A Contemplative Model for Higher Education
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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 tulk (reincarnated master) and lama (Trungpa, 197x). Rinpoche escaped from the Chinese invasion in 1959, and, along with many other Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, 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 Tibetan Buddhism (Trungpa, 1974, 197x, 197x). 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 thusly, 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.

The Naropa Institute was thus modeled on Nalanda University and named for Naropa. It 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.

The Naropa Institute mission explicates many aspects of its approach to higher education. The Institute strives to: 1) **Cultivate awareness of the present moment.** Awareness and mindfulness are the heart of contemplative education. This aspect of the mission emphasizes direct experience in learning, moment-by-moment. It focuses on the integration of thought, sensations, emotions, and the synchronization of mind and body. It facilitates precision, insight, communication, appreciation, and effective action. This element is manifest in the curriculum through traditional and contemporary meditation practices as well as other awareness techniques. 2) **Foster a learning community that uncovers wisdom and compassion.** We recognize that holistic education occurs through working together in a community that joins heart and mind. We value and welcome sharing and feedback, knowing that understanding of the self gives rise to empathy for others. 3) **Cultivate openness, communication, critical intellect, resourcefulness, and effective action.** These five qualities, rooted in the Buddhist view of human life, are considered integral to the make-up of a fully educated person. They provide practical framework for balanced development and a foundation for lifelong learning. The curriculum is designed to help foster these qualities (described more fully below as the “Five Buddha Families”). 4) **Exemplify the Institute’s Buddhist heritage.** Buddhist education goes back 2,500 years in India, and is based on meditation, discipline, and knowledge. It leads to understanding of egolessness, in which we see the self as not fixed but continuously in process. It emphasizes cultivation of mindfulness and awareness through meditation. It views learning as a commitment to a lifelong process that requires patience and humor. 5) **Integrate world wisdom traditions with modern culture.** At Naropa, the curriculum embraces great religious, hermetic, and shamanistic teachings, and examines how they offer insight and guidance for contemporary world. Such a view can help to reduce a student’s self-importance and broaden an overly narrow perspective. It supports exploration of the wide diversity of the expression of human experience. 6) **Offer a nonsectarian community open to all.** Meditation, awareness, and mindfulness have been taught in many traditions throughout human history. We view these practices not specifically as religious, but as a means to stimulate self-discovery. They foster
stimulating interchange, diversity of viewpoint, and provoke understanding of the breadth of human experience.

**Contemplative Education.**

Although we continuously describe the educational approach at Naropa as contemplative education, it would seem presumptuous or even foolhardy to attempt to define this term precisely or represent it succinctly. We could find 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 caveat, 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.” Recognizing the many perspectives with which we might describe the contemplative approach to education and the Naropa journey, we can view the following as representative examples that, collectively, might present the reader with a “sense” of the topic. Building on the heritage of its Buddhist roots, we will describe two perspectives on contemplative knowing and living that have informed the educational approach at The Institute. We will follow these with two perspectives on how contemplative education manifests at Naropa and its effect on the student.

**Three Wiscons.** One classical Buddhist view of contemplative education focuses on three components of wisdom (or Prajna, penetrating insight). These components are hearing, contemplating, meditating (Ponlop, 1996). The Buddhist approach views knowing as a continuously evolving and revolving process, with all three components necessary for complete realization. The first, Hearing (listening) involves attending closely to the information presented, and produces the wisdom of understanding. The learner must remain open to what is presented, keeping a “beginner’s mind” by avoiding quick judgment and criticism, suspending current views for the time being, and paying attention to the immediate environment and the personal experience of reactions and bodily sensations. Hearing takes place through listening, reading, learning, and applying intellectual understanding. Taken alone, we can compare this stage of understanding to a patch that covers a hole in a pair of jeans. It may cover the hole, but it will never merge with the jeans, and can eventually fall off. We can also apply a cooking metaphor to the learning process. We feel great hunger and we suffer from this hunger. We need to learn how to cook and to solve our problem by eating something. In the first, hearing, stage we buy a cookbook, read it and think about what we have read, and develop an understanding of cooking (the ingredients, the process, etc.). If we stay at this stage, however, we will not satisfy our hunger.

The second stage we call Contemplating (reflecting); this phase produces wisdom of experience. When we reflect on what we are learning we find ourselves pondering and examining the material, testing its fit with what we know and our own experience, considering the implications, calming our initial excitement to examine the subject in a practical way, asking questions from the heart, from personal experience, asking how am I responding and why? We remember the
details of the learning environment, including feelings and sensations as well as words and thoughts. Taken alone, experience, including its conceptual, analytical, and theoretical perspectives, may seem quite strong at the time, but it can disappear “like the morning fog after the sun rises” if we do not find a way to incorporate it more deeply into our being. Using the cooking metaphor, this stage is like buying the ingredients and starting to cook. We synchronizing our body and mind, develop an experience of cooking (the smells, the feel of the ingredients, etc.). However, we have the danger of becoming so fascinated with the process of cooking, trying to cook lots of different dishes, analyzing, reflecting, contemplating, that we do not solve our hunger.

The final stage, Meditating (integrating) produces the wisdom of realization. In this phase we move knowledge toward entering our own being. We view this as a never-ending process as understanding continually deepens. We remain open to final knowledge, willing to “not know” and not try to understand. We trust our experience, what we know in our bones. We refrain from arrogance, remaining always a student, a beginner. This stage requires a disciplined and regular meditation practice to provide the opportunity for obtaining perspective on our physical and mental processes. Like great space, forever unchanging, from this stage we see no reference point for a final truth. Using the cooking metaphor, we finally taste the food, eat, chew, and swallow it. This brings relief from the suffering of hunger. Fully integrated knowledge brings a sense of wholeness to our lives.

The Five Buddha Families. Another traditional Buddhist view of contemplative living is seen in the Five Buddha families, which reflect five aspects of an awakened mind. From the Buddhist view, we attempt to find a balance between specific disciplines and strengthening of personal growth in a way that helps to meet the demands of life in our contemporary world. Proper understanding of these aspects can help to address difficulties from psychological hindrances such as lack of confidence, confusion, lack of skill, narrowness of understanding. They also help us develop the healthy aspects and develop awareness of the neurotic aspects. By cultivating these five aspects of our human experience, incorporating an understanding of them into our daily lives, and developing a sensitivity to perceiving our immediate experience of each of them, we can more fully approach our lives from a contemplative perspective. The five qualities, with their “Buddha family” names, are: 1) (Buddha) Openness and respect for our immediate personal experience. We can learn to see how we limit our perception, lose contact with the world and our natural kindness by entering into situations from preconceived and closed viewpoint. We can learn to train ourselves in greater openness and respect for who we are and how we are, without bias. Doing so, the experience of learning becomes more personal and integrated in our daily lives. We can see the vastness and the possibilities of life as well as the profound depths of wisdom. We must, however, learn to avoid “wallowing” in formlessness of openness to the extent that we experience dullness and the seduction of the security of sameness. We can see this danger in the superficial slogan, “it’s all one,” when used as an excuse for the lack of thought and discrimination. 2) (Vajra) Clarity of thought, development of insight and intellect. We live our lives more contemplatively as we learn to balance openness with keen intellectual skills of critical analysis, logic, and conceptual reasoning. When we operate from a healthy vajra perspective we have the ability to
respond effectively to sudden insights, to recognize patterns, themes, and structures, and to use this mental clarity to see possibilities in new situations. This aspect helps us to see things as they are, how everything works together, and to analyze accurately and thoroughly so as to also see what best steps to take next. The neurotic aspects of vajra come from our tendency to want things our own way and our desire to change things to fit our views, together with an overemphasis on intellectualizing and argument. 3) (Ratna) Resourcefulness refers to our ability to appreciate the great variety of talents, skills, resources, and opportunities that we can use in our learning. It also refers to our appreciation for the richness of the present moment of experience, our recognition of the abundance and plenitude of the university and the sufficiency of our lives. From a healthy ratna perspective we learn to use resources effectively, and we become more confident, generous with imagination, understanding, concern, and material resources. The neurotic aspects of this component of living can manifest as feeling bloated and arrogant or feeling deprived, poor, and inadequate. 4) (Padma) Communication refers to how we deal with our sense of union with our experience and to our relationship to it. It manifests as how we relate to others through talking, listening, reading, expression through writing, music, movement, and art. Healthy padma demonstrates a sense of responsibility toward others, recognizing their integrity, and extending ourselves to them. It includes sensitivity to esthetic values, appreciating beauty and harmony, leading to sensitive, gentle interaction with the world. Through developing our padma we relate to the world with a sense of warmth, compassion, gentleness, connection, empathy, intimacy, relationship, and creativity. The neurotic aspects of padma manifest as the passion of craving, the desire for attention from others, and a fear of solitude. 5) (Karma) Action. When we learn to manifest the prior four qualities we can then act effectively. When we let go of bias, mental dullness, incompleteness and inadequacy, and an inability to communicate, we find that problems resolve on their own. Effective action consists of the ability to know how and when to act, and comes from integrating the disciplines we have learned with a clear perception of the immediate environment. Healthy karma comes through maturity, self-discipline, organization of time and space, setting and realizing goals, and getting things done properly. It consists of doing what needs to be done, in a timely, appropriate, and efficient manner, and also refraining from doing what does not need to be done. We learn to appreciate the challenge of opportunity and problems, and use our power in a harmonious, benevolent manner in concert with the world. The neurotic aspects of karma manifest as a sense of being driven, pressured and busy, manipulating others to accomplish our goals, "steamrollering" over others, and excessive worry.

**Contemplative Teaching.** These views of contemplative life, rooted in the Buddhist tradition of The Naropa Institute, represent ideals and goals to which we aspire. Next we examine how they manifest in the teaching and the student experience at The Institute. Sebo Ebbons, a teacher trainer from the Netherlands with a background in contemplative practice, conducted a systematic study of contemplative teaching at the Naropa Institute (Ebbons, 1996). He spent 4 weeks on the campus, visited 20 classes, and interviewed faculty members regarding their approach to contemplative teaching. From this process he construed several themes in what he saw as common characteristics of good contemplative teaching at Naropa. Ebbons attempted to define the word "contemplative" and contemplative
teaching for these purposes. He views a contemplative approach to life as one that realizes "basic goodness" in ourselves and others. Basic goodness always exists in life, but we don't always realize it. A contemplative approach attempts to see beyond the confusion of the present moment to recognize this basic goodness. Contemplative teaching consists of creating an environment which basic goodness develops and is provoked (not forced, but encouraged).

Ebbons drew a distinction between contemplative and "New Age" ideas and approaches. New Age approaches promise us something as a result, proposes that we will get something out of them. A contemplative approach promises nothing as an outcome, because it assumes that everything we need already exists in the present moment. We do not need to change ourselves, but we may benefit from going inside and looking at what we see. Thus, while New Age approaches promise something for later contemplative practice deals with here and now. Trungpa (1973) described our tendency to treat spiritual practice as an achievement as "spiritual materialism" and warned of its dangers. Contemplative teaching should, ideally, lead to integrated knowledge. Students can use knowledge, not just as "information," but as something directly relevant to their personal journey. At Naropa, the personal component of the students, their values and interests, is always discussed. Ebbons contrasted this approach with what he described as the "business deal" at conventional universities where teachers give information and students receive grades and credits. In a contemplative environment student are conscious of how they can use the knowledge in their lives. In order to teach in this way teachers must have integrated the knowledge into their own experience, so that they have the knowledge and can teach from "the heart." Ebbons identified ten main characteristics of contemplative teaching and learning at Naropa. He divided them into three categories: "ground, path, and fruition," a useful concept often used at Naropa to describe the student's journey through a course or the degree program.

**Ground.** The ground consists of what the teacher brings to the teaching, and contains two elements. Ebbons calls the first "incorporate knowledge." Teachers do not always articulate this aspect of their knowledge about teaching. We can view it as a full knowing of oneself, the field of study, and the ability to present the knowledge in a form that students will understand. It appears embodied within the teacher, and feels natural and ordinary to the teacher, after many years of experience. Polanyi (1958) described how knowledge consists of both tacit and articulate dimensions, with deep understanding incorporated into the knower's bodily processes, and he emphasized that the knower often knows "more than he can tell." The ability to teach from incorporate knowledge requires strong contemplative experience, and awareness of the teacher's own experience and thoughts; the teacher has to walk the path before teaching to the students. The second element of the ground consists of a view of teaching as a calling, as part of the teacher's personal path of self exploration. This requires that the teachers share themselves as persons and as teachers, including the fears they may feel. It requires a respect for the goodness of the student. In order to develop these two ground qualities the teacher must practice meditation. This practice is seen as a necessity both for teacher and students, as the only way we know to integrate knowledge.

**Path.** The path consists of the process of transmission from the teacher to the student. Ebbons articulated six elements of this process. 1) **Authentic Presence**
consists of just being there, "being yourself," making contact with your own defenses, immediate experience, mindful and aware with no "protections," as well as connecting with the space and the students in the room. The teacher does not know what will happen, and does not have to depend on feedback. With no hope and no fear the teacher "just does it," with nothing to lose. If the teacher maintains this balance "the students will come," and the teacher need not fear about whether they will show up. Ebbons believes that we can train teachers to be present. Teachers must take their role strongly, making clear that they are the teacher, create an environment that suits them, by fitting the room to their teaching approach. 2) Discipline involves establishing boundaries of appropriate behavior and punctuality, with clear goals of what is expected of students. The teacher creates a sense of expertise that remains friendly, not repressive, and makes clear the correct information or the means to develop appropriate and necessary skills. Of course, this process is not as difficult with motivated, mature students. 3) Slowing down is a way of creating a sense of space that can help the development of openness. Contemplative teachers provide students opportunities to reflect, feel what's happening inside, feel the space, the environment. Students are encouraged to "see what happens, feel what you feel in your body, feel how the brush touches the paper." From this perspective, we are not on a "crash course" or a competition. 4) Tailoring deals with the differences between students and how to bring that awareness into the process. This process occurs by helping students label their experience by giving feedback such as, "look at what you are doing." It recognizes the variety among students, and the awareness that some of these differences bring irritation or other feelings to the teacher. The teacher helps to confirm the student’s experience by responding to the class atmosphere by, for example, jumping in with an activity if the class feels "slow." Tailoring can give students the opportunity to learn the material for themselves in their own way. Ebbons noted that effective tailoring requires a good deal of incorporate knowledge to have sufficient experience to make appropriate choices and to have the self-confidence to "play" with the situation. 5) Balancing form and formlessness consists of offering a learning structure that gives clarity and arouses discipline along with sufficient space and personal connection for creativity. A good learning climate requires form, but too much form can make students dependent and give them little opportunity to use their own insights. Students have to use knowledge in their own way and contemplative teaching recognizes that inspiration may come from an immediate moment. This requires that the teacher "give away" the teaching by giving students space to choose their own forms and by creating formless situations in which students have to work with creativity out of uncertainty. This requires reliance on the sense of basic goodness and a trust in authentic presence. Again, observation indicates the importance of a regular meditation practice in dealing with openness and formlessness. 6) Completing the situation consists of the teacher and students working together and occurs when the teacher moves back from the situation and lets the teaching happens by itself. With trust in openness, a situation clears itself up and resolves itself with a sense of joy and play.

Fruition. The third component of contemplative teaching is the fruition of the teaching situation, or the result within the student. Ebbons identified two major elements of fruition. First, students have integrated knowledge. They know how to use the knowledge in their own lives. They can switch among theory,
practice, and experience. Second, they view learning as an endless path. This view requires that students make friends with themselves, and approach their lives with greater self confidence that they can succeed. They may see life as problematic, but believe that they can handle what it brings to them.

**Initiation into a new way of living.** This sense of ground, path, and fruition corresponds to a view of the student journey at Naropa as described by Reginald Ray, Professor of Religious Studies (Ray, 1995). Ray noted that at Naropa we study a discipline like at any other college, but we also study something non-traditional, in terms of nonverbal, non-conceptual awareness (meditation, traditional martial or meditative arts). We accumulate information and techniques like at other places, but also pass through a process of change and transformation, a change of existential status. Through this process we become a different person, although paradoxically we become the person we always were, but perhaps more real, more like our true self. We come looking for answers to the deep questions we have about our lives. However, we do not find answers to our questions, and sometimes we begin to question the things we thought we knew for sure. We struggle with this uncertainty and ultimately learn to relax with the openness, uncertainty, and unpredictability, seeing the questions as more important than the answers. We learn to appreciate the transformative power of living with those unanswered and unanswerable questions daily, and dwell in the basic questions about our existence, seeing this process as our life, our path. Through it we change and transform.

From this process we can see several fruitions of a Naropa education. Naropa graduates become more comfortable living in the question and asking the question. This leads to a heightened sense of intelligence, openness, presence, attentiveness, curiosity, and inquisitiveness. When we think we have the answers we become very stupid and dull, whereas keeping an open mind and an open heart, makes us energized and inspired by challenges. We come to see learning as a lifelong enterprise, and we continue to deepen our learning as we go through life. We develop greater warmth and compassion toward other people. We cultivate qualities of gentleness and fearlessness, confidence in life as it is, with its uncertainty and pain, and competence to meet its challenges. Ultimately, this process leads toward greater enjoyment of life.

**Bowing Out.** The philosophy of contemplative living, and the components of contemplative teaching, represent an ideal, a vision, toward which we aspire. Although we observe significant change in students in the directions we have described above, as a consequence of their experience at Naropa, we must realize that many individuals devote their entire life to a contemplative path and that we might best view realization of the ideals as a life-long goal. Most students spend between two and four years at The Institute, and their experience provides a base for continuing learning of the contemplative journey. Within the context of this understanding, we can see that the learning experience at The Institute strongly focuses on integrating the spiritual and educational aspirations. Thus we can view this approach to higher education as a context for pursuing both the “sacred” and “secular” (McWilliams, 1993).

At Naropa we follow a tradition of beginning and ending each class or meeting with a bow. Although we did not begin this chapter with the bow, I invite us to end with it, even if only in our minds, as a way of recognizing the depth and
breadth of our aspirations, our shared bravery in pursuing this noble path, and our recognition of each other as fellow seekers in this life-long process. The bow has several purposes (Berliner). It communicates friendliness and respect, and acknowledges and honors the qualities of “warriorship:” bravery, gentleness, and wakeful intelligence. It honors the purpose of our shared activity as cultivating those qualities and bringing them to fuller expression. The bow consists of three distinct stages or components. First, we take a “warrior’s” posture: eyes open, back straight, and with the hands resting inside the thighs. This posture brings a sense of clarity, alertness, strength, free from distraction. It allows us to feel the possibilities of wakefulness and vision, and helps our readiness to learn. Next we focus on feeling the present moment. We attempt to relax within ourselves, feel our hearts, our openness and vulnerability. These feelings provide a source of gentleness, acknowledging our longing to make contact with and serve others. In some ways we might describe it as a kind of positive sadness. Finally we complete the bow itself. In bowing we give a gift of our inspiration to all others bowing with us, and share these qualities fully with others.

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