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## Book Review: Kumar, Ashwani. (Ed.). (2022). Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts. New York, NY: Routledge.

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## *Journal of Contemplative & Holistic Education*

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### Abstract

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Book Review of the following text:

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The publication of Ashwani Kumar's anthology, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (2022), coincided with the international online conference on meditative inquiry organized by Kumar at Mount Saint Vincent University in August 2022; and was preceded by his books, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding Colonial, Ideological, and Neoliberal Influences* (2019).

The anthology is anchored by Kumar's reflection upon the character of meditative inquiry – “What is meditative inquiry? Meditative inquiry is the art of understanding oneself and one's relationship to people and the world. It is an existential process through which each one of us discovers our own truths through living life wakefully, meditatively, and creatively as we interact with people, knowledge, and the world within and around us” (p. xix).

In Kumar's book, the exploration of meditative inquiry is introduced with a forward by his mentor William Pinar and is pondered through a text organized into three parts. The first part is comprised of a collection of 16 chapters, each one a personal exploration of the contributor's understanding of meditative inquiry; the second consists of responses to the collection while the third part consists of final comments by the contributors and an epilogue by Kumar. In addition, each chapter is introduced with an illustration by the artist-educator Adam Garry Podolski which is paired with a passage from Kumar's writings.

### **Meditative Inquiry as Transcendent Welcome**

For this reviewer, the essays in Kumar's anthology are heartfelt, engaging, and generative. There is a sense of welcome in these writings – one which is succinctly captured in Margaret Macintyre Latta's contribution to the collection wherein she writes, “I invite the reader to engage in this journey alongside me, bringing all of us nearer to meditative inquiry as an empowering medium for all learners / learning” (p. 123). Such spirit is echoed in the writings of fellow contributors; amongst them are Christina Flemming's exploration of letter writing as meditative inquiry in which she also ponders “meditative inquiry as invitation” (p. 93); and Diane Obed's exploration of meditative inquiry and Indigenous ways of knowing wherein she expresses her “... gratitude to nature and our elemental relatives for sustaining my life and well-being as well as to each of you who will read this chapter” (p. 167). In kindred spirit, Susan Walsh engages Kumar's writings through poetic and arts-based inquiry and reflects upon the ethos of meditative inquiry as poetic response. Her comment, “let us open our hearts and love” (p. 210), is in dialogue with Kumar's notion of meditative inquiry and Jiddu Krishnamurti's kindred words “where there is love there is instantaneous communion with the other on the same level and at the same time” (Krishnamurti in Kumar, p. 105 in Kumar, 2022, p. 210).

Macintyre Latta's and Flemming's invitation, Obed's gratitude, and Walsh's love express the ethos of the anthology; its sense of warm-hearted outreach to the reader is echoed in Kumar's book dedication where he dedicates the collection to all individuals who have walked, are walking and will walk the “path of Meditative Inquiry” (n.p.). Kumar's dedication reveals the character of meditative inquiry as transcendent welcome, bearing a striking synergy with the words of the twentieth century contemplative Thomas Merton; the dedication in *A Thomas Merton Reader* is addressed to all friends, old and new, near and far, those in Heaven and on Earth, and those he may not know “In the Hope That We May All Meet in the One Light” (1974, n.p.).

The invitation to engage with meditative inquiry in Kumar's volume extends, not only to its readers, but to its contributors, whose offerings, spanning a range of perspectives, are also welcomed. Amongst these are Nayha Acharya, who explores the dialogical character of meditative inquiry within the context of law and how Kumar's notion of dialogical inquiry can inform the process of alternative dispute resolution; or the contribution by Shawn Michael Bullock, who ponders meditative inquiry through the martial arts. Other contributions are philosophical in focus – Vikas Baniwal's ruminations on dialogue as a type of meditative inquiry or Christopher McCaw and John Quay's exploring of meditative inquiry in dialogue with the ideas of Heidegger, Dewey, and Buddhism. Teaching perspectives are represented by Mohamed Kharbach, who explores meditative inquiry and critical discourse analysis in education; and Michael Cosgrove and Shannon Power, whose chapter is structured as a dialogical conversation on the place of meditative inquiry in teaching.

The contributions to Kumar's anthology are wide-ranging and express the ethos of meditative inquiry as an interdisciplinary embrace offered within a spirit of equity and inclusion; careful listening and dialogue; and invitation and welcome. Narrative and dialogical engagement informs the first-person ethos of the writing; the writing is nested within a lived holism where the researcher does not stand apart from their inquiry but lives it. As Baniwal succinctly observes in his contribution to the volume,

...a philosophical study is not just from an intellectual engagement alone, but it requires the involvement of one's whole being. The dialogical nature of philosophical study emerges [sic.] from the questioning of the researcher's own beliefs, assumptions, and positions. It is not just a personal endeavour; rather it is a dialogue of the scholar with oneself, the guide, the institution, the context in which one is situated, and the larger discourse of the discipline and the area of research. (p. 19)

The centrality of the dialogical self and the thesis of meditative inquiry as lived inquiry make it easy to slide towards an interpretation that remains at its core an ethical project. While ethics is undoubtedly central to its ethos, Kumar offers us a more complicated and nuanced understanding of its philosophical breadth. That is, to view meditative inquiry within an ethical register only would make for an incomplete understanding. For Kumar, meditative inquiry extends beyond an ethical register and does not stand apart from philosophical questions of metaphysics and ontology. He observes,

In its *metaphysical* and *ontological orientation*, meditative inquiry invites contemplation on questions about reality, truth, and creation – much like the “Song of Creation” from *Rig Veda* quoted as an epigraph to this chapter. Questions that can be posed in this spirit of meditative inquiry include: What is reality? What is truth? What is the purpose of life? What is the source of life? What is consciousness? What is mind? What is self? What is the nature of time? In meditative inquiry, however, these questions do not remain only intellectual; they are investigated through existential inquiry, which relies on attentiveness to daily life – within us and in our relationships with the people and world outside – with all its complexities, uncertainties, and contradictions. (p. xxii)

### **Meditative Inquiry as “First Philosophy”**

Kumar’s observation about the relation of meditative inquiry to philosophical inquiry in general and to metaphysics and ontology in particular is of special interest. While the latter fields of philosophical study have by tradition stood apart from the study of ethics, Kumar invites a different understanding of their relationship. For Kumar, ethics and metaphysics are entwined; and insofar as we are guided to reflect upon questions of metaphysics by “...existential inquiry, which relies on attentiveness to daily life” (p. xxii), metaphysics cannot stand apart from an ethical register. To probe the core metaphysical questions that Kumar lists “...within us and in our relationships to the people and world outside – with all its complexities, uncertainties, and contradictions” (p. xxiii) is to nest the metaphysical within an ethical examining. Kumar both unifies and inverts the relation of metaphysics and ethics wherein the discourse of ethics becomes foundational to a metaphysical one. For this reviewer, such inverting invites broad comparison to Heesoon Bai’s work on the interrelationship of ethics and ontology (2004/2015); and Emmanuel Levinas’ kindred suggestion of ethics as first philosophy in which he questions the historical prioritizing of metaphysics to ethics (Levinas, 1989). This also by extension guides us to co-op Levinas’ phraseology and ask: can we similarly consider Kumar’s meditative inquiry as first philosophy?

The question is generative and, following in the spirit of the questions Kumar poses in the above passage, others emerge. What could be the configuration, for example, of a metaphysics of meditative inquiry? How would it draw on traditional philosophical discourse; or alternatively, would a project of metaphysical inquiry as meditative inquiry constitute a paradigmatic break with the former?

The reach of the questions extends beyond the immediate discourse of education and is philosophically expansive; in *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research*, the contributions by Kumar offer tantalizing invitations to explore further the project of metaphysics as meditative inquiry. In this regard, Kumar’s text offers a rich vein of untapped inquiry that scholars, such as Bai (2004/2015) in her critique of Cartesian dualism, have already begun to harvest, and one which holds promise to seed the study of metaphysics as a verdant branch of meditative inquiry.

To embrace meditative inquiry as first philosophy is to engage with a path for inquiry which departs from the analytical philosophical tradition. Standing apart from Cartesian dualism and its reductive ethos, which seeks the understanding of self within the disassembly of experience, the philosophy of meditative inquiry crosses onto a different terrain of holism and connection. It stands apart from what Arthur Zajonc critiques as the “epistemology of separation” dominating higher education (2006, p. 1744); instead, nested within a different place which Zajonc, following Parker Palmer, also observes as “every way of knowing becomes a way of living, every epistemology becomes an ethic” (2006, p. 1744); or as Adrian Downey, in his contribution to Kumar’s anthology, describes as follows: “Meditative inquiry is far more than a cognitive disposition; it is an approach to life. It is a quest ‘to come into contact with life through intense awareness, bringing your whole being together so that you can experience life as it is’” (Kumar in Kumar & Downey, 2018, pp. 70-71 in Kumar, 2022, p. 84). Echoing Downey, Debra Wells-Hopey makes a kindred point – following Kumar, she observes how meditative inquiry “...is not a technique but is instead a mode of being” (p. 223). In their exploring of meditative inquiry, Kumar and his contributors transcend reductionist thinking by offering us an expansive philosophy nested in a different ethos of holism, a lived holism wherein inquiry and being are not separate from the other.

But also a holism at whose core is the presence of the aesthetical; for as Kumar, in his Introduction, observes,

Meditative inquiry is an art of becoming aware  
an existential process of asking deep questions about life and our place  
in it. (p.xix)

Engaging with the arts informs meditative inquiry, echoed in Kumar's own study of Indian classical music, Podolski's imaginal contributions to the anthology, and Macintyre Latta's reflection of "...valuing arts-making processes as meaning-making paths" (p. 123). To make ethical meaning from art making or the encounter with art invites reflection on the aesthetical-ethical character of meditative inquiry; that is, if the aesthetical experience can foster reflection upon our relation to self, others and the creation, then such experience becomes an ethic. Such sentiments echo the work of Bai (1997) on the unity of ethics and aesthetics and Hart's view of the transformative power offered by creative practices to nurture awareness and "enable a corresponding opening toward the world before us. Through a fresh lens, our worldview, sense of self, and relationships may be powerfully transformed" (2004, p. 29). The presence of the aesthetical enriches the configuration of meditative inquiry wherein are found a holistic entwining of the aesthetical, ethical, and metaphysical.

The individual contributions to Kumar's anthology share such ethos; and taken together, invite us to re-imagine the thesis of meditative inquiry as first philosophy. In this regard, the originality of Kumar's work offers the reader a foundational text; or as David Sable, in his contribution to Kumar's anthology succinctly describes as "...a new paradigm for education as whole" (p. 188); or as Wells-Hopey also observes as the "radical yet intuitive claim" (p. 225) of meditative inquiry in its recentering of understandings of self away from post structural understandings in favour of another anchored by the necessity of a "non-structural self" (p. 225) and Kumar's thesis of "psychological structures" (p. 222).

### **Meditative Inquiry and its Ethos of Rootedness**

The paradigmatic shifting character of Kumar's text follows in the spirit of kindred foundational anthologies which have been published in the last 10 years, notably the *International Handbook of Holistic Education* (Miller et al., 2018); and *Toward a Spiritual Research Paradigm: Exploring New Ways of Knowing, Researching and Being* (Lin et al., 2016). In kindred spirit that Jing Lin speaks of the "urgent need to develop a spiritual research paradigm" (2016, p. ix), Kumar reflects upon an existential urgency of "'our world [which] is in crisis'" (2013, p. 1 in Kumar, 2022, p. 83) and asks "How shall we realize in the very core of our beings that life exists in relationships, and any isolating act, individually or socially, will bring about fragmentation, conflict, and the dissipation of energy?" (p. 154).

At both the heart of such urgency and the discourse of meditative inquiry is Kumar's appeal for the interior turn. That is, we cannot begin to heal the world if we do not begin to heal ourselves. We cannot transform the "outer" realm of social structures and aspire toward social justice unless we first do the interior work because, as Kumar observes "'...it is essential that we understand and transform the consciousness that lies at their base'" (2013, p.2 in Kumar, 2022, p.33).

There is an ethos of rootedness in such thinking, a deep seeking through self-reflection and dialogue, a courage "'...to look within oneself to face as one is'" (2013, p. 94 in Kumar, 2022, p. 234) in order to begin to heal the inner trauma which Rajean Willis and Laura Leslie also

explore in their contribution to Kumar's anthology.

The metaphor of the tree, which is recurrent in Kumar's text, expresses such rootedness and is captured in Susan Brigham's chapter in the anthology. Here, she explores the intersection of Kumar's understanding of meditative inquiry with kindred notions of Africentricity, amongst these the idea of Ubuntu (*I am because you are*). In her classroom, Brigham has her students draw their "life tree" (p. 41), the roots representing those who have supported them, the trunk influences that have shaped them, and the branches the configuration of their lives today. There are also the leaves, fruits, and buds which form the life tree and reflect their achievements and hopes. The visualization of the life tree is a powerful exercise, a meditation on connection with self and others because *I am because you are*.

Brigham's exploring of the life tree offers a rich metaphor for the ethos of meditative inquiry which the whole of Kumar's anthology embodies. In the anthology's introduction, Kumar retells how after the publication of his previous book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (2013), he discovered the work of Toni Packer who wrote *The Wonder of Presence: The Way of Meditative Inquiry* (2002); the covers of both books, he relates, are illustrated with images of trees. While the imaginal presence of trees in both texts is a synergistic one, it offers, following Brigham's "life tree," a forward-looking metaphor for both its ethos of rootedness and the emergence of meditative inquiry as a foundational discourse – a first philosophy – whose plentiful branches sprout richly with the publication of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research*.

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**Giovanni Rossini PhD** (University of Toronto / OISE) is a philosopher and independent scholar whose research interests span the fields of holistic and contemplative studies in education, and in particular, the terrain of arts-based contemplative inquiry. Core to his research is the intersection of narrative study and the imaginal and how it is foundational to the constructing of self and the ethos of knowledge as wisdom. He is the author of *Self and Wisdom in Arts-Based Contemplative Inquiry in Education: Narrative, Aesthetic and the Dialogical Presence of Thomas Merton*. (2021. Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education. Routledge.