

DRAFT

ONE

Inner Wisdom: A Foundation for Being a Teacher¹

Thomas Falkenberg

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In keeping with the theme of mindfulness and self-study through critical friendship as important components of professional development, this chapter is concerned with the functioning of our mind and our mind's role in who we are and how we respond, act, and behave as teachers as we encounter our students. To illustrate this concern, let me start with a vignette.

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Picture a teacher educator teaching a class of teacher candidates in a classroom. She has just assigned a task to them to undertake in groups of four. After having given the instructions to the students, the teacher educator looks around the room, taking in the image of students getting in groups and starting to work on the task. No particular thought occupies the teacher educator's mind at that moment, when she notices a particular student getting ready to sit down. Suddenly an episode from last class comes to her mind, when she observed that student clandestinely using her cellphone during an activity. The teacher educator's heart starts beating faster and a feeling of uneasiness arises in her; she feels a slight contraction in her stomach area. The thought comes to her mind that this student does not seem to take the course seriously, and that she should monitor this student today. Suddenly her attention shifts to an approaching student, who is starting to ask her something. The teacher educator turns to her, and thoughts related to the question start dominating her mind, while the feeling of uneasiness still persists. When the student has left, suddenly the lesson plan and the timing come to the teacher educa-

tor's mind, and she turns to the clock on the wall and notices that she is about ten minutes behind her planned schedule.

The vignette speaks of *images* and *thoughts* that suddenly *come to mind*, and of *feelings* that suddenly arise, about a *shift of attention* and of *noticing*, and how attention is drawn away toward a new object of attention.

The vignette illustrates what I—and others—call “the inner life” (see, for instance, Cohen, 2009/2015; Johnson, 1986). This chapter is about teachers’ inner lives and the role those inner lives can and do play in teaching, and how that might impact our understanding of what it means to be a teacher. There are three theses that this chapter will develop: 1. A teacher’s inner life plays a central role in how she engages with her students. 2. Teachers can and should learn to attend to their inner life in order to address the ethical imperative of teaching. 3. With a greater concern for teachers’ inner lives a distinction between “to teach” (doing) and “being a teacher” (being) becomes more prominent for teaching. Each thesis will be developed in one of the subsequent three sections.

INNER LIFE

The vignette from the introduction illustrates “inner life” at work. In a first approximation I like to suggest that “inner life” is characterized by what is going on in our mind: sensations, feelings, images, thoughts, and intentions. I start with five observations of our inner life.

Five Observations

The first observation is that *our inner life is “the very stuff of our lives”* (Varela, 1999, p. 9).

We always operate in some kind of immediacy of a given situation. Our lived world is so ready-at-hand that we have no deliberateness about what it is and how we inhabit it. When we sit at the table to eat with a relative or friend, the entire complex know-how of how to handle our utensils, how to sit, how to convers, is present without deliberation. (Varela, 1999, p. 9)

Such immediacy of a given situation and the availability and use of know-how for acting and responding in such situations in the moment permeates the living of our lives—as teachers or humans more generally. While *acting* in response to a given situation can be non-immediate, delayed or even avoided, our *inner life* is always operating in the immediacy of a given situation—and situations are given to us as part of our inner life, namely as thoughts, images, feelings, and so on. Varela (1999) suggests that the know-how that is available to us in a situation of a certain type creates a “microidentity” for us (p. 10), something that characterizes

who we are in such types of situations. This suggests a core role of our inner life in who we are as a person and a teacher.

[1.10] The second observation is that *we can be—and often are—unaware of our inner life in given situations*. While our responding in situations is framed by what we perceive of the situation, such perceptions of outer or inner-sourced experiences can and often are at the subconscious level. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) suggest, “it is the rule of thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought” (p. 13). There are numerous examples, demonstrating how often subconscious know-how is enacted as we respond to the immediacy of a given situation.²

[1.11] I am not saying here that we do not know what we are doing. We do, but in a specific sense. Our know-how allows us to respond in the immediacy of a given situation. We are acting-in-the-situation, our focus and attention is oriented toward the acting in the situation. As has been pointed out in the Buddhist psychology of the mind, however, there is a crucial difference between thinking a thought and being aware of thinking the thought; similarly, there is a difference between feeling an emotion and being aware of the feeling (Gunaratana, 2002, pp. 70, 140). For instance, let us assume that I notice a teacher candidate with bright yellow hair in the hallway. I might think “This man seeks attention from others.” In this situation I am *thinking the thought* that this man seeks attention from others. However, I can also be aware of that very thought, in which case I might notice with interest how my structure of prejudices links a particular hair colour to an assumed psychological need. Thinking the thought is my inner life at work. Being aware of that thought is *conscious awareness* of my inner life. This marks a crucial distinction between “living our inner life” through enacting our know-how in the immediacy of a situation and our conscious awareness of our inner life. This chapter is focused on the latter.

[1.12] It is often what we call “routines” that escape our conscious awareness. These routines help us cope with the immediacy of the situations that make up our lives, but they can also be problematic—a point that I will discuss later.

[1.13] The third observation is that *we can be aware of our inner life in given situations*. This seems particularly the case where we experience extreme shifts to what we consider “normal” in a given situation. For instance, when we feel bodily pain, when thoughts and intentions arise that extremely violate what we consider to be our ethical principles, or when our body responds to sad news we just received by increasing our heart rate and cramping our abdominal muscles.

[1.14] The fourth observation is that *we can learn to become more aware of our inner life as it unfolds in a given moment*. For instance, contemplative practices in different so-called wisdom traditions are in part about becoming more aware of one’s inner life. For instance, relative recent research in the

cognitive and brain sciences in the West on the impact of mindfulness practices on the brain structure and mind capacities strongly suggests that those practices indeed can help us become more aware of our inner life in given situations (see, for instance, Austin, 2009; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009; Smalley & Winston, 2010). I want to call—following other scholars—the working on our awareness of our inner life “inner work” (see, for instance, Cohen, 2009/2015; Johnson, 1986).

The fifth observation is that *our inner life has an ethical aspect*. I would even go so far to claim that our inner life is at the core of who we are as ethical beings. If our inner life is partially our response to our perception of the outer world and is also the basis upon which we respond to and act in that world—as I suggested above—then our inner life has clearly an ethical aspect. It is through our responding to our thinking, feeling and intentions that we engage with the world, including our fellow humans. In other words, it is our inner life that shapes *how* we engage with the world and, thus, it shapes who we are as ethical beings.

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Automatic Routines and the Ethical Imperative of Teaching

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Considering the importance of our inner life for who we are as a teacher and person more generally, the level of awareness of our inner life, what aspects of our inner life we are attending to, what we notice of our inner life and the routines through which we enact our know-how to cope with the demands of a given situation all seem of great importance to our capacity to work with and on our inner life.³ The following vignette—adapted from Falkenberg (2012, p. 5)—is to help illustrate their importance.

[1.17]

It is shortly before the end of class, and the teacher is talking to the students, explaining something. The teacher looks at the clock on the wall and suddenly feels rushed for time. She speeds up her talking, and while she talks, a student raises his hand and says something at the same time. The teacher shushes the student; suddenly the teacher feels blood rushing into her face and a slight cramp-like feeling in her chest area. While she continues talking, the teacher notices her blushing, and then feels slight cramping in the stomach area. She feels distracted from her talking to the students; she finishes off her explanation and gives some instructions for work to the students for the last three minutes of class. As the teacher turns around and goes to sitting down at her desk, thoughts about the ‘incident’ become more prominent and then take over her mind as she sits down.

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Let me first comment on this vignette in terms of the role of awareness, attention, and noticing and of automatic routines in teaching. The teacher *attends to* the clock on the wall, *notices* the time and speeds up her talking; this is an example of *awareness that enables action*. She also feels rushed, which is an example of *awareness* triggering physiological responses. The

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shushing of the student is *action enabled by the teacher's conscious awareness* of the student's interruption of her talking. While she is talking, part of her *attention is drawn* to her physiological state: she *notices* her blushing. This *awareness* triggers thoughts about the "incident", which is an example of *awareness enabling action*, in this case the arising of thoughts. In terms of routines, the teacher's attending to the clock on the wall might be automatic behaviour, routine behaviour by an experienced teacher who might have a "sense" for timing. Second, the teacher's speeding up in response to noticing the time might be an automatic response by the teacher. Furthermore, the shushing seems to clearly have come as an automatic response. As well, the emotional, physiological response to the shushing—the blushing and the feelings in the chest and stomach areas—seem automatic responses to what the teacher has become consciously aware of in these moments.

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Such routines have tremendous advantages for our coping with all the immediacies that we face in teaching and life more generally. Routine expertise in teaching (see, for instance, Berliner, 2001) is seen by teacher education scholars as being of great importance for quality teaching (see, for instance, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The know-how that allows us to adequately cope in the immediacy of a situation is grounded in such routines. But routines have *disadvantages*, exactly for the reason they provide us often with an advantage: they are un-controlled. As teachers—and as human beings more generally—what we want is (a) having available to us the right routines at the right time in the right situation and (b) the ability to change problematic routines. This is one of the concerns for inner work for teachers and a central characteristic of inner wisdom as I will explicate below.

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Let me now comment on the vignette in terms of the ethical imperative of teaching. This imperative is grounded in the idea that teaching is an ethical endeavour because "teaching . . . is, quite centrally, human action undertaken in regard to other human beings" (Fenstermacher, 1990, p. 133). The inner life of the teacher in the vignette takes a particular turn after the automatic shushing of the student: She notices physiological responses right after, and thoughts about the shushing incident first become more prominent and then take over her thinking at the end of the vignette. These developments of the teacher's inner life might be interpreted as a disturbance of the flow in which "thinking, feeling and wanting all go together and lead to effective behaviour" (Korthagen, 2013, p. 35). One way in which this disturbance of flow can be interpreted is that the teacher's automatic shushing response was in conflict with her deep seated values, that is, her understanding of the ethical imperative of teaching. Our inner life is characterized by patterns of thinking, feeling, and by drives, which manifest in how we behave and act in such personal encounters and pedagogical moments with our students. Understanding our inner life is, thus, important for our understanding of the ethical

imperative as teachers. Parker Palmer (1998) suggests that we teach who we are. If that is indeed the case, we better be concerned with who we are as teachers and, thus, with our inner life. This concern for our inner life as teachers leads to the practical concern for our capacity for “inner work”, which I will turn to now.

INNER WORK

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Conceptualizing Inner Work

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Quite a while back I was introduced to the idea of inner work in the sense relevant here by my colleague and friend Avraham Cohen (2009/2015):

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The term *inner work* refers to reflective practices conducted under the gaze of consciousness, which depends on a developed capacity to self-observe, to witness experience. . . . Inner work is a way of working on and with perceptions, sensations, memories, and cognitions, all of which constitute a person’s experience. (p. 29)

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Simplified, we can say that inner work is the practice of working with one’s inner life.

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For the context of teaching, the purpose of inner work is to develop our capacity to be aware of, attend to, and notice our inner life as it unfolds as we teach in order to address the ethical imperative of teaching. What can such inner work for teachers look like?⁴

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Attending to Inner Experiences

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In order to work with our inner life as teachers we need to develop our capacity to attend to our inner life, that is, to attend to the objects that make up our mind: our sensations, feelings, images, thoughts, and intentions—let me call them for short “inner experiences”. There are a number of types of inner work approaches in teacher education. Some approaches within the self-study of teacher education practices movement and the practical wisdom approaches to teacher education are examples. They provide practices that are of great value for the reflection component of the inner work for teachers. For instance, there is the *intelligent report of experience* practice proposed as a way to develop teacher candidates’ capacity for discernment in the practical wisdom approach by Anne Phelan (2005), and there is the *coaching based on core reflection* practice proposed by Korthagen and his collaborators in their Core Reflection Approach to teacher education (Hoekstra and Korthagen, 2013). What these approaches to inner work have in common is that teachers attend to their inner experiences through reflection in the sense of Schön’s (1983) reflection-on-action. While reflection is an important component of inner work,

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when re-lecting we re-create, re-member, or re-imagine those inner experiences *after* the original inner experiences have happened and *outside* of the immediate situational contexts in which those experiences arose. Rather I am interested here in that aspect of inner work that involves our capacity to attend to our inner experiences *while* we are teaching and *as* we have those experiences *within* the specific situational context. Why is such a capacity important to teaching? Let me provide two reasons.

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First, the use of reflection on past experiences involves always a form of re-creating of these original inner experiences, which means, in reflection activities we are always creating new inner experiences that we think and hope are similar enough to the original inner experiences we try to re-create, to re-member. I suggest now that if we as teachers have developed our capacity to attend to our inner experiences *as* we have those experiences, we will be able to more accurately re-create those experiences when we reflect on them. While I am not aware of any studies that inquired into this particular link, my own experience with inner work and my attending to my inner experiences as I have them strongly support the link.

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The second reason for developing our capacity to attend to our inner experiences as we have them is directly linked to the role of this capacity for a particular approach to inner work for teachers. Let me first outline this particular approach and then identify the role that this capacity plays in the approach. In Falkenberg (2012) I have outlined an approach I called "teaching as contemplative professional practice". This practice is conceptualized as professional practice that involves on-going inquiry into our inner lives as teachers. The big idea behind this approach to inner work in and for teaching is as follows:

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As teachers our acting-in-the-moment of teacher-students encounters is framed by the state of our inner life at that very moment. We cannot expect of us that our inner life, our acting, and our automatic routines and know-hows are always completely in line with our ethical commitment to teaching in general and to our students in particular. Through our understanding of our inner life or through reflection on our teaching action, including our routines, we might identify aspects of our inner life that we need or should work on to bring it in line with our ethical commitment to teaching. We, thus, engage in practices that help us develop our understanding and working with and on our inner life in a desired way. This is the inner work involved in teaching as contemplative professional practice.

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Our capacity to attend to our inner experiences at the time of their occurrence plays an important role in this approach to inner work. Let me illustrate the role by drawing on the vignette from above of the teacher who shushes one of her students. The teacher was able to attend to an inner experience as it occurred, namely her physiological response to her shushing: the blushing and the cramping in her stomach and chest area.

In the reflection part of her inner work, she might decide that shushing her student in this moment was not the right thing to do; she thinks that she should not have felt to be under time pressure and as a consequence dismiss her student in the way she did. She decides to work on the way she experiences time and not to try to feel pressured by time so that she can properly address her students' needs. In order to work on the way she experiences time, she would do the following: First, she would imagine alternative ways of feeling and acting. Then she would try to notice specific types of inner experiences, namely feelings of time pressure, as they start to arise. She needs to notice these before they arise, so she might have a chance to respond differently to her students in these moments. Obviously, for this purpose, her ability to attend to her inner experiences as they arise is crucial. Without this ability it will be almost impossible to notice the inner experience of feeling time pressure in time to have alternative ways of responding available to her. How can we develop our capacity to attend to our inner experiences?

Mindfulness Meditation

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Over 2,000 years ago, Buddhist psychology has developed an understanding of our mind and, based on this understanding, has developed practices that indeed can help people develop such capacity: mindfulness meditation practices (see, for instance, Gunaratana, 2002; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Smalley & Winston, 2010). "Being mindful" in this tradition means to be *pre-conceptually and non-judgmentally aware of one's present inner experiences* (see, for instance Kabat-Zinn, 2005, pp. 108–109). The practices developed in Buddhist psychology to enhance one's ability to be mindful have demonstrable impact on that ability (see, for instance, Siegel, 2007). To be mindful while teaching will give us the opportunity to notice our inner life without having to immediately respond to the noticing of physiological changes, particular thoughts and feelings that arise in particular moments of our teaching. Being mindful while teaching provides us with the opportunity to observe our inner life while we are in the flow of teaching.

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Buddhist psychology has developed two types of meditation practice that seem of particular value to developing our capacity to attend to our inner experiences: receptive meditation and concentrative meditation (see Austin, 2009, p. 4). Receptive meditation involves practices in which practitioners attend to the thoughts, images, intentions or sensations as those arise in one's mind. The purpose of receptive meditation practices is pure observation, ideally involving no conceptualizing of the experience and no judgment of the experience. The concentration meditation involves practices in which the practitioner attends to one particular object of attention and tries to stay attentively with that object for a given period of time. Often the focus of attention is a particular aspect of one's

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breathing, for instance, the place in the nostril where the burst of air one breathes in and then out is passing by.

[1.37] The ongoing practice of inquiring into our inner experiences together with the insights resulting from such practice for the purpose of addressing the ethical imperative of our living characterizes what I would call *inner wisdom*.⁵ In the next section I argue that such inner wisdom should be considered a foundational aspect of what it means *to be* a teacher.

[1.38] BEING A TEACHER

[1.39] What does it mean to be a teacher? In an opinion piece written in 1992, Ken Osborn (as quoted in Young, Levin, and Wallin, 2007, pp. 279–280) has argued that teachers and their associations should see themselves *primarily* as public employees and unions, respectively, rather than as professionals and their professional associations, respectively. He argues that because school education is values-based and purpose-driven, school education—its purpose and method—is primarily the responsibility of the community and its elected representatives; teachers are employees of the public serving those values, purposes, and methods. Teachers as employees are hired because of the craftspersonship that they have developed and that they are paid to employ to serve those values, purposes, and methods.

[1.40] In contrast to this understanding of what it means to be a teacher there is a much earlier notion of “teacher”, a notion that might have had its historical pinnacle at what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1953) has called “the axial age”, which was the age in which many religious philosophers like Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and others were teaching. Here, being a teacher meant being a “master” to one’s “disciples”. Under the header “the Zen master”, Lasalle (1968/1974) wrote:

[1.41] We come now to the guidance imparted by the Zen master which is of vital significance for Zen. The relationship between the master and the disciple has always been closer in the Orient than in the Occident. This is especially evident in the practice of Zen. For the great experience, *satori*, is not imparted by means of the written word, but through *ishin-denshin*: from mind to mind. . . .

[1.42] The guidance or transmission mediated by the Zen master is important not only for the continuation of the tradition in the very great figures of Zen Buddhism, but in every individual case where a disciple studies under a master as well. And the same principle applies here: *ishin-denshin*, direct transmission by the person, and not by the written word. This method ensures that the essence of the experience is not falsified. . . . Zen requires personal guidance from the very beginning, for the disciple attempts to penetrate to the unconscious from the outset. (pp. 20–21)

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For this reason, it was not uncommon practice that disciples would move in with their teacher, an approach to teaching and learning that is still practiced for the same reasons, because “all learning of non-trivial subjects is at the foundation tacit, embodied, and involves the whole personality” (Bai, 2006, p. 17). In this tradition, the teacher teaches by *being* the person she is and students learn the “non-trivial subjects” by being around and with the teacher. For Osborn the teacher is *doing* her job, employing the quality of her craftspersonship in a particular field of study.

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The current understanding of what it means to be a teacher in Canada does not go quite as far as Osborn suggests. What speaks to that is the widespread understanding of teaching as a profession—especially in the profession itself—and the existence of codes of ethics for teachers and professional suitability policies for teacher candidates in at least some Canadian faculties of education. On the other hand, this widespread understanding of the teacher as a professional does not go as far as the understanding of what it means to be a teacher reported on by Lasalle and Bai.

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The role of teachers’ inner lives—and, thus, the role of teachers’ inner work—is quite different in the two extreme cases to the degree that this role characterizes a central distinction between a “doing” approach to teaching and a “being” approach to teaching. If we accept that we “teach, who we are” (Palmer, 1998) and—as I would add—“who we are is *what* we teach”, then this suggests a much greater role for teachers’ “inner wisdom” for our understanding of teaching than a doing approach to teaching seems to allow for. It is in the being approach to teaching where the ethical imperative of teaching is front and centre for teaching. Here “inner wisdom” is of *foundational* importance, since it is our inner life—as argued above—that characterizes us as ethical beings.

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NOTES

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1. Acknowledgement: This chapter is based on my keynote address at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE) at the University of Ottawa on 2nd June 2015. I thank the Executive Committee of CATE for that opportunity.

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2. See, for instance, the examples on “mindless eating” in Wansink (2006).

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3. For a more technical discussion of awareness, attention and noticing in the context of inner life, see Falkenberg (2012).

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4. For a more psychotherapeutic approach to inner work for educators, see Cohen (2009/2015).

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5. This phrase seems quite fitting considering the way “wisdom” has been used in the context of teaching and teacher education (see, for instance, Korthagen, 2001; Shulman, 2004; Phelan, 2005).

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