

Contemplative Education in a Liberal Arts Context: Naropa University's Approach to Asian Studies

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Nine months ago, I assumed the presidency of Naropa University. This came on the heels of twenty-nine years of teaching religious studies and Asian studies, and six years as academic dean, at a traditional liberal arts college. While the reasons for my move were multiple, high on the list was the sense that a Naropa education brings to fruition seeds that are planted in the traditional liberal arts context—seeds that are insufficiently nurtured. Naropa, I sensed, answers questions that are asked, but incompletely answered elsewhere. Much of this has to do with Naropa's understanding of Asian Studies, as it intertwines with what we call "contemplative education." The panel today is designed to draw others into exploring this intuition. It consists of four of my faculty colleagues talking about their work. Each of us will speak for ten to twelve minutes, followed by questions and answers. My assignment here is to introduce them with three comments: a thumbnail portrait of Naropa University; a word on how I see contemplative education relating to traditional liberal arts education; and finally a word on Asian Studies at Naropa.

Naropa, established in 1974 by the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and scholar, Chogyam Trungpa, is based on the model of India's renowned Nalanda University and named for its 11th century abbot. The metaphor I have used to describe Naropa is to suggest that it sits at the confluence of two rivers. One has its headwaters in classical India, in the experience of the Buddha. The ensuing tradition has flowed over varied terrains, enriching each of them, inducing a contemplative dimension into even as unpromising a tradition as the martial tradition of Japan. The other river has its headwaters in the eastern Mediterranean, not in the experience of a single individual, but in the creative matrix that was classical Greece. The tradition that was born there, the liberal arts tradition, has also flowed over varied cultures,

enriching each of them. These two rivers have now come together in Boulder, Colorado. Originally a summer institute emphasizing meditation and the creative arts—linked because the arts are the academic disciplines closest to meditation in how they expand conventional consciousness—Naropa moved quickly to offering credit-bearing graduate courses, eventually to some undergraduate offerings, and now offers full four-year Bachelor of Arts and Fine Arts degrees in nine majors and ten Master's programs. The University has just over 1,100 students, roughly 40% of them undergraduates, with sixty ranked faculty and twice that many adjuncts. Accredited since 1986, Naropa's best-known program is probably its writing program, established by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman as "The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics." Naropa's mission statement aspires, among other things, "to offer educational programs that cultivate awareness of the present moment through intellectual, artistic, and meditative disciplines," "to foster a community that . . . uncovers wisdom and heart," and that seeks to remain faithful to the Buddhist educational heritage, while also being non-sectarian and seeking to integrate world wisdom traditions with modern culture. One of Naropa's distribution requirements for undergraduates requires them to take at least three courses in "Contemplative Practices." Beyond Writing and Poetics and several degree programs in Religious Studies, Naropa's graduate programs seek to deepen students' inner lives and provide them with aptitudes for inserting themselves into some of the "hurt points" of the contemporary world: early childhood education, environmental leadership, and a range of programs in psychology and the arts, all manifestations of the Buddhist virtue of compassion, held in counterpoint with wisdom.

Reminiscent of faculty debates elsewhere over what counts as a distribution course, the Naropa faculty is engaged in on-going discussion over the meaning of "contemplative education." While much of the substance of what is taught at Naropa derives from the cultural traditions of Asia, I was surprised to discover that the most recent version of the faculty document on "The Role of Contemplative Practice in Education at Naropa University" begins with a quotation from

William James: “The faculty of bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should improve this faculty [the faculty of wandering attention] would be the education *par excellence*.” I was also surprised to discover that, just last spring, the administrative staff brought forward a document called “The Path of Contemplative Administration at Naropa University.” Working inductively and collectively, staff members have sought to develop a *theory* for their administrative work, an event I think may be unique in American higher education. Although most staff members are not Buddhists, their theory is deeply indebted to the Vajrayana Buddhist notion of the five Buddha families and their qualities as a way of organizing the staff’s aspirations for work culture.

My second point. Naropa’s educational experience contributes, I find, to an enlarged understanding of liberal education in the way it helps us address what I believe is the single most pressing challenge for educators in the 21st century: how can we help our students become able to engage constructively with those who are unlike themselves? That formulation of the challenge, I have found, finds ready agreement virtually everywhere in higher education. It accounts for the major emphasis in the academy on promoting diversity in education, emphasizing issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the like. Countless very imaginative and powerful programs have been developed, doubtless on each of our campuses. While each such program invites the student—invites each of us—to enhanced reflexivity as well as informing us about our fellow human beings, that reflexivity, in my judgment, stops short of what it can be. Let me put the matter this way. The crux of liberal education for many years has been to lead students into mastery of a particular discipline and to cultivate in them certain fundamental liberal arts skills: reading, writing, researching, speaking—all critical skills, to be sure. But isn’t there a missing liberal arts skill in this roster, a skill that is particularly in evidence these days in what Deborah Tannen calls *The Argument Culture*, now freshly apparent as we enter the election season? That underdeveloped skill in mainstream liberal education, I suggest, is *listening*—listening to the other in all of his or her “otherness,” and listening to our own innermost selves, to what lies in our hearts, not just in our heads. In a time when conventional resources are scarce in higher education—resources of time, of money, of personnel—a college that systematically helps students develop their *inner resources* seems to me to hold high promise for an enlarged vision of what it means to be an educated human being, both for the fulfillment he or she finds personally, as well as for his or her ability to engage constructively in the world.

Finally, a word on Asian Studies at Naropa. The situation actually is quite peculiar, with implications both for our own institutional self-understanding and for the familiar discussion, well known in ASIANetwork and beyond, about what we mean by “Asia” and by “Asian Studies.” The fact is that, while Naropa is aptly described as

“Buddhist inspired,” and while perhaps somewhat more than a third of our undergraduate courses touch on Asian subject matter in some way, we have no program in Asian Studies. In fact, when, as a new president, I started talking about Asian Studies, I got curious looks from many faculty. Virtually no one, I think, with the possible exception of some faculty in Religious Studies, thinks of him or herself as an Asianist. So we are in the odd position of teaching a great deal about Asia, but without the Asian studies label. What you will hear in a few minutes, therefore, is the brave first effort by some Naropa faculty members to talk about their work to an audience of Asianists, and perhaps, in the ensuing questions and answers, to explore what it might mean for them to think of themselves as Asianists. Conversely, it will be an invitation to the rest of the audience to think of itself as implicitly engaging in contemplative education.

Some of the peculiarity here might be a function of the fact that much of the Asian subject matter we teach at Naropa is easily elided with contemplative material from elsewhere on the globe. I mentioned earlier that Naropa aspires both to be faithful to the Buddhist educational heritage and to be non-sectarian, seeking to integrate world wisdom traditions with modern culture. Where the subject matter is drawn from geographically or culturally seems to be of less interest in the way we at Naropa teach, and have developed our curriculum, than the fact that there are multiple ways to help students deepen their inner lives—and we draw upon many of them. This, of course, immediately raises the question of whether the Naropa curriculum is implicitly “Orientalist,” in the pejorative, Edward Saidian sense of the word, because it romanticizes Asia, imputes to it a fantasized spirituality, and ignores the self-representation of Asians themselves. There is a lot to be said here, but I shall limit myself to two final comments. First, Naropa owes its existence to a Tibetan Buddhist, with a larger-than-Tibetan vision, who intentionally reached out to teach Westerners. A fair number of them, in Trungpa’s day and continuing today, were drawn to this vision of education. They did not invent that vision or project it onto a distant and unknown Orient. They were taught it by a Tibetan himself. The same, interestingly, applies today to much of today’s teaching and researching about Tibet at other institutions as well, more, I think, than is the case with other parts of Asia. Second, while Said requires all who study Asia to scrutinize their assumptions and motives, the fact is that centuries ago Chinese and Japanese pilgrims and scholars discerned in South Asia a compelling spirituality that was quite different from what they knew in their domestic cultures. Might they be seen as forerunners of those at Naropa today who are drawn to Asian spirituality in search of, and finding, something that educates in a more complete way than what they find in more conventional educational institutions?

Now we need to hear from faculty who have actually been teaching contemplative education, and who may have been teaching Asian Studies, for varying lengths of time.