

Following Contemplative Education Students' Transformation Through Their “Ground-of-Being” Experiences

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Abstract

This article examines a recurring phenomenon in students' experience of contemplation in contemplative and transformative education. This ground-of-being phenomenon, which has been reported by students in higher and adult education settings, is a formative aspect of the positive changes they reported. It is examined here to highlight the ways in which the depth of *felt* or precognitive meaning that can occur in contemplative education impacts these changes. The subtlety and range of contemplative experience is described through the ground-of-being experience as a means to support the call from contemplative and transformative education theorists for pedagogies that include the subjective and contemplative.

Keywords

ground-of-being, contemplative education, contemplative practices, transformative education, phenomenology, classical yoga philosophy

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I don't know why anyone would paint things that they didn't love because when you get to paint something you get to think about focus and almost become the object you're looking at you know, and what is that about? I don't know, it's another space that is very meditative where thought stops and time stands still . . . That's probably why I can meditate because I already know what that feels like, now there's this place in my brain, and I can find that spot because I've been there before (Heather,¹ interview October 24, 2009).

This excerpt from Heather's story, in which she describes her discovery of a place "in her brain," is similar to many descriptions of a ground-of-being experience reported by a range of contemplative education students. These students were participants in a research project I conducted in 2009, which looked at the emerging contemplative orientation in education and its proposed benefits. The recurrence, in the participants' stories, of this ground-of-being experience highlighted its importance as a focus for questions regarding these benefits.

Although there are varying conceptions of the ground-of-being in a wide range of cosmologies and philosophies, methodological considerations have directed my correlation of phenomenological and yogic understandings of it. The joining of two specific aspects of these sciences of consciousness led to the definition of the ground-of-being used here. These aspects are the phenomenological conception of the *Lebenswelt*,² which is the "preconceptual foundation of all thought and existence" (Warren, 1984, p. 130), and Yoga³ philosophy's understanding of *Brahman* as the divine transcendent substrate. These theoretical aspects have been linked with the participants' understanding of a benign, foundational ground that is conceived of here as a transconceptual, elemental substrate that founds reality.

The ground-of-being experience began with the participants' sensing of a dimensionality to the internal space that Heather describes above. It was *felt* by many of them to be a "place" they could inhabit, which gave them a sense of stability or grounding. For Angelina, a student in Los Angeles, it is a place of peace where she "can go to, and it's always there and I just keep forgetting to check in more often" (Interview, October 29, 2009). Jacob, at Ramapo College, New Jersey, described how it provided the space for a metacognitive ability to develop: "there's this space in all of us that is not changing, and it gives us a place, a standpoint, so that you can step back, you know?" (Interview, November 15, 2009). The ground-of-being experience is important in education because it illustrates the depth of focus that contemplative education students can reach. It is this level of focus that can lead to stress reduction, an increased ability to retain and retrieve information, the development of equanimity and metacognitive abilities, and the greater resilience that comes from the new meanings that can result from metacognition.

While these benefits are attributed to contemplative practice more generally (Hart, 2008; Lazar et al., 2005; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008), it appeared that the ground-of-being experience anchored these benefits for many of the participants. It is the grounding nature of this specific aspect of contemplative experience in

education that has led to it being the focus of this article. The ground-of-being is also illustrative of the complexity, depth and range of contemplative, subjective experience, and through its study can provide suggestions for pedagogical ways to engage it. This article aims to outline some of these methods, while illustrating the scope of contemplation as a pedagogical resource. It also seeks to support the calls from contemplative and transformative education pedagogs to include the “interior” or subjective site of contemplation in education (e.g., Dirkx, 1997; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005; Hart, 2008; Miller, 2010; Morley, 2008; Zajonc, 2010).

A number of theorists already working in this field have examined the ground-of-being experience, including Clive Beck and Iris Yob. In his work on spirituality in education, Beck (1986) references Hindu and Buddhist concepts of the ground-of-being, which represent the “interconnectedness of reality in the image of the jewel net” (p. 151). Iris Yob (1995), who also works in the field of spirituality and education, suggests that notions of transcendence can replace Christian concepts of God in secular educational settings. She refers to Tillich’s conception of the transcendent as the ground-of-being or “ultimate concern.” In this way, “God” can be substituted for transcendent experiences that surpass or go “beyond immediate, empirical constructions of the world to indicate its underlying structures or forces” (p. 104). While their focus is different than my own, these theorists aim, as I do, to highlight the interrelationality of this experience and the importance of students’ subjective or interior experience.

Interiority

The students whose experiences are discussed here came from a variety of contemplative education courses in four North American universities. Their ground-of-being experiences were one of a number of aspects of their trajectory through contemplation. However, it is the focus here because it literally “grounds” the others, which are: a return to the body, an experience of an expanded state of affectivity, and an altered sense of time and space. The ground-of-being experience has also been chosen because this *quale* of the interior is not uncommon in contemplation, and it can be found in consciousness and education research (Beck, 1986; Gardner, 1996; Miller, 1994; Yob, 1995; Zinnbauer, 1997). For each of these reasons, it leads this examination of the need in education to reengage with student’s interiority, or as Merleau-Ponty describes it, their “interior armature.”⁴ This subjective site is the focus of a number of alternative approaches in education. For example in his development of the two aspects of the self John Dirkx (2006) suggests that this “interiority”, which he partners with “identity”, needs to be engaged to enable a more integrated approach to education (p. 125).

The interior is fundamental to “perspective transformation,” which Carolyn Clark and Arthur Wilson (1991) describe as the core of transformative education and, I would argue, of contemplative education. The understanding of perspective transformation that is used here is derived from the revision of Jack Mezirow’s

seminal work on cognitive change. His work on cognition and transformation has been taken up by a second wave of theorists such as Patricia Cranton and Merv Roy (2003), John Dirkx (1997), John Miller (2010), and others. They propose that the process of transformation involves more than cognitive reflection and cultural influences that it must also include the “extra-rational.” As Cranton and Roy argue, perspective transformation engages the “rational, affective, extra-rational, experiential, or any combination—depending on the individual and the context” (2003, p. 90). With this understanding, perspective transformation is the process by which old systems of meaning making are transformed through rational and extra-rational processes. In this article, change through the extra-rational experience of the ground-of-being, is the focus.

Methodological Approach

The interdisciplinary project that this article draws from took both a theoretical and an applied approach. It engaged contemplative and transformative educational theory and the theoretical correlate described above. Phenomenology and Yoga philosophy were linked, as they are both “experiential ontologies” (Morley, 2008, p. 160) that affirm the “domain of subjectively lived experience and promote a meditation method that maintains neutrality towards belief systems”⁵ (Morley, 2008, p. 147). The phenomenological orientation in the theory led to a similar approach in the fieldwork, through Clark Moustakas’s (1994) Transcendental Phenomenological method, which is founded on a number of Husserl’s phenomenological principals. Primarily, these are the linking of the *noema* or sensory and the *noesis* or psychical, in intentionality, and the necessity in any phenomenological investigation for the phenomenological reduction or the *epoché*.⁶ These aspects are supported in his method through the use of the fundamental qualitative tools of participant observation and in-depth, unstructured interviews, which were used in this study.

The stories of change that are introduced here are selected from interviews I conducted with sixty five students and academics in formal and informal contemplative education courses at four universities and affiliated yoga schools in North America, in 2009. They were World Religions, Yoga Philosophy, Green Yoga, Yoga in Dance, and Zen Art in the schools of Theology, Dance and Art History, the extension program at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), and the Sivananda Yoga School, Los Angeles. East-West Psychology, California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), Educational Leadership in the School of Education at Saint Mary’s College of California, San Francisco; and Yoga Psychology at Ramapo College, New Jersey. These courses incorporate the contemplative into their curriculums in varying ways, and each aims, as most contemplative education programs do, to include the interior landscapes of the student and educator in the pedagogical process.

Phenomenological and Yogic Understandings of the Ground-of-Being

In the following discussion, phenomenological and yogic understandings of the ground-of-being experience are reviewed. Both phenomenology and Yoga agree on the presence of a pre-ontological ground and its founding of phenomenal existence. They both suggest that reflective or contemplative engagement with it can be useful, and while they do this in different ways, they both understand the contemplative to be a means for individuals to experience the wholeness of themselves. The importance, in education, of the sense of wholeness that can arise from the ground-of-being and other contemplative experience, is obvious when one considers the differences of a pedagogical exchange between educators and students who feel balanced and whole, and one in which they do not.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology,⁷ as the study of first-person experience, is particularly useful for this examination of subjective contemplative experience in education. For it directly supports the participants' phenomenological reports, from the often ineffable realms of the subjective, by providing a means to "word" them. The ephemeral and paradoxical nature of this experience is described by David Levin (1999) in his critique of Heidegger's project on being and embodiment. He starts by introducing the *Befindlichkeit*, which is fundamental to Heidegger's project, it is the:

"pre-ontological understanding of being", which attunes and destines our gestural being . . . that is to be found and retrieved by a reflection which parts company with the subjectivity of the *ego-cogito* and its co-emergent object, in order to recollect "beneath the subject." (p. 142)

This recollection "beneath the subject" is important here for it can be read as a form of contemplation that can lead to the ground-of-being experience.

The participants' stories of ground-of-being experience highlighted the subtlety and richness of the lives that they live "beneath" the subject (themselves). The intensity of these experiences and the meaning that was derived from them, specifically the ground-of-being experience, signals the importance of engaging students' inner realities. An example of the meanings that some of the participants derived from the contemplative experience of their interiors was the way that they understood them as a place of paradox. It had an inner somatic dimension and in that sense was corporeal, but at the same time it was experienced as numinous. As Mike a student at LMU, Los Angeles, said, it "feels like you go somewhere else, like you go out of your body, or you go into your body in a way that you're not normally in it, it's a really trippy feeling" (Interview, October 21, 2009). It was both "inside" and "outside," a space they didn't realize they could access until they found themselves there. Hannah, from Ramapo College spoke of finding the ground-of-being inside herself as "another place that you kind of reside in as well" (Interview, November

22, 2009), where she could be more of who she was. Heather, a yoga practitioner and artist in Los Angeles, described the difficulty that she sometimes had in finding it:

You know that thing when you really go into your painting, time and everything stands still, not stands still but you lose contact with it and its like *voom* that sense of ok I'm in, . . . but I can't always find it, though once in a while I'll find it and then it's kind of like I'm floating above myself (Interview, October 24, 2009).

The “space” that Heather describes floating in can be understood as the *Befindlichkeit*, which Levin explains in his reference to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the movement of his hand. This movement is more than a collection of points or a linear trajectory through certain movements, rather it, and any movement, are the unfurling of a wholeness of gesture that is held in readiness and then produced by the “gathering and laying down” process of the *legein*. The *legein* is defined by Inwood through its root verb, *logos*, which means to manifest or to reveal (1999, p. 159). The *legein*, then, is that which makes manifest through its continuous drawing in.

This latent process that is revealed in movement is thought to exist in a more original dynamic form underlying phenomenal reality (Levin, 1999). The preexistence of this ground-of-being is proposed by Merleau-Ponty, who states that “each instance of the movement embraces its whole span” (Levin, 1999, p. 140), suggesting an unending cycling of elemental movement from the individual to the universal, back to the individual. Generally, the awareness of the entirety of this span, which includes the processes of the *Legein*, is fragmentary. As Levin states, “This *legein* of the gesture . . . is not normally experienced with much awareness” (1999, p. 141). This is where contemplation is useful, for it can reveal our unconscious engagement with the *legein* and support the development of a sense of wholeness, particularly if the contemplative practice directly engages somatic awareness.

The development through contemplation of the subtle introceptive consciousness (awareness of inner space) that can reveal internal processes like the *legein* was described by Hannah in New Jersey. She outlined the merging of the somatic and affective that she experienced in her yoga practice: “Today we were just doing the camel,⁸ and I remembered when I first started doing it, it used to make me cry because you're opening your heart up so much. And it's taken me years to be able to do it and not feel like crying?” (Interview, November 22, 2009). What she describes is both the intersection of her somatic, affective, and cognitive modes and the refinement of focus, that is said to underpin the benefits of contemplation in learning.

Yoga Philosophy

In Yoga the ground-of-being is consciousness, not the “what it feels like”⁹ form of everyday awareness but “the fully awakened consciousness of Self (*atman*)”¹⁰ or

Brahman,”¹¹ the divine absolute (Whicher, 1998, p. 14). The Self is one’s authentic nature, not an object like other objects, for it cannot be analyzed or simply obtained. As the yoga scholar Ian Whicher asks, “how can one ‘acquire’ *that* which one already *is*?” (1998, p. 18). The discovery of a “true” or “essential” self was very much a part of the ground-of-being experience for the participants. It often occurred after their uncertain passage through somatic feelings and was described by Agnes, an educator at LMU, Los Angeles, when speaking about her student’s discovery of it:

I think that most of my students perceive it as peace; it’s just almost like coming home to their true nature. Even though much of their time is spent projecting this stuff onto themselves like, ‘what I need to be’ or ‘have to be’ or ‘this is what I am to that person and that person’, which means that they never allow their true self or inner being to just ‘be’, with no expectations. (Interview October 9, 2009)

The importance, in educational settings, of this stage in contemplative practice relates to the way in which it lends a sense of “mineness” (beyond ego-consciousness) or stability to the amorphous, precognitive experiences that practitioners may initially encounter in contemplation. Yoga posits the ability to attain this awareness through an understanding of *Brahman* as a divine substrate that is said to underpin all reality. First, *Brahman* is present in the fundamental elements of the universe: *purusha*, spirit or Self; and *prakriti*, matter or nature. Then, *Brahman*’s inherence in all reality arises from the correlation (*samyoga*) of *purusha* and *prakriti*. In this way, *Brahman* is said to be present in the *ātman*, which is a product of the *samyoga* of *purusha* and *prakriti*. As Whicher explains, “the transcendent Source of the world is identical with the transcendent core of the human being; *Brahman* and *ātman* are one in identity” (1998, p. 14). It is, I am suggesting, the *ātman* that participants encountered in contemplation and described as their “true” selves. This is not easily realized in every day consciousness, but appears more readily in contemplative consciousness.

Yoga identifies two primary forms of consciousness, the phenomenal and the transcendental (contemplative); and it is immersion in the latter that can reveal the *ātman* or true Self. The transcendental form provides an experience of “immediate intuition where there is no distinction between subject and object. While consciousness in its phenomenal form is sensory awareness, it is awareness with form and content” (Rao, 2005, p. 11). Neville, a Sanskrit student at LMU, encountered these two forms in his meditation practice. As he started to experience the ground-of-being as a merging of fields, he was able to grasp “two kinds of mind”:

I think all of the fields are really all a part of the same field and when in deep meditation it all sort of comes together. I think that our mind tends to pull things apart when we’re in our superficial mind especially I notice when there is some angst or anxiety. It’s almost like different pieces are pulled apart and everything gets separated inside and once everything’s separated . . . well I don’t really find that very helpful because it’s

not based on intuition, there's more of you when you're in that whole state, when intuition just happens (Interview, November 2, 2009).

The experiences that Neville and other participants had of different kinds or levels of mind, or different aspects of their "selves," were common in their ground-of-being experiences. They are important here, because they provide clues to the origins of these experiences. Their descriptions, for example, of a "truer" self or of other levels of mind, when read through Yoga philosophy, suggest that participants engaged the pre-ontological ground of *Brahman* through their encounter with the *ātman* or the transcendental Self.

Three Aspects of the Ground-of-Being Experience

In the following section, an overview is provided of three ground-of-being experiences that were commonly reported by the participants, to further elaborate the ways in which the participants experienced it. These three aspects: a sensing of layers and levels, a witness consciousness, and a form of relationality structure the rest of the article. Each is detailed through exchanges with the participants' experiences and the theoretical supports. In the first section, relating to layers and levels, I engage Olaf Gunnlaugson's (2007a) thesis of generative dialogue,¹² in which he introduces "pre-sencing" as a form of reflective contemplative practice. In the second, I work with Rick Repetti's (2010) and Tobin Hart's (2008) examination of the witness consciousness as metacognition. Finally, I explore the integral approaches of John Dirks (1997), Olaf Gunnlaugson (2007a, 2007b), Kasl and Yorks (2002), and Jorge Ferrer and his colleagues (2005), to investigate participants' experience of a relationality in the ground-of-being.

These aspects of the ground-of-being experiences are outlined here to provide educators with a map of this aspect of precognitive contemplative experience. It is important to remember that while these stages are outlined in a linear fashion, they were not always experienced by the participants in this manner. Some participants experienced them in a linear progression, while for others, it was iterative. Relative to this, if educators choose to use this outline to trace their students' contemplative experience, is to understand that the appearance of these aspects does not necessarily signal a progression through more advanced stages. However, they do indicate that the students' contemplative states are deepening. It is for this reason that it is important to understand this and other aspects of the ground-of-being experience, as it can assist educators to work effectively with their students to integrate the new meanings that can arise from contemplation in education.

Layers and levels. After the participants' initial experiences of the paradoxical nature of the ground-of-being described earlier, many spoke of travelling through different layers to that space. They also suggested that their "inner" movement had

a directionality, which was described as going deeper or “going in.” Hannah at Ramapo College was surprised to find the ground buried deep within her. Upon discovering it, she described *feeling* as though she had developed an extra layer to herself, “or maybe not developed but you’ve pulled back some curtain to be able to see and feel this other part of yourself” (Interview, November 22, 2009).

Some participants’ growing familiarity with the descent into different layers of their *inner landscapes* led them to develop what can be described as sensory maps and languages of the interior. These maps stabilized their inner journeys, allowing them to relax into the experience and to go “deeper.” Hannah spoke of her yoga practice taking her through fragmented levels of focus to “a sense of herself” inside her body. Wording this *felt* sense of herself enabled her to map it through several journeys to what she described as her “center.” Her *feeling* and then wording of, her center, rooted this sensation in her body. It then remained as a sensual marker that she could return to when needed.

The participants growing awareness and movement through different levels in the ground-of-being can be understood as of form of “meta-awareness,”¹³ which according to the integral theorist Olaf Gunnlaugson, is an advanced form of cognition (2007a, p. 52). Gunnlaugson proposes that regular experience of this and other forms of meta-awareness may lead to what he terms “clearing” or “receptive opening.” Drawing from Heidegger, he describes clearing as the ability to “make experiential contact with emotional, intuitive, imaginative, kinaesthetic, and other forms of knowing” (Gunnlaugson, 2007b, p. 140). He combines this meta-awareness with “presencing,” a form of contemplative practice developed by the management theorist Claus Scharmer. Gunnlaugson describes these practices as contemplative and suggests that they help learners “move beyond reflective discourse . . . [to a] deeper category of *self-transcending knowledge*” (2007b, p. 141). He posits that this move to a deeper level of knowing indicates the need for the contemplative in education.

Gunnlaugson’s suggestions and participants’ reports of positive change through contemplation are important for education as they are founded on what I am terming *felt knowing* and *meaning*, by which I mean precognitive knowing and meaning that originates in the interior. The earlier description of journeys through “deepening levels” is one example of the students’ rich inner worlds. The frequency of the layers and levels experience reported by the participants illustrates how important it is for educators to provide pedagogical settings that support these precognitive journeys.

An important aspect of an environment that aids contemplative experience is that it recognizes the refined states of consciousness that students can enter. Following this, is the understanding that a different “language” is used in these journeys through the interior. Not only is it necessary to allow for the disorientation that can occur as practitioners reenter or transition from one state to the other, but it is important to provide a space that is open to *feeling languages*. One way to do this is to be attentive to the *languages* that the students return with; these *languages* are often couched in terms of the somatic or *felt* experience. Educators might, for

example, note down words and phrases so as to build a vocabulary of *felt languages*. They must be careful not to inadvertently privilege one state over another: for example, by valuing cognitive knowing, which is the exit point from deep precognitive knowing, over *felt* knowing. Both are equally important when working with students engaged in the transformation that can result from contemplation, and when developing contemplative curricula.

The witness consciousness. The second aspect of the participants' ground-of-being experience was their encounter with a witness. Jacob at Ramapo College spoke of the witness as a condition of the ground of being:

There's that space in all of us that is not changing . . . a place where you can step back from the flux of all the flowing changes around us, and that's what contemplation does. It gives you a place, a standpoint to step back, you know the "witness consciousness"? . . . And that witness consciousness is what will save you from being swept up in the whirlwind, the *citta-vritti*,¹⁴ whirlwind of the ordinary attitudes (Interview, November 15, 2009).

Yoga suggests that practitioners may encounter the witness if they are able to maintain certain levels of *dhruti* (steadiness), followed by *dhāranā* (sustained focus) and then *dhyāna* (meditation, contemplation). This intense focus, produced by the application of *nirodha* (restriction [of the ego consciousness]) can enable them to apprehend the *drashtri* (Seer/witness). The Yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein suggests that when the "psycho-mental stoppage" or *nirodha* is completely applied, the "transcendental Witness-Consciousness shines forth" (2008, p. 4). He is suggesting that when the self with a lower case "s", or ego-self, is restricted through deep focus then the "true" or transcendental Self with a capital "S" is revealed. Something similar was suggested by Isabella, an academic and yoga teacher at Ramapo College, who acknowledged the role that the witness or internal observer played in the positive changes that had resulted from her yoga practice:

So I think of that in terms of the self with a capital "S", the observer in yourself, I think that, that self has been able to come forward a little bit more than it might have otherwise. You know, I know things now about what to do if I'm feeling low, things that open the front, things that open your heart basically, you know? (Interview, November 24, 2009)

Discovering and experiencing the witness was an important stage in participants' translation of their often ineffable experiences. Their immersion in the witness provided them with a "space" to somatically (*feel*) and cognitively reflect on the changes they were experiencing. Finding this presence or "space," which many began to understand as a part of themselves, facilitated these changes, and cemented their ongoing engagement with their contemplative practices. It did this in two ways: first, it gave them purchase on an entry point into the ineffable *feelings* that they

were experiencing, which led to an understanding of themselves as a part of this inef-
fability. Second, their apperception of the space between their inner experience and
their witnessing of it provided many of the participants with an orientation or a place
from which to witness the experience. Their wording of the *feelings* and mapping of
the state and place then provided them with a level of autonomy and directionality
within their contemplative inner reality. As Jason explained when discussing the
benefits of his yoga practice, “Uhm, definitely the yoga helped me realize . . . say
after a vigorous *āsana* class and then into *shava-āsana*¹⁵ and meditation, that there is
enough space, you know, to just kind of feel the miraculous nature of my own
subjectivity” (Interview, November 11, 2009).

Many contemplative educators, like Yoga philosophers before them, understand
the witness as a form of metacognition. Gunnlaugson introduced it earlier in his
development of “presencing,” while the educational philosopher Rick Repetti
describes contemplative practices as “metacognitive attention-training exercises”
(2010, p. 13). Going “meta” is “reflecting on the mental processes involved while
engaged in the activity” (Repetti, 2010, p. 8). While I believe that there are also
somatic, affective, and transcendent forms of reflection involved in going meta, I
agree that metacognition is the simultaneous experiencing and “witnessing” of that
experience. The educator and psychologist Tobin Hart (2008) introduces metacog-
nition as one of four general dimensions of contemplative learning, describing it
as a process that enables the practitioner to interrupt automatic patterns of condi-
tioned thinking, sensing, and behaving. This in turn can lead to clarity, tolerance, and
heightened empathy toward one’s self and others. Casey, a student at Ramapo
College, simply described it as “you can see things more clearly, you know, get a
grasp on what’s underlying the situation” (Interview, November 12, 2009).

By being aware of and affirming the witness aspect of the ground-of-being
experience, contemplative educators can support their students to move beyond
limiting beliefs that may inhibit their ability to integrate new information and/
or new understandings of themselves. It can also help them understand how enga-
ging the witness provides their students with a means to navigate their inner
worlds, and so develop new levels of equanimity. Hannah at Ramapo College
said, in reference to her contemplative practice, “It gives me more of a balanced
sense, more of an ability to have a bit of space between myself and emotions, and
all of those kinds of things that allow me to feel safer in the world” (Interview,
November 22, 2009).

Relationality in and as the ground-of-being. Experience of the witness consciousness
led in some cases to the sensing in contemplation of a relationality, of being
connected or interconnected with, as participants described it, “everything,”
“everyone,” “something bigger.” Yoga would say that they had apprehended
Brahman, the ground of being, however fleeting the experience. *Brahman* is
described by Jeaneane Fowler as “the material cause, the operative cause, the sub-
stratum, the controller and the principal of the entire phenomenal world of spiritual

and non-spiritual entities” (2002, p. 318). As such, there is a “relational intimacy” between *Brahman* and all that it creates. This inherent relationality comes from the understanding of *Brahman* as the ground of all being, in which “The same principal in each part is in the whole and vice versa” (Kineman & Kumar, 2007, p. 1064).

This relationality has been repeatedly found by Cassandra Vieten in her research on contemplative practice. She is the director of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, California, where she and her colleagues conducted nearly one thousand surveys, sixty in-depth interviews with spiritual teachers and leaders, and a number of longitudinal studies with hundreds of people engaged in learning and spiritual practice. The results of this research were published in 2007;¹⁶ in brief, they found that their participants experienced what Vieten described in the fieldwork interview as a “natural state of awareness that is relational”:

There is an aspect of awareness that appears to be non-personal that appears to be experienced as connected to everything and everyone. Underneath everything, when you really quiet the body and mind and remove the ego stories, there is something still left. What’s left is what people describe as an interconnected field of essential benevolent awareness. Things just don’t seem as personal anymore because they have literally had a “trans” personal experience (Interview, November 7, 2009).

A number of the participants spoke of their transpersonal, contemplative experience as *feeling* like they were beyond (*trans*) their individual or “ego” self. Agnes, a yoga philosophy student and yoga teacher in Los Angeles, spoke of experiencing a relational or ego-less state, particularly in her yoga classes for Spanish speaking elders:

I think there is something inside when your mind is at peace and your spirit . . . it’s just becoming one with everyone else and losing that ego identity. And I think maybe when you experience yourself in that different way, with a group of people, you feel your shared humanity or something. It does just strip away a lot of the stuff that might make you feel separate from them (Interview, October 9, 2009).

A phenomenological reading of this relationality is described by the philosopher Elizabeth Behnke as the *interkinaesthetic field*, a term she has modeled on an “intercorporeal, intersubjectivity.”¹⁶ Behnke suggests that a true understanding of this *interkinaesthetic field* can only be gained by “undergoing it” for “the specifically affective dimension of the interkinaesthetic field requires *being affected* by it—feeling this affection from within and being moved by it” (2008a, p. 146). A way to do this is to suspend or bracket the adumbrating function of perception, which can be understood as a form of contemplation. Behnke describes this as the fixing of just one moment in the “how of the givenness” of a more complex configuration. Doing this through contemplation can stall or suspend the common reflex to stop the flow of experience, allowing the “givenness” of the larger interrelational field to be perceived. I suggest that this is the ground-of-being, which the participants’ described

as beingness, oneness, or the paradoxical sensation of it being inside and outside them simultaneously.

There are two primary aspects of Behnke's *interkinaesthetic field* hypothesis which directly support this development of the ground-of-being experience: first her suggestion that discursive thought needs to be suspended in order to *feel* the *interkinaesthetic field*, and second that it has a foundational aspect. The first can be understood as a form of the *epoche*¹⁷ which resembles the application of *nirodha*¹⁸ in yoga, or the *soft mind*¹⁹ in Buddhism. The *soft mind* is a contemplative state in which thoughts are bracketed and allowed to flow through consciousness without any attachment to them. The second relevant aspect of Behnke's critique is her suggestion that the *interkinaesthetic field* is a preexistent flow in reality, or as she says, the living stream present (2008b). Behnke realized this aspect when, in a state of contemplative reflection, she found herself suffused with the "felt texture" of her own "kinesthetically-accomplished undergoing" (2008b, p. 50). In the moment that she was filled with it, she realized its preexistence, claiming, "I do not have to turn toward this because I am already pervaded (or perhaps invaded) with it" (Behnke, 2008b, p. 50).

The importance of the relational aspect of the ground-of-being experience for transformative and contemplative education becomes obvious when considering their constructivist foundations. The relationality inherent in constructivism or "learning by doing" is described by Dirx. He writes that "learning is a product of neither the individual will nor the powerful forces of sociocultural structures. Rather, learning is understood as a process that takes place within the dynamic and paradoxical relationship of self and other" (1997, p. 83). This is something that Casey, a yoga teacher and student at Ramapo College, described from her experience of contemplative group practice: "it's that group experience we're all experiencing tapping into, it's the same "other place" of our minds, and that makes it more potent" (Interview, November 12, 2009). This relationality does not only exist in group work for as Dirx notes, "the 'other' is anything, anyone, or any group we perceive as apart or separate from our individual nature" (1997, p. 83). It is the experience that Eunice, a student in Los Angeles, described when she was alone meditating: "I did feel all of a sudden almost like a hug from the divine Mother, it was really completely overwhelming" (Interview, October 22, 2009). It was also the "energy thing" that Angelica in Los Angeles spoke of happening in her yoga classes: "It's sometimes completely beyond my control, I just feel that everyone is in sync. And somehow I don't think we can do that for ourselves, so to come together and do it, that makes it more powerful" (Angelica Interview, October 29, 2009).

Both Yoga and phenomenology suggest that this is because the relational, phenomenology's *interkinaesthetic field* and *Brahman* in Yoga, is preexistent. If these conceptions of the inherence of the relational are used to consider the participants' experience of it in the ground-of-being, it is possible to understand, that what they experienced was the relational substrate of themselves. Yoga and phenomenology's

interrelational fields are also illustrative of the intersubjective ground proposed by transformative and contemplative theorists who are calling for its inclusion in education. These are propositions such as Gunnlaugson's (2011) "intersubjective field," an aspect of his second-person or collective/group knowing; Kasl and Yorks' (2002) "whole-person" in their learning-within-relationship; Dirkx's (1997) "trans-egoic" state in learning in which the individual blends with the "world soul" and Ferrer, Romero, and Albareda's (2005) "participatory method" in their integral transformative education.

The importance of this interrelationality for educators starts with their acknowledgment of its existence. If this is done, it will then become necessary to include an ecological awareness in their pedagogical practices. That is educators will recognize the intimate ties between praxis, student, educator, and their contexts. The understandings of the ecology or interrelationality in pedagogy is not the only aspect that the approaches above share, for while they have different emphases they each engage with forms of reflective, subjective, and contemplative consciousness. For Gunnlaugson, it is the use of co-emergent contemplative states. Kasl and Yorks' introduce the psychotherapist John Heron's call for "felt connection" through affective and imaginal modes of psyche. Dirkx's *Soul Learning* incorporates the symbolic, imagistic, and contemplative, and Ferrer et al. incorporate intrapersonal epistemic diversity²⁰ in their integral education. Each of these propositions supports this article's focused examination of contemplation in education. Although the ground-of-being is just one aspect of contemplative experience in education, it illustrates how contemplative states are a fertile ground for pedagogy. As Agnes at LMU said, "That's how I learn, that's how I get things into my brain" (Interview, October 9, 2009).

Conclusion

Each aspect of the participants' ground-of-being experience outlined above illustrates a fundamental tenet of contemplative and transformative education. These have been defined through Yoga and phenomenology and supported by the participants' reports as a means to offer educators a platform for contemplative pedagogical practices.

The first example of participants' experience of layers and levels in the ground-of-being experience illustrates the importance of precognitive knowing. It portrays an instance of the trajectory of change in learning, and its origins in the participants' subjective experience. In the layers and levels example, their initial tacit experience of moving through different levels, then their growing proficiency with a *feeling language*, enabled them to translate their ineffable contemplative experiences. This aspect of the participants' ground-of-being experience is illustrative of the need for educators to provide a supportive pedagogical setting that acknowledges and integrates precognitive knowing.

Linked with the participants' experience of layers or levels in the ground-of-being experience is their apperception of a witness consciousness. It is correlated here with contemplative and transformative educators' understandings of heightened metacognitive abilities. It is suggested that educators' support of the developing metacognitive abilities that can result from contemplation starts with the intermediary state of the witness. This is the "space" that directly bridges the student's precognitive and cognitive experiences; the "inner" foundation of the "outward" positive effects of heightened metacognitive abilities. An example is the growing ability to move beyond limiting paradigms to develop self-soothing and stress-releasing skills, which can then support a greater ability to focus, retain, and retrieve information.

Finally, the relational aspect of the participants' contemplative ground-of-being experience is revealed here to be preexistent. As such, it can be conceived of as the relational substrate for contemplative, transformative, and integral pedagogies that foreground an intersubjective field. While there are different readings of this field, they are integrated in the theoretical calls, including my own, to engage the interior in a "whole-person" intersubjective approach to education. Although the ground-of-being is only one aspect of contemplation in education, its excogitation here clearly illustrates the potential for contemplation in education.

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Notes

1. For ethical reasons, all of the participants in this project have been given first name pseudonyms, and the quotations from their interviews are cited in this manner throughout the article.
2. The *Befindlichkeit* or “pre-ontological understanding of being,” which was used by Heidegger in his development of gestural being, is a related phenomenological concept that is outlined later in this article.
3. The words and phrases Yoga, Yoga philosophy, and classical Yoga philosophy are used interchangeably in this article. Yoga with a capital ‘Y’ denotes Yoga philosophy, and yoga with a lower case ‘y’ denotes the practice of yoga.
4. While Merleau-Ponty differentiates between the “visible” and the “invisible” or “interior armature,” these are not inverses of each other: the interior armature is the “depth” of the visible or the “exterior” world. In that sense, they are not opposed for there is, as Merleau-Ponty states, a bond between “the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 149).
5. Although an understanding of a phenomenological meditative practice is not common, James Morley is alluding here to the *epoché*, which Clark Moustakas defines as a “clearing of the mind” or a form of “reflective meditation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89).
6. Husserl (1970, p. 577) defines the *epoché* as the exclusion of all empirical interpretations and existential affirmations. Moustakas affirms this in his definition, which is the setting aside of prejudgements, biases, and preconceived ideas about things (1994, p. 85).
7. While it is understood that there are many phenomenologies, aspects specific to a phenomenological understanding of a ground-of-being, are drawn from the phenomenologies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. This is not intended as an exegesis of their work but is an attempt to engage the phenomenological tools that they created.
8. The camel or *Ushtra-asana* is a backward bending pose in which practitioners kneel and bends back to grasp their ankles, so opening their chest.
9. This is phenomenal experience, described by Hicks as the “. . . informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience” (Hicks, 2004, p. 243).
10. In the *Vedānta*-based schools of Yoga, the *ātman* can refer to either the empirical (ego-personality) self, which is denoted with a lower case “s,” or the transcendental Self with a capital “S” (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 40).
11. The spelling and meaning of all Sanskrit words and phrases in this article are taken from Jorge Feuerstein’s (1990) *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*.
12. Gunnlaugson defines generative dialogue as “a practice of conversation that draws on a broader spectrum of ways of knowing mediated by ‘meta-awareness’ . . . rather than discursive reason” (2007b, p. 135).
13. Gunnlaugson provides the integral theorist Thomas Jordan’s definition of meta-awareness: “Meta-awareness means awareness of the sensorimotor schematas,

emotions, desires and thoughts that tumble through our being. Instead of being had by one's habitual behavioural patterns, emotions, desires and thoughts, meta-awareness means that there is a locus of witnessing in consciousness that can make the behaviours, emotions, desires and thoughts objects of attention" (Jordan cited in Gunnlaugson, 2007b, p. 145).

14. Jacob combines the two Sanskrit words *citta* (mind or consciousness) and *vritti* (whirl, or in Yoga it specifically stands for the fluctuations of consciousness) to describe a "whirlwind of thought."
15. Shava-āsana, dead pose or corpse pose, also known as *mrita-āsana*, is described by Feuerstein, quoting from the *Gheranada-Samhitā* (II.19) "One should lie flat on the ground like a corpse. This is said to remedy fatigue and also to quieten the mind" (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 221).
16. Behnke is drawing from Husserl's suggestion that "sociality presupposes lived-bodily intersubjectivity" (Behnke, 2008, p. 144). Husserl's intersubjectivity rests on the assumption that the transcendent must be *experienceable*, that the ego experiencing it is real, and that what can be perceived "by one Ego must in principle be conceivable by every Ego" (Husserl, cited in Hermberg, 2006, p. 35).
17. In Phenomenology, the *epoché* is generally understood to be the bracketing of preconceptions to, "invalidate,' inhibit,' and 'disqualify' all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). It can also be understood as a "unique sort of philosophical solitude" (Husserl, in Moustakas, 1994, p. 87) or reflective meditative state.
18. *Nirodha* (restriction or cessation) has four levels of restriction: 1. *vritti-nirodha*, cessation or restriction of the fluctuations of the mind; 2. *Pratyaya-nirodha*, restriction of presentational ideas; 3. *Samskāra-nirodha*, restriction of *samskāra*'s (dynamic imprints on the individual's psychic life); 4. *Sarva-nirodha*, complete restriction (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 239).
19. Hart and his colleagues draw from the teachings of the Zen Buddhist teacher Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, when they describe the *soft mind* as open and flexible, "a mind that can let go" (Hart et al., 2000, p. 48).
20. Ferrer et al. propose that the student's "inner" world, which contains the instinctive, somatic, empathic, intellectual, imaginal, and contemplative ways of knowing, needs to be integrated with their "outer" interpersonal epistemic diversity (2005, p. 321).

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Bio

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