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## Stop Doing Everything: The Case for Personal Mantras as Educational Philosophies

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*Watch your thoughts; they become words.*

*Watch your words; they become actions.*

*Watch your actions; they become habits.*

*Watch your habits; they become character.*

*Watch your character; for it becomes your destiny.*

*You are what your deep, driving desire is.*

*As you desire is, so is your will.*

*As you will is, so is your deed.*

*As your deed is, so is your destiny.*

### The Upanishads

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The United States of America is going through some immense cultural changes, the likes of which have not been seen since the social and political movements of the 1950s and 60s, with generations of people waking up to decades of deep-rooted issues that routinely challenge the fate of America's survival as a solitarily united nation. Teachers play a peculiar role amidst this internationally polarizing political climate, having to justify their roles as educators through unfair accusations of indoctrination, while simultaneously addressing vitally important and relevant matters within the comprehensive development of their academic curriculum. So, how are teachers expected to satisfy an increasingly concerned parent population while at the same

time navigating this turbulent socio-political landscape? As a developing teacher, and through the education I have received as a student of history and secondary education, I have developed a personal philosophy of education (a mantra, one could say) that advises the reader to take a single action to promote a clearer state of thinking and a deeper sense of understanding the source of their thoughts: *stop doing everything*. Allow me to guide you, dear reader, through the development of my philosophy of education and explore its usefulness, not only as an epistemological inquiry on meaning and intent, but in its practicality as a spiritual philosophy.

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There is a peculiar, undeniable neurological sensation that occurs when one learns something and acknowledges it. I imagine that the alleged ‘father of western philosophy,’ René Descartes, must have experienced such an awareness upon conceiving the phrase, *cogito ergo sum*: “I think; therefore, I am.” Descartes explains the logic behind this phrase through his ‘method of doubt,’ concluding that the individual’s sheer sense of doubt necessarily infers their conscious existence. This serves as the guiding framework behind phenomenology, a philosophy partial to the individual’s conscious experience that identifies intentionality as one of the driving characteristics of consciousness (Noddings, 2016). This emphasis on the subjective nature of individual experience has not only influenced me in creating my own philosophy but has also consequently led me to explore more student-centered pedagogies for my practice. A staunch advocate for progressive education reform, John Dewey, observed that children respond significantly better to experiential learning due to the high level of immersion in the acquisition of knowledge and an increased likelihood of meaningful discussion transpiring concerning one’s personal experiences. By allowing the student to build on what they already know and strengthen their understanding of new information based on new experiences, learning becomes more interdisciplinary and interactive. Dewey (1897) also believed that education is not a preparation for life, rather, *education is life itself*; therefore, education is also subject to change.

Dewey wrote about the importance of freedom in his seminal work, *Experience and Education*. He states, “[t]he only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised on behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile” (Dewey, 2012, p. 280). Even if this is the case and indeed intelligence is the utmost important use of one’s personal freedom, I think Dewey would be mortified to see the state of modern intellectual thought despite the fact that we live in a time with the widest available accessibility to information in all of human history, and I highly doubt he would consider very many of our contemporary values as those that encourage “intrinsically worthwhile” purposes. So, if freedom of intelligence is truly the supreme enterprise, what then does Dewey suggest we learn? Nel Noddings summarizes Dewey’s notion that content pales in importance to the method of inquiry and level of thought applied: “[t]here is nothing in any subject itself that is inherently ‘good for the mind.’ Mind is entirely a dynamic affair, and ‘intelligence’ should be applied to *doings*, not to some unseen and stable capacity” (Noddings, 2016, p. 187). Yet, despite his impact in promoting the child-centered educational mindset we recognize to be of high importance today, the American public remains mostly ambivalent to Dewey’s immense influence on modern education. People are more likely to recognize celebrities, athletes, or social media personalities before recalling anything having to do with Dewey.

The irony of Dewey's efforts to better educate the masses and his dwindling popularity in the eyes of the large majority of our population is something that seems to reflect one of the many absurdities in contemporary American society that bring our societal values into question. Could this be due to the rampant and blatant inequality of access and resources throughout the American public school system? Is it because of its role in the world as the leading capitalist nation, and that money is seen as the primary representation and signifier of individual or group success, that our values in education reflect how we allocate funding and the level of care given to certain districts over others? School districts are not only expected to create model citizens, but also inadvertently aid in creating the future consumers and contributors to the economic sector, so what good does knowing where educational approaches come from if they don't ultimately lead to some sort of economic promise, prospect, or pursuit upon graduating? Courtney Cazden compiled a list of basic life skills high school graduates need in order to land a decent paying job. The list states that one should be able to read and do math at the 9th grade level or higher, form and solve hypotheses, work in diverse groups, effectively communicate both verbally and orally, and do basic word processing using computers (Cazden, 2001). If public school standards are really this low for high school graduates seeking well-paying jobs, then why do we still force all students to take four years of math? Why don't we expand the types of classes offered, or diversify schedules catered to specific student needs instead of demanding that all students adhere to rigid, standardized daily procedures? Why not prioritize preparing children with universal life skills they'll need once they graduate from high school, instead of testing them on the basis of receiving funds based on test scores? It seems that the answer nobody wants to say or hear is that it has always been this way and it probably always will be.

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When the pandemic began, we all got a little glimpse of what life would be like if everything just suddenly stopped working. Transportation, schools, businesses, public events—for a brief instant in time, all experienced a momentary shake up not seen or felt since perhaps September 11, 2001. I particularly felt it when my father was hospitalized throughout the month of May 2020. I was living in Chicago with my wife and brother, trying to stay connected with my mom and sister back home, checking on my dad's progress daily, and translating news from the hospital via FaceTime. His condition steadily grew worse and worse, until eventually, on May 25, I lost my father to COVID-19. It was a week I'll never forget. I turned on the TV to disguise the heavy dreadful feeling lingering inside every room, and the George Floyd protests had just begun. No matter where I turned, it seemed as if my entire world was falling apart. I reflected on what Floyd's daughter must feel, with her loss being a much more public expression of what losing a parent feels like. You end up losing a big part of yourself forever, and requires a complete reconfiguration of your mind, body, and soul, to restabilize and find meaning from one day to the next. This struggle to remain whole is what led to the development of the personal philosophy I wish to tell you about.

I felt that the absence I felt inside could only be fulfilled by some sort of experience with the divine. I don't know why, it may have something to do with my Catholic upbringing, but I desperately wanted to establish a connection to help make sense of everything in my life and tell

me what I had to do next, but fell short in actually admitting to myself that I truly believed in God. I strongly believed in science, and felt that any explanation outside of the accepted academic realm could not be accepted as reasonable and therefore not subject to belief. This inner conflict led me to seek enlightenment outside of the spheres I was used to, as I grew biased against the Western religious canon I was raised in, so I began seeking spiritual fulfillment in religions of the East after feeling compelled by the Buddha's curious teachings on escaping earthly life, which he described as eternal suffering. Grieving in the middle of a state mandated lockdown was a peculiarly interesting experience, but one thing I am grateful for is that it allowed me time to read more about things such as this. I found the Buddha's idea of eternal suffering so comforting because I knew, at least through the Buddhist lens, that my dad was not suffering in this world anymore. Although I was still largely skeptical, I could feel the beginning stages of my healing occur through this attempt to get more in touch with what I initially thought was religion, but slowly revealed itself to be a sense of spirituality. I soon became acquainted with the works of Baba Ram Dass, who had also died just months prior to the onset of COVID-19. Born Richard Alpert, Ram Dass was an American spiritual teacher, psychologist, and guru of modern yoga, whose 1971 book *Be Here Now*, introduced me to a six-syllable Sanskrit mantra that he considered a condensed form of all Buddhist teachings:

The awesome drama of nature unfolds before my very eye. Before that eye I I [sic] which sees all and knows all and on and on. Inside goes: **AUM MANI PADME HUM**. Always bringing me right to my heart where I dwell eternally (Dass, 1978, p. 216).

Initially, these words meant nothing to me. I was culturally Catholic and hardly religious, yet I decided to recite this mantra out loud after my father's passing simply because I was at a point in my life where I desperately needed to find meaning in *something*. It suddenly hit me that these nonsensical words I found myself mindlessly repeating over and over and over again in search of some spiritual truth may not even have any meaning behind them at all, and there was a moment of revelation that offered a solution to virtually all my anxieties, worries, and sorrows. I couldn't tell if I was praying or meditating, but I couldn't stop repeating these words. The more I did repeat them, the more intensely I felt a rush of uncontrollable thoughts questioning my every act and intent. What if the mantra itself is a prayer? What if the effects of mastering the discipline of prayer is pretty much exactly what a Buddhist will tell you should be the results of regular meditation? I felt completely outside of my body, beyond the boundaries of my ego, and for the first time since my father's passing, filled with a kind of peaceful joy. By truly considering what my thoughts were trying to tell me, and by having the patience to follow them through, I thought of a phrase that could just as well have been 'Om Mani Padme Hum' but held more considerable meaning for me, personally. Something that John Dewey had talked about in my readings from school—what Kierkegaard meant by "the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 159). What I had to do to keep going was clear: *stop doing everything*.

Upon initial consideration, I'm sure it sounds counterintuitive, perhaps even a little absurd. Maybe even impossible, since we are always doing something—always breathing, always sensing, always being—but what does 'stop doing everything' mean to *you*? Why would I suggest this?



Where is this message coming from? What will doing this achieve? The phrase ‘stop doing everything’ is nothing more than a subtle message for the individual to meditate on, a reminder to withdraw momentarily from the stimulation and influence of the outside world to instead look within and make sense for one’s own sake, and a command for one to reflect on the overall meaning and purpose of their actions. I understand that initial consideration of such an outrageous expression could be determined as utter meaninglessness, but I implore the reader to reconsider denouncing my philosophy in haste due to its noble attempt to stimulate intellectual and spiritual thinking.

The world we live in incessantly begs for change, and teachers everywhere are playing a role in either engaging in this change or holding it back from happening. As a passionate educator seeking to provide more opportunities for necessary change, it is my belief that teachers today should have more deliberate and thoughtful discussions about religious or spiritual traditions so that their students may gain a broader world perspective and seize the opportunity to experience genuine immersion of spirit for themselves. However personal it may be, a spiritual mindset can help us reason with our mortality, with our internal sense of morality, and to gain a broader understanding of some of the most enduring notions in all of humanity. It is a shame that schools increasingly shy away from engaging in such important topics due to politics, as it is my belief that school should be, above all, meaningful. Meaningfulness, practicality, and not least of all, humanity are essential requirements when constructing a learning curriculum that is specifically student-centered.

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These three words, stop doing everything, have become a reminder to myself to at least try to tune out the world’s influence for a moment, and look within myself for inner truth and meaning. This philosophy is not an invitation to be taken at face value. It is meant to promote higher order thinking by design, prompting the reader to reflect on how their mind and body are taking in the world around them and how are they responding to it? There are several names for what this practice helps accomplish. Some call it prayer. Others yoga, or meditation. Ultimately, it is excessive reflection to the point of existential rumination that includes utter submission to the good and bad feelings, thoughts and emotions we all carry inside. As I hope is exceedingly clear, the truth does not exist in certainties, but in the connections we make to justify its existence. If one sits, eyes closed, reflecting and following their thoughts in tranquility, I guarantee a momentary state of bliss that with enough practice can reveal a massive shift in personal motivation, booming creativity, and substantially clearer expressions of thought. It is because this philosophy is meant to evoke an inner reflection of that subjective Kierkegaardian truth buried within each of us, centered around developing a genuinely meaningful and everlasting critical mindset within each of us. ‘Stop doing everything’ is a perfect phrase I feel adequately reflects the contradicting beauty absurdly prevalent in much of modern society. I believe this mantra helps strengthen both our spirit and intellect by stimulating our capabilities internally and interpersonally through the simplicity of its three words:

### **1. Stop**

A commandment to the reader to put a halt to any and all acts. However, as civil of a society we have become, it seems we are all born with a natural affinity to disobey. Look at any child and you

will see the development of an individual that refuses to be subjugated, for they recognize they are unique and have a natural determination to be free. Examining the different aspects of our shared human free will is an important part of developing a more mindful, critically examined, and authentic life. Authentic learning is greatly beneficial for bettering introspection and self-recognition ability, and allows students to pause and reflect on their inner thoughts and emotions and make decisions based on their true intentions. By engaging students in thinking that promotes more individual authenticity, we can begin crafting a student-centered curriculum that develops more meaningful communication skills, offer better tools for social emotional learning, and foster an environment that positively contributes to their overall well-being. When one reads the words ‘stop doing everything’ and hears that initial instruction to stop what they are doing, I *want* them to question the phrase, its meaning, the source, the message’s intent – what this is really meant to do is provoke interest, inspire investigation, welcome inquiry, invite discourse, and stimulate curiosity by design. I believe these are some of the foundations at the heart of authentic learning, teaching, and interpersonal communication.

## 2. Doing

An intentional call to action. I believe an active effort is necessary to build awareness on how one’s thoughts influence their actions, and as teachers we must emphasize how self-awareness precedes any meaningful engagement with the world. Intentionality empowers individuals to set clear goals, make purposeful decisions, and navigate life with focus and determination. Fostering a sense of intention cultivates a proactive mindset and encourages students to take ownership of their learning journey. This skill is instrumental in shaping not only academic achievements but also in developing character and resilience. Instilling a sense of intentionality in students contributes to the cultivation of well-rounded individuals capable of steering their own destinies with purpose and mindfulness, and by suggesting that we as individuals ‘stop doing everything,’ I am encouraging the reader to make a decision with a sense of intention. If I stop doing everything, what else could I be doing?

## 3. Everything

Everything is an all-encompassing word, but true beauty lies in its duality of meaning. When we talk about everything, we must understand that our own complexities, contradictions, and wholeness are in some way intricately tied to others we come across, and therefore, we should acknowledge and embrace our collective similarities *and* differences. For example, what may mean everything to you, may not mean anything to me. The phrase ‘stop doing everything’ carries multifaceted meaning despite its deceptively simplistic words. Even the polarization of our contemporary political climate shows that ‘the truth’ does not lie in absolutes, but sometimes even within contradictions. Allow me to end on a hot note– in the United States, there exists a concept of great ambiguity that has endured spans of reappropriation and is widely seen as representative of the nation’s strongest cultural bond. This concept is called ‘freedom.’ Many Americans prize their freedom above everything else; some even risk their lives to protect it for the sake of others. The enduring persistence of irreconcilable and polarizing political ideologies, both domestically and abroad, have resulted in the definition of ‘freedom’ becoming increasingly obscured. For some, it means complete independent autonomy within the law; for others, the law itself is a barrier that seeks to undermine their individual sovereignty. ‘Freedom,’ and other similar terms



stemming from extensive traditions of patriotism, embody long-conditioned Western values such as ‘peace,’ ‘liberty,’ and ‘democracy.’ These words, whose eroding definitions inevitably invite further deliberation, make at once audible the slow death of old-world mentalities and the contemporaneous birth of new-world sensibilities, as they delicately balance on the thin line of truth. The reciprocity from recognizing this duality in meaning and sharing this understanding with others can hopefully help make what is personal to us, a little more social. In the words of a professor who inspired many parts of this paper, this recognition of duality might make all the difference instead of making blanket generalizations:

“[There is] a fundamental contradiction at the heart of our reflections on philosophy of education, ethics, and the human condition: We are each utterly unique, fully the one-of-one, yet we are each also merely one of the many” (Ayers, 2023).

The driving reason this ironic phrase resonates with me so much is because upon really thinking about it, it seems that my body naturally resists any attempt to obey it. My mind begins to wander, my brain starts automatically crafting different interpretations, and my body intuitively resists any attempt to be commanded or subjected. Why is this? While I am not certain, I do think that this sort of thinking encourages more of this type of inquiry, the type of thinking skills that can naturally and innately develop within us with enough practice. This philosophy aims to encourage these skills by inspiring one’s actions to be taken with thought and purpose. It is inspired by several Eastern spiritual practices. Followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and several other Indian religions believe one of the supreme goals in an individual’s life is to reach a state of nothingness called *śūnyatā*. Some people dedicate their entire lives to reaching this state, practicing meditation techniques for years to reach complete peace of mind, body, and soul, liberating themselves from worldly suffering, attaining nirvana, and breaking the cycle of rebirth known as *samsāra* (Bronkhorst, 2009). My philosophy is intended to work similarly, intending to develop a strong inner awareness of what is genuinely important to us as individuals, motivating us to act based on what these established values are, and taking the initiative to spread these acts with others who may benefit from what they have learned about themselves. It is my belief that by purposefully disrupting our lives by repeating this subtle little reminder throughout the day (audibly or in our heads), we can ground ourselves and hopefully realize what the important things at stake really are. It is my hope that it is now abundantly clear to the reader that if you wish to make sense of our absurd existence, you must look inward for direction—the direction that invites you to *stop doing everything*.

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