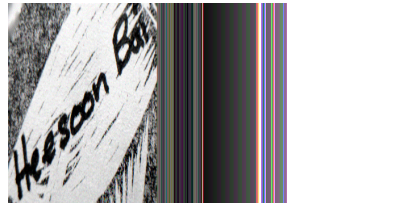


EDUCATION FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

I have been a student of Buddha most of my adult life—for over 30 years now . . .



ACADEMIC SANGHA

Experiment in Being Here-and-Now

I have been a student of Buddha most of my adult life—for over 30 years now. And it does not look like I will graduate from this course of study. No degree, no certificate. Not only that, I am not even sure if I will ever achieve the goal of this study: enlightenment. In fact, if I understand the Buddha's teachings correctly, enlightenment is not something one can achieve by effort as this very striving and achieving drive will guarantee failure. Paradox abounds. What do humans do in the face of paradox and failure? We try to run forward and backward, in time, in space, or in logic, we run away and run around crazily, but in the end, we just sit down, exhausted. It turns out that's what zazen (just sitting) is essentially about. We just sit and face who I am, how I am, and what's happening in my consciousness as I look out at the world. Chödrön (1991), contemporary teacher in the tradition of Shambhala Buddhism, states:

One of the main discoveries of meditation is seeing how we continually run away from the present moment, how we avoid being here just as we are. That's not considered to be a problem; the point is to see it. (p. 3)

Where does this inability to be in the here-and-now come from? If life exists only in the here-and-now, and we have this inability, then logic dictates that we don't really live. A distressing thought! A French philosopher living some 300 years earlier than Chödrön registered exactly the same distress, and expressed it with his usual penetrating insight and precision. His name is Pascal (1623–1662), and he left the following entry in his *Pensées* (1666):

We never keep to the present . . . We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us, and if we find it enjoyable, we are sorry it slips away. We try to give it the support of the future, and think how we are going to arrange things over which we have no control for a time we can never be sure of reaching . . . The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. (p. 43)

I ask again: where does this inability to be in the here-and-now come from? I do not know its origin, but I do know, from my own schooling experience as well as my current professorial work as professor in Education, that the way we educate

people—in content, values, aims, and manner—does not do a good job of developing the ability to be in the here-and-now. How could it, when our education is mostly, if not all, about the future—future survival, success, achievement, improvement, and—a favourite buzz word in education today—transformation? We are consumed by future achievement and success, and the cultural logic behind this future orientation is individual survival. Parents everywhere repeat variations of ‘If you don’t study and work hard, you will be pushing a shopping cart!’ Some variations are, I am sure, more gentle and kind than others: all the same, they voice fear and insecurity about the future.

All my life I knew best how to study hard, compete, win and survive. I survived the so-called ‘Examination Hell’ in Korea—12 long years of enforced studying, under constant fear of failure. After I immigrated to Canada at the age of 17, I basically did the same: studied single-mindedly, while struggling with learning English, and obtained a bachelor’s degree in Honours Philosophy with the Gold Medal. Certainly, this is the way of worldly achievement, but life cannot be sustained through such achievement only. As Pascal (1966) reminded us, if we don’t live here-and-now, in an important way, we don’t live at all. Hence, meditation practice became an important corrective or balance to my life when I came to understand that meditation is all about being open to the here-and-now. Meditation is about being in touch with each emergent moment; fully experiencing it and being fully present. Meditation is not interested in what we can do better or change for the better—in the future and for the future. In meditation, everything is brought to the present—to this moment. What is happening this moment? What am I experiencing, seeing this moment? How am I disposed to the world this moment? How am I relating to people this moment? To truly see, with precision, what is happening in each moment, we need to be wide awake and wide open, full of curiosity, gentleness, and compassion. As Pascal indicated, the present moment usually hurts, and we usually don’t want to face it. To face the present moment with its existential and material hurts, discomforts, distress, and disappointment, we need a lot of equanimity and compassion—towards our selves and others. If I can live each moment with equanimity and compassion, wisdom of love and love of wisdom, I am ready for life, come what may.

I started out as a solitary meditator, and I still meditate alone regularly. Over the years, in increasingly infusing meditation into my pedagogy and classroom learning experience, I have come to see meditation not so much as an activity but rather as an attribute of who we are as relational beings: wide awake, wide open, compassionate, gentle and kind, and care-full. As such, meditation is a way of being and way of life, and there is no better place to practice it than in the company of each other. The Inner Work Educators’ group that came together under the leadership of Avraham Cohen turned out to be the right company for my ever-present beginning level of equanimity and compassion. With these colleagues, my heart naturally and easily opens wide; and my intellect comes alive during our lively and joyful dialogue. My whole being resonates deeply with the generosity of their heart and spirit. I would not hesitate to call my manner of being with them an active meditation. As my sitting meditation nourishes me, a morning or an

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afternoon in the company of my colleagues (whose work you read in these chapters) replenishes me, deeply. Knowing that these colleagues are in the academy gives me hope, comfort, and a sense of solidarity.

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ENTERING THE FIELD OF BEING

Inner Work and Education for Enlightenment

Teaching necessarily happens in the intersection of the personal and the professional. The more integration we can achieve between these two realms, the more embodied, enactive, and alive our teaching becomes, which, in turn, can facilitate transformative learning in our students. This integration of the personal and the professional is supported by what our group calls the inner work for educators.

We tend to think and act in terms of such dichotomies as private/public, subjective/objective, emotional/rational, senses/intellect, making integration of the personal (where the first terms reside) with the professional (where the second terms reside) challenging work. For a lot of professionals, including teachers, this dichotomy means concealing many dimensions of the personal from our professional context. A prime example is the substantial exclusion of our rich emotional lives and resources that might be related to how we make decisions and conduct ourselves as professionals in our institutional lives. Another example is concealment of our spiritual, religious, or contemplative practice from the purview of our professional lives. Our group has been questioning the wisdom of such a stance and understanding. We believe in bringing the whole person and everything that the whole person entails—in short, the whole being—to bear upon our significant work and activities. It turns out, by Buddhist and other holistic understandings, that the whole human being implicates the entire cosmos.

Palmer has inspired us with his declaration of “we teach who we are” (1998, p. 1). How are we to take this statement? I suggest that we need to take it as a general empirical statement: that’s how it is and how it works. We cannot avoid bringing who we are into what we do and how we practice. Who we are just oozes out of ourselves and leaks into whatever we are doing, professionally or otherwise. But even if we somehow manage to do a reasonably good job of keeping the personal and professional separate and hermetically sealed, then this propensity and ability is also part of who we are, or, at least, who we appear to be, and permeates what we do and how we affect others. There is no escape. But beyond the facticity of non-separability of being and doing, the important question for us is, what do we do with this? So what if we teach who we are? What are the implications, and how do we work with it?

Avraham Cohen, who initiated this book project (and associated presentations at major conferences) with the five us—a team of university educators—declared a variation on Palmer’s saying: “We teach who we are and that is the problem” (Cohen, 2009, p. 26). We may not intend to impact our students negatively, but if we as teachers have a certain negative manner of being, then this will negatively

impact students. For example, if a person is highly anxious and tends to be defensive in her interaction with others, and this person conducts a class, chances are that her students will ‘learn’ to be anxious and ill at ease, and will end up with a lot of tension and stress, which will negatively impact not only their learning but also their personhood. I have witnessed this amongst some of my colleagues and their students. In fact, it does not matter if the teacher assures her students that they need not be anxious, and that they should relax, and so on. It is not the saying but the actual permeation of the group’s conscious and unconscious by the teacher’s being dimension (that is highly anxious in this case) that is the critical factor. Indeed, when there is a contradiction between the articulated message and ‘signals’ from the being dimension of the teacher, this creates a highly tense and likely psychologically difficult and even damaging situation that has been described as a double-bind. But not to dwell on the negative example only: if the teacher is an enthusiastic person full of excitement and passion for what he teaches and how he receives and interacts with his students, then this has a great and positive impact not only on what the students are learning but also who they are as persons and how they relate to the world. This speaks to the modeling dimension of teaching (Noddings, 1992), which is recognized for its supreme pedagogic importance.

Given the incredible power of ‘we teach who we are,’ how do we work with who we are and who our students are? First of all, we need to recognize that as educators, we are responsible for not only what we teach but also who we are and how we are. This recognition addresses the crucial importance of inner work; work that each of us undertakes with/in our selves in order to facilitate growth, authenticity, and wholeness as a person. But our recognition of the importance of inner work is not reflected in any teacher education we know of in North America. I am not aware of any teacher education program that pays attention to this. Maybe some reflective educators naturally and individually include inner work (whether it’s called by that name or not) in their curriculum and pedagogy, but I have not known any teacher educator articulating it explicitly and working with it. In a culture that separates the personal from the professional, it would be hard to find teacher education programs that seriously incorporate inner work. Our inquiry and book project here is a response to this lack, and is based on our group’s individual and collective work on who we are as educators. Each of us tells our tale of inner work. This chapter tells my tale, as a beginner, of inner work theory and practice.

INNER WORK

Here we are, seven billion of us, inhabiting a civilization that is increasingly proving to be environmentally and socially untenable and unsustainable. My colleagues and I have made the argument in various places (Bai, Donald & Scott, 2009; Bai & Scutt 2009; Bai, 2001) over the years that our education systems support this civilization by producing people who have internalized the values and beliefs of an untenable and unsustainable civilization best characterized as capitalistic consumerism backed up by militarism. I believe the only viable education that is open to us who are awakening to this understanding is one that

helps and teaches us to deconstruct and reconstruct ourselves from inside out, from within the system, values and beliefs, and our habits of heartmind—all that we have internalized. Let us call such inside-out de- and re-constructive work ‘inner work’ (Bai et al., forthcoming). It is an inner work in the sense that it is focused primarily on individuals changing the matrix of their own self-identity rather than primarily focusing on changing the external conditions and environments. To be clear, the inner work focus and the outer work focus should not be considered an exclusive duality. The relationship between the inner and the outer work is best represented by the imagery of möbius band. One flows and feeds into the other.

From my Buddhist and Daoist perspective on inner work, I see the inner work re-construction as primarily a removal of that which is not coherent with who we are as wholesome beings capable of lovingkindness, joy, compassion, and serenity. In the Buddhist tradition, such core humanity is known as bodhicitta—enlightened heart-mind—and is seen as our fundamental nature (Vokey, 2011). Inner work, if undertaken seriously, would change the world since what we do to the world and how we affect it has everything to do with the values and beliefs we carry about and enact, and attendant states of being or consciousness that permeate who we are. The old adage about the futility of putting old wine into a new wineskin makes sense. Revolutionaries of the world tend to focus on changing the wineskin, but without the change of fermenting old wine, we are soon back to the same state of sour smell in the new wineskin. Inner work does lead to outer transformation. Changing the world results from changing who you and I are in the being dimension. This kind of change has a deep educational implication. Our group of educators who teach teachers are interested in exploring and magnifying inner work in the field of education.

How do we then engage in inner work? Instead of explaining how this is done, I will share my own style of inner work. For the remainder of this writing, I engage in a series of what I call ‘Reminders’ in which I engage in re-mind-ing, that is, re-conditioning my heart-mind.

Reminder One: Look for the Original Face

Last night at a public panel presentation that featured an impressive cadre of educators, academicians, and spiritual teachers, a debate broke out over human nature. The drift of the debate went like this: In the face of so much violence, suffering, deceit, greed, and environmental degradation worldwide, it is difficult to defend a positive view of human nature—that it is fundamentally or primordially compassionate, wise, generous, and loving. At one point of this dark debate, however, one woman rose up and shared her story of looking into a newborn baby’s eyes and seeing utter openness and vulnerability, and how that moment profoundly changed her view of humanity. It was such a singular and transformative experience for her that it changed her life and career. She came to affirm the possibility that humans were capable of becoming wise, compassionate, and loving-caring. Hearing the story, I was deeply moved, for I was reminded of my own singular experience, and because of this, I could resonate deeply with

what I heard. I too looked into such eyes and met, in astonishment, a completely open gaze: those of my own daughters shortly after they were born. It is experience like this that suggests to us that the lack of compassion, generosity, and love and care in human beings signals that something utterly unfortunate happened to compromise, diminish, or even destroy humanity.

Here is an analogy I would like to present. Newborn children, unless perhaps there is some genetic or structural damage, are capable of learning any of a few hundred human languages. Learning, however, is a process of converting capacity to ability. We may be capable of speaking hundreds of different languages, but in most cases, we end up with one spoken language, unless attempts are made to exercise the capacity. Likewise, we are capable of embodying the deepest and widest possibilities of humanity, such as penetrating wisdom, boundless love and compassion at a cosmic scale, and unsuppressible joy of being. I would like to remind readers that such humanity is our birthright.

Yet just how much of such possibility becomes actualized is mostly a matter of learning. We become what we are taught to be. We can learn to become insecure, fearful, anxious, selfish, mean-spirited, greedy, violent, and cruel; or the opposite; or somewhere in-between for most of us. The ‘lessons’ in this learning come to us by way of how our parents and others close to us treat us with all those countless looks, gestures, talks, whispers, and all manners of interaction, instruction, and injunction, said and unsaid, including how they interpret the world for us, show us in action, and the same is reinforced in school, media, and other public institutions. These lessons are, like the air we breathe, invisible in the sense ‘we see them but we don’t really see them.’ The problem with the human nature debate is the confusion: what we are debating about is not really human nature but human learning. The dark and tragic view of the so-called human nature—that we are selfish, insecure, and even cruel—is more about the dark and tragic view and practice by which we learn, mostly unconsciously, to be such people, and less about who we are in our capacity for humanity. And it might be instructive for us to inquire where this dark view originates and how it is reinforced, and why it is so strong in our culture and civilization. One source—but not the only source—may lie in the Judeo-Christian traditions that have a basis in the metaphor of original sin. This view is deeply entrenched in western civilization. (I am relieved to know that not all Christians believe in Original Sin, and some even believe in Original Blessings!)

It is instructive to remind ourselves that this grim view is not shared by all cultures and traditions. In one tradition that I am familiar with, Buddhism, our natural capacity, known in Zen Buddhism as ‘the original face before our parents were born,’ or more simply, ‘the original face before I was born’ the reality of human nature that precedes and goes beyond one’s particular socio-cultural and psychological construction. As such, the original face reflects unconditioned inner radiance and compassion. Recovering, getting in touch with, and rebirthing this original face are the spiritual work from the Buddhist perspective. The Daoist tradition also has a positive view of human nature/capacity. Using the archetypal metaphors of ‘baby’ and the feminine, Daoism also points to our vast and inherent

capacity for openness, receptivity, and creativity. To repeat, this is our natural birthright. Yet, we so easily lose sight of it.

THE ORIGINAL FACE BEFORE I WAS BORN

I am seated in my cross-legged meditation position. Another radiant day with bright sun and blue sky in Vancouver. Yet my inner sun is dim, and the inner horizons are not vast and brilliantly blue. I feel dull and dispirited. It's time for our morning meditation. Avraham, my partner, strikes the brass bowl three times, each peal penetrating deeper into my consciousness. I am searching for my original face before I was born—my Zen face. How deeply buried it seems to be this morning! Beneath my grimace of anxiety, resentment, worry . . . many thick layers to peel off to allow my original face to shine through. My life memories recent and distant flood in. I am re-living these experiences from my past in the moment. Worries and fear grip me when I think of my precious daughters' and their possible progenies on this rapidly degenerating planet. But how my precious children differ from the street people I run into on my street who too were once newborns! I am aware that I have suddenly widened my focus from my personal family to the family of all beings. This increases my despair and fear. My fear is now changing to hatred and aggression. My mind goes to the familiar place of finding some people or some institutions to blame. Ignorant politicians! Another shift: Anger and resentment seize me as thoughts of a colleague whose ways of relating and treating students caused so much grief and trouble recently. I find my mind getting more and more mired in the negative details and agitating. I feel increasing heaviness and suffocating sense in my chest. Emotionally I feel like I am imploding or exploding. Life becomes unbearable. Suffering! The First Noble Truth that the historical Buddha taught! Here we go! Okay, it's hopeless to control the thickly rising thoughts that cloud my consciousness. I know it's not a matter of will and control. I know what I need to do: I take refuge in each breath. One deep breath. Another deep breath. One more. One more. Long and slow, with each exhalation through my pursed lips. Gradually—how long have I been sitting?—my awareness shifts and lifts. As I take in each life-giving breath, worries depart and fear calms down, even though somewhat reluctantly; anger softens by degrees, and anxiety lifts like a coastal fog. I feel immensely relieved. Gratitude floods in. So does an inner light. It feels as though a warm glowing lamp got turned on from within. At last, I have come to the face that beams in radiance and smiles in bliss. Is this the Original Face? Hello! At the same time, I still feel a lingering measure of anxiety—of losing this peaceful but probably very short-lived moment of grace. Clinging onto the experience of bliss is futile, and precipitates another round of torment. Let go of even bliss. Palms up and hands extended in a gesture of letting go. It is easy to forget that, in the midst of all our daily trials and afflictions, the

original face of humanity is still there, ready to shine through even if only momentarily. What is important is that I get in touch with it every day.

Reminder Two: Affirm the primacy of being over having/doing

I am a product of Korean education that was (and still is) driven by examination hell. I am also a product of a family that survived the brutality of Japanese colonization and the Korean War, both of which took place against the backdrop of worldwide westernization and modernization. As the youngest born arriving after the war, I escaped the direct assault of both the colonization and the war that my family suffered first-hand. But just as second-hand smoke is almost equally damaging, so is the second-hand trauma of growing up in a family (and in a nation) that suffered from an immense amount of brutality, deprivation, and survival stress. The determination to survive and succeed was total and uncompromising in my family. I grew up receiving the message, implicit and explicit, from my family and from the culture, that schooling is the only means to ensure my social and economic survival and leading a decent life. This was not a deceptive message: the Korean social reality confirmed it. Thus I spent my initial and formative 12 years going through the examination hell driven Korean schooling. I knew no life other than studying slavishly hard every day from morning till night, perpetually coping with fear and anxiety associated with doing well in school. The fear of not doing well in tests and examinations, and ending up with poor grades which would take away my chance to enter a high-ranking university, was my constant companion. All social security and mobility in Korea are tied up tightly with the rank-ordered schooling system. Even for girls whose only career in life tended to be mothering, it is important to go to a high-ranking university because that is where they will meet their future husbands who will work for high-ranking corporations.

I am still hearing from my Korean friends, some of whom are veteran schoolteachers and school counsellors in Korea, that the pressure on school children, now as young as four and five in kindergartens, is far worse than what we experienced many decades ago. I get the same message from my current Chinese students who are doing their graduate degrees in my university: young children stay up till 11 o'clock every night studying. My Japanese colleagues tell me essentially the same story holds in Japan as well. Are we doing better in North America? If comparison to Asian countries is what we are after, I would say: Yes. North American students are not quite so chained and pressured. But the idea of putting children through a system of schooling in which they are compelled to learn something or another, compelled to work (study) and produce (test results), and that their self-worth is predominantly tied to school performance and productivity is the same everywhere. Differences between east and west are only a matter of degree. The oppressive patterns are not different here. These practices are normalized, and entrenched, and, we do nothing more than complain about how our curriculum is out-dated or does not yield the result we want, namely making our children more competent and smart, and, more prepared to win the competition for the best job, the best house, the best partner, and so on. What we do not ask is

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what this kind of education is doing to the well-being and humanity of our children, and by extension, to ourselves. What kind of people are we creating, and by extension, what kind of civilization on this planet? I suggest that what we are doing to our children in the name of education is violation of their natural birthright—the right to peace, joy, love, and happiness in the company of all beings on this planet. How can I be making such a case when we, parents and teachers, are so dedicated to our children’s learning, and pour so much resources into education, and try really hard to make learning ‘fun’ and useful? And we educators and parents work really very hard! But slave traders work hard too. So do prison guards.

There is no question about all of us—parents, educators, students, and administrators—all working very hard. Also, there is no question that most of us are well meaning and want to see our children and students succeed and have a good life. However, these are not the issues. The question we need to ask is, what about the sanity and well-being of our children and ourselves?

PLEASE LEAD ME TO THE FIELD OF BEING

Now that my mom is physically no more on this planet, she seems to have taken up a virtual residence within my psyche. Here and there, now and then, often out of nowhere and suddenly, I feel her vivid presence. I have also gotten into the habit of addressing her.

Um-ma (‘Mom’ in Korean), I know you believed that you had no choice but to keep pushing me to study hard and succeed in school. That’s how the Korean social system worked, and still does. You were so proud of me because I was a winner as a student. You were so pleased when I graduated with a doctorate. I fulfilled your dream—the dream of achieving social and material success through schooling, which you yourself could not realize because of your poor peasant background. You worshipped education because you saw, correctly in our case, that it was the only road to social success open to people without the prior advantage of wealth and class. You were right. Now your children, with three PhDs, one MD, and one wealthy businesswoman, are leading materially comfortable and professionally respected lives. You succeeded beyond measure! But there is an insidious cost to such success. Do you know that? Do you know that it’s difficult for me to relax and do nothing, to enjoy just being? Growing up in Korea, and having been raised by you, known to be the Tiger Woman in your younger days, striving and achieving were inscribed into my very nervous system. But, as a teacher, how can I be a model of a balanced and wholesome human being for my students? I’ve got to live the values I ‘preach:’ the primacy of being over having and doing and the primacy of intrinsic valuing over instrumentalism. So, Um-ma, now please help me to learn and grow in the dimension of being. Just as you held my little hand and walked me to school, now lead me to the Field of Being that you must be more familiar with in this next life of yours.

Reminder Three: Awaken and Nurture the Soul

Notwithstanding all the well-meaning people and their hard work, and notwithstanding all the care, generosity, and love being practiced every where, much of the world today in industrial civilization is caught up in conditions of alienation and discontent, and locked into a cycle of insatiable consumerism and ever-grinding production. Commodification has come to define every aspect of life on this planet. The wheel of existence that the Hindus and the Buddhists talk about has turned into the capitalist wheel of production and consumption. At present our civilization seems to have one purpose only: to keep this wheel moving and rolling—relentlessly. There shall be no stop or slow down in the production of consumable goods and services, and to support that, consumption must be kept up. The advertising industry uses most advanced psychologists to study how human desire works and how it can be maximally stimulated for the purpose of thirsting after consumable goods and services. Basically humanity is chained to this psychological machinery of ever-thirsting and never-fulfilled desire, which is then further chain-linked to the work world of service and production. We must ask, then, what kind of people does our systems of education have to generate to sustain this juggernaut? The answer: People who are driven to work all the time, who value themselves and others primarily on the basis of what they earn, gain, achieve, win, produce, and consume. They must not experience, neither readily nor deeply, contentment, vitality, inner peace and joy, and love of what is here and now. In fact, they must constantly feel the gnawing dissatisfaction, unrest, and inadequacy, and a sense of gaping insecurity, anxiety, and emptiness: in short, what Buddhists call ‘*dukkha*’. They must habitually think in terms of ‘only if’ and ‘only when,’ and convert all their current misery and dissatisfaction into dreams of future fulfillment through owning and consuming more and better. They must feel greedy, competitive, and insecure about their entitlement. Fear and anxiety, and inadequacy and insufficiency, greed, envy and resentment, must be their constant companions like their own long shadows. Indeed, these are their psychological shadows. They must always put themselves on the constant verge of time-stress and deadline distress, and worry that they are losing and wasting time, and are not getting enough done. They should see the universe as an indifferent place—the Cartesian ‘mere extension’—and life as fundamentally meaningless, and feel no kinship or inter-being (Nhat Hahn, 1998) with the earth community, for it is out of such meaninglessness and disconnect that the soul dreams a nightmare of consumerism as its fulfillment.

The hemlock for this culture is well distributed throughout educational system and practices. I dare say that our schooling is set up, by and large, to disengage and numb the consciousness of our children with a staggering amount of discursive and abstract information that is pumped into them with the expectation that they will pump it back out. We (generally speaking) overwhelm them with time-pressure that precipitates stress-induced diseases in varying degrees and in various ways. We continuously distract them with externally driven demands and rewards so that they are prevented from being in touch with what is happening within them and around them. They become distanced from their own reality of mind-body-heart-

spirit. ‘Good’ students are those who do not keel over from the stress, learn the routine of information overload and discharging, learn to re-orient themselves from the internally-informed to externally-informed mode of action, and who learn to accept the substitution of reality by various simulacra. And part of this learning to accept substitution is forgetting the blissful experience of being alive, being here-and-now, and replacing it by short-lived and never-fulfilled, therefore, continually pursued desires for pleasures and satisfaction that involve having objects, services, and substances. Recall Socrates’ reminder to his fellow Athenians 2,500 years ago: that they were paying attention to wealth, fame, and status, but neglecting to care about improving or perfecting their soul (as cited in Tredennick, 1954). I think the most lucid way to understand the function of ‘soul’ is that it is the existential core of our selves, like *bodhicitta* (*awakened heart-mind*), that directly and sensitively touches reality, and is capable of joy and happiness, wisdom and compassion, and is full of vitality and creativity. If this capacity to experience bliss is so core to our selves, then the fact that for most of us this capacity has shrivelled or that it has been displaced massively by materialistic consumption, should tell us that there has been some major damage to this capacity.

Good students are those who will become ‘good’ citizens, fit into the triple-formation of industry-military-entertainment complex, and perform endless routine tasks around the clock, whether in offices or in factories, and accept the substitution gratification of small pleasures like exotic vacations and new consumer merchandise. This regimen of substitution gratification starts early: teachers putting stars on our homework, receiving good grades, awards, and privileged treatment, and the emotional and material reward system that our parents mount. By the time we reach young adulthood, we are heavily inducted into the worldview of careerism, consumerism, and workaholism. Senseless? A permanent state of distress from time pressure and other externally imposed demands becomes a sign of normalcy and maturity.

Most parents and teachers mean well, and want their children and students to ‘succeed’ in the world. Herein lies the problem. To succeed in the present civilization, people need to be anxious, insecure, greedy, insatiable, and working and pushing themselves all the time. ‘Teaching’ people to be this way is the hidden curriculum of our school today. Every aspect of school life, including curriculum and pedagogy, is creating, even if unwittingly, people who are slaves to the soul-destroying juggernaut. School children learn early that they need to earn good grades to be respected and approved by their teachers, peers, and even by their parents. They are coaxed, lured, and compelled, to learn stuff for which they have no intrinsic desire or motivation. Before long, their intrinsic agency, such as curiosity, love, and enjoyment, is replaced by external control such as fear of losing or desire for gaining. Soon they speak the language of compulsion and compliance: ‘I had to do . . .’ ‘they made me do . . .’ As well, they speak the language of instrumentalism: Doing something for reasons of money, job, status, approval, and so on. They have lost their soul. Anytime we stress ourselves relentlessly and accumulatively, and live routinely in the zone of ‘fight, flight, or

freeze' responses, sooner than later, we become 'drained' and 'burnt out.' We become soulless.

BOOTSTRAPPING MY SOUL

*It is one thing to discourse about the lamentable state of soul loss in the world, and another to do something about it in one's own being. The task is particularly onerous, for it is a catch-22 situation. One needs a soul to deal with one's soul loss! True. But as long as there is enough soul left to initiate the regeneration, all is not lost. From this hopeful place within me, I ask myself: where do I begin this regeneration of my soul? Who in me answers my question? I ask and then wait . . . for a part of me to show up and answer. I wait. Now I hear: begin where the soul manifests, however fleetingly and seemingly small ways. This is intriguing. It's as though there are more than one part to me. That's good. We need a dialogue! Listen, more's coming . . . The moment my heart delights and my face lights up, at that moment my soul is shining through. Joy, gladness, gratitude, and wonder: these are the signs of my soul's presence. I am learning to notice, recognize, and acknowledge these moments of presence. Indeed, every moment contains such presence. My meditation practice is one way for me to learn to notice these moments and to identify and deconstruct those structures in my consciousness that are in the way of this 'shining through.' According to the eminent Buddhist scholar and teacher, Robert Thurman, "Reality itself is bliss!" (Thurman, 2008, April. *Buddhism as a civilization matrix and the current global crisis*. Public talk, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada) In other words, the possibilities of experiencing joy are infinite. Given such possibilities, how is that that I am—many of us are—so prone to dis-ease and dis-content, in one degree or another, in one form or another? Back to my answer: loss of soul. I am reflecting all the ways throughout my growing-up years at home and at school in which my joy receptor—soul—was dampened, harassed, and badly addled. No one set out to destroy my soul. Of course not. On the contrary, everyone around me was deeply interested and invested in my receiving a good education and becoming successful. But therein lies the problem: my attention and energy—the soul's material—was continually siphoned out of me in the name of education. I could not attend to, and give birth to, each moment's pregnant possibility of joy and wonder because I was required to be mostly elsewhere, not where I wanted and needed to be: beside me, inside me, with me, uninterrupted, unobstructed—fully present. What does being fully present feel like? A sudden flashback from my childhood—I am six or seven—I am little Heesoon and I am crouching down for a long spell of time in the backyard of my house by a fist-sized puddle hole created by the rain dripping down from the roof's gutter. All the dirt is washed away, and only pebbles remain in the water-filled hole. It is a miniature tidal pool. I do not know how many countless hours I've spent gazing into the pool, sometime introducing new pebbles and beads I found,*

and raptly watching the ring of ripples when rain drops fall. It is totally magical to me, and I am in another world—in my own matrix, another state of consciousness—in bliss. I now know the name of such state: contemplative consciousness. Such consciousness occurs, as in my example from childhood, naturally and spontaneously. Sooner or later, most children get trained out of it more or less. Finding my way back into it is my idea of bootstrapping the soul.

Reminder Four: Play not Panic

In states of extreme stress, people go into panic. They lose all sense of perspective and bearing, and start to run around senselessly. My observations of the world we live in today convince me that collectively our civilization has reached a state of panic. We have lost the internal guidance system that would tell us when to slow down, rest, sleep, play, contemplate, and recharge. Without such internal guidance, we run ourselves down until we collapse. An animal seized by panic will run around directionless, in fact, often right into the open jaws of a predator. It has lost its ability to see what's going on in the environment. It literally loses sight of what is right before it. It is experiencing tunnel vision. Here is a case narrative I read (Fehmi & Robbins, 2007): a child who lived in terror of his father's violent abuse and neglect was brought to a specialist. The child was lagging far behind in reading competency and suffering from severe anxiety. The specialist found out, through tests and talking to the child, that when he reads, his field of vision narrows to the point that he can only see one letter at a time! Fortunately, the attention specialist who figured out what was going on with this child (a child suffering from 'reading trauma'!) was able to 'teach' the child to bring about sufficient relaxation in himself that his vision widened to include words, and make sense of them in the context of sentences and paragraphs. This is a remarkable story, indeed, and a teaching story for me. There is a whole civilizational implication here. A society hooked on speed and short-term solutions to everything, and unable to look beyond the usual three-year planning (compared to, say, seven generations) for consequences of our action, looks to me like one driven by panic and terror. We are not able to 'read' the book of life. Our reading comprehension of the world is extremely constricted. Evidence of this lies in the way we go on abusing the planet and assaulting human communities. The business-as-usual mannerism is not anything 'cool', but panicking animals' stunned response to circumstances that are incomprehensible and deeply threatening. How do we bring about sufficient relaxation to our whole being so that we can see beyond our nose, and all the immediate busy tasks that consume so much of our waking hours? This is a civilizational question in that the survival and sustainability of the whole civilization (and its responsibility to the biosphere as a whole) crucially depends on the shift in our consciousness from panic to mindfulness or reflective awareness.

When our vision is tightly constricted, we lose the capacity for breadth in our field of vision. We see only one thing and lose all sight of the background. We are not in the field. We only see objects in front of our nose, and at worst, not even the

whole object. When our being is so constricted, we lose the field of play, and we don't know the space in which we can make our movements and moves. We cannot play. Not even the game of chase and chased. We freeze.

Learning and panic are antithetical. No learning can happen when learners are unable to stay in a Field of Being and make creative moves, even including unlearning. For new learning to take place, unlearning old patterns (habits) of perception, interpretation, and how-to's are necessary. A panic-driven animal is unable to be creative. It only repeats what it knows, movement after movement, even if these are fancy and complex movements. It may move, but has no clear sense of directions based on the perception of reality: what is happening in its environment. For sure, the more stressful I perceive and experience a circumstance to be, the more likely I am to lose my consciousness and freedom of choice, and the more likely I am to fall back into stereotyped, deeply inscribed, archaic patterns of reaction. Civilizationally we seem to be permanently gripped in a state of panic. It is not that there is no guidance about the directions we need to take. What is disordering the planet and ailing the hearts and minds of people has been said and heard over and over again. But this knowledge is not being acted upon in any coherent and ordered way. When a person is in a state of panic, telling, shouting, which direction to turn and run to falls on a deaf ear. He cannot make sense of what he hears. So he runs around until no more running can happen: exhaustion and/or death are the outcomes. It's probably fair to say that we have become numbed to these warnings by over-exposure to repetitious and increasingly shrill warnings of doom. Panic has become a way of life. Is there a sense that we are educating people to be in a chronic and unrecognized state of panic? Perhaps it is fair to say that we have all been pushed and stretched so far that we don't even feel the panic anymore. Getting back in touch with this feeling would be a move, albeit an unpleasant one, in the right direction.

It seems the academy is prone to this dis-ease. A colleague in my university once told me that she saw the world in colour again once she received tenure! This story in its own way is as drastic and distressing as the story of the little boy who was unable to read and make sense of what he reads. The ill-logic is the same. Anytime we stress ourselves relentlessly and accumulatively, we become fish without water, birds without air, wizards drained of wizardry.

LEARNING TO PLAY

I sit facing my therapist. She hands me a basket of colourful hand-dyed yarn balls. She suggests to me that I can put the strings around my chair in any way and manner I feel like. She called it putting the boundary around me. At first I misunderstand her meaning. I don't want boundaries—they would feel imprisoning to me! After some hands-on experience with the exercise, and getting feedback from my therapist on what my experiences are with this exercise, I come to the understanding that the boundary is really about demarcating the space within which I would feel safe and secure to play. It is

like setting up a playpen for myself. I am marking out my space of play—space in which I can express my creativity and be playful.

I began my work with this therapist trained in body-oriented psychotherapy to address my tension and stress problems. When I experience tension and stress, there is this sense of reality pressing right into my face, and there is literally little room to move or breathe. Mentally I thrash around when that happens. I feel trapped. A sense of panic hits me, and the first thing I notice is how my peripheral vision has diminished. So does the ability to see distance. Perspective disappears. A sense of flatness comes over me. And I am not amusing to anyone, including myself. Humour has departed. Humourless, witless, smile-less. In short, I am no more homo ludens (human the player); I am homo panikos (human the panic-stricken). I am really sad.

What was the origin and history of my becoming a homo panikos? I cannot date it to the first instance, but I am familiar with the tension and stress that I endured throughout my schooling years and probably earlier. Endless and countless tests and exams: accumulation of deep psychological stress. On the days that I was not too well prepared to write my exams, I would suffer from particular tension and stress, and I kept thinking that hell must be just like this. (Now I know that humans do worse things to themselves and to each other.) We make our children go through experiences like this all in the name of 'for your own good.' There is always some moral justification for torture. Little tortures lead to unimaginably ugly tortures. I don't think I can ever be a schoolteacher for young children. No amount of 'it's for your own good' can convince my mind or my body to carry out any educational measures that will inflict stress, pain, and harm, and drive children to a state of panic, however minor. How can we justify an education that induces panic? The only justifiable education is one that teaches students to create a greater and greater space of play where they can do the interpretive dance with and for life. The greater the space of play, the greater the scope and intensity of creativity.

I have become a teacher of teachers. Leading education out of panic and into play will be my life mission. But for me to do this, I must be simultaneously working on healing my own panic-driven soul, and this will allow transformation of my panic into play. Do I hear the sound of a flute? May I dance?

Dance when you're broken open.

Dance when you've torn the bandage off.

Dance in the middle of fighting.

Dance in your blood.

Dance when you're perfectly free.

Struck, the dancer hears a tambourine inside her,

*like a wave that crests into foam at the very top,
 Begins.
 Maybe you don't hear that tambourine,
 or the tree leaves clapping time.
 Close the ears on your head,
 that listen mostly to lies and cynical jokes.
 There are other things to see, and hear.
 Music. Dance.
 A brilliant city inside your soul!
 (Rumi, as cited in Barks, 2004, p. 281)*

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