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The Sky in the Classroom

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Whatever we do, wherever we go, whatever happens on this crowded surface of interactions constituting our world, there is also the sky.

-Tarthang Tulku, *Time, Space and Knowledge*

The sky jumps into your shoes at night.

-Jasper Tomkins, *The Sky Jumps Into Your Shoes at Night*

Last semester seventeen of us took a course that was like jumping out of an airplane into our own minds.

-A student of Psychology/Asian Studies 81, "The Psychology of Subjective Experience"

We have all experienced the sky – its vast expanse, endless possibilities, the feeling of playful freedom one might have during vacation. It's less obvious, though, how it fits into the classroom, neither slimming down its vastness nor overwhelming precise academic discourse.

This article describes a multi-disciplinary course we taught at Bowdoin College. Through selected reading, writing, class discussions, and experiential exercises, we sought to expand students' views of themselves, their minds, and the nature of academic inquiry. Throughout the semester, we used a series of contemplative activities to open students to their natural, sky-sized mind. In conjunction with these, a series of academic exercises gave them an exact language with which to articulate it. Overall, the course sought to enhance students' academic work by accomplishing the marriage of vastness with precision. We called the whole "The Psychology of Subjective Experience." (Susan Burggraf was in the Psychology Department—her primary fields are developmental and social—and Kidder Smith held a joint appointment in History and Asian Studies, with a focus on traditional China.) Here we'll set out the class, its theory, methods and results, including excerpts from student essays. Our purpose is to evoke that learning experience for other educators who might have similar goals.

This was part of a larger movement at Bowdoin to introduce contemplative methods to the classroom. Over the academic years 1999/2001 we led a series of faculty seminars, including a two-day residential retreat. A chief concern was how to link contemplative pedagogy to instructional goals. Working with faculty members, we identified activities they typically engaged that were already in an important sense contemplative. For example, we all have

the experience of sitting quietly, waiting for an idea. We all sense the value of the difficult silence after we pose a question to our students. And all of us began our academic lives with a love story: falling in love with our field, being deeply supported (or sometimes abandoned) by our mentors, developing a sustained and sustaining relationship with other practitioners of our discipline, and drawing deep inspiration from its methods, questions and modes of investigation. Love is important here because among its many excellent qualities are vastness and precision: its spacious inclusivity and sharply focused, gentle interest in its beloved. These qualities also lie at the heart of the experience of "flow" so successfully investigated by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2008). In all, these workshops were attended by more than thirty people, or 20% of the total faculty population, in fields as diverse as mathematics and literature. Several of these professors were also guests in the course on subjective experience.

That class was planned as the core course of a possible contemplative studies curriculum. It was designed to introduce students to various methods, Euro-American and Asian, by which they could use mind to investigate its own workings and inquire into mind's native qualities such as attentiveness, flexibility, openness, and so on. We drew from four historical precedents. First was American psychology of the early twentieth century, pioneered by William James (e.g., 1912/1996), which had used trained introspection as a research tool (1890) and emphasized "radical empiricism", an approach to pure experience later articulated by B. Alan Wallace (2004). Second, throughout the last century certain European philosophers such as Husserl (1920, 1960), Heidegger (1996) and Merleau-Ponty (1981) had sought to understand human subjectivity in phenomenological terms, examining the relationship of self, world, thought and being. Third, the practices of psychodynamic psychotherapy have introduced us to various levels of mind—conscious, subconscious and unconscious and the therapeutic technique of "evenly hovering attention" (Rubin, 1999). Finally, via the recent development of contemplative approaches to higher education, these three strands of thought have been weaving through the fourth set of traditions, arisen over the past three millennia as religious practitioners of South and East Asia have observed the mind and developed complex means to interpret and systematize their findings. The purpose of our course was to ground students in the literatures of the first three disciplines so that they might fruitfully experience that practice of observation, which in this context we referred to as "contemplation." We were especially concerned to develop a method that was both rigorous and expansive—that paradoxically included precise markers within the openness we came to call "sky mind."

Our work was part of a larger movement in contemporary academia to define the possibilities of contemplative studies. The mainstream of that pedagogy has a bias in favor of quietism, the assumption that the best way for mind to know itself is through shutting down most of its activities. Only in that silence, this view suggests, is it possible to attain mindfulness, the activity or condition in which we are fully aware of our state of being. By contrast, the experience of our course suggests that the open sky-mind of awareness is readily accessed

when it is properly presented to students, without asking them to dampen their other mental faculties. In this open space they have full access to both vastness and precision, to both the larger view and its focused application. Quiet is essential to that awareness, but it is only a means to it, a preliminary stage, not the goal itself.

Traditionally mindfulness practice demands that practitioners attend to the immediacy of their internal feeling states or the activity of the breath. By consistently bringing their attention back to the breath, they attempt to let other mental activity lapse, until their focus is simply on breathing. Within that silence, meditators begin to notice their bodily and mental states—areas of tension or openness, qualities of affect, deeper areas of silence and connection. In the American mainstream the best-known approach to mindfulness is associated with the work of Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn (2001), professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts, Worcester, who has pioneered and popularized the use of meditation in stress reduction. The normal progression is through meditation into a one-pointed focusing of mind and from there into deep relaxation. Kabat-Zinn and many others have demonstrated the clinical benefits of this practice to a host of intractable medical conditions.

Contemplative pedagogy has generally followed a similar approach. Typically, a classroom comes to silence through a guided meditation that focuses on breathing or bodily sensation. As that inner silence stabilizes, students may be asked to extend their awareness outward, as in the loving embrace of all. When students become more accustomed to the technique, they may practice with decreasing guidance from the instructor. An already large literature links mindfulness practice and education. Much of it has been supported by the important activities of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, directed by Amherst physicist Arthur Zajonc (2008).Their work has been important to the development of a methodology for contemporary contemplative pedagogy. It has also included historical studies of contemplation in the pre-modern European university—see, for example, Brian Stock's *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (2006). A concise representation of their work is a special issue of *Teachers College Record* (September 2006, Volume 108, Number 9) with the theme "Contemplative Practices and Education"; it contains articles by well-known scholars from a variety of fields (e.g., Stock, Zajonc).

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society sponsors investigations of contemporary practice; their extensive bibliography, which includes nearly one hundred titles, can be accessed at www.contemplativemind.org. Of special relevance to the questions we address in this article are "Learning to Stop, Stopping to Learn" (Brady), "Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom" (Hart), and "Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person" (Haynes), all of which can be downloaded at that site. More general studies include *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005), which aims to integrate spirituality with the traditional goals of university education, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), and *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (Taylor, 1998), which seeks to revive pre-Cartesian

modes of knowing. See also *Spirituality in Higher Education: New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (Hoppe, 2006), with articles by both faculty and administrators examining spirituality from multiple vantage points and disciplines, and *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education* (Tisdell, 2003).

In psychology, we have already cited a classic work by Csikszentmihalyi (2008), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, which established useful parallels to much of the Society's work on mindfulness and awareness. Wallace and Shapiro's (2006) article in *The American Psychologist* grounds many of the same insights in empirical studies. Though its implications for pedagogy are largely implicit, their bibliography includes some hundred titles.
What we share with these approaches is a conviction that students benefit from realizing a mind that is vaster than that required for most academic work. We differ in our method. The mindfulness approach requires students to first still their minds and only then to examine what arises in that silence. While we agree that students can learn in moderate degree to quiet some of their thoughts, the evidence from all quarters suggests that it is not easy for them to do so. Moreover, we would argue that insofar as students succeed in intermittently quieting their thoughts, their resulting mindfulness is actually a distraction from the vastness of mind that is already always present in their experience. This is especially true of college-aged students, whose motor impulses and energetic dispositions make it harder for them to settle quietly than it is for their teachers.

Our most important claim is to have found a more immediate way to the same goal of open mind. We approach contemplation not from silencing but by opening in the midst of ordinary activities. In that moment, one can both experience that spaciousness and also anchor it in precise observation. With limited training, our students soon evidenced an ability to move between focus and openness, eventually holding both. Indeed, we discovered that they needed only two kinds of instruction to be successful in this. First was to be reminded of their minds' native vastness; second was to identify an activity within which they could hold both this vastness and the details of ordinary life. We provided the first through our course work and consistent scaffolding of their progress through it. ("Scaffolding" is a term developed in the 1950s related to work by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. It describes the way parents or teachers provide a temporary structure to facilitate the child's building of his or her own mental constructs/capabilities.) They developed the second through their engagement with a series of research projects, which we will describe and quote from below. The result in their academic work was a larger vision, greater flexibility of mind, increased creativity, and an ability to hold paradox. Though the essays do not afford a before-and-after comparison of students' thinking, they do give strong evidence of the complex analyses students learned to perform.

We all have experienced the sky. But what can we say about it? Poets have an easy time there, but as academicians we found that our biggest challenge was to formulate a language both open and precise, equal to the vastness that students reported in the experience of their

own minds yet also up to the rigorous standards of our academic disciplines. Our best students immediately noticed that spaciousness without precision is simply spacey, and that precision without spaciousness is rigid and dry. This article is a first attempt at joining these two aspects of mind. Our strategy is to speak as concretely as possible, describing activities, readings, and results. But though definitions are often useful, we found that when we defined sky mind to our class, that state remained distant and slightly imaginary. If we could, by contrast, point to it, then such a state became more identifiable within our students' own field of apprehension. Finally, when we provided activities through which they could experience it directly, they developed an internal referent to which the abstraction of our terminology could attach itself.

At that point students welcomed the stringency that language offered, since it gave them means to clarify, arrange and disaggregate the wealth of their experience. It was like doing a laboratory experiment in which at first too much evidence is gathered—we need a sorting tool, a way to step back from the phenomena and identify their clusters or gathering points. Concepts did that job. Our class was further complicated because the object of study was the same as the tool—our own minds. We were therefore at once subjective and objective, self-aware both experientially and methodologically.

The nature of an academic article suggests that we should begin with descriptions and definitions. Because we do so only in part, our language may appear metaphorical or poetic. In some ways this is no different from an initial encounter with modern physics. Until we have mastered its rigorous calculations, the term "quantum leap" is merely a figure of speech. But just as a brief introduction cannot give us that scientific mastery, so our short article cannot carry readers all the way into the languages that we developed with students over the course of a semester. We would therefore urge interested readers to explore some of the texts we cite here. A good starting point is Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, which we have already cited.

The basic pedagogic modes of our course included reading, writing, discussion, a set of contemplative exercises, and classroom visits by other faculty. Our texts were drawn from standards in the field: Mark Epstein's (2004) *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, which bridges psychoanalysis and Buddhism—we used this to speak to those students who organized their existence around the psyche; Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson's (1992) *The Embodied Mind*, for students operating within the scientific episteme; William James'(1999/1901-1902) magnificent "Mysticism," from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to remind everyone that, although their experiences were happening for the first time, many others had enjoyed them previously; and Maura O'Halloran's (1994) striking diaries of her Zen training and enlightenment, *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind*, to remind them that such things were still always happening.

We assigned a one- or two-page paper every other week on these readings and encouraged private journaling. Students also engaged a contemplative project; we'll quote from some of their essays below. Class discussions unraveled snarls in their conceptual understanding. Thus our time together was primarily driven by issues that their own process of opening brought to light, framed within our attention to larger principles.

Midway in the semester students nominated four faculty guests, who were chosen because quite independently they were already using contemplative approaches in the classroom, even if they did not call those methods "contemplation." Their fields were biology, art history, literature and painting. They came to class over a four week period, and each began by describing their academic work. Students had prepared questions derived from course materials, which they used to structure the subsequent discussion. Their goals were three: to test the discourse of contemplation we had been developing, to ascertain the extent to which other faculty were engaging activities that were recognizable within it, and then to demonstrate to those faculty their embeddedness within a language they most likely did not know they were part of. All of us were struck by these faculty members' intuitive feel for what we had been calling "the sky"—for leaving space around their activities, for including that space in their classrooms and research. The biologist spoke about the necessity of suspending his hypotheses so that experimental designs derived from his full range of insight, rather than premature foreclosure. Quickly class discussion led us to discuss *why* he was a biologist—what was the quality of love or magic or awe that had drawn him there in the first place and sustained him through the mastery of its arduous disciplines. Love, magic, awe—the generous imprecision of that language suggests how understudied this aspect of our learning process remains. Yet love, as in "I love protein synthesis" or "I love the Russian subjunctive" is essential to our moment-to-moment functioning as teachers, researchers, human beings. Contemplative methods offer means to rediscover, sustain and expand such qualities.

The art historian described her morning walk, that pre-dawn encounter of openness, in relationship to her practice of in situ examination of Italian Renaissance painting. Both experiences open a wordless contemplation in which a familiar walking path or Umbrian church speaks again, but now in subtly different dialect, which she was surprised she understands. She spoke too of how she melds this vast patience with the academic and administrative work she would engage on her typical workday.

In his research, the professor of literature engages in relentless questioning, which he demonstrated in his visit to our class. He brought everyone to indecision, that fearful, pregnant moment before something—what?—is born. He held us there, alternatingly at ease and claustrophobic in the space, refusing to let us shrink back to our accustomed size and shape. When the painter showed us slides of his work, white on white, he actually brought that vibrant empty space into the classroom. He left us speechless within the open space that his exacting paintings of ordinary rooms depicted.

Thus far we've discussed conventional categories of pedagogy: texts, papers, discussions, and guest lectures. We turn now to what most distinguished our course and shaped our students' learning process. It is what we called "the sky." Rather than defining it, we'll point to it in several ways and then describe five of the several exercises we did to enhance our students' awareness of what already exists all around and through us. Once students had reliable access to it, we would be able to emphasize the particular exactness of their observations within it.

Some exercises included huge amounts of silence, but they were not designed to produce silence. This was in deliberate contrast to the ways that contemplation is usually taught. When students meditate in the classroom, they are often asked to develop a quiet mind within which they can practice a focused mindfulness. For example, they attend to their breathing, let thoughts come and go, and settle into a steady, open awareness. Within that heightened awareness, they may then focus attention on a particular object of scrutiny, open themselves to a loving connection with all that is, or allow insights to spontaneously occur.

Instead, we asked students to begin with a relaxed, open mind and from that vantage observe their normal functioning with utmost exactitude. We called that openness "sky mind," pointing not to the physical location of the sky but to its quality of vast pervasion. Rather than focusing or quieting, they were asked to use the mind to investigate the space within which their thinking and experiencing all arise. This brought a shift of attention from their immediate object of awareness onto the larger background against which the object occurs. To use a visual analogy, it was a movement from figure to ground, from the thing we first see to the space it is part of, from the immediate colors and textures to what surrounds them. To use an analogy from our experience doing research and writing, it was a momentary suspension of our immediate pursuit and a step back to consider the larger field within which our insights take place. Though our students initially shifted from focusing to openness and back again, eventually they found they could hold both simultaneously.

"Whatever we do, wherever we go, whatever happens on this crowded surface of interactions constituting our world, there is also the sky," writes Tarthang Tulku (1977). What reminds us to open our field of view? Moments of surprise almost always have something of the sky in them—sometimes it takes over completely. A balloon goes POP at a children's birthday party, and for a moment our mind stops thinking. Even before there is a "noise," just before our hunch that someone may be soon in tears, what is happening? At that first moment, it's hard to say a thing. A kind of empty uncertainty has gotten our attention.

Empty uncertainty. Attention. This is all about not knowing, and looking up. Similar moments occur unexpectedly all through our lives. The doorbell rings at 3:00 a.m., and we really don't know why, or who or what is there. We are too sleepy to *think*, but we are completely awake. We have just run ten miles and are lying supine on the ground, unable to move. The earth is

huge, holding us, the mirror of the sky. Anything can happen next. We're taking a chemistry exam and can't answer a question, so for a few seconds we gaze out the window at nothing. We are utterly blank—but without the tiniest effort, that blankness opens as the ground of knowing, and we return to the puzzle.

These uncertainties are often disconcerting, and our habitual response may be to tense up. How can we relax this not-knowing into something vast, playful and wise? Here are five activities we devised to accomplish that.

We began with jumping jacks, for three good reasons. First, they are utterly exoteric. Second, they engage body and mind, but with only moderate stress. Third, they sacralize athletics. We asked a reluctant football player to lead the class through a few mild sets, and then we stood there, holding the space, as our breathing returned to normal. What had happened? Could we be both body-mind and sky at the same time?

Could our body-mind carry this knowledge with us beyond the confines of class and drill?
Jumping jacks led to another exercise in which we squatted with elbows between knees and hands beside head. Then we exploded skyward and yelled HAH!. A dozen repetitions, with brief pauses between. We told students that they could try it before an 8:00 a.m. econ test—it would clear the air. And what is the nature of that clarity? And has it a beginning, middle or end?

We had students chant devotionally with us. They hated singing, of course, until they fell right into it. Furthermore, tedious repetition seemed opposite to the analytic investigations they had entered the academy to train in. But the spirit of song was so lovely, so loving, that the warmth of embarrassment turned into a greater warmth of community, shining sweet and true in the classroom. Was repetition mindless? If so, what mind had gone missing? What remained? Where did that love come from? Did it have a boundary, purpose, or destination? Could that openness of mind be useful academically?

We went outdoors and lay open upon the ground, gazing at the sky the way children often do. We told them, "Mingle your mind with the sky." How big is mind right now?
Finally, in a return to the self-evidence of jumping jacks, we had the whole class dance to great loud thump-thump techno music.

Only in the context of these activities did we introduce sitting meditation. It is, of course, the heart of the sky, the fruition of all practices. It has been our experience, however, that only a few undergraduates take readily to that discipline of quiet—and those who do often come to it from a skill in depression, rather than from the joy of their existence in and of the sky. Energetically, late teens and early twenties people usually have too much going on in their body systems to profitably sit still very long. They imagine that they have to shut down in

order to do so—exactly the wrong move. So we consider sitting meditation an *advanced* practice and apply it sparingly.

Silence is necessary to this work. But it is never the goal, only a mode of inquiry—or, more exactly, a frame within which any mode of inquiry can engage its object. We ordinarily experience classroom silence as an ungainly gap: students have been silenced by an impossible question. Such silences are generally the fault of us instructors. Our task, then, was to learn what kinds of question are best addressed by instructional silence, and then pose them to our class—questions that students could positively reflect upon and within which they might surprise themselves discovering something new. If we asked well, then our collective wordlessness was pregnant with inchoate thought. A birthing process was underway—we could see it on our students' faces—only it had yet to show audible signs of life.

In such silence, awareness is heightened. To borrow a term from Ken McLeod (2002), we're practicing "active attention," a state of mind that is controlled by its owner, directed, energized, and clear. By contrast, degraded attention is a spacing out, dullness and distraction—we see that sometimes in a large lecture class when we're not doing our job properly. Increasingly our students were able to successfully engage in silence. They came to see it as a gesture of our confidence in them. We in turn took their tolerance of these wordless times as a measure of our collective maturity.

In order to bring this sky-like awareness into the whole of their lives, we had them write a ten-page essay investigating a co-curricular or non-curricular activity, something that they loved to do. If, like our faculty guests, they had progressed deeply into some chosen academic field—if they had fallen in love with their field and mastered its fundamental discourse and activity—we would have asked them to write about the heart of academics, the lab, the library, the history essay. Because, though, they were novices in academics but proficient with their own body-minds, we asked them to address an activity in which they were already fluent, so that they might be free of conceptual struggling and better able to notice the ever-present sky. They chose things like acting, writing poetry, singing, lifting weights, and photography. Nearly without exception they were drawn to practices of the body, for, perhaps paradoxically, this is precisely where the sky is most readily known. Here are brief excerpts from four of these essays.

> When perfectly centered clay spins with my fingers, all my consciousness is empty of both thought and meaning. Without intentionality, my hands begin to shape the pot. They know what kind of vessel to make and how the tower of clay is going to become. They know how to pull and stretch the clay, moving slowly and deftly over the surface of that most material form of matter. They make bowls, mugs, and vases, and I do not know what it is that I have made until my hands tell me that I am finished.

When the potter conjures her attention, she enters the clay itself, and her awareness "is empty of both thought and meaning." That emptiness, the sky, "flows from my mind into the clay, and the bowl takes shape." The clay—"that most material form of matter." The bowl—another form of sky, "balanced ... between the receptive negative space of the clay and the intricate network of ... mind." Everything is complete.

Another student writes:

> I have been running since my early teens, and at this stage in my life I am comfortable running for eight to fourteen miles.... Time ceases during my longer runs. One could ask, "How can you say you felt relaxed when you don't remember what happened, since time skipped?" The answer is that the feeling of relaxation comes when the empty mind state ends, and—now in the active thinking state—I realize that I have had such an experience. Of course I cannot know I'm in an empty mind state during it. The moment I realize it, my mind has already switched. When I am back in the library, all my tasks seem much easier. It's as if each step had been massaging a mental cramp, and all those cramps had finally let go. So I have evidence that something happened while I was in the woods, even if I can't tell you what it was.

As with potting, running requires practice, the precision born of experience. And as with potting, the precision eventually disappears into the sky of non-thought. The runner has made no effort to quiet thinking. He is simply "out on the trail, knee up, heel, toe, knee up, heel, toe." At the end of his account, the runner reenters the library. This coming back is the crucial next step. With greater experience, the runner will find the sky there, too. It won't arise from the relaxation of mental cramps, nor the release of beta-endorphins, because it has preceded both those events. Mixed with sky, all our tasks seem much easier, that is, more playful, exact, and conclusive.

The disciplines we have explored so far are solitary. They bring connectedness as practitioners gradually develop mastery of their art. Through dance it can happen all at once.

> The place where I became exposed to human togetherness was the dark, hot, loud, smelly dancehalls of New York and London. It was in the moments of greatest excess that I lost my mind and body to the music, and my heart to the people around me. The highs eventually wore off, but what they taught me I won't ever forget. People of all walks of life coming together for a night, checking their egos with their coats, and letting go. A club of three thousand strangers at 2:00 a.m. is functioning as a single entity by 9:00....

"Dark, hot, loud, smelly"—not the first things we might notice about the sky. But "everyone can relate to the music, and through the music to each other," and through each other to the

fundamental connectedness of being, dark or hot, bright or cool. The excess is the opening: through its practice this young man simply cannot keep his heart back from others.
For most people, this confidence develops gradually. And not necessarily in a linear fashion. A nationally ranked squash player writes of her experience with an entirely different physical discipline:

> In my second month of studying T'ai Chi Ch'üan my teacher exclaimed, "Liz, you will never know exactly how to do T'ai Chi." He went on to explain that even the greatest masters of T'ai Chi will never execute the movements to perfection. After decades of practice, concentration and dedication, the final destination of T'ai Chi remains unattainable, invisible. My conversation with my teacher ended after he smiled enormously and explained the *joy* in this fact. I was stumped even more. Joy? How could incredible amounts of work and no outcome, no job well done, no gratifying closure, be joyful...?
> T'ai Chi keeps no score. Everything that the philosophy of T'ai Chi encompasses is within us the moment we are born. This is the joy that my teacher was referring to. He was sharing something that not only goes against the grain of everything we learn about accomplishment, he was also sharing something that defines T'ai Chi. T'ai Chi is perpetually moving still.

Liz recognizes that in some important sense the essence of T'ai Chi has been with her since she was born. In parallel fashion, we would claim that our course didn't really teach the students anything much, at least in terms of the usual measures of the mastery of novel content, the skills of intellectual manipulation, the development of mind, or even extended abilities of attention. Rather, we gave them names and structures for something they already were. In order to accomplish this, we had them write about topics familiar to them from before the semester began, something from their ordinary lives. That is, we created a lab setting in which we limited the amount of new *intellectual content* so that, by contrast, our students could notice and thus develop another mental function, their *awareness*. Once they had stabilized their awareness in ordinary activities, they could then extend it to their other academic work.

It is easy to describe this trajectory, but harder to demonstrate it. For one, apart from a string of homework exercises, our before-and-after measures are largely subjective. We do know, however, we didn't have to work as hard at the end of the semester as at the beginning! For another, the long-term effects of our course were felt in other classes, after ours had ended. Here we have only anecdotal evidence from other professors. But we have kept in close touch with many of these students, and in our correspondence and conversation we have seen the development of many themes we jointly attended to five years ago. Increasingly they have learned to fully mix vastness and precision in their awareness, an awareness that gazes at the sky not just in swoon but also the way a mountaineer does, assessing the weather gathering there. These acts of awareness are the same ones we use to hold a baby, so intimate that

they are hard to tell from love. It's all right here, next to our face, the breath of a loved one on our cheek.

As children, we are all simple minded. There's deep wisdom here, of course, but also a clutch of egocentric behavior, dependence on caregivers and authorities, lack of discrimination, and limited critical faculty. Gradually we develop a second level of cognitive abilities, wherein we learn increasingly sharper distinctions and organize concepts in a fashion both hierarchical and interconnected. Eventually we construct immense edifices of subtly linked information.
Sky mind introduces a third possibility, a kind of advanced simplicity. But while the first two levels are mutually exclusive, the third does not replace the second. Instead it accommodates the manifold products of differentiation as a limitless container. Whereas we may measure cognitive sophistication by our ever-expanding frames of reference, sky mind acts to remove the frame itself. It's the space that is always present, within and between all concepts and distinctions, independent of size, without compromising any of their specificity.

Thus there are no grounds for rejecting the study of social psychology, nor for denouncing the intricate lattices of organic chemistry or the law. Whatever arduous diligence is required for their mastery, they never depart from the sky. Actually, vastness enhances precision, just as white space on a page highlights the particular formulations inked upon it. In this sense sky mind is the pregnant context of learning, or the ground of all concepts. It is our unconstructed, unlearned, always-there natural state.

Susan Burggraf now teaches at Naropa University, in their undergraduate program in Contemplative Psychology. Naropa is committed to the multiple ways that vastness couples with precision, and their linkage structures and enhances learning throughout its curricula.
We would conclude with offering our thanks, to our home institutions and students, and to their parents and teachers. They nourish these possibilities, nourish our lives.

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