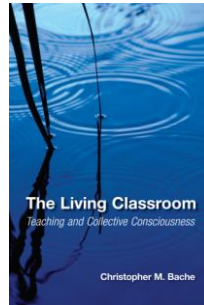


Excerpted from *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness*  
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## Chapter 4

### (An excerpt)

### Skillful Engagement

The outer work can never be small  
if the inner work is great.  
And the outer work can never be great  
if the inner work is small.  
-- Meister Eckhart

Working with students every day has changed my perception of the depth and dynamics of the mind, and this in turn has changed how I engage my students. As my understanding of consciousness has deepened, my approach to teaching has gone through a parallel deepening, leading me to do things I would never have imagined doing when I began my career thirty years ago. If anyone had told me then what I'm about to tell you now, I probably wouldn't have believed them. This is the great gift my students have given me.

In this chapter I want to lay out some of the strategies I've developed through the years for working with fields of consciousness as they emerge in the classroom. There are many ways

of working with these fields, and the suggestions that follow only scratch the surface. We are just beginning to grasp the significance of collective consciousness its implications for how we teach. As we learn more about the deeper workings of the mind, new pedagogical strategies will emerge. We are entering an exciting time of exploration and innovation.

In writing this chapter I have wrestled with how candid to be about how I work with these fields. Part of me wants to describe just the bare bones of the principles involved. I'm a private person by nature, and it's not easy for me to expose this much of my inner world to public scrutiny. Moreover, if I speak the language that is most natural to me, it will combine consciousness discourse with spiritual discourse. Readers who are spirituality-friendly will not be put off by this language, but others may prefer a more spiritually-neutral language. I understand and sympathize with this position, especially given the superficiality of much new age spirituality on the left and the socially conservative agenda of the religious right. On the other hand, if I distance myself from what I am and how I truly operate, the danger is that the abstracted discussion will not have the juice that lived experience brings to the table.

In the end, I have decided to take the risk of candidly describing how I actually work with these fields. I will describe the specific techniques that I use and the assumptions I am making about how the universe works that I bring to these techniques. This is a risky game because I will not argue for these assumptions here or give all the reasons and research that went into their formation. That would be an interesting conversation but it belongs to a different time and place. I am going to trust that readers will recognize the larger intellectual context for many of these convictions or at the very least will be willing to give them a tentative hearing here.

What follows, therefore, reflects a spiritual view of existence. I embrace a multi-dimensional universe alive with multiple forms of life, but I do not accept any one culture's description of this multi-verse as definitive or adequate. I also want to own my limitations and make it clear that the phenomena I'm addressing are larger than any one discipline can encompass and certainly larger than I have encompassed. I therefore encourage readers to critique my positions as they see fit and to experiment with these fields in ways that are most meaningful to them.<sup>76</sup>

### *Fields of Consciousness*

In the new perspective that is emerging in consciousness research today, our personal minds can be thought of as fields and fields have porous boundaries. Fields are open systems. Being porous and open, mental fields seem to be particularly susceptible to *coupling*, to forming spontaneous connections with other minds. As Dean Radin puts it, “individual minds may combine into networks of entangled minds, giving rise to more complex ‘mind circuits.’”

We must twist language to describe the undulations and currents of the resulting patterns of consciousness. While not losing their individual integrity, human minds “flow” and “merge” with other minds to form larger wholes – group fields. Though generated by individual minds, these fields have a life of their own that persists even after the minds that contributed to them have moved on to other activities. They have “sinews” and “fibers.” They have “pockets” and “circles” and “eddies.” This capacity to couple with other minds, when combined with developments in contemporary physics, suggests that there is a pre-existing wholeness underlying individual consciousness, an innate collective potential that can be activated and brought forward.

The class field is a form of collective consciousness that holds our individual minds in communal embrace. It is the instructor’s silent partner in the room, a field of consciousness that connects this present group of students to all the students who have previously taken this course with him or her. Through this field present learning is quickened by previous learning. Just as the prior learning of others has set the stage for these students, their learning will create a slightly stronger and richer platform for those who follow. This is the nature of fields, to become stronger with repetition and gather momentum over time.

The learning fields that develop around teachers are the unregistered student in our courses. Though they do not show up on any roster, they are nonetheless tangibly present in the room. Once you recognize the existence of these fields, it is a natural step to begin working with them *directly* – not just indirectly by working with your students but directly by engaging the fields themselves.

As the instructor, you can work with these fields because you are already part of them, already woven into their fabric. As the teacher of the course, you have been part of the course field from the beginning, and so your mark on it is deep. This is an important point. The teacher is the constant in the long development of the course mind. He or she has been the thread of continuity in the constant turn over of students through the years. These fields, while composed of the energy of many minds, have gathered around *this* person's repeated actions in the world. They are inherently collective fields with many roots and tendrils, but the instructor is their center. If anyone can influence these fields directly, the instructor is in the best position to do so.

Working with these fields is a natural and logical extension of our role as educators. If you understand the model of consciousness that is emerging today, if you grasp the significance of the themes of connectivity, wholeness, superconductivity, resonance, and emergence in contemporary thought, then working with these fields becomes a natural extension of your love of teaching and your desire to do it well. It is simply the "next step" in developing a more conscious pedagogy.

I've broken my strategies for working with these fields into four categories – preparing the field, nourishing the field, visualization exercises, and closing the field. A fifth category, connecting the field through conversation, will be discussed separately in the next chapter.

### ***1. Preparing the Class Field***

Preparing the class field is a process of engaging the learning field being created by the students who are about to take a course with you *before* the course actually begins. *As an intentional field, the class field begins to form when students first decide to take a course and gets stronger as they go through the various steps of enacting that decision.* Because the class field or class mind begins to form before a course begins, I begin working with it before classes start, usually as soon as registration begins.

In preparing the class field, my intention is to remove obstacles to the learning that is about to take place, both my obstacles and those of my students. In doing this, I am making a number of assumptions. In addition to assuming the existence of this field, I assume that I can

communicate with it and enter into conscious communion with it. Because this is an intentional field, I assume that my intention can influence it in some way. This may be a bold presumption, but both research and a long line of meditation masters support this belief.

In addition, I assume that as the instructor for the course, my intention is in certain respects the *seed catalyst* of this field, calling it into existence, so to speak. For this reason I believe it is important for me to clarify my intention for my course and my students before we begin our work together. Clarifying and focusing my intention is the first step toward having a productive semester, and this involves re-connecting with the ideals that guide me in my work.

Before the semester begins, I take some time to *review my commitments*. I remind myself why I am doing what I do for a living and ask myself if I am prepared to do it again. I review my beliefs about humanity, the role of education in changing people's lives, and the critical point we have come to in history. Placing my course in this larger context, I recommit myself to serving my students to the best of my ability.

If I find that I am not ready to give them my best effort or if I am distracted by other things going on in my life, frustrated with departmental politics or just plain tired, I stay with it as long as it takes until I can reconnect with my deeper commitments. Sometimes this realignment takes days or even weeks of attention. Teaching consciously – by which I mean bringing my *full* consciousness with all its levels to the act of teaching and engaging my students with all their levels – is demanding work. I don't deserve the privilege unless I am ready to give it my best effort.

Next, I *screen the field*. In the weeks during registration, I bring my soon-to-be students to mind and hold them in my awareness. I reach out to them mentally and ask that our time together be beneficial and productive. Because of my respect for the power of the forces that may be triggered by our coming together, I ask that the right students show up in my classes. Speaking to their unconscious, I ask that those who are ready to do this work come forward and that those who are not be guided to choose other courses. I project my intentions for the course that they may choose in the deep mystery that surrounds us what best serves their purpose, and then I surrender to the larger wisdom that brings us together.

I don't pretend that I can control these processes, of course, and would not try to calculate the impact of this exercise, but *given what we already know about the power of conscious thought*, I would not be acting responsibly as an educator if I did not clarify my intention and project it outwardly as clearly and powerfully as I know how. I repeat this process several times before a course begins. As soon as I have a tentative roster for the course, I include it in the exercise.

If this sounds suspiciously like prayer, you may be right. Prayer is such a loaded word in our post-9/11, neo-conservative, Christian-ascendancy culture that I hesitate to use it. Academics are not supposed to pray, or at least not talk publicly about praying lest they appear less rigorous, less academic. It would be safer to use more neutral language, to speak here only about "projected intention," but this strikes me as playing word games. The fact is, I do pray for my students, not in the name of God and not prayer in any conventional sense, but it feels like prayer. And yet it is motivated not by religion nor faith but by my growing respect for the power of conscious intention. It reflects not pre-modern sentiment but post-modern research.

Let me put on the table another assumption that I make in preparing the class field. I assume that I am not doing this by myself but am entering into relationship with existing forces, powers, or beings that are willing to help me in this work. I assume that these forces include at the very minimum the souls of my students. By *soul* I mean the consciousness that is larger than their egoic personality, that is the source of their personality (mediated by their genetic matrix). In addition to the souls of my students, I assume that there are *guardians*, for want of a better term, that are interested in what we are doing here on Earth and in this classroom.

This may sound like a monstrously arrogant assumption which gives undue status to human beings, making us the narcissistic center of too much spiritual attention, but it seems to me even more arrogant to assume that the only intelligent beings in the entire Cosmos are we physical beings. For a variety of reasons, I have joined the ranks of those who believe that the Cosmos includes many non-physical dimensions and beings who live in these dimensions as we live in space-time. I believe that there is a world of saints and bodhisattvas, wearing different names in different cultures, "higher beings" of goodness and liberated consciousness that support our activities on this planet.<sup>77</sup>

In preparing the class field, therefore, I ask for the help and assistance of these beings who can see the larger landscape more clearly than I and can do things that I cannot. I call to them without knowing their names and ask them to help me serve the highest good of my students. Thus, my posture in preparing the field is essentially one of *collaboration and cooperation*. I also invoke the guardians of the place where I work, the institution I am part of, and my discipline, because I assume that where there is organization in the physical world, there is a kind of parallel organization in the spiritual world. By entering into a respectful, open, and receptive relationship with these powers, we open ourselves to their help and assistance.

...

### *Specific ritual forms*

I have described the basic intentions involved in preparing the class field rather than specific rituals or procedures because I think these core intentions can be expressed in a variety of intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual frameworks. I encourage readers to experiment with the tools that their specific traditions make available to them to embody these intentions. In the end, the specific rituals may be less important than the power of focused intention itself. Rituals may open the door, but heartfelt intention may carry the greater weight.

Having said this, I also do not want to underestimate the power of ritual. Intention needs to be focused to have its greatest impact and ritual does this. Furthermore, the power of ritual is augmented if one works with rituals that have a long history. Sheldrake's concept of formative causation and morphic resonance supports the time-honored view that powerful fields develop around spiritual practices that have been used for many generations. The longer people have performed a particular practice through history, the stronger its field will be. *When one aligns one's present intention with such a field, it amplifies the power of that intention.*

With both these considerations in mind, let me mention one practice that I have used to prepare my class fields. I will not describe it in sufficient detail for persons to perform it themselves because that would not be appropriate. This practice must be learned from those trained and empowered to transmit it. I mention it here only to give an example of the kind of practices one might use for this purpose.

For the past ten years I have been using a Tibetan Buddhist practice called *Chöd* to work with class fields. *Chöd* means “to cut” and refers to cutting the cords of karmic cause and effect that keep us repeating the patterns of the past in the present. It also refers to cutting the cords that binds us to the illusion that we are a private self separate from the larger whole of life. *Chöd* is a powerful practice that derives from the Tibetan saint Machig Labdrön, a spiritually realized woman who lived in twelfth-century Tibet. It is a practice taught by many teachers of Vajrayana Buddhism today. I received it from Tsultrim Allione, founder of Tara Mandala, a Buddhist retreat center in Colorado.

The essence of the *Chöd* practice lies in symbolically sacrificing one’s egoic self, receiving in return spiritual nourishment from a deeper reality, and then sharing that spiritual nourishment with others – in this case with my students – thus canceling old debts. By “feeding the demons” of our self-cherishing, one cuts through that which keeps us small in order to awaken both ourselves and others to that pristine consciousness that encompasses and permeates all existence. This practice does not require that the other parties know that they are being included in this ritual to receive its benefit. The basic idea is that karma is like a cord held by two people. If one person drops the cord, the other person will feel it at some level and respond.<sup>78</sup>

My subjective perception is that when I began to include my students in my *Chöd* practice, it had an immediate and beneficial impact on my classes. Teaching went more smoothly and productively. I encountered fewer obstacles in the classroom and the students seemed to have an easier time learning on many levels. In my more advanced courses where the more involved students gathered, the disruptive effects described in Chapter 1 seemed to be ameliorated, allowing these fields to rise with fewer disturbances and greater transformative impact. These are entirely subjective impressions, of course, without any objective assessment to support them. There are several dissertations here waiting for the right graduate students. (Can Dean Radin and Roger Nelson’s random number generators detect the presence of learning fields in a classroom? Can we use this technology to assess the comparative effectiveness of different strategies for working with these fields?)



The positive impact of including my students in this practice was so striking that I now include my students in my daily practice as soon as registration begins, weeks before classes actually start. I shudder sometimes at what my colleagues would think if they could see me performing the *Chöd* ritual in front of a student roster for a course that has not yet begun, but to my mind this is simply an extension of my responsibilities as a teacher. It is the logical consequence of recognizing the fields generated by my activities and discovering that I can influence these fields directly. It is simply being efficient as an educator.

Like most rituals, the *Chöd* practice takes some time and a quiet place to perform, but the intention of mutual forgiveness and blessing can be cultivated in short exercises throughout the day. One can, for example, bring this intention to mind while driving to work or walking across campus. It's simply a matter of being conscious of the energetic field we are continuously creating with our thoughts and remembering to choose the thoughts of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Again, I encourage readers to explore the specific spiritual and psychological traditions they feel most comfortable with and to adopt or construct the meditations, rituals, or intentional exercises they feel most aligned with. One can be an atheist, I think, and still work with these fields in a powerful and effective manner – though an unusual atheist to be sure. The key lies in recognizing that our intention is the seed of our behavior, and our behavior generates patterns of contact with others that cumulatively create energetic fields. The more consciousness we bring to our teaching, the more we will generate strong and positive learning fields.

## ***2. Nourishing the field***

The same practices that are used to prepare the class field before a course begins can be used *to purify and elevate the field* as the semester proceeds. These practices do not require the participation of the students. The basic exercise is essentially the same as for preparing the field. One brings the class field into one's conscious awareness and works with it in some way. The difference is that now the students have become known entities to you. They have become real people who challenge you in specific ways, and this gives you more specific content to work with. The same practices that were used to prepare the field can be used to address this

content once a course has begun. Let me give an example, this time focusing on a meditation practice.

Teaching is exhilarating work on the good days but it's also exhausting work with many ups and downs. After a frustrating day when the students were uncommunicative or did not complete their assignments or when we were not up to snuff ourselves, meditation can help us regroup and reset our personal thermostat. It can also become a platform for engaging the class mind. If we consciously incorporate the class field into our meditation practice, we can sometimes melt obstacles when they are still in their early stages or gently lift the baseline of the room.

There are many meditation practices in different traditions for working with other persons. I am going to assume that readers who meditate regularly are already familiar with these practices or that they can learn them from qualified teachers. When using these practices to support one's teaching, one simply enlarges the "target" of one's meditation to include one's class fields. Where the practice instructs you to engage a particular person, you substitute the class field. One may think that including so many people in one's practice would dilute its effect, diminishing its impact to near-zero, but this is an older way of thinking that does not reflect current insights into the dynamics of nonlinear systems. For what it's worth, my experience has been that when I am working with a field that is rooted in my work in the world, I can engage this field with positive results.

One practice that I have used to do so is the Buddhist practice of *tonlin* – the practice of exchanging self and other. *Tonlin* is a compassion practice in which you seek not only to expand your awareness but also to have a positive impact on another person. In this practice you enter into meditative quiet and bring a particular person to mind. Then you consciously take on their suffering, drawing into yourself any problems they may be carrying, and send them joy and happiness in return. You visualize yourself drawing dark clouds from them representing their pain and conflict and sending them bright light in return.

A teacher can use the practice of *tonlin* to purify and uplift their class fields. Once you have established yourself in the calm of meditation, you bring your students to mind and do the practice of exchanging self and other with the class field, drawing in the stresses and resistances

of the entire class and nourishing the field by flooding it with white light. Some may fear that taking on this much darkness may be harmful, but this turns out to be an unfounded worry. Besides, are we not already engaged in this kind of give and take with our students? We are taking on their ignorance to a degree by entering into dialogue with them and sharing with them our understanding in the hope that it will be helpful to them. The practice of *tonlin* simply takes this exchange to a deeper energetic level.

Another reason for working with the class field during the semester is to *skillfully manage the explosive energies of accelerated learning*. Once a course begins and the class field has congealed, it begins to come under the influence of the course field, the cumulative learning field surrounding a course. As I see it, the course field is the older, more powerful core of the field. As the course field begins to penetrate the class field, it begins to touch individual students. If the course field is strong, it can unleash powerful influences in the room, influences so strong they can sometimes be disruptive.

Power is not about nice and it's not always gentle. In fact, the impact of these fields sometimes reminds me of the Hindu goddess Kali. Fierce in contenance and form, Kali's compassion expresses itself in ruthlessly tearing away old structures in order to make room for new growth. Stripping away the old is beneficial but challenging. Students may find themselves grasping a new way of thinking more quickly than they are comfortable with. They may find themselves being drawn into levels of existential self-scrutiny they had not anticipated or feel disoriented by rapidly changing their mind around convictions they've held for a long time. Sometimes the sudden opening of intellectual doors may lead them to consider changing their major or even bring a new career path into view. All of this can be dizzying for students.

As their instructor it is not our place, of course, to think that we can know what our students should believe or what they should do with their lives. Our job is simply to present options. But sometimes the simple act of presenting options compounded with the influence of these group fields and the resonance of lived experience provokes deep changes in our students, and we should not ignore the challenges these changes generate for them. For all these reasons, if we are meditators it is beneficial to hold our students in the open, nonjudgmental and supportive field of our meditative awareness throughout the semester. If

one teaches to change lives, as I think most educators do, one naturally uses all the resources at one's disposal. For me this includes holding my students in my contemplative awareness as long as I am engaged with them in a course.

The class field can also be tapped to *diagnose problems* that come up during the semester. Sometimes when I have finished a lecture and am packing up my books for the walk back to my office, I get a nagging sense that something is not right. If I look objectively at the lecture I've just given, at the facts I presented and how the students seemed to take them in, everything appears fine on the surface. And yet there is a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach that all is not well. Sometimes it works the other way round too. Viewed from the outside, everything may have gone wrong in class, but in the middle of the chaos my gut is telling me that everything is ok.

When I get back to my office and my thoughts have settled or sometimes when I'm sitting in meditation the following morning, if I bring my students to mind and hold them in my awareness, the reason for the discomfort will often show itself. What the rational mind cannot always catch on the fly, the deeper mind registers more clearly. I may have them at one level, but I'm losing them at another level. Once I see what the problem is, I can decide what changes to make. Alternatively, I may see more clearly what's behind the fruitful chaos. Disruptive days sometimes signal new voices coming forward in the room or new lines of thought surfacing. Falling apart is an important part of the cycle of learning. I may need to fan the flames of dissent rather than drown them with answers.

Every teacher has had these moments of insight as we try to read what's going on in our courses, and we interpret them in different ways. One of the ways I understand them is by drawing on the concept of the class field. When I'm trying to discern what's going on beneath the surface in my classroom – the significance of a look, the meaning of a casual remark, the reaction of the room to a new concept – I try to tune into the class field. This field is not outside me; I am part of it. My mind is a fractal participant in its complex patterns. If we think of the field as having holographic properties – the whole registering in every part – then as part of that field I am already registering the dynamics of the entire room at a very subtle level. It's only a

matter of whether I am able to tune into that level of consciousness where this awareness is already registering and take the time to do so.

Some may suggest that this is simply another language for tuning into personal intuition, and it may be. Certainly intuition is involved. And yet, as I think about Roger Nelson's random number generators responding to shifting patterns of collective attention, I think there is more going on than just personal intuition. The back door of the personal opens to the collective domain. The class field is an extraordinarily subtle phenomenon. It is an information-rich pond that collects and reflects the experiences of all its participants. If one practices the art of tuning into this pond, it will register more clearly in our awareness. This is a skill that can be cultivated. The collective mind of our class will speak to us, awaken in us a sense of what's going wrong and what's going right in our classroom. Intuitions will become more articulate. Options for new interventions will present themselves.

I want to underscore in closing that an important part of nourishing the field is being willing to confront our students' disappointment with something we've done or failed to do in class. Of all the challenges teaching presents us with, this is perhaps the hardest and for that reason one of the most productive. It hurts when you are explaining a concept that you find beautiful and your students just yawn. It's confusing when a lecture you've used effectively for years suddenly stops working. Ideas that had previously opened doors begin to fall flat. Why? What's happening? Our ego panics. The temptation is to blame the students. If they would just pay better attention or if they cared more about their education, perhaps the old flame would catch. But sometimes it's not the students' fault at all. Sometimes something deeper is afoot – the field is speaking.

My students' disappointment with a lecture that has been a consistent winner in the past often signals that a shift has taken place in our collective field. A commitment to nourishing the field challenges me to follow these shifts where they lead. My experience is that this shift consistently serves my needs as well as my students' needs. Something about how I have been approaching this subject has outlived its usefulness. No matter that it worked before; it's now time to experiment again, to enter the unknown again, to find a new approach. The students need me to do this; something in me needs me to do this. Nourishing the field calls me to be

constantly realigning myself with the energy generated by our coming together. Parker Palmer put it well when he said, “Teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability.”

When I take the time to step back and open myself to this realignment, I often discover that the time has come for me to change something about how I think or feel about a subject. Life is about growth not fixed success. How I approached a subject in the past may have been an honest expression of my person then and it therefore ignited a positive response in my students, but now something more is called for. It’s time for me to embrace a larger horizon, to become more than I was.

My students’ disappointment often points the way forward in this process. If I delay or defer the task, things will only get worse. If I stay on automatic pilot and try to maintain the past trajectory, my teaching will slowly lose its vitality. Week by week, semester by semester, the gap between me and my students will get wider. But if I am willing to sit with the discomfort of their disappointment and wrestle with the task at hand, something new presents itself. Finding the right pivot always triggers an immediate response in the room. Heads lift, eyes light up, the energy shifts. Nourishing the field, therefore, is not simply about delivering something to the students. It’s also about being willing to receive feedback and follow it where it leads. It’s about allowing not only the students but you yourself to be nourished by the ever-changing course field.

### ***3. Visualization Exercises***

Most of the preceding suggestions have involved strategies for working with the class field outside of the classroom and without the students participating. It is also possible to work with the class field inside the classroom with the students actively participating in the exercise. Visualization exercises can activate the latent potential of the class field and strengthen its influence in the room. Usually I use these exercises only in my upper division courses where the students can be made aware of the theory behind the exercise. Using them in introductory classes, at my university at least, would probably be seen as just too “weird.” (Singing is also a potent way to strengthen group fields, as many religious orders have recognized, but that too would be a hard sell in a university classroom. I have used both visualization and simple tonal

singing in workshops when I want to accelerate and deepen the emergence of a group field as quickly as possible.)

The key to visualization lies in the perception that our thoughts can influence reality, that seeing something clearly in our mind can actually influence the subtle processes that pulse through a room. This notion makes absolutely no sense in the mind-reduces-to-brain model of consciousness, but the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and many other sophisticated contemplative traditions have long emphasized the transformative power of skillful visualization. Moreover, this concept has been taken over today by Olympic coaches working with their athletes and mainstream physicians working with their patients. The insight that the mind can shape our experience in profound and subtle ways seems to be gaining ground in our pragmatic culture.

When I do a visualization exercise with my students or workshop participants, I let the images emerge out of my immediate, intuitive awareness rather than use a pre-planned exercise. I wasn't comfortable taking these kinds of risks in the beginning, but experience has taught me that a visualization sequence that arises from the energetic field of a specific group will be more powerful for that group than a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter exercise. To bring this exercise forward, I clear my mind as best I can, tune into the people present, and trust the images that emerge in my awareness from this subtle communion. Using this approach I don't know where a visualization exercise is going to go, but it has always gone in a good direction, touching people in ways that I could never have anticipated or consciously planned. I am continually amazed by what these exercises evoke in people.

Even in these intuitively-guided exercises there are patterns, however, and the core project in the beginning is to strengthen the awareness that by acting together, we create a collective energy that nourishes everyone present and helps our shared work. Let me give one example of a visualization sequence just to suggest the general tenor of the images that can emerge. I will present this as a verbatim transcript of an exercise that would take between ten and fifteen minutes.

- Preliminary instructions to relax...clear your mind...focus on your breathing...settle into the present moment.

- See our group arranged in a circle. (This suggestion works surprisingly well even when the students are all facing forward in a conventional classroom arrangement.)
- Begin to feel an energy...a warm golden light moving through you...around the circle from left to right...it enters your left arm...moves through your body...exits through your right arm...passing to the person on your right.
- Golden light...like warm steam...brighter...stronger...faster...very strong now...the energy is flowing through you.
- Now...from either your heart or your forehead (whichever feels more natural to you)...project a beam of this golden light to the center of the circle...where it joins with the other beams...to become...a bright flame...the resulting image...resembling a wagon wheel made of light...light moves around the circle...and projects through us to the center...where it becomes a bright fire.
- In the center...the flame grows brighter...stronger...
- As the golden fire grows brighter...warmer...it begins to rise higher.
- The fire at the center...now expands to become a canopy of light...that comes down around all of us...surrounding all of us.
- The light moves around our circle...into the raised center...and now it envelops all of us...we are held by this canopy of light...nourished by it.
- Rest and let this energy flow through us.



- Now...as we begin to come back to our bodily awareness...we can leave this thought form intact...it can remain intact...even as, at another level...we bring our attention back to our individual awareness.
- Wiggle your toes and fingers...stretch your arms...when you're ready open your eyes.

This exercise strengthens the field by making what is already taking place at a subtle energetic level more conscious. In a course, the actions of individuals combine to form a whole that influences everyone in the room. The visualization exercise augments this process. By actively visualizing something collective that moves through us, respecting our individuality and yet combining our energy to form something that nourishes everyone in the room, we encourage the emergence of an integrated group awareness that augments the individuals present. By giving conscious visual expression to what is taking place subliminally, we empower the class field.

#### ***4. Closing the Field***

Just as it is important to prepare the class field at the beginning of a course and to nourish and purify it during the course, it is also important to close the field well at the end of the course. All cycles have beginnings and endings. If you do not decisively close the class field at the end of the semester, you may have students dribbling into your office for months, feeling strangely unable to let go of the course.

I did not appreciate the importance of closing the field in the early years when these fields were first surfacing in my classroom, and it took me a while to understand what was happening. Initially I took the appearance of these students at my door as a compliment, thinking that they had just really enjoyed the course. Only gradually did I realize that something was amiss. They were having difficulty letting go of the course; they were caught by something. I began to realize that the group field was still dynamically active in their psyche. Because the field had not been closed well, they were stuck, with no physical place to go to express the psychic link they still felt to the class mind.

The more powerfully you have invited the group mind to enter your classroom, the more important it is to dissolve that mind at the end of the course and to re-empower the students as self-sufficient fields of awareness, whole and complete within themselves. There are several ways in which this can be done.

In courses where one has used a visualization exercise to open and strengthen the field, the same exercise can be run in reverse to close the field at the end of the course. In the exercise given above, for example, the first step would be to invite the students to bring the original image back to mind. Then I would invite them to visualize the canopy of light retracting back into the bright flame, then let the flame sink lower until it is once again level with the circle of students. Next, I would instruct them to reach into the center of the fire, take out a handful of the flame, place it inside their chest, and seal it inside themselves. When everyone has done this, the fire in the center of the circle has disappeared; the collective fire has been re-assimilated. The circle energy moving around the room is then brought to a stop, and everyone draws its energy back into their person.

What we had constructed from our collective intention, we have now re-appropriated. Because the fire at the center was a composite of all our energies, each of us now carries a small piece of everyone in the room sealed in our individual person. This exercise honors and empowers what has actually taken place during the semester. Our personal learning in a course is always influenced by other people's learning—by the questions they asked, the opinions they've shared, and the enthusiasm they brought to the project. Now is the time of ending, of separation, integration, and individuation.

In introductory courses where visualization exercises are not possible or in situations that do not allow me to address these processes this explicitly, the same result can be achieved by a well-choreographed last lecture or final group discussion. Sometimes I will lead a group discussion at the end of a semester in which I invite the students to identify an idea covered during the semester that was particularly meaningful to them. I put these up on the board, both so that we can review what we have accomplished (closure) and see what was meaningful to *other* people in the room (individuation). This often leads to a discussion of what different

people are doing with these ideas, once again affirming our individual preferences and predilections.

The integration of the class mind into the course mind at the end of a semester seems to take place naturally, like a tree adding a new ring of growth to its girth, and does not require special handling on our part. And yet, the course mind is in my thoughts when I remind students that they are now part of a long lineage of students who have completed this course. At the end of the semester I often collect their recommendations for how I can improve the course for the next group of students, and I do so not only to harvest their valuable feedback but also to reinforce their sense of being part of a larger project of learning that will continue *without them* as they move on in their academic career. I sometimes remind them that they will now carry the new understanding they have acquired here into other courses and eventually into their work in the world where it will combine with still new sources of information to form unpredictable combinations of insight and action, quietly and implicitly reinforcing the theme of self-empowerment and future orientation.

The ritual of a final exam can also be an effective means of closing the class field. The act of demonstrating what one has learned helps bring that cycle of learning to a definitive end. Similarly, giving back the last round of papers provides us with an opportunity to celebrate what has been accomplished. Because saying thanks is an important part of closure, we should create an atmosphere in our last meeting with the students that allows them to express their appreciation for the course if they want to do so, even if it is as simple as a handshake as they turn in their exam. An end of the semester, pizza at the student union or a pot luck dinner should always include a discussion of "What's next?" Here as elsewhere, what makes for good teaching makes for healthy fields. The instincts are the same and many of the things we do naturally will be the same.

Lastly, all these processes can be reinforced by rituals of closure performed privately. Just as we prepared the class field before the course began through skillful intention, we can similarly close the class field at its end. Through ritual, meditation, and focused intention, we can bring our students into our awareness, affirm their separate journeys, and send them back into the stream of life.

For us too, the end of the semester is a time of closure, and closure asks two things of us. First, it asks that we give thanks – for the privilege of teaching and for the help we have received from visible and invisible sources. It would not be wise to ask for help at the beginning of an enterprise and then fail to give thanks for it at its end. Second, closure asks that we take time to reflect on what we have learned from the semester. If we're not expanding, we've begun to grow rigid and die, so what has life been trying to teach us these past fifteen weeks through these particular students? Where did we fail and why? Where did we succeed? What new idea or awareness has been tapping at our window these past months?

However one chooses to do it, it's important to definitively close the class field at the end of the semester in order to encourage a smooth release of all parties and to empower the students as they move on to new courses where they will join new circles and become part of new learning fields. As in life, so in teaching – the end is implicit in the beginning. In this relentless rhythm of opening and closing, we feel the pulse of the living classroom.

If the suggestions outlined in this chapter seem exotic and a little hard to swallow, I certainly understand. I did not come by them without my own internal struggle. We are not accustomed to thinking of consciousness as a significant force in the world. Our thoughts *feel* fleeting and ephemeral and not this powerful. Here the road divides and everyone must make their own choices. All I can say at this point is that the longer I have explored my own interior depths and observed the dance of consciousness taking place among my students, the more convinced I am that consciousness is a truly active and potent force in the world.

Consciousness seems to be like light. When light is scattered and incoherent its influence is low, but when it is focused into the coherent light of a laser, it becomes a powerful force of nature. Similarly, consciousness can be scattered or focused. The more integrated our consciousness and the more intentional focus we bring to our actions, the more influence our consciousness has on life around us. This is something everyone has to discover for themselves. For those teachers who are engaged in transformational practices or who have begun to experience the subtle influence of these collective learning fields that form around them as they work, I hope the strategies outlined here will be helpful.

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<sup>76</sup> I am not conversant with Rudolph Steiner's writings on education, but I have been told by persons who are that some of the recommendations I am making here were foreshadowed in his thought and are incorporated into the training of Waldorf teachers. I must leave it to others to draw out these parallels and chart the history of these concepts.

<sup>77</sup> The distinction between "physical" and "non-physical" dimensions is a crude one that begs for more discussion than I can give here. I'm not a dualist who thinks that there are two types of "stuff" in the Cosmos, physical stuff and non-physical stuff. That course twists us into mental pretzels trying to explain how two different types of reality can influence each other. By non-physical dimensions I mean simply dimensions of the Cosmos that are beyond the four dimensional universe we inhabit, invisible to ordinary sense perception. My basic cosmological convictions go in the direction of monism and panpsychism (de Quincy, 2002; Mathews, 2003), but I don't have a particular theory about the nuts and bolts of how a multi-dimensional universe unfolds. For that discussion, one might consider the insights of Ervin Laszlo (2003, 2004, 2006).

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<sup>84</sup> For more on Chod, see *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* by Jérôme Edou (1996) and Tsultrim Allione's biography of Machig Labdrön in her book *Women of Wisdom* (2000).

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