

# *Contemplation as a Quintessential Educational Project for our Times*

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## **Abstract**

The authors mount an argument in which an etiological link is made between contemporary existential malaise and marginalization of human subjectivity/intersubjectivity and prioritization of the modernist science-driven value of objectivity. We make a case that the failure to validate the inherent value of subjectivity in education has created an imbalanced, incomplete approach to education, resulting in the tide of loneliness, anomie, and disconnection washing over so many people today, especially young people. Going beyond the etiological argument, this work then showcases an educational program that honors and centralizes the subjective and intersubjective, powered by contemplative practices. Contemplative education seeks to correct that imbalance and provides students with a balanced and grounded base from which to grow. The four legs of the stool—mind, body, spirit, and heart—are cultivated and valued as equally important parts of the whole experience of living and learning.

**Keywords:** *contemplation, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, contemplative education, awareness, lines of development, arts-based research, narrative, contemplative writing, graduate contemplative education program, awareness journal, iChange project*

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## **Preamble**

The influential and controversial Scottish psychiatrist of the last century, R. D. Laing, leveled a sustained criticism at the dominant mode of educating and enculturating human beings: de-subjectivization and, simultaneously, objectivization of human beings (Laing, 1980). There is a larger historical background to this, which is the Western philosophical commitment to dualism that divides everything into two

substances (Twyman, 1993): mind (the subjective); and matter (the objective). With rationalism, subjectivity of the cognizing human being is valorized; with empiricism, objectivity of what can be empirically measured and ascertained in the dimension of matter is prized. Thus, when empirical sciences are deemed to be the pinnacle of human achievement, as with the rise of scientific and technological innovation of the modern centuries, the subjective side of the dualistic equation is neglected and even

dismissed. Today, humanity is strongly dominated by the ongoing historical trend that valued empirical sciences and devalued human subjectivity. It is our contention in this paper that this two-fold modernist orientation has been contributing immensely to the sense of alienation, within and without, that humanity is increasingly experiencing.

Of course, there is a lot more complexity and twisted details to this story of dualism, but we will not go into them. Since the purpose of this paper is to explore contemplative education, we will place before our reader only a quick sketch of the historical backdrop of valorization of objectivity and its consequential devaluation of subjectivity in social and educational spheres. The main argument for this paper starts with our contention that neglect of subjectivity stunts human growth and development, and it has untoward consequences that are of utmost importance to human wellbeing and future prospects for democratic citizenry. For instance, underdeveloped subjectivity would be detrimental to cultivating civil, ethical, and wise citizenship, eldership, and leadership that the world needs critically today. The quality of humanity, which can be cultivated within and through intersubjectivity, does matter to the world in which our actions and interactions take place.

### **When Human Subjectivity is Not Cultivated...**

Throughout contemporary schooling and institutional lives in industrialized and science-dominated parts of the world, there is a strong tendency and trend of subjectivity of individuals being marginalized, systemically neglected, and reduced under the ruling educational thought that the most important and valuable thing to learn and practice in formal settings of education is objectivity. Again,

according to our interpretation, the reason for this valorization of objectivity is directly related to the valorization of modern sciences and their achievements. Humanity's salvation from poverty, ignorance, and superstition is understood to be chiefly through science and technology. Science and technology give humans unparalleled power to create a better world of wealth, health, and mastery. In modern centuries, there is a strong and ubiquitous sense that unbridled faith in science has become a new religion.

Science, according to conventional understanding, is all about establishing objective truths. Objectivity is accessed and established through empirical methodological practices of measurement, validity, and reliability, and prediction (Borgmann, 1993). In this heavily prioritizing objectivity, however, its dualized opposite, subjectivity has become devalued. As well, in our increasingly materialistic and reductionistic culture, there is little support for exploring subjective experience in any systematic fashion. We may not go as far as completely denying the presence of subjectivity (amazingly, attempts have been made), but the status of subjectivity has become second-class, compared to objectivity that is prized as in science learning and doing. This is evident in the way we educate our future citizens. Exploring and learning about and from one's subjectivity is not encouraged, if not seriously discouraged. For example, throughout our schooling, most likely past kindergarten and elementary school, we have been instructed not to use "I," the first-person singular when we write our essays, especially in high schools and universities. We have been told repeatedly, one's thoughts and feelings have little or no place in the study of serious subjects, as if talking about one's thoughts, perceptions, and feelings is a childish, "fluffy," unimportant, and

useless diversion. It is as though we have come to the conclusion that, if expressions and exploration of subjectivity has no place in “serious” and “important” pursuits as in science, then that should be the standard in all serious studies.

When scientific objectivity becomes the gold standard, self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-edification, and self-development and refinement all can, and has, become marginalized and neglected as unimportant and not worthy of pursuing as serious matter. The results are evident everywhere around us. We have a highly developed and sophisticated materialistic culture emergent from modern science and technology, but a lot of us, perhaps most of us, exhibit paucity of understanding and knowledge, let alone ‘mastery,’ of what goes on in their hearts and minds of self and others, and some may add, in the spirit and soul dimensions of being. We invite our readers to consider the level of reactivity, prejudice and discrimination, incivility, and heedlessness, as well as all manners of violence, exhibited in the public sphere, not to mention “mental health” issues of existential anguish and distress we witness everywhere today. Is there any wonder that we have difficulty in working with our emotions, perceptions, intuitions, perspectives, values, morals, and so on, when our subjectivity has been neglected and under-valued? It is our contention that the culture we are inhabiting now lacks wisdom: that is, ways to live and die well, with and for each other, which requires us to be able to explore the subjective terrain—the interiority—of our perceptions, beliefs and assumptions, feelings, “souls,” spirits, and the like, where meaning, purpose, dreams, and longings live.

As mentioned, the dominant cultures around the globe have been under the sweeping arch of empiricist and materialist paradigms that valorize

and prize successes in material and materialistic accumulation: success is “measured” in the terms of materialistic achievements, including such things as financial wealth, earning grades, garnering fame and prestige, the getting of well-paying jobs, prestigious positions, and so on. Issues we have here are not so much that these achievements are inherently ‘bad’; rather, our concern is that their singular pursuit can prevent the growth and cultivation of the subjectivity that will yield different kinds of achievement: attainment of the immeasurable, intrinsically experienced “Good” (in contrast to “goods”). Such is—shall we call it?—“spiritual” attainment that fulfills our sense of worthiness from within and leading a meaningful life. Again, because we are mainly focused on materialistic achievements judged by the societal standards and criteria, we have less attention, time, resources to give to the human and humane dimension of growth and development. We end up neglecting, marginalizing, and, even denigrating, the good that the cultivation of subjectivity can realize and manifest.

If the foregoing observation and argument holds, which the authors of this paper maintain, then, we need to make sure that we give ample attention to the cultivation of subjectivity in educational settings. But we may rightly ask, how do we do this cultivation? This is where the central thesis of our paper, contemplative education, comes in.

### Contemplative Education

Whatever we do not pay sufficient attention to, does not develop and grow; it languishes and atrophies. We the authors maintain that this is the case with human subjectivity. Human subjectivity, the within-ness or interiority that human individuals can experience, and from which one can say, “I” and “my experience” and can reflect

on how one has been, and might become, can be cultivated and grow, or neglected and underdeveloped. Unlike the development in the material realms, there is no seeming limit to this cultivation, and for the same reason, there is no limit to the qualitative experiential benefits. We have already noted in our Preamble what such benefits are: for example, civil, ethical, and wise citizenship, eldership, and leadership. To these, we also add those intrinsic qualities of experience that can make life, lived by individuals, more vivaciously alive, expansively and deeply loving, exquisitely and poignantly beautiful, meaningful, empowering, unconditionally good, and so on. These are qualities of subjectivity: that is, experiences individual humans can enjoy from within, and in the intersubjective relational field, which has projective and permeating influences in the entirety of the environment.

Let us, then, talk about how to pay more attention—far more than how it has been hitherto—to subjectivity: that is, the interiority that each of us can experience and self-referentially name, “I.” There are aspects to going about our mission here: protecting and cultivating. Protection here means not allowing forces that threaten the cultivation and growth of subjectivity. Cultivation means actively fostering, nurturing, and facilitating the growth of subjectivity so as to enable its fuller realization and manifestation. Contemplative education is, precisely, about these kinds of protecting and cultivating of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In what follows, we, the three authors, are going to speak from our experience as teachers in teaching and working with our students (Seidel, 2006).

Contemplative education starts with becoming better acquainted with one’s interiority, the inner space, or “soul.” To contemplate is to look inwardly, become aware of and to note what is

going on, to track and trace what one is and has been experiencing, and reflect, interpret, make sense of one’s experience. Let us name this as awareness cultivation. Awareness cultivation (learning and training) is essential to contemplative education.

Awareness has two dimensions of attention: focused (pointed) and diffused (broad-spectrum). Both are equally important to contemplative education. And both dimensions share the essence that we humans are self-aware creatures with the capacity and ability to work with attention, in ways that, for instance, we see in artists and crafts persons who work with all manners of materials and tools to create.

A focus on the subjective and intersubjective worlds requires us to carry on these explorations through the many aspects of our being. We recognize and work through the whole person: that is, as one who is socioculturally, historically, politically, economically situated. Thus, we recognize that contemplative (and academic!) development occurs through several “lines of development” (Wilber, 2006, 2017): somatic, aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, intuitive, relational, moral, and spiritual. There are opportunities for students in all the courses to work in and through these developmental areas, and any work produced by the students (e.g., assignments) can reflect this holistic perspective. Thus, works grounded in arts-based research and narrative inquiry are possible, along with the more ‘traditional’ expressions of scholarship; the whole self, and its situatedness, become the sites of inquiry. As mentioned previously, use of the first-person, either singular or plural as in the case of joint projects, is encouraged; we want the students as authors to claim authority.

At the same time, we recognize that various contemplative practices can be situated within these lines of development and, in turn, have a further developmental impact on them. From a somatic perspective, we work in and through the body while sitting in meditation, learning to still the body and find a pose/posture that is conducive to contemplative inquiry. Students develop a deepened appreciation of and sensitivity to the body and its cues. “How are you feeling?” is not just an inquiry about emotions but instead also includes a call to awareness of what the body is telling us. As a part of embodied work, we also work with the breath, appreciating its role in helping develop mental and physical stillness and well-being (Fincham et al., 2023; Malviya et al., 2022; Nestor, 2020; Zaccaro et al., 2018).

Contemplative inquiry, in its focus on attention, is ideally suited to deepen aesthetic sensitivity and appreciation; as Whitehead (1967) framed it in his 1916 essay “The Aims of Education,” style, the aesthetic sense, “frames the whole being” and represents an “ultimate morality.” Rossini (2020) explores the intersections of art, aesthetic appreciation, the development of wisdom, and the roles of contemplative inquiry in all of this. Tim Lilburn (1999) wonderfully captures the aesthetic dimensions of contemplation in his work, as this passage reveals.

How to know this land without vanquishing it?  
Poetry gestures to contemplation and  
contemplation feeds the poetry, modifying  
language by letting awe undermine it, pare it back,  
lending the poems a thinness, compunction. This  
is a land to wait in, watching. Bring anonymity;  
namelessness has a place here; the land worn to  
the bone hints into you an interior mimesis of  
namelessness. Bring sorrow. Watch. (p. 11)

It is now widely accepted that developing emotional intelligence is a valuable educational goal. As Baugher (2014) puts it: “... contemplating ‘negative’ emotions such as anxiety and fear holds tremendous value for seeing the connections between self and society and for developing the capacity for human freedom and compassionate engagement with others” (p. 234); we would simply add that the same holds true for positive emotions. Of course, universities are noted for developing the intellect; when this is done in conjunction with a focus on emotional development, the result is, we feel, a more fully integrated person.

The transcendent possibilities of deep contemplative experience open participants to the intuitive understandings that can emerge in the subjective and intersubjective dimensions (Drake & Miller, 1991; K. Hart, 2009; Levenson & Aldwin, 2013; Wilber, 2001, 2017). The intersubjective dimensions of contemplative inquiry and practice also develop our relational capacities, whether these are relations with other people or the more-than-human worlds; we and our students interact through our bodies, minds, hearts, and words in the dances that characterize the intersubjective dimensions of contemplation (see Bai et al., 2013).

An integrated approach to contemplative inquiry and practice, often drawing from the contemplative traditions of east and west, includes moral development and the relationship between contemplation and morality (Forbes, 2016; Roeser et al., 2013). Not only does our moral advancement open the doors to contemplative experience, but that experience in turn—for example, in allowing us to experience a deeper kinship with others through a deepened awareness of their presence—creates the possibilities for moral development.

Finally, contemplative education is ideally suited for the spiritual explorations we naturally encounter in the courses of our lives, searching for meaning, possibility, happiness, a sense of place in the cosmos.

... we say that the spiritual experience is registered in, manifests in, and is informed by, perceptual, sensory, cognitive, somatic, affective, and volitional modes or channels of experience. In other words, spiritual experience when sensed in or enhanced by contemplation enables experience of the extra- or more-than-ordinary states of consciousness in multidimensionality of human experience. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. More meaning or meaningfulness, greater insight, more wisdom and compassion, more vividness, acuity, vitality, connectivity and so on, are added to all our ordinary experience. (Bai, et al., 2016, p. 78)

### **Contemplative Inquiry Program at Simon Fraser University**

In this section, we will explore an example of contemplative education in order to convey a concrete and vivid sense of what such education is like: one that we the authors of this chapter are familiar with. We introduce a graduate level contemplative education program that the authors have been involved in as founders and coordinators. We will reflect on and share our experience in developing this program and teaching in the program, to describe and illustrate the views and theses central to this paper. In particular, we will be answering the questions that our readers likely have: “Just what do you do in your program in the way of contemplative education?” By materially describing and reflectively commenting on the program, we hope to give our readers a concrete and vivid illustration of all that we have been talking about so far.

It is reasonable to state that any “new” educational program aims to address an unmet need, to fill a void, or otherwise respond to a perceived or identified gap in program options. The Contemplative Inquiry and Approach to Education (CI) graduate studies program (Anderson et al., 2019) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver, British Columbia is no exception. The critical difference from most proposed new programs, however, was that the founders of the CI program—educators and scholars with extensive experience in both the K-12 and post-secondary context were not interested on tinkering or tweaking current offerings, but rather transforming how we both imagine the educational experience and how that re-imagining is manifested in the classroom. Put simply, unlike conventional educational programs that focus on new content transmitted from the “outside-in,” the CI program was designed to be an “inside-out” process. The starting point, so to speak, is the interior (subjective) world of the learners.

Students in the program are attracted to the philosophical foundations of the program. Program descriptions include these phrasings: “This program is designed for educators, leaders, service-providers and decision-makers in both public and private settings who are seeking deeper levels of inquiry and transformation ...” In working with five cohorts who have undertaken the two-year program, we have found they are seeking answers to kinds of spiritual, existential, self-actualizing questions that contemplative inquiry can address. One of the features of the program that pertains to overall program design, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is its holistic orientation. Successfully addressing these very personal questions requires an educational approach that addresses the whole person.

The CI program at SFU seeks to validate, illuminate, and connect students' (and faculty's) inner lives to their outer lives, intentionally moving beyond the dualism (objectivity and subjectivity) privileged in the dominant educational model. The objective world, conventional third-person learning, as described above, remains important, but the CI program is premised on the principle that students' subjective experience, first-person learning—how they perceive, think, and feel—is both pivotal and integral to the learning and developmental process. Arguably, students' relationship with self (thoughts, emotions, sensations, intuition, awareness level), relationships with others (family, friends, colleagues) and with the cosmos (earth, the universe, the divine, etc.) (Bai et al., 2013) determines how they make sense of the world that shows up to each of us, as if it is a given.

The CI program honours and builds upon the profound, generative, and potentially life-transforming link between the objective, the subjective, the intersubjective (second-person learning) and the student's relationship with self—the intra-subjective. It could thus be stated that the CI program described here acknowledges that the pedagogy of interiority (T. Hart, 2007) as the foundation upon which holistic learning and development grows.

In order to reflect the holistic, integrated, and transformative aspirations of the program's founders, the six courses in the CI program attempt to fuse 1st, 2nd and 3rd person ways of knowing. Whether it is through particular courses with a focus on, for example, embodiment or Indigenous ways of knowing and being, or through exploring texts that deepen students' understanding of how mind, heart, body, and spirit together shape our development as humans both doing and being in the world, the program

cultivates students' contemplative dispositions. The content of the CI program matters, and so, too, does how that content is experienced by students. The "what" of the program matters, but arguably it is the "how" of the program that best supports students' fully embodied, transformative learning.

As noted and elaborated earlier, contemplative studies involve paying attention to what students (and instructors) are feeling, sensing, and thinking. Because the inner lives of everyone in the classroom is considered essential to the learning process, the pedagogic framework of the CI program reflects that. The key principles and practises of the framework include:

Creating a "container" for holistic engagement and inclusion: This begins with a social gathering off-site (typically in a faculty member's home) at the start of the two-year program. Jokingly referred to as "accelerated bonding," this social gathering has both a substantive and symbolic purpose: it helps everyone (students and faculty) get to know each other as individuals and not by their role, and it sends a strong message that interpersonal relationships matter, and that everyone is part of the community of practice being developed;

The Power of the Circle: Time is taken before class starts to arrange the seats in a circle (without desks or tables). Initially the instructors set the room up in this configuration, with students assisting or completing the seating arrangement themselves eventually. The circle is an important feature of the program. In practical terms, it facilitates open dialogue, enhances communication, and fosters trust and candor. In more symbolic terms, it is conveying a critical and integral element of the contemplative program:

deep listening that builds robust, restorative, and authentic relationships (Silverman, 2023);

Coming together in silence: Each class begins not with talking but with silence. The cohort of students, their instructor, and the program site-assistants transition from the outside world to the classroom through meditation, or as it is sometimes referred to as “presencing” or “converging in silence.” This 10–12-minute period to attend to what is going on for each person in that present moment provides a powerful point of convergence to begin the class.

Cohort Check-in: The group meditation described above facilitates the transition from the world outside to being present with each other within the classroom. The check-in that follows—as students and faculty sit in the circle as described above—serves to complement the silent convergence with an invitation to reconnect with each other. Students are invited to express what is going on for them at the present moment, whatever the topic. With instructors modelling open, vulnerable dialogue, each student has an opportunity to share their thoughts and emotions as they deem right at that moment. As trust builds within the group, as the “container” referred to above takes shape, the opening check-in serves to validate students, forge stronger bonds between them, and set the scene for deeper, collaborative engagement with the learning. Feeling valued and included, understanding that your thoughts and emotions are integral to the learning process, and that there is a place in higher learning for simply being present as you are in that moment: this is what the container aims to facilitate.

### Curricular Activity Examples

#### *“What is Contemplation?”*

In a program dedicated to contemplative inquiry, it seems only natural to give the students to explore the nature of contemplation itself. This is an assignment offered to each cohort of students. We have found this to be a fascinating and very worthy exercise. (And an exercise we might consider in our research field to further develop and maintain conceptual clarity.) Students often initially admit they had never really considered the question previously, despite their interest in our program. And the assignment represents a challenge. They grapple with the question. We offer an abundance of resources, new and old, they can access, and inform them that we are not looking for any kind of definitive, standardized, or sanitized answer. Indeed, Lilburn (1999) characterizes contemplation in one instance as “a helpless, desire-filled gaze into what could not be known, a concentration of desire craning toward the unreachable source of being” (p. 12). As well, we ask students to consider what, if anything, makes contemplation unique; is it merely a synonym for reflection or metacognitive reflection? Or do its various forms, both as practice and experience, share some uniqueness that separate them from other reflective practices? We point out to them that their answers do not necessarily have to be couched in ‘academic’ prose but can be expressed in poetic and other forms of written response (oral responses are also welcome); indeed, they are free to leave the confines of the written or spoken word to use various forms of arts-based inquiry or other qualitative approaches (Denzin, et al., 2023).

Delightfully, the students have been up to the challenge. The answers we have received from students in the various cohorts have been



wonderfully deep, thoughtful, heartfelt, and always very personal. The responses have been creative and bold. They reinforce our conviction that this is a worthy assignment. Students have told us it is one of the most difficult academic assignments they have ever had, but they are grateful for it. One of the responses to this question appears in this issue of the journal, authored by Simran Sarwara.

### Contemplative Writing

Pierre Hadot (1995), in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, writes that writing was one of the spiritual exercises of the contemplative schools of ancient Greece. In building on Hadot's work, Michel Foucault (1998) coined the phrase "technologies of the self," which

... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 17)

This is an excellent description of how writing can be, as a technology of the self and the self's unfolding, a profound contemplative practice!

Most university students have, in one way or another, been instructed on the classic structure of the 'academic essay' and the more-or-less required use of the objective third person as the writing voice. As Pinar (2011) observes, in 'critical scholarship' subjectivity gets short shrift. In a program that focuses on the subjective and reflective practice as ours does, the use of the first person is mandatory (although use of the third-person is not forbidden and can be used when appropriate). Students welcome this shift, although some are a bit hesitant to undertake this

style of writing. We point out that in being an 'author' one demonstrates, claims, or becomes an 'author-ity.' Moreover, in an era when we highlight social justice, offering students this power is entirely appropriate. In its truest form, the academy should be, as it was anciently in east and west, a site for spiritual growth where students reconstruct who they are and hope to become, both subjectively and intersubjectively. Writing can play a vital role in this process.

We have an abundance of scholarly resource material to share with them on narrative, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography. One of our faculty members, Vicki Kelly, has expertise in life writing (2010), *métissage*, and what she refers to as 'Indigenous poiesis' (2019), the blending of life writing, arts-based practices, and storytelling. Her 2010 article on life writing, "Finding Face, Finding Heart, and Finding Foundation: Life Writing and the Transformation of Educational Practice" has been deeply appreciated by students, who find it very helpful in engaging in their own meaningful first-person writing, especially appreciating its Indigenous perspectives; in other work appreciated by the students, Dr. Kelly (2021) has pointed to Indigenous relational ethics.

One of our other faculty members, Celeste Snowber (2012, 2019), teaches a course in embodiment for our students. She has written extensively about 'embodied writing,' and her 2016 book *Embodied Inquiry: Writing, Living and Being through the Body* is an excellent collection of essays on living and working in and through the body. We all also work with emotions and helping students in conveying the emotional truth in their writing. We want the students to take risks and explore the dimensions of their lives that might yet remain hidden, dark, scary, but intriguing.

The language of poetry pushes at edges, sometimes even extending beyond the edges, even to the places where language refuses comprehensibility, clarity, coherence, composition (Leggo, 2005, p. 98)

We want them to take risks with their inquiries and, by extension, their writing, and courageously move forth as scholars; the world today demands as much.

Thomas Merton wrote, “There is always a temptation to diddle around in contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues.” There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage.

I won’t have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus. (Dillard, 1974, p. 274)

William Pinar’s (1975/1994, 2019, 2022) pivotal work on *curre*, the notion of curriculum as a vehicle for contemplative self study and character formation, incorporates writing as an essential feature of the contemplative processes incorporated into *curre*, which he promotes in postsecondary education. There is thus a lot of philosophical and curricular support for the kinds of writing we allow our students to engage in. Heesoon and Susan Walsh have written two essays exploring their dialogues through writing as contemplative witnessing—representing the

intersubjective domain. The engagement starts off with one of them writing:

how shall we proceed? witnessing  
our own witnessing something about  
intersubjectivity? set up witnessing  
perspectives/stands (witnessing would  
have to  
take place from a particular stand/stance/  
pose/poise/perspective,  
wouldn't it?) for you and me it will be  
Buddhist and so we  
could articulate what that is about/like am  
I making sense? I will propose something  
more  
concrete in the next couple days as my  
thought  
turns on the matter (2014, p. 24)

They go on to claim that writing together deepens the capacities of witnessing, which is a profound manifestation of the intersubjective dimensions of contemplative practice; they write that theirs is a form of ‘affective meditation.’

Writing thus plays a central role in our program courses, and we radically expand the notion of ‘academic’ writing to include the perspectives of writing as a technology of the self and a way of enacting a contemplative *curre*. As faculty, we are continually delighted in seeing how creatively, passionately, and profoundly the students engage with their writing tasks. Our assessment of these is, in a like-minded fashion, based on engaging in dialogues with them about the explorations and revelations revealed in their work; the assessments are grounded in an intersubjective engagement of mutual unfolding and enlightenment.

### **Awareness Journal and “iChange Project”**

Because awareness is foundational to contemplative practice, our program emphasizes its development through everything we do. Indeed, every moment is taken as an opportunity for strengthening and expanding awareness as our foundational capability. One of the exercises I (Heesoon) have our students do in our class takes the form of pairing up and each person taking the turn in verbalizing, over a duration of a few minutes, what they are aware of in the moment, while their partner is deeply attending and witnessing. I also give students an assignment in the form of “Awareness Journal.” The assigned activity consists of their writing their journal in which they would simply start reporting what they were aware of in the moment: thoughts, feelings, and perceptions they were having, being aware of their being aware .... These journals are not only not graded but also not read by the instructor (Heesoon). The journals are there for the students to engage in a practice that would “build” their awareness muscles and develop skills and artfulness in their applying attention. Moreover, students reflect on what they have been entering in their journal, which builds up another layer of awareness work. Through this process, they see their own growth in awareness, in understanding how their mind works, including habitual patterns of attention, attraction, distraction, avoidance, and so on. They are engaged in the first-order learning that Socrates prescribed: “Know thyself.”

Another assignment that I (Heesoon) designed for an ethics and moral education course is known as “iChange Project.” Based on the cardinal principle of contemplative learning, namely that they see and interpret the world through the lens of their own earlier conditioning or habituation, I propose to my students to engage in changing their mental lens so that they could see the world in ways that

do good rather than harm. For example, there are those of us who tend to lash out and blame the world when things do not go well for us. Blaming and lashing out does harm to the world, in however big or small ways. Hence, becoming ethical would entail changing one’s habituated reactive mind that inflicts harm on the world, again, in however big or small ways. And in order for students to engage in an iChange project, they would need to bring reflective awareness on themselves: on their habits of mind and action tendencies, including reactivity. And they would need to study and analyze these patterns in terms of ethical merits and demerits, carefully teasing out the complexity involved in seeing what is beneficial and what is harmful when, where, and to whom. Learning to navigate this complexity, exercising skills and applying virtues (e.g., compassion, kindness, patience, courage, etc.), while also learning to motivate oneself better and to soothe oneself when feeling hurt or discouraged, are all part of the learning involved in iChange project.

We have sampled only a few curricular examples of contemplative learning in the program. The program, consisting of six graduate-level courses, includes a great variety of contemplative learning that reflect the individual instructors’ own contemplative learnings and leanings, as well as their academic backgrounds and intellectual training.

### **POSTAMBLE**

We began this paper by positing that the failure to validate the inherent value of subjectivity in education has created an imbalanced, incomplete approach to education. We also suggested that this disregard for subjectivity, for example by not validating what students can learn from attending to their inner lives, is inextricably linked to the tide

of loneliness, anomie and disconnection washing over so many people today, especially and disturbingly among young people. This is not an indictment against objectivity and its offspring—science, technology, empiricism, etc.—but a claim that a system or society that reveres these at the expense or exclusion of subjectivity’s contribution (values, meaning, intuition, emotions, and the like) is as incomplete and unstable as a two-legged stool. Contemplative education seeks to correct that imbalance. At the risk of over-extending the metaphor, contemplative education provides students with a balanced and grounded base from which to grow. The four legs of the stool—mind, body, spirit, and heart—are cultivated and valued as equally important parts of the whole experience of living and learning.

Our experience working with the over one hundred students who have taken our two-year program in the past decade is that contemplative education satisfies a deep hunger within students. The swift embrace of contemplative pedagogy, wherein students’ inner landscapes are taken as seriously as received texts and conventional research articles, suggests that students are seeking validation, connection, vulnerability, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to integrate and infuse together the ways of knowing that reside in our objective, inter-subjective, and subjective experiences.

We end our essay with a wonderfully illuminating passage often attributed to Meister Eckhart (cited by Coburn et al., 2011):

“The outer work can never be small if the inner work is great. And the outer world can never be great if the inner work is small.”

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