whole, supports the cultivation of transpersonal spiritual awareness that speaks to not only to one’s realization, but also an active engagement of this realization or awareness in pedagogical exchanges and life more generally. Jorge Ferrer’s (2002) revision of transpersonal theory posits a relaxed perennial philosophy, discussed in more detail next, as one that supports a broader understanding of spirituality and transcends individual embodiment to allow for more active living and being in the world. Yet these approaches are not without their critics, as the next section addresses.
C. Criticisms of Holism and Holistic Approaches

Several contemporary criticisms have been made against the notion of wholeness and holism, both within and beyond the specific field of education. The concept of the whole, or holism, at least as one as equated with global universality, has been challenged by several poststructuralist and postmodern philosophers and thinkers (Forbes, 1996; Gladstone & Worden, 2011; Peters, 1999). They argue that an inherent bias of Western thought and language has shaped the very philosophy, and that embedded in these perspectives is not a universal but rather, a singular and culturally narrow view. The philosopher Jacques Derrida, for example, challenges the philosophy and psychology of humanism, articulated in education often by child-centered progressives who support the holistic paradigm, claiming that they have “traditionally presented their versions of reality” as the norm (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 452). To articulate this critique, Derrida and his supporters tend to focus on the use of language, its power to dominate and how it represents particular discursive states over, and at the expense of, others who have been marginalized.

Epistemologically, postmodernists argue that knowledge does not exist singularly within one person, but rather through a discourse that constructs reality (Pinar et al., 2004 p. 463). My research study does not focus on any one, particular holistic or contemplative curriculum, nor does it claim to advocate for a singular or narrow knowledge. Yet it does acknowledge the philosophical and historical discourse of humanist educators, transpersonal knowing and

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14 The term postmodern generally refers to a cultural and political movement in a given moment of historical time. Pinar et al., (2004) suggests that it is typically characterized by disagreement rather than agreement, often challenging traditional knowledge in the face of what one designates as modern or modernism. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, takes objection to “structuralism.” Pinar et al., (2004) note that the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism have often been used interchangeably (p. 451). Poststructuralism challenges the humanist schools aligned with education research that is based on “truth” and “objectivity” in the name of universal progress. I will use the term “postmodernism” to coalesce these approaches.
mindfulness meditation as contributing to construction of meaning for what is understood and shared by the teachers in their narratives. As Forbes (1996) points out, looking at wholes, as in the systems approach, is recognized as important within Indigenous traditions and cultures (Cajete, 1994; Goddard, 1930; Martin, 2008). As these traditions outline, the experience of authentic contact is necessarily relational, resembling the notion of discourse constructing reality. Mindfulness can enhance this relationality—and transform the pedagogical process—by breaching the barrier of solipsism and moving toward the intimacy of contact and reality construction. As the teachers’ narratives display, they, along with their students, aspire to make connections between individuals, communities and the world at large by constructing *multiple* ways of knowing. Their experiences support Noel Gough’s (2002) notion that “knowledge claims are locatable and can be called to account by those whose race, gender, class, nationality, language, religion or other “otherness” has [sometimes] placed them in the world’s subjugated spaces” (p. 177). Indeed, a number of the children referenced in the narratives have been in many conventional classrooms, due to educational mandate and policy (Kohl, 1991, Sherman, 2012; Ravitch, 2013). Their teachers recognize the value of the pedagogical exchange that supports, rather than excludes, the diversity of their students, not through claims of absolute knowing, but rather, by making the effort to bridge the gaps. By looking at the whole or larger picture without a claim to any one dominant or absolute ideology, they make sense of and understand the local better, in their own schools, classrooms and students.

**D. The Perennial Philosophy**

The origins of holistic pedagogy are located in what has been defined as the relaxed perennial philosophy. This is a philosophy that sees all aspects of life and the universe as spiritually inter-related and interdependent. The concept of a “perennial philosophy” underpins
several of the texts (and criticisms of holistic education) with which I have been engaging. Challenged by postmodern thinkers, the original idea of a “perennial philosophy” is said to affirm a Cartesian dualism: phenomenological inquiry into existential matters such as the nature of self and existence hold a firm subject/object in the “for-itself” and “in-itself,” […] assuming a…] sovereign consciousness as the origin of meaning” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 453).

With respect to spiritual meditative practices, the traditional perennial philosophy could infer that there is a single or absolute that underlies all reality. As Ferrer (2002) states:

“According to the perennialist thinkers, the Intellect participates in the Divine reality, and being therefore universal and unaffected by historical constraints, is able to objectively see ‘things as they really are’ through direct metaphysical intuition (gnosis)” (p. 87). Like many postmodernist thinkers, Ferrer contends that the perennial discourse is circular in nature and open to criticism; it lays claim that for authenticity metaphysical intuitions must be universal, and they demarcate what is True (and known to every civilization) while simultaneously positing that intelligence, intellect and reason are neither universal nor individual. As such, this discourse affirms that metaphysical intuition “confirms Primordial Truth, or it is false, partial or belonging to a lower level of spiritual insight” (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 86-87). This circular reasoning is an a priori meaning, a reasoning or assumption of truth without reference to experience or examination.

Over time, the perennial philosophy has seen numerous permutations that follow the work of Aldous Huxley (1945). As Ferrer (2002) points out, Huxley described the perennial philosophy as the metaphysics of the Ultimate reality or Universal truth beyond the conventional reality or truth that governs our daily lives. This Ultimate reality or Universal truth is based on an ethic of unity of self with other, the Devine, or the cosmos as one can achieve through heightened consciousness in meditation. Huxley’s perennialism held the belief that there is a
single Truth that is embedded in the core of all mystical teachings of the religions of the world. Originally grounded in the philosophical tenets of a universal or permanent truth, this perennial philosophy recognizes, encompasses and unites the plurality of universal traditions. Moreover, those like Huxley who defended the perennial philosophy did so by claiming: “This unity in human knowledge stems from the existence of a single ultimate reality which can be apprehended by the human intellect under certain special conditions” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 73). These conditions, it is worth noting here, could include meditation.

Stanislov Grof’s (1998) investigation of non-ordinary states of consciousness from a more worldly and secular understanding of spirituality contributes to the perennial philosophy. Grof believes that spirituality can come about spontaneously through self-exploration, as in the self-discovery garnered through meditation. For Grof, meditation as a spiritual act should not be confused with dogmatic religiosity, beliefs or doctrines: “Genuine religion is universal, all-inclusive and all-encompassing,” he argues, adding that it “has to transcend specific culture-bound archetypal images and focus on the ultimate source of all forms” (1998, p. 24).

For Grof, the mysterious core of spirituality in most soteriology (defined as doctrines or philosophies of salvation) is found in different states of consciousness, which provide insight into the human psyche. He maintains that many spiritual realizations can be understood differently, yet be experienced in a similar manner. Everyone has the capacity to connect to the highest principle of the universe. Moving away from Huxley’s inclusive and intra-subjective view of spirituality as a single path and goal leading to Ultimate truth or reality, Grof proposes a multi-directional path leading to the same destination.

By embracing many spiritual Ultimates, Grof advances that there are different ways to reach the highest principle of the Universe, including God, the Tao, Brahman, emptiness sunyata
(Mahayana Buddhism), not-self anatta (Theravada Buddhism). For Grof, all religions hold the same underlying cosmic principle of Ultimate truth or reality in terms of “Absolute Consciousness”:

When we reach experiential identification with Absolute Consciousness, we realize that our own being is ultimately commensurate with the entire cosmic network. The recognition of our own divine nature, our identity with the cosmic sources is the most important discovery we can make during the process of deep self-exploration. (Grof, 1998, p. 38)

Like Huxley, Grof posits involution (going inward, a process of reduction) to support his esoteric–perspectivist view of the perennial philosophy. Grof embraces Eastern spiritual traditions as a means to reach the Ultimate, but challenges the notion of a single path, while recognizing that varied spiritual realizations can be experienced similarly by individuals.

Ken Wilber (1996) presents yet another representation of the perennial philosophy, by including the concept of evolution (moving outward, a process of development) as a means of reaching the Ultimate. Wilber (2006) presents an integral approach to spirituality that acknowledges both involution and evolution as accounts of spiritual traditions. While Wilber’s integral theory recognizes relational and socially engaged forms of spirituality, Ferrer (2002) argues that his accounts of spirituality remain structurally hierarchal: “Wilber seems to be still biased in favor of a spirituality primarily based on individualistic practice and tends to prejudge inter-subjective spiritual approaches as spiritually less evolved” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 225).

Ferrer like Donald Rothberg counter-proposes a transpersonal participatory vision of human spirituality as an alternative that includes “a socially engaged spirituality,” one that supports the transformation of “self and society, self and world not to have to choose to choose

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15 Wilber’s integral theory is a multifaceted approach to viewing spirituality and consciousness. It includes aspects of developmental and evolutionary concepts as related to consciousness and then by positions consciousness in a four quadrant model which includes intentionality, behaviour, social and cultural domains. For a more detailed account of his approach, see (Wilber, 2006, pp. 1-32).
to transform only self or only world” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 24). He establishes a standard of empirical validity as a way of accounting for transpersonal inquiry—one I employ as a model for my own research. In contemplative practices like mindfulness meditation, this validity acts as a form of inner empiricism or human science. Ferrer (2002) argues against the dogmatic notion of universalism, because it fails to recognize “contemplative spiritual traditions that do not posit a metaphysical Absolute or transcendent ultimate Reality” (p. 92).

He explains that transpersonal scholars initially adopted the perennial philosophy in large part due to Abraham Maslow’s (1968) seminal work on self-actualization and peak experiences, as well as Ken Wilber’s psychological presentation (2006) of the Great Chain of Being. Yet as previously noted, traditional perennialism infers that one single or absolute truth or reality governs all spiritual traditions, a belief that often leads to dogmatism and intolerance. Ferrer’s vision of a perennial philosophy acknowledges that spiritual events or transpersonal phenomena can go beyond an individual experience or realization to include multilocal or inter-dimensional of communal experience.

Ferrer’s ideas gain relevance when contemplative teachers consider teaching to be a multi-faceted spiritual act (Krishnamurti, 1953). For my research, I adopt Ferrer’s more relaxed universalism of the perennial philosophy (Ferrer, 2002), one that acknowledges the mysteries of

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16 Ferrer argues that the rigidity of the traditional perennial philosophy views that once one thinks that she or he realizes the Ultimate truth or reality she or he is not open or receptive to ideas or dialogue with traditions that maintain a different spiritual vision. Ironically clinging to this attitude or position while touting unity, universalism and harmony one fails to recognize the unique soteriological possibility of contributions to worldwide solutions by the various spiritual traditions because of the exclusive traditional perennial stance.

17 Maslow’s self-actualization and peak experiences are hierarchical in nature. He describes self-actualizing people as those who have achieved the highest level of health, well-being and self-fulfillment, leading to the highest reaches of human nature. Self-actualization is a phenomenal event which is realized through peak experiences or complete integration with or wholeness in an ineffable moment (Maslow, 1968, pp. 71-114).

18 The Great Chain of Being a concept that the universe is hierarchically order (Wilber 2006) contends that there is a hierarchy of levels of reality and self hood made up of matter, body, mind, soul and spirit. These levels of reality and selfhood lie at the heart of most world religious traditions and as such support the perennial philosophy. For a detailed explanation, see Wilber (2006, pp. 213-229).
life, the value of all spiritual traditions and practices, and, like the metaphor of the holon, regards the perennial philosophy as dynamic, inter-dependent and changeable. I view this participatory vision of transpersonal phenomena as shared common events or experiences; transpersonal knowing can be found in community in a multitude of locations or in a collective identity or space. Transpersonal phenomena are participatory. They are engaged in powerfully dynamic dimensions of human nature interacting with a spiritual force to co-create a spiritual event. As Ferrer (2002) explains:

> Spiritual knowing can be a participatory event. It can involve the creative participation of not only our minds, but also our hearts, bodies, souls and most vital essence. Furthermore, spiritual energies are not confined to our inner world, but can also flow out of relationships, communities and even places. (p. 115)

The teachers in this study engage in the human science of mindfulness meditation practice for spiritual enrichment. The fruits of their labour from their own mindfulness practices come to fruition in their pedagogical exchanges with their students, which tacitly bring both spiritedness and spirituality to the fore.

**III. The Historical Buddha**

Here, I want to turn to a discussion of the influence of the historical Buddha. Doing so can provide the context of mindfulness (or in much of the literature, vipassana) and its transformative potential for the individual.

The Buddha has been worshipped and appreciated for his system of thought in meditation, which was based on his experiential spiritual insight or wisdom (Lopez, 2001),\(^\text{19}\) or

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\(^{19}\) Wisdom in the context of mindfulness practice can be explained in three ways of knowing. In accordance with the teachings of the Buddha and subsequent interpretations of his discourses wisdom can be garnered from knowledge of the teachings, or through reading texts, or by listening to them. Wisdom can also be cultivated through contemplation; that is, systematic investigation or questioning of phenomena in mindfulness meditation practice. Wisdom is also uncovered deep in concentration during meditation where serenity is experienced and the seeds of suffering are eliminated. Through gradually exploring all the mind body phenomena and understanding the
transpersonal knowing, as exemplary in what is known as his night of attainment (Nelson, 1996) or awakening (Carrithers, 2001).

The Buddha lived in a time that saw the birth of the first cities and organized states in what is now known as India. As a result, and like many of us today, he lived in socially, politically and economic challenging times (Gombrich, 1996; 2009). The shift from an idolatry of the Buddha—from God-like to man-like—came through a number of translated works by European historians and scholars (Gombrich, 1996; Lopez, 2012; Thomas, 1948). It is generally accepted today Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha, was a contemplative and compassionate man (M. Batchelor, 2010; Burtt, 1982; Lopez, 2012). Through his lived experience and practice of mindfulness meditation, he garnered insight into impermanence, the human condition and the causes of human suffering and its cessation (Rahula, 1974). His translated discourses indicate that mindfulness meditation does not happen in isolation. Rather, it is a practice for the purpose of wise interaction that inspires caring social engagement with others and the world (Gombrich, 2009; Olendzki, 2010).

As one example during his 45 years of teaching and debating, and in one of his arguments against racism, the historical Buddha challenged individuals who thought they were superior to others, arguing that they should closely examine the grounds for their perspective in

pheonomena of no self that is the essential nature of one’s person leads to insight (Lopez, 2001 p. 50). In other words, knowledge, knowing or insight can be understood as based on overt appearances, (written texts; teachings, day to day lived experience) through careful observation or discriminative thought and through the deconstruction of day to day lived experience in contemplation when meditating, and finally, knowledge or knowing realizing the nature of things as they really in their essential nakedness.

In the tradition of the Buddha’s teachings mindfulness—Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta has four basic foundations (Nanamoli Bodhi, 2005, pp. 145-155). For a more concise deconstructed version of the foundations of the mindfulness, see Olendzki (2005) pp. 254-259. As well, Alan Wallace (2011) speaks to the applications of mindfulness and more recently so has Joseph Goldstein (2013). Both books provide a comprehensive guide to the foundations and applications of mindfulness meditation and are listed in the references.

The word “wise” here does not mean merely acquiring knowledge or facts, but rather how one cultivates insight to benefit not only oneself but others as a way of cultivating wisdom through spiritual insight.
their thoughts. In so doing, he coherently raised objections to formulating an argument based on “biology, ethnography and [the] laws of karma which treat all people as equals, psychological, common sense, physics, genetics and social custom” (Olendzki, 2006, p. 16).

The historical Buddha also challenged notions of dualism (Goddard, 1930; Gombrich, 2009) and absolutes, as ways or principles by which to live. By extension, he also challenged the idea of the supremacy of a God or divinity that controlled humankind and the notion that an eternal soul lives on forever after death (Goddard, 1930; Gombrich, 2009). While he accepted the ideas of karma and reincarnation, he did not openly endorse them; rather, he asked those around him to accept them on the understanding of their truthfulness (Goddard, 1930; Gombrich, 2009), and as based on their particular life experiences, their personal insight through mindfulness and their engagement with others (S. Batchelor, 2015; Nehru, 1945).

The historical Buddha also came to understand all things are relational (Gombrich, 1996; Lopez, 2001), and that the universe is shaped according to the laws of causation; one’s actions or karma can cause either positive or negative results as part of an ongoing chain of events in life (Lopez, 2001; Olendzki, 2010; Rahula, 1974). This comprehension of the nature of reality was corroborated by members of his sangha (the assembly of his friends and associates) who practiced mindfulness meditation and who experienced the benefits in conjunction with their lived experiences (Humphreys, 1968; Lopez, 2001, 2012) as human beings. Through his ongoing practice of mindfulness meditation, he came to discover the truth of human suffering—dukkha, the truth about the origin of suffering, the truth about the cessation of suffering (Rahula, 1974; Thomas, 1948) and the way out, typically referred to as the Four Noble Truths, more accurately translated as the “truths for the spiritually wise” (Lopez, 2001, p. 21).
With this knowledge as a life lived by example, he persuaded others to develop their wholesome qualities, such as how the intention to love can be demonstrated through kindness and consideration for one’s self and others (Goldstein, 2013; Gombrich, 2009; Salzberg, 1995; Kornfield, 2008). In keeping with later postmodern thinkers’ later perspectives, he warned people against “accepting any ideas even from him that could not be examined and proved by their own observation” (Goddard, 1930, p. 2) and through shared meaning and understanding (Gombrich, 2009).

By acknowledging these ideas as ‘Truths’, the Buddha provides a map for exploring and understanding the Four Noble Truths i.e., the Noble Eightfold Path, a symbolic map that can lead to personal inner freedom. In essence, he was advocating a middle ground between asceticism and indulgence, the extremes as he observed, experienced and witnessed for the harm and pain they inflicted (Gombrich, 2009). In my research, the holistic educators argue similarly for the need to bring balance back to conventional education, as its current forms often fail to honour the needs of the whole child and value her basic human integrity.

Siddhattha Gotama’s understanding of the human condition and the nature of reality were grounded in what is commonly known as the Four Noble Truths (Goddard, 1930; Keown, 2013; Rahula, 1974). The first three Truths reveal:

The eightfold path points to eight basic features one should be attentive to during her lifetime. They include: appropriate understanding or view, appropriate intentions or resolve. These two attributes relate to acquiring wisdom or and knowing in understanding of the nature of reality. Appropriate speech, appropriate action and appropriate livelihood are features that relate to the cultivation of wholesome thinking and engagement where one works to cultivate merit through thoughtful and benevolent action. The last three features, appropriate effort, appropriate mindfulness and appropriate meditation, refer to the effort and ongoing practice of mindfulness meditation. In the process of meditation the practitioner attempts to achieve deep levels of mental calm and mental agility so that one awakens the capacity to contemplate life deeply to achieve insight into to the nature of things and once again to help one engage wisely and compassionately in the world (Bodhi, 1994; Gunaratana, 2002).

1. All human beings will encounter pain, suffering and dissatisfaction in life.

2. The origin of human suffering or dissatisfaction is part of the human psychological and emotional condition or distress often seen as grief, misery, hopelessness, melancholy attributed to sickness, ageing and death or general dissatisfaction.

3. Suffering and dissatisfaction arises from greed/power, envy, jealousy/hatred and self-blinding/ignorance and the lack of understanding between these and the causes of suffering. However this can be ameliorated by using the eightfold path (the fourth truth) to guide one through the self-exploration process towards mental peace and satisfaction.24

By using the path as a guide, one can cultivate insight and compassion, two essential ingredients that can eliminate or ameliorate suffering and dissatisfaction (S. Batchelor, 1997; Kornfield, 2008). Through the practice of mindfulness, which calmed his discursive mind and tamed unruly emotions, the Buddha is said to have achieved peace and wisdom (Nelson, 1996 pp. 77-84). This authentic knowing or contact supported him in his understanding of humanity. It inspired him toward honest, upright engagement with others. He contemplated and saw the connection between thought and action, and the importance of cultivating virtue, wisdom and compassion because of the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe.

As Donald Lopez (2012) remarks:

Indeed, the most famous statement in all of Buddhism is not a prayer, a mantra or a profession of faith, but a summary of the Buddha’s teaching: “Of those things that have causes, he has shown their causes. And he has shown their cessation.” This law of causation is not limited to the material world, but extends also to the moral realm, where virtue leads eventually to happiness and sin to suffering, not through the whims of a capricious God, but through the natural law of karma [action], a law that, unlike the theistic religions, offers an adequate answer to the question of why the innocent child must suffer. (pp. 5–6)

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24 There is much more to the interpretation of the third truth, as to how clinging, craving, aversion, status, dislike, and indifference contributes to the degree one suffers. For further detailed explanations and descriptions, see Rahula (1974, pp. 29–34); Gombrich (1996, pp. 33, 46–47); and Keown (2013, pp. 50–60).
Lopez further indicates that modern Buddhist texts often focus on the special qualities of the Buddha and less on the events of his time. Yet it is equally important to situate his teachings during his lifetime as a mirror to our own; the existential and pragmatic concerns he wrestled with continue today, albeit with new names, incarnations and expressions. Having a fuller picture of his aspirations for balance, kindness and honesty supports the foundation for much of my research study, and could benefit educators just as much today.

Furthermore, during the historical Buddha’s time in what is now known as India, most people understood the universe to be divided into separate planes or kingdoms (Goddard, 1930) that were dependent and inter-connected. This cosmology can act as a metaphor that symbolizes the dynamism and connectedness of the individual self (teacher) and other (other individuals), or the social context (classroom/school/educational policy), that are experiencing tension, imbalance and wrestling to find equilibrium and harmony. These individual entities are pieces of much larger puzzle or whole (Grumet, 2006; J. P. Miller, 2007; Zajonc, 2009)—akin to a holon coming together and pulling apart in order to find balance and synchronicity.

In keeping with this cosmology of how the Buddha came to understand the universe, I now point to three basic principles of Indo-Yogic philosophy attributed to him. First, the term panna (Pali), or prajna (Sanskrit), which, as wisdom, is the spiritual expression or principle of integration of two other uniting principles, namely: karuna, associated with love and compassion; and nana (Pali) or jnana (Sanskrit), the principle of differentiation associated with the intellect or creative expression. The latter two principles do not operate independently of each other, but inter-connectedly, if at times mysteriously so, in expression (Goddard, 1930).

Mindfulness mediation helps balance love and intellect to access wisdom or penetrative insight. By uniting the principles of love and intellect (Thurman, 2004), the wisdom of
spirituality is revealed. As each individual teacher’s narrative discusses, the teachers in this study each meditate to support the uniting of insight, unconditional love and intellect, and give rise to their own particular and organic spirituality. These principles are congruent with those of holistic principles in education, which attempt to bring spirituality to the fore (Richard Brown, 2014; Ron Miller, 2004). With this understanding in mind, I next turn to a more in-depth discussion of the discourse on mindfulness specifically.

IV. Mindfulness from Past to Present

Donald Lopez (2012) points out that there is no precise word in the English language for the Buddhist expression “meditation” (p. 82). What is often expressed as meditation can be loosely translated from the Sanskrit word bhavana. A lexicon for bhavana includes the following: mind development, mind cultivation and mind training (Dali Lama, XIV, 1991, 2011; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Wallace, 2011), which occurs by “producing, manifesting, imagining, suffusing and reflecting” (Lopez, 2012, p. 83) in a complex sensorial mind-body state like meditation.

Robert Thurman (2006) further explains that the complex mind-body processes in Indo-Yogic meditation traditions differ from “sensory and intellectual reflective states (as in learning) and intellectual reflective or discursive states,” although “they include these states sometimes” in meditation (p. 1765). Mindfulness has “two main categories of meditation, one being shamatha (calming) and the other vipashyana (seeing, knowing or transforming), with both again dividing into critical and creative types” (Thurman, 2006, p.1765).

Recent research in clinical psychology posits that mindfulness can alleviate stress derived from chronic pain and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is also been credited with overcoming substance abuse, and diminishing or eradicating certain forms of depression (Germer, Siegel, &
Fulton, 2005; Melbourne Academic Mindfulness Interest Group, 2006; Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002). More recently in the context of education, mindfulness techniques have been seen to enhance children's attention, emotion regulation, academic and athletic performance (N. Albrecht, P. Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Broderick & Metz, 2009, Smalley & Winston, 2010).

Nicole Albrecht, Patricia Albrecht, and Marc Cohen (2012) maintain that mindfulness is another term lost in translation. They affirm that in the West, the majority of people have a vague understanding of the term mindfulness, and that “capturing and defining mindfulness in words is complex as it requires similar considerations to defining human consciousness” (p. 3).25

Frequently, an author’s personal understanding defines mindfulness, a tendency that leads to a multiplicity of meanings. When defined as a noun, it becomes a method or tool; when defined as a verb, it becomes a state of being or state of consciousness (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). As well, research from cognitive psychology that focuses on the outcomes of mindfulness can blur meanings of the term by arguing that its outcomes can create a wide range of effects, such as, for example, better health and well-being, decision making, self-regulation (Sternberg, 2000), improved memory and intelligence (Langer, 1990; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

More recent research that examines neuroscience and mindfulness emphasizes the neuroplasticity or malleability of the brain, namely “the way the brain changes its connections in response to experience” (D. Siegel, 2013 p. 44). This refers specifically to how one focuses one’s

25 The word consciousness, like pedagogy, can cause ambiguity. According to Andrew Olendzki, in the classical tradition of Buddha’s discourses related to meditation, as illustrated in the foundations of mindfulness, consciousness refers to a simple discernible experience between a sense organ (e.g., eye, nose, tongue, ear, skin or body and the mind) and the object it senses. It is the recognition of each one of the sense organs and its object that leads to cognition or identifiable known which then lays the ground for a multi-layered understanding of conscious existence. The interplay between and amongst the sense organs contribute to one’s overall conscious awareness (Olendzki, 2005). As such consciousness becomes a stream of conditioned awareness that is made of bits of moments of awareness stitched together. In meditation the practitioner draws attention, awareness and focus to this seeing how nothing that arises or passes through mind-body exploration in and of its self but rather is a multi-layered complex stream of awareness or consciousness. This leads to a broader understanding of consciousness such as one expressed in the definition to follow. “Consciousness is a state of mind in which there is knowledge of one’s own existence and of the existence of surroundings. Consciousness is a state of mind” (Damasio 2010, p. 167).
attention in mindfulness. Dan Siegel, whose research focuses on adolescent maturation, posits that meditation can alter connections in brain circuitry. He speaks to the mind’s awareness of one’s subjective mental life, a process in which images reveal “mindsight maps” (D. Siegel, 2013; pp. 42-47); these indicate the changes of the physical structures of the brain. With a clearer understanding of both positive and negative consequences of the changes in brain connections, mindfulness practice may more generally help attune one to negative behaviour (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Thus mindfulness can be said to be an antecedent for certain types of brain mapping to produce other, more desirable behaviours (D. Siegel, 2007; 2013).

While neurological data supports meditation as “a distinct state from simple rest” and “different types of meditation engage different brain regions” (Lazar, 2005 p. 235), it is not clearly understood why engaging specific areas of the brain encourages particular psychological and physiological changes evident in meditation. Additionally, Lazar points out different types of meditation techniques to illustrate different brain patterns that are not clearly understood through neuro-imaging science alone.

Robert Thurman (2006) further adds that reported health benefits from Indo-Yogic meditations like mindfulness can produce a calm, quiet and relaxed state. This is generally the result of single-pointed or concentrative experiences that are free of thought with no images. While a calm state may prove beneficial to one’s well-being, in and of itself “it is not [believed] to produce in a person either positive or negative evolutionary transformation” (Thurman, 2006, p. 1766). Furthermore, he notes that transforming meditations vary in style and practice. Some of these include scanning mindfulness meditations, or penetrative insight and creative visualizations, which are instrumental to psychological, intellectual and spiritual development. Given the multiplicity of mindfulness practices (in definition alone) it is difficult to ascertain
what exactly contributes to the integrated psychological, intellectual and spiritual development of a person.

Additionally, Alan Wallace (2012),\textsuperscript{26} cautions against the growing “neurocentric” approach to meditation research:

Neuroscientists have so far been unsuccessful in identifying the neural correlates of consciousness, namely the minimal levels and types of neural activity needed to generate consciousness. Buddhist contemplatives counter that mental consciousness can occur without dependence on any physical organ. Rather, it arises in dependence upon a nonphysical mental faculty (Skt. Manendriya), which is generally identified as the preceding moment of mental awareness. (p. 189)

Moreover, buttressing his cautionary position, he adds:

Appropriation of Buddhist practices into a materialistic paradigm is common in scientific studies of meditation: the brains and behavior of meditators are studied, but first-person insights into the nature of the mind—especially those that challenge the beliefs of scientific materialism—are generally ignored. (Wallace, 2012, p. 35)

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that we can learn from neuroscience research on meditation. Conversely, as a benevolent practice, mindfulness meditation can certainly abet neuroscience, and has done so. My research, however, looks at how mindfulness contributes to teachers’ knowing, specifically the modes of knowing that provide them insight into the nature of things. This intuitive knowing and understanding shapes their personal values with ongoing practice to support benevolent insightful teaching relationships.

For the purposes of my study, then, mindfulness functions a meditative process to cultivate a level of conscious, focused attention where one experiences tranquility, luminosity or \textit{samadhi} (Wallace, 2011, p. 4). It enables a flexible, agile and attentive mind for deeper

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{26} Alan Wallace is an American Buddhist practitioner. He is a well known scholar, teacher, and translator of Sanskrit and Tibetan. His research interests examine the intersections of consciousness with psychology, physics and cognitive neuroscience.
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contemplation of mental phenomena, such as wholesome intentions, feelings and thoughts to support harmonious relationships.

Bhante Gunaratana (2002) describes the process of mindfulness meditation as “mirror-thought” that “reflects only what is presently happening and in exactly the way it is happening” (p. 139). Non-judgmental observation during mindfulness that trains us to observe and accept whatever is happening, irrespective of our state of mind. In this respect, mindfulness is impartial. It simply perceives the rising and passing of phenomena.

Furthermore, Gunaratana (2002) describes the pre-symbolic process in this way, and it is worth quoting him at length, given the parameters and objectives of my own research:

> When you first become aware of something, there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the thing, before you identify it. That is a state of awareness. Ordinarily, this state is short lived. It is that flashing split second just as you focus your eyes on the thing, just as you focus your mind on the thing, just as you objectify it, clamp down on it mentally, and segregate it from the rest of existence. It takes place just before you start thinking about it – before your mind says “Oh it’s a dog’. That flowing soft-focused moment of pure awareness is mindfulness. In that brief flashing mind-moment your experience a thing as an un-thing. You experience that a softly flowing moment of pure experience that is interlocked with the rest of reality not separate from it [...] In the process of ordinary perception, the mindfulness step is so fleeting as to be unobservable. We have developed the habit of squandering our attention [...] focusing on perception, cognizing perception [...] most of all getting involved in a long string of symbolic thought about it [...] It is the purpose of vipassana meditation to train us to prolong that moment of awareness.

> When this mindfulness is prolonged by using proper techniques you find that this experience is profound and that it changes your entire view of the universe. (p. 138)

This pre-symbolic or open, expansive and non-conceptual process is but one aspect of meditation in the Eightfold Path, with another being concentration (Gunaratnana, 2002). The pre-symbolic aspect of choice-less awareness in the meditative process often precedes what is known as concentration, or vipassana, in mindfulness practice. In meditation, the mind performs a
balancing act between expanding and narrowing concentration (Bodhi, 1994; Goldstein, 2013; Gunaratana, 2002; Olendzki, 2013) As such, mindfulness and concentration can be two quite distinct aspects of a single meditation practice, or as a process, as described by Thurman (2006) and Lopez (2012) and corroborated by Gunaratana (2002).

In mindfulness, the process of concentration is one of deep absorption, a focus of mind that draws together all aspects of the mind in meditation, illustrated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (1994) here:

Concentration represents an intensification of a mental factor present in every state of consciousness [...] The factor of one-pointedness [...] has the function of unifying the other mental factors in the task of cognition [...] One-pointedness of mind explains the fact that in any act of consciousness there is a central point of focus, towards the entire objective datum points from its outer peripheries to its inner nucleus. (p. 93)

Concentration in a mindfulness practice is the wholesome, unburdened quality or state of mind that unifies or draws together in harmony. It is quite different for example, from the meta-attention of the assassin, who may have one-pointedness of focused concentration in the act of slaying her victim. The experiential state of mind during concentration in mindfulness is one of peacefulness (Bodhi, 1994). It is in this wholesome serene state of samadhi that the meditator develops the capacity for insight or “penetrative seeing” (S. Batchelor, 1994, p. 344), a capacity designed to germinate the seeds of wisdom and compassion.

During concentration in mindfulness practice, a clear apprehension of bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and the rising and passing of any and every phenomena is recognized and apprehended clearly. Nothing is excluded from the practitioner’s field of attention to gain access to insight, which is then more easily remembered.

The distinctive goal of any Buddhist contemplative tradition is a state in which inner calm (samatha) is unified with insight (vipassana). Over the centuries, each [Buddhist tradition] has developed its own methods for actualizing this state. And
it is in these methods that the traditions differ, not in their end objective or unified calm and insight. (S. Batchelor, 1994, p. 344)

The practice of vipassana meditation has been typically associated with many Buddhist traditions27 (Goldstein, 2013; Olendzki, 2005; Wallace, 2011); it is also not exclusive to Buddhists alone, as evident by Siddhattha Gotama’s awakening (Carrithers, 2001, pp. 53-78). More recently, the late Burmese Indian Satya Narayan Goenka28 (1924-2013) was an influential non-sectarian vipassana teacher in India (Goenka, 2002; W. Hart, 1987; Menahemi & Ariel, 1997). He trained those interested in the practice of insight meditation by drawing attention to bodily feelings29 (Drummond, 2006), as well as the act of contemplating the cause and effect of one’s thoughts, speech and physical actions (Menahemi & Ariel, 1997). Like the Buddha, he believed that one’s speech and deeds were the result of one’s thinking, and that one’s “mental action, which is the real kamma (Pali), i.e., an action-oriented process, the cause which will give results in the future” (W. Hart, 1987, p. 37).

In this regard, one meditates not only to sharpen one’s attention and achieve serenity, but also to access insight into the nature of reality and the human condition—including one’s own thoughts and feelings for betterment (Dali Lama & Ekman, 2008; Epstein, 1995; Gombrich, 2009; Humphreys, 1968; Welwood, 2000). One maintains an ongoing practice to conduct one’s self with wisdom and compassion when engaging with the world to eliminate suffering and to

27 Bear in mind that during the time the Buddha lived, there was no such thing as Buddhism or psychology (Gombrich, 2009; Lopez, 2001). The birth of Buddhism has been approximated to about 300 years following the death of the historical Buddha with its social and religious affiliates varying from one culture to another depending on the historical time frame. For a chronology of Buddhism see Keown (2013) pp.146-148.

28 Goenka mentored many insight teachers including Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and Stephen Batchelor. In his book Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist, Batchelor shares an anecdote where the Dali Lama directed him and others who were interested in meditation to learn from and practice with Goenka.

29 Drummond (2006) points out that Goenka together with his teacher mentor Sayagi U Ba Khin brought the practice of vipassana to many lay people in Asia emphasizing the importance of mind-body sensorial connections in meditation. Coincidentally their teaching of vipassana in the East approximated the same time that the humanist school of thought in the field of psychology developed in the West.
secure a more peaceful life. By paying attention to the mind-body as it experiences a range of emotions, the teachers in this study examine how negative emotional states can impede insight and compassion.

In a conversation with Paul Ekman, the Dali Lama (2008) explains that becoming familiar with and making sense of our basic emotions is highly complex in everyday life. In my research, the phrase “basic emotions” could refer to Ekman and Cordaro’s (2011) list of seven basic universal emotions: anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt and happiness. Basic emotions can be described as discrete and distinguishable through “facial, vocal [and] anatomic physiology” (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011, p. 364) in a course of events that affects another emotion.

As Ekman points out, understanding negative emotional states in meditation can be useful in recognizing and identifying them, as well as their causes and subsequent effects. In this way, mindfulness can help us find a way to respond more appropriately when engaging with others. Teaching and learning shape a mutually interdependent emotional relationship. Emotional expression becomes significant in the teacher-student relationship (Britzman, 2012; Kessler, 2000) as education is a relational, messy, conflicting emotional journey on many different levels.

In light of this, awareness of one’s emotions and mood can help one become discerningly attuned to emotional fluctuations. Meditation assists the teachers to recognize tensions that surface in the classroom; they then view the tension and events with less negative emotional reactivity and with greater neutrality, which often lessens a conflict or eases tension.

As the narratives demonstrate, the five teachers studied all notice, observe and learn to be with whatever it is in the moment. Time and again, they exist in these spaces with a gentle openness, which allows them to think, speak and act with civility more often than not in the pedagogical process. Put another way, a mindfulness of emotions opens the gates to a fuller and
deeper experience of knowing in which duality between subject and object disappears (J. P. Miller, 2014; Zajonc, 2009), where one clearly distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome mental states.

In sum, mindfulness meditation makes it possible to graduate toward the deeper practice of what is called insight meditation. This more substantive approach helps the teachers in this study hold a less confrontational stance during difficult situations. It enables them to reflect on their students’ basic humanity as individuals bridging the gap between self and other while building mutual trust between the teacher and student. Before delving into my methodology, I next want to highlight and analyze in more depth three central states that inform, and can be seen at work in, the teachers’ narratives — contemplation, contemplative educating and loving-kindness.

A. Contemplation

Contemplation, as seen in the first chapter, operates as a broad term that can encompass various types of meditation and spiritual practices. The etymology for “contemplative” as a term contains the Latin *templum*—a special sacred open space the where one engages in the act of considering carefully the process of attentive awareness (Boyce, 2011, p. 190). In this regard, contemplation in mindfulness is the metaphoric space that can diminish discursive negative thoughts to make way for a more wholesome alternate way of knowing thinking and being. As cited by Rothberg earlier, conceptually western philosophical spiritual and religious traditions, have often see the act of contemplation as separate from action or engaged participation in everyday life (Rothberg, 2011) such as that of in a classroom, but this is, I believe, inaccurate.
In-depth intra-subjective meditative experiences like mindfulness increase the potential for human agency in a socially engaged world, including the classroom. This has been acknowledged through humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Rothberg, 2000, 2011).

In my particular study, contemplation is an aspect of mindfulness meditation (Weissman, 2011) as well as “meditation in action,” meditation that is socially engaged (J. P. Miller, 2014, p. 40; Rothberg, 2011, p. 112), one in which the spiritual, political, social, emotional and practical realms merge.

John Miller defines contemplation as a “non-dualistic experience where we become one with what we are observing” (2014, p. 5). Similarly, Thomas Merton describes contemplation as a “deeper spiritual awakening” and “not the object of calculated ambition” (1961, p. 10). Contemplation, Merton adds, allows one “to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love” (p. 64).

The act of contemplation in pedagogy occurs when the teacher becomes a part of what she sees or acts. Through her presence, she is present to the unfolding events in the classroom. Contemplation cultivates wakefulness and peace, uniting insight with compassion, and building wisdom with love where “the light of conscience reaches beyond social convention to a realm of spiritual realities ruled over by love” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 187).

Contemplation intuitively pulls towards balance, serenity and clarity both in meditation practice and teaching practice. In this study, I see contemplation as an aspect of mindfulness meditation that further supports holistic contemplative pedagogy, a pedagogy that strives to respect and honour the needs of all, especially with caring regard for the students.
B. Contemplative Educator

The contemplative teacher or educator, therefore, is one who is present in the classroom and educates with patience, caring, humility and love (Denton, 2005; J. P. Miller, 2010; Palmer, 2003). Like Miller (2010), Zajonc (2006, 2009) and Foley (2008) all note, a teacher’s love and deep caring for her students is paramount to encouraging authenticity and meaning for her students’ learning. In my research study, contemplating in the practice of mindfulness heightens the teachers’ awareness for the need to be respectful, loving and discerning when engaging with students and colleagues. Their ongoing practises enable the teachers to develop a symbiotic relationship with their students while sustaining their own clarity of mind (Zajonc, 2006).

John Miller describes a contemplative teacher in this manner (2014, p. 117). The contemplative teacher regards contemplative practice like mindfulness as important for building authentic teaching relationships for herself and with her students. She understands the importance of exercising humility in the experiential process of teaching and learning in an effort to educate consciously and conscientiously. Through ongoing contemplative practice, she heightens her awareness and attends to her students with selflessness. She sees the value of aligning her energies of mind, spirit and body to cultivate the human integrity that supports ongoing learning and reflective work when teaching (Bai, Scott & Donald, 2009; hooks, 2006).

Sid Brown (2008) describes an epiphany in how she came to understand the practice of meditation and teaching. As a junior college student, she noticed that she was intellectually astute but intuitively lacking. Sensing a disconnection in her imbalanced educational journey, she travelled to a Buddhist monastery in India, where she learned to meditate. Practicing meditation allowed her to access insight, which revealed itself in a spiritual wisdom on one of her solitary meditation sittings many years later, as a professor:
A teacher is like an author, an artist. An author can control only so much of what a book is, but sometimes a book writes itself through the author, and always a reader reads herself through and into the books. Teaching is also like Buddhist meditation [...] “There is no good meditation. There is no bad meditation. There is only meditation.” At one level there is no good teaching or bad teaching just teaching.

So one thing to keep in mind when you’re assessing your pedagogy is simply that: as a teacher, your practice is teaching, of getting up day after day and standing in front of the classroom. That is the discipline that forms you as a teacher. (Brown, 2008, p. 100)

Meditation offered Brown a new way to engage more meaningfully with her work, her students and life in general. Similarly, Herbert Kohl (2001) and John Miller (2006) maintain that the character and capacity of a teacher is demonstrated by the love and compassion she has for her students and for educating. John Miller (2006) explains: “Kindness starts with the ability to see the needs and interests of others. This ability has been called empathy”; as he continues, empathy is a key element “in any helping relationship, including teaching” (p. 60).

Empathy helps awaken compassion. Equally important as Palmer (2007) argues, the teacher/educator who loves being with her students is one who enjoys being with them, not because of the students alone, but because of the transformation that takes place within the teacher as she continues to learn from them. This is a defining feature of a conscientiously aware holistic contemplative teacher, something many of the participants in my research comment on as valuable in their pedagogy.

Transformation in learning involves a major shift in one’s spiritual awareness, thoughts, feelings and actions. This shift permanently alters the individual’s consciousness because of the effect of this new embodied awareness on inter- and intra-personal relationships. Transformation requires a shift in consciousness that inspires change for the better. It can occur in a peak moment or an epiphany, as previously shared by contemplative educator Sid Brown (2008) or in
the understanding of what the late Chöygam Trungpa (1939-1987) referred to as “completely ordinary” [...] Through that we begin to have greater contact with reality” (p. vii cited in Welwood, 1992).

Maxine Greene (in Hancock & Erickson, 2001) claims that all consciousness is embodied. She maintains that a teacher who separates the head from the body is not teaching from a place of sincerity. The teacher who uses her spiritual knowledge is one who teaches from a place of love, understanding, and authenticity. In keeping with this, Macdonald and Shirley (2010) explain what they deem as mindful teaching: being consciously aware of what is happening by being receptive to new information and ways of knowing, and displaying a “readiness to review one’s previous assumptions as part of a life-long career marked by critical inquiry, reflection, and compassion” (p. 27). A contemplative teacher is mindful, consciously alert, and as such, she teaches from a place of genuine care, knowledge and wisdom (T. Hart, 2004; P. Robinson, 2004).

Greene (in Hancock & Erickson, 2001) and Nel Noddings (2003) agree that superior teaching flourishes from the inner depths of the teacher. Every self-aware teacher has the capacity to reveal her inner being and as such can promote the cultivation of trusting relationships. Thus, it could be said that contemplative teachers are those who are self-aware in their relationships with others. They recognize and realize the merit of human kinship and the interconnectedness of all things. As such, they are caring toward the students they work with by being open, honest and accepting in their interactions. Foley (2008) and Noddings (2003) further maintain that outstanding teaching pedagogy derives from teachers who are self-aware and enact their teaching from a place of honesty, intuitive instinct, love, and respect for themselves as well
as their students. In this regard, the contemplative teacher meditates to balance her intellect with love to demonstrate unconditional acceptance for her students.

In my study, contemplation or “meditation in action” in holistic contemplative pedagogy is interactive. It embraces not only cognitive, rational\(^\text{30}\) and critical connections,\(^\text{31}\) but also embodied and intuitive knowing\(^\text{32}\) and a participatory spirituality.\(^\text{33}\) The contemplative teacher is one who engages in an ongoing mindfulness practice to gain a deeper understanding of the other; she contemplates and engages in the classroom with the intention to inspire authentic pedagogical relationships. This inspiration encompasses a spiritual awareness; an intuitive wisdom that flows organically to support and guide her overall pedagogy.

Parker Palmer (1983) challenges teachers to ask themselves: who is the self that teaches? Presence is visible in the teacher’s embodied sense of self and in her ability to recognize that self that is the “I,” a person not dictated by selfishness. The teacher who is able to maintain balance with this self demonstrates flexibility and humility when teaching. She educates from a place of discernment and care for her students (S. Brown, 2008; J.P. Miller, 2006, 2010).

\(^{30}\) I am referring here to Vygotsky’s ideas of language, communication and cognition, in which language is central to the learning and developmental process, and where the child’s learning potential is largely influenced on her existing knowledge and capacity to learn. Vygotsky’s influential work is often evident in social construction theories of education as noted by holistic educator Ron Miller (2004).

\(^{31}\) Critical connections here are in reference to Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Similarly, Freire’s work paved the way for future critical theories in education, also noted by Ron Miller (2004).

\(^{32}\) Embodied knowing (i.e., embodiment) refers to mind-body connections—how the mind’s mental processes informs the body and how the body’s physical processes informs the mind as outlined by John Miller (2007; pp. 112-130). Intuitive knowing refers to direct knowing (J. P. Miller, 2007, p. 90). In essence, intuition or intuitive knowing is the immediate knowledge that comes to mind spontaneously, not conceptualized, but knowing without rationalizing how the known is known yet comes to be.

\(^{33}\) Participatory spirituality as Ferrer (2002) explains is the engagement through a larger inter-subjective, social engagement with the world in direct intimacy. That is, a person can experience a spiritual knowing or realization beyond her formal seated meditation practice. While Ferrer does not discount that spiritual realization can occur in solitary practice, he posits that transpersonal phenomena also defined as mystical phenomena and spiritual realization can occur in a relationship or community or through a collective identity (Ferrer, 2002, p. 119) as in members of a classroom community or a sangha.
The self is symbolic of the inner landscape, beliefs and integrity of the teacher (Krishnamurti, 1953, 2003; Palmer, 2007; Zajonc, 2009). This concept of self has the ability to weave intimate connections beyond curriculum delivery and assessment of teaching, heightening emotional awareness and affective qualities in pedagogical relationships. Palmer maintains that the “pedagogy of teaching stems from the heart, where intellect, emotion, spirit and will converge in the human self” (2007, p. 11), employing a more holistic contemplative understanding and practice of education. Supporting this idea of the self as relational, David Hunt (2010) suggests three simple questions that a contemplative teacher can ask when engaging in pedagogical relationships to summon friendliness and maintain balance in a difficult situation. “How am I like every other person? How am I like some persons? How am I like no other persons?” (p. 36).

In mindfulness meditation, the disambiguation of the self or no-self (anatta) is understood as changing and relational. In meditation, self is fluid and absent of subjective boundaries, but remains mindfully aware (Young-Eisendrath, 2009, p. 98). The meditating person still exists physically and mentally, but the action-oriented self in meditation is constantly shifting in response to a “process of continually unfolding dynamic systems, responding to a changing environment and perpetually reshaping itself as it constructs a meaningful order out of each moment’s external and internal data” (Olendzki, 2005, p. 248).

To appreciate the transient nature of self in meditation, the self, a mass of complex processes, takes on an impersonal attitude that avoids obfuscations or distortions of the phenomena it is witnessing. The gap between the knower and the known is diminished so that no-self phenomena can be better seen and understood. As Olendzki explains (2005, 2013), in meditation the conscious alert mind is constantly in flux and witnessing the flow of phenomena
through the various senses. From the perspective of the Buddha’s teachings, the human mind
“artificially creates virtual moments of ‘permanence’ by clinging to moments in time or events
and assigning them permanent status in a transient universe” (Olendzki, 2005, p. 249). This
permanent ideation of self, or “delusory self” (cited in J. P. Miller, 2014, p. 66), results in a
complex distortion of perceptions on multiple levels that can perpetuate destructive attitudes and
negative habits of mind, which further fuels ignorance, dissatisfaction, pain and suffering.

Mindfulness that originates from the Pali word, sati, implies non-forgetfulness, or that
one is able to remember clearly. Thus, the self remembers to be thoughtful, not only of the past
and present, but also the future, by remembering through the wholesome presence of mind to do
something positive or thoughtful in the future (Wallace, 2012, pp. 51-52). In accordance with the
Eightfold Path, the self thinks, speaks and acts with the quality of mindfulness presence that
demonstrates integrity. Integrity is visible through love and insight. In essence, the actual fruits
of meditation practice are ripened or realized through civil and honest interactions with others in
everyday life like teaching, as revealed by the teacher participants in this study. Through loving-
kindness the teachers in this study seek to educate students as if it really matters.

C. Loving-kindness

Loving-kindness as a term, or metta, signifies the intention or aspiration or character of
will to yoke one’s integrity with one’s affective consciousness and insight. Appropriate effort
with the intention to be wholesome in mindfulness practice can cultivate the nourishing energy
of loving-kindness. This is turn can give rise to wisdom or one’s organic spirituality by balancing
the intellect with insight. While working with one’s heart mind and body to cultivate metta, the
meditating practitioner can arrive at a place of equipoise and peacefulness.
Embodied loving-kindness is crucial to this study and its research. Loving-kindness liberates the heart and allows lovingness to emerge as a way of being. The Buddha saw the essence of true love as unconditional and non-discriminating because of the universal interconnection, integration and completeness of everything (Lopez, 2012; Kornfield, 2008; Salzberg, 1995). Unconditional love is not to be confused with passion, desire, or sentimentality. Rather, it is an understanding or acceptance of the basic goodness and humanity that lies within us all and that which supports the teachers to be loving and kind toward their students.

Another way to understand loving-kindness is through the Tibetan word chitta. Chitta symbolizes the union of the mind with the heart. It can also serve as a metaphor for the loving nature or attitude one holds (Chödrön, 2007, p. 4). Chitta encompasses one’s cognition, emotions, and a range of consciousness. To have bodhichitta means to hold our hearts completely open and awake in our capacity to love (Chödrön, 2007). In meditation one can cultivate bodhichitta, a true friendship for one’s self, and have it radiate out toward family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, strangers, and even one’s enemies (hooks, 2000a; Salzberg, 1995). The intention and aim of chitta is to develop self-respect and unconditional love for all people. As the translation of Buddha’s words reveal: “Hatred can never cease by hatred. Hatred can only cease by love” (cited in Salzberg, 1995, p. 88).

Author, feminist and social activist bell hooks says that there is a need for love in our world today. Practicing love can remedy the politics of domination by transforming our personal relationships and healing the “the [many] wounds of oppression” (hooks, 2006). We can summon our love through meditation practice and practise love through our shared knowledge, commitment, responsibility, respect and trust for one another (hooks, 2000b).
Broadly speaking, mindfulness meditation is a spiritual practice that embodies contemplation. It acts as a means to heighten awareness, sustain attention, and provide mental, emotional and physical clarity through the liberation of the spirit. In mindfulness, the teachers attempt to cultivate loving-kindness for benevolent pedagogical relationships. Mindfulness provides agency for compassionate attention and equanimity. Mindfulness as a practice is an opportunity to slow down and tune into the moment with silent, neutral observation. Holistic contemplative educators’ mindfulness practice supports the embodiment of loving-kindness in the pedagogical process. It is a sensitive practice that can pave the way for insight into one’s personal and professional relationships.

In conclusion, despite the North American separation of church and state, issues of personal conduct, integrity (sila), and their presence or absence in public schools continue to engage parents, teachers and policy makers. Western intellectual traditions, as reflected in systems of law, philosophy, psychology and science, all take pride in rationality as the way to govern and exist in the world. This may explain why practices like mindfulness meditation, which emphasize wholesomeness and decency through other routes, are met with skepticism in mainstream academic circles; people fear they could become dogmatic and hegemonic. Nonetheless, there are holistic educators, like those in this study, who view education more from a lived experiential lens, and who have also known the benefits of meditation as a contemplative practice—myself certainly included. In the effort to connect our fragmented lives and the disconnectedness in our education circles, mindfulness meditation can help knit us together as community of educators, all while respecting diversity and difference. Through an ongoing self-exploration, one can realize potential, wisdom, and love for all beings, including one’s self, and then bring this capacity into the pedagogical relationship for the good.
While my major focus is on the exploration of teachers’ meditation and contemplative practices, this research also brings to light some of the tensions teachers face when what they are mandated to do conflicts with their personal values and beliefs. Education, like life, is a journey of paradoxes during which people try to find a semblance of order. The diverse literature of my intersecting fields of study emphasize that the teacher who nourishes her soul (Brady, 2004), who is insightful (Palmer, 2003), and who is reflective (Ivason-Jasson & Gu, 2006) will be better equipped to nourish the souls of her students (Kessler, 2000) and teach them how to be more balanced in their lives. Angeles Arrien (2001) maintains that for teachers to survive now, they need to take control of their own lives. Through solitary practice, mindfulness can empower teachers to teach from a place of love and wisdom, and genuine regard for students.

In my research, I hope to bring insight into the process of five teachers’ meditation practices. Supported by the literature on meditation, the historic principles of the Buddha, and the principles of holistic contemplative education, I draw on journal entries and interviews with the teachers to present narratives of their teaching both individually and comparatively. The aim is to demonstrate the contribution of meditation as a participatory spiritual event to teacher development, specifically in the context of their teaching. Each teacher is unique, but as the narratives make visible, taken together they all touch upon the ideas and states outlined in the research, bringing theories to life. For this work to make sense, however, I first want to outline in greater depth the methodology I construct and employ to bring these voices together.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODODOLOGY

As an example of qualitative research, this research study examines the nature of the relationship between teachers’ meditation practices and their pedagogy. Qualitative research looks at the meaning of experience, as opposed to quantitative research, which applies a mathematical procedure to determine statistical significance.

Teaching is a complex dynamic process (Beattie, 2006; Eisner, 1998; van Manen, 1997). It involves a wide range of multifaceted relationships (Britzman, 2011; Giroux, 2004; Sherman, 2012; Stein, 2004). Holistic contemplative pedagogy, like teaching, is also dynamic, multidimensional and evolving (John P. Miller, 2007, 2014). As a topic of study, holistic contemplative pedagogy benefits from a qualitative lens to glean greater insight into the pedagogical process. This is why I have chosen the approach of crafting individual narratives for both the teachers and myself, to ground and detail the claims of the larger project. Two theorists in particular have developed models derived from phenomenology, models that I drew from, as well as adapted, when shaping this research—Max van Manen and Jerome Bruner.

I. Phenomenological Methods: van Manen and Bruner

Directly pertinent to my topic has been Max van Manen (1997), who applied the phenomenological method to the exploration of pedagogy. His phenomenology of the lived experience derived from the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1958) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). As van Manen states, “[p]henomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). As a field, phenomenology aims to seek a deeper meaning of everyday experiences in what it terms a
“lifeworld.” The term refers to the “world of immediate experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 182). In the absence of critical reflection, a lifeworld describes and gives meaning to an organic experience as it unfolds. Lived experience refers to how people experience and makes sense of their world (van Manen, 1997). For my particular topic, I am interested in the “lifeworld” of the teacher in the meditation and teaching.

The practice of mindfulness meditation can also be seen as a phenomenological practice. It is an opportunity for mirror reflection (Olendzki, 2013), in which the actively engaged meditator notices, witnesses and observes the rising and passing of phenomenon including thoughts, images, bodily sensations, feelings and their various textures. In the effort to see the essence of the mirror reflection, the meditator seeks to sustain a non-critical heightened level of consciousness to the unfolding flood of phenomena that rises and passes through the mind’s door. The immediacy of experiential processes of mindfulness can lead to an “an advanced state of wholesome constructed experience” (Olendzki, 2013, p. 55); through contemplation, wisdom and insight can arise supporting the teachers’ understanding of the nature of reality which guides their non-dual holistic contemplative pedagogy of practice.

Hermeneutics (van Manen, 1997) also attends to the descriptive, interpretative features of the phenomenological process. Phenomenology captures nuances in a natural setting and allows for a hermeneutic composition of events (Bruner, 1991; van Manen, 1997; Stemplewska-Zakowicz, 2000). The hermeneutic composition is not a task of explaining why, but rather explaining “what makes it possible for us to speak, think and act in the ways we do” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 423). “Phenomenology of practice [like meditation] operates in the space of the formative relations between who we are and who we may become, between how we think or feel and how we act” (van Manen, 2007, p. 26).
For van Manen (2007), “phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful and as much as possible free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxicants” (p. 11). A phenomenological exploration as a search for essence allows one to see into the heart of the matter—it “offers moments of seeing-meaning” (van Manen, 2007, p. 11). Using this conceptualization of seeing the experience, van Manen recognizes the importance of including both the description and interpretation of the phenomenological events.

The experiential process in mindfulness meditation supports benevolent, or, wholesome thought and action. This then becomes the practise of each teacher’s holistic contemplative teaching pedagogy. Through the experiential practice of meditation and the knowledge of their lived experience, the teachers in this study bring wholesome intention and understanding to their pedagogy, making the effort to engage with each student in a kindhearted thoughtful manner without prejudice (hooks, 2000b).

A hermeneutical phenomenological method requires one to be insightful, thoughtful, and both responsive to language and open to experience (Bruner, 1991; van Manen, 1997; Stemplewska-Zakowicz, 2000). In keeping with Bruner’s (1991) narrative construction, this research study was inspired by van Manen’s (1997) phenomenological hermeneutic approach to analyze journal data on meditation practices and classroom experiences as revealed by the research participants’ journal entries.

Three other elements define van Manen’s (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncovering themes, patterns or sets of representations (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005) from texts. The first includes using a whole approach. Here, the researcher looks the text as a whole to glean its overall meaning. Another approach employs selective reading, whereby the
researcher selects words, phrases, comments that stand out, and something particular about the phenomenon being investigated. The third approach describes a more detailed reading process, in which the researcher examines every sentence or sentence cluster to capture what it revealed about the phenomenon or experience being described.

The method of van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology (1994, 1997, 2007) seemed most appropriate for me to adopt in capturing the common words and phrases of my research data that give credence to the teachers’ mindfulness meditation practices, as well as their holistic contemplative pedagogies. As the researcher, I valued this methodological approach, for it offered me the best lens for describing the teachers’ feelings, attitudes, philosophies and experiences. The other model I adopted for this research is Jerome Bruner’s (1991) narrative approach.

II. Narrative Construction

Narratives/stories are a compelling model of qualitative research in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Narratives help to make sense of storyteller’s world. Bruner’s approach considers the meaning invested by the individual narrator or storyteller in her or his subjective experience (Merriam, 2009). Sometimes narratives require scripts (Bruner, 1991) as necessary background information. In my study, Ministry and Board documents act as scripts. Upon assembling the stories and scripts the task of the researcher is to make a composite of meaningful reality. Reality here is a “hybrid” based on cultural assumptions, the economics and politics of the time, the fluidity of identity and self-understanding and the players in the stories (Beattie, 2006; Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Conle, 2006). To construct this reality, Bruner employed knowledge, genre, context, motivation, veracity, narrative truth, interpretation and hermeneutic composition as factors in the narratives’ design.
As the researcher and writer of this thesis, I used Bruner’s (1991, 1997, 2004) and his narrative construction of the teachers’ realities to shape and construct the individual narratives. These narratives were assembled from both interviews and the participants’ journals. Bruner’s constructivist approach to story construction (2004) “takes as its central premise that ‘world making’ is the principal function of mind,” is one in which ‘stories’ are a way for ‘life-making’ and as such they “captur[e] the sense of lived time” (pp. 691-2).

In this study, events that accrue over time lead to insight and understanding into the teachers’ stories. In essence, all narratives or stories are durative (Bruner, 1991); the act of composing the story emphasizes the process of composition, and as such, provides the language for the story—or what Burner refers to as its “particularity” (Bruner p. 6). Like my thesis’ larger goal of inquiring into the nature of meditation and teachers’ pedagogies, narratives are intentional “about people acting in a setting” and “the happenings that befall them relevant to their intentional states while so engaged” (Bruner, 1991, p. 7).

Narratives also lend themselves to hermeneutic composition: “[T]here is a text or text analogue through which somebody has been trying to express a meaning and from which somebody is trying to extract a meaning” (Bruner, 1991, p.7). In this case, as the researcher, my goal at consolidating a hermeneutic composition of the interview and journal data is to provide the reader, “an intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in light of the smaller anecdotes that make it up” (Bruner, 1991 p. 7).

Choosing to compose my own story generates a reflexive autobiographical act, which in turn creates certain dilemmas and tensions of its own. I did not wish to impose the same “criteria of rightness” on the other teachers’ autobiographical accounts. As Bruner indicates autobiographies are notably unstable (2004, pp. 693-694), but self-revealing. Quoting Bruner:
Life stories must mesh [...] within a community of [shared understanding and knowing] [...] tells and listeners must share some “deep structure” about the nature of a “life” [otherwise] life-telling [is] altogether arbitrary, tells and listeners will be alienated [...] [unable] to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing. (2004, p. 699)

Some narratives require, as Brunner notes,

[S]cripts as necessary background, but they do not constitute narrativity itself. For to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated or deviated from [...] that calls the ‘legitimacy’ of the canonical script [into question]. (1991, p.11)

While narrative analysis was not used in the synthesis and discussion of the final chapter of my thesis, I used Burner’s narrative construction (1991, 1997) to reconstruct the interviews and to tell the larger story of this thesis. This seemed to be the most suitable way to present the research data and to compose the larger thesis. Ultimately, the narrative truth of the story is ultimately judged by its verisimilitude.

III. Teacher-Participants

I originally met four of the participants through my role as a Teaching Educational Program Assistant (TEPA) during the course of my doctoral studies; the exception was Meena, I who I met through a colleague at the University of Toronto. Our shared professional connections in education allowed us the opportunity to get to know one another, cultivate a bond as teachers/educators, and allow for mutual trust and respect to grow. By the time that the interviews took place, each of the teachers were amicable, familiar and comfortable with me to proceed with the interview process.

All the teachers, including myself, are currently employed by the same public school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Part of my choice of these teachers was that I wanted not only experienced teachers, but also teachers who were well experienced with the
practice of meditation as a contemplative practice. The participants each met these criteria. All of them have been employed with the TDSB as teachers for a minimum of eight years, some for much more. We each have had a regular meditation practice for a minimum of five years. While there are variations in the personal practices of meditation, they all practice a form of mindfulness meditation attributed to the historical Buddha (as discussed in Chapter Two).

All the participants engage in a contemplative practice that they identify as part of their meditation practice. Two out of the five participants are active members of a sangha, or meditation community. All of them engage in yearly meditation retreats in addition to their own personal meditation practice. To maintain anonymity, I have used pseudonyms throughout the thesis, including pseudonyms for students, colleagues or any other persons mentioned in the narratives.

All four participants expressed their willingness to be involved in this type of research study, once I had provided them a description of the process and the purpose of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although I provide a more detailed introduction of each person in his or her narrative, I want to introduce each of them briefly here.

Sam is an elementary school teacher with over 30 years of teaching experience with the same school board. He began teaching and meditating at about the same time in his career, and belongs to a sangha, where he meditates regularly. During the year the data were collected, Sam was working as a Grade 6 teacher.

Rachel is an elementary school teacher with over 36 years of teaching experience. She has been meditating for approximately six years. In addition to her personal practice at home, Rachel belongs to a sangha, a group who meets once a week to meditate together. In the year
when the data were collected, she was working as a primary teacher with a small group of children identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ADS).

Meena is the lone high school teacher in this study. She has over eight years of teaching experience with the school board, and began meditating over 20 years ago. During the year that the data were collected, Meena was teaching Grades 9 and 10 mathematics and computer science to high school students.

Diane is an elementary teacher who has been teaching for the large public school board for over 10 years. In the year the data were collected, she held a teaching position at a school outside the TDSB teaching Grade 3. Diane had been meditating for five years at the time of the data collection.

Lastly, I am an elementary school teacher with 16 years of teaching experience, and I have been meditating for approximately 10 years. I was on a leave of absence during the course of my doctoral studies and returned to my elementary teaching position in September 2012. For the past two years I have worked as an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher, and more recently as a Junior/Senior Kindergarten (JK/SK) teacher. In keeping with the other research participants, data reported on my teaching are drawn from my teaching experiences while employed with the same school board as the other research participants.

III. Ethics

Ethical guidelines were met in accordance with the University of Toronto Ethics for this type of research study. Informed consent forms outlining responsibilities, obligations and interest were explained to participants. Copies of informed consent were signed and given to each of the teacher participants. Teachers were informed that they were not obliged to answer questions that posed any discomfort and that they were free to withdraw from this research at any time.
Following my analysis, I shared a completed narrative with each of the research participants to ensure that I maintained accuracy in the writing of their individual stories.

IV. Sources of Data Collection

Data for this work were generated through several sources:

1. Audio-recorded interviews of each participant
2. Journal entries from the participants on meditation practices
3. Journal entries from the participants on classroom experiences
4. Ministry and Board documents outlining mission statements, mandates, and values

V. Interviews

Each participant was interviewed separately on two separate occasions. All the participants chose to be interviewed in their homes and agreed to be audio-recorded. I gave the interviewees a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix A) prior to our initial interview. This allowed them the opportunity to know what was going to be asked.

The benefits for recording the interviews were twofold. First, the recording captured the tone, delivery and syntax of the storyteller, addressing Bruner’s (1991) intentional state of the narrator. Second, it enabled me to listen repeatedly and carefully to what I had heard, which then assisted me in developing the hermeneutic composition of the story (Bruner, 1991; van Manen, 1997).

As van Manen (1997) suggests, the human sciences comprise a dynamic interplay between the researcher and the research participants. By sharing the questions with the participants in advance, I wanted to provide them the opportunity to see what I as the researcher was investigating. I believed this would be mutually beneficial; it would provide them the
opportunity to determine whether the process would be of value to them, and give them an opportunity to stop early on, if they did not see value in the process. As the researcher, it was also my intention to let the participants know the direction I was moving by the sequence of questions. In this way, the questions that could be construed as delicate and intimate would be known in advance and therefore not a shock.

The first interview ranged between 90 and 120 minutes, and the second interview was approximately half that duration. Prior to the second interview, I gave each of the participants a transcribed copy of their interviews with me. This allowed them the opportunity to seek clarification on matters that appeared ambiguous to me. It also allowed them the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding sensitive matters that they may not have wanted in print. Taken together, the process helped me gain a more thorough understanding of the first interview’s content, as well as to be sensitive to and respectful of each participant’s wishes.

Bruner (1991) and van Manen (1997) speak of a common understanding between the researchers so as to maintain rigour in the research process. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Merriam (2009) speak to the value of a supported and shared understanding of the data gleaned between the researcher and the teacher. With these goals in mind, my contact with the participants after our initial meeting was helpful. It served to focus the second round of interviews well, interviews that also were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured by questions, but also open-ended (Merriam, 2009). The questions that guided the interview focused on the teachers’ meditation practices, pedagogy and the relationship between the two (see Appendix A).

As the interviewer, I did my best to listen and comment minimally during the interview, unless something was inaudible and required clarification in the moment. I took the effort to
pause with a silent breath after the participant spoke, leaving a gap of silence before my next question. This pausing was useful in the interviewing process. The participants had much to share to with me, and by holding that brief moment of silence, I helped enable them to continue speaking freely. These moments of silence also helped me to “brace” (Dowling, 2007), to notice any biases that were being aroused within me while listening. While of course it was not always possible for me to let my past experiences or knowledge interfere with pure listening, I practiced “bridling,” a phenomenological term used to exercise humility and respect during the interviews to avoid overshadowing the participant’s telling of her or his story (Dowling, 2007). Both the silence of my pausing and bridling helped me adopt a more receptive and empathetic stance (Rogers, 1974), but more importantly, listen without interrupting or influencing the narrative.

Also, although the “empathetic” stance that Carl Rogers referred to referenced the context of client–therapist relationship. My adopting a similar stance was useful to the interviews. This meant that I listened closely to the feelings of the teachers as they spoke candidly about their personal experiences, and I also watched them carefully. As Sharan Merriam (2009), acknowledges, the less dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee allows for a smoother flow of narration on part of the interviewee, supporting Chase’s (2005) position that a narrative is a speaker’s construction of events rather than merely making reference to them (p. 656).

By being familiar with the pre-set interview questions, I was also able to focus on the participants throughout the interview process. This heightened awareness helped me stay with flow of the experience (Csiksentmilhalyi, 1988), and to listen deeply to what was being said, but again, to be respectful and thorough, I contacted the participants over the phone afterwards to
avoid any ambiguity or misrepresentation of their voices in their stories. Finally, however, it should be noted that the final data synthesis and analysis is mine alone.

Nearly all of the research participants made journal entries for their meditation practices, as well as their teaching experiences; the one exception was Sam. The journals varied in length and were descriptive in nature. I, too, kept a journal throughout the course of my studies. In the case of the teachers, I learned that they did not keep journals detailing their meditation practices typically, given the experiential nature of meditation as an act. I was grateful they made an effort to record some of their practices for this research.

As a result, these journal data supplement the interview questions greatly. They allowed the participants who wrote to contribute to the data in another medium. The entries contributed to the data collection by painting a fuller picture of events, as well as assisting in an authentic reconstruction of the meditation and classroom experiences (Bruner, 1991; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). The journal entries immediately following meditation also allowed for the subtleties of meditation practice to be noted, which may have otherwise been forgotten or not been fully articulated in the interview alone. This served me well, not only by articulating the subtleties of meditation practice from a phenomenological perspective, but also by supporting a triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of the data from multiple sources to examine a single phenomenon, such as, for example, breath awareness in meditation. As narrative construction is enhanced through multi-sources of data, the journal entries enriched and supported the data gathered from the interviews (Weiner, 2011).

One last point on the data collection: Each participant received a final version of his or her story to ensure accuracy of content. Ministry and Board documents supported the individual teachers’ stories and added credence to the larger story for the reader (Bruner, 1991).
VI. Data Analysis

The interviews with the research participants took place between April and September in 2011. The transcriptions of the interviews were completed by April, 2012. As mentioned earlier, the composition of the teachers’ stories was especially guided by Bruner’s (1991, 1997) narrative construction and van Manen’s (1997) three-part approach (wholistic, selective, line-detailed) to uncovering themes of the phenomena, especially the journal entries and other texts. These were conclusions I derived from adopting this three-part approach:

1. The wholistic or sententious reading (complete meaning) approach. After reading the narrative as a whole, three basic sets of representations (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005) stood out: first, the teachers’ philosophy on education guided their holistic contemplative teaching practices; second, their meditation practices guided their ethical conduct and teaching philosophy; and third, both were reflected in their pedagogical relationships.

2. The selective reading approach. I observed specific words, statements, phrases or themes that stood out, for example: “spiritual,” “love,” “compassion,” “respect,” “caring,” “educating the whole child,” “busy mind,” “need for silence,” “noticing my breath”—these words or phrases were often enunciated in relation the experiential nature of holistic contemplative pedagogy and the teachers’ meditation. Some common themes that surfaced through this approach were time, loss, relationship of self to other, need for silence, clarity and more, as will be apparent in the narratives and be discussed further in the concluding chapter.

3. Line detailed reading approach. This approach revealed the participants’ motivations and intentional states, for example:
“I really wore through a lot of my s**t there.”

“School is an institution, a child jail.”

“A lot of days during my school year, my time on my mat was the only time I was happy.”

“Just going to the centre and practicing shamatha with the sangha is profoundly moving. It brings me to tears at time just being in that atmosphere.”

VII. Rationale for Methodology

The combination of methodologies I have described above suited this qualitative research study well. Qualitative research is characteristically naturalistic and interpretative, as often seen in narrations of lived experiences of teachers and students (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Conle, 2006). The researcher is often the primary source for data collection; she analyzes the data through an inductive process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By piecing together data fragments and moving from the parts to the whole, the researcher constructs larger themes or concepts (Merriam, 2009). In the case of the meditative process, by using van Manen’s (1997) detailed approach to examining single sentences, I could articulate some key aspects of the meditative process (as I describe in the thesis’ conclusion). By using Bruner’s (1991) approach to narrative composition, I was able to find a number of common threads in the individual stories that I could stitch together to assemble the larger story, which spoke to the common and shared understanding of how meditation supports teachers’ pedagogies. The flexibility and firmness of both of these methodologies in particular assisted me; I could synthesize themes, patterns and concepts gleaned from the data (and discussed in the concluding chapter), and thus illustrate my understanding how the teachers interpreted their experiences to construct meaning in their world.
Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to the qualitative researcher as the “interpretive bricoleur” or “a jack of all trades” (p. 4). Bricoleurs make use of a wide array of procedures to assemble a set of representations. As such, this qualitative research employed the use of narrative construction and hermeneutic phenomenology and other emergent methodologies, that is, the applications of mindfulness in meditation (Merriam, 2009) to achieve a more complete understanding of the subject matter as presented in this work.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that a qualitative inquiry is constructed into a narrative based on the researcher’s interpretations of the data; data that are gathered from multiple sources. The relationship between meditation and teaching, like holistic education, is evolving and can be interconnected (John Miller, 2010, 2014; Zajonc, 2009); there is no one fixed method to teach, assess and deliver curriculum. Similarly, the multi-methodological approach used in this research study has assisted to refine and bring veracity to the interpretation and composition of the final work.

Bruner (1991) points out that since the Enlightenment, people have been interested in how we achieve “reality,” which is to say, “how we get a reliable fix on the world, a world that is, as it were, assumed to be immutable and, as if it were there to be observed” (p. 1). While empiricist rationalist traditions have typically dominated conceptualizations of how the mind sees reality—arguing that knowledge (intelligence) is acquired in a linear, logical fashion—we now have evidence of quite the contrary (Bai, Scott and Donald 2009; Bruner, 1991; Kostanski & Hassed, 2008; D. Siegel, 2013). Moreover, traditional research methods that have been used to produce idealistic paradigms of teacher excellence (Good & Brophy, 1987) fail to address many issues, including the rapid changes and day-to-day life experiences in which teachers and students are engaged (Beattie, 2006; Conle, 2006; van Manen, 1977). Little is understood about
this pedagogical dimension of life experiences. Using a narrative construction and hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret the experiences of meditation and pedagogical practices provided me a more complete methodological approach to understanding and interpreting the nature of the relationship between a teacher’s meditation practice and pedagogy.

VIII. Rationale for Multi-method Data Collection

It is accepted that most qualitative research is multi-method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Merriam, 2009). As described earlier, the data for this research study were analyzed through a multi-method process of triangulation. Triangulation supports the credibility of the qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), and represents an alternative to validation. Triangulation does not validate, but rather allows for “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to [the] inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). For this research study, multiple methods and sources were used to triangulate the data as noted in the data collection. Sources such as school documents and participants’ journals, allowed for narrative accrual (Bruner, 1991) to help situate the larger narrative in a “normative” sense (Bruner, 1991; Weiner, 2011), and within the broader context of curriculum pedagogy and teacher development.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), however, state helpfully that a qualitative inquiry is best appreciated using the metaphor of a crystal rather than triangulation. In addition to triangulation, the narrative data garnered further depth, or a three-dimensional status, through the support of the literature review, in addition to further sources cited in the discussion (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Mixed-genre texts have a multitude of sides, much like a crystal that changes as it grows: “Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays casting off in different directions” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.
5). Through the crystallization process, the individual narratives can be understood from different viewpoints, adding veracity to the research study as a whole.

**IX. Limitations and Scope of This Study**

A qualitative research study of this type is evaluated on whether or not it communicates something of value, based on a mutual conceptualization of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Ferrer, 2002). The acknowledged small research participant number (Merriam, 2009) should not limit it applicability to the larger field of education, for I used a hermeneutical approach to data interpretation and composition to minimize the risk of bias. Having had professional familiarity with four out of five of the teachers in the course of this research study may have, nonetheless, biased my analysis. As well, being a teacher myself could also have biased my analysis.

The merit of this research lies in my ability to have successfully conveyed the individual stories and the subtleties in the process of meditation as a way to enhance personal development for teachers. The largest hurdles as the researcher were: first, my ability to accurately convey the voices of the teachers in this study and their experiences in both teaching and meditation; and second, my ability to be able to interpret the data well enough to support meaningful comprehension of the larger narrative to achieve verisimilitude and merit.

To give the study more weight, I have attempted to situate this work within the broader dimensions of holistic pedagogy and as such, foreground the role meditation can play in the field of holistic contemplative pedagogy (John Miller, 2007, 2014; Zajonc, 2009). With the support of the literature review, and through the discussion of these narratives, I have cited various sources outside the field of education that speak to the benefit of mindfulness meditation as a practice that supports personal development and integration (S. Batchelor, 1997; Olendzki, 2003, 2010; Wallace, 2011). I have acknowledged elsewhere in this work that contemplative practices such
as meditation contribute to a dynamic, ongoing and evolving process like holistic education. As the practice of meditation attempts to bridge the gap between the individual and the other (Goddard, 1930; Ferrer, 2002), holistic contemplative pedagogy attempts to assemble the component parts of education to create the whole and create balance in an unbalanced conventional system of education (Fullan, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011).

Bruner (1991) points out that “evaluation for warranting a story’s tellability [is] evidencing something unusual [and worthy of being told]” (p. 12). To use Bruner’s (2004) and other theorists’ language, (Beattie, 2006; Weiner, 2011), a language that signals the growing acceptance for these methodologies in educational research, this research study engages in what Bruner calls a “reality construction,” an attempt to reflect the reality of five individuals, their lived experiences as teachers, and the relationship of their meditation practice to their teaching pedagogy. In an effort to combine the individual stories, then, I have attempted to tell a larger story of the whole, a composite that still captures the subtleties of shared human experience—a project designed to benefit to teachers and educational researchers alike.
I. Introducing Sam

I became acquainted with Sam in 2008 through my role as a Teacher Education Program Assistant (TEPA) during my doctoral studies. Sam initially identified himself as a behavioural teacher. I learned that Sam is well-respected by his colleagues and the administration at the school where he is currently employed. In my capacity as a TEPA, I had several opportunities to visit Sam’s classroom unrelated to this research. When Sam learned that my research was in the area of meditation and teaching, he offered to participate in this research study. His narrative is based on information gathered from our formal interviews, and from a few informal conversations we have had over the past three years.

Sam attended York University in the late 1960s, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree, in General Arts and Sciences. His teaching career began over 30 years ago and quite by chance. Laughing, Sam recalls:

One day a teacher in Scarborough came up to me and casually remarked: “You would be a great teacher.” It was a real epiphany, a great moment, because I had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn’t have any interest in doing anything, but I liked to hang out with kids and I knew that one day I would have to pay the rent. I was living off my Bar Mitzvah money, which you can do for only so long.

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34 The School Board where Sam works has a variety of special programs to address behavioural exceptionalities exhibited by their students. The special programs are taught by teachers with Special Education accreditation qualifications recognized by the Ontario College of Teachers. Sam taught classes that were designated as special education for particular children identified with behavioural exceptionalities where many of the children exhibited social emotional adjustment issues that compromised their academic achievement.
By the mid-1970s, Sam had garnered substantial experience working with children in a variety of capacities, including positions as a camp counselor and youth worker. His first professional teaching assignment, which lasted two years, was with the Scarborough Board of Education. He resigned from that board to go on a bicycling expedition, which took him from Toronto to Vancouver, to Los Angeles, to Guatemala and back home.

Sam describes himself as a “classic hippie.” When the first huge wave of yoga hit North America in the early 1970s, he studied with Swami Vishnu Devananda and became a yoga teacher himself. At this time, while reading Timothy Leary’s *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964), Sam experimented with drugs. He did so, he explains, “to have a meaningful spiritual experience, not for the purpose of partying.” Sam attended many spiritual workshops (including yoga) and attended the public appearances of “just about every spiritual teacher or guru from the East who came to North America.”

He says he was especially fortunate to have travelled to Boulder, Colorado in 1971, for it was there that he met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche to many who knew him, the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master. Sam’s spiritual appetite had been whetted by various teachers who traveled from East to West, but it was Chögyam Trungpa who had the greatest influence. He encouraged Sam to cultivate a disciplined meditation practice, as Sam recalls:

I met someone who was the real thing, though he was way too brilliant for me. At the time, I had no interest in doing what he suggested because it wasn’t trippy at all. He wanted me just to sit on my ass. I was young, into acid and colours, and I wanted powers. I kept going back and forth: I would try one spiritual practice with one person and then do something different with someone else. I tried a lot of different things between 1971 and 1977—drugs, therapies, Tai Chi, yoga—but Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was always in the back of my mind.
Sam says he “suffered” between the years of 1971 and 1977, and was confused as to what life was all about. Candidly, he recollects:

I wore through a lot of my s**t. I didn’t know what the f**k I was doing. It was existential anxiety. Eventually I wore out virtually every possibility. I wore out every drug and every teacher and ended up just sitting on my ass. It’s sort of like the story of the Buddha, if you will. Gotama tried all these different ascetic practices and ultimately didn’t know what to do, so he just sat under a tree and eventually “woke up.” I’m not seriously comparing myself with Buddha, of course, but like him, I just ended up sitting. Just to sit was a painfully beautiful thing.

In 1979, Sam returned from his road trip to discover that though teaching jobs in Toronto were scarce, he managed to secure a position teaching “remedial enrichment”—arts-based programming to support and enhance other traditional subject areas at a newly established “public alternative school.”35 The school served both French and English students. Sam’s position was financed by the monies that were garnered through fund-raising ventures initiated by the parents of the students. “I was basically a minister without a portfolio,” he jokes.

Sam did not have a specific classroom. Instead, he fulfilled whatever obligations and responsibilities he had to what he called “the board of directors”—the students’ parents—mandated. Whatever needed to be done, he did it. Sam describes this position as having initially been “very sweet.” For several years, he taught English to three split grades: Grades 1–2–3; 3–4–5; 4–5–6; and 5–6. This went on for several years until eventually Sam began to sense that the job would not last much longer:

35 Alternative schools in the Ontario public educational system claim to have a distinct identity and approach to curriculum delivery when compared to mainstream or conventional public schooling. These smaller schools often sprout in larger schools under the caretaking and guidance of parent advocates of alternative education for their children. Alternative schools in the Board that employs Sam include an active volunteer commitment and involvement from parents or caretakers of children who attend the school.
I could feel it dying. The school board started to feel that this wasn’t kosher, and indeed it never was. I was signing report cards and assuming responsibility for the curriculum. About 10 years after I was hired by the school, somebody said to me: “You can’t do this anymore.” I was very glad to leave the school as the parents had too much say in the teaching and it wasn’t the kind of support I wanted.

I had a friend in Alliston [in Simcoe County, Ontario] who got me a long-term occasional position in nearby Bradford. She knew the principal of the school. So I went there and taught for one year, and during that time I got my Part II Special Education qualifications because Behavioural and French Teachers were the only teachers being hired in Toronto.

Following a year of teaching in Bradford, Sam returned to Toronto with his special education qualifications to secure his second official teaching position. He received this position through the aid of a friend, who had arranged an interview for him at the school where he is currently employed.

II. School

Sam teaches in a school in a middle-class, mixed-ethnic neighbourhood in the city of Toronto. He tells me his school is one of the Board’s older public schools serving approximately 400 students. Sam informs me that he much prefers teaching in a real public school, for the alternative was “a little too homogeneous”; as he put it, “I like the mix of the public.” The school Sam is currently at houses Grades K–6 and one childcare program. At the time I interviewed him, Sam was in his 20th year of teaching at this school. He now works with a split Grade 5–6 class following 15 years of teaching behavioural classes here.

Sam says teaching just fell into his lap but he has grown to love the profession. He sympathizes with people who enter into teacher education programs today and graduate with no
guarantee of securing a job. He points out that the teaching profession “likely attracts a very different sort of individual nowadays,” as compared to when he entered it.

Sam reminds me that his professional engagement with colleagues and students is inextricably linked to his Buddhist meditation practice. “My practice and my teaching started around the same time so they are very inter-connected.” He speaks highly and fondly of the school where he works:

In our [spiritual] tradition we talk about an enlightened society. Because we have basic goodness, it is possible for us to create an enlightened society. That doesn’t mean everyone is enlightened, but we share a vision of people’s basic integrity and compassion, and that’s what we work toward at the school. At our school people are on the same page and have strong bonds with each other. *I really respect teachers’ different styles.* It’s a lovely place to go every morning.

He also tells me that when he enters the school and walks to his classroom each morning, he passes all the other rooms of his colleagues. As he walks by, he smiles, sending loving thoughts to each colleague as he imagines him or her in class with students. For Sam, a good teacher is a “good gardener” someone who pays attention to the conditions and ingredients necessary for a healthy crop to grow and mature. Likewise a good teacher attempts to create a nurturing, safe and healthy environment for students. In Sam’s words:

I try to focus on the children’s basic goodness, integrity and compassion, as those are the things that are going to blossom. I try to give them the *right nourishment* at the right time. I think I’m better at doing this than at adhering to the curriculum, though it’s hard to say or evaluate how that spiritually affects them academically. I like to think that my efforts contribute to the kids’ feeling good about themselves. They know I respect them and that I’m trying to teach them how to be good human beings. I hate using that word, “teach.” Again, what I’m really trying to do is create an environment in which the kids’ finest qualities can blossom.
Sam’s attitude towards his students, and that which he is trying to achieve as an educator, both stem from, and are reinforced by his practice of *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, two related processes in mindfulness meditation. *Shamatha* requires that the practitioner to sit silently and observe the coming and going of phenomena in the mind, while *vipashyana* cultivates insight. Sam uses this approach when teaching. While he knows he is expected to teach the curriculum, he emphatically states that he cannot separate teaching from who he is as a person. He strives to maintain a balanced approach when interacting with his students and when he engages with them, he positively demonstrates respect and understanding.

Sam abashedly admits he does not teach all components of the curriculum well as some of his colleagues; as he puts it, he is more inclined “to fly by the seat of [his] pants.” For him, spontaneity and creativity of a teachable moment are what get his juices flowing. He goes on to say that when he gets excited about something, he “goes with it,” regardless of whether or not it conforms to the curriculum. “I try not to be more than a one trick pony pah!pah!pah!” Yet Sam is also candid about his shortcomings when it comes to teaching. He acknowledges that some teachers are better at meeting the demands of the curriculum than others:

> When I first started teaching, I watched other teachers and tried to teach like them, but I gave up and realized that I should just *be me!* At least *being me*, I’ll have some measure of success. Besides it is impossible and to cover everything in the curriculum.

That said, Sam confesses he still experiences tension around reporting time for it is then that he realizes he has not had time to cover everything in the curriculum. When he attends staff meetings and listens to what other teachers are doing in their classrooms, he says he “feels like wilting,” because he knows “they are just delivering the curriculum. And yet they’re good people who are not full of themselves, and clearly delivering the curriculum is their strength.” Still, he
adds that he cannot fathom how teachers can honestly teach everything in the curriculum, plus prepare students for EQAO, and be good gardeners, too.

Sam sees himself as a “holistic” and “spiritual” teacher. He is more interested in meeting the needs of his students with care and concern to tap into the child’s unique intelligence. He also stresses that inherent in a classroom is the sense of “community,” or “something that is immeasurable.” Sam believes teaching involves individual and communal awareness which is more important than covering the curriculum though he tells me does make sure there is sufficient time for reading, writing and art.

III. Meditation

Sam began meditating and teaching at about the same time. He generally sits between 15 and 20 minutes daily and says he wishes he had more time for formal practice. His official Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist studies, including *shamatha vipashyana* began in 1976 with Chögyam Trungpa. In 1980, Sam participated in a one month dathun, an intense practice of sitting in meditation with a group for 10 hours a day. It was at this retreat that Sam stopped “shopping around” for a spiritual teacher:

I really wore through a lot of my s**t there and it just about killed me. Sitting that long is difficult. I was in so much physical and psychological pain. I was beginning to chip away stuff and see my neuroses for the first time and realize there really *is* no fundamental problem. But I fight against my practice; I can’t

36 Vajrayana also known as the Diamond Vehicle or Tunderbolt was a movement in Indian Buddhism approximately 500 AD. Vajrayana practice aims to move the practitioner quickly to enlightenment. Tantras or rituals play a large part in the Vajrayana lineage and some scholars argue also attributed to the historical Buddha (Keown, 2013; Lopez, 2001). Vajrayana falls under the Mahayana school of Buddhist thought and practice originating between 100BC/AD 100 (Keown, 2013).

37 Dathun Sam explains is a month-long retreat in the Shambhala Tradition where the focus is primarily on meditation. The meditator alternates between sitting and walking for long periods of time. In between the meditation sessions are formal meals, lectures, discussion groups and work periods. Dathun is a concentrated spiritual practice of shamatha vipashyana where one attempts to unite the mind and body to achieve calm abiding insight.
seem to give in to it. I like this world and I get drawn into it. I like pop culture and I like movies. I’m not a hard-line Buddhist, but I am very involved in the centre. I’m constantly trying to bring my practice to my everyday life. I have no problem with retreats; they’re necessary and instructive, but I’d much rather do meditation.

**A. Shamatha Vipashyana**

Sam’s introduction to meditation was through *shamatha vipashyana*. Sam explains the spiritual practice of *shamatha vipashyana*:

*Shamatha vipashyana* is mindfulness awareness practice. The change starts as [you do] *shamatha* not only for yourself, but also for others. You literally raise your gaze […] Not that you’ve cleaned up your garden, but you are not obsessed with your own garden[and] you can actually help others with their garden […] In the beginning you are taught to be aware and not to butt into other people’s business unless you are asked. You are supposed to work with your own mind first.

Sam tells me that this practice is to teach self-acceptance wholly, and with ongoing practice, you learn to cultivate the seed of compassion—compassion both for yourself and for others. Sam tells me this is what he attempts to do when he teaches. Over the years, Sam has learned to bring this compassionate, non-judgmental quality of meditation to his pedagogical relationships in the classroom and the school.

Sam describes mindfulness practice as “following the breath” and “watching the discursiveness of [his] mind.” He notes that “sitting” in meditation enables him to overcome angst and anxiety, and gain insight into his being. He stresses that if one is in physical discomfort in a *sit*, one will become preoccupied with the discomfort rather than observing the state of the mind. Sam suggests if one is new to meditation it is better to sit still for shorter periods of time to reduce distraction from physical pain and eliminate fidgeting.
B. Contemplative Practice

From Sam I understand that there were many significant developments in his meditation practice. *Shamatha vipashyana* was his initial training for meditation practice, followed by various other methods. Sam describes as “contemplative practices” that which one incorporates during a formal “sitting”:

Contemplative practices are related to how with your own mind you put others first. Contemplative practice can lead to penetrative insight. There are a number of contemplative practices such as *tonglen* or practicing the *paramitas* bringing those into your everyday life that are used for the benefit of others.

Sam tells me that contemplative practices are especially beneficial for him; they have helped him have a meaningful, spiritually engaged life especially when teaching.

Among the contemplative practices Sam engages with in meditation, he speaks of the importance of meditating or “contemplating” on the six *paramitas*, also known as the six perfections: generosity or giving, ethics or morality, patience, effort/enthusiastic perseverance, meditation and wisdom. Sam contemplates on these six perfections in meditation, in which his practice emphasizes the needs of others rather than himself. He tells me it is the practice of a Bodhisattva.\(^{38}\) When working with the six *paramitas*, Sam visualizes himself as a *Bodhisattva* embodying the dharma, wholeheartedly imagining he is a sublime and virtuous being who strives to support and save all sentient beings, including his students.

C. Tonglen

Another contemplative practice Sam practices regularly is *tonglen*, which, when roughly translated from Tibetan, means “giving and taking.” Sam describes *tonglen* as working directly

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\(^{38}\) Bodhisattva a Sanskrit term used to describe one who embodies wisdom for the well being of others (Humphreys, 1987, p. 46). In essence a *bodhisattva* is compassionate and makes the commitment to achieve Buddhahood for the welfare of others.
with one’s own heart to cultivate compassion for, and kinship with, others. “Tonglen involves exchanging yourself for another through the medium of the breath and visualization. Sam adds that this is quite “unlike shamatha, wherein the focus is on oneself and one is taught to let one’s thoughts go.” Tonglen is useful in cases where one wants to help someone, but is unsure how. He clarifies: “When a difficult situation presents itself involving someone close to you, you, in that very moment, take on their difficulty through the medium of the breath. This is particularly helpful when someone is seriously ill or dying.”

To help me understand how tonglen works, Sam shares a story about his friend Tom and Tom’s wife.

Tom’s wife was dying. He remained at home with her on the day she was expected to die [based on the opinion of doctors]. That same day he fell and broke his hip and had to be rushed to the hospital. Tom’s wife was scheduled to be admitted to hospital herself that day [for tests] but decided to wait for her husband to return home. A short time passed, and Tom, now in the hospital and aware that his wife was home alone, phoned her. She never picked up the phone. Tom [worrying about her] phoned 911. When the emergency crew got to the house, they had to break down the front door [where they found] Tom’s wife on the floor unable to get up. Upon learning this, Tom got permission to leave the hospital and go home, even though he was still suffering from a broken hip. When he arrived home his wife was there and he was able to admit her to the hospital, where she died shortly afterwards.

When Sam went to visit Tom after this chain of events, his natural inclination was to do something to ease his pain. He could see how badly Tom was suffering physically and emotionally, agonizing over the death of his wife and coping with his own injury. As Sam points out, when events are beyond one’s control, one often doesn’t know what to do.
In situations such as this, where someone is dying or very ill, there is all this discursive stuff going on, and what you want to do is use your breath to take on any or all of the confusion, pain and torment afflicting the person who is suffering. You breathe out clarity, sanity, goodness, lack of pain, or whatever you feel the person needs. Whether it appears to be working or not is irrelevant. You’re actually making a connection with that person insofar as you are making a connection with suffering. You are grounding yourself. This is helping, if only because whatever happens in your mind reverberates. Maybe they are not directly feeling a reduction in pain, but the point is, there is only a fine line between you and them, and again, any act of goodness or compassion or sanity reverberates. It’s a great practice. And it’s particularly good in cases where people are sick or ill or where there is a need to pacify the physical space. So if I don’t know what to do when I am at home, I can include Tom in my practice and connect with him. Anyway, that was my way of connecting with Tom.

Sam says when he practices *tonglen*, the world seems “kinder and softer” and he is much more sensitive to the needs of others, which results in a much stronger connection with them. It is a way to realize the interconnection between you and others. He adds, however, that if he doesn’t *practise* regularly, he tends to forget the benefits. Sam reminds me that this shift in meditative practice for the benefit of others, as well as oneself, speaks to the possibility for *personal transformation in an engaged and enlightened community—one that exists in the here-and-now* as he does in his pedagogical approach when working with his students.

In addition to including contemplative practices in daily meditation and on weekend retreats, Sam takes part in two week-long retreats, one in the spring and the other in the summer. To better understand the various mind-training techniques used in meditation, I ask Sam to explain what he means by “meditation” and “contemplation”:

Contemplation is more conceptual, whereas meditative practices such as *shamatha* and *tonglen* (although previously noted as contemplative practice) are
much more focused, deliberate, and poignant for us as a human species. I was not born an ant or an amoeba. My having been born human is a rare and precious thing, so I should take advantage of what has happened and develop myself spiritually. As such, tonglen, while considered contemplative, is a very focused practice to help one develop his heart and mind as a human being for benefit for the others as well as himself.

Sam reminds me that the concept of rebirth or successive lifetimes is fundamental to Buddhist meditation. For Sam, however, what is important is to make the most of this current life, and he applies this philosophy to teaching in the classroom. Indeed, he is still uncertain about rebirth, noting “the jury is out on this one.”

Sam’s formal daily sitting involves working with other contemplations like the “four reminders,” namely this precious human life, death, samsara and karma. As Sam notes, the formal contemplative practice does affect his teaching but not in any overtly sanctimonious or pious way. “I find myself in this job as a teacher and I’m going to be the best teacher I can. Not only is this human life precious to me, but I am responsible—in a privileged way—for these children as well.”

Knowing that Sam leads meditation sessions, I ask him if he would introduce meditation to teachers. He is ambivalent about doing so, noting that most people simply have no interest in it and that many indeed find it unpalatable.

Westerners have strong reactions—positive and negative—to churches and religion in general. Our center is small, but to me it is bright and colourful. It has imagery. It has a shrine. But it’s hard for some people to accept or adapt to all that. For many, it’s hard to separate the meditation practice from the

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39 Sam explains the four reminders in this way. Human life is a rare and precious gift. Death is inevitable and comes to us all; everybody will be a corpse one day. Samsara is the continual cycle of suffering or struggle one tries to overcome. Karma is the process of action; the law of cause and effect with respect to people’s actions.
surroundings. A lot of people come to [our] Centre because they want community. Others come because they are attracted to Buddhist philosophy. Still others come because they want to learn how to meditate. And that’s all great. Of course, for teachers, the surroundings would have to be neutral, as it were.

I taught a six-week class in meditation at the downtown YMCA and did not like it at all. I didn’t have the confidence to present meditation outside of the Centre. The Centre is like a container that is powerfully supportive. There is a presence, and when people sit, there is a contained feeling. Our Centre is just a great place to practice and to be. A lot of it is just me. I stopped teaching meditation. The main reason I stopped is, I think, because my wife died. (Note: I noticed the anguish in Sam’s face as his voice dropped off.)

J. Would to like to speak more about her?

S. We met at a meditation retreat with Pema Chödrön [an American-born leader in Tibetan Buddhism and a disciple of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche]. I fell in love immediately and knew I would marry her. She remained the same person I met, and she stayed that way for 25 years. There were no surprises. She was a completely transparent human being with no mask at all. She was a delight.

I kind of rode her skirt tails. A lot of my strength came from the fact that she was a completely joyful, generous, compassionate, loving and happy human being who absorbed all my shit. She just sucked up all my problems and smiled and laughed at me…I haven’t been able to find as much trust in myself since she died. I don’t trust my basic goodness. She was the one thing I was sure of. Because she was good, I knew the world was good. Because she was kind, I knew the world was kind.

When she died, she did so peacefully. To her it was no big deal. There was no resistance; she went straight to acceptance. She thought it was all kind of interesting. Unbelievable! But she lost her mind at some point, so it was hard. If I had one ounce of her courage, I would be way ahead. Watching her die was the
most beautiful thing and the most horrific thing I have ever experienced. But I am less confident now and I think it is because I can no longer be identified as her husband. She was my muse. I started teaching more when I was with her. I started painting more. I started playing sax. I wrote a piece for her in the newspaper—it was the best writing I ever did, and I did it in 20 minutes. Here let me get it for you. I have had it in this drawer for a few years. (Sam leaves to get the piece he wrote for his wife).

At this stage in the interview, I realize that Sam is discussing an extremely painful and tumultuous period of his life. I could sense his pain and anguish so I let Sam speak until he had said all he had to say about the loss of his wife.

D. Meditation and Teaching

Sam’s emphasis on “natural things,” that is, “the interconnectedness of life,” relates to his belief that “we are not here just to learn and teach the curriculum. We are a microcosm of the earth and the universe, and Toronto is our community.” He refers to his philosophy as that of the “[Centre’s] vision—a vision of an enlightened world and enlightened human beings.” Sam believes in the equality of all living beings and the birth right for every human being to be happy. “These principles are grounded in our inherent buddha nature. Buddhists also believe in taking refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha.”

Teaching for Sam, is symbolic of these principles, too, as he contemplates them when engaged with his students and colleagues. Teaching, he tells me, provides the opportunity to express his aspiration in subtle ways. Sam wants his students to pay attention to the space they inhabit and how they fit in as individuals in a larger community. More specifically, he wants

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40 In Buddhism the three jewels are one’s community—the sangha; the teachings, or the dharma, including the three marks of existence and the eightfold path; and the Buddha, a place where a Buddhist goes for refuge from the cycle of samsara; literally the world of continuous flux where humans reside (Lopez, 2001). Metaphorically speaking, the three jewels can be regarded as Sam the Buddha teacher, his pedagogy and teaching philosophy are his practice of the dharma, and his classroom and school the community or sangha.
them to appreciate the value of being caring and appreciative of others in the larger world around them. Sam tells me, his lived experience as a school teacher combined with his spiritual practice of meditation and his Buddhist teachings he is able to say see the real value of the school system:

I have taught so long that I now know what’s wrong with the school system: it’s prescriptive and singly directed. Ken Robinson [an English author, speaker and adviser on education] says that if the school system did the best it could do, then everyone would be a professor. School is not the real world. Everyone—teacher and student alike—has his or her own journey. I have been very fortunate in a way to be living and teaching in this neighbourhood for so long. People come back and visit. I have seen people who are doctors, lawyers, professors, people who are crazy, who end up in jail. I can name three people who died. And when I think of them it helps me have a bigger picture of what I am trying to do. They are human beings and they have their journey. Teachers are supposed to be there to help students academically, but a teacher is just one of the many people they’re going to meet. I try to steer the kids in a relatively sane direction.

Sam says, “I am developing a more grandfatherly approach to my students. I just want them to know somebody loves them. I remember my grandparents and how important they were and how much they loved me.”

As Sam reminisces about the time he began teaching in his twenties, he notes that he was not much older than his students. He confesses that he really did not know what he was doing, but opines that he was not a bad teacher either. He admits that since then he is constantly trying to become a better curriculum teacher. “I start to feel bad about the last 20 years.” Now nearing 60, he wants his students to know, first and foremost, that he loves them. While he believes the curriculum serves as a tool to support this fundamental idea, it is a very small piece of a much larger puzzle in the education of life. At the same time, he is constantly trying to help his students become better writers, readers and mathematicians; only he does so mainly by
expressing his unconditional approval of them. It is an attitude of “acceptance” which has helped him become a much more “mindful” and “wise” teacher. Sam says regular meditation has a profound impact on him. He is especially aware of this after he returns from a weekend of solid practice. He says long and consistent daily periods of silent practice help to settle him make him more adept at teaching. “I am much more mindful as a result of meditation,” he remarks. “After meditation, my mind is full of what is happening in the classroom.”

Sam declares his senses are heightened after meditation and that his mind is more receptive to the needs of his students, which include not only the curriculum, but also having various events in the classroom dealt with as they arrive. He stresses that the four karmas of transformation—pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and destroying\(^\text{41}\)—have helped him develop meaningful pedagogical relationships in general.

The four karmas or actions symbolize the stable ego’s non-attachment to the self where one strives to maintain neutrality in the effort to find a peaceful solution involving two or more people. This is done in the effort to attain peace and harmony for all. Sam states: “When I am clear [as a result of meditation], I am much more skilful at pacifying and at enriching, which in turn enables me to help students shine.” He adds that maybe some teachers possess these skills naturally, but because he aspires to be selfless every day. He needs to meditate regularly so that he can remember first and foremost that he is there to attend to the needs of his students in whatever capacity he can, not only as a teacher but as a fellow human being:

\(^{41}\) The Buddhist icon, the Four Arms of the Mahakala, represents the Four Karmas of Transformation, which is symbolic of the balanced ego or self that conducts itself without attachment, but rather, from a place of understanding and care for the well-being of all. In a left arm is a skull with intoxicating nectar that represents pacification. The second arm holds a knife symbolizing one’s influence over others, which is enriching. The right arm holds a lightening rod sword gathering energies from all that is around, depicting reconciliation or a magnetizing force. The fourth and last arm holds a spear showing the elimination of ignorance, greed and over zealousness (Formica, 2008).
I have trouble talking about what I do well as a teacher […] I’d much rather tell you what I don’t do well. But do notice that I like all my kids and always have. I have never had a kid I didn’t like and I think that that’s due to my practice.

*Meditation allows me to “see” other human beings. By that I mean that I see the good regardless of the s**t they might give me or give one another. That’s temporary. That’s an example of clouds. I try to see them fresh, and mindfulness practice allows me to do just that. I’m simply sharing space with these kids, who, like me are on a particular journey. If I ever hurt them, I feel terrible and I apologize. I lose sleep at night if I feel as if I have harmed a kid or caused him or her embarrassment.*

Sam is also quick to point out that teaching is not always easy, especially if one is responsible for 30 or more students. Sometimes teachers find themselves in sticky situations and have to make decisions because of their role and position in the classroom, as the following incident illustrates.

Two months ago I really told a kid off and felt terrible as a result. They next day I went to school and I apologized profusely. Her response was: “No, it’s OK. I deserved it.” I replied by saying that while she might have done something wrong, she didn’t deserve my being cruel to her. My point is that although I wanted her to know that I had been cruel, it was not necessary. Perhaps I’m oversensitive, which I guess is a result of my mindfulness practice. I try not to lord it over them. My attitude is that I am a work in progress and so is my class. It’s always changing and I’m willing to admit when I f**k [mess] up.

Sam does not have a teaching philosophy that is carved in stone, but he adheres to the notion that all “[his] students are equally important.” This attitude enables him to create and foster a climate in which each individual student is acknowledged and allowed to blossom. Sam emphasizes that his goal as a teacher is to provide a strong container; “a welcoming, nurturing,
If I have a philosophy, it’s to try to find out the spark of each child. For some kids you have to really search. I try to teach all sorts of different things, and this approach is hard to evaluate; then I get in trouble with the curriculum. Sometimes I may say this is what we are doing, or I may give them three or four options on how to complete an assignment. If you want to write, OK; if you want to do more art, then that’s fine too, and so on. Then all of a sudden I realize I’ve screwed myself because I don’t know how to evaluate the kids who are performing these activities. So then I may have all of them write simply because I need a piece of writing for the purpose of formal evaluation.

*Respecting each kid’s natural curiosity and intelligence is my job. It’s not about leading them in any particular direction but about finding out what it is that they need in order to blossom.* Sometimes a kid really shines in an area that is not strictly academic. This is often the case with kids who are “developmentally delayed. *Ultimately what’s important is that they are happy to be alive.*

Being a sensitive and perceptive teacher, Sam knows when, and how, to contact parents, or when or when *not* to reach out to a student. Sam usually contacts all the parents with a phone call within the first three weeks of the school year. If there are issues or concerns, he informs the parents earlier rather than later, as he prefers that parents not have any surprises when the first report card arrives (typically early December for public elementary schools in Ontario). Moreover, Sam pays close attention to how parents engage with him. This helps him broach any delicate matters or concerns that may need to be addressed:

You have to be careful where you tread. I sniff around a lot before I make any kind of decision on how to contact and meet with parents. I may have major concerns, or I may say to a parent: “I don’t understand your kid. Let’s talk.”
Sometimes I back right off and go to the principal and tell her what I have noticed in class. A student may have trouble just getting to school on time, or he may have trouble remembering to do his assigned work. I see the parents, myself, the kids, and the administration as a team. I get involved to the degree I need to get involved, depending on the issue and how much I am invited in. Sometimes I am invited in and sometimes I’m not. You develop a feel for this sort of thing.

This is especially significant given the complexities that can arise in a pedagogical relationship. Sam provides an example of a challenging situation that arose for him this year and in his words “was beyond the call of duty as a curriculum teacher.” He shares:

I have kid in class who was adopted by gay parents, and these parents have since adopted other children as well. I noticed she was hanging on to me—literally holding onto my shoe. And every time I gave a reading, she was on my knee. It was physical and I was slightly uncomfortable with it and I wanted to tell the parents. I let them both know it was fine with me, but I felt they should know what was going on. She also preferred to stay indoors during recess, and I told them, so I tend to give kids what they need. If they ask for something, I give it to them, and that includes affection. In this case, the girl wrote a piece about her parents’ not having any time for her anymore. She said they spend all their time with the two kids who were more recently adopted. She hates these two new kids. But in the end it worked out because now she is starting to go out for recess and I’m told she is happier at home. Dealing with this situation was really beyond my role as a teacher of curriculum, but it was easy to do. I made it work for both of us. During recess, she stayed indoors and helped me sharpen pencils. She also filed papers. She needed to be around me and in the room. It was good for her, I guess.
Like all teachers, Sam is called on to negotiate complicated situations like this one respectfully and honestly. Although he tries to promote “pro social values” in his classroom, privately he expresses concerns about the big push by many of the provincial school boards toward “character development.” Generally he is skeptical about such rhetoric.

We have co-operation month. That means my class has to do a presentation for the school on co-operation. The concept is so lame that I went to the principal and suggested we do something where we actually co-operate with each other rather than simply talk about it. My suggestion was that my class take charge of Earth Day by working with other classes to create activities such as gardening and mulching.

Sam acknowledges the value and significance of supporting children to develop pro social qualities such as being respectful and caring of themselves and others should be an integral part of every school day, but the official push of “character development” as an ad hoc goal tied to once-a-month assemblies is a lame gesture. To highlight the importance of respectful listening, he cites an exchange he had with a student.

I was talking to the class and one kid stood up and walked out the room. I asked, “Where are you going?” The kid replied, “I’m getting my snack.” I said, “You know you shouldn’t walk out of the room when I am talking. If you were presenting a project, I wouldn’t walk out on you when you were talking.” It’s important to practise and engender mutual respect in the classroom.

Through my conversations with Sam I appreciate that meditation and teaching are consistent spiritual practices in his life, and he perseveres in both disciplines.

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42 The Ontario Ministry of Education. Report, Finding common ground: Character development in Ontario schools, K-12 (2008a) provides the basis for the promoting character development for pro social values and behaviour.
The idea is that you *practise* on the cushion so that you are saner off the cushion. That’s something I think people forget. Because you work with your mind on the cushion, because you are being kind to yourself on the cushion, you can also be kind off the cushion. Because you’re mindful of your breath on the cushion, you can be mindful when you are speaking off the cushion.

Sam tells me that he is constantly engages in self-talk throughout the day in order to guide his teaching, continually monitoring his delivery and the students’ engagement. Here are some of the questions he silently asks himself even while a lesson is in progress.

How I am doing and how I am presenting things? Is there an uplifting energy in the class? Is it welcoming? Is it nurturing? Or do I appear to be glib? How are they seeing me? Are they smiling? Are they interested? Are they paying attention? Are they cheery? Or are they bored?

Sam tells me he constantly wonders how the students are seeing him at any given moment and notes that his sense of humour provides him insight in this regard as to how he is managing. As he puts it:

I’m funny. My class thinks I’m funny and there is a lot of laughing. That’s one of the things I like about what I do and they love it. Because I can be ridiculous, they can get ridiculous—though it can get too ridiculous, so you’ve got watch it.

For Sam, the importance of being an adept, caring and responsive teacher is reinforced by the contemplative engagement he has with students and colleagues, which he attributes to his many disciplined years of meditation *practise*. Sam reminds me that, mindfulness does not have to be tied to something esoteric or religious. As far as he is concerned, all teachers need to be mindful and in that regard a disciplined meditation practice can support one to be consistently mindful. He stresses:
We’ve seen it in ourselves. We’ve seen it our teachers and our student teachers. They have blinkers on. They teach lessons rather than teach the students themselves. They are so focused on the material that they don’t see that the kids aren’t getting it. A mindful teacher is able to stop and check in. I know someone who has been teaching for 30 years and who has no idea that the kids don’t know what she is talking about—absolutely no idea! The only reason the kids are quiet in her class is because they’re scratching their heads and know they are supposed to be quiet.

Sam says that if there is a problem in the classroom, the astute, mindful teacher always knows that it is because of him or her. As Sam notes of his students:

They are good being quiet during reading time and writing time. But at other times they’ll be engaged in something when they should be listening, and that can be a problem. Sometimes I have to say we’re just listening now. I’ve noticed that other classrooms are usually quieter than mine. It’s a problem and I don’t take it lightly, but it’s a problem I have had since I began teaching. I try to alter it but I realize that there must be some kind of energy I am throwing out. So when I try to fix it with my head it doesn’t seem to work right. I have to fix it another level and there’s no way I can change that level. At the end of the year I always feel that it was a good year. But during the year—I am here we go again (laughing).

Much of what Sam tells me suggests that teachers might best serve their students by cultivating “kindness and a generosity of spirit.” Having acknowledged this, he sees his meditation practice, in large part, contributes to his presence in his classroom and at the school, and is very much part and parcel of who he is as a human being and teacher.
IV. Summarizing Sam’s Story

Sam makes substantial links between his meditation and teaching practices. For one, meditation and teaching are both spiritual acts for him. Likewise, contemplation when teaching gives him insight into the wisdom of love when engaging with his students.

Sam’s main formal practices of shamatha vipashyana and tonglen while contemplating on a precious human life inform his holistic contemplative pedagogy. While his formal meditative practices follow the Centre’s tradition his teaching practices and attitudes are akin to the ethos that governs a holistic contemplative educator. The salient qualities he carries with him as a teacher, and which he attempts to demonstrate, are respect and kindness for each other as fellow human beings. He does this work by wholeheartedly accepting and loving each of each of his students, irrespective of their academic success or behaviour. Sam notes that his meditation practice has helped him gain insight and wisdom about education and its larger significance to life. This understanding is inextricably linked to his intentions, attitudes and practice of unconditional love for his students and colleagues as fellow human beings, and that lets Sam know that love propels his pedagogical relationships.

Sam can articulate his strengths and weaknesses, and acknowledges that he is a weak curriculum teacher. On the other hand, he approaches his work through a holistic contemplative lens and thinks about the broader education of his students in their life-long journeys. Sam uses his sense of humour to maintain a relaxed welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. As well he uses the insight gained from shamatha vipashyana in conjunction with other contemplative practices like visualization techniques to deal with the various tensions in the classroom in a benevolent manner demonstrating the merit of his holistic contemplative pedagogical approach to teaching and engaging with students and colleagues.
CHAPTER FIVE

RACHEL

What are the children bringing to that moment? That’s what meditation should do: teach you to be in the moment, as opposed to something more structured or prescribed.

—Rachel

I. Introducing Rachel

Rachel began teaching 36 years ago after completing her Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees concurrently so that she could have a marketable skill. Following graduation from York University, she was employed by a large public school board as a Grade 1 teacher. Throughout the course of her career, Rachel has held a number of positions in various capacities, including teaching primary and school-age children with social adjustment problems and reading difficulties. She is a literacy expert with many years of experience in the area. For the past four years, Rachel has been working for an inner-city school in Toronto where she teaches a small primary class of seven students who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).43

Like Sam, I met Rachel through my role as a Teacher Education Program Assistant (TEPA). Rachel was one of the host teachers who mentored pre-service student teachers; I, as a TEPA, visited her classroom several times. It was during one of our several conversations in our respective capacities that Rachel expressed an interest in this research, which is how she came to

43 Autism Spectrum Disorder is a term used to identify a range of neurologically based disorders that impair the development of communication and social interaction skills often impeding social and academic success in mainstream education. ASD is also characterized by atypical interests and behaviour patterns. ASD can range in severity from mild to severe (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

128
be a participant. Rachel’s narrative is based on data gathered from interviews, a few informal
cversations, and excerpts from her journal entries and ministry documents.

II. School

Rachel teaches at a school that has been in operation since 1950. It serves the educational
needs of nearly 100 children with intellectual and physical disabilities from Kindergarten
through to Grade 8. The staff adheres to the mission-and-values statements of the larger public
school board that governs the school. The school is involved with several community
partnerships and research projects, and is bustling with activity throughout the work week.

Rachel explains what schooling, teaching and learning mean to her: “Schooling takes
place in a “formalized setting” with “physical classrooms,” as well as with “groups of children”
who have been “organized by the government.” As she adds, “schooling is a formalized situation
and setting for education.” For her, “to educate and teach are not all that different”; as she
contends, “the school board formalizes teaching.” Rachel says her teaching philosophy is always
to imagine “the bigger picture.” Here, she clarifies the role of the teacher in relationship to the
terms teaching and learning:

Teaching is to help an individual develop their own skills to become independent.
Learning means [developing] awareness of something your weren’t aware of
before[…] [It can] be [a] practical […] skill like tying a shoe lace or wider, [like]
how to function in a new setting or to learn about a whole different way of
looking at things. Learning begins when you’re born or probably conceived […]
To me it’s everything that helps you develop as an individual and creates who you
are uniquely.
III. Meditation

Rachel’s interest in meditation began in the early 1970s, when she dabbled in practices such as Transcendental Meditation.\textsuperscript{44} Nine years ago she began a formal meditation practice at her meditation Centre. The Centre was founded by the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987). Rachel tells me there are many programs and events offered by the Centre to help people develop spiritually and completely. In particular, she noted the Vajrayana-Tantric, the path to enlightenment, and described it as a complex system of Buddhist thought and practice is also taught to other sangha members. In addition to participating in group “sittings” (meditation at the centre), Rachel also volunteers there once a week.

She explains that the practice of \textit{shamatha vipashyana} begins with calming the mind to sustain one’s attention easily for an extended length of time. In addition to her \textit{shamatha} practice with the \textit{sangha}, she engages in a personal meditation practice at home four to five times a week. Rachel’s solitary practice meditation practice runs anywhere between 25 and 45 minutes. When asked what prompted her to begin meditating, Rachel responds:

It’s something I’d thought about for most of my adult life, I had some brief connection with meditation when I was in my 20s. I wanted to develop the spiritual part of myself—the part connected to my heart. I think of the heart and mind as being connected, and there is also a shared connection with others and maybe with the future and the past and all those things. This is the idea of oneness. I was reading books and doing it on my own […] but I wasn’t consistent. Anyway, I wasn’t finding that connection on my own, so I sought help in finding it […] I was having personal difficulty not thinking about myself what I wanted to do for myself […] I was always looking at what I should do for my [family] so

\textsuperscript{44} Transcendental Meditation popularized by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008) is a meditation technique used to reach a state or bliss or infinite happiness. The meditator focuses on either a mantra or a thought given to her by her teacher or yogi. Rachel tells me the meditator practices narrowing her focus on the bare mantra or thought, gradually following into a more subtle state of absorption or heightened consciousness.
once my kids were older and I ended my marriage, I made meditation a priority for myself.

Rachel points out that through mindfulness, she is discovering her own mind and heart; this discovery is indirectly helping others as well. It is a powerful emotional journey:

Just going to the Centre and practising *shamatha* with the *sangha* is profoundly moving. It brings me to tears at times just being in that atmosphere, especially after enduring the stress of working. It’s like *coming home* to a peaceful spot. I can meet all kinds of different people who are there for the same positive reason [...] people were coming to learn about themselves to learn about their own minds and their hearts [...] to help themselves better connect with others.

Rachel believes meditation makes it possible to observe and understand one’s self, especially how the self relates to others and experiences compassion. “There’s something uplifting about sitting in a room with a group of different people who have chosen to come there in the middle of their busy conflicting lives,” she says. “The peaceful atmosphere helps me to connect with my real self within.” Rachel notes that while it is important for individuals to find internal peace, it is equally important to find peace with others. “Meditating in a community—that is, with the *sangha*—for several hours a day is a powerful experience.”

Rachel walks me through her past to explain the relevance of her practice. She had a Jewish upbringing and is upfront about the insights and tensions that accompanied it. As a teenager, she stopped going to class. For her, meditation and Buddhism emphasize “people helping them understand themselves, develop[ing] awareness of themselves and others and to connect with others […] It’s compassionate [and] tender and there is no God.” Rachel sees the fundamental differences between Judaism and Vajrayana, with Judaism being dualistic (i.e., if you are good, you go to heaven, and if you are bad, to hell) and monotheistic (one God reigns
supreme over all sentient beings and controls all life), whereas Vajrayana is neither polytheistic nor monotheistic but based on the Buddha’s teachings; it does not posit a God who is in control of our lives. This split moved her to decide she would practice mindfulness.

Rachel is mother to three young adults who are an integral part of her life. At the same time, she concedes that parenting can be emotionally draining and that, in her role as mother, she often neglects her own needs. The dharma—the nature of the world and meditation—have had a powerful influence on how she approaches her relationships with both her children and her students, illustrated here:

As a parent, I don’t always know the right thing to do or how best to support my children in their lives. But my teachings […] and my meditation practice help me to remain open to whatever arises. I no longer push a thing away when it becomes too difficult to deal with. Instead, I sit with that problem, focus on it and explore it. This has been a great opening for me, as a mother and as a woman. (I notice tears welling in Rachel’s eyes. I sense my own tears as well.)

Rachel reminisces about her mother, who tended to put her own needs aside to focus on raising a family:

She never would share with us really what her needs were, nor did she explain life to us. And yet she was my role model, so it was similar with me in my own household. If I was struggling with something, either work-related or personal, I wouldn’t share this. I was just this constant everything-is-fine kind of person who tried to help everybody all the time.

My daughter even wrote a play about me, and in the play I was acting as if everything was fine, even though it wasn’t. I think the situation in my own household now is similar. I live with two of my children and tend to focus on taking care of them whereas ideally we should be taking care of each other. But it’s not always easy opening up that part of oneself. As their mother I’m supposed
to be totally together, running the ship, and not showing any cracks, the cracks being my own personal needs. I’m surprised I haven’t advanced further. However, I’ve learned something valuable through meditation which is that I can’t really be a benefit to other people if I don’t accept my own vulnerability and needfulness. Otherwise I’m just kind of driving everybody crazy and suffocating them. We all have to be involved with, and open to, each other in all directions and back and forth. I think my ending my marriage and going it alone were huge steps in that direction.

Rachel says she gains “insights” into relationships through meditation practice. She applies this “wisdom” to other aspects of her life, including teaching. Whereas she used to ignore problematic situations, now she takes a new approach, which is to “sit with” what is actually happening and confront the problem directly. She has found meditation to be a gateway in this respect but concedes she has a long way to go before she can arrive at her destination:

It’s not always easy to meditate because often when you practice meditation things may come up that are difficult and you begin to face them […] and deal with them […] But it’s a very wonderful loving compassionate kind of container to practice in.

Rachel readily admits there are times when she is “sad, confused, and unsure, about what to do,” but she also knows that uncertainty is natural in life. Gradually she has learned to contemplate her needs and later, her stride and pace. She tells me she has allowed herself more opportunities to pause, breathe and explore things in a peaceful and balanced frame of mind. She feels empowered because, as she puts it:

I was taught that one shouldn’t think of oneself so much and that to do so is to be self-centered and egocentric. For the longest time, then, I tried to connect with
other people and help them, but all the while I was neglecting myself. Now I’m trying to work on myself, which means taking more responsibility for my life.

As she indicates, Rachel likes the idea that she is responsible for her own thoughts and feelings. Through her shamma practice she is able to bear witness to her thoughts and feelings without judgment. In Rachel’s words, “[y]ou’re taught to let your thoughts go. When they come in your mind, you simply observe them and wait for them to pass, which they do. I am learning not to focus on them and not to be governed by them.”

**A. Shamatha Vipashyana**

Rachel informs me at the Centre, people are taught *shamatha* with their eyes open:

“[F]ollow your breath; out breath initially; you let it go.” Rachel found this challenging at first. As a more seasoned meditator, she noted the instructions changed. “You know, 25% of your attention is on your surroundings and maybe 75% on your breathing, but that changes over time.” Prior to joining the centre, she had meditated with her eyes closed and initially found it hard to focus with them open. She also found the environment perturbing as the room where mindfulness meditation is taught is next-door to a pool hall and bar. Rachel describes the experience:

I can hear the sound of laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the clanging of billiard balls. This is weird because normally one is supposed to sit and meditate in silence. This is nuts. They want me to keep my eyes open, and I’m hearing all this noise! What is going on here?

Following several sittings, Rachel discovered she was able to stay more focused internally rather than externally paying less attention to the sounds coming from the nearby bar. The sounds were
just there, present, along with anything else that might come up and occupy her mind. Rachel then explains:

The idea is not to focus on it [the noise]. Instead we learn to follow our breath and just kind of let the noises go. And at different times in the instruction, the teacher will remind us to stay focused on our breathing and not to get distracted by the noise.

During her first year at the Centre, Rachel participated in a two-week meditation retreat in Vermont. There she was introduced to the practice of *shamatha vipashyana* using a combination of sitting and walking for six hours a day. At this retreat, she learned how to say to herself:

Let your thoughts go. As your thoughts arise in your mind, just watch them and let them pass. Try not to become involved with them or focus on them. Just let them go. Touch your thoughts with a feather and move them along, or else pop them as if they are bubbles.

No longer fixated on her breath, Rachel claims she has learned how to exist and remain in the moment, to “befriend” the moment, all while calmly observing the rising and passing of the phenomena that crossed her mind. She tells me only after slowing down her thoughts that she is able to have a clearer view of things go deeper into meditation. “You realize how crazy your mind is […] how fast it’s bouncing all over the place.” She notes she never really took the time, “to learn about [her] mind”: “My thoughts were happening and I was following them, running after them going crazy and never taking the time to understand what this is all about.”

Rachel has learned to use her gaze in meditation to slow down her thoughts:
If I have a really speedy, speedy, mind and difficulty just sitting, being present I just lower my gaze […] taking out a lot of visual information […] Days I am really present I raise my gaze taking in the whole environment.

She goes on to explain that in *shamatha vipashyana* meditation, one can experience a luminous, calm, fully aware state of being: “I am working with this to be able to bring meditation and this awareness in the present moment more and more into my life and my teaching.” Rachel recognizes that she is not her thoughts, and therefore she does not have to get caught up in them, such as react negatively or feel badly as they churn around in her head. She refers to this accepting presence “as a way of bridging her thoughts and feelings when you walk down the street or you’re in your classroom or whatever.”

The following entry from Rachel’s journal, written immediately after a meditation, highlights the mind-body connection while illuminating the discursive nature of the mind:


Rachel tells me that her daily meditation practice is directly related to her “wise understanding” and “construction of the world.” She explains, this wisdom informs her of our “true essence,” and enables her to act responsibly with integrity. Rachel describes this resulting spiritual attitude here:
All people will be connected with their joy and happiness. So I may think about that for a while and then think about different people I know and how this idea applies to them. I’m also aware of my breathing, and then at some point, it just becomes one with everything and I’m not really thinking about it anymore.

Rachel notes embracing the intention of joy and happiness; meditating on it and having it resound with her expresses her clarity of mind. This awareness of mind includes her embodied knowing of the interconnectedness of both personal and professional relationships which shapes her holistic contemplative pedagogical approach when working with her students.

**B. Contemplative Practices**

Rachel attends meditation retreats twice a year. During these retreats, she engages in meditation practice, which includes *shamatha vipashyana* and other contemplative exercises like *tonglen*. She describes *tonglen* as a “contemplative practice [of] giving and receiving and sending out […] as you breathe in you’re receiving as you breathe out, you’re sending.”

Like Sam, Rachel tells me she uses it to focus on someone or some group of people having great difficulty. In her words:

I did a *tonglen* for a week in a concentrated way when the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan […] and it’s something I do for myself too. You know these are either and individuals I ‘m concerned about or for thinking about people and the great difficulty they were in. Doing this helps me to be aware of things in the world […] I am not pushing them away or afraid to think about the problems […]

*Tonglen* is a way of facing it.

Rachel maintains that “holding the people” in her meditation is helpful even when as she adds, “they’re not aware that I’m doing this. I start with mindfulness and then move into *tonglen* breathing in their illness, pain, fear, breathing out peace, end of pain, fearlessness.”
She also reveals that adherence to the dharma and the *sangha*, combined with her “Buddha nature” in Vajrayana, creates what she calls “taking refuge in the Three Jewels.” She explains that for her, believing in the dharma means “understanding the true nature of reality; the *sangha*, the community members like her who come to practice mindfulness, and the Buddha, that is to summon her inherent wisdom.” It is her “Buddha nature” that supports her to be a loving and caring engaged individual in and with the world around her. Referring back to *tonglen*, she tells me that her “sending out whatever positive energy they need” helps her to know she is “making a connection.”

**C. Drala**

Another contemplative technique Rachel uses during meditation is one that invokes *drala*. She explains that “*drala* is a powerful dynamic energy,” a “fearlessness that comes from nature, including the nature within oneself.” To summon *drala* is to contemplate one’s own inherent wisdom, which is in harmony with the elements: fire, earth, rocks, trees and wind. Rachel explains *drala* as that which gives one strength and resolve to see a conflict through. Invoking *drala* in meditation helps Rachel deal effectively when life becomes overwhelming:

Sometimes I do feel overwhelmed and unsure how to move forward. But I’m learning to connect with *drala* energy. *Drala* is about looking out as well as looking within. It’s body work meditation. It’s something open, enriching and aware. It allows me to be more open to what’s happening around me and to connect with it rather than shut down. *Drala* helps me cultivate a sense of fearlessness.

Rachel tells me seeing herself as a warrior by invoking *drala* gives her “strength and courage” to meet the many challenges she faces both in her professionally and personally.
D. Meditation and Teaching

Prior to her steady meditation practice, Rachel has particular “ideas and feelings” about teaching, which [she thinks] haven’t changed.” As she elaborates, it is “who I was as a person, and my belief in people, the goodness of people and feeling loving towards my students was part of who I am and have been as a teacher.” This means “helping young people develop their own skills and become independent.” Through her daily practice and understanding of dharma, she states that she has “a language to talk about it and develop.”

For Rachel teaching involves day-to-day activities and exchanges between the teacher and her students. “Teaching” is not limited to just what Rachel does; it includes what other adults, such as educational assistants or student teachers, do in terms of engaging the children in the classroom, the playground and larger community:

I used to come up against situations where, let’s say colleagues would be very different from my perspective, very rigid in their approach to teaching […] They would have a clear plan of what they were doing and why they were doing it […] what the children were supposed to learn and it some ways that could be positive but at other times it would seem to me—that they weren’t really aware of the individual kids […] really who they were […] you know, their inner beings […] no awareness […] where are we heading? That would be very frustrating for me.

She cites another example of how she uses her mindfulness practice when engaged with colleagues, even those who are not available to students:

One of the adults I worked with had a lot of difficulties. She was often sad or depressed and would bring that difficulty with her into the school. This was having an effect on the children. She wasn’t available for them, by which I mean she wasn’t aware of what they were going through. But then I was able to use my own mindfulness, my own awareness, to deal with the situation. I realized this is who she is, this is what she’s bringing to the classroom, and this is how it is, and
so we’re going to have to carry on. I was able to be open with her and I was aware of what she was going through. I like to think this helped her to relax a bit and adjust.

Rachel believes her role as a teacher is to support her students in all aspects of development, not only academic skills, but also self-help life skills and overall social adjustment. She is there to guide her students and provide opportunities for them as well as provide a nurturing safe space where they can grow and thrive. With this in mind, she is better able to support their cognitive abilities and nurture positive interpersonal social skills. She describes her teaching philosophy as “holistic,” as it aims to educate all aspects of the developing child. She further remarks that “the person who is experiencing the learning begins to take some ownership of it, so in the future he or she can grow with it. In this way, learning becomes personalized—a kind of spiritual journey.”

Rachel explains how contemplating on “loving-kindness” included in both the four immeasurables and “the divine abodes” during meditation, helps to enhance her relationships, including those when engaging with her students:

The way I understand and practise meditation is that it helps people to be self-aware and as a result, to better understand others and connect with them more meaningfully. It helps people to be compassionate and tender and caring toward themselves and others. That makes sense to me. It’s important to be connected with others and to work with them. As you work with yourself, you naturally work with others as well.

Professional relationships are sometimes difficult to manage, and Rachel tells me that here have been conflicts between her and the educational assistants in her class owing to dissimilar teaching philosophies and to different attitudes toward the children and what is
expected of them. Rachel recollects one such experience that involved her and an educational assistant. “We often didn’t find the time to sit down and discuss things, which only added to the tension. But I eventually had to tell him I couldn’t continue in that atmosphere.” Rachel acknowledges that in the past she might have kept quiet, but not now: “[M]y meditation practice [helps] me to be open and look [instead] of what I used to do push things away because they were too difficult” as she adds, “now I sit with what I want to look at.”

Rachel says she feels like a mother to her students, someone who can provide caring, love, tenderness and safety. “It’s important to me that the children who come here feel safe and loved and that they have their needs met as best as possible, the love they receive should be unconditional.”

One of the effects of Rachel’s regular meditation practice is that it enables her to focus on the contents of her mind even while she is busy teaching in the classroom, which she refers to as “embodiment of mindfulness.” This embodiment may characterize Rachel’s overall approach to the interactional moments with her students. As a result, she feels she is able to respect and meet the needs of each of her students in a meaningful way. The following journal entry illustrates her “embodiment of mindfulness” in relationship to being “in the moment”:

A female student who has been in my class for two years enjoys ending each day by taking a picture symbol off the felt board and hiding it nearby in an obvious place. I have been playing along with her little prank for many days, but one day it got old all of a sudden and I didn’t want to play along. I couldn’t seem to connect to my playful side at that particular moment. I felt agitated and wished she would stop repeating the same tedious action over and over again. Then suddenly something woke me up. I realized that this activity was important to her. We as teachers provide the students with structure and repetition to give them the psychological and emotional support they require to function in the world. Suddenly I saw that this was an opportunity to be present with this student, to join
her in her joyful trickery. To be present in the moment means to be present with whatever is happening in that moment. That’s what I’m here for, what I strive for. This student was communicating with me in a tender, playful, predictable way and I realized I had to find a respectful way to meet her there. It was a sweet moment of connection. I have learned to recognize when I am rushing on to the next moment instead of resting in the present moment. I have learned also to recognize when I am caught up in my own impatience rather than seeing my impatience as an indication that it’s time to return to being present, and to connect with the students.

Consistent with her Buddhist philosophy, Rachel believes in the inherent goodness of all people, herself included. She says she believed as much even before she began meditating but was unable to articulate the idea. This is where meditation has had its greatest impact on her, providing her the language to express herself. She explains it is “a way of being,” of “dwelling peacefully.” Rachel attributes this “knowledge or wisdom” to her Buddhist philosophy and ongoing mindfulness practice. She informs me that since she began meditating, she has been better able to communicate her thoughts and feelings whenever conflicts arise between herself and her assistants in the classroom, whereas in the past, she remained silent. “Choosing to remain voiceless didn’t make sense to me, and yet I didn’t know how to express myself. Thanks to my Buddhist study and meditation, I’m now able to articulate my thoughts and views.”

Rachel stresses that mindfulness is the key to understanding oneself. Through her meditation practice, she is able to tap into and harness her intuitive wisdom—her “authentic knowledge”—as well as realize her own basic goodness and that of others. In the following passage, she talks about imbuing her relationships with her students and colleagues with attention and loving-kindness:
I now have the confidence to be open with people and that includes being open to their total goodness. This attitude allows me to explore myself and ensure that communication is kept open. In fact, my meditation has opened more pathways of communication. I feel as if I can function in the world at any level with my family, with my children, with my work, you know, with *everything*.

Rachel’s confident attitude and particular approach to teaching children with autism are, at times, at odds with the expected protocol and mandated curriculum. Her pedagogical practice is based on two elements: one, her vision of an “educational goal of student self-empowerment”; and two, her ability to invoke drala whenever she requires strength and courage to deal with problems that deal with the tension of teaching a group of children identified with ASD. With diligence and patience, she embraces and recognizes her students as unique individuals by embodying loving-kindness.

I want the children in my class to become self-aware, self-motivated and self-regulated. They have difficulty communicating what their needs are and making choices. In order to know how to proceed, it’s essential that I be able to look within them. I keep coming up against people who emphasize the importance of structure in a child’s development whereas what we need to do is look at them as individuals and proceed from there. Thanks to my meditation practice, I’m clear about what I am doing and why I am doing it.

I look at the children as individuals and how they relate to me, to each other, and to the group as a whole. Some of these relationships are non-verbal and don’t always fit into scheduled activities. The important thing is that I be aware of what they’re showing me and what their needs are.

At length she discusses her meditation practice and how it relates to the pedagogical process. She shares an illuminating story about the magic of gentleness and her “authentic presence,” which strengthens the trust she and her students have for each other.
There was one particular little boy who last year was at school one day a week in an intensive one-on-one program. He kicked and scratched and sometimes even bit some of the adults. His behaviour, in other words, was strongly negative and attention-seeking. I was told he liked certain things such as ice cream, etc., and initially I offered these to him. But he always said “no.” In fact he said no to everything, and angrily. His adult supervisor tried to make him comply with what she thought was best. I didn’t agree with her approach. It seemed to me that our job as teachers was to try to show him – through our actions and everything we were doing—that we cared and that there was scope for positive connections. This meant we had to ignore a lot of his negative behaviour. I felt instinctively that was the way to go. So that’s what we did. It took a long time, and there are still some issues remaining, but there have been clear signs of progress. One day I said to him: “Oh, do you want to go for a ride in the wagon?” and he said “yes.” Well, I nearly fainted, because I had never heard him say “yes” before. Gradually he began to see that he could tell us what he needed and what he wanted. All of this shows that being compassionate and tender-hearted toward someone makes it possible for that person to open up to others, and to himself. There’s still a long way to go in this particular case, but he’s very sweet now and even, at times, affectionate.

By summoning up her genuine goodwill and good heartedness through her daily practice, Rachel is able mentally to slow down to deal with whatever arises in the classroom without passing judgment. She emphasizes that vipashyana makes it possible for her to contemplate and bear witness with openness and tenderness:

When I sit during my meditation practice, I often consider and examine what has happened in the classroom. I also sit with my own personal awareness of a specific child or a family or something I’m struggling with when teaching. I sit in awareness, too, of my relationships, such as my interactions with the staff. By practising meditation regularly, I’m able to experience and honour whatever arises, even if it initially appears to be difficult and uncomfortable.
When asked what principles govern her teaching, she immediately replies: “respect” supported by dharma teachings. Rachel notes that by respecting her students, she demonstrates awareness of them and their needs. She also stresses the importance of “generosity of spirit,” which she defines as going out of one’s way to address the needs of other students and non-students alike in a life-affirming way.

Rachel makes a persistent effort to be positive and perceptive when working with her students and colleagues, something she says does not always come easily. Teaching gives her a chance to *practise* mindfulness with students and colleagues, reaping the benefits of formal meditation. The following remarks refer to the tension Rachel sometimes encounters when working with certain children, and how she dissolves that tension in an affirming manner.

Some of the children I work with tend to be unaware of the needs of the other children, and that’s because they’re focused on their own needs and how to fulfill them. I constantly try to demonstrate the importance of being aware of others. I do this by encouraging them to play together, to take turns, and to share in the storytelling experience. I try to allow each of them sufficient space to be individuals, but I also encourage them to be part of a larger group, which is also important.

One of Rachel’s goals as a teacher is to help her students communicate, express their needs, make choices, and be self-determining whenever possible. Before they can reach that stage, they need to learn basic life skills such as grooming, cooking, organization and more. She also teaches her students to be independent in basic life skill such as eating, toileting and dressing. As a public employee of a large school board, she also has to ensure that she is delivering the curriculum and meeting the mandates required by that board. It is a requirement that children with ASD be taught the alphabet, and how to read simple words and recognize numbers, thus enabling them to function academically. This is not the same as teaching children
how to become academically proficient, which is the larger goal of the school, and yet academic skills are not ignored in Rachel’s classroom. Her general approach is to teach to the whole child by addressing all of his or her needs and abilities including social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual on a moment-by-moment, day-by-day, naturally.

Rachel’s students are non-verbal, which may be why she prefers to empower them by teaching functional competency and social-emotional adjustment as opposed to academic proficiency alone. Moreover, she feels it is imperative that she and others see the students as individuals. Put another way, recognizing the students’ birthright as individual human beings takes precedence over recognition of their academic performance. Rachel defends her position by explaining that through non-verbal choice-making her students are often able to bring their own personal energy and ways to comprehend the task at hand. “They have power within themselves,” she says, “and part of what we’re doing here is uncovering that power rather than just directing it in some preconceived way.”

While Rachel recognizes the value of teaching academic skills to her students, she is aware that the mandated curriculum goals with emphasis on academic skills alone are often incongruent with her teaching philosophy, which involves working “with an underlying integrity as to what we’re doing. We’re not just going through the motions, like teaching the children to do things they’re not yet ready to do. I’ve seen that happen and it only creates difficulties.”

Rachel’s contemplative pedagogy of practice is supported by her holistic philosophy and acknowledges all her students have an innate capacity to engage in learning in a way that that suits them. This self-motivating approach should be cultivated and nourished even though it may not always conform to ministry guidelines. She also mentions that “the principal told me my approach has influenced her ideas about what is important in teaching.”
Rachel believes it is important that teachers address non-academic concerns as well as academic ones. For example, if a student exhibits behavior that might harm others, the teacher should intervene to ensure safety. Rachel calls this “pro social action.” Rachel explains that sometimes the children are physically aggressive because of an inability to communicate verbally. As the teacher of the classroom she must ensure “no one gets hurt, child or adult.” Wanting everyone safe means [demonstrating and encouraging] “pro social values.”

When asked what qualities she would like her students to aspire to, she reiterates the concept of existing “in the moment.” The curriculum has value, but often expectations involve rhetoric that does not translate into meaningful outcomes to support genuine pedagogical exchanges that reflect authentic learning. Her response to the TDSB’s Character Education initiative is:

Character development is a great idea, but when you formalize it, you knock the power out of it and turn it into something mechanical. For me, it’s more a matter of what arises in the moment and whether or not the student becomes more self-aware. What are the children bringing to that moment? That’s what meditation should do: teach you to be in the moment, as opposed to something more structured or prescribed.

She adds that what works best for her is “spontaneity.” The teachable moment, for her, is a combination of heightened perception of the event at hand, self-awareness and past experience. This is in addition, of course, to what the ‘children themselves bring to the moment”—all of which, according to Rachel, is part of the natural process of developing one’s character.

For Rachel, “being in the moment” as mindfulness is:

[The person is] aware, of one’s mind as well as one’s heart. The mind and the heart are actually the same thing, though in the West we tend to think of them as separate. When I speak of mindfulness, I’m also speaking [not only] of
awareness—of self—but also of compassion and connection with oneself and with others. That’s all part of mindfulness.

IV. Summarizing Rachel’s Story

While Rachel acknowledges that meditation can be useful for teachers, she points out that it is an extremely personal journey, and an individual decision one should only make independently. She sees the practice as one that encourages for taking responsibility for one’s thoughts, words and actions and self-initiative in supporting the education of all aspects of the child. Rachel’s personal meditation practice enables her to deepen her self-awareness and gives her the confidence to deal with any uncomfortable or unpleasant matters that may arise supporting more authentic and meaningful pedagogical relationships in the classroom.

Rachel sees herself as an educator to guide her students and provide opportunities for them to grow and become more self-aware. This includes supporting them academically to enhance their cognitive abilities, as well as to cultivate positive interpersonal social and emotional skills. She describes her teaching philosophy as “holistic” in that it aims to educate the whole child. Unlike Sam, who says he is there to “steer them in the right direction,” Rachel sees her responsibility as one to educate and model appropriate academic and non-academic skills and behaviour to empower her students identified with ASD. She believes that her students “need to take ownership of their learning experience so that the learning becomes a personalized spiritual journey.”

Rachel’s story reveals her sensitive, thoughtful approach through her holistic contemplative delivery of educating the students in her care. She notes the tensions that arise between what she is hired to do and what she does often due to on a lack of time or hurriedness in the school day that does not allow for genuine communication amongst staff who work with
the students. Rachel also points to the rigidity of the curriculum expectations that are often at incongruent with truly being respectful of the child irrespective of academic performance.

By using mindfulness in the form of shamatha vipashyana to maintain clam and balance, Rachel incorporates various other “contemplative techniques such as tonglen, to cultivate compassion, and drala to invoke fearlessness to support meaningful engagement with others. Rachel practices shamatha vipashyana to heighten her awareness of her thoughts and feelings and sensations which she embodies in her pedagogical relationships. Discriminating when working with children and colleagues, Rachel’s ongoing meditation practice supports and fine tunes her self-awareness while it supports inter personal relationships—a place she endeavours to make caring meaningful connections with the people she encounters.

Rachel’s meditation practice and her understanding of dharma gives shape to her ontological and epistemological map, which guides her ethos and practice of being a holistic contemplative educator. Her insight into the natural connectedness of life further supports her “generosity of spirit” when she teaches which further speaks to the power of meditation to that contributes to her innate wisdom. Regular meditation practice allows her to re-enter her classroom each day with a renewed attentiveness, sense of calm and purpose. She refers to the “letting go” of thoughts and their impermanent nature in the continual flow of consciousness as embodied knowing in the classroom.

The reciprocal relationship of Rachel’s formal meditation as a “life-affirming practice,” along with her personal philosophy of education supports her teaching pedagogy. Meditation provides her the “special place to practice,” and teaching provides her the opportunity to put her practice into practise with grace, humility and unconditional love for her students.
CHAPTER SIX
MEENA

I. Introducing Meena

Meena was born in the Indian state of Punjab. At eight years old, she moved with her family moved to England, and three years later they immigrated to Toronto. Like Sam, she notes that she entered the profession in a roundabout way: “I became a teacher because I wanted to understand how our bodies and minds learn.” Her personal experiences of attending public school in Toronto since age 11 influenced her holistic teaching practices in general. Meena began teaching for a large public school board in the fall of 2006, when she was hired to teach mathematics and computer science at the secondary level.

Following her own high school years, Meena graduated from Ryerson University with a degree in Computer Programming. Shortly after, she found employment as a software programmer, where she worked for approximately five years. Although she found the work was “interesting,” it was also terribly “isolating.” While employed as a software programmer Meena got married and had two children. Following the disintegration of her marriage and a divorce in 1995, she left her job as a software programmer. Meena became the primary caregiver for her two young children, and found part-time work as an artist and therapist. She returned to academia in 2004, earning a Master of Teaching with secondary certification from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto. I made contact with Meena through a colleague at the University of Toronto, and she agreed to be a participant in this research. She is the sole participant in this research who teaches at the secondary level.
II. School

Meena teaches math and computer science to students in Grades 9 and 10 at a high school in Toronto’s East End. Established in 1927, the school now serves approximately 1,600 students. Meena tells me the school is ethnically diverse, with about half the students identifying themselves as “visible minorities.” Unlike other teachers in this study, Meena does not have a home-room class; instead she rotates among two computer science and three mathematics classes, teaching five different sets of students in the course of a one-week cycle.

At Meena’s school students earn credits for their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) by fulfilling the required semester courses. That means Meena sees about 120 students per week. This, combined with various time constraints due to scheduling, leaves Meena with only 70 minutes for each class of 25 students with whom she works. Meena says this teaching model is not ideal for developing in-depth relationships, but she believes interpersonal teaching can still be achieved. She tells me that meditation brings her much closer to reaching this goal. In her words: “Meditation has taught me the importance of connecting with every child every day, and that makes a huge difference in their learning path.”

III. Meditation

Meditation offers Meena an opportunity to “commune” with herself. It allows her to “awaken” her senses and get in touch with both her physical being and the world around her. She considers it her “spiritual anchor”:

It’s the only way I know how to put it all down spiritually, to try to find Mother Earth under my feet and in my body. It allows me to get out of my head and into my physical body. That’s why I meditate.
Meena’s daily meditation practice began in the summer of 1996, when she travelled to Rajasthan, India, to attend a 10-day Goenka meditation retreat. She has been meditating regularly ever since. Her initial experience at the retreat in Rajasthan unlocked the door for Meena; she discovered the way to access her “intuitive knowledge”:

It was a time in my life when I took learning by the horns. I was single and had some extra money. I had always lived a protective, sheltered life. My father was controlling. I decided to leave home. I realized I needed to develop skills for living alone and for being with myself. I was searching. Who do I want to be? Where do I want to be? That was when I started meditating.

Meena initiates her practice by focusing solely on breathing. She adds that there are no mantras involved in this practice.

My dad is weary of religions and considers them “hokey-pokey.” I guess that attitude stayed with me. I’m a scientist, which is why I practice vipassana […] [T]hat appealed to me. There is no goddess, no god, no mantra. It’s just a matter of listening to your breathing. I thought: “Yeah. I breathe all the time. I’ll just sit here and listen. So that’s what I started with. I did that for some years. I sometimes attend weekend meditation retreats but not as often. When my kids get older I want to go back to Goenka.

A. Vipassana

Meena informs me that she practises “vipassana meditation” with her breath as the focal point, saying “that this was what the “Buddha taught.” She says that when she meditates, she “watches” her breath and counts while inhaling. “I’ll say Meena, breathe once, twice, before you think of what you are going to say […] I’m just negotiating better and breathing a little more, therefore handling the many firefights that occur in the school.” She explains: “Observing my
breath is soothing and calming, it slows down the thoughts in my head.” Meena makes the effort to meditate daily, though she admits her regular practice lapses from time to time.

Meena begins her morning with a silent sitting meditation in her home, which lasts 20-30 minutes prior to the start of her workday. Meditation serves as a counter-balance to the demands, interruptions and pressure of her job. By meditating prior to her workday, she is able to bring a sense of equilibrium to the challenges she inevitably encounters. In the following two excerpts, Meena discusses how she uses her breath to slow down her discursive crowded fast-paced mind, to bring more spaciousness, balance and calm, but more importantly a new perspective to the immediacy of the moment.

Entry # 1

All kinds of busy thoughts are running through my head: lessons for the day, photocopying the Grade 10 test. My head is flooded with thoughts as I sit on my stool. I feel the weight of my breath in my body. I am mindful of taking in the breath while counting from 1 to 10. This stills the thoughts that keep creeping into my mind. I feel still, relaxed. After 20 minutes I feel slowed down, physically heavy. My mind is not so busy.

Entry #2

I woke up at 5:00 a.m. today in order to mark math homework. I’m relieved to be sitting at 6:45 a.m. while the house is still and asleep. My mind is busy with the school work […] Random thoughts go through my head…school, the family. I go back to breathing. I breathe out and then count from 1 to 10 as I breathe in. This stops the “busy-ness” of my mind. I go from breathing, stillness, feeling peace, to a sense of new beginning. My meditation feels like a womb – warm and safe. Nothing can touch me here. At the end of my sitting, I decide to lead with my heart not my ego.
By meditating before she goes to school, Meena is able to face the storm of activity that routinely hits her when she first enters the school building and then her classroom. She notes that while the events around her do not change, her reaction to them does:

I breathe […] I will speak to myself […] and then pause before I speak. I tend to negotiate a little better after I have meditated and I use my breath a little more […] I feel calm, generous and kind to myself and to those around me. Conversely, on days when I don’t meditate I’m snappy.

Meena says teaching high school is tough for a number of reasons, including having to deal with “big kids with big attitudes.” She goes on to say that sometimes she purposefully avoids eye contact with students as a way of avoiding confrontation as noted in this journal entry following her early morning meditation:

Entry #3

After my meditation this morning I feel more calm, in the moment. I am a solid boat in a turbulent ocean with issues at hand in my classroom. I walked to school feeling the elements of the weather surround me. I had reported a bullying incident on Friday. Today related paper work awaits me. I feel relaxed, focused, and clear in my body. I chose to walk in the middle of the crowded hallway claiming my space among the teenagers. I am relaxed, clear and in touch with my breath. I feel positive about my decision to report the incident.

Entry #4

I am walking in the hallway of the school this morning, remembering that previously, when I had not meditated in the morning, I would walk around the students, timidly, avoiding any physical outbursts. This morning after meditating I feel slowed down, steady, anchored on my feet, and in touch with my breath. I walk right in the middle of the hallway. I don’t try to avoid the students; they see
me coming and move out of the way. What a difference! I am holding my own space calmly and confidently.

Meena pays attention to her feelings, her felt sense and notices how she is carrying herself when she enters the school. She explains in more detail how meditation helps her:

[It] break down the process […] I breathe when I don’t know what to do […] just breathe don’t think […] that is the hard part because the mind wants to think […] I say to myself M. just breathe […] you don’t know what to do […] And what comes up is more intelligent than my forced thinking thoughts […] In the western sense headstrong dealing with it is not often the way to go […] even though I understand the situation I must contemplate […] meditate […] see what burbles up […] listen to the gurglings […] you know it may sound hokey […] but I listen to the universe for signs.

B. Contemplation

Meena informs me that sometimes her during formal meditation practice, she will contemplate a particular incident that took place in class in order to gain deeper insight into what transpired. When she deliberately does this work, she reflects on the thoughts that arise and pass. Meena tells me breathing allows her to maintain a balance and clam and heightens her senses while she watches the events of the day speak to her. By doing this she gains insight into the problem, and then is able to face the challenge

She also shares that sometimes during meditation she may send a “white light” out to a student who is experiencing personal difficulties such as dealing with death or sickness or a personal conflict. Meena notes that like adults students too, deal with personal issues that can compromise their behaviour, attitudes and actions in the classroom. If she has had a difficult encounter with a particular student she sends out this light during meditation. This practice also
helps subside some of the negativity or angry feelings she unknowingly may be holding toward a student. Meena also sends out white light while working with her students, especially those she sees as suffering. Meena goes on to say that “meditation” helps her start each day with a clean slate, putting yesterday’s conflicts aside and helping her curb negativity or angry feelings she unknowingly be holding toward a student.

C. Meditation and Teaching

A good teacher, according to Meena, is one who “tries to find a way into every child’s heart. I try to ignite a light within the student, to help him see something he can aspire towards.” She emphatically states:

We school children in order to create a successful capitalist society. If children did not go to schools, mommies and daddies couldn’t go to work. Schooling plays a role in our economy.” She further states; “schooling is not necessarily good for all children […] it’s a child jail! […]We make the children sit in rows and chairs.

Referring to her current school as an example, she notes: “We’re highly automated and organized here, but we have to be highly organized in order to control so many children […] but not all children succeed in school.” On the other hand, Meena sees her role as an educator as one that “lead[s]” or guides her students:

What is means to teach is [starting] with the first sentence […] I can only take someone as far as I have gone myself. In order for me to be a good teacher, I need to know how to learn myself. I need to light the path for my students. I’m leading them somewhere. I’m not here to fill their minds with thoughts; I’m trying to awaken them so they will learn and look and smell and find their own way. I’m trying to get them to sample bits and pieces. I always say a journey of a thousand
miles starts with a single step. I’m just helping them to take that step. That’s all I or anyone can ever do. My meditation practice helps me do this.

She regrets her own personal experience with the public education system, which she said did not make her feel like part of the larger school community. Building a caring classroom community takes precedence over curriculum for her. She notes that today, kids come from such diverse backgrounds, including blended families living outside the school neighbourhood, and many have additional responsibilities, like caring for younger siblings or sick family members:

I feel it’s important for me to have a place where they can come and feel [at home]. In high school we don’t have home rooms; we all subject-oriented […] a child feeling out of sorts in high school they have nowhere to go […] that’s a mistake.

While Meena is assigned to give lessons in math and computer science, she tells me, “I try to nurture the whole child because every child needs nurturing outside of the subject matter.” It is her belief that education should be a two-way street, benefitting both student and teacher. In this regard, she would like her students to have a fuller appreciation of life and life skills. As a teacher, she attempts to steer the pedagogical process pragmatically so that it is applicable in the real world:

I have learned thorough meditation and my journey as an artist, therapist, software programmer, and mother that life is only lived in the moment. It’s forever changing, and so I want to teach my students how to be malleable and adaptable. I want to help them develop their thirst for knowledge. It’s not matter of my saying learn this or learn that. What I try to do is teach each of them is how to learn. This is critical in terms of awakening them.
“Awakening” for Meena means becoming aware of one’s affective states and the ability to support one’s self: “I want the students to be in touch with their emotions, whether they’re feeling happy, sad, tired or just silly. I want them to be in touch with their physical bodies and emotional states.” Meena explains this further with an illustration of an impatient student calling out for her assistance (Note: “S” stands for the student, and the “M” for Meena.):

S. Miss, miss, miss…I called you four times…over here miss.

M. You know […] I heard you the first time […] I’ve responded […] I hear you the second time […] you’ve said it four times […] please be aware that I am helping somebody […] Now in your heart think, call to me with kindness […] you’re calling me in this desperate way […] and its very anxiety-provoking. (He then says).

S. Miss I hear you […] that’s been about a month ago […] every time that boy speaks to me now, he says, Miss you kind soul, when you have time can you come to help me.

This has a powerful impact on Meena: “[E]verytime he sees me, he smiles […] He asks Miss how are you […] he shares love every time […] and I think okay that’s one person that’s turned around.”

Meena’s early morning meditation offers her a chance to witness her feelings and emotions while she contemplates. She tells me that through her personal discovery in she is able to better understand and appreciate the needs of her students and “tenderly” also helps them recognize their own. She mentions that she often shares her former stories of employment and travel with her students. Meena does so as part of what she sees as a “holistic” approach to teaching in general, which speaks to her commitment to educating her students for living in the real world.
In addition to life experience, Meena values her personal introspection and continual learning, all of which contributes to the “awakening” process for herself and her students.

Meena continues to draw connections between daily her meditation practice and teaching as she expresses here:

Meditation influences my teaching in a huge way! Teaching is very busy, especially with 25 kids and frequent announcements. I have experimented with my meditation practice and schedule. About a month ago, I went several days went without meditating. On the last day of this experiment, a kid said to me, “Miss, you know, you’re not the same. Are you okay? You don’t seem to be in a good mood.” Children notice things from eye contact (or lack of it) and I guess I wasn’t paying attention to some of them or I was snappy. But when meditation is part of my daily routine, I make it a point to talk to every child in my class, to look into his or her eyes. I’ve learned, from meditation, that that is important to find some way to make contact.

Meena tells me meditation attunes her to the tone of voice and body language by enabling her to send out a certain kind of energy—a “presence,” as she calls it. Being a sensitive person, Meena is conscious of the kind of energy or presence she radiates when she is teaching and how this, in turn, alters the dynamics of the classroom and the manner in which she engages with students in general:

I have a sense my body language, my voice, my enunciation. When a child says “Miss” and I say “excuse me, may I help you?” As soon as I open my mouth, he or she can sense whether I’m curt or upset or what-have-you. Of course, sometimes I am upset, as in “Whoa! I’m asking you for the third time put that down!”
Aware of the way she carries and presents herself, as well as how she speaks to her students determines how they respond to her, Meena states:

How I approach someone is important. If I have to talk to a student about a private matter, I’m not going to tower over him or her. I will pull up a chair sit next to that student, and then talk. There’s no top dog and underdog. For the most part, I like to be level with the kids, and I have to be very mindful of a level relationship and how I use my voice when I am speaking to the student.

Meena further adds that her physical presence and position influences the dynamics of the class. She likes to circulate around the room when teaching:

I try experience what it must be like to be a student in my class. I try sitting where they sit and look around at the room. This gives me empathy and insight. I’ll say to myself: “Oh, this person sits in the back row; that’s how the board appears to him.” Since I’m normally at the front teaching, it’s necessary that I move around as this helps me gain awareness of the students’ perspectives. From my meditation I’ve learned that I need to keep working on my awareness in the classroom if I’m to become a more effective teacher.

Meena tells me that meditation reminds her to connect with every child because contact “makes a huge difference in their learning path.” She credits her heightened awareness, presence and ability to witness her own moods in the classroom to her disciplined practice of meditation, stressing that she is fortunate this year as her working day commences with a planning and preparation period at the school that follows her morning meditation. This opportune timing in her school schedule has been beneficial for both her and her students. Starting her day with a meditation practice, followed by planning for her teaching day—both help to support her “overall mental health and well-being,” while enabling her to be more productive with her lesson
planning. More importantly, they allow her to pay “closer attention to academic and well-being needs of her students.”

By meditating daily, Meena says she can remember to relate to her students as equal members of the classroom community. She believes that in order for the teaching and learning exchange to be authentic, she and her student need to be equal partners. She states that her ability to be less judgmental of her students is a direct result of the meditation process—sitting non-judgmentally in silence, being aware of her breath, and witnessing the thoughts and feelings that arise and pass. She explains:

I see each student for 70 minutes each day for five months, and as a result of my meditation, I’m acutely aware of them when I’m in the class. Yesterday I noticed one student was unusually quiet, so I asked her if anything was wrong and she replied that her father was in the hospital recovering from an operation. Such exchanges remind me that the students like me, have a lot on their minds too.

Meena measures pedagogical success as a teacher in numerous ways. Apart from cultivating meaningful relationships, she acknowledges that she needs to be well prepared, because she is responsible for “bringing the subject matter to life” for the students. That requires expertise and experience. Meena tries to inspire her students by “raising the bar” because, in her words, “nobody rises to low expectations.” She believes a lesson is successful only if the students are engaged and trusting, and that will happen only if it is taught in a flexible fashion.

Flexibility in Meena’s teaching approach allows for a variety of “co-operative partnerships” to complete assignments. As a holistic teacher, she acknowledges it is important that her students stay engaged with the subject and make an effort to complete assignments and adapt to this need when necessary. She concedes that certain concepts in math and computer science can be difficult to grasp, and that some students do not have the foundational experience
to get through the assigned mandated curriculum. In such cases, she knows she “must move with the moment” and make an effort to “read her students.” If it is apparent they are not grasping the lesson, she stops and proposes an alternative plan, depending on how they are responding:

I ask them, should we work in groups? If it’s apparent we need to work in groups, then that’s what we do. No child needs to sit and struggle alone. I may put students in groups of four, three, two, and sometimes have them work independently, depending on what the situation calls for. To meet each child’s needs and make the learning experience meaningful I have to adapt day by day, moment my moment, continuously.

Meena also measures a student’s academic success in numerous ways. One method is by measuring by how at-ease a student is with any given subject, and of course, by how much he/she has improved in the subject by year’s end. She points out that academic success is not necessarily reflected in high grades, per se. She measures success in terms of how engaged a student is and whether or not students persevere with the subject at hand. Meena tells me that while teaching, she is constantly “checking in with herself”: Do they want to be here? Are they comfortable learning? Are they following what I am saying? She describes her pedagogy as “holistic” and “contemplative,” which she explains by example:

I’ll tell a student that if you’re not having fun and you’re not feeling good, something’s wrong. If a student is “unsorted,” I may give him a “hall pass” and suggest he go for a walk. My students are between 14 and 16 years old. Those are difficult years. I’m teaching them to be self-observant and to take notice of what’s going on inside. I tell them a wise man asks for a break; an un-wise one throws a temper tantrum.

Meena acknowledges that almost all opportunities given to students in schools are attached to formal graded success criteria. In her view using grades as a means of measuring
academic achievement does little to support the many students who are struggling. Meena goes on to say if student’s efforts go unrecognized and he/she receives a C or a D, then that student is unlikely to aspire towards anything higher. Meena tries to encourage students to take chances. It is her view, that “when kids are not being judged that they’re likely to take academic chances. It’s only then that the “sleeping giant” can be awoken. To illustrate this point, she shares the following anecdotes:

I had a student in my Grade 10 applied math class. I said to him: “AJ, you’re very bright. I see the way you work. Why did you take applied math?” He replied, “Miss, I was different last year. I skipped a lot and didn’t bother with my school work. I’m different now. I really want to try.” I also knew that AJ wanted to go into architecture, for which academic math is a requirement. So I phoned his dad and told him that if AJ worked in the summer at boosting his skills in math, then he would be able to get into academic math next year. AJ enrolled in summer school math and in September of the following year he joined his grade for academic math. I do a lot of career counselling in my classes because of my own career experiences. I had another Grade 12 student say to me: “Miss, school only caters to the university kids. They don’t cater to people who want to go to college or people who don’t want either.” I said, “You are so right,” so we talked about apprenticeship programs that might be of interest to her.

Meena stresses to all her students that they have options in life and assures them that she will support them in whatever choices they make.

We have to bring life education into our classrooms. The problem is we’re all sectioned. You’re geography, I’m math, he’s history, you get a B, he gets a C, and so on. Real life is not compartmentalized that way. Meditation makes me realize that I need a deeper thrust in my teaching than just teaching the subject matter and assigning grades.
When Meena discusses formal assessment, it is clear she finds the methods for promoting academic success in high school to be counter-intuitive to real authentic learning. In her opinion, public education and for that matter all education should provide students the means and support they need to succeed in school in a much more holistic fashion than it currently does. Schools should also be preparing students to engage meaningfully in the “real world.”

Meena tells me she often tries to give her students a break with what she calls “love-enlightened permission.” To have a mutually engaging relationship with her students, she needs their participatory input into the lesson plan. By encouraging “joint-decision making,” she teaches her students about “democracy,” where they have an opportunity to voice their concerns or opinions on how the lesson will take shape. While she comes to class with a prepared lesson, she remains flexible and responsive to the needs and suggestions of her students and will alter her lesson plan and delivery to accommodate her students and the particularity of the moment.

With 70 minutes for each class, Meena is able to teach in chunks of time, allotting a portion of time for teaching, time for students to actually do the work, as well as some spare time in which the students can relax a bit. She believes it is “unconstitutional” for an institute to expect students to be totally engaged for every 70-minute class. In her view, while many of her students are more or less self-driven, they may not all be self-driven at the same time. If a student asks her for a “spare today,” she may very well say “yes”—if she knows that student is generally well-engaged with assigned work. Meena acknowledges that her class is “ahead of everybody else in terms of success rates,” adding that “to prove it, I have the marks, I have the results, and I have the attendance.”

Teaching teenagers at the high school level has unique challenges that differ from teaching children in elementary grades. For example, in high school, it is not uncommon for
students to text each other or leave the school premises during a spare and not return to class. Meena believes that one of her priorities is simply to keep her students in the classroom. The way to do this is to ensure the students are happy, know they are respected and welcome in her room. She remarks: “My classroom is a sacred space. When you enter my room, I honour you. I will not ask why are you here? Even if you are not supposed to be there, I will welcome you and invite you in.”

As mentioned above, if one day a student does not feel compelled to engage in the mathematics work, Meena gives the student permission to bow out but asks that he or she nonetheless attend class. She explains:

They know that I, too, have bad days when I might not want to show up for work or do anything, but the important thing is to keep the lines of communication open and, if possible, attend the class. I tell them, you can sit, sleep, or read, or do whatever it is you need to do in the classroom. I will give you the space to be. I will honour your needs.

Meena knows that half the battle for high-school teachers is getting the students to class and then keeping them there. She tells me schools with high attendance rates are regarded favourably by the school board, local community and parents. Although she is hired to teach mathematics and computer science, she also feels responsible for helping her students be conscientious of their responsibilities to her and themselves in the pedagogical exchange. Yet she is also sympathetic to the demands and pressures placed them by schools: “It’s essential to recognize that students have ‘sorted’ and ‘un-sorted’ days just like everyone else.” A wise teacher acknowledges this and deals with the student mindfully. While a student may initially not want to come to class, if no pressure exerted, he or she will surprisingly come to the class. The
student may even learn something from the lesson since he or she has been given permission to sit in class, relax, and be free from formal expectations and constraints.

Meena affirms that building and maintaining solid trusting relationships with her students is vital for their success in learning, as well as a more rewarding state for her as a teacher. Meena makes a point of inquiring after them in a caring yet unobtrusive manner. She reiterates that her regular meditation practice has helped her be a more diligent and nurturing teacher when engaging with students in a much more nurturing manner. In her own words:

I remember to connect with them with *compassion and kindness*, and they notice and remember this. I feel like I need to get to know them in order for me to really be effective in their learning. They come to learn math, geography, etc., but there is a deeper connection. Some of my students come back to visit and ask just to sit in the class. *There may be better math teachers than myself, but the personal contact makes a huge difference. Meditating helps remind me that we are on this journey together.*

Like all students, Meena’s have a diverse set of needs. To find ways to reach and teach each and every one of them, she attempts to demonstrate that she supports them in a variety of ways. While she does not pry into the personal lives of her students, she does try to cultivate a more personable rather than merely pedantic relationship. “When it’s clear to them that I care about what’s happening in their lives, they really come on board, and by that I mean they come to class and do the math.” For Meena, the effort she puts into maintaining personal connections with her students is rewarded by their overall engagement with their assignments, and with her as their teacher.

For Meena, meaningful pedagogical relationships can only occur if the teacher genuinely loves teaching and the students she teaches. As Meena aptly puts it, “it’s all about love. It’s about the ‘big love.’ Once they feel my big love, they open up and start sharing their own love.” Love
is a big part of teaching that is rarely discussed, Meena says, adding: “We stress it in our mother-child relationships, but we don’t stress it in the teacher-student relationship.”

When I ask Meena if she thinks it is her responsibility as a teacher to try to instill particular qualities in her students, she responds in the affirmative. She hopes to instill in them a more thoughtful way of socially engaging through the use of responsible language, respectful tone of voice, and so on. She observes the students carefully when she is teaching, noting their actions and reactions particularly to her. Meena sums up teaching in the following way:

*Teaching is all about being mindful*—mindful of what I’m saying, how I’m saying it, what I’m not saying, etc. It’s about making eye contact with the students and not calling them out. The hardest thing for them to deal with is embarrassment. When I was younger, I myself was made to feel embarrassed by teachers for not knowing the answers to certain questions. When that happens, you wish there were a hole in the earth in which you could fall. So I’m very mindful of the importance of not embarrassing anyone. Regardless of the situation, there’s always an out. I tell my students; don’t feel stuck; we’ll work it out. As soon as someone doesn’t feel stuck, he starts looking for ways to figure things out. He doesn’t feel like a failure. Learning is based on confidence and wanting to try and wanting to take a risk. I try to create a caring place where students can come and feel a sense of safety and belonging. They know there’s a place for them. All children need nurturing outside of the subject matter being taught.

Meena says it’s crucial that she “check in” with her students before she teaches a lesson. “We address the issues of the day first,” she says. She is sensitive to the fact that there are times when individual student concerns take precedence over the impending math or computer science lesson she is about to deliver. Meena recounts an incident involving one anxious male pupil who
appeared disengaged. Meena stopped teaching and asked the pupil what was wrong. The following passage is the exchange between Meena (“M”) and that pupil (“P”):

**P.** Miss, you know what? I got a project due next period and if I don’t hand that in, I don’t think I’m going to make that class.

**M.** Whoa! Stakes are high. Thank you for being honest. Let me get everybody started; then you can tell me what you need for your project and I’ll help you. Write down what you need.

Meena adds:

I thus became a partner in his predicament. *Then the magic happened:* We hustled. […] together. So it’s not math, it’s not geography. But I think to myself: If I let this child know that I care about him and his whole academic performance, then he’ll realize that I care about him as a person. If and when a crisis arises, I say let’s put our heads together. It’s all about demonstrating how to create a caring loving community by working together.

Having said this, Meena acknowledges that things can go horribly wrong in a classroom and completely throw her off. However, the steadfast meditation practice enables her to see clearly what actions are required in a given situation. The following journal excerpt is of an unfavourable event that took place while Meena was running a computer lab. One of the students in the lab developed an allergic reaction to some cookies Meena had distributed:

Suddenly one student started to react. I used my breathing to calm myself and, using “self-talk,” said: “Okay, Meena, you can handle this.” I did all the right things. I called the office immediately. There was no Epipen and I informed them of this. I had my car at the school and said I could drive the student to the hospital. I was instructed to do so and the office would get someone to cover the class. When I returned, a student told me that another student had broken into my
computer and written some inappropriate comments. I immediately felt violated, I was angry, thinking to myself: Here I am handling a medical emergency and some smart aleck decides to get into my computer. I say to myself: I have to stay calm and think this through. What do I do? I try to get clarity in the heat of the moment. Then I just stopped and focused on my breath for a few minutes and began to contemplate the situation. I realized I needed to address the computer violation. Later that day, before I left school, I calmly wrote to the principal outlining the events. I found out who the student was and made a formal complaint against him. [The student will be referred to as Fazil]. The principal was aware of Fazil’s computer skills and technological know-how. The student was suspended for three days for using my computer and violating my rights.

Fazil was from Iraq and fairly new to the school. When he returned to school after the suspension, his dad, an engineer, came to apologize on behalf of his son and brought his son with him. Fazil is sweet, charming, charismatic, and tall. He got a lot of attention from other students and teachers in the school. I think he felt sorry for his actions. He realized what he had done, even though, at the time, he was just fooling around with the other boys and humouring them in the class. When he returned, I told him: I’m so glad you’re back, Fazil. We had a beautiful relationship from then on. I didn’t hold his actions against him, and we just moved on. Again, meditation [...] helped me break down the process and take the appropriate actions. At first, I didn’t know what to do and felt angry. But I had to overcome that anger and think calmly about what to do. Contemplating the problem and using my breathing exercises helped me make the wise decision. By the way, the child with the allergic reaction recovered completely.

In meditation, observing and understanding the situation supported Meena in this delicate matter. Like Sam and Rachel, the process of contemplation helped to witness her fluctuating emotions around the incident. Using her breath metaphorically, she brings space and distance to her immediate gut reaction, and then calmly makes the decision to report the incident. By aligning her daily meditation and holistic contemplative teaching practice, Meena gains a better
understanding of the immediate needs of her students, which subsequently guides her behaviour in the classroom. She feels there is a definite link between meditation, particularly her breath and breathing and her teaching practices:

*When I practice my breathing exercises, I tend to be conscious of what I’m feeling.* Sometimes I can lower my overall vibration with the breath; at other times, I may be struggling with that breath as a result of anxiety—but I’m aware that I’m struggling. Basically, my breath helps me get in touch both with myself and my students. When I see a student, I may ask him how he is doing, but all the while I’m reading his body language—breathing, eye movements. If I see a child sitting in a contracted posture, then I know there is probably something going on. Maybe he or she isn’t quite ready to talk about it, but at least I’m aware. Engaging with the students on an emotional level actually promotes learning. If I honour the students in this way, *they’ll let me bear witness to their struggles and invite me to share in them.*

Meena says she teaches her students how to not only “contemplate” math, but also to notice all the options. She does this when she notices the students are looking anxious and unsorted. She advises them to stay with it, breathe calmly or simply put down their pencils and ponder the problem. Sometimes she even has them take a five-minute break from the matter at hand. It is her belief that this by embracing problems openly and gently, students can learn to lower their anxiety and not feel so overwhelmed.

Being in high school itself can be difficult for some students, as Meena knows, and this in turn can make classroom management challenging for her as a teacher. By teaching her students how to *contemplate*, in the general sense, she is able to help them cope with the *welling emotions* that can result from anxiety. She assists them how to recognize these emotions. In doing she hopes they are better able to manage their behaviour appropriately.
Meena reaffirms that *practising* meditation has made her less rigid as a teacher and as a human being. “Too much structure can cause problems. Many of the teachers I work with are so friggin set in their ways that I have to ask myself: Where is the space for me in your world?” […]. “If I need to know something when I don’t know which way to turn […] I contemplate, meditate […] I breathe and then the answer comes.”

Meena explains this through a recollection of a shopping trip in the Beaches one long hot summer’s day last year. She had set out with her 11 year-old son to buy him a “desperately needed pair of shoes.” They had been walking in the heat for a few hours, tired and exhausted and unsuccessful with the shoe purchase. Quite exhausted, she said to her son, “I am going to sit down on that ledge of that house; I need to rest in that shade for a few minutes.” She sat with her son for a few minutes. After sometime had passed she realized it was a former neighbour’s home adjacent to she had rented many years ago. She wondered if the neighbours were still there and knocked on the door to find out:

Mr. Max was in a wheelchair. I [told him], I needed to rest and your house had a ledge so I sat down. How’s your wife? He said, she passed away three years ago. His mind was sharp as a whistle […] Can you believe it? […] Some 15 years I hadn’t seen them. He told me, my birthday is next week […] I told him you are going to be 95. I am coming over man and we are celebrating! *So that’s sign, the universe is telling me why I went to the Beaches...what a goofy thing going out on that hot hot day.* I told my son we go to the Beaches J. we didn’t get your shoes, but we saw Mr. Max I would never have thought of him unless I had to sit down on that ledge.

Meena reminds me that meditation helps her stop worrying about the unknowns. It helps stay present with the moment embracing it willingly, as she has illustrated in her example with Mr. Max. She attempts to carry and hold this intention when she engages with her students. She
does not have many aspirations for her students prior to the commencement of the academic term. Meena explains that her aspirations are anchored in her spiritual beliefs and that her specific objectives are open-ended and take shape as the school days unfold and the relationships between herself and her students mature over the course of the semester. She tacitly acknowledges “one big objective,” which is to make her students comfortable and treat them with respect. “I feel we learn best when we’re comfortable, when we’re respected, and, funnily enough, when we’re given a chance to fail. Life is about taking chances and making mistakes and learning from those mistakes; it’s not merely about getting marked or receiving an A.”

IV. Summarizing Meena’s Story

Meena’s story highlights that her daily meditation plays a pivotal role in her success as a holistic contemplative expert math and computer science teacher. In particular, the use of her breath provides her the space to distance herself from a conflict giving her the time, to pause, and slow down rapidly firing thoughts that enter into her mind.

High-school mathematics can be challenging and Meena has observed many students become apprehensive during mathematics classes. By positioning herself in different areas around the classroom, she attempts to view things from various perspectives of her students. She is then able to maintain the changing ebb and flow of her class and like in meditation, is able to observe and witness her students with gentleness, kindness and empathy. Teaching is a mirror reflection of her meditation, and thus is akin to what Sam and Rachel have also observed. While bearing this in mind, Meena she tries to promote a co-operative, democratic holistic contemplative pedagogical style by integrating as many aspects of her contemplative practice into teaching for a fuller integrated pedagogy to support her students more fully. Her ongoing vipassana practice with contemplative techniques such as positive imagery like a white light, or
contemplating with love helps her to maintain a more nurturing, empathetic stance when engaging with students.

Meena affirms that mediation can serve as “a survival tool” on so many levels, because in her words, “high school is often stressful for the teacher and student alike.” At the same time, she admits that ensuring that the needs of students are addressed, and that those students are respected and made to feel safe can be a tall order for her as a teacher, much like Sam. While Meena has specific subjects she is hired to teach and like Sam is responsible for a broader curriculum delivery, both she and Sam acknowledge that the compartmentalized and rigidity of scheduling and volume in content makes it next to impossible to be a success. This creates tension for her like it does Sam, but meditation helps. It makes Meena realize that she cannot do it all. Like Sam, she can only offer her best at any given moment in time. In this regard, Meena, like both Sam and Rachel, attempts to live up to her professional responsibilities to serve her students with the support of an ongoing meditation practice.

Meena sees meditation as an ongoing spiritual journey—something she continues to learn from day by day, moment by moment, breath by breath, just as she does as a professional educator. Her story demonstrates her practice of vipassana meditation is inextricably linked with her ethos of cultivating a caring and loving community of students both in and out of the classroom. This ethos that guides her teaching practices as a holistic contemplative educator and human being in the pedagogical exchange with her students.
CHAPTER SEVEN
DIANE

I. Introducing Diane

Diane works for the same large public school board that employs the other participants in this research study. I first met Diane when she was teaching Grade 3 in a public school situated in a middle-class neighbourhood in the city of Toronto. As was the case with Rachel and Sam, I met Diane through my role as a TEPA during my doctoral studies. Diane’s interest in meditation inspired her to participate in this research as one of the research participants. The year the data were collected, Diane was working at a private school (nursery to Grade 6), where she taught a Grade 3 class.

Diane tells me she is a “holistic individual” in that is she tries to develop and improve all aspects of her being, including her “eating habits, [observing] her mind in meditation, and practicing yoga for a healthy balanced body and energy.” This integration defines her as both a person and a “holistic contemplative teacher.” She says she knew from a very young age that she wanted a professional teaching career:

I had wanted to be a teacher since I was young and always made my sisters play school with me. I grew up with a father who was an incredibly talented teacher and then administrator, so maybe it was in my blood. The idea of meditation is cultivating awareness, being aware […] an observer quality […] I am watching myself in practice this translates off-the-mat-time in the classroom […] [I] had some extremely challenging things happen to me this year where I really did feel like I [had to distance myself] because I didn’t know what to do. And my meditation practice helped me do this.
For the past 11 years, Diane has been employed by a large public school board in the primary division (K–3), and more recently in Grade 3. While she says hatha yoga has had a profound influence on her professionally and personally, the formal practice of meditation has become the focal point in her daily disciplined practice. She refers to this meditative aspect of her practice as invaluable to her over the past seven years of her teaching.

Diane tells me she teaches because she “believes children need to have mindful adults in their lives.” Because the education system has the “incredible potential to influence the type of adults that will be making decisions for future generations,” Diane makes it a point to remind her students frequently of their place in “the big picture,” meaning the broader community outside the walls of the classroom.

II. School

The year the data were collected for this research study, Diane worked at a private school that follows the Ontario curriculum guidelines for education in the elementary years. Diane informs me that the children who attend this school come from families in a high socioeconomic bracket. The school program is designed to promote integrity, social responsibility, curiosity and an appreciation of learning. She tells me her school is involved and invested in research initiatives that aim to contribute to innovative educational practices, both nationally and internationally. Diane tells me her day is jam-packed from start to finish, with children moving in and out of the classroom from one activity to the next. Unlike the other teachers in this study, Diane has the opportunity to meet weekly with her colleagues to discuss ongoing events and other related matters at the school. Her classroom, she informs me, is a physically small space where she teaches 17 students.
III. Meditation

Diane rises at 5:00 a.m. every morning to practice yoga and meditate. Although she has been practising yoga following the Krishnamacharya tradition for more than 11 years, her formal meditation practice began about five years ago. She tells me that her daily *asana* (yoga postures) practice led her to the cultivation of a disciplined seated meditation practice:

Yoga led into the meditation […] I intuitively knew that’s what I needed […] and through the teachers I worked with I became drawn to meditation. It is a big part of my whole practice now. […] The *asana*, or physical practice, was the gateway for me, and now meditation has become a greater part of my whole practice.

Diane tells me her meditation practice follows the tradition of *vipassana*, the spiritual practice of the Buddha, and that she initially learned to meditate with one of her yoga teacher/mentors. She explains how she prepares herself for *vipassana*:

The *asana* is all connected with the breath, so it flows, but in meditation priority is maintaining the quality of the breath. I do a lot of visualization of the two channels that crisscross through the chakras, working with the inhale and exhale. […] You really have to focus and pay attention. This helps me to stay focused in meditation. My meditation comes at the end. It’s usually seated, on the floor. It’s *vipassana*. I will pay attention to just the breath coming in and out of the nostrils. At night I also do a practice right before I go to bed […] usually lying down.

Through Diane’s journal entries, I learn she generally meditates twice a day: once in the morning before going to school and in the evening before sleep. In the morning she begins with a “sit” on a cushion in an upright, cross-legged posture known as *swastikansa* (commonly seen as sitting cross-legged, usually on the floor). If she is tired, as she tells me she often is after a day of
teaching, then she will remain supine (lying on her back, face upward) in *savasana* (“corpse pose”) with a bolster under her spine.\(^{45}\)

Like the other teachers in this study, Diane learned to meditate with a *sangha* and began by meeting them “twice a week.” Now, however, she confirms her practice is solitary and at home. Like the other teachers interviewed, Diane informs me that she initiates her meditation practice with “breath awareness” or “breath observation.” By using her breath she is able to reach an “embodied state of calm and ease.” She also employs visualization techniques to help calm her mind before she begins to meditate, evident in the following excerpt from her journal:

**Entry #1**

I am lying down meditating with a bolster under my spine, focussing on the third eye [located in the middle space between the eyebrows] for forgiveness; on the heart, the focus is on expansiveness; on sacral region, the focus is on strengthening my “inner child.” The sensations in my body are slow. I am relaxed, feeling heavy, but the energy in my head seems almost light. It travels down my body, occasionally jolting me […] like when you fall and land suddenly. I am experiencing lots of warmth and feel the energy moving. It drops away for a few minutes. There is stillness.

For Diane, visualization helps stop her mind from going “crazy,” and slows down the thoughts, which frees the *prana* (vital life force, or energy) in her body to flow. This passage, in which she explains how she prepares her mind for meditation, helps clarify the nature of Diane’s formal

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\(^{45}\) Props are often used in restorative yoga practices. Savasana typically follows the end of an *asana* practice. B. K. S. Iyengar, one of Krishnamacharya’s first students, notes that mastering this pose requires the body to remain motionless while the soothed calm mind remains alert. Iyengar further indicates that stillness and tranquility in this pose is not meditation but preparing one for meditation (Iyengar, 2001 p. 234).
I find, like, paying attention to the breathing first is helpful. Sometimes my mind can settle really. During the working year I find it's harder to slow my thoughts down. Yeah, it's definitely harder. I've done a lot with, drawing the breath down and picturing the different chakra colours as I exhale back up. And then it's like you let the breath drop away, and sometimes you can find real stillness, or, you know, you can feel just energy take over. Like, the bounds of your body sort of become unclear. And then other days your mind just doesn't stop, and that's fine too.

Like Meena, Diane explains that when she is breathing and paying attention to the breath, the thoughts in her mind slow down and she notices that whatever she had been previously occupied with mentally disappears. Yet as she notes, settling the mind is not always easy to do after a frantic teaching day. Her thoughts are still racing, making it difficult to slow down the chatter in her mind. Nonetheless, with perseverance and regular practice, Diane has come to appreciate its benefits, especially in her ability to maintain emotional balance throughout many difficult teaching days.

A. Vipassana

In 2009, Diane participated in a 10-day meditation retreat at an ashram just outside of Chennai, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The retreat, which focused on stillness, was led by one of her yoga mentors who, according to Diane, has a “big vipassana background influenced by Goenka.”

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Pranayama is a conscious practice of breathing with control or controlling the breath in the process of breathing in yoga. Pranayama is breathing is a particular way where prana or life force is controlled and the suspension of the breath is increased. (Johari, 2000). This is different from breath observation in shamatha, where one watches and observes the natural rhythmic flow and subtleties of the breath.
Diane points out, that “the penny actually dropped” for her the previous year during the culmination of a week-long meditation retreat with another yoga teacher-mentor here in Ontario: “I was very focused on my asana and pranayama […] Meditation was what I needed. And that retreat really did that for me, because C. used a lot of silence. […] She is no-nonsense and gave the space to sink into meditation.”

This week-long retreat of a more formal seated “spiritual meditation” prompted Diane to include meditation alongside her daily yoga. For Diane, this made meditation practice distinct from her previous asana and pranayama practice:

I learned how to sit properly and use certain techniques to settle my mind and how to be with my breath, my thoughts. It’s hard to ask someone to put meditation into her yoga practice. I think it’s something you have to come to on your own. I was seeking that sort of stillness, that next level of practice, where you’re dropping into something deeper, connecting more deeply. That retreat really did that for me.

Although Diane’s yoga practice and formal discipline of meditation both require commitment and concentration, the distinguishing features of the latter are silence and stillness, without movement of the body or manipulation of her breath. Most importantly, she notices the rapidity of thoughts that enter and exit her mind, and how meditation allows her to “watch this with neutrality.” She describes her first meditation retreat experience as profoundly still and quiet, characterized simply by “being” and “awakening”—akin to what Sam described of his first dathun.
**B. Contemplation**

Ever since she began meditating, Diane feels she is able to perceive things more clearly. Her formal seated practice of meditation provides her a new lens through with which to view the world:

If you’re able to cultivate a clearer mind, then you’re going to be better able to *contemplate* things through. That means you’re going to be able to *examine and observe* what has happened or what is happening with greater clarity […]

Mindfulness meditation is the gateway. It’s like the story of the guy looking out a window and he’s saying to wife, ah it’s so awful it so grey out there. Look at this city! And he carries on about how awful it is. And then his wife wipes the window and all of a sudden he sees much more clearly. And that means you’re seeing clearly and going to be in a better position to *remember to think* and make improvements—that is, to make the world a better place.

Diane tells me that often during her meditation, she contemplates events that have transpired in the class:

We’re all prone to making rushed decisions and snap judgments. It’s nice to be able to contemplate, especially when you’re interacting with a great many people. It’s nice just to sit with things for a while and not answer questions or respond to e-mails right away. My mind goes crazy thinking or over-analyzing things, especially after they happen. It’s nice to hold the idea […] contemplation is like just sitting with an idea. We’re always rushing to decisions and snap judgments, and maybe that’s a nice quality to cultivate in yourself when you’re dealing with so many people in this job. But it’s okay to sit with things for a while, not answer that email right away, ask for more time.
Diane informs me that contemplation helps her to slow down and pause, particularly in her reactions, and in her subsequent actions that follow. Contemplation enables her to wrestle with ideas until she feels comfortable acting on them.

**C. Meditation and Teaching**

Diane informs me that she writes up a formal teaching philosophy every year for parents, but what matters most to her as a teacher is that her students know she cares about them—even though she admits that she is a stickler for maintaining routines and upholding rules. As she states “My responsibility as a teacher of young children is to create a community where they all feel safe.” She goes on to define what schooling, teaching and educating mean to her:

Schooling exists within an institution or a set of curriculum where you’re bound […] To teach is tied to assessment [in that system]. The teacher has to figure out where the gaps are. Teaching in the context of schooling has responsibility with it. If I am supposed to teach children to improve their writing then there is an assessment piece that is built in. To educate has a bit more freedom […] like your personality and how you as a teacher would embody your teaching […] how you go about it.

She explains that “to educate” implies a certain amount of freedom, and that the teacher must be free to bring her personality into the pedagogical mix. “To school,” by contrast, often implies to her that a teacher is restricted by institution’s polices and by the curriculum. Yet when one teaches, one naturally imparts values and principles to the students. Like Sam and the other teachers, Diane notes that while teaching is a complex enterprise, what dominates and even determines many teaching practices nowadays is “assessment”:

If I'm supposed to teach children how to improve their writing, then there's an assessment practice to determine where they're at and what I need to do to move
them forward. Learning means improvement. As the teacher, I know there’s
movement from one place to another. I know that, before, you were able to do
this, whereas now, with some effort and new knowledge, you can do something
more. [You know] that you’ve learned something new.

While Diane does present a formal teaching philosophy to parents, she shares her personal
philosophy as that which “boils down to trying your best to see each child as an individual, and
that you need to create a caring environment so that they can recognize this, too.”

Diane acknowledges that her philosophy and teaching practices changed substantially after
she began meditating:

As my practice got deeper I became a better teacher because I was more patient
and I could focus better. I began to see that the kids themselves stood to benefit
from learning to be quiet, still, caring and so on. And then, I started to realize if
kids have a chance to be quiet or be still or talk about their feelings, or all those
deeper-level things then they also settle and they have a different experience in
that space.

Like Rachel, while she always understood and saw the need to have a safe welcoming classroom
for children to thrive, vipassana gave her the “language for how to communicate this” with her
kids in a manner “that was consistent with [the] philosophy and understanding [she] explores
through [her] ongoing meditation practice.”

As a paid professional educator, Diane is also interested in moving her students upward
academically. She explains that meta-cognitive awareness (knowing about knowing) becomes
important in the learning process for the student. Additionally, it is rewarding for a teacher to see
a child improve academically and jump from level two to three47 in the rubric designated by the

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Ontario Ministry of Education to evaluate students’ work from Grades 1–12 adding, “It makes learning that much richer.”

Typically, Diane arrives at school between 7:30 and 8:00 am. Her morning classroom-entry ritual includes playing gentle music and a form of aromatherapy: allowing the scent of lavender oil to permeate the classroom. She does this to counter stress and create a calm climate for the upcoming hectic school day. This time is especially important for her; it allows her to settle into a comfortable, gentle space to be in order to receive and, as she puts it, “hold” her students for the day. Diane also acknowledges that this ritual contributes to her personal presence in the classroom, which has a direct impact on how she relates to events and, in turn, how her students respond. This action sets the tone for the day, she believes; her morning meditation “greatly” influences her teaching because mediation is “kind of magical”:

It’s just creating space for silence. And I don’t think schools do well at that, and certainly I don’t think kids are given the space for that much in their lives. You just have that distance a little bit, or that neutrality, that maybe you can step outside of what’s happening or take my small self out of this. And that’s because you’ve practiced.

Another residual effect of Diane’s morning meditation has been its effect on her presence, or “energy,” in the classroom, declaring it as another one of meditation’s “gifts”:

Becoming aware of my energy and other people’s energy and how I respond to it. So if I’m tired and cranky that’s probably what I will get back but when I am feeling really loving open and relaxed, that’s how the kids are. Meditation helps me be stay open and loving.
On the other hand, just as her presence has an effect on her students, the reverse is true of the climate of the school; its negative effect also have an impact on her as an individual teacher and her presence:

Presence is also impacted by the environment [...] if it’s a stressed-out place [like the school] it’s hard to fight that all the time. It takes a lot of energy [...] I realized how important my practice is in terms of my beliefs and principles [...] what I have to fight for at this school.

While she begins her morning feeling rejuvenated, Diane doesn’t necessarily exit the school in that same condition. Yet her evening meditation provides her with the requisite support and understanding to re-establish calmness of mind in preparation for the next day. Still, she readily admits that “after a hard day at work, it takes longer for my mind to settle.”

In the following excerpt, Diane shares how the “interpenetration” of her meditation practice manifests itself in the classroom:

Meditation helps create a space for silence. Speaking for myself, silence helps me cope. There are times when I’ll find myself in a frustrating situation or perhaps an annoyingly loud activity, and I’ll feel as if I’m about to lose my mind. That’s when I know I have to distance myself from what’s happening. Meditation helps me do that.

She then explains how she faces the “whirlwind” of her teaching day while engaged in her formal meditation practice.

I take on the observer quality when I’m meditating. I watch myself. Breathing—and concentrating on my breathing—helps me create space and simply exist in that space. That’s what I mean by neutrality. I just accept that this is where I am at this moment instead of getting caught up in the moment that just passed or the moments to come. I try to this in the classroom. That’s not to say I don’t get
caught up in the whirlwind of the school and classroom, but because of my meditation practice, sometimes, I’m able to let the whirlwind pass and move on.

Systematically, and partly through her breathing practices like Meena’s, Diane creates the space for pockets of silence throughout her teaching day. She acknowledges a strong link between her silent disciplined meditation practice and her teaching practices; meditation helps her face the many exasperating situations that arise or do arise in the classroom. Diane explains that she finds her current teaching environment to be loquacious and overtly industrious, with little time for and acknowledgement of the respect for silence and sincere listening.

Sometimes you have to fight for the kind of room you want. You may think the people around you should be respectful, listen and be kind, but a lot of people have difficulty understanding and accepting that idea. It makes them uncomfortable. And here is where I realize how important my practice is, because if I’m honest about being kind and really listening to others, then I have to stand up for those principles even though they might not go over well where I work.

Diane has had her patience tested repeatedly this past year on many different levels with students and fellow staff members. In her 11 years of teaching, she has never had to be so insistent about routines and expectations in the classroom as this year at this school. She acknowledges:

Some days went really well but a great many did not. If I didn’t have my mediation practice, I don’t know how I would’ve managed. Well, I wouldn’t have ended up here and frankly I wouldn’t have been able to keep this job. But the meditation kept me sane. A lot of days during the school year, my time on my mat was the only time I was happy.
While the other participants in this study spoke freely about their teaching experiences with colleagues, Diane was somewhat reserved to share detailed anecdotes involving conflicts. The following two entries from Diane’s journal provide a glimpse into some of the tensions she experienced during meditation, as well as when engaging with colleagues. The first entry reveals the embodied experiential nature of her practice, while the second entry sheds light on how she manages the tensions and challenging conflicts of her job by putting her practice into practise when engaging with colleagues.

Entry #1

I’m going to write on a really difficult experience. I think one reason I’ve had such a hard time sitting down to write these entries is that I don’t quite know how to articulate the intensity of the clearing I’ve been working through lately. [...] It was intense. I sobbed for almost 3 hours. I didn’t even recognize myself. It was like something terribly deep was starting to move up and out. I couldn’t go to work the next morning, as there were more tears. I don’t think I’ve ever cried like that. Now that I’m calmer, it amazes me that our body can hold so much and that it waits until we’re strong enough to face whatever it is we have to face. [...] I’ve been working at acknowledging and expressing genuine emotion. I do feel a bit more expansive in my heart. I’ll be interested to know what happens next. It still feel like there is more there, but today I’m going to take it easy.

Entry #2. (Note: here, Diane writes about an unpleasant experience at a staff meeting following her previous aforementioned experience in meditation).

I’ve been thinking about how the big emotional release from the weekend has affected my week at school. It definitely took the lid off my underlying emotions. I think I’m now more grounded in the way I respond to such events. I almost always manage to respond fairly and calmly, but often my physiological reactions
are intense. I was provoked at a staff meeting; but while I got pulled into the story I was telling myself to stay put, not get sucked in. Overall, I managed to stand back and observe my reaction. Maybe now I’m better able to sit with things, as it were, and let them play out. You might think I would be hesitant about meditating since it was meditation that triggered my sobbing a few days ago, but thankfully meditation has remained a safe place to go. In fact, meditation continues to supply answers and clarity for me.

As these entries make clear, Diane deems it is important to pay attention to the here and now with sincerity and honesty. She makes the effort to meditate with whatever discomfort she is experiencing, and do so with the intention to adopt a calm, neutral demeanour. This demeanour or strength of character is tied inextricably to her daily meditation practice by staying present, and by being open to whatever arises with kindness and curiosity. She incorporates this stance into her pedagogical approach with students. Diane tells me her goal as a teacher is to recognize each one of her students as extraordinarily unique. In the following quote she describes her students.

They have such different gifts even though it’s difficult [to really acknowledge] in a school setting where the group dynamic can be challenging […] But [somehow] you have to let them know that you really do see them as an individual and a person you care about, even though you are calling them on stuff.

With this understanding, Diane strives to engage authentically with her students—something she credits to her regular meditation practice. Diane refers to meditation as a “loving state,” a way of feeling. She attempts to bring the quality of this attitude to her holistic contemplative teaching. In her words:

Obviously one of my goals is that the kids learn something academically [through my help] to move their skills forward. But it’s it equally important to let them
explore the idea of what is it to be a caring person and remind that they have a role to play in the larger community. And again, it starts with how they treat themselves and other people.

Carrying the loving state into the rest of her school day is important for Diane. She informs me that when she treats herself kindly, it is easier to treat others kindly, too. Diane’s meditation practice provides her many benefits, among them a comfortable and safe space she needs to witness and navigate the paradoxes and tensions she faces in her role as a teacher in a highly competitive school.

Diane acknowledges that by contemplating events during her formal seated morning meditation practice, she is more astute to the times she does not exercise good decisions when engaging with colleagues or students. At the same time, she takes comfort in knowing that her “mindfulness meditation practice” gives her the tools to deal with those slips, as opposed to remaining ignorant of them. This offers her consolation, as her internal talk suggests while contemplating:

I’ll ask myself, “Was that the best I could offer in that moment?” And it usually is. At times I’ll find myself exhausted and yet there are 25 people calling my name at once. I’m only human, and my slip-up won’t happen again, at least to the same extent, because now I’m aware of it.

Diane shares that she has mixed feelings about working in an environment where her beliefs, values and teaching practices differ from those of her colleagues; they are, at times, in complete contradiction with hers. She says she teaches the best way she knows how, based on what she believes is best for her students. While her approach has occasionally been challenged as unorthodox by her colleagues, Diane is confident her holistic contemplative approach is
important to the lives of the students. She shares the following observation, noting the tension that sometimes surfaces in the highly visible and competitive teaching environment.

There’s an element of always being on and watched in this kind of setting. There are always people around and, in a sense *you’re on display all the time*. That means you have to be on the top of your game all the time. The problem is most people don’t live that way. *Everyone has off days; it’s only natural.* Besides, sometimes a teacher and her students just need a day in which to be together and relax, and be free from the pressure of academic achievement. But teaching here is a constant show. It has such intensity! There are also *huge expectations that breed an entire staff of overachieving competitive people.* It’s difficult for me to be a part of it. *It’s as if there’s no time to breathe!*

Diane tells me that she discussed her ambivalence and dissatisfaction with teaching at the school with her yoga teacher mentor, who, then, suggested that she bring more of her personal practice to the classroom to help her cope with some of the aforementioned tensions. As Diane explains, “[i]t was then that I learned just how valuable that meditation practice can be as a comfort in a challenging situation. Until then, I had been keeping these techniques safe in my idyllic morning practice.” She was initially reluctant to bring her “home-based techniques such as music, lavender and meditation to the classroom,” for she nervously associates her current teaching environment with painful discomfort. In other words, Diane did not want to bring what was pleasurable and reassuring to her from home to the school, because she identified the former as a safe haven and the latter as hellish. Following this advice and bridging these worlds, however, has made it possible for Diane to explore contemplative teaching more thoroughly, as well as impart some aspects of her personal practice to her students. Indeed, she is certain her application of her particular “mindfulness” practices in the classroom has contributed positively to make the pedagogical exchange more meaningful for both her and her students.
Diane describes the difference between mindful teaching and teaching “mindfulness” as a way to encourage the development of good strength of character:

Mindful teaching involves thinking, thought processes, making decisions, *contemplating* on what you are doing whereas teaching mindfulness involves presenting students with techniques for *calming themselves and settling comfortably in the moment, or just creating the space where they can be*.

Diane uses mindfulness techniques to encourage what she considers positive character development in her students and, in the process, introduces them to the value of mindfulness. For example, she uses ting shaws (small finger cymbals) in her classroom to get the students to stop what they are doing, pause, notice their breath for a few moments, and then return to what they were previously doing. Each student in the class has the opportunity to ring the ting shaws thrice a day at any time of his/her choice. Diane tells me, at the sound of the cymbals, the dynamic of the classroom changes. She values this action because it reminds them to “be aware of the moment and to notice the changes in energy levels and volume in the room.” It also teaches them how to “bring of moments of silence and stillness into a busy day.” Another reason students find the exercise appealing is that every single one of them is made personally responsible for the ting shaws for one day. The students recognize the importance and value of the act, which may appear insignificant on the surface, but the ringing of the ting shaws encourages the group as a whole to stop, notice and experience the moment.

Diane believes this unity contributes to the development of mutual respect and the well-being of all. As the students’ commune silently, albeit for moment, they completely stop whatever they are individually engaged with and become part of a larger collective. This exercise encourages each child to take responsibility for ringing the ting shaws, as well as be responsible to the sound by responding accordingly to the ring. Diane believes strongly that a calm
classroom environment with mutual respect for its occupants is necessary for “authentic teaching and learning to take place.” The aforementioned exercises are one way to cultivate this respect between classroom members, including her.

Additionally, to achieve and sustain a positive “climate” in the classroom, Diane utilizes other techniques, such as contemplation and visualization from her personal meditation practice, to help diffuse conflicts and reduce her general confusion. This is illustrated in the following excerpt as she describes her process both in personal practice as well as when engaged in the classroom:

If I don’t know what to do with a kid, I’ll meditate, contemplate about it or I’ll send him or her a pink light. If I’m just at my wit’s end in the classroom and don’t know what the hell to do, I may try picture the child sound asleep, innocent and silent, as opposed to bratty and frustrating. When I send the pink light or imagine them sleeping, I am trying to cultivate a neutral view of them.

The “pink light,” or visualization, is used when one wants to change something for the better. For example, if she wants the tension to dissipate between her and a student, she will imagine or visualize the student changing in a positive way by surrounding him in her mind’s eye with a pink light. Diane associates the colour pink with the heart chakra. “It’s a nice, gentle way to deal with something,” she says. This action is similar to Sam and Rachel’s use of tonglen to help ease the burden of pain, or Meena’s visualization of a white light to help a student in a difficult situation that cannot be avoided.

Visualization, then, is one of several tools Diane uses to take care of herself and her students when teaching. She also teaches her students how to calm themselves when they experience difficulties in the classroom through the use of props to foster relaxation, quiet and stillness. In particular, she states that “the students have eye pillows which they place over their
eyes when they lie down to relax. We have also made “mind jars.” Using such techniques affects the relationships I have with them in ways that are not always easy to pinpoint.”

The eye pillows are made of soft fabric and filled with flax and or lavender seeds. They fit the contours of the eyes blocking out light and help to relieve tension around the eyes and sinus cavities. Eye pillows are often used to support deep relaxation in savasana (corpse pose) after a rigorous asana practice in yoga but are also used in various modes of health and well-being therapies, such as aromatherapy, and for relieving headaches or simply to fall into a deeper state of relaxation. Diane gives her students eye pillows when she wants them to relax and still their bodies after a hectic loud morning or afternoon in the classroom.

The other “mindfulness tool” Diane uses is the mind jar, which comes from Moody Cow Meditates, a children’s book by Kerry Lee Maclean. In this story, a cow, the main character, encounters a series of frustrating events throughout the course of his day and repeatedly over-reacts in mounting frustration. When the cow’s grandfather hears family members calling his grandson “Moody Cow,” he instructs the grandson to place his angry thoughts in a jar where they can settle down. The mind jar, as described by Diane (and Maclean), is similar to a snow globe. It is symbolic of the mind, and the sparkles inside are representative of the multitude of thoughts and feelings that arise and pass. As the sparkles settle to the bottom of the jar, the mind remains still, tranquil and clear. Diane uses “mind jars” to remind her students that over-busy and over-active minds can sometimes produce negative emotions, which in turn can strain relationships between people.

Diane believes teachers should be concerned with matters beyond academics in the classroom, citing recent brain research that shows that people cannot learn if they are scared or experiencing high levels of stress; this includes teachers. “I don’t think you can possibly address
the curriculum if you don’t first address the state of the room,” she says. “I don’t think you have a choice. How people treat each other is important, and having honest conversations about how people treat each other is important too.”

Like the other teachers interviewed in this research Diane embodies her meditation philosophy by “doing” and “being” more so than talking about it. She is confident the students will naturally absorb the ideas and techniques as they move ahead in their education. She seeks to understand the underpinnings of her thoughts and her emotions and how all of this relates to her pedagogical relationships, and to life in general. Here, she explains the deeper “spiritual” connection between her ongoing vipassana practice and teaching:

It’s like the chicken and the egg […] If I am stressed out about work my meditation practice suffers because my mind is harder to settle, harder to know what’s going on in my head […] but it’s absolutely necessary to get some sense of calm. And if my meditation practice does get some calm then that positively impacts how I am in the classroom. It’s so inter-connected. In a perfect world you could just drop into meditation and that would carry into your classroom […] but I think that’s not totally where I’m at.

This interconnection represents an integral feature of her meditation practice, which is inextricably linked to her holistic contemplative approach towards educating her students. She firmly believes that “meditation is to improve your perception of things” and “to see with more clarity.” Diane’s biggest personal challenge is dealing with the discrepancy between her personal philosophy and understanding the mandate of the school, which has its teaching principles embedded in “cognitive inquiry-based child-centered learning.” On the upside, she says her meditation practice has given her the language she needs to articulate her own pedagogy, and this in turn helps her negotiate conflicts and sticky situations to lead to more frequent positive outcomes.
As a result, Diane feels more confident as a teacher and better able to maintain good teaching practices, practices that demonstrate discernment and minimize stress for both her and the students. Diane further states that she is able to hold a more neutral position when things go awry. She sees this neutrality as the utmost benefit not only for herself, but more importantly, for her students:

I’ve always understood the necessity of creating a caring environment for children and I was able to do that, to some degree, both intuitively and based on what I had learned in teacher's college. Then I gradually realized that if you treat yourself well, you’ll have more to offer other people. So as my meditation practice got deeper, I also became a better teacher. I was more patient, I could focus better, I was more attentive. Then I began to see that the kids themselves stood to benefit from learning how to be quiet, still, caring, and so on. The meditation practice gave me a language for my practice and also a language for how to relate to my students—something deeper than the usual education-speak.

Character, she emphatically insists, is what is going to matter most in the future, and what will determine the future:

Character development has to be encouraged. It's not going to matter if the students know their times tables; that will help, but the state of the world right now calls for people to be kind. We need people to listen to each other and care for one another. We need tolerance. We're all arguing over money and who is the best and nothing else seems to matter.

Diane admits that this school year did not always go as well as she had expected, nor has her meditation practice. Still, she says she is very grateful to be able to meditate daily:

You can have magical meditations that make you feel as if you’ve been transported to another universe, but that doesn’t happen often. A lot of the time, you just have to accept that your practice didn’t go the way you expected,
especially if you didn’t succeed in settling your mind, thinking, I could have handled that better, or I could have been more kind, and so on. That’s a good lesson in forgiving yourself. The important thing is to persevere, that is, to sit and practise meditation every day.

IV. Summarizing Diane’s Story

Diane’s meditation practice has deeply influenced her holistic contemplative teaching pedagogy, a pedagogy emphasized by her mind-body and intuitive connections. Her holistic contemplative approach to teaching involves using several “mindfulness tools,” such as yoga, gentle music, aromatherapy and silence to induce a relaxed state of mind and heighten awareness, which she shares with her students in her classroom. Like the other teachers, Diane speaks to the benefits of the experiential nature of vipassana to guide and inform her teaching pedagogy, highlighting the importance of cultivating respectful, caring her relationships with her students and others in the school. Her daily meditation practice helps her maintain neutrality with kindness and a little more clarity, balancing the more aggressive, competitive challenging teaching environment that she encounters at school and in classroom.

Unlike the other teachers in the study, however, Diane prefers not to discuss direct conflicts involving students or colleagues. Still, she willingly shares her general concerns as a teacher, namely that she sees the school environment and culture as overly competitive, pre-occupied with superfluous talk with not enough emphasis given to honest listening. Contemplating these points in daily meditation practice helps her sustain the inner silence and remain attuned to her own need to relieve her stress, as well as the stresses to which her students are subjected. Her daily meditation practice supports her pedagogical understanding that a safe container is essential for her students to liberate themselves and learn to respect the unique qualities they have as individual human beings.
Like Meena, Diane informs me that she begins her meditation practice with “breath awareness” or “breath observation.” This aspect of her practice provides her both the space and distance she needs to ameliorate some of the tensions and balance the paradoxes of her job. By using her breath, she is able to reach an “embodied state of calm and ease,” which gives her—if only momentarily—a reprieve in her overly hurried high performing school day. Additionally, like Sam, Rachel and Meena, Diane uses an array of contemplative techniques like visualization and imagery to exercise a more benevolent way of being in the pedagogical exchange. Diane’s personal teaching philosophy is interconnected with her vipassana practice, which begins with the intention of engaging with self and others lovingly.
CHAPTER EIGHT
JENNIFER

I. Introducing Myself

Like Meena, I arrived in Canada from India shortly after my eighth birthday. In 1979, I earned a 4-year Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto with a major in Sociology. Like Sam, I did not have a career plan or a job prospect, nor did I start out in teaching straight away.

In January 1980, I left for southeast London, U.K., where I found employment as a tour-booking clerk for a small travel agency. In mid-September of that same year, I left London and returned to India, where I traveled for six months before returning to Toronto. Shortly after, I packed my bags again and headed to California to work for a mortgage company, but a year later, I was back in Toronto.

As with Sam, teaching seemed to fall into my lap. In the early spring of 1982, thanks to an aunt who got me an interview with the former York Board of Education, and I was hired as an educational assistant (EA). Here I worked at a middle school. In this capacity, my responsibilities were split between assisting the librarian and supporting the Grade 7 and 8 students with academic work. I also worked wherever I was needed, often in a classroom of young adolescents diagnosed with Down’s Syndrome. In just a few months, I secured an additional part-time position with the former Toronto Board of Education (TBE) running an after-school program for children ages 6-12.

In the fall of 1984, I was offered full-time employment as an early-childhood educator working at a childcare centre in the heart of the city. I felt an immediate kinship with the culturally diverse children here. The centre was part of a larger vibrant school community in a
multi-ethnic neighbourhood with a rich arts-based program. After a few years of working as an early-childhood educator, I returned to university and in 1989, graduated from the Institute of Child Study now known as the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study where I received a diploma in child studies with a focus on child development in clinical settings, along with my Ontario Teaching Certificate.

After applying to four school boards I found occasional supply-teaching. Like Sam, I learned that without personal connections, permanent teaching positions were hard to come by. Following a year of supply work, I returned to university once again and earned a Masters degree in Education.

During this time, I also underwent several profound personal changes. After being independent and single for some time, I discovered the responsibilities and privileges that come with being a partner and mother. Following my marriage, the birth of a daughter in 1993 and then a son in 1994, I remained home with my children until the autumn of 1996, at which time I re-entered the workforce as child care supervisor. While I enjoyed some aspects of this job, I had little opportunity to engage with the children—something I missed.

Then, on August 31, 1997, my father drowned. His death left a void unlike any other I had known before. At the sound of the news, which was delivered to me over the phone, lightning-like images flashed across my mind and a sense of utter emptiness filled me. I suddenly became painfully aware of the fragility and preciousness of life. Sensing an urgency to work in a more engaging manner, I applied for a long-term occasional teaching position. In January 1998, I was hired as junior/senior kindergarten (JK/SK) at an inner-city school, where I remain today.

Finally, this teaching assignment seemed to fit my needs, especially the enjoyment I derived from working with children. After the shock of my father’s death, I felt the need to throw
myself into something creative, loving and nurturing, which was precisely what teaching JK/SK offered. It was also a good fit with the needs of my immediate family at the time; with my two children in public school and my husband involved in his private practice, we could organize holidays and family relatively easily. More importantly to me, I could be with my own children during their holidays.

II. School

As mentioned in my introduction I work in a large public school on the site of a historical social housing project dating back to the mid-1850s. My job as JK-SK teacher began when I was hired to replace someone on a maternity leave. Since then, I have held various positions, working with children with oral language delays, difficulties with reading and writing, social adjustment problems and more. Specialized board-designated programs in which I have taught include Kindergarten Early Language Intervention (KELI), Primary Diagnostic (PD), Reading Recovery (RR) and Special Education (SE). In 2012, I returned from my leave of absence to teach mixed groupings of students ranging from Grades 1-6 as the English-Language Learner (ELL) teacher.48 In the fall of 2013, I returned to teaching JK/SK.

48 The Kindergarten Early Language Intervention Program is an intensive early literacy and oral program for a select group of senior Kindergarten students who demonstrate delays in oral language acquisition. The program is one of many services provided by the Toronto District School Board offered in ten of its host schools.

The Primary Diagnostic Program is one the many special education programs offered by the Toronto District School Board aims to meet the needs of students who exhibit exceptionalities in behaviour, communication, intellectual, and physical attributes. These students are offered specialized or intensive programs and supports as provided by a primary diagnostic classroom.

Reading Recovery (RR), founded by Dame Marie Clay, is an early literacy intervention to help lowest achieving Grade 1 students to develop effective reading and writing processing strategies in order to achieve average levels of academic performance. The Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery Standards and Guidelines (2006) outlines the principles of the program. A program with four components of literacy to be covered in each one half-hour of instruction with the student includes: reading, writing, composition and spelling. It is a highly structured standardized literacy intervention requiring a standardized daily formal assessment.

English Language Learners (ELL) are students in a provincially funded English language school whose first language is not English or a variety of English distinct from what is being taught in the public schools. As such,
III. Meditation

Over the course of my life, I have engaged in a number of contemplative practices. I was always interested in the nature of the human condition and how to make sense of the world. I suspect this in part influenced by my father who would often recite short verses from his favourite poets or throw my sisters and myself a one liner to contemplate.

My interest in mindfulness meditation took root in 2004, when I attended a Kalachakra ceremony for world peace in Toronto. The XIV Dalai Lama, whom I had first heard speak in 1990 at the University of Toronto shortly after he won the Noble Peace Prize, led this ritual ceremony. I was impressed, and remain so, by not only the emphasis he places on understanding but also kindness.

My interest in the Dali Lama as a spiritual scholar has been furthered by my academic curiosity. Although I knew next to nothing about the Kalachakra initiation, I wanted to see and hear him in a different context from the academic setting where I had first heard him speak. While he is suffering and holds the responsibility of being the spiritual leader of Tibet, his worldwide popularity has evolved because he lives in an exile that is also the cause of his suffering.

Later that same year, I attended a three-day teaching and discourse on the “Four Immeasurables” and the “Six Paramitas,” delivered by Tai Situ Rinpoche of the Kagyu

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49 The Kalachakra Initiation is the largest Buddhist ritual initiation conferred by a Dali Lama and is given to many people around the world. It is also known as the “Wheel of Time,” in reference to particular cycles of time in Tantric Buddhism. The foundations of Kalachakra are embedded in the Buddha’s Noble Truths. At this particular event, the XIV Dali Lama emphasized universal peace for humanity (Kalachakra for World Peace, 2004). The “Wheel of Time” is also sometimes referred to as the “Wheel of Samsara” or the “Wheel of Life” (Epstein, 1995 pp. 15-41).
Lineage\textsuperscript{50} of Tibetan Buddhism. Accompanied by one of my sisters, I felt a little awkward, having never sat in silence for an extended length of time (approximately two hours), nor having been one to follow religious teachings, as I understood them in that context. Yet the kind Rinpoche assured me that if I were to “simply sit,” everything would be fine. What he did not say, but which I soon came to learn, was that my mind was a rumbling rollercoaster, my feet would feel like pins and needles after sitting on the floor for two hours, and that I would doze off several times during meditation. Nonetheless, I was grateful for the opportunity to have to sit with my thoughts in a way that I had not done so before.

Like the other teachers indicated in this study, simply sitting was mix of pain and pleasure, with many moments of discomfort and sluggishness as well as clarity. While I sat, I would bear in mind my intention that I want to be a decent human being, and with this intention close to heart, I meditated for three days.

Following this session, I discovered a luminosity and spaciousness in me, in spite of the confusion and angst I had been experiencing at the time. I found the experience of meditation to be utterly remarkable, though at the time, I would have been hard-pressed to articulate why. Possibly the seeds of meditation had always been dormant in me (as they are in everyone), and the time had come for them to sprout. I returned to Toronto with a newfound vitality, with a clarity and calm I had not previously known. I had discovered a language to express what I felt intuitively and spiritually that I wanted to be a good decent person. To accomplish this work, though, I first had to get to know myself better. Meditation affords me the opportunity of a bird’s-eye view of myself and the world around me, and an appreciation that people the world over are similar in wanting to be happy and at peace. I knew I was hard working, and that I

\textsuperscript{50} The Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism is known for its emphasis on the practice of meditation (Trangu, 2002; Trungpa, 1995).
wanted to do well at my job and have fulfilling meaningful relationships. Rejuvenated by my new knowing, and wanting to have a better understanding of sitting in silence, I began periodic sessions alone for brief periods of 20 to 25 minutes, several times a week. I proceeded to read Larry Rosenberg’s *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation* (1999) and Joseph Goldstein’s *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (1976), both of which helped establish the foundation for my personal meditation practice.

In the spring of 2007, I once again saw and heard the Dali Lama, who on this occasion spoke about the principle of dependent co-origination. At this time, I was feeling ambivalent about a number of things in my life. I had recently lost my maternal grandmother, and the consequent disintegration of extended family ties left me feeling knotted-up and hollow. What’s more, the enthusiasm I once had for teaching was waning. I seemed spiritless, gloomy and confused, full of angst and turmoil. I began sitting quietly before leaving the house to go to work. I knew I enjoyed being around the children and working with people in general, but I needed to gain clarity and escape this cloud of dissatisfaction hanging over me.

Meditating regularly helped me to slow down and take the time to examine my thoughts and feelings unfold. Like Rachel and Diane, I found a pedagogical language to express and make sense of what I was doing when engaging with others. Experiencing greater clarity, I felt the sun

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51 Dependent co-origination, according to Buddhism, explains the human condition in relation to the nature of reality. As Thurman (2004) explains, in accordance with the teaching of the time of the historical Buddha human lifeform was evolutionary, connected to and developed from all other life forms where one could regress back into former lifeforms. This ontological understanding of reality is also known as “transmigration” or “rebirth” (Carrithers, 2001, p. 25). For the purpose of this research study, the main thread that is common to all the participants is that their existence is relational and as teachers they have an influence on their students and vice-versa. They see the individual self in relationship to the larger community and the world. As such, the combination of virtuous thoughts action and speech combined with meditation, i.e., deep contemplation to gain insight or wisdom into the true nature of reality awakens us, or liberates them from our perceived difficulties or suffering (Keown, 2013, p. 49). The teachers in this study meditate regularly to cultivate benevolence and insight so that they can engage more meaningfully in pedagogical relationships.
breaking through. I began to bask in its light and warmth, aware of how fortunate I was to have
good health, a caring family, a good job and colleagues with whom I enjoyed working. Some
might say that this attitude of clarity was not due to the meditation at all; rather, it was all “in my
head.” Yet I know that this renewed clarity was precisely the result of my having taken the time
to sit in meditation and examine the contents in my head.

A. Vipassana

In the fall of 2007, while I was participating in a year-long yoga-teacher training
program, my vipassana practice became more disciplined. In this regard I make the effort to
meditate every morning anywhere from one half hour to an hour, whatever feels natural. I simply
“sit with attention tenderly” (SWAT), a phrase that came to me after facilitating a weekly sitting
with a group of teacher student interns in my role as a TEPA one year at the University of
Toronto.

I embrace meditation as a spiritual practice. My personal practice is grounded in
mindfulness for insight, as explained in the first two chapters. I meditate to see beyond myself
and the immediate, for I am understanding that I am but one tiny piece in the larger magic of
life’s puzzle. Having already explained mindfulness in the first two chapters, and having
expanded on it through words of the other teachers, I will simply outline my own experience
here, much of which resonates with the other teachers’ descriptions.

I begin my practice with breath observation and a shift to breathing with my body. My
body serves as an anchor in my meditation. Anapanasati is Pali for “awareness of respiration,” or
“breathing with the body,” as Larry Rosenberg refers to it. With awareness and vigilance, I have
learned to observe my breath, noting its quality and energy as it enters and exits my nostrils. The
effect of this embodied experience is difficult to capture. What I can say is that the moment-by-
moment experience of inspiration and expiration generates an overall stilling, slowing-down and calming effect, making it possible to turn off the chatter in my ever-busy mind—or at least slow it down. When I first began sitting, my mind was constantly racing; it was difficult to keep up with what was going on. I have learned to sense the subtle qualities of my breath and bodily sensations while going through the various stages of meditation. Put another way, each inhalation is a new moment, a new arrival or a birth. With each exhalation, the old moment departs and terminates.

The following excerpt from my meditation journal attempts to describe this experience:

Entry # 1

Observing my breath, I sense my rib cage move in and out like the folds of an accordion. Exhaling, 1-2-3-4-5-6 my lower belly draws in and my ribs knit together. Inhaling, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 my spine tingling…lengthening…Exhaling 1-2-3-4-5-6-.pause…Inhaling 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, I breathe in long. Exhaling, I breathe long also. I feel my buttocks firm on the cushion. My right hand is heavy and nestled into the left. I feel the cool air enter my nostrils and then exit, dissolving into the space around me. My belly rises, ribs float down and out…and falls shrink wrapping it all… rises and falls. My jaw relaxes and my lips part. Peace. There is stillness. Thoughts are white words rolling and gently tumble out the window. My ankles are heavy, pressing into the floor. I see Ram Dass [American spiritual teacher] with Krishna Dass [American devotional singer] beside him crooning. My face softens. I feel wetness on my cheeks. Ram Dass wipes his tears—he is swaying. Krishna Dass’s baritone fills my entire body; the hair on my arms stand at attention. My arms hang heavy. Energy flows from my shoulders down through my arms into my palms. My fingers are lead but the tips are pulsing… . . . soft…quiet…calm…stillness…dissolving.

The above picture, however imperfectly, describes a few moments in a longer seated practice. This joining of breath, body and mind enables me to experience moments as they unfold,
becoming both the subject and object of my attention. My attention grows expansively until eventually it melts into oneness yet it also points to the discursive, busyness of the endless proliferating random thoughts that come and go through the mind’s door.

**B. Teaching and Meditation**

Looking back on my first few years in the profession (mainly in the primary division), I did not give much thought to my teaching philosophy. I knew I wanted the children to feel comfortable and respected, and to enjoy learning. I also knew that I wanted them to benefit from being in school. I believe that public education can provide a great arena to embrace the nuances of diversity and commonality. When I was responsible for a class of my own, I usually delivered most of the curriculum through an arts-based investigative play and inquiry program, all while aiming to make the teaching and learning an experiential adventure. The teacher training I received obviously influenced the design of my program. My literacy program was heavily influenced by the work of Marie Clay and Frank Smith, while my mathematics programming was supported by the work of Mary Baratta-Lorton. I threw myself into my job, creating many hands-on activities in literacy, numeracy, science and art units of study like Sam, Rachel and Meena all describe. Because I see teaching and learning as a reciprocal relationship, my job is to guide and support children assisting them to take charge of their own learning. Like Sam and Diane acknowledge, I cannot separate who I am from what I am hired to do. For example, I really enjoy music, dance and art, so I expose the children to that as well. I can be very animated, and the children get to know me in that way. On a closer look, the first year I taught JK/SK, it became clear that I had a more organic approach to teaching as opposed to a prescriptive approach.

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pedagogical approach. I am the sort of individual who has an experience first, and then finds a theory to support it. Although I did not initially have the language for my approach, in retrospect I would define mine as a holistic and integrated approach to working with children at the elementary level. I like to include community engagement, support that the children recognize, and take advantage of opportunities such as swimming and skating lessons, regular visits to the public library and a local farm—places we could easily access by walking. I would offer the children a smorgasbord, hopefully introducing them to something new, and to whet their appetite for long educational journeys. I remembered that I was serving mix of impoverished families, some in crisis with roots in the neighbourhood, and others from far-flung places like the Middle East, Eastern Asia, the Caribbean and North Africa.

Over the last 16 years, the demographics of the school changed, and while the school still serves a diverse, mixed population, their needs and desires differ from the children and families I had previously served. Yet when teaching, although there is reflection going on, one is so immersed in the work that there is rarely time to truly slow down, notice and pay attention to all that is happening, whether it be directly in the classroom or in the changing politics of the profession. Here is where my ongoing mindfulness has brought me perspective and clarity. It has helped me see just how important it is for me to make the students in my charge feel truly welcomed, loved and nurtured. Meditation offers a clearer lens into the transience nature of life. It helps me be a little nicer to, and with, others, in the face of difficulty, uncertainty and confusion.

Like Rachel, I see learning that takes place on many different levels. Over the years, I have watched teaching becoming increasingly prescriptive and too directed, demanding even at the Kindergarten level that children work on skills for which they are simply not ready. For
example, returning to JK/SK classroom after 11 years, I noticed a number of children’s printing skills lagged behind those of their same age when I first entered the teaching profession. I am not surprised. With increasing use of computers, touch screens, mobile phones, Velcro jackets and shoes and zip-lock bags, fine finger muscles are not engaged as often or in the same way. Nevertheless, there is increasing pressure on children to develop print fluency at an early stage of schooling, and without sufficient opportunities to practice. Similarly, while working with my senior ELL students, I discovered that many of them did not know to write in cursive because it was not taught to them. Much of their penultimate assigned work is generated by computers, and they are expected to produce hand-written drafts in the interim. This can be a difficult, labourious task for some children.

On the other hand, technological advancements can bring virtual field trip experiences from around the world to a classroom. This can help teachers and children so they can have a sense of another’s experience by way of the Internet, as, for example, our ELL class discovered when we learned about the activist work of Wangari Maathai through video footage of her.

Above are just a few examples of some of the paradoxes that take place in everyday daily schooling practices. Meditation, however, makes me realize I must advocate for the children on a multitude of levels first and foremost, because of the increasing demands and burdens placed on the as children in the rapidly confusing world of education.

For me, teaching is a naturally contemplative process. I recall a poignant moment during a conversation I had with my son many years ago when he was in Kindergarten himself. I asked him what he had done that day, to which he replied: “Oh you know, the usual ABCs. We sing it in French, then write it, then sing it again. We do this every day.” Then he asked: “What am I going to do with the alphabets anyway mom?” This made me wonder about what I was trying to
accomplish with the children in my care? What was their take on what I was teaching? What did they see when I stood at the easel printing words or sat with them in our circle singing songs and telling stories? I’ve always believed a teacher should teach with her heart as well as her head, combining intellect, critical awareness, understanding, and empathy. I also knew that I wanted to share and nurture caring and respect among my students, most of whom lived in impoverished, sometimes dangerous neighbourhoods, and who often suffered blatant discrimination! The question I asked was: Am I carrying through on my intentions and what are the children getting out of this pedagogical exchange? As a teacher, I try to provide experiences that tap into a child’s curiosity or in that which he or she may be interested. My aim is to help the child make meaningful connections with the world at large, but I often wonder really how successful I am?

When I am hurried and pressed for time, I tend to be preoccupied with my own agenda, and then not as astute as to what is happening before me, and not as keenly observant of the children around me. For example, one day I had a unit on fractions prepared for a group of ELL students, which I wanted to videotape as part our school-wide Teaching Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) 53 for accountability. As soon the students entered the room, I launched into the lesson, giving them no time or space to settle in. Some of them expressed frustration and one student called out to me. “Hey Jen, stop and listen I have something important to tell everyone.” Normally I greet my students the door when they enter the room and then we sit down and have had a few minutes to settle in at our round table to take up any pressing matters that are of concern to them. This is a practice we established at the onset of the school year. But that day, I was eager to deliver the lesson and videotape the students. I failed to recognize they had closed

53 The Teaching Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) model was inspired by the work of Fullan, Hill, and Crévola as part of a capacity-building series to improve student achievement. For details, see Ontario Ministry of Education (2008b), The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat.
the door behind them. In this class the children would close the door when we had discussed sensitive matters amongst ourselves. This signal used by both the students and myself. On this particular day, I had been rushed, and so launched in with my own agenda. Still, as soon as I was called on my behaviour, I paused, breathed deeply, leaving the room walked out the door, and re-entered saying, “let me start again.” I then sat down, glanced around the table and asked the student to continue with his story. The kids laughed, as did I!

In keeping with the broader vision of the school when I was first employed, I have tried maintaining an informal, open-door policy by welcoming parents and colleagues, as well as senior students from other classes, into the classroom. In this way we get to know each other. I share Sam’s view that we are all part of a larger and enlightened community, a community with both a spiritual and intellectual capacity a view shared by the other teachers as well. This attitude has enabled me to foster meaningful, engaged relationships with colleagues, students and parents alike (regardless of the various problems that inevitably surface in some relationships). As well, it is an attitude conducive to kindness and camaraderie; it prevents unnecessary officiousness and separation between community members. Yet this “welcome invitation” approach, while serving as a safe window through which parents may observe the day-to-day activities and progress of the classroom, is rather harder to practice now, as compared to when I first began teaching at the school. The rigidity of the structure of schooling, the rules that accompany protocol and the identification with the role of the job as an educator that sometimes disconnects one from her basic humanity—all of these factors have made an integral approach to education more difficult to practice in the more recent years.

Like the other teachers included in this research, I often contemplate in meditation on classroom events that have transpired. Meditation has given me the contemplative language to
understand the larger value and purpose for educating the children in my care. This in turn helps me view pedagogical exchanges in particular, from a much broader perspective than I have done in the past. This by no means everything works out perfectly as I often make mistakes. Yet I try to adopt a more “connected” than corrective approach. I have also come to appreciate just how important small acts of kindness and consideration can build trusting pedagogical relationships between teacher and student, as the following anecdote demonstrates.

Not long ago, in a year as a Reading Recovery (RR) teacher, I had a talkative young student, Noah. While initially interested in the program, he grew unenthusiastic. We had a relatively openly communicative rapport, but I could not understand or get him to explain why he was no longer interested in reading the books that he was required to read when he went home. I also discovered that when he came to see he preferred to sing and talk about music, his favourite singers and so on. I would tell him we didn’t have time for singing, only reading and possibly some discussion, which technically speaking was true, given the rigid requirements of the program (For details see footnote 47) Eventually I grew irritated by Noah’s stubborn oppositional stance, which I thought was a problem of his attitude. I was not sure if he was throwing away or losing his RR books, but I could not understand or get him to explain why. I spoke with Noah’s classroom teacher, who was also perplexed and noted that he was often daydreaming in class. Being familiar with his family from having taught two of his older siblings, I decided meet with them. I informed his parents of the missing books and Noah’s reluctance to fully engage in the RR program and explained that I could not understand why. They were furious with him. Not wanting to involve them further in this matter, I decided I needed to find some middle ground where Noah and I could work.
I contemplated on Noah, seeing him like me in ways – a young person who likes music, pop culture, singing and dancing. This brought me a new perspective. I went to school one day and asked him if he could find 15 minutes sometime during his school to read with me every afternoon before he left school for home. This way he would not have to take his books home because he would have done his work with me. I also agreed to let him sing for me after his RR lesson and talk to me about music if he felt like doing so. I had to modify my schedule to accommodate this plan, but in this way, Noah grew to like reading once again. There were still days when he preferred to talk instead of engaging with the lesson, but by finding what he needed first and then creating the time to work with him, we accomplished much.

Fast forward six years later: Noah is now in Grade 7. While he has not been the best or most enthusiastic RR student, he managed to complete the program and is doing fine academically. In hindsight, there were so many issues (e.g., his family life and his sexuality) that he was dealing with, and to which I was not privy. What I did know is that he valued his privacy and so did his family. A minor change in my perspective, combined with a break in protocol and scheduling, along with my genuine love for him as an individual—all had the effect of spurring Noah to participate in the (RR) pedagogical exchange. Moreover, he knew I was interested in him as a person, irrespective of his recalcitrance and the distance that had grown between us. Knowing I was genuinely interested in him as a person drew us closer together once more.

I believe the RR program is a good program that benefits many students, but not all children are ready to begin reading at the same time, nor are they motivated to do so contrary to the desires of their teachers and parents. The needs and desires of children vary due to a host of circumstances. Yet in the highly circumscribed world of conventional schooling, there is little opportunity to be in the moment unless one consciouslyseizes it. It is my job to recognize these
moments, in the effort to keep the curiosity aflame for those in my care while providing them a safe harbor to explore, flounder and succeed, all while knowing that they have a kind, caring and intelligent teacher who will support them on their journey in spite of the obstacles.

While I strive to engage students with a variety of academic activities that I feel challenge and inspire, trying to fulfill my curriculum responsibilities, like Meena and Sam, I prefer to evaluate my success based on how the children feel about their personal accomplishments (or failures). I attempt to initiate my pedagogy from a place of insight into and regard for the children in my care. My meditation practice enables me to put this aspiration and intention into action much more regularly. Because I sit every morning before I go to work, I am more often thoughtful towards the children, and more perceptive of what is happening in the classroom, in the school as whole and, by extension, the profession. Furthermore, my experience on the job with children has taught me that they themselves are the best teachers; they provide me with the clues as to what to do next and how to teach efficaciously. I know that each child is equally precious. I am reminded of this when I enter the classroom day after day.

Over the years I have observed and learned from children that many teachers (myself included) talk too much. Perhaps this is due to being inundated with information from all over that we feel the need to unload onto our students. I often remind the children I am working with to let me know if I am talking too much giving too many instructions. My experience in meditation has taught me to practice being more observant in the classroom, and to offer less commentary. I now notice what I observe. I wonder why I am noticing this, but not that. These are states to which I have grown accustomed in my meditation practice. Needless to say, not all my sittings are pleasurable, just like a number of teaching experiences aren’t always pleasurable. It can be harder to meditate when I am out of sorts with a sea of faces and buzzing bodies all
demanding my attention simultaneously, or in conflict with colleague or family member, or overwhelmed and wrought with worry (about, for example, this thesis!) Nonetheless, with persistence and practice, I am able to achieve greater awareness of my being, my feelings and my understanding of something larger than myself, all of which helps me gain perspective on the day-to-day conflicts and tensions I must negotiate as an educator, student, colleague or human being.

When I teach, I try to envision the broader education of the child. Like Meena, I often contemplate on the experience the children are having in the classroom, trying to see it from their perspective but knowing that I cannot truly know what is going on in their heads. For example, while working with my ELL students, a number whose families have fled their war-torn native countries in search for more desirable living conditions, I often contemplate what it must be like for them to be thrust into this new world they now inhabit.

Like the others teachers, I see public schooling as a process of moving along an institutionalized path. In this regard, some children manage fairly well. For others who are less fortunate, this can become an arduous, painful journey. For the latter, the pedagogical practices and expectations that accompany schooling, when too controlled, do not envision diverse knowledge and rarely offer new approaches to learning and understanding. The protocols and mandates the teachers are expected to follow, all in the name of helping children, can be—and in many cases are—counterintuitive to genuinely supporting an individual child to thrive.

Akin to the other teachers discussed in this research study, I see my job as being one to ensure children feel safe, comfortable and loved. Yet I also see the importance for them to find some measure of academic success so that they can keep up with those who are more privileged. Like Diane, Rachel and Sam, I also feel they first need to be comfortable with themselves as
individuals regardless of their personal academic successes or failures. As an elementary teacher, I am hired to teach specific subjects and skills, as per the curriculum—and I work very hard to deliver what is expected of me as a professional. Yet I am aware, like the other teachers in this study, that teaching is full of contradictions. Genuine learning is an ongoing fluid process that is not easily measurable by artificial curriculum expectations and grade assignments, especially at the primary level. Unfortunately, more and more teaching practices are governed by these measures over which teachers have little or no control—a change that became obvious to me when I returned to teach as an ELL teacher and more recently as JK/SK teacher.

Between February 2012 and January 2013, I experienced seven unrelated deaths of significant people in my life, both young and old. Living in the light of death can have a remarkable effect on one’s consciousness. The significance of every life became glaringly apparent, which in turn revealed the preciousness of human life as a gift to behold—to use Rachel’s words, the “birthright” for everyone to be happy and at peace particularly children.

Put another way, each life is a single thread woven together to make the blanket of humanity. When I meditate on this knowing, I think of the children with whom I am working. I think of their “birthright” to have peace, justice and happiness. By sitting regularly, I learn to expect the unexpected and try to engage meaningfully with the uncertainty of everything, including teaching.

As previously noted, in September 2012, I returned to the school as an ELL teacher. At this time, the school was operating temporarily from a different location. As well, many of the colleagues with whom I had previously worked had left, with the exception of a handful of the “old-timers.” From October through December 2013, the school, like many others in Ontario, was under the dark cloud of work-to-rule industrial action. This political upheaval, coupled with
the temporary dislocation of the school, intersected with a leadership crisis and bad press to create yet another set of tensions for teachers, administrators and students. We were all in transition, working under uncertain times and conditions. Adding to these stresses was that in the poorest of schools, such as the one where I worked, there was, and remains, a pecking order. The newest immigrants, the poor and the academically challenged (not because of their inability, but because they do not fit the conventional educational expectations of academic success) are often the target of put-downs by fellow students and even teachers in some cases (who feel the pressure of having their students make the grade). Coining Sam’s phrase, these teachers are “good people”; they are dedicated, hard-working individuals, too. Many of my students would often share their concerns of where they fit in, how they were going to manage, and how they were often confused by chaos around them. Some had witnessed gun violence, others political unrest. They were savvy, intuitively alert and sharp, but they lacked self-confidence because their strengths were neither easily visible nor recognized by conventional means, and in some cases, not by their peers and teachers either. These were difficult lessons that my kids taught me, posing questions for which I did not have adequate answers.

Yet, as a teacher, I am able to help children discover what interests them. Through my professional knowledge assist them as they set out on what I hope will be a long and stimulating educational journey. At the same time, I am aware like the other teachers in this study I am one teacher among many whom they will encounter on their journey, and that most of their learning will take place outside the classroom. What was and remains important is, how we learn to negotiate meaning and mutual understanding in our small classroom community so it can support them make sense of the larger world.
Contemplating while I am teaching has taught me that while it may be nice to be important, it is more important to be nice. Many young children regard their teachers as important figures. Meditation reminds me that I am no more important than them, and it is crucial that they know that they are equally important on this educational journey together.

For me, teaching in this way also becomes a spiritual exercise, because I feel committed to a teaching approach that stresses love, peace and equality. I do not believe that we should all be the same kind of person. Like Sam, I appreciate the differences I observe in my students. Their individuality teaches me to become a more insightful educator and offers me new ways of knowing. As a holistic contemplative educator, I see it as both my responsibility and privilege to treat every child in my charge with equal respect and dignity, which they deserve as human beings. The reality of teaching is that it is so much about efficiency and strategy these days. Everyone is expected to cooperate, perform to his or her best of his or her abilities, and produce the best possible results, all while believing in mottos like “We are the leaders of tomorrow.” These expectations do not mirror real life. How can all of us be leaders, ask my students, while some ask: who gets to pick the leaders?

My greatest strength as a teacher, I’ve come to realize, is my ability to face challenges intelligently with warmth, humour and love. For example, if I see unpleasant behaviour issues arise in the class, especially at the primary level I tend to animate them into a form of role-play rather than a verbal diatribe. The children are much more responsive when we all see the humour in our foibles including my own. I find humour and authentic dialogue can help build trust.

Teaching depends on developing and negotiating trusting, meaningful relationships. While there are no foolproof answers to the problems and challenges that arise, I know that my disciplined
meditation practice provides me the necessary spiritual space to contemplate these challenges, while the classroom allows me to put my practice into *practise*.

Like the other participants in this research study, I am inclined to see and believe in the basic humanity that knits us teachers, parents and children together. The reality, however, is that teaching is full of paradoxes and tensions, and characterized by imperfection. I generally try to show fondness for my students and colleagues, and usually succeed. Yet, there are times when I’m tired, overwhelmed and preoccupied, times when I become disengaged and dissatisfied, in the pedagogical process. Here especially is when my ongoing meditation practice supports me. It serves as a reminder to engage more wholeheartedly.

As a teacher, I can provide them with a rough map to explore the landscape. I can even show them how to use the map, but inevitably how they use the map and navigate the terrain is their choice. They will experience ups and downs on their individual journeys, but the important thing is that they embrace the journey with sensibility, minimal trepidation, confidence and balance.

Teaching is indeed contemplation in action. It can generate a particular kind of wise, thoughtful, loving and honest engagement that I term holistic contemplative pedagogy. The following is an anecdotal account from a journal entry. It details an event I had while working with a small group of six-year-olds with severe social adjustment problems. The first account is a short clip of what happened in the classroom. The second paragraph is an experiential description of the events as they unfolded moment by moment. I use this example to highlight what I see as contemplation in action.

There is a flurry of activity, a cacophony of sound, a dance of bodies up and down. Nafisa and Hared are sprawled on the floor scrambling with their hands to put the last few pieces of the giant puzzle into place. Daniel is off in the corner
with the train set at usual. He lines up the 10 cars one behind the other and then places the engine in front of the line and the caboose at the end. He travels with the train meandering the around the tracks and then up, up, up over the bridge and – whoosh! – down and around, moving under the bridge, circling the track again around again. Daniel can sit with the train all morning. Ricky is on the computer. Nafisa wants to know when it will be her turn. She yells to me, using the interrogative inflection: “Ricky’s time up?” Ricky does not flinch. His eyes are fixed on the screen and his hand is on the mouse. I see Daniel lift his head to see where I am. I am helping Lee write a letter to put in our classroom mailbox. From the corner of my eye I see a small waterfall – oops! It misses the water table and splatters onto the floor. I get up and move for the mop only to find Michael tugging at my left leg, tears streaming down his face. He is crying because David has started taking apart his architectural masterpiece. David is knocking down the building Michael has built with meticulous care. David is angry because Michael wouldn’t share the blocks with him, and he now moves toward me, crying. I am mopping up the water. David and Michael are standing on either side of me crying. Daniel gives another quick glance my way. Nafisa is hovering over Ricky, loudly demanding he get off the computer.

My eyes peer out from the back of my head, watching the water table, feeling the wetness as it spills onto the floor. My ears are on the floor, *sensing each and every wooden block tumble down one on top of the other, banging the floor . . . thud, thud, thud.* Thoughts arrive in a flash and then disappear just as quickly. My bladder talks to me as my arms move rapidly and rhythmically in unison with the mop, back and forth over the spilt water. I sense the distressed energy from the crying boys encircling me. The volume in the room has cranked up. It is loud! I think back with tenderness to this morning on my cushion, quietly observing my thoughts as they came and went as quickly as the events that have just transpired. My stance softens, as I look around the room at the faces peering at me. I take a quiet deep breath in, and exhaling out, a smile emerges. I ring the tingshaws once, twice, thrice. There is silence. Pause. We all stop. I move to the boom box and hit
‘play’. The sound of the sea combined with Pachelbel’s *Canon in D* fills the room. The children move toward the centre of the classroom and, one by one, lay their bodies down on the carpet. Some fold their hands and rest them on their bellies; others leave them by their sides. Breathing in, the wave from the sea can be heard rolling in; breathing out, the wave rolls out. We are silent and still. We are breathing. Together, breath by breath, we are one with the rolling waves moving in and moving out. An inexplicable soft feeling engulfs us all and holds us together tenderly.

These examples show how quickly things can change over the course of a few moments in a classroom, not unlike the rapid activity that often occupies my mind during meditation. Intuitively I make the effort to alter the burgeoning force into something softer and gentler. This has the effect of diffusing the vigorous energy in the room, which otherwise might cause events to spiral out of control. I sense the room and the needs of the children. Together, we transform the boisterous energy into one that is calmer and more collectively nurturing.

Working with children and ensuring they are comfortable, safe and content when engaged in activities is not always easy, given their various different personalities, needs and wants. Moreover, children sometimes compete with each other, and not just physically; they often vie for the teacher’s attention. At the same time, they feel my presence and energy; they are able to read my body language. The look on my face, for example, can speak volumes, as can the tone of my voice. My behavior, at any given moment, is in full view for them to observe and respond to positively or negatively. I try not to let my negativity or frustration dictate my words and actions.

The classroom operates as our safe haven. Just as mindfulness provides the safe haven for personal integration, the classroom can support the integration of its collective members through the desire for meaningful engagement and understanding. In meditation we can become aware;
we are free to witness, speak, listen and cultivate equipoise (e.g., equilibrium). We learn to accept the tensions that arise with gentle curiosity. We aim to speak with civility and listen with acceptance. In the classroom, the children and I mutually explore ways to listen, speak and build trusting, caring relationships. We learn to be aware of each other. In this process, we try to find balance and share the space.

Like Sam, I have loved all the kids I have taught. My experiences in the classroom have been mostly positive, but I have experienced conflicts or had to deal with some exasperating situations. The following anecdote describes a confrontation I had with a student in Grade Six, a student whose poor reputation preceded his actions, but with whom I had not been in contact much prior to this encounter.

I was on yard duty one day when the student in question, Devon, scaled a wall and jumped onto a section of the school roof. The children in the yard were agog. Noticing him on the roof, I called out, “Hey, please get down!” He retorted, “f**k off.” I was momentarily incensed and could feel the hair on the back of neck rising and my face tightening. I drew a deep breath and upon exhaling, felt the muscles in my face and neck relax. Once again, in a firm by gentler tone, I said, “Please come down off the roof,” only to have him ignore me. Devon then proceeded to walk the length of the roof, which was a few metres high, pick up a ball, and scale back down to the ground. The drop from the roof to the asphalt was about three metres.

By the time of this incident, Devon had confronted nearly every authority figure in the school, including his teacher and the principal. During our altercation, a flurry of questions crossed my mind. “Should I send in a student to report the incident, as I was the only one out on yard duty, or should I go to his teacher directly?” What would be the benefit of reporting the incident now that it was over? I also asked myself: “What exactly do I feel in this moment and
why?” Although I had not actually met Devon I was acquainted with the enormous challenges he had already faced in this short life thus far. Following yard duty, I told Devon’s teacher about the incident, and later that same day Devon and his teacher came to my classroom to see me.

Devon entered the room reluctantly. I was seated at a small desk and he sat down in front of me beside his teacher. I wanted to have a “blank slate” before Devon began talking, that is, I wanted to clear my head of any pre-conceptions about him and really be open to our impending conversation. He was asked to apologize by his homeroom teacher and did so half-heartedly, with his head slightly cocked to one side and eyes downcast, said: “Sorry for jumping on the roof and sorry for swearing.” At this point, his teacher, a caring colleague who meant well, began to lecture him about how no one should be treated disrespectfully. He emphasized that as teacher who had been at the school for many years helping many kids warranted respect. At this point Devon piped up: “She doesn’t even know who I am. She doesn’t even know me!” Now I saw defiance on Devon’s face and the tension escalating. I drew a conscious quiet breath and before I let the words out of my mouth. I let Devon know my concern was that his being on the roof was dangerous, and that I did not want any younger kids attempting what he had done, because they may not be as adept as he is at climbing. I explained why I thought it was dangerous and that I did not know what he was doing up there. I also told him that I had initially felt incensed by his remarks, but I was over it now. Devon seemed to relax a little. The defiant look from his face vanished. He nodded his head, acknowledging what I had said. When I was finished I thanked Devon and his teacher for coming to see me. We decided we would not report the incident as the matter had been dealt with.

Unbeknownst to me, however, it was not over. The following morning during my meditation, images of Devon on the roof floated in and out of my mind. I could hear him telling...
me off. My chattering mind was full of questions. A flush of heat travelled up my spine. I asked myself what exactly did I hear in his utterance? Did I hear “Drop dead,” “Get lost,” “Don’t bother me,” “It’s none of your business” or “You’re kidding, right?” His tone seemed more irritated than defiant. I thought about my immediate gut reaction to hearing the words “F**k off.” My mind was sweeping all over the place. Then I recalled his body language when he came to apologize, in particular his downcast eyes, just before the look of defiance came over him. I thought about how it vanished after I honestly shared how I had felt. All the while I was paying close attention to my body and its reactions to the endless questions. Devon is more than just the kid who jumped up on the roof. In a flash, I saw him carrying a heavy burden, one much too large for someone his age. He had exercised what both the school and I thought was inappropriate behaviour, according to the rules, by his actions and words. Yet I remained alert to my questions and paid close attention to why I was noticing what I was noticing.

That same morning, I was scheduled to host the school’s character development assembly. Once a month, the school holds students’ awards assembly, combined with a character development trait. The classes had seated themselves and just as I was about to launch into my introduction, I spotted Devon. Looking at him, I spoke to him and the crowd, publicly thanking him saying something like this: “Before we begin, I want to thank Devon for his honesty when we met yesterday, and for reminding me to come out of my little corner and engage with the rest of the school.” I went on to say, “teachers like me get so immersed in our work that they sometimes forget they are part of a larger school community, of which Devon reminded me of that yesterday.”

The Character Development practiced by the TDSB (2014a) identifies 10 character traits that are to be introduced into the curriculum each month of the school year to encourage children to excel in their studies and build success. The 10 traits include: respect (September), responsibility (October), empathy (November), kindness and caring (December), teamwork (January), fairness (February), honesty (March), co-operation (April), integrity (May) and perseverance (June).
The words tumbled out of my mouth easily and confidently. Judging by the warm smile and look I received from Devon, I believe he understood that I was making an effort to make peace with him so that he knew the “thank you” he’d heard from me before was genuine. In retrospect, I am aware that as a teacher I often have to maintain a delicate balance between involvement and detachment, especially when it comes to matters outside my classroom. Naturally I want to make sure I do everything that is expected of me, but there is much more to teaching than looking after one’s own class. In a large school, peoples’ paths often intersect, sometimes under unpleasant circumstances and at unexpected moments, just as in the so-called “real world.” If we are mindful, then we can choose how to conduct ourselves for the better. The irony here is that I was hosting the character development assembly, which was intended for the children, but Devon had helped me bring out a better part of my character and given me the chance to display the trait being featured, honesty.

Some may question whether meditation made it possible for me to say those words, or if it was simply my nature; I know that while I was sitting in my practice that morning, images of Devon kept resurfacing in my mind. When I saw him at the assembly, I instinctively knew what to say. My morning mediation practice therefore, served as a gentle reminder and guiding influence during the assembly. Moreover, my encounter with Devon turned from sour to sweet, from destructive to constructive, in a moment of authentic contact.

While I find it generally easy dealing with children, being open with, receptive to and accepting of adults can be more challenging, particularly in the teaching profession. Not long ago, for example, I was involved in a situation that involved my own son and his high-school principal. At issue was the school’s policy on missed exams. To give some context, I acknowledge that while I had not always agreed with this principal, for we view education
through different lenses, I was fully cognizant of his professional responsibilities and obligations. Yet I was not particularly impressed with the way he dealt with conflicts or sensitive issues, based on my own observations as a parent, community member and teacher.

When I first heard that I needed to go the school and meet over this matter, I was upset. I saw that my son had followed proper protocol and tried to resolve the matter with the principal himself. After sitting with the issue in meditation, however, I became less agitated; asking myself how was I similar to or different from the principal. I wondered if we shared anything, given that we were polar opposites in many aspects of pedagogy philosophy and practice. So later, at the start of the meeting, I seemed gentler, with a more balanced frame of mind.

Our lengthy verbal exchange revealed a clear difference of opinion regarding educational goals. Noting the principal’s rigid attitude and defensiveness, I left the office feeling calm but disappointed. There was still no definite answer from the principal as to whether or not my son would have to make up this exam, nor was there a reasonable explanation regarding why this had became an issue for the principal. Later that same day, the principal phoned to notify me my son had been exempted from writing the exam.

For me, the resolution of the exam was less important; the matter had already been resolved when I left the office because I was content with how I had conducted myself. Meditating on the conflict gave me a clearer perspective, enabling me to consider it from a distance. While I did not leave the meeting loving the man, I was able to see his vulnerability and humanity, and could therefore empathize with him regardless of his final decision with which I disagreed. Thus, my behaviour and tone was more dispassionate towards him in the meeting and my ego more balanced during the conflictual discussion.
I often remind myself while walking the spiritual path that we all have goodness that can reveal itself in different ways. Sometimes we must look harder to see this goodness in others, especially when a conflict arises. My personal meditation practice reflects both the good and the bad that I see in myself. It enables me to witness my proliferating thoughts, only some of which are constructive. It also reflects its transience nature.

My practice has made me see that first and foremost, I must accept myself as I am, in the present moment. My character is fluid, a flow of energy, thoughts and feelings. These change from one moment to the next in relation to what and with whom I come into contact. How I choose to react to any situation is entirely up to me. I bring not only my expertise to my teaching, but also my identity, cultural heritage, and life history, as well as the wider world’s changing trends and politics.

Reflecting on my teaching leads me to reflect on my self-conduct. As I think about how to be a better person, I see there are no absolutes or dualities; everything is subject to the ebb and flow of events. To ride this wave freely, I need to be more fluid and less rigid, but this is easier said than done. In a highly energetic teaching environment, one must keep moving with the tide no matter how strong the current. The quietude of my practice allows the wisdom of love to flourish in me and in my classroom. I see things more clearly, with composure and without fear. Then I can act with benevolence and care while remaining open to challenges that arise.

The more I practise, the more fully present and aware I am in school. Like Sam says, “I am less about me and more about them.” There is no them or me, but rather, only an us, dynamic and interactive. When I am alert and present for my students, the quality of our pedagogical relationships improves which I feel benefits the children, and more than just academically. By being attentive to the dynamic stream of moments in my mind during meditation, I am better
able to achieve the clarity, understanding and emotional balance necessary for responding to daily challenges in the classroom. Everything does not always work out beautifully, but I can accept the joys and sorrows of teaching in equal measure, and in so doing, bring more of my skill and expertise to the pedagogical exchange.

IV. Summarizing My Story

Throughout this narrative, I have tried to demonstrate how meditation offers me a clearer lens for exploring the landscape of my mind. Looking back at my life, I have come to know and appreciate the transient nature of all things—the loss of loved ones, the loss of homes, the loss of schools. These losses are one part of life being lived day to day, and they are part of the reality of teaching. Through my practice of sitting, I have learned to be more fully engaged as a holistic contemplative educator. The formal practice gives me an opportunity to slow down, which is profoundly important in such a heavily scheduled yet often disjointed profession like teaching.

By making explicit some of the details of the phenomenological experience of my own engaged practice, I have tried to offer the reader a window into my felt experiences, and how I use this embodied knowledge when engaged with children and colleagues. The act of teaching is all about engagement: building trusting, caring honest relationships with others, with one’s self and with the profession more broadly. With continued meditation practice, I work toward being more present and more compassionately attentive toward my students.
CHAPTER NINE

REFLECTIONS OF THIS JOURNEY

A research project of this nature produced challenges and insights in equal measure for the researcher. The first challenge involved “bracketing” (van Manen, 1997, p. 1) my own knowledge of meditation and teaching to practice letting go of my presuppositions about teaching and meditation, and to refrain from inferring meaning into what was being initially shared at the interviews.

Yet I also benefitted from my own meditation practice. It enabled me to stay impartial but receptive (Kramer, 2007) to these stories. In my own meditation, I listen to “that which constitutes the nature of essence of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1997, p. 122) or in the language of interpersonal mindfulness meditation, become mindfully aware (Kramer, 2007) of the use of language, intonation and rhythm of speech and the silences between words. To focus on the interviewee during the interviews I contemplated on the original set of questions (Appendix A), which I had presented the participants prior to the interview. Having the questions prior to the interview helped the participants maintain “flow” (Csiksentmihalyi, 1988) with minimal interruption by me, supporting the view that less dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee ensures a smoother narrative flow (Merriam, 2009) and helps generate mutual contact and trust (Puhakka, 2000) between us. As well, mutual contact gave the teachers the freedom to candidly share personal anecdotes, insights and concerns in what Sam termed a “safe container.”

Two other challenges of this research included how or whether to position my own story as part of it, and how to explain the central tenets of mindfulness meditation and contemplation in an engaged pedagogy. In terms of the first challenge, much of what was shared resonated with
my own experience of meditation and teaching. So where relevant, I chose to situate my story as a response to what I was hearing (Weiner, 2011). As for the issue of clearly explaining key tenets, the interviews themselves guided me to appreciate how mindfulness/vipassana falls under the larger umbrella of meditation, and is a composite of several characteristics, including contemplation. The solitary experiential nature of meditation can be difficult to capture verbally, but the experience cultivates rich insights. Forms of methodical, vigilant attention and reasoned attention, as well as wise consideration may be understated, but they are each significant to the practices of all of the teachers cited in this study and supported by Lopez (2012), Thurman (2006) and Wallace (2012).

This aspect of the practice also illuminates the path to insight that guides holistic contemplative pedagogy. Mindfulness meditation allows a glimpse into the conditioned mind, which in turn takes on a form of social engagement (Rothberg, 2011) in the pedagogical exchange in a classroom. In other words, contemplation in action reveals the fruit of a solitary mindfulness practice in teaching-learning exchanges.

As well, contemplation is also considered an active process in the practice of mindfulness meditation, a process that requires reasoned and wise consideration. This consideration requires discernment, which differs from the process of neutral observation and acts like noticing the range of phenomena that enter and exit the mind-body. It would have been valuable to put these participants into a face-to-face conversation together, and see what kind of social engagement their conversation might have produced. Although such an exchange was not feasible for this study, my analysis that follows gestures toward such a convergence.

Mindfulness meditation practice functions as a three-fold, interconnected relationship: first, to develop focused attention; second, to cultivate wholesome qualities; and third, to garner
wisdom. Each of the research study participants conveyed a benevolent will of intention in the understanding and value of wholesome thoughts and qualities, as described by the four limitless qualities of the heart (Olendzki, 2005), with emphasis on “loving-kindness” (Salzberg, 1995). By embracing and embodying these qualities, the teachers strove to exercise loving-kindness through their pedagogical relationships—a holistic contemplative pedagogy in action. They articulated this pedagogy, shaping a larger theme of my research. That is, the teachers meditate to cultivate a more benevolent way of engaging with their students and colleagues. This intention is nourished through the experience of insight in mindfulness practice that understands the wisdom of love as a way of being and engaging with their students, colleagues and world around them.

As van Manen (1997) has argued, the very act of writing requires a heightened awareness, a stance of reflecting on the material while producing it. Here, too, my own practice helped give me both an intimacy with and a productive, reflective distance from the narratives of the participants. Synthesizing and analyzing that data, in conjunction with my own reflections on and contributions to their experiences, forms the basis of this last chapter. I discussed the methodology in detail in Chapter Three, and now turn to examining how the methodology led to the synthesis of shared patterns in the data.

As a reminder of the methodology I employed, much of the data was drawn from two sets of audio-taped interviews, which were then transcribed. These interviews took place with each participant individually over the course of several months. Additional data came from the journal entries of teachers’ meditation and classroom experiences. As well, additional sources from the Toronto District School Board and Ontario Ministry of Education helped make connections to
the teachers’ experiences. The review of the literature on these fields of study demarcated points of support for the teachers’ insights into their lived experience as professional educators.

Following the transcription of each interview, I listened to the original audio recording while I read the transcribed interviews, doing so to ensure accuracy of the transcription. I then separated the transcribed copies of the data according to themes and patterns as they emerged.

Striving for authenticity, I assembled the stories, but must acknowledge that, as the researcher, I can only aspire to verisimilitude (Bruner, 1991). In the effort to maintain authenticity, wherever possible I tried to let the teachers speak for themselves. Data from the interviews are triangulated in this chapter especially; the individual stories form a collective lived experience of the participants as holistic contemplative teachers who regard teaching as a spiritual engagement. This analysis is further supported by the work of holistic educators like Ron Miller (2003, 2004) Jack Miller (2007) and Richard Brown (2014).

A brief note of explanation on how to read the references in this section: first, the following abbreviations refer to the five participants:

- S: Sam
- R: Rachel
- M: Meena
- D: Diane
- J: Jennifer

Second, parenthetical references will be used. These references cite the specific page number of the written transcription. Here is an example: “S p. 90” refers to a section from Sam’s interview on page 90.
As the preceding narratives illustrate, my research looks at the relationship of five teacher participants, their ongoing meditation practice and their holistic contemplative teaching pedagogy. An overarching question that guides this work: What is the relationship between the teachers’ meditation practice and their pedagogy? The order and substance of my questions were developed to explore the three basic areas:

1. To identify and learn about the nature of the meditation practice of each teacher participant, for mindfulness meditation is the broad practice used by all the participants, a practice that includes contemplative techniques.

2. To gain an understanding of the teachers’ philosophies and insight into their lived experience as professional teachers.

3. To learn about the relationship between the teacher’s pedagogy and meditation as means of self-exploration and insight.

Taken together, the data revealed several shared patterns amongst the teachers. First, mindfulness meditation is a spiritual practice that clearly contributes to the teachers’ holistic contemplative pedagogy. Second, the teachers’ holistic contemplative pedagogy is fuelled by the love and unconditional approval (compassion) and insight (wisdom) cultivated through ongoing mindfulness practice and the teachers’ longstanding experience as educators. Third, the practice of mindfulness provides a safe harbor for teachers to witness the discursive nature of mind, affective states, and to explore the nature of one’s self in relation to others and the world. The overarching theme throughout this work is that mindfulness/vipassana practice supports teachers to engage in a more benevolent manner with their students and colleagues.
In meditation, we do not know what we know until we have experienced the character of the mind’s will in active engagement with the world. Similarly in phenomenological research, the understanding of the phenomenon becomes known in the writing and sharing of the research. As previously noted in the methodology chapter, a hermeneutic composition is not a task of explaining why, but rather, “what makes it possible for us to speak, think and act in the ways we do” (cited in Pinar et al., 2004, p. 423). In this study, the hermeneutic composition in my acceptance of a collective understanding is based on the phenomena gleaned from the data from the individual stories. Audio recordings of the interviews provided me several opportunities to listen with mindful attention. Using the selective reading approach (van Manen, 1997) to review data at this point revealed a shared pattern of word choice and phrases that further contributed to the development of patterns. These patterns underscore the influence of the teachers’ meditation practices and holistic contemplative pedagogy.

For example, certain words arose with greater frequency for the teachers throughout their individual stories. These included: “spiritual” “love”, “kindness”, “respect” “nurturing”, “honour”; compassion; “mindful”; “wise”; “tenderness”; “safe”; “loving”; “meaningful”; “respect”; “holistic”; “connected”; “contemplate”; “compassionate”; “nourishment”; “caring; goodness”; and “affection.” These adjectives, verbs, and nouns revealed the teachers intentions, views, values, and in some cases, their actions as educators. The teachers attempt to embody these wholesome qualities through their presence as professional educators in the classroom.

Similarly, several phrases and sentences spoke more pointedly to the pattern of holistic contemplative engagement and therefore indicate how mindfulness abets the teachers’ benevolent stance in the pedagogical process For example: “We need people to listen to each other and care for one another” (D p. 194); “[T]hey let me bear witness to their struggles and
invite me to share in them” (M p. 171); “[P]ersonal transformation in an engaged and enlightened community—one that exists in the here-and-now” (S p. 115) “I have tried maintaining an informal, open-door policy […] welcoming parents, colleagues as well as senior students from other classes” (J p. 209); “It’s important to be connected with others” (R p. 140) and “[E]mbodiment of mindfulness” (R p. 141); “[L]ife] is only lived in the moment” (M p. 157); “Was that the best I could offer in that moment?” (D p. 188); “It helps people to be compassionate and tender and caring toward themselves and others” (R p. 140); “For me teaching is a naturally contemplative process” (J p. 207); “[T]eachers might best serve their students by cultivating kindness and a generosity of spirit” (S p. 126); “I initiate my pedagogy from a place of insight into and regard for the children in my care. My meditation practice enables me to put this aspiration and intention into action more regularly” (J p. 212); “I’m reading his body language breathing, eye movements” (M p. 170); and “[B]eing in the moment” (R p. 142).

These phrases to speak directly to holistic contemplative relational aspects in teaching supported by J. P. Miller (2010), and R. Miller (2003) and R. Brown (2014), and corroborated by Rothberg (2011) as forms of contemplation in action.

I have chosen to organize this chapter into six sections, beginning with “Meditation.” The participants spoke of the natural draw toward heightening their spiritual awareness through mindfulness meditation practice. They see mindfulness as a consciousness-raising process in self-exploration that helps them to open up their hearts with genuine regard for self and for the well-being of others, most especially their students. In the next section “Mindfulness: A Spiritual Exploration,” I look as the teachers’ responses to and understandings of spirituality in their practice and pedagogy. Overall, I posit that it forms a multilocal participatory event (Ferrer,
2002). That is the teachers approach their pedagogical relationships with benevolence and understand teaching to be a spiritually engaging act. This leads to my third section, which explores how contemplation comprises a central and unique component of both the spiritual practice of meditation and a holistic pedagogy. “Contemplation” leads well into the fourth section, “Mindfulness and Holistic Contemplative Pedagogy,” which focuses on the intersections between mindfulness meditation and holistic pedagogy in greater depth. It is slightly longer and multi-layered, with a subsection on loving-kindness, and then the teachers’ philosophies on education and teachers’ roles. Here I highlight the teachers’ impressions on schooling and experiences of teaching, learning and education more broadly. In particular, I concentrate on three facets of the teachers’ pedagogical practices: creating respect, love and a nurturing space. The fifth section, “Contemplating Teaching: Paradoxes and Tensions,” looks at the challenges and dilemmas the participants face as holistic educators. Finally, the last section, “Contemplating Teaching” is a synthesis of my research more broadly and its implications, what I have learned and its significance for teachers’ personal development.

I. Meditation

In this study, the participants (and I, too) all identify mindfulness meditation as a contemplative spiritual meditation practice originally attributed to the historical Buddha by virtue of their mindfulness/vipassana practice and meditation mentors. Sam, the longest practitioner of mindfulness, or what he refers to as “shamatha vipashyana,” shares an anecdote to explain his introduction to meditation practice: “It’s sort of like the story of the Buddha, if you will. Gotama tried all these different ascetic practices and ultimately didn’t know what to do, so he just sat under a tree and eventually “woke up” (S p. 107).
All of the teachers spoke of their inclination to turn inward to meditation as a means of self-exploration, as a commitment to uncover their natural spirituality, and as a way to ameliorate negative emotions and heighten their senses. Below, I want to highlight some of the language each teacher uses to describe her or his experience of “mindfulness” specifically.

Sam began meditating in his twenties, and as mentioned, was a self-described classic “hippie” in search of a “meaningful spiritual experience” (Sp. 106). He further acknowledges that existential anxiety led him on his mindfulness spiritual path. His first month-long retreat at dathun was a painfully beautiful experience: “I was in so much physical and psychological pain […] I was beginning to chip away stuff and see my neuroses for the first time and realize there really is no fundamental problem” (Sp. 111). Sam explains the significance of his mindfulness practice. “You literally raise your gaze […] Not that you’ve cleaned up your garden, but you are not so obsessed with your own garden [and] you can actually help others with their garden” (Sp. 112).

Like Sam, Rachel began meditating “to develop the spiritual part” of herself, the part as she put it, “connected to my heart […] As you work with yourself, you naturally work with others as well.” Mindfulness is positively affirming for Rachel because it is like “coming home to a peaceful spot” (Rp. 131). In explaining some of the preliminary mechanics of breathing, Rachel describes shamatha as an act in which you “follow your breath; out breath initially. You let it go […] You know, 25% of your attention is on your surroundings and maybe 75% on your breathing, but that changes over time” (Rp. 134). Rachel describes her mind’s stream of consciousness in a string of never-ending thoughts and images:

Body relaxed. Strong. […] Eyes half-open. […] Breath relaxed. […] Natural rhythm. Mind is active. […] Nature. Woods. […] Attention is elsewhere. Begin to count breaths. Thoughts arise. Burst them as if they are bubbles. Let them go. […]
I am way off somewhere caught up in an involved story. As soon as I realize this, I return to the breath. Was it a fantasy? Was I starting to sleep? Doesn’t matter. Return to the present. (R p. 136)

Rachel explains that when she no longer fixates on her breath, she has the opportunity to “befriend” the moment. By not identifying with her thoughts, Rachel is able to find a more relaxed, expansive state of heightened awareness for a fuller experiential practice: “Days I am really present I raise my gaze taking in the whole environment” (R p. 136). This state enables her to gain insight into the nature of herself: “My thoughts were happening and I was following them, running after them going crazy and never taking the time to understand what this is all about” (R p. 135). She admits this is not always easy. “Now I’m trying to work on myself, which means taking more responsibility for my life” (R p. 134). Meditation helps Rachel accomplish this, for through mindfulness, Rachel summons and contemplates her “inherent wisdom” (R p. 138), to summon her “fearlessness” (R p. 138), which helps her to face the challenges in her personal and professional life. As she puts it, her “teachings,” and her “meditation practice” help her “to remain open to whatever arises.” She adds: “I no longer push a thing away when it becomes too difficult to deal with. Instead I sit with the problem, focus on it and explore it” (R p. 132).

Meena remarks that her early morning meditation practice provides her with an opportunity to commune with herself. Meditation is her “spiritual anchor” (M p. 151), and she refers to her practice of “vipassana meditation” using her breath as the focal point, a technique she learned by Goenka teachers (M p. 152). She claims, “I’m a scientist, which is why I practice vipassana […] There is no goddess, no god, no mantra. It’s just a matter of listening to your breathing. Yeah, I thought I breathe all the time. I’ll just sit here and listen” (M p. 152). Breath
watching and counting helps Meena access mental stability to slow down the discursive chatter in her head:

All kinds of busy thoughts are running through my head […] lessons for the day, photocopying the grade 10 test […] My head […] flooded […] I am mindful of taking in the in breath […] This stills the thoughts […] I feel slowed down […] My mind […] not so busy […] I go from breathing, stillness, feeling peace, to a sense of new beginning. (M p. 153)

By focusing on her breath, Meena is able to find more balance and calm in the heat of a moment. This balance provides her an alternative view to the immediacy of the moment; it helps reduce her anxiety when she faces the storm of activity at school. Yet while events around her do not change, her response does in that she is calmer, kinder and more generous to herself and those around her. She notes that on “days when I don’t meditate, I’m snappy” (M p. 154).

Diane describes her meditation practice based on Goenka training of vipassana (D p. 178). Like Rachel and Meena, Diane explains the phenomenon of letting her breath “drop away to find real stillness or you know you can feel the energy take over” making “the bounds of” her “body sort of become unclear” (D p. 178). Diane’s fusion with the rising and passing of phenomena brings her mind to rest slowing down the internal chatter as she astutely goes on to state: “And other days your mind just doesn’t stop.” My own introduction to mindfulness, which led to the development of my ongoing practice, was the result of turmoil, angst and spiritual depletion I was experiencing from 2004 to 2007 (J p. 203). Like the other participants, I use my breath initially to summon calm and stability of mind for greater depth of exploration—breathing with my body, and paying attention as closely as possible to all the subtle nuances of the breathing process. At some point, the breath is me and I am the breath. Here, I find real stillness, calm and buoyancy, a remarkable lightness (J p. 204), where my mind-body connection is
vibrantly alive. My practice brings an acute subtle awareness to the nuances of my felt sense or my kinesthetic knowing. And often when I am faced with a challenging situation it is my felt sense or physical sensations that “speak” to me first before the flurry of thoughts take over.

Meditation sharpens my awareness not just mentally, but physically as well. As a result, I am much more attuned to what is happening around me when teaching. The anecdote of the swiftly changing winds in the classroom illustrates this dynamic. Although I was not angry, my body spoke loudly; my skin clearly informed me that I needed to take action in a highly discombobulated room (J pp. 220-221). My embodied awareness to the changing dynamics in the room prompted me to act. Like Diane and Meena, I intuitively draw on my breath, which gives me the time and space time to act insightfully, with discernment, or as Rachel would say, “pro-social action” for the benefit of all in the room.

Polly Young-Eisendrath (2009) refers to the absence of subjective boundaries is as no-self. This disambiguation of self is a dynamic unfolding process that responds to a changing environment, one that is continually shifting to make meaningful sense of the internal experience of the outward manifestation of events. The teachers’ respective forms of awareness garnered by the practices, help to avert unnecessary angst, frustration, and tension that can arise in challenging environments (D p. 186; M p. 161; R p. 141).

As all the participants demonstrate, mindfulness of breathing during meditation slows down and supports the arrestment of our discursive minds. We remain consciously alert to what is happening by witnessing the thoughts and images that enter and exit. Breathing with the body in a tense or muddied situation can offer simple clarity or intuitive knowing. It can guide someone about how to proceed in a split moment of impasse, one in which the rational mind is not sure or gets stuck in cognitive rumination, negative ideation.
Still, it is not always easy to let go of the thoughts that arise in meditation because of our previous conditioning and exposure to the events of everyday life. An example of this difficulty is illustrated in the tense exchange I had with my own son’s school principal (J p. 225). Having been familiar with the principal’s administrative practices and policies over the course of five years (i.e., both my teenage children had attended the same high school), I was well aware of differences regarding his and my politics and policies of education. My ability to cultivate neutrality and disengage from the me-him, I-you or us-them battles largely depended on my ability to find the right spaciousness, balance and perspective in the moment. In that meeting with the principal, I let my felt sense guide me to maintain balance.

Like the other participants in this study, I accept the good, bad and indifferent in meditation. Ongoing practice can be tumultuous and extremely painful at times, as corroborated by all the participants. Yet in this process, healing occurs. Like the others in this study, I recognize and then can accept, forgive and let go of the guilt, shame or avoidance that estranges me from others. Through mindfulness I learn to *friend* the flow of the meditative experience, rather than getting entangled in the contents.

In this conscious effort, my organic spirit sails freely and safely without attachment or avoidance. With undistracted awareness I can be fully present to the here and now, allowing love and kindness to fill the gaps that lie between the thoughts, without attachment to the thinker (Epstein, 1995). It is in this space that love grows, matures, and when nurtured wisely, I believe can bloom into compassion. In this way, practising meditation and mindfulness can also take on a spiritual dimension, as I discuss next.
II. Mindfulness: A Spiritual Self-Exploration

In this study, love drives each of the teachers’ pedagogies. As such, the teachers meditate to cultivate insight into the wisdom that is their organic spirituality, made visible through unconditional love. They strive to become compassionate persons to support benevolent thought and action, and less selfishness, whenever they engage with their students.

Sam, who has both the longest ongoing meditation practice and teaching practice stretching over 30 years, states that it is difficult to know how the “right nourishment at the right time […] spiritually affects [students] academically” (S p. 109). While there is no single way to measure spirituality, teachers in this study see qualities as significant to the spiritual, particularly in their use of words like “big love” or “wisdom” guiding their pedagogy.

In this respect, the teachers each illustrate Ferrer’s (2002) conceptualization of spirituality as a multilocal and communal participatory engagement. This form of spirituality arises from direct intimate contact with another or with the world, as symbolized in authentic pedagogical relationships.

All of participants spoke of mindfulness as a practice that cultivates a heightened awareness of self-exploration through meditation. Self-exploration not only helps them open up their own hearts, but also supports them in nourishing the hearts and minds of their respective students—all while grounding them spiritually as individual human beings and teachers (S p. 109 R pp. 130-133; M p. 162; D p. 188; J pp. 216-217).

For example, Sam and the teachers in this study often look for a deeper purpose and meaning to existence—including a search for meaning in, and to, their work as teachers. Sam’s personal and professional lived experience indicates that he understands and appreciates the transient nature of life, that impermanence is part of one’s existence in the world and that each
individual has her or his own journey (S p. 119). For example, when he speaks of his initial teaching, he shares experiences of both his security and insecurity, or love and disdain, which reflects his first dathun experience. To recall his phrasing, “[i]t was a very sweet position,” but after a few years it turned bitter. “I could feel it dying […] The […] board started to feel that this wasn’t kosher […] it never was […] I was […] glad to leave the school […] parents had too much say in the teaching […] it wasn’t the kind of support I wanted” (S p. 108).

After losing this position, Sam left Toronto to find work elsewhere. Meditation in this moment (and others) helped Sam make sense of his world and the events around him, including his relationships. In understanding impermanence and the constellation of emotions that accompany such impermanence, he attempts to make the most of the moment day by day. By accepting himself in meditation, he is softer and kinder with others, including his students. He affirms that his spiritual practice mirrors his teaching pedagogy. “In our spiritual tradition we share a vision of people’s basic integrity and compassion and that’s what we work toward at the school” (S p. 109).

Meditation fundamentally influences Sam’s thinking and behaviour, especially when engaging with his students as he contemplates on their “inherent Buddha nature” that is their capacity to be “happy to be alive” (S p.123). Meditation reminds Sam of the basic goodness in everyone, including his students. Sam embraces this view and intention of purpose when engaging with his students, and notably, is what he sees as important in the pedagogical exchange.

Diane notes that she intuitively fell into mindfulness practice as she was looking for a deeper “spiritual” (D p. 179) connection to the underpinnings of her thoughts, emotions and how all of this relates to her pedagogical relationships and life in general (D pp. 182, 188). Like Sam,
she describes meditation as a “loving state” (D p. 187), one in which she is kind to and forgiving of herself. She embodies the rewards of practice, and recognizes it benefits those with whom she engages—most especially, her students. Sitting in meditation daily helps Diane cultivate a clearer mind. For example, she engages less reactively when working through difficulties with students and colleagues. She explains it in this way: “Meditation helps create a space for silence….silence helps me …I’ll find… in a frustrating situation…an annoyingly loud activity…I’m about to lose my mind… I know I have to distance myself from what’s happening…Meditation helps me do that” (D p. 184).

Diane explains the spiritual dimensions to the relationship between her silent mindfulness practice and practice at school by describing meditation as “kind of magical” (D p. 183). She also stated that schools do not appreciate the value and significance of silence. For her, meditation can be a spiritual practice in that it can help create “space for silence.” As she adds, “I don’t think schools do well at that, and certainly I don’t think kids are given the space for that much in their lives” (D p. 183). For Diane, creating pockets of silence through the agency of her own conscious awareness bring a certain grace or presence (J. P. Miller, 2014) to the space. It is through this grace or presence, using what she terms “mindfulness techniques,” that she attempts to summon a peaceful and more loving tone to the classroom, something that moves beyond the individual and embraces them more collectively (D p. 190).

Rachel works with young children and explains that she began meditating to develop her spiritual side, which she sees as connected to her heart. “I think of the heart and mind as being connected, and there is also a shared connection with others and maybe with the future and the past and all those things” (R p. 130). Rachel embodies this spirit, which permeates her pedagogy, and underscores her tender, caring and compassionate connections with her students, seen in this
remark: “All people will be connected with their joy and happiness” (R p. 137). This knowing, gained from her understanding of mindfulness practice, shapes her pedagogy as a holistic contemplative one with spiritual dimensions. She explains her pedagogical approach aims to support her students to take responsibility for their learning, for ongoing personal development, and for growth where “[l]earning becomes personalized—a kind of spiritual journey” (R p. 140).

As a specific example of how she experiences a spiritual aspect to her holistic contemplative pedagogy, Rachel describes a “sweet moment of connection” that she experienced with one of her students with whom she was bored of playing with. However she intuitively realized the pleasure in the interaction. “[S]uddenly something woke me up” (R pp. 141-142). I regard this moment as an epiphanic spiritual awakening for Rachel, one that came about by being present with the moment of intimate contact with genuine openness to sharing in the child’s “joyful trickery.”

Rachel also affirms that meditation has helped her to summon her “inherent wisdom” (R p. 139), which assists her in facing the challenges in her professional and personal life with confidence. In her practice, she strives to remain open to whatever arises and not “push things away because they were too difficult” to deal with. Instead, “I sit with what I want to look at, focus on it and explore it” (R p. 141).

Meena similarly confirms that meditation influences her teaching greatly and specifically, that her daily morning practice helps summon her spirituality. Meena embodies this visceral knowing as a spiritual awareness, which is evident in her voicing the word “presence” for descriptions of engaging with her students, and her desire to make direct or authentic contact with them (M p. 160). Meena’s spiritual and pedagogical approaches are linked, as she displays here: “[W]hen meditation is part of my daily routine I make it a point to talk to every child in my
class, to look into his or her eyes [...] I’ve learned from meditation to find some way to make contact” (M p. 160).

Meena’s classroom is symbolic of a *templum* much like her meditation is her sacred space, Meena notes a parallel: “My classroom is a sacred space. When you enter my room, I *honour* you” (M p. 165). In this sacred space cultivated with discernment, Meena aspires figuratively to awaken the “sleeping giant”—her students—as she herself awakens in meditation (M p. 163).

Like the other teachers in this research, I also see teaching as a spiritually engaging act. In India, where I lived the first eight years of my life, contemplative practices like mindfulness meditation are understood as an inner or human science, and known to people from all walks of life. The spiritual awareness that arises from a practice of solitude like mindfulness becomes an engaged part of everyday life, much like mind and matter become one energy; it is the understanding of knowing this is something sacred and much larger than oneself (J. P. Miller, 2014, R. Miller, 2003; Thurman, 2004). My experience of this spiritual dimension, I believe, helps to unite the members of my classroom and me in the pedagogical experience. By being love this knowing or spiritual insight helps connect each one of us in the room with the world.

Authentic engagements in relationships are also spiritual. Spirituality can be as simple as a daily warm-hearted greeting given to each student through authentic contact as they enter into the classroom, and an acknowledging goodbye when they depart. Spirituality can result in epiphanic or intuitively unfolding moments in a pedagogical exchange that are dynamic and naturally occurring (J pp. 217-220). The sound of the ting shaw signals to us to come together in our circle. I would be hard-pressed to explain the thoughts of six year-old children nor their in-body experience at that particular moment, but there is a capacity for all of
us to share an unspoken love and experience it in unfolding moments like those in which the ting shaws ring and link us. These moments illustrate a spiritual engagement with an unspoken visceral energy that is larger than the individual, beyond cognition, and capable of uniting the members of the class in *being love*.

Ferrer’s (2002) version of a relaxed perennial philosophy also recognizes spiritual events or transpersonal phenomena to include multilocal or inter-dimensions of communal experience. By this he means that the magic of spirituality is completely ordinary yet extraordinary at the point of contact. A classroom can be a space that realizes a precious, sacred, communal and/or epiphanic moment or spiritual experience. For a holistic classroom is a dynamic, evolving and organic life form, where members work for a deep sense of meaning—a search that reveals an underlying spiritual thread at its core (R. Miller, 2004; Zajonc, 2009; 2010). The expression of “participatory knowing” can be spiritual—as an experience of the “emergence of an embodied presence pregnant with meaning that transforms self and the world” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 122). Referring back to the aforementioned experience, initially all of us in the classroom may be apart, symbolic of separate *holons*, and engaged in our own domains, satisfying our own individual needs and desires. Yet at the sound of the ting shaws we unite, assembling peacefully together as a single *holon*.

The intuitive uniting of our collective spiritedness can transform the individual chaos of clashing *holons*, into a ubiquitous stream of spacious consciousness and calm, breath by breath, and evolving into singular whole spiritual entity that is ultimately transcendent. Thomas Moore refers to education as having a “spiritual dimension,” and that while, “the eternal is certainly part of that spirituality,” it “is never far removed from ordinary existence and from the material earth and the human body” (Moore, 2005, p. 12).
Mindfulness practice provides the teachers numerous benefits that bear a spiritual dimension. For one, it provides the sacred space for the heart to open up unconditionally, where one can be present to the unfolding reality. An ongoing mindfulness practice also helps the teachers develop self-confidence and trust in themselves by helping the teachers become less self-obsessed with their thoughts and better able to assist others through authentic meaningful relationships. In this regard, the teachers’ attempts to conduct themselves with wholesome intention, reveals a heart’s desire for spiritual integrity—and that this integrity be a part of, not apart from, the pedagogical process.

III. Contemplation

As has been evident in all of the teachers’ narratives, contemplation is central to their practice, spirituality and pedagogy. Contemplation is a conceptual process in mindfulness meditation as well as engaged practice. It can take the form of visual imagery, imagination or cognitive conceptual thinking (Lopez, 2012; Thurman, 2006). Contemplation differs from shamatha (breath) or choice-less awareness, wherein one witnesses, and observes without judgment the rising and passing of all phenomena that touches the mind-body.

Contemplation serves a range of purposes in this study. In one way contemplation in mindfulness offers a means to experience release in the body and mind. Although employed conceptually it provides a way to release specific tension, conflict, sorrow and anxiety because it is grounded in wholesomeness and equanimity. For example, Diane explained that when she had a particularly challenging year during the data collection, contemplation played this role: “Some days went really well but a great many did not. If I did not have my meditation practice, I don’t know how I would have managed […] But meditation kept me sane” (D p. 185). She also explains how her overly analytical mind can cause her a great deal of suffering: “I could have
handled that better, or I could have been more kind,” and so on. “That’s a good lesson in forgiving yourself. The important thing is to persevere, that is, to sit and practise meditation every day” (D p. 195). Thus, Diane engages in contemplation at school by paying heed to her sensorial experience when she is engaged in tense situations with others. “It’s nice to hold the idea [...] Contemplation is like just sitting with an idea” effortlessly (D p. 180).

Another way contemplation plays a role in these teachers’ lives and work is in how much it can them help to connect with self and others with graciousness, respecting the understanding of the universal spirit of camaraderie and concern. Through contemplation in action, teachers show that they genuinely care for their students, colleagues and the larger world. One example is Sam’s and Rachel’s use of tonglen (S p. 114; R p. 137), a contemplative practice that involves the symbolic exchange of breath to alleviate the pain and suffering of another. As a reminder, tonglen is the conscious act of working with one’s mind to send love and compassion to another who is experiencing pain suffering. Sam described tonglen in the anecdote of his friend Tom and Tom’s dying wife. Rachel practices tonglen in her solitary practice, when she sent out love and peace to those caught in the tragedy of the tsunami. Tonglen, in other words, is a selfless contemplation that helps liberate the heart by accepting the pain of another, which in turn leads one on the path to personal transformation (Chödrön, 2001) arising from heartfelt “big love.”

Rachel’s use of drala represents an analogous mode of contemplation, in that she summons her own inner strength and wisdom through earthly connections (R. p. 138). Drala in shamatha vipashyana helps Rachel build confidence, which in turn assists her to be more genuinely open to her own problems and those of her colleagues. “Drala is about looking out as well as within. It’s open, enriching and aware. It allows me [...] to connect with things rather than shut down. Drala helps me cultivate a sense of fearlessness” (R p. 138).
As Rachel uses the contemplative techniques of drala to build her strength and resolve in meditation, Diane visualizes the chakras to summon her spiritual energy (D p. 177) during practice to find equanimity and clam; that is her place of samadhi (Wallace, 2012, p. 159). In doing so, she can settle herself into a more in-depth meditation practice (D p. 186), where she contemplates on other matters as indicated in her one of her journal entries (D entry #1, p. 186; entry #2, p. 187). While Diane uses contemplation in self-exploration, she also engages in contemplation in action, when she imagines a “pink light” surrounding a student she is having difficulty with (D p. 191). This choice supports Rotherberg’s (2011) idea that contemplation is a spiritual act that is visible through our thoughtful actions in everyday life.

In the same vein, Meena, like Diane, Rachel and Sam, uses imagery as she sends out a “white light” to express love and compassion to a student experiencing personal difficulty (M p. 155). As a holistic contemplative educator, Meena contemplates on her students, even while directly engaging with them. She is reminded through her own solitary practice that she and her students are on a spiritual journey. That is the form of sati for Meena, contemplation in action when she is engaged in the pedagogical process and contemplates on her students’ backgrounds, their responsibilities as older siblings, and their specific predicaments (M p. 157). This practice of contemplation enables her to become more understanding, insightful and empathetic, knowing that like her, they are all individual human beings with their own lives to live.

Other types of conceptual contemplation engage specifically with certain thoughts or ideas, as in the reflexive exploration in meditation (Thurman, 2006; Wallace, 2012). Meena explains that in meditation, she may contemplate on a particular incident that took place in class to gain a deeper understanding of what transpired. Following a meditation practice in which she
contemplates on being open and honest, Meena writes in journal entry, “[a]t the end of my sitting, “I decide to lead with my heart and not my ego” (M p. 153).

I, too, exercise contemplation in my ongoing mindfulness practice, both in meditation and when engaging with students and colleagues. In this way I contemplate my weaknesses and those of the others, like the students I work with, and try to find a creative way to bridge them and transform our weaknesses into strengths. I also have come to appreciate that not everyone has the same experience as me or thinks the same way I do, and unless I can find a way for us to share a mutual experience of contact, one party will be left out, as was the case with student Noah (J pp. 212-213). In effect I placed myself in Noah’s shoes. By taking part in his interest in music and pop culture we each found an experiential moment of togetherness and pleasure; contact as a small spiritual awakening.

Contemplation for the teachers then, is multi-dimensional, as illustrated above. It is also the engaged spirited action of everyday teaching that propels these teachers’ specifically contemplative holistic pedagogy. Contemplation encourages their conscious efforts to engage with benevolent intention, thought, and action to enhance the “larger education” of their students.

In this study, contemplation is also embedded in the understanding of wholesomeness and connectedness for the well-being of all involved in the pedagogical process. The teacher actively works to find balance and harmony by bridging the gap between self and other. In doing so, there is an effort to realize a spiritual connectedness, while embracing the uniqueness of self and the other yet understanding and holding the common threads of our basic integrity as human beings.

Contemplation in action is commensurate with the teachers’ considerate engagement with their students. Through their contemplative presence in the classroom and contemplative action
they gain insight into their individual students. And while this process may not reveal the deepest wisdom, it is the insight unveiled in the discriminating mind that helps germinate the seed of compassion (i.e., profound wisdom). More importantly, it the action of wholesome intention or conduct exercised from goodwill for all in the effort to balance self-regard and regard for others inspired from a loving heart in meditation.

Supporting the aforementioned, Goddard (1930) posits that those engaging in mindfulness practice, including contemplation, have an understanding of knowledge that falls into three categories: “First is knowledge that is based on appearances; second is knowledge based on careful observation and discriminative thought; and the third is knowledge of things as they truly are in their essential reality” (p. 76). In other words, contemplation in the context of mindfulness is not representative of typical receptive learning, intellectual or reflective discursive states, although it can sometimes resemble them (Lopez, 2012; Thurman, 2006). In this study, contemplation enacted in the pedagogical process reflects both inner and outer transformation (Rothberg, 2011, p. 113). I posit that contemplation in action, or engaged contemplation, forms the spiritual link between mindfulness meditation and holistic pedagogy. It is what makes a specifically holistic contemplative pedagogy.

IV. Mindfulness Meditation and Holistic Contemplative Pedagogy

The teachers in this study each register their mindfulness practice as intertwined with their holistic contemplative pedagogy and teaching practice. Mindfulness as a spiritual meditative practice, therefore, lays the foundation for holistic contemplative pedagogy. The teachers’ understanding of humanity’s universal interconnectedness guides their pedagogy, a view discussed by Ron Miller (2004) and Jack Miller (2007). Embracing the four limitless qualities of the heart (Olendzki, 2005) and based on the eightfold path attributed to the historical
contemplative Siddhattha Gotama (Bodhi, 1994; Goddard, 1930), the teachers meditate with the intention to embody and engage with loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic or appreciative joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha) when engaging with their students and colleagues in the pedagogical process.

Several of the participants elaborate specifically on how their teaching philosophy has been guided by meditation. Diane, for example, regards her vipassana practice as spiritual (D pp. 179, 193). One of her primary goals as a teacher is to support her students academically (D p. 182), but she feels it is equally important for them to develop the skill of being kind and respectful towards one another. As she articulates it, “[i]t’s not going to matter if the students know their times tables; that will help, but the state of the world right now calls for people to be kind” (D p. 194). This view also permits and encourages her to be kind to herself: “I gradually realized that if you treat yourself well, you’ll have more to offer other people. So as my meditation practice got deeper, I also became a better teacher, I was more patient” (D p. 194). In this regard she is better able to recognize each of her students as unique human beings (D p. 187) with their own “different gifts.”

Having her students belong to a caring classroom community becomes easier when Diane uses tools like ting shaws, mind jars, eye pillows, lavender and breath awareness to embody silence and stillness in the classroom. It is her aim to heighten and awaken their spiritual sensibility, allowing them to simply “be” with their breath in silence, something that she uses throughout the day with awareness. She hopes this practice brings balance to their textbook cognitive schooling, whereby through contemplative techniques they call upon their inner wisdom to focus on their individual felt sense in quietude, if only for fleeting moments. She encourages her students to inhabit their bodies with conscious awareness, something that is not
emphasized much in public conventional schooling and was acknowledged by Bai, Scott & Donald (2009), but which is important in developing alternate ways of knowing and experiencing.

Each of the teachers intuit and understand mindfulness as a spiritually engaging practice that gives credence to their holistic contemplative pedagogy. Through their ongoing meditation practice, the teachers gain insight into themselves, which supports them to be discerning and understanding of the needs of their students. The philosophy that guides their pedagogical relationships is expressed through their many anecdotes, especially by recognizing their right to happiness and peace as human beings.

These participants also recognize the importance of possessing the expertise to do their jobs well as educators. Their ongoing mindfulness practice enhances this skill, rendering their pedagogy more humanistic and individualistic. Knowing that teaching is a relational act (Britzman, 2012; J. P. Miller, 2007, 1993), they each make the effort to embody these humanistic qualities for the benefit of their students and themselves, to support authentic learning and meaningful pedagogical relationships.

There are numerous examples in each of the narratives that illustrate how a contemplative holistic pedagogy takes shape in practice. Sam, for example, who was teaching a split Grade 5-6 class at the time the data were collected, states that his regular meditation practice helps him engage more “mindfully” and with heightened sensitivity to the needs of his individual students: “After meditation, my mind is full of what is happening in the classroom” (Sp. 120). His philosophy is to try to find the “spark” within child, though it can be difficult because “for some kids you really have to search” (Sp. 121). Sam has worked with children who exhibit
developmental delays and affirms that his practice helps him assist children who may excel at something that is not conventionally academic.

Sam openly admits to not being a good teacher in all aspects of the curriculum. He shares that when he began teaching, he tried to be like others, but realized that if he was “just” himself, then at least he’d have “some measure of success” (S p. 110). Insight cultivated from his meditation practice guides Sam’s teaching pedagogy in that it recognizes “the curriculum serves as a tool” (S p. 119), but only a small part of a much larger puzzle.

Like the other participants in this study, Sam wants his students to appreciate the value of being caring and appreciative of others (S pp. 109-110). This is important to him, and what he hopes his students will recognize, too, for we have a larger role to play in life—being thoughtful of and responsible to each other as human beings (S pp. 109, 111). Insight through his meditation practice, combined with his experience as an educator, helps him to see the significance of the “interconnectedness of life,” for he emphatically states: “We are a microcosm of the earth and the universe and we belong to a special community” (S p. 118). He brings this view to working with his students. This can be seen in the example of how he supports a young student who feels neglected by her parents (S p. 123), taking on added responsibility beyond that of a curriculum teacher.

Meena, who teaches mathematics and computer science to Grades 9 and 10, also wants to steer her students in an appropriate direction like Sam, as well as encourage them to maintain high academic standards. She is there to “ignite a light within” (M p. 156), and to help students be aware of the moment. For Meena, it is crucial to keep this light bright “to help [them] see something [they] can aspire towards” (M p. 156) of their own choice and attend to it
conscientiously: “I’m not here to fill their minds with thoughts; I am trying to awaken them so they will learn, look and smell and find their own way” (M p. 156).

Meena believes meditation helps her to see “Life is only lived in the moment,” for it “is forever changing” (M p. 157). Insight garnered from her ongoing practice combined with her personal career experience tells her that her “students need to be “malleable and adaptable,” and in this regard she encourages them to develop their thirst for knowledge” (M p. 157). Meditation is the road she travels daily. Her formal practice illuminates her teaching philosophy as a holistic contemplative educator: “I can only take someone as far as I have gone myself. In order to be a good teacher, I need to know how to learn myself” (M p. 156). Meditation helps her see, understand and remember to begin each day anew. She claims all she can ever do is help her students take a step, and meditation assists her to do this work (M p. 157).

Rachel, who works with young children diagnosed with ASD, shares a holistic education philosophy similar to that of Sam and Meena. She envisions her role as that of a “guide” in that it is important to be aware of kids, of “who they [really] are,” and “their inner beings.” (R p. 139) Her role as an educator is one that nurtures and supports her students in all aspects of their development (R. p. 143) through “self-empowerment,” but not for academic achievement alone. She demonstrates this through her “compassionate, tender, caring” engagement, as it reminds her of the importance of connectedness in her pedagogical relationships (R p. 140).

Rachel recognizes that her ongoing meditation practice helps her pedagogy by helping her stay “connected to her understanding of human connectedness,” and see that each student is deserving of compassion and tenderness (R p. 140). Just as she is mindful in her understanding of herself, she also works to give them opportunities to be in the moment and develop insight into their own nature as exampled by the young boy in her class who always said “no”!
Similarly, Diane’s teaching philosophy “boils down to trying your best to see each child as an individual” so that the children themselves can “recognize this, too” (D p. 182). This approach reflects her aspiration for a larger, caring and conscientious global community (D p. 194). As a self-defined “holistic” teacher, she makes the effort to teach to the conventional cognitive aspects of the child, such as helping them improve their writing skills (D pp. 181-182). Nonetheless, she stresses that for her, it is equally important to focus on values and respectful conduct in a visibly competitive and frantic school environment (D p. 185).

Mindfulness in these examples can act as a foil for one’s life in general, as emphasized in the teachers’ active relational engagement with their students. These teachers understand meditation as a spiritually affirming practice for life, one that gives credence to their holistic contemplative pedagogy. Holistic pedagogy (R. Miller, 2000, 2003, 2004), like mindfulness (Gunaratana, 2002; Kornfield, 2008; Thurman, 2004), recognizes the symbolic importance of wholeness. In terms of pedagogy, this means maintaining integrity and balance in the multiple dimensions of pedagogy, including personal and interpersonal connections that influence the affective relationships in the educational process more generally (Denton, 2005; Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013)—more simply put, being wholesome. Both Jack Miller’s and Ron Miller’s visions of holism is based on integration, one that nourishes the mind, body and spirit. The practice of loving-kindness acts similarly as an integrative process, and is worth exploring in more detail; in loving-kindness, mindfulness and contemplation interact to help love to flourish, which in turn nourishes the minds and bodies of children.

A. Loving-kindness

Happiness borne from peace of mind can be achieved by being respected, feeling loved and belonging to a safe and nurturing environment in which one can thrive (hooks, 2006;
Noddings, 2003). The five teachers see these attributes as contributing to building trust in meaningful pedagogical relationships, which connects directly to their educational philosophies and ethos. Although in practice they certainly do overlap, it is worth discussing each of these three attributes of the concept “loving-kindness” individually.

1. *Respect*

Like the other teachers in this study, Diane’s ethos is interconnected to her teaching philosophy. That includes having a safe, caring classroom community, which she acknowledges she has had to fight for at times. Diane noted that she writes up a teaching philosophy for parents each year, and was especially focused on cultivating respect in her classroom the year the data were collected.

She stresses that listening and being kind to one another demonstrates respect, but that “some people have difficulty understanding and accepting this” (D p. 185). She models respect for her students, and expects the same from them. Diane supports them to cultivate respect by being insistent with routines that foster positive listening skills. Cultivating positive and respectful listening skills, as well as demonstrating the value of being kind, were some challenges that Diane encountered. She persevered with her daily meditation practice, which enabled her to access clarity of mind and correspondingly act respectfully with good sense when engaging with others as she described the reward of her daily practice (D pp. 185-186).

Sam also sees himself as playing a supportive role in the education of the students entrusted in his care, and his sense of respect for students fundamentally informs this stance: “Respecting each child’s natural curiosity and intelligence is my job. It’s not about leading them in any particular direction but finding out what they need in order to blossom” (S p. 122). Sam shared an anecdote of how he used his role and position in the classroom to reprimand a student,
but subsequently felt terrible about it because he disrespected the student—and this goes against his deep desire to enact a stance of respect for his students as fellow human beings.

By exercising humility and acknowledging his error to the student, Sam exposed his vulnerability as a human being who makes mistakes. He allowed the student to see him demonstrate genuine respect and concern. In his role, Sam knows it is important that he demonstrate respect for his students, but also understands it is equally important that they do the same with him (S pp. 121, 124).

Meena shared her own anecdote about the complexities of respect, in her story about Fazil, a young computer-savvy student who took advantage of her absence, hacked into her computer and left inappropriate comments while she was dealing with an emergency. Initially filled with anger and feeling “violated,” Meena summoned her breath to clam herself down bringing her some space and distance to the immediacy of the angry moment (M p. 169). Contemplating on the matter at the end of the school day, as well as sensing her feelings and knowing why, she made a decision to report the incident to the office. This resulted in a three-day suspension for Fazil, but upon his return, both she and the student were able to respectfully engage with each other and move ahead in a positive manner. Her daily morning practice helped her to refrain from harbouring any ill thoughts, as illustrated by this line from a journal entry: “I decide to lead with my heart not my ego” (M. p. 153). As a result, following Fazil’s suspension and return to the classroom, Meena was quick to welcome him back in a gesture of reconciliation. Meena and Fazil then maintained a good working relationship the rest of the school year. While Fazil did initiate an inappropriate action, he suffered the consequences of his actions through his three-day suspension. Returning to the class was a new phase in his journey. Through reconciliation and respect, Meena and he began anew. More generally, this anecdote
illustrates that Meena believes that for teaching and learning to be authentic, she, like her students, needs to be a respectful and responsible classroom participant. As she recalled, “when he returned, I told him: I’m so glad your back, Fazil. We had a beautiful relationship from then on. I didn’t hold his actions against him, we just moved on” (M p. 169).

Meena claims the positive connection she makes with her students, including the example of Fazil, is the direct result of her meditation process—sitting in silence, being aware of her breath and respectfully witnessing her thoughts and feelings as they arise and pass (M p. 153). Engaging in reconciliation with Fazil enables her own self-respect to flourish as well as respect for him; as Salzberg (1995) affirms, after all, respect is rooted in compassion.

Another variation of the centrality of respect can be seen in the example of Meena assisting a student to complete his unfinished assignment for another subject one for which Meena was not responsible. Intuiting the importance of this effort for the student, Meena supports and encourages the student’s motivation to complete the work during her mathematics class. Meena becomes a partner in his predicament, letting him know that she respects and values his honesty (M p. 168).

In the face of this unexpected dilemma, Meena empathizes with the student; she embraces the events of the moment. Her generosity of spirit assists them both, rather than adhering to her structured timetable. These qualities of creativity and flexibility exemplify not only respect, but also holistic teaching, as both Kessler (2000) and Brady (2004) observe. Meena “honours” her student’s needs and gives him “love-enlightened permission” to complete the assignment during her mathematics class.

Meditation reminds Meena that by being in the moment, she is respecting the needs of her students. In this way she can provide the environment for a genuine “caring” and “loving
community,” as well as an authentic learning opportunity by working together (M p. 168). With intuitive knowing, Meena understands what is important to act on in that moment. Rather than making the student follow the obligatory mathematics lesson, she gives him “love and enlightened” permission to complete his other assignment. Meena “honours” the needs of this student, then, by teaching from a place of authenticity (M. Greene, cited in Hancock & Ericson, 2001), all while demonstrating genuine love for the teaching-learning exchange (Palmer, 2007).

Rachel gives a similar example of what she terms the “embodiment of mindfulness” (R p.140) or “being in the moment,” and how it grounds the foundation for respect. In this account, (a spiritual moment of realization as previously mentioned), she is initially bored of a repetitive prank played by one of her students. Indifferent during this interaction, Rachel is suddenly overcome with an intuitive realization that the “joyful trickery” in this game brings tremendous happiness to this child. Inspired by this fleeting moment of contact (Puhakka, 2000), an epiphany, Rachel senses an organic spiritual shift, which then draws her back into the game with renewed enthusiasm. Embracing this moment of deep “connection,” Rachel demonstrates her respect and love for the young child as another human being reveling and sharing in happiness.

While she once deemed this game to be a tedious repetitious act, Rachel’s moment of “awakening” altered her mindset. It was transformative for Rachel in that she was moved from indifference to experiencing a “sweet moment of connection” (R p. 142). This quality of appreciative joy, or mudita, in which the mind openly embraces the happiness of the other (Olendzki, 2005 p. 294), is also one that helps to cultivate compassion and affirms Rachel’s philosophy that as an educator, she needs to be respectful toward all her students equally. Through this epiphany, respect is realized; the seeds of a solitary mindfulness practice come to
fruition in pedagogical practise. Her “embodiment of mindfulness” illuminates a new way for Rachel to see and be with this young girl, as well as experience and share in the student’s joy.

My own narrative emphasizes the ways that a loving respect is fundamental to the pedagogical exchange. In my encounter with Noah, for example, the young student in the Reading Recovery Program, after meditating I saw the situation in a whole new light. I understood better his need to spend time talking to me about matters that were important to him. Being respectful of his desire, I refrained from using my position of authority as educator and instead sought to bring balance to our pedagogical relationship through mutual respect. By maintaining openness to the moment and accepting Noah as individual person, I was able to find the space so we could meet halfway. In doing so, I held and embraced an empathetic stance toward his need, and did so with less self-concern about the lesson, or the bureaucratic accountability, or my role, and instead held a greater regard for Noah—intuitively, the appropriate action for that time. I did not have meaningful resolution to the problem until Noah and I became equal partners; Noah understood I respected him as a person because I was willing to meet him. Cultivating mutual respect allowed us to bridge the gap. While our differences initially divided us in the end through mutual trust and respect it drew us together (J p. 211).

2. Love

Love, as Salzberg (1995) and hooks (2000a) point out; is not passion but something much larger and all-encompassing. Through their ongoing mindfulness practice, these teachers continue to cultivate the seed for universal love—an unconditional love steeped in acceptance and compassion that promotes benevolent engagement with their students. The ongoing daily mindfulness practice (or sati) reminds teachers to pay attention to what is happening in the very moment (Analyo, 2006). This awareness supports the creation of a physically, emotionally and
nurturing environment for authentic pedagogical relationships to develop and mature (hooks, 2000a, 2006; Kessler, 2000), and nourishes the mind so that the curiosity within has the opportunity to emerge. The teachers remember and embody the “intention and aspiration” to be loving and kind and with their students in the safe harbor of the classroom and school community.

Meena, for example, indicates that building loving respectful and trusting relationships with her high school students occurs through authentic contact. Like the other participants in this study, she wants her students to be “comfortable and feel respected” (M p. 172). She understands that authentic relationships are all “about love,” what she calls “the big love.” (M p. 166) When students are loved they feel comfortable and are often more receptive to face challenges.

For Meena, “love” as a big part of teaching and engaging with students, but often not openly addressed in education (M p. 167), as noted by both Britzman (2012) and hooks (2000a). Meena recognizes that like her, students also encounter difficulties and challenging life experiences that can affect their mood and preoccupy their minds with personal matters. In turn, these preoccupations can obstruct the learning process. As one example, Meena observed a female student who was unusually quiet one day and somewhat disengaged. Being sensitive, Meena inquired after the student, and discovered that the student’s father has been hospitalized the previous night (M p. 161). Sensitive to the suffering of this young adolescent and recognizing her need for privacy and quiet, Meena provides the student “the space to be” and “honours” her need for solitude. While Meena may not know the actual experience of the student, by making contact with her, she illustrates a shared understanding of “suffering” and through her actions demonstrates her “big love” for the student.
Meena points out that it is “unconstitutional” for an institution to expect students to be engaged for every 70-minute class, and while many of her students are driven, they are not necessarily all so at the same time (M pp. 164-165). Having a busy, scheduled and compartmentalized school day (M p. 159, 162) with many demands and interruptions (M p. 161) can be counter-intuitive for authentic learning and developing trusting connections (M pp.162-163). By honouring the needs of her students as individuals in specific moments, Meena lets them know she loves them as human beings first and foremost. Love is a huge part of the pedagogical process for Meena in particular. She demonstrates this by being flexible, creative, adept, sensitive and perceptive—all while holding a democratic and equitable stance in her pedagogical relationships with students. As she notes, “[o]nce they feel my big love, they open up and start sharing their own love” (M p. 166). For Meena, then, love is the gateway to authentic teaching partnerships with her students.

Rachel, who works with much younger children identified with ASD, previously mentioned, also sees nurturing her students as a demonstration of her unconditional love for them. While the needs of her students differ from Meena’s, she, like Meena, understands the importance for the educator to be loving and kind when engaging with them. Rachel cites an example of how a gentle attitude with loving perseverance triumphs (mentioned earlier) over the particularly difficult year long relationship with one young boy. By holding her aspiration of love and understanding close to her heart and engaging with him in a loving, positive, caring manner, Rachel helps diminish his angry and negative attention-seeking behaviour, transforming it into something more “affectionate” and “sweet” (R p. 144). Through her persistence in maintaining a “generosity of spirit,” and by ignoring much of the child’s negative behaviour, Rachel lets him know she genuinely loves him. Although developing this trust took a long time,
and Rachel admits there continue to be issues involving the child’s behaviour, she recognizes the tremendous social and emotional growth made in this child, who before these changes always said “no to everything.” To recall Rachel’s own words describing this change, she states: “One day I said to him, ‘Oh do you want to go for a ride in the wagon?’ And he said, ‘yes.’ Well, I nearly fainted because I had never heard him say ‘yes’ before” (R p. 144).

This example shows that Rachel knows that once the young child felt comfortable with the teaching staff, he would be able to tell them what he needed and wanted. Moreover, he could then demonstrate affection toward others. This change shows that “being compassionate and tender-hearted toward someone makes it possible for that person to open up to others and to himself” (R p. 144). By embodying her generosity of spirit, Rachel’s love for this young boy nurtures his own capacity to love in return.

Sam’s language also invokes the centrality of love, especially in his phrase: “I just want them to know somebody loves them” (S p. 119). Sam’s goal as a teacher is to provide a “strong container, that is, a welcoming, nurturing, respectful and loving space” where “students can mature and discover their distinctive strengths” (S p. 122). He embodies this attitude by teaching broadly (whether or not topics are part of the curriculum) to expose his students to a wide variety of ideas and subjects. Not only is Sam’s pedagogy diverse in its teaching content, it is designed to provide his students a variety of ways for completing assignments through media like art and writing, for example, or by deciding to give “three or four options on how to complete an assignment” (S pp. 122-123), even though it can cause him problems when evaluating the assignments. Sam likes to be creative in his teaching approach and “flies by the seat of his pants,” which “gets his creative juices flowing.” Sam illustrates this through his hands on co-
operative event engaging the whole school in gardening and mulching activity for Earth Day (S p. 124).

Like the other participants, Diane states the importance of demonstrating respect (D p. 186) and love (D p. 188) when engaging with her students. While she spoke more to the challenge of this work with her students (who are 8-9 years of age) and having them respond accordingly, she also emphasized our collective universal responsibility as educators to embody both love and respect daily in the pedagogical exchange, an exchange in which, by our presence as teachers, we are being love and respect.

For me, the example of Devon created an unexpected opportunity at a character development assembly that I was hosting. Here I demonstrate my respect and “big love” for him by acknowledging his honesty (J p. 223). Through this public event I let him know that in spite of some adversity, he could feel safe and confident to freely voice his opinion without being silenced by someone in a position of authority.

All of these examples remind me that love is porous, ubiquitous, and does not belong to anyone but is available to all. The participants’ in this research study embody the experience of knowing love and its manifestation as appreciative joy. In the effort to be less self-centered and more attentive to the needs of the others, the teachers attempt to enable insight (wisdom) and unconditional love (compassion) when working with others, most especially their students.

3. Safety and a nurturing environment

Sam mentioned several times that his role is to keep his students happy and safe. Being singularly responsible for approximately 30 students can be challenging for any elementary teacher. So Sam uses contemplative practices of the four karmas of transformation: pacifying, enriching, magnetizing and destroying (footnote 41, p. 120). In his words, a “mindful” teacher
augments his ability to respond appropriately and discerningly when trying to manage a large class. While he may encounter difficulties with students, he shrugs them off: “I have never had a kid I didn’t like and I think that is due to my practice” (S p. 121). As he earlier noted, “[w]hen I am clear [as a result of meditation], I am much more skillful at pacifying and at enriching, which in turn enables me to help students shine” (S p. 121).

As a primary teacher, I see it as especially important for young children to have a safe, friendly and welcoming environment in which to thrive. This space includes not only the physical space they inhabit, but also the symbolic space in which to explore feelings, physicality and opportunities to voice their thoughts and ask questions freely. As an example of these twin spaces, (J pp. 218-219) and cited earlier in this section when I was working with a small group of six year-olds, I refrained from interfering with the energy in the room until I intuitively rang the ting shaws to signal a change. Rather than addressing the children individually, I choose to address the energy in the room, which changed the dynamic of the space. When working with older students, like Meena, I see their particular need to find a space to discuss matters that are relevant to them, such as the experience of the group of English Language Learners (J p. 219).

Over years of working with children I have come to recognize that they need time to explore and examine their fluctuating feelings, their action and reactions, and then they need to be allowed opportunities to resolve conflicts safely with minimal adult intervention if possible (but also knowing they have their support and guidance when and if needed). The safety of all present in the classroom is crucial to building trust and maintaining a nurturing environment; like Sam, Rachel, Meena and Diane, I also see the classroom as a sacred space that can hold confusion, challenges and tensions, too, and in so doing, make room for the unknown and the magic of wonderful, mysterious teaching-learning exchanges (Motha, 2011, pp. 62-63).
Out of habit due to conditions of managing a large group of diverse children, often with varying academic skills and needs, I have found that adults—myself included!—are often too quick to correct or impose sanctions on what we deem as unwanted or unwarranted behaviour in the effort to manage a group. This is understandable as a simple pragmatic matter. Meena, Sam and Diane (S p. 121; M p. 157; D p. 189) have also pointed out how managing a classroom space can be challenging when one individual is responsible for the well-being of 25 students or more, or, in Rachel’s classrooms, when as few as six or seven highly energetic children with unique and more complicated needs are present together. Nevertheless, for us in this study, the support of a mindfulness practice, has taught us to pause for a moment or longer to bring spaciousness and openness to the present moment (S p. 112; R p. 136; M p. 155; D p. 194; J p. 210), and to remember to act with thoughtful consideration. In so doing, I have witnessed and learned that children with the trust of adults can take responsibility to reclaim their space in the effort to resolve a conflict or simply just be with moments as they unfold (Motha, 2011 p. 62).

As I have shared in my story, I try to provide my students with a smorgasbord to whet the appetite to satisfy their various tastes (J p. 206) and freely explore what is available to them. I am also aware that not all of my students will like what is being offered, but I continue to search, like Sam, “to find the spark,” or like Meena, “to ignite the flame,” or Diane, to help them see their “unique gifts”—to help children find meaning, value and purpose in attending school. I share Rachel’s aspiration for the students in my care: to “empower” them to “be with” and relish “the existing moment” (R p. 147). The beauty of being in a classroom space and community is that these organic spiritual, teachable or ah-ha! moments can sprout unexpectedly with the “right nourishment,” as Sam says, and be shared multilocally (Ferrer, 2002), be enjoyed by all in symbioses (Zajonc, 2006), and transform teachers and students (Zajonc, 2010).
The teachers in this study all strive for authenticity and integrity in their pedagogical relationships by recognizing the importance and significance of honouring each child in their charge, and in the specific space. Their teaching philosophy and ethos is shaped by the ongoing the love and respect for each child built on trust between the teacher and student. This is understood as key and invaluable to the pedagogical exchange.

Still our approaches and attitudes do differ; Sam, Rachel and I appear more relaxed in our engagement with students, whereas Meena and Diane seem more agitated with challenging engagement. In terms of Meena, this difference could be due to Meena working with high school students, while the rest of us are engaged with students at the elementary level, and that Meena must be more demanding of her students academically (i.e., because they are in high school). Although Diane also works with children at an elementary level, she did so at a private school, which has its own unique demands and may emphasize academic performance more aggressively in “the desire or craving to be the best.” Finally, Rachel works with a primarily non-verbal group of children presents unique challenges of its own that are quite distinct from any of the other teachers, even though her philosophy and approach does parallel aspects of the others.

Notwithstanding these differences, all of the teachers collectively see the significance and value of preparing their students to treat others well by embodying the principles of love and respect, characteristics that make us more humane (Kornfield, 2008). Furthermore, public spaces like schools, while striving to provide a strong foundation in the conventional domains of reading, writing and numeracy, can also provide a safe welcoming space for children to grow mentally, physically and emotionally (Macdonald & Shirley, 2010; Noddings, 2003; Ungerleider, 2003, 2004). In this regard the teachers see their roles as nurturers who guide their students to uncover and develop their unique skills, strengths and sensibilities.
Sam invariably mentions that for him to be a good “gardener,” he needs to provide a safe container to offer the right kind of nourishment for his students to develop and mature wholesomely. It is important to Sam that his students recognize and appreciate the gift of being members of a larger global community as well as members of a community in the classroom (S pp. 118 & 124) as he reminded a student who left the room while he (Sam) was speaking. Once again, Sam claims that he is more adept at doing this as a teacher than delivering the curriculum.

The wisdom garnered as a long time practitioner of “shamatha vipashyana” and his lived experience as a teacher, however, contributes to Sam’s understanding and insight that a safe space to nourish mental, social, and emotional well-being for his students is key. He explains why:

We are a microcosm of the earth and the universe, and Toronto is our community […] I have seen people who are doctors, lawyers, professors, people who are crazy, who end up in jail […] And when I think of them it helps me have a bigger picture of what I am trying to do. They are human beings and they have their journey. (S p.119)

Sam sees the inter-dependence of life through life-long learning (Lemkow, 2005); schooling is but a small part of this bigger picture. In this regard Sam like the other teachers in this study sees humanity on a spiritual (Humphreys, 1968; Teilhard de Chardin, 1960), not a merely academic, quest; to support this journey, he wants to provide his students with a safe and nurturing garden in which they can bloom.

Rachel also understands the need for a safe and nurturing environment from working with children diagnosed with ASD, who often tend to focus on their own needs and are unaware of the needs of others. Many of Rachel’s students communicate by using inappropriate physical means to express their dissatisfaction (R p. 147). This requires Rachel to be vigilant to the need to
maintain a safe environment for the children, as well as for the adults who work with her and them. Reducing negative behaviour patterns and habits can be a long arduous process, but it supports her philosophy of her role as an educator—one who guides students by not only demonstrating appropriate behaviour, which she outlines through turn taking and story-telling (R p 145), but also by being present in the moment to whatever arises for authentic teaching-learning exchanges in social interactions. In this regard, Rachel sees herself and other adults taking “pro social action” to intervene when they observe an impending unsafe situation (R p. 147).

In contrast to Rachel, Diane works with a group of children who are relatively high functioning and socially adept. Nonetheless, she too emphasizes the need to “address the state of the room” before dealing with any matters of the curriculum: “How people treat each other is important, and having honest conversations about how people treat each other is important, too” (D p. 194). While Diane does not emphasize the safety of her physical environment per se, she does so more metaphorically, by promoting a desirable intellectual and emotional environment for the space for her students to occupy in the classroom.

Diane sees the classroom environment as integral to social education and civility. For a mutually beneficial pedagogical exchange to take place, respect as a foundation insures its members in the space are safe, as well as receptive to authentic teaching and learning. In making connections between her personal meditation and teaching practice, she states: “I began to see that the kids themselves stood to benefit from learning how to be quiet, still, caring and so on” (D p. 182). Diane intuitively understands and stresses that her meditation practice helps her to remember to engage with this care and patience in the pedagogical process especially when the climate of the school has a negative effect on her (D p. 185).
My own ongoing practice of mindfulness has reminded me that all people, including the students I work with, need a place in which they feel like they belong and can be themselves, without fear of being negatively judged or ridiculed. A caring classroom community can provide this space by making the students feel equally responsible for in the partnership of learning. Like Meena, I often move around the room and sit with my students on the floor or at their desks. Also like Meena, me offering my students time to discuss issues that are close to their heart builds a genuine sense of camaraderie between us. Unfortunately, though, more often the school day is so jam-packed that there is little time for this level of authentic communication.

Thus, all of the teachers share a teaching philosophy that is governed by three overlapping and basic principles: first, to provide a safe nurturing environment for their students; second, to embody and share the “big love” for students; and third to demonstrate respect for all their students; a multi-dimensional respect comprised of honest communication and listening, empathy and reconciliation, making mistakes, learning from them and moving on. Most importantly, respect is evident in the teachers’ unconditional acceptance for their students as fellow human beings, and in the teachers’ holistic contemplative pedagogy, a pedagogy supported by their individual and ongoing mindfulness meditation practice.

Sharon Salzberg (1995) says the practice of metta or loving-kindness is a conscious intention, which can allay fears one may have. The fear could be something small as in Rachel’s case being bored or indifferent with the repetitive game, or fear of negative feeling tone that may linger as in the disappointment/hurt I originally experienced when I heard Devon’s words or something more explosive as fear or being angry as Meena experienced with Fazil’s violation or even worse fear that anger can lead to quick-tempered cruel language as Sam acknowledged.
In the face of the most terrible fear, loving-kindness can be summoned to bring out empathy, generosity of spirit and reconciliation to make room for compassion. Compassion for oneself and others comes from the understanding that everyone wants to be free from pain, or difficulty. Mindfulness practice helps to dissolve the boundaries between self and other, and allows for the experience of pain and difficulty to surface in practice and when engaging with others. In this way the meditator can experience the feeling tones and fluctuating emotions, apathy or neutrality that may accompany them. The mind begins to know peace by recognizing this and not getting attached to the thoughts and images and feelings that arise and pass. In this sense there is bridging or drawing together of self and other (be it fear or a difficult person). By facing your felt suffering, the image and fear, and then making the honest connection or being with the cause of your suffering your fear stands nakedly visible paving the way for insight and appropriate action grounded in good will.

The threads of love and respect are interlaced in this pedagogy, revealing a common pattern out of the individual stories that speaks to the larger narrative of this study that sees the classroom can be an ideal place to cultivate a symbiotic relationship with students while the teacher sustains her clarity of mind (Zajonc, 2009). Moreover, a holistic contemplative pedagogy provides a genuine opportunity for creating a nurturing and nourishing community for mutual care, regard and trust amongst and for its members—both teachers and students.

V. Contemplating Teaching: Paradoxes and Tensions

Tensions arise in many relationships, and this is particularly so in the pedagogical process. Being only one person responsible for the well-being for many others, as the teachers are in this study, can prove to be difficult and challenging, not only in the classroom, but also in the school environment more broadly. Trying to meet the all the needs; of all children,
unequivocally in one’s care becomes difficult for one adult, as we all have indicated in our stories. Yet each of us makes the effort to be welcoming, nurturing, respectful and kind, especially in such a highly structured and overly demanding educational environment.

Furthermore, the effort to use one’s position of authority in a more benevolent manner can also create tensions and uneasiness, as the teacher struggles to find her own space to be confident to engage gracefully and wholeheartedly in the pedagogical exchange. On the one hand, conventionally speaking rules and routines in a classroom can create the nurturing space to cultivate wholesome qualities like kindness, generosity, tolerance, perseverance, cooperation, honesty and empathy. Conversely as Meena notes, they can also be too restrictive and confining, perhaps especially for high school students who, in Meena’s words, have “big egos.” While Meena recognizes that they need to have a sense of belonging and a nurturing space to feel comfortable or at home, she too recognizes this need for herself, as she indicated in the journal entry where she speaks of claiming her space by walking amongst them and not feeling intimidated (M pp. 154-155). While she “lovingly” grants her students “enlightened permission” with brief breaks from the classroom, recognizing them as responsible individuals who will conduct themselves appropriately, she is also aware that they too can display unseemly behaviour; after all, for her, meditation soothes her before she enters the school to deal with the “many firefights,” implying there are indeed many challenges and tensions within the environment.

In case of Meena’s student Fazil, who hacked into her computer because of his technological prowess (a case of a “big ego” trying to impress his peers), and in the case of my student Devon, a pre-adolescent who I do not believe had a “big ego” but did behave inappropriately, Meena and I both needed to contemplate on our respective concerns, roles and responsibilities with positive regard for our students. Devon may not have a big ego, but he was
trying to strengthen his ego by asserting himself in our conversation; I had to strike a balance between acknowledging this behaviour was not in keeping with the expectations of the school’s rules and simultaneously recognizing that there were good character traits in it, too—fearlessness, self-respect, and instinctive problem-solving.

Sam admits that he also experienced remorse after he really “stuck it to a student,” something he could do because of his position of power and authority. Yet, his mindfulness practice reminded him that he, like his students, are all a “work in progress” and “always changing” (S p. 121); any trouble they give him are examples “of the clouds” (S p. 121). He remembers his commitment to be kind and loving with all his students, irrespective of any predicament that befalls him and them as he enters the classroom day after day.

Diane mentions that in all her years of teaching she has never been so adamant about sticking to rules and routines as she had during the year the data were collected for this study. She has needed to use her position of authority as the teacher to encourage her students to better observe classroom etiquette. She sees this as the necessary precursor to assisting students’ respect and open acceptance for each other—including her—in a communal classroom.

In my student Noah’s case, what I perceived to originally be an oppositional stance was him trying to truly speak to me. My ongoing mindfulness practice helps me to orient myself more neutrally; when working with young children like Noah, who often are compliant and obedient and eager to please, I try to bear in mind that in a typical school day, elementary school children may have at anywhere between five and ten adults supervising and directing them, each requiring their utmost attention. I often tell the students in my care to remind me if I am talking too much or giving too many instructions. This is surprisingly insightful and makes room for genuine engaging pedagogical exchanges. I have discovered that if I have something of value to
contribute, when I am teaching from my heart with genuine enthusiasm, they also engage themselves and can be enthralled and focused. On the other hand, if I do not have something of substance for them or if I am too singularly directed or controlling (akin to Sam’s fear of being a “one trick pony”), then their attention wanes quickly, which is no surprise.

Dan Siegel (2013) points out that adolescence is often characterized by intense emotion, novelty, the need for connection for others, as well as the need for separateness through exploring domains of creativity. Moreover, by being passionate explorers and striving to be unique and creative (or independent and in some cases fearless), adolescents will test boundaries, as evident with Fazil or Devon. What appears to be problematic for the teacher can “set the stage for the development of core character traits that will [in some cases] enable adolescents to go on to lead great lives of adventure and purpose” (Siegel, 2013, p. 2). As the actions of Sam and me corroborate, we have seen some students who have achieved much after leaving school and others who have not. As teachers, to quote Sam, “we simply try to steer them in a relatively sane direction.”

Mindfulness practice supports the “wise,” discerning and contemplative educator to exercise good judgment, or in Diane’s words, to “offer what is best in that moment” when facing dilemmas. Yet how far and to what degree should teachers adhere to rules and routines for genuine meaningful pedagogical relationship? This is often a paradox, as demonstrated by Meena and myself in the cases of our respective students, Fazil and Devon; after all, I chose not to report Devon to the administration, but Meena did report Fazil. Diane uses her position of authority as the teacher to encourage her students to observe classroom etiquette. The contemplative practice of forbearance that she embodies is based on her insight for the need for tolerance and kindness.
Being aware of one’s role and position in the classroom can sometimes create an imbalance in the teacher-student relationship, in which the teacher can exercise power over students in the pedagogical relationship. Mindfulness supports the teachers manage the imbalances of power by dis-identifying with self (Young-Eisendrath, 2009), or the role of the teacher as separate from the other. By not letting their position of power dictate the outcome, and by instead incorporating mindfulness, the meditating teacher can witness all that arises with *that power* to assist students to nurture insight. There is little reward of power and authority as an end in itself. As these examples illustrate, the teachers in this study each express her or his true insight in the effort to more often *curb* their professional power.

The teachers’ in this study all felt that schooling in general does not mirror the real world, and often as paid professionals they are trapped in following protocol—protocol that is counterintuitive to truly educating students. As Sam and I have observed over the years, most teachers simply teach the curriculum because they are expected to. Sam pointedly acknowledged that often teachers are oblivious to the disengaged students around them (S p. 126). Sam, Rachel, Meena, Diane and I all have seen schooling become far too “prescriptive and singularly directed” (S p. 119; R p. 139; M p. 172; J p. 216). As Sam firmly states, “school is not the real word. Everyone—teacher and student alike—has his or her own journey [...] A teacher is just one of the many people [his students are] going to meet” (S p. 119). In this regard he, like the others and including me, try to make the educational journey enjoyable while we steer our children in a reasonably sensible way.

Rachel and I have both indicated that we see learning taking place in many different spaces and on numerous levels. As a seasoned professional educator, Rachel, like Sam, has noticed that teachers are often taught to teach in a rigid manner with little insight into their
students “and no awareness of where we are heading” (R p. 139). Her wisdom corresponds to the findings of Ravitch (2013) and Grumet’s address on schooling (2006); schooling is far too politically influenced and standardized. It fails to prepare children well for the real world (S p. 120). Moreover, Rachel, like Sam and me, finds herself at odds with mandated practices that she sees as doing little to truly empower children, especially those who are experiencing social and developmental challenges. She takes solace in knowing, however, that what she is doing as an educator is the best she can offer, thanks to her daily mindfulness practice, which has provided her the spiritual insight and confidence to be “tender-hearted” at all times with her students.

“Schooling is not necessarily good for all children […] it’s a child jail […] We’re highly automated and organized here, but we have to be […] in order to control so many children […] but not all children succeed in school” (M p. 156). Like Sam, Meena also has difficulty assigning grades to her students because they do not reflect authentic effort and learning. Moreover, she is of the opinion that schools do not do well in educating students how to engage meaningfully in the “real world” (M p. 156); in this regard, grades are of little value. While she is hired to teach mathematics and computer science, meditation makes her realize that her more authentic responsibility is to “bring life education into [the] classroom” (M p. 163). She claims that schools fail to recognize that everything in life has spiritual meaning (M p. 172); knowing this inspires her to teach with compassion and kindness as she realizes “that we are on this journey together” (M. p. 166).

These examples indicate that teaching, like meditation, is filled with imperfection and paradoxes. To this extent, the teachers understand that there is “no good teaching or bad teaching, simply teaching” (S. Brown 2008, p. 100). Mindfulness practice, however, brings perspective to the paradoxes and provides a window of opportunity to gain insight into the
imperfections and muddiness of teaching. It also helps the teachers restore balance and harmony to our respective situations with positive regard for all.

The will that perseveres is cultivated in meditation—another value of how meditation can contribute to a valuable pedagogy. It can embolden the teachers’ benevolent intentions to manage the many paradoxes and tensions they will encounter. The presence of love and respect for their students brings balance to the academic demands and challenges of the job as educators.

Wisdom (prajna, or insight) in the tradition of mindfulness is the spiritual expression of the two principles, karuna-love and jnana-intellect, which are constantly working to find balance and harmony (Goddard, 1930). Thus, these professional educators understand insight and knowledge. They know that teaching, like life, is riding a see-saw in search for delicate balance of harmony.

As holistic contemplative educators, the five teachers are constantly working to harmonize the principles of love and intellect to bring balance to the self as well and the collective (Ferrer, 2002) in the pedagogical exchange. As discerning holistic educators, they strive to engage with their students with flexibility, creativity, and most importantly, with respect and love and in the effort for the wisdom of spirituality to be known.

The connection between spirituality and holistic contemplative pedagogy, then, is a prevalent but tacit theme common to the stories of the five participants. They recognize that holistic contemplative pedagogy and meditation are organically “spiritually awakening” and sacred to them, summoning unconditional love to know and experience wholesome universal connectedness (Ron Miller, 2003; Olendzki, 2010). They illustrate Arthur Zajone’s (2009) claim that a spiritual awakening can heighten the capacity for wakefulness and peace, uniting insight with love. Indeed, a classroom can provide the safe nurturing space in which to be spiritually awakened. Lastly, a holistic contemplative pedagogy, like a mindfulness practice, embraces
wholeness in understanding of universal connectedness and the “reverence for life” as something larger than the self and can be “wonderful and mysterious” (J. P. Miller, 2007). Thus, the classroom can be seen as the dynamism of a holon constantly in motion, coming together and pulling apart, in the effort to find balance and harmony and wholeness (Kosteler, 1967; Lemkow, 2005).

VI. Contemplating Teaching

Insight garnered through my daily meditation practice has helped me see the students are like me: walking the same path, albeit at different paces and times. Over the last few years of teaching, I have made an effort to let the children in my charge experience things first-hand if possible, and not vicariously through me, especially when we are in the classroom together. Of course, every teacher knows there are days that are wonderful and there are days that are horrible where every possible thing imaginable can go wrong. Yet I am often reminded by Nelson Mandela’s words: “The greatest glory in living is not in rising, but in rising every time we fall.”

My experience as a teacher and human being, like the others in this study, teaches me things in life including the current state of education as impermanent and rapidly being shaped through political and economic trends (Apple, 2001; Grumet, 2006; Ravitch, 2013; Ungerlieder, 2006) far beyond the control of any one individual teacher. Yet through my mindfulness practice, I am reminded of the significance of education and my intention to keep nurturing and feeding the curiosity of the individual children I encounter, engaging them with love and insight.

Across this study, mindfulness meditation has provided the teachers an ontological and epistemological map that guides what I have termed a holistic contemplative pedagogy (R. Brown, 2014; R. Miller, 2003; J. P. Miller, 2014). Mindfulness practice is based on knowing, understanding and respecting the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, including education,
which is grounded in balancing one’s intellect with love to enable wisdom—our organic spirituality—to flow unconditionally.

In the preceding section I explored how three simple principles structure this pedagogy as loving-kindness. Teaching, like life, is constantly changing and messy, filled with imperfections that can cause stress, unhappiness and anguish. Yet as the teachers note here, often anguish arises as a reaction, shaped by one’s desire to cling to a particular way of being (habits), thinking (ideology) or existing (identification of self)—all of which include habituated teaching patterns of thinking and practice (M. Batchelor, 2007; Fullan, 2011; K. Robinson, 2010; Sherman, 2012) or identifying one’s self with the position of authority as the teacher to assert permanent control and expertise. In terms of the latter, the desire to assert one’s expertise can be borne from the fear of being undervalued, unappreciated, unacknowledged, unmotivated and uncertain as noted by Fullan (2009), Salhberg (2011) and Slaughter (2000).

This way of existence persistently strains teachers and obfuscates the contemporary transient reality of teaching and education today (Amundson et al., 2014; Kohl & Oppenheim, 2012; Wegner & Ward, 2013). It is a misguided assumption that there is only one absolute way of thinking, knowing and being in the teaching profession or educating students. Through careful observation of their own discursive minds, the teachers in this study understand and experience phenomena through mind, body and breath, as experienced and practiced in meditation. The teachers access insight into the ebb and flow of life, which mirrors the nature of self, others and the surrounding world, including that of their profession.

Daily meditation provides these teachers clarity and insight into the dilemmas of teaching; meditation provides a means of easing the tensions that surface to support them to respond wisely and confidently. With intuition and love—the “awakening of the inner eye”
(Noddings and Shore, 1984, pp. 154-175)—these teachers engage in a more contemplative and benevolent pedagogy that shapes their teaching relationships, a pedagogy based on humane connection and a commitment to engage honestly and respectfully with their students. Their ongoing meditation practices support the teachers’ unconditional acceptance and love for their students; here, mindfulness orients the teachers’ holistic contemplative pedagogical process. In so doing, the work they are doing, as meditators and educators, may provide the groundwork for a promising and timely new pedagogical approach for teachers in the profession.

To use van Manen’s language, the “orientation” of this new approach (1977, p. 211), with its embodied generosity of spirit, could enable teachers to encourage their students to develop an individual orientation towards learning and being connected to the larger world. This “orientation” refers to the specific ways that an individual sees and engages with the world (van Manen, 1977, p. 211). In other words, mindfulness practice supports the teachers’ wholesome way of being with their students and their profession. More explicitly this “orientation” includes their point of view, i.e., “their standpoint” (van Manen, 1977, p. 211) gleaned from insightful experience born from their meditation practice and teaching practice.

As lived professional educators, the teachers in this study come to know that teaching is a paradox defined by tension, misperception and imperfection. Like holons, we all (students and teachers both) are in constant motion, pulling together and drawing apart—constantly in flux. Thus, holistic contemplative educators are constantly working to harmonize the principles of love and intellect to bring balance to the self as well and the collective (Ferrer, 2002) in the pedagogical exchange. As holistic contemplative educators, these teachers all strive to engage with their students with flexibility, creativity and love.
The data from this research study indicates that mindfulness mediation as a spiritual practice can provide a means for life-long learning and support a more benevolent way of being with others and the world. Mindfulness meditation sees non-identification with phenomena in the meditative process as the kernel for human awakening. This study indicates that contemplation is a wholesome process in mindfulness where one is working with one’s mind and body. As such, mindfulness as a contemplative benevolent practice has not often or typically been addressed in the wider, burgeoning body of academic literature on mindfulness meditation.

As a reminder, mindfulness includes contemplation, an action that seeks to bridge between love (karuna) and the intellect (jnana) to enable wisdom (or insight) to flourish. In other words, mindfulness practice gives spirituality form, as in contemplation in action. It germinates the teachers’ intuitive knowing in the pedagogical process, helping them be more creative in their teaching and to deliver a more personal educational experience for their students.

Mindfulness practice can also be used as methodological tool for future exploration into the long-range benefits of holistic contemplative pedagogy, especially by providing an epistemological map; how can meditation guide teachers’ personal development? Certainly as this study demonstrates, mindfulness practice can facilitate and further loving-kindness in the pedagogical exchange, which can help teachers tune into their mind-body-feeling connections and become more effective educators. It heightens the teachers’ conscious awareness of not only the external world, but also teachers’ own inner worlds. They become better able to appreciate what it is to be a whole person, one who is better able to empathize and connect with their students, and thus improving pedagogical relationships as a whole.

In meditation one realizes nothing exists in and of itself, including the human body, identity and thought. Meditation is an experiential flow that allows us to see ourselves in relation
to the world. Like the Buddha did over 2,500 years ago (M. Batchleor, 2010; Gombrich, 2009), and like the teachers in this study advocate, mindfulness meditation and contemplation in action go hand in hand to facilitate both inner and outer forms of transformation—a natural, spiritual participatory event (Ferrer, 2002; Tacey, 2004).

Implicit or sometimes explicit in these narratives is the idea that educational policy and practice need to be re-visited to inspire and promote meaningful education for positive social change. This could help restore balance to an educational system that too often produces conformity by, for example, neglecting the arts, which provides alternate ways of knowing and being in the world and understanding it. By “the arts,” I include the fine and performing arts, including embodied arts that explore mind-body connections. By focusing strictly on formulaic rational ways of knowing and assessing knowledge, human beings have lost their sense of spiritual awareness and a capacity to think creatively and more expansively. We have mistakenly taken linear thinking as the only true way of knowing the truth of the mind. Mindfulness, however, helps challenge the limits and errors of this rationale. Mindfulness practice reminds us that teachers, schools and communities are dynamic, organic entities, not mechanistic; they are occupied by human beings. Understanding consciousness is not only the privilege of rational sciences, as phenomena of the external world; it is equally important as an internal world of each individual spiritual human being. Education offers us this opportunity to achieve a balance and harmony between these worlds, but it has become too impersonal, especially with the over-saturation of theories that have given birth to rigid mandates and school structure, overly ambitious curricula and ineffective pedagogical practices. The time is ripe for both a philosophy and practise in education that will support authentic learning and particularly, a more caring and
unselfish presence in the world, one in which equity and social justice prevail, and within which we educate new generations with a deeper sense of purpose, respect and dignity.

In this research study, mindfulness practice supports the teachers’ insight into the wisdom of the interconnectedness of humanity. As educators, they have learned to share the school space with children in way that allows both groups, students and teachers, to be more authentic, a dynamic that cultivates genuine intimacy and a love for learning—a love for being in and with the world together as one. As the narratives and many sources I have drawn from reveal, a holistic contemplative pedagogy strives to ensure that no child should suffer, or at least not alone and without compassion and an effort to seek respite. Of course (or at least I would hope!!), no teacher wants to see a child suffer! Unique to my study are the teachers’ contemplative holistic view of this issue and that they may understand children’s suffering or dissatisfaction as a part of the process of being in the world and learning. They also seek to address it collaboratively, in particular to help the student to find ways of addressing it herself, but not only by herself—rather, with considerable relationship support.

As noted in the literature review, there are ontological challenges to describing the essence of mindfulness meditation, because it is such a personal, unique and often private experience of an individual. Yet these data, provided by the teachers, helps highlight the shared language, experiences and effects. They all experience the discursiveness of the mind, the rising and passing of phenomena in the processes of the meditative state, and their mind-body connections as ways of knowing and intuiting. By drawing their voices together, my research can help generate greater clarity about the experience, benefits and effects of mindfulness meditation practice for interested teachers, parents and advocates for public education. I aim to highlight the salient principles behind the practice of mindfulness as a meditation, and in so doing, speak to
the power of the practice for teacher’s personal development to support holistic contemplative principles and bring balance and humanness back into mainstream education. Toward that end, and given that meditation is a very personal journey, I have offered a listing of a variety of places and mentors that contributed to my understanding of mindfulness in education in Appendix B as well as an substantial reference list. It is my hope that could serve as an initial stepping stone for teachers and administrators who are interested in developing a personal meditation practice.

VII. Closing Remarks

Meditation, like teaching, can be messy and complicated. Having been someone who meditates regularly now, I see the transience of life in the loss of loved ones, homes, and even loss of schools—all part of the ebb and flow of life unfolding day to day. Yet returning to the classroom day after day also offers a new possibilities and ways of knowing and appreciating the world.

Meditation has helped me to stay receptive and caring, with an open mind, body and heart. By witnessing the seemingly endless proliferating thoughts in my mind, and by staying open to the embodied experience of felt sense, I have begun to find more spaciousness in trusting my awareness. I use this experiential insight to guide me through my pedagogical practices where I once would have been quick to rationalize or resolve too-quickly—and therefore not resolve—problems. I have slowed down, and become more ready and willing to expect the unexpected with more grace, humility and a little more understanding.

Teaching is also a spiritual act, and authentic pedagogical relationships can only arise through trusting, caring and honest relationships with one’s self, with others and with the profession. By paying close attention to my intention, my ongoing mindfulness practice has
supported me to be a little more honest with, present with, as well as attentive toward, my
students in loving way—a way that would characterize that of a holistic contemplative educator.

I know I still have a long road to travel, but the practice of mindfulness meditation has
helped me find the language and map to guide both my spiritual awareness and holistic
contemplative pedagogy—and put this pedagogy into action. For meditation, like teaching, is
about transformation. For me, transformation is about overcoming fears: fears of failing to be
a good teacher, or losing control, or loss, or not being heard, or not being right and of being
wronged—all reflections of my insecurities. While self-improvement sounds like a goal I should
aspire to, I am often reminded of the uncomfortable fact that teaching, like me as a person, is
cracked with imperfection. In meditation, I can see what I am capable of changing, and what I
am not, and I have discovered that I can always be loving and bring this compassionate love
wholeheartedly to the pedagogical exchanges I share with students and colleagues. For as
Leonard Cohen says, “there is a crack in everything and that’s how the light gets in” (1992).
Appendix A
Interview Questions

Introduction: What brought you to teaching? What qualities do you think make a good teacher?

1. What does it mean to teach? What does it mean to school? What does it mean to educate?
   Is there a difference between these terms for you as a teacher? What does it mean to learn?

Meditation practice

2. How long have you been meditating? What prompted you to begin meditating?

3. Describe the nature of your meditation practice. How often do you meditate and for how long? Do you meditate alone or with a sangha? Which do you prefer and why?

4. Do you go on retreat? If yes, how often?

5. Describe the retreats you attend. Why do you attend these retreats?

6. Does your meditation practice influence your teaching?

7. Does meditation influence the relationships you have with your students?

Teaching Philosophy

I am interested in your thoughts about teaching. Would you say you have a teaching philosophy?

8. What are your goals as a teacher?

9. Do you think a teacher should be concerned with issues beyond academics in the classroom?

10. I am interested in your thoughts about meditation and teaching. Does meditation influence your teaching philosophy/principles?
11. One of the things I am looking at in this study is contemplation. Can you explain what contemplation means to you? O

**Teaching Practices**

I am interested in your teaching practices. AD

12. Do you think about your presence in the classroom? What would you say contributes to your presence in the classroom? OB

13. Do you see a connection between your meditation practice and your teaching presence? OABC

14. Does your mediation practice influence your behavior in the classroom? Do you think it the teacher’s responsibility to help students develop personal qualities? Do you feel that meditation leads to the development of certain qualities? OD

15. **I am interested in the concept of mindfulness in teaching.** How important do you think it is? OB

16. What connection do you see between mediation and contemplation in your teaching practice? ABCD

17. Do you think meditation could be useful for teacher development? If yes how would you introduce the practice of meditation to teachers? O

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question for this thesis is: What is the relationship between a teacher’s meditation practice and pedagogy? O

1. Do the teacher's interactions with his or her students during the school day demonstrate a heightened awareness that connects to the teacher's personal meditation practice? A

2. If there is a heightened awareness, how does it manifest itself? B
3. What are the physiological, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive effects of this heightened awareness? C

4. Does this awareness offer the teacher alternative ways to understand, teach, and relate to students that differ from what the teacher had known and done before?
Appendix B
Practical Considerations for This Research Study

In an effort to familiarize myself with meditation and contemplative practices popular among Western educators, I participated in several programs and retreats over the course of my doctoral studies. These retreats allowed me to make better connections between the theory, concepts and practical applications of meditation in general, and of mindfulness/vipassana meditation in particular.

In the fall of 2008, I joined small group of practicing meditators guided by True North Insight teachers Molly Swan and Norman Feldman, senior teachers of vipassana from the Theravada tradition. We have met twice a month for two hours, which included a 45-minute silent meditation followed by a discussion regarding meditation or the Buddha’s teachings—what Kabat-Zinn (2013) refers to the “the universal qualities of being a [humane] human” (p. 283). These dharma teachings also accessed audio recordings made available through http://www.truenorthinsight.org/ for sangha members and contributors.

To familiarize myself with Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), I enrolled in a 12-week MBSR training session developed by the University Health Network at the Toronto General Hospital. This course ran from January to March 2010. The program involved a three-hour weekly commitment, plus a completion of a homework log by clinical patients and other participating community members in this MBSR research study as well as participants like me from the local community in attendance.

The MBSR program, primarily credited to the work of Kabat-Zinn, was initiated at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre and employed various cognitive behavioural
techniques (Beck, 1979). The program is designed to reduce stress and enhance the well-being by invoking the wisdom of the mind and body through the practice of meditation and other contemplative practices like yoga, breathing exercises, reading poetry and more (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The Toronto program I attended was facilitated by Dr. Susan Abbey, and typically included two basic silent meditation sessions, each of which lasted 15-30 minutes, one at the start and the second at the end of the three-hour weekly session.

Between these pockets of silence, Dr. Abbey a MBSR trained psychiatrist (currently the University Health Network’s appointed psychiatrist-in-chief) facilitated group discussions about the formal meditation practices and techniques taught in the MBSR program. Participants were encouraged to read chapters from Kabat-Zinn’s Full Catastrophe Living and practice formal mindfulness meditation daily. There was no set requirement for the number of minutes required in formal meditation, but we were encouraged to record how long we actually meditated. The formal mindfulness practices were supplemented with other mindful activities, which included alternating between practicing a mental body scan (guided by a CD produced by Kabat-Zinn) and a gentle form of yoga, which incorporated slow, deliberate and controlled movement.

To support our sessions, we were encouraged to practice these exercises independently. As the course progressed, participants were introduced to other contemplative techniques like loving-kindness meditation, and were encouraged to engage in a mindful activity of their own choice. Much of the independent work required self-observation and self-monitoring of negative or unhelpful thoughts, behavioural patterns and blocks to listening, work based on that of Dr. David Burns’ Feeling Good Handbook (1999), which encourages people to recognize their blocks to listening.

55 Aaron Beck is a well known American psychiatrist who in the west is regarded as the forerunner of cognitive depression theories and clinical intervention for various forms of depression, anxieties and suicide.
In August 2010, I attended the Garrison Institute in New York, where I participated in a contemplative week-long program titled “Cultivating Awareness and Resilience” (CARE), a program that was specifically designed for educators. Facilitated by Patricia Jennings, Christa Turksma and Richard Brown, CARE, like the MBSR, is an integrated contemplative-based program aimed to reduce stress. CARE, however, focused more specifically on reducing the stress of teachers, by providing us with the tools to develop personal awareness and maintain greater resilience. An aspect of the program was its central focus on the social, emotional and instructional supports for teachers to use with their students. In this respect, the program was grounded in the work of Paul Ekman (2007), whose work explores emotional awareness and emotion regulation. Practical applications of the CARE program included contemplative activities such as journaling, role-play and mindful listening, activities that were designed to bring mindful teaching to challenging interactions and cultivate empathy and compassion.

In CARE, each morning commenced with an opportunity for silent formal meditation, which all the participants were encouraged but not required to do. While there was interaction and dialogue between participants during scheduled activities and lectures by the facilitators, the rest of the time was spent in silence. This included silence during meals so that people could practice mindful eating.

In June of 2010, I attended a month-long intensive yoga immersion, run by the Centre of Gravity in Toronto, and led by Michael Stone. Sessions ran Monday to Friday for eight hours a day. One 45-minute silent meditation began and closed each training day. After the opening meditation, Michael Stone would facilitate the asana (yoga postures) and pranayama (breathing techniques); the one exception was a guest teacher who facilitated three days of yoga and pranayama practice. After lunch, we would commence with asana practice followed by
discussion involving some aspect of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, which echoed aspects of the Buddha’s eightfold map for the wise.

Given that the teacher participants in this research study referred to their personal meditation practice as mindfulness/vipassana, I wanted a fuller appreciation of the experiential applications of vipassana in a retreat setting. In order to do this, I took part in two seven-day silent retreats with True North Insight, facilitated by teachers Norman Feldman and Molly Swan in November of 2010, and in May 2011, with Pascal Auclair and Winnie Nazarko. At these retreats, silence was maintained throughout the day, including meals. Silence was broken at the end of the day, when a teacher would lead a discussion on the dharma, i.e., translated teachings of the historical Buddha.

These retreats commenced with an early morning meditation, a seated practice usually lasting about 45 minutes before the first meal of the day would be had. After, participants would meditate as a group in a large hall, also in silence and alternating between walking, sitting and standing. These components would last for approximately two hours, with a break for lunch and dinner.

The value of solitary meditation deepened for me by reading Gregory Kramer’s *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom*. My initial encounter with insight dialogue took place in Toronto on May 13 to 15, 2011; the second was at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, November 4 to 12, 2011. The contemplative exercises for insight dialogue include interpersonal meditation practice with a partner following a period of

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56 Patanjali is regarded as an Indian sage that lived over 2000 years ago after the Budhha (de Bary, 1958). Patanjali like the Buddha philosophized about the human condition and in particular suffering. The sutras are a collection of aphorisms/observations; metaphors for psychological exploration to assist in the observation of consciousness to support penetrating insight in the meditative process (Hartranft, 2003).
independent silent meditation. Insight dialogue is rooted in the Buddhist tradition of *vipassana* meditation.

I found that these two retreats offered new ways to practice mindfulness meditation. While we meditate in solitude, our lives are relational. Teachers’ lives are particularly relational; we not only interact with our students, but also with our colleagues and our students’ parents. Kramer’s contemplative partnering exercises for insight dialogue were especially useful for me in bridging the gap between the solitary and relational. Furthermore, teaching remains a predominantly oral practice. Kramer’s fundamental principles guiding insight dialogue were relevant here, too, as they included the following actions:

i) Pause (do not interrupt, stay present with a bright alert mind)

ii) Relax (soften, settle in, face the challenge)

iii) Open the mind, heart and body (broaden your scope to fully receive, be available relationally)

iv) Trust emergence (surrender to what’s emerging, bring energy forward to go with the flow and ride the moment no matter how uncomfortable)

v) Listen deeply (make contact, absorb meaning of what is being said, absorb the felt experience including the emotions and energy of the speaker)

vi) When speaking speak the truth (take action do act with integrity, care and love).

These guiding principles were practical tools I have used when negotiating difficult issues with students and colleagues. In practicing insight dialogue, I have come to appreciate more of Ferrrer’s (2002) participatory vision of human spirituality.
An additional weekend of meditation and teaching led by Stephen and Martine Batchelor June 17 to 19, 2011, at the University of Toronto deserves mention here, as it contributed to my understanding of the breadth and practice of mindfulness the development of insight. S. Batchelor’s deconstruction of Buddhist philosophy, psychology and practices was useful in understanding the appeal for mindfulness/vipassana as a meditation practice for everyday life, and how one can expand awareness both internally and externally. M. Batchelor’s engagement with the creative process in meditation here was especially illuminating, and corroborated my own experience of the practice. That is, formal meditation is ordinarily spiritual. It does not necessarily result in an epiphany, but it can gradually help one to learn to relax, then experience new spaciousness and freedom from negative habituation in everyday life—a state that translates well to the space of and experiences in the classroom. Here, I learned that we cannot change the past, but we can creatively contemplate the conditions or events that came together to result in felt experiences that feed negative habituation or reactions.

After reviewing some of my initial data in July 2012, I attended a five-day meditation retreat at the California Institute of Integral Studies, led by transpersonal psychologist and Buddhist meditation teacher Dr. John Welwood. As a transpersonal psychologist, Welwood’s focus and interest in psycho-spiritual contemplative work has been bringing together Eastern and Western psychology, meditation and psychotherapy, in a practical way. He has written extensively on embodiment, reflection, presence and awakening in the process of meditation and draws attention to the felt sense/embodied knowing during practice. The contemplative retreat training session I attended devoted a full days of solitary, silent meditation. At the end of each day practice was supported and guided by Dr. Welwood’s teachings in a discussion among the participants at the retreat with emphasis on embodied awareness.
In conclusion, the benefit of being present with my mind, body and spirit in a mindfulness/vipassana practice has provided me a window to observe the proliferating thoughts in my mind, along with the opportunity to experience the feelings and physical sensations that accompany the thoughts. While this maybe unsatisfying at times, I am present to knowing that I am a dynamic changing organism moment by moment, breath by breath. With this insight I am better able to engage more wholeheartedly with others, most especially my students.
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