

Exploring the Dao-field: Practicing Alchemy and Philosophy in the Classroom

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Abstract:

Drawing from practices of mindfulness, martial arts, and psychotherapy, we present a dialogue and inquiry into how educators can attend to experience through inner work. It is our conviction that schools that undertake education as a participatory endeavour in both knowledge and knowing, having and being, will depend greatly on our capacity, as educators, to see and attend to the different, yet inter-related dimensions of personal and collective experience. We draw, in particular, from Daoist and Buddhist thought as they offer cross-cultural applications to education wherein classrooms are seen as a field for cultivating our full humanity through a boundless integration of the body-mind-heart-spirit.

Key Words:

Philosophy of education, mindfulness, martial arts, Daoism, Buddhism.

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Attending to Experience

This manuscript is structured around a shared dialogue and inquiry into practices of mindfulness, martial arts, psychotherapy, and education. Through our personal experiences, we have learned that these practices are facilitative, and allow us to experience and bear witness to transformation, healing and growth along a number of dimensions in human consciousness - both within ourselves and in others. The insights

borne of these practices have led us to see that much of modern schooling, and similarly much of what constitutes the 'consensus reality' of mainstream Western society, is premised in systems of thought that dichotomize and privilege *knowledge* over *knowing* and *having* over *being*. Knowledge/knowing and having/being are related in that both are distinctions between the imminent, gross, surface, and still very real part of learning and transformation from the deeper and subtler aspects. Knowledge may, in one sense, be thought of as the outcome or product of an inquiry, whereas knowing, as we are defining it, is a process by which one arrived at or grew from the outcome. Having, as in 'having knowledge,' requires that something outside of yourself can be acquired, owned, changed, and even transmitted or given to others. Being constitutes the embodied and lived integration of experiences within and between persons. To further clarify, this means the capacity to be present in the moment, awake within one's experience and to experience 'being' in a more or less full way.

The perception that knowledge/knowing and having/being are separate creates a schism that denies us the capacity to know the integrated totality of our experience fully because the various dimensions of experience (emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual, etc.) become compartmentalized. This compartmentalization in the outer world can be social and institutional: school for the intellect, after-school sports for the physical, parents and friends for the emotional, and religious settings for the spiritual and so on. These kinds of 'outer' divisions can bring about and reinforce divisions within our inner landscape, divisions that, depending on the situation one might find him or herself in, force heart, head, body or spirit to be privileged over each other. We do many things, consciously and unconsciously to satisfy the deep longings we have to feel loved, to belong, to be seen and not rejected or judged. We are able to ignore, deny or suppress the essentially integrated nature of lived experience into fragments by severing these related yet distinct dimensions from each other, from the view of others, and even from ourselves. This results in 'psychic wounding,' the trauma that results from experiences that have been lost from consciousness and that have become reified (made into concrete existence) and lodged within our being.

We believe that education can be a process that develops our capacity to more fully know the integrated totality of our experience, a process that embodies 'health', which in Old English means 'whole.' Wholeness is about a total integration and interconnection between all parts of a system. If we are fundamentally already and always interconnected, already whole, schooling as but one site of education is a context where we attend to the common-ground of knowledge and knowing. But the educational paradigm that we are representing here also requires being-oriented, participatory and processual philosophies that honour and work with all levels of human consciousness, not just the cognitive domains of skills and knowledge acquisition that appear to dominate modern educational approaches. As Ferrer, Romero & Albareda (2005) point out, we need to address modern education's emphasis on "cognicentrism," a position that privileges rational analysis and instrumental reason above other ways of knowing. We agree with their observation that modern education tends to guide the maturation of the multiple dimensions of consciousness and then legitimize them solely on the grounds that they can be defined and guided mentally and conceptually. To the contrary, we need to give space, opportunity and support for the autonomous development of other dimensions of our being. In other words, the mind alone is not

enough to guide and develop heart, body and spirit. To cultivate knowledge/known through our bodies is to inhabit, use, and feel them, not just think about them. Culture and communication require listening deeply and openly to others, to be aware of how we dialogue and ask questions in process, not only studying the theories of how meaning is made.

We thus find it illuminating to consider Ferrer et al.'s (2005) distinction between three different approaches to education aimed at incorporating all dimensions of the human into education, learning and inquiry: *mind-centred/intellectualist*, *bricolage/eclectic*, and *participatory*. Briefly, the mind-centred/intellectualist approach is concerned about all dimensions of human beings, but mainly uses texts, argumentation, and rational and logical analysis as tools. The pedagogy, methodologies, or inquiry processes are not inclusive of other types/modes of knowledge/known, and the learning experiences are usually limited, especially in higher education, to lectures, texts and written essays. The experiential, subjective, cultural and dialogical perspectives at play are pushed to and beyond the margins. The bricolage/eclectic approach brings in practices (i.e. meditation, painting, dance, etc.) and courses in the curriculum that work with non-mental human dimensions, yet these practices and dimensions are not engaged across the educational process, particularly with how content is explored, and how learning is demonstrated and evaluated. Primacy is still rooted with mental processes and representations.

The participatory approach acknowledges that although there are dimensions more prominent at different age ranges (e.g. physical in early years, emotional in preteen and intellectual in teen years), we are always working with the entire person at all stages of the educational process, from the construction of curriculum and the learning and inquiry process, to the assessment of outcomes and relationships with wider communities (Ferrer et al., 2005, Miller, 1996).

The physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions are always already present and can, in various ways, shape and be shaped by every aspect of the educational process. Some aspects of these dimensions are empirically observable, quantifiable, and can be made into learning objectives with objective and predetermined activities that can seemingly 'cause' those objectives to be achieved. For instance, the synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses in education research compiled by Hattie (2008) concludes that drawing forth students' prior conceptions, integrating feedback, formative evaluation, group work and supporting peer-peer and student-teacher relationships have the largest positive impacts on student achievement. We should also consider how space and furniture is being used, the structure of classes and breaks, temperature and lighting, and the use of handouts, assignments and visual aids - "if you do not help students to be present to the actual exchange of signifiers they are not going to learn the signifieds" (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007, p. 19).

Other aspects of the above dimensions cannot be reduced to that which is observable or comprehended by the mind, particularly within the subjective and inter-subjective (Wilber, 2000). Questions about what is authentic, sincere, trustworthy, good, culturally appropriate, just, and of mutual reciprocity are just as valuable and relevant in education as 'what is true or fact' and cannot be answered with the mind alone. The cultivation of qualities such as compassion, trust, and openness are critical for being

able to take different perspectives, and they depend upon our capacity to listen deeply to each other and within ourselves. This kind of 'listening' draws our attention to how we experience states like confusion, desire, fear, attachment and resistance inwardly and in dialogue with others. These questions evoke difficult thoughts, emotions and sensations in students that can be worked with skillfully. For example, contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation can assist in grounding students who panic at test time (Schonert-Reichl, 2008), working through issues of oppression (Orr, 2002), and the inquiry and research process (Zajonc, 2009; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

Yet, before we can ever hope to venture into engendering a truly participatory education that honours and develops all human dimensions, would we not be wise to look deeply at and work towards healing our own psychic wounding so that we work to minimize the same fragmentation that we think we are somehow fixing? How do we know we are not separating and privileging one dimension of consciousness to the detriment of the others? It is our conviction that undertaking education as a participatory endeavour in both knowledge and knowing, having and being, will depend greatly on *our capacity, as educators, to see and attend to the different, yet inter-related dimensions of personal and collective experience*. This capacity is our in-the-moment enlightenment, a knowledge and a knowing that is cultivated by what we are referring to as 'inner work.' I have described inner work in my paper, *Becoming a Daoist Educator: The Pedagogy of Wu-Wei* (Cohen, 2009) as follows:

I characterize *inner work as education about the inner world, the relational world, and the environment within the psychological realm*. This form of work that I practice comes under the heading of existential-humanistic practice, which is an approach that builds on strength, seeks the meaning in adversity, and is non-pathologizing. This approach is often done with the help of a therapist and can be done on one's own with practice. (p. 19)

Throughout the paper we show an engaged reflection on inner work and . That is, a deep awareness of how intention and being are distinct when we step and reflect, yet ultimately unified in the moment of spontaneous being. Since few of us are enlightened, we do the best we can along the way as we work towards enlightenment. Reflective practice and inner work on the egoic self are great ways to further the project, which, of course, has no goal other than the project in the moment itself, which is not really a goal. It already is. It is only a matter of whether we know it in the moment.

Cultivating Insight

The following story (Rasmussen, 2004) exemplifies what we are getting at:

How do we keep going?

A couple of years ago, I went down to Berea Kentucky to a small Christian college, to meet Ivan Illich. Illich gave a public talk to maybe 200 students and activists from the area. Illich walked down from the stage, refusing to use the microphones, preferring instead to speak with his unamplified voice. He stood and spoke from the first row of seats in the auditorium. We all moved in closer to hear him. Near the end of the talk there was time for questions, and a black woman rose to ask him a question, "Given the difficulty of improving things in

society, and given how often there is frustration and failure, how do we keep from despair? How do we keep going?" she asked.

Illich didn't have a pat answer. There was a long pause while he considered her question. We all waited quietly. Then Illich motioned to Lee Hoinecki, his best friend, who was sitting in the audience; he motioned to Lee to come up. Lee stood next to Ivan, and Illich put his arm around his shoulders. Ivan smiled at the woman who had asked the question, and said one word: "Friendship." (p. 32)

This story is an example of a unique pedagogical moment, and even more a statement about what matters in life. The centralizing of friendship within the context of life and strife is not what usually happens in classrooms and yet surely it's an important pedagogical feature of learning about being humane, human, and relational, and also what underlies the creation of optimal conditions for formal and informal learning (van Swet, Smit, Corvers & Van Dijk, 2009). Somehow, Illich co-created with his audience an atmosphere where questions of personal importance could be asked. The circumstances are not all known, but in this situation a woman, a black woman, felt she could ask this white man, in a very direct way, how can a person keep going. The narrative is very clear and very poignant. Illich pauses, reflects and responds initially with an action. He invites his friend up, and he puts his arm around him and says only one word, "Friendship." The simplicity of the response belies the complexity of what is conveyed. He is saying that friendship is central. He does not say what the theory is. He takes the risk to demonstrate something personal that speaks to the woman and the entire group of students. Illich is pointing to profound and loving personal connection as central to his being in the world. This is a statement in a moment that seems to have reverberations that go on and on.

We like this story because it is an example of how attending deeply to our 'inner life' can lead us to express not only what might be an appropriate response to a question like the one raised by the woman, but also what feels authentic and sincere to the personal resonance of the question. Honouring both the woman's question and Illich's own deep sense of what is important to 'keep going,' we think, has to do with what Cohen (2009) describes as inner work. He defines 'inner work' as reflective practices that are conducted under conscious awareness and that depend on a "developed capacity to self-observe, to witness experience" (p. 31). Included in inner work and the experience of inner life are the awareness and reflections upon perceptions, feelings, memories, dreams, sensations, and thoughts. This inner life is imminent and in continual response to internal and external events. Inner work involves *contemplation* in what Hart (2008) describes as involving a certain kind of presencing, a "nondefensive openness, flexibility of thought, curiosity and questioning, a sense of wonder, suspension of disbelief, (Hart, 2008, p. 236) to what one is experiencing. He states his thesis about inner work with four points:

1. Familiarity with and ability to access inner experience contributes to an authenticity that is compelling and appealing for students.
2. Educators can perform some form of inner work that is interactive with and responsive to their outer experiences.
3. Inner work can lead to transformation into new ways of being and a changed sense of identity that influences practice and invites new responses from learners, which can recursively precipitate further inner work.
- 4.

Inner work is germane to the development and nurturance of fully alive meta-skills in the human dimensions of curiosity, warmth, excitement, and compassion, to name a few. (pp. 30-31)

We believe that Daoist and Buddhist practices and humanistic and existential psychotherapies offer ways to convert philosophy into being and inter-being (Nhat Hanh, 1976). These psychotherapy modalities differ substantially from more conventional approaches in that they do not see persons as having pathology, rather the view is that they have issues of meaning, relationship, and fulfillment. They are aligned with ideas about living philosophically. As well, one major emphasis in Daoist and Buddhist philosophy and practice is the orientation towards seeing life as whole rather than the separated and individualized consciousness and ego as pre-eminent. What follows first is a conversation between two educators that weaves philosophy and personal experience and reveals how we both work to honour the inner world and engage in philosophy as a way of attending more deeply to the inner world. Second, we view this inner world as interconnecting and interpenetrating with the outer world and make space in the last section of this paper to reflect on an example of how inner work connects to working with students and classrooms as fields of enlightenment and healing.

Avraham:

My earliest recollection of school is feeling terrified while sitting in a grade one class at the beginning of my schooling experience. In retrospect, I now know that I was frightened by the unexplained and incomprehensible foreignness of being there; sitting in a classroom with twenty-five other children and an adult I did not know and somehow knowing that I was to sit still and be quiet. I was a little stranger, and I was in a very strange land. I only lived three blocks from school, but home seemed as far away as the moon. Everything that would or could save me from my fears was out of my reach.

When I was in grade five. I was sitting in class and not attending to the lesson as I was engaged in showing my baseball card collection to another little boy. I was especially proud of my collection as I had managed to accumulate some cards that were in very short supply and valuable even in those days. The teacher caught me and confiscated the cards. When I asked for them back after the class, he told me that he was going to throw them out and that there would be no discussion. I managed to speak with the school janitor, and asked if he would rescue the cards for me. He told me that he couldn't do that. I was extremely upset by this loss, but the message was clear. I was not there to have fun, at least not as I perceived fun. I was there to learn, and anything that interfered with or deviated from the prescribed curriculum would be dealt with swiftly and severely. There was no interest in my feelings or needs. I became increasingly frightened of doing anything wrong in school, and this fear transferred to other areas of my life where there were authority figures. I learned that it was not a good idea to be excited about something, and, increasingly, I became a child who did not exhibit exuberance and who did not tolerate it too well in others. I learned that expressing my wants and needs was not going to have any positive effect, and I subsequently found this increasingly more difficult to do (Author 2, 2006).

I entered deeply into a process of implosion that carried on right through my undergraduate schooling.

I can see how my early experiences opened the gate to my inner world. The combination of the perceived menace in the outer world, the classroom and the teacher, and my own introverted tendencies sowed the seeds of my reflective and inner work practices. Although I did not see it at the time, of course, this was also the beginning of what eventually became my entrance into the Zen world of the Gateless Gate. This term, Gateless Gate, has become familiar and popular but a number of scholars have suggested that a more accurate reflection of the Chinese characters, 門 and 關, might be Gateless Passage or Gateless Barrier¹. The term is representative of Buddhist practice, which I might add is consistent with Daoist philosophy and practice and could also be translated as Gate of Emptiness. This all points to the idea of the unification of consciousness with ontology and epistemology

The idea of the Gateless Gate is that a situation that comes unwanted, unbidden, and in a horrifying form does offer an opportunity to learn about life and self that is unsurpassed. The seeming or actual impossibility of a situation will drive you towards your deepest sense of self in a search for answers that are about the meaning of life, your life, and your purpose. What really matters and what does not is more likely to become apparent in extreme and difficult circumstances that threaten static, built-up and egoic concepts of self. This level and type of inquiry requires a level of mindfulness that will allow you to notice the opportunity and an ability not to succumb to the seduction of the role of victim.

Carlos Castaneda (1972) talks about Death as an ally. Death is, unavoidably so, a vital part of life, of change and transformation. We often think of death only in terms of the end of a human life, but it also occurs when the self-structures we hold onto are let go and allowed to dissolve and transforms into something different. The ally is a teacher or teaching that invites us to stay awake to other possibilities; a teacher of very difficult and very important lessons. A personal example:

When a relationship that I was very invested in disintegrated and I was left with myself in a state of anxiety and despair that was like a continuous wave, I recognized that I had been here before and that I had always found a way out. Usually by finding another relationship. I decided to seize this opportunity and do everything I could to ensure that I would never be in such a relationship again and that I would never again feel that I could not endure not being with the person. I spent nine months developing an intimate relationship with my demons. I invited them in even at moments when I felt better. I knew that my projections onto this person were indeed about the holes in my own being and discovered how my earliest childhood experiences had ensured the existence of these empty spaces in me. I worked on this for nine months. I didn't sleep well. I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing. The only thing that mattered was getting to the bottom of my own personal hell and knowing it was me. I emerged at the end of nine months, an uncanny amount of time—my own personal birthing experience, a deeply changed person. I knew myself in ways that were

¹ see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_Men_Guan

not possible previously. I knew that while I still needed contact with others and would like to have an intimate relationship with someone that my need was not driven by my fears of being alone. I was indeed a more whole person. I had passed through a Gateless Gate.

Sean:

Yes, it is my past experiences as well that have opened new understandings to how I respond to my inner and outer world. School was never a place where I was able to reflect upon and learn how to attend to my emotions. When I was young my parents were so filled with anxiety and worry that I rarely had an opportunity to learn how to communicate and work with my emotions. I learned that it was easier to deny or push away the darkness. At school, I tried very hard to avoid the aggression and anger expressed by my male peers and would find myself silent, broken, and nearly paralyzed when confronted by their intense, negative energy. Fighting and physical confrontation has always been very foreign to me, and I feared it more than anything else. The world inside the classroom was isolating and comforting because it encouraged and rewarded me for living inside my head without ever having to practice working with and transforming how I responded to aggression and anger. The 'zero tolerance' stance my schools took towards violence and aggression did not come with a strategy that empowered teachers and students to transform it, but instead it ignored, suppressed or expelled it along with the students that carried it.

I think we can become so fragmented that those thought to be calm and collected individuals can one day unleash tremendous violence. On the online journal of Kimveer Gill, the young man who shot nineteen people and killed one person at Dawson College in Montreal in September 2006, he wrote "Work sucks ... School sucks ... Life sucks ... What else can I say?" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007) In a very chilling feature produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, his friends and teachers described him as a forgettable, quiet guy, remembered for being unremarkable. He came from a 'good' home, was a 'nice' guy who always stayed under the radar, doing whatever he could to never bring attention on himself. Although there is no way of really knowing what pushed Gill to walk into a school cafeteria and open fire, one psychologist commented that he probably had no way of expressing or dealing with anger and resentment as he grew up. Small acts of violence, over a long period of time, build up to create an inner world so very cruel and dark. With the exception of a few friends, his parents and teachers were oblivious to the changes. What strikes me about Gill's story was how so many people we assume to be guides and mentors, our teachers and parents, failed to notice changes in him.

Although I still have fears about working on my own anger, I've been fortunate to have a father and a few teachers who brought me into studying a number of internal (soft) and external (hard) Daoist martial arts. Many people are familiar with the external arts such as Kung Fu and Wing Chun (made famous by Bruce Lee), but it is the internal arts, and *t'ai chi* in particular, that I presently find fascinating as a domain for exploring fear and anger in my body.

T'ai chi is a moving form of mindfulness meditation that consists of expanding and contracting postures co-ordinated with the breath. These postures and the transitions

between them have a martial application; however the deeper power of t'ai chi comes from developing sensitivity, cultivating and circulating *qi* (energy), and being fully present. One aspect of t'ai chi that has helped me transform my fear of physical confrontation is to face a partner and softly push and pull each other's arms in a circular and back-and-forth motion, a practice known as *tui shou* or push-hands. Two people face each other at arms distance and with the same foot forward. We bow to each other. The forward arm of each person is raised to chest height, forming the shape of a ball between the chest and hand. The palm of the raised hand faces in towards the chest and the back of the hand lightly touches the same part of the other player's hand. The other hand is placed gently on the elbow of the other's lead elbow so that both persons are in an equal starting position.

One of the goals of push-hands is to move your partner off-balance with as little effort as possible by *working with*, and not resisting, the force exerted on you by your partner. The concept is rather simple, but the practice is often extremely frustrating because our natural tendency is to meet oncoming forces with equal resistance. I have been fascinated with applying the concept of *yielding* to an incoming force and in essence inviting this force into an empty space. By withdrawing from the space and contracting into an energy ball, this same force can eventually move back out to my partner. In the yielding, my partner attempts to push on my arms and through my centre and as I sink slightly down and back into a deeper posture, I also rotate my hips, torso and arms in such a way that my partner's force is redirected away from my centre. The sinking and rotating motion of my body directs my partner's force into an empty space, and it is the energy condensed into the structure of my body that I can powerfully recoil back out with very little effort.

Push hands is an inquiry of love for me. It begins with bowing, with respect for the other, his position, his strengths and weaknesses. We smile towards each other. As we begin to push with each other, we do so gently and sensitively. We feel the subtle movement of energy where our wrists, hands and elbows connect as we shift back and forth. An intimate dance starts to form, and we are ready to play the game. With as little movement and energy as possible, we attempt to push force through the others centre, to put them off balance without coming off balance ourselves. Our vulnerabilities, often quite different, become exposed. We observe and look for patterns and openings in the other's posture and make attempts to push through the cracks. This is where my fears about anger and violence often bubble up, and I have a space to relate compassionately to them. I frequently feel like I am cooking inside. Tension and heat build in my body, and my breathing and mental state becomes agitated. I somehow keep focused and calm through most of it, and often the game transforms to a growing edge where we can both see our cracks and weak spots, and practice different ways of moving our arms, our whole body and energy through them. After much practice, insight can emerge - both players become one as the pusher becomes the pushed and the pushed becomes the pusher. This insight of non-duality, beyond right and wrong, strong and weak and so on, is experienced momentarily. It is fleeting and, once again, in the next moment, the whole foundation of respect, gentleness, sensitivity, intimacy, vulnerability, intention, and transformation are required for this insight to be continuous.

As well, there is also a teaching about Death as an ally here. My psycho-physical resistance to an oncoming force represents an attempt to rigidify my structure, to become attached to a position or to a particular way of moving my energy. This attachment generates tension, making me less stable and less sensitive to my partner. I must 'let die' this structure with my whole being, and emptying and yielding are key to this. It seems as if I can gently lean into and more deeply understand the embodied experience of fear and anger in push-hands when *wu-wei* emerges from the practice. *Wu-wei* is a Daoist term meaning no (*wu*) forced effort (*wei*) or achievement and is inadequately described as "non-doing". *Wu-wei* arises out of creative emptiness and "points to the process of acquiring a disposition where immediacy precedes deliberation, where non-dual action precedes the radical distinction between subject and object" (Varela, 1999, p. 33). It is experienced when the dynamic between the pusher and the pushed is embodied as a co-evolving whole and seems to contradict the goal of moving a partner off-balance or defending against his push because achieving these goals appear to require effort. It is the *yi*, which translates as intention, that is directed through a person's centre and *qi* is said to follow intention. For intention to work in harmony with *wu-wei*, we must somehow attend to our experience and see it clearly. Seeing clearly is the practice of mindfulness and to draw from another tradition, Tibetan Buddhism, a metaphor for mindful intention is reading a wall tapestry in a candle-lit room (Wallace, 1999). If the flame is too low or wavering (even when bright), the tapestry cannot be read. The flame must be stable and bright or vivid enough to see the tapestry clearly. In the same way, the at/intentional flame of the mind and body must be stable and discerning enough to see *wu-wei* as how things are.

Avraham:

For *qi* to flow freely in the body, stagnations, blockages, and the psychological (egoic) self must be dissolved; otherwise one cannot effectively cultivate and channel energy. Consider the unexpected transitions and collisions that frequently happen between moments of consciousness in your push-hands practice. Perhaps you over committed your energy towards the other person and feel your partner's arm diverting the force away from his or her body and down to the ground. This can be a moment of awakening, a moment of dissolution in which your consciousness is inseparable from the other.

We seem to be working very hard to get back to 'sleep.' Those who use these moments as 'wake-up' opportunities and reminders are rare. I want to use such experiences, when I 'remember,' as Viktor Frankl said, according to Alfried Längle (ECPS Colloquium, UBC, February 3, 2005), "I take everything as a question to myself," which seems to mean that 'I' take everything as a mirror in the world reflecting something about existence and meaning to me; if I can just find the way in and stay awake when I am in. I practice going to sleep on purpose sometimes and then bringing myself back. In psychotherapy it's a way of gaining a sense of agency; taking over the symptom.

This agency is different than effort; it is the *yi*. One can apply effort in push-hands, inwardly to one's self, or to others in a dialogue; however, like a muscle that is holding up heavy weight, effort will tire and no longer allow a person to attend sensitively to that which he is related. I see the egoic self and the psychology of the person as the same

thing. Most of a person's psychology or ego structure is in the service of surviving and is largely unconscious. T'ai chi push-hands serves as a wonderful example of how we can intentionally practice penetrating the unconscious that constitutes the 'crazy glue' holding the egoic self in place. To the extent this 'self' is alchemized, the capacity for awareness of wu-wei frees the qi and allows it to be spontaneously in action without effort.

In speaking about the stability and vividness of awareness (the candle), I think you have identified a subtle distinction between experience and the associated feeling-attitude. To experience and to clearly see this experience with equanimity and compassion are related, yet different factors (revise for clarity). This feeling-attitude is what I have called the meta-dimensions, the inner pairs of hands that, depending on how open and supple they are, shape how the experience is received, held and responded to. I think that integration of experience and meta-dimension is crucial to how the doing is known and attended to. The depth of knowing is to do with practice of being present and learning by a commitment to and an engagement with practice over time; (revise for clarity) which supports learning that is embodied by experience.

I am also reminded of Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art, Aikido, who said "True victory is not defeating an enemy. True victory gives love and changes the enemy's heart. (Morihei Ueshiba (O-Sensei), quote from Mitsugi Saitome (Leonard, 2000, p. 150). A basic premise of Aikido is to invite the opponent in and to join with his or her energy. The 'combining' of apparent opponents who are joined together by energy is transformative. "Surely, if as O-Sensei said, we might achieve victory by giving love to transform an enemy's heart, it makes eminent good sense to apply this transformational idea to classroom practice" (Author 2, 2006, p. 10). Most of our students are wounded. Educators have the opportunity to at least enter into a process of transformation of these wounded hearts.

Sean:

This notion of agency has me thinking about Varela and Shear's (1999) perspective on the relationship between first-person subjective experience, the intentional stances we take toward phenomena in the inner and outer world (the second person), and the third-person objectivist perspective of life and mind. The subjective mode of direct experience has a 'givenness' that is so readily available we often take it for granted. It is the bare sensorial contact we have with the world and the thoughts and emotions that arise from this contact. This mode is pre-reflective and does not involve critical distance, introspection, or reflection about the experience itself. The first-person perspective does not discern if one's thoughts are necessarily true or just noise. It is the second person stance that allows for subjective experience to become an object of inquiry in the same way that nature is the object of study for the natural scientist. The scientist cannot make a few observations of what he or she sees in nature and make claims about it. If he or she is interested in knowing nature, the scientist must take the second person intentional stance of suspending belief, judgment and assumption – essentially acts of listening deeply to what nature is saying without trying to radically distort it with a view of how we think it should be. Of course, the scientist is a human being with a unique perceptual and sensory experience that is part of and made of the very substance of nature. Although pure objectivity is not attainable because of our situatedness within the

world, analysis, dialogue and research, the processes of inter-subjective validation, enable us to make tentative yet warranted statements about nature. We can similarly take an intentional stance towards our own experience an inward turn that is actively listening to the flow of sensations, thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

Avraham:

I agree with your last statement about the “inward turn.” I would add that the knowing of the enlightened, the direct knowing of things as they are, is a knowing that just is. Intention and being are unified, and there is no struggle to reconcile the inner world with the outer – this duality is dissolved. Since few of us are enlightened, we do the best we can along the way as we work towards enlightenment. I believe that each of us is more or less enlightened at various moments. I think that reflective practice and inner work on the egoic self are great ways to further the project. The project, of course, has no goal other than the project in the moment itself, which is not really a goal. It already is. It is only a matter of whether I know it in the moment.

Sean:

It is possible that education can honour this project by integrating the inner and the outer world. These worlds are not respectively located outside and inside our bodies and minds, but in the *Dao-field*. I like how you and Heesoon Bai described the ontological notion of ‘*dao*’ as a field of infinite possibilities that human consciousness, perception and action must become one with so as to work with these possibilities (Bai & Cohen, 2007).

The Dao-field is full of qi, life energy, and becoming one with this field requires knowing how to work with the ebb and flow of our experience in everyday human action and perception, especially within the classroom. The classroom is full of everything that constitutes our human-ness; our values, bodies, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, desires, fears, perceptions and the unfolding relationships we have with others, the planet, and the cosmos. Qi is thus not some ungraspable concept, but the *felt* nature of our experience.

Just as I feel the tension in my body and a loss of balance when I do not adequately yield to the force of my push-hands partner in t'ai chi, I can also feel the tiredness, alertness, and responsiveness of my students. It is said that qi follows awareness and intention and by ignoring, suppressing, or delegitimizing some aspects of our experience in favour of others, stagnations or surges in the flow of qi can bring about unstable and destructive dynamics, in persons and in collectives of people. I think education can help cultivate intention towards listening to and working with the flow of energy as it jointly manifests in the inner and outer world.

Qi-work in the Classroom

One of my (Avi) students offered me the following insight into the Dao-field:

Avi, i've known myself for 28 years and i know that i have always been a rather rigid person. flexibility has always been my weakness. it used to raise a lot of anxieties for me, but you in your way have really helped me

learn to bring out and strengthen that part of me that was unknown to me all these years.

now that i'm talking, i think it was in your group's class that i learned that by sharing power with the group, you will not end up losing it but quite the opposite, you may gain a whole lot more!

i still vividly remember that your class was different from others that there was not really a clear "start", that i always looked forward to going to your class becoz it was lots of fun. we would gather in a circle and people would start to chat about whatever and you would be there too and you wouldn't tell us to stop but u didn't encourage us to talk more either. i think u just sat there.

actually, what were u doing there in the beginning, Avi? now that i'm a therapist, i really want to know

anyhow, soon, the group would focus and we would "start" without an official start. you know how many teachers would do stuff like clap their hands, flick the lights or yell at the students to stop talking, out of respect to them, etc? i find that to be a bit abrupt. i used to think your way of starting class was lots of fun becoz it was more relaxing, casual, natural, and less formal and intimidating and i felt like i could "ease" into the academic matters. i felt like i was "prepared" to ease into the group, as opposed to being asked to stop whatever i was doing all of a sudden and to turn my attention to elsewhere and somehow you turned the whole group into an experiential experience, without really making a point to talk about group, but then the ideas would be made quite clear to us becoz i remember you talking about the 'chaotic beginning', and "sitting in the fire" etc.

so, what art! what skill! i think it was becoz i saw you felt comfortable enough to allow what the group to do whatever they wanted in the beginning and then somehow it would focus. that is what motivated me to do the same with the families i work with, to allow them to be where they are at and to trust that they know what the meetings are for and somehow, we would "adjoin"

is it what this is about Avi?

Wong, J. (2008). Personal email communication, Vancouver BC.

This narrative tells us that what we have in mind for classroom experience is in fact happening. It seems like a manifestation of the Dao. June describes the process as one that unfolds naturally. She observes the process, the facilitation/leadership, her own inner and outer responses, the effect on the class, and the relationship to curriculum material. Within this message, she has embedded questions that demonstrate that the process, which took place in a class two years ago, is still alive and fermenting personal and professional growth. Our students learning can be affected on multiple levels if we are willing and able to meet them at all these levels. The questions that resound are What kind of person do I/you want to be? What kind of personal growth opportunity do

I/you want to provide students? What kind of integrated learning experience do I/you want to provide students?

Of course, not all conversation takes place in words. In fact, much of what is transmitted is not about words at all. When our conversations with students enter into periods of silence, instead of reacting to the tendency to fill it in with verbal noise, we notice that the emptiness of the silence is not actually empty at all. We feel the *qi* that exists at our growing edge. This edge is analogous to the 'edge of chaos' in the field of complexity science, a phase where complex, living systems are the most adaptive. At the edge of chaos, parts of a system are connected together just enough to have coherent organization, but not so connected that the parts cannot readily re-organize in response to a changing environment.

By looking at the *distinctions* between the inner and outer world of the Dao-field, we mean in Zen terms, 'seeing what is'. 'Seeing what is' requires more than just taking a peak every now and then for the 'what is' as the lived experience of being with others and with our self does not fully present itself to the untrained eye. Our 'expectation on experience' frames not just *what* we know but also *how* we know what we know (author, 2007). Expectations in the form of predispositions, judgments, attachments, and aversions are brought to bear upon moment-to-moment awareness and have a way of distorting and guiding perception. They rise to the surface of the mind before an intentional thought is brought to bear upon our actions. It is within the shadows and mysteries of our inner and outer world that rational, intentional thought cannot fully penetrate except as afterthoughts that point toward the shadows. Here, we find that working with the distinction between the *knowledge* we have *acquired* and theorized of the outer and inner world and *knowing* as *becoming* or *being* is where, or more accurately, *when* we cultivate insight into 'what is'.

The predominating view of modern schooling is that of knowledge acquisition; knowledge as discrete, objectifiable, and quantifiable units that can be transmitted, stored, processed and applied just as one might do with a material object. Success and worth are premised on the belief that knowledge must be somehow optimally acquired and applied. The missing piece, however, is the person undertaking all this work for the purpose of *having*. Focus on the person brings us to the knowing mode where *being* matters most. These two contrasting modes, the first-person and the third-person, however, are not to be understood dualistically and, hence, exclusively (author, 2007). The having mode does not exclude us from the being mode and vice versa. They are orientations in the sense that one mode can be taken up to the subordination of the other. In a having-oriented society, we have neglected our being. Stanley (2007) remarked that the relegation of being and lived experience to the margins is at the root of our 'crisis of perception'; the major problems facing humanity and the planet are seen and experienced as separate fragments, a worldview of reality that takes the distinctions of our thoughts to replace the world as it is (Capra, 1983).

As in push-hands, we may come into the classroom as educators with an intention of what we want to push through the 'centre' of the discussion, but if this intention is not manifesting through effortless awareness, or *wu-wei*, we end up 'on the floor'. Effort and tension mask the sensation of *qi* flow and distort our perception of the 'intrinsic

dynamics' present in the dao-field, dynamics that are present even before learning occurs (Kelso & Engstrom, 2006).

In our work with students, we have learned that providing students the opportunity to spend regular and consistent time at the beginning of each session to speak spontaneously about what is on their mind, what they are feeling, how their day is going, or what is happening in their lives that matters to them is critical to helping us connect more deeply with the *dao-field*. In practical terms this helps students come into a more present state in the classroom. It also provides a lesson about themselves in groups, both as effectors and affected. They also learn about community and a deeper form of democracy (Mindell, 2002). Through practicing mindfulness as a way of emptying the mind of expectations, of respecting, sensing, transforming and merging with the other, a space is created for sensing the body language, silence, and facial expressions of students; cues to the insights, struggles, questions, and emotions that are arising in the moment. The inner experience of mindfulness also reveals our own stagnations, attachments, and aversions to what the egoic self, the commentary and chatter of the mind, thinks should or should not be happening in 'our' classrooms. It is in the transitions between moments of consciousness where creative activity emerges (Varela, 1999), and the egoic self dissolves and opportunities for exploring the *dao-field* with students are manifested.

Being with and attending to our growing edge is a foreign experience in most classrooms because it is ignored, resisted, and often punished. Avi's grade five experience of having his baseball cards taken away resonates with many other stories of having our needs, interests and excitement swiftly judged and punished as deviant classroom behaviour. Over time our exuberance for inquiry diminishes for fear of failure, of involving our whole self, of 'leaping into uncertainty without knowledge' (Derrida, 1995 in Fenwick, 2009). Many of our students express anxiety and frustration when we do not give them the 'road map' and ask them to pursue *their* interests and questions as the heart of the curriculum. However, when we can help students to become aware of and intentionally move their qi without invoking expectation or judgment, we are all freed to move in the dao-field of infinite possibilities. This freedom is rarely achieved and the best we can do is work towards it such that the classroom process is not therapy, but therapeutic and allows for opportunities to walk up to and through the Gateless Gate.

In this paper, we have touched on the connection between humanistic existential psychotherapies, Eastern philosophies and practices, inner work of the educator, and educational praxis. We have shared our view about the importance of attending to the wholeness of experience as a response to the individualistic and competitive consciousness and practice that is dominant in educational environments. We have tentatively addressed the question: "what is an educator?" We have outlined the possibility that an educator is a person who has committed themselves to working towards un/dis/recovering their wholeness as a person, which includes all their sensibilities and sensitivities to self, other, and all dimensions of the world. Classrooms are a microcosm of the world and teachers have a great opportunity to provide opportunity for an experience that shows something closer to the high end of possibility for human learning and experience.

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