

**Contemplative Approaches to Working with Others
and The Five Wisdom Energies in Education**

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Introduction

Contemplative approaches to working with others is an effective way to improve the quality of relationships and communication. It is a way of having conscious relationships with people that bring out the best qualities in each person. It can be the foundation for anyone working in the service of others such as therapy, counseling, and teaching. In organizations it can be a practical way to enhance better interpersonal communication, team work, and quality leadership. As well it is key to fulfilling personal relationships. Used in conjunction with The Five Wisdom Energies work, it provides a creative and dynamic model for working with others.

The nature of contemplation is that it is a twenty-four-hour-a-day awareness, or continual attentiveness, to whatever one is doing. This requires training. The training involves repeatedly coming back to a sense of basic being, remembering to be present with oneself in the midst of the task at hand. It is about re-aligning oneself towards another way of being: rather than focusing only on what has to be done, we remain present with ourselves. Everything that we encounter presents an opportunity to do this. We are invited to drop our views, opinions, concepts, and projects and mingle with our world: the people and environment.

Applied to contemplative education this means that the focus is on process, a sense of journey, as well as content. Educational administrators, teachers, and students alike enter into a personal journey that runs parallel with the tasks of administration, the skills of teaching, and the acquisition of knowledge. There is an emphasis on being as much as doing; an embodied knowing as much as accumulated knowledge. Fundamental to contemplative education is an interest in learning how to learn. This has three aspects: 1. learning or listening, 2. contemplating or reflecting, and 3. embodying or manifesting. Contemplative education is curious about the uniqueness of each persons' learning journey. It aspires to educate a full human being, which is enhanced by work with the Five Energies.

Working with others begins with the commitment to work with oneself

To take on the principles of contemplative approaches to working with others, we involve ourselves with both personal and interpersonal practices. Specifically, we integrate the practice of meditation and our service work. We ground the process of working with others in process of working with ourselves. We train in doing this in formal practices so that it happens spontaneously in our work.

Sitting meditation, the practice of just being, is the foundation for this work to take place. It is coming back to ground zero, starting where we are. It is very experiential, not hypothetical, and it's practical. It works. Sitting meditation trains us in the precision of being directly in the moment and being open to whatever arises. We cultivate an ability to be present, which is so fundamental to working with others. The three aspects of the technique are 1. holding one's posture in an embodied presence, 2. following our breathing, and 3. noting mental fixation and letting it dissolve.

Meditation is also the most fundamental discipline of looking at oneself without judgment. For many of us this is a first step in honest facing of whatever is happening with us. It cuts through our attempts to resist what is happening and deceive ourselves

and dissolves habitual pattern of avoidance. We learn that we can just stay with it: whatever is happening is happening. We can ride it out. Meditation awakens the intelligence of seeing our trips, seeing our patterns. The intention here is to recover our own aliveness. When we are willing to stay with what is awkward or painful, we come alive. When we find our situation unworkable, we close down. So, we begin to make friends with ourselves and our world.

Working with oneself while working with others

The more we work with ourselves, the more we open to working with others; the more we know ourselves, the more we can know others. It is a potent combination of a personal and interpersonal path. There is an oscillation between self and other. We put the emphasis on self discipline; then we can be more spontaneous for others. It makes working with others a very lively journey.

Relationships are central to our lives as human beings but good relationships do not happen automatically. Our relationships with others can be a vehicle for essential change. Any close relationship, brings up our own stuff as well as that of others, so it is an opportunity to work with self and other at the same time.

Our ability to be helpful to others is not only based on learned systems and theories but on trusting our spontaneous presence and innate intelligence. Methods go only so far. Set ideas destroy creativity and insight and obscure the nature of what is really helpful. Great teachers and healers have dazzling successes not because they are following a book, but because of their presence and intuitive powers.

The essence of this work is sharing our being in a compassionate way, the best of who we are. It is being a compassionate friend. It means being in the moment with someone, whatever they bring to us. We do not have to be thrown off by the unpredictable, but open to whatever arises. Often we panic when we are confronted by an unfamiliar situation. We grasp onto whatever might help us: more research, more knowledge, more information, more training, wanting someone to help us. This takes us away from moment. Instead, we could go deeper into ourselves. Our own work with ourselves becomes a powerful tool for working with others. It requires that we know ourselves very well, so that we can be a clear channel.

Having theories and techniques to fall back on can reduce anxiety but anxiety might be a necessary learning ground if we know how to ride it out. We need to continually return to how to be with someone, not relying on what we know. Rather than panic, we can relax and open, staying with what is happening. From that space we can offer someone a helpful hand. It might not be heard; it might be the wrong time for someone to work with it. Later, they might come up with something completely appropriate. Their intelligence is at play too.

Genuine relationship

There are three essential aspects to a contemplative approach to working with others: 1. presence, 2. seeing clearly, and 3. knowing what to do. The inseparability of these three, deepened by experience, is very powerful: when you are present, you see people more clearly, and you know what to do to come to their aid.

The commitment to working with others in this way is a big leap. It goes beyond professionalism and beyond the safety of a one-up relationship. It aspires to a willingness to take on the confusion and difficult situations of others. For me personally, I find working this way with others immensely creative and rewarding. I like to think that everyone is a work of art and in working with someone I am participating in a mutually beneficial creative process.

1. Presence

The quality of being present

Most fundamentally, we are trying to cultivate a sense of unconditional presence. Synchronizing body, speech, and mind, which we do in sitting meditation, is the act of being present. There is an immediacy and nowness. When we are precise with ourselves, we experience wakefulness and gentleness. We become aware of an inner strength and expanded awareness. This is the power of unconditional presence. It has less to do with doing and more to do with being or a doing that is grounded in being.

At the same time we can pay attention to space and the physical atmosphere. We can create environments of sanity, upliftedness. It seems simple-minded yet it is very important. There could be a sense of sacredness involved with the whole situation. So we work with the creation of an entire atmosphere. This is very important when we are working people who might be vulnerable, anxious, or experiencing negativity. Holding our seat, standing our ground, in difficult situations is the ultimate skillful action.

Developing our ability to be present

When we immerse ourselves in sitting meditation, the technique becomes part of our being. So we can practice on the spot, moment by moment. We continually come back to the present. We develop confidence in our own sense of being, our intrinsic sanity. It has a fearless quality so we can shed our protective defenses. We have enough trust in ourselves to be completely open. As we cultivate a sense of personal openness, we transmit sanity just through being. At the same time our mind is sharp because our awareness is one-pointed, in the moment. We are not distracted or preoccupied, and if we are, we know how to come back.

With this way of working, we try to cultivate a general sense of spaciousness. We can become present, space, over and over again by dropping our fixed agendas. We learn to trust in the intelligence that can come through if we slow down and allow ourselves to really feel the situation. If we are present in a spacious way, it suggests that they can be present in a spacious way as well. There is a gradual shift of allegiance from the content (agendas, business, task at hand) to the process of being with someone. We are more able to be in the now.

Being present is open-hearted; it invites people in. It is the beginning of caring for others. Each moment, each day, when we drop our own agenda, our "I," we make ourselves available to others. First we empty, then we engage. As the process deepens, our sense of being with a person deepens. We are not bound by the images or preconceptions we have of them.

Compassion

Presence is intrinsically compassionate. When we begin to feel more gentleness in ourselves, we are able to feel compassionate towards others. Because positive things are happening in us, we naturally extend outward. Our greatest obstacle to working with others is truly understanding someone's confusion. Compassion opens us to their predicament. When we know what pain is, then we know what compassion is. Compassion begins to play a part in our world. We find not only calm and peace, but also warmth and generosity. It is the key to opening our heart.

We might think this would drain our energy but in fact compassion recharges us. It allows ourselves to be in touch with our own sense of abundance. There is a dignity in compassion that doesn't let it get mushy. It is not about feeling sorry for people or looking down on them but has its own intelligence. It is not just sympathy but big mind. It has a clarity that contains fundamental warmth and fearlessness. Compassionate presence involves us in a communication process that is soft, open and warm. Therefore it is the ground of any kind of work with another person.

Exchange

The natural process of merging with another, the direct intuitive experience of another, is called exchange. There is an unobstructed sharing of energy, an emotional identification. Unobstructed means that it is without interpretation, concepts, or projections. It is an open moment with the intention of relating, an intimate connection. We have an inner feeling of being able to tune into the tone or underlying quality of a person. We develop a somatic response to them. It is commonly talked about as empathy.

We need to arouse our motivation to have healthy interactions with people. It can begin with our willingness to make genuine contact. The basic premise is that we can't relate with depth if there is not shared experience. When we drop our own story line and put ourselves in someone's shoes, we identify with them, empathize, resonate with their energy. We enter their world. Then we can see our interconnectedness.

Obstacles to exchange

The main obstacle to exchange is that we feel a barrier between ourselves and others. We habitually create a fortress of self defense; we are "closed" rather than "open." We feel separate, not joined. We may even feel like we are opening to another but the chances are we are projecting our version of them and not seeing who they are. However, we can't be truly helpful to others if put up defenses and are too preoccupied with our own stuff. We miss what is going on with another. We can't enter their world, unless we are somewhat free of our own self-absorption.

Working with our obstacles to exchange is none other than working with our habitual tendencies, our biases and overlays, how we are predisposed to view things. We become aware of the filters we use to see the world and so see how, from moment to moment, we block ourselves. We have our excuses for not opening, our strategies of avoidance. So there is a sense of not being there in some way. Our biggest obstacle is fear, which underlies all these attempts to protect ourselves. We live in a perpetual state of feeling that someone or something is threatening. We can work with our fear by becoming aware of how it is triggered. Then we are not caught by surprise.

We habitually solidify ourselves in a number of ways, based on our personality. In the blue energy, we could keep our distance by taking a stance of professionalism, by being prone to interpretation and analysis, judgment and criticism. In the yellow energy, we could be overwhelmed and feel inadequate, discount our own intelligence, and are self-critical, feeling not good enough. In the red energy, we could be stuck in our own emotions with a sense of self-absorption making us irritable, and feel that anyone else's pain is too much. In the green energy, we could feel that we simply don't have the time for someone, being caught up in our own speed, and get impatient and try to manipulate the situation. Or, in the white energy, we could just feel separate, get distracted, preoccupied, and space out.

When we are not in exchange, we are not connected. We feel ineffectual, that trying to relate to someone is drudgery, a "job." We can train ourselves to be aware of when we get lost or more concerned with our own needs. It is a matter of bringing ourselves back, time and time again. When we are able to re-engage, inspiration returns.

Beginning to break down the barriers between self and other is key. We get in touch with our permeable nature: when we dissolve the barriers between self and other, the distinction between self and other gets blurred. We merge: their confusion becomes our confusion; their joy becomes our joy.

Training ourselves to be a sensitive tool

Working with exchange deepens our sense of being present. We use ourselves as a tool to work with others. We become a psychophysical barometer for the climate of mind states in the room, ours and theirs, and are highly sensitive to the oscillation of energy between self and other. When we take on the task of consciously relating to others, we enter another person's life. As well, they also enter ours. Whoever we are working with is also working with us.

Exchange is an unconditionally occurring phenomenon. It happens automatically, naturally, whether we are aware of it or not. It is present in all human relationships. When we are not aware of exchange and it is confused by projections and expectations, it clouds the interaction, becomes neurotic, and an obstacle to relationship. It is like pollution: a lot of stuff proliferating without a container. We wander in confusion and don't know if it is their story or our story we find ourselves in. When we encounter someone who is a little crazy or confused, we get crazy and confused ourselves. We get caught and feel "stuck in the exchange." This happens because we regard certain people as difficult; we don't feel comfortable when we are with them. Wherever we are personally stuck will arise in our work with others. We are never off the hook.

When we are aware of the exchange, it becomes a useful tool and the very key to healthy relationships. It is the highlight or hallmark of intimate relationships. It is mutually healing and nurturing as well as delightful and joyous. Being in exchange has the flavor of being in love; you love someone unconditionally, no matter who they are and what they do. So exchange takes into account the full range of a person. We get more of a flavor of someone's world.

Exchange does not mean losing oneself in another. For instance, in the presence of craziness, we are able to see it for what it is: intensified energy. We can feel grounded and hold our seat. There is a sense of connection, and yet we are still who we are. We can also experience the tendency to avoid the intensity and close off, either in them or ourselves. We can gauge our mutual ability to tolerate what is coming up. The more intensity in our interaction with others, the more there is capacity for intimacy. This is why a relationship like a marriage, if a conscious one, is a powerful learning experience.

Sense of equality and shared experience

Exchange cuts through our sense of personal identity and opens us to the possibility of shared experience. Rather than feeling a need to be proactive, we can just see that things are happening: we are happening; they are happening. Whatever is happening is happening. We can let go of our struggle and relax. When we have a sense of "big mind" and not get caught up with the discursiveness that arises in confusing situations, we are able to be spaciousness. Then we experience the basic sanity that is always available.

Exchange involves having a sense of touch and go. Touching is connecting fully. We first learn how to genuinely tolerate touch and work with our tendency to avoid intense feelings. But then we need to let go. Otherwise we become enmeshed, trapped. We might think we are being compassionate, but it is stupid, we are just wallowing in their suffering; it is idiot compassion. We are so eager to share our love and experience but we find that it is merely in order to confirm ourselves. So we learn at what point to let go. When we practice touch and go we create openness. When we let ourselves open, we "catch" the feeling of another person. Our openness and warmth allows us to be touched. Exchange deepens our understanding of genuine relationship.

Presence is intrinsically compassionate and has a willingness to connect with someone, exchange. The power of simple presence is the essence of a genuine relationship. It is the language of the heart and communicates authenticity. From this ground of openness, warmth and friendliness, arises the possibility of sanity and workability of someone's confusion. Because it is a shared experience, it restores both ourselves and the other simultaneously. Being genuinely present for someone is the best we can give them.

2. Seeing Clearly; Seeing Them

The quality of clear seeing

When we relax into the open space of compassionate presence and make genuine contact with someone, we see them more clearly. Clear seeing, or seeing things as they are, is the awareness of whatever is taking place. It is insight, precise and intelligent. We experience it as tangible, a physical sensation of being synchronized, a feeling of "clicking in." Clear seeing joins heart and mind, intellect and intuition. It has a sharp quality and so we are able to penetrate and reveal situations that might go unnoticed with a more diffuse mind. We look and then we see, like a reflecting mirror. We discriminate rather than analyze, are aware rather than interpret. Insight is sensing the energy of the situation and letting it be in its own state without appropriating, rejecting, or ignoring.

Trungpa Rinpoche called insight "first thought, best thought." First thought comes to us; we don't have to figure it out. The "figuring out" capacity of mind is the one we use the most. Insight seems to come from nowhere, an "aha." It pops up in the midst of our oceans of discursive thought like an island of clarity. It comes to us as a small moment of wakefulness or spontaneous flash of clarity. We are suddenly free from preoccupation. Clear seeing brings us back, connects us to reality. Compassion is very powerful, but it needs the intelligence of clear seeing, just as intelligence needs the openness of compassion; they work together.

Using clear seeing as a tool

The environment of compassionate presence and clear seeing creates a situation for accurate communication. When we open to the atmosphere of a situation and specific highlights within it, we are aware not only of what people are saying, but also of their tone of being. Their actual words or smile represent a small fraction of their communication; equally important is the quality of their presence, their energy. Clearly seeing someone's predicament goes below what they might be saying to the heart of the matter, the meaning at a deeper level. It draws the covert out of the overt, the unknown out of the known. So we avoid buying the storyline which could be a smoke screen, a cover.

Clear seeing enables us to be with person as a human being rather than set of problems to solve. In helping professions, we often define a person in terms of a set of problems and then go about solving the problems. So we cut through the sense of professionalism and expertise, our tendency to lay our idea about what is right on the world. We also cut through an itch scratch mentality toward problems, our habitual defensive response which is jumping in to fix it.

When we relate in a human way rather than problem-oriented way, we get to the point of the immediacy of human contact. It takes a lot of bravery to let go who we think we are, and who the other person is. We can just respond in the moment, being there.

Projection is the primary obstacle to clear seeing

We all carry around our own version of reality. When we are absorbed in our own version, we project it onto others and situations rather than perceiving them accurately. We tend to see people and events in terms of our own interpretations. We then develop expectations based on how we think things are. On top of that we have emotional reactions to what we perceive to be real. So it becomes very confusing. When we don't practice exchange, everything is a projection. It is easy to get caught up in projections. They can become very convincing and solid.

We are always relating with our version of people rather than with who they truly are, particularly if we are very close to them. In any relationship there are four people: yourself, your version of the other person, the other person, and the other person's version of you. We believe in their projection and project it back. We create a world in which projections are bouncing all over the place. The world becomes polluted with projections.

When we are able to step back from this, we see how we project and solidify. We see how, collectively, we create an environment that is heavy and intense, as if polluted. What we are actually seeing is the energy in the space. Working with the Five Energies we see that it is polluted with red projections or green projections. When mind is more spacious and we practice exchange, we see things for what they are. We are more likely to see someone's energetic being.

Clear seeing as a further refinement to genuine relationship

Clear seeing is quite rare. Sometimes when it does happen, it is so fleeting that we hardly notice. If we are too eager in wanting to understand, there is no space for natural intelligence to arise. So in trying to help somebody, we just impose our view. We may never know who the person really is and may actually cause harm. We need to support the other person's true self, not who we would like him or her to be. Otherwise we end up with a false relationship.

When we experience clear seeing, it is a meaningful moment. It is a moment when we feel completely touched by someone. Something comes into focus in a heartfelt/mind penetrating way. Those moments have a wakeful quality and resonate over time. The experience of compassion and clear seeing coming together in relation to someone can be heartbreakingly touching. I usually get tears in my eyes. I take it as a sign that we have hit the mark

3. Knowing What To Do

Genuine path and knowing what to do

With this approach, our actions are continually informed by a sense of genuine path. A genuine path has a ground of openness. It is understanding or knowing rather than having a set of beliefs. It is a willingness to experience whatever arises without answers, staying with the groundlessness, and not knowing the outcome. So doing something in this context has a very different quality than in our normal way of operating.

Genuine path allows us to relate to the particular situation and feel it. Knowing what to do arises from the union of compassionate presence and clear seeing. When we know intuitively and intellectually what is going on, then we do what is appropriate. It sounds almost too simple to be true and from a conceptual point of view it is. But in this case our actions arise not just from our mind but our heart.

When we are in open communication, the skillful means comes from a common ground of experience. Seeing where to guide someone happens spontaneously in response to the shared communication. Then there is no need to convince someone with logic. Everyone looks honestly at what is happening without trying to change it. If we try to change the situation, it is not appreciating it. When we appreciate it, we connect with the intelligence present.

Our primary obstacles to giving someone assistance arises from either having too much enthusiasm, too much aggression, or too much simple-mindedness. Generally we are unaware of these tendencies in ourselves. When we are too enthusiastic, we get into trying to rescue someone or take over the situation. We see ourselves as the savior.

Taking an aggressive stance means that we want to find the quick fix and change someone or something. Simple-mindedness is withdrawing into a cloud of denial and ignorance which we often cover over with a sense of professionalism. So, again, working with ourselves is key to working with others.

Taking action towards essential change

Taking action here means giving a gesture of support, no matter who the person or situation is. In assisting someone we alternate between being in the immediacy of the moment and intervening to move the process of helping someone forward. What we do depends on what is appropriate in the moment.

Having cultivated a sense of genuine path ourselves, we become people who nurture motivations for change. By change we don't mean changing someone into someone else but in bringing out the essential sanity in an individual. We are aides in uncovering well being and seeing that stuckness is not an enemy. As we have seen, we do this by having unconditional positive regard towards others. In doing so, we encourage people to take an unbiased view towards themselves. As essential change implies experiencing what we usually try to avoid, we can show our willingness to enter places they are not willing to go. We can model that a particular situation is workable. We can transmit our confidence by direct experience.

In being advocates for change, we can be more proactive. Bringing awareness to somebody's habitual patterns challenges them to take a closer look at themselves. We can encourage them to let go of what is no longer working for them and does not feel wholesome. This brings a sense of dignity; they don't have to succumb to their hopes and fears. They can hold their seat and give up being a nuisance to themselves and others. They could also be experiencing a sense of inspiration, a fundamental desire to be decent, upright, and connect with their sense of goodness. So the basic point is that we can suggest dropping habitual patterns and realigning towards a more sane version of themselves, encouraging them to see their inherent sanity and intelligence.

Change can take place at several levels. At the level of body it involves changing a habit, like stopping drinking. It is aligning with what is wholesome and rejecting what creates misery. This involves establishing a mindfulness discipline, being very attentive to one's patterns. At the level of emotions it involves a change of attitude towards them. We embrace who we are with unconditional love and see the positive qualities in our feelings. At the level of mind, we change our view, our attitude. We look at something differently.

To encourage change we can make people aware that they have possibilities and options. They don't have to feel stuck. But connecting to their goodness and intelligence is more important than giving them a set of techniques for battling their problems. However change brings up fear and later, a sense of loss. We have nostalgia for how we were, no matter how miserable it might have been. However the main point of essential change is to heal a loss of spirit and connect some one to their aliveness. We encourage them to align with brilliance, connect with what they fell passionate about. Working with the Five Energies enhances this.

Ultimately, our work with others could inspire full beingness in people and lead them to adopting a genuine path. We could model that life is a learning journey and encourage them to create a wholesome, creative life.

Letting go and closing

At some point we need to let go. We can't hold on to trying to make it all come out all right. We need to give up all hope of results. By doing this we stay open to the situation. We also do not beat ourselves up for our seeming failures. The process of working with others requires patience and has many ups and downs. We need to embrace a nonjudgmental openness, towards ourselves and others. When we can do that, a transmission of ease and relaxation takes place.

It is important to go back into joining, a heartfelt exchange, when closing, whether for an interim period or more finally. This involves reducing the energy and any discursiveness that might have arisen; just going to the heart. In addition I always like giving people something to think about until the next time I see them to provide continuity.

Cycling through the three-step process continually

Over time we can gain familiarity with these three aspects of working with others: presence, implicit in which is compassion and exchange, seeing clearly and knowing what to do. We can cycle through them continually, whether in a few moments or in broad strokes over years. We continually re-engage, communicate, and feel the particular situation. The more we rely on intuition, the more creative and appropriate our responses will be. Everyone is a work of art.