Cultivating Awareness, Reverence, and Autonomy in Students: Meditative Inquiry as a Catalyst to Holistic Learning and Living

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Abstract

This conversational paper between Ashwani Kumar and Shane Theunissen explores how meditative inquiry in teaching and learning can foster reverence for nature, life, and learning. Through an organic and reflective conversation rooted in Dialogical Meditative Inquiry (DMI), the authors offer a holistic exploration of the intersections between personal transformation, environmental awareness, and holistic education. The authors emphasize that meditative inquiry challenges predetermined educational outcomes and encourages a profound, personal transformation that can lead to social change. Authors discuss how meditative inquiry can facilitate learning relationships that promote student autonomy and awareness, and how it can instill reverence for life. The paper considers how awe, wonder, and reverence can shift educational paradigms from mechanistic models toward contemplative, relational approaches informed by Indigenous and meditative perspectives. The conversation also highlights the strong connection between meditative inquiry and Indigenous ways of knowing, both of which are rooted in a deep reverence for nature and a harmonious relationship with the natural world. The paper promotes a contemplative and holistic approach to education and living, suggesting that personal transformation through meditative inquiry can contribute to a more respectful and interconnected relationship with oneself, others, and the environment. By challenging dominant narratives in education and promoting meditative and emergent dialogue, the authors advocate for education as a regenerative and transformative practice grounded in deep listening, interconnectedness, and awareness.

Keywords: meditative inquiry, reverence, dialogical meditative inquiry, holistic education, nature, Indigenous philosophy

Cultivating Awareness, Reverence, and Autonomy in Students: Meditative Inquiry as a Catalyst to Holistic Learning and Living

In this conversational paper, we, Ashwani Kumar and Shane Theunissen, explore how meditative inquiry as an approach to teaching and learning can act as a catalyst for reverence toward nature, life, and learning. Through the processes of Dialogical Meditative Inquiry (DMI) (Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fisher, 2021)[1], we offer a holistic understanding of the importance of self within broader social, political, and economic structures. We discuss how meditative inquiry may facilitate learning relationships that promote student autonomy and awareness while engaging in moments that instill reverence and reflection. For the benefit of the readers new to meditative inquiry, we try to clearly describe its fundamental principles in a way that is accessible to everyone. The conversation provides an exemplary synthesis of critical reflection, environmental education, and meditative inquiry. It is this synthesis that is the catalyst to deepen our understanding of power, education, and relationships.

The key questions that we explored in this paper include: 1) What is the meaning of authenticity and meaningfulness in the context of meditative inquiry? 2) How can an individual struggling to meet survival needs become engaged in the reflective and meditative process? 3) What are the political implications of meditative inquiry? 4) What is the role of reverence in teaching and learning? 5) What are the intersections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous philosophy? and 6) How may we inculcate reverence for life in ourselves and our students and children?

It is important to note that while the conversation captured in this article was structured around guiding questions, all follow-up questions and insights emerged organically as a result of the stimulus of the conversation. It is our sincere hope that educators and students may find inspiration in the ideas presented in this paper and embark on their journeys of critical dialogue, reflection, reverence, and discovery.[2]

In the next section, Shane introduces himself and outlines the experiences that have brought him and Ashwani to a moment of conversational intersection that is captured in this article. The next section is followed by the conversation.

Laying the Ground for Conversation by Shane Theunissen

Sitting down to write this preamble presented an opportunity to contemplate the complexity of this seemingly innocuous action. Hidden within any brief synopsis we articulate to introduce ourselves is the intersection of countless socio-political undercurrents that constitute the narrative that we choose to define our positionality. And this, of course, might even be the intent or the expectation of holistic education and meditative inquiry. As for me, and I feel I can only speak to my own experience, I have struggled with this through every personal introduction for the past 36 years. I was born a white South African male in what some might describe as one of the most absurdly racist societies in recent memory (Drury, 1967). Many of my childhood and early adolescent memories of landscapes, the heat, the smells from the confines of small spaces and woodsmoke, and the immeasurable expanses of the Karoo and its environs evoke a sense of happiness and contentment. I understand in a way that squeezes my heart what is meant when that place, far from

[1] For similar approaches that use dialogue in the process of inquiry and writing, see Margolin & Jones (2024); McLaren & Rikowski (2016); Mclaughlin & Kelly (2009); Shor & Freire (1987).
[2] You can watch the virtual conversation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0caetcVJmw

my new home and life in Nova Scotia (Canada), is described as "beautiful beyond any singing of it" (Paton, p. 1987). It is only in hindsight that I know my happiness and contentment were contingent and achieved only through the appropriation of land, resources and privilege that was exacted, in most instances through brutish savagery, by my race and class. There is no way for me to reconcile these feelings that are the catalyst to my acute understanding of moral injury. But what I do know is that the South African apartheid regime perpetuated its hate through a narrative that foreclosed any possibility of alternative storylines (Willis, 2009). To this end, I have an impassioned interest in dialectic processes as mechanisms that undermine attempts at censorship while concurrently challenging the hegemonic normative discourse.

It was through a conversation with a respected colleague, whose work has a significant focus on moral injury within the context of potential conflict zones, including Rwanda (Baillie-Abidi & Cleave, 2024), that I was introduced to the idea of Dialogic Meditative Inquiry (DMI). While I did not, after this initial conversation, fully understand the concept of DMI, the name resonated with me because, for me, teaching is centred on the dialogic processes of the Socratic method. Further to this, with my academic journey's focus on depoliticizing education with a particular focus on experiential learning, I began to wonder if part of the experiential education process might include a dialogue between individuals and the natural context that they engage with. It was at this time that I, fortuitously, reconnected with Ashwani. As we walked the picket line as part of our collective job action in February and March of 2024 at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax (Nova Scotia, Canada), we spoke of the potential that our ongoing conversations might have for a broader readership, and we committed to publishing this article.

Ashwani suggested that I, in preparation for our collaboration, develop a line of questioning that might address issues that I wished to explore. To this end, I recognized this as an opportunity to extend my thinking around human and environmental interrelations. One of the moments that was a catalyst to my thinking occurred on a recent trans-Atlantic sailing trip with my daughter. We had the absolute pleasure of watching a 14-foot swordfish that followed our sailboat for about 20-30 minutes. My daughter was so excited from seeing this spectacular fish changing its colours from deep blues to radiant purples as it swam leisurely, keeping pace with our boat, that her body was shaking. When reflecting on this moment, I thought to myself, something is happening here that is special. I wanted to try and understand how we can look at a reverent moment like this and use it as a way to help engage students in learning generally and engaging in learning with nature specifically. I started thinking about awe and wonder, which challenge current conceptions of ocean literacy, which I feel lacks humility (Guest et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2020). Through my engagement with awe and wonder, as mechanisms for promoting engagement, I came across the concept of *reverence*. Some of the authors were talking about awe and wonder as a passive reception of the incalculable, the mysterious, and the unknown, while reverence was articulated as a more reflexively active engagement with this space.

Shawn Wilson (2008) in his book *Research as Ceremony* (2008) talks about the space between humans and the environment as being sacred (p. 87). In my mind, awe and wonder did not encapsulate the sacredness of the space between human beings and the environment. However, reverence does. So, I see the idea of ceremony as being the enactment of reverence. When people engage in ceremony, they enact reverence for the space or the moment, or whatever it is that they are engaging with. From my rudimentary understanding of meditative inquiry, I see that meditative inquiry might be inextricably linked to reverence, and I humbly engage in this dialogue to explore these intersections with Ashwani.

Conversation

Shane: In preparing for this conversation, I read a few of your articles, Ashwani (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fisher, 2021), and found myself, as a neophyte to this process and space, challenged by the subjectivity which appears to be central to meditative inquiry. Based on my study of your ideas, I have two streams of questions. The first set is burdened by my background, and my questions reflect a skepticism that I approach most topics with, and may seem antagonistic, but please know this is not my intention. The second set represents excerpts or ideas that I found intriguing in your writings, especially the opportunity to explore how mediative inquiry could work in engagement with nature. In reading your work, it does not seem as though we can separate those two streams of questions because I think they probably are linked, but I have arbitrarily separated them so we can leave it at that, and then maybe as we move along, we can unpack them. Does that feel good for you?

Ashwani: I think that is wonderful. It is important for me to know where you are coming from, what the purpose of the conversation is, and what your thoughts and intentions are behind coming to this space of mutual exploration.

I am very intrigued by the questions or the thoughts that you have, and I am very willing to engage with them, especially because nature, which seems to occupy your thinking, is very central to meditative inquiry. As you might recall, I sent you a description of one of the assignments from one of my course outlines where I have asked students to do a nature reflection journal[3], which encourages them to spend time in nature, observe nature, listen to nature, and then be aware of what happens to them and what they learn about nature and themselves through that engagement (see Kumar et al., 2023). So, I think that is a very important aspect of my whole pedagogy.

One of the key principles of meditative inquiry is questioning everything without fear and creating dialogue between and among people rather than, as Paulo Freire (2000) discusses, imposing one's notions of truth, what is right and what is not right, and what individuals can do and what they cannot do. So, I welcome your critical questioning.

While it is important to have some prepared questions, the nature of dialogical meditative inquiry is spontaneous and emergent (see Somerville & Powell, 2022; Stacey, 2011); one can come to the dialogic space with questions and intentions, but then it opens the space for exploration (see

[3] Description of the Nature Reflection Journal Assignment: Developing ecological consciousness is central to education, particularly social studies education. The purpose of this assignment is to create opportunities for you to develop a deeper awareness of and connection with nature. Ancient cultures have known it throughout human history, and there is a lot of evidence now that suggests, that spending time in nature is beneficial to our health and well-being. Each student will be working on a nature reflection journal throughout this course based on their experiences of spending time in nature in a contemplative, reflective, and meditative way. How often should you spend time in nature? As often as you can! Try to make it part of your life this term and at least do it once or twice a week. There is no specific format, word limit, or structure for this assignment. I want you to use your own intuition in preparing this reflection journal. Feel free to use pictures, videos, artwork, poetry, and music to share your reflections. Please write a brief introduction (to describe the approach you took to report your experiences with this activity) and conclusion (to explain the impact it had on you and how may an activity like this inform your own teaching). You will be requested to briefly share your reflections on your experiences in nature in the class a few times during the course. We will discuss more about this and other assignments in class.

Kumar & Caron, 2024). So, listening to something new that can emerge through conversation is so central to the process of meditative inquiry.

Shane: Yes, absolutely. I was talking to my wife the other day, and I mentioned that we are doing a lot of curriculum mapping in our department (Department of Child and Youth Study). I was saying that it is kind of tricky for me because a lot of the time in my classes, I am engaging in this emerging curricular process, which means that we do not necessarily want to have those prescribed curriculum restrictions. So, I appreciate your emphasis on the emergent process.

Let us start with the sort of politically oriented questions first, and we will see how the conversation goes from there. And then hopefully we can get to those nature-related questions as well in a bit. A lot of these questions are coming from my lack of experience with meditative inquiry or a holistic learning approach, but one of the things that you mentioned in relation to meditative inquiry that stands out to me is the significance of authenticity and meaningfulness. You wrote:

> Unless there is a real passion to understand and explore, and unless students and I ask authentic and meaningful questions, for me, true and transformative education is not occurring (Downey & Kumar, 2018).

When I read those words, I struggle with how we might define what "authentic" and "meaningful" are. I recognize that those are subjective terms. When you are engaging a group of people or students and you are talking about authenticity and meaningfulness, I am curious as to how you present that to the class or even to me, a student in this space. How am I to understand those concepts as they apply to meditative inquiry?

Ashwani: Wonderful question, Shane. The kind of educational spaces that we have constructed in schools and universities are mediated by a given curriculum, a curriculum that is a contested space, a space that is negotiated between different power influences (Kumar, 2019). What gets reflected in the curriculum is dominated by people in power, those who have control, and that is why the curriculum reflects power. It is a reflection of whose truth or whose ideologies are more relevant, whose knowledge is more important to learn. That is what gets reflected in the curriculum, and because of that, we create inauthentic spaces in schools and universities.

What gets reflected in the curriculum and what is studied in the classrooms in schools and universities lacks authenticity. In schools, there is very little academic freedom – what the teacher needs to teach is already decided and is often linked to the standardized testing that happens at the end of the course. It is the pre-decided nature of what knowledge has the most worth, including how that knowledge should be engaged with, that takes away the authenticity and meaningfulness from learning and educational experience, because it is not the teacher's or student's inner pursuit of learning and exploration that is informing the educational space. Rather, it is the pressures of society, the pressures of the government, the pressures of the educational system, and the demands of the economic systems that are dominating the educational space. By the time a student comes to the educational space, they are not sure whether they are authentically interested in that subject matter, whether that subject matter means something to them, and because of that, the possibility of learning that transforms you deeply, changes your mind deeply, invigorates you, doesn't exist. That is one response to that question.

There is another response as well. Often, students are doing the work to achieve a grade or to respond to the demands of the person in authority, who is the professor or the schoolteacher.

Because the orientation is not necessary to explore oneself and what one wants to do, but it is driven by the authority of the teacher or the authority of the system, all of this also undermines authenticity and meaningfulness. What I do to avoid this in my courses is encourage students to choose the work and readings that they want to engage with. Of course, if I had unlimited time with them, I would construct the whole curriculum with them. But even in the design that I develop before the course starts, there are options for them to choose their reading material, and to write very open reflective journals on topics that draw their attention. From the very beginning, in every step of the curriculum design, I promote their engagement and curiosity.

What they want to explore is made central in the course and is made clear to them from the very beginning. If you look at my course evaluations, students leave positive remarks about the engagement that I have with them. They emphasize the value of an open dialogical atmosphere in which we explore the thoughts and ideas together, where everybody shares what they find meaningful in what we, as a class, are studying. To make it authentic, it is also made very clear to them that they should not complete the assignments for me. I say to them "Do this work for yourself because once you have the taste of this freedom and this creative exploration, you are going to encourage that in your own pedagogical spaces, you will also encourage authenticity among your students and encourage them to find meaning in what they are doing, rather than just conforming to what is already decided for them."

Shane: You suggested that once student-teachers experienced freedom from some of those structures, such as imposed curriculum, they would want to promote those same processes in their own learning spaces. It is interesting that you say that freedom is not a technique; it is a way of being. It is something that you have to embody, and it has to become part of who you are, so that it is authentic; if it is not a part of who you are, then it lacks this authenticity.

I quite liked the idea of personal transformation, but one of the things that I am perhaps struggling with is how this relates to Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs. In Maslow's model, personal transformation is the actualization of self. It is pretty near the top of Maslow's pyramid. But you may have students who are still working, maybe on survival needs, and they do not necessarily have the luxury (or maybe the privilege) of being able to release themselves in the space created by meditative inquiry. If they have time to be able to reflect, maybe that is the time that they would rather put into meeting their survival needs. So, the question is: How does this individual who is stuck trying to meet survival needs become engaged in this reflective process that is meant to bring them freedom?

Ashwani: I think that is a very important question. I want to address two points from your narration. One is the idea of how, as a society, our way of being is often conditioned. The social forces are not just economic forces. They are political forces. They are cultural forces. They are market forces. There are influences that emanate from the media. There are also impacts that come from the music, the arts, and the literature. Whatever discourse is floating around us shapes our way of being. In fact, it shapes us biologically: how we move, how our eyes move, how we speak, how we listen, etc. So much of our thinking and behaviour is constructed by the discourses that are going on around us. The fact is that human beings live in the space of knowledge, the constructed knowledge space – I am referring to knowledge as all kinds of thought patterns that are around us, whether it is from the economic system or the cultural practices or the religious practices or the political ideologies and whatnot. This whole knowledge web and discourse are around us from the very moment we take birth, and it begins to shape the way we are and the way we act in the world. One of the significant aspects of meditative inquiry is to realize this network

of thought, this web of discourse around us, so that we begin to see how it has shaped us and constructed us in our specific contexts. When we observe and question how we, as individuals, have been shaped by our environment, we begin to have space in our mind, in our brain, which allows for the possibility of freedom. But if we do not even realize this, recognize this, and begin to see how the environment impacts us and our relationship on a day-to-day basis, I think there is very little space for freedom, for real freedom. That is one aspect.

The other aspect is about the survival needs. First, I want to begin by acknowledging that life can become very difficult for many of us. For example, what has been happening in the Gaza Strip, and even though that is an extreme case, there are so many other examples from all around the world where people are dealing with extreme difficulties. People in these situations do not have food to eat or shelter. There is a wave of migration that is happening. People are trying to find a place where they can be safe and where they can live their lives without extreme distress. Before the national boundaries became so impermeable, there was a possibility for people to migrate and move as they pleased, as their circumstances allowed, and find different places to live and raise their families. But now we have made it so bureaucratized, so racist, so nationalistic, that it is very difficult for people to find places to be where they can feel safe and secure and pursue work that they want to do. People rave about Canada giving space to people to come here, but most of it is economically driven and highly selective, which we can perhaps explore another time.

I am giving these examples to point out how difficult we have made life for people in many parts of the world to just have a proper living. There are so many reasons – economic, political, but also deeply psychological and spiritual reasons – for the way we have collectively created these unjust structures, where only some people can live properly and sufficiently, and a majority of us are struggling very hard. When that is the kind of situation for a majority of the population of the world, that situation in itself is creating a context where meditativeness is not possible. Because if we are struggling for the survival and safety of ourselves and our family and community, then that state is not conducive to meditation, because we are in a state of constant struggle.

There is one more very important thing that should be recognized as well: many of us may not be interested in meditative exploration. Because of the social structures that we live in, we grow in a context that emphasizes desire. We emphasize competition and desire in the sense of getting more and more in the capitalist society. The comparison that is enforced on us to be somebody else or be better than somebody else forces us to keep struggling in a social structure for our survival and betterment.

All kinds of people are coming to my classroom, including international students who are struggling because of the lack of employment and high rents, as well as teachers who feel oppressed in the public education system. Whatever inner and outer pressures they are bringing with them, I try to create an educational space where there is at least a moment of relief, where they can explore how they are being bombarded in their specific contexts, and what struggles they are currently experiencing.

I just taught a course called “Music of India” through the Cultural Studies program at MSVU, and in the first hour of each lesson, we, as a class, sat on the floor close to each other. We did some vocal warmups, some physical warmups, and then learned songs rooted in Indian classical music. We mastered 3 songs that we performed at a public event at the end of the course. I did not know what their response would be to all this. They unanimously expressed that for them

this was a very meditative experience, although the music and the language of the songs–Hindi–was completely new to most of them.

What I am trying to convey is that if we can create educational and social spaces where being together and working on your well-being is important, then through that, we can sow the seeds for creating a different society. If students can be educated to understand themselves, reflect on their thoughts and emotions, and sit together in a community, they will grow and learn in very different ways. But society, especially Western societies, creates so many barriers between individuals due to a strong emphasis on ego, self, and identity. It seems there are barriers between people - invisible walls - which do not allow them to connect at a deeper level. I do not know about South Africa, but in India, you will not see that, and these students, in my Music of India course, for the first time experienced boundaries disappearing between them: a small group sitting together close to each other and exploring something together.

I don't deny that oppression exists, struggles exist, and life can be very difficult. The climate crisis continues, and the majority of the World's population is not living the way human beings should live. Governments' expenditures on defence are more than the amount of money needed to end world hunger, but still, we haven't been able to take care of it. I recognize that structural problems, psychological problems, the problem of colonization, etc., are all examples of systemic issues. However, I still feel there is a possibility, despite all the difficulties and problems, to create those spaces where people can catch a breath, where they can nourish themselves and energize themselves to have more strength and energy to be in and to transform the difficult spaces they are in. But, often, we try to have a different argument that unless everything becomes better, meditation is not possible or looking inward is not possible. I do not agree with Maslow's hierarchy at one level, but I do agree with it at another level.

Shane: Yeah, as you are talking, it leads me to reflect on South Africa, especially your remarks about people having spaces where they can create hope. I do not think the political resistance to Apartheid could have occurred without the spaces that you described. As a teenager growing up in South Africa, I would not have had access to those spaces. But as you are talking, I am thinking to myself that those spaces must have existed amongst the black African population who were actively working against the apartheid system. I feel that communities need those spaces of hope to mobilize the people against the system. I do see that correlation. However, as you were talking, and as you were making that correlation, another point that you emphasized was how fear underpins the system, and some people are afraid of not being successful (or they are afraid of being poor). That is what pushes them into this education system. That is inauthentic, as we have discussed, and they may not be realizing their potential as human beings. It is funny because in my classes, we have had conversations where I will put out the question: "Do you, as students, want to actualize as a human being, or do you want to actualize as a human resource?" Sometimes, that is what is happening in the education system: you are being made into a human resource, right?

You say in your paper with Downey (2018, p. 967) that meditative inquiry is a gentle but intense approach. And you say that it is our conviction and engagement that is going to touch people, and that meditative inquiry is not political propaganda, which you need to convince people of. But I think that meditative inquiry is political. If everybody in Canada, for instance, began to engage in this way of being, this philosophical way of being and embodied it, then that certainly presents challenges to the economic and social systems. So, I do see the work that you do as being political, do you?

Ashwani: Absolutely. See, I think the one aspect of the question that I did not respond to before is that dialogue or meditative inquiry is not just a technique. The goal of this approach is for me to invite students or colleagues interested in engaging with me, and through that engagement, they create their own approaches. They create their own way of being, and that way of being, wherever they go, has an interaction, a dialogue, with people, so it is much more organic and more subtle than: "Here is the five-step approach, go and implement it", right? That is one part that I wanted to connect.

Also, meditative inquiry is a way of being, which means through engagement, our authentic, meaningful and exploratory engagement, we begin to change our thinking. That is a way of transformation that is different from a transformation where you convince people, create propaganda, and say, "This is the best thing everybody has to do. This is the new bandwagon, and everybody has to get on it". Meditative inquiry is different from that. It is an authentic, personal, and relational engagement and exploration. And, of course, when that happens, the changes begin to happen in participants, which are very organic and subtle, as it is not a superficial approach. Cognitive behavioural therapy, and similar approaches, just change the negative thoughts and behaviours into what is more acceptable, but they don't change our whole being.

When a person's being begins to change from the very core of their existence, then that poses a huge challenge to whatever context they are in because they will be asking difficult questions. They will be questioning inequitable practices. They will be questioning racism. My dear supervisor and colleague, Bill Pinar, with whom I had a dialogue (Kumar & Pinar, 2023), a similar dialogue to what we are having here, talked about the political possibility of meditative inquiry in his foreword (Pinar, 2022) to the meditative inquiry collection that I edited (Kumar, 2022). He works from an autobiographical perspective (Pinar, 1994), which underscores the significance of understanding oneself in relation to social structures. A lot of people also thought autobiography was not political, that it was not radical. But it is! When people are learning about their lives, which are not disconnected from the structures around them, they are engaging in a political act. It is a radical, critical act.

Shane: What you were saying jogged my memory to recent conversations I have been having with some other folks in the department, and we are looking at making a co-edited book around the decolonization of self. Your thoughts are interesting in that regard. When I went to my supervisor and used that word, decolonization, he said, "Well, is there a more positive word you could use?" It was through a conversation with someone else who brought up the term "regenerative," and I was almost thinking of this regenerative self, where we are regenerating who we are as individuals, as a consequence of this process of transformation. Further to this, I compare the banking model (Freire, 2000) with the regenerative transformational model of education. The banking model of education is a mechanistic process where learners take in something and then put out the same thing. The difference between this machine and the living being that is being transformed is metabolism. When people metabolize something, they take it in, and it becomes part of who they are. As teachers promoting transformation, we put out something that may be different, and our students metabolize these things, which then become a part of them, and they are transformed, and they regenerate. This idea might align with your discussion about introducing student-teachers to freedom so that they regenerate and are transformed, and then manifest opportunities for freedom in their own classes.

Ashwani: It is regeneration! It is regeneration, not according to a pre-decided method or concoction, but something that is organic and mysterious rather than something predetermined and

preestablished. That is why I do not agree with outcomes-based approaches because outcomes make everything predetermined. However, education is a generative, regenerative, and emergent process, rather than something fixed.

Shane: In my second line of questioning, and I realize we may be going in a very different direction, I'd like to have more of an understanding of what you call listening with your whole being, but maybe it is connected in ways that I do not see.

Ashwani: Yes, it is. Listening is central to a meditative way of living; it is central to the process of meditative inquiry. I think what happens is that through the web of thoughts, the web of discourses, and the web of social structures, our brain becomes narrow, and begins to think, feel and listen in ways that are prescribed or that are acceptable in particular contexts. And listening is a process through which we receive the world, and we learn from the world. It's one of the ways through which we connect with the world, right? The whole world of music is rooted in listening (Kumar & Downey, 2019). When we listen to our environment attentively, it creates the possibilities in us to create something beautiful (Kumar et al., 2023).

Listening with your whole being implies not listening just with your mind, which is conditioned because it translates everything into its vocabulary or its conception, which in many instances is socially or politically constructed. Listening with your whole being is the capacity to be meditatively aware in the presence of people and nature so that we are not listening to what we want to listen to, or what we can quickly translate into our mental structures, but listening to something with a fresh mind, with a sense of openness. And when that happens, then listening has a very different effect than the listening that happens from a mind that is limited to its own conditioning. There are a lot of people who will disagree with this idea because they believe that nobody can listen without all the prejudices and conditioned thought patterns one has. I think these people have not experimented with what meditative listening is.

We, as human beings, can be deeply aware of the moment and be free of these conditioned patterns. It is possible; otherwise, we would never think of anything new. There would not be any explorations or "Eureka moments" if our brains were completely limited by what they have known from the pressures of society. We can be attentive to be free and invite something new. Listening with your whole being is not just listening through conditioned thought patterns; meditative listening creates the capacity for an open being which can perceive more, which can understand more deeply.

Shane: Connecting this discussion to my write-up at the beginning of this paper, learning about oceans can be viewed from two angles: the perspective of ocean literacy and from a sense of awe and wonder. The ocean literacy approach is a conditioned approach that involves conditioned ideals of any one way of looking at things. On the other hand, awe and wonder open up one's whole being to see and respond to the ocean in a way that is not so conditioned. So, when you are talking about listening with your whole being, I can see that application in that context for me. Even when I was talking about sort of just having an intuitive response to words, you may be receiving them in a way that is not uniformly cognitive.

Ashwani: Absolutely. And I think I am really glad that you mentioned that point because I did want to explore it a bit. See, when we are talking about the climate crisis, sustainability, etc., we are talking about it from a very cognitive and scientific perspective, and a lot of people think that the solution to the climate crisis is going to happen through science. I do not think it can only be through science, because science is rooted in capitalist structures. Science is not independent of

capitalism or racism. It is not free from them because who are scientists? Scientists are people who are impacted and influenced by the structures in which they are living in. Science can play an important role, but the most important role has to be played by each one of us, where we each have a relationship with nature. A relationship of awe, wonder, and reverence, as you said – a meditative relationship where we do not see nature as something different from us. We have been created from the elements of nature, we live in it, and we die in it. In other words, there is no "we" and "nature;" we are nature!

We do not respect our bodies; we do not respect our creative capacities. We do not respect the life in us and around us. Of course, we do not respect nature; we pollute the oceans, you go on the oceans, right? We all have heard of the Pacific Gyre, such a big island of plastic, right? How ruthlessly we cut the trees. We just do not care about nature, which means that we see ourselves as being so much bigger and better than nature. We have stopped caring about ourselves and our relationship to nature. We are inflicting violence on everything. Unless this tendency to be violent to oneself, and to one's relationships, including nature, ends, we are not going to respect and have reverence for nature. We are not going to protect nature, really, in a deep way, in an interconnected way. When one feels that cutting a tree is cutting open one's baby or cutting oneself, one will be very careful. Do you need to cut it? Do I need it? I have heard that in Brazil and other South American countries, they are just destroying the Amazon rainforests to produce more cattle for the meat industry. It is clear that eating too much meat or eating meat every day is not healthy. It is not supporting healthy lifestyles. It is not helping the animals, and it is not helping nature, but, as a society, we are still on that path. The solution to that is not changing the government. That could be one partial solution, but the real solution is rooted in how we, each one of us, are going to discover ourselves in a way so that we are not violent to ourselves and to people and nature around us. If we are stressed, if we are conflicted within, if we have outward conflicts, if we have no sense of peace, we will not care about the peace on Earth or peace in nature.

Shane: Yes, I think sometimes when I am teaching my classes, I feel like I talk a lot about hegemonic systems and processes, and I think, "OK, well, I have got to leave my students with a little bit of hope". So, I talk about axiology – the choices that reflect our individual and communal values. These choices help to manifest the world, so it is nice that I have been sort of talking about it, but I have not understood what I am talking about in my class as being linked to meditative inquiry. Therefore, it is really good for me to see that what I am talking about is linked in a way to this process of meditative inquiry, and I am able to enact the values that are important.

I have heard people talk about Indigenous knowledge, being, and connection to the place. In many Indigenous cultures in North America, people have this idea that you cannot separate the individual from the land.[4] And that is one of the points you mentioned above. So there seems to be a sort of coalescing, I guess, of Indigenous knowledge ways and the meditative approach. Do you want to speak to that intersection?

Ashwani: Absolutely. I recently edited a book called *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research,* which I also referenced above. One of the chapters in this book is written by one of my doctoral students, Diane Obed (2022), who is an Inuit. She explored the connections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous philosophy in her chapter.

[4] For further exploration of Indigenous perspectives see Kimmerer (2015, 2024), Kimmerer & Smith (2022), Machon (2023), Smith (1999), Wilson (2008), and Wilson et al. (2017).

I think that the ancient cultures were quite connected to nature. They did not see nature as an enemy that they needed to control or tame to do what they wanted to do. They always worked along with nature. So, in the older societies, the relationship with nature was not one of antagonism. It was always from the perspective of working together. When I was growing up in New Delhi, India, about 30 years ago, every house in my locality used to have at least a tree inside the house, but if you go now, you will not find any tree in any of the houses. Even New Delhi 30-40 years ago was very different from what it is now. If you see the neighbourhoods that are being built in Halifax now, they do not seem to care about trees much. They do not care about nature. They are ensuring to get as much built-up area as possible. The ancient cultures, the older cultures, did not have an antagonistic relationship with nature. They lived in harmony with nature, right? That is why they established themselves along the rivers. They knew that their sustenance was dependent on the river, so they would pray to the river or have reverence in the sense we have discussed in this conversation. They would look at nature and natural elements as their equal partners and even as deities in many cultures; they never thought of themselves as superior to nature. When they are praying to the sun, or praying to the river or praying to the mountains, they are seeing themselves as someone who depends on these elements, right? So, reverence emerges on its own. But with the advent of science and being able to control nature in certain ways, we begin to think that we do not need to have reverence for nature. We may have a lot of trees in some areas and have manicured grass because that looks pretty. And we can go for a walk in nature, but the idea of reverence is lost, which is core to Indigenous people and meditative inquiry. The Indigenous philosophy and Eastern wisdom put a lot of emphasis on learning about yourself and understanding your connection with nature and the universe.

The perspective of acquiring knowledge about nature and controlling it, whether to destroy it or to protect it, is deeply anthropocentric and fundamentally different from the perception where we have reverence for nature, where we see ourselves as something which emerged from nature and is entirely dependent on nature.

Shane: Yes, I agree. So, how do we help those students, or how do I help my daughter manifest this idea of listening with the whole being? Maybe she was listening with her whole being when she interacted with the swordfish. I do not want her to lose that, because I think the education system teaches that out of us. It teaches us not to have reverence anymore, so I do not want that to happen to my child. So, how do I protect my daughter?

Ashwani: And protect everybody, right? I think when the relationship is broken, one way to bring it back is by initiating the conversation. In this context, that conversation can happen by being in nature, like you do while on the ocean. We have become so detached from nature. As soon as I am outside in the elements, I have noticed that nature begins to cleanse my stresses and my fears. It starts to heal me. The healing process begins as soon as you are in nature. The beauty of nature is everywhere, from the smallest dust particle to the galaxies and the sun and the moon. It is everywhere, so when we look at it, the awe and wonder are very natural, which is there in all kids. The curiosity, the desire to touch everything, the desire to explore everything. I have a baby girl right now who is 14 months old. For her, putting everything in her mouth is intrinsic. Curiosity, awe, and wonder are already there in her eyes and being. When we let that happen, let that happen continually, for which the parents have to make an effort, we help the child to grow meditatively. I often take her to a tree or a plant and just stand still. Now, science says, hey, this is the leaf, this is the flower and all that. But can you just sense the tree? Can you just sense the grass? They have their energies. They have their being, and through that contact, through that regular contact, that

frequent contact, the awe and wonder and curiosity will grow more and more. And when they see people around them who have reverence for nature, like your daughter sees you having a reverence for nature, they will have the reverence too. They will see that the trees, waters, and rocks are all wonderful. They will thank nature and be grateful because they depend on it. They will have so much respect and reverence for everything around them. If you talk to children about nature and our reverence for it, if we share it with them, not necessarily to make them reverent, but sharing reverence, sharing connection, will help others see and feel it. To feel reverence for nature will be natural, and they will imbibe that.

I mentioned the Nature Reflection Assignment previously. Students were so surprised to have participated in that assignment. They realized that they hardly looked at anything with awareness. They never looked at a tree with full attention. They never looked at the bird. What the woodpeckers do, or at least they did not do so since they were children. For them, it was so refreshing. It was just an open assignment. They were encouraged to go to nature as many times to nature as possible and just listen and observe what they see. That was it. Some of the students wondered, "What's your angle here?" "What am I, as a student, really supposed to do when I am in nature?" And I would just say that there is no angle! I just want you to take time for yourself and connect with nature. That is an important part of being a human being and being an educator. You need to know your environment in a very deep way. I would say the majority of them just loved the possibility that they could just do this assignment throughout the term as part of the coursework, so they did not have to take out any extra time to be in nature. It was part of their studies.

Shane: I wanted to share a final thought about an epiphany I had. It is funny that I wanted to control the destiny of my daughter. And then you were very quick to add "and everybody else" because it is my daughter's wellbeing which is interconnected to the wellbeing of everybody else, and also the environment. There is this interconnection because the way that she engages in the world, as we spoke about in this conversation, influences all the people that she engages with. So yes, it is maintaining that sense of awe and wonder, but that is beneficial to everybody that she encounters. And I think that is a really important point: the exploration of self is also looking after my relationships with the planet, other people, and myself.

I was trapped in a patriarchal mindset when I was wondering, "How do I protect that (awe and wonder) in my daughter?" Well, she has power of her own, and I think there is a big lesson for me as a teacher, as a parent, as a human being: I can control who I am and my reverence. People, including my daughter, will see how I choose to manifest in the world, and they can choose to take that on for themselves, or not. Either way, my reverence and processes of meditative inquiry will impact other people's ways of being, and their interactions will impact me.

So, to reiterate, it is not political propaganda; it is my way of being that can influence the interactions that I have with other people or other beings. For me, that is what I want people to take away from this conversation. That is what I found incredibly insightful, and maybe people can learn from the lessons that I have had from this conversation.

Ashwani: I think one of the tendencies that we as human beings have is to not only control our way of being, but also control other people's ways of being out of fear, because we do not know the deeper dynamics of life, right?

So, I think it is so important to transform ourselves, taking a deep interest in that and engaging through that with people and see if it has any impact on the people. So, rather than controlling people, we are sharing our way of living with them.

I want to thank you again because I enjoy the opportunity to speak with people, to listen to their ideas, and to be able to share my ideas when the conversation is authentic and when somebody wants to have that conversation. And in this case, it was clear that you wanted to explore some of the things that you thought were important to you, and you raised so many points that I found very interesting. Thank you for your engagement.

Shane: I appreciate that, and I am also really grateful for your time.

In Closing

In this conversational paper, we explored insights and experiences that influence our pedagogical practices in higher education and, by extension, our lives. We begin the dialogue with a critical approach by respectfully questioning and challenging some of the key ideas presented in Ashwani's previous writings on meditative inquiry (Kumar & Downey, 2018; Kumar & Fisher, 2021), with an additional goal of deepening our understanding of how we perceive and relate to nature. Guided by the process of Dialogical Meditative Inquiry, this interlocution is an emergent conversational process which explores themes like authenticity and meaningfulness, awe and wonder, reverence and reflection, and capitalism and colonialism, among others.

In curricula and pedagogical spaces, we see inauthenticity due to power structures that value certain types of knowledge over others. With these systemic pressures that cascade down from economies, governments, and society, students arrive in educational spaces unsure of what interests them in authentic ways. This explains why students are often hesitant in the beginning to transformative education approaches (Kumar et al., 2023; Kumar & Caron, 2024), since they are taught from their earliest educational experiences that achieving high grades or following assignment instructions (without deviating) are more important than exercising one's creative imagination and critical thinking. We express concerns with this current approach as it leaves little space for self-exploration, authenticity, and meaningfulness in one's learning. As an antidote to this approach, we propose that opening opportunities for students to engage in meditative inquiry will create spaces for more authentic and meaningful learning in the same way that Freire (2000) calls for freedom through critical consciousness.

This freedom of the mind, creativity, and critical thinking that we speak of here may seem utopic given the volume and complexity of global crises (Kumar & Acharya, 2021a). We attempt to reframe this thinking in this paper. We acknowledge that there are many challenges which students face as they arrive at educational spaces; however, meditative inquiry provides opportunities to create spaces of freedom to overcome capitalist structures that foster competition (Giroux, 2014; Kumar, 2019) and instrumentalism (Kumar & Acharya, 2021b). By engaging in contemplative and reflective processes, including spending time reconnecting with nature, with others in safe community spaces, and studying the self, we submit that meditative inquiry can promote spaces of hope (Freire, P., & Freire, A.M.A., 2021).

We also briefly discuss important connections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning (see Obed, 2022). Indigenous ways of being and knowing and meditative inquiry are informed by what we call in this paper a *reverence* for nature. The tensions between capitalism and living in harmony with nature are explored, and we maintain that

meditative inquiry, like Indigenous worldviews, can offer ways of being, knowing, teaching, and learning that are connected to our natural world in a harmonious way, and it can help individuals and society overcome this unhealthy thirst for "more" that permeates globally. We argue that our relationship with the natural world around us has largely been cast aside as a result of a system that is reliant on perpetual and proliferating growth. This system distracts most of us from what is most important, and we suggest that the solution to this problem exists in each individual spending more time with nature, studying it, understanding it, and decreasing the violent acts of aggression toward it.

For many educators, education administrators, and political groups, education is a mechanism for social, political, and economic control. The ideas of education as a means of actualization or empowerment have been superseded by those of the corporate state. Throughout this conversation, we challenge conceptions of education as a mechanism for domination and promote a more contemplative and holistic approach to teaching, learning, and living. The paper underscores the importance of personal transformation as the basis of social transformation. We maintain that true transformation cannot be imposed but ignited through dialogue and exploration.

The dialogue closes with Shane's epiphany about relinquishing control of his daughter's and everyone else's experiences of reverence. This can be seen as a marker of personal spiritual, ethical, and intellectual growth. We hope that readers of this paper are able to recognize the inherent power of meditative inquiry to facilitate personal transformation and consequently embark on their own journeys of personal discovery.

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