



To Guard and Cherish

Contemplative Practices for a Compassionate Education

By

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Introduction

In 1921 Rudolf Steiner gave this verse to the first Waldorf teachers in Stuttgart Germany but it is a call to all teachers who believe that education is more than filling minds with facts and formulas. For all teachers who strive to go deeper, this verse endures as a guiding light.

May there reign here spirit strength in love.

May there work here spirit light in goodness.

Born from certainty of heart, and from steadfastness of soul,

so that we may bring to young human beings,

bodily strength for work, inwardness of soul, and clarity of spirit.

May this place be consecrated to such a task.

May young minds and hearts here find,

servers of the light, endowed with strength,

who will guard and cherish them.

This verse has spread from faculty to faculty through Waldorf schools across the globe passed down from one generation of teachers to the next for more than 100 years. There are a variety of translations in existence, but the essence of the verse endures with vivid clarity.

Waldorf teachers are charged with a powerful and humbling duty, to guard and cherish their students. Beyond educating the mind, Waldorf teachers strive to develop the whole human being through a living and holistic education that enlivens the senses and balances the impulses of thinking, feeling, and willing.

During my years of teaching, I became convinced that guarding and cherishing students is as vital to a successful educational experience, as it is an elusive feat.

What does it mean to guard and cherish our students? To guard means to watch over and fiercely protect from harmful external forces. To cherish is to lovingly nurture, to treasure as rare, unique, and beautiful. How do we guard our students' hearts and minds while cherishing their individuality, and their unique gifts, so that each one feels safely held and treasured as a vital member of the class community?

This isn't always easy amidst the many responsibilities and duties Waldorf teachers have. The daily meditative practices Steiner indicated were designed to cultivate inner capacities of patience, love, compassion, peace, kindness, gentleness, and goodness. All the capacities a teacher needs to build true positive and authentic relationships with each of their students.

Healthy student-teacher relationships are the foundation of academic success. While Waldorf teachers pioneered this notion, it has now become widely accepted in education research (Finser, 1994; hooks, 2003; Kresin-Price, 2009; Moen et al., 2019; Nilsen, 2022; Zignego, 2024). Less common in education discourse is the notion that using contemplative practices helps teachers build the necessary foundation for caring relationships. This foundation consists of deeply knowing students and cultivating compassion and understanding for them in order to forge authentic interpersonal relationships. Within the vibrant and dynamic web of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, teachers can truly guard and cherish their students.

Today low self-esteem, depression and death by suicide is on the rise for young people between the ages of ten and eighteen. As the world faces a mental

health crisis for our children, it is time to shift education's focus from ever-increasing competition and intellectual development at younger and younger ages, to a more holistic and loving view of the growing student. When education focuses solely on the intellect, the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the child is impeded ([Dearnley, 2022](#), Steiner, 2000).

Waldorf schools are uniquely positioned to be leaders of change in today's educational system because of their foundational philosophy regarding the child's wholeness. Their physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions are all taken into account when lesson plans are formed, and education is delivered. Waldorf teachers also observe their students with spiritual eyes, which look beyond the physical manifestation of the child into their essential being.

As Waldorf teachers deepen their spiritual practices through focused observations and meditations of their students, they develop a purer understanding of each one. From this deeper knowing, positive, healthy relationships develop, enabling teachers to better meet the needs of each student and serve their highest and best social, emotional, and academic development.

My years of working with student-centered contemplative practices in Waldorf schools, and subsequent research on the student-teacher relationship, revealed that healthy student-teacher relationships are the foundation of academic success, and that using contemplative practices helps teachers build caring relationships with their students, thus guarding them from the many threats to mental health and wellbeing that loom large in society today.

It is my firm conviction that treating students with kindness, compassion, and care, enables them to achieve their optimal academic growth, and social and emotional development. As a teacher and a parent of two teenagers, I have observed

the positive and profound impact of teachers who care about their students' wellbeing, and the devastating consequences to children's mental health under the toxic paradigm that self-worth is earned through achievement. This is not only detrimental to students' mental health, but it has also been shown to be an ineffective way to achieve academic success.

Researchers and educators are finding that teachers who make sure their students know they are valued, take time to build connections with each student, reflect on them after school, and from that reflection, flexibly adapt lesson plans to best support them and meet their needs, achieve the best outcomes in overall academic success, as well as in forming healthy, authentic connections and relationships in the classroom (McKay & Macomber, 2021; Nilsen, 2022).

When I took my first class, a combined sixth and seventh grade in southern California, I had an uphill trek to win the respect of my students and their parents. What I discovered during that first year of teaching, is that sowing seeds of warmth and kindness in students cultivates respect, confidence, and motivation within them.

Even as I was being challenged and sometimes undermined by my students, I continued to show care for and interest in each of them. Even when they were being intentionally uncooperative or disrespectful, I would offer kindness and care back to them. I used humor (not sarcasm) instead of anger to bring awareness to mistakes and unruly behavior, and I preempted all discipline with affection, reminding them how much I cared for them before addressing problematic behavior or delivering consequences. Over time I saw each of my students flourish, becoming capable, caring, and confident scholars with healthy self-esteem, and a strong sense of self-worth.

But there is work to be done to cultivate unending patience and positivity towards students in an authentic way. This must come not from our own Will which inevitably tires, and wears thin, but from spiritual sources, which Steiner tells us are inexhaustible. Practicing contemplation, reflection, meditation, and dream incubation, creates mental space in which to receive intuitive insights, spiritual downloads, and divine intervention.

Contemplative practices are a powerful, untapped resource for teachers who wish to form positive, healthy relationships in the classroom. By starting my day with meditation, observing my students deeply throughout the day, and meditating on them each night, I found deeper levels of understanding of them. And as I did so, students responded in kind, feeling my intention to support them and my attention on them.

Current education scholarship illuminates the dawning reality that all meaningful academic and social progress in the classroom is built upon the necessary foundation of positive student-teacher relationships (Gui et al., 2022; Moen et al., 2019; Yassine, et al., 2020).

By increasing awareness of thoughts and feelings through daily contemplative practices and harnessing the power of dreams at night through dream-incubation, teachers develop the inner capacities of positivity, equanimity, patience, compassion, and clarity. These are the essential tools needed to cultivate a classroom environment in which healthy interpersonal relationships can flourish and from which academic success can flow.

In the following chapters we will explore a variety of contemplative practices that will help teachers develop the inner capacities needed to meet the challenges of

teaching and support students' optimal growth and development. We will do this while achieving inward balance and wellbeing and reaching higher levels of consciousness.

Part I introduces nine meditative practices for daytime that support teachers as they strive to meet the needs of their students while delivering a *living* education.

A living education is an education that adapts and evolves with the interest and needs of the students it serves. A living education enlivens students and brings to life the teacher's enthusiasm. Indeed, all of the meditations explored in this book will cultivate vibrant life within the teacher, supporting them in delivering a living education to their students.

Chapter four introduces three meditations for the morning, chapter five offers three meditations to use throughout the day, and chapter six closes the day with three meditations for the evening. Part II explores how meditation can be brought into sleep through dream incubation and the ways in which teachers can direct their dreams to produce wisdom, guidance, and insight about their students and overcome challenges in teaching.

The contemplations explored in the following pages are drawn mainly from Steiner's indications to his first teachers and to the students of spiritual science whom he referred to as "initiates" as they followed a path of spiritual development. The practices described have been translated and passed on by one or more of my own teachers or colleagues and most of them contain my personal adaptations.

Steiner continually reminded Waldorf teachers not to do what he did with rigidity but rather to commit to the path he followed. Steiner wanted teachers to discover their own right practices and lessons to support development of the self, alongside the development of the children entrusted to their care. I encourage the

same kind of use of this book. Adapt the practices to best suit your life and your unique classroom of students as you strive to grow in consciousness, and to guard and cherish each of the students entrusted to you.

Part I: Waking Contemplation and Meditation

Chapter One

A Call to Contemplation

“Contemporary humanity is beset by brutal power structures which have been built up in East and West: gigantic military-industrial power blocs, whose over-kill capacities threaten the very existence of mankind. A giant network of computers — a monstrous spider web — grips the world, a non-human, automated intelligence robbing us of our individualized human existence. Aggressive terrorism, proceeding from violent actions against material objects to violence against persons, is an expression of dehumanized feeling which destroys lives and creates paralyzing fear. These forces of history appear as dangers threatening the very basis of human existence. These stark signs of the times and our insight into them demand deliberate action.”

-Johannes Tautz, *The Meditative Life of the Teacher*, 1986

This statement was written 38 years ago, yet the threats to the soul of humanity described, remain relevant today. Tautz’s (1986) call to Waldorf teachers was to continue cultivating their higher senses through daily contemplative practices to strengthen their connections to the spiritual cosmic realities.

Without our connection to the spiritual world, we risk losing our very humanity. It is becoming ever more difficult to connect to the spiritual world in our daily lives because the material world has gotten louder. Everywhere we turn we find reminders of the material. For example, ticktock tutorials on makeup, hair styling, desk organization, exercise, and dieting, all encourage obsession with physical appearance and the material aspects of reality.

Our daily routines propel us on a repetitious pattern of activities and duties that drive our lives. We go to work, shop, cook, eat, clean, fold laundry, tick off a list of to-dos, drop off and pick up our kids, and walk our dogs. It is easy to lose sight of the deeper meaning in any of it. Life can quickly start to feel pointless and shallow when we do not make time to pause in the midst of the routine and look to the deeper, spiritual dimensions of our existence.

Pausing in our daily routines to meditate is like stopping to gaze at the ocean instead of jogging along the shore. It is sitting on a stump in the forest and listening to the birds and the squirrels instead of hiking the trail with headphones on. We can move through life in such a way that we miss the staggering beauty that is everywhere, or we can dive deeply into the richness of life by pausing and paying attention to the complex weaving of our own existence with that of the rest of humanity and the natural world.

As educators we are offered this same choice each day that we teach. We can move across the surface of teaching, delivering content and assigning projects, checking boxes that move students along the conveyor belt of the educational system, ever onward—or we can pause and go deeper. Each day we have an opportunity to meet the children we educate with a sense of reverence and awe for

the sacred, unfolding human beings they are. Rudolf Steiner (1922) famously said to his first group of teachers that they were to “receive the children with reverence, educate them with love, and send them forth in freedom.” This is an invitation to all educators to go deeper.

Look once more at Tautz’s statement about the threats to the soul of humanity, what feelings does it evoke? Does it draw you to deeper consideration or does it make you want to shut your eyes, turn on a movie, or find some other method of distraction to drown out the seemingly hopeless predicament that humanity finds itself in?

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Thirty-eight years after this declaration was made, the situation has, if anything, become even more dire. The “monstrous spider web” of automated thinking has been given the name ChatGPT and can now accomplish tasks that were once the sole purview of human consciousness such as writing poetry, composing songs, drafting college essays and legal documents, and answering as many questions as the human mind can conceive of.

One need only read the news to see that the “aggressive terrorism” and “overkill” tactics of the military-industrial powers is as aggressively ravaging human life as ever it was. Human beings are forced to decide how to exist alongside these realities. Some are overwhelmed, turning a blind eye out of hopelessness and helplessness. Some cannot turn a blind eye because they are living in the midst of the atrocities of war and may turn to activism and even terrorism in desperation and self-preservation. Still others in the western world rage against political leaders or “terrorists” on the other side of the world, choosing sides and feeling justified in their thinking.

Rudolf Steiner called his initiates to both, swim upstream against cultural currents, and to find a way to love the time in which we live. This is a challenge to say the least. Waldorf teachers today are not unfamiliar with this tension. Many Waldorf schools have media policies and dress codes that are upheld to widely varying degrees by community members. The Waldorf teacher today must strive to educate parent communities about the need for such policies, while withholding judgment for parents who come from diverse backgrounds and may hold widely varying beliefs about Waldorf philosophies and policies. As this tension is held, a pure warmth and affection for the children of all parents must remain unwavering and undaunted.

Beholding each child with love and acceptance of their whole being, no matter what they come to school wearing, what movie they are telling their friends about, or what candy they have sneaked into their lunch, requires a strong sense of inner peace about the decisions that are made outside of class and the way those decisions

impact the class culture. To hold such cultural and societal tensions—whether on the microcosmic scale of the classroom, or the macrocosmic scale of human existence in society—with grace, equanimity, and authenticity, the teacher, or initiate is reliant upon a rich inner life of spiritual development that is cultivated through contemplative practices and meditations.

In the first chapter of *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Steiner (1994) described the changes that occur within individuals who become “initiates”—those who strive to integrate meditative practices into their daily lives on the path toward higher knowing. He stated that as individuals begin to pause throughout the busyness of their day to focus on their inward thoughts and feelings, separating themselves from the chaos of activity and the energy and emotions of others, they will begin to cultivate a different inner attitude toward their work and their duties. They will start to see the world differently.

Steiner goes on to say that as this inner feeling is cultivated and developed, initiates will begin to see past the mundane challenges of their daily activities and realize that all their work, struggle, and suffering are working in concert with a “great spiritual whole.” This is an interconnectedness with all things. Cultivating this sense of knowing and understanding, lifts the anxious human out of their physical, material existence, and reminds them that there are larger truths than the terror of violence and the risks of misaligned artificial intelligence ([Russel, 2019](#)).

When we allocate even a very small amount of time throughout the day to pause and meditate, we build up within ourselves an inner peace and calm about the small frustrations of work. This can open a space to expand into peace and calm that

can even extend to catastrophic challenges and daunting realities. In this way, Waldorf teachers can be the forerunners of peace in society by creating peaceful classrooms in which students feel safe and are fully supported in their healthy development.

Frustration with Work

Take a moment to pause and reflect on your classroom. Picture yourself entering your room before the start of the school day. It is quiet and dark as you set down your bags and consider what needs to be prepared before the students arrive. What feelings arise as you anticipate the start of school? What do you look forward to and what, if anything, brings up anxiety, worry, or self-doubt?

As a general rule, teachers love their work, yet can also be challenged by certain colleagues, students, parents, or tasks. One of the primary purposes of meditation is to bring those aspects that are challenging into alignment with the joy of teaching.

When reflecting on your own teaching, note the people, topics, or activities that cause a spike of anxiety. Lift that topic out of the realm of subconscious emotion into conscious thought for reflection. Ask yourself, what is it about this student that feels so overwhelming? Or why do I dread the start of math, or another subject? Whatever the challenge is, bring it into meditative reflection. Over time, through consistent meditation, new insights, ideas, and ways of thinking will arise, and even very negative feelings toward a person or a task can be transformed into optimism, enthusiasm, and compassion.

Take a moment to write down the tasks, people, or dynamics that cause a feeling of frustration or exhaustion when you think about them. These will be important topics to hold in the meditations discussed in chapters four through six.

In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the importance of building positive relationships with students and potential hindrances to that important connection. You will be invited to reflect on your own childhood education and the ways in which you were shown love and support. We will also look at the ways your own education may have fallen short. Additionally, we will consider the relationships in school that pose a particular challenge and how to take conscious control of the patterns of thought that may be perpetuating difficult dynamics.

Chapter Two

The Student-Teacher Relationship

Teachers generally fall into one of two categories, those who do not take the time to build authentic relationships with their students, and those who do. The first, unfortunate group of teachers believe that the job of the teacher is simply to convey information to their students and then create assessments to test how much their students have learned. This group of teachers may teach facts and skills that their students will use in life, but they will rarely, if ever, make a meaningful impact on their students' developing sense of self as scholars or human beings. This group of teachers skate across the very top of the shallowest educational journey missing bountiful depths below the surface.

But the other group of teachers see their work as something much deeper and more profound than filling heads with knowledge. These teachers dive deep into the learning experience with their students. The second group of teachers see themselves as more than educators, they are co-journeyers on an epic adventure. They not only want to teach, but they also want to impart their enthusiasm and passion for learning. They want their students to discover their own passion for learning and to enjoy and be empowered by the learning process.

These teachers find new ways to enjoy the art of teaching so that they stay fresh, and their teaching never gets stale. This group of teachers are generally the kind of teachers who prioritize interpersonal connections with their students and understand the importance of relationship-building in the classroom.