



Meditation as Teaching and Learning Tool **Theory, Practice, and Testimony**

**Wayne-Daniel Berard, Alexandria Hallam, Anne Geiwitz,
Matthew R. Kerzner**

Nichols College

Wayne-Daniel.Berard@nichols.edu • Alexandria.Hallam@nichols.edu •
Anne.Geiwitz@nichols.edu • Mkerzner@sbcglobal.net

Abstract: This essay explores a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning based upon Eastern philosophy, particularly Zen, with specific attention to the writing process. Meditation, practiced in class, is central to this method. Together, students and teacher move from a Western, dualistic educational model in which teacher, learner and subject are separate and foreign to each other, to the East's emphasis upon the essential oneness of all things, including student, educator, and material. The essay details the theory underlying this approach, outlines specific classroom practices (particularly in the writing process), and offers testimony to the approach's effectiveness from two current students and an alumnus, as presented by them at UMass Boston's CIT Annual Conference in 2009.

I. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MEDITATION—BY WAYNE-DANIEL BERARD

Theory

The traditional Western approach to education, including the writing process, is based upon Aristotle's *Physics* and on the few extant pieces of his *Education*. It is an approach characterized by the following:

- Viewer and subject are two different, entirely distinct entities.

- Therefore, the viewer's task is to observe the reality before him or her, dissect it, analyze its component parts, and (for a writer) explain the conclusions or judgments he or she has come to as a result of this process.

Eastern philosophy, such as (though not entirely relying on) the Hindu *Vedas*, the teachings of the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and others maintains that:

- There is only one reality, to which subject and viewer both belong. Subsequently, viewer and subject are one.

Wayne-Daniel Berard is Professor of English, Director of Spiritual Life and Chaplain at Nichols College, Dudley, MA, and an interfaith Peace Chaplain, commissioned by the Peace Abbey, Sherborn, MA. **Alexandria Hallam** is a sophomore Management major at Nichols College. **Anne Geiwitz** is a sophomore English major at Nichols College. **Matthew R. Kerzner** is a Human Resource professional, founder and president of MRK Associates, and Adjunct Professor of Management and Economics at University of New Haven. He holds a BA in Industrial Psychology from Nichols College, an MA in Industrial Organizational Psychology and an MS in Labor Relations, both from University of New Haven.

Separateness is, therefore, an illusion of the senses; differentiation is a matter only of “parts of a whole,” rather than actual individuation.

The “viewer’s” task is to step back from that illusion, to be still and allow an experience of his or her oneness with all things to occur. As there is no real distinction between “self” and “all,” no “this or that,” the more the “viewer” knows him or herself, the more access he or she has to “everything else” (including the writing process). From this awareness, the “viewer” can create work with authenticity of experience regarding the subject at hand.

According to the Western approach, reality is dualistic; self and the rest of reality are largely foreign to each other. Understanding is a struggle in this approach; the subject must be “cracked open” in order to gain knowledge of and insight into it. This adversarial approach to learning, taking subject as enemy to be conquered and tamed, facilitates the creation of negative self-image; the more difficulty one has with school, the weaker and more inadequate one feels as “conqueror” and as a person (this is particularly true of male students).

The Eastern approach differs greatly. A famous Zen dictum is “No two, but one”; reality is a oneness rather than a dualism or multiplicity. Wolfgang Kopp, successor to the great Zen Master Soji Enku Roshi, describes this central concept of Zen as “the teaching of the mutual penetration of all things, the teaching of the fundamental oneness and sameness of all being” (1). He further illustrates this through use of a classic analogy from the *Avatama Sutra* known as “Indra’s Pearl Net”:

The sutra says that a great pearl net hangs high up in the heavens above the palace of the god Indra. All the pearls in this net are strung in such a way that each pearl contains all the others and at the same time mirrors, through the reflection of light, the entire cosmos with everything in it. Every-

thing is an all-encompassing totality in which all is contained. Everything is an absolute *here* and *now*. (2)

Accordingly any person, any student, any teacher, as one of “Indra’s pearls,” contains the totality of the real in his or her own person. There is, therefore, no question of *obtaining* knowledge or skills; we each already possess the most direct experience of all things, an innate knowledge needing only to be accessed and utilized. We already are the skills we need—to learn, to write, to succeed. If all things are self, “there is nothing to seek! There is no space in which things are separate from each other, and there is no time when something is not yet or no longer is.” (3)

Neither can there be failure, as this implies a dualism (one fails *at* something). There is no outside subject to be conquered, no foreignness. One needs only increased awareness and a willingness to allow the oneness of subject, learner and task to emerge. This awareness is largely gained through the use of meditation, which can also be used as a teaching and learning tool.

In the Western model, the conclusions to which academic work and writing in particular lead one are meant to result in judgments about the subject, to decisions as to what is right or wrong, better or worse, preferable or to be avoided.

In the Eastern approach, the end result of academic work, including writing, is compassion, that is, the ability to feel *with* someone or something (co-passion).

If all things are one, then the *Vedas*’ admonition “This, too, is thou” becomes particularly relevant; whatever conclusions one comes to about a subject are true likewise of oneself (4). Finger-pointing, dehumanization of “the other,” and disregard for the environment, the common good, or for future generations are much less likely outcomes of academic inquiry and writing under this approach.

Clearly, each model, Western and Eastern, has its benefits and drawbacks.

Benefits of the Western approach to learning, including writing, involve:

- The practical use of knowledge; knowledge as tool. This leads to the acceptance of:
- Knowledge as power.

Benefits of an Eastern approach to learning, including writing, involve:

- A greater understanding of self, others, and the world.
- Understanding as acceptance of all-in-self and self-in-all.
- Acceptance as cooperation; knowledge as relationship.

Drawbacks of the Eastern approach include:

- Difficulty in “going along” further with a dualistic worldview of conflict, power and dominance
- The difficulty of changing attitudes and lifestyles accordingly.

Meditation, a time-honored means of exploring beyond the surface of the self, is the principle practice of the Eastern approach. It is the primary means by which students and teachers experience a deeper self, beyond any self-images of inadequacy as learners, writers or educators. It is through meditation that students and teachers become aware of their own oneness with all things; it is the vehicle of access for them to that which the Western approach views as “subject,” but the East as part of the all which students and teachers themselves are and have always been.

Practice

In each class period, students and teacher meditate together for approximately five minutes; on days which employ in-class writing, a more specific and lengthier meditation, geared directly toward an

immediate writing experience, is used. In each case, the basic practice is the same:

- Students are asked to sit up in a comfortable position, one that they can readily maintain for several minutes (but one which does not necessarily induce slumber!)
- As most residents of the 21st-century West seem unaccustomed to silence, soft, meditative music is played throughout.
- Together, teacher and students breathe in (“all the air you can fit”) three times very deeply through the nose (if cold or allergies permit) and out very slowly through the mouth. Exhaling, students are asked to envision trying to make a candle flame flicker, but not go out.
- On the second breath, students are invited to lower their shoulders down as they exhale, and to give themselves “permission to *stop* for a few minutes.”
- Throughout, students are informed as to the progress and duration of the process’s stages (“Third and final time: breathe in ...”)
- After three deep breaths, students are asked to place their attention on the air coming in and out, preferably through their nostrils, both ways. They are reminded *not to concentrate* on the breath, but to rather “place their attention” on it, envisioning a bed sheet being fluffed and then allowed to float down, “placing itself” onto the mattress. This proceeds for five breaths.
- Students are then invited to add to their breathing a mantra, “just to give the conscious mind something to do.” The mantra used is the word *shanti*, a Sanskrit term meaning, “deep, deep peace.”
- Students are then invited to “take all the cares, the anxieties, anything that weighs heavily on the mind or heart, and leave them outside the door for a few moments,” to “dedicate this time

just to” themselves. Having been reminded to gently follow their breathing and to repeat their mantra, students and teachers sit together in meditation for two to five minutes.

- At the close of this time, the music is faded to close. Students are invited to “breathe in deeply and out very slowly,” twice more to close the meditation.

In writing courses, on days which employ in-class writing, a more specific and lengthier meditation, geared directly toward an immediate writing experience, is used. Students are offered five previously unseen topics to choose from. Before they write (by hand), students are led through a very specific meditation designed to help them by-pass their self-image, access a deeper self, let go of the stress associated with a writing assignment, and experience the entire writing process in a new, refreshing way:

- First, students engage in the course’s regular meditation practice.
- After two to five minutes, “without losing the meditative feel to what we are doing,” students are asked to turn over the topics sheet (previously handed out, face down) and to fix their gaze on the first of the five possible essay topics. These may include themes such as, *My Other Self*, *An Idea I Need to Let Go Of*, *An Idea I Need to Embrace*, *My Greatest Fear(s)*, and *I Was So Sure ...*
- Under the aegis of “writing is breathing” (“we take what’s outside, we bring it into ourselves—that is, experience—it becomes a part of us, and we breathe it back, transformed”), the students are asked to look at each topic, one by one, and, in their imaginations, breathe it deeply into themselves. Two breaths are employed for each topic.
- Once this topic list is entirely “breathed in,” students are invited to close their eyes and place their attention on

whichever topic spoke to them, for whatever reason (or none).

- Students are then asked to return to their meditation practice, substituting the topic phrase for their mantra, *shanti*. (If the phrase is too long for a single breath, they are invited to divide it between the inhalation and exhalation). This proceeds for five breaths.
- Students are then asked, in their imagination, to “hold the topic phrase” progressively in different parts of the body: first, the head (“just behind the spot above your eyes”), then allowing it to proceed down into the hands, the heart, the gut, and finally into the feet. In each spot, a corresponding “center” is identified (head: the center of thought, hands: physical sensation and description; heart: emotion; gut: gut reaction, a deeper level of feeling; feet: coordinated motion). In each of the first four “locations,” students are invited to follow their breathing, repeat the topic phrase, and to experience that center’s essence (thought, physical description, emotion, gut reaction) as it concerns the topic to surface, all on its own—to “let and allow,” rather than to “try and to work.”
- When the meditation reaches the feet, students are invited to allow all that which has surfaced during the meditation—the thoughts, the physical descriptions, the emotions, the gut reactions—to “flow down” into the feet, ready, then, as a thing real and alive, to take on a motion of its own.
- With two more deep breaths, the students are invited to allow the essay—now “compose,” organized via centers, and completed within them—to rise up the way it had come, and to be breathed out onto the paper. Students are invited to repeat silently the topic phrase as they exhale.
- Students then are invited to begin writing the essay at their place.

It is critical that students engage in this meditation *and then turn immediately* to writing their essays, before negativity and dualism can set back in. Two class periods are devoted to the assignment. Students are required to finish two handwritten drafts, one rough and one edited. In the first, emphasis is placed on trusting the self and allowing the words and ideas to flow; in the second, more attention is paid to grammar, punctuation, etc. Following a conference, the second draft is graded and returned to the student to be word-processed. The student receives the average of the second and the final draft grade.

II. TESTIMONY

Alexandria Hallam

As a freshman at Nichols College in 2007 I took a class called Expository Writing. It is a required course at Nichols College for all incoming freshmen, and a class some struggle with through their first semester. However, instead of a struggle, for me this class and the way in which it was taught shaped me into the student I am today.

We began each class with about a five-minute meditation session. At first, students were a little leery about it, but after the second class everyone jumped right in. Through meditation we learned that it was okay to be ourselves, that what we had learned in life, and from what others had said to us was wrong. We could do anything that we gave our minds to. We began to use mediation, and translated it into the mission of the course: "writing as a vehicle of self discovery."

Since this class was a writing course, every two weeks we would have a writing meditation session. In this session we would meditate upon each topic given as an option for the essay. We would meditate as usual, breathing in each topic, and re-

leasing it with peace. We were told that "the topic had already chosen us" and that "our papers were already written; they just needed to be put down on paper." Once our papers were written, we would have individual conferences with the professor, analyzing them and discussing the content, grammar, and overall turnout of the paper. To my surprise, for the first time in my life I had written an amazing paper. I was proud of my work. I enjoyed writing, and couldn't wait to write another. Being relaxed with academic work was something I had never been taught before, and for the first time I enjoyed school.

Meditation is not just an act for me but something that helps me succeed in life. Without it I do not believe I would have the success in and out of the classroom that I do today. It centers me, allows me to deal with any task at hand, stress-free and calmly. I believe that this stress is the number one reason students in colleges and universities across the country fail at their work. If they understood that a paper was "already written within them," then they would not have the trouble and anxiety that seems to accompany learning. Meditation made learning fun again for me. It was no longer a job or a requirement just to get ahead in life, but something that I could take pride in and enjoy.

Today I am a second-semester sophomore, and continue to use mediation in my daily routine. Before I sit down to do homework I meditate to relax myself for the work ahead. During exam times I meditate several times a day, and in between exams. It relaxes me and helps me focus on my work. Writing isn't the only class I use meditation in. I use it in math; if I am struggling with a problem, I take a minute to relax myself, analyze the question and handle it the way I would any other task in life that creates a struggle, that is, to realize that that struggle is artificial, and that, in my oneness with all things, nothing is beyond me.

Anne Geiwitz

When I first found out that I had Professor Berard for a world literature course at Nichols College in the fall of 2008, one word came to mind: meditation. I had heard from fellow classmates and friends that Professor Berard “meditated” with his students, and I was confused. In my head I pictured a classroom of students sitting Indian-style on pillows reciting Buddhist chants. I did not know it at the time, but I would soon find that this meditation would become an important part of my life.

During Thanksgiving break in 2008, I got into a very serious car accident. I was able to go back to school about a week later, once I had fully recovered. Since I had missed a week of classes, I found it incredibly hard to keep my stress level down; the work had piled up. I had no idea what to do, until I remembered meditation. In class, meditation always worked at relieving the daily stressors, so I began meditating on my own. I was amazed at how relaxed I became. After meditating, it felt as if a million pounds had been lifted off my shoulders, which enabled me to begin slowly tackling my work. Meditation helped me to realize that no matter how much I had to do, no matter how stressed I felt, if I took a few minutes a day to reflect and calm down, I could accomplish everything with a greater ease and with even more success.

Matthew R. Kerzner

My story begins at Nichols College in 1991, when I audited a course that Professor Berard was teaching on the works of Herman Hesse. During this course, not only did we read a number of Hesse’s works, but Professor Berard introduced the class to meditation and the experience of the inner self. I thought this was the most interesting part of the class.

After the course, I found myself talking

with Professor Berard about the stress of life, and of mine in particular. He would introduce me to an even deeper meditation practice, as well as Zen readings and art work, paths to help me find my inner self.

After Nichols College, I moved on to do many things. I accepted a position in management department of a large food retail company and began learning the universe of “big business.” My position involved overseeing a weekly payroll of over \$50,000, directly managing ten department managers and indirectly over 250 employees. I found myself in stressful situations on a daily basis. Through the art of mediation, as I had learned it, I was able to take time for myself every day and to maintain contact with my inner self to help deal with the stress. In my senior year, my grade point average allowed me to take advantage of an independent study. I approached Professor Berard with the idea of continuing my work in mediation and on Herman Hesse. In this study, I was introduced to Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game*. Professor Berard asked me to keep a journal and to record my thoughts concerning each chapter of the book. He also explained that we were going to play the Glass Bead Game. In this game, student and teacher exchange items, either visual or in audio, for each to explore through mediation and reflection. This was one of the best experiences I had at Nichols College. I learned from this independent study that learning encompasses more than just what one reads or hears.

Through meditation, the decision emerged to go back to graduate school and pursue my desire to become a Human Resource professional. I have earned two graduate degrees and have moved on to become a Human Resource Director in a different industry.

After finishing my second Masters degree, I was asked to teach at the University of New Haven in its graduate program of Management and Economics. I also began a

Human Resource consulting company through which I help individuals reach their professional and personal goals.

My management and teaching styles are a direct result of lessons that I learned and continue to learn from my inner self, as introduced to me by Professor Berard. When I work with executives, employees, clients, and students, I am able to deeply listen to their problems, meditate on them, and present options to help address these issues, both big and small. I've incorporated Professor Berard's teaching style, and encourage people to write down their thoughts, and to meditate before acting upon them.

The meditation process I learned at Nichols College in the early '90s has not only brought success to my professional and personal life, but has enabled me to help the many people that I have encountered over the years in their quest to find their inner self and to respond from it.

III. DISCUSSION—BY WAYNE-DANIEL BERARD

In the course of submitting and revising this article for publication, several points for discussions arose that may be helpful in further shedding light on the theory, practice, and testimonies reported herein.

One editor noted that,

... the notion that students (or anyone for that matter) already knows the answer, somewhat runs contrary to the notion that we all need to learn something new and goes to the heart of teaching and learning. I think your intent is to suggest that we often know more than we think we know (hence the need for being reflective in our learning/teaching experiences)...

I am still not sure how to digest the notion that we each already know everything about the universe. There is a difference in being, and knowing/understanding. We may be particles and mirrors of the universe, but how we become aware of this and the extent of it, seems to me to be a process rather than taken for granted. It seems to me that believing in this makes the process of teaching/learning somewhat redundant, even though meditation can be helpful, as I noted before, in accessing what information, insight, and experience we do have, yet don't relate to given the fragmentations and distractions of everyday life.

... For instance, regarding your cited the Zen dictum "Not two, but one," the very notion that a Zen dictum as such becomes necessary is indicative that there are some who see two and not one, and hence do not yet "already possess" the knowledge. ...

In this sense, the notion that nothing is fragmented and everything is one, can be fine at a very general ontological level, but epistemologically, and in everyday, actual, life, there is no denying that our selves, and knowledges, could be quite fragmented. Isn't it the purpose of meditation actually to observe, take account of, and remedy such fragmentations in our selves, lives, attention, and experiences? I am certain that you are fully aware of this, given your experience and what you write about, but I think somehow the simplification that you intend to provide in the essay to make your thought accessible, somehow lends itself to misunder-

standing to the point where readers (students and teachers) may not grasp clearly what you intend to convey.

Much of the comments one hears in response to the theory, practice, and testimonies such as those outlined above (especially the idea that one already knows and experiences the subject of one's knowing and experiencing) is in the "this is too good (or too simple) to be true" category. I encounter this quite often. There's an understandable reluctance on all of our parts to accept that anything in education (or in life, for that matter) could be this simple, this easy.

In a recent book, Dr. Chopra put forth three basic questions to ask ourselves regarding anything we do: "Am I acting easily, without struggle. Do I enjoy what am doing? Are results coming of their own accord?" My experience has been that, for the overwhelming majority of my students employing with me the method outlined in this article, the answer to all three has been "yes." Writing (and education in general, and life itself) *can* be a matter of acting without effort, feeling joy in what we do, and still experiencing fine results. Yes, it is true; it is this easy. Life and knowledge are not fragmented; they only appear so. The process described in the article truly helps students (and teachers) to move beyond this state of educational maya.

A second reviewer had further comments on this matter,

1. The sections describing Western and Eastern approaches to education are highly general descriptions of very broad and complicated phenomena. Rather than providing a much deeper and more nuanced treatment of these issues, the author should at the very least acknowledge that he is representing these complex is-

sues—in order to see them in relief with one another—in a simplified and schematic way. Furthermore, how does the author reconcile the reality of a classroom in which he determines the activity, assigns the work, and grades students' texts with the Eastern philosophy he refers to?

I concur that an example or two would serve to illustrate how classrooms influenced by the 2 different philosophical orientations would operate or look and how these orientations affect the roles that teachers and students play.

2. A couple of the students mention literature and the reading of texts. But the writing course that the author described suggests that students, after meditating, write about previously unseen topics. Is this how the writing course works? Are students not asked to read texts about which they write? Given the critical relationship between reading and writing, how do students progress? How can a writing course without reading be justified?

3. On what basis is students' progress as writers graded? What signs of improvement or growth does the author look for in students' texts and revisions? Are there a couple of examples of students' writing, such as short excerpts, that reflect this kind of growth? I can understand that meditation can help relax students who are struggling with or anxious about writing, but is the author suggesting that meditation is the factor responsible for this growth?

The comments by the second reviewer seemed to me to form more the germ of a response article (which I think might be very edifying). Along with this, many of the questions asked goes beyond, I think, the scope of the article, which is *meditation* as a teaching and learning tool. The manner and amount of material my students read, the grading method, etc.—treating these things, I am afraid, would have broadened the article too far beyond its focus, not to mention lengthen it considerably. It is noteworthy to mention, by the way, that we do use a text, the Zen monk Cheri Huber's book *Regardless of What You Were Taught to Believe, There's Nothing Wrong with You*. As the title indicates, it's a book dealing with the ideas discussed in this article—not a writing text.

"Given the critical relationship between reading and writing, how do students progress? How can a writing course without reading be justified?" the editor asks. My response would be, "How can we justify writing courses and programs which, term after term, yield so little when measured against the man/woman hours, the expense, etc.?" There is too much rote acceptance of "givens" in the field, and not enough attention paid to actual results. The method my students and I employ, as they explain, actually works, with ease and with simplicity. (This, of course, can be a very threatening notion in our culture!)

IV. CONCLUDING NOTES

It is up to us, as educators, to lead our students to an awareness of their innate Oneness with all things, to permit them to feel comfortable with acting without effort (so addicted are we to struggle and pain, as individual and as institutions). Meditation is a key tool in this, to which the co-authors of this article have testified. One would think that, generally, readers would,

indeed, grasp what the authors have tried to convey in this article; they may very well likewise come away thinking that it is too good to be true, too simple. But the truth of it is the truth of it.

NOTES

1. Kopp, Wolfgang, *Zen Beyond All Words*, 4.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. <http://www.members.shaw.ca/jgfriesen/Definitions/Tattvamasi.html>.

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