

## Contemplative Engagement at Home and Abroad

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*The Naropa Institute*

The only Buddhist-inspired regionally-accredited liberal arts college in the United States, The Naropa Institute follows a contemplative approach to higher education that emphasizes spirituality and personal transformation as integral components of all academic degree programs. At Naropa faculty, staff and students describe the educational program as "the student journey," emphasizing the personal path quality of their educational experience. The contemplative and transformational focus appears in many elements of the curriculum and influences each student's personal experience. All degree programs require course work in meditation and/or contemplative body awareness disciplines. Many classes begin with a brief meditation session. Experiential learning figures heavily into the course format; most courses include a strong experiential component in which students explore their connection to the course content and material in personal, emotional, bodily, and intellectual ways.

Faculty, staff and students typically come to Naropa because they desire greater integration in their lives: physically, mentally, and spiritually. They wish to connect their interest in their academic disciplines and education with their personal path of discovery, which often includes a pre-existing commitment to some form of meditative or contemplative practice. In many respects this reflects a desire for authenticity and meaning in their lives and work. Fundamentally, those drawn to Naropa view knowledge as having a deeply personal component as well as the objective element more typical of conventional higher education.

**History and Vision** The Naropa Institute was founded in 1974 by the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a Tibetan tulku (reincarnated master) and lama. Along with many other Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, he escaped from the Chinese invasion in 1959, and, settled in Northern India. He later traveled to England, where he studied at Oxford, and then came to the USA in the early 1970s. He founded several practice centers and institutions, religious, secular, and educational. He was a renowned author and teacher who inspired many American to study the insights and wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism and its secular implications.

He modeled The Naropa Institute on Nalanda University, which flourished in Northern India from the fifth to eleventh centuries, prior to the Moghul invasion. Nalanda University enrolled about 10,000 students. It had a strong Buddhist heritage, but was an open, stimulating university that taught many disciplines: religion, philosophy, arts, crafts, etc., and it invited practitioners of many traditions to visit and teach. Nalanda University had demanding entrance criteria, and applicants had to demonstrate serious intentions and mature reflection on their lives.

Naropa was a great scholar who served as the abbot of Nalanda University for 8 years. He was greatly acclaimed for his wisdom and understanding, and was considered a superior debater. A famous teaching story tells about Naropa having a visitation from an "old hag" while he was reading some texts. The visitor asked Naropa whether he understood the words of what he studied and he replied that he did, much to his visitor's delight. When she asked whether he also understood the sense or the meaning of the words and he again replied in the affirmative, his visitor expressed great anger and dismay. When he asked why she responded this way, she said that she was delighted with

the appropriate humility of his first response, but dismayed with the lack of wisdom in the second, which presumed that he could truly understand the sense of these teachings. From this, according to the story, Naropa realized the never-ending nature of understanding the inner meaning of what we wish to study. He then left his post at Nalanda and continued his search for meaning for the remainder of his life. This story reflects the underlying view at The Institute that ultimate knowledge lies beyond our grasp and that learning is a never-ending, life-long process.

### **Contemplative Education**

The mission of The Naropa Institute is to offer educational programs that cultivate awareness of the present moment through intellectual, artistic, and meditative disciplines, foster a learning community that uncovers wisdom and compassion; cultivate openness and communication, sharpen critical intellect, enhance resourcefulness, and develop effective action in all disciplines; exemplify the principles of the Institute's Buddhist educational heritage; encourage the integration of world wisdom traditions with modern culture; and be nonsectarian and open to all.

We regularly describe the educational approach at Naropa as contemplative education, but we find it difficult to define this term precisely or represent it succinctly. We have many different definitions for the term and many descriptions of how it manifests. We might wish, as Naropa himself did, to find the real understanding or meaning through experience, not just by attending to words. With this caution, we might describe some recurrent themes in the language used to describe our fundamental assumptions. From a contemplative perspective, we see education as a deeply personal and experiential process in which the student actively engages in the process of education "from the inside out." We can view education as a process of uncovering naturally existing wisdom and understanding. In an important sense we might say that "we already know everything," and that education consists of recognizing our inherent wisdom rather than only learning something "out there."

Located in Boulder, Colorado, The Naropa Institute began as a continuing education summer program, and then started to offer graduate and undergraduate education, and degrees. It became independent in 1984, and accredited by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1986. It awards BA, MA, and MFA degrees in 14 different subjects in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, as well as offering an extensive continuing education program. In the Fall of 1996 it enrolled over 700 degree-seeking students. Several components of the Institute's educational programs reflect the values and mission of international education and service-learning.

### **Study Abroad at The Naropa Institute**

Our Study Abroad programs, in three countries, consist of a cross-cultural education that emphasizes awareness of the student's personal experience, combining academic study with experiential learning that uncovers cultural bias and habitual patterns. Drawing on the wealth of opportunities available in Nepal, Thailand, and Bali, The Naropa Institute's Study Abroad programs provide a thorough introduction to the living traditions of meditation, religion, philosophy, the arts (music, painting and dance), and community development activities. Naropa study abroad programs are designed to infuse the cross-cultural educational experience with awareness of the student's personal journey of discovery. The programs aim to cultivate our inherent curiosity and appreciation of the world, while uncovering cultural biases and habitual patterns. They mix academic study

with experiential learning so the student engages in an original process, and can more directly experience and understand these diverse cultures.

In Naropa's Study Abroad Programs, students, faculty, and staff live together in a residential setting in the midst of the local community. This model strengthens students' opportunities to process their cross-cultural experiences. Required meditation classes provide a context for working with culture shock, enhancing the student's mindfulness and awareness of the environment along with facilitating an openness to new experiences.

**Fall Program in Nepal** Located at the foot of the Himalayas in the ancient kingdom of Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley has long been a center of art, culture and trade for South and Central Asia. On the edge of the Valley is the village of Boudha, a major pilgrimage center and home of Nepal's largest stupa. Here, the many cultures of Nepal and Tibet mix in a panorama of ancient devotion, modern development, and lively trade. This richness, diversity, and cultural tolerance provides a fertile ground for The Naropa Study Abroad program. The Nepal program aims to provide a thorough introduction to the traditional culture, meditation, philosophy, and arts which are presently flowering in the Kathmandu Valley and neighboring regions. The Nepal program takes place from early September through mid-December, and is situated in the pilgrim's village of Boudha. The program is housed in a two-story guest house where participants live, study, and practice together. The guesthouse facilities include a garden, student and faculty rooms, classroom/library, meditation hall, and a dining room and kitchen which serves local recipes and a variety of western dishes.

The overall program schedule begins with an in-country orientation phase followed by nine weeks of academic course work, field trips, festivals and performances, community gatherings, as well as built-in time for exploring the surrounding valley. The Independent Study and Travel section lasts for three weeks and sends participants off into a variety of regions pursuing their projects. Upon completion the group reunites in Boudha for final presentations and closing celebrations. Student service-learning projects in Nepal have focused on such topics as Women's issues, and volunteering at a hospice related to Mother Teresa's ministries.

**Winter Program in Siam** Our newest offering, which most directly addresses Service-Learning, consists of a one-month program in Thailand. Titled "Engaged Buddhism in Siam," this course explores the history of the people and politics of Southeast Asia. Our primary instructor for this course, Sulak Sivaraksa, is a well-known Siamese activist and community organizer. Students spent a week in a Buddhist Retreat Center, where they attend lectures and discussions side-by-side with Thai university students. They also meditate together in the meditation hall. In the following week students participate in community service-learning development projects, choosing among a children's village, where street children from Bangkok obtain schooling and life in a self-sufficient community, an AIDS hospice, or a rural ecological enrichment and reforestation project. Following these activities students participate in traditional week-long Buddhist forest walk.

**Spring Program in Bali** Bali is one of 13,000 islands in Indonesia, and is often called the Island of the Gods. It is world-renowned as a land where the arts, spiritual practice and daily activity are thoroughly integrated. The terracing of rice fields, the coursing of waterways and the mythology and drama of dance, music and theater all reveal a sense of natural hierarchy (everything in its proper time and place) which permeates the Balinese culture. It is an ideal setting for exploring art in everyday life. Through studies of music and dance, meditation, language, arts and culture, participants enter the path of

Balinese life. They explore their own artistic processes by immersing themselves in a culture where true integration exists between creativity, spirituality and daily living.

The Bali program takes place from mid-February to mid-April, in the artistic community of Ubud, where participants will live, study and practice together in a Balinese "losmen" (a cluster of bungalows and pavilions.) The eight-week program combines classes, discussion groups, community gatherings, field trips through the island, attendance at temple ceremonies, performances, festivals and independent study projects. Service-learning projects regularly included in the Bali program include reforestation projects in collaboration with local village councils, refuse clean-up from riverbanks and temples, community presentations of art, puppetry, and music, and developing collaborative projects with community neighborhood councils

### **Domestic Service-Learning Activities**

**Engaged Buddhism** The Institute offers concentration in "Engaged Buddhism" within our M.A. program in Buddhist Studies. "Engaged Buddhism" refers to a broadly based movement of Asians and Westerners seeking to apply Buddhist principles to the challenges of rapid global secularization, economic development, and rampant materialism. The program includes both theoretical and practical training. Students study classical Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and meditation. They also explore "engaged" ideas and traditions of Buddhism, from its origins in the life of the Buddha, down to the modern engaged Buddhist movement with its three dimensions. These include alternative social models (monasteries, practice communities), radical activism (focusing on changing institutions and societal values), and social service work. Practical training focuses particularly on the "social service" dimension and trains students in skills that will enable them to enter into and be effective within this arena of helping others, especially leadership training and conflict resolution. Students serve an internship in pastoral counseling which leads to certification in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), qualifying them for work in hospital, hospice, prison, or homeless shelter settings. A meditation retreat with a minimum of a four-week duration is a prerequisite for the program.

**Project Outreach** Founded by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, the MFA degree program in Writing and Poetics, known as the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, offers training in composition of poetry, prose, and fiction. The program focuses on The Institute's contemplative base of mindfulness, alertness to the use of language, and awareness of society and social issues as grounds of writing practice. For a number of years the program has offered a course that MFA places students in local prisons, homeless shelters, halfway houses, schools, retirement homes, and hospitals to assist others in opening their voices. Students facilitate writing workshops that inspire and instruct community members in use of the language arts, bringing "cultural work" to the community.

**Undergraduate Service-Learning** A faculty task force currently explores a range of topics related to the expanding nature of undergraduate education at Naropa, within our contemplative context. This group has devoted extensive discussion to the idea of including a required service-learning component in the undergraduate curriculum. Such a requirement would serve as an additional mode for implementing The Institute's contemplative approach to higher education.