

**Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning as Meditative Inquiry: A Book  
Review of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning,  
and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*  
(2022, Routledge, edited by Ashwani Kumar)**

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**Abstract**

In this book, Ashwani Kumar explores meditative inquiry as curriculum, enfolding the personal and professional experience into a blended sensational phenomenon. He believes a continual practice of contemplative dialogical engagement can manifest a re-envisioned approach to teaching as it acknowledges and nurtures the inter-relational and wholeness aspect of living and learning. Through an edited collection of essays from scholars, teachers, and practitioners, infused meditative inquiry experiences are shared. Each of their unique depictions demonstrates the transformative value and far-reaching effect of a deep reflective study of the self. Their stories show how evolving a greater sense of self-awareness generates a change in action which transfers through to all interrelations. This insight reveals that teaching, learning, and living are experientially embodied and educational; the practice of teaching is a practice of the self. Kumar's research indicates a holistic view with a meditative mind embedding theory into practice allows for a healthier, progressive advancement in education.

*Keywords:* meditative inquiry, dialogical engagement, holistic, education, curriculum

**Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning as Meditative Inquiry: A Book Review of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts***

Ashwani Kumar's book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* is an edited collection of essays, which is a part of the Studies in Curriculum Theory Series of Routledge. In the book, Kumar emphasizes that meditative inquiry must be a personally experienced quest involving a deep reflective inquiry into one's customs, beliefs, and values. He believes that the purpose of practicing and refining contemplative attentiveness is for the transformative value of not only one's personal but also professional experience. Kumar's idea of curriculum as meditative inquiry is rooted in his belief in achieving harmony between one's educational experience and lived experience. Through this belief, he encourages educators to re-envision the process of education in which teaching and learning occur in an inter-relational experience. He writes, "Meditative inquiry is a holistic engagement that brings together our bodies, minds, hearts, and beings in the process of teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living" (Kumar, p. xxv). He continues,

"The core purpose of this approach is to develop a deeper sense of awareness through attentive listening, asking fundamental questions, and engaging in authentic and open dialogue regarding education and life as a whole. This pedagogy invokes a deeper sense of ourselves, not only as teachers but also as human beings. Learning to observe one's body, mind, and emotions, and to

experiment with meditation and relaxation exercises are the experiential aspects of this pedagogy.” (Kumar, p. xxvi)

For individuals to navigate their inner and outer worlds with greater ease and clarity, Kumar suggests stepping towards insightful existential dialogue. He emphasizes, “While one can read and reflect on what others have said...the understanding only deepens and takes root in one’s being when the search goes deeper than mere cognitive levels” (Kumar, p. xix). He adds that the holistic movement is founded in relational connectivity, interdependence, reciprocity, and lovingness. Seeking awareness turns one’s outward focus inwards and allows one to be attentive in the present, thereby facilitating contemplation and awareness. Kumar’s core principles of meditative inquiry, which are the tools needed to activate emotional intelligence, are substantiated by critical choice-making that is crucial to building a healthy growth mindset. He posits that self-transformation happens with dialogical interpretation and deep inner reflection, which can be a wiser way of being, as it encourages us to emotionally address conflicts and challenges and intelligently deconstruct oppressive political, economic, social, and educational structures.

Furthermore, the chapters in Kumar’s book demonstrate that individuals can actualize their awareness using meditative inquiry in all fields of work, disciplines of study, geographical boundaries, cultures, and identities. His book provides a platform for scholars, teachers, and practitioners to share their personal experiences with meditative inquiry. Additionally, the readers can resonate with the relatable demonstrations of contemplation that this collection offers. The volume contains sixteen chapters opening with a foreword from Dr. William F. Pinar. Pinar emphasizes Kumar’s belief that in the space between the planned and the spontaneous, one

shares, listens, and reflects in dialogical meditative inquiry for deepening self-understanding. He says, “Everyday life and our embodied experience of it become the site of one’s spiritual and intellectual practice, one’s ongoing meditative inquiry” (p. xii). Through meditative inquiry, one moves from mechanically seeing the world in pieces to feeling its togetherness through holistic awareness. Following Pinar’s reflection, Kumar, in his introduction, elucidates the notion that contemplative seeing is a creative undertaking. He recognizes meditative inquiry as an art form and asserts that its practice must be rigorous and permeative. He underlines a critical point by saying, “The goal of meditative inquiry is not to meet the expectations of capitalist culture and its focus on productivity and performance. Rather by awakening our awareness and intelligence, meditative inquiry enables us to engage with internal and external conflicts and challenges profoundly and holistically” (p. xxi). The art of meditative inquiry is a self-reflective, embodied experience that is contingent on one’s level of focus and tenacity.

The chapter series begins with a response from the illustrator, Adam Garry Podolski, whose artwork introduces each essay and invites a visceral and aesthetic interaction from the reader. As a teacher, artist, and curriculum theorist, Podolski reflects on the work of Kumar and explains how engaging in dialogical collaboration with not only people but nature has had a transformative impact on his approach to working with art and curriculum. He feels one can also dialogically engage with animals, foliage, and minerals. He explains, “In the moment of practicing meditative inquiry and illustrating it, I experience an intimate and dialogical encounter with my surroundings. In this engagement, I allow my art to be taken away by my spirit. I hear nature speak directly to me” (p. xlv). Podolski believes that dialogical meditative inquiry leads to

an empowering experience of metamorphosis, where one taps into the intrinsic motivation to approach life and teach with a newly enriched understanding.

In each chapter, an author reflects on Kumar's written and dialogical words and blends this understanding into personal experience. Their narrations cover philosophy, psychology, social work, community development, law, religious studies, education, and science. The engaging themes compel the reader to contemplate the barriers of oppressive structures, the significance of appreciating diverse worldviews, the importance of freedom from resistance, the need for interconnectedness, the beauty of creative and authentic experience, and the value of embodied wisdom. Through their critical analysis and reflection, the authors' articulated meaning flows thoughtfully between sensitive and bold assertions. The pages cover various topics, including the curriculum as meditative inquiry, reimagining education, Africentricity in education, discourse, and consciousness, Indigenous land-based learning and healing, spirituality and Eastern philosophies, and learning from silence. In the following paragraphs, I highlight four chapters to exemplify how the authors personally engage with meditative inquiry in diverse contexts and unique ways.

In Chapter 6, *Mindset and Meditative Inquiry*, Adrian M. Downey believes that meaningful change must occur with a meditative mind. He further suggests that personal change is required before social change can unfold in the public sphere. Downey situates his belief within teaching and learning by examining the fixed and growth mindsets using the work of Carol Dweck. He pairs ideas of the growth mindset with Kumar's work on meditative inquiry, noting that a growth mindset allows for potentiality and possibility for change, and meditative inquiry deepens understanding of the self. Downey points out that each of these perspectives views the nature of

self-growth differently; the growth mindset approaches change as a cognitive exercise; however, meditative inquiry approaches change as a holistic engagement. Downey provides insights that inspire one to practice teaching and learning with a meditative mind.

Margaret Macintyre Latta, in chapter 9, *Meditative Inquiry as Medium for Learning: Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Love of Self, Learning, and Life*, discusses the importance of prospective teachers' engagement with the curriculum as meditative inquiry in order to create liberating curricular experiences. She describes the journey through the learning terrain as a transformative self-study where assumptions and the desensitization to mainstream values and beliefs must be confronted. Macintyre Latta explains that the continuous process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the self can bring about an organic way of seeing and being with the world. She suggests that inquiry for meaning-making is an individual and collective construction, which requires awareness to provide relevance and purpose to one's personal and professional practice.

Diane Obed, in chapter 11, *Synergies Between Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Meditative Inquiry*, says that in dominant Eurocentric learning spaces, there is sensitivity reduction as well as a gradual narrowing in the range of our human capacities. Due to this phenomenon, a felt sense of alienation and assimilation is experienced by many in the teaching and learning process. To propose productive ways for decolonizing education, Obed blends her work concerning earth-based knowledge with the similarities between meditative inquiry and Indigenous ways of knowing and highlights the need and significance of holism, intuition, and self-knowledge. She believes fostering our relationship in holistic practices deepens the

embodied learning experience, which rebuilds a healthier relationship with self, world, and lineages and supports pedagogy for teaching, learning, and living.

In chapter 16, *Explorations of Trauma Through Meditative Inquiry*, Rajean Willis and Laura Leslie examine how meditative inquiry impacts their work on trauma through a self-reflective and dialogical process. Through research, self-inquiry, and dialogue with African Nova Scotians and Indigenous peers, Willis and Leslie broaden their preformed ideas of trauma and reconsider how to address trauma meaningfully. The transformative aspects of meditative inquiry lie in one's ability to stop and question, behold and reflect, and act in fairer and just ways. Willis and Leslie emphasize that a learning and healing-centered classroom requires an ongoing commitment to counteract oppressive barriers using trauma-informed practices and pedagogies.

In overview, Kumar's depth and breadth of research on meditative engagement are informative, inspiring, and thought-provoking. His work encourages educators and others to dig into a meaningful study of the self to renew their outlook and enact personal agency for holistic living and teaching. The volume of personal narratives shows how meditative inquiry is applied in diverse contexts, under various conditions, and within different individuals. Stories of their actions depict heartfelt engagement with theory, revealing that theory outside practice is *of* understanding, not simply understanding. Lastly, they model how small changes by many people build the momentum for redesigning the infrastructure needed to reveal the holistic paradigm we fully live within. The goal is to perceive, feel, and imagine it until it is tangibly, visibly realized. The current oppressive paradigm can only be changed by living holistically, a way of life that lives according to action and attitude. Kumar's essential work about meditative inquiry as the curriculum is significant to the future of education as its transformative power can revolutionize

teaching and learning. It supports interconnectivity; safer, fairer, and unbiased attitudes and structures; a greater intelligence for humanity; and planetary sustainability. Resistance to the oppressive system can only be disarmed by understanding. Therefore, as Kumar urges, engaging in dialogue, sitting with questions, reflecting in silence, and surrendering to the unknown, are necessary and merited practices.

In conclusion, this wonderful collection offers exceptional contributions of diverse experiences and progressive and liberating views that describe and demonstrate how meditative inquiry as an art form can potentially transform the nature of education. This ground-breaking book is a must-read for educators from all walks of life who want to centralize intelligence, freedom, awareness, dialogue, and creativity in their classrooms and lives. An inspiring conference on this book was held in August 2022, in which the authors of the book as well as a number of invited scholars and practitioners, explored the significance of meditative inquiry in their diverse contexts. The video proceedings of the conference can be accessed at the following address: <https://youtu.be/hqVoziuD3E>



### References

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*Biography:* Cherie Carter is a Ph.D. student in Education at Simon Fraser University. She has taught for over twenty years at the elementary level, both locally in Ontario and internationally. During these years, she focused on incorporating a holistic philosophy of education and the practice of mindfulness and compassion into her pedagogy. Having completed her Master of Arts in Holistic Education, she is furthering her scholarly pursuit and focusing on the role of the body, affectivities, and healing as part of the learning process.