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A Conversation on the Edited Collection *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*

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The purpose of this conversation with Dr. Ashwani Kumar, Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (Canada), is to explore his perspective and thinking behind his upcoming edited book titled *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* which will be published by Routledge in April 2022. This book is a collection of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary essays that explore the transformative potential of his work on meditative inquiry in diverse educational contexts. For readers new to his work, according to Dr. Kumar,

Meditative inquiry is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach that I have developed for teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. It urges educators to re-imagine the phenomenon of education where understanding of consciousness and its transformation become the core of teaching and learning. Meditative inquiry aspires to awaken awareness, intelligence, compassion, collaboration, and aesthetic sensibility among students and their teachers through self-reflection, critique, dialogue, and creative exploration. (personal communication, 2021)

This new book showcases unique ways in which scholars (including Indigenous, African, Asian, and Buddhist scholars) have engaged with the idea of meditative inquiry from diverse disciplinary, cultural,

and spiritual traditions, perspectives, and practices. The collection explores a variety of themes in relation to meditative inquiry including arts-based research, mindfulness, poetic inquiry, Africentricity, Indigenous thinking, martial arts, positive psychology, trauma, dispute resolution, and critical discourse analysis, and it offers insights into how the principles of meditative inquiry can be incorporated in school and university classrooms. The diverse and rich contributions contained in this volume will inspire readers to explore further and adopt its principles in their own specific fields and contexts.

In the interest of full disclosure, Dr. Kumar and I have known each other for several years, and I have contributed a chapter to this collection under discussion. Through my participation, I have learned more about the depth of the ideas that Dr. Kumar and the contributors have shared in this book. I was also able to witness what he calls teaching as meditative inquiry in his classroom and in one of his workshops at Dalhousie University. As co-editor of the *Journal*, I thought that it would be of great interest to many of our readers to explore this further with him in a book review-interview.

Dr. Sable: I would like to welcome you to this interview, Dr. Kumar. Many people are caught between a concept of education that is purely based on rationality, reasoning, and critical thinking, and the belief that education can also include or at least tolerate different types of faith. How do you relate to the issue of faith and reason or faith and science?

Dr. Kumar: I think that is a very good question, and I think that is also a very broad question. I will have to explore it dialogically and that is why I wanted not to see your questions in advance because I feel that spontaneous exploration leads to fresh insights. I view science as an exploration of the world—we have a desire to understand how the world works, how our body works, how we think, and how we learn. The scope of questioning can range from an atom to the whole existence of the universe. In other words, how does the universe and what it contains function and where has it all come from? I

think science has approached these questions outwardly; it wants to go outward, and through observation and verification it wants to understand how the world works.

I think when the question of faith enters the conversation, we come upon perspectives that are opposite of science because faith relies on what we want to believe in or what we have been told to believe in. Even if we may not have any evidence for it, per se, our faith is something that we want to believe in. There are millions of people on earth who believe in God, but they cannot provide hard evidence for that. This is something they are conditioned to do (conditioned to believe in), and people may become very fanatic about it. The Taliban regime that has recently reemerged in Afghanistan is a case in point. We can see the way the faith systems have evolved. They have become quite divided, and often many faiths seem to think that their faith is better than everybody else's faith. This is mostly what I have seen happen, and it has caused so many problems and conflict in the society. There are also people who intuitively and subjectively sense something, but they cannot necessarily prove it scientifically, or in a way that can offer to the world evidence for the existence of God or even the need to lead a spiritually fulfilling life.

So, I see that these are two ways of approaching our existential quest. One is the scientific quest which seeks reasoning, as you said, and collecting the evidence to construct and to verify or falsify theories about the world. The other is kind of a leap of faith, you believe in something, and you are just happy with your belief. Having said that, an important point that we should also consider is that science is also kind of rooted in faith, because you have to have faith in a particular process and particular system, through which you gather the evidence. We see that science has also been constantly evolving, where new discoveries and ideas begin to act like faith. To that end, those who believe in science are not ready to hear anything else other than what they have come

to believe through scientific exploration. This is how I look at science and faith. We should explore how all this relates to education.

Dr. Sable: Yes! In the context higher education, how do you approach a holistic and meditative education that you have described in your writings? How do you approach that when it would seem to possibly encroach on someone's religion and possibly threaten the separation of church and state? In western education the dominant tendency is to overcome religious bias of previous generations by offering liberal education that is rooted in science and secularism.

Dr. Kumar: I think you are very right that a key focus of meditative inquiry is spiritual exploration. In my view, spirituality does not encroach upon anybody's religion, although it can, but it is not my intention for it to encroach anybody's religious convictions or beliefs. The way I approach spiritual inquiry in my classrooms is through self-understanding. The questions and the activities that my students and I engage with do not need to invoke any religious beliefs.

Often, I would ask students to do an exercise in the class where I would instruct them to take a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to put down on the paper whatever is happening in themselves, whatever thoughts and feelings they are experiencing in that moment. What is important is that they write as honestly and as authentically as they can without worrying about whether it is grammatically making sense, or whether they have written a properly constructed sentence. In this exercise, neither religious beliefs nor a critique of them is important—the focus is for students to put their whole being on the paper, as they are experiencing it in the moment. In my experience as an educator and a researcher, this is one of the ways in which we get to connect with ourselves and what is actually happening in the moment.

Often my students tell me that they have never been offered this kind of an opportunity where they can actually

connect with their own selves. This is not a usual meditation where one is sitting and is asked to concentrate on breath. I do that as well. But I start with activities that avoid resistance because a lot of people have pre-existing ideas of what meditation is and how they should be doing it. For instance, a lot of people enter my classes with the idea that they already know that they are not good at meditation and that meditation does not work for them. 99.99% of the students have shown a great interest in the exercise that I discussed above—it seems to be working for most of them because it allows them to be aware of themselves without believing in any religious traditions.

I also deepen this exercise by reintroducing this exercise in a later class to see what are the things that have been on students' minds by asking them to circle thoughts and feelings that are recurring and then explore them further. To me, this is a form of spiritual inquiry, because it is helping participants understand themselves, and it does not require any religious belief insofar as one does not require any religious conviction to follow it to the end of one's life, or to have faith in it so that they will get some results out of it in this or the afterlife. It is in-the-moment exploration of what is happening inside of a person. I have developed a lot of exercises like the one I described above.

To help my students understand their own inner selves and structures (and their relationship to the world), another exercise that I ask students to do is to put down any questions they have (whether the questions are conscious, or they are hidden in the deeper layers of the mind) on paper. It can be any question about anything. For example, "Why am I on Earth? Where has the universe come from? What is the purpose of life? Why is there discrimination?" etc. Anything that can come to their mind is good, and often students say that when they have put their questions down on a piece of

paper, they feel a sense of relief because there has been a lot of things that have been going on inside of them. They did not have a connection with those issues, feelings, and thoughts, but when they are allowed to do look inward, their questions about life and everything it contains just come out. This is how I approach holistic education. I do not feel that it encroaches on any religious or spiritual convictions. Having said that, there is a little caveat: people who have a strong faith in their religion, or in their spirituality may be hesitant. Once a student asked, "Is this a Buddhist meditation? Am I becoming a Buddhist by doing this?" That happens very rarely, and I clarify that "No, you don't have to become part of any faith or organization, it is for you to see the value in this exercise and to try it once. If you see value in it, you can continue because it is your exercise, and you can change it in any way that you think will work best for you."

Dr. Sable: Let me inquire further about what you call "exercises" and let us make a distinction. I know from your work that you discuss at length the distinction between techniques, instrumentalism, and meditative inquiry. Although you may be offering many different types of exercises, you do not regard them as meditative inquiry in and of themselves. I think a lot of people in the audience tend to think that the practices themselves are some kind of special techniques that are necessary to achieve the knowledge that they think they are going to achieve if they practice these techniques religiously.

Dr. Kumar: I think that is a great question, David, and I think we have talked about it on other occasions as well, so I am glad that you brought it up. As you know, I have critiqued this reliance on and obsession with techniques and methods quite a bit. Based on my understanding of the philosopher and educator J. Krishnamurti's work and in my own exploration, when anybody hears the word "meditation," or even "meditative inquiry," the image that comes to their mind is: "I am sitting somewhere on a cushion, my eyes are closed and there is ei-

ther some music going on, or some sound technique is being involved, or I have to focus on my breathing, or I have to visualize something.”

You have said it very well, and I agree that reducing meditative inquiry or meditation to techniques is problematic. As an experimentation, I support it. If somebody is drawn to observing their breathing, then it is a great exercise for them. You experiment, you explore, and you try to find out what this observation is and why it is important. Often, these techniques are presented or understood as sacrosanct in themselves as if they are the truth. In this case one may believe that if you follow them religiously, day after day, year after year, you will finally reach some kind of a state or enlightenment or something else. This interpretation of techniques is widely prevalent. When people are approaching techniques, they are probably approaching them from this perspective: “These techniques are ultimately going to lead me to some point, if I religiously and consciously continue to practice them.”

The problem that I see with it is that this approach becomes technique focused. There is an instrumentalism implied, and its biggest danger is that it is also shown to improve concentration and well-being, and it reduces your stress, right? In the workplace, it has been shown to increase productivity. If kids do these exercises, they may have less symptoms of ADHD, such as improved concentration, focus, and self-regulation. This means that their work will improve, their efficiency will improve, and they will experience increased results on math and English tests. Based on your own study of Buddhism, and based on my own exploration, I think you will agree that the purpose of meditation is much deeper and broader. It is not just to gain some instrumental results; it is to develop a deeper understanding of yourself and deeper understanding of life, so that we can see how our egos, individual and collective, create such a mess in the

world. Perhaps we would come to questions like: What kind of a lifestyle have we adopted that is causing so much havoc on the earth, within ourselves, and in our relationships? Is it possible to touch the fountain of compassion within ourselves to so that we relate with each other in a very different way? There is a very broad and deeper purpose of meditative inquiry, but there is the danger that it can be reduced to very instrumental purposes as I discussed above.

Now, in the kind of the world we are living in, it is the instrumentalist purpose that most of us are interested in, and that is how meditation is sold. In my view, when we look at meditation as an instrument for success in the world, it loses its whole purpose. For me meditative inquiry is very broad, and its breadth is quite extensive, as I think the new book that we are discussing here expands on. This is the first time I have talked about the many layers of meditative inquiry. Meditative inquiry is personal. It can allow you to understand your psychological structures in relation to the other, but then it is also social because you do not exist in isolation. You exist with everybody else and everything else. Then, I have talked about its epistemological orientation and ontological orientation, its capacity to be critical of the social structures and the injustices that are embedded in them. I have tried to show to the best of my capacity—given the space available to me—that meditative inquiry is not just about doing exercises, although exercises can be a really important part of it; it is much broader than that. Its scope is quite expansive, and it is a holistic view, rather than an instrumental or technical view.

Dr. Sable: Would you say that in order to approach this deeper, more transformative purpose, people may need first to come to sense of well-being, healing, or peace so that they have the openness to look at these more fundamental questions, these more existential issues, which they may take for granted to begin with. Then once they settle, they can begin to experience their meaningful relationship to these bigger

questions. Is there an issue there that for some people, the entrance might be instrumental, but maybe later, it becomes more existential? Or, you could say that exploring ontological issues and pure being on a deeper level might become available to them, more likely, when they have already settled themselves.

Dr. Kumar: I think it depends on the person, and it depends on how they are approaching this issue. I think it is perfectly fine if somebody says, "First, I need to take care of myself." For example, that person may be going through a crisis, and they might think, "First, I need to get myself out of the crisis," which is perfectly fine. I also think that from the very beginning we need to pay attention to how we are relating to anything. I should be aware of it, whatever action I am taking or whatever approach I am taking towards myself; there has to be a sense of awareness. I should not be deluding myself. When I say, for instance, "I am instrumental now, and tomorrow I am going to become existential," to me that is being delusional. The very idea, the very understanding that I am instrumental in the moment is existential and is rooted in reality. So, when I see my instrumental focus in the very beginning, that is an existential process to me, and the deeper inquiry has already begun. I see that I am practicing a technique for an instrumental purpose. As long as I see it, I think it can have a lot of impact on the way I approach it.

Dr. Sable: Let us suppose theoretically we have administrators in an educational institution, and they want to pay attention to what students are asking for. Let us suppose administrators decide to expand their business school because many students are interested in business: MBA programs, executive leadership programs, all of which can enhance the university revenue stream. Or, suppose I am an administrator, and I come to this book because I see that there is a significant issue around mental health in my student population. I am wondering if

there is something that should be more centrally incorporated into our university mission that we need to investigate. I hear the holistic aspect that you and the contributors in this volume have talked about, and it appeals to me personally, but how do I incorporate this when students are demanding course offerings that are going to be personally appealing to them from a career point of view? What am I going to do about that?

Dr. Kumar: There are so many important topics you have touched on in your question that I would like respond to. First of all, this corporatization of the university is very problematic in my view, and it is central to neoliberal reforms. This places the burden of sustaining an institution on the institution itself, so you are forcing institutions to become private corporations. When you become a private corporation, your primary goal is how to balance your budget. So, how are you going to gain more money? The focus then becomes primarily about the programs that are going to bring more money to the institution. Even if that is the issue, why cannot ethical thinking and contemplative thinking be part of business education as well? Why do we need to see business as only concerned with money devoid of any ethical or contemplative or sustainable orientation? I am sure there are a lot of business scholars who bring in these questions into the matrix. It is not only about preparing students to fit into the economic system, but also helping students to see the problem of the existing economic system and the relationship that it has formed with ecology (and try to change that relationship). I think that should be part of business education, if we are truly providing a good business education.

Dr. Sable: That is an excellent response and I think it goes a long way, but tell me, even in your own experience, about the attitudes of people in the liberal arts toward the people who teach management sciences or business and commerce. What is the relationship of faculty and administrators to these broad

generalizations and cynical views of anything that appears to be of societal benefit? Do you find that in your institution?

Dr. Kumar: I think people who are rooted in critical theory traditions and Marxist traditions often see professional programs like business and law and education as being primarily instrumentalist because those programs may not necessarily be questioning the deeper problems of the society. There are a lot of people who see the other side of the coin as well; within these programs, there are folks who are looking at these areas from more critical angles. So, I see both. There are people who are completely cynical, and I do not blame them for that, because these programs are kind of given more significance and priority as they are more marketable professions, and they are going to bring more money and more donations. They are essential for the sustenance of the university, and often professors teaching in these programs are paid more. On the other hand, there are also folks within these programs who are very critical as well. Although, in my limited understanding, I think the number of those folks would be less than the number of people who are just going along with the flow the way the economic system wants them to perform, or in the way the donors and funders want them to structure their programs.

I did want to respond to your other question as well. If an administrator is seeing the significance of meditative inquiry, or if the school principal is seeing the significance of it, or even if an instructor is seeing the significance of holistic educational approaches, how can they allow it to become more widely recognized? I think a lot of people—especially after the pandemic—have realized what isolation means, what depression means and how widespread it is, and that internal problems, relational problems, and domestic abuse exist in our society at many levels. People know that human beings are not just economic and political units. They are also psychological and existential beings, and there are a lot of things

that happen within and around them that we conveniently or ignorantly ignore. So, I think people are already realizing the importance of relationship, connection, and internal peace.

As an administrator, I would first show people why I take an interest in it. I would hold a forum and have a discussion, or invite people, and have a broader conversation about why it is important to pay attention to our wellbeing. As I see based on my own experience of having conversations in my class (and outside of the class), I have not found many people who do not see the value in contemplation or in understanding oneself. So, if we present it right (and by that, I mean present it authentically), people would see that this person is not only talking about contemplation, but is actually contemplative. Then they see the value in it. For instance, many of my students notice that I talk about dialogical pedagogy and my classes are also dialogical. There are also a lot of people who talk about dialogue, but their classes are lecture driven. So, if I embody contemplation and meditation, then people see it. Lastly, if people do not want to partake in it, or explore it, I think that is perfectly fine. Perhaps it is not the time in their life where they can see the significance of meditative inquiry yet.

Dr. Sable: There are many people who look at the structure of larger society and the so-called “democracy” that we live in, and what they see is almost the opposite of what it is (at least intended to be). They do not see the freedoms insured by democracy, and they do not see a meaningful participation for themselves, or people like them. They see, historically, that they have been unfairly marginalized and treated with racism. It is not just the explicit behavior but the implicit behavior, which is the condition that they have not been able to penetrate or shift. When you see that an administrator or a tenured faculty person feels kind of backed into a corner, do you expect them to just yield to the truth, when it would mean for them to give up power? So, how do you approach it not from the point of view of someone who has been traumatized by all

this, but from the point of view of the person who is in power? They likely realize, “Oh my goodness, what we really mean by decolonization (at least in Canada) is to share our power and privilege.” That is challenging. Are people going to face this issue of literally giving up some control? How do you take that person’s point of view and create a dialogue through meditative inquiry?

Dr. Kumar: I think that that is a tremendous question, David. I would say that we are definitely grappling with this question in Canada now and anywhere in the world where this recognition is finally descending on the people that people have been systematically marginalized, oppressed, and exploited. In your question you mentioned democracy. I think it is true that the world may have become more democratic, and there have been more possibilities for people who have been marginalized—who have been controlled—to find their way towards equality, to get out of the cycle of injustice, and to find their place in society. At the same time, democracy has also shown that there are a lot of people who have more power and control. The COVID-19 situation clearly shows that pharmaceutical companies do not listen to anybody. These types of companies and corporations have a lot of power. Then there are politicians and dominant groups, who also have tremendous sway in society. So, even though the democratic movement has grown, that does not mean that the injustices and the operations have completely stopped. I think we have to realize that in any freer kind of a political space, there is a possibility of challenging the injustices and the oppression, but there is also the possibility that the dominant class and the nexus among powerful people will exert their influence on the society. The dominant classes, I think, are quite threatened by the movement that is growing, because it is bringing out and exposing more and more the oppression and the injustices that have existed.

I would say that there are people who do not care about

it and have the attitude, “Okay, whatever is happening is happening. It doesn’t affect me.” Then there are people who are threatened, and who want to suppress this movement towards social justice. Then there are also a lot of people who feel or who realize that these injustices have happened. Since I focus on Indigenous issues in Canada in my Curriculum Theory, Holistic Education, and Educational Theory courses, some of my students say, “We could not believe that this actually happened here; Canada is supposed to be the most peaceful, friendly, and happy country, and this thing has happened in Canada. Indigenous genocide happened in Canada!” There are so many graves of the Indigenous children from the residential schools that are being uncovered now. Many students are going through this internal tumultuous kind of state, where they realize that they have inherited this history and ask themselves, “What are we going to do about it?”

As you are saying, it will be difficult and, again, that is where, I think, meditative and contemplative approaches can be really helpful, because they cannot only help you see what is happening within you, but also to come in touch with a deeper movement within yourself. Buddha talked about it thousands of years ago—we have the fountain of compassion within us. So, if we only look at the problem of discrimination, politically, economically, historically, and from the perspective of power structures, I do not think we will be able to make real progress. But, if we look at injustices and oppression from the perspective of relating with each other more compassionately and more ethically (because as human beings we have a deeper connection with each other), then the decolonization and the transformation of the society may take a very different form. I would say that this should be the foundation of the dialogue among us all. How can such a dialogue can be facilitated? There has to be a recognition of the injustices and oppression, but everybody is not going to

recognize it; in fact, a lot of people will simply ignore it. Their attitude will reflect, “Whatever is happening is happening. We do not care about it,” and that is the attitude of a huge population.

Some cannot participate in this dialogue because they do not have the means or the time to think about it. Then, there is a powerful group who does not want to give up their power. However, there are people who are more sensitive and are feeling quite conflicted inwardly. These people have a lot of potential or possibility to generate a dialogue. A lot of students say, “How can we talk about Indigenous issues with my students in school? I am not Indigenous. How can I talk about Africentric issues? I am not an African Canadian.” And I respond that you can start from the perspective of learning about these issues. Nobody will say, “Why are you learning about Indigenous cultures and worldviews?” So, if we even begin with the perspective of learning that there is a diversity, there are different ways of knowing, and at the same time also look inward to connect with our very deep internal self—which a lot of spiritual teachers have said, and I also believe, is the self of everybody—we can find connection not only outwardly, but also internally with ourselves, and with everybody else. I think that would promote the dialogue that you are speaking of, David.

Dr. Sable: *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* captures and expands on this, and I think it is important to include that this is not a book that is just about your own personal point of view. It is a collection of voices advocating for deeply meaningful change. Can you please say something about your motivation in creating a book which is an edited collection of a very diverse group of authors?

Dr. Kumar: I am glad that you asked that question, David. This book is a collection of writings where folks from a variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds are engaging with my work

on meditative inquiry. Since I have begun working on this idea of meditative inquiry—more formally since my PhD, but informally since my teenage years—I have been involved in rich and deep conversation with a lot of people. A couple of years ago, it occurred to me, why do not I invite my colleagues and students who have taken interest in the idea of meditative inquiry to engage with it from their own perspectives? In this book, there are sixteen core chapters where educators have engaged with meditative inquiry (and with one another through peer-feedback process) from a variety of perspectives including Africentricity, Indigenous thinking, mindfulness, arts-based research, Heideggerian and Deweyan perspectives, and critical discourse analysis, among others. This book also contains illustrations by artist, teacher, and curriculum theorist Adam Garry Podolski, who has engaged with meditative inquiry through his art. In addition, I invited William Pinar to write a foreword to this book, and I sought five senior scholars from the field of education—Ardra Cole, Michael Corbett, Anne Phelan, E. Wayne Ross, and John J. Guiney Yallop—to comment on the value and significance of this book. So, the book has allowed a multi-faceted dialogue between and among scholars. I think that is what you were talking about when you asked, “How can we facilitate the dialogue?” I think the dialogue can be facilitated when we are interested in each other’s perspective. So, I just opened that kind of venue and hoped that it would work, because people had expressed interest previously, and I think it worked very well.

Dr. Sable: To conclude, this a bit of a curveball, but I would like to include your comment on a short quote from W. H. Auden, who wrote: “Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense.”

Dr. Kumar: My reading of that poetic thought is that whenever you try to impose restrictions on something, or whenever you try to lay a path which is too rigid—which does not have possibilities,

which does not have openings—it often forces people to resist, to not see it. Or, if they are not strong enough, or if their particular group is not allowing them to be strong enough, they just adopt the path as it is. Either there is indoctrination and then repetition of what the tradition has told you, or there is a resistance and rebellion without even understanding what the tradition is about. So, like Auden, I would say there is a great beauty in keeping things open and flexible and approaching things more gently, tentatively, hesitantly, and openly, particularly this area of meditative and contemplative exploration, rather than trying to impose it on people. Otherwise, there will be either indoctrination or resistance. Meditative inquiry is an invitation—not imposition—to learn about ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. Thank you, David, for this conversation.

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I (Ashwani Kumar) would like to thank my research assistant, James Caron, for his help with transcribing and editing this dialogue.

Dr. Ashwani Kumar is an Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. His teaching and research focus upon meditative inquiry, which is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. He has conceptualized several key curricular and pedagogical concepts, namely, curriculum as meditative inquiry, teaching as meditative inquiry, and music as meditative inquiry. He has also developed a contemplative research methodology called dialogical meditative inquiry to conduct subjective and inter-subjective qualitative research. He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding Colonial, Ideological, and Neoliberal Influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He has served as the President of Arts Researchers and Teachers Society, Canada. Contact: ashwani.kumar@msvu.ca