CALLING IN THE SELF:

CENTERING SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This essay troubles notions of critical pedagogy that promote binary and fragmented conceptions of identity and oppression, which tend to be hyper-rational and outward focused. Socially engaged Buddhism has much to offer critical pedagogy because it challenges the notion of a separate self, engaging in the work of justice and movement-building. It is an embodied way of inner knowing that invites dis-identification with a separate self, thereby experiencing the self as interconnected. It also provides insight into the root causes of violence and oppression and a mechanism by which we can purify the root causes to avoid replication in new, subtle, and subversive ways. Critical pedagogy without embodied, contemplative practices create the illusion of systemic and structural change. Without awareness into the ways that our ego mind centers and re-centers a separate self, we unconsciously operate from a place of self-interest and self-protection, furthering individualism at the expense of collective liberation. This essay intentionally engages contemplative personal narrative to model the power of self-awareness in Socially engaged Buddhism and the practice of *calling in the self through insights gained by the author. I*

call for a more embodied, self-reflective approach to critical pedagogy at the individual level to support deeper and more sustained systemic transformation and movement building.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, ego, socially engaged Buddhism, embodied ways of knowing, personal narrative

Based on Karl Marx's critique of society and capitalism and with origins in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, critical pedagogy has played an important role in challenging hegemonic structures and ideologies that perpetuate violence and oppression. Since the 1960s, it has come to include an examination of systemic violence and oppression along the intersecting lines of race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, faith/worldview, ability, and other subjectivities. In carrying out the work of critical pedagogy, scholars and activists challenge the status quo, increase access and opportunity for historically and presently colonized, racialized, and marginalized populations, and create policies, structures, and programs that promote justice, democracy, and movement building. Despite these efforts and sacrifices, grave abuses of power and acts of violence continue to operate in critical spaces, often because relations of domination are operating in and through us in repressive ways, thereby reproducing repression (Ellsworth, 1989). Renowned Buddhist teacher Reverend angel Kyodo williams (2015) submits that efforts to liberate have been born of the same constructs they seem to undermine: "competition over cooperation, power over rather than with us and them" (p. xv). How might we explain the violence and oppression that occurs in critical spaces committed to resisting and transforming violence and oppression? In accepting Kumashiro's (2004) invitation to relate to knowledge in troubled and paradoxical ways, this essay troubles the contributions and enactment of critical pedagogy that tends to focus on rational approaches to reflection and outward-focused approaches to transformation, which replicate violent and oppressive structures.

There are three main limitations of critical pedagogy that serve as a breeding ground for violence and oppression. First, critical pedagogy assumes that through the use of reason, one can come to a "truer" understanding of oppressive systems and ideas and be compelled to action (Holohan, 2019). Critical reflection (a key component of praxis in critical pedagogy) is often engaged at an intellectual level and does not center spiritual and embodied ways of knowing (Anzaldúa, 2002; Frelier, 2008; Ng, 2008; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). Without centering embodied ways of knowing, reflection does not allow for deep understandings of our complicity in violence and oppression

and does not provide opportunities to address and eradicate the root causes of violence and oppression in each of us. Second, critical pedagogy locates the site of both oppression and liberation in systems and ideologies and fails to account for the role of individuals in those systems. As individuals in systems *unconsciously* replicate patterns of violence and oppression (because of unconscious pain, fears, and insecurities), efforts at systemic change unknowingly promote individual interests (e.g., escaping pain, alleviating fears, masking insecurities, etc.) at the expense of collective liberation. Third, critical pedagogy, like other knowledge systems, views the self and knowledge as stable and permanent, because it promotes a relationship to our world through our knowledge of reality instead of reality itself (Kumashiro, 2004). Kumashiro (2004) asserts that relating to the world through our lens of reality leads to suffering (and oppression) in two significant ways: first, our knowledge systems have set us up to engage the world in binaries (e.g., good and evil, right and wrong, us and them, etc.), which negate other possibilities (as in the context of gender construction) and render hierarchies and exclusions inevitable. Second, our knowledge systems operate on the presumption that knowledge is independent and unchanging. This leads us to extrapolate meaning in different situations without recognizing that context determines meaning, and that knowledge should therefore change with context (Kumashiro, 2004). These limitations of critical pedagogy create the conditions for abuses of power and acts of violence in critical spaces.

To address the limitations of critical pedagogy, I turn to the practice of socially engaged Buddhism, which promotes embodied, inner knowing through self-observation and nonviolent, political/social action. Socially engaged Buddhism constructs the self and conceptualizes the cause of suffering/oppression differently than critical pedagogy. While critical pedagogy locates the source of suffering and liberation in cultural and economic systems and ideologies such as capitalism, Buddhism locates the source of suffering and liberation in the concept of a separate self (Holohan, 2019). While critical pedagogy reifies the notion of self as it operates within an understanding of duality, Buddhism nurtures embodied experiences of

anatta (or impermanence), which lead one to experience the absence of a subject or separate self through in the realm of non-duality. Leading Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) suggests that an embodied experience of anatta leads to understandings of inter-being, the idea that since there is no separate self and that each of us "exists" because of non-self-elements. Therefore, I, Vidya, do not exist. I only exist because of the non-Vidya elements that constitute this idea of Vidya.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of socially engaged Buddhism, it is important to situate it within the teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion that originated 25 centuries ago in India and is based on the teachings and life of Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as the Buddha (i.e., one who achieves enlightenment and awakening through meditation). Buddhism is a very diverse religion with many perspectives and practices, and, like all religions, has been used throughout history to both promote and challenge oppression (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 41). Buddhism is based on the premise that life is filled with suffering caused by clinging or attachment in all its forms (e.g., attachment to ideas, emotions, sense pleasures, roles, routines, representations of reality, etc.). These attachments to, and identifications with, our thoughts, feelings, experiences, and identities create the illusion of a separate self, known as the ego mind. According to Buddhism, the ego mind is a construct that constantly reinforces itself, building structures and systems of control and developing attitudes and views that maintain its primacy to substantiate its validity (williams, 2016, xxvii). Dzochen Ponlop Rinpoche**,** a leading Tibetan Buddhist scholar, defines ego as the story of "I" or "me" that we cling to as the basis of our feelings of self-importance, and attachment to this story causes suffering (Rinpoche, 2010). The practice of meditation in Buddhism encourages us to loosen the grip of our connection to this story, to doubt the certainty of the ego, and to question whether we are who we really think we are (Epstein, 2008).

As stated above, socially engaged Buddhism conceptualizes the nature of reality as one that is constantly changing. As such, we are invited into a different relationship with our ego minds, which includes our changing ideas, beliefs, identities, and feelings. This creates the

conditions for equity activists and scholars to dis-identify from these identities, which is significant to transformative practice in several ways. First, dis-identification allows for greater nuance, complexity, and ambiguity in the search for justice and liberation because we are less attached to our ideas and convictions. Second, less attachment increases the awareness of blind spots in our understanding of oppression. Third, dis-identification supports individual and collective capacities to sit with discomfort and to make more thoughtful choices about how and when emotion is directed toward inaction/action. Socially engaged Buddhism teaches the importance of being astutely aware of thoughts, feelings, and experiences and meeting them non-reactively. Fourth, dis-identification challenges our notion of the individual self and invites exploration into a deeply interconnected reality beyond the self/other binary. Interbeing, defined above as being empty of a separate self, invites us to understand our co-responsibility in dismantling violence and oppression. Finally, dis-identification invites a very intimate knowledge and radical honesty about the more true motivations for engaging this work. As such, there is greater discernment about the ways in which we benefit from, and are complicit in, systems of violence and oppression. This essay invites us to explore the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that the ego mind limits dis-identification and replicates violence and oppression.

Despite the importance, there is significant danger in exploring the role of socially engaged Buddhism in critical pedagogy. First, you might think that focusing on transformation at the individual level denies the importance of disrupting systemic practices that maintain injustice. That is false. Changing systems and structures is *essential* to transformative change in socially engaged Buddhism. The intent of this article is *not* to absolve systems of responsibility, nor is it to turn our gaze away from systems of oppression. As stated above, this article is asking us to consider the ways in which, despite our focus on systems, the unconscious ego mind recenters individuality at the expense of collective liberation. Second, an analysis at the level of the individual should not be confused with a focus on liberal individualism, which often serves to blame the individual for perceived shortcomings (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). This is

especially problematic for racialized and marginalized scholars and activists who disproportionately face numerous barriers personally and professionally because of their subjectivities (Baez, 2000; Henry et al., 2017; Sadao, 2003; Turner & Myers, 2000). Instead, socially engaged Buddhism invites us to consider how (neo)liberalism, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other systems of oppression, which are designed to categorize us and foster competition for power and control (Dei, 2000; Shahjahan, 2014), operate in and through us. It invites us to inquire about who we need to be to live a different logic. Third, socially engaged Buddhism illuminates a journey into the self that deeply understands its impermanent nature, shifting from an intellectual understanding of a separate self to an embodiment of interconnectedness. Fourth, this essay is not intended to minimize the labor and expertise of Indigenous, Black, queer, other racialized, and other marginalized scholars, activists, elders, and educators, which is often at the expense of their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health, well-being, and safety. Finally, this essay is not intended to contribute to the self-shaming/blaming that many equity advocates experience because the labor in sustaining movements for justice may seem ineffective and unceasing. Instead, it is intended to support our wholeness and humanity in this work, and to revitalize the critical in critical pedagogy.

INSIGHTS

You might imagine that while concepts in socially engaged Buddhism offer powerful lenses for critical self-reflection, similar rational or philosophical insights would emerge from other forms of critical self-reflection. However, there is a level of *embodied understanding* through the practice of dis-identification that *far exceeds insights* I have gained from any other reflective practice I have engaged in. Socially engaged Buddhism helps us dissect our thought patterns, come to new and nuanced insights, and purify the mind at the root level, where violence and oppression originate. Since 2012, this question continued to emerge in my meditation practice: How might my ego mind perpetuate the very violence, inequity, and oppression that I seek to dismantle in the world? Over the past seven years, I observed some ways in which the nature of violence that lives in and

through me, mirrors the nature of violence that lives in and through larger, systemic forces of oppression. I also observed how unconscious fears, insecurities, and pain have subverted collective and systemic efforts and liberation. Over time, I began noticing similar patterns and behaviors operating in others. These ideas are, and will always be, partial and fluid. As I become more aware of the nature of reality as opposed to my knowledge of reality (Kumashiro, 2004), my insights will change. While embodied critical reflection is beyond the scope of an essay, I invite you to reflect on the ways in which similar patterns and examples of violence and oppression may manifest in you and consider how meditative and other embodied reflective practices may allow you to come to your own insights.

PERFORMING EQUITY AND COMMODIFYING OPPRESSION

Many of us who engage in education for justice focus our energy on building and cultivating the image of equity scholar, equity activist, or equity badass. Socially engaged Buddhism supports us in dis-identifying with our activist identities so that we may better discern the mental volition and motivations behind our speech and actions, as mental volition is foundational to physical and vocal action towards peace, harmony, and justice. The embodied practice of mediation also supports us in purifying the parts of our minds that are attached to motivations such as the need for validation, approval, and personal gain in the first place. These motivations work to deify the self while working against opportunities for collective and systemic change.

Performing equity is the practice of engaging in equity speech and action for self-protection, self-promotion, and self-glorification. It often leads to the misappropriation and co-opting of complex ideas for personal gain rather than for collective liberation and systemic change. For example, I perform equity when I "name-drop" equity-minded academics, practitioners, concepts, or initiatives without adequate historical, contextual, or embodied understanding/analysis. I find myself overusing academic terms and concepts that are highly philosophical and often convoluted as a way of presenting myself as intelligent. I also find myself engaging in convenient equity and decolonization efforts because my intention is to create an illusion of activist rather than to truly engage this work. There is a part of me

that craves a sense of belonging and community and recognizes the increased safety afforded within equity circles. There is another part of me that is strictly interested in upward mobility, and I am attempting to gain access to power in equity circles. We are seasoned at naming our complicity in critical spaces (Grande, 2004; Razack, 2007) and recognizing that our subjectivities implicate us differently in acts of complicity. However, we are all complicit in varying degrees, and what we lack in critical spaces is a sustained method of accessing and addressing the root of our complicity in systems of violence, which socially engaged Buddhism offers. Commodifying oppression is the use of critical pedagogy as a platform for professional growth and mobility. In this sense, oppression and liberation become commodities in a disconnected and competitive world. For many of us, our careers and career mobility *depend on* the "issues" we are working to address. Our "purpose" and "work" in the world depends on, and demands, the suffering and oppression of others.

A nuanced approach helps us realize that performing equity is different from the recognition of Indigenous and marginalized knowledge(s) and representation of the contributions and expertise of racialized and other minoritized scholars (Turner, 2002; Vargas, 2002), or the importance of re/naming concepts that give voice and validity to previously hidden or silenced experiences and expressions of oppression (Keating, 1998; Lorde, 1984). Representational work is important for Indigenous, marginalized, and racialized scholars and activists to "gain credibility," especially for those of us in bodies marked by "difference" (Fenelon, 2003). In many activist and academic spaces, representation and recognition need to be protected, fostered, and promoted, often in subversive ways, and almost always in community. However, performing equity is an act of self-promotion that is in greater service to our ego minds than to justice and liberation that can operate even within efforts to center representation.

SILENCING THE OPPRESSOR WITHIN

Socially engaged Buddhism promotes dis-identification from our emotions, developing in us the capacity and willingness to observe discomfort from multiple perspectives while being conscious of the need to divert the discomfort. Often times, we divert discomfort when

we identify so strongly with experiences of oppression that we fail to recognize and respond to the ways in which we perpetuate oppression and subtly benefit from the relative oppression of others. Truly sitting in and with discomfort is a commitment to holding the internal tension that we are simultaneously oppressed and oppressor. Socially engaged Buddhism invites the embodiment of interconnectedness instead of the rational understanding of it.

Silencing the oppressor within refers to how we relate to our internalized oppressor by challenging the binary of oppressor/oppressed thinking. For example, as a South Asian and racialized model minority, there have been many instances in which my voice has been silenced, negative assumptions have been made about me, and I have been expected to work twice as hard just to earn a seat at a table (that I have not actually wanted to sit at). My experiences are also minimalized and invisibilized in the context of race as part of a catch-all "people of color" group that is neither White nor Black or Indigenous. Simultaneously, I have often failed at times to acknowledge the greater access to power I have in relation to Black and Indigenous colleagues, and how my success has supported and maintained a racial order from which I gain advantage. I have benefited from White supremacy because of my proximity to Whiteness, albeit precarious (Syedullah, 2015). I am often more likely to have my voice heard, be seen as more intelligent and capable, and be given the benefit of the doubt when I make a mistake. I also do not have to continuously navigate anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in systems and structures in higher education and society as a whole. Given my proximity to whiteness, I have observed patterns of *meritocratic equity* that claim to work towards equity while maintaining an inequitable order, operating within me and other equity advocates who are simultaneously invisibilized and relatively advantaged. There is growing awareness that this behavior is rooted in the deeply ingrained and ableist belief that my self-worth is intimately connected to my ability to produce. Meditation has allowed me to deeply explore the embodied complexities of multiple racisms (and their connections to other systems of oppression), relative advantages afforded within these complexities, and the ways in which White

supremacy erases different experiences of racism by pitting racialized people against one another.

Silencing the oppressor within also occurs when we stay silent while bearing witness to violent and oppressive behaviors. For example, physical and/or sexual harassment occurs in critical spaces and is protected through secrecy for fear that exposure may taint the important work of a racialized or other minoritized scholar/activist or the movement altogether (Chen, Dulani, & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011). As well, intellectual property is regularly appropriated by those with greater power in critical spaces in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, which is especially problematic when we consider all of the unpaid, unnamed, and unrecognized labor of racialized and other marginalized activists and scholars, and, in particular, graduate students and women. Ultimately, silencing the oppressor maintains the oppressed/oppressor binary and denies the interconnectedness of systems of oppression (Collins, 1986; hooks, n.d.) and collective liberation (Collins, 1986; williams, 2016). This maintains racial and other hierarchies and perpetuates the myth that independent and individual liberation is possible.

OPPOSITIONAL CRITIQUE

Socially engaged Buddhism also invites us to dis-identify with our thoughts and ideas, to observe them, to wonder about how we have come to know what we know, and to reflect on the partiality of our knowing (Kumashiro, 2004). It changes our relationship to knowledge. The notion that knowledge is fluid and dynamic becomes less of a theoretical concept and more of an embodied experience. Socially engaged Buddhism also invites us to deconstruct the Self/Other binary and question "how this knowledge comes to bear on my sense of self" (Kumashiro, 2000). From this place of dis-identification, we can hold complexities, subtleties, and paradoxes with greater care and intensity.

Complexities are often explored through critique, a foundational aspect of equity work that disrupts normalized behaviours and legitimized knowledge(s) that maintain violence and oppression. Oppositional critiques are necessary to shine a spotlight on ideological tensions and silenced realities that require naming, resistance, and

intervention. Engaging those who confirm our worldviews and affirm our identities serves to create a space for safety, support, and renewal. This is especially important for those of us whose experiences, both personally and professionally, render us invisible, unsafe, and disposable.

However, I have noticed that when I *continuously* engage with folks who share my beliefs, worldviews, and lived experiences, my learning is stunted, and I have a greater capacity to dehumanize another with radically different views. Oppositional critique can also dehumanize when it is used as a form of equity currency for personal gain and advancement. This may take the form of self-interested critique rooted in the motivation to appear intelligent or gain influence or critique intended to discredit the work of another scholar or activist whom we have deemed "not critical enough." There is an assumption of finishedness among critical scholars and activists (including me) who contradict the idea that we are all unfinished (Freire, 1998). All of us. Oppositional critiques focus too narrowly on one part of a larger whole, leading to phenomena such as oppression Olympics that disproportionately harm oppressed groups (Hancock, 2007; Martinez, 1993). While oppositional approaches are positioned as "radical" and "critical," they often conform to logics of neoliberalism and colonialism, which frame our understandings and experiences in fragmented, disconnected, and binary ways, and stifle complexity and creativity (Akanbi, 2018).

EQUITY EMPIRES

Socially engaged Buddhism sheds light on the fact that without an ongoing and committed practice to inner knowing, theoretical concepts about the logics of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, White supremacy, capitalism, etc. do little to help guard against these logics being replicated in critical spaces. As critical scholars, we then fall into the dangerous trap of convincing ourselves that we are free of these logics when they are simply subverted and transmuted with greater sophistication and secrecy.

Some academics and practitioners look to create monopolies or empires within critical spaces, complete with groupies and followers.

They get swept up in the allure of power and influence and develop a strong and harmful attachment to maintaining an image while convincing themselves that they are doing this work for a noble purpose. Within each empire, there is the creation of "in-groups" and "out-groups" based on the extent of agreement on concepts and perspectives. I don't have an empire, but I have noticed my desire to have one. I have noticed an addictive quality in my attachment to the number of shares and likes on social media or the number of publication citations that is so central to the worth of faculty. It is the very neoliberal markers of success I critique in my scholarship that I have internalized as markers of my worth.

I am inviting us to reflect on the intentionality behind the equity empire, and the misdirected energy required to maintain it. Equity empires are often rooted in the need for recognition and validation, which result in continuous efforts at self-promotion but are positioned as promoting, leading, and speaking for the collective. While the aim is not to demonize these needs, it is important to note that equity empires recenter the individual at the expense of the collective. I have witnessed the desire to create and maintain "equity empires" lead to the withholding of ideas and information from those who may improve upon them. I have seen equity empires restrict the ability of "followers" to trust their own knowing and agency by deferring all authority to empire leaders, thereby limiting the entry points to engage in discourse, dissent, and meaning-making. I have also seen equity empires disallow multiple and potentially contradictory truths. These practices are important in developing critical consciousness as a collective, instead of relegating the responsibility of knowledge construction to a select few. Finally, I have seen equity empires reinscribe the very binaries of good/evil, right/wrong, and us/them that our efforts aim to challenge, with the most positive qualities associated with the empress and emperor. Socially engaged Buddhism invites me to bring into awareness how I have internalized these logics.

ACTIVISM ROOTED IN ESCAPE

Activism rooted in escape also threatens our capacity to build, create, and sustain movements for justice, because we are

unconsciously committed to meeting our individual needs often at the expense of collective liberation. Socially engaged Buddhism helps us discern when we are coming to this work from a place of contraction and separation (to escape our emotions) rather than expansion and connection (by acknowledging our emotions). It helps us see when our work lacks awareness and wisdom because our loyalty to emotional escapism is greater than our loyalty to collective liberation. Escapism limits our agency as well as our ability to heal from the destructive and generational effects of oppression. Finally, embodied meditative practices in Socially engaged Buddhism can provide greater space between ourselves and difficult emotions, traumas, and pain, which affords us greater choice in how we might consciously direct emotions such as anger and frustration or consciously respond in a given situation. williams (2016) states that without the proper tools, our strategies for coping can turn inward, leading to "suppression, depression, diversion, martyrdom, and simply taking it until there's no room left in our bodies to contain the force of destruction" (p. xvi).

I have noticed in myself and others that it is most often the fear of being alone, the fear of not being seen/heard, and the fear of not being good enough that we are trying to escape. Underneath my activist identity, there is often the need to be liked, to be admired, to be right. From this place, I am complicit, competitive, exploitative, oppressive, violent, divided within myself and in my relations to others, and I am suffering. In these instances, fighting against oppression becomes a tool to quiet these parts of myself. I have recognized that when my intention is emotional distraction and escapism, my work takes on an overly fervent and frenzied nature. I am too attached to the outcome and too identified with the concept of activist or activist-scholar.

I am not suggesting that we engage in activism *only* when we have acknowledged and processed all of our pain, fears, and insecurities. That may not occur in this lifetime. I am also not denying or disparaging the importance of perceived "negative" emotions. I am suggesting that we be fiercely *aware* of our thoughts and emotions, that we make space for them, and that we consciously choose our re/actions. Anger, frustration, and rage are important and necessary responses to the denial of rights, recognition, and representation, and

our pain and fears are not to be ignored or pacified (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). However, unacknowledged anger, frustration, and pain can be harmful to the self and to the larger collective because it recenters individuality at the expense of collective liberation.

INTENTIONALLY SITUATING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

The power of the above reflections is in their embodiment, which allows for deeper knowing and the opportunity to identify and release the root causes of impurities through meditative practices. In attempting to capture the embodied nature of these insights, contemplative, personal narrative methodology was selected for a few reasons. First, personal narratives can provide a model for critical self-reflection when they explore the unconscious ego mind without reifying the self. Second, a personal narrative approach grounds what is often a theoretical discussion about complicity in oppression in the embodied experience of one person's journey and struggles in working through that complicity. Third, a narrative approach challenges the self/other binary that is often constructed and reconstructed in call-out/in culture. In writing this essay, I engaged in the process of *calling in the self* by exploring the ways in which my ego mind perpetuates violence and oppression and by naming the partiality of my knowing.

To be faithful to myself in this essay, it is important to center my body and my embodied experiences in this essay. I come to this work as a South Asian, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied female. I also negotiate being a colonial settler in Tkaronto (Toronto), Canada with my family and ancestors having been subjugated to colonialism in various parts of the world. I have also come to this work as someone who has been deeply committed to a spiritual practice, with roots in Eastern spirituality (Hinduism, Jainism, and more intentionally, Buddhism). In a time when mindfulness and meditation are becoming commodified and appropriated, it is important to also situate my connection to, and experience with, meditation. While there are different approaches to meditation in Buddhism, which form the basis of nonviolent political/social action in socially engaged Buddhism, I have been a student of Vipassana meditation, under the tradition of

S.N. Goenka, for the past 10 years. Vipassana meditation is a non-sectarian approach that leads to self-transformation through self-observation and "aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and the resultant highest happiness of full liberation" ("Vipassana meditation," n.d.).

In the Theravada tradition, Vipassana meditation is also known as insight meditation. This meditation practice helps an individual to attain insight into the nature of reality, namely dukkha (suffering), anatta (non-self), and anicca (impermanence). The practice of anapana, or mindful breathing, is used to calm the mind and develop its concentration. The interconnection of the mind and body is then explored by gradually and systematically scanning the body to develop distinct awareness of increasingly subtle feelings or "sensations" (vedanā) with the intention of not reacting to them (Anâlayo, 2011). During meditation, sudden and unprovoked insights emerge into the nature of reality as we purify our minds from blockages to happiness to experience effortless joy (Yong, 2017). Therefore, vipassana can be summarized as ordinary experience, awareness, and balance leading to insights and purification (Young, 2017). The insights noted here emerged over the course of my vipassana retreats. The experience would often be one of standing outside of a cage and observing its composition from multiple angles and perspectives. At these times, I was an observer of my deeply held beliefs, identifications, feelings, stories, and lived experiences, all of which exist in me as impermanent, changing phenomena, but are not fundamentally who I am.

While not everyone may have access or a desire to practice vipassana meditation, what is important to our conversation on critical pedagogy is an embodied practice of critical self-reflection. Critical pedagogy without insight into one's thoughts, feelings, and motivations will do little to change unjust systems and structures and will simply replicate patterns of violence and oppression in supposedly critical spaces. Embodied, contemplative practices allow for deeper reflexivity—opportunities to consistently, patiently, and honestly explore our ego minds and the intentions/thoughts behind our words and actions. Meditation also invites us into a knowing of ourselves that does not deny our subjectivities and lived experiences but allows us to

access the part of ourselves that is beyond them. With this approach, equity work can center love instead of fear, wholeness instead of fragmentation, and embodied ways of knowing and being instead of mere intellectual debates.

CONCLUSION

Each of us are part of the very systems we are critiquing. We have both collective responsibility and agency in this system. This does not mean that we should absolve the system or those with greater power of their responsibility to create and sustain change, nor does it mean that we all have the same access to agency. As equity educators, we need to engage a dual approach. We must continue to develop our critical consciousness through ongoing dialogue that problematizes injustice and mobilizes social action aimed at changing unjust systemic practices. The consciousness of each of us contributes to our collective consciousness. However, a rational or philosophical approach that is void of contemplative practice at the individual and collective levels is highly problematic. Critical pedagogy without an embodied practice of self-awareness will perpetuate violence and oppression in new and hidden forms. To only focus on the system denies the ways in which our unconscious ego minds unintentionally keep us trapped at the individual level while convincing us that we are working towards systemic change. This delusion serves to replicate violence and oppression in us and through us and denies us of opportunities for liberation, dignity, and humanity.

Engaging this work from a place of greater self-awareness asks us to consider new ways of being through practices such as embodied learning (Frelier, 2008; Ng, 2008; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015), slow learning (Shahjahan, 2014), critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005), and learning in community (hooks, 2003; Ritskes, 2011). This might mean creating spaces that promote and value collaboration, co-authorship, public scholarship, and direct, reciprocal connections to communities (Kumashiro, personal communication, 2017) instead of searching for individual recognition through awards and equity empires that promote competition and fragmentation.

Embodied and connected critical consciousness requires us to blur the binary between self and other, self and society, and individual and system. It also requires that we relate to this knowledge in troubled and paradoxical ways (Kumashiro, 2004) even as we work towards critical, contemplative practices. This means we examine the ways we are commodifying and performing critical contemplative practice, creating contemplative empires, and replicating colonial logics in newer and more sophisticated ways. We must continuously reflect on the ways in which we are contributing to, and perpetuating, the very oppression we are working to eradicate, and engage in embodied practices to purify our minds at the root level. Our systems depend on it, and so do we.

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