

The Practice of Discernment in Contemplative Education

Nona Olivia
Naropa University

In my brief presentation at the ASIANetwork Conference, I touched on two points: first, my teaching at a Buddhist-inspired institution, and secondly, the practice of contemplative education. These two points realize a synthesis in my training as a classicist, odd as that may be for a conference on Asian Studies.

My own training is in Comparative Literature, focusing on the literature from ancient Greece and Rome, with an emphasis on ancient philosophy and drama. My area of expertise is the role and representation of women in ancient religious rituals, particularly the sacrificial rituals that were so important to both Athenian and Roman State religions.

It is clear to me that the classical tradition with its roots in ancient Greece and Rome and the religious traditions from India, specifically Buddhism, have a natural cohesion. Tom Coburn uses the metaphor of Naropa's contemplative education as a confluence of two rivers—the river of the Greek classical tradition and the river of Buddhist contemplative tradition. I would like to elaborate further in imaging the rivers as bodies of water emerging from the same subterranean sea. While above ground, to stay with the metaphor, they appear diverse, but both emphasize, and necessitate, actually require, Discernment: the ability to perceive deeply into things.

An example of this from the Greek philosophical tradition is in Plato's *Apology*. Here, Socrates makes his famous observation that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Ap.* 38a). According to Socrates, in order to live a moral and ethical life, we should examine not only *what* we believe, but also *why* we believe what we believe. In the Socratic method of philosophy, we examine our minds and see if our thoughts, our perceptions, our behaviors, our biases, are rooted in Clear Seeing, come from some form of truth, or instead are simply rooted in habits of mind. According to Socrates, much of what we believe, that is, much of what we take to be our personal beliefs, are actually conditioned by our culture. And much of what *are* our personal beliefs are simply habits of mind, habits that are so often repeated that we take them to be true. Coming from the classical tradition, then, examination, questioning, becoming aware, allows us, invites us, to go beyond what we take to be givens. In academia, we call this process of examination and questioning, this practice of discernment, "critical thinking."

In Buddhism, the practice of Discernment, that is, "seeing the way things are," is a proximate cause of Wisdom. In both the Greek classical tradition and Buddhism, Discernment leading to Wisdom gives rise to Compassion. We can think, for example, of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, urging those with Clear Seeing to awaken the inhabitants of the cave to the shadows of puppets that they take to be real

(*Republic* 29 (514a-521b)). Following these traditions, then, in my classes, I tell my students that I am much more interested in questions than I am in answers. It's true. Answers often worry me.

I don't mean to suggest that there are no answers or that we should live in a state of suspended belief, but I hope to urge my students to postpone answering questions for as long as possible. It is necessary to keep questioning in order to recognize how often we solicit and receive the expected answer.

In contemplative education, for example, we try to solicit from our students an examination of "racism," both ancient and modern, cultural and personal. Through this examination, we inquire into its roots, its subterfuges, its intricate particularities and its numbing generalities. That is, in Buddhist terms, we inquire into its causes and conditions. By this inquiry we may have to contend with the unpleasantness of the investigation, the groundlessness of having no-easy-answer, but through this examination, we are more likely to learn something deeply useful for and about each other and ourselves.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum says that while this kind of questioning, "...may not get us to love one another, it may get us to stop pretending that we have rational arguments for our refusals of sympathy" (*Cultivating Humanity* 36).

I have experienced time after time that learning to "think critically," to practice discernment, allows students to develop what I call the mental and emotional "muscles" that are needed in order to live a morally and ethically engaged life. When students are exposed to the complexities of other people's lives—whether the issues of cultural differences, social injustices such as racism, or issues of suffering from disease or hunger—the abilities to read and think critically about oneself in relation to others, brings a depth of awareness in which empathy and the desire to help others are natural responses.

In Buddhism we use the term Bodhicitta to mean "the awakened (or better still, the awakening) heart/mind." In many ancient cultures, the heart and mind are not separated. Ancient cultures saw the connection between the two: in ancient Greek the word for heart and mind is *nous*, in Latin its *animus*, and in Sanskrit it is *Citta*. The heart and mind that are aware is the heart/mind of awakening. The heart/mind that is awakening is aware of the interconnectedness of our global community. Creating people who possess the skills to respond with compassionate action to the similarities and differences of people who make up our global community is the goal of contemplative education.

Sometimes in my classes, my students and I learn about situations in the world that are painful and disturbing—the AIDS epidemic in Africa, for example—and the warfare that can be found somewhere in the world at any given time. We become aware of injustices beyond comprehension, unimaginable suffering, stunning poverty and deprivation. To see these things pushes us beyond our comfort zone. We might want to look away or hope for a quick answer.

Sometimes we find that it is our own country that perpetuates the suffering. (And we may think here of the Greek tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides, whose tragedies criticized the continual wars fought by the Athenians. These ancient tragedies draw poignant and sympathetic portrayals of the victims of war: the women, children, and the slaves. Cf: *Troides, Iphigenia at Aulis* et al). Sometimes we learn that it is a member of the class or community that has suffered a rape, abuse or whose friend or family member is serving in the Iraq War. (We think here of Homer's *Iliad*, for example, and its illustration of the ruthlessness of war). These discoveries are difficult to endure. However, the awareness of the suffering and the injustices is for our students in contemplative education, a call to compassionate, engaged action.

Some people may think that contemplative education is passive—that teachers simply create a safe container for a person's true inner self to emerge, some idealized peaceful "inner self," and to use an expression from somewhere, these students can then "follow their bliss." Instead, I like to think of education in the terms used by Ajahn Sumedho, an American who has been a monk in the Theravadan tradition for forty years. "The goal of contemplative practice," he says, "is not to follow one's heart, but to train one's heart." It is the same for contemplative education. As all teachers know, education is a transformative experience (Cf Cicero, "*sed pleni sunt omnes libri, plenae sapientium voces, plena exemplorum vetustas: quae iacerent in tenebris omnia, nisi litterarum lumen accederet*" *Pro Archia*).

To conclude: I urge my students to build confidence, courage and strength through their developing ability to be aware of what is—not some idealized state of mind or utopian world view—and I urge them to resist the pressure to think reductively, simplistically, selfishly, that is, to see themselves as excluded or powerless in the face of the world's problems. Instead, I urge them to unpack the complexities of whatever issues they are confronting to better understand the historical and cultural contexts of those issues so that they can respond with an awakening heart and mind. I suggest then, and only somewhat facetiously, that contemplative education at Naropa, with its roots in both the Greek classical tradition and Indian Buddhism, might be called "applied Asian Studies."

A Path To Intimacy With Demons: Contemplative Education at Naropa University

Andrew Schelling
Naropa University

The question of how contemplative practice fits in with the arts in general, and poetry in particular, has been by turns coolly ignored or hotly contested at Naropa. For many years the MFA in Writing and Poetics at The Jack Kerouac School was the university's only program that re-

quired no contemplative study for a degree. This provoked some irritable growls out of other departments, but little articulate debate—not surprising given that to speak about either Buddhism or poetry is a challenging task. Neither is well understood, or should I say readily understood.

From its earliest days Buddhism was ambivalent about literature—specifically the composing of poems. Like Buddhist practice, good poetry demands arduous, concentrated, long-term engagement along unconventional lines. The evidence suggests that true proficiency or accomplishment in poetry as in Buddhism is so distinct, so individual, and so unpredictable, that only a few people achieve mastery. Moreover, their accomplishments veer into unmapped terrain. This makes proficiency appear unique, if not downright eccentric.

In 1987 the Zen teacher Norman Fischer—himself a prolific experimental poet—convened a gathering of poets who practice some form of Buddhism at Green Gulch Zen Center on the flanks of Mt. Tamalpais, just north of San Francisco. This was surely the first time poets had gathered in the west to discuss what role meditation played in their art. For me the most memorable statement came in Norman's opening comments. He said, "When you sit down and do nothing, that's meditation. When you sit down and do something, that's poetry."

Curiously, when I quoted this back to him some years later a vague look overtook him and he replied that he doubted he'd said such a thing. So another uncrackable little kernel of words enters Zen lore, pithy and anonymous. But if there were not present-day uncertainty concerning what these two activities mean, poetry and contemplative practice, something would be amiss. I think not only of early injunctions in Indian Buddhism against musical instruments and discursive speech. In T'ang Dynasty China Po Chu-i could write:

Since earnestly studying the Buddhist
doctrine of emptiness,
I've learned to still all the common
states of mind.

Only the devil of poetry I have yet
to conquer—

let me come on a bit of scenery and

I start my idle droning. (Burton Watson, trans.)

In Japan, the forthright Ikkyu (1394-1481), a riveting poet as well as a Zen abbot, declared poetry "originally a work out of hell." "We must sigh," he added, "for those taking this path / to intimacy with demons."

Tongue in cheek those statements may have been, but I think beneath their playfulness stirs an uneasy heart. Here is a story told by the American poet Gary Snyder. In 1956 Gary went to Kyoto. He had received the first scholarship from The First Zen Institute of America, founded by Ms. Ruth Fuller Sasaki to send Americans to Japan to study Zen. Gary arrived at the Shokoku-ji temple.

...I found myself in Japan, at the age of twenty-six, in a Zen temple with Oda Roshi, and in one of our early conversations I timorously asked him, "You know, sometimes I write poetry. Is that alright?"