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Exploring *Shunyata* (Emptiness) and the Cultivation of Mindfulness Practices: Educators Finding Their Zero-Point Balance

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Drawing from the conceptual framework of *shunyata* (emptiness), this article elucidates mindfulness practices and detachment from identity labels, offering a turn toward educators' and students' well-being. With a call for educators to consider a personal mindfulness practice prior to implementing techniques with children, the author provides an example of a breathing sequence and suggestions about when and how to implement these practices. As postmodern classrooms are often filled with uncertainty, such mindfulness practices can promote educators' well-being through the reduction of reactivity, the acceptance of self and others, and the enhancement of creativity. As educators enhance their own well-being, they will, in turn, subtly affect students and the education environment.



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What lies behind us and what lies before us
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

This article explores *shunyata* (emptiness) as a conceptual framework for a pedagogy of “becoming zero.” Through an exploration of *shunyata* and a discussion of detachment from identity labels, I provide a guide for two mindfulness practices: mindful breathing and observing the constant computations of the mind. What can educators learn from mindfulness concepts and practices? What are the pedagogical possibilities when educators implement such practices as mindful breathing and observing the mind?

This article attempts to stimulate educators’ curiosity about mindfulness concepts and practices. By exploring mindfulness practices, educators allow connections with self and community (Miller, 2006; Nhat Hanh, 1987; Tolle, 2003; Watts, 1966). These are practices that begin with the educator prior to implementing mindfulness techniques in the classroom: “A teacher who explores his or her own contemplative mind is better able to help his or her student to do the same” (Hart, 2004, p. 35). Beneficial for educators in postmodern classrooms filled with uncertainty, mindfulness serves to promote educators’ well-being through the reduction of reactivity, the acceptance of self and other, and the enhancement of creativity. As educators find a “zero-point balance” with mindfulness practices, they enhance their well-being, which, in turn, subtly affects students and the educational environment.

To Begin in Wonder: Who Am I?

Once you label me, you negate me.
—Søren Kierkegaard

Learning Our Labels: What Is at Stake?

Who am I really? When I ponder this question or ask my young students to answer it for themselves, we often find ourselves in a discussion of gender and roles. From a young age, we curate ourselves. We learn who we are based on the stories we are told and begin to tell.

The following autobiographical sketch may be familiar. As a young human being, I learned that I was a girl, a daughter, a little sister. I took on the role of a straight-A (except for math) student. After completing my bachelor of education degree, I became an English as a second language (ESL) teacher. After another decade, I was an avid

traveler and a curriculum developer. While such identity markers often are necessary to function in the world, I find that I suffer when I am overly invested in my roles and labels. The reification of the self makes concrete that which is impermanent. Identity markers may comfort us to an extent and for a certain time, yet may not protect us from a lingering sensation of unfulfillment. Often, this sensation is misunderstood, avoided, or feared. It may be helpful to ease the discomfort by slowly opening up to impermanence and uncertainty.

When I allow my labels to come and go like clouds in the sky, I feel more freedom to morph as I develop, switch gears, or regress. I *was* an ESL teacher. Now, I *am* a scholar and a yoga teacher. While I enjoy “being” or “living up to” my current labels, the key to existential freedom is releasing the attachment to labeling (Garfield, 1995; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Loy, 2008; Miller, 2006; Tolle, 1999; Watts, 1966). Detaching from the conception of one’s self may sound a little daunting or unappealing, yet it offers a refreshing (non) space of possibility—as is apparent in the concept of *shunyata*.

Describing Shunyata

I am nothing / I am everything.
—David R. Loy

Loy (2008) provides insight regarding the word *shunyata*:

The original Buddhist term, usually translated as emptiness, actually has this double-sided meaning. It derives from the root *shu*, which means “swollen” in both senses: not only the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So a more accurate translation of *shunyata* would be: emptiness / fullness. (p. 22)

Shunyata is both swollen full as well as empty like the number, or non-number, zero. It is the (non) space between dualistic notions such as good/bad, form/not form, separate/together. If the pendulum of duality stops swinging back and forth, what remains is a point of stillness—a middle way or “zero-ness.” It is both spaces, neither space, or inclusive of all spaces.

For many Westerners, the idea of emptiness or being zero is unnerving (Epstein, 1998; Loy, 2008). *Shunyata* is not a nihilistic void nor does it mean non-existence; rather, it is a space of possibility and potentiality: “We can think of emptiness like the clear, blue sky—a transparent space that is wide

open. In that way, our empty natures mean that there is no limit to what we can become” (Newland, 2008, p. 15). Everything becomes possible within *shunyata*, but how does one fully realize this elusive (non) space? An educator may begin to find some openness and relief in the busy classroom by cultivating mindfulness practices, such as paying attention to one’s thoughts in the moment and breathing mindfully.

Cultivating Mindful Practices

Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky.
Conscious breathing is my anchor.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Breathing Mindfully

Mindful breathing nurtures the experience of *shunyata*. Experiencing the in-breath as fullness and the out-breath as emptiness, one is in dynamic equilibrium of a zero-point balance. Apart from finding zero-ness, effects of mindfully breathing include relaxation, stress reduction, and enhanced creativity (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Miller, 1994; Tolle, 1999). In Sanskrit, the breath is called *prana* (also *prāṇa*), which translates as *life force* or *vital principle*. In Kundalini yoga, the breath is considered to be the teacher, or guru, within: *pavan guru* (Yogi Bhajan, 2007). Breath is the undeniable force that sustains life and teaches the ultimate lesson in sustaining balance with each balancing inhale and exhale.

How and Why

Educators might try the following as a primer to focus on the breath, setting a timer for three minutes upon waking up, before the work day begins, or before bed. Increase the time daily if desired and commit to a conscious breathing practice for 40 days. To begin:

Find a comfortable position with your spine lengthened.
Bring your awareness to your breath.
Allow each inhale to happen naturally.
Allow each exhale to happen naturally.
Observe the breath.
Follow the breath as it moves through the body.
Observe the movements of the belly and chest on each inhale.
Observe the movements of the belly and chest on each exhale.
Sense the temperature changes in the nostrils.
Keep following the breath.
The mind may wander—that is the mind’s job.

Smile when you notice the mind wander. It is a moment of awareness.

Gently bring your awareness back to the natural breath.

Allow thoughts, feelings, and sensations to pass like clouds in the sky.

Each time the mind wanders, bring your awareness back to your breath.

Notice the slight pause at the top of each inhale.

Notice the slight pause at the bottom of each exhale.

Continue to observe and attend to your breath for some minutes.

Paying conscious attention to the breath may reveal a new (non) space, a mysterious realm within. Einstein (1933) posits: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science” (p. 8). I boldly add that the mysterious is the underlying principle in education as well. Every day, educators are faced with the uncertainty and mystery of “what will happen today.” Viewing the self, the classroom, and the breath as mysteries to be explored opens up possibilities.

As a connection to nature, our breath is mysterious. Nature is breathing you. You do not have to remember to breathe, but when you do consciously breathe, you return your awareness to nature:

You reconnect with nature in the most intimate and powerful way by becoming aware of your breathing and learning to hold your attention there. This is a healing and deeply empowering thing to do. It brings about a shift in consciousness from the conceptual world of thought to the inner realm of unconditioned consciousness. (Tolle, 2003, p. 83)

Tapping into the inner environment of unconditioned consciousness allows educators to approach their external environments and students with a fresh perspective: “We seem to become more aware of the beauty in nature and the joy of children at play, and yes, more attuned to the suffering of others. Attention connects us more deeply with everything that is happening around us” (Miller, 1994, p. 52). Once aware of others’ suffering, we may begin to interact with students through a new lens and responses. As Gunnlaugson (2011) posits, mindfulness practice leads us to “cultivate presence as a basis for apprehending, seeing, and sensing into emergent (i.e., not-yet-known) possibilities and knowledge with our students” (p. 9). We are

Busy-ness and suffering are like warning bells to remind us to slow down, be aware of nature within, and come into balance.

cultivating new ways of being and fostering an acceptance of “what is” in the moment.

Attention to the Moment

Present moment.
Wonderful moment.
—Thich Nhat Hanh

Phrases reminding one to be in the present moment are familiar: “Be in the now”; “Focus on the present moment”; “Come back to class, Johnny. Where did you go—outer space?” How does an educator begin the process of bringing her own awareness to the present moment? When one thinks of the past or future, one abandons the present. The attention to mental noise in the construction of the past or future, the delusion of time, causes suffering: “Incessant mental noise prevents you from finding that realm of inner stillness. . . . It also creates a false mind-made self that casts a shadow of fear and suffering” (Tolle, 1999, p. 15). How do I unburden myself from the delusion of time?

Tolle (1999) states, “The beginning of freedom is the realization that you are not the possessing entity—the thinker. Knowing this enables you to observe the entity. The moment you start *watching the thinker*, a higher level of consciousness becomes activated” (p. 17). An educator may observe her thoughts in a moment of unpredictability: “Oh no, Johnny threw his juice on the floor again. Ah, I feel a buzzing in my head and a burning in my chest. I feel very agitated.” This slower observation of the computations of the mind and manifestations of feeling in the body within the moment of the juice tantrum allows space for a more thoughtful response. With increased practice of “watching the thinker,” one creates space or gaps between the thoughts and there is less compulsion for reactivity:

At first, the gaps will be short, a few seconds perhaps, but gradually they will become longer. When these gaps occur, you feel a certain stillness and peace inside you. . . . With practice, the sense of stillness and peace will deepen. In fact, there is no end to its depth. (Tolle, 1999, p. 19)

As we observe the mind chatter, we create distance between self and the thinker within and cognitive gaps blossom. Within this resulting (non) space of “no-mind,” there is the possibility of “conceptual flexibility and multiplicity” (Hart, 2004, p. 34), which allows an educator to be more responsive in moments of uncertainty and chaos in the classroom.

New (Non) Spaces for Creativity and Acceptance

Mindfulness practices such as observing thought processes or mindful breathing, facilitate the creative process. Over time and with practice, one reaches a relaxed state in which one is more open to new insights (Miller, 1994). Tolle (1999) asserts, “All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind” (p. 24). Children’s book author and illustrator Maurice Sendak (1986) recalls his experience creating drawings, explaining, “[They] came easy. They were painted in rare moments of relaxation” (p. 1). Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, started each day with a meditative practice. “I spend a few minutes in meditation and prayer each morning. I find that this really helps me to start the day with a good frame of reference” (Henson, 2005, p. 40). Whether it is meditation, prayer, or mindful breathing, such deliberate practices enhance our being and doing. As educators, we are artists in that we create lessons and a classroom environment on a daily basis. Turning away from overthinking and toward mindfulness practices creates opportunity for what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has called the experience of *flow*, or being completely in synchronicity with what is happening in the moment. Through mindfulness practices, educators may tap into “flow” experiences as they accept what is happening in the classroom at any given moment with ease.

Too Busy for Mindfulness Practices

When does an educator have time to breathe mindfully? Examples of opportunities to take a few mindful breaths include: waiting at a stoplight, preparing a cup of tea, or walking down the hallway. These can be times for active, momentary meditations on the breath that fit into an educator’s busy routine. In order to counter the effects of teaching in fast-paced educational environments, mindfulness is essential to maintain well-being and balance. Miller (1994) explains the potentially profound benefit of mindfulness practice: “One of the reasons [a practice] is so nourishing is that we are not performing. We simply are. We begin to accept ourselves at a

deeper level” (p. 55). A few mindful breaths per day nourish our inner environment.

Conclusion and a Beginning

The observed effects of practicing mindfulness include an increase in calmness, creativity, and acceptance in the personal realm, pedagogical spaces, and beyond. Becoming inquisitive about *shunyata* and detachment from labels places the educator in the role of learner, with a beginner’s mind where newness is possible. In a (non) space of *shunyata*, one can experience feeling both formlessness *and* form, independence *and* interconnectedness—revealing a paradoxical truth: “Separation and connectedness exist simultaneously and make each other possible” (Epstein, 1998, p. 79). Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) further explains the connection of self-practice to the larger community:

The kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you, you bring society with you. You bring all of us with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself, you do it for the whole society. You seek solutions to your problems not only for yourself, but for all of us. (p. 47)

Busy-ness and suffering are like warning bells to remind us to slow down, be aware of nature within, and come into balance. Hart (2004) notes that subtle shifts over time allow educators as a learners and seekers to come to their own understanding of the value and impact of such mindfulness practices:

The more subtle benefits rooted in stillness of mind and expanded awareness are real and essential but more difficult to quantify. In the end, however, it is these subtle shifts that may have the most potential for transforming the learner and the quality of learning. (p. 34)

Sustaining mindfulness practices has the potential for transforming educators, learners, and classrooms. Mindfulness practices therefore may be thought of as “inner technology” (Hart, 2008, p. 239). This technology may be a salve for an aching inner environment and ultimately create new responses to stressors in education environments. Educators who have accessed their “inner technology” to cultivate their zero-point balance have great potential to enhance their personal well-being as well as their education environment and community. This is an educator’s invitation, if not

a call of urgency, to attend to the self by cultivating a personal mindfulness practice.

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