

Teaching inherent Goodness:  
Contemplative Education at the Shambhala School of Halifax

By  
Ashely L. Crouch

A Thesis Submitted to  
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, Honours Religious Studies.

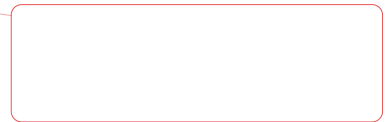
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**Abstract**

This undergraduate honours thesis examines the role of contemplative and spiritual education at the Shambhala School of Halifax in the aim of developing compassionate, socially engaged citizens. Literature and field research focus on the pedagogies and practices at the school, its holistic and spiritual roots, and the goals proposed by the mission statement. The Shambhala School of Halifax runs on the philosophy that all humans possess an inherent goodness and that education should develop youth in a wholesome manner enabling confidence, community building, academic interest, and compassion. The school draws on various influences including Buddhism, Native American wisdom traditions, Waldorf Education and the lesser-known Enki Approach to education developed by Beth Sutton. Key examinations in the study include the historical development of the Shambhala School by members of the Shambhala Buddhist Community of Halifax; how teachers draw on different scriptures, philosophies, religious figures, and cultural themes to promote compassion, confidence and a passion for learning; and the importance of spirituality to the Shambhala education system.

April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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## **Chapter One: Introduction and Background**

This honours thesis examines the role that spiritual education plays in developing confident, compassionate, and socially engaged citizens at the Shambhala School of Halifax. Spiritual teachings play an important role in personal, academic, and community development at the school, many of which are based in Shambhala Buddhism and Aboriginal spirituality. These spiritual philosophies and principles aim to address and deal with school issues such as bullying and introspection development, and broader issues such as multiculturalism and religious diversity by teaching the inherent goodness of all beings. The thesis focuses on the pedagogy and practices that Shambhala uses in its attempt to educate students and prepare them for life after high school. Education is a vital aspect of society in which worldviews are shaped and transformed. Spiritual education institutions, such as the Shambhala School, may provide a worldview that not only enables academic growth and discovery, but also enables personal and social transformation, which can create a more compassionate society.

The current Shambhala School of Halifax was founded by a group of Shambhala Buddhists, who wanted a more holistic and contemplative emphasis in their children's education. The institution opened with the aim of developing students not only academically, but with the sense that they and all other people are inherently good. The school began in 1993 with an elementary school. Later, a high school was created in a separate location, and in the late 1990's the two merged at their current location to form the Shambhala School of Halifax. Drawing on Buddhist philosophies, theories and

methods from various religious traditions, psychology, and neuroscience, the school describes itself as a “contemplative and spiritual education institution.”<sup>1</sup> The faculty members of the Shambhala School described contemplative education as an education style that emphasizes living in the present moment, enhancing the learning experience through meditation, and using art forms such as Japanese flower arranging and water painting that focus on mindfulness and process as opposed to product (referred to as contemplative arts) alongside the typical academic courses.<sup>2</sup>

The faculty members at the Shambhala School have developed their mission statement in accordance with their philosophy that education should deal with the whole of an individual; raising students to be confident, compassionate members of society.<sup>3</sup>

The mission statement on the school’s website reads:

The heart of the Shambhala School education is teaching, modeling, and experiencing confidence in unconditional goodness for everyone. Out of this confidence in the inherent basic goodness arises a culture of kindness, compassion and awareness. The development of “character” and the noble qualities of wakeful citizen-leaders arises from a curriculum that transmits the experience of basic goodness. The journey of expanding beyond personal limitations, engaging in academic rigor, and offering service to society is activated in the context of confidence in our inherent worthiness and intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

The school uses holistic pedagogy alongside the philosophy of Buddhism and religious traditions in order to develop what they feel is a well-rounded curriculum. The faculty described a well-rounded curriculum as one in which students are not only academically challenged and prepared for life after high school, but also able to see the value in their education and grow in mind, body, and spirit.<sup>5</sup> The school’s goal is not to create a society of Shambhala Buddhists but rather to enable the development of a society of confident and socially engaged citizens who, regardless of religion, or lack thereof, will be

comfortable with themselves, introspective in nature, and will interact with their community in a compassionate manner.<sup>6</sup>

The Shambhala Vision is another vital statement to understanding the intent of the founders for creating the school. The vision statement is found on the school's website, and reads as follows:

1. We are guided by Shambhala principles in our curriculum, relationships and day-to-day operations. As a school community, we foster and express basic goodness, wisdom, compassion, respect and dignity.
2. We nurture genuine delight in learning, and the joy and inspiration this brings.
3. We hold the child's well-being as paramount.
4. Our curriculum has a strong academic foundation that is enriched through the arts and contemplative disciplines.
5. We embrace diverse expressions of human culture and wisdom.
6. We honour and support the developmental needs of our students at each stage of their education
7. We hold ourselves accountable through all aspects of our behaviour in keeping with the principles and decorum of our community.
8. The participation of all people involved in the Shambhala School, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, families, and supporters is essential to the creation of a vibrant learning community.
9. Shambhala School students develop confidence, competence, wisdom, vitality and personal discipline. Those who attend the Shambhala School will have a positive impact on the world in which they live.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the mission and vision statements that the Shambhala Tradition's worldview is most noticeable. Education helps to inform an individual's worldview, changing, shaping, and rearranging the way individuals understand self, others, and the universe. A teacher's worldview inevitably influences the way they teach, what they teach, and how they interact with students. The Shambhala School faculty members therefore focus much of their energy on cultivating a worldview of the inherent goodness of all beings, leading to practices that attempt to cultivate respect, community building, mindfulness, confidence, and joy in learning.

**Methodology:**

The focus of this research is to examine the pedagogies, practices, and mission of the school. The research began with an examination of literature, which explored holistic and contemplative pedagogies, as well as the philosophy of spiritual education. For the study it was important to examine the historical foundations of the Shambhala Community in Halifax, the core tenets of Shambhala Training, and contemplative Shambhala practices; as Shambhala School faculty members noted the importance of the Shambhala Community in developing the school mission.<sup>8</sup> Equally relevant to the study was an examination of the roots of holistic education, from main founder Rudolph Steiner, to current pedagogies and practices used in Waldorf schools in North America. Faculty members cited these pedagogies as playing a major role in developing the Shambhala School curriculum, especially in the elementary school.<sup>9</sup>

Field research was conducted between December 2013 and February 2014 with the faculty members of the Shambhala School. Interviews were conducted with the director and long-time faculty members from the elementary and upper school departments. Participant observation took place in classrooms and during workshops at the school to gain a deeper understanding of how pedagogy led to practice on a daily basis. Interviews and observations focused on the use of different pedagogies and practices, and how they relate to creating compassionate, socially engaged citizens. Outcomes for the alumni of the school and experiences of parents were beyond the scope of this study.



### **Spiritual and Holistic Education Roots: Historical Context**

The Shambhala School describes itself as a holistic institution, which they also consider to mean contemplative and spiritual. Holistic education is:

A philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace. Holistic education aims to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning.<sup>10</sup>

Holistic and contemplative educators have argued that education should be about more than academic standards and acquiring knowledge, it must also enable the personal growth of each individual to think critically, and develop spiritually, emotionally, and socially (Miller 1990:7). Holistic Pedagogy argues for integrating mind, body, and spirit into the curriculum of a school. Teachers, students, and parents are all seen as vital components to self-discovery, academic learning, social development, and confidence building. The mission at the Shambhala School emphasizes the ideals of creating a meaningful, respectful, and academically rigorous educational community.

Holistic education first developed as an alternative to Western mainstream education when Rudolph Steiner developed his pedagogy in post-WWI Germany (Foster 1984:228). At the time, German society was trying to develop a new type of citizen, one who was a critical thinker and engaged in their community. Steiner recognized that education was an important aspect of this transformation. Steiner's pedagogy was also a bold statement about modernity and a critique of modern economic systems in the West, specifically Capitalism. Steiner, both a scientist and a Christian, developed methods to

integrate the whole of a person's experience into the education system in order to "become aware of the capacity to become fully human in order to resist competing pressures toward dehumanization." (Easton 1997:88) He also argued that the only way to achieve this through education was by a threefold method of integrating the mind, body, and spirit. His initial pedagogy was used in the first Steiner school in Stuttgart, Germany, 1919.<sup>11</sup> By 1965 however, there were one hundred and twenty-five Steiner Schools in North America (where they are known as Waldorf Schools). As of 2013 there were one thousand and twenty-five Steiner and Waldorf Schools in over sixty countries.

The continued expansion of Steiner's theories and methods of education are attributed to his emphasis on community building, self-discovery through education and socialization, and his ultimate aim of positive societal transformation. His theory on the combination of mind, body, and spirit as well as his methods for teaching students, have been emulated both in Waldorf Schools and independent holistic institutions, including the Shambhala School.

In relation to the other spiritual and Buddhist influences on the Shambhala School, Steiner was known for his involvement in the Eastern Philosophy inspired theosophy movement (Easton 1997:91). Theosophy combines several esoteric spiritual teachings, predominantly those of Eastern Philosophy including Buddhism, which followers study in an attempt to grasp the greater workings and reality of the universe (Snell 1895:202). Steiner eventually left the theosophy movement to start the related anthroposophy movement, which became the prevailing influence on his pedagogy. Anthroposophy builds on theosophy and states that the spiritual world is entwined with the material world, and thus all aspects of society, including education, must deal with both components in order to function in a healthy manner (Urhmacher 1995:386). The faculty

members at the Shambhala School follow this sentiment, and chapter two will explore their view of the school as a living, sacred, and spiritual ecosystem.

Another vital influence cited in the development of the Shambhala School was an independent program called Enki Education.<sup>12</sup> Many methods were borrowed from Enki founder Beth Sutton to enhance the curriculum of Shambhala's elementary school. Enki itself was inspired by Waldorf Schools but differs in its approach to teaching in specific ways, especially in its emphasis on using psychology and neurological development theories in building a curriculum.<sup>13</sup> Enki proposes that the method of integrating the mind, body, and spirit of a person through education enables individuals to meet the world head-on in a confident, compassionate manner. The influence of Enki is markedly pronounced in the elementary school, sometimes known as the Lower School, though the philosophy fits with the school's overall mission of mind-body integration and teaching inherent goodness.<sup>14</sup>

Another influence that is vital to the elementary school is the Virtues Project.<sup>15</sup> Linda Kavelin-Popov, Dr. Dan Popov, and John Kavelin founded the Virtues Project in 1991 as a grassroots initiative to inspire the practice of bringing the virtues of kindness, service, justice, and love into everyday life.<sup>16</sup> The project was honored by the United Nations and has been integrated into different institutions in more than one hundred countries around the world. The Shambhala School has hosted workshops on developing and using the many virtues proposed by the creators. The aim of the Virtues Project is that it can:

Empower individuals to live more authentic meaningful lives, families to raise children of compassion and integrity, educators to create safe, caring, and high performing learning communities, and leaders to encourage excellence and ethics in the work place.<sup>17</sup>

The final major influence for the Shambhala School comes from Shambhala Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> Meditation and contemplative practices were becoming popular in the United States when the founder of Shambhala Buddhism, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, decided that opening a contemplation-oriented university would be most helpful to enabling the growth of an enlightened society (Hayward 2007:124). Naropa University was opened in Colorado in 1975 as a summer school for contemplative arts, including creative writing, yoga, and Buddhist philosophy (Goss 1999:217). After several years, the university expanded to the status of being a fully accredited post-secondary institution. Naropa University is described as a “Buddhist inspired, non-sectarian liberal arts college with undergraduate and graduate programs.” (Goss 1999:216) Trungpa believed that awakening individuals through contemplative education would lead to a society where basic human goodness was nourished (Hayward 2007:152).

The creation of an elementary school in the same region of Colorado followed the accreditation of Naropa University (Hayward 2007:220). The elementary school was modeled on teaching the inherent goodness of all beings to students from grade primary to grade twelve. After several years in operation, the elementary school in Colorado shut down due to funding and faculty issues (Hayward 2007:220). The current Shambhala School has been modeled in part on the original Colorado school, though by different members of the Shambhala Community.

Trungpa, much like the faculty at the Shambhala School of Halifax, stated that he did not intend create a society of Buddhists, but rather to create a society influenced by the ideals of compassion, inherent goodness, and respect for self, other and environment while celebrating the diversity of religious and cultural identities (Goss 1999:219).

Trungpa wanted his followers to maintain their familial religious identities, but many of the community's values, rituals, beliefs, and passages remain very Buddhist in nature.

### **The Origins of the Shambhala School**

Parents and faculty of the school in 1993 came predominantly from the Shambhala community of Halifax (Swick 1996:154). The Shambhala community is mostly made up of Buddhists, however some members still maintain another specific religious identity, often Christian or Jewish. Much of the community moved to Halifax from the United States after the founder of the Shambhala Tradition, Chögyam Trungpa, stated that Halifax was a place where an enlightened society could develop (Hayward 2007:154).

Since the opening of the Halifax Shambhala Centre in the late 1970's, the community has grown from a few dozen American immigrants to several hundred people, including both locals and immigrants from other nations outside of the United States (Swick 1996:14). The community remains predominantly filled with Canadian and American citizens, though increased interest in Buddhism and contemplation arts have enhanced the number of visitors and members in recent years. When members formed the Shambhala School, the community had already been established in Halifax for many years and had built a reputation as a community brought together by a common interest in contemplative practice (Swift 1996:17).

As one of the founding members of the Shambhala School stated, the school was a response to the perceived lack of mindfulness and "child first" mentality in the public school system.<sup>19</sup> The initial ideology of the school, which remains today, is to educate students academically with a sense of the inherent goodness of all human beings.<sup>20</sup> This

concept is vital to the Shambhala Buddhist Tradition, as well as many other Engaged Buddhist groups (Goss 1999:218). Another vital agreement between the founders was that *how* classes were taught was of equal importance as *what* they were teaching.

As previously mentioned, the faculty members refer to the Shambhala School as “Spiritual but not Buddhist.”<sup>21</sup> They emphasized that although they use many Buddhist philosophies and methods, including meditation and Shambhala Buddhist contemplative arts, the school draws from a wider range of spiritual and religious traditions (Faculty often referred to these as wisdom traditions, which include aboriginal spiritual teachings and practices) in building its curriculum. These other traditions and methods will be explored further in the following chapters. The faculty defines spiritual education as an education system that connects mind, body, and spirit through contemplative and holistic methods. This spiritual education system is a combination of the two methods with the addition of practices from various wisdom traditions around the world. In explaining what spirituality is, the Director stated:

I suppose in its broadest strokes, spirituality is just orienting towards the most important, fundamental, essential aspects of existence and consciousness. So from that point of view, post modernism, existentialism and post-structuralism phenomenology... it's spirituality. I don't know that they would ever say those words, cause there's nothing about God in there, but what you end up with is a very open world of in between and grey. It's profound, it's really a training in saying “I don't know” and the world is filled with wonder because of that. There's probably good reasons why it isn't, maybe the right word is sacredness. I don't believe there's actually a difference; I don't believe that the teachers here see it either. There is no separation, economics have to take part in the sacredness of the world, it's the flow of energy in the world, it has to take part in sacredness, it may not be abiding by the rules of sacredness, but it has to take part.<sup>22</sup>

The school wants to be defined more broadly than being Buddhist alone, as many do not even see Buddhism as a religion and the intention of the school has never been to create

self-identified Buddhists. The director also highlights the relation of Buddhist impermanence to modern scientific understandings of the world. The faculty members feel that much of what people consider specifically Buddhist about their worldview, was also inherently scientific and found among other wisdom traditions:

I know that there are good reasons that people would not agree with this, but at its core, Buddhism is not a religion. It has its scripture and its politics, as much as anything that defines it as a religion. But to say that as a way of life, it references the impermanence of everything and the openness and undefined characteristic of things, is hardly a reason to limit to yourself to saying that's Buddhist. It could be science. Almost everything shakes from impermanence. Like impermanence, which is a basic scientific fact... let's act as if that's true... that means you are not you. It brings into question why we would hold on to our own self and self-interest, when it doesn't actually ascribe to reality. If impermanence is true, then what are the implications of that? Why would you get attached to the world if it were essentially ephemeral? Because things are constantly changing, that is the very thing that makes things dynamic and vivid. If things didn't change then there wouldn't be any vitality.<sup>23</sup>

The faculty member continued to explain how many philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, also understood impermanence and found inspiration from this in many of their key writings. The faculty members at the Shambhala School see their worldview and pedagogy as a combination of intersecting understandings of reality and human nature from Buddhism, wisdom traditions and modern science. Indeed the discourse relating scientific and Buddhist worldviews has been increasingly discussed in recent decades by scholars and practitioners of Buddhism alike (e.g. Wallace:2003).

It is important to note the desire for the Shambhala Community and the Shambhala School not to be categorized as Buddhist organizations. Many members of the community view themselves as Buddhist, but not the programs offered or even the community itself. This leads to the question of what social or political reasoning the Shambhala Community or school may have for labeling themselves as Spiritual but not

Buddhist. Are people more attracted to a non-sectarian approach to spiritual education or workshops? Do faculty members and Shambhala Community members understand their teachings as beyond Buddhism? Might the discourse have to do with the increased secularization of Western society, thus making a non-sectarian, yet still spiritual institution non-threatening? For future research it may be important to understand how students, parents and outsiders understand the school's mission, and how they perceive these institutions along spiritual and Buddhist lines.

## **Chapters**

In the following chapters I will be discussing the worldviews, pedagogies, and practices of the Shambhala School in greater detail. The second chapter will focus on the worldview and pedagogies that have influenced the school, and then describe the culmination into a full Shambhala pedagogy. The third chapter will focus on how these worldviews and pedagogies are turned into practice. Observations made during the field research will be explored, as well as case studies and examples of situations related to Shambhala pedagogies of teaching inherent goodness. The final chapter will summarize the findings, introduce questions for future consideration, and highlight valuable areas for future research.



## **Chapter Two: Philosophy and Pedagogies of the Shambhala School**

The examination of The Shambhala School will begin with the exploration of their worldview of inherent goodness and their resulting pedagogy. The worldview of the school faculty follows many traditional Shambhala teachings, but extends also to include the related philosophies of Rudolph Steiner and Enki Education.<sup>24</sup> As one teacher remarked, the philosophy that all humans have inherent goodness leads to a pedagogy and practice that develops a culture of kindness, having students “come to know themselves in their bones”, and using methods that integrate the mind, body, and spirit into the curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Teaching students to discover the inherent goodness that all individuals possess is the base of the school because, as the same faculty member described it, “if you don’t know that, how can you teach them anything?” For the faculty at the Shambhala School, there is no difference between the sacred and the secular, nor should there be between education and spirituality.

### **Inherent Goodness**

The philosophy that all humans possess inherent goodness at their core is a central tenet of Shambhala Buddhism (Hayward 2007). Chögyam Trungpa, founder of Shambhala Buddhism, stated that people could harness their own inherent goodness through mindfulness, contemplative techniques, and meditation. He believed that the transformation of society into a more compassionate, peaceful place began with the

transformation of the individual by reconnecting with their basic goodness and learning the Buddhist principles of emptiness, egolessness, and non-attachment (Hayward 2007:150). He posited that people find themselves in conflict, making damaging life choices due to their reactions and attachments stemming from the ego.

The philosophy of inherent goodness leads to the intent to cultivate a culture of kindness. The faculty members described a culture of kindness as a community that interacts in a compassionate, caring, and accepting way.<sup>26</sup> The culture of kindness is developed through methods of mindfulness activities, non-violent communication lessons and workshops, meditation, and through the way that faculty and students interact with each other. Faculty members have stated that creating a culture of kindness begins with mindfulness and being aware of the way we communicate with, relate to, and understand others. This culture is developed through the idea that all conflict can be resolved in a peaceful, compassionate manner.

As one elementary school faculty member explained, a third grade boy was acting out and teasing other students. Instead of reprimanding him, she took him aside and told him that she understood he was acting out because of a desire to be seen and that she acknowledged his presence. The teacher was attempting to instill a sense of trust into the child, as well as an understanding that she recognized his value and strengths. She noted that his interactions with other students became more compassionate over time and he began to act out less.<sup>27</sup> There were several other examples of students and teachers attempting to create a culture of kindness. In the upper school, two new boys started at the school in the fall semester of 2013. They began to tease a boy in the classroom who had aspergers syndrome and several girls stood up for him, telling the boys “we don’t do that here.”<sup>28</sup> As with any school, there will be cases of teasing, conflict, and intolerance. The

intention to create a culture of kindness through language, interaction, and compassion is the Shambhala School way of responding to inevitable human conflict. At the Shambhala School, the philosophy is that conflict can be resolved through communication and non-violent means.

### **Buddhism and Pedagogy**

For many teachers at the school, Buddhism is their way of life, influencing how they interact with each other, students, and parents.<sup>29</sup> The director of the school stated that there are at least six or seven teachers who have “over ten thousand hours of meditation practice in their lifetime.”<sup>30</sup> These teachers consider the extensive meditation practice to have been beneficial in cultivating compassion, working with others, and dealing with conflicts in the school. The director mentioned:

That’s probably where the Buddhist influence is... just in the training and the rigorous personal work that all these people have done. So when students or parents are freaking out it’s seen as a kind of a dance... it’s not something that is either for you or against you, its often not that easy to solve, but you don’t have to panic to solve it. You can ride with it. Rather than taking things personally, instead you sort of open up and you’re curious. Just being with the person is simple. That takes some training!<sup>31</sup>

Thus teachers at the school view their Buddhist background as essential to every facet of their profession, from educating students to working with parents and other teachers. Teachers encourage students to explore and embrace their own religious and cultural backgrounds. However, the majority of students and teachers at the school are Caucasian and predominantly from Christian backgrounds. There is no data on the official religious

or ethnic diversity of the school population, but observations at the school showed a very small amount of ethnic diversity.

One of the main Buddhist wisdom teachings used in the school is the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the Five Wisdom Energies.<sup>32</sup> These are used in the upper school, where students learn how to incorporate these wisdom energies into their lives. The Five Wisdom Energies were brought to North America with the aim of teaching people to master the expanse of their emotions:

In the early 1970s Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught the five wisdom energies to contemporary practitioners as a way of understanding who we are fundamentally: our personality, our emotional landscape, and how we relate to others and our world. He promoted the understanding that there is nothing inherently wrong or bad about the energy itself. He taught that to bring the wisdom energies to the path, we first learn to stay with them through mindfulness and awareness. Then we can work with these energies as they arise in our experience by applying loving-kindness. We allow them to express themselves openly rather than trying fruitlessly to manipulate and control them. The energies then become a way of celebrating our strengths and working with our weaknesses.<sup>33</sup>

These energies are considered spaciousness, clarity, richness, passion, and activity. These are all good energies, but can become troublesome when we try to control and manipulate them. Students and teachers are taught to practice cultivating these energies in order to transform their energy for personal and communal benefit.

Another specific Buddhist part to the school is the usage of bowing and Tibetan meditation practices.<sup>34</sup> Students from pre-primary through to grade twelve practice bowing to one another and the teacher before the start of most classes. In the upper school, students practice Shambhala meditation for ten minutes each morning and at the end of the school day. These practices were instilled in the school to develop mutual respect, self-compassion, and to cultivate mindfulness, all leading back to cultivating

inherent goodness. In addition, Shambhala Buddhist mindfulness is interwoven into the activities of every day. These practices will be described more in depth in the next chapter.

### **The School as an Ecosystem**

The faculty members at the Shambhala School describe the school as a living ecosystem.<sup>35</sup> They understand the universe and all its manifestations as linked together through constant communication and interaction. There is a common notion of a non-dual universe, where the sacred and secular are inseparable, and every action causes a reaction. At the school, mind and body are always interacting, intellect and wisdom come together through life experience and education, and students come to know themselves through interactions with other people and the world around them. The school ascribes to an Eastern philosophy of interconnection that is in direct contrast to traditional Western philosophies of materialism and dualism. Everything in a student's life is seen as interconnected and class curriculum follows this precept. For example, when students are learning about ecosystems in biology, they also do artwork in art class on nature to connect subject matter for a broader understanding of universal interconnection.<sup>36</sup> Much like the earlier established Waldorf schools, the Shambhala School seeks to bring personal relevance and meaning to everything learned in school.

Students, parents, faculty, administration, and even the physical building itself are seen as inherently valuable and as pieces of the summation of the entire school ecosystem. A public lecture by faculty member Jackie Mitchell discussed this view in depth:

To take an analogy from the natural world, one can see the school as an eco-system existing in a larger educational environment. The definition of an eco-system is “a community of organisms interacting with one another and the environment in which they live”. In a healthy eco-system all the parts are interconnected making up a balanced whole. All the parts have a role to play, they are integrated with each other and they are continually shifting to maintain the balance within the eco-system. In nature, the health of the eco-system is dependent on this balance, and imbalance results in dis-ease. We can take this model of ecological balance and apply it to a model for education that sees the school as an eco-system. In this approach, therefore, we need to look at all the players and aspects of school life as an integrated whole, rather than focusing solely on curriculum as distinct from method, or regarding the physical environment as secondary to what is taught. All the elements, which include students, teachers, parents, the administration, the physical environment and the classrooms, the materials and teaching tools, the curriculum and the methodology – what we teach and how we teach it – and the open communication and interaction between these elements, are all important to the overall health of the school. (Mitchell 2007:3)

This understanding of the school as an ecosystem affects the way that decisions and interactions are undertaken. There is considerable communication between faculty as well as between faculty and parents whenever a decision needs to be made that will affect the school. The administration has a leadership role in the ecosystem. Parents are vital to the school because “The more educated the parents are in school values, curriculum and methodology, the smoother the interface between home and school.” (Mitchell 2007:16) The children are most important because they need to be fostered to develop qualities that allow them to find their confidence, wisdom, and a life-long love of learning.

### **The Waldorf Influence**

An important pedagogical feature of Waldorf education that Shambhala uses is the division of types of teaching into three main age groups. Steiner proposed that children learn in increasingly complex ways in seven-year segments, starting with 0-7 years of

age, then 7-14 years of age, and finally 14-21 years of age (Urhmacher 1995:389).

Teachers follow the theory that at each age group, students take in information and learn in different ways.<sup>37</sup> The faculty members teach children under seven years old through a primarily visual-kinesthetic oriented curriculum. Steiner theorized that children at this age have yet to develop complex analytical and abstract thinking skills, and thus learn best through movement, visuals, and imitation.

The second important pedagogical feature followed for this age group surrounds the teaching of morals. Steiner and many other holistic educators have argued that moral teachings did not fully get through to children in this age group (Urhmacher 1995:390). Rather than trying to teach morals through stories, teachers should act in a moral way and provide an example for how children should grow up to be. The faculty in the elementary school at Shambhala take caution to be mindful of the way that they interact with students as well as how they are setting an example for how to act.<sup>38</sup> Teachers at Shambhala note that it is a difficult task to always be mindful of how they are portraying themselves as a moralistic, compassionate leader in front of students, but cite it as a rewarding and vital part of teaching children.<sup>39</sup> Teaching young children with this philosophy is thought to allow the whole of a child to grow in a confident, compassionate manner, at an academic level that is most suitable for their age, and to enhance a sense of belonging to a community.

At ages 7-14 the child is considered to be entering into a time of deeper feeling and processing (Urhmacher 1995:390). In this age group, students start to develop a need for explanations, begin to detach from home life and identify with peers over family, and develop a deeper sense of reasoning and thought processing. During this time, methods shift away from primarily body-oriented tasks, to ones that are based in reading, writing,

drawing, and story telling. The involvement of the whole body is still vital, but deeper psychological growth requires everything taught to be endowed with meaning and relevance to the student. At this stage, many teachers still follow the philosophy of Steiner and Enki to help students make the transition from a family-focused mentality to a peer-focused mentality, with the aim of helping students “come into their own” and develop a strong sense of self-confidence and community.<sup>40</sup>

After this phase, students in the high school level are considered to be ready for abstract thinking, the formation of opinions, and the development of deep analytical thinking (Urhmacher 1995:391). This is also followed at the Shambhala School in the upper years. At this point students are taught meditation, varying contemplation techniques, and how to think critically.<sup>41</sup> Students at this age are considered to be developing a sense of personal identity and understanding their connection to the world around them. Up until graduation the curriculum continues to be enhanced by this philosophy, with the aim of having students graduate as confident, engaged, academically curious individuals.<sup>42</sup>

Teacher autonomy is considered an important factor in bringing this philosophy to life.<sup>43</sup> This level of autonomy is valued in Waldorf Schools (Foster 1984:230), and is also apparent at the Shambhala School. The faculty members agree that in order to allow for the best teaching methods to come forward, teachers should have a generous amount of autonomy in creating their curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to integrate methods that suit their strengths or they perceive to be beneficial for the development of the student. Teachers are given room to explore the theories and methods that they prefer, but each faculty member interviewed remained philosophically grounded in the notion that all



humans are inherently good and that part of their mission was to develop students in a confident, compassionate manner.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Enki Influence on Pedagogy**

Enki predominantly plays a role in influencing the elementary school's philosophy. Enki itself is an amalgamation of Waldorf philosophy, scientific findings in psychology, and neurological development theories.<sup>45</sup> Teachers at the lower school have incorporated this pedagogy into the classroom since the school's inception. While many of the holistic theories and methods remain similar to Waldorf education, the emphasis on practices to benefit neurological development, which founded its Sensory Integration Program, make it unique. The faculty members interviewed at the school were interested in scientific research including neuroscience and psychology, that can help them to improve their curriculum and better educate the whole of a student.<sup>46</sup>

The Sensory Integration Program is rooted in the idea that the base development of human beings is still the same as it was in ancient times. Enki education posits that the four senses of sound, smell, sight, and hearing are better developed and processed when the sense of touch is nourished first. Touch is considered the base of a person's neurological development, and without nourishing movement systems; a child may become overwhelmed with all other sensory input. Therefore, elementary education must include an emphasis on nourishing and integrating the touch system, balance system, and muscle/joint system. The theory argues that without an internal awareness and understanding of what is happening in the body at the present moment, it will be much

harder to process incoming stimuli from the other four senses; which may inhibit the full psychological growth of a child. As stated on the Enki Website:

Our first emphasis is on strengthening and developing the core muscles and the limbs to give the child the postural base for both movement and later “seat” learning. Next we look to develop his ground rhythm through both movement work and the dependable rhythms of the day. This will be the base experience on which the sense of order and sequence so critical to higher learning is founded. From here, through movement activities, crafts, finger plays, we work with the more complex skills of balance, crossing of all three midlines, wrist flexibility, fine motor coordination, visual tracking, and auditory discrimination. We look to see not only strength in each area but overall integration of these senses.<sup>47</sup>

The faculty members of the elementary school at Shambhala attempt to foster the imaginative side of students through Enki practices; enhancing their pedagogy with other techniques found in the Shambhala tradition and Waldorf education. Enki’s Sensory Integration Program fits into the worldview of Shambhala’s spiritual education system. Whereas the Shambhala Buddhist influence emphasizes present moment living and contemplation from a spiritual perspective, Enki explores the potential benefits of full-body, sensory-based education from a more scientific perspective.

Enki education’s Sensory Integration Program is less emphasized in the upper school, but full-body experiential practices remain a component of daily life in the school. Students in the upper years are still considered to be part of the three-tiered, seven-year age groups, where the 14-18 year old students begin to receive more of an emphasis in academic learning and critical thinking skills.<sup>48</sup> The adolescents in Enki programs as well as at Shambhala are faced with the question of “Who am I?” and the upper years aim to enable a healthy exploration of this deeper question amidst academic learning.<sup>49</sup>

The philosophy supports holistic growth through self-discovery, community building, and academic rigor. It seeks to tie together each component so that every part of

a student's education is a valuable and meaningful experience. As stated on the Enki

Education website:

Twelfth graders will focus on modern global culture comparing it to ancient worlds. Particular focus will be on how this global culture impacts their lives and their "world view"... Along with the need to make an independent contribution in the larger community, high school students still need to form their own community of peers.<sup>50</sup>

The Shambhala School integrates all of the above practices through an annual wilderness retreat at a National Park, volunteering and fundraising for local organizations throughout the year, learning about social issues, as well as the interconnection of the world's peoples and natural systems.<sup>51</sup>

Relating both to Waldorf and Enki education models, the Shambhala School faculty believe that students should have a certain level of autonomy for academic discovery.<sup>52</sup> Student autonomy at Shambhala allows students to explore topics of their own interest within a school subject, so that they can learn and grow from material that is relevant and personally interesting to them. The ability for students to choose projects and explorations in a given subject increases as students enter higher grades. The theory posits that by the time a student is in their final year of high school, they will have cultivated a curiosity for learning, a sense of self-discovery through this exploration, and a larger level of academic knowledge that can benefit them in life and in future educational ventures.<sup>53</sup> Autonomy to explore what interests them is a way of cultivating a passion for learning and an ability to make healthy life choices.

## Science and Shambhala Philosophy

“Holistic education is rooted in a cosmology that posits a fundamental unity to the universe and as such ought to take into account interconnections among the purpose of schooling, the nature of the growing child, and the relationships between human being and the universe at large.” (Urmacher, 1995:401)

A very important final component to the exploration of the Shambhala School worldview and pedagogy is the influence of modern sciences. In interviews with the participants, neuroscience, psychology, quantum physics, and biology were mentioned as empirical evidence to support the reasoning for their style of education.<sup>54</sup> There is extensive research available in scholarly journals that propose the possibility of long-term benefits of mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative activities (e.g. Shapiro et al. 2008; Hart 2004). There is also a developing body of research in neuroscience that is changing the way holistic educators and even some mainstream schools teach and interact with students. Two faculty members mentioned quantum physics as a scientific body of research that relates to common Western Buddhist perceptions of interconnection and impermanence.<sup>55</sup> Biology was given as a primary example for the fundamental interconnection of everything within nature, as well as evidence for the impermanence of all life.

All of the faculty members interviewed were interested in modern neuroscience findings relating to early child development.<sup>56</sup> The faculty members at the school stated that they were interested in learning how the brains of developing youth worked, so that they could continue to develop a curriculum that would benefit the whole of the student. Faculty members have used many of these research findings when creating their own

classroom curriculum, from pre-primary through to grade twelve. Examples of this include dancing and drumming in the elementary school, and yoga in the upper school.

When discussing the worldview of the Shambhala School, some faculty members related their understanding of the universe to modern theories purported by quantum physics.<sup>57</sup> Faculty members aim to undo the current prevalent mechanistic-model of the universe, which they explained as viewing the universe as a machine, operating in separated parts to create a mechanistic whole. The mechanistic worldview does not fit with the Shambhala vision of holism and inherent interconnection. As one faculty member explained, this worldview is not only inconsistent with modern physics, but has created a dangerous ‘survival of the fittest’ model for the way people interact and deal with conflict:

The worldview that is most problematic, that we are working against, is... the mechanistic model. That we are... just sort of machines, that the environment is a machine that can be fixed, and there are all these separate parts. Molecules bump into molecules, but its very materialistic. The other part is how we’ve adopted the survival of the fittest modality. It’s those two paradigms that are the biggest obstacle. And both of them are being torn apart by science... but also the social sciences! Darwin’s book *The Descent of Man* mentions survival of the fittest twice, and it mentions the word love ninety some times. Huxley who popularized Darwin actually had the much more cynical view of survival of the fittest; Darwin noticed a huge amount of cooperation in the natural world. So both of those paradigms basically lead to this fundamental error. The sense that we are separate! That’s it. We’re separated because we’re machines, and because we’re supposed to be separated to survive. That isn’t the way it works, but that’s the way we act.<sup>58</sup>

The faculty member continued on describing specific examples that support modern physics and the possibility that the entire universe is entangled. Quoting everything from Einstein, to Darwin, and Princeton studies on random number generators, they detailed their understanding of entanglement and its important relation to education:

Do you know about entanglement? This was an experiment that Einstein did; he called it spooky action at a distance. Two other scientists worked on this experiment... no matter how far they separated two atoms, they continued to interact and turn. Well, from that point of view, we all started at the big bang... so we're all entangled! We're all completely entangled! Do you know about argon? So argon is 1% of the earth's atmosphere. It never changes. It's always been 1%, it doesn't combine or change, it just stays free floating. So they literally know how many argon particles are in the atmospheres. So they can calculate how many you take in. they calculate every time you breathe, you are literally breathing the same particles once breathed by Jesus, Joan of Arc, and so on... we're completely entangled. The last one is a random number generator; they are very simple machines, and now they have like sixty of them. It was developed out of Princeton, this undergrad student proposed this experiment and this old professor liked the design of it, but the results of the experiment were so astounding that he followed it through for the rest of his career. So the actual machine is basically a glorified coin machine... ones and zeros. They had somebody sit there and have it go a certain way, they noticed that a small fluctuation is significant. Things like the Twin Towers event, or the tsunami in Indonesia, that these random number generators which are now all around the world, explode with a lack of random numbers. There is no media that has picked this stuff up yet. Even more, it happens slightly before the event. There is a global consciousness that responds and affects the world as a unit! They are talking about results that are improbable, to the tune of ten to the thirteenth power. A trillion of a chance... that this level of data would be seen. Why is that? Because we're not separate! Ok... so let's act that way. Let's create institutions and education systems that act that way. The way that we treat each other is impactful on a powerful level. We're not creating the citizens we want to create.<sup>59</sup>

Other faculty members briefly mentioned undoing the materialistic worldview that they argue permeates Western thought.<sup>60</sup> Faculty members considered the modern physics worldview of entanglement to be consistent with their philosophy of education from all predominant influences, those being Shambhala Buddhist, Waldorf, and Enki. Continuing with the topic of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' debate, faculty members cited biology as a prime example for the need to develop education systems that focus on communication, cooperation, and respect.

## **Conclusion**

The Shambhala philosophy of education is an amalgamation of holistic and contemplative theories and methods. There is a major influence of Buddhism in its core teachings, but it works coherently with the other models of education they use. Waldorf, Enki, and science, especially neuroscience and psychology, comprise the majority of non-Buddhist influences on pedagogy. These influences culminate in a pedagogy that draws on a variety of methods in The Shambhala School's attempt to educate students in mind, body, and spirit. It aims to be a fully holistic education system, seeking to integrate every noticeable and important aspect of individuals, community, and academics into an enriching educational experience.

The faculty members emphasize undoing the modern materialistic worldview, aiming to instill a sense of a living universe that is interconnected. They view the school as an ecosystem, and everything within it as changing and vibrant. The worldview of the school is congruent with Shambhala Buddhism as well as nature-based spiritual traditions, such as Aboriginal spirituality and Shamanism. The worldview of the school as a living organism directs teachers into taking an organic approach to teaching communication, conflict, and pedagogy. The goals are hefty and it remains difficult to quantify how the philosophy has translated to affecting students who have graduated from the school. It was beyond the scope of research to interview the majority of faculty members, and thus understand if this philosophy of education is shared among all staff, or even practiced in similar ways.

### **Chapter 3: Practices at the Shambhala School**

This chapter will address how the Shambhala School integrates their worldview and pedagogies into an actual classroom setting. The majority of subjects taught in class are the same as Nova Scotian public schools (e.g. math, English, biology etc.), however the methods used to teach differ in some ways. As well, the Shambhala School aims to integrate contemplative practices into each class and they also offer workshops specifically in the contemplative arts, such as Japanese flower arranging and non-violent communication (Faculty consider learning how to communicate in a compassionate way to be an art form, as well as a practice that becomes better over time). The daily life of the school is where the philosophy of teaching inherent goodness comes into practice.

In this chapter I will explore several key components that make up the methods specific to holistic and contemplative education at the Shambhala School. I will explore the general practices of the entire school, paying attention to what is used by both the elementary and upper school on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Then I will explore some of the practices observed by only the elementary school or upper school. Most of the specific practices are drawn from Waldorf, Enki, and the Virtues Project (which will be explained in detail below). The methods used at the school will be related back to the mission statement, and lead into the final chapter concluding the research study and raising questions for future research.



### **Physical Surroundings of the School**

Tibetan artistic design influences the interior of the building. The wall colors are warm, rich colors similar to those seen in the Shambhala center and many Tibetan meditation retreats. One of the faculty members noted that physical space is a very important aspect of the teaching environment.<sup>61</sup> Most of the walls are a warm yellow, vibrant red, pastel pink, or a bright blue. The artwork and projects of students hangs amidst Shambhala School flags and posters. Flowers, plants, and incense burners are found in each classroom, often leaving the school with a faint scent of smoky, sweet incense.

The faculty members interviewed all remarked on the importance of creating a warm, safe-feeling environment in order to allow students to flourish socially as well as academically.<sup>62</sup> The director of the school emphasized that children cannot flourish under a fight or flight response, and in the daily life of educating youth, the school must continually create a comfortable presence. Once space and place are taken care of, the faculty members can turn their attentions to the interactions with students and the subject at hand.

### **The Rhythm of Daily Learning**

The faculty members of the school ascribed to the notion of completing each day as a rhythm of in-breath and out-breath movements.<sup>63</sup> In-breath activities were described as rigorous, learning intensive activities. Out breath activities on the other hand, were described as mental release; a time to relax and reflect. Both the upper school and

elementary school take part in the rhythmic learning of working with in-breath and out-breath. Faculty members understand daily life, even outside of the classroom, to benefit from periods of intensity alternating with periods of rest and reflection.

There were many instances where I observed this practice during my field research. On a daily basis, each class began with a bow and a few moments for students to settle into their chairs.<sup>64</sup> Students would then explore the topic of the class, such as physics in science or geometry in mathematics, and at the end of class bow again to one another and the teacher. Even during a class, there was an emphasis on being mindful of the task at hand. During art class, students in the elementary school were taught a specific method for water painting, and were shown how to focus on each movement of the brush stroke in the process of creating their art piece. After the period of painting, focusing on process over finished product, the students sat on the floor and read novels to each other. Following a rhythmic approach that allows for in-breath and out-breath patterns, as well as integrating mindfulness and full-body experience into the entire day, is not an easy task, as faculty member Jackie Mitchell mentioned in her lecture:

In the formation of the daily schedule, the rhythms of the body and in particular the breath, is an underlying reference point. There are times of day when the child focuses intently, metaphorically breathing in. Then there are the times of day when the child is putting out a lot of energy, such as at recess, which can be corresponded with the out breath. The gap between the two is the time for rest and relaxation – “down time”. Most schedules will incorporate the rhythm of the in breath and the out breath, but it is harder to schedule the gap, which is an essential aspect of this rhythm. Without it however, the children’s energy can become rather frenetic and discipline problems may occur. For the teacher, too, an absence of gap becomes tiring and she will feel as if she is dragging the class along, rather than directing with a light touch. A successful schedule will attend to the balance of in breath, out breath and gap. (Mitchell 2007:14)

The rhythmic pattern of the school day is intended to support both students and teachers. One faculty member stated that this was another way of seeing the school as an ecosystem.<sup>65</sup>

As another example of the daily rhythm, the upper school students were completing intensives week in February. Intensives week is very similar to exam week in the Nova Scotia public school system. Students and teachers delve deeply into the subjects they are learning and complete projects related to the subject. After intensives were finished, the teachers took them to the gym for meditation and rest. One faculty member mentioned that aside from being part of a rhythm, it was teaching students self-care.<sup>66</sup>

On another occasion after an intensives period, the grade eleven students watched a series of TED Talks on education, happiness, and purpose, and engaged in a conversation about each video. TED Talks are a series of videotaped short lectures given at educational institutions around the world on a variety of topics falling under Technology, Education, and Design. Between videos the students were allowed to get up, walk around the room, and stretch. During the videos, students were allowed to practice whatever helped them focus on the video. For students who felt they were more tactile, they were allowed to make origami, while visual-oriented students doodled on paper while listening. Students who found it hard to sit still were allowed to sit or stand in the back of the class and move quietly as they pleased. They were encouraged to find their breath and be present. When discussing the videos afterwards, the students were encouraged to explore how the message made them feel, how the video resonated with them, and what they thought about the message. Before leaving the class, students were

instructed to bow, with the teacher saying, “Remember, a proper bow, respectful of yourself and everyone else.”

### **Communication and Conflict**

Volunteering takes place throughout the school year and is guided by the students’ particular interests.<sup>67</sup> In previous years students have volunteered with local food banks, fundraised money to support the damage from the typhoon in the Philippines, participated in discussions about the Cogswell Interchange in Halifax (an intersection in the downtown core being redeveloped to better suit automotive and pedestrian needs), and put on coffee houses to fundraise for different local charities. The teachers want to instill a sense of compassion and engagement with society, and allow students to choose for which projects they would like to volunteer. As one of the upper school faculty members emphasized, “it’s what they want to see, what they feel is important.”<sup>68</sup> Teachers saw this as enabling the development of understanding and connection with the outer world, and allowing students to feel empowered to make a positive impact on their community.

In class students take part in talking circles that are based on an Aboriginal model, as well as when conflict arises among classmates.<sup>69</sup> The talking circle is explained in the student handbook as:

A medium for direct exchange of views and information, students meet in a circle monthly or as need dictates. Participants pass a special object around the circle enabling students and staff alike to have the opportunity to express any thoughts or feelings they wish.<sup>70</sup>

Talking circles are used in class to discuss ideas and ensure that students are being heard when talking. There are specific talking circles for both the boys and girls at the school. Women's Circles occur monthly; and the female students and teachers in the school gather in an afternoon during the week to discuss topics such as feminine hygiene, dating, self-compassion, and other topics that the girls feel are important; male students partake in a similar one. One of the faculty members stated that they had previously worked in an intercity school in Winnipeg with a large aboriginal population.<sup>71</sup> They borrowed the method from the community because of the benefits to communication and conflict resolution they had witnessed in the school, which they believed could be used at any school.

The school deals with conflict through combining talking circle methods with non-violent communication practices proposed by specialist Marshall Rosenberg. The faculty members understood talking circles as a great method to exercise their philosophy of teaching compassion and inherent goodness. Teachers in conflict resolution circles direct students when there is an issue. Teachers also use this method to resolve many of their own conflicts when dealing with administrative, financial, and social disputes. As the director of the program stated:

Student conflict is pretty easy... there are forms that we have, for instance a bowing form. They know for example, when they sit up straight, there's a sense of being your best. They look at the other person and offer them their best. It's like a kinesthetic memory cue for all the contemplative mindfulness stuff that we do. As soon as you do that, you're in this space. The way we run meetings after that is very much a talking circle. So there's a sense of learning how to listen, how to speak, what occurred without getting into interpretation or blame, how you felt when it happened. Which is not that easy! Feelings versus judgments... basically stuff that was drawn from the non-violent communication seminar by Marshall Rosenberg.<sup>72</sup>

When it comes to a student acting out consistently or running into trouble at the school, a talking circle is also called. The Shambhala School Student handbook explains their method for dealing with students who are having issues, whether social, academic, or otherwise:

Mistakes are not a problem per se. When a student is seen as veering off track, a teacher will call a talking circle with various stakeholders so that everyone can speak from the heart and everyone can hear the felt experience of people involved. In this way the school will go a great distance to join a student's journey with the practice and acquisition of lifelong strengths, virtues and noble qualities.<sup>73</sup>

All of these methods for introspection, social engagement, and communication relate back to the core mission of the school. The faculty members understand conflict as inevitable, but it is not seen as necessarily negative. They understand conflict as an opportunity to transform emotions and situations into a deeper level of understanding self and other, allowing for the growth of compassionate interaction.

### **Theme Teaching Throughout the School**

One of the most important methods used by the faculty for teaching values, morals, and wisdom is that of Multicultural Theme Teaching. Every story taught to elementary school children is carefully selected for its themes relating to the students' stage of life; this approach is drawn from Waldorf Education. As an example, students in grade three are considered to be entering a time where they are moving away from their family-oriented identity and starting to identify more with their friends. Stories taught at this grade focus on people who are leaving the comforts of home and beginning to explore the world on their own, collecting wisdom and self-confidence as they go forward. The story that was

being explored during observations in the lower school was the tale of the Israelites wandering the desert. In the upper school, students read stories such as Gilgamesh and The Iliad, which are much more complex and deal with deepening self-discovery, questions about meaning, and considerations of purpose in life.

Theme teaching is considered important at each level of education at the Shambhala School because of the relevance to the student's personal development as an independent, confident, critically aware individual.<sup>74</sup> At a young age stories are read to the students out loud, and classroom projects such as painting a desert scene or eating the food that the traveling Israelites were said to have eaten, are thought to bring the story to life and allow the student to contemplate the meaning of the story and its relation to their own life. As explained by Jackie Mitchell in her public lecture:

By grounding concepts and knowledge in experience through storytelling, and integrating them through the process of artistic expression, what a child learns is rooted in their experience. Insight based on perception and experience has deeper roots than information that is received without experiential understanding. Knowledge that is connected, holistic and developmentally appropriate fosters a love of learning and the natural curiosity and intelligence of the child. (Mitchell, 2007:10)

Teachers aim to bring relevance and meaning into every aspect of the classroom experience, and theme teaching is considered one of the best methods to achieve this. Mitchell further explained the details in relation to the development of a child at the elementary school level:

At Grade 5 the child is in a delightful equilibrium between childhood and puberty, having successfully negotiated their way through growing up so far, before the hormonal surge of adolescence again tips them off balance. At this stage, cultures that express the values of harmony and balance, such as Greece or India at the time of Ashoka, reflect the child's development in a way that is integrating for them... At the Shambhala School from grade 3 onwards there is a strong emphasis

on story cycles from indigenous cultures, which often communicate the inherent truths of a culture. (Mitchell 2007:7)

Theme teaching reflects the Shambhala School's belief in the inherent wisdom found in all of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. The faculty members agreed that there is wisdom among all of the religious traditions and cultures, and that the best way to grow and develop in a compassionate, confident manner is through examining several traditions. The theosophy movement and the offshoot anthroposophy movement also hold this concept as vital, yet again showing the interconnection of various philosophies and methods used by the school.

### **Parental Involvement**

Parents are seen as a vital component to the child's academic and personal development.<sup>75</sup> Parents provide the most guidance and support to their children outside of the school environment. They also take part in some of the decisions made about the functioning of the school, with some parents being members of the board and many volunteering their time to school operations. The school serves the students, but in many ways also serves the parents. Faculty members acknowledge that parents want their kids to be happy, as much as they want them to be successful. Interviews with parents were beyond the scope and timeframe allowed for this study. The experiences of parents and their understanding, agreements and disagreements with the school's philosophy could not be addressed.



The Upper School Handbook explains that parental involvement will enrich their understanding of their child's experience as well as allow them to take part in the experience. The handbook states, "whether it be driving on a field trip or speaking to a class about your area of expertise, becoming involved in your child's education enriches your relationship with your own child and allows you to experience their world."<sup>76</sup>

The director of the school acknowledged that teaching youth with the premise of inherent goodness is a worldview, and one that can be difficult to convey to parents and others outside of the school or Shambhala Community. The director explained:

We serve them, we work for them... we want to influence a child's world; we want to provide a meaningful journey. How can you have a meaningful journey if you don't collaborate with their parents? I mean there is a worldview we're putting forth... basic goodness is a worldview. Compassion and empathy is a worldview that our main modality as humans is not to be competitive, its not to be self interested machines. Nor is it in the animal world! So the more we can sync up with the parents, the easier it will be. They want their kid to be happy.<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, in teaching youth the worldview of inherent goodness and attempting to instill that into their way of interacting with the world, parents are an important part of the process. Faculty members argue that it is important to have a shared understanding and practice of teaching students and one's children across the board, from classroom to home life. One way they aim to increase understanding for parents is with weekly newsletters and parent-teacher sessions throughout the year.

Parents are also considered vital to resolving conflicts involving their children. As Jackie Mitchell stated:

When there are serious issues of discipline it is most helpful if the parents and teachers together come up with solutions for dealing with these issues. In cases of extreme difficulty it might be necessary for the teacher to suggest resource help to

the parents. The key to integration here, as in all other aspects, is communication and an emphasis on shared values. (Mitchell 2007:18)

The school considers communication and understanding of the Shambhala philosophy important to the success of the child on a more personal level. The “shared values” mentioned by Mitchell relates to understanding and integrating the practices of compassion, patience, and other virtues in the student’s home life.

Finally, parents are vital to the functioning and continued existence of the school. Being privately funded, the school values contributions made by parents in both financial and volunteer forms.<sup>78</sup> Most of the funding for the school comes from annual tuition fees and donations given to the school by parents, alumni, and others.

### **Practices of the Elementary School**

In the elementary school, students were never sitting still for extended periods of time. Teachers followed the premise that young children do not naturally sit still, so each subject was broken up with movement in between. As well, much of the classroom activities involved a form of full-body movement. Students painted while standing and learned letters by walking them out with their whole body. Communication between teachers and students was acted out through the methods provided predominantly by Waldorf education and the Enki approach.

Teachers attempt to find ways to integrate whole body movement and sensory integration into each portion of the day. One such example is in the arts, where students learn to knit. On occasion, some grandmothers and aunts of students will come on Friday afternoons to teach the students how to knit, and then stay to practice with them for the

duration of the class.<sup>79</sup> Another example is music lessons and dance. Teachers guide the students through dance and movement sequences, or teach them to play the drums, focusing on being present and feeling their physical movements. One of the faculty members of the school described drumming and dancing as one of the most exciting activities, and explained that the energy in the room was “really something to see!”<sup>80</sup>

One faculty member described the importance of sensory experience from a scientific point of view:

Beyond the teacher holding the atmosphere, the more kind of sensory experience really creates a learning environment where you’re smelling, touching and feeling... feeling how your emotions move in your body. That has been shown to be a great way to operate from your prefrontal cortex. That place is for creativity, the bigger picture. So just from a scientific point of view, a sensory experience is shown to activate your higher brain.<sup>81</sup>

There was a lot of discussion with the faculty members about neuroscience studying the different cortexes of the brain when individuals are engaged in multi-sensory tasks.

One important practice in the elementary school relating back to the core mission of teaching inherent goodness is the use of The Virtues Project.<sup>82</sup> Posters and flyers about the Virtues Project were found on walls in the entrance and main office of the school. Teachers saw the Virtues Project as a perfect fit with the school’s intention of creating compassionate and confident youth. When interviewing a teacher who has given workshops on integrating the virtues into both school and home life, she explained that these virtues were “the language of basic goodness.”<sup>83</sup> She stated that in order to bring out the inherent goodness in students and teachers, one must use a language of kindness to instruct and guide youth.

Much of the practice of the Virtues Project in the elementary school comes from what the faculty member described as “teachable moments.”<sup>84</sup> One of the main ideas was that when a student has done something wrong, instead of reprimanding and punishing them, the teacher should converse with them and see the positive. One such example was given of a boy who transferred to the school who was highly energetic and sometimes destructive to property or hurtful to other students. The teacher approached him affirming the positive things that he brought to the class, and then explained to him that he could work on transferring his energy into something positive. The teacher had him talk to the students he had upset to understand how it made the other person feel, and guided him to school activities that used lots of energy. Over time, she stated that the young boy did become less destructive and developed closer relationships with his peers.

An important part of the process that is emphasized by the Virtues Project, but also Shambhala Buddhism, is the notion of non-judgment. What the teacher above aimed to do was create a dialogue that did not reprimand the boy by focusing on the negative event and punishing him, but rather looking into the situation to discern what was causing the behavior, finding the positive aspect, and attempting to transform the way that the student directed his energy. The focus on non-judgment in dealing with school conflict begins in the early years with affirming the basic goodness of students and attempting to cultivate virtues. This non-judgment means dealing with conflict without getting attached to one’s perceptions of the event.

Another important aspect of elementary school experience is having students complete daily chores. Teachers want to instill a sense of responsibility in the students from an early age. During observation, at the end of the day students returned to the classroom and immediately begin to complete their cleaning tasks.<sup>85</sup> Some students swept

the floor, others put up chairs, some tidied the arts and crafts on a table, and others wiped the chalkboard clean. The teacher explained that at the school, students had responsibilities to help keep the school environment clean and healthy.

In terms of socializing, students and teachers take snack and lunch breaks as a group, and many activities involve working in groups.<sup>86</sup> Sometimes the teacher will read a story to the students as they eat, or everyone will engage in relaxed conversation. Students in the elementary school have reading buddies; usually a student in upper elementary grades will read to a student in the lower grades. Group discussions and social interaction are a large part of the daily curriculum in all of the subjects. Social interaction is enhanced through community and school events involving students, teachers, and sometimes parents. The Shambhala School celebrates festivals in honor of the changing of the seasons of fall, winter, and spring as understood in the Shambhala tradition.<sup>87</sup> Children in the elementary school cook a meal together, under the supervision of teachers, and then dress up and eat together in the school's gym. Parents volunteer to help out with the organizing and setting up of the event, and also take part in the feast. There are other minor events throughout the year that are observed by students and teachers.

### **Practices of the Upper School**

In many respects, the upper school continues the philosophies and methods of the elementary school. One faculty member explained that the upper school follows the Waldorf approach in some ways, but also incorporates more meditation and contemplative activities into the curriculum.<sup>88</sup> They explained that as the students reach adolescence, they become able to think in increasingly abstract and complex ways.

The practice of meditation begins in grade seven and remains a part of the daily morning and afternoon routine until graduation. Students are taught a form of meditation practiced in Shambhala Buddhism; that is, eyes open but facing downward, legs crossed comfortably, sitting upright, mouth and body relaxed, and mind attempting to focus on breathing. This is done for ten minutes each morning and again before students go home at the end of the day. The reasoning for teaching meditation is based on the proposed mental, emotional, and physical benefits of the practice.

Mindfulness and contemplation are woven into the curriculum in all aspects of study, from the morning meditation to the subjects learned throughout the day. As the school website states:

Regular participation by students in physical education, sports, and martial arts promotes healthy living, and helps centre the mind and body. Drawing from the Shambhala tradition, the school invites students from grades seven to twelve to begin each day with a brief period of meditation and yoga. These activities help students to centre themselves and create a “fresh start”, which provides a natural transition from non-school to school activities.<sup>89</sup>

Continuing the intent of making a “fresh start” each day, students are encouraged in their courses to think critically about the subject, and journaling is often used.<sup>90</sup>

The Shambhala School faculty members desire a well-rounded curriculum, which to them means one that not only integrates mind, body, and spirit, but also the arts and sciences.<sup>91</sup> The school offers courses that compliment their philosophy of education; for example Cultures and Leadership offered in grade ten which “explores the themes of contemporary culture and leadership through the lens of historical examples.”<sup>92</sup> Students in this course study historical cultures from around the world as well as critically examine modern society to attempt to gain insight into the current world. Students explore the

teachings and experiences of leaders from these cultures as well as values, strategies, and models. One faculty member explained that this course is valuable for theme teaching, but also aims to be a guide in teaching students how to become compassionate leaders and citizens in their own society.<sup>93</sup>

One of the experiential ways that students are taught how to become leaders and contributing members to their community is through nature excursions.<sup>94</sup> The upper year students partake in an excursion to Kejimikujik National Park in southern Nova Scotia each fall. This is considered an opportunity to spend several days in nature learning hands-on skills about the natural world as well as leadership development. The faculty members want to instill a love and appreciation of the natural world within each student. Activities in nature are completed throughout the school year, with the trip to the national park being the most rigorous and lengthy. Faculty members explain that working in nature helps to develop a sense of interconnection with the land, and that working as a group helps build leadership skills.

Another excursion that happens each year is a trip to Windhorse Farm in New Germany, Nova Scotia. Windhorse Farm is run by Shambala Community members with years of experience in both Shambhala Training and environmental sustainability.<sup>95</sup> The trip for students of the school focuses on creating leaders, learning about sustainability, permaculture, and living in harmony with nature. Upper year students participate in workshops developed by the leaders of the farm, and also partake in Shambhala-oriented mindfulness activities including meditation. Between the Kejimikujik excursion, Windhorse farm retreat, and other outdoor activities, faculty members hope that students will develop confidence about being in nature, appreciate the beauty of nature, and also come to see their inherent connection to nature and the importance of taking care of it.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

A main point in relating the pedagogies and practices back to the core mission of teaching inherent goodness is the realization that *how* someone teaches is equally as important to *what* someone teaches. The faculty members at the Shambhala School believe that they are integrating their worldview of inherent goodness into the way that they teach and interact with one another, students, and parents. The influence of Waldorf, Shambhala Buddhism, and the holistic Enki Approach help to define the school as a spiritual institution not only in philosophy, but also in practice. Staff members at Shambhala have assessed the whole of the educational institution, from communication to curriculum and social interaction, in order to develop what they believe is a truly holistic and spiritual school community. Through interacting and transforming the lives and worldviews of teachers and parents, the school aims to cultivate a culture of kindness that may extend to the outside world. By educating students using methods in a holistic, caring, and community-oriented way, the school hopes to create a kind of citizen that is confident, critical, and actively engaged in their community.

It is important to note the differences in practices between the elementary school and the upper school. This could trace back to how the schools began separately and after a few years of operation, joined together at the current location as one school. The philosophy is similar between both, but the practices emphasize different theories and methods. For example, the elementary school relies heavily on Waldorf, Enki, and the Virtues Project, while the upper school places less emphasis on those and more on contemplation-based activities. There is a marked pronunciation of Buddhist-style



practices in the upper school. Might these differences become lessened as the school continues into the future? What do these differences say about the functioning of the school as a unified body and a “spiritual ecosystem”? Another important question surrounds parental views and acceptance of the school’s philosophies and practices. Since interviews with parents were beyond the scope of this research, future research could examine how parents understand the school’s mission and practice, as well as their general experiences of having children educated in this setting.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

This thesis has explored the pedagogies and practices of the Shambhala School of Halifax and their aim of developing confident, compassionate, and socially engaged citizens. I have examined how their worldview of compassion and inherent goodness influences pedagogy and praxis, leading to the potential development of socially engaged citizens. During the research I have discovered a complex education system that seeks to embrace the spiritual and cultural diversity of the world in order to educate individuals in what the faculty believes is a well-rounded, personally meaningful way. The founders started the school out of a desire to give their children a holistic education that encouraged compassion and critical thinking. Drawing on the separate but interrelated influences of Shambhala Buddhism, Waldorf Education, Enki Education, The Virtues Project, and the different world religions, the school has developed a pedagogy that aims to educate youth to succeed and find meaning in the modern world.

Examining the intent to teach inherent goodness at the Shambhala School raises the important question of process. In future research on education and pedagogy it would be worth exploring the impact that this school has had on former students. The difficulty in assessing the impact of the school on alumni lies in the ability to properly quantify what a compassionate, successful, socially engaged citizen looks like. As well, research must take into account other factors that have influenced the development of students, including home life, economics, and outside influences from the media.

The school claims to maintain a focus on personal, spiritual, and community development. It would be interesting to explore the ways that their pedagogy can fit with other curricula that have specific aims to fight racism, oppression, religious intolerance, and other forms of inequality. It is impossible to transform society without first transforming the worldview of the individuals, and there is a possibility that a pedagogy such as the one used at Shambhala could enhance a community building, equality-focused education system. One such example is the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, which aims to bring students from Irish and British backgrounds together through educating them in a worldview of unity, appreciation of diversity, and acceptance of differences.<sup>97</sup> The Shambhala approaches of talking circles, cultures and leadership classes, and even contemplation-based activities could provide additional ways to build unity and teach youth to celebrate diversity.

Looking ahead to the goal of an enlightened society, I asked faculty members what they perceived as potential difficulties in realizing the development of confident, socially engaged citizens. Faculty members had much to say about varying influential factors that can prevent progress towards a more compassionate, peaceful society. They agreed on a few key points worth addressing: the mainstream media needs to change, worldviews of materialism and divisiveness need to be broken down, and education must nourish the mind, body, and spirit of students in order for personal and societal transformation to reach a larger scale.<sup>98</sup> The faculty members shared valuable insights into the challenges they see facing modern North American society:

There's a lot of fear in the world, so a lot of the motivation... doesn't operate or base itself on fear. Three years ago we went to Dalhousie, and talked to the sustainability school there. When we talked to them, they were pretty freaked out about the kinds of information they were hearing, about the problems, anything to

do with the sustainability of society was filled with these threats of food security, insurmountable odds, not only them, but their colleagues... it was exhausting. I think that is a big problem.<sup>99</sup>

The faculty members teach with the sense of basic goodness in order to dismount the fear that they argue permeates modern society. Going back to their view of the world as interconnected, organic, and alive, one faculty member stated:

The worldview that is most problematic, that we are working against, is first, the mechanistic model: that we are, the world and we are, just sort of machines, and that the environment is a machine that can be fixed, and there are all these separate parts. Molecules bump into molecules, but it's very materialistic. The other part is how we've adopted the survival of the fittest modality. It's those two paradigms that are the biggest obstacle. And both of them are being torn apart by science... but also the social sciences... So both of those paradigms basically lead to this fundamental error. The sense that we are separate! That's it. We're separated because we're machines, and because we're supposed to be separated to survive. That isn't the way it works, but that's the way we act.<sup>100</sup>

Education is one mode of enabling personal and societal transformation, but faculty members argue that a compassionate society must come from the different facets that make up the whole of society. This society would not be easily achieved, nor can the fruition come from one area of focus, such as education or politics. The faculty members were realistic about the challenges they worked against, but remained devoted to working with their students to raise them in a confident, intellectual, and compassionate manner. They see their education system as a contrast to the present cultural trend of individual development and achievement by stressing the importance of group forming and social skill development (Mitchell 2007:7).

Teaching inherent goodness aims to bring communities together, strengthen the confidence and self-compassion of the individual, and empower people to transform their communities, and possibly the world at large. The philosophy and practices of the school

reflect a growing movement towards bringing spirituality and sacredness into the education and work spheres. The continued existence of the school over the past two decades, as well as the growth of the Shambhala Community worldwide signify a growing acceptance and use of contemplative and holistic practices by Westerners, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike (Baer 2003).

Thus some of the interesting questions for inquiry become: what are the potential personal and societal benefits to spiritual and contemplative education systems? If societal transformation must come from different sectors of society (i.e. government or businesses), how can contemplation and spirituality be integrated into other areas? What will psychology and the sciences continue to discover about contemplative practices? Are there any downsides to this style of education? Does spiritual, holistic, and contemplative education prepare students for the challenges of life after graduation? How can different sectors of society incorporate and perhaps benefit from contemplative practices and philosophies that are community-oriented?

Studies have been conducted on the proposed benefits of mindfulness and meditation in academic settings for the past several decades. Scholars such as Shauna L. Shapiro, Kirk Warren Brown, and John A. Astin (2008) have summarized key findings from hundreds of lab research reports on people engaging in various forms of contemplative activities. Findings are congruent with personal claims from faculty members at the school that contemplative practices can increase empathy and concentration, while decreasing levels of aggression, anxiety, and negative moods. As stated in Shapiro's report on *The Integration of Meditation in Higher Education*:

Practices for the cultivation of empathy, compassion, and other qualities with consequences for interpersonal behavior have a long tradition in the meditative

disciplines (Walsh, 1999). Mindfulness practice, for example, is believed to lead to a felt sense of trust and closeness with others and an enhanced ability to approach stressful interpersonal events as challenges rather than threats (Kabat-Zinn, 1996), perhaps by promoting a capacity to witness thought and emotion so as not to react impulsively and destructively. (Shapiro et. al. 2008: 12)

Results from these studies are not yet conclusive and little published research has been done to refute these claims.

There are some important conclusions that I have drawn from my research with the Shambhala School. Their worldview of compassion and interconnection has influenced the majority of their pedagogy and practice. Within the Shambhala Education systems lays the same hope that people around the world desire of society: one in which people can live in harmony, citizens can feel like they belong, and where individuals are able to realize their full potential and live a meaningful life. Perhaps a societal shift into a more peaceful, accepting place is still in the distant future, but the work of the school shows that education can play an invaluable role beyond academic pursuits. It is becoming increasingly important to ask what the purpose of education is, why it is important, and how and which underlying worldviews taught within the school system will continue to shape and change the reality of society.

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