

# The Heart, Love and the Self are Educational Subjects Too – a Field Report<sup>1</sup>

## An experience of the heart

Have you heard of the town of Delft? It's best known for its world renowned blue and white porcelain. Together with Amsterdam, it was an important trading hub during the Netherland's Golden Age. For many centuries, it's also been the final resting place for members of the Dutch royal family. With its many canals and manor houses steeped in history, the beautiful old town of Delft is also known for its magical light – which the painter Johannes Vermeer most famously was able to capture in perfect detail. This is the city where I was born.

When I was young – about 13 years old, I used to deliver the morning paper with my older sister. My mother would wake us up at five in the morning every day, and we would take our bikes to the paper warehouse where we'd stuff our bike bags full of newspapers. Riding to the center of the city, we'd each take the subscriber addresses assigned to us. We were usually home by 6:30 a.m., where our mother, expecting us, had prepared a big pot of brinta, a warm porridge. Soon after breakfast we'd head off to school.

This memory suddenly came back to me, during a meditation retreat for university lecturers at the Benediktushof – Centre for Meditation and Mindfulness, in Holzkirchen near Würzburg, in October 2019. It was Tuesday, the second day of the retreat, exactly at 6am, during the first walking meditation. I had joined the other seminar participants gathered in the courtyard. As it was pretty cold due to the winter season, most of us were wrapped in warm jackets, hats and scarves. We walked round and round in a big circle attentively, silently, but still at a brisk pace. The ground surface was cobblestone, the same material that makes up many of the streets lining Delft's canals. The ringing of the bells in the church nearby abruptly brought back a memory of the church bells in Delft. There the bells ring every half hour, and the Nieuwe Kerk on the market place has a carillon, which sounds a little melody every quarter hour. As I walked, step by step and in silence, my childhood home was suddenly present before me. I could see the early morning

fog over the canals and the narrow streets; feel the cold on my fingers during those winter days and smell the porridge as if it was in front of me.

Most importantly, my mother was there. I saw how she lovingly embraced my sister and me before we left the house in the morning. I could suddenly see and feel the love she had for us. I saw my mother surrounded by this love that passed through her and emanated from her; this love energy moved from behind her head to her shoulders and forward to her chest. Love was fully present; I perceived its essence and it touched me deeply.

At the same time, in the midst of this totally unexpected experience, rational thoughts came to my mind: what was she thinking as she waved to my sister and me just before we turned off on the bicycles at the end of the road? We were still quite young, and being on the road alone so early in the morning was not without its dangers. Would everything be alright? Another thought came to me: she rose so early for us every day, and was always there to prepare the warm porridge for us.

As the thoughts gradually subsided, another picture emerged. Surrounding my sister and me, I could see a field of love energy that interacted with that of my mother's. At the same time, all three of us were surrounded by an even larger, all-encompassing force field. We were in the middle of this field, which seemed to expand around us. While I had this picture in mind, so present and real as if it were yesterday, it became clear to me: this power is always present, everywhere. It was there then, and is still here now. It holds everything together.

As I slowly did my walking meditation rounds, I could now feel my heart more and more. It was a strong, extraordinary force that filled me. I was pervaded by a deep feeling of security and peace accompanied by the grateful certainty that all is well.

Suddenly the bright ringing of hand bells sounded: the walking meditation was ending. The participants of our seminar group made their way towards the meditation room. I quickly first went to get some hot tea, as I attempted to process what had just taken place.

Did this experience really come out of nowhere, or was there an explanation behind it? Could it have been related to events from the day before, when upon arrival, we had received an introduction to Zen? This had also led to a lively discussion about the conditioning of the human being and the meaning of emptiness. I was plagued by the question of whether, in the observation and analysis of thought, we get too entangled in rational explanations. Wouldn't it be more sensible to seek silence directly, in order to experience this power in a direct way – as repeatedly reported on by mystics both East and West? And is it perhaps the same power shown to me during my walking meditation that awaits one there in the field of stillness? Is that what we call love? And is this guiding force the core of our being? Our soul? Our higher Self?

In this context, our Zen master, Alexander Poraj, shared a contemplative phrase during the common sitting meditation: “The breath is not there because I breathe; I am there, because there is the breath.” Seen in this light, the question arises as to what inner essence breathes for us. What works through us? The philosophy behind the Zen garden in the Benedictine monastery was a metaphor: “In a Zen garden, the essence of every plant and every tree is made visible.”

The unexpected and intense experience that had occurred during the walking meditation remained with me all week. Although afterwards we frequently practiced walking meditation, it was no longer so intense. Yet, during the early walking meditation on Thursday, the space around me seemed to change. The steps of the other seminar participants seemed quieter. Their shape also changed; it was more shadow-like. I spontaneously recalled the allegory of Plato's cave, in which a group of people live their lives chained to the wall of a cave. They notice shadows on the cave wall, but since they cannot see those who cast the shadows, they assume the shadows to be living beings themselves. I asked myself: do we really see the people around us? What if we were able to perceive more their true essence? In the same way that in a zen garden, the unique essence of each plant and tree can be seen.

## Being mindful

On Thursday afternoon, as we shared our experiences of silence from the previous days, one participant noted: “Everything is more intense: more wind, more light, birds, butterflies; everything has increased in intensity!”

I could easily relate to this and found the statement to be quite true. At the same time, I was also conscious of the idea that in mindfulness practices that relate to everyday actions there is a general danger of wanting too much – and that these are then carried out too self-consciously or too mechanically: “I *must* now eat mindfully, I *must* now walk mindfully, etc.”

The Christian tradition differentiates between different forms of seeing: seeing through sensory perception, seeing through the mind and seeing with the heart.<sup>2</sup> It's this last level that matters. When you connect mindfulness to your heart, practicing becomes very natural. Looking back on my experience, this point proves meaningful. We were connected through our hearts; it was through our hearts that love enveloped us. And all this was happening, whether or not I was aware of it at the time.

I ask myself what it would be like if we could more consciously perceive and express such a heart connection in everyday life? Perhaps the mind would no longer occupy the role it usually does, meaning that we would only use the mind when a particular situation requires it.

The Indian spiritual teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981) said about the mind: “When you totally realize that ‘You are’, but not conditioned by this body-mind, you will be one with the whole world.”<sup>3</sup>

And the Benedictine monk, Zen master and founder of the Benediktushof, Willigis Jäger (1925-2020) writes in his book *Kontemplation – ein spiritueller Weg [Contemplation – a Spiritual Path]*: “It's correct: our mind makes us human. But we must stop identifying with it. It's only the tool, an instrument upon which our true being plays.”<sup>4</sup>

We might not have to do so much to allow this “true being” to play and act freely. Perhaps it's simply a matter of just being. With regard to the practice of mindfulness, however, the question arises as to whether I can really be in the moment if I perceive myself as an observer observing the observed. The Indian spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) often spoke in his lectures about perception and the dissolution of the ego. In answer to the question “How can we perceive our own mind when the mind is the perceiver as well as that which it perceives?” Krishnamurti first illuminates the thinking that

*But the moment you have  
in your heart this extraordinary thing  
called love and feel the depth,  
the delight, the ecstasy of it,  
you will discover that for you  
the world is transformed.*

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986)

produces the I, the thinker, the perceiver, the observer, thus producing a split. At first glance, the perceiver seems to be an independent entity, but in the end the perceiver is also created by thinking.<sup>5</sup> It is about going one level further. “When you look at a flower, when you just see it, at the moment is there an entity who sees? Or is there only seeing?”<sup>6</sup>

For Nisargadatta Maharaj, the difficulty lies in verbalizing the observer: “To say: I am only the witness is both false and true: false because of the ‘I am’, true because of the witness. It is better to say: ‘there is witnessing.’ The moment you say: ‘I am’, the entire universe comes into being along with its creator.”<sup>7</sup> What he thinks is about the resolution of this term: “You have to be one with the Self, the ‘I Am’. If you say ‘knowledge’, it is just the same as information. If necessary, discard the words ‘I Am’. Even without the words you are that ‘You are’. Do not say or even think that ‘You are’. Just be aware of the Presence without thinking about it.”<sup>8</sup>

## Loneliness and isolation

Giving up the habit of verbalizing the observer can promote a feeling of loneliness and aloneness. There is then no point of reference: “I go, I see, I ...” becomes “go, see ...” For Krishnamurti, however, there is a clear difference between loneliness and being alone. Krishnamurti: “You know, there is a vast difference between loneliness and aloneness. [...] The mind knows this fear when for a moment it realizes that it can rely on nothing, that no distraction can take away the sense of self-enclosing emptiness. That is loneliness. But aloneness is something entirely different; it is a state of freedom which comes into being when you have gone through loneliness and understand it.”<sup>9</sup>

Krishnamurti stresses that it is important to deal with this loneliness: “All this is part of education: to face the ache of loneliness, that extraordinary feeling of emptiness which all of us know, and not be frightened when it comes; not to turn on the radio, lose one-self in work, or run to the cinema, but to look at it, go into it, understand it.”<sup>10</sup> Not being constantly distracted and instead seeking silence is essential for exploring the “inner space.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed: “Very few go beyond this extraordinary fear of loneliness; but one *must* go beyond it, because beyond it lies the real treasure.”<sup>12</sup>

The Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast sees the heart as a way to dissolve loneliness. “When we reach our innermost heart, we reach a realm where we are not only intimately at home with ourselves, but intimately united with others, all others. The heart is not a lonely place. It is the realm where solitude and togetherness coincide.”<sup>13</sup> For him, it is the special moments of being alone, such as a nice walk, a mountain hike, a sunrise, when we can feel connected to everything: “It felt as if your heart were expanding, as if your being were expanding to embrace everything, as if the barriers were in some way broken down or dissolved and you were one with all.”<sup>14</sup>

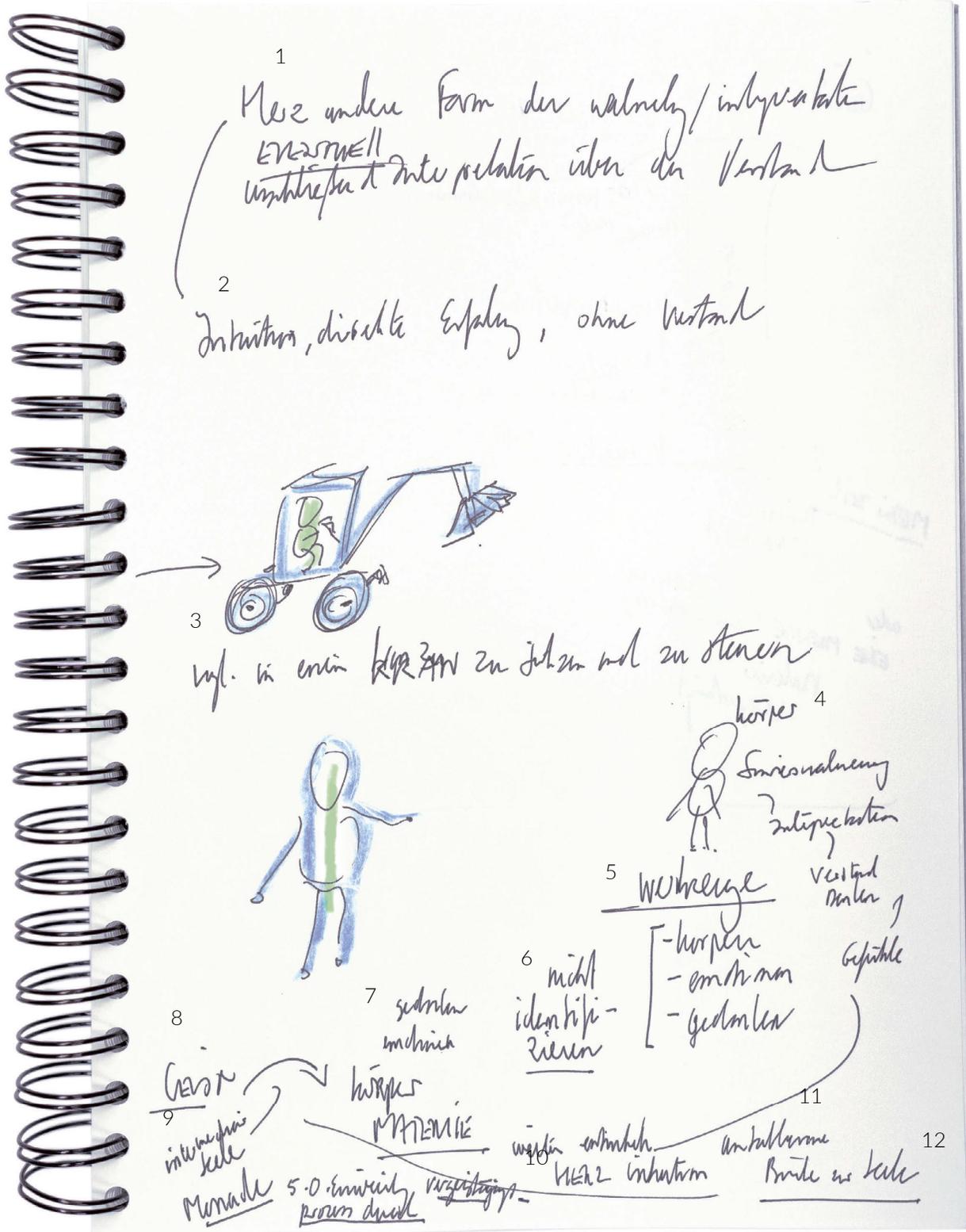
For Willigis Jäger it is love that provides security: “It is love that gives trust and strength and thus the certainty of being caught and carried.”<sup>15</sup> Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield also described this aspect of love: “Love is a blessed mystery. It is like gravity: vast, invisible, the unstoppable force that connects all things”.<sup>16</sup> This love is in us too, it is our essence. Nisargadatta emphasizes: “The very nature of the self is love”<sup>17</sup>; and elsewhere: “‘I amness’, awareness without thought, is love.”<sup>18</sup>

## Outlook

The connection to the inner self helps us to see more clearly what’s important in life and to act accordingly. If you ask dying people what they regret most about looking back at their life, it turns out that they would have liked to express their feelings more, to have maintained contact with friends more, to have not worked so much and had more courage to live life the way they would have liked.<sup>19</sup>

When Nisargadatta Maharaj was once asked by a woman why she had been unhappy all her life, he replied: “Because you did not go down to the very roots of your being. It is your complete ignorance of yourself, that

We are in one body - our vehicle. It's as if we were sitting in a tractor.



<sup>1</sup> the heart another form of perception / interpretation; subsequent interpretations eventually come via the mind | <sup>2</sup> intuition, direct experience, without the mind | <sup>3</sup> like sitting in a crane and steering | <sup>4</sup> body, sensory perception, interpretation, mind, thinking, feeling | <sup>5</sup> vehicles; body, emotions, thoughts | <sup>6</sup> not identifying (with ...) | <sup>7</sup> thoughts | <sup>8</sup> spirit, body, matter | <sup>9</sup> interaction soul | <sup>10</sup> heart, intuition | <sup>11</sup> antahkarana | <sup>12</sup> bridge to the soul

*People who truly know  
and experience the scriptures  
understand things not just  
from books but from the heart.  
And the heart is  
the greatest library.*

Swami Chidvilasananda

covered up your love and happiness and made you seek for what you have never lost. Love is will, the will to share your happiness with all. Being happy – making happy – this is the rhythm of love.”<sup>20</sup>

In his book *Über die Liebe [About Love]*, Willigis Jäger describes the effect a near-death experience had on him: “What remained behind after this experience was the certainty: when I die, I will return to this infinite love, without any I-limitation. And this love is the source of all being. Our I with all its encrustations and selfish imprints only constantly covers it up. I realized that we as human beings will not progress if we do not succeed in growing into this level of experience of unconditional love.”<sup>21</sup>

Arriving at the central station in Munich after the five-day retreat on Friday afternoon, I notice it’s quite an adjustment; so many impressions, the hectic pace, everything is loud, the people chasing past me, like shadows. Immediately Plato’s allegory of the cave is again present. And again the question arises in my mind: Do we really see each other? Do we recognize our true essence? And at the same time I feel the feeling of connectedness – that this essence is present in all of us.

A chief aim of the retreat at Benediktushof was to enable more effective exchange among university teachers on the implementation of mindfulness and meditation approaches at universities. For me, looking back, this closes the circle. After such a deep experience of the heart, it became clear to me once again how important it is to make sufficient room for the topics of the heart and love, as well as the connection to the inner self in daily life – and therefore also at universities.

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<sup>1</sup> The experiences described in this text section occurred during the incubation workshop *Achtsame Hochschulen – Innehalten und Vorwärtsschreiten*, to which I was invited by my colleagues Mike Sandbothe and Reyk Albrecht. The event was an offer of the Thuringian Model Mindful Universities and took place from October 7-11, 2019 at Benediktushof – Center for Meditation and Mindfulness in Holzkirchen near Würzburg, [www.benediktushof-holzkirchen.de](http://www.benediktushof-holzkirchen.de) (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jäger 2015, p. 125 f.

<sup>3</sup> Nisargadatta 2014, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Jäger 2015, p. 9 f. [Author's translation].

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Krishnamurti 1989, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Krishnamurti 1989, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Nisargadatta 2009, p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Nisargadatta 2014, p. 15. Nisargadatta Maharaj distinguishes in his teachings between the verbal and the non-verbal I am. An exercise on the “non-verbal I am” is shown by the long-time disciple of Nisargadatta Maharaj and founder of quantum psychology, Stephen H. Wolinsky, Ph.D., under “What is the I am?”, “Nisargadatta Maharaj / Experiential Meditation”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE6kS7vVsXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE6kS7vVsXw) (accessed September 13, 2020). The exercise is also part of the film *I Am That I Am. Experience the Teachings of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj – Part 1* (2009, 7:33-16:39 min.). For more in-depth information, see the short article by Jack Kornfield about his experience with Nisargadatta: “Jack Kornfield on Nisargadatta Maharaj (2)”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXuF8qmv5Nc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXuF8qmv5Nc) (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Krishnamurti 1989, p. 201. See also Krishnamurti 2010, p. 69 f.

<sup>10</sup> Krishnamurti 1989, p. 201.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Krishnamurti 1989, p. 199 f.

<sup>12</sup> Krishnamurti 1989, p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Steindl-Rast 1984, p. 29

<sup>14</sup> Steindl-Rast 2016, p. 47 f.

<sup>15</sup> Jäger 2017, p. 115 [Author's translation].

<sup>16</sup> Kornfield 2008, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Nisargadatta 2009, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> Nisargadatta 2014, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ware 2012

<sup>20</sup> Nisargadatta 2009, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> Jäger 2017, p. 133 [Author's translation].