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Inner Work: Foundational to Contemplative and Holistic Education

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Abstract

In this interview (conducted by Heesoon Bai), Avraham Cohen and Thomas Falkenberg speak about the origin and practice of their respective inner work and about the need for and ways of bringing more inner work into the world.

Keywords
Inner work; Contemplative practice; Holistic education; Practical wisdom; Reflection; Attention; Forms of knowledge

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Heesoon Bai: Welcome, Colleagues, to the JCHE's inaugural Special Issue! We, the Special Issue Editors, have in mind for our curated collection diverse voices that speak to multifaceted nature of contemplative and holistic education. To that end, we are approaching you two to speak on inner work as contemplative work and its contribution to holistic education.

You both are "inner workers"— people who clearly understand the connection between, on the one hand, how we see the world and how we act in the world, and on the other hand, how we feel and see ourselves. Furthermore, you both know what it takes to undertake the kinds of practice that will realize this connection in ways that contribute to human well-being and "well becoming," to quote you, Thomas. Let us hear from you the details.

Where I wish to start is how you each came to an explicit understanding of the abovementioned connection. I ask because, I would observe, the general social conditioning in the contemporary world is to the externalist viewpoint and stance. That is, we tend to see reality as being objective, meaning existing independently of human beings' subjectivist points of view, interpretation, and valuation. Moreover, this way of seeing comes with a further implied understanding that external conditions that make up reality "out there" determine who one is and how one acts. Just note our tendency to say, "I had to do . . .," "So-and-so made me do that," and so on. Such an externalist viewpoint is a perfect vehicle for our penchant for solving whatever problems we experience by proposing to change or eliminate the external conditions.

We exercise this externalist approach even towards people. "Other people" become the external condition, and when these "other" people get in the way of one's perceived happiness or profit (well, for many, their profit is their happiness), we like to fix our problem by shunning them, shutting them down, or even eliminating them. Yet, being surrounded by and immersed in this prevailing ethos, you both have taken a very different path of understanding and life practices.

Shall we start with you, Dr. Cohen? How did you become an inner worker? Wen the world around you must have been very much focused on the externalist ways of going about the world, what prompted you to look at the inner world and its dynamics?

Avraham Cohen: My affinity for inner work/inner exploration essentially grew out of my own misery. And I had a tendency, from young age, to look beyond the usual for information, ways, and meaning. I grew up as a second-generation Jewish boy. I was thrown into misery early on when my family moved from Toronto to Vancouver, leaving all my close-knit extended family members and my friends. Next came the loss of my "special" position in the family as the first and only child (and a boy at that) when my brother was born! Growing up as a Jewish child in a very non-Jewish neighbourhood, I always felt strangely different from others, even as I was joining in with all the kids on my street. I should add that while my family was quite secular in their practice of Judaism, still, there was cultural nuance with which I was unconsciously attuned. This differentness I felt became increasingly my experience and seemed to connect strongly with my leanings into all kinds of dark and not-so-dark feelings.

Initially, and for many years, I was predisposed to look for causes of my misery outside myself, my parents, a teacher, other kids, circumstances, etc. As time went by, I began to wonder about my own experience and its contribution to the way I saw and acted towards the world. I was still a long way from seeing my essential part in many of the events in my life.

A major change came about when I was most fortunate to be hired to work in a treatment center for severely disturbed adolescents. The director was an Irish psychiatrist who, to put it mildly, entertained non-mainstream and non-orthodox medical views for those days and, as it turned out, would likely be still viewed as such. This was back in the 1970s. He was very interested in the emerging Human Potential Movement and did not believe that psychiatry had much to offer to the children with whom we would be working. It was the time of the emergence of the "Third Wave" of psychology: personal growth and personal growth centers were emergent phenomena. As well, this was the time of major protests, particularly by young people. Anti-war protests were common, desegregation was emerging as a movement in the United States, and anti-authority stances and activism were predominant. As well, the use of psycho-active, consciousness-changing substances was becoming popular, particularly with young people and students on college campuses. It was a very exciting time to be alive. "Changing minds" was *de rigueur*.

As time went by, my personal and professional experiences deepened under Life's tutelage—at times, with hard lessons, and I became increasingly and clearly aware that I had to become the prime mover in my own world with directionality.

I have been, and continue to this day to be, exploring "inner practices," including psychotherapeutic spiritual approaches, especially, such as Gestalt therapy-based and process-oriented work, along with a wide variety of spiritual practices. I was and continue to be fascinated with research into, and the development of the integration of spiritual approaches with humanistic, existential, and process-oriented psychological work, which I increasingly see as a part of a whole.

Heesoon: How about you, Thomas? I am aware of the long arc of intellectual development in your case that includes your work on attention, pedagogical noticing, mindfulness and contemplative practices, Tai Chi, and so on. I understand that these practices are increasingly integrated into your work in teacher education. How did you become an inner worker?

Thomas Falkenberg: My interest in personal development goes back to the time I developed an interest in becoming a school teacher, which happened when I attended high school in Berlin, Germany. The notion of personal development I had in mind at that time was characterized by ideas like social engagement, citizenship education, and moral and character education. I saw school education as a way to support students in this kind of personal development. This understanding of personal development was external, as I would now suggest, in the sense that it was in response to the educational work by others with me as the student that I would develop personally.

For instance, through the reading and discussing of socially engaged dramatic literature (e.g., by Bertolt Brecht) students would develop their social responsibility—personal development was for me an intellectually guided response to an externally initiated engagement with values and ethical questions. While this was not *inner work* toward personal development, it was the foundation, upon which I was interested enough in philosophies that bridged this type of outer-oriented work and the kind of inner work we are talking about here.

In my case, this "transitional" philosophy was the ethics of care developed by Nel Noddings to which I was exposed by you, Heesoon, when I started my doctoral studies at Simon Fraser University. Because of the way in which Noddings defines what it means to care for someone in a situational encounter with that someone, I was compelled to confront what I discovered were my emotional, perceptual, and attentional limitations to care for those I encountered. To care for someone in an encounter means, as Noddings conceptualized, to make a motivational shift toward the needs of the person one encounters; in addition, one needs to be attentive and responsive to the reception *by the "cared-for"* of what the "carer" might believe is their caring.

If the cared-for does not receive the caring, it is not caring. Because the relational definition of what it means to care for someone made sense to me, I was confronted with the question of my own caring—or better to say, whether what I thought was my caring for a person I encountered was indeed true caring. In my recollection, this was—about 20 years ago—the start of my intentional and systematic work with forces of my "inner life": my emotions, my attention, and my perception of others' state of being.

Heesoon: Thank you, Avraham and Thomas! Your life stories are most illuminating, touching, and inspiring. Let us get to know a little more the depth, rigour, and richness of inner work either you personally practice, or you "teach" (invite others to try, and suggest, model, demonstrate to) others in your professional work. An example or two of practices that you are currently engaged in would be helpful. Let's start, this time, with you, Thomas.

Thomas: My current personal daily inner work practice starts off right after I get up. I begin with some yoga stretches followed by about fifteen minutes of concentrative and/or receptive (mindfulness) sitting meditation. During the summertime, I often replace these two practices with a Sun-style Tai Chi routine outside in our backyard. Then after breakfast and before I generally start my work, I decide on a particular focus for the day to work on my awareness and noticing in the moment *as I live my life outside of the quietness and "safety" of my room/home*. The focus would be on a particular aspect of my inner life as I engage with my life partner (when I am at home) or with my colleagues or students (when I am at work).

For instance, a focus might be my attention to the state of being of the other person as the person engages with me. I have noticed about myself that I often get so caught up in focusing on the issue of conversation, that I attend little to indicators of the state of being of my interlocutor. My intent is then to spend part of my attention to the topic of conversation, of course, but also to spend part of my attention to identify indicators of their state of being, like feeling rushed, being upset, or feeling nervous. In addition to this externally focused attention, I also have the intent to attend to my attention, which make my inner life in the very moment of my engagement with another person a focus of my attention. Here, I attend to what I am attending to: *Am I attending to my interlocutor's state of being?* If not, I try to bring my attention back to what I intended to attend to.

All this "during-life practice" is bringing my practice of sitting concentrative meditation into the flow of my daily life—giving the latter the meaning of a practice for the former. Over the last few years, I have been working on my inner life while engaged in the messiness and distractions of living my daily life. I aim to use journalling to reflect more deeply about my experiences with this practice on the particular day, but often enough, I go to sleep in the evening without having taken/found the time to sit down to journal; so, I left it at my having taken "mental notes."

Avraham: Heesoon and Thomas! This question for me is really about how to live a life, my life, a whole life, and within my inner world, and within the many aspects of the relational field. To what do I relate? Is there a distinction between me and that to which I relate? Increasingly, I have to answer *yes and no*. In a certain state of consciousness, the world and I are made up of parts, and in another state of consciousness, the distinction between the two begins to be increasingly blurry, or even at certain moments, non-existent.

I like your description of how you start your day, Thomas. I have a whole morning routine of physical exercise (weight bearing, cardiovascular) and inner work-based meditative and psychological practice. Before this, I sit down with my partner for tea and connection. My meditation may involve sitting and mostly is about being/becoming conscious and noticing, noticing as much as possible, the subtlest flirts of life happening in both the inner and outer worlds. For example, I was out for a walk this morning that included some spurts of running. I witnessed a small long-haired dachshund being walked by its humans. Suddenly a Canada Goose began moving towards the little dog in a menacing way. The little "fellow" turned to the right and charged at the Goose, which almost fell over backwards as it put on its brakes very suddenly. I was struck by the sudden energy shift that occurred between these two life energies. As a human with a cerebral cortex that is significantly larger than that of these little beings, I was able to reflect on and think about this most fascinating encounter.

As my life lengthens and seemingly draws ever closer to a close, I continue my inner and outer research and do what I can to share my learning with everyone, including my psychotherapy clients. I see psychotherapy as an integrated curriculum of learning about life and self.

Heesoon: Thank you, Thomas and Avraham! My students, as well as my colleagues, for whom becoming reflective persons is an important educational aim, being able to "walk the talk" is a most valuable ethical good in a world, such as ours, mired in public deception, duplicity, and media-based metrics-driven performativity. As you two demonstrate, we do not become contemplative and holistic educators without the kind of committed and disciplined moment-by-moment daily engagement in inner work for years and decades.

Indeed, it does trouble me greatly when I continue to observe in the academy, as elsewhere, that we *talk about* what is good without *actually* becoming them. Parker Palmer's well-known line, "We teach who we are," has become a credo amongst many educators who value teacher authenticity and its defining influence on their students. Avraham, your further addition to Palmer's line, "We teach who we are, *and that's the problem*," gained traction amongst many who were exposed to your work. Knowing your work, I say what you signaled is not just that there is a deep problem to confusing education with knowledge acquisition and skills building by their identification; also, we as educators have the responsibility to continue to work on ourselves (self-work, inner work) to bring into alignment what we espouse as our values, ideals, educational aims, and how we live out the latter.

Here, then, is my final question to you, Thomas and Avraham: in a world so externally and materialistically focused and driven by metrics, how can we contemplative educators change the overwhelming power and influence of the mainstream or conventional world? What are your "tactical" suggestions, as we participate, wrestle with, and tackle what we do professionally and in civic spheres? By "tactical," of course, I don't mean that we are going to turn contemplative education into a military exercise! Humour aside, from what I see and have experienced in our academy is, *Lo and Behold*, a veritable battlefield in which egoic personalities are vying for power, maneuvering for advantages, "politicking" for resources, and waging and staging various "warfare" exercises, deploying warlike concepts and vocabulary, such as "mobilization," "impact," "ranks," "targets," and so on. I could create a whole glossary! What I am really asking is: please share with us your thoughts on how we may make a difference to the world, large and small, with our contemplative and holistic ways.

Thomas: I respond in the context of my work in the academy—as a teacher and scholar. I think the line of reasoning transfers easily to other educational contexts, like school education.

Not long ago, I watched a recent episode of *Nature of Things* on the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). This particular episode was on "The Secrets of Friendship." The host, David Suzuki, introduced an evolutionary psychologist as "the renowned friendship expert ...." It was obvious that this psychologist was invited to share their academic expertise on the topic of friendship. The person was, for instance, quoted on a definition of the term *friend*. As I heard this section of the documentary, it struck me how limited and limiting such an understanding of an "expert" on a domain of human living is. We value expertise in knowing *about* a human life domain like friendship rather than knowing *your way with* everything that is relevant to living well concerning this life domain. For all we know, that "renowned friendship expert" might be a miserable and lonely fellow because nobody wants to befriend them. Now, that is just to make the case of the limited understanding of expertise. Of course, I don't know the ability that this knowing-about expert has in the realm of making and keeping friends. But this illustrates very well the point that you are making, Heesoon, and it leads me to my first of three steps in responding to your invitation, Heesoon, namely *the diagnosis* of the problem. Here, I am using "'diagnosis'" in its Latin root sense: *discernment, looking through*.

Diagnosing the problem, I want, first, to suggest that our limited and limiting cultural notion of "expertise" needs to change, from a notion that gives primacy to "knowing about" to giving primacy to "knowing how" (practical wisdom). Connecting to this is the notion that "knowing how" is not simply an "application" of "knowing about." Both forms of knowledge are *different* forms of knowledge for different ends. It is practical wisdom that we need for living a flourishing life, for instance, by being able to secure and maintain friendships in the specific contexts in which opportunities arise for us. That brings me to a second notion in diagnosing the problem: We are not speaking often and openly enough about purpose (of life) and meaningfulness (of one's life). Our education systems are good in helping learners to develop an understanding *about* life, but not so good in helping them with the actual *living life*.

This diagnosis leads to, second, the question of the *focus or purpose* of the changes/of the "tactics" to be employed to achieve such changes. Discussions about changes to address the diagnosed issues should focus on the following two things. (For space reasons, I limited the diagnosis to the presented two notions and, thus, I will limit my suggestions for foci of change to the following three.) First, we should focus on the question of what it means to live a flourishing (including meaningful) life. Second, we should focus on ways in which people can develop practical wisdom needed to work toward living a flourishing life (well-becoming). Third, we should focus on contemplative practices (understood in a comprehensive way) as a needed rather than possible way toward developing such practical wisdom.

These foci in response to the diagnosis suggest to me the following "tactics." As scholars of the writing word, we should develop and disseminate knowledge-about the need to challenge the notions mentioned in the diagnosis above. We should provide knowledge-about the alternative concerns that humankind should engage with and that I listed as foci for the needed change: the concern with the purpose / question that each of us should face for their respective lives; the concern with developing practical wisdom in relevant life domains; and the concern with contemplative practices as needed ways to develop such practical wisdom.

As teacher scholars, we should first and foremost engage with these three concerns ourselves—concerning our own lives. Second, the learning that we engage in and arrive at through this process should be a core part of our work as teachers of other human beings, regardless of the subject matter we teach. In all subject matters—from education and economics to physics—human beings and their lives are involved. All subject matters are human endeavours, involving ideas, struggles, curiosity, emotions, and other aspects of researchers and professionals being human. We need to "humanize" the subject matters we teach by bringing into focus what gives purpose to the subject matter and those engaged in the subject matter, which is to understand any subject matter as a human endeavour.

Engaging in such long-term tactics requires resilience. For instance, as I know from my own inner work, it is difficult to stick with contemplative practices and it can be discouraging having to work within institutions and a culture that are characterized by the diagnosed features. Support is beneficial, and I can see how an immediate tactic should be to work on community building: i.e., building opportunities to connect with others who share the diagnosis of the problem, the needed foci for change, and the tactics to work on the change.

Heesoon: Very lucid and comprehensive, Thomas, not to mention, again, inspiring! Yes! Now, final words go to you, Avraham. Some distilled wisdom from your five decades of working with people very intimately, please.

Avraham: What I have professed increasingly, persistently, and ongoingly to this day is that what is lacking in education as a foundation is a profound and wise attention to and engagement with the human dimension. I have witnessed horrible things in academic environments perpetrated by scholars with, shall we say, high IQs and low EQs. This inability to see beyond the content and details of a person and situations is reflective of the world writ small, as in families and marriages, and writ large as in the world; there are too many examples to pick from.

I recall reading John Taylor Gatto's resonant words, "We are human beings, not human doings." I also recall sitting at a student presentation at a conference where students had the opportunity to receive feedback at a roundtable from a scholar. My colleague, Johanne Provençal, was to receive a review from Dr. Carl Leggo. Joanne introduced her paper and voiced her concerns that her paper was not "rigorous" enough. I recall Carl's most amazing response that included, "Rigor!" (with a jesting tone). He then added, "I prefer the vigour of Tigger ... not rigour mortis!" This latter was certainly said with a great deal of vigour!

For me, my own inner work, and my ongoing encouragement in this realm for others, is to move towards their own wholeness and humanity, and to become increasingly living, breathing exemplars of this, at least to the best of their ability.

If education is not about becoming more fully human, I ask, "What is the point?" Surely, we do not want to continue to educate for a success that will wear down students and educators alike, and even kill you, as you strive for higher grades, promotion, better jobs, more status, more financial gains, and eventually the burial of the soul of every student and educator.

I encourage educators to step outside the "consensus reality" (to use Arnold Mindell's terminology) realm, to risk, and to feel most fully alive and engaged.