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Manifesto for a Pedagogy of the Soul

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Manifesto for a Pedagogy of the Soul

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Abstract

This essay argues that the current historical moment—marked by ecological crisis, political upheaval, and a mental health emergency among young people—demands that humanities scholars move beyond a pedagogy centered exclusively on critique. While critical tools remain indispensable, a critique-only classroom risks reinforcing prejudice, alienating students seeking meaning, and compounding the marginalization of the very communities we study. In response, the author proposes a “pedagogy of the soul”: a teaching practice that reclaims “soul” as a generative rather than religious category, opening classroom space for healing, self-discovery, and the cultivation of whole persons through contemplative activities, embodied learning, radical transparency, and power-flattening strategies. The essay closes with reflective prompts to help educators reimagine their teaching as a vital healing practice for a broken world.

“Despite all the cultural stereotypes, the current generation of college students is yearning to connect in a meaningful way. Many want to find ways to use their educational experience to engage in making a difference in the world, especially in ways that address human suffering, of which they see so much. They don't know how best to do that, and they're often inarticulate about how to do it. They want to know that education is not just about writing papers and developing skills to earn a living but is really about caring for each other and making the world a livable place because they realize that soon, it may not be a livable place.”¹

One day in 2019, I was attending a lecture by one of the leading senior scholars in Buddhist studies.² At the top of her game and in full display of her scholarly prowess, the professor delivered an erudite, perfectly structured lecture with a compelling, exquisitely argued thesis. To be honest, it was a great talk and the audience appeared enthralled by it. I would have been too, were it not for the timing.

As it happens, I had just been listening to a news roundup on my drive to campus. I had been hearing about politicians in several states stripping women of their reproductive rights, and the administration's machinations toward war with yet another so-called adversary. Here in the US, race relations had been deteriorating, while around the world, social unrest and political extremism were on the rise. Sixty million acres of Australian bush were on fire, the polar ice was melting, and the global economy was in shambles.

With all of that swimming around in my mind, I simply could not focus on the minutia of an argument about what a handful of Chinese

¹ Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2014), 174.

² This essay is based on a series of blog posts that first appeared on my blog Human•ities, located at <https://medium.com/@piercesalguero>, between 2019 and 2022.

characters meant in the second century AD, no matter how great the presentation. With all apologies to the professor and to my field as a whole, I just could not buy into a 90-minute lecture where the grand conclusion was to add a tiny shade of nuance to a 2000-year-old argument about an obscure Buddhist doctrine. The world outside our lecture hall was on fire, literally and figuratively, but what were we doing about it?

Reflecting after the lecture, it occurred to me that every day in my classroom, I was asking my students to perform the exact same act of compartmentalization that I was unable to do myself. In many ways, they actually have it worse. The future is more uncertain than ever for young people. They live under the unimaginable weight of countless domestic, international, and personal traumas and must navigate these with brains that have been optimized for anxiety and self-loathing by decades of addiction to social media. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control had reported that the suicide rate among 10- to 24-year-olds increased more than 57 percent in the preceding decade (and this was before the Covid-19 pandemic ushered in a whole new level of anxiety, precarity, and mortal danger).³

As I reflected on these realities, it began to dawn on me that this historical moment called for something more than business as usual from professors. I began to realize that we needed a bigger mission than simply helping students to keep moving through the pipelines of this broken system of ours. Something more than “resilience,” “stress-reduction,” or “student success.” What we needed was a pedagogy that responded to the crushing burdens young people faced and offered real alternatives. A

³ Sally C. Curtin, “State Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 69, no. 11 (2020), last accessed Jan. 3, 2026, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/231887/cdc_231887_DS1.pdf.

pedagogy that could contribute to healing, community building, empathy, and spiritual renewal at the deepest level.

Beyond Critique

The pedagogy I began envisioning on that day would necessitate moving beyond the humanities' current exclusive focus on critique. I used to think that my principal job as a scholar and teacher of Buddhist studies was synonymous with critique. In my academic training as a historian of religions and medical traditions, I was taught to question master narratives, to debunk mythologies, and to expose hidden social and political forces behind historical events. When I began teaching, I brought these priorities into my own classroom and imposed them on my students without questioning them.

But is this really the best way to serve students' deepest needs in the present moment? Is this really the most relevant gift we have to offer? The shortcomings of a critique-only approach can be illustrated by a story a colleague told me once at a conference. At the end of an Introduction to Buddhism class, he asked students what the biggest takeaway was from the semester. One responded by saying that they had learned that Buddhism was "all about power." I had a similar experience when a student of mine began a paper with the observation that Buddhism is "primarily a method of social control."

These students' assertions are not wrong *per se*. They are understandable, if reductive, crystallizations of the main themes I and most of my colleagues have, in fact, been emphasizing in our Buddhist studies courses. But are these really the most impactful takeaways from spending a semester studying this rich tradition? If a student is only going to ever take one course on Buddhism, or Asia, or religion more broadly, is this the core message we want them to remember? Most of my students are taking

my classes as part of the General Education curriculum, and many will only have a small number of opportunities to be exposed to the humanities throughout their academic careers. Given these constraints, is that the one core message I want them to remember about my class 10, 20, 30 years from now?

Worse yet, I asked myself, how might critique-only teaching be heard (or misheard) by different groups of students? Some of my students are white Christians who have been raised to distrust other cultures and have never even visited Philadelphia's Chinatown, a mere 12 miles down the road from our campus. Will my class simply reinforce their prejudices and squander a valuable opportunity to help them develop tolerance, empathy, and understanding of other cultures and religions? Some of my students choose to enroll in a course on Buddhism because they are interested in the possibility of mindfulness as a balm for debilitating anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. Will my emphasis on critique turn them away from what could be a beneficial life-long practice?

Even more horrifying, many of my students are first- and second-generation Americans from Philadelphia's diverse Asian neighborhoods. What if one of the students was, say, the daughter of Cambodian refugees whose local temple played a major role in helping them acclimate and find community when they resettled in the US? Will the authoritative professor's emphasis on unmasking the power dynamics of Buddhist institutions contribute to the sense of oppression that her family has already been experiencing as a member of this marginalized community?⁴

⁴ For one idea on how to flip this kind of power dynamic, see C. Pierce Salguero, "Buddhist Healthcare in Philadelphia: An Ethnographic Experiment in Student-Centered, Engaged, and Inclusive Pedagogy," *Religions* 12, no 6 (2021): 420,

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060420>.

When I think about how my teaching will be received by ever more diverse students in the trenches of our various contemporary catastrophes, it is clear to me that the crux of my work in the classroom can no longer be simply to critique. Don't get me wrong: I'm not suggesting abandoning our critical tools. Scholars must question, analyze, and scrutinize. Critical thinking is what we do; it's our vital service to society. However, I am proposing that instead of burning down the proverbial house and considering our job to be accomplished, we also need to sift through the ashes. We need to find the phoenix-like elements that will reemerge after our critique, allowing us to construct new worlds of possibility for our students and for ourselves.

I am proposing that, teachers in 21st-century classrooms need not only to deconstruct old narratives, but also to learn to construct new ones. We need to articulate bold new visions that can provide purpose and meaning, and that can inspire. We need to show the world that humanistic scholarship has an entire toolkit that we can employ in the classroom for the benefit of the widest number of students. Some of these are indeed critical tools, but this moment also calls for us to find tools for empowerment, empathy, and meaning-making.

A New Narrative

Humanistic Buddhist studies scholars are masters of discourse, having honed our skills in this area for years or even decades. Mostly, we have been exploring how to deconstruct discourses: taking them apart, understanding how they work, exposing their hidden agendas, uncovering their sins of omission and commission. No one can deny that, as a field, we have acquired truly impressive expertise in this realm. However, most of us have not paid much attention at all to the flip-side of this deconstruction. While we have learned the ins and outs of scholarly disputation, we have

not fully considered how we can intentionally use language in order to creatively construct new worlds of meaning and resonance.

In the rest of this essay, I will perform an exercise in this kind of creative construction, proposing a new narrative grounded in a new discourse. I call this “a pedagogy of the soul.” Many scholars, particularly in the field of religious studies, will bristle at my use of such a laden and problematic term as “soul.” But, while I recognize the full range of issues that are inherent in the word, I am nevertheless reclaiming it from the ashes and breathing new life into it.

For me, the phrase “pedagogy of the soul” opens up a cluster of evocative ways of speaking. It helps me to articulate an intention to engage in a pedagogy that aims beyond development in the intellectual, political, moral, or self-help arenas. A pedagogy that consists of more than sparking our students’ interests, engagement, or enthusiasm; more than shaping their minds, values, or emotional intelligence. It is about more than crafting their identity, or building their “personal brand,” or clarifying their life’s “vision statement.” More than exposing them to new worldviews or opening them up to new perspectives.

I’m far from the first to put the words “pedagogy” and “soul” together. “Pedagogy of the soul” is not an uncommon phrase among Christian educators who connect the art of teaching with the development of spiritual virtues.⁵ However, when I use the word “soul,” I am definitely not invoking a religious notion of the term. I want to make clear that I am not at all suggesting that we start indoctrinating our students into Buddhist

⁵ See, for example, Margaret Benefiel and Bo Karen Lee, *The Soul of Higher Education: Contemplative Pedagogy, Research, and Institutional Life for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2019). For a Muslim example, see Ashwak Hauter, “Pedagogies of the Soul, an Anthropologist in Isolation, and the Cut.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly Rapid Response Blog Series* (2020), last accessed Jan 3, 2026, <http://medanthroquarterly.org/?p=454>.

doctrine or any other religion or belief system. The way I'm using the term, a pedagogy of the soul would be the very antithesis of asking students to conform to some pre-existing model, doctrine, or ideal. Rather than pre-determining, scripting, or shaping their path of growth and discovery, my notion of a pedagogy of the soul would give each student the freedom to discover what lies at the core of their own being and to enact their own individual destiny.

When I speak of a pedagogy of the soul, I am envisioning using our classrooms to catalyze encounters with heretofore undiscovered depths of human possibility. I'm speaking about planting seeds that could potentially grow to radically reconfigure who a student thinks they are—which might eventually sprout into a powerful new vision of who or what they could become. I'm thinking about how we can help our students to unlock transcendent dreams of how their lives might unfold, dreams both sublime and terrifying in the scope of what they portend. To discover siren calls from their muse that will lay claim to their imaginations for lifetimes to come.

Pedagogy of the Soul in Practice

I trust that you can see how I am playing with words here, but let's get a bit more practical. How do we teach on this level? What does a soulful pedagogy actually consist of? Based on my experimentation over the past years since the initial insight, I think it starts with being radically present. Learning to see each student as a full human being—not just a name on a roster or a face in the crowd. And then, it requires us learning to really show up for them. Fully here. Right now. All in.

Engaging with our students as souls instead of as disembodied intellects, we no longer can justify spending all of our classroom time on imparting new information or new ways of thinking. We no longer can kid

ourselves that lectures, reading assignments, and intellectual discussions could ever be enough. We no longer can stay within the bounds of those tried-and-true comfort zones. But, showing up in a soulful way also involves realizing that the academy's exclusive focus on the mind has negated the full spectrum of our own humanity, too. We come to see that our own self-constrained identities as monodimensional experts are part of the problem, part of the alienating power dynamics of the broken system we work in. At the end of the day, a pedagogy of the soul isn't just about our students. It must be about our own souls, too.

So, yes, we should continue to expand our students' intellectual horizons, of course, for cognitive development is part of the whole person. But, we also need to explore the kinesthetic dimension by including our physical bodies. We need to pay attention to the sensory aesthetics: what does our pedagogy look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like? We need to encourage imagination and creative expression—both our students' and our own. We need to talk and share about morality and ethics. Emotional development. Interpersonal intelligence.

Bit by bit, attending to the whole persons in the classroom, we open up as many doors as possible for personal reflection, story-telling, and dream-sharing. We take on a sacred obligation to help each and every soul in this classroom to discover and begin to embody its hidden potentials. Our pedagogy becomes subtly attuned, richly enveloping, and deeply nourishing for each student—as well as for ourselves.

By definition, the details of attentive, responsive, soulful teaching must vary from place to place and day to day. Pedagogy of the soul is more of a "heartset" than a mindset. It is not about a specific set of techniques, activities, or technologies, and it can never be prescriptive. Nevertheless, we can say that specific teaching methods that reliably increase impact, engagement, and relevance, as well as unflinching commitment to

inclusion and accessibility, are all essential prerequisites. As is the diversification and globalization of the curriculum, integration of active learning methods, and an emphasis on student success. These are immensely valuable approaches that create a just and welcoming classroom, and they lay the groundwork for everything else to come.

That being said, pedagogy of the soul begins where these traditional higher education considerations leave off. Once our classroom is inclusive, accessible, dynamic, and student-centered, we need to build upon those solid foundations to also transform the classroom into a space of transformation, refuge, and healing. A space where students can be seen and empowered, and where they can discover themselves and express themselves as the unique individuals that they are. A heartfelt—and yes, soulful—space.

Fostering this kind of environment needs radical transparency from professors. Our students aren't brains in vats, and they need to see that we are not either. Are we brave enough to share our own stories, our humanity, our vulnerabilities? Are we present enough to unflinchingly inhabit our bodies in this space? Are we clear enough in our own motives and methods that we can allow others to look behind the curtain and understand how and why everything in this class is being put together? Is our commitment to our own self-care and self-discovery strong enough to hold space for others while they go through their own processes of transformation?

If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then the next step is to align our course materials, syllabus design, assignments, and all other dimensions of our course with the priorities of the soul. To get started, we might incorporate small moments of mindfulness, self-reflection, deep listening, or embodied learning throughout the semester (or perhaps at

the beginning and end of each class period).⁶ For our grading system, we might try ungrading,⁷ learning contracts,⁸ or other ways of empowering students and flattening the power hierarchy.

In terms of assigned materials, we might strategically select primary source reading materials and discussion topics that we think will open up our students' curiosity and imagination about alternative possible selves and ways of being. We might develop assignments that ask students to engage deeply, not just with their thinking minds but with the whole range of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual perspectives they possess as human beings. In a Buddhist studies course, it would also be quite fitting to integrate contemplative activities that encourage our students to have intimate personal encounters with silence, with the non-duality of consciousness, or with the subtler energies of the bodymind—not just as an afterthought to our rigorous scholarly agenda, but as a core mission of the course.⁹

⁶ Some practical ideas are presented in Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices*; Christopher Jensen and Ivette Vargas-O'Bryan, eds., "Special Issue: Comparative Teaching in Troubled Times," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 27, no. 3 (2024): 53-110; Frances Garrett and Sophie Chase, "'Deep Listening' in Buddhist Studies: Teaching and Learning during a Pandemic," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 387, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060387>. Frances Garrett's many projects in these areas have been influential for me, see <https://francesgarrett.info/publications>, last accessed Jan. 3, 2026.

⁷ See in particular Susan D. Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (University of West Virginia Press, 2020); Jesse Stommel's website <https://www.jessestommel.com>, last accessed Jan. 3, 2026.

⁸ See especially Fred Glennon, "The Learning Covenant: Promoting Freedom and Responsibility in the Religious Studies Classroom," *CSSR Bulletin* 24, no. 2 (1995): 32-37; Geoff Anderson, David Boud, and Jane Sampson, *Learning Contracts: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 1996).

⁹ Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices*; Benefiel and Lee, *The Soul of Higher Education*; and Frances Garrett's work are again some sources of practical ideas.

Such changes might seem overwhelming at first, as they deeply challenge traditional professorial norms and habits. Quite frankly, they do take a lot of effort and considerable care to design, and, yes, they do take class time away from traditional course content. Perhaps most frighteningly for those of us accustomed to being the “sage on the stage,” the outcomes of introducing such activities can be highly unpredictable in how they expose our own vulnerabilities. Yet, over time, as we slowly begin to release our attachment to the safety of our usual routines, we will stop seeing teaching as simply filling empty buckets in tried-and-true ways. Little by little, as we begin to make space in the classroom for emotions, for dreams, and for inchoate soulful rumblings, a magical world of self-discovery will begin to open right before our eyes. For them and for us alike.

Conclusion

Having read this far, I would invite you take a moment to reflect on how you are responding to the new narrative I am constructing here. Perhaps you find yourself retrenching back into critique, picking out all of the places where I ran afoul of cherished ideas of what proper scholarly discourse should be like. Perhaps you find yourself exhausted, wondering where you would possibly find the time or energy to transform your pedagogy in these ways. Perhaps you find yourself exasperated with the “kids these days,” or terrified of opening up in this way to your students. Or, perhaps, does what I’m saying here resonate in some way, or even stir up a sense of possibility?

After all I’ve said above, you still may be hung up on my use of the word “soul.” That’s perfectly fine; feel free to create your own new narratives using different words. The point is not for you to accept my ideas as I have written them here, but rather to inspire you to reimagine your own

pedagogy as a vital healing practice for our broken world in whatever way makes sense to you.

If you are willing to take the plunge, I will leave you with a few considerations to think about as you wade into these waters. Each one is a kind of meditation or inquiry that can inspire you to reflect further and deepen into this soulful endeavor:

- What is one memory you hope students could take away from your class and still value 50 years from now? How can you make sure it is truly unforgettable?
- What is the single most transformative insight that you've gained from all of your years studying your specialization, which is meaningful to your life beyond academia? How can you explain it in 30 minutes to a group of 18-year-olds who have no background in your field and no reason to care?
- What is the single most impactful piece of writing you have ever read, which speaks to universal concerns and would be accessible to students? How can you make a connection with it and assign it in your class?
- Who was the kindest or most compassionate mentor in your life (academic or otherwise), and what particular approaches of theirs can you borrow/emulate?
- What aspect of your personal life are you least likely to share in academic spaces, and how does holding that back inhibit your ability to develop authentic relationships with your students?
- How closely do you think a group of strangers could bond in the space of 15 weeks under ideal circumstances? What concrete steps

could you take to begin to foster that level of connection in your classroom?

- What is the best possible way to use face-to-face classroom time if the goal were strictly for students to discover their deepest selves? How much of the semester are you willing to give over to this?
- How does your own field understand the soulful, numinous, ineffable, or mystical side of human experience? How can you introduce this within your own disciplinary frameworks without dampening any of the mystery?
- What would you do differently if you saw the classroom not only as a place for *their* learning and growth, but also as the crucible for your own personal transformation? Or, what would it be like to redefine your teaching as less of a job and more of a spiritual practice?

Now, go put one of those crazy dreams of yours into action. The world needs you, and your students are waiting.

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