

The Buddha's Five Remembrances: Fuel for Contemplative Education

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Abstract

Higher education meets ancient wisdom as the author reflects on implications for the present-day learning environment. The Buddha's Five Remembrances are explored as an underlying source of motivation for teaching with presence and purpose.

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All throughout Buddhist traditions are myriad illustrations, stories, and teachings that point to impermanence and mindful awareness of the present moment. Perhaps nowhere are these concepts more strikingly presented than in the Buddha's Five Remembrances, which highlight our essential nature as temporary beings in a temporary world.

While there are, of course, many translations, a common interpretation of the Five Remembrances, found in the Upajjhatthana Sutta, are as follows:

- I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape from aging.
- I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.
- I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
- All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
- My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my

actions. They are the ground upon which I stand.

I find myself interpreting these realizations as motivation for presence and perspective in my approach to contemplative education. After all, we are not here just to impart information or teach memorization of facts, but to teach aliveness. Contemplative education has been described as pedagogical practices aimed at cultivating mindful awareness, learning, personal choice, and growth, and in a context that promotes caring for others (Roeser & Peck, 2009). It is a philosophical approach to higher education that emphasizes experiential learning and introspection. Ultimately, contemplative education calls on us to support social engagement, critical thinking, and self-discovery (Lewis, 2006).

So, what has any of this got to do with the Five Remembrances? For me, they serve as a kind of ballast for standing in a place of stability and clear perspective. There is nothing instructional about them, just more fingers pointing to the moon. This is not so unlike the overarching contemplative approaches to

teaching and learning. It begins within. In the end, what is the purpose of this whole educational endeavor anyway? How might we arrive as our fullest, most present and attentive selves? What will propel and sustain our best of intentions for the benefit of others? I read the Five Remembrances, not so much as guidance but as a kind of call and response. Here's the truth - do with it as you will. Simply by realizing anew the precious uncertainty of the moment, any moment, we become part of cultivating a sense of engaged immediacy in the learning environment. Just this, just now.

Beyond the trappings of rubrics, proper citations, attendance policies, and due dates, what is the barest, most fundamental purpose of this work? For me, it can often be distilled as "How can I help?" As both an educator and lifelong learner, I have come to appreciate searching and serving within the space of not-knowing, of great doubt. The Five Remembrances are an invitation to a life of purpose, all of it against the backdrop of mystery, the impossible miracle of consciousness itself. Amid the bewilderment of our very existence, and the infinite unknowns that accompany it, are these incontrovertible facts: We age, become sick, and die. Loss happens continually along the way. Nothing is truly ours to keep; we are the imprint of our actions.

To reflect even for a moment on such pointed realities is to strip away all pretenses. It is to unearth and open the guiding question of, "What is this?" Contemplative education involves being authentically engaged, awake, and welcoming of inquiry. The Five Remembrances may provide a complementary motivation for tending to what's now, what's here. What better time and place for discovery?

self-regulated learning in contemplative perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, 44, 119-136.

Author Acknowledgement

Dr. Troy Gregorino is an educator and licensed mental health counselor who has taught in areas ranging from addiction studies for undergraduates to group counseling at the graduate level. Some of his most recent teaching experience is with Naropa University's Mindfulness-Based Transpersonal Counseling program. He enjoys encouraging and challenging students through reflective, experiential learning.

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