Heart Knowledge: Inwardbound

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Rainbow Child, Shizuye Takashima, 1983

My interest in exploring "heart pedagogies" is rooted in my conviction that educational research, related theories and practices need to address particular metaphysical and psycho-spiritual perspectives for enlightening students about the mystery of life, root causes of human existence and the reality of human nature. Bringing these topics into the educational debate would inspire students to learn metaphysical, psycho-spiritual and practical educational tools in the art of becoming profoundly ethical human beings. Ancient universal wisdom teachings tell us that the pathways of "Knowing Thyself" are educational means towards this end. These pathways are said to activate those ethical and divine parts of human nature which make us treat our fellow human beings and all other life forms with goodwill, generosity, compassionate understanding, charity and justice. The exploration and discovery of these pursuits are at the core of what heart pedagogies stand for.

We all live through multiple experiences daily without being fully aware of these experiences. We rarely pause to contemplate what our experiences mean to us. Most of us are satisfied to simply flow from one experience to the next without stopping to investigate. Remaining fully engaged or identified with the experience without being conscious of it prevents us from knowing what the experience is all about. What if we were to look at our experience from an attitude of detachment or with keen interest to consciously explore it? What if we valued our experience enough to actually stop, pause and pay attention to what is going on in our hearts, minds and bodies?
Heart-knowledge calls for ways of mindfully attending to moments of lived experience, ways of following a conscious pursuit of self-analysis and self-reflection, or ways of pursuing meditation practices. When viewed in conjunction with, and not disconnected from mind-knowledge, heart-knowledge provides many insights. Heart-knowledge is "hidden knowledge," also referred to as "wisdom-knowledge" (H.P. Blavatsky, Vol. I, 1976) which at its highest level is referred to as "divine wisdom.” The idea of heart-knowledge pertains to many levels of wisdom ranging from personal to spiritual and universal stages of wisdom. Heart knowledge is distinctly different from mind-knowledge but not necessarily exclusive of the latter. Both can inform one another.

Heart-knowledge speaks to ways of becoming creatively involved in the flow of creation and ways of seeking insights and revelations from deeper psycho-spiritual encounters. The experiential scope is very broad and distinctly multi-dimensional spanning a wide variety of heart-connections. In these connections, the personal, interpersonal, transpersonal and universal realms meet and mingle.
Heart-knowledge needs to be discovered experientially. The experiential aspect of heart-knowledge can easily be said to be the most crucial element for understanding, exploring and inventing heart-pedagogies. The experiential side brings about authentic knowing in the one who discovers aspects of truth-elements through conscious effort and will.

The multi-dimensional idea of heart-knowledge is best explored through heart-images in order to describe progressively deepening forms of heart-knowledge. The first heart-image of interest is that of the “emotional heart.” We often experience feelings as emotional polarities. We can think of polarities based on love/hate, acceptance/rejection, peace/anger or courage/fear opposites. Whether involved in romantic, parent-child, student-teacher, peer-relations, social, communal or world-relations, the emotional heart provides all kinds of shades and scales of emotional content, positive and negative. Here the explorative field of heart-knowledge vacillates between feeling-polarities without ever resolving them. As long as we are caught in the swing of oppositional feelings, we are hard pressed to reconcile them into one unified heart-experience. Nevertheless, these kinds of emotional experiences allow us to develop personal wisdom.
The second image, known as the “pure heart,” is best described by using the term “a center of pure awareness” explained by Assagioli (1965/1982), further described by Brown (1983, p. 13) and borrowed from universal wisdom-teachings worldwide. Accordingly, Heart-knowledge moves away from a polar-oppositional orientation and toward contact with a non-dual reality experienced within the heart-space as purity. To consider the idea of non-duality, we might think of the heart as a state of consciousness completely purified from any personal self-sense. Dis-identification as such involves learning to let go of all conditioned responses based on past childhood experiences and memories. At the point of personal detachment, the heart is said to be pure. Here the heart-space is the “center of pure awareness” (Assagioli, 1982) in which we experience a state of consciousness freed from any ordinary levels of self-identifications because we are elevated to an agency where we become identified as the “inner witness.” This witness-position refers to an inner agency where the state of “pure awareness” represents “being.” It is this ontological mode of being where the inner silent mode of observation qualifies as “inner stillness.” To clarify, the detached inner agency assumes a form of identity that is indifferent to all phenomena. Indifference in this regard does not mean coldness or lack of caring. To the contrary, this type of agency represents a state of mindful attending to that which is witnessed. A witness mode of mindful attending is a conscious space of profound caring because in it the agent is fully aware of everything, hence in a state of “pure awareness.”

The witness mode of knowing can benefit greatly from using the intellectual mind for interpreting, analyzing and discriminating that which is witnessed by the individual witness. The intellect can assist the heart-learner in making sense of the experience. The intellect in this function is never superior to knowing by way of the heart. When we release ourselves into the realm of “pure awareness,” we become open to new insights and wisdom-factors that produce new knowledge which the intellect does not know how to produce.

The third heart-image refers to the idea that within each human being there abides the “Heart–as–Self” (Ramana Maharshi, 1972/1988; 1978). Knowledge of the Heart–as–Self leads to a depth of knowledge recognized as “spiritual wisdom.” Here, we are able to capture glimpses into the realms of spiritual wisdom where poetic inspirations, flashes of intuition, spiritual insights and revelations become a definite possibility. On the highest level of spiritual ascent, it is possible to gain insight into the infinite and changeless reality of the Heart–as–Self. This reality of the Self is impersonal, universal and eternal,
experienced rarely, but primarily by those who walk the path of spiritual liberation. To make sense of this impersonal aspect of the Heart–as–Self image it is useful to rely on analogies. The most often used analogies are the “lake–analogy” and the “two bird analogy” (Kalupahana, 1995).

In the lake analogy, the lake image represents the mind, the waves of the lake-surface our thoughts, and the bottom of the lake the unblemished Heart–as–Self. More specifically, the undulating waves on the lake surface represent the constantly active thoughts–activities in our minds. As our “mind–activities” tend to muddy up the lake’s surface, the bottom of the lake or the Self is most often obscured. The Self itself is described as motionless, unstirred, calm, peaceful and silent because it is without thoughts, i. e. waves. This peaceful state of mind is comparable to a reflecting pool through which we can witness simultaneously everything below the surface and everything above it.

The two–bird–analogy recalled by Kalupahana (1995) makes another important distinction: “two birds perched on one branch, the one simply watching and the other enjoying the fruit” (p. 12). Here, two birds are doing different things, both of them representative of two distinct aspects of the Self. One aspect refers to the detached or silent witness while the other refers to the active agent involved in an activity. In other words, the Self can be looked upon as a stable inner authority silently observing each activity a person is involved in without ever interfering in it, yet all the while being aware of the activity itself. Or, the Self can become actively engaged in an activity whatever it may be, hence assuming a form of identification in the process. The philosophical idea underlying this double aspect of the Self is that one has a choice to either remain detached from the world or become involved or engaged in it.

These three heart-images invite us to re-imagine the multi-dimensional range of heart-knowledge, and to consider engaging ways of living that are profoundly ethical. Not only will heart–pedagogies broaden our intellectual and spiritual horizons; they will also provide us with insight into heart–spaces and heart–experiences which can bring about character transformations based on the highest human values.
About the Author

Ursula Velonis is a PH.D. graduate at Simon Fraser University in Curriculum Theory and Implementation in the Faculty of Education. The current EI issue "Pedagogies of the Heart" was inspired by her research interests in spiritual curriculum development, spiritual inquiry and emerging pedagogies based on traditions of metaphysical and universal wisdom-teachings worldwide. Currently, she teaches special topics courses related to these subjects areas at Choice School for Gifted Children, Richmond, BC. and self-designed courses at Langara College, Vancouver, BC. She is also a psychosynthesis psychotherapist in private practice and an author of children's books.

About the Artist

Shizuye Takashima is a graduate of Ontario College of Fine Arts in Toronto. Her paintings have been exhibited in Toronto, Montreal and New York. Her work is included in the art collections of the National Art Gallery in Ottawa and the Burnaby Art Gallery in British Columbia. She received major awards for her autobiographical book about her time spent in an internment camp with her Japanese-Canadian family in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia during the Second World War. Translated into Japanese and Italian, her book was made into a musical in Tokyo, Japan, in 1972. She has travelled extensively through India and Asia. These life experiences informed her work as a Fine Arts instructor at the Ontario College of Fine Arts, Toronto where she taught art students for twenty-two years.