

A Spinning Top or a Dragon Fly?

Having recently returned from a five day mindfulness retreat at the Blue Cliff Monastery with Thich Nhat Hanh and about 500 others, I walked into my second grade classroom with great hopes and dreams. I had my bell in hand, my new Zen story books, and a commitment to help the children slow down and focus. I decided to tell the kids about my time away and knew that I would explain my absence by saying that I had been at a gathering where I was learning about paying attention. Simple enough.

During our morning time on the rug altogether, I talked about the retreat, about being at a Buddhist monastery, and I spoke about mindfulness and being present and attentive. The children all agreed that it was a good idea to pay attention when you are trying to learn about something. They decided that it would be hard to learn something if you didn't really look at it and think about. The group also concluded that it makes sense to be alert to one's world if one truly wants to experience something through sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste. It would be hard to eat a piece of pizza if you didn't know it was there!

The discussion then turned to how to really see what is in front of you. In my enthusiasm, I came up with an on-the-spot analogy about seeing. I like to paint pictures with words. I tell a lot of stories with lessons. Sometimes I get it right. Sometimes I'm a bit off target. So, I asked the kids to imagine being a spinning top. We talked about what that might be like -- particularly if you were trying to look at one thing in one place. You would have to look, spin, look again -- look, spin, look -- and so on. We all agreed that it would be a challenge to really see something if you only got a series of quick glances interrupted by spinning away over and over. Then I said, "Imagine being a dragonfly who lands on a lily pad in a pond." I asked the children if they thought a dragonfly would "see" the pond better than a spinning top. After a divergent conversation about compound eyes which refract light in a similar fashion as a prism, they began to make sense of my analogy. I was feeling pretty proud of myself as a master teacher when a child pointed out that, in fact, a top spinning on a lily pad in the center of a pond would see the entire pond -- all at the same time! How true, we agreed -- with each revolution the entire pond would be surveyed and could be taken in as one whole experience.

Even though my analogy held true to some degree, I learned other lessons entirely. And these lessons were for me. First, my second graders helped me to see that in my efforts to introduce mindfulness, I had not been very mindful myself. My analogy was not really built on solid ground. My spinning top analogy with the dragonfly imagery was comparing apples to oranges. I had not discerned what it was that the spinning top and the dragonfly were trying to see. And more importantly, there was a second lesson. While "seeing" is all well and good, the object of sight is not a given. Generalizations about "seeing" and "experiencing" are not very useful. Assumptions made, but not articulated, cause confusion. In future lessons designed to help children learn to be more mindful, I had better be certain that I am specific in my goals and that my pedagogy conveys purpose in clear terms. The third lesson was humility. I recognize from the mindfulness of the children -- that mindfulness is not something to be deposited by teachers into the minds of students. Helping others learn about mindfulness requires the self-criticism and humility of the teacher.

Mindfulness is a disciplined awareness that helps the teacher learn and grow through dialogue with the student. Such reflection brings us all closer to understanding.

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