

## **Taming Emotion: Tibetan Meditation in Teacher Education**

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Tibetan Buddhist meditation offers a non-sectarian, spiritual practice for knowing and liberating our inner resources, so we can become more effective and compassionate teachers. Meditation, rather than being an escape from the stresses of teaching, is a method for relating more fully and honestly to the learning environment and ourselves. In the process the seemingly mundane and problematic aspects of ourselves and teaching relationships become transformed and sacred.

Over the last thirty years Tibetan Buddhist teachers have established many centers in North America and Europe. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, in particular, was interested in establishing non-sectarian cultural forms in North America, which could express the qualities of an “enlightened society”. Because he was particularly interested in education, in the 1970’s Rinpoche founded three non-sectarian schools in Boulder, Colorado: Alaya Preschool, The Vidya School (an elementary and middle school), and Naropa University. During the 1980’s elementary and secondary schools were also founded in Halifax, Nova Scotia. With the exception of The Vidya School all of these schools still operate.

During this period I have been a teacher in the “Buddhist-inspired” schools in Boulder. For the past ten years I have been developing non-sectarian teacher education programs based on the principles and practices of Tibetan meditation. The first of these was an undergraduate degree at Naropa University in Early Childhood Education. Recently we have begun a Masters in Contemplative Education for teachers at all instructional levels.

In this chapter I will use reports from Naropa University undergraduate student teachers’ experiences to illustrate particular aspects of contemplative teacher development. I will briefly explore how a meditative approach to knowing and accepting ourselves can lead to compassionate and effective teaching particularly in situations where “negative” emotions are present.

Most of the students quoted in this chapter have been meditating for only two years and are at the very beginning of their teaching careers. Even so, we will see how the practice of mediation has begun to permeate their student teaching. The effects of meditation are cumulative and the practice of contemplative teaching is a life-long journey. We are just beginning to discover what it is to join Buddhist meditation with holistic teaching.

### **The Contemplative Teacher**

According to Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche’s view, Buddhism *per se* was not to be taught in our “Buddhist-inspired” schools, except in classes on comparative religion. Instead, Rinpoche suggested that we should manifest the effects of our practice of meditation in our everyday teaching. This he called “contemplative education”, distinguishing it from religious education, because it is applicable in many educational settings. This integration of meditative principles and practice into everyday, non-

sectarian education is, for me, one of the most intriguing and personally rewarding contributions of Buddhism to holistic education.

In contemplative education the inner lives of teachers and students are viewed as vital ingredients in teaching and learning. The primary method for knowing ourselves in Buddhism is meditation. As Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun and teacher, says: “The path of meditation and the path of our lives altogether has to do with curiosity, inquisitiveness. The ground is ourselves; we’re here to study ourselves and to get to know ourselves now, not later...So come as you are. The magic is being willing to open to that, being willing to be fully awake to that.” (1991, p. 4)

Meditation practice develops precision regarding the elements of our inner experience. Usually these sometimes-subtle states of mind go unnoticed during our active days. Thoughts, feelings and perceptions are so intertwined that we are often consciously or unconsciously bewildered and anxious. Teachers may be aware of inner experiences while teaching, but often mask them because they seem tangential or problematic. The complexities and alienation, which result from maintaining a separate inner life, can be very stressful and compromise the quality of education for everyone. Meditation is a method of effectively integrating our inner experience into teaching; and the accumulated knowledge of Buddhist practitioners over the centuries offers a wealth of wisdom regarding the skillful transformation and integration of our inner selves into everyday activities.

Faced with meeting the many needs and demands of ourselves and our students, finding time to nurture inner experience may seem like an impossible luxury. However, by meditating regularly outside of our teaching schedule mindfulness of our inner life emerges and, over time, carries over into skillful and intuitive teaching.

An important aspect of this transformation and integration of inner experience for the contemplative teacher is the process of acceptance or “making friends” with ourselves. Through meditation we begin to notice and respect all that we are, including our foibles, gifts, and the experiences we can’t even label. In this often-humbling encounter, we begin to see these elements of experience as inner resources. All of our emotional, intellectual, and physical experiences are relevant to the contemplative journey. When we experience ourselves directly and with compassion, we begin to relax and take our place in the classroom just as we are.

Teachers know that we all carry individual burdens that often hamper effective teaching. When we encounter these in ourselves during meditation, they may be experienced as complex habits that we have learned in the course of our lives. Under the gentleness of the mindful attention and non-attachment of meditation, needless patterns may naturally fall away or be transformed. In this non-judgmental practice we simply notice our momentary experience or habits and let them go with the breath. By mixing the objects of mindfulness with the breath, the elements of our direct experience are infused with spaciousness and, eventually, liberated from habituation. There are no other strategies for the elimination of harmful patterns during meditation. As Trungpa, Rinpoche writes: “Generally, when the idea of ego is presented, the immediate reaction ... is to regard it as a villain, an enemy. You feel you must destroy this ego, this me, which is a masochistic and suicidal approach. ...But true spirituality is not a battle; it is the ultimate practice of non-violence. We are not regarding any part of us as being a villain, an enemy, but we are trying to use everything as part of the natural process of life.” (p. 68).

Experiencing ourselves directly and thoroughly means not dismissing any of our base inner experiences because they don't meet our high conceptual standards. Among the obstacles that holistic teachers may encounter are preconceived ideas of what it is to be "holistic" or "spiritual". We can fall into the trap of thinking that spirituality in education is, perhaps, only evidenced by an inspired, blissful state of mind or an enchanting classroom experience. However, Chogyam Trungpa suggests a more earthy view: "The whole approach of Buddhism is to develop transcendental common sense, seeing things as they are, without magnifying what is, or dreaming about what we would like to be." (p. 4). This contemplative approach does not identify certain experiences as "spiritual", because the whole of existence is seen as sacred. The practice is to synchronize with that. In the process of inner exploration, we may discover that our notions of the "spirituality in education" have become so fixed that we are unconsciously restrictive or hurtful toward certain expressions of natural harmony.

### **Opening to Emotion**

When we are too firmly attached to what we think education should be, it is often experienced as aggression not only by our students, but also within ourselves. Meditation with its practice of precise noticing and then letting go has the effect of softening our sense of ownership and the accompanying rigidity. Plans and inspirations that may arise for us as teachers are transformed by this practice of acceptance and spaciousness. "My" plan, "my" feeling, "my" opinion, "my" theory, are experienced less as possessions of truth than as open, transitory, participatory creations. Often this radical acceptance of and simultaneous non-attachment to our inner experience, can be a painful, disconcerting, and humbling process, but it is the Buddhist path to compassion.

Because meditation invites our emotional lives to be included in our practice, we gradually become familiar, relaxed and trusting of our feelings. By learning to experience emotions clearly, spaciously and without attachment, meditation seems to enhance our natural compassionate, empathetic and intuitive qualities. Here is an incident from a student teacher's self-evaluation, which reflects a simple, basic experience of empathy:

*"There is a child in my class who is not very verbal. He is often reluctant to speak, and when he does, he usually offers only enough words to get his point across. I watch his strong physical play and feel that he experiences the world this way, a way that is very different than mine. So, on this day, he was on the swings and he asked for a push. As I stood behind him, I watched as he would swing forward and then just as the swing was about to come back, he would arch his body back and close his eyes. His face smiled more than I had ever seen before. As I watched him, I could remember what that felt like, I could feel my stomach do that small flip flop it does, just after the swing stops in mid air to begin its way backwards. The feeling was so overwhelming it brought tears to my eyes... I was truly able to feel the experience this child had. This experience opened up a whole different approach to communication and a new dimension to my relationship with this child."*

Teachers are usually expected to be objective, calm, mature mentors and leaders. When we begin as contemplative teachers, to open to our emotional energies, they are usually experienced as the antitheses of these characteristics. As teachers we can feel guilty or unprofessional we they express, or even notice, strong emotions; we have little training or experience otherwise.

Tibetan Buddhism is unique among spiritual traditions in its depth of wisdom and skillful means related to working with emotion. When neither suppressed nor indulged,

emotion is seen as the ground of compassion. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes this view of transforming emotional energy: “The intelligent way of working with emotions is to try to relate to their basic substance, the abstract quality of the emotion, so to speak. The basic ‘isness’ quality of the emotions, the fundamental nature of the emotions is just energy. And if one is able to relate with energy, then the energies have no conflict with you. They become a natural process... When there is no panic involved in dealing with the emotions, then you can deal with them completely, properly. Then you are like someone who is completely skilled in his profession, who does not panic, but just does his work completely, thoroughly.” (p. 67). The synchronization that Rinpoche describes energizes our teaching by freeing us from resistance to our emerging emotions. The skill comes when we ride those energies for the benefit of our students.

A student teacher writes about her anxiety and expectations while preparing to teach. Her attention to her feelings and openness to her intuition seem to lead to an experience of effective teaching which is new to her:

*“I was nervously preparing myself mentally to lead circle that day. At one point, I decided to let go of all my expectations of how it was supposed to turn out. Suddenly I got an inspiration... I noticed that I seemed more able to be calm and centered in the midst of activity; I was helping each child through their projects, remaining mindful of the environment, attending to a nearby conflict, and focusing on my project all at the same time. I felt coordinated, synchronized and clear! I felt more competent than ever – able to come up with the right words and solutions while thoroughly enjoying myself in the role of teacher. I had finally fallen in [a] smooth rapid groove and caught a glimpse of effective action.”*

Having the same attitude towards our emotions while teaching as while meditating can be very liberating. As Pema Chodron notes, “Feeling irritated, restless, afraid and hopeless is a reminder to listen more carefully. It’s a reminder to stop talking; watch and listen.” (1994, p. 115) In this way, ‘negative’ emotions can wake us up; we can be aware and effective teachers even while miserable. Ultimate generosity in teaching is the willingness to be thoroughly true to what we think and feel and to embody it skillfully and without attachment. This student teacher gives a vivid report of working directly with the energy of strong emotion in herself and a child:

*“I have lots of difficulty allowing myself to feel irritated when with the children. I think there is an underlying feeling that it is wrong to feel irritation towards children and that I should be able to accept them fully and in a non-judgmental way. This sounds great but in reality is very difficult. To be able to come into the classroom fully and truthfully I need to be able to acknowledge anger and irritation in myself. There is a particular child in our classroom who has taught me a lot about this energy and I have become much more able to work with it because of him. This child has an incredible temper and he is very intense in the way that he deals with things. As I worked with him I began to realize that my fear of becoming angry or irritated had a lot to do with being afraid of not being liked by the children if I wasn’t always ‘nice’. As I continued to work through situations with this child I began to be able to let go of that fear and count these emotions among the many other tools I work with. I found that if I acknowledged these feelings that I didn’t even need to go to a place of anger or annoyance but was able to use them to cut through the situation in a much cleaner way than if I tried to be ‘nice’ about it.”*

### Harmonizing with Emotional Energy

Experienced teachers are prepared for strong emotions in learning environments. Usually we notice emotions only when they are fully manifest in our students or ourselves. At that point we might forcefully plow ahead or abandon the situation altogether, causing confusion or anxiety. When we don't synchronize with emotional energies, we give mixed messages, become heartless or actually cause harm. In contemplative learning communities where ego-based agendas are naturally exposed, we make friends with emotions and are less likely to be reactive towards our students or ourselves when strong feelings emerge.

Through meditation practice we can begin to notice precisely when emotions begin to arise, feel their qualities, and notice their passing away. When we are present with our emotional experience, yet hold it very lightly, our ownership begins to loosen. There is a spaciousness and creativity when there is harmony with emotional energy. Rather than *having* an emotional experience we *participate* in an energetic experience.

*"I remember one incident where a little boy was having a temper tantrum. There were two teachers slowly moving towards him and trying to talk to him. When they got close he would try to hit or kick them. I could see that he was lost in his own emotions and I remember knowing that he needed to be held. I was a little anxious to do anything because I didn't want the other teachers to feel I was stepping on their toes. He continued to cry until I finally decided to do something. At first, I sat down next to him for a few minutes, then slowly, I moved closer and picked him up. He was still crying really loud so I carried him outside. I remember feeling his face nuzzle into my neck and his warm tears running down my shoulder. In that moment I could completely feel his sorrow. This situation really helped me to trust my own abilities and to trust that genuine action arises when I am really present with what is going on."*

The Tibetan teacher Tarthang Tulku summarizes the Buddhist approach to transforming strong emotion, in this case anger: "What we can do is concentrate on the anger, not allowing any other thoughts to enter. That means we sit with our angry thoughts, focusing our concentration on the anger -- not on its objects -- so that we make no discriminations, have no reactions... Concentrate on the center of the feeling: penetrate into that space. There is a density of energy in that center that is clear and distinct. This energy has great power, and can transmit great clarity. To transform our negativities, we need only to learn to touch them skillfully and gently." (p. 52)

In this report a student examines her own negativity and its relationship to the negativity of a child. This insight changes her teaching approach with this child:

*"There was one particular child that I had a difficult time with. The main and only way that it seemed he had to connect with people was to intimidate them. This was especially hard for me to deal with because I would be watching a group of children playing and he would come and try to purposely destroy the game that they had going. I felt that the teachers were constantly taking him aside, making him take a break, or losing patience with him. I also discovered that he definitely intimidated me. He was such a bright little boy that I felt useless as I tried to talk to him. Usually he would just laugh at me or roll his eyes. Insecurity and hopelessness would sometimes overcome me and I would be so shocked at how much this boy could affect the other children and myself.*

*"I decided to watch with 'curiosity' to see what I could do to change the interactions that we were having and how to end the negativity within myself... I was*

*shocked to find that the only interactions I had had with him in the past were negative... I started to engage with him and ask him about things that were of interest to him. He was so responsive and we ended up forming a friendship. I was able to witness my anger and frustration transform into curiosity and compassion."*

### **The Intention of Compassion**

As the Dalai Lama points out, simply the intention of compassion itself can make a difference in relationships: "If you approach others with the thought of compassion, then that will automatically reduce fear and allow openness with other people. It creates a positive, friendly atmosphere. With that attitude, you can approach a relationship in which you, yourself, initially create the possibility of receiving affection or a positive response from the other person. And with that attitude, even if the other person is unfriendly or doesn't respond to you in a positive way, then at least you've approached the person with a feeling of openness that gives you a certain flexibility and the freedom to change your approach as needed." (p. 69)

On the path of contemplative teaching we develop clarity and respect for what is happening in the moment, even when it is painful. Awareness through meditation not only leads to self-knowledge and acceptance, but also the integration of emotional energies into learning relationships. When we are open to the changing emotional energies of our students that usually produces an opening or directness on their part. In those moments there can be real connection, communication and discovery. When we honestly and compassionately manifest who we are, without attachment, we can experience ourselves and our students as ordinary *and* sacred. Such a genuine meeting of hearts and minds naturally gives rise to effective teaching and learning. This is education without aggression; education not based upon fear, rigidity or control, but upon uncovering, exploring and creating a sacred world.

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