

# Meditative Silence and Reciprocity: The Dialogic Implications for “Spiritual Sites of Composing”

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The shift from a product- to process-centered pedagogy has brought with it an advantageous change, one that even cuts—in varying degrees—across ideological boundaries: a more fluid representation of the elements of the composing process and the relationship among these elements as well as among writer, reader, and text.

The meditative traditions of the East, rooted as they are in similarly fluid depictions of experience, offer notions of growth and change that are especially helpful in our current thinking about the teaching of writing and theories of composing. In fact, explicit proposals have been put forth in composition studies for including silence in the writing curriculum. In particular, James Moffett (1977, 1981, 1982) and, more recently, Charles Suhor (1992) have described the benefits of incorporating practices of silence, many of which are rooted in Eastern meditative traditions,<sup>1</sup> into the writing classroom.

Specifically, Charles Suhor advances an argument for using silence in English programs as a means of effecting emotional and psychological “transcendence” evoked by literature and other “aesthetic experiences” (1991, p. 23). “A fertile language environment,” he notes, “is one in which a dynamic interaction exists between talk and silence” (p. 24). According to Suhor, “silence is already part of our [English classroom] tradition,” appearing purposefully during silent reading periods, in-class writing situations, the orchestration of class discussions, and peer editing activities (p. 24). Teachers should take the next step, he argues, by including the actual practice of meditation in their pedagogies, while remaining “committed to pluralism” and “without proselytizing for a belief system” (p. 26). Silence, as Suhor describes it, has always been a goal of education: “When we are most successful, our students have a sense of well-being which is intimately linked with the inexpressible, the ineffable—that is, with silence” (1992, p. 11).

Perhaps more significantly, James Moffett’s ground-breaking article, “Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation,” is one of the fullest articulations in Western

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<sup>1</sup>Eastern mysticism is diverse. I emphasize the yogic tradition of Hinduism, specifically, *Advaita-Vedanta* (absolute nondualism), but on occasion I refer to other, complementary traditions. Eastern mysticism is given a fuller examination in my book.

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composition studies of the benefits to language development and learning derived from practices of silence.<sup>2</sup> Moffett advocates using various meditative practices in the classroom to facilitate student access to what he calls “inner speech.” Moffett describes its goal this way:

The teaching of writing must rise to a new sophistication consonant with a new stage in human evolution. A paradox is literally a “double-teaching,” and that is exactly what we must do—teach two apparently contradictory things at once. Youngsters need to develop inner speech as fully as possible and at the same time learn to suspend it. They must talk through to silence and through stillness find original thought. A paradox is not a real but an apparent contradiction. To develop and undo discourse at the same time would not be working against ourselves.

. . . [I]t is a practical fact that people who can suspend discourse think and speak better when they turn it back on. (1982, p. 240)

Although I, too, am an advocate of more seriously incorporating silence in composition studies, I find Moffett’s idea of “original thought” somewhat problematic, for it suggests an ontological wellspring from which some mysterious condition called *originality* is drawn. It is thus reminiscent of expressivist claims of individuality rather than of reciprocity (and by extension of the social significance of silence), a tenet of Eastern meditative practices that aligns them with poststructuralist dialogic theory—a point I hope to make clear in this paper. Likewise, Suhor’s focus on the “transcendent” nature of knowledge derived from practices of silence is equally problematic, for it represents a significant misreading of the Eastern meditative tradition. On the contrary, Eastern contemplative philosophy does not suggest transcendence at all but, rather, presents a nonoppositional model that begins from reciprocity that cannot accommodate an awareness above, beyond, or outside the perceiving consciousness of the meditator.

At the same time, Moffett’s and Suhor’s depiction of the reciprocity between silence and language is insightful. I, too, am interested in the effects that this nonconceptual understanding has on conceptual thought. Furthermore, my own practical experience as a writer and a meditator for many years confirms Moffett’s (1982) proposition “that people who can suspend discourse think and speak better when they turn it back on” (p. 240).

However, when I consider how nonconceptual understanding deepens conceptual understanding, there seems to be an issue more significant to consider than the values of silence for individual writers; namely, the impact of silence on theories of composing as well as on the writing curriculum itself. Moffett alluded to this in his essay, “Yoga for Public School Teachers” (1981); however, there remained in his discussion at that time a similar utilitarian tone

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<sup>2</sup>I cite Moffett’s abridged version of this essay which appeared in *College English* in 1992, after its 1991 publication in his book, *Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution*.

regarding, to put it crudely, what teachers, like students, "gain" or "get" out of silence (pp. 119–124).

One recent example of the tendency to cast meditative silence in utilitarian terms occurred at the 1992 CCCC's meeting in Cincinnati. I was struck by the large attendance at a Saturday panel on "Spiritual Sites of Composing." As an active meditator for many years (my practices rooted in the Hindu-Yogic tradition), I arrived at the panel fully playing Peter Elbow's "believing game." There's a session on meditation, I thought; it's about time! Each of the panelists delivered fascinating papers, describing the positive effects of meditation (or, at the least, spiritual values in general) on the emotional, psychological, and, by extension, writerly lives of people—students and community members alike. I had, indeed, expected to hear such expressivist claims for personal growth through meditation, although being interested in the social dimensions of meditation and composition I'm always a bit disappointed to hear meditation discussed in predominantly expressivist terms. However, I was not as prepared for the functionalist undertone of some of the presentations— notions to the effect that if students meditate, then the process will have such and such an impact on their writing. In such a proposition, meditation is in a sense cast as a means to an end, a vehicle in the production of goods.

Although such claims about meditation are in my experience true and may be necessary to legitimize the idea of silence in education, they simultaneously obscure the ways meditative practices result in an awareness that is allied to dialogic theory. Meditative awareness can never privilege one aspect, such as product over process, or even individual expression over the social construction of knowledge, but sees their relationship more complexly.

The respondent to this panel presentation, James Moffett, related a poignant story of one of his earliest meetings with his spiritual teacher, the yogic master Swami Sivalingam. In it, Moffett suggested a concern, similar to mine, regarding the emphasis on the pedagogical effects of meditation, reversing his earlier seemingly functionalist presentation of meditation in "Yoga for Public School Teachers." As Moffett recalled, when he first met his teacher, the man asked him what he spent most of his time doing. Moffett replied, "Writing."

"That's good," Swami Sivalingam answered, adding something to the effect that it would help deepen Moffett's concentration for meditation.<sup>3</sup>

What I admire most about this story is that it turns the sock inside out, so to speak, reversing the perceiver's expectations of the role of meditation in the writing classroom. Rather than arguing for better writing as the goal of meditation, Moffett's story suggests that writing in itself may be a practice that deepens one's spiritual life in significant ways. Perhaps more important, though, its ironic reversal boldly suggests (in the manner of a Zen koan, a paradoxical Buddhist riddle that communicates spiritual insight) the problem of framing such practices as meditation and writing as goal-oriented in the first place. When we perceive a practice only in terms of its benefits, we begin to lose hold of the importance of the practice itself—whether it be meditation or writing.

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<sup>3</sup>Moffett's written response in the "Spiritual Sites of Composing" interchange does not include this story.

The paper to which Moffett responded with this story was delivered by JoAnne Campbell (1992). And to her credit, Campbell (1994) has clearly rethought the functionalist aspects of her original position in her article published two years later as part of a "Spiritual Sites" interchange in *College Composition and Communication*. In her article, "Writing to Heal: Using Meditation in the Writing Process," she highlighted shifting the goal in writing classes from producing better prose to making writing and meditation more enjoyable activities, without emphasizing finished products. In concluding her essay, she argued:

It's perhaps a particularly capitalist perspective to think of meditation as a means to an end. In Buddhism the practice of meditation is all, and meditators are cautioned against becoming attached to outcomes or insights. Yet in a discipline which talks of process but where teachers often must still evaluate products, and in universities where students want class activities to feed directly into the papers they write, it's difficult to avoid arguing for the practical benefits of offering meditation . . . . (p. 251)

Campbell put her finger on the crux of the problem, namely, finding a way to talk about meditative consciousness within the academy without resorting to functionalist claims. Institutional pressure for *outcomes* is indeed strong. However, I would also suggest that equally strong is the pressure on professional academic discourse and rituals. How often, for instance, have many of us heard in professional circles that this article or that presentation said nothing of practical value, and how have such critiques shaped our own later articles and talks? Campbell is indeed dealing with a thorny issue. In doing so, she maintained some functionalist undertones (as she herself admits in the conclusion of her essay). Some of these continue to leave me uncomfortable. I question, for example, her suggestion in her title of the *use* of meditation *for* something. However, I do not want to overstate my point here; and it is not my intent to take Campbell to task, especially given the instructive ways she's reconsidered the broader aspects of her position (even I have found myself making functionalist claims from time to time). But I wish to examine this moment as emblematic of the complexity of introducing "spiritual sites" into the classroom. A more productive way to examine this conflict might be for us to avoid *selling* meditation but rather to deepen our understanding of it. Such practices are always culturally inscribed, and when Eastern techniques, for instance, are brought to the West, we need to learn to *read* them from inside rather than from outside that perspective, say, as through a Western model of productivity.

This reminds me of another story that illustrates the complexity of cultural interpretation, a story an old office mate told me. He had studied in upstate New York with a certain Tibetan lama who once said roughly the following:

When I tell Western audiences about the heightened powers of Tibetan yogis [meditators], how they can literally fly across canyon crevices on their way to morning prayers, they often look at me as if I was crazy. When I tell Eastern audiences about the powers of

the West, how you always have hundreds of fresh flowers when it snows, and how you drink oranges in winter out of cardboard boxes, they often look at me as if I was crazy.

I want to argue, then, that we have misread aspects of the Eastern meditation, perceiving them from a primarily binary rationalist framework. In the process we have relegated silence either to the ranks of an educational “nicety” divorced from the social, or equally troubling, to a product-centered social-capitalist America reminiscent of our dominant economic arbiter. Our perceptions in the West have become so imprinted with the productivity model of education and the drive to realize some Utopian end (a kind of educational “manifest destiny”) that we sometimes miss the subtleties of an experience like meditation, which is not a territory to be colonized but is at least at parity with educational goals, if not a goal in itself.

At the same time, I am aware that discussing meditation as a goal in itself begins to make it again sound expressivist, namely, that it is an activity that transcends social forces. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Before I discuss the dialogic rather than expressivist nature of meditation, let me first put my cards on the table. As a committed yogi, my experience (as well as the documented experiences of others) suggests that the world would probably be a better place if more people meditated regularly: people would most likely be happier and more relaxed, maintain better physical, psychological, and emotional health, be less selfish and more helpful to others, be more imaginative, independent, and critical thinkers, and—specific to our enterprise—many would most likely become more fluent, insightful, and clear writers, a point well-argued by Moffett, Suhor, and others. However, unlike Suhor, I am not so sure that introducing meditation into the writing class is not a kind of “proselytizing for a belief system,” as he put it. Although the practice of silence is cast in terms of meditation rather than religion,<sup>4</sup> it still encompasses a system of spiritual beliefs, the introduction of which into the secular community makes me uneasy. Having students actively meditate, then, is not merely politically incorrect but potentially dangerous to democratic education, carrying with it some of the same baggage as the school prayer debate.

At the same time, does this mean that meditation has no role in the classroom? That it should be seen as a private and personal act alone simply because it derives from a set of spiritual and human values? Certainly, it encompasses a belief system. But what theory doesn’t? Even in the most critically aware social constructionist classroom, for instance, the pedagogy derives from a particular belief system known as social construction, and from the need to alert and introduce learners to the discourses of power. It should be obvious at this point that I think meditation and its belief system does indeed have a role, and a significant one, although perhaps not the one envisioned by Moffett, Suhor, and other advocates of silence.

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<sup>4</sup>Meditation constitutes one aspect of Eastern and Western religion and consists of contemplative exercises that seek to interiorize consciousness so that meditators can directly experience the divine ground of being.

My emphasis differs from theirs. Rather, it focuses on the ways values that come from the practice of meditation—such as trust in intuition, ambiguity, and chaos as well as trust in the reciprocity and interpretative quality of experience—shape theories of composing, pedagogy, and curricular reform. In other words, I am less interested in but more wary of actual meditation in class. I am more interested in teachers recruiting meditative values as a guiding principle in their pedagogical theories.

In order to clarify how these meditative values can guide our pedagogies in socially aware ways, I want to reiterate that meditative silence, perhaps paradoxically, is more closely aligned with dialogic theories of composing. As the Tibetan lama's story suggested, both East and West have misunderstood one another. I would argue that central to Western misunderstanding of meditation is the idea of transcendence, so often championed by expressivists and critically scrutinized by social constructionists.

In the West, for instance, there is the common perception that meditative practice strives to transcend symbolic forms, such as language, and locate some mysterious Other outside the realm of discourse. However, this is not so; practices of silence actually attempt to deepen intimacy with symbolic form, although their route differs from that of discourse. Such a nontranscendent model more closely allies silence with dialogic rather than expressivist theories of composing, suggesting a focus on the reciprocal values of silence rather than on those of individual expression.

For meditators in both Eastern and Western mystical traditions, for instance, the process of attentiveness to symbols yields psychic fluidity and, thus, meaning. This fluidity is similar to the awareness Walt Whitman describes when he echoes Wordsworth, "There was a child went forth every day, / And the first object he [sic] looked upon . . . that object he became . . ." (p. 138). That is, meditation intensifies this process of looking. In this way, the seer and the seen merge, the perceiver and the perceived become one.

Eastern traditions, especially, have cultivated highly refined practices to interiorize consciousness and heighten this sense of looking. Through various practices such as focus on a *mantra* (a word or phrase with particular sound and/or verbal significance), a *yantra* (a geometric design with spiritual attributes), one's own breathing, or even silence itself, Hindu yogis attempt greater intimacy with that object they look upon, in other words, with the symbol. Western poetics offers an analogue to these practices. Gaston Bachelard's (1964/1969) theory of "intimate immensity," for instance, suggests "a phenomenology without phenomena" (p. 184). Specifically, Bachelard argued that through heightened attentiveness to the poetic image, the image user psychically merges with it. Similarly, the knowledge meditators attain through practices of silence is not transcendental to, or outside the realm of symbolic form. Rather, meaning lies within the interaction itself, that is, in attentiveness to, or in the deepening intimacy with, symbols. Flora Courtois, founder of the Los Angeles Zen Center explained it this way:

At the heart of Zen practice there is a kind of radically intimate attention. This absolutely firsthand quality of experience

characterizes the beginning of our lives, and if we are not drugged, the end. No “other” mediates between us and the intimate aloneness of birth. . . . Here attention is reality and reality attention. (1990, p. 17)

Understanding that the reality of complete attention that silence yields is itself a symbolic form requires a shift from a model of opposition to reciprocity. In Eastern meditative traditions there is no concept of opposition, at least as we have come to conceptualize it. Rather, unlike Western rationalism, meditative consciousness is an experience of unity in which paradoxes such as self/other, inner/outer, the seer/seen, personal/cultural, as well as other seeming contradictions, are resolved and the seer and the seen become one. As the Zen mystic D.T. Suzuki (1956) noted: “The doctrine of *śūnyatā* [the Void of meditative consciousness] is neither an immanentism nor a transcendentalism. . . . ‘Knowing and seeing’ *śūnyatā* is *śūnyatā* knowing and seeing itself; there is no outside knower or spectator; it is its own knower and seer” (pp. 261–262). Meditative awareness, then, is a realm in which consciousness of distinction or separation, and thus the possibility of transcendence and hierarchy, are nonexistent.

How, then, might the values of silence and reciprocity inform classroom practices? Given my discomfort with introducing meditation into the classroom, I cannot very well argue that all composition instructors be required to take up meditation and allow its values to seep into their pedagogies. Although the dynamics of teacher development differ in some significant ways from those of student learning, both dynamics share many features, two of which are issues of mentor or instructor power and maintaining secular educational settings. To be sure, the practice of meditation facilitates a nonoppositional world view and would be helpful for interested instructors. However, I would argue that as a profession we would do better to focus on the dialogic of meditation. In this way current advocates of silence might benefit from perceiving meditation more subtly; likewise, social constructionists might enhance their dialogic perspective by more seriously engaging the meditative idea of reciprocity.

Specifically, then, how might such awareness inform instruction? Nearly all Eastern meditative traditions strive to cultivate an awareness that the individual self equals the expansive Self. Thus, for the practitioner of silence, as with dialogics, meditation is an experience in which an individual deconstructs the self and reconstitutes it in more connective terms. A classroom grounded in such a model and its corresponding values would, first, resist romantic notions of individual expressivity and ownership of texts. Second, it would hold dialectic suspect in favor of dialogics and conversation. And this is why. Dialectics begins with the assumption that there is, indeed, a thesis and an antithesis to resolve, in other words, a binary framework that leads to the hierarchies of winners and losers; pure dialogics positions opposites, so to speak, in more complementary terms, yielding what Bakhtin refers to as an “interanimation” or “interillumination” of discourses (pp. 47–49).

This orientation, then, might manifest itself through a variety of activities. For example, methods of written and oral response to student texts and discussion, perceived through such a reciprocal model, would approach student ideas

(even so-called finished essays) always as work in progress, creating a site for critical thinking and revision of ideas. The tone of teacher comments, furthermore, would be less hierarchical; rather than asking teacherly questions of students, teachers would pose *real*, that is, writerly questions, with the teacher voice constructed as a trusted problem-posing colleague rather than as an objective authority, or for that matter, in an expressivist model, only as an encouraging coach. The development of sequential, interconnected writing assignments would be a further attribute of such a learning environment; in keeping with meditative perceptions, assignments could be designed in more fluid, connected ways, relying on both formal and informal writing in nonhierarchical, supportive ways to yield student investigation of both personal and cultural issues that lead to multivocality and the seeing of self as implicated in a variety of discourses.

Finally, central to these values and practices of silence as a whole is a complex rendering of the significance of change as a dynamic and generative activity. What the meditator discovers in deep contemplation is that the universe exists in a state of continual flux. As quantum physicists have similarly described, the universe manifests itself as a seemingly stable entity according to one's particular mode of conceptual knowing (Zukav, 1980). Thus, rather than trying to normalize writing activities and student products to reflect outdated classical and Newtonian perceptions of the universe, a classroom grounded in meditative values would be radically dialogic. It would create continual opportunities for multi-vocality and revision, anchoring its authority, for example, in the interpretation of texts.

A true model of reciprocity can never ultimately serve a functionalist orientation (except, perhaps, as a pleasant result). Nor can it cultivate individual expression at the expense of the social construction of knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, the meditative model, grounded in the assumption of reciprocity and a Bakhtinian interanimation of all things, does not ask students to go through transformations themselves without the teacher doing the same. This, obviously, complicates the practice of teaching. However, if we learn to trust the process of continual deconstruction and reconstitution of the self that both dialogics and the values of meditation suggest, we, too, can come to trust even more fully the chaos that we so much want our students to embrace. ☺

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