On Spirituality and Teaching

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More than a hundred years ago William James called the attention of teachers to what he termed a "pathological anaesthesia" to the magic of the world.[1] More recently, David Purpel has written of a moral and spiritual crisis in education,[2] and Robert Coles has called for the development of "a day-to-day attentiveness...that touches all spheres of activity."[3] Yet nowhere in either pedagogical literature or practice do we find a concern to develop such qualities of life in teachers, even though it is obvious that, if spirituality is desired, then those who live the spiritual life, however narrowly, are likely to be better teachers than those who merely know about it, however much.[4]

Here I will argue that spirituality is one of the most important qualities a teacher can develop. I shall point to some of the obstacles to such spiritual development and shall suggest some ways in which it can be integrated in teacher preparation.

The Nature Of Spirituality

In the West, the Platonic distinction between the intelligible and the sensible was colored by the Christian distinction between soul and body, itself tinged with the Gnostic distinction between spirit and matter and the Hebrew distinction between spirit and soul. The result was a tripartite division between spirit, soul, and body. Spirit was defined in contradistinction to matter, and spirituality as a certain non-material and even religious quality of life.

Here I maintain that spirituality connotes, first of all, a quality of lived experience rather than a mode of knowing, though obviously such living involves reflection and may include profound cognitive interests. Further, I maintain that such living involves some sense of self-transcendence, not necessarily toward a god or higher power, but certainly beyond the narrow, selfish confines of ego; and is rooted in the knowledge that human nature involves a radical openness, or a radical non-coincidence with itself that is the ground of hope, humility, and growth, but also of moral evil. To be human is to be *capax infiniti*.[5] Further, spirituality entails the pursuit of the highest values commensurate with one's particular calling, personality, culture, and religious orientation. Thus it would be found in the actualization of the highest ideals of a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Shinto, Buddhist, Anthroposophist, or Humanist life,[6] and it would be equally discernible in the failures.

More specifically, spirituality defines the quality of a life of spirit. Spirit itself consists in the radical openness or self-transcendence characteristic of human nature. It is the basic possibility of a true human existence in time. It is opposed to *thing*, the Sartrean in-itself, and to all facticity; in Derrida's words, "it is what in no way allows itself to be thingified"[7] or immobilized.

Moreover, spirit is what ultimately makes us undefinable because the *terminus ad quem*, the parameter toward which there is an openness, is not forthcoming. It is

like a horizon blurred in the pale blue haze of distance. We are undefinable due to the elusiveness of that toward which we are an openness and in relation to which we would, perhaps, define ourselves.

For this very reason, spirit is what allows us to ask questions of ourselves, because, unlike things, we are not "finished" or "complete."[8] We are like travelers constantly on the verge of journeys, of whom it is always legitimate to ask, *quo vadis*?

Spirit, then, is not mere interiority, as is often supposed based on the Platonic-Judaeo-Christian model. Neither is spirit primarily what is opposed to matter as eternity is opposed to time. Actually, temporality is essentially connected with spirit because time pertains to the essence of actualization, to the essence of journeying. On the other hand, once its being is given to it, a thing is what it is instantaneously; but spirit *becomes*. Therefore temporality is not negative; in fact, from a certain perspective, spirit and temporality are inextricably twined, for the very existing of spirit *is* the temporalization of human becoming.[9]

Finally, spirituality describes the ecstasy of spirit,[10] spirit's passing beyond itself in the free actualization of all human potentialities. In this sense it is germane to the notion of vocation, understood as the call to tap the most fundamental aptitudes we possess while in pursuit of a teaching life.[11]

Sins Against The Spirit

Next I shall maintain with Niebuhr that sin is any denial of transcendence. Sin is what Sartre called "bad faith."[12] In Niebuhr's words:

> If finiteness cannot be without guilt because it is mixed with freedom and stands under ideal possibilities, it cannot be without sin (in the more exact sense of the term) because man makes pretensions of being absolute in his finiteness. He tries to translate his finite existence into a more permanent and absolute form of existence. Ideally men seek to subject their arbitrary and contingent existence under the dominion of absolute reality. But practically they always mix the finite with the eternal and claim for themselves, their nation, their culture, or their class, the center of existence. This is the root of all imperialism in man and explains why the restricted predatory impulses of the animal world are transmuted into the boundless imperial ambitions of human life.[13]

These general claims must be concretized, but here I shall restrict myself to some that characteristically might affect teachers:

1. The abbreviation of infinity to mean this or that orthodox ideology, religion, or political system, the esoteric or occult, the conceptual, one's culture (especially if taken at its lowest common denominator), one's pet teaching method, one's discipline. Partiality and fanaticism are reprehensible on many grounds, but perhaps principally as denials of transcendence.

2. Capitulation to mediocrity, to the average, to the mass point of view. As Ortega claimed, we live in the era of the rights of the mediocre, where to be different is to be indecent. "*The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will*.[14] This commonplace average person, Ortega says, is "the new barbarian," typified above all by the specialist and the professional, "more learned than ever before,

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but at the same time more uncultured — the engineer, the physician, the lawyer, the scientist,"[15] to which we could add today the business person and, too often, the teacher.

3. Pride of reason, which Michele Crozier has called "the arrogance of rationality"; namely, self-assurance in one's knowledge to the point of dogmatism. In Niebuhr's words,

> All human knowledge is tainted with an "ideological" taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge...[This] pride of intellect is derived on the one hand from ignorance of the finiteness of the human mind and on the other hand from an attempt to obscure the known conditioned character of human knowledge and the taint of self-interest in human truth.[16]

One ponders with dismay Camus's words, "How many crimes committed merely because their authors could not endure being wrong!"[17]

4. The instrumentalist fallacy (to which teachers are especially prone today), that flashy technology can supplant mystery, and that where insight is lacking hardware can win the day. But as currently used technology eschews mystery and, with it, transcendence. Also, democracy abhors mystery because it is unpublishable. Mysteries are unpublishable because they cannot be put into words and because only some, not all, can peer into them.

How would we handle a situation in which only visionaries could be teachers? The suggestion is inconceivable today, but the truth is there: since we cannot have visionaries we train instrumentalists, people with the tools to handle every eventuality, and we forget that, in Norman O. Brown's felicitous phrase, "fools with tools are still fools."[18]

5. The demise of questioning brought about by the subordination of mind to power, of teacher to administrator, of truth to political correctness, of invention to repetition. Today most teachers are subalterns and, as such, they speak someone else's words or speak because they are expected to, even commanded, though they may have nothing important to say. Nietzsche raises the question:

> Can a philosopher commit himself with a good conscience to having to teach something daily? And to teach anyone who cares to listen? Must he not pretend to know more than he actually knows? Must he not talk before strangers about things which he could discuss safely only with his closest friends? And is he not robbing himself of his most wonderful freedom to follow his genius when and where it calls him — by being obliged to think publicly on predetermined subjects at appointed hours?...What if he feels some day: "Today I cannot think, I have no good ideas" — and nevertheless he would have to appear and give the appearance of thinking![19]

Toward A Spirituality of Teaching

To think that an overall plan or a general methodology for developing a spirituality for teachers is possible is to delude oneself. To take a parallel example, religious spirituality itself has dozens of legitimate paths on which thousands of people have trod since time immemorial. Even a superficial survey of monastic Christianity will reveal ways such as Benedictine spirituality, Jesuit spirituality, Dominican, Carmelite, Franciscan, and Trappist spirituality, each distinct, each special, each legitimate or valid in its own right yet incompatible with the others.

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However, the field can be narrowed somewhat in that the objective is the development of a spirituality *for teachers*, though here again difference threatens the enterprise because of the diversity of teaching styles, methods, and situations, let alone the idiosyncracies of individual teachers and their particular callings. What follows, then, must be taken as tentative and provisional.

I take teaching to mean a set of ostensive behaviors (pointing, showing, and the like) intended to let learning take place. A spirituality developed in the context of a teaching life would have to strive to maintain an ongoing openness toward new and diverse ways of letting people learn, but *especially toward letting oneself learn how to let others learn*, in such a way that one would progressively become transparent to what one intends to let others learn, so that in "seeing" the teacher they would learn the taught.

Buber has written that "what we term education, conscious and willed, means *a selection by man of the effective world*: it means to give decisive effective power to a selection of the world which is concentrated and manifested in the educator." This means that "the master remains the model of the teacher," for in imitating the master, the techniques and the life lived by him/her are learned. Similarly, through the teacher (says Buber), "the selection of the effective world reaches the pupil. He [the teacher] fails the recipient when he presents this selection with a gesture of interference,"[20] but teachers accomplish their task best when they are transparent to the world.

This notion of openness and transparency has a long tradition in the major spiritualities of the world. The Gospels claim that Jesus said, "Who sees me sees the Father" (*John* 14:9), by which Jesus probably meant that his personality was totally transparent so that the divine horizon of Godhead could be glimpsed through it. Mohammed, too, made the same claim, contained in a *hadîth*: "He who has seen me has seen the Truth," whence it follows that to know the Prophet is to know Allah.[21] In India, the tradition of *darshan* accentuates the belief that to "see" the teacher is to see the taught, especially when the taught is the divine reality of Brahman. Now, *darshan* is the seeing of the divinity incarnate in the icon, but it is procured also of holy people and seers, of the real teachers. To see them is to see the pointing that *is* teaching. But to see teaching is to see the Self, because we all are It. Therefore the *darshan* of the teacher is the *darshan* of Brahman, the eternal, imponderable Self. To see (= know) the teacher is to see (= know) Brahman, and to know Brahman is to become Brahman.[22]

How to achieve this transparency? A story by Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (1207-1273) may offer a suggestion:

> The Chinese said: "We are the best artists." The Byzantines said: "To us belong the power and the perfection"…."I will put you to trial," said the Sultân, and I will see which of you is right in your pretensions.…There were two rooms whose doors faced each other; the Chinese took one and the Byzantines the other. The Chinese asked the Sultân to give them a hundred colors. The Sultân opened his treasure in order that they might have what they wanted. Each morning, through his generosity, more colors were taken from his treasures by the Chinese. On the other hand, the Byzantines declared, "No tint or color is necessary for

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> our work; we need only to take the rust off the walls." They closed the door and started to polish the walls which became as clear and pure as the sky....When the Chinese finished their task, they started to beat their drums with joy. The Sultân came and saw the paintings, and the vision ravished his mind. Then he went to the Byzantines. When they drew away the curtain which separated the two rooms the reflection of the paintings of the Chinese struck the walls which had been cleansed. Everything the Sultân had seen in the room of the Chinese was splendidly reflected here, and the sight ravished his entire soul.[23]

It is easy to see that an adequate teaching spirituality would entail a constant polishing of the self to render it as perfectly reflective or transparent as possible.

In all spiritual traditions self-analysis has led to the mapping of the way to self-transcendence. Not that the steps described necessarily or automatically lead to the desired transparency, but that when this occurs, it appears to have followed a loosely recognizable sequence. Philosophical, artistic, and scientific literatures in the West speak of preparation, incubation, insight, and creation or verification; mystical traditions East and West have produced exhaustive analyses of four similar stages, generally termed purification, progressive illumination (with intervals of "darkness"), ecstasy, and praxis.[24]

Limitations of time and space preclude a detailed study of these stages, but a brief indication of their scope may be permitted. Purification is the cleansing of the walls. In the Indian tradition, the image is that of a pond whose bottom has been stirred so that the water has become turbid. There is need to still the water so that transparency may be regained. Similarly the apprentice teacher must learn to still the mind's surface so that it may truly reveal to the pupils the reality the teacher expects to be learned.

As progress in the spiritual way takes place, the acquisition of knowledge should proceed in earnest, not in a perfunctory way, just to pass exams and fulfill degree requirements, but in search of identification with the subject matter. Subject matter, as Buber said, is a selection of the world to be revealed. To identify with it is to become ready to reflect the world or to let it be seen through the teacher without interference.

Eventually it may happen, though often only after a long life and mostly to a few chosen ones, that a mystical union of sorts takes place. When that happens, teaching reaches its most exalted level. Characteristic of this stage is a shift in intentionality from inculcating to letting learn, a shift steeped in the realization of the unity of all knowledge.

This does not mean that all obstacles automatically disappear and everything is plain sailing from then on; neither does this mean that teachers proficient in their own spiritual development are holy: spirituality does not confer sainthood. What it does mean is a centering of all energies at one's command, like spokes in a wheel, around the execution of the tasks one is called to, so that failure to heed such a call would undermine not only the performance of the specific tasks at hand, but the development of one's personality as a whole.

Hermann Hesse described an instance of this teaching summit in a letter Knecht wrote about the aging Music Master:

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> It was as if by becoming a musician and Music Master he had chosen music as one of the ways toward man's highest goal, inner freedom, purity, perfection, and as though ever since making that choice he had done nothing but let himself be more permeated, transformed, purified by music — his entire self from his nimble, clever pianist's hands and his vast, well-stocked musician's memory to all the parts and organs of body and soul, to his pulses and breathing, to his sleep and dreaming — so that he was now only a symbol, or rather a manifestation, a personification of music. At any rate, I experienced what radiated from him, or what surged back and forth between him and me like rhythmic breathing, entirely as music, as an altogether immaterial esoteric music which absorbs everyone who enters its magic circle as a song for many voices absorbs an entering voice.[25]

In an earlier age Plato had envisioned the same three-fold development in a way that extended beyond mere intellectual wisdom and contemplation, the ultimate reaches of which, steeped as they are in mystical experience, are surely beyond the pale of most individuals and outside the range of most institutions. There is here "a new type of cognition, which cannot be learned from anyone else, but if the thought in the soul of the inquirer is led on in the right way, arises of itself."[26] This takes place under the impulse of Eros in oneself yearning to attain one's true nature, and therefore it is a "moulding of oneself."[27]

The processes are described by Plato in *Republic* VI.490A-B and 500B-C. Nettleship summarizes them:

> Beginning with the instinctive attraction to what is familiar, passing on into the ready receptivity for all that is admirable in nature and art, with the unconscious grace and refinement which accompany it, it has now become the consuming passion for what is true and real, at once the most human and the most divine attribute of the soul, the crowning gift and complete embodiment of perfect manhood.[28]

The affective and even religious elements are found, not in the *Republic*, but in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. Several of the speeches in the latter — for instance, Alcibiades's — indicate some of the ascetical practices[29] required to begin the march toward the mystical heights sketched later by Diotima. Detachment from individual and physical beauty is followed by learning to value moral beauty and to contemplate the unity and kinship of all that is noble and honorable. There follows the relish of abstract relationships, culminating in a divinizing union with Beauty itself, as in the Mysteries. Thus the individual, "initiated into perfect mystery, becomes truly perfect."[30] Only after having attained this pinnacle of spiritual self-development did Plato think people could become teachers!

Conclusion

To descend to the concrete and the practical is to become necessarily provincial. Nothing wrong in this, provided fanaticism is avoided and openness preserved. What I mean is that the "how" of pedagogical spirituality must be developed in the context of specific spiritualities. Some of these have been delineated already. For example, the Jesuits (the most successful educators from their beginnings until the nineteenth century) developed their own teaching spirituality and method in the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), based on St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*.[31] Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) developed the spiritual method and approach of the Waldorf Schools (the fastest growing independent school movement in the world) between 1919 and 1924, based on the tenets of Anthroposophy.[32] Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) institutionalized his ideas of a spiritual and universalistic education in

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learning centers (*ashrams*), principally Sriniketan, Shantiniketan, and Visvabharati University,[33] while Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and the Mother (1878-1973) developed their spiritual approach to education based on his ideas of evolutionary consciousness and "integral yoga," showcased first at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and now in Auroville.[34] There is also the long standing spiritual tradition in education of the American Plains Indians,[35] and even a proposal for a Zen teaching spirituality adapted to the West.[36]

Does this mean that there should be courses on spirituality in teacher preparation programs? Why not? But with the caveat that such programs be conducted in ways that avoid the five pitfalls or sins referred to above. In a more positive vein, the emphasis in teacher preparation should be, not on the tools alone, but on the spirit, and this emphasis should be reflected in the choice of required programs and courses.

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1. William James, *Talks to Teachers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958), 170.

2. David E. Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1989). Also Arthur T. Jersild, *When Teachers Face Themselves* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967).

3. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 9.

4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1959), Lecture 20, Conclusions, 370.

5. See Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (Chicago: Regnery, 1967), 6: "Man is not intermediate because he is between angel and animal; he is intermediate within himself, within his *selves*. He is intermediate because he is a mixture." Also Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964); and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1960), 66: "Man is infinite in the sense that his mind constantly seeks to relate all particular events to the totality of the real. He is finite in that this same mind is itself 'imbedded in the passing flux, a tool of a finite organism, the instrument of its physical necessities, and the prisoner of the partial perspectives of a limited time and place.'" See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), and Daniel A. Helminiak, *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 35 and 41.

6. Adrian van Kaam, *In Search of Spiritual Identity* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1975); Karlfried, Graf von Dürckheim, *Daily Life as a Spiritual Exercise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); and Michael Gelven, *Spirit and Existence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), part 2.

7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 16.

8. In this respect Descartes' *Cogito* is sterile, since the facticity of the *sum* admits no doubt. The greatest importance, however, attaches to the next sentence, "I reflected upon the fact that I doubted ... and that, in consequence, *my spirit was not wholly perfect*" (*Discourse* IV [33]. Emphasis added). Descartes' conclusion is that he is "a being who doubts" (*Meditations* II [22]). Doubt is possible where there is no absolute certainty. A being that doubts is one open to the many possibilities of truth.

9. Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 29.

10. Ibid., 98.

11. See Wayne Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Ignacio L. Götz, *Zen and the Art of Teaching* (Westbury, N.Y.: J.L. Wilkerson, 1988) and "On Teaching as a Profession," *Journal of Thought* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 7-17; D. Huebner, "The Vocation of Teaching," in *Teacher Renewal: Professional Issues, Personal Choices,* ed. F.S. Bolin and J.M. Falk (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987); and David T. Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).

12. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 59 ff.

13. Niebuhr, *Interpretation,* 84-85.

14. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), 18.

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15. José Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 38-39.

16. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, I, 194-95.

17. Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 18-19.

18. Norman O. Brown, "Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind," in *The Movement toward a New America*, ed. Mitchell Goodman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971), 629.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), 97.

20. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 89-90.

21. This sentiment is common in the early mystical literature of Islam. A prayer of Bâyazîd al-Bistâmî († 874) is preserved: "Adorn me with thy unity and clothe me with thy I-ness and raise me up unto thy oneness, so that when the creatures see me, they may say, 'We have seen Thee [i.e., God] and Thou art that.' Yet I [Bâyazîd] will not be there at all"; quoted by Abû Nasr al-Sarrâj, *Kitâb al-Luma'fî`l-Tasawwuf*, ed. R.A. Nicholson (Leyden: E.J. Brill, 1914), 382, in R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 94.

22. *Mandukya Up* III.2.9.

23. *Mathnawî* I, 3467 ff. A different image, but with the same import, may be seen in René Magritte's painting, "The Human Condition" (1934).

24. Götz, *Zen and the Art of Teaching*, 173; Helminiak, *Spiritual Development*, chaps. 3 and 4.

25. Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (New York: Bantam, 1969), 239.

26. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (3 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), II,171. *Meno* 85D.; *Epist.VII*. 341C-D.

27. *Republic* 500D. In our times Richard Rorty has revived the idea of education as self-creation or "edification" (*Bildung*) in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). See also René V. Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Kenneth Wain, "Richard Rorty, Education, and Politics," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 395-409.

28. Richard Lewis Nettleship, *The Theory of Education in the* Republic *of Plato* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 23.

29. Eduard Zeller, *Plato and the Older Academy* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 193 ff. *Republic* 515E speaks of a "steep and rugged ascent."

30. *Phaedrus* 249C. On the implication of *teloumenos* see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially Ch. III and notes, and Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). Also, briefly, Ignacio L. Götz, "A Note on Myth, the Mysteries, and Teaching in Plato's *Republic*," *Alexandria* 3 (1995): 271-75.

31. See John W. Donohue, S.J., *Jesuit Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1963); José Francisco Corta, *Hacia una mayor eficiencia en los colegios* (Caracas: Hechos y Dichos, 1963).

32. Alan Howard, *You wanted to Know*...(Spring Valley, N.Y.: St. George Publications, 1983); Ekkehard Piening and Nick Lyons, *Education as an Art: Essays on the Rudolf Steiner Method — Waldorf Education* (New York: Rudolf Steiner School Press, 1979); Douglas Sloane, *Waldorf Education: A Symposium* published in *Teachers College Record* 81:3 (Spring, 1980): 322-370; John F. Gardner, *The Experience of Knowledge* (New York: Waldorf Press, 1975); Mary Caroline Richards, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1980).

33. See K.G. Saiyidain, *The Humanist Tradition in Modern Indian Educational Thought* (Madison, Wis.: Dembar Educational Research Services, 1967), chap. 2 and Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

34. See *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Education* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1973); Norman C. Dowsett and Sita Ram Jayaswal, eds., *The True Teacher* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Society, 1975); Kireet Joshi and Yvonne Artaud, *Exploration in Education* (Auroville: Auropublications, 1974); and Robert McDermott, ed., *The Essential Aurobindo* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1987).

35. Sylvester M. Morey, ed., *Can the Red Man help the White Man?* (New York: The Myrin Institute, 1970) and Joseph Epes Brown, ed., *The Sacred Pipe* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971).

36. Götz, *Zen and the Art of Teaching*, 140-84.

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