

Nihilistic Education and the Three P'angs

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Faced with the nihilistic beliefs and behaviors of students, educators often attempt to replace this nihilism with meaningful ideals and positive-sounding values. In contrast, Yoshiko Nakama proposes instead that we encourage students to deepen the nihilism they already carry with them. Drawing upon the philosophy of Keiji Nishitani she advocates “fully experiencing nihilism” as a path toward “actualizing one’s ideal self.” If one can completely experience nihilism, according to this philosophy, it may become possible to discover the “emptiness” of ultimate reality and thus encounter the ground of our “true nature.”

Contemplating Nakama’s project brings to mind this “anecdote” from the Record of Layman P’ang:

Layman P’ang was sitting in his thatched cottage one day. “Difficult, difficult, difficult,” he suddenly exclaimed, “like trying to scatter ten measures of sesame seed all over a tree.” “Easy, easy, easy,” returned Mrs. P’ang, “just like touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed.” “Neither difficult nor easy,” said their daughter Ling-chao.¹

All three P’angs could be correct when it comes to Nakama’s project. Let’s start with Layman P’ang’s “difficult, difficult, difficult.” First comes the difficulty of interpretive translation for North American English-speaking cultures. Even with Nakama’s able explication, we can become perplexed. In her introduction, Nakama writes: “Education is a process of actualizing one’s ideal self.” But, someone might ask: Isn’t it the very nature of emptiness that we become empty of any separate self? Nakama herself says a few pages later, “the power of an experience breaks through the frame of the self.” What is going on here?

A.H. Almaas explains it this way:

The process of freeing oneself can be seen from two complementary and interconnected points of view. The first...as self-realization...self-actualization or essential development. The other...as liberation or freedom....these two developments go on simultaneously; they are actually one process.²

I suggest we use a more “self-less” phrase such as “true nature” in order to offset the automatic associations with ego-structures, conditioned personalities, and self-images evoked by the term “self-actualization.”

Another difficulty appears in the form of pedagogical perplexity. All adherents of emptiness as true nature, regardless of their translations or terminology, admit that one cannot directly teach what is to be learned here. Furthermore, neither can any student set out to directly learn it, in other words, to enter the field of emptiness. Other pedagogical difficulties include the uncertainty an educator might experience when, as Nakama acknowledges: “Recognizing the reality of nihilism is sometimes terrifying and can prevent students from affirming life.” Yet she remains undeterred by specters of terrified students, insisting that “facing the reality of nihilism is an...inevitable step for students to...realize their true nature.”

Surveying our array of difficulties, one might wonder how Mrs. P'ang's down to earth "easy, easy, easy" can find any foothold in the present investigation. Yet, on one level, at least in principle, if not in practice, it is very simple or "easy." As Nakama tells us: "The field of emptiness is realized when we are freed from the distractions of our thoughts, and when we pay attention to the presence of each moment of our activities." Isn't this exactly what Mrs. P'ang is talking about, namely "touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed." What if when we got out of bed, we were free of any distracting thoughts and were simply, totally, fully, completely present to and aware of our feet touching the floor in that moment? One is reminded of the classic Buddhist saying: "When you are walking, walk. When you are standing, stand. When you are sitting, sit. Don't wobble."³

Indeed, at this point, we might even be lulled into thinking "easy" ourselves; but for most of us this "easy" cannot be sustained past our first few strikingly unsuccessful attempts to follow Mrs. P'ang's "easy" instructions. We soon realize we have something (or many things) still to learn. This realization can re-connect us with Nakama's project of "educating people in an age of nihilism." Let's consider how some North American meditative inquirers, familiar with Zen traditions, provide additional clues that may contribute to the educational project.

In one account, Toni Packer describes two aspects of "meditative inquiry":

One aspect of meditation is becoming intelligently aware of what we call our conditioning, our habitually unconscious or semi-conscious reactions toward each other and the situations around us...[the] other aspect...[is] coming upon that which is not conditioned...beyond fantasy and remembrance....without desire and fear, beyond the sense of time, vast, boundless being, not belonging to you or me.⁴

Let's look at each aspect from a teaching-learning perspective. To undertake the first aspect, "becoming intelligently aware" of our conditioning, launches one into a prolonged and daunting endeavor, where most people flounder without guidance from experienced teachers. What further advice or help can experienced teachers contribute along the lines of Nakama's project with its focus on nihilism? An example could be Eckhart Tolle's succinct advice to watch our minds, to notice how every "thought pretends that it matters so much."⁵ Tolle then suggests what he calls a "new spiritual practice...don't take your thoughts too seriously."⁶ In my reading of John Daido Looi, I think he demonstrates one way to connect Tolle's practice with Nakama's project. Here is an excerpt from Looi as he reminds his students of their intermittently conscious nihilism:

Two weeks ago you wanted to die, everything was intolerable, nothing was working out. Here it is two weeks later, and everything is wonderful. When you really examine the circumstances nothing has changed. All the things that were awful last week are still there, but...you don't think you should die now; you want to live forever...What is meant by "being battered about by circumstances"[?] Those circumstances are nothing but ourselves....How we perceive.⁷

Toni Packer's other aspect, "coming upon that which is not conditioned," brings us to Nakama's own pedagogical suggestions:

Although teachers cannot directly provide students with the field of emptiness itself, they can help students learn to attune themselves to the suchness of things and provide students with experiences such as those of beauty through nature and works of art, whose power can break through the frame of the self.

Even though most educators can, and do, provide students with experiences of beauty, some of us might still wonder what's entailed in helping "students learn to attune themselves to the suchness of things."

Sogyal Rinpoche, Tibetan lama and western teacher, agrees with Nakama about the importance of being inspired by works of art and the beauty of nature. He suggests, furthermore, that "we do, sometimes, half understand these glimpses." Yet, according to Sogyal, "modern culture gives us no context or framework in which to comprehend...[or] explore these glimpses more deeply."⁸ Thus, Sogyal and Nakama keep us wondering what it might mean to give students an educational "context or framework" that opens up the possibility of deeper explorations.

Nevertheless, even without a sufficient framework or context, I suspect, as Sogyal says: "Such moments of illumination, peace, and bliss happen to us all and stay strangely with us."⁹ During these moments, we do "break through the frame of the self." We reach a place where we can hear Ling-chao, the P'ang family's daughter, reply to her parent's dichotomy: "Neither difficult nor easy." For instance, Nishitani's encounter with the suchness of a sunrise, "being bathed in the brightness of the sun's ray" belongs in "Neither difficult nor easy." When one is "bathed in the brightness of the sun's ray" it is decidedly odd to be raising questions about "difficult or easy." Here, at last, the questions we associate with nihilism, along with their complicated analyses and associated anxieties, dissolve, at least momentarily.

1. *The Recorded Sayings of Layman P'ang*, trans. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Yoshitaka Iriya, and Dana R. Fraser (New York: Weatherhill, 1971), 74.

2. A.H. Almaas, *Diamond Heart: Book Two* (Berkeley, Calif.: Diamond Books, 1989), 1-2. For much more detailed descriptions, see A.H. Almaas, *The Inner Journey Home* (Boston: Shambala, 2004).

3. Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation* (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1991), 132.

4. Toni Packer, *The Wonder of Presence* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), 127-128, 131.

5. Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2003), 14.

6. *Ibid.*, 15.

7. John Daido Looi, *Mountain Record of Zen Talks* (Boston: Shambala, 1988), 141.

8. Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, ed. Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 50-51.

9. For further discussion along similar lines, see Ann Diller, "Expanding Identities: The Importance of Wow! Experiences," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 71-74.