Tantra: The quest for the ecstatic mind
by Kathleen Kesson

This essay is one of a collection of original writings on spirituality and education edited by John P. Miller and Yoshiharu Nakagawa, published by the Foundation for Educational Renewal in January 2002.

In 1968, George Leonard, an education writer and consultant, wrote a book entitled Education and Ecstasy. Capturing the spirit of the decade, it wove together ideas from the human potential movement, the counterculture, brain research, new technologies, and psychedelic experimentation to attempt to seed new thinking about educational possibilities. Leonard's book was widely read by a mass audience. Like many of us at the time, Leonard was confident that the various revolutions taking place in consciousness, social patterns, and politics were about to usher in a new era of freedom, experimentation, and, well, ecstasy. We would, he hoped, soon take advantage of innovative new technologies to individualize instruction. We would take seriously the current brain research that insisted that pleasure (yes pleasure!) was at the heart of meaningful learning, and we would affirm that the aim of human life was the fulfillment of latent human capacities, including the capacities for joy, freedom, inquiry, and relationship.

Well, it is the year 2001, over 30 years after the publication of this interesting book, and there is today little talk of pleasure or ecstasy, or even joy in the world of educational discourse. Now, the more familiar words are assessment, standards, zero tolerance, and accountability—the words of the corporate boardroom, not the human potential movement. In such a climate, it is perhaps absurd to attempt to resuscitate interest in the ecstatic possibilities of the human mind. But the quest for ecstasy—the search for meaning, pleasure, and lasting joy—is much older than the 60's cultural revolution. It is an important current in all of human history, and we can only hope that our contemporary obsession with the standardization and mechanization of learning may eventually give way to an engagement with more enduring human values, including that state of aesthetic fulfillment spoken of by sages throughout time, and widely misunderstood—the state of ecstasy, or bliss (ananda, in Sanskrit). It is this transformation to a state of blissful enlightenment that provides the foundation of Tantric spiritual practice. Understanding the mental model and the spiritual science underlying this practice may help orient us towards more expansive educational possibilities, should we ever tire of the corporate social engineering that characterizes the present era of education.

There are other reasons why it is vital for educators to understand various forms of spirituality and spiritual practice, even such esoteric traditions as Tantra. Let me share a personal story. I recently returned from a trip to India. On the leg of the flight between Kuwait and London, I sat between a woman from Mumbai, India and a woman from Karachi, Pakistan. The woman from Pakistan shared with us a handwritten piece of inspirational writing from her Muslim tradition, which we agreed had universal appeal. The woman from India, a Hindu, unpacked a gift she had received on her trip, and showed us the lovely, beaded statue of the legendary god Krishna that her nephew had given her for her birthday. An animated conversation ensued among us that covered the topics of idol worship, the names of God, deities, gender issues, and Pakistan/Indian hostilities. All of us were comfortable discussing our various beliefs and seeking the common threads in our understandings of these topics. The woman from India talked about her son who had become a computer programmer and wanted nothing more than to settle in America. I talked about my son, who is an aspiring Sanskrit scholar, married to a Parsi woman from Mumbai, and who wants nothing more than to stay in India. The woman from Pakistan, a geography teacher, was extremely interested in strategies to enliven her geography classes, which sparked a spirited discussion about the project method, experiential learning, John Dewey, and Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory. We chuckled at the ironies in all of this. And thus, global connections are made

in this increasingly smaller world. In this era of globalization, easy international transportation, electronic communication, and immigration, it is crucial that we come to understand both our cultural differences and the similarities that promise to link us together in peaceful coexistence.

Religious difference is the one territory largely ignored by theorists of multicultural education. Perhaps this is because of great nervousness having to do with anything "spiritual" in the context of public education. And yet it is religious differences that lie at the root of many of the most devastating international conflicts, as well as those closer to home. In order to learn to live together in an increasingly pluralistic world, we must come to understand each other, and this understanding must begin with knowledge.

In addition to increasing our intercultural understanding, there are yet other reasons to study worldviews that are vastly different from our taken-for-granted ways of thinking. Tantra embodies a philosophy of mind and consciousness that challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions upon which we base our western theories of teaching and learning. Its theories are derived from centuries of introspective practice, providing us with a wealth of historic, contemplative insight. Understanding such significant conceptual differences may help us think in fresh ways about our taken for granted assumptions, which could foster important new questions and insights about the aims and purposes, as well as the methods, of education. And finally, Tantra embodies a value system worth examining in this era of materialism, greed, and egocentricity writ large. Contemporary Tantrics are attempting to put their philosophical principles as well as their values into practice in education. I believe that we all have something to learn from this effort.

The Spiritual Science of Tantra

What combination of cultural circumstance and internal psychological dynamic is it that causes some of us to be attracted to the "Other", that which is quite foreign to everything in our culture of birth? Why are some people content to carry on the cultural and spiritual traditions of their foremothers and fathers, and others only satisfied to forge less familiar paths? In my case, it was likely a convergence of factors. I was born in a neighborhood bordering the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, a port city known for its liberality and cultural pluralism, to parents of mixed European heritage. One of my earliest memories, reinforced by family photographs and my mother’s narratives, is of regular excursions in my stroller to the Japanese Tea Gardens in that park. Another vivid memory is of the Chinese New Year’s Parade on Grant Avenue—I recall being very small and very lost there, while above me a dragon’s head dipped and swayed and firecrackers boomed. One might think such an early trauma would have left me terrified of all things "Oriental" (a common term signifying Asian back then), yet my fascination only grew. Mother and I went to Chinatown regularly, for lunch and shopping, and on one of these excursions I purchased a golden Buddha. Returning home, I set it up in my room, and proudly announced to my mother that I believed in reincarnation. I was a young adolescent at the time, so perhaps my announcement was designed for shock value. I think not however, for the attraction continued to grow and deepen. Fortunately I had parents who, rather than being shocked at my declaration, encouraged me to explore whatever interested me spiritually, which probably resulted in my later pursuing an undergraduate minor in comparative religion and philosophy.

When I left home to take up professional studies in dance and theater, one of the first books I bought myself was a handbook on Hatha Yoga. Laboring in the privacy of my own small Hollywood apartment, I worked to perfect the physical yoga postures. I approached them much as I approached my dance studies, with determination and the goal of technical perfection! In that book, there was some mention made of meditation, and this sounded like a good thing, so I tried to teach myself how to do it. There is some conventional wisdom in the world of spiritual practice that when the student is ready, the teacher, or the teachings, will appear. That did seem to be the operative

principle in my case. In 1965, I was working as a dancer on a movie set at Allied Arts Studio in Hollywood. I can't even remember what movie it was now, 35 years later, but I distinctly remember the book that many of the leading actors were reading during the filming. It was The Autobiography of a Yogi, by Paramahansa Yogananda (1946). I was intrigued. The actors invited me out to lunch, and we went next door to the first vegetarian restaurant I had ever experienced, which happened to be associated with the Self-Realization Fellowship (the LA center of Yogananda's teachings). I was hooked; I bought the book, began to eat soybeans and yogurt and drink herbal tea, and immersed myself in what would become a lifetime of exploration of the various spiritual traditions of the "East."

At the core of many of these traditions is Tantra, perhaps the most ancient set of spiritual practices still in existence on the planet. There are scholarly debates about Tantra's origins as well as its relationship to the Vedic School of Indian philosophy, which is historically important in Hinduism. The history of this tradition is hard to pin down due to the oral nature of transmission that has carried its teachings forth for centuries. Its Indian roots are in the indigenous nature worship that predated the Aryan invasions (approximately 1500 BCE) of that subcontinent. It both shaped and was shaped by the scriptures known as the Vedas, composed in India by the invading Aryans. Its many branches include "cults", such as Shaeva, Kaula, and Shakta cults, as well as profound influences upon major religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. It is at the heart of what we know in the west as "Yoga", due in large part to the work of Patanjali around 100 CE to systematize the beliefs and principles into a practice. The system articulated by Patanjali came to be called Astanga Yoga, the "Eight-Fold Path." Although Tantra is much larger, in both the historical and philosophical sense, than Yoga, the terms can be, to some extent, used interchangeably. According to Zimmer (1951), yoga means "the yoking of empirical consciousness to transcendental consciousness" (p. 580).

Tantra is a culturally specific spiritual practice, and thus connected with particular myths, legends, creation stories, deities, and forms of ritual and worship. Tantra and Yoga permeate Hindu mythology, such as in the epic poem, The Mahabharata, and one of its most important narratives, the Bhagavad-Gita. Despite its mythopoeic elements, Tantra is not itself a religion, but a "spiritual science", a set of practices that includes physical culture, mental development, and spiritual devotion. Although Tantra has a mystical and a philosophical dimension, virtually all writings about it stress the experiential nature of the practice, which requires no adherence to belief or dogma.

The most appropriate analogy for this for this internal process in the modern world is probably psychoanalysis. Bharati (1965) uses the phrase "psycho-experimental-speculative" to convey the essentially exploratory nature of the practice. In this context, gods and goddesses, deities and demons have no ontological or existential status to the Tantric, rather they serve as archetypes: "necessary anthropomorphic ways of finding out 'what is inside the mind'" (p. 20). Axioms, principles and guidelines are tentatively held speculative constructs, to be amended on the basis of experimental data.

Below, I provide a necessarily abbreviated overview of the main concepts and assumptions underlying Tantra, then highlight one particular form of education—Neo-humanist education—that is making the effort to implement this philosophy.

Fundamental concepts

For ease of communication, what follows is an attempt to articulate some of the fundamental concepts of Tantra in the context of Western philosophical categories. I do this with some hesitation in this "post-ontological, post-epistemological" academic atmosphere. (For an exploration of the relationship between contemplative traditions and philosophical postmodernism, see Kesson, 2000.)

For the purposes of this paper, however, rather than problematize the categories, I will lay out the ontological, epistemological, psychological, and axiological principles that seem most germane to my understanding of this very complex system.

Ontology. When we study ontology, we study the nature of being. According to Tantra, human being is a multidimensional condition. At the level of the conscious mind, there is a sense of separation. But within every human resides the "âtman", variously defined as soul, mind, spirit, or self (Müller, 1962). Through contemplative practice, one realizes the essential unity of the âtman with the higher Self, variously called the Divine, the Supreme, the Absolute. In this tradition, this highest Self is the last point to be reached by philosophical speculation, and the goal is overcoming the limitations imposed by the individual ego. The working assumption here is that there is a "higher" form of existence, attained when the ego-bound mind is freed of illusion. This notion of a supreme state, variously called nirvana (Buddhism), satori (Zen), or samadhi (Tantra), represents humanity's longing for something larger and more significant than the limited self. Tantra supposes that the individual mind (or unit mind) can transcend its limitations to understand itself as part of the ocean of limitless consciousness. Tantric practice is a system of atunement in which the individual mind comes into resonance with the universal mind.

Psychology. More properly phrased, in this context, biopsychology, Tantra proposes a model of the psyche that encompasses the entire human body, which is composed of both material and subtle energies as well as "energy fields" outside the body. Unlike western models of the mind, which locate mental functions entirely in the brain, Tantra assumes a more interpenetrating body-mind system, a continuum of increasing subtlety as one moves conceptually from the dense material body to the more ethereal mental functions. To understand this comprehensive psychosomatic system, one must suspend deeply engrained, dualistic models of body and mind.

Perhaps the most elusive concept to people not practiced in this tradition is the notion of kundalini (kula kundalini literally means "coiled serpentine force"). The kundalini is a psycho/spiritual force that lies dormant at the base of the spine until "awakened"—most commonly by the invocation of a mantra (a special sound vibration that when repeated, either audibly or internally, fosters a resonance between the practitioner and the sought after state of cosmic consciousness), or through other psycho-somatic processes such as chanting, breath control (pranayama), visualization (either internally or on an external object), or concentration. The awakened kundalini moves upward through a system of seven chakras along the shushuma nadi, a psychic energy channel in the spine. Chakras are "the points of contact between the individual on the one hand, and non-physical energies and beings on the other—psychic energy centres (sic) which are associated with particular areas of the body, but are not part of the body" (King, 1986, p. 55). Various Tantric texts allude to innumerable other energy centers in the body, "all of them interconnected by subtle energy channels, the psychic equivalents of nerves, arteries, and veins, which are called nadis" (p. 56). For our purposes, the main point of interest is that the various chakras are thought to control different aspects of human life (speech, digestion, emotions, mental activity, etc.) culminating with the seventh and highest chakra at the top of the head, which is the seat of pure blissful consciousness, Sat Chit Ananda. According to Tantra, physical, mental, and spiritual health depends on the proper balance and functioning of the energy of the chakras. The entire system, which includes physical exercises, meditation, vegetarian diet, and breathing techniques, is oriented towards creating such a balance, a state of well-being that is conducive to the realization of the higher, or limitless Self.

While the chakras may have no "objective" (physical) existence, they are a useful heuristic device. That they are "real" at some level of experience is suggested by the Tantric theory of the Sanskrit language, which is that the phonemes in that language are based upon the vibrational sound frequencies of the various "petals" of the chakras. Sanskrit is, according to this theory, a language of the body, and the many chants and mantras based upon these sounds do not merely correspond to

arbitrarily assigned meanings, but have psychosomatic effects as well. Other traditional explanations of the origins of Sanskrit differ on this point.

While Tantra recognizes, with western psychology, the conscious and the subconscious layers of the mind, it further elaborates the dimensionality of the mind by positing mental realms termed the "superconscious", where the capacities for intuition, discrimination (defined as the ability to transcend illusion), and union with the infinite abide. Western psychology pays little attention to these categories of the superconscious. One important exception to this neglect is the field of transpersonal psychology, which is perhaps best articulated in the work of the prolific, interdisciplinary scholar, Ken Wilber.

Epistemology. Epistemology is a category of speculation applied to efforts to understand how it is we can know anything at all. Ironically, in contemplative practice, it seems more important to explore the process of unknowing - that is, how we free ourselves of limited, conditioned responses. Some of the epistemological processes utilized to enable the mind to deconstruct its normal awareness are embodied in Tantric meditative techniques: bhuta shuddi (withdrawal of the mind from the external world); asana shuddi (process of withdrawing the mind from its conditioned identification with the body); citta shuddi (suspension of thoughts); dharana (focused concentration on a single point of awareness); and dhyana (unification of individual consciousness with cosmic consciousness, a blissful state of non-duality).

Many eastern philosophies disavow all objective knowledge as illusory, which has in some historical cases led to cultural passivity. While Tantra is certainly an introspective practice, its essential dynamism is best represented by a yantra (image for contemplation) used by Ananda Marga, a contemporary Tantric group, which includes two interlocking triangles, one pointing upwards and one pointing downwards. These are said to symbolize the necessity for "objective" adjustment (action in the world) to complement the "subjective approach" of contemplative practice. Tantra's longevity may in part be due to its empirical method (it is an experiential, experimental approach to the development of consciousness). Unlike western science, however, there is an emphasis on following all thought to its source, introspectively. This practice highlights the nature of all thought as dependent upon other thought. When the jinána yogi (one who seeks self realization through the path of knowledge) proceeds along this epistemological line, he or she inevitably reaches a point where both reflection and refraction end. That is, the mind of the inquirer reaches a point where it fails to comprehend that plate on which the processes of reflection and refraction operate. The point where the mind loses its capacity to analyse (sic) or compare further is the supreme point. (Sarkar, 1998, p. 180).

Tantric practice thus embodies both a dynamic theory of knowledge and a keen sense of its limits, or the point where intellectuality gives way to intuition.

Axiology. Morality is said to be the base of Tantric practice. In historical times, it is said that when disciples approached a guru (spiritual teacher) seeking enlightenment, they would often be instructed to develop a moral approach to life before given further teachings. Unlike the conventional morality in some religions, in which the precepts are rigid and connected to fixed structures of reward and punishment, the moral framework in Tantric Yoga is a set of guidelines oriented towards creating mental harmony. They include principles of relating to society (Yama) and principles for personal integration (Niyama). The principles of Yama include: Ahimsa, action performed without the intention to harm anyone or anything by thought, word, or deed; Satya, a spirit of truthfulness, in which all thought, speech and action is guided by a feeling of benevolence; Asteya, trustworthiness, non-stealing, the spirit of not taking that which belongs to another; Aparigraha, an ecological and psychological principle that asks that we minimize our needs, and

only use what is necessary for individual preservation; and Bramacarya, a state of mind in which one sees everyone as an expression of the Divine.

The principles of Niyama include Shaoca, the cultivation of a strong healthy body through proper exercise, diet and asanas (yoga postures), as well as attention to destructive mental habits such as greed, jealousy, fear, shame, etc.; Santosa, cultivation of a state of mental ease, contentment; Tapah, the practice of foregoing personal pleasures for the joy of serving others, an expression of our essential "oneness"; Svadhyaya, the effort to penetrate beyond dogma and ritualism to the truth in scriptures; and Ishvara Pranidhana, the mental effort, through meditation, towards union with cosmic consciousness.

All of these principles have been interpreted in various ways, and a more complex examination of the subtleties and differences of interpretation are well beyond the scope of this introductory paper. What is important is to understand that the pedagogical principles that emerge from these values play an important role in the educational design of Tantric schools.

Misconceptions and Distortions of Tantra

In the western mind, Tantra is most often associated with "spiritual sexuality", and sometimes with magical practices and the occult. It is not difficult to understand how these conceptions came about. Ideas in Tantric texts, according to Eliade (in Bharati, 1965), are frequently couched in secret, obscure language, with double meanings, sometimes expressed in erotic terminology. This has two intentions: first, to camouflage the teachings from non-initiates, and second, to "project the Yogi into the ‘paradoxical situation’ indispensable for his (sic) spiritual training" (p. 173). Many of the primal symbols of Tantra are overtly sexual in content. In India, one can still visit temples dedicated to Shiva and observe contemporary Shiva worshippers making offerings at an altar at which the primary symbol is a phallus (lingam) emerging from a vagina (yoni). In Tantric lore, the act of creation between people, as represented in the sexual act, parallels the cosmic act of creation, in which pure consciousness (often represented by Shiva) interfaces with active, dynamic forces in time and space (often represented by his consort, Shakti). Lama Yeshe (1987) suggests that the images of male and female deities in erotic embraces, rather than signifying degeneration (a charge that has been directed towards Tantra), is a symbolic portrayal of the inner unification of our own male and female energies. On a deeper level, their embrace symbolizes the aim of the very highest Tantric practices: generation of a most subtle and blissful state of mind that, by its very nature, is supremely suited to penetrate ultimate reality and free us from all delusion and suffering (p. 31-32).

Ecstatic bliss, brought about by the "sense of freedom from the impoverishment brought about by ego-centeredness" is, according to Guenther (1972), a "peak experience of pure aesthetic perception and enjoyment" (p. 37). For most of us, sexuality is as close as we ever get to a peak experience (Maslow, the western psychologist who developed the theory of the "peak experience" describes it as "the experience of awe, mystery, wonder, or of perfect completion" [1975, p. 312]). Is it any wonder that early Yogis used symbols derived from such fundamental human experience to describe what is, essentially, indescribable? In truth, while it is the erotocentric passages in Tantric texts that have made Tantra famous, these passages represent only a small fraction of the literature.

Because esoteric texts are widely available now, as opposed to a former time in which the teachings were transmitted orally by spiritual teachers who oversaw the moral and ethical development of their disciples, interpreters have made of the teachings what they will; thus a body of both sexual and occult practices has sprung up around Tantra, which according to some contemporary Tantrics, are but pale reflections of the genuine enlightenment tradition. The theme of ecstasy, says Bharati (1965), "has been victimized in recent times by fraudulent esotericism of the sort that is rampant in the western world (p. 285). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop an elaborate

critique of these practices, let the reader be cautioned that especially in the west, practitioners have sometimes been guilty of appropriating those elements of the practice which suit their inclinations, without attention to the much broader and deeper spiritual tradition from which they have been extracted.

Herein, of course, lies one of the great dilemmas of this era of cultural pluralism, exchange, and synthesis: to what extent can we adopt aspects of "foreign" traditions to meet our own spiritual needs without being guilty of cultural appropriation? And, without neutralizing, trivializing, or distorting the original intent(s) of the tradition? It is an ethical dilemma with which I have personally wrestled. Lama Yeshe reminds us that it is "very important to be able to differentiate clearly between the essence of Tantra and the cultural forms in which it is currently (and historically) wrapped (1987, p. 27). Tantra, he notes, is far deeper than language or custom might suggest. It is also important to remember that Tantra is nomadic, traveling as it has from India to China, Tibet, Japan (Zen) and more recently to the "Western" world. In transit, the essence remains, while forms change. And that essence, Lama Yeshe reminds us, is a teaching that embodies a way of breaking free from all the conditioning that limits our understanding of who we are and what we can become. In this sense, it is a truly universal spiritual practice.

Educating the Ecstatic Mind

Neo-humanist education has evolved from the teachings of Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, a Tantric guru of the 20th century with a worldwide following. The fundamental principles were originally laid out in a little book entitled The Liberation of Intellect: Neo-Humanism (1982). Neo-humanism is defined as:

> The love and respect for all people, extended to include all living beings, animate and inanimate. Neo-humanist education is the concerned effort to develop the highest human potential of every child. This translates into an emphasis on the whole child—physical, mental and spiritual—infusing children with love so that they grow into people who care to improve the world in which they live.
> (Nivedita & Bardwell, 1999, p. 147)

In contrast to a dominant western view of education (increasingly adopted by "modernizing" nations the world over), which understands the individual as fundamentally alone in the universe and in competition with others for resources and status, this educational philosophy promotes a vision of humanity as "intimately linked with the fabric of the universe" (Bussey, 2000, p. 10). This fundamental concept of interconnectedness, derived directly from Tantric philosophy, is at the heart of their pedagogy. Also at the heart of the philosophy are concepts familiar to educators acquainted with the experiential, constructivist educational models of John Dewey and other "progressive" educators: continuity, interaction, engagement, and integration. Knowledge, in Tantra, is obtained through personal encounter, through concrete involvement with and through an understanding of the relationship of one thing to another as well as of the fundamental unity of things. This happens in an integrated way, through feeling, acting, thinking, which is the ‘Way’ as a process of unification. The result, the unity of knowledge, is then not a constructed intellectual scheme, but a personal acquisition, a living state of mind which can be recognized and known, but which defies all conceptual statements (Guenther, 1972, p. 100-101).

Interestingly, according to Tantric scholar Guenther, in Buddhism, Tantra means both "integration" and "continuity." We can hear shades of Dewey in the words Guenther uses to describe the form of learning fundamental to Tantra:

> The world of man (sic) is not some solipsism (subjectivism at its peak) nor is it the sum total of all the objects that can be found in the world; the world of man is his horizon of meaning without which there can neither be a world nor an understanding of it so that man can live. This horizon of meaning is not something fixed once and forever, but it expands as man grows, and growth is the actuality of man's lived experience (p. 3).

The human problem is one of knowledge and that knowledge is not merely a record of the past but a reshaping of the present directed toward fulfillments in the emerging future (p. 3).

We can begin to glean from these descriptions an idea of the inherent dynamism of Tantra, and of its concerns with human growth and development and with lived experience. Its gaze is not otherworldly, but rather focused on concrete human experience, understood introspectively. This synthesis of the core ideas of Tantra raises a number of important questions for educators to consider: What sorts of educational experiences are integrative, involving body, emotions, mind - the full spectrum of human being? What sort of pedagogy might illuminate the ways in which the mind gets "stuck" in habitual thinking patterns, and how might we help students become reflective about those patterns? What sorts of educational experiences evoke shifts in perspective that lead to greater freedom, joy, sensitivity, compassion and purpose? What do we have to learn about the nature of deeply aesthetic experience, in which subject and object fuse in pure pleasure and appreciation?

Since I first wrote about Neo-humanist education for the Holistic Education Review (Kesson, 1988), schools in this Tantric tradition have continued to proliferate all over the world (there are over 1000 schools in over 50 countries in both the "developed" and the "developing" world). Recently, practitioners in Neo-humanist schools contributed short narratives of their practice for a lovely, illustrated collection entitled Neo-Humanist Education (Ananda Rama, 2000). I was asked to review these papers and write a brief introduction, and was pleased to see that this tradition, from humble beginnings, is beginning to make a significant contribution to the emerging literature on spiritual pedagogy.

The core values listed earlier in this paper, under "Axiology" serve as a referent for educational decisions in this approach and further expand on the basic commitments noted above. Based on my study of this system, a few principles stand out as fundamental. First, Neo-humanist education confers a much needed sense of value on the profession of teaching. The work of teachers is thought to be one of the most important roles in society, and the work they do is thought to be far more than that of a technician. Morality, ethics, and the development of pro-social behavior is of great importance in this system, and it is believed that "adult's loving behavior and good role modeling are the most effective ways of helping children develop their morality" (Nivedita & Bardwell, 1999, p. 151). Therefore, the qualifications of a teacher must include "personal integrity, strength of character, righteousness, a feeling for social service, unselfishness, an inspiring personality, and leadership ability" (Jacobson, 2000, p. 20). It goes without saying that teachers should be deeply engaged with their own spiritual practice, for it is felt that working with children demands mindful self-analysis.

Teachers, above all else, must exemplify the notion of bramacarya, a state of mind in which everyone is perceived as an expression of the Divine. Teachers are encouraged to see the child in all of his or her potential fullness, as opposed to a "deficit model" in which students are perceived as incomplete, and in need of fixing. This fundamental shift in perception gives rise to a host of pedagogical commitments. Teachers act as facilitators, "encouraging and guiding the children to bring out what is within themselves" (Jacobson & Volpe, 2000, p. 21). Academic experiences encourage the creative self-expression of each child. And at the spiritual level, the validity of spiritual experience is affirmed through myth, story, play and the opportunity for reflection within

the context of the overall life and rhythm of the class. Bussey (2000) reminds us that spirituality is not a doctrine, but a "living sense of one's connectedness within a greater whole" (p. 29).

This sense of interconnectedness finds concrete expression in the Neo-humanist commitment to fostering a "sense of place." On the material level, students practice aparigraha as they participate in organic agriculture, recycling, composting, land and water management, forestry, and wildlife care. At a more conceptual level, this move towards sustainability "must be created in local communities by people who have been stirred by a profound sense of wonder at the beauty and mystery of the world around them, who have experienced ecstasy in nature" (Ananda Mitra, 2000, p. 53). The capacity for "wonder at the beauty and mystery of the world" is essentially an aesthetic capacity, and Neo-humanist schools understand art and the creative process as central to the full development of human being. Painting, music, dance, sculpture, music, and theater are at the core of the curriculum in these schools, not at the periphery, and these art forms are fully integrated into all subjects, for it is art that expands the inventive, intuitive, and imaginative powers of the superconscious mind.

A key element of the Neo-humanist vision is the belief that educational institutions are of great importance in the transformation of our world from its current conditions of war, poverty, environmental degradation, materialism, racism, and a host of other destructive "isms" to a world of mutual respect, peace, and justice that is free from dogma, superstition, and exploitation. To this end, Neo-humanist educators value the multitude of cultural expressions that make up the whole of humanity, fostering indigenous language, arts, and other cultural expressions in their schools. Multicultural education, in this context, is about "transcending the text of nationalism and creating a new type of globalism: (a) recognition of the differences that are part of the post-modern thrust but not its conclusion; a climax neither in capitalist homogeneity nor post-modern nihilism but in life-embracing unity" (Inayatullah, 2000, p. 72). One of the currents that Neo-humanist schools find themselves swimming against is what is termed "pseudo-culture", the homogenous (mostly American) music, films, and television shows that are designed not to uplift the human spirit, but to gain short term profits for their makers. These products are finding their way into every corner of the world, and eroding local cultural expressions and sentiments. This raging current of cultural products is countered in Neo-humanist schools by working to develop local art and craft forms, by media literacy and the development of a critical social/political awareness, and by fostering the creative transmission of cherished local values to future generations (through plays, murals, literature, and other forms of expression).

Neo-humanist schools are understood as communities in the broadest sense, with the welfare of all of the groups—parents, teachers, staff, and students—in mind. For example, schools in poverty-stricken areas of the world often have adult education, nutritional programs, and agricultural projects connected to them. Students in Neo-humanist schools are encouraged to direct their efforts outwards to the community in self-selected service projects, exemplifying the commitment to tapah. Service to people, plants, animals and the earth itself helps to develop feelings of selflessness, and a sense that one is "involved in the web of life as a contributor and not only a taker" (Ananda Rama, 2000, p. 63).

Children in these schools are exposed to the basic Yoga practices embodied in Tantric philosophy. Students' all around growth and development is fostered through eating wholesome vegetarian foods, the practice of asanas (physical postures that balance and strengthen the body), guided imagery, and ample opportunities for silent reflection and introspection. One powerful practice, sustained even into the higher grades, is the "morning circle", a collective activity in which the child has an opportunity to transcend their own personal struggles to feel themselves an integral part of the whole. Morning circle may include singing, dancing, chanting, contemplation, or discussion, but whatever the content, the aim is that students "contribute to the collective intelligence and wisdom

(and) at the same time they are supported by the powerful synergetic flow" (Merz, 2000, p. 30). Above all, joy and pleasure in learning is fostered in an atmosphere free from rewards and punishments, from externally mandated standards of learning, and from the unproductive stress of high stakes tests. Unlike state schools (in almost any modern, industrialized country), which increasingly are required to "cover the curriculum", whether or not the curriculum connects to anything of relevance to the students, Neo-humanist schools have the luxury of cultivating the more subtle human characteristics and interests: emotion, intuition, insight, imagination, aesthetics, reflection, service, and spiritual development. This educational philosophy and practice provides a stark contrast to the kind of education that dominates the planet right now, one geared toward high test scores, decontextualized knowledge, nationalism, and narrow vocationalism.

Conclusion

George Leonard was convinced, back in the 1960's, that new global conditions such as the incredible destructive power of new technologies, population increases, and the compression of time and space called for entirely new responses, indeed for a new kind of human being. This sort of human would not be driven by "narrow competition, eager acquisition, and aggression" but would "spend his (or her) life in the joyful pursuit of learning." The chief ingredient in the form of education necessary to bring about this new human being would be "'ecstasy': joy, ananda, the ultimate delight" (1968, p. 230). In the last chapter of his book, he acknowledged the fear that we have about this secret ingredient, and attempted to convince the skeptical reader that ecstasy is not necessarily opposed to reason, order, or morality. In fact, he suggests, "ecstasy is education's most powerful ally. It is reinforcer for and substance of the moment of learning" (p. 232). "To affirm, to follow ecstasy in learning, is to move more easily toward an education, a society that would free the enormous potential of man (sic)" (p. 234).

Although the Cold War, which was at its height in the 1960's, is over now, the times are, if anything, more complex, and every bit as treacherous. Population is steadily increasing, environmental destruction escalates, wars and rumors of war abound, consumerism and commercialism have seemingly conquered the hearts and minds of everyone, and the gap between the rich and poor persists. The need for a "new kind of human" is as compelling as ever. Perhaps we have something to learn from the planet's most ancient tradition about how to nurture the capacities that will help us develop a peaceful, healthy, and happy society, a society in which learning is engaged in for sheer and utter pleasure, and for the genuine welfare of humanity. This is truly a revolutionary idea—perhaps one whose time has come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ananda Mitra. (2000). "Environmental education", in Neo-humanist education. Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications, pp. 52-53.

Ananda Rama, (2000). Neo-humanist education. Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications.

Bharati, A. (1965). The Tantric tradition. London: Rider and Company.

Bussey, M. (2000). "Sa' visya' ya' vimuktaye: 'Education is that which liberates'", in Neo-humanist education. Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications, pp.10-11.

Guenther, H.V. (1972). The Tantric view of life. Berkeley: Shambala.

Inayatullah, S. (2000). "The multicultural challenge to the future of education", in Neo-

Humanist education. Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications, pp. 72-73.

Jacobson, E. & Volpe, K. (2000). "The role of the teacher", in Neo-humanist education, Ananda Rama (Ed.). Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications, pp. 20-21.

Kesson, K. (2000). "Contemplative spirituality, social transformation, and currere: Finding our 'way'". In Educational yearning: The journey of the spirit and democratic education, Carlson, D. & Oldenski, T. (Eds.), NY: SUNY Press.

Kesson, K. (1989). A Neo-humanist model of education. Holistic Education Review, 1(3), 12-18.

King, F. (1986). Tantra for westerners: A practical guide to the way of action. NY: Destiny Books.

Leonard, G. (1968). Education and ecstasy. NY: Dell Publishing Co.

Maslow, A.H. (1975). "Some educational implications of the humanistic psychologies", in Four psychologies applied to education, Roberts, T. (Ed.). NY: Schenkman Publishing Co.

Merz, A. (2000). "Morning circle", in Neo-humanist education. Germany: Ananda Marga Gurukula Publications, p. 30.

Müller, M. (Trans.). (1962). The Upanishads. NY: Dover Publications.

Nivedita, A.A. & Bardwell, K. (1999). "Expanding the child's mind: Sarkar's theories on early childhood education", in Transcending boundaries, Inayatullah & Fitzgerald (Eds.). Australia: Gurukula Press.

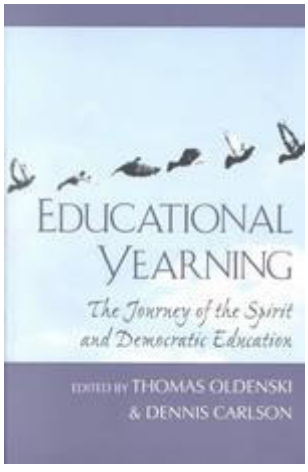
Sarkar, P.R. (1998). Discourses on Neo-humanist education. Thailand: Ananda Marga Publications.

Sarkar, P.R. (1982). The liberation of intellect: Neo-humanism.

Yogananda, P. (1946). Autobiography of a yogi. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship Publishers.

Yeshe, L. (1987). Introduction to Tantra: A vision of totality. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Zimmer, H. (1951). Campbell, J. (Ed.) Philosophies of India. N.Y: Pantheon Books.



For information contact:

Foundation for Educational Renewal
P.O. Box 328, Brandon,
Vermont 05733 USA
http://www.gurukul.edu/

Table of Contents