Reclaiming our moral agency through healing: a call to moral, social, environmental activists

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Reclaiming our moral agency through healing: a call to moral, social, environmental activists

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This paper makes the case that environmental education needs to be taken up as a moral education to the extent that we see the connection between harm and destruction in the environment and harm and destruction within human individuals and their relationship, and proceeds to show this connection by introducing the key notion of human alienation and its psychological factors of wounding, dissociation or split, self and other oppression and exploitation, all of which result in compromised moral agency. To this end, the paper further makes the case that we need to replace the culture of alienation with a culture of healing and reclamation of fundamental humanity manifest as compassion and wisdom, and presents an ideal of moral agency that would emerge when all parts and dimensions of one's being——body–mind–heart–energetics——are aligned, attuned and integrated, having healed from the body–mind split, mind–heart split, body–spirit split and mind–matter split. Concepts and imagery borrowed from Asian philosophies, such as Buddhism and Daoism, are offered as illustrative resources for the project of reclaiming uncompromised moral agency and its manifestation through compassion and wisdom. These concepts include *hungry ghosts, bodhicitta, sunyata* and *wu-wei*.

Environment is *us*

Fundamentally, environmental problems are *us*——the manner of our presence in the world. By saying 'us' I mean to implicate all of us humans, including myself. By virtue of participating in the industrialised and militarised world order that pollutes and destroys the air, water, land and human communities, each and every one of us is complicit in various ways and degrees in creating natural and human environmental problems. To the degree to which we are not awakened to the reality of interdependency and to our unwitting participation in what is happening to the world, and to the degree to which we are not courageous enough to take responsibility for our manner of being in the world, to that degree we are compromised moral agents.

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Parker Palmer has gifted us with the famous line, 'We teach who we are' (1998, p. 1), and Cohen gave it an incisive twist: 'We teach who we are, and that's the problem' (2009, p. 27). We can replace 'teach' with many other action words and the essential meaning of the statement is the same. Our actions in the world emanate from *who we are*: the way we think, perceive, sense and feel. The landscape outside reflects our inner landscape, and environmental problems reflect the disorder of the human mind (Schumacher, 1999; Orr, 1994). If the world that resulted from our intense interaction over time is riddled with problems, then the first order of action we need to take is re-searching ourselves and changing who (or how) we are. Yet it seems that is not how most us are educated to think. We look at the problem-ridden world (that we have created), and the first and often only thing we think of is doing something to the environment to fix it without recognising how we created and contributed to the problem by thinking, perceiving and acting in certain ways. The subtext to this *modus operandi* seems to be that we fix and change the world so that we do not have to change ourselves and can go on being and acting the way we have been. I propose that this very way of externalising problems, based on thinking dualistically in terms of the inner–outer separation, is the fundamental problem that we the environmental educators are called to address.

The understanding that fundamentally environmental problems are not the problems *of* the environment (although *in* the environment) but of current humanity is becoming increasingly an accepted position among many contemporary environmental educators and activists. My observation is that this understanding has yet to take root in the minds of the general public. I have a couple of anecdotal accounts to share. In the mid-nineties, I had my graduate class read Orr's book, *Earth in mind* (1994). In the Introduction Orr asserts: 'The disordering of ecological systems and of the great biogeochemical cycles of the earth reflects a prior disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities, and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind' (p. 3). My students, many of whom were dedicated environmental educators in their schools, thought that Orr was off the mark in locating the environmental problems in humans when, clearly, the environment needed clean-up, repair and conservation. Today, 15 years later, most of the graduate students I teach in the same course are convinced that we need to work on ourselves, and change our consciousness: our mind–body–heart–spirit. They are seeing this work of changing our consciousness as seamlessly integrated with sustainable environmental actions. They are eager to be introduced to ways of thinking and living that will shift their consciousness from the problematic industrial–military–consumeristic mindset to one that is ecological, holistic, compassionate and aligned with the earth. Ecopsychologist Metzner's message that '[w]hat individuals and groups can do … is to change their relationship to Earth and the ecosystem in which they live——and this would contribute to the healing of Earth as a whole' (1999, p. 35) is embraced wholeheartedly by my students. I am heartened by this shift in philosophical and political orientation that I am witnessing in my graduate student population. I am also aware that they struggle to enact

this shift in thinking in their daily professional practice in institutions and in their personal lives. I validate their struggle: it is my struggle too.

In another context of interaction, however, I recently came away astonished and disheartened from listening to a panel discussion on a green economy. The expert panel gathered some of the most successful green entrepreneurs local to Vancouver where I live. These were CEOs, directors, presidents and inventors in companies that market and manage products that create and support a green economy. The panel quoted the Globe Foundation Report on British Columbia's Green Economy:

> GDP from [British Columbia's] green sectors could grow from $15.3 billion in 2009 to between $20.1 billion and $27.4 billion in 2020. … With an average annual green labour force growth rate of 2.6 percent, direct and indirect [full-time equivalent] jobs in BC's green economy would grow 1666,000 in 2008 to 225,000 by 2020. (Globe Foundation, 2010, p. 15)

I was impressed and pleased. At the same time, as I listened to the panel, I was struck by the uniformity of modernist worldview and mindset that prevailed. The modernist worldview and mindset is one that categorically separates self the subject from Nature the object and sees the former's role to be exercising mastery and domination over the latter (Smart, 1993). Amongst the panellists, there was not one mention of changing our mindset, consciousness, paradigm, orientation, worldview, values and ways of being! This was astonishing to me. The closest the panel came to mentioning human subjectivity was a remark by one panellist who declared that he was pessimistic about human nature but optimistic about technology. I guessed that he was entertaining the classic notion of 'human nature' as being fixed (and probably, 'dark', as in Hobbes), and that this person did not think we could do anything about human nature to effect environmental changes. Coming from this viewpoint, he understandably decided to put all his energy and effort into technological innovations to bring about desired environmental changes. He was not alone in this way of thinking: for all the panellists, changing and improving the world was a matter of using greener technology and doing greener resource management.

I bow to the effort and achievement of the panel: citizens in the province and beyond have all benefitted tremendously from their generous and smart actions. However, the panel left me deeply troubled and thoughtful. It is not what they were able to achieve that troubled me. It was what was *not* addressed: greening our consciousness and changing the destructive inner landscape. Joanna Macy (2000) puts it this way: 'Action is not something you do. It's something you are' (p. 253). Greening of our inner landscape was not mentioned because, I surmise, to the panellists it was outside their vision or control. People cannot change what they do not notice or have little control over. Could it be that people are not recognising that their inner landscape has been shaped and conditioned to exclude thinking of greening consciousness? Could it be that for these panellists and many others in our society, the notion of being able to exert the same degree of control over one's inner landscape as over one's physical environment is a foreign notion?

And that this inability to work with the inner landscape——the shape of one's subjectivity——is precisely a major part of environmental problems? I wish to pursue this line of thinking in the present paper.

I draw upon Asian philosophies, especially Buddhism and Daoism, as well as existential psychotherapy to help me see and articulate the environmental problem as a moral, cultural and spiritual problem. Students of Buddhism may name the present rapacious and insatiable humanity that keeps devouring the world resources and each other as 'hungry ghosts'; in psychotherapy we call it alienated subjectivity. I wish to examine in depth this issue of 'human nature' and human presence that has become a singularly destructive force, and that, according to many, cannot be changed. I wish to challenge the underlying assumptions about human nature by uncovering its wounded origin and finding ways to heal it. To me this healing is the primary task today of environmental education as moral education, and moral education as cultural and spiritual education. I shall make the meaning of 'moral', 'cultural' and 'spiritual' more explicit in the pages to come.

Hungry ghosts

One of the life-changing books I read not long after I immigrated to Canada in the 1970s was *The limits to growth* (Meadows, 1972). The author and associated researchers behind this project, backed up by extant research and the best simulation modelling available in those days, indicated that, if the existing trend of human systems (e.g. population increase, industrialisation and concomitant production/consumption growth, pollution, food production and resource depletion) continued, it would overtake the earth's carrying capacity, and by the twenty-first century, the world would face serious survival challenges both for humans and the rest of the planet. Did we heed the warning, then? No. The Wheel of Progress kept turning, and we kept marching on, like sleepwalkers.

The limits of growth faced some severe criticisms and dismissal from both the public and the scientific community when it first came out. The work was attacked and dismissed as '"an empty and misleading work ... and smelling of chicanery"' and further ridiculed with a remark: '"an extrapolation of the trends of the 1880s would show today's cities buried under horse manure"' (Passell et al., as quoted in Atkisson, 1999, p. 14). The methodology, database and variables used for modelling the consequences of an exponentially growing world population and finite resources, as well as the motives behind the authors, were all criticised. Henry C. Wallich, Yale economist, accused the work as a publicity stunt, and assured the public that 'technology could solve all the problems [the authors] were concerned about, but only if growth continued apace' (The limits to growth, n.d., para. # 11). Now it appears that its original 'predictions' are being largely validated (Turner, 2008). Today, the same warning about limits to growth in human systems is heard, but this time the warning signals an imminent disaster like an ambulance or fire truck siren. Are we taking immediate action to avoid disaster? No, not really. Many, including Lovelock (2009), believe that it is too late now to

turn our civilisation around and avoid disaster. The collapse is imminent. I will not join the technical debate regarding the whether and when of the collapse. My father, a Traditional Oriental Medicine doctor, never refused to see patients as long as they were still alive and breathing, and my father did his best to help the ill and distressed, regardless of the future outcome. Our species' death may be imminent, but we are not dead yet. Speaking as a physician's daughter, I say, it is never too late to extend care and healing to suffering patients.

I have been for a long time trying to make sense of why people (including myself) do not easily change their destructive ways of being, even in the face of impending danger and harm. Addiction is a classic example. An insight for my inquiry into humanity's resistance to change initially came from my Buddhist studies, and now I also have the chance to see how this insight is corroborated by psychotherapy. Buddhism posits the core state of humanity to be unconditioned goodness. (As we shall see later, this understanding is not speculative and theoretical; it is experiential.) This is the primal or *aboriginal* state of humanity, and it is known in Buddhism as *bodhicitta*, enlightened consciousness that is full of compassion and wisdom. *Bodhicitta* exists as a potential capacity for all humans (and according to Buddhism, for all sentient beings). In this sense, it is our birthright. However, potential is not actual. Capacity remains only as potential unless it is given the opportunity to be developed and realised.

Opportunities to fully develop and manifest *bodhicitta* are, however, not easily and amply available in a culture entrenched in anxiety, insecurity and fear associated with individualistic survival stress and competition. Soon after birth (or even prenatal), many babies receive distorted or ruptured forms of attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Neufeld & Maté, 2005; Winnicott, 1964; Winnicott, Winnicott, Shepherd, & Davis, 1984), which compromises the manifestation of *bodhicitta*. Psychological and psychotherapeutic literature is replete with research details about infant bonding rupture and insecure attachment in young children, as well as parenting, socialisation, and education practices that build, even if unwittingly, not open-heartedness, compassion and collaboration but jealousy, greed, enmity and self- and other destructive behaviour (Miller, 1987/2005, 2009; Schellenbaum, 1988/1990; Siegel & Solomon, 2003).

To briefly explain psychodynamically this *bodhicitta* manifestation: human individuals, especially during their early bonding period of growth, thrive when they have unconditionally loving and wisely caring others who are fully present to them, and who attentively listen for their needs, validate their experience, and interact with them in ways that are conducive to their developing into secure and confident persons, ready to encounter and embrace the world with warmth, courage, curiosity and confidence. That is the way of the open-mind and open-heart. However, to the extent this process is disrupted and thwarted, and we become psychologically wounded and scarred beings, to that extent our aboriginal nature as *bodhicitta* does not manifest itself fully or readily. The result of such thwarting is compromised or even arrested growth as ontologically secure, confident and compassionate human beings. In fact, we insidiously develop distorted and defensive

personality structures and patterns that are seamlessly interlocked with emotional and physical patterns that we ignorantly think of as our authentic identity (Cohen, 2009).

The entire defence configuration actually serves the purpose of protecting what Schneider (2004) describes as the '*fluid center*'. He explains:

> The fluid center is any sphere of human consciousness which has as its concern the widest possible relationship to existence; or to put it another way, it is structured inclusiveness——the richest possible range of experience within the most suitable parameters of support. (p. 10)

Generosity, caring, warm-heartedness, receptivity and empathy and compassion do not flow easily and amply out of human beings when they are unconsciously constructed to protect their fluid centre. This seems to be more or less the case for everyone. As the Buddhist practitioner and psychotherapist David Brazier (1997/2001) observes: 'We all carry hurt within us. It is not possible to have gone through life without getting buffeted' (p. 44).

Fragile and vulnerable infants and children who have no capacity to defend themselves against repeated patterns of intrusion, insult and neglect——albeit by mostly very well-meaning parents and authority figures——will manifest the psychological defence structures in order to survive and to get at least some morsels of the love that they need for survival (Schellenbaum, 1990). In the process, their moral agency is more or less compromised. How could they manifest what they do not have? These deprived and hurt beings, in turn, are in search of what they did not receive, are missing and not getting: love, compassion, caring, confidence and integrity as human beings, and an inward measure of peace and equanimity.

In Buddhist literature, there is the figure of a hungry ghost, a human figure with impossibly thin, long neck and a needle-like small aperture as mouth and bloated belly. This is how Epstein (1995), contemporary psychiatrist and Buddhist teacher, depicts hungry ghosts:

> Phantom-like creatures with withered limbs, grossly bloated bellies, and long thin necks, the Hungry Ghosts in many ways represent a fusion of rage and desire. Tormented by unfulfilled cravings and insatiably demanding of impossible satisfactions, the Hungry Ghosts are searching for gratification for old unfulfilled needs whose time has passed. They are beings who have uncovered a terrible emptiness within themselves, who cannot see the impossibility of correcting something that has already happened. (p. 28)

Hungry ghosts devour everything in sight, and want more and more, but nothing nourishes them, or nothing they eat has the right nourishment, and they are left hungrier than ever. Please look around; and look deeply within. Are we——most of us——not hungry ghosts in this desire-saturated culture of production and consumption (Kaza, 2005)? Has our culture not normalised this hungry-ghost state of being?

In addition to the Buddhist imagery of the hungry ghost, I also find the existentialist psychotherapeutic language of *alienated subjectivity* to be very pertinent and useful in describing and illuminating the above-mentioned process of privation,

wounding and compromised human maturity. I turn to Laing (1967), foremost existential psychotherapist of the twentieth century and outspoken communicator, for his articulation of alienation:

> What we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience … It is radically estranged from the structure of being … The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. (pp. 23–24)

I extrapolate three points from the above: (1) that alienation comes about through negating and invalidating an individual's experience, hence subjectivity, that results in his/her estrangement from the 'structure of being'; (2) that a person suffering from alienation has compromised moral agency and therefore limited capacity for responsibility; and (3) that alienation is normalised in our culture and society. In the following pages, I shall attempt to further explore and elaborate these three points.

I turn to Laing (1967) again for his insight into the aetiology of alienated human subjectivity that has been normalised in our modern civilisation, and the destructive consequences of alienation. Laing states: 'Much of human behaviour can be seen as unilateral or bilateral attempts to eliminate experience. A person may treat another as though he was not a person, and he may act himself as though he was not a person' (1967, p. 22). How do we eliminate experience? By not respectfully and sensitively receiving and acknowledging another's expression of experience, thereby their presence. This can take many forms, including: denying, ignoring, dismissing, invalidating, trivialising and/or ridiculing it. Of course, this type of reactivity is not just reserved for others. Having been treated in invalidating ways ourselves, we may well have incorporated these ways unconsciously into our sense of identity, and this has the consequence of subjecting ourselves and our own thoughts and feelings to the same forms of invalidation. Because we are fundamentally intersubjective beings, how we are received, understood and treated by others matters crucially to our sense of self and our reality. When a growing and evolving person is not heard, seen, or met with by another in a fully attentive and caring way, that person's subjectivity, which I have been referring to as 'inner landscape', is likely to become eroded and distorted, her sense of self-worth becomes diminished and even wounded, and her confidence and ontological security is compromised. 'There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive, or, by a glance, a gesture, or a remark, shrivelling up the reality in which one is lodged' (Goffman, as cited in Laing, 1967, p. 28). Repeated patterns of abuse to and/or neglect of subjectivity will lead to wounding and crippling of the young person's psyche (Miller, 1987/2005; Schellenbaum, 1988/1990).

As illustrations I present two vignettes here. Suppose a little boy cries, feeling upset and sad at losing his pet goldfish, and his mother or father says, 'Boys don't cry! Don't be a sissy. Now, just go and flush that ugly sight down the toilet!'. The boy learns then that in order for him not to be an embarrassment to his parents,

and to continue to win their approval, esteem, love and acceptance, he would need to suppress his emotions, especially tender sorrowful emotions, and pretend that he is emotionally tough. This 'tough' lesson may continue in his school and in his neighbourhood. Being a 'good boy' (he 'instinctively' knows that he needs to be a 'good boy' to win his parents' and teachers' support and care), he learns the lesson well, he may even demonstrate his competence in toughness by being disrespectful and insensitive, and even cruel, to other vulnerable people, other sentient beings and objects. By this process, gradually he may become disconnected from those emotions that express tenderness towards the marginalised and vulnerable, and compassion for the hurt and suffering.

Similarly, suppose a mother turns to her son and says, 'Don't hang out with children who get low grades. They are losers. Only smart people succeed these days. The world is getting really competitive.' This son, out of fear of disapproval and losing parental love and out of survival anxiety, may learn to separate mind/intellect from heart/emotion, and prioritise the former over the latter, thus devaluing the latter. This person may become a successful surgeon, engineer, lawyer, business leader, or accountant, but his capacity for compassion is limited, and he may not think much about suffering others, including non-human others who, in their understanding, lack intelligence or rationality.

The above vignettes are not intended to somehow prove that everyone who has been unkindly and insensitively treated as children will become insensitive, and lack empathy and compassion. Rather, I offer these vignettes as a lens through which to view the present world and see the underlying psychological reality——the inner landscape of alienated human beings. At the present moment, the planet abounds with human beings who have learned to see non-human sentient beings merely or mostly as objects, as resources that satisfy human desires but not as beings that live for themselves, that are subjects unto themselves, and worthy of our fundamental respect (Bai, 2001; Bai & Scutt, 2009). Likewise, the planet also abounds with human beings who see other humans as failures, distortions and perversions, and therefore not worthy and deserving of one's respect and care. Many also have learned to see their own self in the same dark light. Or, even as exploitable resources that exist to provide goods and services to privileged others. All these are instances of alienated subjectivity. As we saw, alienated subjectivity is a product of ruptured intersubjectivity, meaning that *communion* did not take place between experiencing subjects.

Arguably, alienation is normalised in the world today. Yet, sooner or later, many of us come to our senses enough to feel the pain and horror of alienation deep within ourselves. For example:

> When our personal worlds are rediscovered and allowed to reconstitute themselves, we first discover a shambles. Bodies half-dead; genitals dissociated from heart; heart severed from head; heads dissociated from genitals. Without inner unity, with just enough sense of continuity to clutch at identity——the current idolatry. Torn, body, mind and spirit, by inner contradictions, pulled in different directions, Man cut off from his own

mind, cut off equally from his own body——a half-crazed creature in a mad world. (Laing, 1967, pp. 46–47)

These are outspoken and dramatic words, and many of us may not readily resonate with them. Bodies half-dead? We would become defensive and cry out, 'Surely, this is not me!'. Let us meditate upon what Laing is getting at: there is an impeccable psycho-logic to this. In the way of living beings, what is not properly and adequately attended to, and cared for, dies. Splitting the whole human being into mind and body, thereby violating the integrity of the person, and then disrespecting the body (human bodies, animal or plant bodies) by teaching us that body is lesser than mind, is not as important, is made of 'meat', is just a piece of machinery, or even 'sinful' and so on, would result in neglected, misunderstood, abused, 'half-dead' bodies.

Genitals dissociated from heart? Another splitting similar to the mind–body split is the body–emotion split. When this split happens, for example, we may have sex without love, which may result in much suffering. Another framing well known to us in the context of schooling is the emotion–intellect split. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of emotion to learning today, education is still primarily focused on the development of intellect (Goleman, 1995). Emotions, especially dark or negative ones (e.g. anger, hostility, loneliness, anxiety, sadness), are usually seen as irrelevance and distraction, if not hindrance, to the development of intellect, and therefore are kept out of school as much as possible. To this end, we tend not to encourage personal openness to and expression of emotions, and do not include working with personal emotions as an important part of school learning. In general we learn to ignore and suppress our emotions in schools, and the same learning tends to be reinforced at home and at work. The general outcome is that we grow up emotionally suppressed, if not distorted and stunted. This affects our ability to be fully and skilfully relational with and responsible (the ability to respond appropriately) towards the world, and to feel and live the *interbeing* (Hahn, 1998/2009) with the world. Our predominant mode of interaction with the world today is instrumentalism: the domination of calculative thinking that leads to abuse and exploitation of the world, which is the opposite of being responsible (Bai, 2001, 2004).

Whatever we learn to devalue and suppress in ourselves, we do the same, unconsciously, to human and non-human others. Unless we come to an explicit realisation that we are the way we are, in our thought patterns, feelings, habits and actions, due to prior conditioning and programming in alienation that we have received from our culture and family of origin, we tend to live and act out of alienated consciousness, and in turn spread, unconsciously, more alienation (Laing, 1980; Loy, 2008; Metzner, 1999). It is, I suggest, this unconsciousness (in degrees) that prevents us from fully taking responsibility as moral agents, and deliberately and decisively enacting changes to heal the damaged inner and outer landscapes.

The enlightenment that Buddhism talks about is waking up from our own unconsciousness about alienation. Unless we can wake up from our conditioning and programming, we will be likely to perform, in turn, the same process upon

another human being, especially upon our own vulnerable young children and others under their leadership. This, I believe, is the origin of continuing oppression and exploitation of human and non-human others.

To summarise the main thrust of my arguments so far: environmental educators are moral educators, and moral educators are psychological educators, and all three are cultural educators. What I am trying to convey with this seemingly convoluted statement here is this:

(a) Environmental education needs to be taken up as a moral education to the extent that we see the connection between harm and destruction in the environment and harm and destruction within human individuals and in their relationship.

(b) Environmental education as moral education will need to start with addressing people's alienation (wounding, dissociation, self- and other oppression, instrumentalism and exploitation).

(c) Addressing alienation is a healing (etymologically, *therapy* means healing) work that needs to be taken up not only by the expert professionals (psychotherapists and counsellors) but also by educators in all walks of life, from parents to teachers, from self to leaders.

(d) Healing from alienation is a cultural work in that we need to engage in it collectively through relationship building and community development (Cohen, 2009). We need to replace the culture of alienation (that results in insatiably rapacious hungry ghosts roaming the planet) by a culture of healing and reclamation of fundamental human integrity and dignity, wisdom and compassion.

Now, supposing that we are convinced of the above points, a pressing question for us educators is: how do we put the above proposals into practice? I suggest that the question of 'how' involves finding helpful resources with which we transform our selves and daily lives. In other words, we need to re-*source* ourselves. The good news is that such resources with which we can re-source ourselves abound in many wisdom traditions of the world. In the rest of the paper, I wish to share some resources that derive from some concepts and attendant practices of the Buddhist and the Daoist traditions.

Resources from Eastern sources

Bodhicitta

Robert Thurman, influential scholar of Buddhism and writer, has captured the essence of the Buddha's teaching: an educational programme dedicated to transforming human consciousness at its roots (Thurman, 1998). The central part of this transformation is helping people to get in touch with *bodhicitta*—the core humanity of passion and compassion—and fully manifesting it in everyday life

(Brazier, 1997/2001). Earlier I stated that *bodhicitta* is a human birthright, meaning that it is a fundamental human capacity. The whole meditation tradition in all branches of Buddhism is focused on finding ways to get in touch with the seed of *bodhicitta*, watering it and growing it. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk in exile in France and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hahn, is famous for using the metaphorical language of 'watering the seed' (1991). For many of us who have been heavily conditioned to a modern life of alienation and its ego-driven successes, the seed may be still dormant or has not grown beyond the seedling stage. We search our consciousness, and may find nothing like luxuriantly growing *bodhicitta*. Often all we find may be an onrush of anxiety, fear, frustration, jealousy, feelings of inadequacy, discontent, ill will, anger and hatred, and the attendant turmoil, confusion, despair, self- and other loathing, empty feelings, or wishes that things are otherwise, and resulting tension and despair, helplessness and dispiritedness. Where is this boundlessly warm and radiant, spirited and courageous, at the same time, clear-sighted and calm, loving and compassionate consciousness?

Buddhist teachers talk about catching fleeting glimpses of *bodhicitta* consciousness naturally occurring in our daily lives, and extending or stabilising these glimpses into more enduring experiences. My personal list of such moments probably would elicit resonances from the reader: looking into a wide-eyed baby face, gazing into loved ones' eyes, beholding first spring flowers bursting through the still half-frozen ground, looking up into the vast cloudless sky, and so on. The next step to noticing a *bodhicitta* moment is intentionally extending the experience by lingering and dwelling in it rather than the usual cognitive habit of quickly moving on. Extension is a powerful learning principle well known in ancient China (Kupperman, 1999) as is today in cognitive science (Varela, 1999). Not surprisingly, this principle of noticing what is already there (in our case, the *bodhicitta* moments) and extending it constitutes the most practical instruction on meditation (Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002). Meditation teachers with whom I have worked in the past would give a sitting meditation instruction of finding a moment of gap between two discrete thought events, and extending the gap by staying in it longer and longer. It is not easy to communicate about a subjective experience, and I am struggling to find a way to do so here. Perhaps I can suggest to the reader to think of, or better yet to try, extending the lengths of their in-breaths and out-breaths. I suggest that this experience of extending each breath is similar to the experience of extending the gap between cognitive-events in meditation.

The moment of gap between thoughts (cognitive content) is experienced as the source of *bodhicitta*——the ontological space of unconditioned and spacious stillness that is full of warm and radiant energy. This ontological space is understood in Buddhism as the matrix of human consciousness, and therefore the source of human wisdom and compassion. With regular practice of touching *bodhicitta* and extending these moments, we may be able to establish ourselves in a steady state of *bodhicitta* consciousness. We may expect three things to happen over time: (1) *bodhicitta* becomes the permanent background consciousness that can be brought

to the foreground at will; (2) we can take refuge in *bodhicitta* anytime and take a break from the usual conditioned consciousness that compels us to think, feel and react in particular ways that are not life-nourishing and dignity and integrity promoting; (3) aided by *bodhicitta*, we may change our conditioned patterns of thought and feeling that are manifestations of our alienated subjectivity, and feel more integrated, fluid, connected, authentic and alive. As a practitioner of *bodhicitta*, I find these three points to be powerfully helpful for healing my own alienated subjectivity and encouraging me to gain confidence in the primordial level of my being and awareness (Ray, 2008). I propose that the cultivation of *bodhicitta* is the way to work with——nourish and nurture——the *hungry ghosts* within each of us.

Sunyata

There is the tendency in the modern Western traditions of moral education to mainly focus on the *content* of moral teaching in the sense that we want our learners to acquire specific discursive moral teachings and competencies, be they moral concepts, rules, imperatives, reasoning, judgement, criteria, evaluation, stories, virtues or character. In contrast, the approach I have taken in this paper, based on my studies of Buddhism and Daoism, is focused primarily on the 'ontological space' around the discursive content of consciousness: that is, the 'container' itself. This space or container is mostly invisible to us in our daily lives precisely because we are most often singularly focused on the discursive content, of which there are endless torrents. When we are so immersed in the details of the content, we lose sight of the empty (i.e. non-discursive) space that holds the content. The experience here may be likened to walking into a room so completely filled up with things that one does not see the space: all one sees are the things. In the Buddhist understanding and practice, the discursively empty 'space' is the field of *bodhicitta*. Hence, the notion of emptiness, *sunyata* (means zero, nothing), plays a crucial role in Buddhist theory and practice, and Far Eastern cultures in general (Suzuki, 1959).

I now wish to probe the importance of *sunyata* for our moral–environmental–cultural education, suggesting that emptiness *as experience* yields some very important insights for us:

(1) Being highly languaged beings, we tend to take our words and the ideas behind them too literally. When we do that, we forget that words and ideas are human inventions and devices, and that, as such, we need to take responsibility for our use of them rather than seeing them as 'Truth' and 'Reality'. The result of taking our words and concepts as 'Truth' and 'Reality' is, I suggest, fundamentalism, of which we have a whole variety: religious fundamentalism, ethnic fundamentalism, economic fundamentalism, and so on. I would like to add 'moral fundamentalism' to the list. Anytime we find people ready to go to war and kill (invalidate, marginalise, silence, dehumanise, punish) others who are holding other or opposite

moral views, we should know that we are dealing with a case of fundamentalism. Moral fundamentalists are those who are so focused on what is right (moral, good) and wrong (immoral, evil) that they neglect to wonder whether there are different ways of understanding what is right and wrong, good or bad. And more seriously, they fail to exercise empathy and compassion in understanding different others who may be in difficulties, and providing support to them. Predictably, when faced with different others and their ways, moral fundamentalists react by condemning, marginalising and punishing those who transgress. Moral fundamentalists' need to be 'right' and 'good' overwhelms them such that they have little room for understanding others and interacting with them in ways that will foster peace and harmony.

But if we could see that words do not mirror reality (Rorty, 1979/2009), and that their relationship to reality is *subjunctive*, not literal, then, I suspect, we would not be so militantly rigid and insistent about the right and the wrong of our views. Reality is far bigger than what anyone can name with his or her words. Being mindful of this, we may cultivate a subjunctive relationship with words. We may speak *as if* our words name some truths; we may listen to others *as if* their words are right, and so on. We need not be committed to our or their words once and for all, objectively and forever. I admit that this subjunctive attitude is difficult to cultivate. This is where experience of *sunyata* would be helpful as it would have us realise that reality is *fundamentally ineffable*, and that all our ideas, concepts and words are fingers pointing to the moon, not the moon itself, to use the well-known zennist metaphor. Our job, especially as educators, is to find helpful fingers, but not to mistake fingers for the moon, and fight, and train others to fight, over the fingers.

(2) *Sunyata* also points to the need to regularly empty ourselves of fixed notions, power struggles, judgemental attitudes, and other ego preoccupations that mark the phenomenal plane of human existence, in order to support and experience the ample arising of *bodhicitta*. Of course, again, 'emptying' is not to be taken in absolute or even literal terms. 'Emptiness' and 'fullness' are polar terms, as in *yin* and *yang*. Human consciousness is always in dynamic flux of emptiness/fullness (Cheng, 1994). It is when we are held captive by thoughts, ideas, information, knowledge, plans, desire, goals, objectives, agendas, and so on, that we have difficulty experiencing *sunyata*——the spaciousness of the mindheart. My experience is that without being able to experience some measure of *sunyata*, it is difficult to experience the spontaneous arising of *bodhicitta*. Hence, I suggest that moral (social, environmental) education based on getting in touch with *bodhicitta* would need to be careful about doing the usual, which is discursively filling people up with moral principles, rules, imperatives and virtues, and compelling them to act. It is not that these morals are bad or useless: they are most often helpful and useful.

> But if we are mainly focused on these, then we may neglect to connect with the source of compassion and wisdom: *bodhicitta*.

Wu-wei moral agency

As a last resource, I wish to introduce another related concept from the Eastern tradition: the Daoist concept of *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* means 'no (wu) effort/work (wei).' Like *sunyata*, *wu-wei* is a concept of negation. However, *wu-wei* does not mean that one does nothing. Rather, it negates stressful and strained effort-making or work: doing too much, producing too much, consuming too much, and in general pushing and straining oneself and others until we are beyond limits and out of balance. Arguably, today the world has gone to the opposite direction of *wu-wei*, and the result is a civilisation that is egregiously straining the carrying capacity of the biosphere and the caring capacity of humans. In my view, much harm and damage in the world come from such rapacious energy and action. Given this, *wu-wei* may offer a paradigm of moral agency that does not fuel the relentlessly grinding engine of our industrial–consumer–military civilisation.

Wu-wei is a complex and demanding concept. *Wu-wei* agency requires knowing when is 'just enough' and optimal in one's action. This in turn requires us to study and know the environment and the objects/beings within it, including, of course, one's self, very closely and carefully to the point that we have an intimate understanding of not only the interconnected parts of what we study but also the whole dynamic system and its residing genius. There is a famous story of the cook Ting who was able to cut up a whole ox without dulling his knife blade (Chuang Tze, 1964). When asked what his secret was, his reply was that he did not need to look at the ox anymore, but just followed the 'way' of the animal in front of him, implying that he knew the animal so intimately that all he had to do was just thrust his knife blade into the hollow space between joints, never hitting bones or ligaments. Optimal effort is what *wu-wei* agency is about, and thus is a paradigm of action that would be a corrective to the kind of more-is-better, bigger-is-better, faster-is-better, aggressive and rapacious agency that dominates the world today. Insofar as the latter kind of agency is stressing us out and burning up the world, *wu-wei* is an antidote and re-balancing moral agency that we are well to adopt and adapt in some form in support of more ecological and sustainable living.

As indicated, no one can practice *wu-wei* without cultivating an acute power of observation and listening, sensitivity, intimate knowing of self, other and world, and a highly attuned feeling and knowing in-the-moment, each and every moment. All of this requires one to be supremely relational with the world. Here, too, the support for the *wu-wei* agency is the same as *bodhicitta*: *sunyata*. *Sunyata* allows us to be unfettered enough that we can really pay attention to what is before and around us and notice, rather than being continually compelled by the pre-given mental constructs and habits that make up our ordinary identity. This process of learning to let go of agenda and of letting be, so as to be able to pay attention to whatever arises in the moment is what *zazen* (literally, seated meditation) practice

of 'just sitting' meditation is about. Through *just sitting* and other related practices that liberate us from the restless and aggressive energy that knows no limit, contentment and fulfilment, we learn to dwell in the moment, making peace with the world and our selves, and living in harmony.

As an educator, I have taken Parker Palmer's message of 'We teach who we are' (1998, p. 1) to heart; I have also taken Cohen's addition of 'We teach who we are, and that's the problem' (2009, p. 27) to heart. For me, taking these messages to heart means daily engaging in my own self-healing and self-cultivation (Bai, 2012) so that when I go into my class I can speak from a place of mind–body–heart–spirit integrity-in-the-making, and offer my own self and life as a resource, including my own mistakes, limitations and struggles for my students' learning.

Acknowledgements

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