SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING THROUGH THE EYES OF A BUDDHIST MEDITATOR: (NON)CONTROL, (NON)BECOMING, AND (NON)JUDGEMENT

By

Cuong Huy Nguyen

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ABSTRACT

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By using the meditative inquiry approach, I compare and contrast the philosophy underlying Buddhist meditation, based on my personal experiences with and scholarship on the mindfulness practice, with self-directed learning within the tradition of progressive education, based on the case study of the Jefferson County Open School, a progressive school in Lakewood (CO, USA). I found that Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning have a lot in common. In particular, they both emphasize (non)control, (non)becoming, and (non)judgement. As a meditative inquiry, this study has brought about a lot of profound inner transformation in terms of both spirituality and philosophy of education, which are explicitly presented in this dissertation.
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Introduction

In this dissertation I explore how Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning can be seen in the light of each other. Why Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning? Because I feel the urge to understand them better in order to survive--Buddhist meditation as a way of life and self-direction a way of education that I can identify with and that has nurtured my existence. If you are looking for the “best” path of spirituality or the “best” model of education, you may be disappointed when reading this thesis. I am writing this not to prove the superiority of self-directed learning or calling for its implementation on a massive scale, but simply to explore how I as a Buddhist meditator make sense of self-directed learning. In addition, at first glance, Buddhism and self-directed learning seem very unrelated, but by studying them in the light of each other I hope to generate some original insights. Originality is, no doubt, one of the main aims of inquiry.

Meditative inquiry methodology is used in this project. As a Buddhist meditator, this methodology comes naturally to me, although it took me quite a bit of work to figure out how to articulate the methodology in explicit terms. Interestingly, meditative inquiry is used to study itself and education simultaneously. In this case, there is no clear separation between an inquirer, a Buddhist meditator, an educator, and a student. As part of this methodology, I include many “behind the curtain” details in this paper.
because they are no less important than the polished product. Meditative inquiry not only takes place in the library or during study trips, but also in the kitchen, on the bus, in the cab\(^1\), in the parking lot, in a dream, in the cinema, at the grocery store, etc.—the everyday settings that are not customarily associated with academic research. In addition, in meditative inquiry, the process is as important as the product. The boundary between a process and a product is not always clear cut. I not only write about the product of a meditative inquiry, but also perform this inquiry via the writing process. The “finalized” product of this dissertation is the manuscript that I have in my hand on the day I am supposed to submit it to the dissertation committee or the graduate school, even though this manuscript is not at all finalized in the true sense of the word\(^2\).

The footnotes are very important in this paper. They are the places where I add later reflection and comments that I do not know how to insert seamlessly into the main text because they are not “on the same page” as the main text. Again, I cherish the fact that human mind is not always consistent and linear.

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\(^1\) In a recent random conversation with a Haitian-American Uber driver, I suddenly realized the suffering of black people in the U.S. due to racial discrimination. In academia, I had read a lot about racial discrimination, but I had never been convinced until I heard his story. He did not have to share the story with me; he did it by accident; and he had no reason to be politically correct.

\(^2\) I feel very relieved when writing this line because I know that I don’t have to run after a predetermined rigid deadline and a predetermined standard of a perfect dissertation. I will do my best until the due date without forcing myself to accomplish a fixed standard. This is an example of letting go.
Writing this dissertation has been my meditative experience, which had me look both within myself and into the outside world of education, and has brought me a lot of personal transformation. Who I am now is very different from who I was at the beginning of the writing process. Meditative writing has transformed me spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. Meditative inquiry is impossible without my full presence--my thoughts, feelings, questions, etc. Meditative inquiry is about personal interactions with the outside world--I can even call it “experiential inquiry.”

I am writing this dissertation with both my mind and my heart. The mind works on rational, analytical and logical reasoning, while the heart is concerned with personal feelings. Mindfulness, or meditative inquiry, is about both feelings and rationality, even though the English translation of the Vietnamese term “chánh niệm” is “mindfulness”. “Mindfulness” can be misleading because “mind” usually refers to rationality in the West, while it refers to both rationality and feelings in many Asian languages, including the Vietnamese language. This is why Ajahn Brahm suggests replacing “mindfulness” with “kindfulness” and some other scholars consider using “heartfulness” together with “mindfulness.” In this paper I do rational, intellectual reasoning (or philosophizing) at some points, and I also describe my emotional reactions at many others. For example, I focus explicitly on analyses of (non)judgment, (non)becoming,

3 More about experiential inquiry can be found here: http://chenghsin.com/art-of-inquiry.html

4 See, for example, Daugherty, A. (2014). From Mindfulness to Heartfulness. Archway Publishing.
and (non)control. At the same time, I add my own feelings in the stories and in the footnotes.

In Chapter 1, I narrate my spiritual and educational paths to pave the way for the later chapters. These narratives are intended to introduce who I am as an inquirer. I do not hide from the inquiry, but my presence makes the backbone of this inquiry.

In Chapter 2, I present Buddhist meditation through the teachings of two Vietnamese Buddhist monks who have a significant impact on my spirituality and thus my research methodology—meditative inquiry. I wanted to situate Buddhist meditation, or meditative inquiry, in the broader context of Buddhism, without which the understanding of meditative inquiry can be distorted. However, I am not going to present Buddhist meditation as an objective fact, but through my personal experiences.

In Chapter 3, I situate meditative inquiry in the broader landscape of academic inquiry. This chapter tries to visualize how Buddhist meditation can be perceived beyond its religious context and how relevant it is to the academy.

In Chapter 4, I introduce self-directed learning theory and describe the Jefferson County Open School as an illustration. This chapter seems to deviate considerably from the preceding three chapters; however, the liaison is that I approach the self-directed learning theory and the Open school with the eyes of a Buddhist meditator (using meditative inquiry). In the discussion section, I analyze some key paradoxes and potential downsides of this philosophy.
In Chapter 5, I make explicit the similarities and differences between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning theory in a reconstructed semi-fictional dialogue between a Buddhist meditator and a progressive educator, and the in-depth discussion that follows.

In Chapter 6, I present my personal transformation during this inquiry, the educational implications of this inquiry [including (non)judgment, (non)becoming, and (non)control], and my future inquiry directions.
Chapter 1 Two Paths

Narrative 1 The Spiritual Path

Initial Encounter with Mindfulness

I grew up in a traditional Vietnamese family with many big questions in my mind. What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here, doing what I do? Can I live a different life? And how can I escape from my turbulent childhood? These questions eventually led me to the Catholic belief when I was in the middle school. The church was the place where I sheltered from my troubled family, where my hopes were nurtured, and my stories listened to. In particular, I was inspired by the Catholic belief to immerse myself into the infinity of the mystic world. In retrospect, the church gave me a worldview that I could rely on to for my existence. It gave me a meaning.

However, when I moved to the city for college, I was increasingly alienated from the church. Among other things, church services in the city were, at least at the church in my new neighborhood, a ritual gathering of strangers with no human warmth and

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This seems to be a lifelong question. I'm still asking this question now.

I think my childhood experiences had a profound impact on my worldview. I did not have a happy childhood, but my life has been better over time. On second thought, I thought my turbulent childhood was in a sense a blessing in disguise because it motivated me to critically examine myself and others.

I remember walking shyly into the church pretending to be a Catholic. After several weeks, I managed to come in and talk with the priest. After that, I went to church every Sunday and usually stopped by to visit him after school. I also participated in the parish youth group that met every Sunday after the morning service. However, I was never baptized because my parents were concerned that as a Catholic I would not worship our ancestors. Despite the Vatican Council II, many Vietnamese Catholics at that time still did not worship their ancestors. As the youngest son, I was expected to take this responsibility.
little spirituality. Because I no longer had a sense of belonging, I decided not to go to church on Sunday any more. I gradually slid back into an existential crisis: the questions that had obsessed my childhood returned to me unanswered.

In the summer of my freshman year at college, I encountered a book that changed my life forever—*Connecting with Life (Tiếp Xúc Với Sự Sống)* by Thích Nhất Hạnh. This book, which was like a fresh gust of breeze in my life, represented a Buddhism very different from the Buddhism that I had been familiar with. This new Buddhism was not as much about cause & effect and rebirth as about the wonder of ordinary life, ranging from the rain, a flower, the blue sky, to a friend, a neighbor, a bus trip, etc. When reading this book, I was not confronted with certain ethical standards and judgement, but simply saw myself as a being amidst the beautiful world of human and non-human creatures. This new Buddhism was about this visible, real world that I could easily identify with.

In particular, I was deeply touched by the story narrated in the book about a river that ran breathlessly after the clouds on its way to the sea, only to realize in the end that it had already had the clouds within itself. This story is the most poetic but provocative definition of mindfulness I have ever read. The story is as follows:

A baby river was born on the top of a mountain. When it got older, it wanted to make a journey to the sea. When it set off on the mountain, it flowed very slowly, but soon afterwards it began to speed up because it couldn’t wait to
see the sea. On the way, it made friends with a lot of colorful clouds in the sky, which reflected their images on the water. They had a lot of fun together. The river loved these friends so much that it thought it would not be able to survive without them.

One day, strong winds came and blew the clouds away. Once the storm was over, the river looked everywhere but could not find the clouds. It began crying. It felt lonely and desperate. However, after a whole night of crying, it discovered something new: the blue sky within itself! Its hopelessness disappeared instantly. It began understanding that the clouds must keep changing their colors, formats, and directions, but the blue sky was always there.

Right after that, it made another important discovery: it already had the clouds within itself! It realized that the water in it and the clouds in the sky seemed unrelated, but they turned out to be one thing. The clouds could have turned into the rain and fallen into the river, becoming a part of it; and they could also have ended up in a cup of tea. Because it already had the clouds, it did not have to run after them anymore. The river felt so peaceful.

The following day, the colorful clouds appeared again in the sky, reflecting their colorful images on the river. The river was so glad to see them,
gave each of them a big hug, and when they had to go, the river smiled and said

“Have a good day! See you again.”

The story had immediate effects on me. I stopped running after my “clouds” and began seeing the world as miracles “interbeing” with one another (a neologism coined by Thích Nhất Hạnh, meaning interconnectedness, referring to the Buddha’s teaching “This is, because that is”). My life was no longer defined by poverty, violence, and hopelessness, but it also had miraculous elements as long as I knew how to appreciate them. Once in a while, I found myself sitting for hours in the balcony watching the rain falling on the trees in front of my apartment, wondering why I had never seen its amazing beauty before. Every drop of rain water was indeed a miracle. With the new lens, I no longer felt frustrated when caught in the tropical rain, because this turned out to be a delightful experience when I had the opportunity to feel the cool water on my skin, an experience that I had forgotten for years. In short, with the new lens of mindfulness I began seeing the artistic side of the world. I knew that the unpleasant side of my life was still there, but it was not the only one any more.

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8 Hanh, T. N. (?). Tiếp Xúc Với Sự Sống (Connecting with Life). See http://thuvienhoasen.org/images/file/FswRwap1G0QxQAE9c/tiep-xuc-su-song.pdf

9 The Sutras on Dependant Co-arising and Great Emptiness
After the encounter with the book, mindfulness practice became an indispensable part of my life. I became more sensitive to what was happening in my body, my feelings, my mind, and the surrounding environment. Despite occasional questions and doubts, I found a lot of joy and consolation in reading the books by Thích Nhất Hạnh. His writing style and voice brought about a feeling of peace and hope in me. I was reminded that a satisfactory life was possible, as long as I knew how to appreciate the familiar. As a result of the mindfulness practice, I switched from exploring metaphysical questions to looking closely at my ordinary life. Walking to school, cooking a meal, talking with a friend, using the restroom, etc. were all beautiful.

One day in summer 2005, I turned off my cell phone and took a coach to Bát Nhã Monastery, which was located on a mountain about 300 kilometers from Saigon, for a youth retreat. This retreat, which was in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh, was one of the best memories in my life. We got up at 4:00 in the morning, walked to the meditation hall and practiced guided sitting meditation. Other than these formalities, the monastery was full of laughter and brotherhood. I slept very well every night. Whenever I tossed and turned during my sleepless nights in my apartment during my graduate school, I could not help but think about my three days at this monastery--about my Buddhist mentors, my friends, the Eagle Wing meditation hall, the small creek down the hill, the morning fog, the clouds, the rainy afternoon, the golden
sunshine, the green pine forest, and especially the brotherhood. The living conditions there were very modest, but I could feel the warmth and the joy in everyone’s eyes.

This recollection also made me wonder what it meant to be a student, to have an education, and to grow up. I also wondered if I was on the right path of education, which I believed should produce joy and peace instead of anxiety and sleeplessness. I remember sharing in a doctoral class that I was most concerned about generating joy in the classroom when the professor asked us to write down a question most critical to us.

When the retreat was over, I did not want to leave the monastery, but I had to because my family and my career were waiting for me outside. Saying goodbye to the brother who took me to the foot of the mountain, I realized that I had left a dream world behind. Sometimes I wonder how my life would be had I never left the monastery in that summer foggy morning.

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10 I would not ignore my interest and leave the monastery if I had to make a similar decision. I did not dare to face the world alone at that time. I was desperate for a familiar community that would approve of my choice.

11 The monastics in the tradition of Thich Nhất Hạnh were expelled from this monastery in 2009. I came back for a visit in 2011, but it was totally different. The spirit of brotherhood was gone.
Ups and Downs with Mindfulness

I visited Lake Superior (Michigan, USA) for the first time in summer 2013. The lake was so beautiful that I was standing there on the shore looking into the water for hours. Suddenly, I felt that I wanted to jump into it, to feel its blue water, to become one with it, to never forget it. This impulse was weird and surprising, even shocking, to myself. How did this impulse arise? After a few seconds, I realized that this desire had always been there whenever I visited a beautiful place, but I had never noticed it until that moment. I had become more sensitive over the years, probably thanks to the mindfulness practice. When confronted with a situation, I would react in a certain way, physically, intellectually and emotionally, but more often than not these reactions are ignored. The mindfulness practice helps bring them to the forefront.

The mindfulness practice brought about a huge transformation in me, sowing in me the seeds of optimism. Whenever I was in trouble, I told myself that the miraculous side of the world was still there: the sky was still blue and the breeze still cool; and even the storm had its own beauty. I was so pleased with the positive change in my life that I wanted to try harder in the mindfulness practice. I wanted to become more mindful and less mindless; closer to the Buddha and farther from the worldliness--I wanted to bring the mindfulness practice into all aspects of my life! I also made the mindfulness practice
the object of my academic research. I attended many conferences on mindfulness and education, and even presented at some of them.

However, I gradually realized that something was going wrong. I felt exhausted. I felt as if I was choked by the term “mindfulness” and the name “Thích Nhất Hạnh.” I had to cover my ears when somebody mentioned this term and this name. I was panicked to realize how much my life had been shaped by them. For many years I had made sense of the world through only one point of reference--mindfulness. I felt an urge to run away from it and look for something new. I literally threw away all the books on mindfulness by Thích Nhất Hạnh, with the hope of regaining the control of my life. I wanted to open myself to the world out there beyond the discourse of mindfulness.

Thích Nhất Hạnh had led me into the miracle of mindfulness over a decade before, which, as narrated earlier, transformed my life dramatically, but something was not completely right. To some extent, these terms had become a ghost, an obsession, even a prison to me. Ironically, I was being constrained by the concept of mindfulness itself, while mindfulness was supposed to liberate me. What was wrong with me, with the term “mindfulness”, with the name “Thích Nhất Hạnh”, and especially with my perception of them? I did not know for sure, but I was convinced that I needed to let go of what I had been attached to for so long in order to live a new life.
By stopping the deliberate mindfulness practice, I started living a new life in response to my natural intuition and personal experience. I began trying things I had never done before and learned lessons from them. I was very happy with the new freedom that I was enjoying. I felt relieved not to have to “practice” mindfulness any more. I ate my dinner and watched TV at the same time—no problem! I no longer forced myself to pay conscious attention to my steps while walking to school, which made me feel easy and comfortable. I bought fashionable clothes without thinking too much about the cheap Third World labor. And I expanded my reading and listening lists and my circles of friends, which I loved a lot. In summary, my living zone was widened, and my life became easier, simpler, and more enjoyable.

In 2015, a big incident happened to me. I had surgery, after which I had to lie miserably in pain for two weeks. One night, while lying in bed lamenting over the pain, I happened to listen to a talk by another Vietnamese Buddhist monk (Thích Viên

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12 In the mindfulness practice, we are taught not to do two things at one time.

13 When re-reading this paragraph, I realize that this word “happened” is significant here. Indeed, I did not intend to listen to his talk in order to gain anything. I just came across it and got the right message by chance. This kind of “random encounter” works well with me on many other occasions too. For example, I only read Rousseau for fun.

Added later: I wonder if I can live in the “random world” only. This world seems more intriguing than the regular “planned world”. But “random world” is a tricky concept because whenever we try to live in a random world, it is no longer random.
Minh), which made me realize something very new: I was more controlling than I had thought. I wanted the pain to go away instantly, and I was highly dissatisfied with the doctor’s prescription. I wanted the world to respond to my needs\textsuperscript{14}. But why not the other way around? I asked myself. I had never asked this question before. No, requesting the world to follow my way did not have to be the only, default way. With this realization, I began letting go of the desire to get better and to complain about the doctor’s prescription. A powerful feeling of relief and freedom was engulfing me. I had never experienced such a big freedom before—freedom from the desire to manipulate myself and others according to my personal standards and desires. I did not have to get better; I could choose to accept, even appreciate, the horrible situation I was in. Control was good and necessary, but it was not necessarily the only, default option as I had assumed.

This experience made me understand what had gone wrong with my previous mindfulness practice: I had controlled myself excessively in an effort to “become” more mindful, while mindfulness is technically the art of mere observation and letting go. According to Thích Viên Minh, Buddhist meditation is about flipping one’s attitude towards oneself and others rather than utilizing certain techniques to attain a

\textsuperscript{14} The desire to recover from an illness is totally justifiable. However, there are certain moments when letting go may work better. I could never have understood the Buddhist term “letting go” without this life-and-death experience. It is very hard for me to describe it to someone else.
predetermined goal. I had never understood this teaching until the moment of “realization” as narrated above. According to traditional Buddhist teachings, control/manipulation reflects ego-centeredness, which is the root of human suffering. We simply listen to ourselves and others without a desire to manipulate anything or anyone. Meditation is an effortless practice; we do not have to “try” to “achieve” anything, because everything is already there. The clouds are already in the river, so the river does not have to run after them. The meditation techniques can be useful in the short term, but they may hinder spiritual liberation in the long term. I will write in greater detail about Buddhist meditation in Chapter 2.

With the mindfulness practice as the practice of letting go, I was no longer too hard on myself and others; I also did not make judgement of others as frequently as before; and I was more aware of my otherwise hidden standards for judgement. I no longer had the strong desire to manipulate myself and others. When seeing a withering rose, I accepted it as a withering rose; I did not want it to be a fresh rose;

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15 This, however, does not mean that I easily accept the social injustice. This is a difficult dilemma that I am dealing with. From my experience, these two orientations can co-exist, but I am not sure how to philosophize their co-existence now. This is also exactly the dilemma that confronts the socially engaged Buddhist movement.

Added later: In my opinion, people have talked too much about social justice but ignored “personal justice” (or what Foucault and Deleuze call ‘micropolitics’). Personal justice refers to how a person treats himself/herself and others in his/her immediate community, like friends, relatives, neighbors, colleagues. Without personal justice, social justice is impossible. Social justice originates from the personal sense of justice.
when seeing a duck, I did not want it to turn into a chicken; when meeting a woman with short hair, I did not expect her hair to become longer. I began understanding what pure observation meant and why it was emphasized in Buddhist meditation.

My spiritual experience with letting go occurred to me in my particular context of physical pain, but I wonder how it may be perceived in the regular, control-oriented world where people always look to manipulate and hopefully ameliorate everything\textsuperscript{16}. In this world, letting go can easily be labeled as passive, reactionary, or even evil\textsuperscript{17}. I will discuss further the idea of control versus letting go in Chapter 2, where the key teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viên Minh are presented.

At first glance, my story of spirituality seems to be a personal story which has nothing to do with my professional life as an educator. However, in retrospect, it has had a lot of influence on how I make sense of education in general and self-directed learning philosophy in particular, which will be presented in Chapters 4 and 5. More directly, my philosophy of education is also shaped by my past schooling experiences as narrated below.

\textsuperscript{16} In essence, both peace activism and violent warfare are based on efforts to control others according to certain standards, though by different means and for different purposes.

\textsuperscript{17} Judgment, becoming, and control are the biggest, if not the only, concerns of the Western academy. The aim of scientific research is to control the nature and to promote social amelioration.
Narrative 2 My Educational Path

1988

I started school at the age of six in a one-classroom school in the shade of a sake tree. Because the teacher was my father’s friend, she let me audit her class for one year before I was officially admitted. I loved my classroom, my teacher, my classmates, and my textbooks. I got up early every morning to recite my lessons and do my homework. I was interested in the alphabet, the poems, the short reading texts, and the math problems. I still remember many short poems now. For example:

Quýt nhà ai chín đố cây,
Hôi em đi học, hãy hãy mà trời.
Trương em mấy tô trong thôn,
Ríu rú ríu rí, chim non dâu mùa.\(^{18}\)

At the end of my first grade, I was selected to participate in a contest in the town, and a few weeks later my mother was informed that I had won an award. As a little child, I did not understand what that meant, but by observing the way the news was broken, I

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\(^{18}\) Hỏi em đi học by Tố Hữu
understood that it was an achievement. This was my first experience with the formal “judgement” in education.

1992

I did not know what competition meant until the first semester of my third grade. One day, I got 9/10 points while my best friend got 10/10 points for a math test. I glanced at his paper and saw that a similar spot was marked. I showed the test papers to our teacher and asked for an explanation, hoping he would upgrade my score. He refused to because our mistakes, he explained, were actually different—a spelling mistake on my friend’s paper, and a real math mistake on my paper. Of course he was right. I was embarrassed and retreated to my seat, trying to prevent tears from rolling on my face. I felt bad about my score and especially about the fact that I was no longer a champion in class. This reaction was also very surprising to me. In retrospect, that was a moment of self-judgement, which I now recognize as one of the three major concepts that distinguishes most Western educational philosophy from Buddhist meditation.

I am not sure when the sense of competitiveness began in me and if it was a natural or socially conditioned phenomenon. Competition, which was the backbone of my education from grade school to college, many times turned my school life into a

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19 Schools in Vietnam use the score scale of 1-10.
nightmare. However, I am not sure if I would dismiss it completely. Who does not have moments of pride and joy when winning an award? What would education look like if competition were completely eliminated? And how would the children be prepared for adulthood, which is, believe it or not, based on competition, if competition were absent in the classroom?\textsuperscript{20} This is still one of my “koans.”\textsuperscript{21}

1994

In the summer of my fifth grade, I participated in a crash math course in preparation for a big math contest. The class included 25 selected fifth-graders in our school district\textsuperscript{22}, and was taught by a math specialist from the department of education. I met many smart students there, but I could not make friends with any. I had no idea what was happening in the classroom because the lessons were all beyond my level. I felt as if I was drowning. I was also very scared of the instructor because she would not slow down so that I could catch up. I had to pretend that I was doing alright although I did not understand a single thing. After that devastating summer course, my romantic

\textsuperscript{20} This is not necessarily the only way to look at life. However, it is the way I grew up seeing life. This is not the best way, but at the time of writing these lines, I did not have an alternative option.

\textsuperscript{21} A koan is a very difficult question in Zen Buddhism, intended to help a person to realize something important. For example, what is the clapping sound of one hand?

\textsuperscript{22} This district included one town and 7 surrounding villages. It had at least 10 elementary schools at that time.
relationship with schooling was shaken. Schooling was not a beautiful experience any more. It could be difficult, cold, and even humiliating. I wanted to become better at math, so I was angry when this did not happen.

I had this negative feeling a couple of other times later in my school life, especially when I had to encounter those snobbish philosophers who tried to make themselves appear intellectual, sophisticated, and superior by expressing very simple ideas in unnecessarily complicated ways. Whenever reading these snobs, I felt as if I was an idiot who was excluded from the palace of philosophy all my life. At those moments, the image of the math specialist in that summer course recurred in my mind. I later discovered that philosophy was life and it was not exclusive to those sophisticated thinkers; even the “uneducated” people on the street could do and understand philosophy, although they would use a different language to express their thoughts. Likewise, math did not have to be that boring and difficult as it was presented in my high school.
“It’s getting dark. Put the dictionary down and eat your dinner! Don’t harm your eyes!” my mom yelled in the kitchen while I was sitting under the patio at twilight, working on my English exercises. It started raining outside and the oil lamp had been lit in the kitchen, but I was hesitant to put the dictionary down because I wanted to finish my vocabulary exercises. Once with the dictionary in hand, I forgot everything else--one new word led to another. I felt as if I was harvesting a big crop! This Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary had been really useful for my English vocabulary and grammar in the previous six months. Never before had I had such a strong passion and sense of self-efficacy in my student life. I knew that I was making a lot of progress and that I was on the right path.

I recalled the story that my English teacher had shared with us earlier that day. His former student, Th., who had graduated two years earlier, had just won a scholarship to study abroad. He narrated how Th. had improved his English during the time at this school and then won an award in the national contest in his senior year, and finally won this scholarship. Th. was not the only talent at my school.

My high school education was based on competition, which made me well grounded. I knew what I had to fight for every day. When I went to college, I felt aimless because nobody told me what to do. The traditional curriculum, which relies on testing and competition, can be problematic in many ways, but it makes students grounded and secured.

I did not regain enthusiasm and passion until I began writing this dissertation. I have been absorbed in writing every day. I enjoy it because I have a clear goal and complete autonomy, which are key to fulfilling education.
scholarship to study in the U.S., Qu. was admitted into the National Academy for International Relations in Ha Noi in the same year, Ch. went to Australia, and over ten other students went to the Foreign Trade University the previous year. These stories, which my English teacher shared with us repeatedly in our English class, motivated us to work hard to prepare for our futures. We all wanted to become successful professionals in one field or another, and in order to make this come true we tried to align ourselves with the educational high-stakes tests, which serve as an expression of “judgmental” systems.

*Summer 1998*

When I arrived at B.'s house, he was sitting with his father in the front yard, in the shade of a Vietnamese cherry tree, his father in the hammock and he in the wooden chair, facing each other, bending over a thick dictionary placed on the small tea table between them. B. and I had been classmates for four years, but I had never met his parents. I stepped in, said the greetings and had a short conversation with them. His father asked me about my schoolwork, especially my English, because he was an English teacher, who worked in Saigon and only went home at the weekend. I told him how I had been struggling with my English for years. Like B., I had been in this magnet school for four years and had been studying English as an endorsement with the best teachers in town, but I had not made much progress. I did alright on my English tests,
but I never had the sense of self-efficacy and the passion, or understood the nature of this language, despite all my personal efforts. For example, the more I tried to cram new vocabulary into my memory, the more it slipped out of my mind, however hard my teachers tried to help me out. Unlike B., I had never won any awards in any English contests²⁵.

B.’s father contemptuously burst into laughter, and said, ”Do you think your teachers can help you to improve your English? Can they ever do the eating for you? No, you must do the eating for yourself. Likewise, you must teach English to yourself! Your best teacher is a good monolingual dictionary!” He repeated this message over a dozen times that afternoon and many more times when I met him later in the summer. I was struck by his powerful message as well as his arrogant manner, but I was highly impressed and convinced. No one had ever told me about this monolingual-dictionary-as-the-best-teacher thing before. I felt as if I had just discovered a treasure that had been hidden for years. I had found the key. True, no one could do the eating for me; I must do it for myself!

I ordered the best Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary with all my savings. With the brand new dictionary in hand two weeks later, I began to find myself living in a different world. It was not easy to look up this dictionary at first, but it was also full of

²⁵ At this magnet school, we were obsessed with awards. The main task of this school, I may argue, was to compete and win awards, although this comment is not politically correct.
I enjoyed the pleasant fragrance of the Bible paper, and I loved the illustration pictures and the cultural notes. The dictionary was indeed my real teacher of English language and culture and was a distinct world in its own right. I enjoyed looking up new words, reading their long definitions and examples, encountering one or two words that I had met a couple of days before. I may not remember the full meanings of these "old friends," but I could always look them up again and again in this dictionary, and in many cases, while revisiting these words, I came across the words I had just encountered in class earlier that day. For example, the word “paradox” is defined as “a person, thing or situation that has two opposite features and therefore seems strange: He was a paradox—a loner who loved to chat to strangers. It is a curious paradox that professional comedians often have unhappy personal lives”. In this definition, I was not very sure about “feature”, but I could easily guess the meaning of “loner” because I had already known “alone”. When I looked up “feature”, I encountered this example: The software has no particular distinguishing features. I moved on to looking up “distinguish”, which led me to “differentiate,” which in its turn led me to “discriminate”, “gender”, and then “distinguish” again. I learned all these words in their interrelations with one another.

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26 This is a monolingual dictionary. When I looked up a new word, I found a long definition of it, which may contain many new words as well. However, this dictionary forced me to encounter English vocabulary constantly and enabled me to guess the meanings of new words in contexts, which helped me to memorize them easily.
The dictionary became an amazing world where all words were connected in meaningful ways. One word could show up before my eyes a dozen times a day, while another word did not appear again after a couple of days, but once they showed up, they were situated in meaningful definitions and examples. When facing an English word, I might know its meaning right away (like a close friend—comedian above); or had a very vague idea of its meaning (like an acquaintance—loner above); or had no idea at all (like a total stranger—feature above).

With this dictionary in hand, the boundary between schoolwork and homework, and between work and play, blurred. I might encounter a new word for the first time in class and then encountered it again at home, or at home first and then in class then at home again. I might understand a certain word more deeply while reading the definition of another word or reading an unrelated cultural note. The English language was more fascinating and easier than ever before thanks to the great “English teacher” that stayed with me 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The dictionary was not only my teacher but also my friend, "someone" I could turn to and play with when I was bored. I would sometimes find myself wandering in the Midwestern U.S., in downtown London, in the highlands of Scotland, in the arid Sahara, or at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, thanks to the maps and the culture notes in it. I also found myself talking with Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, or Benjamin Franklin, who also found their
ways into my dictionary. I still love dictionaries now. The first books I will buy and keep in my private home are dictionaries and atlases.

March 1999

I came first in the provincial English contest in my junior year, after less than one year of “playing” with my new “teacher” and “friend”, to the surprise of my teachers and friends. In the senior year, B. and I won an award in the national contest, and we were both exempt from the college entrance exam. B. went to the Academy for International Relations in Ha Noi, and I, with the encouragement of my father, went to the University of Education in Ho Chi Minh City. I was grateful to B.’s father, whom I considered as my teacher/mentor. He only repeated one simple message, which disrupted my entire student life. Indeed, no one can do the eating for me, and no one can teach a language better than a monolingual dictionary. This message is still echoing in my mind now. My work with the dictionary was my first lesson about self-directed learning. Also, I will never forget the summer afternoon when I sat in the shade of the cherry tree with B. and his father, and the many twilight moments when I was “playing” in the patio of my parents’ home with my Oxford “teacher”. These remain the loveliest memories of my student life.
2002

When I was at college in Saigon, I found a nice autobiography by a Vietnamese educator, Dương Thieu Tông\(^{27}\). I bought one copy for myself and another for B.’s father. When I handed the gift to him, he almost burst into tears, because Dương Thieu Tông turned out to be his first English teacher 50 years before. He enthusiastically recounted the English lessons he had had with Dương Thieu Tông in Hue. He also began mumbling “Jingle Bell, Jingle Bell”, the first English song that Dương Thieu Tông taught him. They had not met each other for half a century, and I was honored to be a small bridge, albeit only in spirits, between them.

2012

After the TESOL conference in Portland, Oregon in 2013, some friends and I spent a half day in Astoria, a small Oregon town by the Columbia River, which divides the states of Oregon and Washington. Astoria was a beautiful town and a popular tourist destination thanks to its purity, its green grass, and its spectacular location where the Columbia River empties into the Pacific Ocean. Standing on the streets looking downhill, I could feel the green grass under my feet, the yellow flowers on the steps, the cool drizzle, the fragrant breeze, the blue sky overhead, the vast space, and

\(^{27}\) Dương Thieu Tông (?). Thự Ban Đậu.
the immense river in the distance. Putting its beauty aside, Astoria was appealing to me for another, more significant reason—it reminded me of a childhood fantasy that, in retrospect, made me decide to go to the U.S. in the first place.

After teaching for five years, I was so burned out that I considered quitting teaching and figured out what to do next with my life. I was “hitting the wall” and began questioning my profession. There were days when I was hesitant to step into the classroom because I did not have much to share with my students. I felt that I was filling the class hours with lively but useless activities. I also suspected that my students, at least some of them, attended my class because they had to, not because they wanted to\textsuperscript{28}. To some extent, I thought that they did not need me because, from my

\textsuperscript{28} In retrospect, I was ashamed of my modest salary, and I did not know how to justify my pursuit of the teaching profession to my students. The teaching profession did not guarantee a proper livelihood and a decent social status. Ironically, I was training preservice teachers, knowing that they would end up in a mediocre social position like me. I was very skeptical about the value of what I was doing. More seriously, I did not feel connected with them, and I was also very self-conscious. I always feared that they would judge my mediocre position, my limited knowledge, and especially my modest salary. In other words, I could not live my true self when working with them. I agree with Parker Palmer (2007) that the teaching profession is not sustainable if the teacher is not living with his or her true self.

However, I did not hate the teaching profession per se. I loved my students and enjoyed creating meaningful learning experiences for them and with them. I had joy seeing them work in groups, meet foreign tourists in downtown Saigon and interview them. I understood that a good education must disrupt their existential being, bringing them to appreciation, awe, hope, questioning, and imagination; it must, like a great piece of music, move them to tears, or like a beautiful landscape, keep them silent in awe for hours. It must make them question their very existence in this world. I could not fulfill any of these, but at least I brought them to new experiences that few other teachers brought them.

My hidden assumption was that a true education was not limited in theories, but must connect to their personal experiences, or lead to the experiences they could easily relate to. The ancient wisdom must be excavated and revived. This was where the teacher would jump in. Teaching was so difficult for me because it depended so much on diverse student response. Some teachers choose to ignore student response completely, but for me this is no more teaching.
earlier experience, I knew that no one could teach a language to another one but himself or herself. As an instructor I was supposed to do the instruction and they were supposed to attend my classes. I tried to engage them by using project-based and interactive activities. However, my innovation was limited, and I finally came to the point where I could not go any further with my pedagogical innovation. I was hitting the wall.

I applied for a PhD fellowship program and won it—unexpectedly. I was torn between Australia and the U.S. but finally chose the U.S. because I had some relatives in the U.S. and there seemed to be some very good programs in the U.S. that I wanted to go to. At that time, I did not notice a very prominent factor that was quietly shaping my decision making; my childhood fantasy about standing on a vast prairie in North America, facing the cool wind blowing down from the Arctic through the vast territory of Canada.

I am not sure how and when this fantasy first emerged in my mind—probably through a geography lesson or a documentary film; I only know that I have had it for years—subconsciously. I also never considered this fantasy to be something important and serious that would influence my future trajectory. I did not consciously take this fantasy into account when making the decision, but in retrospect, I would not have chosen the U.S. for my PhD education without it. Only when standing on the steps leading to an uphill neighborhood in downtown Astoria in spring 2013 did I suddenly
recollect this childhood fantasy. The sky, the wind, the grass, and the river to some extent fulfilled my dream, even though Astoria was not a true prairie at all. It suddenly occurred to me that I had decided to come to the U.S. for a very romantic but unusual reason.

2015

As mentioned earlier, Thích Viên Minh had a lot of influence on how I made sense of my own education and education in general. His emphasis on direct living experiences enhanced my belief in experiential education. I believed that I would not grow up without experiencing all aspects of life firsthand.

I decided to explore the Rocky Mountain by myself in the winter break of 2015. I needed the solitude to figure out the direction for my life and also to push my physical and mental limits. I planned on renting a car at the Denver International Airport before driving to Estes Park\textsuperscript{29} the following morning. Before departure I had anticipated all the possible challenges during this trip because: I had never rented a car from the airport before; I had never driven a car alone on a road trip before; and especially I had never driven on the mountain before. Technically, I knew how to do all these things, but I was pretty sure that things would never go smoothly and I would have to adjust myself on

\textsuperscript{29}Estes Park is a small Colorado town at the gate of the Rocky Mountain National Park.
the way. The Hertz associate tried to persuade me to pick up an SUV instead of a sedan because he said that the weather forecast was not very positive. I did not listen to him. And later I had to pay a high price for my arrogance.

I woke up the following morning only to find Denver in white snow. Not too bad, I thought. But according to the weather forecast it would not snow heavily until the afternoon. I decided to leave Denver for Estes Park around 10:00 am. Estes Park was two hours from Denver, so I would be fine. The first two thirds of the journey were good, but when I reached the Rocky Mountain area, about 45 minutes from Estes Park, it began snowing so heavily that I could hardly see the lanes on the mountain road. I held my breath and drove at 15 miles per hour for the rest of the journey until I arrived in Estes Park around 1:00pm. I saw multiple car crashes on the way. It snowed so heavily and continuously that the roads were not cleared in a timely manner. But I made it. Estes Park was so beautiful, with herds of elks roaming around.

The following day, I decided to drive around to explore Estes Park. After some minutes on the road, I could not see anything because of the frost on the windshield. To my surprise, I did not remember how to remove it, because I had never had to do it myself. I almost hit a car in front of me, so I decided to pull over and ask a passer-by for help. She came into my car and showed me how to defrost. I eventually knew how to defrost after two years of driving in Michigan! Estes Park was so beautiful. I saw herds of elks roaming the streets. I looked into their eyes, trying to guess what they were
thinking about. I had heard much about Western wildlife, but this was the first time I had such a close-up interaction with it.

I began driving to the mountain top. Despite the slippery road, driving to the mountaintop was not difficult. I was driving slowly and arrived at one of the highest locations on the Rocky Mountain. Obviously, the mountain was spectacular. After an hour or so, I began driving down back to Estes Park, and driving downhill was much trickier than I thought--because I was nearly killed on the road! On the icy road, the brake did not work properly, so I lost control of the car when making an elbow turn downhill, before crashing into the snowy roadside, several inches from a huge pine tree. I was panicked and did not know what to do. I remember thinking about death, and some moments later, when I knew I was still alive, about the reparation fee I would have to pay to Hertz, and in one brief moment regretted taking this solo trip. Fortunately, I was not injured and the car was fine--it was just stuck in the snow. A while later, some drivers stopped by and helped me to push the car out of the snow. A driver said that he had never seen a smaller car in his life! It was getting dark outside, and the strong wind was blowing on the mountainside. I arrived at my cabin in Estes Park safely but was still shivering, keeping thinking about the crash. I could have easily died of my carelessness, but at least I had learnt something. In particular, I knew what I was thinking about at the moment of life and death.
I actually learnt a lot from this dangerous trip. The Hertz assistant was trying to help me but I did not listen to him out of arrogance. I also learnt how to ask for help when necessary. It was not much fun to ask a stranger to teach me how to defrost, but I did it anyway. Finally, I could not have made it without the other drivers on the Rocky Mountain, who helped push my car out of the snow, after several attempts. I also learned much about myself: how I reacted to a certain situation and what was important to me at the moment of life and death. In particular, this trip confirmed my belief that education is always possible as long as I am open to it.
Chapter 2 Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viên Minh

If you want a chicken to be a duck, and a duck to be a chicken, you will suffer.
—Ajahn Chah

Introduction

In this chapter, I present Buddhist meditation through the teachings of two Vietnamese Buddhist monks: Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viên Minh. I include these two Buddhist teachers here because they both have had a significant impact on me, leading me to important insights into, and questions about, spirituality and education. At the conclusion of my analysis, I came to understand that the key themes are the issues of control, judgement, and becoming, which make up thrust of this dissertation. Thích Nhất Hạnh led me to the practice of Buddhist mindfulness meditation in 2001, and Thích Viên Minh helped me to escape from a spiritual trap that I was stuck in in 2015. I consider the encounters with these two teachers as the two most significant turning points in my spiritual life. The former made me switch from asking metaphysical questions about the world to asking questions about my subjective perception of the world, and the latter led me to a new understanding of spiritual liberation, where non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-control are emphasized.30

30 This does not necessarily mean that the latter continues where the former one stopped. My path to knowledge is not linear. A may teach 10 things, but I may only understand the first 5, but then I find the remaining 5 in the teachings of B, for instance. Several years later, when reading A, I may realize the remaining 5 points that I failed to see in his teachings before.
Although these two Buddhist monks teach many things in common, they differ in a number of ways. In this chapter I do not have the intention of representing their entire careers, but am going to present my interpretation of their key teachings—those that I identify the most with. As a matter of fact, I have never had any face-to-face conversations with either of them, but I have had much access to their teachings through different channels for a relatively extended period of time—with Thầy Nhất Hạnh since 2001, and with Thầy Viên Minh since early 2015. I have also attended several retreats in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh, and have communicated by email with Thầy Viên Minh a couple of times to clarify his teachings. In particular, it is worth emphasizing that I did not read them for scholarly knowledge, but first and foremost for my immediate survival needs—as a response to my suffering. As narrated in Chapter 1, I encountered Thầy Nhất Hạnh amidst an existential crisis, and Thầy Viên Minh when stuck in the mindfulness practice (or more precisely, in my perception of it).

This chapter is written based on my assumptions that it is impossible to understand accurately and thoroughly a person, being a normal person or a scholar, and that the interpretation of a person’s works is always grounded on the writer’s personal experiences. Given the large number of books and talks that Thích Nhất Hạnh has published, formally and informally, I believe that I cannot read and listen to all of

31 "Thầy" is Vietnamese for "teacher". It is impolite to address Buddhist monks by their names without the title "Thầy" in front of them. In this text, I combine the Western and the Vietnamese codes of addressing people—e.g. both “Thích Nhất Hạnh” and “Thầy Thích Nhất Hạnh”.

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them, although I have been trying to read as much as possible. And even if I managed to read and listen to all of them, I still do not believe that I would be able to understand him 100 percent because, as a common sense, language is misleading. Therefore, what I am going to write is based on my interpretation, which is in turn grounded in my personal experiences. For this reason, I may emphasize some tenets of his teachings over some others simply because I find these tenets more meaningful. However, while I acknowledge the inevitability of biases, the value of this chapter is not in how objectively and thoroughly I present the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viện Minh, but in how as an educator I perceive of their teachings.

In this chapter, I am going to first present the key teachings of Thầy Nhất Hạnh and Thầy Viện Minh separately, before analyzing their commonalities and differences. Then, I argue that these two monks belong to, and probably represent, the two main orientations in Buddhism: social engagement and escapism. I am using the term “orientation”, not “tradition”, to emphasize the fact that these two orientations are not as separate as the Buddhist traditions are. While socially engaged Buddhists (e.g. Thích Nhất Hạnh and the Dalai Lama) look to change the status quo by means of interventive actions with the aim of alleviating social suffering (wars, injustice, ecological disasters, etc.), traditional Buddhists (e.g. Thích Viện Minh and Ajahn Chah) prioritize individual psycho-spiritual liberation from suffering caused by greed, anger, and delusion, with little care about the socio-political conditions of the world. Finally, I zoom in on the
themes of judgement, becoming, and control, which to some extent distinguish these two primary Buddhist orientations. In contrast to engaged Buddhists, traditional Buddhists completely let go of judgement, becoming, and control and submit to the dhamma as a way of overcoming ego-centeredness. The discussion of the issues of judgement, becoming, and control in Buddhism will lead to the discussion of judgement, becoming, and control in educational theory and practice in Chapters 4 and 5.

Thích Nhật Hạnh

Thích Nhật Hạnh (1926-) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet, and peace activist. He belongs to the 42th generation of the Linji lineage, a Chinese Chan/Zen tradition, and the 8th generation of the Vietnamese Liễu Quán Zen School. He began his monastic life at the age of 16 at the root temple of Tử Hiệu in Central Vietnam. Thích Nhật Hạnh was a peace activist during the Vietnam War. He established the School of Youth for Social Services (SYSS) in Saigon in the 1960s to train social workers in response to the needs of war victims. In the 1960s and 1970s, he traveled to Europe and North America to call for an end to the Vietnam War. He was a pioneer of the Engaged Buddhism movement.

Due to his anti-war activities, he was put into exile by the South Vietnamese government, and after 1975, by the government of unified Vietnam. He and his
associates established a Buddhist community in the south of France in 1982, which is now known as the Plum Village, where he resides and teaches mindfulness meditation to practitioners coming from different parts of the world. He also travels to many countries, especially in Europe and North America, to lead mindfulness retreats. The monasteries in his tradition include: Plum Village (in France), Deer Park monastery (in CA, USA), Blue Cliff monastery (in NY, USA), Magnolia monastery (in Mississippi, USA), Plum Village Thailand, the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (Germany), the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism (Hong Kong). In addition, the Order of Interbeing that he founded in 1967 has hundreds of ordained monastic and lay members.

Thích Nhật Hạnh returned to Vietnam for the first time in 2005 after 39 years of exile, then again in 2007 and 2008. However, due to some tension between his tradition and the Vietnamese government, his students were evicted from Bát Nhã Monastery in 2009, and he has not returned to Vietnam since then.

A prolific author, Thích Nhật Hạnh has published nearly 100 books, in both Vietnamese and English. In the West, he is best known for *The Miracle of Mindfulness; Old Paths, White Clouds; Living Buddha, Living Christ; Buddha and Christ as Brothers; Peace is Every Step*; etc. His books were banned in Vietnam until 2005.
Here and Now

As narrated in Chapter 1, the first book by Thích Nhất Hạnh that I read, *Connecting with Life* (Tiếp Xúc Vôi Sự Sống)*32*, had a powerful impact on me. This thin book contains his core teachings about the mindfulness practice, which makes his entire career. For him, mindfulness is the heart of Buddhist meditation, and it can be summarized in two key words: here and now. To live mindfully is to live the here and the now to the fullest. In this book, he defines mindfulness by telling the story about a river running after the clouds, only to realize that it already has the clouds in itself (see Chapter 1). The river does not have to run and become something because it already has everything within it. This is the most profound and poetic definition of mindfulness I have ever read. After reading this story, I knew that my life would never be the same. I stopped running after my “clouds” like a crazy man and began enquiring within and appreciating deeply what I had. A drop of morning dew on a leaf, for example, turned out to be a miracle. So is a withering flower, or the summer rain. Thích Nhất Hạnh has a special talent for unfolding the beauty of the familiar. For example, he convinced me of the miracle of walking on earth. Walking on earth is, he argues, a true miracle if we think about bedridden people. He also reminds people not to take their beloved ones for granted. It is Thích Nhất Hạnh who began the tradition of pinning roses on chests

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on the Vietnamese Mother’s Day (the 15th of July on the lunar calendar): those with parents still alive are pinned red roses, while those with dead parents white roses. This tradition, which has been adopted by almost all Buddhist temples in Vietnam for half a century, originated from his short essay about his mother, in which he likens her to a source of fresh water, a large tree, a gust of cool breeze, etc., all of which seem normal but are actually extraordinary. He urged people to appreciate their mother’s presence and love before it was too late. He wrote:

Today, when you get home from school or from work, stop by your mother’s room with a smile on your face. Sit down by her, and ask her to pause her sewing. Then look closely at her, to really see her face, to feel her presence. Then hold her hands gently, asking her this question: “Mother, do you know that …?” , and she asks you: “Know what?”. “That I love you?”. This question does not need an answer. With this question, you and your mother become immortal, and you will not regret it once she is no longer around.33

Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teaching about mindfulness is not separate from his teaching about beauty, impermanence, and interbeing. Because everything is impermanent and fragile, their existence is beautiful and invaluable, but this beauty can only be appreciated through mindful eyes. This beauty is possible also because of their interconnectedness

with other phenomena. The clouds in the sky are beautiful because of their colors, but also because they are interconnected with the water in the river, with the Amazon forest, and with the polar bears in the Arctic, etc.

His writing about “interbeing” totally changed the way I looked at the world. The world, in my new vision, no longer consists of different things connected by bolts and nuts, but by things that influence each other, interact with each other, penetrate each other, and even turn into each other. I was convinced that the world is lively, sparkling, and organic. I began reconsidering the relationship between myself and my family. I was born into a culture where family values are highly regarded, but I did not feel the interconnectedness between myself and my family until I read his poetic philosophizing about “interbeing”.

My grandfather, who was killed by a mine on the rice paddy in the Vietnam War, is, in the light of interbeing, not really dead. His legacy is still present in different forms right now. He was the only one among his siblings to finish elementary school, and in his turn the only one to send his children to school. He was also the only one to distribute his properties equally to his children in his (oral) will, contrary to the common practice of his generation which favored sons over daughters. Thầy Nhất Hạnh’s teaching about interbeing encourages me to meditate on how I relate with my grandfather, and a feeling of closeness and gratitude emerged. My grandfather is still visible within me, my father, my family, our coconut farm, and even the strangers that
had the chance to meet him during his lifetime. Through the lens of interbeing, my connections with the past and the future becomes a reality that I can touch, feel, and smell. It is not only a theory that is understood intellectually, but also emotionally and experientially. In the same vein, I know that my presence, my thoughts, my actions, and my attitudes will never disappear completely, but they will re-emerge in other forms, places, and times.

I feel humbler and more responsible than ever. At first glance, my accomplishments, if any, are usually attributed to my own talents and efforts, but once looked at more deeply, they may not be possible without others’ contributions. What if my grandfather had never gone to school? What if my mother had never gone to Saigon when she was 18? What if my father had not been nice to his classmates? I do not know, but I am sure that I would not be the same. I am reminded to reconsider my ego-centeredness by meditating on my interconnection with the others. I feel more responsible because I know that what I do now may have impacts on more people and in longer term than I thought.

With the insight of “interbeing” in mind, this very piece of writing that I am working on can be an interesting phenomenon. When Thầy Nhất Hạnh wrote his book Connecting with Life, he may not have seen the interbeing between the river, the clouds,

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34 I was able to finish college thanks partially to the financial support of my father’s old friend. After 30 years of losing touch with each other, he managed to find my father and offered to support my college education.
the blue sky that he depicted in the story, and an old farmer man who was killed while working on the rice paddy in 1974, through his grandson’s recollection, and a Vietnamese doctoral student writing his dissertation in the main library of a university in the U.S. Through the lens of interbeing, the world turns into a miraculous matrix where all formations interact each other in unpredictable ways. The blessed, the miserable, the good, the bad, the right, the wrong, the old, the young, the dead, the living, the east, the west, the rain, the sunshine, the past, the present, the future, etc. all merge into each other, even turn into one another. Spatially, nothing is totally separate from others; temporally, nothing is really gone, as described by the Heart Sutra:

Listen Sariputra,

all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;

their true nature is the nature of

no Birth no Death,

no Being no Non-being,

no Defilement no Purity,

no Increasing no Decreasing

Emptiness, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, does not mean nothingness or nihilism, but it means non-self, meaning things are “empty” of a separate self.

Emptiness is another way of talking about interbeing. In this sense, “non-self” does not mean that we have no selves, or that we are not existing, but that we are interconnected with all other formations. In this light, we can see the connection between ourselves and the banana farmers in Latin America, with Marie Curie from France, or with the emperor geese in Alaska, for example.

The teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh on mindfulness, beauty, impermanence, interbeing, and emptiness open a new world before my eyes--a world that goes beyond the normal labeling, categorization, discrimination, or competition. However, while I embrace this new world with all my heart, I remember that I am still living in this normal, relative world. As a doctoral student, I cannot pretend that my dissertation and my career are not important. While I embrace the world of interbeing and non-representation, I have to remind myself that I must be realistic enough to survive in this world.

What struck me the most about Thích Nhất Hạnh is the fact that he does not believe in a metaphysical Pure Land or nirvana that only exists after death. Pure Land or nirvana is, according to him, completely possible in this ordinary, secular life, as long as we look at this life deeply and appreciatively. If we listen to a bird’s song mindfully, we realize that the bird is giving a beautiful dharma talk, unfolding the nature of this

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world. If we look at a flower closely, we will hear its dharma message. In short, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, Buddhism does not have to be a religion of the dead, as it is traditionally perceived, but it can and should be a religion of the living.

A “Businessless Person”

In spring 2015, I was busy with writing my dissertation, working on a book chapter, peer-reviewing a journal manuscript, revising my own journal manuscript, preparing for the trip to Vietnam, and then another trip to Europe, writing a funding report for a project, transcribing interviews, applying for a new DS-2019, applying for a Japanese transit visa, and so on. Like my colleagues in the academy, I was a busy person with many deadlines, and for this reason I adored Thầy Nhất Hạnh’s description of a “businessless person” (người vô sự).

In his commentary on the Records of Linjì, he says that while the hero in Theravada Buddhism is an arhat, someone who has escaped the cycle of birth and death, in Mahayana Buddhism a bodhisattva, someone who not only liberates themselves but also supports others on the path of liberation, the hero in the Linjì Zen

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37 While I appreciate the beauty of Patriarch Linjì’s philosophy about “businessless” through the interpretation of Thích Nhất Hạnh, I did not see the connection between this philosophy with vipassana meditation until reading Thích Viên Minh. Thầy Viên Minh points out, and I agree, that, the Zen tradition and the Vipassana tradition are identical at the core.

tradition is a “businessless” person, someone who has “nothing to do and nowhere to go”. In other words, a businessless person is a non-judgmental, non-becoming, and non-controlling person. Aha! How dare he teach about “nothing to do and nowhere to go” in this competitive, neoliberal society, where people run after one goal after another? Isn’t Walmart open 24 hours per day, 7 days per week?

As far as I am concerned, a major portion of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings about mindfulness revolves around this ideal image of a “businessless” person (người vô sự). A businessless person does not literally have nothing to do and nowhere to go, but he or she is not drawn away by the past, the future, the calculation, the comparison, etc., to the extent that he or she does not live the present moment fully. In other words, a businessless person may do many things but he does not have a busy mind—the mind of judgement, becoming, and control. Let us meet one such businessless person in this poem:

Ngồi đây lắng nghe cánh chim bay
(Sitting here listening to the birds’ wings)
Ba ngàn thế giới không đầy tác gang
(The entire universe is right here)
Phương Tây vừa khuyết quả vàng
(While the sun is setting in the west)
Phương Đông thở ngược dâng dâng định đối
The image of a businessless hero, as described by Thích Nhất Hạnh, is particularly attractive to me because it describes one of my main ideals of success. I have been trained to be judgmental and efficient for so long that I have lost the capability to rest, or in the language of Thích Nhất Hạnh, to be “businessless”. Indeed, it is not easy to

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stop and rest. To rest is to let go of judgement, becoming, and control. Some people are not able to rest, even during their summer vacation! “Businessless” does not mean doing nothing and going nowhere, but rather it is a matter of the inner freedom made possible by a non-judging, non-becoming, and non-controlling mind. Thích Nhất Hạnh himself has a tight schedule filled with a lot of teaching and travelling activities, but he says that he has nothing to do and nowhere to go at all. In a talk, a practitioner asked him how he was going to prepare for the next generation of monastics in his tradition; he replied that he was preparing nothing, because he had done his best with every and all things that he did, and that all his plans had already been fulfilled.

From my experience, “businessless” is not an illusion. I have experienced it at some rare moments in my life. As narrated in chapter 1, I had a very “businessless” first grade. However, my pure heart and fresh mind of the first grade were gone, only to be replaced by boredom, fear, struggling, and even disappointment. Fortunately, I have gradually restored the fresh mind and the pure heart of 30 years before. I have found myself getting up early in the morning, with a fresh mind and a pure heart, reading and writing what interests me, without much calculation and comparison on my part. I have also become truer to myself. I was taught for many years that I must “become” someone

40 Hanh, T. N. Người Thân Chết Bây Giờ Ở Đâu? (Where are my Deceased Relatives?). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQCugHyEICs

41 I’m sharing my personal experience in a chapter about the two Buddhist monks because I believe in experiential writing (as opposed to objective writing). I don’t want to hide from the text I am writing. This approach is repeated throughout this chapter.
else because who I am is not good enough, but I have realized that the best way to live is to live a natural, authentic life—to non-become. The ability to be true to oneself is more difficult than it seems to be; many lose it during the process of educational socialization.

Another “businessless” moment occurred to me in the US several years ago, after the conference in Portland, Oregon, as narrated in Chapter 1. I did not have to worry about any presentation or prepare for any future plans. I was enjoying myself completely amidst the blue sky, the green grass, etc., literally with “nothing to do” and “nowhere to go”! At that moment I was totally non-judgmental, non-becoming, and non-controlling.

Mindful Breaths and Mindful Footsteps

Thích Nhật Hạnh’s teachings on mindfulness revolve around mindful breathing (breathing meditation) and mindful walking (walking meditation), which I find very useful in my life. These two methods are based on the Anapanasati Sutta (Mindfulness of Breathing) and the Satipatthana Sutta (The Establishments of Mindfulness), the two most important suttas of Early Buddhism. The practice of these two suttas, according to him, can bring to practitioners the state of bliss, even nirvana, right in the present

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42 Hanh, T. N. 16 Pháp quán niệm hồi thở (16 Mindful Breaths). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpjW6rLsF5Y&index=1&list=PLDB3BD8EB3C636438
moment. Breathing meditation and walking meditation are the core components of any retreat led by Thích Nhất Hạnh and his students. At the retreat for teachers at Brock University (Toronto, Canada) in 2012, retreatants got up early and practiced walking meditation in a procession led by Thích Nhất Hạnh himself. After one hour of walking, we gathered in the hall to practice breathing meditation. A whole congregation of over 1,000 people sat there in silence, listening to the bell, the guidance, and following the breaths. In all monasteries in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh, people are expected to pause what they are doing and observe their breaths whenever a bell is rung, being the bell of the monastery, the bell of the church nearby, or the ding-dong of a grandfather clock. While this is a useful practice, I find it too controlling and constraining. This is a paradox because control is used here with the aim of liberation.

Even though I gradually came to disagree with some aspects of the mindfulness practice taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh, I find mindful breathing and mindful walking very useful. This practice brings awareness to my body, my feelings, my mind, and objects of the mind. Whenever I feel restless, I return to my breaths, notice them, and listen to my feelings, my emotions, my bodily reactions. The mere noticing of what is happening within myself is healing. Whenever my mind wanders into the past, the future, or another location, I just return to the reality of my breaths and escape from illusions and fantasies. I agree with Thích Nhất Hạnh that breaths are the bridges linking body and mind, grounding them into the present moment. Walking meditation
works in a similar manner. By being aware of each footstep, I train myself not to hurry, not to be drawn away by the future, so that I can see clearly what is happening within me and around me. In other words, breathing and walking meditation helps me to return to the state of non-becoming. I am not trying to be anything other than who I am at the moment.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

Thích Nhất Hạnh’s new interpretation of the five Buddhist precepts, or in his language, the five mindfulness trainings, is also very meaningful to me. The first training is to protect life, to decrease violence in oneself, in the family and in society. The second training is to practice social justice, generosity, not stealing and not exploiting other living beings. The third is the practice of responsible sexual behavior in order to protect individuals, couples, families and children. The fourth is the practice of deep listening and loving speech to restore communication and reconcile. The fifth is about mindful consumption, to help us not bring toxins and poisons into our body or mind.

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43 The renaming of the five Buddhist precepts indicates that mindfulness is, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, an ethical project.

These trainings respond to major problems of our contemporary society, including violence, war, pollution, corruption, addiction, and so on. As far as I am concerned, they are an invitation to live one’s life in a beautiful and responsible manner. My personal experience and my observation of the society make me believe that these trainings are necessary for a sustainable future, at the personal level and the social level. They are not commandments that require absolute obedience, but are flexible suggestions that require further digging and contemplation. When reading Thích Nhất Hạnh’s interpretation of these trainings, I cannot help but think about the problems of alcoholism and domestic violence that inflicted on my childhood, the environmental disaster caused by a bauxite mining factory in Central Vietnam since 2005, and the waste of food that I sometimes witness in the US and other places.

In the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh, practitioners are encouraged to receive the five mindfulness trainings in order to become Buddhists; however, if they do not read and discuss these trainings with fellow Buddhist meditators for three months, their Buddhist membership automatically goes invalid. Thích Nhất Hạnh also adds that these trainings are going to change in the future, in response to the social change.

In a retreat, I asked one of his senior students why I had to receive these five trainings, and expressed the concern that these five trainings might restrict my living experiences. I argued that if I did not experience something firsthand, how would I know if it was right or wrong? Their answer did not address my question. This question
continued to bother me until I listened to a talk by Thầy Viên Minh, who said that people need to experience things before knowing if they are right or wrong, and that each person has their unique starting point. Everyone also has to learn their own lessons at their own pace. A drug addict, for example, is definitely learning their life lessons, while a college professor is also learning their own life lessons. We cannot tell whose lessons are more significant. While I agree that it is a waste of time to reinvent the wheel, I agree with Thầy Viên Minh that people grow up for the most part through their own experiences, not much through external instruction or advice. External instruction or advice only confirm what people have come to believe through their firsthand experiences. My experience driving in the Rocky Mountains was an example of a great educational opportunity--to understand myself better and to learn important lessons that I would not otherwise. Yes, I acknowledge the beauty and value of the five mindfulness trainings as interpreted by Thích Nhất Hạnh, but I believe that they must go along with personal experiences. Nobody will take them seriously without experiencing them directly. For some people, mere obedience may not work at all.

Thích Viên Minh

Thích Viên Minh (1943-) is a Vietnamese Theravada Buddhist monk. He was ordained in Saigon in 1965 and has been teaching Buddhism to both laypeople and monastics in Saigon and the surrounding area since then. Thầy Viên Minh studies
different schools of Buddhism and different religions, including Taoism and Christianity. He currently serves as Abbot of Bửu Long Root Temple in the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. He is also founder of a number of other Theravada temples in central Vietnam.

His teachings can be found in his books (all in Vietnamese), his collections of letters to his students, his Zen stories, his dharma talks\(^{45}\) on YouTube, and his question and answer forum on his website\(^{46}\). His books include *Living in the Present*, *Buddhist Meditation: Theravada and Zen*, etc.

Although I did not know Thầy Viên Minh until recently, his teachings have a powerful impact on me—both my living philosophy and in my concrete actions. My trip to the Rocky Mountain in December 2015, for example, was inspired by his teachings. As narrated above, I learned quite a few lessons during this trip, which helped me to understand myself better.

**Non-self and Non-control**

I learn a lot from Thầy Viên Minh, but in this section I only focus on some of his sharings about Buddhist meditation that are most meaningful to me. First of all, while Thầy Nhất Hạnh mostly presents non-self (and/or interbeing) metaphysically, which

\(^{45}\) Talks on Buddhist teachings

changes my philosophical view of the world, Thầy Viên Minh presents non-self psychically, which changes how I relate to myself and others in my everyday life and relieves my suffering. Essentially, I learn from Thầy Viên Minh the spirit of non-control, because according to him, non-self means non-control. The desire to control oneself and others, according to him, is a manifestation of greed, hatred, and delusion—three Buddhist poisons. I had learnt about these three poisons multiple times before, but I had never experienced them firsthand until I was lying sick in bed listening to his talk about non-self, as narrated in Chapter 1. It occurred to me that I had always wanted to control everything, including my health condition, which was my subtle but important enlightenment.

This experience really changed my mind about who I was. I began reflecting on my habit of control in my relationships with myself and others. Once I send somebody an email, I would expect a reply as soon as possible, or I would get mad. When I am dissatisfied with a situation, I immediately take action to change it. Indeed, control had been part of who I was. I was taught to take action to make possible what I believe is justifiable. According to Thầy Viên Minh, the desire to control is a manifestation of greed, anger, and delusion. I obviously understand that some degree of control or control over some domains is indispensable in life, but I realize that control can sometimes damage myself and others, and it does not have to be the only reaction on

47 Minh, T. V. Bản Ngã (Ego). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBTeHdeKZM
my part. I had always been taught how to control people and things, but nobody had ever taught me how not to control. For many, non-control is an indicator of weakness, inefficiency, even incompetence, but for me it can be an indicator of strength and liberation. It is worth noting that non-control is not a universal truth that should work for all people in all circumstances. I am writing about it here because it worked for me in my particular situation.

The lesson of non-control is a difficult but rewarding one. Without a spirit of control, I accept myself, other people and things as they are, not as I think they should be. A withering flower is a withering flower; it does not have to be a fresh, colorful flower. My roommate is who he is; he does not have to become someone I assume he should be. When it snows heavily, I respond to it and do not try to change it. When people do not reply to my email, I may send a reminder email, but I am not mad about it, because after all it is their responsibility, not mine, to reply to this email. This is the core of Buddhist meditation, in which pure observation is emphasized. It is not that I have turned into an irresponsible person with an indifferent attitude. No, I still live my usual life, with multiple responsibilities to fulfill and many dreams to realize, but I simply respond to them, not control them. I will cook dinner when I am hungry, reply to emails when they come, make plans for my trips, ask for necessary information, go out with my friends, etc., but I do not try to control any of them. My life turns out to be easy and peaceful.
Non-control, as a fundamental constituent of self-directed learning, is different from the educational ideal of (moral) autonomy in at least two primary ways. First, while autonomy is about deliberately keeping oneself from external influences with the hope of maintaining and nurturing one’s authentic self, non-control is about seeing clearly the status of one’s body, feelings, and thoughts without trying to control them. This means with moral autonomy one has a clear goal (autonomy) to work towards, while with non-control one has no particular goal and thus no means-end distinction and no instrumentality spirit. In short, one needs to exercise control in order to maintain the possibility of autonomy, which obviously contradicts non-control, and more broadly speaking, self-directed learning.

The second difference, which is closely related to the first one, is about the role of rationality. While autonomy primarily refers to one’s own rational choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgments, plannings, or reasonings, it undermines desires, feelings, and interests, which are at the core of self-directed learning. This is why some feminist scholars (like Stone 1990, Cuypers 1992) accuse the educational ideal of autonomy of being exclusively and excessively masculine.

It is also through the spirit of non-self, or non-control, that I revitalized my lesson about non-discrimination. Any form of discrimination involves a set of standards subconsciously adopted. For example, when someone abhors homosexuality, they believe that homosexuality deviates from their own standards of gender and sexuality,
and thus they have a desire to control/eliminate it. According to Thây Viện Minh, the desire to control is the root of all violence. The practice of meditation is the practice of observing and listening without a discriminatory/controlling mind. Controlling one’s breath and one’s body is a common meditative practice, especially among the Buddhist converts in the West, but according to Thây Viện Minh this is definitely not a Buddhist meditative practice. Controlling equals increasing the self, which contradicts the Buddhist insight of non-self. Instead, Buddhist meditation takes place in all regular activities when one is aware of what is happening. Meditation is not restricted to controlling the breaths and the body, but it can be done through cooking, traveling, jogging, teaching, and so on. It is one’s attitude, not the efforts at controlling, that makes up the core of Buddhist meditation.\(^{48}\)

According to Thây Viện Minh, Buddhist meditation is absolutely not a matter of self-improvement (or control) effort. A person may decide to close the door and practice sitting meditation in silence for several hours a day with the hope of attaining better concentration and bliss, but this is not necessarily a Buddhist meditation practice.\(^{49}\) This is a manifestation of self. Instead, Buddhist meditation manifests in the relationships with others—on one’s children, spouse, students, professors, etc. True concentration

\(^{48}\) Minh, T. V. Thiền Trong Đạo Phật: Minh hay Vô Minh? (Buddhist Meditation: Ignorance or Wisdom?). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3SiCi39x8

\(^{49}\) Minh, T. V. Pháp Đã Hoàn Hảo Nội Mỗ Nguời (The Dhamma is Already Perfect Within Us) . See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkeYx9jUfSI
does not result from efforts to control oneself (the breath, the body) and the environment (a silent room with a pleasant fragrance), but from living fully with oneself and the environment with a spirit of letting go. Pure observation is key to Buddhist meditation. In this spirit, one does not have to enter a monastery to practice meditation, but meditation is possible in all daily activities, with all people involved, in both desirable and undesirable situations. Thầy Viện Minh asserts that life is the best school of meditation, and meditation is effortless. He says that meditation is the easiest thing in the world because one does not have to do anything, achieve anything, or compare with anyone. In short, Buddhist meditation is only possible in the absence of control, effort, and methods.

Thầy Viện Minh dismisses meditation methods as controlling, although he admits that they are useful in particular situations. In general, people need methods in order to achieve something quickly, which works towards efficiency and contradicts the principle of non-self and letting go (of control). Many of his students complain that they still have no idea of what to do after many hours of listening to his talks about meditation because he never gives any step-by-step instructions, but he asks them to keep listening to the talks before figuring out what to do for themselves. Meditation techniques, he stresses, can constrain the practitioners, which is against the spirit of Buddhist meditation. Meditation, according to him, is not a matter of implementing techniques. Thầy Viện Minh does not believe in breathing, sitting, or walking
meditation methods. Meditation may include the action of breathing, sitting, or walking, but an action is different from a method. Methods, according to him, may entrap people, while general principles may open the door for them. In this respect, Thầy Viên Minh is different from most other Buddhist teachers, who emphasize methods over principles. However, this does not mean that Thầy Viên Minh dismisses meditation methods as useless. He considers methods as useful but only temporary remedies, which may work for some people in some special circumstances. He likens a meditation method to a walking stick. If I hurt my leg, I should use a walking stick to move from point A to point B, but once my leg gets better, I should throw the stick away. In the same vein, a sitting meditation method, for example, can be necessary in a particular context to a particular person, but it does not equal Buddhist meditation. Buddhist meditation is a matter of flipping my attitude, not of applying certain techniques or methods. Instead, Thầy Viên Minh teaches meditative insights, which are broader and more flexible than methods/techniques, with the hope that they may inspire people to transform their attitudes. Non-self and letting go, for example, are meditative insights, not methods. This also sets up an important contrast to traditional Western philosophy of education that usually assumes methods.

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50 While principles are general patterns found in nature, methods are man-made strategies intended for only particular contexts.
Learning from Personal Experiences

When I decided to make a road trip from East Lansing (Michigan) to San José (California) by bus in 2012, I knew it would be a difficult but rewarding experience. In addition to crossing numerous states on the way, the trip was a great opportunity for me to meet the lowest class of the American society and to try eating fast food for several days in a row. I always believed in experiential education, and my belief was strengthened when I read Rousseau’s Émile two years ago. To grow up, I believe, children must be exposed to diverse living situations different from what they are familiar with. For example, children from wealthy families must have opportunities to live with the poor for an extended period of time to understand what poverty really means. Poverty, as presented in textbooks or on TV, does not mean much to them.

A true believer in experiential education, I always doubt theoretical knowledge and moral standards imposed from outside. For example, in a question-and-answer session with Plum Village monastics on the MSU campus, I asked them why I had to follow the five mindfulness trainings. While I understood that these five mindfulness trainings could bring about positive changes to my life and the community, I was concerned that they might deprive me of the opportunity to live diverse living

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51 A colleague asked me if reading about a theory was considered a first-hand experience. I replied yes, but added that it depended on what kind of experience we were referring to. An experience must be about or with something. For example, an experience with reading a book about Alaska is different from an experience with Alaska itself.
experiences. For example, I have never smoked in my life, but this does not mean that I do not want to have the experience of smoking at one point in my life! Deep within me, I tend not accept something as true until I had already experienced it firsthand.

Interestingly enough, Thầy Viên Minh’s stance is not far from mine. He says that a piece of advice, however reasonable it is, would mean nothing unless people experience it firsthand. A person may read about mother’s love a hundred times without understanding it, until she becomes a mother herself. Thầy Viên Minh adds that living experiences, both desirable and undesirable, are great educational opportunities. A road trip, for instance, is an educational opportunity. So is a broken heart. Children cannot mature if they are overprotected by parents. If they do not stumble and fall down once in a while, it is difficult for them to learn how to walk by themselves.

Thầy Viên Minh believes that Buddhist meditation is impossible without concrete living experiences. Actually, according to him meditation is only possible through living experiences--with oneself and others. Meditation absolutely does not mean closing the door and practicing breathing in solitude. Thầy Viên Minh asserts that it is a mistake to isolate oneself from the world in order to practice meditation, because the action of staying away from the world is a manifestation of self--to renounce this world in order to attain a goal. This is the mind of becoming and control because it asks us to discipline our actions in order to try to become something we are not (at least at
that moment). Meditation, enlightenment, nirvana, etc. all exist within, not outside of, this world. Inner renunciation, or renunciation in one’s attitude, is more important than physically turning away from the world. Inner renunciation means letting go of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

Non-becoming

Another teaching of Thầy Viên Minh that really struck me is about non-becoming. Buddhist meditation is not about implementing certain techniques in order to achieve a goal within a period of time. In other words, it is not a matter of “becoming”. We do not have to “become” more enlightened, more relaxed, or happier. We do not have to “become” Buddhists either. We are simply who we are. The desire to “become” creates the “psychological time” that prevents us from living our present life to the fullest52. Objectively, we are going to become someone or something, whether we want it or not, but this objective becoming does not involve the psychological time—it just happens that way in a natural way. A young jackfruit does not have to become a mature jackfruit, or become an orange, in order to feel fulfilled, because its image of the mature jackfruit, or of the orange, is actually an illusion. It will likely become a mature

jackfruit at some point in the future, but this mature jackfruit will not be the same as the image of the mature jackfruit that it visualized when it was younger.

Thày Viên Minh believes that the desire to “become” is the root of birth and death, and those who are not “becoming” are called arhats, or Buddhist saints. By definition, arhats are those who have escaped the cycle of birth and death in the sense that they have been liberated from the psychological time, or the sense of becoming.

While Thày Nhật Hạnh led me to the practice of Buddhist meditation, and to a religion called Buddhism, Thày Viên Minh inspired me to leave a religion called Buddhism and become a free person and in a sense a true Buddhist. I may still visit a Buddhist temple once in a while, but my mind is no longer limited within a religious institution called “Buddhism”. The Buddhist meditation that I learned from Thày Viên Minh is not necessarily affiliated with any particular tradition of Buddhism, although he is a Theravada monk himself. I do not have to belong to a particular lineage, tradition, or religion. When a student asked Thày Viên Minh how she should teach Buddhism to her colleagues, he replied that she should live her life beautifully and support her friends when possible, but should never convert them to Buddhism. I find this teaching very beautiful, noble and profound.

I am open to the diverse world out there, with different religious beliefs, ideologies, lifestyles, and so on. I can live with anyone, travel anywhere, and do anything, as long as I remember to observe and listen to myself, in relation to others,
and learn my lessons along the way. Also, I do not have to look or sound different from others, but I am just an ordinary man living his ordinary life, with his dreams, his family, his friends, his job, etc. Who prevents me from dreaming? I can dream if I want to, but at least I know that I am dreaming.

The insight of “non-becoming” can be very challenging for academicians, myself included. In the past two years, I have been reluctant to read new theories that I believe have little to do with my life. Philosophers create their own discursive worlds, based on their systems of terminology, concepts, and definitions, and as a reader I am dragged into their respective abstract worlds. Rancière, for instance, creates a conceptual world based on the assumption of radical equality, which may have powerful impacts on his readers. At many moments I am tempted to read with the intention of accumulating knowledge and understanding. When I heard about Rancière, I decided to read him to know who he was, what his theory was about, and how sensible it was. I also believed that a real scholar must read widely so that we can communicate with other scholars in the academy. My desire to have more, to know more, to “become” more knowledgeable, dominated my life for many years, but over the time I found this desire meaningless. When at academic conferences, I witnessed people fight with each other over someone else’s theories, which is so ridiculous to me. Why do I have to take side with a certain philosopher/theorist that I have never met and that I only believe I understand his or her theorizing, and fight with the one physically present right in front
of me? What would this philosopher/theorist think about the fight, if they happened to be present there? Would they burst into laughter? For me, although theories and arguments are valuable, they are in the realm of fantasy which I would not take too seriously. I may die for another person, but not for a theory.

The modern Western civilization is based primarily on relative knowledge, argument, and critique, which are all means of “becoming”, but thanks to which this society has evolved over the time in terms of materials. At the personal level, one is expected to become more knowledgeable and critical, publish more journal articles, present at more conferences, network with more scholars, etc. At the social level, we are expected to accumulate more wealth, fight for more social justice, contribute to a more peaceful world, etc. “Becoming” is a red thread running through the entire modern society. In this spirit, reading is a must because it is considered as the primary path leading to knowledge and power. One must read in order to educate oneself and improve this society. Knowledge, as it is commonly held, is power. As a scholar I am expected to join the mainstream of “becoming” and encourage others to do so.

In the past two years, I have not stopped reading, but I only read what keeps me away from, or at least minimizes, the spirit of “becoming”. Instrumental reading has become a big challenge for me. Take Rousseau’s Émile as an example. When I first read it for fun two years ago, I enjoyed it so much. However, when I read it again recently, with the intention of quoting some important excerpts for my paper, it became an
unpleasant experience. I still read current news, but I have not read much to increase my scholarly knowledge. Instead, I spend most of my time reading and listening to myself, in relation with others, as a survival need. I play with myself, experiment with myself, observe myself, etc. without the intention of “becoming” anything. This way, however, may have put me in direct contradiction with the mainstream culture of the academy and with most philosophy of education.

Non-becoming, however, if not taken critically, can be dangerous and antisocial. Whenever I read news about violence or environmental disasters somewhere in the world, I cannot pretend that I do not want this world to “become” better. Who would not expect to see a cleaner beach or a safer neighborhood? If so, what is the role of “non-becoming”? Is non-becoming only a myth that can never come true? Is it only a radical ideal, reflecting one end of the hypothetical spectrum? As far as I am concerned, non-becoming can never be considered as a universal truth that works for all people in all circumstances. Instead, it is a suggestion that people may or may not accept, depending on where they are in their “school” of life, intended to even out the dominant orientation towards becoming. Personally, this insight works for me in some cases and not very much in some others. However, the value of this insight is that I know that there is one more option out there, that I do not have to “become” all the time, that the spirit of “becoming” can be very devastating to myself and others if it is not taken critically.
Differences between Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viện Minh

Thầy Nhất Hạnh and Thầy Viện Minh teach many things in common, especially their emphasis on living the present moment to the fullest, or mindfulness. However, they are also different in many ways.

As far as I am concerned, the main difference between Thầy Nhất Hạnh and Thầy Viện Minh is in their perspectives on the role of judgement, becoming, and control. While Thầy Nhất Hạnh does not dismiss these three elements completely (via his Engaged Buddhism movement and emphasis on methods), Thầy Viện Minh considers these elements as manifestation of an ego and the root of human suffering.

Thầy Nhất Hạnh teaches sitting meditation and walking meditation step by step, using the sound of the bell to control the mind and awareness to control the steps, with an emphasis on the importance of practice. He has established multiple mindfulness practice centers and community-based practice groups (or shangas) all over the world. In addition, he also took actions to change the status quo of the world through his peace and ecology activism, linking inner peace with external world peace. He began the socially engaged Buddhism movement (for short, Engaged Buddhism) during the
Vietnam War. To some extent, he considers personal peace as a pathway to world peace, or at least personal peace as a contributor to world peace\(^3\).

In contrast, Thày Viên Minh dismisses all forms of judgement, becoming, and control, including the control of oneself with the hope of gaining better concentration, bliss, or enlightenment. He does not consider Buddhist meditation as a process of controlled practice with the aim of becoming something but as a matter of self-realization, although practice can be a useful means in particular contexts, like a walking stick to an injured man. Self-realization does not come from conscious, controlled practice but from submission to the reality (the dhamma), which unfolds in the regular, daily life. Any controlled effort at Buddhist meditation manifests an ego-centeredness, which is the root of human suffering. He prioritizes changing one’s attitude towards the reality over taking actions to change the reality. The reality will take care of itself. In short, according to Thày Viên Minh, Buddhist meditation is an individual, rather than a social, project.

Thày Nhật Hạnh and Thày Viên Minh represents two main orientations in Buddhism: socially engaged Buddhism and traditional Buddhism (or escapist Buddhism). While traditional Buddhism aims at liberating oneself from spiritual-psychological clinging to the world, Engaged Buddhism aims at taking action to change

the world. One is escapist, other-worldly, and even anti-social, while the other is socially engaged. From my perspective, it is difficult to prove which orientation is better because they both respond to the needs of different people who may find themselves in different circumstances. Over a decade ago, I was attracted to Engaged Buddhism because I found it relevant to my circumstance at that time. However, after undergoing the surgery last year, I was leaning towards the traditional Buddhism because this tradition speaks to the most immediate issues of human life and death. It will obviously come to a point in their lives when people realize that it is the ego-centeredness that makes them suffer, and the only way of escaping from suffering is to stay away from that ego-centeredness, that is the tendency to judge, become, and control, which is exactly what traditional Buddhism is all about.

I have presented Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viên Minh with a particular emphasis on the issues of judgement versus non-judgement, control versus letting go, and becoming versus non-becoming. As far as I am concerned, these are three key Buddhist concerns, which are also the key considerations of self-directed learning philosophy that I am going to discuss and analyze in Chapters 4 and 5. Self-manipulation/ violence\(^5\), a form of control, is avoided in both Buddhist meditation and

\(^5\) I am trying to avoid the term ”self-control” here because this term has a positive connotation in the mainstream discourse of education.
self-directed education. A Buddhist meditator is not violent to his or her breaths, as much as a self-directed student does not repress his or her natural curiosity.
Chapter 3 Meditative Inquiry

Yes, Kalamas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: “This is our teacher.” But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourself that certain things are unwholesome and wrong, and bad, then give them up…. And when you know for yourself that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.

--Gautama Buddha

Introduction

As narrated in Chapter 1, in summer 2013 some friends and I went camping in the Lake Superior area in northern Michigan. This was my first visit to Lake Superior. It was amazing! Standing on the shore, I looked at the lake, enjoying its blue water, and suddenly I had the urge to jump into it, to be one with it, to never forget it. I was a little bit surprised by this impulse, but I realized that I had always had such an impulse when exposed to awe-inspiring scenery, but it had usually been ignored. Never had I felt it as clearly as on that day, when I was standing on the shore of Lake Superior. I believe that I had become much more sensitive to my own feelings thanks to the mindfulness practice that I had begun over a decade before. This is an example of the so-called "meditative inquiry."

We are familiar with many forms of inquiry ranging from qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, to narrative, appreciative, phenomenological, action research, philosophical research, etc. But today, I am talking about meditative inquiry.

How is “inquiry” different from “research”? According to many scholars, inquiry is looser and broader than research. While research aims to seek the answer, inquiry also includes raising meaningful questions without answering them. Inquiry may refer to many forms of research that are beyond traditional, objective ones. Unlike research, inquiry is not limited within the academy. Anyone who is involved in thinking, asking or answering questions is called an inquirer. For example, a child looking at the clouds in the sky and questioning it can be considered as an example of inquiry. In this sense, inquiry may cover almost all human activities that produce knowledge and are related to questions and answers. Buddhist meditation, for example, can be considered a form of inquiry, but not a form of research. However, this differentiation between inquiry and research is not necessarily universally accepted.

Now let us come back to meditative inquiry. Obviously, meditative inquiry has much to do with meditation, but meditation is a very elusive term, which can be defined differently by different traditions. You may have heard about Buddhist meditation, Christian meditation, philosophical meditation, and so on. So what kind of

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meditation is it in meditative inquiry? In current literature, it refers to Buddhist meditation. Meditative inquiry means Buddhist meditation.

For many people, meditation is a spiritual practice rather than a form of inquiry. In the past 26 centuries, Buddhists in Asia have practiced meditation in order to attain inner freedom and liberation, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. However, a phenomenon can be approached and therefore viewed from different angles and labeled differently. Buddhist meditation is a spiritual practice and also a form of inquiry.

So what is meditative inquiry? And how is it different from more familiar forms of inquiry in the West? This chapter looks to answer these questions. In part 1, I present the key characteristics of meditative inquiry. In part 2, I contrast it with traditional forms of inquiry, both modern and postmodern, and discuss its significance in the context of education.

Indeed, meditative inquiry is so different from other forms of inquiry that to engage in it means to live in a different world, have a different plane of imagination, with different assumptions, intentions and means.
Meditative Inquiry

“Meditative inquiry” is a new term, and also a new area of study. People in the field use the terms “meditative inquiry” and “contemplative inquiry” interchangeably, but for the sake of consistency, I am going to use “meditative inquiry” in this chapter.

As indicated above, Buddhist meditation is a form of inquiry, but meditation is a rich term which can be found in different religious and philosophical traditions. However, in current literature, the element “meditative” in meditative inquiry refers to Buddhist meditation, especially the Vipassana and the Zen traditions; therefore, to understand meditative inquiry, we have to understand Buddhism, especially these two Buddhist traditions. Accordingly, I am going to use resources from these two traditions to talk about meditative inquiry. As far as I am concerned, these two traditions are the same at the core, despite their superficial differences due to their different cultural and historical contexts.

Buddhism was founded in India/Nepal by Gautama Buddha, who was born in 563 BCE and died in 483 BCE (according to Buddhist tradition). After his death, Buddhism developed into different traditions in the past 2,600 years. Theravada Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, while Mahayana Buddhism, which includes Zen, spread to East Asia. According to many Buddhist scholars, although Zen

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57 Buddhism includes four main traditions: Theravada, Chan/Zen, Vajrayana (or Tibetan Buddhism), and Pure Land. The latter three make up Mahayana Buddhism. There is a lot of variation within each tradition.
was developed in China over a thousand years after Theravada Buddhism, it was surprisingly faithful to the heart of Theravada Buddhism, which revolves around Vipassana meditation\(^{58}\). “Vipassana” means “seeing clearly”. Meditation, as we understand it in the Buddhist context of the West, is for the most part Vipassana meditation, although it can be under different labels. Thích Nhất Hạnh, for example, calls it mindfulness meditation, or for short mindfulness, while some others also call it insight meditation.

The ultimate aim of Buddhism is liberation from suffering. The core teachings of Buddhism revolve around the Four Noble Truths, which are about dukkha (incapable of satisfying), the arising of dukkha (due to craving and clinging), the cessation of dukkha (stopping craving and clinging), and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha (the Eightfold Path). This is the essence of Buddhist doctrine agreed upon by all traditions, which only differ in how they practice this doctrine. However, “doctrine” is what we use to talk about a system of thoughts, meanwhile the Buddha himself did not give a doctrine to his students. His teaching was contextual, individually oriented, responsive, and on the spot. He taught different things to different people, depending on their particular circumstances, which could sometimes be contradictory with one another.

The Buddhist precepts, or monastic discipline, were also developed gradually based on the real problems that arose here and there in his congregation over an extended period

\(^{58}\) Minh, T. V. (?). Thiên Phật Giáo – Nguyên Thủy và Phát Triển (Buddhist Meditation–Theravada and Zen).
of time. His purpose was not to transmit a doctrine, or a body of rules and discipline, but to point particular people to particular insights that led them to liberation from suffering. However, people of later generations systematized his teachings and made them into a doctrine, and we cannot help but talk about his teachings as if there was a bounded doctrine, as opposed to other doctrines. As Lyotard (1984) puts it, this is only a language game. After over 45 years of teaching, the Buddha claimed that he had not said a word during his life (according to Zen tradition). He advised his disciples to consider his teachings as a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself; a raft to get to the other shore, but not the other shore itself. This way of contextual instruction is quite different from our modern instruction, where one curriculum is designed for one group of people and a body of knowledge is to be transmitted.

Let us talk in greater detail about the Four Noble Truths. Dukkha is usually translated into English as suffering, which is quite reasonable, but it should be noted that the suffering that Buddhism refers to is not general suffering, but mostly psychic suffering. For example, if you are hungry, you are definitely suffering, but this is not the main concern of Buddhism; it may be the concern of politicians, economists, or social activists. Buddhism is mainly concerned with suffering caused by greed, hatred, and delusion. For example, when one mistakes a rope for a snake, one feels scared and runs away; this is a form of suffering caused by delusion, which is the concern of Buddhism.

If you have $1,000,000 (or any amount) in your bank account but are still dissatisfied and miserable, this attitude is the concern of Buddhism. This suffering is based on an illusion, greed and delusion. The Buddha taught that with meditation practice, we could see reality as it is, based on our immediate first-hand clear seeing (as opposed to logical speculation or reasoning), and therefore escape from suffering and attain nirvana. Nirvana is freedom from suffering. So the primary goal of Buddhist meditation, or meditative inquiry, is to attain liberation from psychic suffering, which is presumably caused by greed, anger, and delusion. In a sense, liberation is also a big concern of education, especially progressive education and critical theories in education. Among many other purposes, education aims at liberating people from ignorance and delusion and bringing about wisdom and freedom.

The path to this liberation is the Eightfold Path, which includes right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. To be fair, meditative inquiry is the practice of all these eight sub-paths simultaneously, although they are presented separately for pedagogical, representational reasons. However, many scholars believe that of these eight components, right mindfulness is the leading one because the other ones depend on it. For this reason, right mindfulness, or for short mindfulness, is traditionally considered
the heart of Buddhist meditation\textsuperscript{60}, which explains why meditative inquiry is primarily about the mindfulness practice. However, it must be noted that while mindfulness is the heart of Buddhist meditation, it cannot substitute the other seven components, and it must be viewed and practiced in the light of the three poisons of greed (or craving), hatred (or anger), and delusion. Many people start the mindfulness practice technically without considering these three poisons and without the aim of final liberation; in this way, the mindfulness practice turns into a psychotherapeutic procedure, not a Buddhist spiritual practice. A psychotherapeutic technique may lead to temporary bliss, but not a long-term spiritual liberation.

Now, let us turn to the heart of Buddhist meditative inquiry—right mindfulness, or for short mindfulness. Mindfulness has been a big movement in the West, especially in the U.S., in the past couple decades. You may have encountered it on television, on radio, and even on online ads! I will skip the history and the current situation of this movement, but I will focus on the concept of mindfulness itself. Because it is such a cornerstone concept in Buddhism, which is represented by so many people, East and West, I am very careful with how I present it here. What I am going to say is based on my personal, firsthand experience with the mindfulness practice; and I also depend on the interpretations of Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Gierrick Minh, the two Buddhist

teachers that have the most influence on my understanding, discourse, and practice of Buddhist meditative inquiry. I also borrow the language of some Western Buddhist teachers when necessary to make what I say more accessible to English-speaking readers. I am saying this because Asian Buddhist teachers tend to be less linear in their teachings than Western ones, which may be a bit of a challenge for Western audience.

In essence, mindfulness is the practice of observing one’s body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind non-judgmentally and in relation to one’s living environment (Thích Viên Minh). Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness practice as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”61 These are very concise definitions, every single word of which is important, but these words can be easily misleading if we are not careful. “Paying attention”, for example, can be misleading because we usually understand it as a conscious, controlled action, but in the Buddhist context, it is beyond the conscious level. However, let’s temporarily forget about these mundane, abstract, and concise definitions and explore more down-to-earth, realistic, and interesting stories!

If somebody asked you the question “What does Coke taste like?” what would you say? I guess you have drunk Coke thousands of times, but how would you describe it? I am ashamed to admit that I did not know how to describe it. I knew what it tasted

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like in general, but I did not really know it. I just drank Coke as a habit, to satisfy my thirst, but I did not notice its distinctive properties and smells. The next time I drink Coke, I will slow down and discern its taste and smell better. This is an example of mindfulness. Another example. What do you do when you walk from the parking lot to your office? Of course, your feet touch the ground and you arrive safely at your office, right? But what else do you do during that five minutes of walking? Do you notice that your feet are touching the ground only, or are you also thinking about a range of other things? If you forget your steps and think about the upcoming meeting in the office, for instance, you are not very mindful.

So mindfulness firstly means living in the present moment with what you are doing to the fullest. Are you cooking dinner? You can do it fully and beautifully. Are you driving? Pay attention and drive safely. The sense of time and space is almost gone; you are simply absorbed in what you are doing in the present moment. You are not drawn away by the past or the future, but you are not frozen in the present, either. You simply flow with what is unfolding in the present moment and what is going to come next. Generally speaking, you know clearly what is happening with your body, your feelings, thinking, and the surrounding environment. For example, you know that you are walking from the parking lot to your office, when it is windy and chilly outside and the fall is in the air. Or when you hear some bad news, you feel disappointed and you are aware of your disappointment. Meditative inquiry is quite alien to conventional
education because it aims at self-knowledge while the latter aims at external knowledge. For example, when funding is cut, school subjects like arts, music, and physical education are usually sacrificed, while it is these subjects that help students to discover themselves and gain self-knowledge. Meditative inquiry, in a sense, goes against the general spirit of conventional education.

But what I just said about mindfulness is very familiar to you, right? There are moments when you are distracted, but there are also moments when you know what you are doing very clearly. Indeed, you may agree with me that mindfulness is nothing new—it is just part of our daily life. But let me add something more now. The other day, I met a friend in the local library. We had a very pleasant conversation for a while before I realized that her hair was too short—her hair should be longer! I did not speak this out, but it was on my mind at that moment. I was ashamed to realize that I was actually judging her against my own standards of beauty. I was judgmental. That lady was the object of my mind, and I observed her judgmentally. So, non-judgmentally is a very important component in the above definition of mindfulness. Actually, non-judgment has a very profound implication in Buddhist meditative inquiry. It is related to two others issues—non-becoming and non-control. When you observe your breaths, you just observe them as they are, but not try to control or change them. You do not say, my breath is too short, I must make it longer. When you see something, you see it as it is; you do not judge it, try to control it, or want it to become something else. You respect
its “suchness.” Non-judgement is emphasized in meditative inquiry because judgement is perceived as a barrier to open-mindedness, and is also the manifestation of the ego-centeredness of the one making the judgement, which is the root of suffering. This is what the Buddha said to his disciple Bahiya, right after which the latter attained enlightenment and became an arhat (Buddhist saint)\(^62\):

Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: 'In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.' In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya.

"When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen... in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be 'with that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'with that,' then, Bahiya, you will not be 'in that.'

When, Bahiya, you are not 'in that,' then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.\(^63\)

This is mere natural knowing as opposed to conscious knowing. Conscious knowing is made up of previous knowledge, experience, perception, prejudice, or generally speaking, conditioning. When I meet a new friend affiliated with a certain cultural

\(^62\) An arhat is someone who has attained complete liberation.

heritage or a particular social role, I may react in a certain way because I have been taught in particular ways about this cultural group or social role; but with this predetermined perception, I cannot know my new friend as he really is. He is who he is; he is not necessarily who my previous knowledge makes me think he is. I also do not want to become someone in accordance with my standards and ideals. Also, who he is now may be different from who will be tomorrow or who he was yesterday. Therefore, I may not let my image of him yesterday to compromise my knowing about him today. Unlearning prejudices and assumptions is no doubt a very important concern of education, especially in a time when discrimination of different types seems to be worsening in many parts of the world. Education not only means learning new knowledge and skills but also means “unlearning” previous prejudices and assumptions, which pave the way for judgment. This is exactly where Buddhist meditation comes in. Meditative inquirers are invited to look into their feelings and thoughts, including their anger, hatred, assumptions, biases and transform them. These ingrained mental states are the sources of suffering, and thanks to the mindfulness practice, or the practice of clear seeing, they are brought to the forefront and transformed. Unlearning is impossible without clear seeing.
Life, or dhamma, is perfect in its own way, but it can turn into a source suffering if I want it to be perfect in my own terms. Buddhist meditative inquiry is basically about seeing things and people as they are at the present moment, not as they should be, will be, or must be, according to my standards or speculations. And in this sense meditative inquiry is also a process of transforming ego-centeredness and the spirit of “becoming”. Ego-centeredness and becoming are two very big issues of Buddhist meditative inquiry. Ego-centeredness manifests in the desire to control oneself and others according to one’s own standards and ideals. The mindfulness practice is not a process of controlling, but of seeing oneself and others clearly as they are. As I mentioned earlier, we do not control our breaths; we just observe them. If they are long, we know that they are long; we do not try to make them shorter. With regards to becoming, we all know that becoming is a natural phenomenon; we change into, or “become”, someone else over the time, right? A young papaya becomes a ripe papaya after a few months; and we get older every year. However, “becoming” in the Buddhist context refers to psychological becoming. We are not settled with who we already are, but we want to become someone else. Even the desire to attain nirvana is also a manifestation of this psychological becoming, which is also the root of suffering.

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64 Minh, T. V. (?). Thiền Là Thấy Cái Đang Là, Không Phải Đặt Được Cái Sẽ Là (Meditation as Seeing Clearly What Is, not Attaining What Will Be). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXKMHyCzGdA

65 Minh, T. V. (?). Nhẫn Nại Với Thực Tài (To be Patient with the Present). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2oWqcSbV-E
young papaya would suffer terribly if it wants to become a ripe papaya, or even worse, an orange.

I believe that these three issues of judgement, becoming, and control, which originate from ego-centeredness, are really difficult for those who are immersed in Western modern education, where we are acculturated to believe in the importance of individual achievements and social change, even social revolution. I am one of these people. I said “conditioned” because we were not born with these beliefs and they are not universally accepted. On the one hand, we are led to believe that we are competent individuals that should pursue our dreams and interests; one the other hand, we admire those who bring about social changes or at least theorize about social changes. We are also taught to struggle for social justice; we want to make sure that the world will “become” a better place for ourselves and future generations, based on our perception of what a good society “should” look like. Most prominent Western philosophers look to change the world in one way or another, or at least to say that the status quo is not good enough and something must be done about it. I am a product of Western education. I am also proud of my achievements, and I want myself and my community to change for the better as well.

Buddhist meditation points to a different way of sense-making. Buddhist meditation emphasizes flipping attitudes rather than instrumental action-taking. Buddhist meditation is not a matter of control, using certain meditative techniques over
a period of time in order to become enlightened; instead, it is a process of transforming
greed, anger, and delusion. On the contrary, the western mentality emphasizes
instrumental goal-setting and action-taking. In order to attain an ideal body shape, we
are advised to follow a certain strict exercise and diet regiment. To contain an illness,
we are required to take a certain medication. And to bring about social equality, we are
taught to eliminate those who cause inequality--the capitalists and the industrialists.
This said, I do not mean that Buddhist meditators do not take any action. They also take
action, but they prioritize flipping their attitudes over taking action. I have used the
word “transform” instead of “change” so far because “change” refers to instrumental
action-taking.

A product of Western modern education, I myself struggled with these three
themes of judgement, becoming, and control for a long time. I understood them
semantically and intellectually, but I was not really convinced by them until I was faced
with them firsthand in an experience of life and death, as narrated in Chapter 1. They
are no longer the mere concepts to be conceptually understood and theorized but are
experienced as a part of my blood and flesh.

In short, meditative inquiry, or mindfulness practice, is to see/know oneself
(body, feeling, mind, object of mind) in relation to others as they really are in the
present moment without the ego-centered desire to judge, become or control. This
contrasts with most scientific approaches to inquiry in a couple of ways: While scientific
approaches to inquiry relies on external data, protocols and objective evidence primarily for the purposes of control, accumulation, and amelioration (or becoming), meditative inquiry relies on personal experience, feelings, and intuition for the purposes of letting go and inner liberation. I will contrast meditative inquiry with other forms of inquiry in greater detail later in a separate section of this chapter.

**Mindfulness Practice and Meditative Inquiry**

When it comes to Buddhist meditation, what image pops up in your mind right away? Is it a person sitting quietly, looking down, with crossed legs? When the Westerners learn Buddhism, the first thing they learn is sitting meditation. Although this is a very familiar image of meditation, it is not necessarily the core of Buddhist meditative inquiry. It is a practice that has been adopted for a long time, but we will explore it a little bit further to see how and why people do it, and how it reflects or departs from Buddhist meditation.

As I mentioned earlier, meditative inquiry is basically a project of seeing/observing one’s own body, feeling, mind, and the objects of mind without the ego-centered desire to judge, become or control, and sitting is considered by many as the best posture to do so. Once sitting down, one begins observing their breaths, which are the bridge between the body and the mind. The attention to the breaths also reminds practitioners of the impermanence of life--a life can be as long as a hundred
years, but it can be as short as one breath. Through the breaths, one knows if one is well or sick, angry or calm, happy or sorrowful, greedy or generous, etc. The observation of the breath also helps the practitioners to be grounded in the present moment, which leads to concentration. Concentration, together with discipline, supports the development of deep insights, as opposed to ignorance, the leading component of the twelfeold chain of dependent origination.

However, sitting meditation does not equal meditative inquiry. At most, it is one means of meditative inquiry, among many other means. This is why many Buddhist teachers teach about sitting meditation (e.g. Thích Nhất Hạnh), while many others do not teach it (e.g. Thích Viên Minh). Meditative inquiry, as far as I am concerned, is more of a matter of switching to a different attitude towards life, in which craving/greed, anger/hatred, and delusion are lessened. In this sense, meditative inquiry is possible in all living situations--within monastery, at school, at bus station, in the kitchen, etc. When I meet a beggar on the street, I may notice my inner reactions and assumptions and have a better idea of how generous or stingy I am and what I think about him or her. In this way, I am actually engaging in meditative inquiry. When I have a broken heart, I learn to listen to my emotions and understand myself better, in relation to the other person. I may not be able to do anything to heal my broken heart, but the action of listening to my heart, or meditative inquiry, is already liberating.
In short, meditative inquiry is ultimately not a technical procedure, as we usually see in sitting or walking meditation. It is an attitudinal art of seeing clearly, or waking up to, what is actually happening within oneself in relation to others. In the context of inquiry, it means that we observe what is unfolding within ourselves in relation to the surrounding environment and we do not necessarily set a goal and follow certain protocols or procedures to attain that goal. It aims at liberation from the three poisons of greed/craving, anger/hatred, and delusion. Any techniques or strategies of meditation that aim to judge, become, or control do not truly reflect the spirit of Buddhist meditative inquiry. A person who closes the door after him and intentionally practices meditation with the aim of achieving a higher level of concentration or becoming an arhat may not be a true Buddhist meditative inquirer. Sitting meditation is good; concentration is good; and an arhat-hood is also good. However, if they are situated within the realm of instrumentality, greed, and control, they are no longer good; they are better to be situated in the realm of non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-control.

**Meditative Inquiry in Contrast with Modernist and Postmodernist Inquiry**

Like other forms of inquiry, meditative inquiry relies on skepticism. In the *Kamalas Sutra*66 (quoted in the epigraph above), Buddha encouraged his students to be skeptical:

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skeptical and warned them against blind beliefs. In the Zen tradition, practitioners are encouraged to live with difficult questions instead of answering them because questions are believed to lead to insights. I once asked a Buddhist teacher a difficult question, and to my surprise he asked me to continue living with that question. The question is still with me now and will probably have no answer, but I still remember the meeting with this teacher.

However, meditative inquiry is different from modernist, positivist inquiry in that the former is primarily about self-knowledge while the latter is concerned with the objective, external truth. In modernist inquiry, the inquirers try to detach themselves from the inquiry process for fear that subjective emotions and opinions may “contaminate” the pure reality; in contrast, the meditative inquirers live with subjective bodily reactions, feelings, thinking, and also the external reality, but this reality is perceived in relation to the inquirers.

Another difference is that meditative inquiry does not rely on logical speculation and language-based theorizing, but on direct, immediate experience of the inquirer. Some forms of meditative inquiry (like journaling and poetry) may involve language, but for the most part meditative inquiry goes beyond language. Thích Nhất Hạnh, co-founder of Van Hạnh Buddhist University in Vietnam in the 1960s, regretted adopting

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the Western model of higher education for this institution, where conceptual knowledge was prioritized over experiential learning. He corrected himself when establishing the Plum Village community in France in 1982, where Buddhist meditative practice was emphasized over the accumulation of conceptual knowledge about Buddhism. In fact, language-based theorizing and speculation can be a barrier to spiritual liberation. A representational tool, language is easily misleading, and it cannot convey all the nuances of life. In a sense, language is made up of many boxes, which can contain bits and pieces of life, but not life in its entirety. Buddha advised his students to take his language-based teachings very cautiously because it is like catching a snake, which easily turns around and bites the snake-catcher. In the Zen tradition, the transmission of the dharma between teachers and students is through the heart (mental impression—tâm ăn), not through language. The Zen tradition can be summarized in this short stanza, which is usually attributed to Bodhidarma, the first patriarch of this tradition:

A special transmission outside the scriptures

Not founded upon words and letters;

By pointing directly to [one's] mind

It lets one see into [one's own true] nature and [thus] attain Buddhahood.

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Unlike modern scientific inquiry, meditative inquiry is an individualized, non-replicable process. Even though greed, anger, and delusion are important considerations, they are up to the exploration of each individual during their meditative inquiry process. Even suffering, which is a cornerstone of Buddhism, is not intended to be philosophized in a general conceptual manner, but to be lived and meditated upon through personal contemplation and first-hand experience. Suffering is not something explicit and simple, but very implicit, profound, and individualized. Personally, I discovered my suffering slowly over the time. This fact may surprise many, but it is my real experience. We do not always know that we are suffering! A realization of when one is suffering (and when one is not) is a big milestone on the path of meditative inquiry.

While modern scientific inquiry aims at accumulation, control, efficiency, instrumentality and productivity, meditative inquiry looks towards non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-control with the aim of liberation. Meditators do not accumulate even knowledge about Buddhism, or try to be efficient even in the meditation practice. A scholar of Buddhism is not necessarily a good meditator with much inner peace. A person who tries hard to practice meditation day and night is not necessarily a good meditator, either. As narrated in Chapter 1, the mindset of efficiency was a huge hindrance to my spiritual path.
Indeed, my engagement with meditative inquiry has led me to a completely new plane of imagination, mindset and assumptions, which took me a very long time to familiarize myself with. For example, it was really hard for me to avoid the desire to improve myself, to be efficient, to accumulate, and to run after an ideal. These tendencies had been all ingrained in me and had made up my mode of being.

Ironically, when I realized how controlling I was thanks to a talk by Thích Viên Minh, I immediately had the aspiration to fly back to Vietnam to visit his temple, talk with him, and explore my discovery further. Right at that moment, I realized that I was actually running after an illusion, although this illusion was in form of a Buddhist monk and a beautiful ideal of liberation. In other words, I was falling back to the old mode of being.

No, I did not have to go anywhere, to meet anyone, or to accumulate any more knowledge. Where I was was already adequate. Of course, I could have done all those things, but at least I knew that it was not the only, default option any more.

Because postmodernist inquiry is an open concept, it is very hard to compare meditative inquiry with it. However, it can be stated that meditative inquiry is a form of postmodernist inquiry, if we understand postmodernist inquiry as any form of inquiry other than modernist, scientific inquiry. However, if we believe that, as some postmodernist theorists do, there is definitely no pre-existing, persistent reality out

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69 When I first realized the spiritual dimension of liberation, I wanted to fly back to Vietnam to meet Thích Viên Minh immediately. However, I also realized right at that moment that I was running after an illusion and decided not to think about traveling to Vietnam any more.
there, and the process of inquiry itself can “alter the reality”, then meditative inquiry is not in the very core of postmodernism. As a matter of fact, Buddhists believe in a dhamma out there with its own rules and laws, like the law of cause and effect. Thích Viên Minh, for example, claims that the dhamma remains unchanged whether or not Buddha (or any religious leaders and thinkers) was born 2,600 years ago. The job of Buddha, he adds, was to point out the pre-existent truth, and in this way helped his students to escape from suffering. Actually, ignorance is the first component of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination that must be eliminated. For this reason, Buddhism is called a religion of wisdom, and many scholars debate whether it is a religion or a philosophy or neither.

However, like postmodern theories of inquiry, meditative inquiry goes beyond conscious, rational knowledge. The mere, natural knowing that I mentioned earlier refers to intuitive awareness, which everyone is born with. We simply know what is happening thanks to the sensual organs, and we can make good judgment thanks to our experience without any verbal explanation or theorizing. For example, when someone claps their hands, we immediately know that there is a noise, although nobody theorizes about that noise. This is the mere, natural, direct, immediate knowing/knowledge that Buddhist meditative inquiry prioritizes.

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70 See Minh, T. V. (?). Sống Trong Thực Tải (Living in the Present Moment); and Minh, T. V. (?). Đâu Là Sinh Tử, Giải Thoát, Nìết Bàn? (What are Birth, Death, Liberation, and Nirvana?) See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fSgphtcnUw&t=387s
Unlike other forms of inquiry, meditative inquiry is for everyone and is possible in all contexts. Apparently, it is not exclusive to educated, literate people. The sixth patriarch of the Zen tradition, Hui Neng, was illiterate. He is one of the most respected patriarchs of this tradition thanks to his profound insights. Obviously, meditative inquiry is not limited within the academy.

Another important distinguishing feature of meditative inquiry is that it is not about life, but is life. As a Buddhist meditator, I do not separate my inquiry from my life because no separation is possible. This dissertation project, which is based on meditative inquiry, has taken place in the classroom, in the library, on the plane, in bed, in the restroom, in the kitchen, in the parking lot, etc. It has indeed been a part of my personal life.

Significance of Meditative Inquiry

Mr. A, an imaginary character, is well educated, wealthy, and fit; he has an ideal family, and he has traveled worldwide. However, he is an unhappy lamerter. When I first heard his laments, I thought he was an underprivileged man, but later I found out that I was wrong. He did not know how to appreciate what life had to offer to him. He wanted the world to please his increasing desires. Does Mr. A’s story sound familiar? It does sound familiar to me.
In history, humans have worked hard to improve their lives. They expanded their territories (usually by means of invasion), built up communities, manipulated nature, increased efficiency and productivity (sometimes by means of exploitation), fought for social justice (sometimes by means of violence), etc. These struggles are very different from one another, but they have at least three things in common: first, they rely on dissatisfaction with the status quo and they want to become something other than what they are; second, they work towards certain predetermined standards and ideals by controlling their actions; and third, they make judgments on the basis of traditional forms of inquiries to carry out their plans.

It cannot be denied that thanks to these mindsets our standards of living have improved significantly in some parts of the world. However, even in the most prosperous countries, Mr. A’s story is not uncommon. People are still suffering, and new innovations and technologies do not seem to solve the problem. Buddhist meditative inquiry, which aims at this psychic suffering, offers a viable, new option.

Needless to say, meditative inquiry goes against all the foundational assumptions of the other traditional forms of inquiry, and it is this radical difference that is its biggest contribution. To do meditative inquiry, we have to live in a different world, have a different plane of imagination, with different assumptions, intentions and means--the world of non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-control. If nothing else,
meditative inquiry invites us to look out of the familiar existential box and try a new mode of being.

Meditative inquiry is so different from other forms of inquiry, both modernist and postmodernist, that it may arouse much skepticism, even resistance, among Western academicians. With its emphasis on mere, natural, immediate knowing, as opposed to conscious, language-based knowing, and its de-emphasis of ego-centeredness, it questions, disrupts, and even dismisses, the entire mindset(s) behind Western scholarship tradition. It indicates that our education, even our society, has been built upon only one mindset, while at least one alternative option is available, and that the dominant mindset is not a given.

Obviously, with the meditative inquiry approach, I could not fit into the mainstream academic culture, which relied heavily on external sources of knowledge. How could we envision a scholar with no interest in reading the work of his contemporaries and of the leading figures in his area of study? That would be a terrible scholar in the conventional sense of the word “scholar”. Having no interest in reading others’ works does not mean I am not interested in learning new things about myself and the world, nor that I am lazy. I love traveling and exploring life in different places and cultures; I also love pushing my own limits and exploring different possibilities; and I am definitely not a lazy person, if there ever exists a so-called “lazy person”. In particular, I have a lot of questions about myself and about education that I wanted to
answer. I never thought that I would ever be able to become a scholar in the conventional way; many times I even wondered if I was competent enough to finish the Ph.D. program or not. In the language of postmodernism, I was a product of, but at the same time an alien to, the traditional, modernist paradigm of inquiry.

Meditative inquiry can easily be considered by many as passive, weak, even anti-social and evil. It is believed to be socially irresponsible not to take action to fight against injustice and to make our society a better place. To some extent, this criticism is fair. However, meditative inquiry does not equal social irresponsibility and passivity. It simply prioritizes individual transformation over social change. It points out the danger of labeling, of ignorance, of greed, of anger. It also warns us of the danger of predetermined ideals and standards, of an instrumental and controlling mind, of overestimating action and underestimating attitudes. It reminds us that social evils first and foremost come from the unwholesome seeds within each individual, and by taking care of these unwholesome seeds we are contributing to our own wellbeing and to the social good. Action taking without inner transformation may do more harm than good.

Significance of Meditative Inquiry in Education

In the context of education, meditative inquiry is significant in at least two important ways. First, the primary aim of meditative inquiry is liberation from suffering presumably caused by greed, anger, and delusion--by nurturing generosity,
compassion, and wisdom. This goal is more necessary in our world than ever before. Aren't we talking about consumerism, exploitation, violence, terrorism, injustice, etc. every day? Open the TV and we can see these right away. It is not simple to solve these problems, but at least we know that these are man-made, and I believe that education has a role to play in making a change for the better. We can consider making institutional changes, but from a Buddhist perspective institutional change begins from individual transformation.

Second, as analyzed earlier, meditative inquiry is about seeing clearly in order to overcome prejudices and assumptions. With the mindfulness practice people gradually realize why we say or behave in a certain way, exposing their assumptions and ways of thinking that are buried deep down otherwise. The prejudices and assumptions are gradually found out and transformed. This is vitally important because discrimination based on various labels (skin color, gender, etc.) is widespread. Labels go along with prejudices and assumptions. The practice of seeing clearly in meditative inquiry is very necessary in education today.

**Meditative Inquiry in the Classroom**

Many attempts have been made to bring meditative inquiry into the classroom in the West. There have been three main approaches: technical approach, integrated/curricular approach, and philosophical/structural approach.
With the technical approach, educators simply add the mindfulness practice to their regular curriculum. For example, some reserve five minutes before each class for contemplation, with students closing their eyes, following their breaths, and mindfulness bell rung. Some schools make mindfulness practice a part of their existing social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. Some schools offer mindfulness workshops for teachers, with the hope that more mindful, peaceful teachers have a positive impact on students.

With the integrated/curricular approach, mindfulness practice is integrated into the subject areas and disciplines, such as contemplative writing, contemplative literature, contemplative art, mindful tech, contemplative critical studies, contemplative counselling (positive psychology), etc. This approach is relatively new and more common in higher education, especially at some liberal arts colleges in the U.S.

The third approach is the philosophical/structural approach. This approach looks to add the meditative paradigm (with curriculum as space for meditative inquiry) to the existing dominant Western paradigms. Kumar is the first scholar to write about this model in his book *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry*\(^71\).

These approaches all look to add a meditative dimension to the existing system(s)—in different ways and to varying extents. The technical approach is useful but does not work in the long term. As mentioned earlier, Buddhist meditation is more a

\(^{71}\) Kumar, A. (2013). *Curriculum as meditative inquiry*. Springer.
matter of attitudes and less a matter of techniques. While the second and the third approaches seem to be closer to Buddhist philosophy, they are difficult in P-12 settings. For example, how do we teach basic literacy to children with a meditative dimension? The add-on approaches do not seem to work well. We need another foundational way of thinking about meditative inquiry and education.

Conclusion

Buddhist meditation is a form of inquiry--we call it “meditative inquiry.” Meditative inquiry is about seeing clearly our body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind non-judgmentally in relation to the surrounding environment. Meditative inquiry is situated within the Buddhist theory of suffering and its origins--greed, anger, and delusion. Meditative inquiry is so different from other forms of inquiry that rely heavily on judgement, becoming, and control in the spirit of scientific methodology. Its goal of liberation from greed, anger, and delusion and its emphasis on clear seeing and mere knowledge have important educational implications. There have been many attempts to bring meditative inquiry into the classroom, most of which are in forms of psychological add-ons.

In Chapter 4 I am going to explore an approach to education called self-directed learning with the case study of the Jefferson County Open School in Denver, Colorado (U.S.A.). I believe that this approach to education offers a viable answer to the question
of how to bring Buddhist meditative inquiry into the Western classroom without relying on add-on approaches.
Chapter 4 The Jefferson County Open School: A Case Study of Self-Directed Learning

All genuine learning comes through experience.
--John Dewey

Introduction

In August 2014, I met my professor for lunch after spending two summer months away from campus, and she immediately noticed something different and asked me what had happened to me during the summer. I was puzzled and replied that I had no idea, except that I had just read a book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that I liked so much. I told her that perhaps the book had changed my vision about education, and thus also changed my living philosophy and my facial expression! This may sound like a joke, but it is not, because the book actually had a very profound impact on my vision of education and my lifestyle. Yes, I am talking about Rousseau’s Émile, or On Education.

The book projected a very hopeful picture of education, whereby Émile was free to explore the world through his direct experiences, under the guidance of a tutor. Schooling, as depicted by Rousseau, does not necessarily mean many hours of doing drill exercises in preparation for a test, or struggling with a meaningless assignment, but it could be much more exciting than that—like doing house chores, making a road trip, cooking a meal, cultivating a relationship, etc. From the bottom of my heart I had always dreamt of this form of experiential education although I did not have the
language to articulate it. For example, I did not understand why math was taught the way it was—I did not see its functionality and beauty at all although my math scores were not bad in middle and high schools. Every line of the book made me reflect on my own education, asking how it was different from the romantic picture of education projected by Rousseau.

The most powerful message that I got from Rousseau is that real life is a great school, and by immersing into it I would grow up. A man of books and tests, I was thrilled to know that there was an alternative path of education beyond books and tests, where education was not a meaningless struggle, and that I could become a different person by engaging in life instead of limiting myself to a particular corner that I happen to find myself in. Furthermore, why do I have to deprive myself of the rights to wearing other kinds of clothes, to hanging out with new friends, to eating exotic foods, to leading a different lifestyle, and even to trying another religious belief? As a matter of fact, I had long known such concepts as experiential education, project-based learning, learner-centered pedagogy, active learning, etc., but I had never felt convinced by them until reading Rousseau’s *Émile*.

I began experimenting with novel living experiences. For example, I purchased a new vegetable every shopping trip, went to exotic restaurants more frequently, served

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72 “To be convinced” seems to be my recurrent topic. I may read or hear about something hundreds of times without being convinced, until an expected moment of realization.
on graduate student committees, learned how to mow a lawn, visited a mosque with my Muslim friend, cultivated a summer garden, rented the car for a road trip, rode a horse on the mountain, recited poems, read a difficult book, visited Europe, dreamed a big dream, etc., all of which I had never done before. I did not like each and every of them, but at least I gave each of them a try. In short, after reading Rousseau, I became more open and adventurous, believing that engaging in new experiences was an essential part of my education\textsuperscript{73}.

My education, as it turns out, has no finite destination because it is life--and life has no real destination. The picture of the North American prairie that I described in Chapter 1 returned to my mind. Yes, I am feeling as if I was standing on an immense prairie, looking at the distant horizon and welcoming the chilly wind blowing down from the Arctic through the vast territory of Canada. It is a romantic picture, but it is not far from truth. It is amazing to be a student and a seeker in the most interesting but challenging school--the school of life. And it is no less interesting to witness myself, as a student and a human being, engaging in different possibilities, trying different identities, playing different roles, and meditating on different ideas. My zone of comfort was expanded every day.

\textsuperscript{73} Thanks to this spirit, I encountered the talks by Thầy Viên Minh. At that time, I did not like Theravada Buddhism, but I gave it a try and found out Thầy Viên Minh. Also under the influence of Rousseau I came up with the principle of 30-30-30 for academic conferences, whereby I spend 30% of my time on my favorite sessions, another 30% on the ones I dislike, and the last 30% on random ones. I believe this principle has kept my mind open.
As narrated earlier, my interest in self-directed education philosophy was first sparked when I read Rousseau’s Émile, or On Education a couple of years ago, which then led me to A. S. Neill’s Summerhill, John Dewey’s Experience and Education, Rick Posner’s Lives of Passion, School of Hope, and many other similar books. It is A. S. Neill’s book that inspired me to attend the International Democratic Education Conference in Finland in summer 2016, and it is Posner’s book that motivated me to make a 10-day visit to the Open School in Lakewood, Colorado, where I had conversations with students, teachers, parents; observed classes; and participated in school events. It is this school that matches my ideals of emancipation and experiential learning in my stories above.

Actually, the picture of alternative, democratic education is much more diverse than I had originally thought. Some schools are totally secular, while some others are spiritually oriented; some offer required classes, some only offer optional ones, and some do not provide any formal instruction; some serve disadvantaged students, while some only accept elites, etc. In particular, these schools go by a range of different labels, such as alternative schools, democratic schools, progressive schools, free schools, self-governing communities, etc. Therefore, as a researcher I have had a lot of difficulty selecting one single umbrella term for them in this chapter. Fortunately, I recently came across the term “self-directed learning” suggested by Professor Maurice Gibbons of
British Columbia University, which I think conveys faithfully the philosophy behind these schools.

In this chapter, I am first going to introduce the philosophy of self-directed learning, then describe the Jefferson County Open School as an illustration for this philosophy, and finally discuss the key paradoxes of this philosophy using the examples from the school.

Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning in the context of progressive education is not the same as self-directed learning in the area of adult and lifelong learning. Knowles (1975) provides the most widely accepted definition in adult and lifelong learning with eight elements: (a) it is a process (b) that is initiated by the individual, (c) which may or may not involve the help of others, (d) to identify their learning needs, (e) develop learning goals from these needs, (f) find the necessary resources to attain these goals, (g) select and implement the proper learning strategies to meet their goals, and (h) determine how to measure learning outcomes. Although self-directed learning in progressive education share many characteristics with self-directed learning in adult and lifelong learning, they have different implications and connotations, the most noticeable of which is that the former targets emancipation, while the latter revolves primarily around efficiency.

In conventional schools, education seems to be in the hands of adults for the most part, who develop the curriculum, determine the expected outcomes, do the instruction and assessments, while the students conform to what has been laid out for them. A.S. Neill calls this “spoon-fed education.” Obviously, the students in these schools have the freedom to respond in certain ways, but technically they do not have much say in the overall curriculum and assessment of their schooling. In contrast, in the schools with the self-directed philosophy like the Summerhill (in the UK), the Sudbury Valley (mostly in the U.S.), the Open school in Colorado (the U.S.), and many others, the students are, to varying extents, responsible for their education--developing their personalized curriculum, deciding on assessment, and even coming up with the governing policies for their schools, with the support of the faculty and staff members. The teachers in these schools step back and yield much decision making to their students. In other words, they let go of much of the judgement, and they relinquish control over their students.

At Summerhill, for example, classes are optional, so each student has to decide if they want to attend classes or not, and if they do, which ones to go to. At Sudbury, no classes are offered, but the students are required to go to school five days a week, where
they teach themselves with the support of the staff (only when necessary). While both Summerhill and Sudbury are private and independent, the Open School in Colorado is a public institution where the students have to take standardized tests as mandated by the school district, but other than that, they can select their classes and design their individualized education plans and evaluate their own progress (self-evaluation). In particular, in order to graduate, each student completes six Walkabout passages/projects with the contents of their choice, instead of sitting for externally directed examinations as in conventional schools. I am going to discuss the Open School curriculum in great detail later in this chapter.

Following are some important characteristics that I notice these schools have in common. First, there is a minimal judgement and control imposed on the student by the teacher, which means schooling depends for the most part on the student’s personal interests, concerns, choices, and pace. The responsibility of the administrators and the faculty is to secure a safe environment with abundant resources, within which self-directed learning is possible. At the Open School, for example, with an advising system as its cornerstone, each student works closely with one advisor and a group of 3-4 peers (called a triad), who help them select appropriate classes for each semester and to give feedback on their assignments, presentations, and projects. At Summerhill and Sudbury, schooling activities revolve around weekly General Meetings, where students make decisions related to their schools in a democratic manner. The main responsibility
of the adults is to ensure that the children are safe, and particularly at Summerhill, have access to healthful, organic food. These structures are intended to make self-directed learning possible.

Another important characteristic of these schools is the high level of trust between the teacher and the student. The students are entrusted to decide when to study, what to study, how to pursue what they are interested in, how to evaluate themselves, and especially when and how to utilize support. Summerhill students, for example, do not have to attend classes if they prefer playing to studying--because A. S. Neill, Summerhill founder, believes that they will go to classes when they are ready--and they know when they are ready! Neill also believes that children are good, not evil, as he puts it, “all crimes, all hatreds, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness” (1992, p. 7); and unhappy children need support and freedom, not punishment and control. Neill also does not believe in the so-called “lazy child”. He wrote: “What is called laziness is either lack of interest or lack of health. A healthy child cannot be idle: he has to be doing something all day long” (p. 40). At the Open School, each student, with the support of an advisor and some peers, develops an individualized education plan, take classes, and works on projects based on their interests and at their own paces. “Self-directed” does not mean that the students do everything by themselves, but it is they who decide when to ask for support and from whom. In particular, they know that their advisors,
their peers, the administrators, and the faculty are always there to support them whenever they need them— but it is they who decide how to mobilize support.

The third common characteristic of these schools is the minimal hierarchy between the teacher and the student, and between the administrator and the faculty, which is why these schools are sometimes called “democratic schools.” The students address their teachers by first names, and they treat each other in the spirit of respect and equality. At Summerhill and Sudbury, almost all decisions are made by popular votes, and each student vote is as valid as each teacher vote. At the Open School, the teacher has much discretion in designing syllabi for their courses, based on the interests and requests of students, without much interference from the administrators, who do not evaluate the teachers formally as in traditional schools. A new teacher at this school told me that at his job interview he asked the principal “What do you want me to teach?”, and to his astonishment the principal asked him “What do you want to teach?” Also at this school, teaching is done not just by the teacher but also by the student. Students are encouraged to propose and teach classes to their peers and teachers. A student said that she felt that her teachers at this school were truly open to learning new things from the students (herself included), which was not necessarily the case at her previous school, where, in her words, teachers were mostly “programmed to give instruction, not the other way around”. A retired teacher at this school reveals that he did not know anything about animal tracking until he attended a class on animal
tracking that his student offered. It is this student who later took him and a group of students to the forest and showed them the animal tracks during a wilderness trip.

Another important feature of these schools is a lack of fear among students and teachers. They are not scared of being judged and controlled. They are encouraged to pursue their personal interests, and because there are no grades, they do not have to compete with their peers for grades out of fear of falling behind. In the conventional school that I went to, each school day was filled with fear, at least from my personal experience--fear of falling behind, fear of failing the college entrance exam, fear of getting the poor grade for a weekly test, fear of losing an end-of-year award, fear of teachers’ judgement, fear of their facial expression, fear of parents’ disappointment, fear of losing face, etc. In the conventional environment, students had either the pride of a winner or the bitter disappointment of a loser. The students at schools with self-directed learning philosophy seem to be emancipated from all these externally triggered fears. They know that they have to move forward and make progress, but they are allowed to follow their own paths, at their own pace, and without the harsh judgement or manipulation of others. They know that they are approved and empowered by their teachers and peers. They are liberated from the fear of living their true selves and expressing their authentic ideas. As stated by Arnold Langberg, the first Open School principal, self-discipline is more important than externally imposed discipline. This, however, does not mean that the adults play no significant roles in the education of the
youth. They are expected to give suggestions and facilitate self-direction, which is why advising is so important at the Open School, for instance, but advising is done in the spirit of mutual trust, respect, and relative equality. I think the absence of fear is one of the most important features of the schools with self-directed learning philosophy, which is built upon the other three features discussed earlier. This is the fundamental difference between self-direction schools and conventional schools.

In summary, the theory of self-directed learning assumes that the students are to be primarily responsible for their education, with the support of the teacher and others when necessary. Self-directed education is made possible by the lessening of external judgement and control, the mutual trust, the equality between the teacher and the student, and most importantly the absence of fear in both students and teachers. This spirit of self-direction manifests in the fact that the students develop their personalized curriculum, outcomes, and assessments. In the next section, I am going to explore how this theory of self-directed education is actualized at the Jefferson County Open School in Lakewood, Colorado (U.S.A.).

**The Jefferson County Open School (JCOS)**

I begin this section by providing an overview of JCOS before discussing its key features. The JCOS is a public PreK-12 school in Lakewood, Colorado (U.S.A.). It was established by a small group of parents and students in 1970, and after several times of
relocation and merging, it has remained in its present shape since 1980. With the recent standardization policy in the U.S., it has had to make a number of compromises, especially having its students take the mandated standardized tests, but it has managed to retain its special alternative curriculum and preserved the five original goals set by its founders—that is to build a school that helps children (1) to rediscover the joy of learning, (2) to engage in the search for meaning in life, (3) to adapt to the world as it is, (4) to prepare for the world that might be, and (5) to help create the world that ought to be. Within these five goals in mind, all three domains of personal, social, and intellectual growth are equally considered in the teaching and learning process. Each and every activity at JCOS reflects these five goals and three domains of a holistic approach to teaching and learning.

As of November 2016, the school has 550 students, all within one two-story building complex, with a large common area in the middle of the building on the first floor where people run into each other multiple times a day, many corners where kids can play their musical instruments or simply have their alone, low-key time, and a large football field to the left where children run around during the recess.

JCOS is a non-graded and ungraded school, where no letter grades are given and where children are not categorized into twelve different grade levels as in conventional schools. Classes are offered every semester, and each student selects the classes in accordance with their individualized education plans (IEP). At the end of each course,
students write a self-evaluation narrative and the teacher responds to it. The student may complete a lot of assignments in each class, but there are definitely no letter grades given by the teacher. In order to graduate from this school, each student has to complete a narrative transcript that includes descriptions of all the classes, projects, and activities that they have done during the program. This official transcript will be submitted as part of the college applications, together with a letter from the school principal, if this student decides to apply for college. The lack of traditional testing makes the students feel that they are really learning the subject matter that they are interested in, instead of running after the teacher’s judgement— the teachers are there to support, not to judge and to rank the students with a number or a letter grade. A JCOS student who experimented with conventional schooling for one semester as part of her LEAP project said that she did not understand why her classmates and teachers in this conventional school cared so much about testing and grades.

In a conversation with an advisor and her advising group, I asked them without letter grades and other explicit evaluation forms, how they knew where they were in the course or the program. The students replied that they knew their own success or failure by evaluating how wholeheartedly they were engaged with each class, each

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74 The Leadership Program (LEAP) is an intensive curriculum designed to orient new and transitioning students into the Walkabout program. Students must demonstrate the internalization of the Three Domains, Four Quadrants, Five Goals, and Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Self-Directed Learner. The culminating project is the Demonstration of Readiness (DOR).
project, and each activity, without relying excessively on external assessment. They just relied on their “common sense”. One male student in the group said that “common sense” was the signature feature of JCOS. I will return to the topic of “common sense” later in this chapter. They admit that many of them had failed multiple times, but failure was not considered as worrisome but they were expected to learn from their failures. Learning from failures was mentioned repeatedly in my conversations with people at JCOS. In an invited graduation address, JCOS former principal Arnold Langberg even suggested a new motto for the school: “Make New Mistakes!” An elementary teacher said that she was teaching the kids to consider failure as part of life and how to deal with it in a reasonable way. A parent and retired teacher said that she was happy that JCOS students were granted much freedom to experiment with their lives early because it was better to fail sooner than later. She added that thanks to many experiences of failure early in her school life at JCOS her daughter managed to adapt very well to the new living situations in college and later in her life. A Walkabout student who was working with the robot team said that his team had failed multiple times, but they still continued working at the robot workshop twice a week because they all loved it. Mistakes are not to be judged, but to be learned from. Obviously, each student also gets feedback from their course teachers, advisors, and triad members, but this feedback is secondary to their self-evaluation.
The student body at JCOS is roughly divided into Preschool, Kindergarten, Early Learning Center, Intermediate Area, Intermediate Area 6th Grade, Pre Walkabout, and Walkabout, so each student identifies themselves not by a specific grade level but by a program. A Walkabout student, for example, is expected to complete six Walkabout projects before graduating from the school. Most would finish these projects within three years, but some would finish them within two or four years. A Walkabout student I interviewed said that she was going to stay on for the fourth year to complete her projects because she did not feel ready to graduate yet. Another student said that she hoped to graduate within two years because she had already finished five projects in the first semester of her second year. In particular, although these students are at different stages of their Walkabout completion, they hang out with one another in the same advising group, with the same advisor who stays with them for multiple years. Each Walkabout advising group shares a common family with a Pre Walkabout group and an Early Learning Center or Intermediate Area group. They are expected to learn from and support each other. I attended a family meeting where students of two advising groups (one Walkabout, one Intermediate Area), together with their respective advisors, gathered to plan a common community service activity the following weekend. One Intermediate Area student led the discussion; one Walkabout student kept the minutes; and they reached a consensus after 30 minutes of democratic
brainstorming and discussion. The third group, which supposedly belonged to this family, decided not to participate in this family meeting this month.

Following are four key features that make up the uniqueness of JCOS, including its Walkabout curriculum, its advisory system, its focus on traveling, and its culture of common sense. After presenting these four characteristics, I will discuss how they are constructed around the philosophy of self-directed learning.

The Walkabout Curriculum

One of the features that distinguishes JCOS from other public schools in the U.S. is its Walkabout curriculum, which was initiated by the University of British Columbia Professor Maurice Gibbons in the 1970s and then adopted by JCOS in 1980. *Walkabout* historically refers to a rite of passage during which Indigenous male Australians would undergo a journey during adolescence, typically ages 10 to 16, and live in the wilderness for a period as long as six months to make the spiritual and traditional transition into manhood.

Inspired by this rite of passage, Maurice Gibbons developed the Walkabout curriculum, which comprises six components/projects: Adventure, Career Exploration, Global Awareness, Creative Expression, Logical Inquiry, and Practical Skills. This

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curriculum is based upon the principle of self-directed learning, by which each student will pursue their own studies that are meaningful to them, on the basis of their personal interests, choices, and paces, with the aim of transitioning successfully into adulthood.

Curriculum at the JCOS, as defined by Arnold Langberg, the first principal of the school, is “that process whereby the school facilitates the integration of a student’s experiences, in school and out, planned and unplanned, into a coherent framework which has personal meaning for that student” (Smith, 1993, p. 137). Most authentic education, claims Scott Bain (current principal of JCOS, personal communication), “happens outside school and in an unplanned manner, but students go to school to socialize and gain foundational skills. As educators we need to look beyond the school walls to see authentic education”. Accordingly, this curriculum not only looks to fulfill a certain future vision but also ensures that the students find their experiences at school meaningful. The concern about the future, or becoming, does not dominate the concern about the present. As indicated earlier, teaching to the test—a form of preparation for the future at the expenses of the present experiences—is not imaginable in this curriculum.

The first project of the Walkabout curriculum is Adventure, which is “a quest, a personal and meaningful challenge, the pursuit of which requires courage, endurance, self-reliance, and intelligent decision-making” (Community Owner’s Manual). Students can choose to take a physical, psychological or spiritual adventure. A Walkabout
student I interviewed had made a 5-day solo trip to the Rocky Mountain, while another student explored and came to terms with her sexual orientation. Posner narrates the story about a student who as part of her Adventure project began looking for her biological father--an emotionally challenging journey

With the second project, Career Exploration, students investigate “a broad field of employment, including an in-depth study of at least one job within that field, with particular attention to possibilities for the future” (Community Owner’s Manual). They can make field trips to the working sites, doing observation, and/or interviewing those working there. A student said that she was interested in medical science, especially medical emergency rescue, and because her father was working for a helicopter emergency rescue team, she decided to visit this team, observing their activities and interviewing her father’s colleagues. When I asked her if she had already decided to pursue helicopter emergency rescue as her future career, she replied that this was only one of the possibilities she was considering. For those students without personal connections, the outreach specialist at JCOS helps them to contact with the relevant professionals and make the necessary arrangement for them.

In the third project, Global Awareness, the student identifies “an issue having global impact, followed by a study of how one’s own culture and at least one other culture deal with this issue, culminating in a service project designed to influence the

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issue on a local level”. One student was investigating the Israel-Palestine conflict because he was still perplexed by what was happening there during his trip to Israel and wanted to investigate it further. He also revealed that he might be working for peace activism or diplomacy in his future career. Another student was inspired by her recent visit to the U.S.-Mexican border to pursue her studies on global immigration and engage in community service work with the immigrants in Denver area.

The fourth project, Creative Expression, is about artistic creativity, whereby students create a product expressing their personal imagination, together with a detailed analysis of the process by which it was created. One student I interviewed had pursued belly dancing for three years and made it her creativity project. Another student practiced her role as Alice in the play “Alice in Wonderland” for an entire semester and made it her project. Another student, who prepared all the settings for this play, also made this her creativity project. I watched these students perform this play, which involved over 50 people (mostly students), during my visit to JCOS in November 2016. All phases of the play, from script writing, design of settings, to making up, sound effects, lighting, budget planning, video-recording, web design, marketing, selling ticket, etc. were done by the students, under the leadership of one drama teacher. The play was performed in three sessions (on three consecutive nights), attracting students, teachers, parents, and the local communities, who booked the tickets online.
The fifth project, Logical Inquiry, is a scientific project that includes “the generation of a hypothesis, the development of a systematic approach to data collection, and sufficient documentation to allow replication of the study”. One student I interviewed participated in the weekly robot workshop at the school and made this his logical inquiry project. Another student, dissatisfied with her previous schooling experiences, conducted a comparative study on students’ attitudes towards conventional schooling versus alternative schooling by using a 10-item questionnaire at two schools (one conventional, one alternative) in Colorado. She published her findings on an online education forum, received mixed responses from readers, and responded to these responses. Another student, who had been struggling with a rare syndrome since childhood, decided to study this syndrome for her Logical Inquiry project.

The final project, Practical Skills, helps students “develop proficiency in a skill or set of skills for which one was formerly dependent on others and which has the potential for life-long usefulness”. During the visit, I attended a student’s presentation about job application, in which she described how she applied for and did at a variety of jobs (ranging from pizza houses, shopping malls, to Starbucks) in the past three years and shared her rich experience about job application. Another student wrote about her experience working as a cook at the Happy Mocha cafeteria at JCOS. This mini cafeteria was supervised by one teacher, managed by two students as managers, and was a real cafeteria that served beverages and light meals to students and teachers. It is open from
9-11:00 am four days per week and staffed by students, who counted working here as their class hours.

These six projects are aligned with the students’ personal lives and interests, and as a result very meaningful to them. To complete each project, they work with their advisor and another teacher, whose specialization is more relevant to the project in question. According to principal Scott Bain, although each Walkabout student is expected to complete all six projects, most of them excel at three or four projects, to which they devote a lot of time and effort for two or three years. One alumnus comments that thanks to these Walkabout projects, he found that he was over-prepared for many of his courses in college.

*Advisory System as a Cornerstone*

Another cornerstone of JCOS is its emphasis on advising. Advising is taken very seriously by both teacher advisors and students. Each teacher advises between 15-20 students in his/her advising group, who are in different stages of a program (either Pre Walkabout or Walkabout). Each advising group meets in the advisor’s room for one hour every day, four days a week, and the advisor meets with each advisee for about half an hour per week. Advisors work with advisees for multiple years until the latter graduate or move up to the next level, so the advisors and their advisees know each other very well. The advisor is the main contact person between the school and the
parents, and makes important decisions related to the student on behalf of the school principal. It is the advisors who support the students in completing their six projects, in collaboration with another teacher (teacher consultant), and especially in working on the final official transcripts.

The relationship between the advisors and the students is perceived by both the principal, the teachers, and the students as very important. A teacher said that he found his profession really meaningful since moving to JCOS because in a sense he was nurtured by the relationships with his students, especially those in his advising group. In his previous job, he worked with a lot of students every day, but he felt that he did not know any of them well enough, or as he puts it, he knew them only by a “quick look” or by “a name on the roll”. The constant interaction with the students and the witnessing of their growth at JCOS made him feel that he was making a difference to the youth, no longer functioning merely as “a bolt in a machine”. He knew each of his advisees very well because he worked with them on a daily basis—selecting the classes for their individualized education plans each semester, meeting them almost every morning, responding to their class self-evaluations, supporting them on their projects and transcripts, and in particular taking many long trips with them. Each advisor is expected to take their new advisees of each academic year on the so-called “advising trip” as a bonding opportunity, not to mention many other trips they may take together later in the program. A parent told me that she had once burst into tears when reading a
memo from her son’s advisor because the advisor understood her son so well, even better than she did in some aspects.

Most of the students I conversed with considered their advising room as their second home, where they met with their peers and their advisor(s) every day. The advising room was also the place where they retreated to for a short nap between classes, or when they needed to work on their projects. I met a girl working on her Global Awareness project on the sofa in one corner of the advising room while her advisor was teaching an art class to a group of students in another corner. I had the feeling that the Open School was like a home, where each student was protected and encouraged to discover and pursue their passions without any fear.

Both the principal and the teachers agreed that the advisory system was a cornerstone of this school. The core of education here, they maintained, was the relationship of mutual trust between the teacher and the student, and this relationship culminates in the advisory system. It is through the trusting relationship between the teacher, especially the advisor, and the student that the student developed self-confidence and self-knowledge, which enabled them to come up with ideas for their projects, pursue them and complete them—the manifestation of self-direction education. Every student in the school has an advisor, a trusted adult who is there for them. Arnold Langberg said, “There are no anonymous people in JCOS, which, unfortunately, is not the case in most conventional high schools”.
A young mother said that she was amazed at how self-confident her seven-year-old son was. She narrated that at her birthday party, because she was busy cooking in the kitchen, it was her son who shook hands with every adult guest that came to the party, on her behalf. This mother attributed his self-confidence to the Open culture, even though the Early Learning Center (ELC) program at JCOS is much more structured than the Pre Walkabout and Walkabout programs. I shared this story with two ELC teachers and asked them if they agreed with this parent’s comment. They said that this parent was probably right. They added that the ELC program here paid a lot of attention to the teacher’s language in the classroom--the teacher’s language could make a huge difference in kids’ self-perception and self-confidence, and that ELC children were especially encouraged to verbalize their thoughts in front of the entire class and in pairs. I also saw the kids shake hands with their teachers saying goodbye for their long holiday weekend. While this anecdote is not very much about advising, it illustrates the significance of teacher-student relationship at this school, as one retired teacher put it, “it is important that each child has an adult at school that they really trust. This is not just important in a K-12 setting but also in a teacher education program setting.”

*Traveling as Another Cornerstone*

JCOS does not have any sports programs because sports funding is sacrificed for travel funding, which again distinguishes this school from regular public schools.
Traveling is prioritized because, as one teacher puts it, “we want the students to understand that the world is their classroom”. Indeed, trip leadership is one of the three main responsibilities of each teacher (the other two are teaching and advising—mentioned above). School principal Scott Bain said that because of the school’s emphasis on traveling, he tended to recruit teachers with Peace Corps or other wilderness leadership experience, in addition to their regular credentials required by the school district. He himself used to work in the river guiding and skiing industry before becoming a teacher.

Understanding the world outside the walls of the classroom is perceived as essential because it equips the student (and the teacher) with a global awareness, enabling them to see how their academic studies are relevant to the world, what the real world out there is like, and what the world ought to be like. For example, thanks to the trip to Israel that a student decided to investigate the Israel-Palestine conflict for his Global Awareness project and planned on engaging in peace activism or diplomacy in the future; and thanks to the trip to the U.S.-Mexican border that another student decided to explore the issue of global immigration in her Global Awareness project.

Actually, traveling is a recurrent topic in the conversations I had at the school. The assistant principal said that she had just come back from a trip with a group of students to Boston and Maine; a retired teacher said that he would never forget the trips down the Mississippi River that he used to lead, and in particular the trip to Berlin right
at the moment of the Berlin Wall collapse in 1989. One advisor said that her group had just returned from a two-day advising trip to the Rocky Mountain National Park, and a Walkabout student said that she had come back from a solo trip to London a couple weeks before and was preparing for another trip to Louisiana. I saw on the announcement board a leaflet about the information session for the upcoming annual Nicaraguan trip. Many students admitted that they chose this school because of the traveling opportunities it offered.

There are required and optional trips, short and extended trips, group and solo trips, domestic and international trips, trips for adventure purposes, for inquiry purposes, for community service purposes, etc. For example, advisors are expected to lead their new advisees on an “advising trip” every year, which is an opportunity for new students to bond with their advisor(s), their new peers, and the school culture. In order to graduate, each student has to make at least one extended solo trip. Some Walkabout senior students volunteer to co-lead the trips with their teachers, and some actually made multiple extended trips during their years at the school. However, even though traveling is one of the top priorities at JCOS, it is not necessarily for everybody. An alumnus, who is a college professor now, said that he found the trips useful but he was not really crazy about them. As an introvert, he explained, he tended to work more effectively by himself, which was why he ended up working as professor at a research university. He loved writing in solitude.
It is worth noting that the JCOS is a public school with about 50 percent of students eligible for reduced price meals. The school is able to offer many traveling opportunities for students because of its strong commitment to experiential, self-directed education (at the expenses of other programs, like the sports program) and its fund-raising activities. Each student can get travel grants from the school twice a year, which must not exceed 50% of the total cost of each trip, and pay back in multiple ways, usually through community services within the school (like window cleaning or book keeping) and especially by co-leading future trips. In addition, the students also manage to cut down on the expenses of each trip by relying on the school bus whenever possible, by sleeping in tents on church yard, by staying with local residents, or/and by cooking food for themselves. Therefore, even though parents have to chip in about 50 percent of the trip costs, most Open students end up being able to make a lot of trips.

The Culture of Common Sense

“Common sense” is a phrase that I heard a couple of times during my visit but did not really understand what it meant exactly. The first time, one student commented that JCOS people seemed to have more common sense than those at his previous school. Perplexed by this comment, I asked him what he meant by “common sense”, and he said that he was not able to explain it explicitly, but he knew it was there. Then, in a later conversation with a teacher in his advising room, he asked me to excuse his messy
room, explaining that he and his advising group had just spent the night there as an annual tradition of his group. He added that the room was messy also because his dog was there with him last night—nobody was taking care of him at home. He and his students were watching movies, playing games, and chit-chatting, before going to sleep around midnight. Again, I was shocked by this tradition. Wasn’t he concerned about the sexuality and gender issues? I gradually figured out what the other student meant by “common sense” earlier. Their relationships seemed to rely on the common sense rather than on the politically correct codes of behavior. They were not very concerned about others’ judgements.

Another teacher told me that when he transferred to JCOS, he was stunned to discover that he could bring his personal hobbies into the classroom to share with his students as part of the curriculum, something he had never even imagined in his previous teaching appointments. He began teaching ping pong to his students and proposed multiple trips that he himself found interesting. In other words, he was able to be who he was at this school, without having to draw a clear line between his personal and professional lives. One advisor said that as an advisor at JCOS she could never hide her personality, because with so much interaction and engagement with her

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77 This reminds me of Freer Spreckley, a Summerhill alumnus, who said that he was very surprised with the attitude towards sexuality of the youth in the outside environment. At Summerhill, he described, “Sex was seen as healthy and good. Everyone was equally naive in a sense; there was a good deal of sexual experimentation but little intercourse. People sunbathed nude in the summer, but outsiders couldn’t believe this... I also feel that my attitude to sexual equality is genuine but light-hearted. I don’t have much time for the heavy, politically-correct male attitude to women’s rights” (Lucas, 2011, pp. 113-4).
colleagues and students on a daily basis, she had to live her true self. The students accept their teachers as who they are, and vice versa.

The culture of common sense also manifests in how casual JCOS teachers and students seemed to be. The principal, the teachers, and the students were all casually dressed at school, and people addressed each other by first names. I never heard titles like “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, and “Ms.” even once during the visit, not to mention “Sir” or “Ma’am”. One sunny morning, I saw a teacher teaching his Spanish class on the lawn in front of the school building, with his dog standing behind. At another moment, I witnessed a student lying on the couch during the science class hours. I also observed a class called “Reading for Meaning” where students dispersed to different corners of the building to do their free reading. This class was intended this way.

The common sense also manifests in JCOS’s emphasis on experiential education. A history teacher said that he taught history classes by combining novel reading with field trips, such as the one down the Mississippi River or the U.S.-Mexican border. Another teacher, who was teaching a biology class called “Zika”, said that he wanted his class to be part of the contemporary world outside the classroom, with Zika as a new challenge in some parts of the world. The day I visited, the class was observing a piece of material collected by one student using the microscope. An alumnus, who is a professor at the University of Colorado (CU), said that his pedagogical approach was strongly influenced by his experiences at JCOS. In his course on Swedish studies at CU,
he used the contemporary materials to make class instruction be in sync with the real world out there, to create the feeling that what he and his students were talking about in the classroom was part of the outside world. In an art class at JCOS, the teacher played classical music and asked the students to close their eyes and use their hands to apply water colors on the paper, without trying to make any particular shape, in response to the music they were listening to. And more than once, people at the school mentioned a late legendary English teacher who brought Shakespeare out of the world of literature into the world of philosophy, psychology, ethics, and especially into the world of human life that each of her students could identify easily with.

In particular, when sitting in the Common Area or the bench in front of the school, I was amazed at how the teachers and the students interacted with one another. The building was designed in such a way that allowed everybody to run into each other multiple times a day. I met the principal in his office, and five minutes later I saw him exchanging with a teacher at the foot of the staircase, and a bit later talking with a parent outside the building. I also saw a couple of Pre Walkabout students ordering cheeseburgers on the phone for their lunch, and another Pre Walkabout student giving out Halloween candy to whoever stepping out of the door. At one corner of the Common Area, a group of Walkabout students were working on their projects; at the middle of the Common Area, an advisor was working on her computer; at another

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78 Her name is Dana Sutton, and she passed away shortly before I visited JCOS in November 2016.
corner, elementary children were heading to the cafeteria for lunch. After working on her computer, the advisor had a one-on-one meeting with her advisee, with all the kids having lunch around her. At another corner but on the second floor, a group of elementary kids were heading out of the library after an hour of learning how to check out books. Also on the second floor, the Happy Mocha cafeteria was busy with teachers and students coming in and out. I then heard somebody playing the piano at a distant corner of the building.

In the afternoon, while observing an elementary classroom, I saw a Walkabout student come in and give a chart that he had made to the elementary teacher, who was going to use it to teach calendar to the kids. And later that afternoon, I went to a general faculty meeting in the library where two teachers introduced a good book to the entire faculty. At the end of the school day, I saw a first grader hanging out with a group of Walkabout students in front of the main gate while waiting for his mother to come and pick him up.

The commonsensical culture also manifests in the meaningful relationships that each student has with their peers and teachers. Advising is less about providing information and more about creating a meaningful, trustful bonding between the advisor and the advisee and among the advisees. A teacher said that he did not appreciate his teaching profession until he transferred to JCOS, where he began having very meaningful relationships with his students, especially those in his advising
groups. He said that he felt his profession was meaningful when he knew each of his advisees very well and they also knew him very well. He felt like he was working with “real” human beings, not names on an attendance list or on a grade report. His sharing immediately created an “Aha” moment in me, making me realize why I had been so burnt out as a college instructor five years before: I failed to maintain meaningful relationships with my students. Without a meaningful relationship, I interacted with my students solely at the professional level—to give instruction, to grade the papers, to call their names by looking at the name list, to refrain from laughing, to avoid making personal references, etc. I now believe that it is meaningful relationships that nurture both the teachers and the students.

In short, the JCOS campus was an organic, commonsensical space with a lot of things going on at the same time—formal instruction, group advising, individual advising, tutoring on writing, independent project work, professional exchange, faculty meeting, having lunch at cafeteria, ordering food from outside, robot building, rehearsing for a play, the sound of music, etc. The school is indeed an organic living body where one part interacted with multiple other parts nonstop. What the student meant by “common sense” is that the school life is indeed not separate from regular life; it is part of life out there, where multiple people interact with one another in multiple ways. This school is not like a factory or a shopping mall where everything is in a perfect order, but it is a living environment where life is possible. At this school,
students do real learning--learning that they find meaningful right now. They do not run after the academic standards formulated by someone else in forms of letter grades or awards. Their sense of “becoming” is not as clear as in most conventional schools.

Self-directed Learning at JCOS

The four cornerstones above are intended to support the spirit of self-direction in the JCOS students. For example, to complete the six Walkabout projects, they have to figure out what they are interested in and how to proceed with each project. This is a very long process that requires a lot of soul searching. For example, when a student decides to make a psychological adventure (the Adventure Project) by looking for her biological father, she must understand clearly how important her father was to her and what emotional challenges she might face during this adventure. Similarly, when a student decides to make a solo trip to a foreign country for the first time, he must be aware of how ready and/or nervous he is when facing the new world alone.

Advising supports self-directed learning. This sounds strange, but it works that way in practice. Advising is so important that the school principal said that his school would be impossible without the advisory system. This is clearly a paradox, which I will analyze further in the discussion section below.

Traveling, or more generally exposure to new living situations, is also a great opportunity for self-direction. When encountering new people, societies, or natural
landscapes, the students will understand themselves better. As Roland Michaud, a renowned French explorer and photographer, puts it, "Travel is perhaps just going round in a circle, because in the end what one meets is oneself". (Enchanted Lands, p. 7). True, traveling is indeed a process of self-discovery. External and internal discovery take place simultaneously. I did not see the beauty of the piano until I accidentally encountered an insane man playing the piano at Venice train station; I also changed my mind about Catholicism after visiting Saint Peter’s Square in the Vatican. Due to my exposure to new people and new places during my Europe trip, some of my beliefs and assumptions were challenged, while some others were confirmed. I know that these new beliefs and assumptions will continue to be challenged or confirmed in the future when I am exposed to more and more living experiences.

Finally, the culture of common sense at JCOS encourages an authentic, fearless mode of living and studying, which makes self-direction possible for both the student and the teacher. Once fear is gone, people tend to be open, honest and kind-hearted because they know that their authenticity is respected. Once the students know that they do not go to school in order to compete with their peers on a daily basis, they listen to their hearts instead of looking constantly at their scores and their teacher’s facial expressions.

Besides these four cornerstones, a lot of other practices at JCOS also support self-direction. For example, the student, with the collaboration of the advisor, develops an
individualized education plan and selects classes, trips, and projects to build up on it.
This plan reflects the student’s interests and passions. In addition, the teachers do not
grade the students, but the students evaluate themselves and then the teachers respond
to it. The student is also expected to write their final narrative transcripts, which will be
part of their college applications, if they choose to go to college. And finally, the student
organizes their Final Support groups by inviting friends, teachers, families, to share
their experiences at JCOS. These practices, among many others, encourage the spirit of
self-direction in the students.

Discussion

Three paradoxes

The study of the self-directed learning philosophy and JCOS had led me to three
main theoretical paradoxes. The first is the paradox between personal freedom and
structure/discipline; the second between self-direction and advising; and the third
between the individual and the sense of community. I will analyze each of these
paradoxes and look into how JCOS deals with them.

The first paradox, between personal freedom and discipline, comes from this
question: Without the intervention from adults in form of discipline, what if the
children make big mistakes and do harm to themselves and others? This is the most
common concern raised by the critics of progressive education, in this case self-directed
learning philosophy. First, there is never complete freedom. Children at Summerhill, JCOS, or any other self-directed schools are not told what to do in by adults, but they are also not allowed to do harm to themselves and others, either. They definitely have more freedom than children in conventional schools, and they can easily make mistakes with their freedom due to their lack of living experience, but the point is how we view mistakes. In conventional schools, mistakes are avoided at any cost, while children at self-directed schools like JCOS are given opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. They learn not only from books, teachers, peers, trips, internships, but also from their own mistakes. The more mistakes they make and learn from, the more they grow up.

Second, structure and discipline are always necessary to make things possible. Even the most progressive school, the Summerhill, is bounded by structure and discipline. The question is what kind of structure and discipline they are. A closed structure, like a prison, can constrain people, but an open structure, like a bridge, can lead people to new possibilities. Self-directed learning philosophy prioritizes open structure and self-discipline. For example, the Walkabout curriculum of JCOS is a kind of open structure, which is flexible enough to accommodate the needs, talents, and dispositions of almost all students. When the students cause a problem, the teachers do not punish them according to certain externally imposed behavioral codes, but instead help them to understand the problem and make adjustments. Self-discipline is based on
an awareness of the consequences of one’s action or of a certain unavoidable trade-off, which leads to an adjustment. While external discipline requires a blind obedience, self-discipline necessitates an understanding. In short, according to self-directed learning theory, students’ freedom is made possible by open structure and self-discipline.

The second paradox, between advising and self-directed learning, gives rise to this question: If learning is self-directed, why do students need guidance from advisors? If advisors are involved, is it really self-directed learning? In order to answer these questions, we need to examine what we mean by “self-directed” and what the roles of advisors are. “Self-directed” means we make our own decisions, without being told what to do, including the decision about when to ask for help and from whom. Self-directed students do not stay away from other people and do everything by themselves; instead, they know what they are interested, what they need, and how to mobilize support from others. To complete their projects, students at JCOS ask for help from a lot of people, ranging from advisors, peers, to other teachers and the local community.

The job of the advisors is to be available for the students and give support when requested. There is a big difference between requiring someone to do something and giving suggestions when requested. Advisors in self-directed learning philosophy go with the latter. It is the students who decide when to approach the advisors for guidance, the advisors do not give guidance unless they are requested. To be available for students is another very important part of advisors’ job. The students need to know
that they have an adult advocate at school who is there for them, listens to them and supports them when necessary, and whom they trust. The advisors make sure that their students are not invisible or anonymous. In short, advising and self-directed learning seem contradictory, but actually they go together beautifully. Self-directed learning is difficult without a good advisory system. The point is how the advisory system operates and what kind of advising is involved—authoritarian or democratic?

The third paradox, between self-directed learning and the sense of community, is based on this question: If students care too much about themselves, how can they pay attention to the others? To answer this question, we need to look further into the concepts of “self-directed” and “community”. The concept of “self-directed” is based on the assumption that each individual is unique—with their own talents, skills, preferences, dispositions, inclinations, etc., and that their uniqueness should be respected and nurtured, paving the way for their personal identity. Due to their uniqueness, each student at JCOS has an individualized education plan (IEP) outlined by themselves with the help of their advisors. So, self-directed learning philosophy calls for a respect for children’s uniqueness, which does not necessarily mean that it dismisses their commonalities.

At JCOS, students work closely with their peers and their advisors within one advising group, which meets for one hour every day, four days a week. They also take field trips together, work in the same robot or carpentry workshop, perform together in
one play, serve on different governing committees together, etc. They are pursuing their personal projects, but they also engage in the community due to the structures secured at JCOS—the advisory system and the Walkabout curriculum. The advising group is where they meet with their advisors and peers on a daily basis. It is the advisors who create the bonding opportunities for their groups, e.g. by observing the sleep-over night tradition or leading advising trips. The Walkabout curriculum is based on five foundational goals of the school, the first two of which are about personal growth, while the other three are concerned with social responsibility. The Global Awareness project, for example, invites students to look beyond themselves and head to broader communities. Community, in the context of self-directed learning philosophy, is where people with their different personal identities gather together for a common purpose. In this sense, community is not where personal identities are sacrificed and everyone must be the same.

In summary, self-directed learning philosophy, via the case study of JCOS, does not dismiss structure and discipline, guidance from adults (advising), and the sense of community. They rely on open structure, self-discipline, democratic advising, and diverse community.
Challenges facing self-directed learning and JCOS

Self-directed learning philosophy aims to build a democratic schooling environment, where both students and teachers are treated with respect. While this philosophy has been in operation for several decades, it may face a number of challenges. Again, these challenges are discussed only via the case study of JCOS.

First, the quality of self-directed learning, in the case of JCOS, seems to depend excessively on the advisory system, which may give rise to two problems. The first problem is that it places a heavy burden on the advisors, and the second is that it lacks alternative pillars. While advising could be very rewarding, as reported by many advisors at JCOS that I interviewed, it is also very demanding. Advising, especially democratic advising, is an art form that depends the experience and the ethical convictions of individual advisors. Like teaching, anyone can do the advising, but not everyone can do good advising, while the quality of advising means almost everything in a school like JCOS. With an open curriculum like the one at JCOS, if advising is poor, the students will be at a huge disadvantage without any alternative backup options.

Second, schools with self-directed learning philosophy operates with the assumption that their students are self-directed. The question is: what if their students are not self-directed, for different reasons? Are the teachers going to intervene and direct them how to be self-directed? If so, this is a very big paradox. In reality, not all students at JCOS are self-directed right at the beginning. While most gradually adapt to
the new culture without any direct intervention from teachers, some—especially those who transfer to JCOS mid-way—never transition successfully to self-directed learning mode. They may end up wandering aimlessly at school, dropping out or transferring to a conventional school. Again, the advisors are always faced with the question of when to intervene and when to leave the students alone. There is no easy answer to this question, because as one experienced advisor at JCOS told me, “It depends on my gut feelings.”

Third, self-directed learning philosophy is not a mainstream philosophy of education, which puts the teachers, students, and administrators in this tradition at a big disadvantage. The first question most people would ask is about college admission. Most schools in this tradition follow alternative assessment systems, which do not match with college admissions. JCOS relies on narrative self-evaluation, and the final transcript is also in form of narrative. JCOS students of the first several generations had a lot of difficulty with college admission because all colleges at that time required conventional, letter-grade transcripts. Although college admission is generally more open now, the principal of JCOS still has to write a letter to explain the JCOS system to college admission committees. Another problem is with college preparation. With the aim of helping students find joy in learning, classes at JCOS are far from test preparation and there are few advanced courses in math and science. Those students who are planning to go to college usually have to make arrangements to take these
advanced courses with nearby conventional schools or community colleges. Finally, due to its minority status, schools in this tradition are always under pressure to compromise. This is especially true with JCOS because it is a public school. Because of the recent accountability policies in the U.S., JCOS has had to make a number of big compromises, e.g. having students take the annual tests as mandated by the school district. However, despite the recent compromises, JCOS has managed to maintain its spirit of self-directed learning.

Last but not least is a very classical question: What if students, once with much personal freedom in hand, make irreversible mistakes that are harmful to themselves? This is a reasonable but difficult question. Even though we acknowledge that students grow up by learning from mistakes, we cannot pretend that freedom never does harm. Personal freedom sometimes does harm—even irreversible harm, and the benefits it brings about always go with a risk. Therefore, we cannot argue that self-directed learning philosophy should be adopted because it is superior to other philosophies of education. As far as I am concerned, adoption of self-directed learning (or not) is only a matter of preference. We can adopt it if we love the potential benefits it may bring about and are willing to face the accompanying risks that it may pose.
Conclusion

Self-directed learning is not far from the ideas of Rousseau, Dewey, A. S. Neill, and many other progressive educators of different generations. These ideas are romantic but they are not too romantic to be true. Hundreds of schools have been built up all over the world following this line of philosophy of education. The Jefferson County Open School in Denver, Colorado (U.S.A.) is an example.

In this chapter, after nailing down some key characteristics of self-directed learning philosophy, I described in details the philosophical tenets underlying JCOS, which is founded on four cornerstones: Walkabout curriculum, advisory system, traveling, and the culture of common sense. I then straightened out the three paradoxes confronting the school before discussing its four main challenges.

This school is different from conventional schools in three main ways. First, it minimizes the judgement from adults and relies on student self-evaluation instead. Second, it respects the students’ experiences at school in the present moment instead of running after future preparation in ways that are meaningless to both the students and the teachers. In other words, it minimizes the mentality of becoming. Third, it releases its control over the students so that self-directed learning is possible.
Chapter 5 A Dialogue between a Buddhist Meditator and a Progressive Educator

*Travel is perhaps just going round in a circle, because in the end what one meets is oneself.*
--Roland Michaud & Sabrina Michaud (2016)\(^7^9\)

Introduction

During my visit to the Jefferson County Open School (JCOS) in November 2016, I heard about Arnie Langberg, the first principal and thinker behind JCOS, but I could not manage to meet with him. Shortly afterwards, I called him, then had some exchanges with him via email, and finally came to see him in Denver in January 2017. I spent three days at his apartment, engaging in in-depth conversations about self-directed learning\(^8^0\). During this visit, I mostly asked questions and he answered, but he also asked me questions once in a while. I also embedded my Buddhist comments here and there to push the conversations further. We also went to a concert and made a field trip together. At the end of the visit, I realized that although my original purpose was to collect input about self-directed learning, we had actually had a two-way conversation—at least from my perspective—between a Buddhist meditator (myself) and a progressive...

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\(^{8^0}\) Before I came to see Arnie, he suggested that I read a couple of texts related to his work, in preparation for our face-to-face conversations.
educator (Arnie)\textsuperscript{81}. I understand that these labels only reflect part of who we are and can easily be misleading, but at least they helped “turn the wheel” of our conversations.

In this chapter, I am going to construct a semi-fictional dialogue between a Buddhist meditator and a progressive educator, based primarily on my exchanges with Arnie, with the aim of exploring the relationship between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning. This dialogue is obviously not a verbatim transcription of our fragmented conversations\textsuperscript{82}, but is reconstructed based on the key points that we discussed, with an eye to the target readers and the general framework of this dissertation. Although Arnie and I may not be the best representatives of progressive education and Buddhist meditation respectively, I hope that this dialogue will unfold many original and useful insights.

Before beginning the dialogue, I would like to answer a question that many have asked me recently, that is, why do I write about Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning? The implication of this question is: is it arbitrary to put these two different areas together? I replied that I wrote about them because I was interested in them, but some people did not seem convinced. After some reflection, I have figured out three

\textsuperscript{81} I say “at least on my part” because there was actually a conversation in my mind, although I did not always speak out what I thought, given the original purpose of the conversation.

\textsuperscript{82} I refused to record our conversations with an electronic device. After the visit, it took me a couple of days to jot down all the details of the conversations. I chose this way because I did not want to let the device stay in the way of our natural conversations. I also had a lot of pleasure recollecting what we discussed and gradually connecting the dots.
main reasons for examining these two areas in the light of each other--hopefully they are more convincing than the original one.

First, these two areas are dear to me, so by writing about them I am presenting who I am. Buddhist meditation has a huge impact on my living philosophy, which in its turn shapes my educational philosophy, so I cannot write about educational philosophy without taking my living philosophy, as a starting point, into account. Second, it is true that at first glance Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning seem to differ from each other, but by making a bridge between these two seemingly unrelated things, I hope to generate originality, which is presumably my contribution to the academic community. From my perspective, originality is primarily what academic inquiry is about. Third, the cross-examining of these two areas helps break the monopoly of wisdom and the narrow identities, at least on my part. At the end of the day, the Buddhist insights, for example, are not exclusive to a spiritual tradition called Buddhism; and the philosophy of self-directed learning can also be found beyond the field of education. Specifically, I may identify myself as a Buddhist, but I understand that I am a Buddhist in addition to, not as opposed to, an educator, a Christian, or any other identities. There is a significant difference between in addition to and as opposed to.

Moreover, I could have written about the relationship between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning in the traditional textual form, but I decided not to
because I wanted to preserve the organic flow of our original conversations. “Organic” is one of the key features of self-directed learning.

The dialogue

Cuòng Nguyen (CN): Thanks for inviting me to Denver, Arnie. It’s my great pleasure to meet you.

Arnie Langberg (AL): You’re welcome! Thanks for coming here. It’s my pleasure to meet you too. How was the flight? You must be very hungry now.

CN: The flight was good. And yes, I am a bit hungry because I left Michigan very early this morning.

AL: OK, let’s have something for breakfast. How about an omelet? Do you like tea or coffee?

CN: An omelet is great. Tea, please.

AL: Make yourself at home. The bathroom is right here, and you will be sleeping in the sofa bed over there. I hope you’ll like it. While I am fixing breakfast, why don’t you tell me something about your dissertation?

CN: Well, I am writing about the relationship between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning theory, with the case study of the Open School in Lakewood, CO. I came to visit the school in November 2016, and now I am here to see you. The
tentative title of my dissertation is *Self-directed Learning Theory through the Eyes of a Buddhist Meditator*. I do hope to listen to your insights into the self-directed learning.

AL: That sounds interesting. I do not know much about Buddhism, but I used to use one fiction book about Buddhism, among many others, to teach my literature class in New York 50 years ago. Do you know *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse? It's a great book. FYI, I was trained to be an engineer, but I ended up teaching math and literature!

CN: Yes, you mentioned it in your book chapter. I really like *Siddhartha*, although it is not the book that led me to Buddhist meditation. The book that “converted” me to Buddhist meditation is by Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. This small book, *Connecting with Life*, was banned in Vietnam at that time (around 2000).

AL: I have heard about Thích Nhất Hạnh, but I have not read his books, although I always like reading banned books, from any country! It's interesting that you used the word “converted”. Why don't you tell me more about your “conversion moments”?

CN: Conversion moments? This is an interesting phrase!

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AL: It’s new to me too. A friend of mine applied for a job, and they asked her about her “conversion moments” in the interview. She didn’t end up getting the job, but we continued using the term afterwards. I like this term.

CN: I see. This term beautifully describes the turning points in our lives, doesn’t it? If so, I think I have had at least three major “conversion moments” so far. The first one was when I read that book by Thích Nhất Hạnh, and the second, I think, was when I read Rousseau’s Émile, which then led me to A. S. Neill’s Summerhill, Dewey, and Posner’s Lives of Passion, School of Hope. And the third was when I encountered Thích Viên Minh’s teaching about letting go. I had encountered the term “letting go” hundreds of times before that, but I did not really understand it until I experienced it firsthand. The book by Thích Nhất Hạnh made me see the miracles in my ordinary life; Rousseau’s Émile convinced me of an alternative path of education, at first for myself; and Thích Viên Minh made me realize how controlling I was, which was presumably my source of dissatisfaction. I began living my life differently after each of these three encounters— I appreciated ordinary things better, I was more open to unfamiliar living experiences, and I became more easy-going with myself and others, and especially more adventurous. I can say that Thích Nhất Hạnh led me to Buddhist meditation, Rousseau led me to alternative, democratic education, and Thích Viên Minh helped endorse my path of spiritual liberation. I began to believe that spiritual liberation was for real. What about your conversion moment(s)?
AL: Well, I guess you know that I went to MIT to become an engineer. My father owned an air-conditioning business in New York and he wanted me to inherit this family business. He spent a lot of money to send me to MIT, but although I was a student at MIT, my real education happened at the fraternity, where I found a real sense of community with good food, ping pong, and friendship. As these new aspects of my life grew in importance, I became even less engaged in the classes. I found one or two professors that inspired me, but began to question my career path. When I actually failed my first class, thermodynamics, and was put on academic probation, I was forced to do some serious soul-searching. I could have left MIT and pursued another path, but I wanted to stay because my parents had invested so much money on me and I did not want to leave my community of friends there. I met with the department chair to figure out what I would have to do to stay. I had become interested in the humanities, but we discovered that I would only be allowed a maximum of 10 such courses to count toward graduation, since MIT did not grant a BA degree. Combined with the minimum number of engineering courses that I needed, it looked like I was going to come up a bit short. My professor and his secretary helped me to identify psychology as an acceptable bridge, with the Institute considering it a technical elective, and my considering it a branch of the humanities. I ended up graduating on time in four years with essentially a triple major! I ended up teaching math and then literature in New York. My father must have been disappointed that I refused to inherit his business. If I had, I could easily
have become a millionaire within five years. So, I consider the academic probation as my most important conversion moment.

CN: Wow, it sounds like you experienced a kind of crisis, didn’t you?

AL: That’s right. But a crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. It can have great educational values. You told me on the phone that you had been in an existential crisis before encountering Buddhist meditation, didn’t you?

CN: That’s right. And I was also in a crisis before reading Rousseau, or later on, before encountering Thích Viên Minh. The crises must have been due to my difficult, big questions, which I did not even know how to express in words, but which may have enabled me to see something that I wouldn’t see otherwise. I would not have been able to appreciate Thích Nhất Hạnh, Rousseau, and Thích Viên Minh without these crises. These people came to me just in time to shed light on my burning questions. And I would not have decided to visit the Open School or come to see you today without these crises.

AL: That’s right. They are great opportunities for soul-searching, which, by the way, is strongly emphasized at the Open School and the Denver Redirection. You may notice that the first two goals of the Open school—*to rediscover the joy of learning* and *to engage in the search for meaning*—are actually about soul-searching. We want to encourage

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84 After stepping down from the leadership of the Open School, Arnie founded Denver Redirection School. This school was closed after four years of operation for many reasons.
our students to discover themselves, to understand themselves, to know what brings
them joy and a feeling of fulfillment--through our overall curriculum, especially the
Walkabout passages. By “overall”, I mean it also includes the hidden curriculum, or the
culture of our schools. This culture is no less significant than the visible, official
curriculum. When you step into a campus, you can tell right away if it has the culture of
fear or non-fear, for example.

CN: You are talking about soul-searching and curriculum. How do you define
curriculum then?

AL: For me, curriculum is that process whereby the school facilitates the
integration of a student’s experiences, in-school and out, planned and unplanned, into a
coherent framework having personal meaning for that student.

CN: This is a very progressive definition! Curriculum as a process!

AL: Yes, it is a process based on each student’s experiences. The teachers and the
administrators cannot plan the entire curriculum for the students because it depends
not only on in-school activities but also on their lives outside school. Much of their real
education happens way beyond the walls of our campus--it happens in life out there!
They have to learn from real life. In other words, there is an interconnectedness
between what happens in the classroom and what happens outside the classroom, what
is planned and what is unplanned. We cannot engage in education as educators without
considering what happens outside the classroom and what is unplanned. This also
means that each student has their own curriculum, which is called individualized education plan (IEP) at the Open School. Each student works with an advisor to figure out an IEP, and then select the courses and projects accordingly. Each student is unique. Our friend Rick Posner usually jokes that each student should be considered as a “special education” student. In a sense, he is right. They are different; they need different advice; and they follow different paths. Again, to make this curriculum possible, they have to engage in soul-searching.

CN: So we are coming back to soul-searching again. Actually, I think that soul-searching is exactly where Buddhist meditation meets self-directed learning. It is this factor that attracted me, as a Buddhist educator, to self-directed learning in the first place. When I first read about the five main goals of the Open School in Posner’s book, I had an “Aha” moment and decided right then that I must go visit the school. I wanted to see how these five goals were realized in practice.

AL: Could you elaborate on it?

CN: Sure. For the most part, Buddhist meditation is about soul-searching, although in Buddhism there is not the so-called “soul” as we understand it in Abrahamic religions. But Buddhist meditation, or the mindfulness practice as we normally call it in the West, is about non-judgemental observation of body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind—in the present moment, or in the language of Thích Nhất Hạnh, in the “here and now”. In other words, it is about being aware of what is
happening within you in relation to the situation you find yourself in. If you have a headache, you know that you are having a headache; if you are excited about something, you know that you're being excited about it. If you are shopping in a busy market, you know that you are doing shopping in a busy market. With the mindfulness practice, you become more discernible and sensitive--physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Another no less important part of the mindfulness practice is its ethical aspect. It is not only therapeutic but also ethical--it is a matter of letting go of the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion, although this ethical aspect is usually undermined, even ignored. Anyway, Thích Nhất Hạnh calls the five Buddhist precepts the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

AL: How does it relate to the sitting meditation that is often associated with Buddhism, at least on the media?

CN: “Sitting still” is only one way that is believed to support Buddhist meditation, but it is not synonymous with Buddhist meditation. Buddhist meditation is about self-awareness and liberation, which can happen anywhere and anytime, not only when you are “sitting still.” However, most Buddhist meditator begins with sitting still and paying attention to their breaths, which is believed to mediate the physical body and the mind. By paying attention to the breaths, we bring ourselves to the present moment--to have concentration. But from my perspective, Buddhist meditation is a living philosophy, not a technique. Sitting still can be considered as one of the “skillful
means” of nurturing this living philosophy. My Buddhist teacher, Thích Viên Minh, says that Buddhist meditation is manifested in the engagement with life— in the household, at work, through failure and success, ups and downs. The best meditation school is not a monastery but is this messy life. The monastery, he stresses, is too ideal for true Buddhist meditation! Only in this real, messy life can we learn our lessons, adjust ourselves, grow up, and attain inner peace. If we shut down the door in order to have peace, this peace is artificial and unsustainable.

AL: Your understanding of Buddhist meditation is very close to my definition of curriculum as I mentioned it above. I believe that real education takes place outside the classroom— through the internships, through travelling, through working on projects, etc. All these activities are intended to not only prepare for the student’s future, but also bring joy and meaning to them right in the present moment. The Walkabout passages, for example, as indicated by the name, help kids to transition successfully to adulthood, but at the same time, they also make kids understand themselves, enjoy themselves, and find the meaning for their lives right in the present. To be honest, I never assumed that self-directed learning had anything to do with Buddhist meditation. Thank you for pointing it out for me.

CN: The present moment is a big, if not the biggest, concern of Buddhist meditation. We define mindfulness practices as those acts which require giving full attention to the here and now, without regret for the past or anxiety for the future. By
paying full attention to the here and now, we are able to appreciate the beauty of our ordinary, everyday life. This said, I think Buddhist meditation also has a kind of “future trajectory”--that is the ultimate spiritual liberation (nirvana), but this future trajectory is only possible by living the present moment to the fullest. In other words, nirvana is both in the future and in the present. Thích Nhất Hạnh says, “there is no path to happiness; happiness is the path”. We are heading towards the direction of happiness or nirvana, but it is not a goal in the traditional sense of the word. So yes, in a sense, you are a very devout Buddhist meditator. But I hope the label “Buddhist” does not bother you. Personally, I rarely identify myself as “Buddhist” although I engage in Buddhist meditation. Labels can be misleading and dangerous, although we sometimes need them to converse with one another. A Buddhist friend of mine said that she was neither Buddhist nor non-Buddhist! Another friend of mine said that he was neither gay nor straight, but he simply loved a man and would like to marry one. I agree with both of them.

AL: I agree, too. Some people ask me if I am comfortable with the term “self-directed learning”, and I say “I don’t know”. I did not coin this term myself. I just ran the Village School in New York, then the Open School in Evergreen (now Lakewood), and the Redirection School in Denver based on my personal experience and observation. I did not mean to implement any theories of education. However, later on I discovered that Professor Maurice Gibbons at the University of British Columbia had
developed a theory called “self-directed learning,” which coincided with what I had been doing. In 1980, a teacher at the Open School adopted the Walkabout model suggested by Professor Gibbons for his advising group, and soon afterwards it was adopted by the entire school. So, I do not care if it is called “self-directed learning” or “personal responsibility education” as Ronald Swartz suggested. I relied primarily on my observation, experience, and intuition, although some specific practical ideas from others, like the Walkabout model, are very useful.

CN: Walkabout is a very interesting model. I watched the movie “Walkabout” a couple of weeks ago. It was an amazing movie! By the way, you just mentioned intuition--could you say more about it?

AL: Sure! From my perspective, intuition plays a significant role in education, although it is usually undermined. It is related to the issue of training--training versus intuition. When I was at the Open School, someone suggested that we compile a handbook for our new teachers because our school was so different from traditional ones, but I disagreed. By relying on the handbook, the new teachers, I was afraid, would become robotic, which would be harmful to themselves, to our school culture and our students. I believe that each teacher would be able to observe themselves, their students, their fellow teachers, the school culture, and figure out how to function

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successfully as teacher and advisor. Or in your language, they would have to engage in “meditation” and find out what to do. I am not a big fan of (external) training, including training in form of a handbook. I expected my teachers to rely on their intuition and make their decisions. I think that each of them already had the potentials to become great teachers, as long as they cared about the kids. Education is a matter of love and intuition, not of training. Please do not get me wrong. Training is necessary in many cases, and I myself offered training workshops for my teachers as well, but it should not be overestimated, or even worse, abused. In the same vein, I believe that each person already has the full potentials to educate themselves, and our responsibility as educators is to create an environment that nurture these potentials. This potential is like an acorn—this is my favorite metaphor. The kids will figure out what to do with their lives, including their education. This is the assumption underlying the self-directed learning philosophy.

CN: Well, this is a very powerful metaphor—each human being with a potential like an acorn. This metaphor reminds me of one of the key Buddhist teachings, that is, each sentient being is a would-be Buddha. After forty days of contemplation under a bodhi tree, Gautama became enlightened, which is called self-attained enlightenment (vô sự giác—literally, teacherless enlightenment). More importantly, he realized that all sentient beings already had the potentials to attain enlightenment like him—without the external salvation from any divine being. In addition, this is what the Buddha said to
his closest assistant Ananda when the former was about to die: “Therefore, Ananda, be a lamp unto yourself, be a refuge to yourself. Take yourself to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp; hold fast to the Truth as a refuge. Look not for a refuge in anyone beside yourself.” The historical Buddha did not identify himself as a divine being, but simply as a teacher that was willing to share his experience to those seeking for his guidance. How Buddhist you are, Arnie!

AL: (Laughing) I didn’t know I was that Buddhist! But as I said earlier, I relied primarily on my experience and observation when running the schools.

CN: I really like what you said about training versus intuition. It is not easy to agree with what you said, because many would think that training is essential, and a handbook is a must for new teachers. Your argument reminds me of my comps question, that is, should we keep the methods course in teacher education programs? I argued for a yes because I believed that in-service teachers would not know how to teach without being equipped with teaching methods--specific pedagogical strategies and techniques. I still believe in the values of methods courses now, but at least I am more aware of their potential downsides--as you put it, they may hinder teachers’ creativity and turn them into robots.

AL: That is actually only one of the reasons why I am against an overemphasis on training. Another reason is that once training, or in this case teaching methods, is

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86 Mahaparinibbana Sutta
emphasized, the language of education easily becomes the language of teaching, while it should be the language of learning. At the Open School, for instance, we do not emphasize teaching, and you may have seen that a lot of student learning takes place--everywhere, in the classroom, outside the classroom, in field trips, in the community, through internships, through extracurricular activities, in the nearby community colleges, etc. In-class teaching makes up a very small chunk of student learning. We are always concerned that our teachers are over-teaching, which does more harm than good to the kids because it depletes their self-direction. Also, we do not consider specialized training in teacher education as essential, by which I mean a teacher can even teach something he or she is not trained to teach in a professional manner. For example, I was trained to be an engineer, but I ended up teaching math and literature very successfully. The fact that a teacher only teaches one narrow subject matter is, in my opinion, not a great idea. Subject areas are interrelated, or we can use the Buddhist term, interconnected. When kids do their projects, they cannot see a clear distinction among subject areas as presented by traditional curriculum. As teachers, we can learn new stuff with our students--this is what teaching is about. The most important thing, as far as I am concerned, is that the teacher has to transmit their enthusiasm about the subject matter to the students.

CN: Because you’re talking about enthusiasm, I am recollecting my math classes in high school. I still do not like math now because I simply don’t see its functionality
and its beauty. My math scores were not bad, but nobody helped me to see its functionality and beauty. Why math? Why square root? How is it related to life? How is it beautiful?

AL: This is the reason why I used to teach a math course entitled “Why?” at the Open School. I could not explain why for every math problem, but at least my students and I were working on this question together. Also, I was fortunate enough to see the beauty of math, so I shared it enthusiastically with my students. I was teaching in New York at that time. One day, I discovered that if the pi number, the e number, and the i number were configured in a certain way, I would have -1. Wasn't it miraculous? Three irrational numbers would make up a whole number! I am still very curious about math now—it is so interesting, mysterious and beautiful. We do not always see its functionality, but its beauty is always there. But you are right, it is a disaster to teach math in a robotic, formulaic way! The job of a teacher is to inspire the students, or as I mentioned earlier, to transmit enthusiasm to them. The teacher can easily kill the natural curiosity of kids!

CN: I wish I could study math with you. (Laughing)

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87 This is the Euler's formula.
AL: I will teach you math if you like. I will teach you Moby Dick, too.\^88

(Laughing). But seriously, what do you think about the issue of training and methods from the Buddhist perspective?

CN: Even though there is not a clear, consistent stance on the role of training and methods in Buddhism, my Buddhist teachers, especially Thích Viên Minh, would agree with you. He refuses to introduce any specific methods of meditation because he believes that no single methods work for everyone, and methods can easily constrain people. Instead, he gives instruction on general Buddhist doctrines with the hope that each person will figure out what to do for themselves. His approach, as you can imagine, is not very popular with many Buddhist practitioners, who expect a step-by-step instruction, but I myself understand the great value of his approach thanks to my personal previous meditative experiences. I had been stuck in meditation methods for a while before liberating myself from them.

AL: Could you say more about this experience of yours?

CN: To cut a long story short, Thích Nhật Hạnh led me to Buddhist meditation 15 years ago. He was very poetic and humanistic--very “Zen”, but he did not dismiss meditation techniques altogether. He taught us how to do walking meditation, step by step, how to use our breaths, also step by step, etc. These steps were necessary, but the

\^88 Later on, Arnie indeed taught me how to read Moby Dick. Because of its length, Arnie believed that I should follow certain reading strategies in order to enjoy it to the fullest.
problem is that I was stuck in them—I was obsessed with utilizing these steps to improve myself quickly. These steps worked very well at first, but I wanted more—I wanted to become more mindful and less mindless. I wanted to become an efficient Buddhist meditator! I ended up being exhausted. I was falling victim to the first of the three poisons—greed. I realized how wrong I had been when listening to Thích Viên Minh’s talk about letting go. I think both Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Viên Minh stepped into my life at the right moments. Without my previous experience with Thích Nhất Hạnh, I could not have understood Thích Viên Minh.

AL: Your story is amazing! Yes, methods can be very dangerous. They are a kind of two-bladed swords. We can easily cut ourselves if we are not careful. It is sad that people are talking too much about training, methods, best practices, strategies, etc. these days as if they were indispensable, while undermining something like intuition and care in education. The point is that intuition and care are invisible and cannot be taught explicitly, but this does not mean they are not important.

CN: We have discussed intuition for a while, but to be honest it remains a mystery to me. When visiting the Open School, I asked Roberta how she decided on when to intervene and when to leave her students alone (for self-direction). She smiled and said there was no fixed, magic formula—it all depended on her “gut feeling” in a particular situation. Obviously, she could not explain further because it was a matter of

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89 Roberta is an advisor/teacher at JCOS.
“gut feeling”, or intuition, which was beyond analytical reasoning. No, I could not ask her to rationalize “gut feeling” then.

AL: But intuition is there--we cannot deny its existence, don’t you agree?

CN: Yes, I agree. And by the way, intuition is also a big thing in traditional Buddhism. The Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment by means of intuitive awareness (tánh biết, tánh giác), not by conceptual, analytical reasoning. Unfortunately, this element of intuition has been undermined, even ignored, in the modernized version of Buddhism. Modern Buddhism emphasizes the aspects that can be rationalized, in line with modern sciences. The mystic elements are downplayed, and intuition is, I guess, one of them. I am glad that you mentioned intuition in the context of education because it reminded me of something that has almost been forgotten in my Buddhist heritage and made me reconsider my approach to education.

AL: Could you say more about intuitive awareness in Buddhism?

CN: Intuitive awareness, also known as Buddhahood, is the innate wisdom that everyone is born with. This intuitive awareness is usually covered by the dirt of greed, anger, and delusion, and especially by the inferiority complex. We think that we are incompetent, that we have no value, that we need to run away to find something great that can make us competent. We forget that we have a great pearl at home that needs to be uncovered and polished. This is our intuitive awareness, or Buddhahood.
AL: That’s interesting! I think we are getting closer and closer. First, soul-searching, or self-knowledge, then the roles of living experiences, living the present moment fully versus preparing for the future, metaphor of an acorn, or in your Buddhist language the potentiality of self-realization, and now intuition versus training. Thanks to our conversation, I now understand Buddhism better, and I also have a better idea why you were attracted to self-directed learning in the first place. But let me ask you this tricky question: Are you completely comfortable with self-directed learning and with what you noticed at the Open School?

CN: A great question. Actually, I was not completely comfortable. I had two main concerns. First, when I walked into the Open School campus, I had the feeling that I was lost in the world of “hippies”. Kids wearing colorful hair, with pierced noses, in casual clothes, and so on. While I was excited about the freedom that kids were enjoying, I could not help but think about the discipline issue. With the self-direction principle, what if kids make terrible, irreversible mistakes and do harm to themselves and others? Second, a friend of mine, upon hearing the term “self-directed”, immediately claimed that we had had enough of selfish, self-centered, even narcissistic people in this world--those who only care about “I” and “me”. He seemed to equate “self-directed” with “selfish”, “self-centeredness”, and even “narcissistic”. I disagreed with him, but I did not know how explain myself, because indeed I also found some contradiction between self-direction and the sense of community. If we think too much
about ourselves, as implied in self-direction, perhaps it is more difficult for us to think about the community—the common good. To some extent, self-direction, because of the prefix “self-”, also seems contrary to the Buddhist teaching about non-self. What do you say?

AL: Thanks for your profound questions. In response to the first question, I think mistakes are essential for growth. We mature by making mistakes and adjusting ourselves. It is good to make mistakes earlier than later in life, don’t you agree? A couple of years ago, I was invited to give a graduation address at the Open School, where I said that we needed a new motto for the school, that is, “Make new mistakes!”.

We don’t want to make the same mistake again and again because that means we are not learning anything. We have to make new mistakes, and learn from them. Of course, we do not let kids do harm to others, but we prioritize self-discipline over external discipline. When kids do something terrible, we tend to coordinate a conversation between different stakeholders, including the kids and the “victims”, to figure out a solution. As I mentioned earlier, I am a “radical”, which literally means a “root”, so I always look into the roots of things. The original purpose of schooling is to help kids grow up, not to punish them, as much as the original purpose of a prison is to correct people, not to punish them or to hang them. FYI, I am against capital punishment. So, we do not punish kids according to our school “codes,” but we try to discuss with them and find a way out. This approach takes much more time and energy than mere
punishment, but it is worth it—it is what educators are here for. For the second question, you friend is not the only person to react that way. But let me ask you this question: Do you feel selfish when practicing Buddhist meditation—observing your body, your feelings, your mind, and objects of the mind, as you defined it earlier?

CN: Not at all.

AL: Exactly! The term “self-directed learning” can be misleading (I didn't coin this term by the way), but self-directed learning is actually about acknowledging and nurturing the personal identity of each student—their talents, dispositions, backgrounds, interests, readiness, etc., which paves the way for their individual paths of progress. I would describe it as “self-awareness” rather than “selfish” or “self-centered”. Self-direction refers to self-consciousness, self-discovery, self-evaluation, self-discipline, self-responsibility, self-motivation, self-reliance, etc. We want them to know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, what they find meaningful; to take initiatives and to be responsible for their choices, and to not conform blindly to unreasonable social norms. Indeed, there seems to be a conceptual contradiction between self-direction and the sense of community, but this is not necessarily the case in reality. If people do not know who they are, they may do more harm than good to themselves and others. They must know themselves before reaching out to other people, and this second part is no less important. Do you remember our five main goals? The first two—*to rediscover the joy of learning and to engage in the search for meaning*—
are about “I”, while the last three--to adapt to the world as it is, to prepare for the world as it might be, and to help create the world as it ought to be--are about social engagement and responsibility, about “We.”

CN: I agree.

AL: And you may have noticed that at the Open school the sense of community was strongly emphasized. The kids may pursue their interests and travel their personal journeys, but they are part of the community, especially thanks to our advisement system. I think the advisor plays a really important role in nurturing the sense of community at Open. Of course, some students only want to work and study by themselves, but it is the advisor that engages them into the advising group, advising family, and advising trips. The advisor is the cornerstone of self-directed learning. Our general curriculum, e.g. the Walkabout passages, also encourages the spirit of community. For example, to complete the Global Awareness project, the students must look beyond themselves. In practice, the personal identity and the sense of community can go together, although this is not always easy; as Rick Posner puts it, it is an art form. But to be part of a community does not mean you have to eliminate your personal identity.

CN: Yeah, I could see both self-direction and the spirit of community during my visit to the Open school, but it was really hard to explain their coexistence conceptually. You said that the advisor plays an essential role in the Open School. Let’s straighten this
“paradox” out a little bit. On the one hand, advisement; on the other hand, self-direction?

AL: Again, language and concepts are misleading. As a matter of fact, kids need both advising and self-direction. People may have chosen to use the term “self-direction” to fight against, or balance out, the constraints of a rigid, manipulative system, which chokes up kids and makes them into robots. Yes, with self-direction, they are liberated from external control in order to develop their personal ways, but we cannot deny the fact that kids need an adult whom they trust and who is able to listen to them, understand them, advocate them, and give them suggestions when requested. Self-direction does not mean they work/study alone without any support from others. Self-direction actually refers to the capability to mobilize support. They know that there is always someone trustworthy they can turn to, but they must take an initiative in asking for help. This is the true spirit of self-direction. They have the freedom to educate themselves, which includes the freedom to ask for help.

CN: Let’s return to the issue of liberation and freedom a bit later, but for now it looks like the quality of education at the Open School depends much on the quality of advising and the advisor. If the advisor does a great job of advising, his or her students will benefit; otherwise, they may be at a great disadvantage.

AL: The fact that we depend much on the advisor is probably the biggest strength, but also the biggest weakness, of our school. The solution is that our students
can switch to another advisor if they do not get along well. Moreover, the advisor may not be perfect, but at least kids have the opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with an adult for an extended period of time every week—at least half an hour at Open. How many kids in conventional schools have this opportunity? We want to make sure that no kids at our schools are anonymous. Relying too much on advisors can be risky, but we don’t have to avoid it altogether only because it is risky. After all, kids are free to discover themselves and pursue their interests, which makes their education personally meaningful. The advisors only play a supporting, facilitating role. At the end of the day, the students have to make their own decisions, although they can mobilize support from others.

CN: You have mentioned “freedom” and “liberation” a couple of times. For the most part, I think freedom and liberation are what Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning have in common. The ultimate aim of Buddhist meditation is spiritual liberation (nirvana), and Buddhist meditators are free to rely on themselves for liberation—they do not have to submit to any powerful, divine authority. They are free to make mistakes, pay the price (karma), learn their lessons, and adjust themselves. The Buddhist monks, and even the historical Buddha, do not have the divine power to redeem anyone, but they can show the way to liberation—that is the transformation of greed, anger, and delusion. Obviously, the spirit of freedom and liberation are also the core values of the Open school, which attracted me to it in the first place. Kids are free
to pursue their interests, to take the classes of their choices, to work on their personalized projects, etc. However, this liberation is worldly liberation, as opposed to the transcendent liberation of Buddhism. Buddhist liberation is liberation from greed, anger, and delusion, while worldly liberation is personal liberation from oppressive institutions.

AL: Could you say more about the Buddhist liberation?

CN: Buddhist liberation is a matter of letting go of ego--of greed, anger, and delusion. Ego-centered desire is a key word here. We have a desire for something, but if we cannot get it, we get frustrated and angry, all of which comes from wrong views, or delusion, about life. Letting go is a very big issue in Buddhist meditation.

AL: But if we let go of everything, how can we struggle for a better society?

CN: This is a great question, but I do not have a complete answer to it. It is still my “koan”. In traditional Buddhism, the social aspects are almost undermined while the personal spiritual liberation is emphasized. In the mid-20th century, however, a new school of Buddhism called the socially engaged Buddhist movement (for short Engaged Buddhism) emerged. Thích Nhất Hạnh was one of the pioneers of this movement/school. But this movement also has a lot of variation within it. Some believe that by attaining personal liberation, they are already contributing to the common good--already socially engaged, while some others believe that they have to take concrete actions to change the status quo. Most engaged Buddhists undertake both personal and
social transformation, as Ken Jones puts it, “without inner work, we are more of the problem than the solution to the outside work”\textsuperscript{90}. Communism in China, Vietnam, Russia, etc. is a great example for this. For engaged Buddhists, the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion should also be seen not only at the personal but also the social level. Theologically, this argument does not work properly. If we think we should take certain actions to bring more justice to the world, we are already imposing our standards on others. How do we dare to think our ethical standards are the best? And why do others have to conform to our standards? Perhaps I am more of the opinion that we should take care of ourselves first, and the world will take care of itself. Probably, I am less Marxist and more traditionally Buddhist in this sense.

AL: Perhaps this is where self-directed learning, or more broadly progressive education, deviates from Buddhist meditation, at least the traditional version of it. I am leaning towards an equilibrium between personal and social transformation. So I think I am closer to the spirit of engaged Buddhism. Of the five goals that we have been referring to, the second (to engage in a search for meaning) and the fifth (to help create a world that ought to be) are most important to me. As you can it, the fifth one--to help create the world as it ought to be--is about social transformation. We want to struggle for a better society. Okay, we have been talking a lot about Buddhist meditation and self-

\textsuperscript{90} Jones, K. (1995). Buddhism and Social Action: An Exploration. See: \url{http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/jones/wheel285.htm}
directed education as if they were out there. Let’s talk a bit more about yourself now. As a Buddhist meditator, what have you learned from self-directed learning philosophy and the Open School on the personal level?

CN: As a Buddhist meditator, sometimes I notice that I care excessively about the transcendent world--the world of non-self, samsara, and letting go, while undermining our ordinary, messy world. I was living “in the world but not of the world”, as is advised by many sages. In other words, I was not a permanent, full-fledged resident of the world. But when I was at the Open School, seeing the kids engaging in their projects and pursuing their interests I suddenly realized that I must take more responsibility for my worldly life through my deliberate, personal decisions and choices. I could not afford to avoid this world. I must take it seriously. I must live in the world and also of the world, even though my vision is not limited within the worldly issues. It was also the first time I had ever had the feeling that I dared to face the world alone, irrespective of what others were thinking about me. I felt as if I had turned into a quiet hero, a pioneer, and an innovator--right in this world. I began listening closely and trustfully to my intuition and my heart without repressing them in order to please others. I could say No while all the others in the room said Yes. I felt empowered when giving my authentic opinions and making my own decisions. It is not that I became selfish and no longer cared about others. I could still care about others and pursue my interests at the same time, in much the same way I could be “of the world” and look beyond it.
simultaneously. It does not mean that I have thrown the transcendent world away, but it means that I have begun caring more about this world. I no longer saw this world through the transcendent eyes only—I began seeing the world through the worldly eyes as well. This world does not have to be seen as unreal, or as a temporary journey leading to a full enlightenment or nirvana, but this world has its own value and meaning that do not have to be secondary to the Buddhist transcendent world. I guess I began seeing the “worldly holiness”. It is not about applying the mindfulness practice in everyday activities. It is more than that. Ironically, by seeing the world through the worldly lens, I felt that I was closer to Buddhist meditation than ever before. I felt that the invisible wall between me and the others had collapsed, which brought me a lot of joy and meaning. My strict, judgmental eyes are replaced by my witty, understanding eyes. Even the word “understanding” sounds a bit arrogant to me. I feel as if I could see the “humanness” in people now, although I have to say No to them sometimes.

Spirituality, in my opinion, manifests not only in a metaphysical way, but more importantly in human warmth—in how I treat other people in this world with care and respect. I am not sure if I have made my points clear enough, because it is indeed very hard for me to express this special new experience. It is emerging, it is still taking shape, and I am not there yet.

AL: I guess you are switching between “humanness” and spirituality, and I suspect that you may have been inspired by the humanness at the Open School.
CN: You can put it that way—humanness is the key word. A student at Open told me that there was more common sense at the Open school than at his previous traditional school, but he could not explain further what he meant by “common sense”. Now I think he actually meant “humanness”, in the sense that people behave in an informal, non-assuming way.

AL: That’s right. When I first transferred to the X school in New York, I was working with a student leader and social activist known for being very critical. But we got along very well. Later he told me that it was not only about my pedagogies that impressed him but more about the fact that I was the same inside the classroom and outside the classroom. I did not pretend to be someone else in the classroom—I said the same thing and had the same manners inside and outside the classroom. This made him feel so comfortable working with me. I rarely use the term “humanness” at our schools—it is too big and abstract, but we tried to build up a culture in which emotional expression is not restricted. Many years ago, an accreditation officer visited our school, and his first remark was that there was too much physical touching on our campus! I did not deny it, but I told him that the school Y that he had just visited was also very problematic because it did not have any physical touching! Personally, I believe that physical touching, including the physical presence, goes along with emotional, even spiritual, touching. As an expression of love, education can involve physical touching, but of course this is a very risky stuff. But we don’t want to eliminate it only because it
is risky. We know it is risky and we are more cautious about it. As you can see it, group traveling, for example, is also a very risky thing to do.

CN: As an atheist, do you think that you have a spiritual dimension?

AL: Have I told you that I am a non-practicing Jew? Many people consider me an atheist, and I am comfortable with this label. But many have told me that my career in education has a strong spiritual dimension, and I agree too. Actually, my grandmother, that is my mother’s mother, was born to an Orthodox Jewish family, so when I turned 13, she expected me to participate in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. I agreed to participate only because I wanted to please her, but when the day of the ceremony came, she had just passed away. I participated in the ceremony anyway. Even though I am not a practicing Jew now, I still remember the three key messages that I read aloud at that ceremony--justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. I am not so sure about the third one, but I have been trying to observe the first two, which I think had much influence on my worldview and my career in education. I also agree with you that joy, meaningfulness, kindness, and probably also openness and authenticity make the spiritual dimension of the Open School, although we never use any religious terminology there. You may see this spiritual dimension most clearly if you attend the Final Support Meetings, where each graduating student invites their families, friends, and teachers to the event where they share their experiences at the school. You will feel that they are presenting their authentic selves. You can see their successes, their failures,
their ups and downs, their joys and sorrows, but most importantly their growth. I used to attend quite a few meetings of this kind every year, and I always felt as if I was attending some holy religious events, like the Catholic confirmation ceremony, for example. Very holy and touching. It is not a religious ritual, but is an event where humanness is indeed explicit.

CN: Scott Bain invited me to come over for these meetings in May 2017, and I have promised to come. I hope I will be able to make it. And you are right. The spirituality and the worldly are not separate, although the language makes us feel as if they were two separate things. When my teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh returned to Vietnam for the first time in 2005, he gave a lot of public talks. In one of his talks, he made reference to the “spiritual dimension” of the Vietnamese communists, which astonished me. I was not sure what he was talking about. Do the atheist communists also have a spiritual dimension? Now I understand what he meant. Ajahn Brahm, a renowned Buddhist monk, says that mindfulness as we see it in the media is inadequate--we need “kindfulness”, not “mindfulness”. I think the fact that you are supporting your gay, sick, pianist friend, as you revealed to me previously, is indeed an act of kindfulness--of both human warmth and spirituality⁹¹.

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⁹¹ I was moved by Arnie’s story about his sick pianist friend. He said that he was supporting this friend so that the latter could continue playing the piano, because this is the latter’s only source of life. I was moved by this kind act, but I was also surprised because it was rather unusual. As you know, I like reading Leo Tolstoy because he wrote about compassion and love, but deep within me I only considered these as two beautiful ideals that would never come true. When listening to Arnie’s story, I was convinced that they could be true. I also admire Arnie because of his open-mindedness and tolerance to a
AL: Up to now, we have talked much about the commonalities between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning theory. It has been amazing--we have learnt a lot from each other. I have a much better idea about Buddhist meditation now, and I guess I have answered many of your profound questions about our schools as well. Now, even though we have agreed that there is no real distinction between the secular world and spirituality, I would like to hear more about your personal Buddhist spiritual experiences, which I think you may have a lot but have not shared much of. Who knows, we may find some other unexpected linkages between these experiences with education?

CN: I am not sure how my Buddhist spiritual experiences are related to education, but I can summarize them in two key words: “beauty” and “letting go”. These two words exactly describe my two spiritual “conversion moments” that I mentioned briefly earlier. Through his poetic teaching on mindfulness, Thích Nhất Hạnh inspired me to appreciate the beauty, the preciousness, and the uniqueness of the present familiar--the rain, the sunshine, the friendship, the smile of a child, the kindly acts, etc. My life became a miracle when I looked at it with different eyes and when I was grounded in what was unfolding in the present moment. If I could not appreciate it now, I would never be able to appreciate it--I would always be busy running after other

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things and forget what is real right within me and in front of my eyes. Nothing was going to satisfy me if I keep running after one thing after another. If I cannot find joy in cooking my simple breakfast or writing these lines right this morning, I would never find joy in anything else later in my life. I can say that I have managed to survive thanks to this flip in my worldview. The second experience is with letting go. I had heard this phrase “letting go” hundreds of times, but I had not really understood what it meant until I was pushed into the corner of suffering. I was so painful as a result of a surgery that I was furious with my health status and with the doctor. However, at one moment, I realized that I was actually trying to control the world, and more importantly that I could let go of the controlling mindset. I saw the clear distinction between a controlling mindset that I was having and a mindset of letting go. No, control and manipulation are not the default and only options in the world, although I had been conditioned to think that way. After realizing how controlling I was, I began letting go of many things, which made me feel so relieved. From my experience, letting go is one of the most important but difficult survival skills I have ever learned. In some cases, I have to forget some people or some incidents in order to put myself together and get back on my feet. Several years ago, Phạm Duy, a (late) renowned Vietnamese songwriter, said in an interview that one of his three most important lessons in his life was how to forget. It did not make any sense to me then, but it does now. The other two were to be grateful
and to apologize. To let go means to forget, or even more, to forgive. To forgive oneself and others. I sound like a moralist or a preacher now. But no, it is about my survival. I would not survive if I failed to let go--to forget and to forgive. I think this is the key difference between the worldly and the spiritual realms, if we are ok with such a temporary differentiation.

AL: Although I am not a Buddhist, I can understand what you said. Probably the kids in our schools are not as serene as you seem to be, but we expect them to see the beauty and the joy in what they study as well--probably the subject matter, the projects, the trips, the community activities, etc. Obviously, what you said about letting go is also very sensible to me. As parents and teachers, we usually expect kids to live according to our standards. If this is not the control mindset, what is it? I have three kids, and I let them follow their personal passions--I did not want them to continue my impossible dreams as some parents do! My eldest son liked cooking, so he worked as a chef for a while, then taught ESL in Taiwan for half a year or so, before going back to school to pursue his Master’s in Chinese studies at the University of Michigan. He is working for a Spanish bank now--very successful! He is going to pay the college tuition for all his nieces and nephews. My second son pursued his interests in arts and sciences, and ended up working as an architect in Los Angeles now. My daughter loved dancing and

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92 Phạm Duy (2013). Phải Biết Cảm Ơn, Phải Biết Xin Lỗi, Phải Biết Quên (Say Thank-you; Apologize; and Forget It). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBaGpXMqihQ
has been a well-known professional dancer. You may be curious about why I let my first son work for a bank while I am so anti-capitalist. Well, it is his life, and I refused to interfere with it; or in your language I let go of my desire to manipulate his career choice. Also, the fact that I am anti-capitalist does not mean that I support communism. No, I do not worship poverty, either. A person can be an ethical entrepreneur and an unethical communist—we do not know. Again, the labels can be misleading.

CN: Look, time flies fast. Arnie, thank you so much for the conversation. We have touched so many things and I believe that we are getting closer and closer in so many ways. Despite our differences in perspectives, we easily agree on so many things related to education, like soul-searching, self-awareness, interconnectedness, or in the Buddhist term, non-self, life as a school, human being as an acorn, the role of intuition, the role of personal living experiences, personal meaningfulness, the misleading labels, the freedom, the care, and even the spiritual dimension. But above all, I now think Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning have themes in common: they both look to minimize judgement, becoming, and control. This is how they both deviate from conventional education and Western scholarship traditions.

AL: Could you say more about these three concepts of judgement, becoming, and control?

CN: These concepts popped up in my mind just now, so I do not know them very clearly yet. I will need some more time to think about them. Anyway, we do not
have much time left--I will head to the airport in a few. I will write you and share what I think about them. They seem to be the meeting points between self-directed learning philosophy and Buddhist meditation.

AL: Sounds great. Let's stay in touch. By the way, do you want some snack to eat on the plane? I have some cookies and an apple.

CN: Sure. Thanks. We will be in touch. Bye for now.

After the Dialogue: Three Major Commonalities

In the dialogue with Arnie above, we figured out a lot of commonalities--big and small--between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning. However, in this section I am going to focus on three major commonalities, using JCOS as an illustration. Specifically, these traditions both acknowledge individuality, aim at transformation and freedom/liberation, and promote fearlessness. After the analysis, I will discuss the three philosophical principles underlying these common characteristics--non-judgment, non-becoming, and non-control.

Individuality

Buddhist meditation discourages ego and ego-centeredness but in a sense promotes individuality. Individuality is a tricky word, but in the Buddhist context it can
be understood in terms of individual capabilities/potentials, self-knowledge, individual spiritual paths, and personal responsibility. Interestingly, these four tenets are also emphasized in self-directed learning.

According to Buddhist history, after 49 days of intense meditation under a bodhi tree, Siddhartha was enlightened. Among his many important realizations, he found that each sentient being had the great potentials to be enlightened and attain complete liberation. These potentials, also known as Buddhahood (Phật tánh) or intuitive awareness (tánh biệt), are inherent in each person, which, if properly nurtured, would bloom and lead to liberation. Therefore, the Buddha encouraged people to rely on their own Buddhahood to gain enlightenment, while his guidelines only played a supporting role. For this reason, Buddhists of many generations have been taught to be self-confident in their practice of meditation because they believe that they are would-be Enlightened Ones. Once greed, anger, and delusion are gone, the Buddhahood within each person will be uncovered and make nirvana possible. Buddhists worship the Buddha not as a divine being with the absolute power of redemption, but as a teacher who reminds them to rely on themselves. To bow to a Buddha statue in the temple means to pay respect to the Buddhahood within oneself.

Like Buddhist meditation, educators in the tradition of self-directed learning believes in their students’ potentials. They assume that children are born with great but

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sometimes hidden talents, skills, capabilities, etc. that are to be guarded and cultivated, and that children are able to figure out what to do for themselves once external control is gone. In other words, they are able to be self-directed and develop a personal identity. In the context of JCOS, they can select their courses, complete their projects, evaluate their classes, make their solo trips, etc. In particular, they are assumed to be good, not evil, which is why external discipline does not make sense. A. S. Neill, founder of Summerhill, believes that there are no lazy kids--they are idle because they are either sick or unhappy. In short, self-directed learning philosophy is not built upon the assumption of deficiency on the part of the children, as in conventional education, but in the trust in their capabilities, skills, dispositions, and virtues.

Self-knowledge, another example of individuality, is also a common concern of Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy. As defined in Chapter 3, Buddhist meditation is about observing one’s body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind non-judgmentally in relation to one’s environment, with the aim of liberation from suffering. This is the practice of looking inward to understand oneself, to see one’s assumptions, to flip one’s attitudes, without which a person cannot transform their psychic suffering. In other words, Buddhist meditation is the art of seeing and transforming the heart. It is not about taking actions to change the external conditions of the world; external change automatically follows inner transformation, which is made possible by self-knowledge.
Soul-searching, which is closely related with self-knowledge, is strongly emphasized at the JCOS. The first two goals of the school--to rediscover the joy of learning and to engage in the search for meaning--are actually about soul-searching and self-knowledge. JCOS students are encouraged to discover themselves, to understand themselves, to know what brings them joy and fulfillment--through the overall curriculum, especially the Walkabout passages. By “overall”, I mean it also includes the hidden curriculum, or the culture of open-mindedness and common sense, which are no less significant than the visible, official curriculum. By soul-searching, they figure out what courses to take, what projects to work on, and in general what to do with their freedom. For example, when a student decides to make a psychological adventure (the Adventure Project) by looking for her biological father, she must understand clearly how important her father was to her and what emotional challenges she might face during this adventure.

Individuality also manifests in the fact that both Buddhist meditators and students in self-directed learning tradition are encouraged to pursue their individual paths that are most relevant to who they are. According to Buddhist tradition, there are 84,000 different paths to enlightenment, and each person figures out a path that works best for them. Thích Viên Minh refuses to teach meditative methods because he argues that particular methods may prevent Buddhist meditators from figuring out a unique
path for themselves\(^{94}\). In the context of education, one-size-fits-all curriculum has long been criticized by progressive educators, although it is still the standard way in conventional schools. On the contrary, students at JCOS develop their individualized education plans (IEPs) with the help of their advisors, and then select courses, projects, activities to build up these IEPs. As of November 2016, JCOS has 550 students, which means there are 550 different IEPs. Students at JCOS may collaborate with one another on many occasions, but they are also traveling on their unique paths, depending on their talents, preferences, and dispositions.

The final tenet of individuality shared by Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy is the spirit of personal responsibility. The Buddhist law of karma says that no one can liberate us from suffering but ourselves. The Buddha is an enlightened being, but he does not have the power to save us from suffering. He is the teacher who shows us the path to liberation, but he cannot walk this path on our behalf. At the metaphysical level, Buddhists believe that what we think, say, or act now (karma) will have an impact on the future, even on future lives. By doing good deeds, we hope to sow good seeds for the sake of the future. In a sense, this theory of karma may contradict with the Buddhist theory of non-self, but it is widely accepted and

practiced in Buddhist Asia. We donate to the poor and help the sick out of compassion, but also with the hope of gaining some merits for future lives. When confronted with adversities, Buddhists tend to blame themselves rather others or social institutions. We fail because we did not work hard enough, even because we did unwholesome deeds in our previous lives. Indeed, the law of karma leads to the spirit of personal responsibility.

The spirit of personal responsibility is also very explicit in self-directed learning philosophy. As I wrote in Chapter 4, in the schools with the self-directed philosophy like the Summerhill (in the UK), the Sudbury Valley (mostly in the U.S.), the Open school in Colorado (the U.S.), and many others, the students are, to varying extents, responsible for their education—developing their personalized curriculum, deciding on assessment, and even coming up with the governing policies for their schools, with the support of the faculty and staff members. The teachers in these schools step back and yield much decision making to their students.

To sum up, Buddhist mediators and educators in the tradition of self-directed learning both believe in the great hidden potentials of each individual, in the role of soul-searching and self-knowledge, in the unique paths that each person walks on by themselves and is responsible for. External forces, like the Buddha or the teachers, only play supporting roles. These practices reflect a promotion of individuality in both traditions.
Transformation, Letting Go and Freedom/Liberation

Buddhist meditation is a path of liberation. This is what the Buddha said 26 centuries ago: “Just as in the great ocean there is but one taste — the taste of salt — so in this Doctrine and Discipline there is but one taste — the taste of freedom”\(^95\). Freedom from suffering caused by greed, anger, and delusion. Other than greed and anger, delusion is a big issue in Buddhism. Delusion comes from misperceptions, prejudices, discriminations, etc. that have been ingrained in us for a long time. The job of a Buddhist meditator is to bring them to the forefront, to face them, to see them clearly, and thus to transform them. Seeing clearly is transformative.

Transformation and freedom/liberation are also two major concerns of self-directed learning philosophy, although they are not as explicit as in Buddhism. Without excessive intervention from adults, students are free to explore themselves and pursue what they find meaningful. As mentioned earlier, students at Summerhill do not have to go to classes if they do not want to. They can engage in creative arts, in woodwork, in gardening, in free reading, in writing, etc. or whatever I want to instead. Students at JCOS are free to attend their selected classes, to propose to teach classes, to develop their own curricula, to work on their Walkabout projects, to make solo trips, etc. Obviously, freedom at JCOS is within open structures and connected with self-

\(^95\) Pahārāda Sutta. See [https://suttacentral.net/en/an8.19](https://suttacentral.net/en/an8.19)
discipline, but all these activities are intended to help students, among many other things, to discover the joy of learning and the meaning of their lives. It is them who figure out the joy and the meaning for themselves. Isn’t this liberatory?

People at J COS care little about academic performance in form of test scores, but they care primarily about personal growth and transformation. Teachers are excited to read their students’ narratives that reflect transformation, and students are excited to share their transformation with others as well. As mentioned earlier, J COS students grow up by engaging in different activities, by making mistakes, and especially by learning from mistakes.

Apparently, liberation in self-directed learning philosophy is not the same as liberation in Buddhist terms. While the former is about liberation from adults’ excessive intervention, the latter is about liberation from psychic suffering presumably caused by greed, anger, and delusion. One is worldly; the other is spiritual. However, at their cores, both Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy are concerned about the issue of control/manipulation vs. letting go. As I narrated in Chapter 1, I learned how to let go of my desire to improve my conditions while lying in bed lamenting about my pain after an operation. I wrote, “With this realization, I began letting go of the desire to get better and to complain about the doctor’s prescription. A powerful feeling of relief and freedom was engulfing me. I had never experienced such a big freedom before--freedom from the desire to manipulate myself and others according to my personal standards.”. Since then, I have gradually
learned to let go of manipulating myself and others. This is a viable option. In the Buddhist terms, I have learned to throw the ego-centeredness away.

In the context of schooling, I used to force myself to study something I did not like, in order to pass an exam or to be approved by others. This habit of self-manipulation (I can even call it self-violence) gradually depleted my natural curiosity, depriving myself of the capability to realize what I was really interested in. Natural curiosity is exactly what self-directed learning philosophy really cares about. Students in this tradition are encouraged to respect and nurture their natural orientations, talents, and interests. They are discouraged from aligning themselves to other people’s ideas or preferences, but they are encouraged to develop their personal identity, to walk their own paths, at their own pace, and pursue whatever they find meaningful for themselves.

There is a subtle difference between self-violence/manipulation and self-discipline. Self-violence/manipulation is when you manipulate yourself out of blind obedience or unknown external pressure, while self-discipline is when you deliberately refrain from doing something or try to do something because you’re aware of its consequences. Self-discipline results from the consideration of an unavoidable trade-off. Actually, the term “self-discipline” can be misleading—I would replace it with “self-adjustment.” We simply adjust ourselves after learning about the consequences of our past actions. Self-discipline has a harsh connotation, at least for me.
In short, the bridge between Buddhist meditation and self-directed education is in the fact that they are both concerned with transformation (rather than test scores), both aim at their respective ideals of freedom and liberation. In particular, they are both based on the practice of letting go (as opposed to self-manipulation/violence).

**Fearlessness**

Fear is not part of the Four Noble Truths but is prevalent in Buddhist literature. However, the discussion of fear is not consistent, even contradictory, in different traditions. In some cases, fear is even used to manipulate people into observing the Buddhist precepts. Many try to behave themselves out of fear--fear of harsh punishment in hell. However, in Theravada and Zen Buddhism, meditative inquiry is to bring about fearlessness. Growing up in these two traditions, I believe that fearlessness is one of the most important fruits of Buddhist meditation.

Fearlessness comes from the insights that are cultivated by means of deep meditation. First, if there is a hell, one cannot be stuck there forever due to the impermanence of life, and it is also a good place for us to learn good lessons on the path to liberation. Therefore, a hell is not frightening. Second, thanks to meditative inquiry we believe in the inner nirvana/hell rather than the metaphysical nirvana/hell. By observing my body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind, I can see many moments of nirvana and hell on a daily basis. Whenever I am disappointed, I know that I am
suffering and that I am being in the hell, and the practice of clear seeing helps me to escape from it and reach the shore of peace. In his book *No Death, No Fear*, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2003) argues that we do not have to be fearful of death because we have died and been born multiple times in this life. There is no so-called “birthday”—it is actually a continuation day! In short, fear is a form of misperception caused by delusion, and by practicing Buddhist meditation this misperception will be transformed.

When I stepped into the JCOS campus, I could feel the atmosphere of fearlessness among teachers and students. Unlike students in conventional schools, JCOS have nothing to be fearful of. With self-evaluation as the main form of assessment, they are not evaluated or ranked by their teachers; with no letter grades they do not have to compete with their peers for scores; and with no external discipline, they are not fearful of adults and try to please them. I could see a lot of joy, passion, warmth—but not fear—in the eyes of the students I met at JCOS. They are also not fearful about the future because they are taught to find the joy in what they are doing at JCOS—the courses they take, the projects they work on, the trips they take, the community activities they engage in, etc. They are not fearful of their mistakes either because they are taught to appreciate mistakes, from which they can learn and grow up. They are also not fearful of being different from others because they know their personal identities are accepted by peers and adults. In short, students in the tradition of self-
directed learning tend to be self-confident and fearless because they know that they are approved and empowered by adults at school.

**Non-judgment, Non-becoming, Non-control: Three Underlying Philosophical Principles of Buddhist Meditation and Self-Directed Learning**

As analyzed above, both Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy aim at individuality, liberation and fearlessness on the part of Buddhist meditators and students respectively. But philosophically speaking, what makes these three common characteristics possible? The answer is: non-judgment, non-becoming, and non-control. These are the common philosophical foundations of both Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy.

As defined earlier, Buddhist meditation is the practice of observing body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind non-judgmentally. Meditators see people and things based on their firsthand, immediate experience rather than on predetermined concepts and labels. By being non-judgmental, Buddhist meditators escape from prejudices and discrimination. In the context of education, the spirit of non-judgment brings about fearlessness and individuality on the part of the students. Without the judgment and ranking from teachers, they are free to follow their natural curiosity, explore their interests, and discover their true selves, paving the way for meaningful, emancipatory lives. In particular, without harsh judgment from adults, they are not fearful of the
mistakes they may make during their self-directed learning. Instead, they learn from mistakes.

Non-judgment is closely related to non-control. The desire to control is based on judgment. Buddhist meditation is not a controlled practice. Buddhist meditators do not try to apply a certain technique to attain a certain goal within a certain period of time. As repeated in the previous chapters, it is a matter of flipping one’s attitude towards oneself and others. Buddhist meditators do not work towards what will be, should be, or must be. Non-control is obvious in self-directed learning. The teachers do not impose their control over the students, and the students do not try to manipulate themselves in order to attain certain externally determined bounded goals like test scores or positive feedback from teachers. They are free to figure out what brings them joy and meaning, as reflected in the two general goals of JCOS. Again, without excessive control from adults, students develop their personal identity, have much more freedom, and are self-confident.

The last common philosophical principle is non-becoming. Non-becoming is obvious in Buddhist meditation. Meditators are taught to live the here and now to the fullest, without regret about the past or anxiety about the future. Of course, Buddhist meditators aim at liberation from suffering, but this liberation is only possible right here and now. Liberation is a matter of realization (ngô). This is the teaching of both Zen and Theravada traditions. Likewise, education, in the tradition of self-directed learning, is
not only about preparing children for adulthood but also about their educational experiences in the present. Didn't Dewey say that education is a process of living and not a preparation for living?\textsuperscript{96} At JCOS, for example, people care about education as a process of living by asking question about joy and meaningfulness. Do the students find joy in their learning? And do they find what I do meaningful? By focusing on what they find joyful and meaningful, JCOS seems to be liberated from sacrificing their present experiences for future gains.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy have a lot in common, but I have analyzed their three major commonalities in this chapter. They both emphasize individuality (in forms of individual capabilities/potentials, self-knowledge, individual spiritual paths, and personal responsibility); they both aim at freedom/liberation; and they both produce fearlessness. At a deeper level, these three common features are all based on the three philosophical pillars of non-judgment, non-becoming, and non-control.

Chapter 6 Personal Transformation, Educational Implications, and Future Inquiry Directions

Whatever you do in your life, Son, the door of my heart will always be open to you.
--Ajahn Brahm

Introduction

This thesis is the fruit of over ten years of Buddhist meditative practice and twenty years of educational experience as student and teacher. In particular, I have also written this thesis as a practice of Buddhist meditative inquiry. I observed my body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind during the writing/inquiry process, within the broader, multi-faceted context that I found myself in. As I mentioned earlier, my experiences, feelings, thoughts, reactions, questions, adjustments, etc. are all taken into account in this study. After all, the purpose of meditative inquiry is to bring about personal transformation--that is transformation in how I make sense of myself in relation to the world. In this concluding chapter, I am going to first narrate some of my examples of transformation, then discuss a couple of educational implications of my findings in this study, and finally present my future inquiry directions.

Personal Transformation

Meditative inquiry generates transformation, usually in forms of new realizations and questions. Obviously, transformation is abstract, invisible, ungraspable,
and sometimes unstable. However, if we see human life as a process of living, we accept the fact that transformation is also constantly in motion. Following are some of my experiences of transformation:

_Taking Initiatives_

My first realization is that doing what I am told to do is not the only, default option. The other option is taking an initiative and doing what I find justifiable. There is a huge discrepancy between these two attitudes. I have gradually switched from “being told what to do” to “taking initiatives.” I learned this from many people, especially from JCOS students. Seeing them start their own projects and run around to mobilize support from others really changed my approach to life. I have realized that I did not have to wait for and depend on someone else’s ideas, but I can come up with my own ideas and be brave enough to follow them. The world is full of opportunities and potentials, so I must go out and find them. The answers to all my questions are out there. Why not asking a stranger for directions? Why not writing philosophers for their wisdom? Why not asking a neighbor for some cooking oil? Mobilizing support is one of the most profound lessons I have learned during the inquiry. This switch from “doing what I am told to do” to “walking independent steps” sounds simple, but it is actually a huge transformative experience.
Listening to the Heart

To take initiatives and to walk independent steps, I have learned to listen to my heart patiently. The mind is no longer my only source of wisdom. The heart has much to say, but it is usually implicit and thus easily ignored. The mindfulness practice has helped me to hear its voice more clearly. I have realized my moments of joy, suffering, excitement, judgement, anger, dissatisfaction, disappointment, etc., which all help me to understand myself better—in relation to the people and the things I am exposed to. I learned this from my Buddhist heritage and from JCOS students. For example, a student told me that when he transferred to JCOS, he had no idea what he was interested in because he had always been told what to in his previous schools. After some time of struggling with his new freedom, he simply did what he felt like doing without any calculation, and this turned out to be his interest (drawing). He pursued this interest in two of his Walkabout projects and was going to graduate from JCOS in May 2017. He was considering a career in architecture. “Feel like doing without any calculation” no doubt reflects the voice of the heart.

I was very surprised to realize that I had not always been aware of my suffering. How is it possible? I had been so carried away that I lost the ability to discern what was happening in my heart, to know whether I was suffering or not. Ignoring the heart was not a remedy. The remedy was looking into it, seeing it clearly, and thus transforming it.
A New Career Trajectory

Listening to the heart has had an impact on my career trajectory too. I have questioned my career trajectory in the academy, which seems to be the default path of most graduate students. To my surprise, I felt so relieved when no longer considering the academy as my only, default option. I was relieved, even delighted, because I knew that I would suffer if I forced myself into this well-trodden path and away from my individual path. I used to suffer with this option, so there is no reason for why I have to endure it again in the future. Even if I end up stepping back into the academy, I will take another approach to teaching and learning that hopefully nurtures myself and my students better--less technically oriented and more relationally oriented. I had been burnt out as college instructor because I did not develop any meaningful relationships with my students. I had an "Aha moment" when a JCOS teacher told me that his teaching profession was meaningful thanks to the close relationships he had with his advising group. Like me, he used to have very painful experiences with his teaching profession before he realized what was really important to him. I am also hesitant to return to the academy because, ironically, I love writing, and I am afraid that academic conventions may kill my creative writing and my natural curiosity.
De-labeling

Also related to the heart is the issue of de-labeling. I began this thesis as a Buddhist meditator, but during the inquiry process I found that the label “Buddhist,” or any other label, was somewhat constraining and misleading. The JCOS has no such Buddhist label, but it is actually very Buddhist—at least from my perspective. This has reminded me to be very cautious with the labels I deal with every day. Labeling, which may go with stereotyping, prejudices, and judgement, is easily antithetical to an open heart. The label “Chinese,” for example, can trigger certain socially conditioned emotions in me, which may prevent me from making friends with someone affiliated with this label. I have gradually learned to look beyond labels, which is sometimes not easy because our society exists and operates on the basis of labels. However, at some rare moments when I managed to look beyond the labels, I had a lot of freedom! I began listening to Chinese music again after many years of interruption. Once labeling is removed, the voice of the heart is heard and inner freedom is possible. Isn't it amazing to be able to turn to anyone in the room and say hello to them? The process of de-labeling is still going on in me, and I suspect it will never come to an end. I find myself stuck in the labels on a daily basis—and seeing my status is the first step of liberation.
Another realization is concerned with the art of resting. One afternoon, after the entire day of observing classes and interviewing teachers at JCOS, I was sitting on the bench in front of the school watching the kids rushing out of the building. I recognized a first grader that I had met in the classroom earlier; he was roaming about, probably waiting for his mother to pick him up. He then joined a group of Pre-Walkabout kids, who chatted and played with him as if they knew each other very well. I noticed that they knew his name and he seemed very comfortable with them. The little boy was simply standing there, smiling, pointing here and there, and just chilling out. For many people, there was nothing very special about this scenario, but when seeing it, I suddenly realized that I had lost the ability to chill out—for many years. I wondered when I had last hung out with my friends without looking at the watch. I always had something important to do and not to chill out. Except for the first grade, I had probably pushed myself so hard during my school life. My time and other resources were carefully calculated and planned. In other words, I was efficient. Resting, I realized with astonishment, is not as easy as it is supposed to be. Once stuck in a certain agenda, people keep pushing themselves forward—nonstop. I was afraid to stop advancing, because this meant I would risk falling behind. This fear was a red thread running through my entire school life, from grade school to graduate school. The image of the little boy chilling out in front of the Open School reminded me of the fact that
education is not only a matter of achievement but also a matter of joy and inner space. Buddhist meditation brings people back to this natural state of rest. So is self-directed learning.

*Letting Go*

Resting is closely related with letting go, another transformative experience of mine. I realized that I needed to let go of many things in order to survive. To let go means to release control, to forget, and to forgive: to forget a person or an incident in the past, to forgive others and myself, to release my standards about what things and people should be like. I may take actions to change the world or to accumulate knowledge and wealth, but at the end of the day I always remind myself that I must be willing to let go of them completely and to return to the “zero zone” (zone of non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-controlling). Like maintaining an open heart, letting go is not easy, but it is not impossible. I could not have survived without knowing how to let go. Indeed, letting go is one of the most difficult but powerful lessons I have ever learned in my life. I learned this lesson from my personal life, but it was later confirmed and reinforced when I read about self-directed learning philosophy and met with JCOS students and teachers. The teachers released their control over the students, and the students release their self-manipulation/violence.
Fearlessness

The conventional education that I had--from grade school to graduate school--was based on fear--fear of falling behind, fear of failing an exam, fear of disappointing parents, fear of punishment, fear of losing face, fear of an uncertain future, and in particular fear of people with authority. One day, standing at the door of a JCOS classroom, I was hesitant to step into the classroom and say hello to the teacher because the teacher, for me, was always someone to be cautious about--to be fearful of. The students saw me, waved to me, and invited me to come in. Immersed in the democratic environment at JCOS, I learned to adjust how I made sense of myself in relation to others. Fear was gradually replaced with confidence, equality, warmth, and authenticity. To overcome fear, I reminded myself that the people I met were just my fellow human beings, not school principals, teachers, deans, professors, or any other social roles. I would look into their eyes and ask them a question. I felt empowered. I also realized that fear begins from myself and I change it by changing how I make sense of myself. If I refuse to look down on myself, nobody dares to look down on me. It is a matter of self-perception.

By rediscovering the joy of learning, as suggested by one of the main goals of JCOS, my fear for the future gradually disappeared. I realized that the fear of this kind was an illusion. If I refuse to manipulate myself and find joy in any possible way in my current circumstance, I will definitely have joy in the future, no matter where I end up.
living and working. I have always been taught this way in the Buddhist tradition, but only when being immersed into the self-directed learning atmosphere did I feel a clear transformation. I have learned to walk step by step and found joy in each one. Many people cannot wait to leave graduate school in order to begin a real job somewhere, but graduate school is the best time of my life now. In any circumstance, I know that I will choose to do what I like, not necessarily what others expect me to do. Once I know myself, I am liberated. Self-awareness is indeed very powerful. Nobody has complete freedom, but they definitely have the freedom to decide what to do or how to respond within their limited freedom.

Meaningfulness

The last transformative experience is in form of a question about meaning that emerged during my study of self-directed learning: Once I have more self-direction and freedom, what kind of life do I want to live? I do not have an answer to this question, and I am pretty sure that the answer is not going to come up soon in the future, either. However, this question is taken into account whenever I need to make an important decision. A sense of meaningfulness has become clearer and clearer over the time and transformed how I make sense of my life. This question is apparently not new in Zen literature and self-directed learning philosophy, but it has become a meaningful question that is shaping my life.
In short, the meditative inquiry that I engaged in brought me not only new knowledge about Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy but also much transformation in forms of realizations and questions. By switching from being told what to do to taking initiatives, listening to my heart, overcoming labeling, returning to the zero zone of resting and letting go, and facing the world fearlessly, I feel ready for my own path of building up a meaningful, emancipatory life. However, these realizations and questions are never going to be concluded. As lifelong koans, they will be meditated on again and again in my life.

Educational Implications of This Study

I have pointed out the commonalities between Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy via the case study of JCOS. As presented in Chapter 5, the commonalities are many and multifaceted, but they are all based on non-judgement, non-becoming, and non-control. In this sense, self-directed learning philosophy is completely incompatible with Western purposes of education, as presented by, for example, Labaree\(^97\), Kliebard\(^98\), or to some extent even Dewey. Those three writers tend to agree that the main purposes of US education have been to *judge* and sort students so

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that their schooling might be controlled efficiently to help them become productive members of society. It is evident that self-directed learning philosophy is closer Buddhist meditation than most of the Western traditions of scholarship.

The findings of this study about the encounter of self-directed learning philosophy with Buddhist meditation may have a powerful impact on the shape of the mindfulness education movement in the West. As discussed in Chapter 3, many attempts have been made to bring mindfulness practice into the classroom in the West, using mostly the psychological approaches of judgment, becoming, and control. These approaches are problematic because they deviate significantly from the spirit of Buddhist meditation.

In response to this problem, self-directed learning philosophy seems to be a viable option to consider when it comes to bringing the mindfulness practice into the classroom. As shown in this thesis, self-directed learning philosophy conveys the very core of Buddhist philosophy and thus is much closer to Buddhist philosophy than any technical attempts to teach mindfulness practice, even though this philosophy of education never uses the Buddhist language.

**Future Inquiry Directions**

In the future, I would like to continue my study in a couple directions. First, I would look deeper into the downsides of self-directed learning theory. Specifically, I
would interview drop-outs and their parents about their experiences at JCOS. People usually adore success stories and ignore failure ones, so the stories of those who drop out of JCOS may shed light on the hidden corners of the school and the self-directed learning philosophy. This study will help improve this philosophy in theory and in practice.

Another direction is to study the relationship between JCOS and the local school district. In an interview, a former principal of JCOS said that as a mediator between the school district and the school he tried to interpret the messages from the school district to the students and the faculty and vice versa in the best way. He considered himself a messenger. I will look into this role of the school principal as a mediator and messenger--someone who creates a bridge between two very different institutions. What does he do every day in this role? How does he communicate with both sides, with parents, and with the general public? How does he make compromises to ensure both its unique identity and its survival within a larger community?

The third direction is to study how the students transition from externally directed education to self-directed education. Many students transfer to JCOS mid-way and have to adapt to a totally different culture at this school. The interviews seem to indicate that there is a transitional period and not all students can transition successfully to the new mode of self-directed learning. I will study the stories of those
who transition successfully and those who fail to do so and have to drop out or suffer at the school.

Theoretically, I would like to explore the positionality of those who adopt a less judgmental, becoming, and controlling approach in dealing with the judgmental, becoming, and controlling world. Are they put in a disadvantaged position? How do they compromise? How do they respond to the attempts at control that others want to impose on them? As an educator with the influence of Buddhist meditation and self-directed learning philosophy, how do I deal with the authoritarian approach that others use in their personal and professional lives? Throughout my future research, I hope to sustain the meditative inquiry practices that I developed during the writing of this dissertation so that the process as well as the product may be educational and life affirming.
Rick Posner’s Letter to the Committee

March 31, 2107

To Cuong’s committee:

I met Cuong Huy Nguyen for the first time late last year in Colorado when he was visiting Jefferson County Open School. Immediately, I was impressed with his sensitivity and passion for progressive, student-centered education. I knew he was on a parallel journey – one of personal and professional growth, each area merging and changing, much like a student growing up in an open, experiential learning environment. His journey is an exciting one, and it is just beginning. I know how he feels because I too went through some of the same stages with my own development as part of an open school program. I believe in Cuong, and I know that his work is important. I am sure that you have felt the passion and power of his work as well.

It has been my pleasure to be a part of Mr. Nguyen’s work. I am honored to have had some influence on his journey. I know that he will become an integral part of the movement to personalize education systems by helping to develop authentic communities of learners. Finally, I celebrate his accomplishments with my best wishes for his future in the most important of all endeavors – to make children feel valued and needed.

All the best,

Rick Posner PhD
303-929-5064
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