



**Mr. Jack Miller**

***Symposium Session 1:***  
**Education and Global Citizenship:**  
**A Buddhist Perspective**  
*Speaker*

### **Brief Bio-data**

#### **Educating for Wisdom**

This explores the nature of wisdom and includes a brief discussion of insight, humility and love. Education that facilitates the development of wisdom in students focuses on connections in various areas including connection to the earth and to community. Finally two examples of educating for wisdom are described including the Equinox school in Toronto and education reform in Bhutan.

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“The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.” -Ralph Waldo Emerson





## **E**ducating for Wisdom

*Mr. John P. Miller*

The focus of most schools and universities is on the development of marketable skills. Departments and Ministries of Education support this focus by stating that these skills are needed if citizens are to compete in the global marketplace. We have heard this mantra since the early 80's with documents as a *Nation at Risk* which eventually led to programs such as No Child Left Behind with its emphasis on standardized testing. Has this emphasis achieved its goals? In some cases test scores have gone up but has this focus made the world a better place to live in? In the fall of 2008 the world experienced a financial meltdown that began in the United States where investment banks and the banking system in general were engaged in high risk investment strategies. Many of the individuals running these institutions were educated in the best universities in the U.S. Clearly there was little wisdom in their decisions that led to the financial mess. We also live in a world where each day there is more evidence of climate change that could very soon make much of the world uninhabitable. Yet governments and world leaders refuse to seriously address the problem.



The former Dean of Harvard writes in his book *Excellence without Soul* that Harvard teaches students but does not make them wise

It is time that schools and universities focus on the development of wisdom if humanity is to survive. Matthew Fox quotes a Native American elder who said: “Only a madman thinks with his head.” Fox (2006) goes on to write: “I might add, only a mad civilization thinks with its head...or educates people to think their heads. A healthy individual and a healthy educational system learn to think with the heart as well as with head. Such a civilization thinks wisely.” (p.102) Our education system needs to focus on the development of wisdom or what the ancients called the “thinking heart” (Miller, 2008).

## Wisdom

What is wisdom? It is not the collection of information but a deeper knowing that is characterized by *insight, humility, and love*.

*Insight.* Wisdom involves seeing into the nature of things. Both science and religion have helped us in this quest. Science and particularly ecology has shown us the interdependence and interconnectedness of nature. Yet various religions have also shared this insight at a more personal level. In Christianity there is the proverb “as a man thinketh so he or she is” clarifying the effect that our thoughts have on our life.. In Buddhism there is the following statement:

The thought manifests as the word,  
The word manifests as the deed,  
The deed develops into habit,  
And the habit hardens into character.  
So watch the thought  
And its ways with care,  
And let it spring from love  
Born out of respect for all beings.

(Source unknown cited in Miller, 2007. p. 191)

Seeing how our thoughts impact ourselves and others is an insight that can eventually change our behavior so that we live more wisely.



Another insight into the nature of things is that universe is constantly changing and evolving. We see this in our own lives as we go through infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age and we witness it in nature with the change of the seasons. In Buddhism this is the principle of *impermanence* as things are constantly in a state of flux. As we see how we are interconnected and how we are part of a dynamic process of change, we lose the sense of self-importance that our egos crave. Instead we can see our place in the cosmos.

*Humility.* Seeing our place in nature is a humbling process. By humbling I do not mean demeaning, in fact, it can lead to sense that each of us has a unique role to fill in the universe. Yet this sense should not lead us to egoism but an awareness that we part of a whole. The *Tao Te Ching* constantly reinforces this message and suggests that the best leaders are the ones who in their wisdom bring out the best in people and do not feel the need to control others.. One quotation for the *Tao Te Ching* states “ Know your position and understand the Mother” (#59) (Kaufman, 1998. p.122)

Emerson (1990) comments on how humans separate themselves from nature:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is not time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (169)

As a result of having not seen ourselves as part of nature, we have inflicted environmental damage on the planet. Rather than humility there has been an arrogance that has led to the subjugation of indigenous peoples, needless wars (e.g Vietnam and Iraq) and poverty. Through wisdom and seeing our place in the cosmos we could begin heal the planet.

Nature helps us see our place in the universe and to also embrace the mystery at the heart of the cosmos. Confronting this mystery leads to sense of not-knowing and humility. Zen and Taoism emphasize this element. For example, Ray Grigg (1994) cites the following Zen saying “The most dangerous thing in the world is to think you understand something.”(p. 247) He then follows with a quotation from Taoism “Knowing is the way of fools”.(p.247) Both these quotations point to how experience cannot be explained away. Grigg argues that this wisdom leads to a “perpetual preparedness” where the person approaches each situation with a readiness and openness. He states: “Each individual person becomes the balanced and shapeless center of the universe, dancing alone with the unpredictable order that swirls everywhere.” (p.247)



Susan Murphy (2006), a Zen teacher writes of not knowing our own goodness: The *Tao Te Ching* speaks of the “people of old” (or people closer to our own original simplicity) as being good without knowing that they were good, and being just without knowing that they were just. When we stop supposing that this or that and freely become what we actually are, we leave generous room for the other to be free to be exactly what they are. What a gift!” (p.161)

### *Love*

A commitment to spiritual life necessarily means we embrace the eternal principle that love is all, everything, our true destiny. Despite overwhelming pressure to conform to the culture of lovelessness, we still seek to know love. That seeking is itself a manifestation of divine spirit. (bell hooks, 2000, p. 78)

Like hooks, King and Gandhi believed that love was at the centre of the cosmos and underlies all that we strive for. Wisdom acknowledges this and nourishes all forms of love.

I find hooks’ arguments particularly compelling because she suggests that those who fight for social justice and equity often ignore the importance of love in their struggles. She sees love as “the primary way we end domination and oppression.” (p.76) Through love we see how as human beings we all want happiness and well being. Of course, the shape of this happiness can differ in various contexts but still we share this desire to be happy and not suffer.

Gandhi and King would let not themselves hate their opponents but instead saw them through the eye of compassion. Mandela also had this quality. When he was in prison, he would look for small acts of kindness from the guards and this awareness kept him going for the 27 years he was in prison. When he was heading up the commission for reconciliation, he made sure that wardens from his prison were included.

When love disappears then we see the other as object and no longer as a human being. Unfortunately much political discourse today in the United States is characterized by name calling and lack of mutual respect. Paul Krugman (2009) calls this behavior “The Big Hate.”

Love, or compassion, is also missing in our education. How often do we hear education officials or academics speak of love? Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (1999) sates

that the development of compassion is what is most missing from schools today. Perhaps it is that our teachers are not compassionate, or maybe it is the students who are not compassionate. But it is clear-something is wrong. We are not learning properly. I feel that we are not learning properly because we are not open to each other. Compassion, however, is what opens the heart. (p. 59)

I turn now to how we can develop wisdom-based learning in our schools.



## Wisdom based learning

If insight is one of the key aspects of wisdom, then how can we foster this in our schools? I have argued in other contexts that *the curriculum should focus primarily on relationships and connections so that the student can become aware of the interdependence of life* (Miller, 2007). Unfortunately the school curriculum tends to be fragmented as we break information down into courses, units, and lessons with little emphasis on how knowledge is connected. Instead, the curriculum should be developed around several key connections and I have identified six. They include:

- Subject connections
- Earth connections
- Community connections
- Thinking connections
- Body mind connections
- Soul connections.

The first three tend to be more external while the last three or more internal to the individual. Let me describe each of the six and give an example of how each connection might be manifested in the classroom.

*Subject Connections.* It is important that children see how knowledge is interrelated. Taking courses in separate subjects that does not allow for exploring that connections between subjects is problematic. What is needed are integrated approaches to curriculum. Issues such as poverty and violence in society lend themselves to this broadly integrative approach. James Beane(1997) is an advocate of this approach and describes how teachers can implement it in his book *Curriculum Integration*. In all the these approaches knowledge is not kept within a particular subject but linked to other subjects and themes. An outcome for students is that they see relationships and how these relationships can impact their life and society at large.

At the University Level we here the call for interdisciplinary programs but often bureaucratic regulations prevent this from happening.

*Earth Connections.* Here students see their relationship to the earth and its processes. They can start by reading indigenous people's literature from the around the world. I particularly like a book entitled *Touch the Earth* (McLuhan, 1972). For example, below are the words of Chief Flying Hawk of the Ogalaga Sioux:



The tipi is much better to live in; always clean, warm in winter, cool in summer; easy to move. The white man builds big house, cost much money, like big cage shut out sun, can never move; always sick. Indians and animals know better how to live than white man; nobody can be in good health if he does not have all the time fresh air, sunshine and good water. If the Great Spirit wanted men to stay in one place he would make the world stand still; but He made it to always change, so birds and animals can move and always have green grass and ripe berries, sunlight to work and play, and night to sleep; summer for flowers to bloom, and winter for them to sleep; always changing; everything for good. . . (p.64)

Even more important is for children to have direct experience with the earth. In Japan I met a school principal, Giichiro Yamanouchi who had small forests planted on the school grounds. The students would do research about what trees to plant and then once planted they took care of the trees and watched them grow. The students would even write poems about the trees that they care for.

*Community Connections.* Children need to develop connections to each other, to adults, to the community at large and the global community. Ideally the classroom should be community where students feel safe and loved. The teacher sets this tone of trust and acceptance through their care and authenticity. Strategies as cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994 )and Tribes (Gibbs, 1987 ) can also help in this process.

King developed his vision of the Beloved Community for society and I believe this vision can also be applied to the school. King (1968) believed that “We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” (p.168) Students need to see how their well being is connected to the well being of others in the school. This vision runs counter to the one that is fostered by the current emphasis on testing and competition. This kind of mutuality can be developed through school wide projects. The film *Paper Clips* shows how a school came together through a project that collected a paper clip for each person who died in the holocaust.

As the children mature they can also see how they are part of wider community that extends to the entire planet. Awareness that we are not separate from people suffering on other continents should gradually emerge as the students sense of interconnectedness grows and expands.

*Thinking Connections.* In her book Jill Bolte Taylor (2009), a brain scientist, describes her stroke experience and how it made her aware of the importance of right brained thinking. Her stroke affected her left brain which is the seat of logical thought and language. She refers to this “brain chatter” or that “calculating intelligence that knows when you have to do your laundry.” (p.31) It is also home of our “ego center.” The right hemisphere sees things in relationship and in the large context of the whole.





...our right mind perceives each of us as equal members of the human family. It identifies our similarities and recognizes our relationship with this marvelous planet, which sustains our life. It perceives the big picture, how everything is related, and how we all join together to make up the whole. Our ability to be empathic, to walk in the shoes of another and feel their feelings is a product of our right frontal cortex. (p.30)

Taylor also suggests that it is the place where we experience inner peace. Through rehabilitation therapy Taylor recovered the use of her left brain but she has learned to use both sides of the brain to live more fully and realize a deeper happiness. Now when she begins to feel stress she “shifts right” and thus slows down and now listens to her body and trusts her instincts. She breathes deeply and repeats to herself “*In this moment I reclaim my JOY, or In this moment I am perfect, whole, and beautiful, or I am an innocent and peaceful child of the universe*, I shift back into the consciousness of right mind. (p. 178)

Our students need to use both the right and left brain. They need to be able to think clearly and analyze information but they also need to see relationships and feel the kind of peace that Taylor and all of us can experience. I believe that the use of imagery and metaphor in the classroom can stimulate the right side of the brain while various approaches to critical thinking can support the left side. (Miller, 2007)

*Body-Mind Connections.* We have lost touch with our bodies. The evidence that supports this view is the data on the high percentage of people that are overweight in North America (<http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSL0778048620070807>). These data include young people as well. This problem is in part due to a tendency to live in our heads with little connection to body and soul. Abrams (1996) points to Descartes’ work as contributing to our alienation from the body. He believes this has led to our disconnection from the environment instead of recognizing that the body and the earth are intimately connected. Indigenous people have made this connection. Abrams describes how the native peoples of Australia would walk the routes of their ancestors and in this process the body and the land would become one. Abrams states: “he virtually *becomes* the journeying Ancestor, and thus the storied earth is born afresh” (p.170)

In North America Mindfulness practices are helping teachers and students be more connected to their bodies. A variety of programs have been initiated that usually start with a focus on the breath that allow the person to move into their bodies. The Mind-Body Awareness (MBA) program in Oakland California developed by Noah Levine works with inner city youth, often gang members. Director of the MBA, Chris McKenna, introduces mindfulness activities through martial arts movies and songs to engage the young people. McKenna says, “I’ve experienced many different approaches to working with people in these kinds of extreme circumstances and mindfulness is by far the most powerful intervention I’ve ever worked with” (Boyce 2011, 257).



In my own teaching I have introduced meditation and mindfulness practices to over 2000 teachers in the courses I teach at the University of Toronto. I ask them meditate every day for six weeks. Students are required to keep a journal which focuses on how the process of meditation is going (e.g. how the concentration and focus are going, how the body is feeling, etc.). The journals also focus on how meditation has affected them. Some of themes have included

- Giving themselves permission to be alone and enjoy their own company;
- Increased listening capacities;
- Feeling increased energy;
- Being less reactive to situations and generally experiencing greater calm and clarity.

At the end of the process they write a reflective summary of the experience. Below is an excerpt from one of these summaries.

I find it difficult to express how the meditation experience has been for me, . . . I find it difficult to use language to describe what's happened to over the course of the last few weeks. . . . What amazed me the most was how concentrating intensely on loving kindness and its implications for myself, my friends, my family my neighbors, my teachers, my colleagues, my acquaintances, the people who pass me on the street, the people who upset me, the people who participate and perpetuate structures that I oppose-that projecting lovingkindness to them resulted in a tangible concrete shift in my relationships-without my necessarily knowing, or intending it. We always think we have to 'do' something in order to effect change, without realizing that we are acting, we are effecting change by attuning to our self, to our capacity for compassion and understanding and reflection. Mindfulness practice, similarly, I do believe effects change. For me at least it enables me to pause a moment before I react, before I blindly go about responding or acknowledging as I walk through my daily experiences without every really needing to be there. I felt the effects-I felt a shift-I felt I most when it would suddenly occur to me that I'm feeling good as a result of relating to people-and I don't mean my friends and family. I felt it most when I related to strangers, when I looked at them and saw them for the first time, when I thought about them as co-creators, as parts of myself. . . . What I mean is that. . . it is a matter of my not seeing a distinction between myself and them.

By working on themselves through meditative practice teachers can simply be more present in their work and thus more available to students. Through this presence they can more easily connect with students and provide a richer context for learning..



*Soul Connections*. Emerson wrote that “Education is the drawing out of the soul” yet the term soul is rarely heard in educational discourse. Soul is defined here as a vital and mysterious energy that gives meaning and purpose to one’s life. In my *book Education and the Soul* (2000) I have described my understanding of soul and how it can be nurtured in students, our schools, and ourselves.

Awareness of the soul in education means that we are sensitive to the inner life of the student and attempt to nourish this life in various ways. I have called for a *curriculum for the inner life* which can include journal writing where students explore their thoughts and feelings, writing their own autobiography, visualization, dream work, and meditation.

Another valuable approach to soul connections is what Maria Montessori called *cosmic education*. Montessori’s son, Mario. (1992) describes cosmic education when he writes: “Cosmic education seeks to offer the young, at the appropriate sensitive period, the stimulation and help they need to develop their minds, their vision, and their creative power, whatever the level or range of their personal contributions may be.”(p.101) Her son wrote that the child needs to have a “prior interest in the whole” so he or she can make sense of individual facts. This can be done in part by introducing students to ecological principles that focus on the interdependence of living and non-living things. Mario Montessori gives the example of students studying the life cycle of salmon and its relationship with the environment.

Aline Wolf (2004) has recently written about Montessori’s vision of cosmic education. She argues that

Essentially Montessori’s cosmic education gives the child first an all-encompassing sense of the universe with its billions of galaxies. Then it focuses on our galaxy, the Milky Way, our solar system, planet Earth and its geological history, the first specimens of life, all species of plants and animals and finally human beings. Inherent in the whole study is the interconnectedness of all creation, the oneness of things. (p.6)

Wolf also makes reference to the work of Brian Swimme and the Universe story. Cosmic education helps the children place themselves within the total framework of the universe. The image of the universe presented by Montessori and Swimme is one of order and purpose. Since human beings are part of the universe, it gives us a common reference point beyond the boundaries created by nations and religions. Wolf also points out the cosmic education can help children develop a sense of reverence for life and care for the earth. Seeing the miracle of life on earth within the vastness of the universe can help students appreciate more deeply life and the earth itself. Cosmic education can also give students a deep sense of gratitude as well.



As examples, when we see a beautiful valley nestled in the mountains, we can reflect on the fact that it was formed by water that labored thousands of years to wear down the mountainous terrain, when we enter a car or train, we can look back and feel grateful to the first human being who constructed a wheel. Awareness of the long-term cosmic pattern, of which we are only an infinitesimal part, calls us to a deep humility and reverence for all the labors of nature and the work of human beings that preceded us.

(Wolf, p.16)

Wolf suggests that cosmic education can give children a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Montessori felt that within the person lay a *spiritual embryo* which needs to be respected and nourished so that students can eventually find their purpose on earth.

## **Examples of Wisdom Based Education**

In the last few years I have had the privilege of working with two projects that are based on the principles that I have been talking about. One is a public school in Toronto called the Equinox Holistic Alternative School. This is an elementary school in its fourth year that has based its curriculum planning on the six connections that I have just spoken of. It is committed to teaching the whole child-body, mind and spirit. You can learn more about the school by going to its website: [www.wholechildschool.ca](http://www.wholechildschool.ca).

Another very interesting example is the country of Bhutan. It is known as the country whose primary goal is to develop Gross National Happiness (GNH). Rather than emphasizing consumerism and expanding GDP, they have focused on happiness and well being. Bhutan aspires to be a wisdom-based culture with this broader perspective.

In December, 2009, 24 educators with expertise in holistic and ecological education were invited to work with Bhutanese officials to orient the education system to support the goal of GNH. A month after the workshop, principals from all the schools were brought together to begin the process of working towards the vision developed in the workshop and articulated by the Prime Minister. At beginning of that meeting the Prime Minister, Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley (2010) addressed the principals and identified some areas of focus.

First, he referred to the research on mindfulness meditation and recommended that each day teachers and students engage in meditation for a few minutes. He connected this suggestion to the wisdom traditions in Bhutanese culture:

And likewise, just a few minutes of contemplation and meditation at the beginning and end of a school day or of a ceremony, ritual, class, assembly, or even sports event can change and deepen the atmosphere on the spot, and bring instant connection



with the inner joy that is the essence of GNH. . . We are learning personally how to connect directly with these ancient teachings and wisdom that are such a precious part of our heritage. (p.10)

Another important initiative was committing to developing Green Schools in Bhutan. Green schools focus on the following dimensions:

- *Environmental Greenery*-Creating the ambience for enriching the experience of living and learning;
- *Intellectual Greenery*- Cultivating the gifts of the mind;
- *Academic Greenery*-Discovering the grace of great ideas;
- *Social Greenery*- Learning to live and learn together;
- *Cultural Greenery*-Proclaiming our sense of self and identity;
- *Spiritual Greenery*- Looking into ourselves and connecting to higher level of consciousness;
- *Aesthetic Greenery*- Appreciating the beautiful, the graceful and the tasteful;
- *Moral Greenery*- Fostering goodness over cleverness, cooperation over competition, fair play over victory at any cost.

I am very excited about the work in Bhutan and the Equinox School. They are providing examples of how we can educate children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the end of the workshop the Prime Minister was interviewed by one of the observers, Silver Donald Cameron, who writes for the *Chronicle Herald* in Halifax. The Prime Minister made the following comments.

I would like to see an educational system quite different from the conventional factory, where children are just turned out to become economic animals, thinking only for themselves. I would like to see graduates that are more human beings, with human values, that give importance to relationships, that are eco-literate, contemplative, analytical. I would like graduates who know that success in life is a state of being when you can come home at the end of the day satisfied with what you have done, realizing that you are a happy individual not only because you have found happiness for yourself, but because you have given happiness, in this one day's work, to your spouse, to your family, to your neighbours — and to the world at large. <http://thechronicleherald.ca/NovaScotian/1159562.html>

I believe more and more people around the planet also share this inspiring vision of education. As one of my students wrote this summer, "let the real education begin!"



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