Contemplative Education in a Liberal Arts Context: Naropa University’s Approach to Asian Studies

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Nine months ago, I assumed the presidency of Naropa University. This came on the heels of twenty-nine years of teaching religious studies and Asian studies, and six years as academic dean, at a traditional liberal arts college. While the reasons for my move were multiple, high on the list was the sense that a Naropa education brings to fruition seeds that are planted in the traditional liberal arts context—seeds that are insufficiently nurtured. Naropa, I sensed, answers questions that are asked, but incompletely answered elsewhere. Much of this has to do with Naropa’s understanding of Asian Studies, as it intertwines with what we call “contemplative education.” The panel today is designed to draw others into exploring this intuition. It consists of four of my faculty colleagues talking about their work. Each of us will speak for ten to twelve minutes, followed by questions and answers. My assignment here is to introduce them with three comments: a thumbnail portrait of Naropa University; a word on how I see contemplative education relating to traditional liberal arts education; and finally a word on Asian Studies at Naropa.

Naropa, established in 1974 by the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and scholar, Chogyam Trungpa, is based on the model of India’s renowned Nalanda University and named for its 11th century abbot. The metaphor I have used to describe Naropa is to suggest that it sits at the confluence of two rivers. One has its headwaters in classical India, in the experience of the Buddha. The ensuing tradition has flowed over varied terrains, enriching each of them, inducing a contemplative dimension into even as unpromising a tradition as the martial tradition of Japan. The other river has its headwaters in the eastern Mediterranean, not in the experience of a single individual, but in the creative matrix that was classical Greece. The tradition that was born there, the liberal arts tradition, has also flowed over varied cultures, enriching each of them. These two rivers have now come together in Boulder, Colorado. Originally a summer institute emphasizing meditation and the creative arts—linked because the arts are the academic disciplines closest to meditation in how they expand conventional consciousness—Naropa moved quickly to offering credit-bearing graduate courses, eventually to some undergraduate offerings, and now offers full four-year Bachelor of Arts and Fine Arts degrees in nine majors and ten Master’s programs. The University has just over 1,100 students, roughly 40% of them undergraduates, with sixty ranked faculty and twice that many adjuncts. Accredited since 1986, Naropa’s best-known program is probably its writing program, established by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman as “The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.” Naropa’s mission statement aspires, among other things, “to offer educational programs that cultivate awareness of the present moment through intellectual, artistic, and meditative disciplines,” “to foster a community that . . . uncovers wisdom and heart,” and that seeks to remain faithful to the Buddhist educational heritage, while also being non-sectarian and seeking to integrate world wisdom traditions with modern culture. One of Naropa’s distribution requirements for undergraduates requires them to take at least three courses in “Contemplative Practices.” Beyond Writing and Poetics and several degree programs in Religious Studies, Naropa’s graduate programs seek to deepen students’ inner lives and provide them with aptitudes for inserting themselves into some of the “hurt points” of the contemporary world: early childhood education, environmental leadership, and a range of programs in psychology and the arts, all manifestations of the Buddhist virtue of compassion, held in counterpoint with wisdom.

Reminiscent of faculty debates elsewhere over what counts as a distribution course, the Naropa faculty is engaged in on-going discussion over the meaning of “contemplative education.” While much of the substance of what is taught at Naropa derives from the cultural traditions of Asia, I was surprised to discover that the most recent version of the faculty document on “The Role of Contemplative Practice in Education at Naropa University” begins with a quotation from
William James: “The faculty of bringing back a wandering
attention over and over again is the very root of judgment,
character, and will. An education which should improve this
faculty [the faculty of wandering attention] would be the
education *par excellence.*” I was also surprised to discover
that, just last spring, the administrative staff brought forward
a document called “The Path of Contemplative Administration at Naropa University.” Working inductively
and collectively, staff members have sought to develop a
theory for their administrative work, an event I think may be
unique in American higher education. Although most staff
members are not Buddhists, their theory is deeply indebted
to the Vajrayana Buddhist notion of the five Buddha families
and their qualities as a way of organizing the staff’s
aspirations for work culture.

My second point, Naropa’s educational experience
contributes, I find, to an enlarged understanding of liberal
education in the way it helps us address what I believe is the
single most pressing challenge for educators in the 21st
century: how can we help our students become able to engage
constructively with those who are unlike themselves? That
formulation of the challenge, I have found, finds ready
agreement virtually everywhere in higher education. It
accounts for the major emphasis in the academy on promoting
diversity in education, emphasizing issues of race, class,
gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the like. Countless
very imaginative and powerful programs have been
developed, doubtless on each of our campuses. While each
such program invites the student—in each of us—to
take and weave a new life, as well as informing us about our fellow
human beings, that reflexivity, in my judgment, stops short
of what it can be. Let me put the matter this way. The crux
of liberal education for many years has been to lead students
into mastery of a particular discipline and to cultivate in them
certain fundamental liberal arts skills: reading, writing,
researching, speaking—all critical skills, to be sure. But isn’t
there a missing liberal arts skill in this roster, a skill that is
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there a missing liberal arts skill in this roster, a skill that is
particularly in evidence these days in what Deborah Tannen
calls *The Argument Culture,* now freshly apparent as we enter
the election season? That underdeveloped skill in mainstream
liberal education, I suggest, is *listening*—listening to the other
in all of his or her “otherness,” and listening to our own
innermost selves, to what lies in our hearts, not just in our
heads. In a time when conventional resources are scarce in
higher education—resources of time, of money, of
personnel—a college that systematically helps students
develop their *inner resources* seems to me to hold high
promise for an enlarged vision of what it means to be an
educated human being, both for the fulfillment he or she
finds personally, as well as for his or her ability to engage
constructively in the world.

Finally, a word on Asian Studies at Naropa. The
situation actually is quite peculiar, with implications both
for our own institutional self-understanding and for the
familiar discussion, well known in ASIANetwork and
beyond, about what we mean by “Asia” and by “Asian
Studies.” The fact is that, while Naropa is aptly described as
“Buddhist inspired,” and while perhaps somewhat more than
a third of our undergraduate courses touch on Asian subject
matter in some way, we have no program in Asian Studies.
In fact, when, as a new president, I started talking about Asian
Studies, I got curious looks from many faculty. Virtually no
one, I think, with the possible exception of some faculty in
Religious Studies, thinks of him or herself as an Asianist.
So we are in the odd position of teaching a great deal about
Asia, but without the Asian studies label. What you will hear
in a few minutes, therefore, is the brave first effort by some
Naropa faculty members to talk about their work to an
audience of Asianists, and perhaps, in the ensuing questions
and answers, to explore what it might mean for them to think
of themselves as Asianists. Conversely, it will be an invitation
to the rest of the audience to think of itself as implicitly
engaging in contemplative education.

Some of the peculiarity here might be a function of
the fact that much of the Asian subject matter we teach at
Naropa is easily elided with contemplative material from
elsewhere on the globe. I mentioned earlier that Naropa
aspires both to be faithful to the Buddhist educational heritage
and to be non-sectarian, seeking to integrate world wisdom
traditions with modern culture. Where the subject matter is
drawn from geographically or culturally seems to be of less
interest in the way we at Naropa teach, and have developed
our curriculum, than the fact that there are multiple ways to
help students deepen their inner lives—and we draw upon
many of them. This, of course, immediately raises the
question of whether the Naropa curriculum is implicitly
“Orientalist,” in the pejorative, Edward Saidian sense of the
word, because it romanticizes Asia, imputes to it a fantasized
spirituality, and ignores the self-representation of Asians
themselves. There is a lot to be said here, but I shall limit
myself to two final comments. First, Naropa owes its
existence to a Tibetan Buddhist, with a larger-than-Tibetan
vision, who intentionally reached out to teach Westerners.
A fair number of them, in Trungpa’s day and continuing today,
were drawn to this vision of education. They did not invent
that vision or project it onto a distant and unknown Orient.
They were taught it by a Tibetan himself. The same,
interestingly, applies today to much of today’s teaching and
researching about Tibet at other institutions as well, more, I
think, than is the case with other parts of Asia. Second, while
Said requires all who study Asia to scrutinize their
assumptions and motives, the fact is that centuries ago
Chinese and Japanese pilgrims and scholars discerned in
South Asia a compelling spirituality that was quite different
from what they knew in their domestic cultures. Might they
be seen as forerunners of those at Naropa today who are
drawn to Asian spirituality in search of, and finding,
something that educates in a more complete way than what
they find in more conventional educational institutions?

Now we need to hear from faculty who have actually
been teaching contemplative education, and who may have
been teaching Asian Studies, for varying lengths of time.