



PHILOSOPHY EAST/WEST

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL AND
CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

Edited by Oren Ergas and Sharon Todd

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Philosophy East/West

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*Exploring Intersections between Educational
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Edited by

Oren Ergas and Sharon Todd

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Introduction

OREN ERGAS AND SHARON TODD

This book addresses two interrelated themes that have emerged both from within philosophy and from within education. The first has to do with reading across philosophical traditions in order to address what educational and contemplative practices have to say to one another; the second concerns the recent ‘contemplative turn’ in education, with its focus on mindfulness and other forms of mind/body work that are incorporated into the curriculum based on scientific research, on the one hand, and their spiritual origins, on the other.

Contemplative practices can be broadly defined as ‘the ways that human beings, across cultures and across time, have found to concentrate, broaden, and deepen conscious awareness as the gateway to cultivating their full potential and to leading more meaningful and fulfilling lives’ (Roth, 2006, p. 1788). The interpretative space that this particular definition opens may be an appropriate way of capturing the diversity and complexity that characterises a current social arena in which contemplative practices are increasingly being incorporated into educational settings in Western industrialised countries (Barbezat and Bush, 2014; Ergas, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott and Bai, 2014; Hart, 2004; Hyland, 2011; MLERN, 2012; Palmer and Zajonc, 2010; Roeser and Peck, 2009; Roth, 2006; Shapiro, Brown and Astin, 2011). It is this diversity that stands at the heart of this book that locates what might be justly paraphrased as ‘the varieties of contemplative practice in and as education’ as a dense intersection point. At this intersection several strands, dualisms and categorisations are brought to bear as ‘West’ meets ‘East’, wisdom traditions meet science, individual meets society, self meets world, mindfulness meets mindlessness, spirituality meets secularity and more.

Contemplative educational thought takes us back to the roots of philosophy of education as well as to the roots of East-Asian wisdom traditions. It is found in the Delphic ideal of ‘know thyself’ and in its application within the Socratic dialogue, that Pierre Hadot (1995) interpreted as a ‘spiritual practice’ in which philosophy was considered a pedagogy and a ‘way of life’. It is similarly found in Buddhism—what

Robert Thurman understands primarily as an ‘Educational tradition’ (2006, p. 1769) in which the cultivation of a contemplative mind based on meditative practice constituted an integral part of the curriculum. Thurman claimed that, ‘For liberal education to fulfill its responsibility, the teaching of contemplative skills is a necessity, not a luxury’ (p. 1767). Our interest is to examine how the above Western and East-Asian strands might be understood as a fruitful intersection that can shed light on such possibility that in recent years seems to be moving from theory into actual practice and from philosophy into education.

Analytic philosopher Owen Flanagan (2011) notes three different philosophical styles that work across the borders of Western philosophy and Eastern wisdom traditions. The first is a comparative approach in which philosophical approaches are merely compared and contrasted, with little exploration of how they might mutually inform each other. The second is a fusion approach whereby different philosophical notions are integrated into a whole. This, he cautions, can sometimes (although not always) lead to a disrespect of the very differences that constitute the respective positions under discussion. The third style is a cosmopolitan one. Here, Flanagan notes that doing this kind of philosophical work implicates the author in a critical and ironic openness to all positions, including one’s own: ‘the cosmopolitan is a listener and a speaker . . . he or she compares and contrasts, is willing to try fusings of silly and safe sorts, but mostly likes living at the intersection of multiple spaces of meaning, waiting and seeing and watching whatever happens happen’ (2011, p. 2).

It is this living in the interstitial space of meaning that informs the approach undertaken in this book. And although the essays would not necessarily embrace the call to ‘irony’ invoked by Flanagan, they nonetheless offer a vision of what Eppert, Vokey, Nguyen and Bai in this book call ‘intercultural’ philosophy. It is precisely an *exploration* of the intersections between educational practices informed by Western philosophical traditions and the contemplative practices informed by Eastern wisdom traditions that characterise the orientation of the articles collected here. Offering a range of perspectives that cut across analytic and continental traditions within philosophy of education and bridging these with Buddhist, yogic, and Daoist philosophies of contemplative practices, this book opens up possibilities for reframing our attention to mind/body as a central aspect of, and a site of resistance to, ‘doing’ education.

Philosophically speaking, then, the challenge becomes how not to typecast ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ thought as unified categories in the first place (Eppert and Wang, 2008). Using these two broad terms can hide a richness of differences within and not only between them.

There is no ‘essence’ of Eastern wisdom traditions. Although there are some interrelated threads that form a constellation of elements that are recognisable across traditions, these threads are not interchangeable across those traditions. Like threads on a loom, they are woven in varying patterns to create differently textured tapestries. Not only is the weave different for each, but the thread itself also changes appearance in its varying creations. We find, for instance, notions of ‘nonduality’ as ways of capturing our interdependence and interconnectedness with the world, yet these expressions take on different forms whether we are talking about Shambhala Buddhism, Daoism, Vedanta or Theravada Buddhism (Loy, 1988). It is these different nuances that the papers explore collectively in relation to—and not so much in distinction from—Western philosophical and educational concerns. Similarly, the fetishisation of Western philosophy into ontological dualisms and epistemological certainties does little justice to the kinds of pursuits that Western philosophers have indeed been preoccupied with, from the ancient Greeks through to Foucault and Deleuze. Again, the work of Pierre Hadot is noteworthy here in emphasising philosophy’s relation to life, which grants to philosophy its particularly educational character. In this ‘Western’ conception there is no border between the thoughtfulness occasioned by the life of the mind and the orientation one has to the world in the life of the body; knowledge is not disconnected from virtue, insight from compassion, or wisdom from ethics.

It is this broader and richer conception of philosophy that has led the articles collected here to employ a different kind of language. Instead of using words such as evaluation, assessment, and appraisal as comparative terms between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ thought, the essays instead turn to resonance, significance, and implication. This alternative lexicon allows for a more complex picture of the intersections to emerge from reading across the traditions, ones that occasion a learning from each other, as opposed to one reigning over the other in some hierarchal game of philosophical—and educational—value.

Turning to the second theme of this issue, the ‘contemplative turn’, it is important to note that contemplation has been no stranger to 20th century curriculum theory and philosophy of education (Huebner, 1999; Miller, 1994; Palmer, 1983, Pinar and Grumet, 1976; Weil, 1956). Despite these rich and compelling accounts, and despite the depth of the traditions from which they have sprung, contemplative practices such as meditation have been quite a rare phenomenon within public schools and/or higher education institutions. Since around the turn of the millennium, however, there has been a dramatic shift in this domain, as various contemplative practices have been gradually moved from the margins to the mainstream of social discourse.

There may be several reasons for this current shift. Sociologists suggest the alienation of living in a technologically saturated information-age and capitalist regime that push individuals and groups to search for an antidote, alongside the deepening pull of a teleological quest for meaning (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Wexler, 2000; Wexler and Hotam, 2015). Notwithstanding these possibilities, what seems to be almost unquestionable at this point in time is that one of the most prominent forces in the making of this current ‘turn’ has been the unique, impregnated, and controversial, intersection between mindfulness practice—originating in Buddhism—and modern *science*.

This change has been mostly bolstered by the success of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (1990) Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction—a skilful rendition of a Buddhist meditational practice applied toward medical ends. Kabat-Zinn’s work began in 1979, taking some time until its impact has captured the interest of the scientific community, a point from which this interest has been rising dramatically. Documenting the number of peer-reviewed scientific research on mindfulness may serve as testimony to the ‘contemplative turn’ mindfulness has introduced to a variety of fields. Prior to 1980 there were 0 publications on mindfulness. The number rises exponentially to 549 publications in 2013 alone (Black *et al.*, 2014). The discovery of mindfulness practices’ effects on brain plasticity (Davidson, 2012), and the amelioration of several human conditions based on therapy (Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002; Siegel, 2011) seems to have been a major factor in the makings of the contemporary image of contemplative practice.

In recent years, the pace of these changes is accelerating and has become widely manifest in several developments. A host of higher educational initiatives dedicated specifically to the study of contemplation are offered both within special Bachelors and Masters degrees (e.g. Brown University’s Bachelor’s degree in contemplative studies, Simon Fraser University’s MEd in contemplative inquiry and approaches in education) and within specific pedagogical applications of contemplation in academic courses (Barbezat and Bush, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott and Bai, 2014; Lin, Oxford and Brantmeier, 2013; Simmer-Brown and Grace, 2011). In pre-K to K-12 settings we find a proliferation of mindfulness based curricular interventions (e.g. MINDUP [Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor, 2010]; ‘.b’ curriculum [Burnett, 2011]; Inner-Kids [Kaiser-Greenland, 2010]).

This arena calls us to ask: what are the potentials, difficulties and questions that stem from this intersection of Wisdom traditions, academia, and science as it gives rise to novel educational phenomena? Against the backdrop of this vibrant and novel domain we find an increasingly complex social-political-economic educational arena in

which a host of practices, originating in diverse traditions, are referred to as ‘contemplative’, and are applied in different educational settings geared toward a plethora of aims, some of which might be considered almost antithetical (e.g. stress-reduction, productivity, meaning, boosting of immune system, cognitive therapy, enhancing executive functions). How do these ‘mindfulness-based curricular interventions’ affect current educational theory and practice? Where are these short-termed evidence-based programs that are incorporated across America and Europe leading? What are the curricular and pedagogical implications of the incorporation of mindfulness, yoga, and compassion meditation in a higher education course?

The latter questions, are currently addressed within the burgeoning ‘contemplative education’ discourse, and are discussed directly in some of the essays in this book. Yet, here we seek to extend our horizons and ask whether our critique could also move beyond the current ‘mindfulness’ buzz that has earned the derogatory term ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy, 2013). A fair question would be whether there is a need to ‘import’ practices from East Asia, rather than turn to a rich contemplative tradition found in the Greek, Roman, Hellenistic and Christian schools of thought (Foucault, 1988; Hadot, 1995; Steel, 2012)? Another question would be what about other contemplative traditions—Daoism, Vedanta, Classical yoga? And why settle for East Asia, and not venture to Aboriginal or compelling accounts of Native American traditions (Mercurieff and Roderick, 2013)?

Although this volume does not respond to all of these questions, and in fact does indeed mostly focus on the Eastern wisdom traditions, it nonetheless grapples with the complexity of introducing those wisdom traditions into the context of the Western educational systems in which the authors are immersed. The essays here can be grouped into three distinct yet overlapping areas. The first three essays by Terry Hyland, Aislinn O’Donnell and Oren Ergas are concerned with contextualising contemporary educational concerns with mindfulness as an example of one contemplative practice. Hyland’s essay opens this book with a comprehensive view of the mindfulness movement, examining the construction of ‘mindfulness’ based on its secularisation and its psychological adaptations. He brings this analysis to bear on the philosophical underpinnings and potentialities of mindfulness in education grounded in current examples from the field. Aislinn O’Donnell’s piece follows with a critical exploration of the recent rise in the incorporation of mindfulness practice in diverse social settings. As she claims, the well-meaning efforts to secularise mindfulness towards making it accessible may be impoverishing its broader ethical contribution. Thus, she depicts a more nuanced approach to the incorporation

of mindfulness in schools that pushes it beyond the curricular interventions model. Acting somewhat as a bridge between these views Oren Ergas's essay asks us to look beyond the 'rivalry' between the evidence-based approach and the wisdom-tradition approach for the justification of contemplative practices in the curriculum. Building on William James's conception of attention, he depicts the core meta-pedagogical teaching of the 'contemplative turn' as the injunction to attend *in here now*. Such practice, even if instrumentalised, is a challenging reconstruction of the social understanding of 'education', and the 'curriculum' that has far-reaching educational implications.

Picking up the threads of attention, David Lewin's essay is the first of the next three papers to focus on the work of major Western philosophers. Here, he uses insights from East-Asian wisdom traditions as a means for interpreting Heidegger's attempt to overcome Western metaphysics by challenging 'thinking' as representational. With this, he arrives at an interpretation of Heideggerean learning as a project of relinquishing all images in what he calls 'a contemplative *aporia*'. Through interweaving the ethics of alterity of Emmanuel Levinas with Theravada Buddhism's idea of nonself, Sharon Todd argues for an education committed to 'negative capability'. Here the focus is on developing a sensibility that is accepting of change and the unfamiliar as an essential part of education. Reading Levinas with and across Buddhism, she outlines an ethical approach that resonates with the experiential dimensions of educational practice. Next, Rob Hattam and Bernadette Baker take the reader into Foucauldian territory with a careful examination of technologies of the self in relation to Buddhist cultivation of virtue and doctoral education. Specifically, they juxtapose Foucault's call for practices of subjectivation with the Tibetan meditation of compassion known as *tonglen*. In seeking to keep a dialogical openness between these two positions, the authors explore a critical pedagogical approach to doctoral education and argue for a new vision of how change is located in the aporetic spaces opened up therein.

The final three essays take us more deeply into the spiritual dimensions of education. Tom Culham continues Hattam and Baker's theme of 'care of the self' to elucidate the integration of virtue and knowledge in light of Greek philosophy, on the one hand, and Daoism, on the other hand. The idea that virtue and knowledge can be separated, as he shows, is a relatively recent idea reflected in certain interpretations of the epistemology of modern science. Through exploring Daoist concepts (e.g. *dao*, *dé*, *qi*) Culham demonstrates Daoist contemplative practices as ways for the cultivation of an integrated knowledge-virtue. In their co-authored piece, Claudia Eppert, Daniel Vokey, Tram Nguyen and Heesoon Bai depict the framework of 'intercultural

philosophy’ as carrying a rich potential for the quest for social transformation. Based on this approach they turn to the concept of ‘basic goodness’ that constitutes the ground of several East-Asian wisdom traditions. Focusing on Shambhala Buddhism, they detail this concept and examine its implications for transformative and contemplative education toward social transformation. Finally, Ed Sarath studies the intersection of two neglected epistemologies—improvisation and meditation—as they bear on the understanding of contemporary higher education. He describes the dilemmas and controversies involved in his own journey of developing and implementing the BFA in Jazz and Contemplative Studies at Michigan University. These serve to demonstrate contemporary contemplative higher education, and to open his critical discussion of the current state of contemplative education, its limitations and future possibilities.

Since philosophy is an ongoing conversation, we view these essays as ways of stimulating further discussion, as opening novel perspectives from which to examine the foundations of educational theory and practice. We hope they can offer inspiration to others for pursuing work in this border landscape of Eastern and Western thought, and contribute to a renewed commitment to exploring the deeper purposes of education, broadly conceived.

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1

On the Contemporary Applications of Mindfulness: Some Implications for Education

TERRY HYLAND

THE CONCEPT OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has become something of a boom industry over the last few decades, thanks largely to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) who developed a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme in his work at the Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since then the work of Kabat-Zinn and associates (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002; Williams *et al.*, 2007; Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013) has been responsible for a massive global expansion of interest in mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in a diverse range of domains including work in schools, prisons, workplaces and hospitals, in addition to wide applications in psychology, psychotherapy, education and medicine. An Internet search on the concept of mindfulness retrieves around 18 million items and, in terms of publications, numbers have grown from one or two per year in 1980 to around 400 per year in 2011 (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 3; the growth of mindfulness publications has been exponential over the last few years, see American Mindfulness Research Association, <https://goamra.org/>).

In accounting for this burgeoning interest in the idea of mindfulness we are immediately faced with questions of definition, meaning and interpretation. What is the relationship between the concept of mindfulness which informs Buddhist traditions and that which is utilised in the treatment of addictions and chronic pain sufferers? Moreover, is there a coherent concept which connects mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) programmes—for example, the treatment of cancer sufferers (Bartley, 2012), addiction therapy (Baer, 2006) and

care of elderly people in nursing homes (Langer, 1989)—with the use of mindfulness in education (Hyland, 2011)?

Thich Nhat Hanh (1999)—the renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and campaigner for world peace and justice—describes mindfulness as being ‘at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings’. It involves ‘attention to the present moment’ which is ‘inclusive and loving’ and ‘which accepts everything without judging or reacting’ (p. 64). Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994) and associates have been largely responsible for transforming the original spiritual notion (i.e. the training of the mind to alleviate suffering in ourselves and others) into a powerful and ubiquitous therapeutic tool based on forms of meditation and mindful practices. Mindfulness simply means ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally’ in a way which ‘nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality’. Such practice—whether this involves breathing or walking meditation or giving full non-judgmental attention to everyday activities—can offer a ‘powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back in touch with our own wisdom and vitality’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, pp. 4–5).

Bodhi (2013) explains that the original *sati* (the Pali word for mindfulness, *smṛti* in Sanskrit) meant memory or recollection as originally interpreted by Rhys Davids the founder of the Pali Text Society in 1910. Another layer of meaning relating to ‘lucid awareness’ using all the senses was added later and this forged the connection between the ‘two primary canonical meanings: as memory and as lucid awareness of present happenings’ (ibid., p. 25).

Bodhi (2013) also points to the role of mindfulness (in addition to being the seventh strand of the path) in integrating other elements of the noble eightfold path, a role which Hanh (1999) also highlights in observing that:

When right mindfulness is present the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are also present. When we are mindful, our thinking is Right Thinking, our speech is Right Speech, and so on. Right Mindfulness is the energy that brings us back to the present moment (p. 64).

There are, however, two aspects of the secular therapeutic conception of mindfulness—as ‘bare attention’ and non-conceptual, non-judgmental awareness—which require explanation in terms of their difference from Buddhist traditional notions. Buddhist accounts of the awareness involved in *sati* indicate an awareness which is cognitive, discursive and goes beyond pre-conceptual bare attention