

# Education and the Heart of Social Change

## Could transforming the way we educate our children create a kinder, more compassionate world? **By Robert W. Roeser**

*I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.*

*John Dewey<sup>1</sup>*

*As we reflect on our world today, we sense and see dramatic, interdependent global challenges—racial, political, economic, and ecological—all around us. This awareness leads many of us to feel an immediate need for action aimed at broad and deep systemic change. But what kinds of action and what approaches to social change are needed to encourage and support more people to be a force for good<sup>2</sup> in the world?*

*One powerful, albeit complicated, lever for generational social change focuses on education and the transformation of the schools that serve children, adolescents, young adults, and their families. Since 2000, efforts to cultivate attention, awareness, empathy, and compassion among educators and students in schools through various contemplative practices have proliferated. These efforts have now blossomed into a growing movement of scientists and educational scholars and practitioners across the globe who are more committed than ever to understanding if and how such skills and dispositions can be cultivated in schools for adults and young people alike. A guiding question is how a greater focus on awareness and care in schools can be further leveraged to transform the nature of interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and school climates more broadly. A focus on teaching students awareness and compassion, infused with a sense of the personal, social, and global responsibilities that attend these, is what His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama<sup>3</sup> has called “educating the heart.”*

*An education of the heart emphasizes not only the development of social-emotional skills (e.g., self-management, emotional awareness, kindness), but adds the cultivation of attentional skills (e.g., focus, mindful awareness), systems-thinking skills (e.g., seeing interdependence and common humanity), and ethical dispositions (e.g., fairness, altruism, non-violence<sup>5</sup>). Training all of these together is believed to help young people be more personally healthy and happy, and support identities in which being a force for good in the world is central. Although the transformation of education<sup>6</sup> in this direction remains a distal goal, the historical need, the growing number of people committed to such an approach,<sup>7</sup> and the existence in schools and universities of many beautiful examples,<sup>8</sup> provide a blueprint for the future.*

*Below, I discuss the prospects of contemplative approaches in education, summarize what we have learned, and end with some needed future directions if we are to realize the aim of educating whole people and their whole hearts “for their own liberation and for the good of the world” (motto of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Kolkotta, India).*

### Seeking New Models of Education

*Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning. – Paolo Freire<sup>9</sup>*

*My journey to understand how best to holistically educate the hearts of young people, alongside their heads and hands, began in my early 20s. I had been studying for my PhD at the University of Michigan and, after two years, found myself a bit disheartened and yearning for a clear, fresh, and healing vision in education. I wanted an approach that would re-energize education as a source of wonder and curiosity, and as a force to dispel the narratives of erasure and exclusion that rendered Indigenous, Black, and other persons of color invisible in the curriculum and the historical life of nations and the world. We needed an education that stressed our fundamental interdependence as beings. Moreover, we needed an education to re-center the human journey and meaning-making around our earthly connection to the natural world.<sup>10</sup> Although I had some clarity about the need for a new educational model, I had not yet experienced one directly.*

*One night in 1991, I happened upon a stack of Psychology Today magazines my mother had given me in high school when my interest in psychology and education first emerged. In a copy from 1989, an article by Matthew Fox entitled "Original Blessing, Not Original Sin" caught my eye. Fox, then a Dominican priest, was a spiritual visionary and educator who was teaching and preaching the new vision of education that I hungered to learn. The subtitle of the article struck me—"Psychology asks the question: What is your problem? It should ask, what is your power?"*

*In the article, Fox discussed challenges in US society—including rampant consumerism, addiction, inattention to the poor and marginalization of social groups, and the ecological crisis—as spiritual problems grounded in a clouded vision of self, others, and reality. For Fox, Christian theology's focus on sin, and disdain of the body and our earthiness, was a major part of this clouded vision. Beyond these disparaging narratives in religion (e.g., original sin), he and colleagues identified other non-conscious cultural narratives from science (e.g., a mechanistic universe), economics (e.g., homo economicus as definitional of being human) and politics (e.g., patriarchal, post-colonial power structures) as fueling—and often profiting from—flawed and pessimistic models of self, others, and nature. As the article's tagline indicated, psychology was not spared from Fox's critique. To create a new society based on a new vision of reality, Fox believed that optimistic, embodied forms of spirituality and psychology, community rituals and caring social institutions, and new forms of education were needed. That night in 1991, I decided to take a leave of absence from my PhD program to study with Fox at Holy Names College in Oakland, California.*

*The form of education Fox and his faculty were creating was unlike any experience I had ever had educationally, and became the blueprint for the rest of my career. The faculty at Holy Names included artists, poets, contemplatives, philosophers, religious scholars, scientists, and social activists who brought together their diverse ways of knowing—aesthetic, spiritual, philosophic, historical, scientific, and practical. Together, they explored questions of selfhood, belonging, purpose, the story of creation, and the mystery of the web of life. The curriculum was deeply oriented around awareness and insight into classic spiritual questions that Rumi asks in one of his poems: "Who am I, where am I from, and what am I supposed to be doing?"*

*Alongside formal academic learning and the deep honoring of different knowledge traditions, the pedagogy emphasized community and ritual (e.g., drum circles, singing/chanting), engagement in self-reflective social forums, the practice of physical disciplines (e.g., tai chi, yoga), art-as-meditation (e.g., painting, pottery), and opportunities for service in the surrounding community. When it came to sparking social transformation, Fox believed that all of these practices were as important as more introverted forms of contemplation like sitting meditation.*

*These novel features of a holistic education were all invaluable lessons I learned that year about the kind of education we need. I had found a new model, a model my colleagues and I later called "contemplative education."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the greatest gift I received from this year with Fox was finding a meditation path and developing a meditation practice. I decided to keep meditating in a group, and to return to academia and finish my PhD, hoping that all the things I learned in California might come into my work in some refreshing and yet unknown way in the future.*

*Later, as an Assistant Professor, I struggled for years to come up with subtle ways of integrating contemplative practices into my teaching and research. It seemed like an ill-advised strategy for getting tenure, and in the end I didn't receive tenure anyway. I was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study schools in India that were incorporating—with adolescents—many of the practices I learned with Fox. One door was closing, and thankfully, another was opening.*

## **India and Premodern Wisdom in Post-Modern Education**

*There is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.*

*bell hooks<sup>12</sup>*

*Upon arriving in India for my Fulbright in 2005, I had another set of formative experiences. As part of my research on schools for adolescents that were using meditation as part of their curriculum, I interviewed the headmaster of a secondary school run by the Ramakrishna Order of Monks in Mysore. I asked the head Swami (monk) what he and the staff sought to accomplish in the school, and how meditation practices fit into the school's educational aims. "Our job is to help young people*

discover who they are," he said. His hand motions over his heart seemed to suggest that here, "discover" meant literally "dis-cover"—to take the covers off of something. His gesture invoked a dis-covering of the heart center, the "anahata chakra." As Bhagwan Nityananda was reputed to say: "The heart is the hub of all things sacred, go there and roam." For this monk and this school based in a Hindu contemplative tradition, education was not just the gradual construction of knowledge to gain understanding. It also involved a kind of subtraction through concentration and awareness to dispel ignorance. In the words of the Indian Hindu spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda: "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in the human being."

Meditation, study, service, memorization and recitation, engagement in the arts, being in nature—all of these the monk told me offered insight into the self, others, and reality. All were royal roads to seeing who we are beyond our conditioned identities and who others are beyond our conditioned perceptions of them. In that clear seeing, a sense of love and deep interconnection could evolve. In this school and others across India, I saw examples of what Fox<sup>6</sup> called the infusion of premodern forms of wisdom in post-modern educational institutions.

My research in India revealed that while many adolescents were curious to explore their inner lives, their engagement during meditation time in these schools was modest, and made some students socially self-conscious. In addition, many youth reported not understanding meditation practices or why they were valuable for their lives. Others expressed wanting scientific, rather than only classical religious explanations, as to why one would do such practices. Nonetheless, the students had a sense of the potential value of doing these practices.

I left India excited, and with big unanswered questions: how to study meditation in school-aged children and develop a science around that—a science that could be taught to children and youth alongside meditation practices to motivate and educate them. I also wondered about the impact of the more active and social practices some of these schools were using, such as being in nature, memorization, communication, the arts, and service to others. How could such practices be central in contemplative education in the US, and how could the impacts of these practices on positive youth development be studied?

## Meeting Mind & Life

Later in 2005, I attended a Mind & Life Dialogue with the Dalai Lama on *Investigating the Mind: The Science and Clinical Applications of Meditation* in Washington, DC. Having experienced a new form of education with Matthew Fox, and having seen real examples of whole schools trying to bring about a holistic vision of education in India, I was still looking for a way to unite science and practice<sup>14</sup> in contemplative education. More than that, I was looking for a group of people with whom I could explore these "outside the box" issues in science, and who sought to apply them in the educational field.

The meeting was another milestone in my professional journey, and my spiritual life. For the first time, I saw amazing individuals—the Dalai Lama, Richie Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and others—on stage outlining a path forward scientifically to study meditation and well-being, and by extension, perhaps, education. For the first time, I heard ideas such as "mindfulness, kindness, and compassion can be viewed as skills that can be learned and assessed mentally and neurally;" that "such skills may aid in improving physical and mental health;" and that "contemplative practices like focused attention or loving-kindness meditations can be thought of as specialized forms of training or education that foster skills like focus and kindness, as well as their beneficial impacts for health." These ideas were astounding to me and so clear... I knew I was witnessing a deep dialogue about the very science I had been dreaming of! What would happen, I wondered, if we cultivated these skills in schools earlier in development as a key part of the curriculum aimed at fostering student flourishing and preventing student problems?

Soon thereafter, I started working at Mind & Life. As part of my role, I was the coordinator and a member of the Mind & Life Educational Research Network led by Richie Davidson and Mark Greenberg. With these new relationships, I felt I had found my tribe—an interdisciplinary group of scientists, scholars, and contemplative practitioners interested in thinking outside the box in education around contemplative practices. Now the work began in earnest to develop a science and practice around the "education of the heart."

## Emergence of Contemplative Education

*By 2005, many creative curricula had emerged that aimed to cultivate students' attention, awareness, empathy, and compassion in secular ways. These programs included experiential practices designed to help students develop calm, clear, and kind states of awareness, and ethical values such as curiosity, open-mindedness, open-heartedness, and caring for others. Meditation was a central practice of these programs.<sup>15</sup> sometimes more so than other practices such as being in nature; doing art; body-based practices (e.g., tai chi, yoga); engaging in guided imagery; or contemplating, debating, and discussing deep philosophical questions.*

*Interestingly, many programs also began to take recourse in the new sciences of the mind (psychology) and the brain (neuroscience) to explain concepts like mindfulness, the stress response, and how practicing breathing and mindfulness over and over changes the structure and function of our minds and brains (e.g., neuroplasticity). Soon, mindfulness-based school programs proliferated in public education in the United States, Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico, and other countries. As is often the case, the scientific investigation of the effects of such programs on child and adolescent development lagged behind the rapid spread of the programs in schools (see Roeser et al., 2020). Many of us were busy trying to research the impacts of mindfulness programs on teachers and students using experimental methods, and we were genuinely surprised by the rapid growth of these programs in schools.*

## Research on Contemplative Education

*The research on school-based programs<sup>16</sup> teaching mindfulness, yoga, and other contemplative practices began in the early 2000s. The emerging work on mindfulness in education built on the decades-long work done on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in schools. SEL involves teaching children to be self-aware, socially cognizant, able to make responsible decisions, and competent in self-management and relationship-management skills so as to foster their academic success.<sup>17</sup> Research has shown<sup>18</sup> that SEL programs help students to improve their social-emotional skills, academic motivation, behavior, and achievement; and that many of these benefits are still evident years later.<sup>19</sup>*

*What mindfulness programs added to the SEL work was a focus on the training of attention skills (e.g., focus), kindness and compassion skills, and the use of these for regulating emotion and behavior—and for getting along with and caring for others. A second addition was thinking about mindfulness training for both educators and students. Research on SEL had revealed the critical importance of training teachers in the social-emotional skills necessary to deliver SEL programs to students in a high quality way. The same was true for mindfulness and compassion programs. A key benefit of such programs is that it was a way to “care for the care-givers” by offering resources and support to teachers<sup>20</sup> before asking them to implement something new with their students.*

*Recently, my colleagues and I reviewed the experimental research<sup>21</sup> on school-based mindfulness programs for children and adolescents, and found that such programs improve students' self-regulation abilities, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve their physical health and relationships with others. (Little consistent evidence was found regarding anger or aggression, feelings of well-being, or school behavior and performance.) Limitations in the state of research as well as theory were also noted. Suffice it to say, there is a lot we still do not know and the evidence regarding current mindfulness programs in schools as a universal strategy for all students is not fully clear.<sup>22</sup>*

*While the impact of mindfulness practices on students is still being evaluated, there is promising evidence of the value of such practices for cultivating attention and self-regulation of emotion and behavior. While it is not clear if such practices produce other valued impacts on students at this time (e.g., less anxiety or depressive symptoms, greater well-being), the impact of such practices on teachers' well-being and classroom interactions with students is better established.<sup>23</sup> Research shows that teachers who undergo mindfulness training are less stressed, burned out, anxious, and depressed than those who do not. Additionally, there is evidence that mindfulness training improves teachers' classroom organization and emotional support of students.*

## Where are we going?

*How can we reshape education in order to foster new generations of citizens who are simultaneously keen of mind, compassionate in heart, competent in their chosen work, and well-equipped to build a more equitable, just, and sustainable future? Similar to the wider science on (adult) mindfulness<sup>24</sup> today, much of the practice and science of mindfulness in schools has been clinical in outlook and focused on preventing individual problems. It has not focused as much on social engagement and collective action for the welfare of all. It has also not been developmental, considering how practices can affect children, youth, and adults.*

*Where does the field of contemplative education need to go in the future? Below are seven key areas that I believe are where more practice and science are needed to deliver on the promise of this growing movement:*

1. **Love.** *Focusing more on social relationship skills related to care, compassion, and forgiveness; as well as the processes of social othering and belonging, seems critical in the future of this work. In the face of growing divides, we need an education of the heart earlier and ongoing, across the first decades of life.*
2. **Body.** *We need a greater focus on the physical body and its connection to our earthiness in contemplative programs. We need to nurture our body alongside the heart and mind, as well as our connection to nature and our related awe and joy. Many programs and scientific studies still view mindfulness as a way to reduce problems and distress—rather than to foster joy and meaning. Including more body-centered activities in which students engage in the arts, spend time in nature, participate in youth events, share meals, and do acts of service together are all ways to include the body more and to make programs more interesting, engaging, active, and relevant.*
3. **Development.** *We need to move beyond just thinking about adults in contemplative studies and focus on intergenerational relationships. A developmental contemplative science approach is needed to answer many practical questions of relevance for families, schools, and communities (e.g., when and how can I teach mindfulness, and how does one think about motivating students to practice at different ages? How long should students of different ages practice?)*
4. **Diversity.** *We need diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and cultural points of view included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of contemplative programs in education. The goal is to create ways of developing and evaluating programs that are culturally responsive and inclusive. In addition, we need to honor diverse wisdom traditions and practices including and extending beyond Buddhist-inspired ones.*
5. **Youth participation.** *We need to explicitly include the views of young people in the design, activities, and implementation of programs. Such programs can provide opportunities for young people themselves to think about how, specifically, they will act as forces for good in the world, or in what ways they want to learn to train their attention and compassion.*
6. **Engagement in society.** *We need to develop young people's personal, social, and global ethical responsibilities alongside their own skills and well-being. The aims of these programs should focus on both personal transformation and systems change.*
7. **Human-earth connection.** *We need to tell every student the scientific story of the creation of the universe and foster a sense of belonging and connection to the earth. We need to take all students to places like the ocean, the mountains, and beyond city lights at night so they can see this magnificent planet and universe for themselves. We need to situate human flourishing within the human-earth connection, and support students in working to save and love Mother Earth.*

*In the end, I believe in a simple maxim articulated by [Francisco Varela](#). He spoke of how, despite there being many ways of knowing, "there is only one wisdom, which is based on love." He also said: **25***

*Everything we do, as individuals, is] an expression of some kind of unifying harmony. And that wisdom is something that one has to cultivate and learn. I feel, or see, societal wisdom in the same light. If we cultivate societal wisdom, then whatever we do as a society has the same kind of quality. The art we do, the science we do, the streets we build, the roads we design, the gardens we have, will have the same quality.*

*[insights@mindandlife.org](mailto:insights@mindandlife.org)*