

## The Primacy of Consciousness in Philosophy: A Role for Contemplative Practices in Education

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### < ABSTRACT >

In this paper, we make the case that the purview of philosophizing in philosophy of education needs to extend beyond the rational discursive practices, such as, notably conceptual analysis and argumentation, and to include non-discursive practices that would yield epistemic and ontic forms of knowledge that are of educational value to us. We base this case-making on the primacy of states of consciousness thesis that shows the contingency relationship between knowledge production and states of consciousness. Using Zen philosophy of nondualism and practice of nondual experience as a choice example, we argue that inclusion of such non-rational and non-discursive philosophies in the purview of philosophy of education would allow us to effectively participate in an important educational project of cultivating humanity imbued with extraordinary degrees of compassion, wisdom, generosity, and courage, so needed for today's troubled world.

Key Words: pluralism, Non-discursive philosophy, Asian philosophy, contemplative practice, states of consciousness.

### I. PREAMBLE

In his provocative essay, *Can Western Philosophers Understand Asian Philosophies*, Roger Walsh (1992) recounts the story of encounter between Alexander the Great and Indian rishis some 2,300 years ago. As we know, Alexander the Great had Aristotle as his teacher, and having studied with Aristotle, Alexander prided himself as something of a real

philosopher. When he and his generals arrived in the Indus Valley, they were keen to meet these Indian philosophers and engage in philosophical dialogue and debate. That's what philosophers do: dialogue and debate. Their keenness was, however, badly blunted when their request to hold a philosophical discourse was refused by the rishis on the ground that these Greeks were unlikely candidate(s) for philosophy because they had not learnt to "sit peacefully on broiling rock" (Walsh, 1992: 282). We can well imagine dumbfounded expressions on the Greeks. What would "sitting on broiling rock" have to do with the practice of philosophy? And most explicitly, philosophy as a pursuit of rationality *par excellence* would have to be furthest away from this case of extreme irrationalism, wouldn't it? Or are we missing something crucial here?

In this essay, we wish to argue that the practice of philosophy can be multifold and can go beyond discursive forms of conceptual analysis to include non-discursive forms of philosophical practice. We shall begin with a plea for pluralism, and follow this with an outline of an alternate form of philosophical practice based in subjective and intersubjective experience aimed at alternating states of consciousness in the attempts to develop certain kinds of knowledge. We then consider the implications of such experience and efforts in the contexts of education, and conclude that the work of consciousness represents legitimate and necessary educational work.

## II. REVISIONING PHILOSOPHY: A PLURALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Walsh's essay appears as part of a collection of essays edited by James Ogilvy (1992) and published under the title: *Revisioning Philosophy*. As the title suggests, this volume assembled a group of renegade academic philosophers and scientists<sup>1)</sup>—well established and well respected in the ir academic circles—who were operating on the margins of main stream Anglo-American analytic philosophy and attempting to move beyond the pur views

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1) Contributors' list includes names such as Robert C. Solomon, Francisco Varela, Hubert Dreyfus, Huston Smith, and Raimundo Panikkar.

of analytic philosophy by confronting its assumptions and biases, and getting ideas from other “alternative” and indigenous philosophical paradigms and epistemologies.

The first point Walsh makes in his essay is that there are many different paradigms of philosophy—analytic philosophy being only one of many—and that ancient Greek originated Western philosophy with its central discursive practice of dialogue and debate is not a philosophical *lingua franca*. To think that these other philosophical systems that centralize contemplative practices as ‘bizarre’ and ‘crazy’, and hence do not merit to be called ‘philosophy’ by “our” standard is, of course, to utterly expose one’s narrow mindedness, not to mention arrogance. As a way of illustration, we would like to share some encounter stories of our own:

*Heesoon:* Having been trained as an analytic philosopher in a North American Philosophy Department, I can illustrate many personal stories of such insularity. I recall one of my philosophy professors, highly respected in the field of continental philosophy, making fun of the famous Zen koan of one hand clapping. Putting up his right hand, he bent and folded down his hand in half presumably to say something like, “What’s the fuss? What a dumb question!” He would have never considered a koan as a philosophical methodology. Another time, I tried to write a paper that compared Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to Laozi’s *Daodejing*, but my professor wouldn’t hear of it, even taking offence that I was comparing a rigorous philosophical work with some spiritualist poetry.

*Charles:* I am currently teaching a group of students from China who are taking a Master’s program in my university. I had a conversation with one student about the self, and she informed me that her sense of self is not confined to a rigid identification with her body and localized to her own thoughts and perspectives. She feels a strong sense of identification with her surrounding communities—family, close friends and neighbors, organizations of which she is a part—and noted that this sense of identification arose out of the Confucian teachings she has been exposed to most of her life as part of Chinese culture and, as well, from the contemplative and other spiritual practices which she has practiced, which offered her a phenomenological confirmation of those teachings. Listening to her, I

thought it a sorely missed opportunity for rich cross- and intercultural inquires in education: in most of our graduate courses, we still only bring in the Western philosophical works for our students' readings. And ours is a cosmopolitan city with a majority population of Asian immigrants and their progenies, and a large number of international students.

In the academy today, this ethnocentric situation has changed somewhat but unhappily, not enough, even though postmodern, poststructuralist, and critical perspectives have since become more dominant. We have a long way to go.<sup>2)</sup> 'Philosophy' is still synonymous with 'western philosophy'. The same goes for philosophy of education. While we may be much more sensitive to eurocentric issues today and refrain from making politically incorrect comments that would get us into trouble, the very fact that neither Philosophy nor Philosophy of Education show much interest in other philosophical paradigms, and still keeps their programs and discourses confined to European and Anglo-American philosophical works is surely indicative of insularity and perhaps some kind of understated arrogance. In fact, this situation of eurocentrism in Philosophy of Education was painfully visible at an *international* philosophy of education conference held in Japan some years ago on the theme of education and multicultural understanding. It turned out there was hardly anyone (possibly except one panel presentation that was rather poorly attended) who talked seriously about non-Western philosophies! It was also apparent that the pride of scholarship for our hosting Japanese philosophers of education lay in their knowledge of Western philosophy.

Please do not misunderstand us. We are not at all implying that just because they are Japanese, they *should* know their own Asian philosophy, for example, Zen Buddhism, more and better than Western philosophy. What we are disturbed by is the apparent privileging of the western philosophy over non-western philosophies and their attendant practices, Asian philosophies included. Such privileging is, we suggest, precisely the legacy of colonialism, and we the authors of this paper would contend that this legacy is very much alive today in Philosophy of Education. In fact, the veritable sign of colonial subjectivity is that the

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2) Along the way, we find some delightful exceptions. See, for example, Deborah Orr's (2007) philosophical work, *Important to Education*, which compares and integrates the Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna's work and Wittgenstein's.

colonized firmly believe that Western ideas and philosophy are superior to non-Western ones. The conspicuous absence of Asian and other non-Western philosophies at the conference in Japan has us wondering if what we are seeing is not a sign of colonial legacy. Again, we are not interested in reversing the power relation here and making non-Western philosophies come out superior to Western philosophy. That would be yet another centricism—a reverse kind. We are not interested in centricism at all. Nor are we suggesting that non-Western philosophies and practices be exempt from standards of rigor. Our interest is pluralism and interculturalism with respect to philosophical systems or paradigms. We are not denying that there has been a rich interchange of philosophical ideas between East and West. Rather, what concerns us is the insufficiency of attention on this exchange and the lack of focused study of Asian philosophies in philosophy of education in the West. How often, for example, in discussions of Heidegger's concept of *dasein*, do we hear about its comparisons to Zen Buddhism (Steffney, 1977; May, 1989)? In our North American philosophy of education context, we have not heard such comparative discussions much at all.

It is not likely that our academic colleagues today in this global age would seriously oppose our promotion of inclusion, pluralism, and the like. As an ideological stance, such promotion receives an almost unquestioned support. We contend, however, that it is not enough to officially support pluralism merely intellectually. Pluralism is to be *practiced*. Just as bilingualism means that people speak two languages, and polyglot means that people speak many languages, as pluralists, we need to be able to entertain and practice diverse worldviews and ways of being human. We the authors of this paper are interested in promoting philosophers of education in the world becoming pluralistic and intercultural with respect to different systems of thought or philosophies (Panikkar, 1992). But we will go nowhere with such promotion so long as philosophy is singularly identified with the western paradigm of discursive rationalistic philosophy, such as Anglo-American analytic philosophy. As illustrated by Walsh's encounter story at the beginning of this paper, Western philosophizing is seemingly permanently located, even stuck, in one track modality of discursive or conceptual analysis. Here is Walsh (1992: 283) again:

. . . Western philosophy usually assumes that conceptual analysis in and of itself is the royal road to philosophical understanding. This analysis is meant to lead to rational, verbal and publishable products and nonrational, nonverbal intuitions are not the coin of the Western philosophical realm.

Again, the point we want to make is not that there is something inherently wrong with conceptual analysis, nor whether conceptual analysis should be part of doing philosophy. Of course, conceptual analysis is an important philosophical viewpoint and tool. We embrace pluralism, and that includes conceptual analysis. Rather, the case we want to make is that we should not define what philosophy is or what it is to do philosophy in education *exclusively* or even primarily with this particular paradigm. As well, while we are not saying that all western philosophical practice is solely analytical, we would suggest that even within postmodernism and critical theory there are still tendencies to focus on conceptual analysis—the engagements of reason and reason alone in dialectical games—and avoid the sometimes painful work that a focus on mindful awareness calls for. Robert Hattam, for example, points out that Buddhism has developed a pronounced critical theory of liberation, but that it is one whose struggles begin with the inner work of consciousness in developing equanimity and compassion: “I propose that Buddhism, and especially its meditation practices, be read as ‘technologies of self’ . . . that deconstructs a reified self, and enables the development of an altruistic mind as a basis for living an ethico-political life in an unjust world” (Hattam, 2004: 110).<sup>3)</sup> There is more to philosophy and doing philosophy than the singularity of the analytic, rational, logical, and conceptual. But what more is there in the way of epistemologies and ontologies? And why should knowing and doing of the “more” matter to our philosophers in education?

### III. EPISTEMOLOGY AS ALTERING CONSCIOUSNESS

What more there is to practicing philosophy cannot be found and really understood without our selves sitting (or standing or moving) on broiling rock (or chair or mat or bare

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3) Hattam cites Foucault’s “technologies of the self,” a concept which Foucault developed from his reading of Perre Hadot’s (1995) work (see below).

earth) or something equivalent as a practice. Again, we can talk about what we could and would find if we were to take up the practice, but *talking about something is not the same as experiencing it first-hand, non-discursively*. What we are arguing for is inviting in and including non-discursive practices that aim to alter consciousness as legitimate philosophical activity, in the way of epistemology, in order to gain certain kinds of knowledge or understanding that cannot be had through conceptual analysis. For example, Buddhism talks about *bodhicitta*: enlightened mind-heart that is the source of compassion and wisdom. The reality of *bodhicitta* can only be confirmed through experiencing it, and its experience requires us to get out of the ordinary dualistic states of consciousness. Sitting meditation as in *zazen* or *vipassana* or yogic *samyama* is a personally important example for the authors of this paper in establishing the view that many non-discursive practices yield philosophically important form of knowledge<sup>4)</sup> and that, as such, these and other practices need to be considered as legitimate philosophical methods, and in sights produced by such methods (e.g., *bodhicitta*), legitimate philosophical knowledge.

Pierre Hadot argues that for the ancient Greeks—the Platonists, Stoics, Epicureans, for example—the work of philosophy was a “way of life” dedicated to a progression toward the “ideal state of wisdom” (Hadot, 1995: 59). For all these schools, the practice of the “spiritual exercises” of philosophy, such as self-control and meditation, involved an “attentive concentration on the present moment in order to enjoy it or live it in full consciousness” (ibid.). Thus, for Plotinus, the aim is to experience in consciousness the transcendence of the soul and one’s union with that transcendence. Hadot cites the Neo-Platonist Porphyry: “Beatific contemplation does not consist of the accumulation of arguments or a storehouse of learned knowledge, but in us theory must become nature and life itself” (ibid.).

Again, we turn to Walsh’s paper. According to Walsh, mainstream Western philosophy has paid little attention to various states of consciousness—differing and distinct states of

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4) An important example for us is the embodied knowledge of ‘intrinsic goodness’, known in the Buddhist tradition as ‘*bodhicitta*’. See Daniel Vokey’s (2009) critique of MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics for failing to provide an adequate description of experiential and embodied knowledge of intrinsic goodness. This failure is seen as due to the intellectualist philosophy’s limitation in not recognizing non-discursive practices, such as meditations in Buddhist traditions, which would yield the embodied philosophical knowledge of intrinsic goodness.

awareness dominated by particular ways of knowing; for example, our ordinary consciousness is dominated by knowledge generated through the senses and empiricism and rationality—and their role in producing different kinds of knowledge, basically equating knowledge with propositionally stated beliefs and values generated in one type of consciousness, namely the “ordinary state of consciousness” that characterizes much of our waking life of busily engaging in transactions with the world. This ordinary state of consciousness is also characteristically: a) dualistic in that it sees the world in terms of the exclusive binary of self and not-self, subject and object, or knower and the known; b) related to the above, empiricist in that it sees the world in categorically separate terms of what is outside the self—the objective—and what is inside the self—the subjective; and c) atomistic and linear in that the world comes in discrete parts that coordinate in the manner of linear causality. By the same token, the so-called

‘non-rational’ states of consciousness, such as *Zen*, are characterized by nonduality, non-linearity, synchronicity, and simultaneity.

What is important for us to note here is that we usually cannot get into these non-ordinary states of consciousness by means of the “ordinary” philosophical methods, such as conceptual analysis and logical thinking. And—this is a crucial point for us—what we will refer to as non-ordinary states of consciousness allow us to see and understand the world in ways that are not usually afforded by the ordinary states of consciousness tethered to various forms of conceptual analysis that are dominated by rational processes. Non-linear and non-dualistic understanding and perceptions of the world, which yield a certain kind of specialized knowledge, are not accessible by linear and discursive consciousnesses. What this view points to is a thesis to be found in consciousness studies, namely that knowledge is specific to states of consciousness (Tart, 1969, 2001).

Walsh advances the thesis of *the primacy of consciousness* in knowledge production by enlisting the research in consciousness studies—specifically, Charles Tart’s (1969) research concerning “state-specificity” that says: “... certain capacities such as learning, memory and understanding that occur in one state of consciousness may be specific and/or tied to that state and show limited transfer to and accessibility in other states” (cited in Walsh, 1982: 285). Similarly, Ken Wilber (1999) proposes a spectrum of ways of knowing based on states



of consciousness: empiricism, rationalism, and intuition, each of which has its own injunctions and confirmations.

There are experiences that take us right out of the ordinary dualistic consciousness that categorically separates self from non-self, and the knower and the known: non-dualistic, unitive, and typically timeless experiences that profoundly change, even if just for a moment, our perception and understanding of who we are. In Eastern traditions, such experience is known as awakening (*bodhi* or *satori*). Perceptions, views, and understanding of the world, people, situations, and so on, that come out of *bodhi* state of consciousness look quite different from those that come out of dualistic, linear, and ego-bound consciousness.<sup>5)</sup>

We want to consolidate the thesis that knowledge (what we see, understand, know) is contingent upon states of consciousness. If A is contingent upon B, then changing B changes A. On the other hand, if B is not contingent upon A, then changing A does not necessarily change B. For the present discussion, A is 'knowledge' and B is 'states of consciousness.' According to Tart (1969, 2001), Walsh (1982) and Wilber (1999), our claims of knowledge are contingent upon states of consciousness. This is a general claim. More specifically, they claim that different states of consciousness are associated with different kinds of knowledge claims. Moreover, knowledge claims made in one kind of consciousness states are not accessible, let alone verifiable, from another kind of consciousness, a point that Wilber (1999) repeatedly stresses. For example, if one were to enter a nondualistic state of consciousness, such as *Zen*, and then to experience no separation between the seeing subjectivity that one normally calls 'myself' and the seen that we normally call the object, thus developing an insight and intuitive understanding about the fundamental interdependence and interpenetration (*pratītyasamutpāda*), then, according to the Tart-Walsh-Wilber thesis, one's knowledge claims embedded in one's non-dual experience are not open to evaluations and criticisms by those who are not having or have not had similar non-dual experiences.

This is exactly the point that the rishis in the Indus Valleys were making 2300 years ago to the Greek philosophers. Dialogue is not a consciousness-neutral activity that enables the

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5) Just how different are these enlightened perceptions from the ordinary? Zen literature is filled with accounts, in prose and poetry, that attempt to convey that what is ultimately ineffable (language can only invoke and evoke experience) and strange (zen experiences confound the rational understanding).

interlocutors to talk about “anything and everything under the sun.” Philosophers typically think that they have the license, presumably by virtue of their sharply trained rational-logical ability to tackle and pull apart any idea, theory, and arguments, to talk about everything and anything. But the question of legitimate knowledge is not a matter of how well we can dissect and argue about ideas; it is whether we have undergone the apropos experiences rooted in states of consciousness.

If and when we accept this thesis, we will then need to think about how we would *do* education differently from the prevailing discursivity-dominated ways of abstract knowledge and information transmission. Are we now willing to consider that different forms of knowledge can be generated in and through different states of consciousness? We would have to think of curriculum creation and pedagogy primarily in terms of embodied experiential practices, including the non-discursive, and help to engender such experiences in students that will in turn yield relevant knowledge. Teaching will have to be a lot more hands-on, mentoring-based, and guided by apprenticeship. What this also means is that intersubjective relationship between teachers and students, as well among students, becomes the matrix out of which any teaching and learning materialize. However, this intersubjective relationship is now itself altered by our efforts at individually and collectively affecting consciousness through efforts such as contemplative practice.

#### IV. CONSCIOUSNESS FOR INNER AND OUTER BALANCE

We would now like to consider the implications of our previous suggestions about the primacy of consciousness and practice in the exigent context of education. Today the human presence on this blue planet has become profoundly problematic. We are not only threatening our own existence but also that of all other sentient beings. While we require technological solutions, they are not enough as our problems have their origin in the manner of our presence on the planet. Environmental educators such as Neil Evernden (1993), David Jardine (1998), David Orr (2004), and E. F. Schumacher (1989) have unequivocally stated that our ecological problems originate from the way we think, see, feel, and relate to and act towards

the world: in short, with our very consciousness. Nel Noddings (2008) asserts that peace education begins with efforts to understand the self and affect changes in the consciousness of the self vis-à-vis others; Karen Armstrong (2010) makes a similar point with regard to the development of compassion. This radical suggestion regarding the need to work with consciousness—radical only because it flies against the conventional aims of education—is not something new. On the contrary, many, perhaps all, of our wisdom traditions that trace their origins back to the axial age (Armstrong, 2006) had this same understanding that the heart of education is to change our consciousness and embody the ideal humanity filled with wisdom and compassion, and associated with or derived from virtues.

To put it another, more positive way, as soon as education acknowledges that whatever it does and whatever form it takes affect and shape human consciousness, and that therefore it needs to prioritize the development of consciousness over the creation of knowledge and skills, it can begin to focus on nurturing humanity and finding ways to cultivate wisdom and compassion. The most urgent and absolutely essential question that we as educators need to work with today in the face of stupendous environmental and societal challenges is how we may educate people to embody the consciousness of wisdom and compassion, generosity, existential ease, containment and contentment, and courage. Lacking such consciousness, we perpetuate and accelerate the present conditions of damage and suffering. Methodologies such as contemplative practice can play a part in this nurturance of humanity and compassion.

## V. SITTING ON THE ROCK AS OUR REQUIRED EDUCATIONAL WORK

We started out this paper with what may have appeared to be a rather conventional criticism of Euro- or Western-centrism in Anglo-American philosophy of education. We argued that in limiting the purview of philosophy of education to the rationalist enterprise, equating doing philosophy with discursive practices such as conceptual analysis and argumentation, or even dialogue, we commit eurocentrism, despite the usual loudly voiced

rhetoric of embracing pluralism that we hear in our own field. But we had an additional intent that is really the heart of the matter in this paper. Limiting philosophy to exclusively or even predominantly to discursive practices of conceptual analysis and argumentation deprives ourselves of learning from and working with those world philosophies that acknowledge the primacy of consciousness in learning and knowledge acquisition and work directly with generating and shaping certain modes of consciousness. Examples of such philosophies are Buddhist and Daoist philosophies that are of Asian origins. In these philosophies, there is the recognition that what we know and how we know are dependent upon the states of being (consciousness) that we inhabit. By the same token, how we act and relate to the world, then, ultimately depends on our states of being. Hence, these philosophies are practical vehicles by which we change our states of being from states of ignorance, greed, and hatred, and all other associated or resultant unwholesome states, to those of wisdom, compassion, generosity, courage, and peaceableness.

Philosophies associated with these wisdom traditions are foremost practice-based, and therefore experiential. Although discursive knowledge is valued for helping us to orient towards the required practice that changes our consciousness, it is not the independent or ultimate objective of learning. Education in the wisdom tradition ultimately comes down to the question of how well we live with ourselves and with the environment (Smith, 1999). We need to enlarge our scope of understanding and practice as for what it is to do philosophy and to apply philosophy to education: learning or adopting from those world philosophies that prioritize consciousness cultivation and centralize consciousness-shaping practices. We need philosophy that orients and guides us to actually cultivate those states of consciousness that will manifest actions of wisdom and compassion, generosity and peaceableness.

We are cognizant of the curricular and pedagogical challenges, but both of us have engaged with those challenges, engaging in the teaching of philosophy of education, curriculum theory, and introductory courses in education in which we engage with consciousness and how it influences our relations with others and the world (Bai, Cohen, Culham, Park, Rabi, Scott, & Tait, under review; Bai, Scott, Donald, 2009; Scott, 2010). We the authors work with contemplative practices that are both solitary and relational. In emphasizing consciousness, practice, and experience as being educationally most relevant and

critical, we suggest that education is not about teachers imposing stuffs to learn onto students, making them work hard to absorb them. It is about students wanting to learn (not for extrinsic reasons only), and taking the responsibility of working with their own consciousness, in the company of each other who are engaged in the same, and investigating, analyzing, and working with their experience. We become increasingly more fully developed authorities as we become more intimately aware and knowledgeable of what happens in our consciousness (and unconsciousness), working with our experiences to generate more and deeper insight, wisdom, and virtue (Bai, 2006). We come to understand and work with our own subjectivity, expanding our sense and understanding of self, and moving into the realm of the intersubjective. Teachers who share similar life passions and concerns, and who have taken up the practices that enable them to indwell experiences conducive to the identified learning objectives, are the guides in students' learning process. We focus on how to become wise, compassionate, generous, and courageous to the degrees and ways that would support and sustain life on the planet earth.

This, then, is our plea: Let us embrace philosophies from many of the world traditions that will change our consciousness to one that can protect, nurture, and sustain all life on earth. While literally sitting on broiling rock may not be a necessity, some forms of contemplative practices, whether sitting or walking or standing, that have us to carefully watch, examine, and work with our consciousness would be an essential aspect of our new curriculum. Living in a pluralistic world as we do today, we have many different rocks to try sitting on, so to speak, for cultivating inner and outer balance, peace, and harmony. For example, to North Americans, the example of First Nations philosophies would be a particularly pertinent one. So is Zen philosophy.

The question clear, the answer deep,  
Each particle, each instant a reality,  
A bird call shrills through mountain dawn:  
Look where the old master sits, a rock, in Zen.  
Sodo (1841-1920) (Stryk & Ikemoto, 1977: 82)

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국문초록

## 철학에 있어서 의식의 중요성: 교육적 성찰 실천의 역할

배희순(사이먼 프레이저 대학교)

찰스 스콧(사이먼 프레이저 대학교)

이 연구는 교육철학의 철학적 실천이 개념분석 및 논증과 같은 합리적 추론의 실천을 넘어서, 우리에게 교육적 가치를 부여하는 인식론적이고 존재론적인 지식의 형식을 낳는 비추론적 실천을 포함하는 사례를 제안한다. 이 연구는 지식 생산과 의식 상태 사이의 우발적 관계를 보여주는 의식 상태의 중요성 이론에 근거하여 이 사례를 제시한다.

하나의 사례로, 비이원론의 선(Zen) 철학과 비이원적인 경험의 실재를 사용함으로써, 이 연구는 교육철학의 영역에서 이러한 비합리적이고 비추론적인 철학이 오늘날의 험난한 세계에 필요한 공감, 지혜, 관용, 용기의 비범함을 가진 인간성을 함양하는 중요한 교육적 과업에 효과적으로 참여하도록 유도할 수 있음을 주장한다.

주제어: 복수주의, 비추론적 철학, 아시아 철학, 성찰의 실천, 의식 상태