

Making Peace, Becoming Awake:
Contemplative Practice in Education
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Wherever you are in the world, a quiet – one might call it a “mindful” – revolution is taking place in education. Visit a classroom in a high school, college, university, or professional school, and you might well see students sitting quietly with their eyes closed attending to their breath. They are using an age-old contemplative practice to settle their minds, reduce stress, strengthen attention and to cultivate emotional balance. Although the roots of contemplative practice are ancient, modern-day neuroscience has shown that such practices have significant benefits for those who do them.

Visit the Law School at UC Berkeley and you might well meet Charles Halpern, Director of the Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness in Law. Or maybe you are interested in Harvard’s educational leadership program. If so, you will likely bump into Prof. Jerry Murphy and Metta McGarvey who offer a course on leadership with a contemplative component at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. Or if you came to visit me at Amherst College, you would be welcomed into my First-Year Seminar where every week I use a different contemplative exercise designed especially for each part of the course. Nor are such methods limited to the United States. I have worked with contemplative educators in Israel, Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, England, Finland, Germany, Holland, France, to name a few.

Rather than tell you about the thousand of professors and high school teachers who are using contemplative practices as part of their pedagogy, I’ll send you to [Center for Contemplative Mind in Society website](#) for information. Instead, let me invite you to my class for incoming First-Year students.

As you come in I hand you a sheet with a few short passages from authors whose ideas will prove central to the course. The first passage is from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Read it slowly and aloud for us please.

The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air — to a higher life than we fell asleep from... The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face? ...We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.

When you have finished reading it, I may well as another student of two to read it again, and then go on to read it aloud myself one last time, slowly. Already this is an adaptation of the old monastic practice of *lectio divina* or sacred reading. Go ahead and read the above passage aloud, and take your time. You will be surprised by how much more you notice, how many questions and thoughts occur to you on the second or third reading.

Now that we have lingered long on the words of Thoreau, what do you think? What does he mean by the poetic and divine life? How awake, or how alive are you? How might you awaken yourself to a higher life “than we fell asleep from”? Pick a line or phrase and tell me what it signifies.

It is said that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of his presence. The man stopped and asked,

“My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?”

Again the Buddha answered, “No.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Well, my friend, what then are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.”

The name Buddha means “one who is awake.” Do you think you could have looked the Buddha in the face? What might it feel like?

Read Thoreau one last time, and then sit quietly for a while.

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The second selection is comprised of two short passages from Simone Weil’s remarkable book *Gravity and Grace*.

All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.

Have you noticed, with Simone Weil, how much of your inner life is as predictable as the behavior of a thrown rock? Human nature is like that. Show a guy a cute girl, and it will prompt the same reaction every time. Such are the “natural movements of the soul;” they are predictable and follow laws analogous to those of physics. Psychology is the study of those laws.

But according to Simone Weil there is an exception that she calls “grace.” She thinks that the interior movements of our “soul” are not completely predictable: occasionally, exceptionally something unpredictable enters in! Check it out for yourself. Look inside. Introspect. How many of your emotions and thoughts are really your own? Don’t they seem to link up in predictable ways? Can you find an exception? If there is an exception, where does it come from?

To the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, who was one of France's greatest minds in the period 1935 to her death in 1945, such exceptions seem to enter from without. Moreover, they carry with them no power to force their way in. Rather, law-breaking grace can enter our inner life only when there is "a void to receive it."

The deep quiet that can arise in contemplative practice is an invitation to the void Weil is writing about, but not the void itself. We silence ourselves outwardly and inwardly. Thoughts and feelings that normally run riot inside us gradually subside when we meditate. It can take some time and repeated practice, but we can quiet ourselves so that grace has a chance.

Simone Weil observed herself, her mind or soul. Her observations of her inner life match my own. We both came to them by meditative introspection. We sought inside ourselves carefully and patiently, and came to similar conclusions.

With our physical senses we can examine the vast world around us, but a second and equally amazing world lies within. Science is the study of nature, and contemplative science is the study of the mind. At first encounter, your mind may be more like a jungle than a orderly universe. Meditation offers a way in, a method of calming the chaos and of self-exploration that can lead to what I hold to be the greatest task of being human: to know ourselves truly.

Permit me to end as I do with my students on that first day, by inviting you to join me in a contemplative practice: becoming silent. Sit yourself down, feet flat on the floor, back gently erect, head resting easily, and your hands on your thighs or in your lap. Softly close your eyes, and settle your body, releasing all tension in your arms, legs, neck, back. With each outbreath, settle the body still more, so that you are completely relaxed but alert.

Now settle your mind. Thoughts and feeling arise and pass away; these are the natural movements of the soul. Observe them, but see if you can also release them, quieting the mind as you quieted the body. Again use the breath as a help. Rest your attention on it, feeling the in-breath and out-breath... until all your thoughts and feelings become merely a murmur in the background of your mind.

Rest in the stillness and peace that opens up within you. Don't look for anything, merely experience the profound peace that is available to you, if you can settle mind and body. And in the deepening silence, maybe, just maybe grace will open up a void in you, and you will awaken to the poetic and divine life that you fell asleep from.