

CHAPTER I

Lie Until It's True

Attention in the Classroom



*What a foe may do to a foe,
Or a hater to a hater—
Far worse than that
The mind ill held may do to him.*
—Dhammapada 42

Buddhists prize meditation as the primary muscle of ethical action and spiritual knowledge. Through cultivating attention,¹ you learn to let go of what is not happening here and now so that extraneous motivations and ideas don't interfere with your direct perception of reality—you learn to let go of greed, anger, and delusion so they don't interfere with how you're perceiving and what you're doing. Instead, you perceive what is happening here and now, and greet it with generosity, loving-kindness, clarity and insight. Developing your power of attention simultaneously feels good, helps you to behave better, and makes your life more meaningful.

Like a muscle, the quality of attention can be developed through its use. As you practice paying attention to what is happening right here, right now, you become better able to pay attention. You strengthen your power of attention. It's like learning to play a piano—you practice hour after hour until you can play Mozart. In the case of attention, all that practice pays off, too. Hour after hour, you watch as physical feelings, emotions, thoughts, and inclinations arise and pass away. Every moment clusters of these arise and pass away. You practice noting their presence and letting them go. You watch them go, not allowing

them, for this period of daily practice, to cause you to act. For now, they are just part of a parade to be watched. Later, let's say an acquaintance has come by and the two of you are having tea in your cherished cups with lovely silver trim and violets on them. Suppose your guest stumbles as he brings his cup to the next room. You leap to help him regain his stability, concerned that he might fall. You think nothing of your cup and the possibility of its crashing to the floor. That attention to the pain and comfort of another, the lack of concern for the gratification of one's own selfish desires, is Buddhism's playing of Mozart.²

Buddhists' reverence of attention is made clear in stories. One features a much-loved monk who was repeatedly frustrated that his eyes closed in meditation, helping send him off to sleep. He finally ripped off his eyelids to stay awake. It is said that where his eyelids landed the first tea plants grew, giving the gift of caffeine to those who yearn to cultivate attention. In one form of Buddhism, a person walks among meditators to offer strong and resounding blows across the upper back to bring dozing meditators back to the moment. For one month, I meditated daily at a temple of this sort. Thirty of us sat each morning and evening in a still room lit by just a few candles. For long stretches, we heard only the occasional candle flicker or the soft padding of the walker's socks on the floor. When that stick hit the back of someone, however, a loud thwack resounded, calling everyone to attention. Traditionally, the walker discerns who needs the blows by watching the meditators' postures for signs of distraction or sleep, but in that temple the meditator nonverbally requested the blow by putting her hands together in prayer position. Regardless of who determines who will be so dramatically brought back to attention, both the person who wields the stick and the person who receives the blow bow to the stick that has served to help a person keep the discipline of attention. I bowed to that discipline stick with the reverent gratitude I feel for everything that helps me attend properly.

These stories may seem violent and even disgusting, but they serve to emphasize the power of attention. According to Buddhists, with that power you can respond freely and skillfully to your intentions as they are rooted in generosity. Without powers of attention, you can only react, restricted by a limited view of what is and what can be, your intentions crippled by desire or

anger. Your memories and fears for the future obscure your view and limit your response. The Buddha himself became the Buddha (“the enlightened one”) through the wisdom he gained by paying attention. Buddhists understand that through proper attention everyone can become enlightened.

So I sit in formal meditation daily and practice paying attention, moment by moment, to what is happening, to what I am experiencing through my senses and in my mind. I recognize what Buddhists call the monkey quality of the mind—how it swings from tree to tree. This solitary daily training of noticing the monkey mind and of experiencing each moment and letting it go as it passes away can help teachers when they’re in the classroom. They can then better resist getting lost in the comments of one student, in a short lecture they’re giving, in their own desires and pains. When slighted by a student, a teacher may be more able to see past that slighting to the dynamics of what’s going on—the intricacies of the teacher-student relationship, and our mutual teaching and learning.

Teachers have any number of problems related to attention. You woke up from a distressing nightmare. You cannot find any love for your profession, for your daily work. (Who cares about this subject to which you’ve devoted a fair portion of your life? Who cares about academics at all?) Your partner is leaving you. You are deeply and deliriously in love. Your cat is ill. You’re now in class: how do you attend to what is really there?

The answer: you simply, repeatedly, call your attention back to whatever you are doing. Again and again and again.

Similarly, the students suffer attention problems. They woke up from awful nightmares. They cannot find any love for their work as students, for their daily work. (Who cares about these subjects of study? Who cares about academics at all?) Their partners broke up with them. They are in love. Their cats are ill. And if they’re simply young, as my students are, they are riding chemical/hormonal trains that take them all over the universe within the space of an hour. How do they attend to what is really there?

You get the idea. Teachers need not try to keep students’ attention as though it were a hostage. They are simply obliged to help them call their attention back again and again.³ Teachers call the students to pay attention to what is going on. They want to bring

the students back, gently, from wherever they are going. Teachers want to direct students' minds to whatever is in front of them.

Once a colleague ended class, enraged. The students didn't pay any attention at all when she spoke, they talked through class, ate snacks—why, they acted as though she weren't there at all. They were, she said, exceedingly disrespectful. Then she gave me a three-minute demonstration of the kind of lecture she gave in class, and I started to see the problem. What the teacher *said* and what she communicated with the rest of her body were opposites. It was hard to watch her when what was coming out of her mouth was being cancelled out by the rest of her body. She was saying (without any particular volume or changes in emphasis) some things about her area of specialty. Her body, on the other hand, was punishing anyone who paid attention to it. She wasn't making eye contact; her trunk didn't face me. Her arms and legs swung the way a three-year-old's do when it's time to go to bed but that toddler is reluctant to go.

It was clear: something in her didn't want attention.

Some days I don't want attention, either. All I want to do is stay home and read a book. If I must be with others, I want to do so wearing sunglasses. As to my colleague, the deep reflection she did after our discussion was helpful in discerning why she didn't want her students' attention, and I recommend that kind of reflection to anyone who finds they have the same problem. In the meantime, however, here are some specifics about getting people's attention when you're talking.

- First, simply reconcile yourself to getting some attention for a while in the service of communication. Face your students, take a deep breath and let it out, work on a smile that is both authentic and welcoming.
- Start class on time and thereby communicate to the students that every minute in the classroom is precious, every minute counts. (If you don't start on time regularly, you will find that a certain sluggishness, a certain reluctance, a heaviness creeps into the classroom. In a sense, you've taught that to the class.)
- Discern a particular point or two you're trying to make—either in your short lecture or during the class period. Then choose particular words/ideas to punch or emphasize, and emphasize these points. (Whisper, shout, vary your tone,

pause significantly before or after those words, make a particular unforgettable gesture when you speak those words, for example.) Repeat the points, changing the wording or keeping it the same while you make it more interesting some other way. Call on students to repeat those points periodically as you build on them—let them show you they’re learning. (Make it a game, make it call-and-response.)

- Make eye contact with particular students as you speak so that eventually many if not all (depending on your class size) have had eye contact with you.
- Ask students questions frequently to make sure they’re following you. For example, “Now, I have just said a few things about the mechanics of synapses. What were those things?” Take the time, make sure they get it right.
- Use diagrams, drawings, pictures. (When I am feeling shy, I use an overhead projector or PowerPoint. While students are facing me, their attention is deflected a bit to what’s on the screen.)
- Avoid talking longer than you need in order to get your point across.
- Relate what you’re doing in class to what they are actually attending to.

Before addressing how the Buddha did this latter on occasions, it’s worth examining more closely the advice to avoid talking longer than necessary. Often when we speak, we feel good. We’re doing something with our bodies and minds and that is moderately to greatly exciting. If we’re talking about an area of interest, well, all the better. So as teachers we, understandably, tend to talk more. Add to this the complication that many of those to whom we speak every day are below us in status and power and so disinclined to interrupt us, and there’s a set up for unfortunate monologues that bore everyone but the speaker. A linguist reports a story about the problems in communication between teachers and students, which she compares to those of parents and children. She audiotaped conferences between teachers and students and then met with each individually to get their impressions of how well they communicated: “One student said of a long monologue by her teacher: ‘She is going on about something, but it would have been rude to interrupt. She clearly didn’t hear what I said in the first place.’ Of the same passage,

the teacher reported, "This is a teaching moment for me. I like these moments. . . . I can really teach here."⁴

This research embarrasses me as it affirms the adage: if the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught. What the teacher was doing in this case *felt* like teaching but wasn't. Attention to this area of possible self-delusion can help teachers speak in a way worth listening to.

So far I have discussed the more obvious elements of getting the attention of students. Other aspects of this process are more subtle—such as using what students are already attending to, as the Buddha did on many occasions. For example, once a group of young men stumbled upon the Buddha in the woods while they were chasing a prostitute who had stolen something of theirs. When they asked him if he'd seen a woman, the Buddha asked, "Which is better for you, that you should seek a woman or that you should seek yourselves?" When they agreed that it would be better if they seek themselves, he invited them to sit and listen to the Dhamma (Buddhist teaching).⁵ (Would that our own students could so easily be turned from their various pursuits to listen to a teaching.) A bit school-marmy and pedantic in the modern American setting, I think, but the point is clear: it's helpful to relate what students are drawn to to what you are all doing in class together.

The complex results that can come of relating teaching to students' other interests are apparent in another story. In this one, the Buddha heard that one of his followers, Nanda, was thinking of disrobing as a monk and rejoining the larger community—in essence, of giving up his studies. When the Buddha asked why, Nanda replied, "When I left to renounce the house life, the [. . .] beauty Janapadakalyāṇī gazed after me with her hair partly held back and she said, 'Come back soon, prince.' When I remember that, I lead the holy life dissatisfied."⁶ Well, no wonder.

The Buddha knew what Nanda needed. He took him to look at "five hundred nymphs with dove's feet" and asked Nanda to compare their beauty with that of Janapadakalyāṇī. Nanda could hardly compare them, the nymphs were so much more beautiful: "Janapadakalyāṇī is like a scalded she-monkey with her nose and ears lopped off compared to these five hundred nymphs with dove's feet," he said. "She does not count at all; she is nothing like

them; there is no comparison whatever.”⁷ The Buddha then made a promise: if Nanda kept on with the holy life, he’d get five hundred nymphs with dove’s feet.

All very well, but the other monks were not impressed with Nanda’s new motivation for the holy life. They “treated him as a hireling who had sold himself.” Humiliated, he retired and practiced with diligence until he was enlightened. (No longer desirous of the nymphs, Nanda returned to the Buddha to release him from his vow. But the Buddha was one step ahead of him. When he saw that Nanda’s heart “was freed from taints,” he knew he was free from keeping that promise.) Under the Buddha’s guidance (and notably with the help of his fellows ostracizing him), Nanda’s attraction to a beautiful woman was transformed into an impetus for practice.

When students stop learning in a regular high school or college, it is often because they hope for something better in another context—a different kind of learning, money, a beautiful man or woman. That something better, they feel, will make their lives more meaningful, more purposeful. But will it? Two lines of thought come to mind. One is simply that regardless of what their hearts quicken after, if we don’t know it, we can’t help them. To learn about their hopes, we can simply ask the students what they’re thinking about—one-by-one, in small groups, over coffee, before class, anonymously on index cards. If we don’t know about Janapadakalyāṇī, we don’t know to show them the 500 nymphs with dove’s feet.

The other line of thought is more complex. I am concerned about what our students really learn in our schools. If, as Cesar Chavez says and as I believe, “The end of all education should surely be service to others,” are we doing our jobs? Do students in our schools really learn what they need to be of service to others? The world has too many poor, sick, dying people and poor, sick, dying ecosystems. Do our classes and curricula direct students to this suffering and teach them how to alleviate it? Or do our schools instead socialize them into a certain level of comfort or resign them to a lack of thereof? While I cannot call for a complete revision of our educational system, I am convinced that one way teachers can remain vital is to keep these questions in mind.

Some students are compelled by a desire to serve others, but others want the nymphs. For some students, the A’s at the top of

our grading scale are their dove-footed nymphs. Most of my students are quite compelled by grades. They are aiming for careers, and their grades are their highways to these careers. The education I provide, then, must help them understand that mere careers aren't enough. Their learning needs to be designed so they experience their own pain and the pain of those around them in such a way that they are called to alleviate pain as much as they can.

While it's important to know what motivates students, it's also critical for me as a teacher to know what motivates me. For example, I frequently use new material in class. At the beginning of the term, for any particular class, I have never read about one third of the assignments, sometimes more. For a long time I admitted this infrequently, but the main reason for my practice is not laziness—it's a way I keep courses interesting for myself, cultivating a curiosity that is real and vibrant during class. It motivates me. It gives my classes an edge. By facing unforeseen problems, I've been forced to improvise creatively, and students and I have learned a lot of things not on the syllabus.⁸

In my first year of teaching I assigned a particularly poorly written and difficult article I'd never read. I didn't read it until the day before class, and when I did, I was appalled. My students were sure to come to class resentful and angry, not having understood so much as the main point of the article. This was going to a pedagogical disaster. What were we going to do? Into a basket went some wads made up of used paper, and as the students arrived I invited them each to take one or more. (How quickly the mood changed from resentment and anger to curiosity—no teacher had ever done this before, and they'd been in school for more than 12 years.) Then I announced that whenever they wanted to express their anger toward me for assigning such a horrendous article, they could let a paper ball fly at me with no ill consequences. The classroom filled with a playful mischievousness. Although they threatened me throughout the period, not a single paper ball came my way. Not until the very end, that is, when they all let fly. The flurry in those last few minutes was a celebration of our accomplishments that hour rather than a miserable complaint about their reading.

I've gotten better at discerning the appropriateness of readings from a glance so my students don't suffer dramatically as

they did during those first years. Nevertheless, on another occasion I managed to assign an entire book that was packed with material, far more than the students could absorb in the short time we had. When the problem became clear, we had a brainstorming session that led to, among other things, a ten-minute presentation on skimming—how to get the main points quickly by reading the table of contents, the headings and subheadings, and paying particular attention to introductions and conclusions, as well as first and last sentences in paragraphs. Skimming, obviously, is not always or even often a good alternative to a careful reading of a textbook, but it's a good skill to have and can be useful for review.

Even when I've chosen a lively, fascinating essay, my students still have trouble focusing. If I know they're overwhelmed by the work in my class, the problems in the world, the problems on campus (any time from midterms on generally seems appropriate), I instigate a whining session. I visibly set a timer for five minutes and invite the students to use the time to call out their greatest annoyances. As students try to top each other with their annoyances, they become energized. Occasionally students just need to let you know their current problems and issues, and sometimes it's more effective to listen to them on topics completely unrelated to the class than it is to storm ahead assuming they have what they need to follow you. They don't. They need motivation to follow a teacher, and leaving them and their concerns behind tells them the teacher values something else more than them. By ignoring their need for motivation, she's created a disinclination to follow her. Five minutes can clear the air for serious and important work, inform the teacher of students' problems, raise the class energy level, and focus the students. You may be concerned that the students will take this opportunity to dump on the teacher and the class. It's true; they can. In many cases, however, if a student starts to do this and the teacher does not react defensively but simply listens, another student or two will defend the class. Either way, though, whether students come to the defense or not, you've learned something valuable and you do have the timer on your side. You can address the complaints later as you like. I suggest waiting at least one day before replying if at all.

Not that all student concerns can be attended to. Not even most of them. In fact, valuable lessons can be learned when students

find what professors won't attend to, what teachers ignore. Once while living on a Sri Lankan island, I spotted offshore an outrigger canoe holding two Sri Lankans and a Caucasian man. My curiosity was piqued—the only nearby island was an island monastery like ours, only for men. Were these men headed to that island? Was there to be a westerner practicing Buddhism on that island? At that moment, Sister Khema, the abbess of the nunnery, happened by. "Hey," I called to her, "There's a white man in a boat out there. Do we know anything about white men in boats?"

"It doesn't matter," she replied, not pausing in her walk.

In a regular classroom, the teacher can say, "OK: Five minutes about your parking troubles, your bodily woes, and your negative interactions with others and then back to our topic in the long term interest of your contributing helpfully to the world despite your distractions." The teacher in this way simultaneously gives importance to particular woes of students while communicating their greater responsibility to others.

Instead of listening to his monks whine, the Buddha sometimes used miracles to get their attention. At one point he "rose into the air to the height of seven palm-trees, and project[ed] a beam for the height of another seven so that it blazed and shed fragrance, and then reappeared in the Gabled Hall of the Great Fast."⁹ A professor of mine once brought in a piano and led our entire class in a song about the founders of the field of psychology—miracle enough in those circumstances. If you're capable of such feats and can use them to help students attend, do so.

A one-on-one conversation with a student can miraculously remove obstacles that promise only to get larger as the term wears on and nerves fray. Once I had a senior, Beth, taking a 100-level class who behaved quite immaturely in class—criticizing other students by making faces at her friends, rolling her eyes, shifting angrily in her seat—basically acting as though she were above and outside the challenges of our classroom. Beth had disengaged from most members of the class and from our work and struck out with a few friends to mock the whole proceedings. I didn't know Beth—I'd never had her in a class before—but her behavior was not helping the class. My teaching mentor Roger Betsworth advised me to guide her in a certain kind of conversation.¹⁰ I called her into my office and outlined how we would proceed: "I'd like to have a frank conversation about

your performance in the class. First I'm going to tell you some things I see in your behavior, then I'm going to tell you what those things seem to communicate to me. Then I'm going to ask you to offer your reflections on the situation. Don't worry: you will get your say." I then described specific occasions when her behavior had seemed disrespectful. I was quite specific and did not burden my telling with the emotions I actually felt, which were anger and frustration. I concluded, "Frankly, this behavior makes me think you've forgotten you're in college. You act like you're in high school."¹¹

She looked at me, stunned. There was a long silence.

"I had no idea you could tell how I felt," she replied, and I watched as she figured out the roots of the problem, her face opening up as she considered what I'd told her. She said she was behaving that way because it seemed as though in that class she *was* back in high school. As a senior, she'd learned to work hard in her classes and enjoy the work. But she felt a lot of students in the class were not working as hard—they were first-years and hadn't learned what she felt she had about working seriously. She reminisced that she had gone to a bad high school and lots of students had treated the work disrespectfully. Now that she was back with underclass students, she felt as though she were back in high school, and "I guess I act just like I feel." Her honesty lit up the room. We'd made a lot of progress in a short period of time. And it was clear we were going to have some concrete ways to solve our problems shortly.

"So, what's the solution?" I asked her. "It sounds like there are some things I need to do as the professor and some things you need to do as a student." From that point we had a constructive conversation about ways I could help the less serious students work more seriously and specific ways she could behave to help foster the learning environment we both wanted. We were on the same team solving a problem together that affected us both. My anger and frustration dissipated, and I sensed none from her. This conversation transformed anger into helpful self-reflection and student-teacher collaboration.

The Buddha's miracles were more dramatic, but the miracle of breaking down barriers of status, disrespect, and lack of attention can be pretty dramatic too—and they are the kind of work the Buddha valued. Ironically, considering the drama of some of

his own, he actually warned against showy miracles. They don't really convince skeptics and they don't focus onlookers on the important issue of relieving suffering.

Of course I like to discover problems with students and work with them to formulate ways of handling them, but with some students that seems impossible. They condemn a professor's openness and interest in collaboration as signs of weakness and ignorance. In the face of innovative interactive classroom exercises, for example, such a student wants a lecture from an authority: "Why don't you just *teach* me if you know so much?" (After all, most students have been trained to *receive information* from teachers, not to grapple with their teachers and fellows to *create knowledge*.)¹² If a teacher doesn't lecture, these students assume, it must be because that teacher doesn't know much. According to the Buddhist texts, the Buddha once faced a similar situation when he came to a place where Kassapa, who thought he himself was the accomplished spiritual master, was teaching. Knowing Kassapa's arrogance was only leading him to refuse learning offered by the Buddha, the Buddha sought to get Kassapa's attention and earn his respect. First, the Buddha defeated a horrible snake demon who had "supernormal powers [and] who [was] venomous, fearfully poisonous" without killing it. This defeat impressed the gods so much that they came and paid homage to him. Trees, similarly impressed, bent their branches down so the Buddha could wash out a rag by a river with less trouble. The Buddha evidenced power, and beings recognized that power in all manners of ways. Still, however, Kassapa thought he was more spiritually advanced than the Buddha and was unwilling and unable to learn from him. Finally, faced with this level of obtuseness, the Buddha gave Kassapa a helpful shock by saying to him, "There is nothing that you do by which you might become an Arahant (an enlightened one) or enter into the way to becoming one."¹³

Kassapa prostrated himself to the Buddha right then and there and asked to go forth, to become a monk.^{14, 15} (Becoming a Buddhist monk or nun is called "going forth" from the longer phrase "going forth from home to homelessness.")

I am uncomfortable with this sort of bully-teaching, and I'm hesitant to recommend it. For one thing, it happens enough already. Teaching in most traditional contexts already reinforces

violent habits and oppressive power structures in so many ways that I'm troubled by any self-conscious reinforcement of these patterns. The Buddha, however, was spiritually accomplished. Presumably, with enlightenment, his motivations were much better than mine are going to be in this lifetime, so, from a Buddhist perspective, he could be more skillful than I could with this technique. I've only done this sort of bullying once to good effect.¹⁶ In my case I had a student who had been quite rude at the end of the previous semester—disrespectful of our class and our class time. Once he came into class and lay down on top of a table with a huge sigh, calling everyone's attention away from the work at hand and to his own misery. New to teaching, I had foolishly chosen to ignore his behavior because the student intimidated me and because the semester was ending soon. When the young man showed up in another of my classes the next semester, I was surprised—I thought his rudeness had indicated he didn't appreciate my classes and wouldn't take another. He was rude repeatedly in much more subtle ways in this new class.

Having been coached by my mentor, I took that student outside the class directly after one such incident, when he seemed to be making a comment about me to a fellow student. In the hall, shaking with anger and standing too close to him, I asked him directly and forcefully what was going on. My physical stance with him was unyielding. When he looked confused, I described what I'd seen and speculated he had been making a derogatory comment about me. He was stunned and sputtered that he'd noticed I neither called on him nor visited his group when I was working with small groups and that he was noting this to his fellow student. "Do you think that is a very helpful way of dealing with your problem?" I asked. Greeted with silence, I suggested that he could take me aside and point out that behavior and ask about it as I was asking about his behavior now. That, I told him, would have a better effect than simply behaving in a manner I could only interpret as being rude. I told him I would try to pay more attention to whatever group he was in and I expected him to be more polite and direct.

The young man and I were able to work out a mutually respectful relationship, so one could say bullying him worked. He was able to learn and I was able to teach. Our relationship got better, too. Perhaps I gave him more possibilities of response to

this sort of problem than simply talking behind a person's back. I'm still not comfortable with it, though. While the Buddha might have managed to confront Kassapa without anger and fear, treasuring the goal of Kassapa's release from the round of suffering, I was primarily motivated by fear of what this student could do to my class. I was not motivated by generosity and love, as Buddhist philosophy encourages and which I've found to be better compasses for navigation. While I certainly was not even close to being out of control with anger or fear (in fact, the event was carefully choreographed), my motivations were far from what I dream they someday might be.

A larger issue related to this young man's problem is the need of some students for a lot of attention. When he had lain down on that table in class, that student had wanted attention. When he talked with his fellow student, he wanted attention. To his mind (and probably in reality, too, in this case), I had been ignoring him. Why would I ever withhold attention from a student who wanted it? Generally speaking, if a student wants attention, I try to give it, and I try to give more positive attention than I managed in this case. Why not? Too often in the face of a student's need for attention a teacher will dismiss that need with a comment such as, "Oh, he just wants attention." That sentence is code for "There's no real reason to give this person what he wants." If all he wants is attention, though, there's no reason not to give it. After all, to attend to means to care for. And teachers are to care for their students. If I knew a student behaved annoyingly because she was hungry, would I pointedly ignore the hunger in the same way? I hope not. I hope I would offer the student some food. To dismiss a problem like that is to make myself callous and deny myself the pleasure of watching a hunger satisfied, of experiencing joy in the pleasure another takes in food. I regret that many of us teach students who are desperate for attention—we cannot fill all those needs. But giving care as we can to those who need it is feeding the hungry: a valuable thing to do. As a general rule, if a student wants care, one should probably be attentive to that student—when and in what form that attention comes is part of the pedagogical art.

At all times when I teach, I try to attend. I try to be aware of where I am, who I'm with, what I'm doing. I try to be aware of what I see, hear, smell, taste, feel. I try to be aware of the dynamism of

being with others doing something important. I find as I practice being present outside the classroom, I'm much more present in the classroom. So I work to be with my students. At the beginning of class, I look around at my group and smile to myself: what adventures we'll have today together. Why, we haven't got a clue what's going to happen.

During class, I attend to each student who speaks, helping the other students to do that, too. I make sure they make eye contact with the speaker. (Sometimes if it requires students turning their necks or turning their whole trunks, they won't do it. Years of classroom training keeps them static. One can use their natural inclination to keep their eyes on you more than on their fellow students by walking over to whoever is speaking and standing right by her. More direct approaches work, too—just ask everyone to turn to look at the speaker and point out how the movement energizes them a bit and how making eye contact helps keep their attention on the speaker.) I try to be aware of those who are fading away and help them come back—if I thought someone on the opposite team is not paying attention in volleyball, I'd head the ball their way, of course. This makes for a good game, good competition. There's less competition in my classroom—I hope it's more of a creative building process—but I make sure to toss the volleyball to the people who need some help focusing. I knew a teacher who could lead a conversation with fifty students participating—I'm still working toward that goal.¹⁷

So far in this chapter I've used the term attention in a broad sense. In Buddhist philosophy, however, there is what one teacher of mine referred to as a "science" of meditation. Other books address this topic at greater length, but here I just note this: many students in the United States don't notice how good it feels simply to pay attention to something. So many aspects of their lives give such immediate emotional and physical rewards that they simply don't realize consciously that the intellectual engagement required to work on an algebra problem or read a difficult text is rewarding in and of itself. Calling students' attention to this subtle good feeling can give them a bit more impetus to do any intellectual work.

Related to the intrinsic rewards of attention are other rewards one can gain through different kinds of attention. Buddhist texts offer a wide variety of methods of attention (or

meditation, cultivation), but regardless of which ones a person engages in, all can help to enlarge one's sensibilities and deepen one's heart. Like the practice of reading, meditation demands you remove yourself from the nexus causing emotions and from the tumult of emotions themselves. Removed from emotions, one isn't paralyzed by them. One isn't tossed about on the seas or running desperately for shore. Nor does one act on them overly hastily or distractedly. Yet one still *cares* about them, giving them calm, quiet attention.¹⁸

When I was in that Sri Lankan island nunnery, I spent three months meditating between six and fourteen hours a day. The air was wonderfully humid but cool. The sounds of the palms of coconut trees wisping together filled my days and nights. And I loved the food. We had rice every day at lunch, and the curries were delicious. We ate juicy papayas, mangosteins, rambutans, and other tropical fruit. Further, we only ate two meals a day, spending eighteen and a half hours a day without food (as is the custom of Theravada Buddhist renunciants).¹⁹ Because of these reasons, and because I was young and fit and metabolizing food quickly, mealtimes were wondrous for me. I ate the food with vigor. Yet each day I was required to chant this reminder before I ate:

Reflecting carefully, I eat this food. Not for amusement or intoxication, not for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life, considering: "Thus I shall terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings and I shall be healthy and blameless and live in comfort."²⁰

Having taken the five precepts, which included a vow prohibiting me from untruthfulness, I was troubled that every time I chanted, I was lying. I was definitely eating the food for sensual pleasure. When I approached the abbess (another one of my finest teachers), she let a pause yawn as she looked me dead in the eye. She replied, "Lie until it's true."²¹

Attend as much as you can. Pay close attention in class, to your work, to grading, to each student who comes to your office or passes you in the hall. And if you feel disconnected, if you feel alienated, if you are tired and just want to curl up by a fire with a

book and forget this whole thing, if you feel like this is the biggest waste of time in the universe, try to pay attention anyway. And if you're angry, if all the students, the administration, your colleagues are all clearly plotting your demise, try to pay attention. But if you can't, pretend. Pretend you're attending. Pretend this is the most important moment in your life and in that of your students. Pretend that this thing called a classroom is a crucible. Pretend that we all breathe to be together doing this.

Until it's true.