

“The Collective Dynamics of Contemplative Practice”
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As contemplative studies becomes an established part of our university curriculum, it will do more than influence the content of what we teach and the manner in which we teach it. It will also tend to expose the workings of the collective psyche in our classrooms. Our contemplative traditions have extensive history with these dynamics, but the academy does not. While our spiritual traditions have placed great value on the insights of interdependence and the transparency of self to a deeper collective matrix, our academic institutions for the most part have committed themselves to an “atomistic psychology” that emphasizes separation and self-autonomy – one mind per brain. As a result, introducing practices that have the capacity to initiate persons into this deeper matrix will hold some surprises not only for our students but for our colleagues as well.

I have been a professor of religious studies at a public university in northeastern Ohio for over thirty years. While I have incorporated meditation into a few of my courses, I have done so only in a limited fashion. In this respect, I probably represent a transitional pedagogy, something between the conventions of the past and the more robust contemplative pedagogies represented by others in this volume. In the conservative setting in which I have taught, I felt it was important for me to maintain a clear distinction between my private life and my professional work on campus. In my private life, I cultivated an active spiritual practice, drawing primarily from Buddhist and shamanic traditions. In my professional life, I worked as a more or less traditional academic, teaching courses in world religions, Eastern religions, psychology of religion, Buddhism, and transpersonal studies. As a matter of professional ethics, I kept these two domains separate from each other. I did not discuss my personal practice with my students and few knew about this side of my life. And yet what I discovered was that nature did not honor the boundary I had so carefully drawn.

As my spiritual practice deepened over the years, a variety of “paranormal” phenomena began to surface in my classroom, if one wishes to use that term. My mind and my students’ minds began to become more porous to each other in striking ways. Spiritual breakthroughs at

home sometimes triggered shockwaves among my students on campus. Over the years, as I entered progressively deeper states of consciousness, the number of students being affected increased and the impact intensified. Eventually these energetic and cognitive resonances became such a prominent part of my teaching that I had no choice but to explore what was driving them in greater detail. I carefully observed what was taking place in my classes, read the consciousness literature extensively, and experimented with how to work with the powerful forces involved. Over time, this inquiry profoundly changed how I teach and eventually resulted in the publication of *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness*.¹

If a professor's "private" spiritual practice can trigger effects like those I am going to describe here among students who were neither aware of their professor's practice nor (in most cases) doing practice themselves, it seems reasonable to suggest that these effects could be even more pronounced where professors and students are doing contemplative practice together on a regular basis.² In my experience, these practices not only illumine the great *depth* of consciousness, they also *activate* the great *breadth* of consciousness. Therefore, if we are going to initiate our students into these practices, we should be prepared to manage this activation when it occurs and to help our students understand it. These dynamics challenge the conventional psychological and pedagogical paradigm and invite us to take our teaching to a more conscious, more intentional level.

Resonance in the classroom

About five years after I began teaching, a student came up to me after class one day and said, "You know, it's strange that you used the example you did in class today, because that's exactly what happened to me this week." In my experience, I had simply reached for a random example to illustrate a point I had been making, but what had been random for me turned out to be poignantly significant for him. When he heard his recent life experience coming back to him in my lecture, it snapped him to attention. It was as if he had been given a personal invitation to get more deeply involved in the course.

The first time this happened, I brushed it off as mere coincidence, but it continued to happen often enough that eventually I could no longer dismiss it. In the years that followed, it became a not uncommon occurrence in my classes. My students were finding bits and pieces of their recent life experience, or the experience of a close family member, in my lectures. Without

my intending it, without my even being aware when it was happening, my consciousness seemed to be tapping into some kind of informational field that held their life experience. (I should mention that I have never considered myself particularly psychically sensitive. In fact, before these events, I had always thought of myself as something of a psychic brick.)

One evening, for example, I was teaching a night course in Eastern religions with about thirty students. In the middle of my lecture, I found myself taking a little detour in which I described an account of a Zen master who had had an accurate precognitive intuition of his impending death, similar to accounts Sushila Blackman later published in *Graceful Exits*.³ I had never talked about this in this lecture before. It was just a little aside, something dropped in to add a little anecdotal interest to the discussion we were having about the capacities of the mind.

After class, a silver-haired elderly lady came up to talk with me. She was not part of our usual group but had been brought to class that night by a friend who was worried about her. Her husband had died three months before, and her friend thought she was languishing at home and needed to get out of the house. In the conversation that followed, she told me this story. Her husband had been a used car salesman in good health. Several weeks before his unexpected death, he had cleared out most of the cars from his lot and gotten all his financial paperwork in order. A few days later, he and his wife were watching TV in the evening when he put down his newspaper and, in a way that was quite out of character for him, turned to his wife and said, “Darling, I just want you to know that if I died tomorrow, you’ve made my entire life worthwhile.” A week later, he died in his sleep.

What she wanted to know was whether I thought her husband might have been unconsciously aware that he was going to die, like the person I had described in my lecture. I said that it sounded like a possibility, and this thought was comforting to her. This led to a longer conversation in which she described the challenges his passing had created for her. In the midst of her grief, she then got in touch with how overprotective he had been and how she was now being given the opportunity to develop herself in ways that his well-intentioned care had always prevented. That very night, she decided to return to college, where she thrived for several years, allowing many new doors to open in her life.

When these things first started happening in my classroom, I was in the early stages of both my career and my spiritual practice, and here the plot thickens. To make a very long story short, as my spiritual practice gradually deepened through the years, these synchronicities

became more frequent. It was as though by entering more deeply into conscious communion with the underlying fabric of life, the threads of that fabric were being activated around me. The experience of depth seemed to be triggering the emergence of greater breadth, as though depth and breadth were two different dimensions of a seamless fabric.

Not only were these cognitive resonances becoming more frequent, they were also targeting increasingly sensitive areas in my students' lives. It was as though a radar had been activated that was operating below the threshold of my egoic awareness, a radar that zeroed in on some part of their life that was hurting or constricted. Sometimes it touched a question they had been holding for years, or triggered an insight they had been searching for, something they needed to find before they could take the some next step in their development. Sometimes it lanced a private pain that had been festering inside them. In this mysterious communion that opened between us, it was as if my students' souls were slipping messages to me, giving me hints on how I might reach them – telling me where they were hiding, where they were hurting, and most importantly, what ideas they needed to take the next step in their lives.

As the years passed and the process deepened, my students also began to have unusually deep experiences related to some of the concepts I was presenting in class. It was as though they were being activated by more than just the ideas, as though they were somehow being touched by the actual *experience* of these realities that now lived in me to some degree because of my practice.

I have taught more sections of Introduction to World Religions than I care to remember; it is a staple in our department. When students hear the perennial truths of the world's spiritual traditions simply spoken, when they are reminded of things long ago forgotten but always present at the edge of their awareness, there is sometimes a spark of recognition that can explode into a flame. This flame is contagious and sometimes stimulates sympathetic resonances with other students in the room. Students may collectively feel their energy shift to different centers of awareness, though they may not understand what is happening at the time. Symptoms of “chakra-opening” and “kundalini arousal” may begin to manifest. Energy runs, hearts open, and insights arise.⁴

These can be very powerful experiences for students. One sophomore described such an experience in an essay she wrote at the end of the semester. It happened to her on a day when I was describing the Buddhist understanding of the relationship of individual mind to non-dual

consciousness. To convey this point, I sometimes use the analogy of a tree, contrasting leaf-consciousness (the personal mind) with tree-consciousness (non-dual consciousness). In this exercise, I invite the students to imagine that the leaves of a tree are individually self-aware but not yet conscious of the life of the tree they are part of, until the moment of breakthrough. It is a powerful metaphor that I save until I think the class is ready to absorb its full import. On this particular day, this young woman experienced the following:

The thing that hit me the hardest of all that we talked about in class was tree-consciousness and leaf-consciousness. It was what brought everything together for me. What made me understand everyone's interdependence and stopped me from living in fear. I was so moved that it took everything that I had not to cry in class, not from sadness but from being hit by a life-altering realization. It made an emotion rise in me that I had never felt before and I wasn't really sure how to react to it.

Another student, a woman in her mid-thirties, summarized a similar experience in a different course in the following way:

Sitting in class, I felt like I was inside one of those glass ball snow scenes that folks use as paperweights. Shake the ball and mass confusion begins with flakes of fake snow swirling all around....I couldn't *hear* the lecture. My mind struggled to focus and stay with your words, but I was missing it....

Later...at home...alone. It would all return to me, the lecture...Mostly feelings. Tears. Recognition. Understanding after I let it simmer for a while. Realization that if I didn't grab at it, it would be there waiting, this knowledge. These tiny bright spots of revelatory insight. I'd journal. I'd cry. Sometimes light and gentle, warm feel-good crying. Sometimes sobs, wracking and exhausting. I THOUGHT I WAS LOSING MY MIND A FEW TIMES....

The result? I'm becoming who I was *long* ago. The field by-passed my intellect and went directly to my heart to pry it open....I now know what I had deeply buried in me for years, and the gift of the pick and shovel for the ongoing process comes from being in the energy of the folks in our classroom. It didn't come from me alone.

I should mention that it wasn't my intention to trigger such deep existential reactions among my students. In fact, fearing that they were out of place in a university setting, I often

tried to damp them down, but I found that this was impossible without damaging the teaching process itself. Whenever my students and I would gather and simply cover the day's assignment, these things would spontaneously occur without my consciously intending them. It was as though fire was lighting fire. When we would simply focus on the task of sharing understanding, these *resonances of living experience* would spring up – not always but often – drawing students into heightened states of awareness.

The challenges of self-transformation

Most of the students who were touched by these dynamics experienced them as uplifting, even exhilarating “Aha!” moments. For some students, however, the process presented them with difficult personal challenges. As the spiritual literature makes clear, purification is often the companion of liberation. Before we can realize the greater being that we are, we must confront and release what is holding us back from realizing this potential – some habit of thought, some emotional constriction. When some of my students were activated by what I believe is a life-enhancing process, their systems began a process of spontaneous detoxification – a shedding of old patterns, old ways of thinking and feeling. I do not believe this would have happened to them if they had not been ready for it at a deeper level, even inviting it. They entered this transformational process because they were ripe for it.

These cathartic activations became particularly pronounced during a period of several years when I was undergoing a series of powerful transformative experiences in my practice that were breaking me down at very deep levels. The details of these experiences are not important here and are described in my book *Dark Night, Early Dawn*.⁵ Many spiritual traditions describe a phase of inner work that involves dissolving the sense of boundary between self and other. They describe an experiential membrane that marks the border between one's individual mind-field and surrounding fields of awareness. On the near side of this membrane, the world appears to be composed of separate beings, each with their seemingly private existence. On the far side of the membrane, the world appears as an integrated whole, a continuum of energy that is unfathomably complex and extravagantly beautiful. When a practitioner is transitioning through this territory, standing at the interface of these two paradoxically compatible realities, powerful synchronicities with surrounding persons sometimes manifest.

As my inner work came to focus on this boundary, triggering the purifications that

typically accompany this transition, some of my students simultaneously began to undergo very difficult challenges in their lives. Most of my students did not enter these waters, of course, and passed through my courses untouched by these dynamics, but some did enter them. Those who did so sometimes felt themselves coming to a breaking point in their lives or a moment of supreme risk-taking. It was as though they and I were being drawn through a *collective death-rebirth vortex* together, a vortex that was breaking all of us down in different ways, uprooting deeply buried pains, and challenging restrictive barriers in our lives.

Some students chose to end bad marriages or to heal wounded ones. Others left careers they had outgrown but were still holding onto. (Thirty percent of the students at my university are older, non-traditional students.) Some began to confront their addictions and others to re-approach persons from whom they had been estranged for a long time. One woman in her mid-forties hints at the profound disruption of her inner and outer worlds that occurred during this period when she began to spontaneously recover painful memories of child abuse, in a course on Buddhism, of all places:

During and after having been in your classes, my internal world became increasingly chaotic as demons from painful psychological gestalts began to emerge, and eventually coloring my external world too, challenging everything I thought I was and dissolving familiar reference points...As I struggled to break through powerful gestalts of pain, you spoke to and nourished my soul, making it possible for me to move more deeply into my spiritual journey.

Obviously the phenomena I am describing raise important pedagogical and ethical issues. As my students came to me with these reports and I saw how deeply they were being affected by this mysterious alchemy that had opened between us, I was more than a little shaken myself. Neither of us had solicited this connection, yet here it was. Did I need to protect them from what was happening? Obviously this was not what they had consciously signed up for when they signed up for my course. How does one ensure informed consent when the dynamics are so involuntary and beyond the pale of current academic discussion?

While the activation some of my students experienced during this period was quite powerful, there were no casualties and many positive breakthroughs. On the rare occasion when a student's self-transformation became particularly turbulent, I referred him or her to a gifted therapist in the area with whom they could process what was emerging in a safe setting.

While these kinds of responses might be expected in certain types of courses, such as a counseling course, this was not the case for the kind of courses I was teaching. Rather, these events seemed to be the *indirect effect* of our simply coming together to learn. It was not the content of the course that seemed to be driving these effects, but something deeper. I believe it had something to do with the interaction of our subtle life energy at a fundamental level. What was triggering these effects was not what I was *doing* but rather what I had *become*. They were being evoked less by what I was saying than by what I was, or more accurately, by what we were together.

The ecology of consciousness

Whatever description scientists eventually give the fundamental level of reality that underlies space-time and its relation to consciousness⁶ the experiences of my students appear to demonstrate a simple principle: *clarified states of consciousness are contagious*. My efforts to realize deeper states of awareness seem to have caused my person to begin acting as a kind of lightning rod triggering sparks of a similar awakening among those students who were receptive to this influence. Like ripples spreading across water, this is an utterly natural effect. When one person begins to throw off layers of egoic conditioning and awaken to clearer, more inclusive states of awareness, surrounding persons will be affected. Our spiritual ecology simply does not permit private awakening. *The ecology of consciousness is an inherently collective ecology*.

Though this suggestion is still regarded as heretical in most academic circles, it raises fewer eyebrows in spiritual communities, which have long known that persons undergoing deep transformation affect those around them in subtle ways. The devotee and author Satprem, for example, discusses this phenomenon in his biography of Sri Aurobindo where he writes:

...Sri Aurobindo and the Mother would realize that transformation is not just an individual problem but one involving the earth and that no individual transformation is possible (or at least complete) without some degree of collective transformation....It should be noted that each time Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had some experience indicating a new progress in the transformation, the disciples, without their even knowing anything about it, experienced in their consciousness a period of increased difficulties or even revolts and illnesses, as if everything were grating. Now we begin to understand how things work.⁷

Similarly, scholar-practitioner Mike Sayama mentions this phenomenon in his book, *Samadhi*. In his discussion of the dynamics of *ch'i*, Sayama quotes the Japanese healer Kaneko Shoseki who observes:

Apart from the normal communication between men through language and action there is another quite different sort of mutual influence. It is that of the rhythm of the Original Strength which permeates all human beings and Nature. Through it every individual thing... is connected with every other. If then one who is further removed from the working of the Primordial Force is close to one who lives more in accord with it, the rhythm of the Primordial Force will certainly be transmitted from the one to the other. The latter without knowing it exerts a good influence on the other.⁸

Conclusion

If my students could share one message with teachers of contemplative studies, I think it would be this. If you are an educator who is doing a form of spiritual practice that has the capacity to activate deep levels of the unconscious, especially at the level of the collective psyche, you can expect to stimulate sympathetic resonances with at least some of your students. These resonances will likely be more pronounced if you are meditating with your students on a regular basis. This is a natural and unstoppable effect of practice, a manifestation of the inherent wholeness of consciousness at deep levels.

Furthermore, in addition to the energetic resonances between teacher and student, when a class meditates together, there is a compounding effect generated by the *group field* of the class as a whole. Though I do not have the space to discuss this second part of the equation here, readers will find an extensive discussion of it in *The Living Classroom*. There I draw upon Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance to explore the compounding effect learning has on groups and the emergence of a true collective intelligence in the classroom.⁹

To teach conscientiously in a world where minds are separate at one level and yet "entangled" in a unified field at another calls for a more intentional pedagogy than the separatist, atomistic psychology of the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm. The new paradigm emerging in science today emphasizes the inherent connectivity of life and the powerful tendency of nature to synchronize its many parts into larger wholes.¹⁰ Accordingly, the pedagogy emerging within this new paradigm will recognize the innate connectivity of consciousness and the distributive effect

of specific states of consciousness. Contemplative studies has an important role to play in this transition.

¹ Chris Bache, *The Living Classroom*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008).

²“Spiritual practice” is being used here as a broader category than “contemplative practice” and includes all practices designed to initiate one into and deepen one’s experience of spiritual reality, such as shamanic work, yoga, meditation, vision quest, prayer, fasting, deep body work, etc. “Contemplative practice” refers more narrowly to various forms of meditation practice.

³ Shushila Blackman, *Graceful Exists*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).

⁴In Indian yoga and medicine, the *chakras* (or “wheels”) are centers of consciousness and bioenergy believed to exist in the subtle body. Traditionally there are seven chakras, each associated with a major nerve ganglia in the body and reflecting a specific kind of conscious awareness. Together the chakras are said compose the entire range of human experience from the primitive fight or flight response to highly spiritual non-dual awareness. *Kundalini* (literally “coiled”) is described as the bio-spiritual energy that animates the chakra system. This energy rests at the base of the spine, and as it rises it “opens” the various chakras, activating their potential for certain kinds of experience and insight. Gopi Krishna, *Kundalini*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1997); Lee Sannella, *The Kundalini Experience*, (Lower Lake, CA: Integral Publishing, 1987).

⁵ Chris Bache, *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).

⁶ Amit Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe*, (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995); Ervin Laszlo, *The Interconnected Universe*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1999), *The Connectivity Hypothesis*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), *Science and the Akashic Field*, (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004).

⁷ Satprem, *Sri Aurobindo or The Adventure of Consciousness*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1993), 291.

⁸ Michael Sayama, *Samadhi*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986) 80-81.

⁹ Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life*, (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1981), *The Presence Of The Past* (New York: Vintage, 1988), *The Rebirth Of Nature*, (New York: Bantam, 1991).

¹⁰ Howard Blook, *Global Brain*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000); Stewart Kaufman, *At Home in the Universe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dean Radin, *Entangled Minds*, (New York: Pocket Books, 2006); Steve Strogatz, *Sync*, (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003).