

“Can You See Me?” Eye-Gazing: A Meditation Practice for Understanding

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Through an autobiographical recount, this essay explores the meditation practice of eye-gazing as a way to create understanding about the self and the Other. Eye-gazing is described as a contemplative practice that individuals can use not only to be self-reflective but to sit with discomfort as a way to begin cultivating compassion and understanding for individuals. Within this essay, a definition of eye-gazing is provided alongside theoretical understandings of its implications for the PK-12 classroom space and broader sociopolitical context.

// I was encouraged to write myself, my struggle, my meaning into existence” (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2006, p. 89). As a Black woman, I seek to be understood and seen in society and the academy. I seek to have my voice and narrative stand as valuable text, worthy of unearthing social indignities and societal inequities. I seek to have connection and community with groups of people who are willing to see me and release hold of thoughts and perceptions that limit their ability to connect with me. I seek these places of “refuge” in the academy, the education community, and yoga studios.

This reflection details my experience during a chakra flow yoga class, one in which asanas (yoga poses) and meditative techniques are utilized to support practitioners in feeling energetically and spiritually aligned. I use Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989) and the autoethnographic method to bring to bear how the introspective practice of eye-gazing can be utilized to rethink oppression, marginalization, and connection. I draw from Black feminist thought to extract the ideas of personal transformation, storytelling, and building a critical consciousness (hooks, 2013, 2015). Eye-gazing is outlined through thematic descriptions provided by my yoga instructor to situate the premise of this reflection. The themes include: (a) breaking illusions, (b) releasing existential separation, and (c) softening to find compassion. I situate these themes to uncover how transformation and social change can be achieved through seeing, understanding, and connecting with the Other. I reflect and theorize upon the practice of eye-gazing as necessary, not only for social change but for shifting practices in PK-12 classrooms, particularly those practices and policies that serve to silence Black and Brown students.

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EYE-GAZING: SEEING THE OTHER

Sunday morning chakra class was always something to look forward to. I must admit, the first time I attended I was skeptical about the idea of clearing something I could not see or physically touch, but as time passed, the class became necessary. During this class, my wonderful instructor would set students up to participate in the meditative and reflective activity of eye-gazing.

On the one particular Sunday on which this essay is based, I was looking forward to pairing up with someone new. I always engaged in the activity with someone who knew me, but this particular Sunday I was without my partner, so I confidently extended my sweaty hands to this stranger in the room for her to place her palms on top of mine, got comfortable in Sukhasana (easy seat, or, as we would tell children, “criss cross applesauce”), and waited for instructions. The yoga instructor proceeded to remind the whole room that the activity of just staring at another individual can be uncomfortable, but she asked us to set the intention of staring or gazing with a message: “What would you say to the person across from you if this were your last day on Earth?” So, without words, I began to tell this stranger “You were loved, and you lived a wonderful life—” and that’s where it stopped, because I was interrupted by her choice to close her eyes.

I felt rage consume my body and mind. She closed her eyes! All notions of mindfulness went out the window. Prior to the class beginning she had mentioned being a lawyer to someone else in the room; now I used what I knew about this woman to tell her—through my eyes, of course—how angry I was: “*You’re a lawyer. You’re a White woman lawyer. I don’t know what kind of lawyer you are, but I pray to God it’s not a criminal attorney! Whatever type of lawyer you are, you have a responsibility to keep your eyes open! To see me. To see the people who look like me. To use your eyes to connect with us, to see that we don’t experience this life—this society—the way you do. You need to keep your eyes open! I’m angry at you for closing your eyes on me. See me! I see you.*”

The yoga instructor called time on the activity; the woman opened her eyes and turned to face the front of the room. I sat there seething. My chakras were not going to get cleared that day. I marched out of that room upset. I had such a difficult time understanding her conscious choice to close her eyes. “Indeed, often emotions serve to draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ wherein those who are marked as others are made responsible for ‘our’ feelings” (Berila, 2016, p. 43). My emotions in that moment served as protection for me to assign her the role of the enemy. As I saw it, she was a White woman lawyer who of course held bias towards me as a Black woman. My embodied learning in that moment suggested that she read my body, she read my skin, and that was why she chose to check out. I decided to perceive her potential discomfort with the exercise as an indictment of my being.

I could not drop the feeling of being unseen, of being ignored. As a Black woman academician, I’m prepared for the deintellectualization and devaluation I experience in the academy (Collins, 1986), but I was not prepared for it during a yoga class. During yoga I’m expecting a sense of community, even though I know the colonization of yoga typically dismisses my body and presence. So, rather than function in my irritation, I used theory to undo it.

EYE-GAZING IN THREE THEMES

In my effort to theorize my unsettling eye-gazing moment, I sought to understand operationally why eye-gazing is practiced and, through that understanding, how eye-gazing be utilized in seeing the Other, seeing subject identities, and creating connection to bring about social change and change in PK-12 classroom spaces. My yoga instructor, Courtney McNabb, provided me with a definition to support my theorizing:

Eye-gazing is a quick and often existentially painful way to cut through disconnection and separation, replacing "I" and "You" with a powerful feeling of empathy, connectedness, and truth. Although we may hold eye contact and be in the presence of another, humans will still use words to create space between self and other. By removing language from the scenario and only allowing for eye contact in silence or a guided other, the participants cannot hide. (personal communication, July 23, 2018)

Eye-gazing, then, is a contemplative practice that individuals can use not only to be self-reflective but to sit with discomfort as a way to begin cultivating compassion and understanding for individuals (Berila, 2016); the action my yoga instructor described can easily be used to support our understanding of oppression, power, privilege, and domination. The act of eye-gazing is useful in beginning to build a collective liberatory voice—the voice that's created when we can all come to see our notions of domination (hooks, 2015).

BREAK THROUGH ILLUSIONS ABOUT ONE'S DISPOSITIONS

In order for us to connect, we have to begin with ourselves. As individuals we have to be willing to recognize the feelings and emotions tied to our own perceptions about ourselves that are limiting to our growth: "It is important not to be a victim to your false perceptions. If you are victim of your false perceptions, you will suffer a lot. You have to sit down and look at perceptions very calmly" (Hanh, 2009, p. 29). Furthermore, once able to recognize and treat those emotions and feelings with grace, we can allow ourselves to be seen and to see. While I projected onto my eye-gazing partner her reasons for not wanting to see me, her choice to close her eyes may have been an indication that she was not ready to be seen.

Here my yoga instructor describes breaking through illusions:

As a teacher, I use eye-gazing with several intentions. The first is to break through any illusions a person has about his/her own disposition. A person may be highly anxious, depressed, isolated, angry, self-conscious, or self-deprecating but may not be aware of the level to which they are. Eye-gazing acts as a mirror to self. When eye-gazing, participants gain the feeling of "being fully seen" without language, technology, or avoidance as a buffer. (C. McNabb, personal communication, July 23, 2018)

This description suggests that an individual participating in eye gazing must be willing to drop what is “known” to be able to see and be seen. The illusions my instructor refers to are those inner resistances that protect us from fully engaging.

Our feelings about the “Other” can also be understood in her words. If we strip away language, media, and other sources of projected knowledge that flood our minds with understandings of marginalized and oppressed people and instead make a choice to just see them, what changes would we notice within ourselves? What changes might we notice in a broader sociopolitical context? Eye-gazing allows us to be invited to the experiences of the other by sitting in close proximity to see and “hear” what we have chosen to dismiss; the practice would give many individuals the opportunity to drop any perceived notions or ideologies that allow for continued oppression of the other and the self that they may be holding onto.

ERASE THE EXISTENTIAL SEPARATION BETWEEN EACH OTHER

Eye-gazing is a powerful act that opens up the terrain of possibility for connection; its realization as a reflective, introspective, and mindful practice helps to situate the reality of connection with the Other. What is learned through eye-gazing is the ability to erase or remove the ever-present separations that exist between us. My instructor describes this as an existential separation:

The second intention is to erase the existential separation between the two participants. After the participant has surrendered that they are, in fact, being seen for the truth of who they are (or who they think they are) and where they are existentially, then they begin to drop the neurosis and see the other. As they see the other, they begin to soften. In softening they are hopefully able to see that they are no different than the other. (C. McNabb, personal communication, July 23, 2018)

We live in a society with carefully curated binaries (white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, men/women, Christian/Semitic, etc.) that operate based on rules, norms, and perceptions. The operation of these binaries often prevents us from seeing the possibility of connecting with the Other. As individuals sit together, gazing at each other silently, they have an opportunity to connect with their bodies and engage in a process of embodied learning. In this way it becomes understood by both participants that the body is a site of knowledge, a site for generative meaning-making to lead towards understanding and collective liberation.

SOFTEN TO FIND COMPASSION

The objective of eye-gazing is to engage in a way that allows each person an opportunity to drop their boundaries and protections so they may open up the possibility of connection and understanding. The final description provided by my instructor situates softening as a reciprocal and inward-looking experience:

The final intention is to drop enough neurosis and soften so much that you find compassion, not just for the other but for the self participating. In finding love, compassion, acceptance, and understanding for the other, they then, too, find it for themselves. (C. McNabb, personal communication, July 23, 2018)

Compassion gives us the opportunity to forge connections and build understanding. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) teaches that meditation is not done to escape society or for mere individualistic needs. It is done to build up society: the moments we take to reflect and truly become self-aware bolster our ability to engage with the injustices of society in a more thoughtful and dynamic way. Through my instructor's description of the three themes of eye-gazing, we come to see eye-gazing as a deeply reflective, introspective, and mindful activity. "Mindfulness, then, helps us strengthen our capacity for compassion" (Berila, 2016, p. 24). Once we can strengthen our capacity for compassion, then we will be able to meet ourselves and others with compassion, in order to truly learn about and understand the oppressive systems that stand before all of us.

WORKING TO UNDERSTAND: TO SEE AND BE SEEN

I didn't understand why that woman closed her eyes during the chakra yoga flow class, but I was clamoring to be seen, to have an opportunity to speak through my eyes—to be subject, too. When she closed her eyes, I felt I no longer had that chance. But in challenging myself a bit and calling into question my own understanding of my eye-gazing partner that day, I found I was angry because I perceived her actions to be an indictment of my body. I made a choice to not understand that maybe closing her eyes was the best way she could participate that day or she wasn't willing to be seen. In the moment of the practice, I didn't consider that even though her eyes were closed she still had a desire to see and be seen. It was important for me, not only as a Black woman with deep-seated thoughts and embodiments of oppression but as a scholar of race and gender discourse, to recognize that my experiences of oppression blinded me from being able to understand the other side. My lack of understanding that day created my anger, my discomfort, the reason for this reflection.

If I don't understand you, I may be angry with you all the time. As I ponder these words over and over again, I'm plagued with thoughts of our current and ongoing struggles for equity in our society, for social reform and justice, for the chance to be seen and heard for who we each are individually. Our inability to understand each other has created the division; in Thich Nhat Hanh's (1987) words, "If I don't understand you, I may be angry at you all the time. We are not capable of understanding each other, and that is the main source of human suffering" (p. 41). It seems so simple, like the "aha" moment I've been longing for.

As a former third-grade special education teacher who is now a teacher educator, I can't help but consider that this lack of true understanding of both the self and

the Other might be the cause of the awry classroom dynamics witnessed in the PK-12 space: issues with behavior, the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education, the high rate of suspension of Black girls...the list goes on. "Our ability to fully hear and see our students invites them into a space in which they feel known and valued" (Schneider and Keenan, 2015, p. 1). If it is as simple as building understanding, then how do I as an academician help teachers *understand*? What exactly is missing from their ability to *understand*? What's missing from my own ability to *understand*?

CONCLUSION

When we take time to see the Other, we invite them to become subject rather than object to us. When we see the Other as subject, they have the opportunity to move their voice from the margins to the center. My eye-gazing partner's choice to close her eyes, to be with her assumed discomfort rather than with me in that moment, closed her off from seeing me—from seeing my marginalization and oppression. When she closed her eyes, I experienced the aforementioned isolation of the academy all over again. She consciously chose to check out, much like we do when experiencing the oppression of people in this society: we make conscious efforts to close our eyes to social issues like racism, sexism, heterosexism/heteronormative behavior, classism, ableism, etc., and allow them to continue to prevail. When teachers metaphorically close their eyes, they are making a choice to detach from what they don't know and don't understand in order to remain comfortable. As a teacher educator, I have to be willing to urge teachers to get comfortable being uncomfortable and support them in their contemplative and self-reflective work to develop their compassion practices (Healey, 2017). I have called myself to the challenge of this work of urging teachers to drop their staunchly held beliefs and ideologies so they may be able to see the bodies in front of them. Then, and only then, will we see a shift toward social change and justice in our schools.

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