

Dance: the Creative Process from A Contemplative Point of View
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CONTEMPLATIVE EDUCATION

Contemplative education is a concept relatively new to the Western world, although it has a long history and tradition in the East. It is both inspiring and challenging to bring the perspective of learning based on a contemplative environment to contemporary idioms. The purpose of this article is to explore the possibilities of exploring the contemplative viewpoint in the field of dance and in particular the creative process in dance.

The Dance/Movement Studies Department at The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado has had an educational commitment to explore and experiment in synthesizing contemplative disciplines and dance/movement in the many different activities of the department. Over the years, it has become nationally and internationally known as being on the leading edge of contemporary dance because of the way it has viewed the nature and role of dance and movement education in our society. Although no general research methodologies have yet been used, there are specific ways in which results have been documented at Naropa. For example, the faculty has engaged in seminars, workshops, and meetings; student/faculty colloquia included in the curriculum provide up-to-date feedback from students regarding their experiences; and instructor/course evaluations, student self-evaluations, and a recent alumni survey have provided other channels for assessing results. Moreover, the classroom and various performance situations are the arenas where direct observation has occurred. As a dancer, performer, choreographer, and teacher of dance, and a practitioner of contemplative disciplines, I have observed my own journey while directing this research within our department.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

The contemplative practice at the core of this educational approach is that of "sitting meditation." The form of sitting meditation is deceptively simple. Basically, there are three aspects to the technique, dealing with body, speech, and mind, respectively. For body, the instruction is to sit cross-legged on a cushion with a straight back. The idea of this posture is to sit firmly on the ground and be connected to the earth, as well as to have a sense of strength and dignity in the body's uprightness. The arms are relaxed with the hands placed on the thighs and the eyes are open, looking slightly downward

in front of one. The approach to speech, or the vocal channel, is simplified to merely following the breath. One breathes naturally although there is an emphasis on the outbreath and dissolving with it into space as it goes out. Thirdly, a technique of labeling, whereby one acknowledges when the mind is constantly full of thoughts, is introduced to work with the mind. As a thought arises, the technique is to label it thinking and return to following the outbreath. In no way does this imply that thoughts are good or bad; the technique merely makes the practitioner aware of his or her thought process.

In the Buddhist tradition, this contemplative practice is called shamatha/vipashyana (mindfulness/awareness) practice. Shamatha has to do with training the mind to see the "precision of situations at each moment" (Trungpa,1973). This precision is fostered by the technique through developing a synchronicity of body, speech, and mind. One is completely and fully there. There is a sharpening of the mind and development of one-pointedness because experience is reduced to a moment-to-moment awareness without the distractions of past or future.

Vipashyana develops out of mindfulness practice. The precision expands into a more panoramic view; the discipline of the technique is relaxed as it becomes a part of basic being. This is the development of clear seeing, or insight. There is a sense of general vision rather than focused attention, yet the precision of the mindfulness is not lost. A vivid image of mindfulness and awareness-practice working together is that of someone costumed at a carnival, holding out in front of himself a teaspoon of water that he must not spill as he walks through the crowd. One is both mindful of the spoon and yet completely aware of the surrounding environment.

Initially, sitting practice is about coming to stillness. We have a fundamental interest in taming our overly exuberant bodies, our active speech patterns and our wild minds. There is a simplifying of our situation, a coming to the moment, to the present, to the now. A sense of being, rather than doing, is developed. Ultimately, when one has become comfortable with a sense of being, it is about appreciating stillness in activity and connecting directly with the raw energy of the phenomenal world.

CONTEMPLATIVE ART

The understanding of contemplative art which this paper explores was first presented by the founder and president of The Naropa Institute, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. In a collection of writings (1978,1979) based on a series of programs he presented, he states that contemplative art is not a particular kind of art, but rather that

which springs from a certain state of mind, a state of mind cultivated by the practice of sitting meditation. This state of mind is one of calmness and lack of attachment to habitual ways of perceiving; an attitude of openness, inquisitiveness and clarity comes about. The mind's usual lack of clarity comes from fixed ways of being, the entrapment of ego, a self-centered view of existence. Ego builds itself up to protect itself, creating biases in experience. Art created from this state of mind remains narrow and confused. Egolessness, or openness to one's existence free from territorial biases, means that one is unencumbered and works freely and dynamically with energy, space, and one's environment. One sees and experiences reality directly and spontaneously, is more present in one's being and more genuine in one's actions. We call this beginner's mind, for Suzuki Roshi (1977) has said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." Suzuki Roshi (1977) has also called this the mind of readiness, which is cultivated as a way of being. The mind is always open, flexible and inquisitive. This mind is a joining of intellect and intuition. In fact, they are originally joined. It is only in the West that we have separated them, making intellect dominant. In the East they say, "Trust in the heart and rest in the mind" (Hayward, 1984). Thus, training in both intuition and intellect is the basis of the contemplative tradition. This process is also called polishing the mind (idem). In general, there is a joining of heart and mind. In fact when you ask a Japanese person where his mind is, he will point to his chest. "When the heart is purified, actions are precise and wholeheartedly involved and one does not hesitate" (idem).

In contrast to this, art that has at its core an ethic of individuality, which is a distinctly Western concept, implies a sense of uniqueness, differentiation from other, and separateness. Simply put, it could be seen as an expression of self-centered ego or idiosyncratic tendencies. In studying the nature of ego we see that it produces aggression and could lead to an art that is surrounded by ambition, one-upmanship, and manipulated cleverness. Though the initial impulses to create may be genuine and pure, it is difficult to maintain them in this environment. In particular, when art is created in a commercial atmosphere it can become highly neurotic, competitive, and aggressive.

For me, this experience of neurosis became vivid when my repertory modern dance company had reached some peak of success. That was the point where I experienced the most alienation from it. Dances were being created for the grants, the audience, the critics, but were no longer coming from within. Though I don't mean to suggest that this would be true of everyone, the tendency towards neurosis is quite predictable.

Traditionally, art in the East is essentially contemplative, and there is much to be gained by turning to the principles and practices of Eastern art disciplines. Aside from sitting meditation, there are traditional contemplative arts such as Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), Bugaku (Japanese court dance), and Kyudo (Japanese archery). The goal of these art forms is to wake people up, to uplift them.

Another aspect of contemplative art is the orientation towards art in everyday life. The artistic process is not isolated; art is a part of one's whole life and affects every part of it. From this point of view, the whole world and one's existence can become a work of art. There is a tendency among artists to reject their world and find isolated experiences of artistic or spiritual inspiration. In the contemplative mode, the idea is to have a twenty-four-hour-a-day discipline of awareness with your art; that is, in essence, what makes it contemplative. The implications of this are that everyone is an artist and that we are always making art, or that there is no distinction between art and anything else we do. As it is said in Bali, "We have no art; we do everything as well as possible."

Basically, from a contemplative point of view, the education or practice of an artist is to become more sensitive to the world. Obviously, this is a large project and a very slow process. It begins with the synchronization of body, speech, and mind developed in sitting practice. You sit and observe yourself and your world. There is clarity, because sitting practice is not based on anxiety, expectation, ideals, or ideas. You are not trying to buy or sell your experience. It is direct and personal and yet can be painful, penetrating, irritating, and humorous. Basically, a sense of being develops. Out of that comes an opening of the heart. When body, speech, and mind are synchronized, there is more synchronization with the senses. You see, hear, feel, more clearly. Sitting practice opens your sense perceptions, your connection to the world. You learn how to perceive, to be in contact. There is a familiarity and friendliness towards yourself and an appreciation of the world. From this there comes a sense of celebration, delight, joy, humor, and passion that is pure. There is an experience and expression of brilliance and intelligence. The world is vibrant.

CONTEMPLATIVE EDUCATION IN DANCE

In working with the process of contemplative dance, a format has evolved that explicitly addresses the relationship between sitting practice and dancing. It is a deceptively simple format. There is sitting for forty-five minutes, then a personal warm-up for thirty minutes. This is followed by an hour of "open space." The class ends with about half an hour of discussion and a brief sitting period. On the periphery

of the space are sitting cushions and, during "open space" time, people sit until moved to enter the space. There is intentionally very little said about what one does during the "open space" period. The idea is to make a personal connection to one's experience and to express it through movement, sounding, or speaking. Even drawing or making journal entries is appropriate. There is no teacher in this situation, but a faculty member guides understanding of the students' experiences. Readings for the class, which are from various writings on contemplative art, become a reference point for exploring personal experience.

The juxtaposition of sitting practice and dancing creates an opportunity to view the mind and body in reference to each other. One could say that sitting practice is the most simplified form of dancing. The body is still, one is following the breath, and the mind becomes one-pointed. There is a synchronization of body, speech, and mind. A sense of being present in the moment is achieved. This is the taming quality of practice. Also, one is made well aware of the contrast to this, the agitated body, the erratic breath patterns, the wild mind. This one could say, is de-synchronization, but it also provides the opportunity to be conscious of what exactly is going on. Awareness develops.

This training of body, speech, and mind is then taken into movement. The dancing can be as wild and discursive as the mind was while sitting or there could be a real sense of presence and openness. The emphasis is on awareness. Awareness, in turn, brings about genuine action. That seems to be the goal, if one can say there is a goal.

CREATIVITY AND COMPOSITION

In teaching creativity and composition, the principles of Heaven, Earth and Man are introduced. Most Eastern art forms are based on these principles. They are the essence of the creative process from a contemplative point of view. As they are vast ideas, I have simplified them in order to present them as accessible guidelines for students in exploring their own creative processes. It has been of great interest to me to see how this approach can expand and enliven the contemporary approaches to choreography, composition and the creative process.

Heaven is the space of mind that is open, includes all possibilities and from which first thought arises. It is not blank or vacant but accommodates everything. It is going back to zero with no reference point. First thought, in essence, is that which arises out of space and is not manufactured by ego's habitually-patterned mind. It comes to you; it is not created by you. In Western terms, the word that comes closest to expressing this is "inspiration." There is a sense of "ah" to it. The principle of Earth is the

manifestation of first thought. It is the flowering of the seed, the fleshing out of the skeleton. The principle of Heaven is brought to Earth. Man, then, is the connecting principle. The vision of Heaven is made manifest on Earth by the actions of Man. You could say Man is the skillful means, the expertise and even the style with which these two principles are connected.

In working with these principles, I have come to trust them implicitly. It has to do with connecting one's sense of being to one's creative process. My own experience has been to trust more and more the space of Heaven, learning to distinguish what arises from space and what arises from the habitually-patterned mind and discursive thought. Genuine action comes from that trust. There is a directness and unself-consciousness to one's actions. Whether it be in creating a dance piece, preparing for a business meeting, planning a dinner or writing an article, that seems to be the key. If we allow the space of Heaven to be present in our lives, it ventilates all our actions or manifestations. Our action has vision and, therefore, an ease to it. Creativity comes more naturally with this approach. There is an interest in creation and a necessity to express just as the world is constantly creating and expressing itself. The creation of a true work of art liberates the artist in the process of creation. There is relief, not struggle, in the process. If there is too much eagerness or too much intensity, you lose your gentleness and genuineness and your canvas is already painted black. Sitting before doing a work of art makes a space, creates a gap. The hesitation or holding still is like clearing your canvas. You can then make a move from there. How you move depends on your own confidence and your willingness to expose yourself. In this way, making art opens all your abilities and potentialities. You don't need a vocabulary and tricks; you just express who you are and what you want to say straightforwardly. It has nothing to do with what we conventionally understand as artistic talent. Instead, there is a new definition of talent: awareness.

QUALITIES OF ENERGY AND STYLE

Another aspect of the contemplative approach reflects the particular flavor of Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, in working with the arts. This viewpoint has to do with the direct experience of energy, the "direct link with nature, life and all situations" (Trungpa, 1973). Specifically, this means working with five qualities of energy that pervade all aspects of existence. Within each quality is the possibility of both its confused and wisdom manifestations. What is particularly intriguing about working with the arts with this viewpoint is that instead of rejecting who one is or how one expresses oneself, everything is used. There is a constant sense of riding the edge

between neurotic manifestation and genuine expression. The training and practice work more and more towards genuine expression.

Working in this way necessitates a redefining of contemplative practice or, at least, sheds new light on it. For the most part, the atmosphere created is hot rather than cool, charged rather than peaceful. People's neuroses are included and accommodated rather than rejected. This allows for an intermingling of the educational, therapeutic and creative processes. This creates a very juicy and sometimes explosive atmosphere. It is unavoidable to feel the provocativeness of this atmosphere. What you are learning is not abstract and irrelevant but constantly related to personal experience. What is being created is also teaching you in the process. Your personal life becomes the springboard for your creativity. Awareness in one area bounces off awareness in another area.

The implications of this for the creation of art are obvious. Art, at its best, has always been an area where people have sought true expression that springs from life experience. Yet it has always brought confusion with it. What clarifies this confusion is the viewpoint of awareness—awareness that is brought to body, speech, and mind. The synchronization of body, speech, and mind from moment to moment is the essence of this training.

IMPROVISATION AND PROCESS

Moment-to-moment synchronization of oneself with one's environment is also worked with in the context of improvisational dance. Though the more formalized traditions of modern dance techniques also train this synchronization, improvisation offers opportunities for spontaneous action and seems particularly conducive to contemplative dance training. The methods of training dancers in improvisation are about as diverse as are the individuals in the field. From a contemplative point of view, whatever the particular skills being incorporated, the essence of the training has to do with mindfulness and awareness. There is also an emphasis on process and acknowledging the students' personal journeys, on quality rather than quantity, exploration and experience rather than product.

PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCT

With the emphasis on process rather than product, the question of whether to perform at all comes up. More accurately, the question becomes what role performance plays in such a dance training. The fruition of the creative process, by definition, includes product. The process is not complete until there is a manifestation

of it. There seems to be a natural progression from opening to oneself and one's world, to finding the inspiration to create, and going through the pragmatics in order to see a vision manifested. The culmination is as natural and simple as the flowering of a seed that has been planted and nourished. It is also terrifying.

Performance means being on the spot. You are "out there." You are vulnerable. You are naked. Everything shows. There is no place to hide and if you seek a place to hide, then that is what shows. So there is no escape. This is at once the magic of performance and the terror of it. It is both what attracts us to it and what puts us in an extremely agitated state when a performance rolls around.

In our times, the sense of being so on edge has been heightened by two factors. One is the separation that has been created between performers and their audience. When dancers are trained with perfectionist ideals to the exclusion of a more wholesome approach to humanity, there is more possibility of creating a barrier between performers and audience. This dualistic barrier easily could engender aggression and, in some cases, narcissism in the performer. Empathetic communication between performer and audience could easily dissolve in such a situation. This results in artificiality, superficiality, and the eternal quest for titillating entertainment rather than the profundity of genuine art. This split can be a paralyzing one.

The second factor is the ethic of individuality that produces aggression and intensifies the frozen quality of the performance arena. The competitive edge in most performance situations is diametrically opposite to the expression of genuine art. It is important for us to learn how genuine art can be trained, nurtured, cultivated, and produced in our society.

With the shift in emphasis towards process, a new attitude emerges in which performance becomes a highlight on the path, a seed for further exploration rather than an end in itself. As the process unfolds, it is at some point framed by the time and space of the performance. But that frame isn't a solid thing. It is more a snapshot than a portrait. There is less distinction between the commitment to the rehearsal and the commitment to the performance. The process itself is explosive.

Performance provides a situation where all one's creative energies are brought together and highlighted in a single time and space. A spotlight is thrown onto one's journey. If one is able to stay aware and not blank out from stage fright, this provides a tremendous opportunity to explore what one is doing. The experience is a heightened sense of the synchronization of mind and body. That is the magic part. The other part, the struggle, is the apparent inability to achieve that. It makes performance a challenging practice.

Performance is similar to sitting on the meditation cushion. You are on the spot, as you explore your own mind and your particular relation to your world. Everything comes up and becomes heightened—passion, aggression, bewilderment, confusion, numbness. You are revealed. There is a raw quality to it if you are genuinely present and not coming up with items from your bag of tricks. As performance is such an on the spot situation, it seems to be a skillful training-ground for bare attention. After much practice, you develop an ability to encompass all states of mind with a passionate coolness. You are there fully with all that you are. You don't let yourself run away with yourself, nor do you bottle yourself up. You have an easy relationship with the fullness of your being. Your experience could be brilliant yet ordinary.

The differences between the performance of improvisation and the performance of choreography are interesting to note in this context. Pure improvisation—where there is no idea of what will happen next—is probably the more daring. You meet yourself face to face. You have no crutches, nothing to fall back on. More structured forms of improvisation have more guidelines, but the emphasis is still very much on connecting with your world on the spot. Performing choreography deals much more with form. The challenge is to recreate the life of the work with detailed attention to the given form. Though the patterns of movement might be repeated, the performer's perceptions and awareness could still be fresh and extraordinary. Because there is more interest in refinement, there is often more subtle exploration of the material than is possible with improvisation. The pitfall of improvisation is the tendency to get stuck in habitual ways of moving. In choreography, the tendency is to get stuck in form without life. In each case, the essence of the discipline is the relationship to your mind.

By working with performance, one begins to make subtle discriminations. The terms being on and being off are popular expressions. They refer to the experience of being synchronized or not. You either feel wonderful, totally at one with your situation, or you feel as though you are totally outside of the situation. Ironically, it is a question of getting yourself, or your confused self, out of the way. That is the key. That is what creates genuine expression and what could be considered the objective criterion for working with performance in this way. It is often what is referred to as presence. It is the sense of presence or genuinely being there that makes performance a worthwhile practice. There is much more going on than the movement; there is you going on and the exchange between you and the audience.

The relationship with the audience is very much part of the performance. The first thing that happens is not the audience's reaction to the performer but the performer's reaction to the audience. At best, it is an integrated part of what the performer is

working with. The fact that any given audience comprises such diverse reactions to any given performance attests to the fact that each person comes with his own individual perceptions, attitudes and preconceptions. The performance, in fact, takes place between the performers and the audience; that is where true communication takes place. The message, whatever it may be, is in that communication. The clarity with which the performer can express himself and with which the audience can receive the expression, brings about a refinement in the performance arena.

Kadensho (1968) a book written by Ze-ami, the son of the founder of Noh theater in Japan, speaks of these issues with great eloquence. Although specifically dealing with the terminology of Noh theater, the message of Kadensho is universally applicable. It presents the most refined ideals of how a performer can train in his art and how he can relate to the audience. The essential message is this: Use your art as a practice dedicated to the full flowering of your personhood--where you can be human without being human--and there will be art that is no longer art. Principles of hana (aesthetic beauty), momomane (imitation of essence, rather than particulars) and karai (mind without mind) are presented with great sensitivity and detail.

What seems clear is that this way of working on performance or product, which is the fruition of one's training, comes after a lengthy process. The Noh actor, for instance, begins training at the age of eight and is expected to finally develop his full potential at the age of forty-five. This is startling in contrast to the Westerner's ideal of youthful dancers in their early twenties.

CONCLUSION

This way of thinking about art is very immediate. Contemplative means making awareness a twenty-four-hour-a-day practice. It does not matter so much what you are doing, but that there is a certain attentiveness of mind to what you are doing. It means that "art" or that certain attitude of mind with which we relate to our world is present all the time. Art becomes pervasive and our lives are enriched by a perpetually creative, inquisitive and open mind. With this viewpoint one does not need any fancy art training. One merely needs to synchronize oneself with oneself. This is a transformational experience that profoundly changes one's attitudes and way of being in the world.

In bringing this paper to a close, I feel it would be helpful to look at some specific responses of people who have been involved in this process of education. It is heartening to see that students and alumni of the Dance/Movement Studies Department have been able to integrate this viewpoint. To quote from some of the

alumni survey responses would probably give the clearest indication of these outcomes. One student writes:

Through the practice of meditation and contemplative practice [dance and movement studies] I continue to expand and deepen my ability to be fully who I am moment to moment and work effectively with others. Specifically, I work with my students based on the discoveries of clarity, confidence and genuineness that come from meditation/contemplative practice. I am able to see more accurately and guide more beneficially. Appreciation for the individual's educational journey, which is so parallel to the meditation/contemplative journey, brings the two paths into direct relationship. Likewise, another student says, "I feel that my approach to my artistic process matured and developed in direct response to my meditation experiences." And, finally, a student concludes, "In teaching or performing it [contemplative/meditation practice] allows me to relax in order to give a presentation (so that I am present in the presentation). It helps me to trust enough in myself to be totally spontaneous and keeps me from judging so much."

The founder of the Dance/Movement Studies Department, Barbara Dilley, expressed her own inspiration for starting to work with a contemplative approach:

I felt some commitment to the idea that dance could be more personal, intimate, more heartfelt--and I felt that meditation could help cultivate that... I was interested in what it would be like for other dancers to slow down and work with training their minds. I wanted to help them peel away the unnecessary aspects of their training and become more basic, more fundamental. It is not that I wanted to throw out the American dance tradition. It seems that there is an aspect of the American creative process which is genuine and clear; but then there is another aspect which is highly neurotic, escapist and fundamentally aggressive. I wanted to start at the beginning, and then sort from there." (10)

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