

Creative Expression Inspired by Buddhist Practice

Art inspired by Buddhism is not necessarily art that depicts Buddhist symbols or ideas but art that springs from a certain state of mind. That state of mind is cultivated by the practice of sitting meditation. It engenders calmness and lack of attachment to habitual ways of perceiving. Instead, an attitude of openness, inquisitiveness and clarity comes about. Openness to our existence means that we engage freely and dynamically with not only our inner world of thoughts, emotions and imagination, but also the energy of the world around us. We experience reality directly and spontaneously, are more present in our being, and more genuine in our actions. This experience has been called "beginner's mind." Suzuki Roshi, a Zen Buddhist teacher, has said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." Suzuki Roshi has also called this the "mind of readiness" which is cultivated as a way of being.

Three Aspects to Creative Expression

In teaching and working with creativity what I have found most helpful is an approach that encompasses three aspects. These are: 1. opening to the moment and allowing inspiration to arise, 2. elaborating on and embellishing the first idea, and 3. adding a personal touch. These three aspects are adapted from the principles of heaven, earth, and human on which traditional art forms of the East are based. Using these aspects is the act of doing something attentively. It requires a commitment to the moment; then the next move becomes clear. The three aspects happen both sequentially and simultaneously. They apply to large-scale projects, such as the building of a city, and to the smallest, most mundane task – any sequence that begins with a thought and leads to an action.

An open mind includes all possibilities without any one reference point. In an open space inspiration arises spontaneously, without strategy. What arises depends on who we are, where we are, what our energy is, and what we are trying to create. For example, in our inspiration to create a portrait of a friend – whether poetic or visual – we might clearly see her energy for the first time. Aha! The way ideas arise when we are in an open state of mind is like having a brainstorm. A word or an image comes to us "out of the blue." So to begin a creative endeavor, we could luxuriate in the open space of all possibilities, trusting that the space will provide the inspiration.

Some of us are in the habit of jumping into our creative form prematurely, putting brush to canvas or pen to paper before having taken our seat. This is a dull and narrow way to create – not nearly as sparky and rich as tuning in to our creative possibilities in a spacious state of mind. On the other hand, some of us luxuriate in the spaciousness and then can't ground our ideas. We have ten ideas but initiate none. Being unable to connect our ideas to earth can seem confusing. Hanging out in space, we feel awkward, groundless, and uncomfortable. In some cases it helps to just do nothing for a while; in other cases it helps to bring ourselves down to earth by making a move – any move.

Next, we ground our inspiration by elaborating, developing, embellishing. As we work, our vision becomes full-blown. With the proper materials and skill, we put flesh on its bones. We bring its essence to flower. For example, we might fill out our friend's portrait by layering on her subtle coloring, calling forth her unique energy style. Grounding the idea is always ventilated by the first sense of spaciousness.

The third aspect of the creative process is being in tune with our personal energy. Our unique manner of expression brings definition and shape to our creation. The portrait we create says as much about us as it does about the person depicted. Taking the same subject matter, different people will produce very different results. When several choreographers were asked to work with the theme of Adam and Eve, each of their dances was unique in its use of movement style, costume, and setting. Each showcased the individual choreographer's unique way of expressing himself.

I have come to trust these three aspects of working with creativity. They connect my sense of being with my creative process. Through using this approach, I've slowly learned to distinguish what arises from space and what arises from habitual patterns and discursive thought. I increasingly trust opening to space. Appropriate, direct, and unself-conscious action comes from that trust, whether I am creating a dance piece, preparing for a business meeting, planning a dinner, or writing an article. I've noticed that allowing the same sense of spaciousness to permeate my life ventilates every activity, bringing vision and ease to everything I do. With this approach creativity becomes a natural part of life. As they say in Bali, "We have no art; we do everything as well as possible."

Maitri in the Creative Process

Maitri, a Sanskrit word meaning loving-kindness, is an essential element in the creative process. When we accept ourselves unconditionally and feel good about ourselves, we are less neurotic and are able to give full rein to our creative expression. Embraced with maitri, we are able to express ourselves in a purer and more brilliant way. To illustrate: during a certain period of my life, I danced only in the friendly, familiar atmosphere of Naropa University. When I was invited to perform in another setting, I sensed competitiveness and judgment in the air. Carrying this energy into my performance, I became judgmental of myself. Under these circumstances I did not enjoy performing nearly as much, nor did I perform as well. Another example is of a young, internationally known, Juilliard-trained violinist. She says that she does not get nervous before performing. She doesn't worry about getting the notes right. What she mostly wants to do is communicate. Her sense of maitri toward herself allows her to do this.

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