

Returning Meditation to Education

Charles Burack



In our schools and universities we teach our children—and each other—to separate mind from body, politics from spirituality, male from female, black from white, West from East, art from science, human from non-human. Students learn how to categorize and characterize, number and name, measure and manipulate. Rarely do they learn to intuit and integrate, contemplate and create, heal and hallow. Several years ago, I felt that a radical change in educational methods was needed to help transform our fractured selves, communities, and ecosystems. I began experimenting with meditation techniques in my university courses on writing and literature as well as in more informal workshops on poetry, psychology, and spiritual development. As a longtime practitioner, I knew the powerful transformative effects of meditation and felt sure that contemplative practices could help heal the painful divisions I saw everywhere in contemporary life, particularly in education and business. Today, I am more convinced than ever that we urgently need to recover as well as invent med-

itative approaches that tap our complete powers of awareness, expression, and compassionate action.

In exploring the educational uses of meditation, I've worked with a wide range of techniques: breath meditations, visualizations, word contemplations, insight meditations, mantra meditations, and chants. Over the years, I've had the privilege to witness many amazing learning experiences and transformational moments. I hope that my descriptions of a few of these techniques and experiences will inspire other educators—teachers, trainers, group facilitators—to experiment with contemplative practices in their own classrooms. Some of the techniques come out of ancient contemplative traditions from around the world. Others were created in the course of my own experiments. Often, I modified standard approaches in order to meet student needs and school/course/time requirements. These adjustments are essential if meditation is to be effectively integrated into current and future curricula.

Breath Meditation

Nearly every contemplative tradition makes use of the breath. I've discovered that simple breath meditations can transform students' fundamental relation to themselves and the world. In one meditation, I ask students to simply

ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS ANDO

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focus on their breath. Here are the instructions: *Close your eyes and take several deep, slow breaths. Now allow yourself to breathe naturally, and begin to focus on your inbreaths and your outbreaths. Be present with your breath in the region of your body where you observe it most clearly and distinctly. It can be the in and out at the nostrils, or the rising and falling of the chest or the belly. Don't look for anything in particular. Just observe whatever sensations and feelings are actually occurring moment to moment. The breath may be slow or quick, regular or irregular, deep or shallow, steady or unsteady, warm or cool, moist or dry. And the pauses between breaths may be long or short, regular or irregular. If your mind wanders, which it naturally will, simply bring your attention back to your breath. Be gentle with yourself. It is natural for the mind to wander and to chatter, so each time you notice it wandering or chattering, simply refocus your attention on your breath.*

This bare attention meditation, which can be conducted for as few as two minutes, helps to clarify and concentrate attention and relax the mind/body. It is called a "bare attention" technique because it requires the practitioner to simply observe the breath as it is—without imposing ideas, visualizing images, projecting wishes and aversions, or making judgments, assumptions, and evaluations. Nearly all students become aware of the busyness of their own minds—of the insistent mental chatter. For some this is a surprise; for others, it is a fuller realization of a familiar phenomenon. The first time the meditation is done, some students will notice that the chatter diminishes as the exercise proceeds.

Repeating and lengthening the meditation on subsequent occasions will deepen its effects, and more and more students will benefit. The continual bringing back of the attention to the breath gradually builds concentration. Students also discover powers of inner perception they didn't know they had. Many, for the first time, are able to experience subtle and complex bodily sensations, such as the movement of their nasal hairs, the blockage or free flow of air through their sinuses, the expansion and contraction of their chest muscles, the elasticity or tightness of their belly muscles, or the changing rhythms of breathing. This meditation is quite powerful when practiced for ten or more minutes.

After the meditation, I often ask students to share what they experienced. This sharing can be done after any of the meditations. It gives students an opportunity to express their observations, concerns, insights, questions. Initially, many will say they had a hard time concentrating and had many distracting thoughts. I reassure them that this is natural and that they only need to be patient and gentle with themselves and to continually refocus their attention.

Breath meditation is also an excellent preparation for brainstorming and freewriting—two techniques that help students deepen their reflections on a text and develop their essay ideas. The meditation expands the range and depth of mental associations by dissolving blocks and relaxing con-

ventional connections and logical linkages. Some of my students also use the breath meditation before studying or going to sleep. Because of the paradoxical effects of meditation, it can stimulate the alertness and concentration needed for active study, or induce the relaxation needed for falling and remaining asleep. Some students use the technique to calm themselves during finals week.

Sometimes, I follow the breath meditation with the reading or discussion of a literary text. I may even read a poem to the students while they are still meditating on their breath. In both situations, students usually listen more attentively and deeply and so experience new dimensions of the poem or receive new insights into how the poem applies to their lives. This is because meditative awareness allows increased access to the forgotten details of past experiences that are stored in the brain/body and to the unnoticed details of current experiences that are continually registered subliminally.

For example, I've found it effective to lead a breath meditation before or during a reading of Denise Levertov's poem "Flickering Mind." As the students observe their own "flickering mind," they will appreciate the speaker's observation that her "mind ... like a minnow darts away" and that her "self [will not] hold still, but wanders anywhere." The poem emphasizes the value of being fully aware and present in one's life. Indeed, the speaker declares twice that "Lord, not you, / it is I who am absent" and concludes with the question, "How can I focus my flickering, perceive / at the fountain's heart / the sapphire I know is there?"

One of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (translated by Stephen Mitchell) reveals the experiential fruit of being fully present to one's breath: "Breathing: you invisible poem! Complete / interchange of our own essence with world-space. You counterweight / in which I rhythmically happen. / Single wave-motion whose / gradual sea I am; / you, most inclusive of all our possible seas— / ... / How many regions in space have already been / inside me." By focusing on the breath, Rilke experiences the nonduality of self and universe. The breath links inside with outside, or, rather, shows the artificiality of that distinction. Breath is but a part of the life-giving air that encompasses us all. In many languages, the word for *breath* also means *wind* or *soul* or *spirit*.

The pairing of the breath meditation with the Levertov and Rilke poems enables students to have an informed discussion of the inner and outer realities they miss because their minds are continually darting and wandering. They can also discuss the psycho-cultural causes and consequences of mental busyness. Those who are mentally distracted, overwhelmed, and preoccupied—namely, all of us!—can be easily manipulated by self-serving elites who offer temporary, superficial solutions that in effect say, "Do what I tell you to do, and your life will be happy, meaningful, and prosperous." Bare attention meditation is a

nonideological, nonauthoritarian, and nonconsumerist means of self-empowerment because it puts individuals in touch with their own deep, vital self, which is the living source of strength, wisdom, and kindness. This self is not selfish; rather, it is highly sensitive and responsive to the real needs and worth of the surrounding universe. It is a primordial, preconceptual self free of social, political, and economic ideologies.

Insight Meditation

Insight meditation, also known as *vipassana* meditation, is a powerful bare attention technique and one of the central practices of Theravada Buddhism. Despite its Buddhist origin, it in no way requires adherence to Buddhist beliefs. All that is required is a willingness to pay attention, observe, inquire. Here are the instructions: *Close your eyes and take several deep, slow breaths. Now allow yourself to breathe naturally, and begin to focus on your inbreaths and your outbreaths. Be present with your breath in the region of your body where you observe it most clearly and distinctly. It can be the in and out at the nostrils, or the rising and falling of the chest or the belly. Don't look for anything in particular. Just observe whatever sensations and feelings are actually occurring moment to moment.* [Focus on the breath for about two minutes.] *Now begin to focus your attention on whatever body sensations predominate in your consciousness. They may be sensations of pressure, pain, tightness, warmth. Don't look for sensations, just observe them as they arise spontaneously. When a sensation disappears, bring your awareness back to your breath. Use your breath as the primary object of attention. When you notice your mind wandering, bring your attention back to your breath.* [Focus on body sensations for at least three minutes.] *Now begin to focus your attention on whatever thoughts predominate in your awareness. Don't search for them; just observe them when they spontaneously arise. They may be words, pictures, stories, memories, anticipations, fragments of conversations. Watch them as they arise and pass away. Don't try to analyze them; merely bring an alert but gentle attention to them. When a thought passes away, return to focusing on your breath. Use your breath as the primary object of awareness.* [Focus on the thoughts for at least three minutes.] *Now focus your attention on the sounds that predominate in your awareness. Bring an alert, interested attention to them as they arise and pass away. Again, use your breath as the primary object. Whenever a sound arises in your consciousness, be present with it, observe it for as long as it occurs.* [Focus on sounds for at least three minutes.] *Now turn your attention to the feelings that pass through your consciousness. They may be feelings of sadness, anger, joy, happiness, frustration, fear, anxiety. Don't analyze the feeling. Merely observe it. Notice where it's located in your body. Notice the bodily sensations associated with the feeling. When a feeling disappears, bring your attention back to your breath.* [Focus on

feelings for at least three minutes.] *Now allow your attention to focus on whatever sensation, thought, sound, or feeling predominates in your consciousness. Follow that mindbody state as it arises, changes, and disappears. If you wish, you may make a mental note of it by silently saying to yourself, "thought" or "feeling" or "sound" or "sensation."* *The important thing is just to be present with whatever passes through your consciousness. Don't try to change or interfere with it. Just observe it as it passes through your consciousness. Again, use your breath as the primary object.*

It is the final phase of this meditation—the focusing on whatever mindbody state spontaneously predominates in consciousness—that is insight meditation per se. Indeed, for the sake of truncating the instructional process, I've actually combined several meditations into one. Ordinarily, separate meditations can be carried out for body sensations, thoughts, sounds, and feelings. There can also be meditations on smells, intentions, and other mindbody states. These selective meditations are valuable in their own right, but are usually understood as preparations for insight meditation per se, which does not single out a single type of mindbody phenomenon. This truncated approach can give students a sense of what insight meditation is, but the most effective way to teach insight meditation is to do the selective meditations first and then gradually introduce the students to the nonselective practice. It is usually not advisable to introduce insight meditation without some preparatory work because students are easily overwhelmed and confused by the plethora of mindbody phenomena that pass through their consciousness. The graduated approach enables students to slowly learn to identify and concentrate on particular types of phenomena. It is often useful to precede insight meditation with a discussion of the distinctions between sensations, feelings, and thoughts. Indeed, students will come to realize the constructed nature of these—and all—experiential categories. Distinctions exist, but our cultural conventions determine which distinctions we notice and how we categorize them. Categorization in turn determines how distinctions are valued and used. Valued

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distinctions are enshrined in our words, symbols, stories, rituals, and roles. Like the deconstructive practice of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, meditation exposes the pseudo-certainty, stability, and clarity of language. But unlike deconstruction, which is still caught up in and dependent upon language, meditation enables a profound prelinguistic experience of the world.

In practicing insight meditation, students discover the ever-shifting nature of their consciousness. Some come to realize that their very being is constantly changing. Indeed, they realize they cannot distinguish between their consciousness and their being because their only access to the latter is through the former. The world exists to them as an experiential phenomenon. With continued practice, some will begin to perceive the relativity of categories like inner and outer, you and me. What is called "the world" is that part of our field of experience which surrounds the part we call "my body." Indeed, our field of awareness, and the knowledge we derive from it, is neither subjective nor objective. As we observe the dynamic contents of our consciousness, we discover that these phenomena are simultaneously inner and outer. That is, both "the external world" and "the inner world" exist within one field—the observer's field—of awareness. Emily Dickinson conveys this idea when she writes that "The Brain—is wider than the sky— / For—put them side by side— / The one the other will contain / With ease—and You—beside." The world does exist, but we can only know of its existence through our experience. Observer and observed cannot be strictly separated; awareness and reality are inextricable. The true meaning of "objectivity" is that observers agree that the contents of their fields of awareness correspond.

Insight meditation will deepen students' understanding of writers who emphasize the experiential foundation of our relation to reality: e.g., Coleridge, Emerson, Whitman, Hardy, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Lessing. And because the technique enables students to move beyond dualistic thinking and experience a greater sense of community with each other and with all beings, it is effective when used just before psychological discussions of love and individuation and political discussions of multiculturalism and community. Greater awareness of interconnection, and of the pervasiveness of suffering on the planet, can motivate students to greater acts of compassion, love, understanding, and healing.

Visualizations

Visualization techniques also have powerful applications in the classroom. When teaching poetic imagery, I sometimes ask students to concentrate on the images that

arise spontaneously in their minds as the poem is being read by myself or by a student. This technique helps to fortify the students' powers of mental imaging. Here are the meditation instructions: *Close your eyes. Listen carefully to the poem as I (or a student) read it. Observe the images that arise in your mind. Some of these images will be from the poem; others will be from your own life experience. Just allow the images to arise spontaneously, of their own accord.* After the meditation, the discussion focuses on: the meanings of indi-

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vidual images; the sequencing and interrelations between images; the feelings and sensations that the poet intends to evoke with the images; the actual feelings and sensations evoked in the students; and the interrelations among the students' experiences, the experiences of the poem's speaker, and the poet's implicit attitude.

Recently, I had students meditate during a reading of Mary Oliver's poem, "The Sun." The poem begins by describing the wonderful way the setting sun moves in the evening sky, "relaxed and easy." Gently drawing readers into the poem, the speaker asks us to imagine how the rising sun looks ("like a red flower"), and to consider our feelings towards the pleasure given by the sun's warmth. She asks, "have you ever felt for anything / such wild love— / do you think there is anywhere, in any language, / a word billowing enough / for the pleasure ... / as it warms you." But this appreciative poem ends with a direct confrontation to readers—if we don't share the speaker's gratitude towards the sun, is it because we have "gone crazy / for power, / for things?"

Students often report experiencing a slow parade of clear images and soothing feelings evoked by the representation of the sun's daily cycle in the second, third, and fourth stanzas of Oliver's poem. The next three stanzas, which describe the speaker's wild love and indescribable pleasure for the sun, tend to produce more exuberant feelings and a greater variety of mental images, probably because the poem's images are less distinct and so allow more personal projection and construction. One recent student experienced the sun that "reaches out, as it warms you" as a benevolent parent. Some students report that their experience of the poem nearly matches their own experience of the sun on special occasions. Others say their experience of the sun is nothing like the one Oliver tries to evoke. These students generally find the nature and intensity of the speaker's response to be quite odd. We then consider why different individuals experience the sun differently, and how cultural and familial attitudes shape our experience of the natural world. We also examine how Oliver's use of imagery, syntax, and line length channels the reader's literary experience of the sun. Indeed, meditation sensitizes students to a "reader response" approach to

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poetry: one that examines how textual devices shape a reader's ideational and emotional reactions. Finally, we discuss the shift at the end of the poem, when the speaker seems to turn on readers and question if they too have "gone crazy / for power, / for things?" We consider how this accusatory question affects the overall experience of the poem. Many students feel interrogated and assaulted by the question; for some, it ruins the entire poem. A few students feel they were "set up" by Oliver: she draws them into having a wonderful vicarious experience of the sun and then accuses them of being materialistic and power-hungry and of neglecting the sun in their everyday lives.

I sometimes introduce a more active visualization after a discussion of a poem in order to help students relate the poem more intimately to their own lives. For example, after discussing a poem like Oliver's, I ask students to visualize a powerful experience they had in nature: *Close your eyes and take a few deep, slow breaths. Recall an occasion when you had a powerful experience while alone in nature. Try to remember a time when you felt extremely connected or alive or peaceful or filled with wonder and awe. Where were you? Try to see in your mind's eye exactly where you were. Was it in the forest, at the seashore, in the desert? If you were in the forest, try to see and smell the trees, to hear and feel the wind, to see and feel the sun. Use all of your senses to reexperience the event. Were you walking or sitting? Were you silent or singing or talking to yourself? How did this powerful experience come about? What event seemed to trigger your experience? What sequence of thoughts, feelings, sensations did you experience? How does this experience continue to affect you to this day?*

After students meditate for three to five minutes, I ask if anyone would like to share his or her contemplative experience. The ensuing discussion of personal experiences is illuminating in its own right and also serves to shed new light not only on the previous poetry discussion but also on our complex relationship to the world. This particular meditation, for example, allows students to consider the difference between their original experience in nature and their reexperiencing of that encounter in the present.

Contemplating Questions

One method for strengthening students' contemplative and creative powers is to have them meditate on a question. In a psychology course on interpersonal relations or a literature course on romantic poetry, students can be asked to contemplate questions like "What is love?" or "Who am I?" Here are the instructions: *Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. Now focus your attention on the question "Who am I?" Don't force any answers. Just allow your thoughts to form spontaneously. Observe the ideas and images and feelings that arise of their own accord.*

Students can also pair up and repeat the question out loud to each other. Through this exercise, students become aware of their covert role identifications and self-images. They come to realize the multifarious ways in which early cultural conditioning and ongoing social pressures shape their experience of themselves. They also come to realize how their own self-judgments diminish their personal well-being and constrict their powers of love and creativity. As the meditation is extended for longer periods, some students begin to tap more expansive senses of identity that lie

beneath the dense web of socially constructed identities. I have heard students say, "I am the earth," "I am the sun," "I am an ocean of energy," "I am the cosmos," "I am a child of God." When students become aware of these broader and deeper identifications, they are more likely to feel real responsibility for the well-being of others and to act on that sense

of responsibility. This exercise can be followed by a discussion of how internalized images and ideas affect—extend, contract, clarify, cloud, distort—our sense of who we are and what we can do.

In closing, I want to emphasize that what meditation can do is not speculative and should not be taken on faith. Meditation is an empirical art and science. Students need to experience for themselves what contemplative awareness is. Once they've had this experience, they'll understand that all conversation about meditative consciousness is metaphorical and approximate. They'll also realize they can observe their experience more truly than they can possibly say or picture. Indeed, meditative experience gives students powerful evidence of the limits of language, logic, representation, and expression. They come to realize the artificiality or conventionality involved in imposing ideas and images on experience. They start to see that their own words and pictures are static, approximate renderings of the dynamic, complex flux of reality as it is experienced by a human being.

Meditation also gives students more time to reflect with their full powers of awareness. And that is what is most needed in the classroom: sufficient time to contemplate deeply. As educators, we need to resist the pervasive societal—indeed, global—emphasis on speed because it guarantees partial, superficial, or distorted understanding. No depth of comprehension can come out of rushing, scanning, skimming.

We have seen that contemplation helps to heal inner splits and outer conflicts by accessing our most expansive and integrated powers of awareness and action. Through meditative awareness, we become more deeply responsive to ourselves and our fellow living beings. Through contemplation we reach the source of our greatest compassion, creativity, tranquillity, and joy. So while meditation is not a panacea, it does powerfully transform our lives and the lives of all other beings inhabiting this planet. □

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