

The Farther Reaches of Contemplative Inquiry

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Abstract

I explore contemplation as a transcendent, spiritual inquiry that is holistic and integrated in nature. Drawing from both ancient contemplative teaching and contemporary scholarship, I describe contemplative education as a transformative epistemological, ontological, and axiological project; it becomes a 'spiritual research paradigm.'

Keywords: contemplation, holistic and integrated contemplative education, spirituality, transformation, Ontology, Epistemology, Axiology

As I point out in the essay in this issue Heesoon Bai, Laurie Anderson, and I co-authored, I make it a point to include an assignment on "What is Contemplation?" for the students in our graduate contemplative inquiry program. The question is, I will admit, a bit of an obsession with me. In this essay, I outline a claim that contemplation (or contemplative inquiry) is a particular epistemological vehicle for inquiry into spiritual dimension of our beings, what I would characterize as the holistic integration of our many dimensions; this integration could be said to represent the farthest reaches of human nature.

I hasten to add that this is simply a personal perspective, and I don't expect everyone to agree with it or, indeed, agree to any kind of standardized conception of contemplation. It is evident that in the field of contemplative

education there are a number of conceptions and definitions present. That makes sense to me.

I have written previously (Scott, 2019) about defining contemplation. Here, I will briefly elaborate on that position. Abraham Maslow (1971) didn't directly address contemplation in his later work, but in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, the collection of his last essays that also helped inspire the creation of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, he advocated for a "pervasively holistic attitude and way of thinking" (p. 334). In the appendix on religion, Maslow argues that both religion and self-development can "quite easily integrate the healthily animal, material, and selfish with the naturalistically transcendent, spiritual, and axiological" (p. 335). He goes on to make a significant point.

... to take up residence on the high plateau of Unitive consciousness tends to be a lifelong effort.... The “spiritual disciplines,” both the classical ones and the new ones that keep on being discovered these days, all take time, work, discipline, study, commitment. (pp. 336–337)

Whatever other limitations they might have had, the ‘classic’ wisdom traditions of east and west developed comprehensive, well-integrated approaches to contemplation as an epistemological and ontological vehicle for spiritual development. Contemplation reaches out beyond sitting for 10 minutes in meditation or an eight-week mindfulness program of simply purposely paying attention to the present moment. Contemplation becomes, rather, not only a way of seeing and understanding but also a way of being, both as a journey and as a state of being-ness. As a way of seeing and of being, contemplation thus involves, in an integrated fashion, all the aspects of our knowing and being, from the somatic to the spiritual.

Contemplative Education

I turn now to an examination of contemplative education for its significant role as an integral part of holistic education. Pierre Hadot (2002), in discussing the role of philosophy in the ancient Greek schools, noted “the goal was to learn a type of know-how; to develop a *habitus*, or new capacity to judge and to criticize; and to *transform*—that is, to change people’s way of living and of seeing the world (p. 274). Zajonc (2016) alludes to the holistic application of contemplative approaches in “aiding students in moving from one affective, cognitive, or epistemological stage to another” (p. 27). David Keiser and Saratid Sakulkoo’s (2014) definition of Contemplative

Education as an educational approach is based on “individual transformation through the cultivation of inherent spiritual human qualities, including mindfulness, awareness, empathy, authenticity, and synchronized body, speech and mind” (p. 85).

One can see that effective and meaningful contemplative education would necessarily have a holistic, integrated orientation, working with the whole student in the context of an evolving learning community that is recognized to be socioculturally, economically, politically, historically, and environmentally situated. There are many forms contemplation and contemplative inquiry can take; we see this in examining contemplation as it has appeared in the various classic contemplative traditions of east and west. The current overemphasis on a narrowly-conceptualized, ‘secular’ mindfulness, for example, offers an example of the lack of holistic approaches in some instances of contemplative education. In this context, some contemporary adaptations of contemplative inquiry have taken a practice like mindfulness and stripped it away from its place in an integrated Buddhist teaching, as expressed in the Eightfold Path that comprises of teachings of right view, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood ... and we are left only the barest minimums of right mindfulness.¹ While we may not wish to incorporate all the teachings of Buddhism into our secular adaptations of contemplative inquiry, we do need to take an integral approach, incorporating considerations of ethics and right

¹ It is worth noting that Bhikkhu Anālayo’s (2006) masterful translation of and commentary on the Satipatthāna Sutta, the Buddha’s teaching on mindfulness, runs over 270 pages; renowned American teacher of mindfulness, Joseph Goldstein (2016), has written an authoritative work on mindfulness practice, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, that is over 450 pages in length!

living, for example. Programs of contemplative inquiry need to be located within a holistic framework that recognizes all lines of development: physical, aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, social/relational, moral, and existential/spiritual.²

Wilber (2006, 2016, 2017) maintains that to develop a truly integral contemplative approach, we need not only the teachings of the classic contemplative traditions but, in conjunction, the findings of contemporary science, philosophy, the social sciences, and other lines of scholarly inquiry. For example, postmodern and poststructuralist scholars have helped us understand how, for example, the teachings of the classic contemplative traditions emerged out of various sociocultural and historical contexts; contemporary contexts may require different or modified approaches. Contemporary neuroscience is helping us better refine meditative practices. Psychology has helped us understand phenomena such as attachments, a lack of emotional intelligence, 'spiritual bypassing' that interfere with spiritual development. Physiology and medicine are helping us confirm or enhance the benefits of practices such as pranayama or Qigong. Again, a contemporary, integrated, and holistic approach to contemplation works through all lines of development: somatic, aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, moral, relational, and spiritual.

Tim Lilburn's (1999) observation, similar to that of Wilber's (1999), is that "Contemplation is inquiry into the nature of being" (p. 27). This becomes another possible consideration, for both teacher and student, for applying contemplation in a more

holistic fashion. Arthur Zajonc (2013) suggests taking a more holistic perspective, arguing we need a "more robust and complete ontology, investigated by a broad range of methods, and a more inclusive ethics that gets beyond cost benefit" (p. 93). Lilburn is also pointing to ontology. We can use the language of spirituality, as well. Ergas (2016) describes contemplation as a spiritual research paradigm that works with 'inwardness' (first- and third-persons) and connectedness (second-person). In previous work (Bai et al. (2018) point to a pluralistic, integral conception of spirituality that focuses on the following: meaning making; a realization of and engagement with the sacred or transcendent; a sense of awe and wonder; that which is sensorially or perceptually extraordinary; a sense of wholeness, connectedness, integration, and harmony; compassion, love, kindness, joy; intuitive clarity and insight; and creativity and vitality. Contemplation can be seen as a research methodology for exploring these dimensions of spirituality. As Wilber (1999) asserts "... in the spiritual sciences the exemplar, the injunction, the paradigm, the practice is: meditation or contemplation" (p. 143).

I can echo Renee Owen's comment in our joint editorial. As she has insightfully conveyed, contemplation is or at least can be a matter of being rather than something one does. Of course, there is the deliciousness of it being a matter of both, one feeding the other, as contemplatives from Laozi to Aristotle to Thomas Merton have observed. I would suggest that the contemplative sense of beingness, initially quite subjective, suddenly at times, and then gradually morphs into a more expansive relational beingness. As poet-philosopher Tim Lilburn (1999) writes "The end of contemplation is not dominance or circumspection, but affective domesticity ..."

² See Wilber 2006, 2016, 2017 for further discussions of these points.

(p. 32). Lilburn then points to contemplation as knowing, writing:

Indeed, contemplation is a recovery of the full eros to know being clearly in all its specificity, to know the world as itself, unqualified by language, unedited by consciousness, to know it as it would be known by a perfect intellect. Such knowledge, at the moment, lies in silence, an attentive, name-asserting, name-cancelling silence. Here knowledge is love; knowledge is desire, the eros to know fully which is the eros for marriage to the world.... Contemplation is the mind humbled and sharpened, made keen for love. (p. 33)

Merton (1961) returns us to the intersections of being and knowing by asserting “For the contemplative there is no *cogito* (‘I think’) and no *ergo* (‘therefore’) but only SUM, I am” (p. 9), a thought echoed in the Sanskrit “Tat tvam asi” of the Chandogya Upanishad—“That thou art.”

This is not a solipsistic inner turn. The necessary subjective inner turn soon becomes the ‘inter’ turn to the other: intersubjectivity. The “That” that one is is in fact relational, interconnected. It is everything. Connecting to that represents the farther reaches of contemplative inquiry.

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