

Meditation as Education in the Present – A Dialogical-Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper examines meditation as an educational practice through a dialogical-pedagogical perspective, bringing Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue into conversation with Tibetan Buddhist contemplative traditions. It argues that both approaches share a common concern with the existential search for truth, the cultivation of authentic presence, and the reduction of human suffering through heightened awareness. Drawing on the teachings of Lama Rigdzin Shikpo and Lama Shenpen Hookham, meditation is interpreted as a process of perceptual practice that develops openness, clarity, and self-awareness. These insights are related to dialogic pedagogy, which emphasizes performative, phenomenological, and transcultural learning grounded in recognition of the Other. The paper further examines the epistemological and practical limits of dialogic pedagogy, arguing that rational reflection alone is insufficient for authentic educational transformation. By integrating embodied awareness with dialogical encounter, both Buber's philosophy and Tibetan Buddhist meditation challenge objectifying modes of perception and emphasize the educational significance of the present moment. The study concludes that meditation can be understood not merely as a contemplative technique but as a dialogical educational practice that fosters ethical responsiveness, self-knowledge, and meaningful relationships in contemporary adult education.

Keywords: I-Thou reality, Tibetan Buddhism, Martin Buber, Dialogic Pedagogy.

Review Article

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1. INTRODUCTION

In my contribution I show what meditational elements dialogic pedagogy in trans-cultural adult education entails. [Starting from its aims, the implementation essentially lies in finding one's own true-life path, as undistorted or as healthy as possible, or, put in Buddhist terms, with as little suffering as possible. For here lie, as Martin Buber critically formulates in I and Thou, common ways in the dialogical and Buddhist perception of the world as it is seen together. A central moment of both paths of knowledge is existential search for truth. This perception materializes as an active-passive process. For Buber it happens only in the present, in the immediacy of the moment. The power of the present is decisive. But how this is possible, Buber did not provide an answer. I have found

it in Tibetan Buddhism. How truth is sought through meditation there, I want to represent critically in connection with my dialogical-pedagogical reflections.

2. Meditation

Meditation refers here to Tibetan Buddhism and its interpretations of the yogin Lama Rigdzin Rhikpo and the yogini Lama Shenpen Hookham. Hookham (among others) is a pupil of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, a teacher of the Kagyu tradition; Rigdzin Rhikpo also represents the Nyingma tradition and is a pupil of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Hookham (2006) regards meditation as a remedy for a suffering that arises from fundamental confusion. This confusion prevents people from perceiving the "true nature" of human being. "True nature"

here means sensing and recognizing reality and truth of one's own immediate experiences. For Shikpo (2000) meditation is a process of self-awareness. Through learning openness, clarity, and sensitivity in the meditation process, both teachers say, people become aware of themselves.

2.1 Dialogical-pedagogical viewpoint

From a dialogic-pedagogical viewpoint, these statements about meditation can be understood as a theory of perceptual practice. At the conceptual level, it resembles dialog pedagogy as a methodology of performative-aesthetic education: "In the mediation of the dialogical principle, it is about shaping a space of discourse that enables cognitive, emotional, and socio-bodily—i.e., performative perception and radically democratic recognition of the otherness" (Muth 2009, p. 36). Epistemologically, this education is oriented toward trans-cultural dialogic exchange (cf. Muth 2011). Its mode, in turn, is phenomenological, meaning that the educational contents are the conscious processes of the people involved in the educational process (cf. Muth 2008). In practical terms, a perceptual space should be created during meditation in which participants consciously recognize concepts about their fellow humans. This insight, according to the claim of dialogic pedagogy and Tibetan Buddhist meditation, leads to turning toward the Other and to the reduction of suffering for all living beings.

2.1.1 Limits

However, from a dialogic-pedagogical perspective, the transmission and realization of a performative capability of dialogic ethics encounters limits, because it transcends technique on the one hand and can only occur in the absence of conceptualizations regarding the otherness of the Other on the other hand. For the dialog philosophy's philosopher Martin Buber, it was only a matter of authentic response to the respective existential situation and of "vulnerability to the unknown" when he says: "... the real path ... does not arise

merely from what I perceive and what I plan, but also from the unrecognized and not-to-be-recognized, from the unforeseen and not-to-be-expected" (Buber 1962, p. 841).

2.2.2 Existential and Scientific Truth

Here, Buber fundamentally assumes that the person knows their own existential truth and has awareness of their own biography. Yet these conditions are, on the one hand, idealistically formulated, and on the other hand, they reflect, in the sense of Bourdieu (1999), "doxa commonplaces" of the dialogic philosopher. In other words, when implementing dialogic-pedagogical aims, the question arises as to how "true subjects" (Bourdieu) can gain freedom and authentic truth about their lives. For Bourdieu as for Merleau-Ponty, this happens through the reflection on the unreflect, through recognizing the unconscious social determinants that weigh on the inquirer of knowledge, which for Bourdieu rests on sociologists (cf. Schrage 2009). It is, according to Bourdieu, to be neutralized to generate scientific thinking that "does not trap the actors in the cage of rigid determinism but provides them with means for potentially liberating consciousness" (Bourdieu *ibid.* p. 372ff.). Yet dialogic pedagogy assumes that pure reflection is not enough if the person does not engage with things in a distancing from their "nature" (cf. Buber 1978, p. 45). For, as Böhme/Böhme (1985) show in "The other of reason," reason only helps so much, since "reason alienates the human from the body and thereby excludes a fundamental source of liberation." The human nature must therefore be included in processes of self-awareness. Reason as intellectual autonomy excludes bodily embodiment, natural dependencies, affective spontaneity, and traditional ties (*ibid.*, p. 18). Accordingly, Buber recognizes the human as a "body-soul unity" and also criticizes the "reification of the world," which he means as the alienation of humans from their own nature. In this sense, Buddhism and dialogic thinking align again. An intellectual analysis alone does not help the human being to perceive the otherness of

the Other and to ensure their own happiness. In this regard, Buber relies on dialog, while Buddhism relies on the conceptual triad of insight, meditation, and action, which, however, can form a unit in concrete life. What both paths connect is their temporal and spatial reference to the present.

2.2 The Present Moment

Experientially, the process of perceiving is always connected to the present moment, as Shikpo (2000, p. 14) describes: "Awareness itself is intimately connected to our idea of time. The whole notion of time implies the presence of awareness." In this way, with the perception of the present, a more aware perception of space occurs. Similarly, Buber speaks of the dialog: "Present, not the punctual, which only denotes the conclusion of the time laid out in thought, the illusion of a fixed progression, but the real and fulfilled, there is only insofar as there is presence" (Buber 1995, p. 13).

From a dialogic-pedagogical perspective, the link to educational processes is derived here, for Shikpo and Buber alike hold that changes, new insights, and an immediate perception of the otherness of the Other are possible only in the present. In meditation, one speaks of the "presentness of the experience": "All our sense of power and ability to change – and to affect, to be aware, and so on – is in the present. The past, for instance, is a living present experience" (Shikpo 2007, p. 93). Thus, there is a corresponding immediate experience in which, for a moment, past, present, and future coincide, which Shikpo calls "immediacy, nowness, and presentness" (ibid., p. 94). Immediacy is also a quality of truly genuine encounter, which Buber means: "The relationship to the Thou is immediate. Between I and Thou there is no conceptuality, no foreknowledge, and no imagination; and memory itself is transformed as it plunges from singularity into wholeness. Between I and Thou there is no purpose, no greed, and no anticipation; and longing itself is transformed as it plunges from dream into appearing. Any

means is an obstacle. Only where all means have fallen away does the encounter occur" (Buber 1995, p. 12). Consequently, Buber sees the present as a force that generates change when a person responds to the present in dialogue with a Thou (cf. Muth 2004a, 2004b). Yet naming a dialogical doctrine is resisted by the author. He does not want to impose rules. Still, the few of his hints amount to a rational description of a dialogical method while also attributing feelings to the I-It domain of human experience. Nevertheless, he conceptually integrates the wholeness of the human being.

3. The New Perspective

On the one hand, dialog pedagogy follows Buber's "existential philosophy of form" (Werner 1994, p. 13), which attempts to lift the logocentric splits between knowing and acting and the egocentric self-reflection of the human being, and thus understands itself as also a pedagogical perspective "with its own direction" (ibid.). On the other hand, it positions itself before the paradox of offering a practice, although the intended perspective can only be captured or represented in a conceptual form to a limited extent, because the dialogical reality of the I-Thou "cannot be managed through clinging to a concept, but through unprejudiced perception of the real situation" (Muth 2011, p. 7), i.e., in Buber's words: "I have no principles. There are things we must do here and now. I have no principles, only a sense of direction and I act according to the given situation ... A principle is something that forces you to act in a prescribed way. ... every situation must be re-considered. ... Keep your eyes open – that is all I can tell you, for I cannot give you a principle" (Buber as quoted in Mendes-Flohr 1995, p. 19).

Under this new direction, which Buber's dialogic philosophy and dialog pedagogy classify as one form of practical life stance, there is a form of existential epistemology located at the boundary of transrational consciousness (cf. Muth 2005; Wilber 1994). This means that a rational

worldview of the material sciences and an autonomous adult I, which freely binds itself, move beyond through contemplative faculties and deep intuition toward the sense of a “divinity behind the appearances of the Manifested,” i.e., an existential space (ibid.). This occurs here through linking dialogical motifs as a perspective and dialog as action with the previously described view of meditation. The following approaches to meditation identified by Hookham and Shikpo, namely their so-called meditational methodologies, are intended here to close the conceptual gap in the implementation of the dialogical principle.

If Buber emphasizes describing what I-Thou is, Buddhism actively asks how people can fail and miss the I-Thou reality: “These texts, written by realized masters from their own experience, are not so much about non-conceptual reality itself, as about how to avoid the many subtle ways we can get side-tracked in our pursuit of it” (Hookham 2008, p. 15). Yet in dialogic thinking as in Buddhism, the aim is not merely to find the I-Thou reality. Rather, the motivation for this search lies in the fact that only in the concept-free reality lies the truth that people need for their own conscious life conduct and for biographical self-education, and thus for gaining our own self-education (cf. Muth 2011, p. 185). Consequently, a person can only genuinely perceive their truth and decide how and what to realize with the world and with people. For Buddhism, in finding this truth lies liberation from suffering: “... we are trying to link into that truth as deeply as possible, because linking into truth has a profoundly liberating effect. It is for you to judge for yourself whether that is true or not. ... The overall aim ... is to awaken in you a heart response giving you increased confidence with a greater sense of connectedness, value, meaning, purpose and direction in life” (Hookham 2008, 15f.).

4. Which Way?

Moreover, the author (2007, p. 50) assumes that people can develop “an inherent sense of truth.” Through meditation and letting

go of our false convictions in the form of thoughts, we “discover the true nature of our being” (ibid.). This discovery occurs through continuous and systematic exploration and reflection along the path of meditation. Practically, this exploration happens through conscious awareness of thoughts, feelings, and impulses to act. Beyond these thoughts and the concepts created about the world, fellow humans, and us, Tibetan Buddhism describes a reality that Hookham (2007, p. 49) characterizes as “openness, clarity, and sensitivity.”

To cultivate trust in the reality of openness, clarity, and sensitivity, which dialog pedagogy understands as a differentiated form of I-Thou reality, characterizes then practical meditation. When a person opens themselves on the meditative practice path to the I-Thou or the reality of openness, clarity, and sensitivity, they discover their true nature, for this reality “... does not change, neither in life nor in death” (ibid., pp. 48–49). But due to conditioned beliefs, people are confused, so the Buddhist tradition suggests, and consequently they do not recognize their true nature. They are ignorant. From this arises fear, which in turn reveals a lack of trust. Physically, we can feel when and how our heart tightens, for “the heart is a natural part of reality” (ibid., p. 42). What people truly feel in their hearts, according to the Buddhist thesis, is “the vitality of the heart of the universe” (ibid.). By universe, the embodied reality of the Buddha is meant, as shown in the Dharma. The Dharma is the power connected with reality, which can be gained through the study of Buddhist texts, but is primarily conveyed through the teacher-student relationship. Instead of perceiving this power, people identify with their feelings and thoughts and regard the latter as the only reality. Consequently, people experience letting go of the reality constructed by feelings and thoughts as a threat to their/its life. They prefer clinging to images of the Other rather than meeting them or distinguishing between the heart and the constructed reality. Yet it is difficult to describe where thoughts occur

when we meditate: “Usually we think they are in the head or mind, but we have no direct experience of what is in our head” (ibid., pp. 50–51). More precisely, we imagine the head in our field of awareness. But where this dwell remains indeterminable: “That is, you cannot grasp awareness as an object of awareness, just as an eye can see objects but cannot see itself” (ibid., p. 47). Nevertheless, awareness manifests in the “three inseparable qualities of openness, clarity, and sensitivity,” which in turn present the intersubjective reality. In direct experiences in meditation, we discover our latent, but direct knowledge about this: “We open and feel touched. That is essentially all.”

Buber (1995, p. 105) describes the human being in the I-Thou relationship as present and tangible: “What is the eternal: that present in the Now and Here, the primal phenomenon of what we call Revelation? It is this: the person, from the moment of the highest encounter, does not emerge as the same person as the one who entered them. The moment of encounter is not an “experience” that excites and perfects the receptive soul: something happens in the person. It is sometimes like a breath, sometimes like a struggle; it happens. The person who leaves the act of essence of pure relation has within their being something added, something grown, of which they previously did not know and whose origin they cannot rightly name. ... The reality is that we receive what we did not have before and receive it in a way that we know it has been given to us.” (Buber 1995, p. 105).

Thus, for Shikpo (1988, p. 50) a key point in meditation is “learning to be at ease with oneself,” and one thereby notices that ideals are ideals and conditioning of a given culture and society. The aim is not to withdraw internal distance from internalized rules, but to bring them into consciousness and develop awareness of them. This yields new feelings of connectedness to the world and to other people.

Authentically connecting with the world aligns with the educational goals of dialogic action: a shared reality emerges that lies beyond emotions, concepts, and images. Through genuine dialogue, conceptual fixations such as how I engage with people are broken. Similarly, Shikpo regards the essence of meditation as trusting that feelings and thoughts come and go: “The most important thing is how one relates to those things. One needs to develop a feeling of confidence in oneself that one can allow those things (= socially conditioned emotions and thoughts/concepts – CM) to come up. One must understand that they are demonstrating an aspect of the nature of the mind, like waves demonstrate an aspect of the ocean” (ibid., p. 52). This openness corresponds to the equivalent of dialogic action in turning toward the Other. The human being opens themselves to the situation, to the person, to the world, or to one’s own as well as others’ thoughts (cf. Muth 2011, pp. 60–72). It does not require a goal. Simply opening provides the possibility of altering habitual behavioral and action patterns in view of existential decisions. Such openness in dialogic pedagogy is meant in the sense of the I-Thou mode. That is: a person becomes aware that her/his I cannot appropriate the otherness of the Other and that their counterpart is more than a person that can be conceptually grasped. The I-Thou attitude thus opens a space for a new perspective. What matters first is the turning toward rather than turning away. Yet for real change, a clear direction is also required. From a Buddhist perspective, this denotes the intellectual differentiation regarding awareness of interpersonal relationships. Simply spontaneous openness could lead again to another conditioned binding pattern, increasing confusion about the otherness. Thus an open stance helps us turn toward the Thou, and a clear orientation gives us strength to perceive the otherness: “We see that clarity is like a knife that cuts to the heart of the confusion so that the concepts that were shoring up the confusion are forced to collapse” (Hookham 1999, p. 81). This includes the insight that worldly phenomena

continually change, and therefore what we perceive can change: “Increasing awareness is experienced as a sense of entering something new, beginning to see something that you had not noticed before that is somehow real and alive. Each time your awareness increases, your experience feels more real and alive than it did before” (Shikpo 2000, p. 89). At the same time, a new form of sensibility develops in how people respond to their environment. Less entrenched emotional expressions steer action, and people learn to distinguish between habitual feelings and current sensitivity.

5. The New Perspective

Sensitivity, dialogically understood, is the inner realization of the other in relation to the observation of the other as an object of our perceptual structures (cf. Muth 2013). A form of love, which Buber equates with taking responsibility, could also be sensitivity. In this regard, the author does not engage with the associated emotions. However, from the Buddhist perspective described here, awareness of our emotions is crucial; because they create the world in which we live. It should be distinguished that emotions always arise from people themselves, even if the cause appears to lie in the external world, as soon as we become angry with our counterpart: “Actually, however, the anger is in our mind and body. The person or situation that we associate with the anger is external to us and cannot make us feel anything. It is the thoughts and feelings in us that create the sense of anger” (Shikpo 2000, p. 91). But the process of awareness is not about controlling feelings or submitting to them. Rather, it is about becoming sensitive to feelings, sensing their force, and perceiving how they influence reactions to people and the world. From this, space for possibilities of change can be created, regarding perceiving the otherness and the dialogic pedagogical action that follows. To deepen this with sensitivity, openness, and clarity, education can be seen here as a meditative process, without ever fully conceptualizing it. This places us in a space “beyond the thinking mind,” which is only affirmed by those who have opened

themselves to it (cf. Gebauer/Wulf 1992). Dialogic pedagogues tread the narrow edge of the between: “Beyond the subjective, this side of the objective, on the narrow edge where I and Thou meet, lies the realm of the In-Between” (Buber 1982, p. 167). From a dialogic-pedagogical perspective, the Between refers to the present space in which past, present, and future coincide as concepts, and where we humans—in a self-constructing mode—are sensitive, open, and clear.

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