

The Contemplative Approach to Creativity
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For the past ten years I have been involved with the vision of The Naropa Institute where there is an educational commitment to explore artistic expression that is informed by contemplative disciplines. In the Movement Studies Department this has been done with dance and dance therapy. In particular I have been exploring what creativity might mean when approached from a contemplative point of view: what it might mean to have a conscious expression, awareness of who you are, what you are doing, what you are putting out. It is here at Naropa that I have begun to find some answers that satisfy me about what creativity is and how it can benefit individuals and society. Most of what follows are my observations from working with students and faculty over the years. The guiding light has always been the particular teachings to which Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of the Institute, has introduced us.

Contemplative Art

It is impossible to talk about the contemplative approach without talking about the practice of sitting meditation. In this approach, whatever one's artistic discipline is, meditation is the core discipline, which nourishes all the others. In the beginning, sitting practice has to do with taming the mind and coming to stillness. This precision is fostered by the technique through training oneself to be simply present in the moment or synchronized in body, speech and mind. One is completely and fully there. Rather than an involvement with doing, a sense of being is developed. From this one-pointed, simple sense of being one's awareness is expanded to include a larger world. Because one is in the moment and up-to-date with oneself, a flexibility and spontaneity with whatever might arise is possible.

Contemplative art is not any particular kind of art but art that springs from a certain state of mind and that state of mind is cultivated by the practice of sitting meditation. This state of mind is one of calmness and lack of attachment to habitual ways of perceiving. Instead, an attitude of openness, inquisitiveness and clarity comes about. Openness to one's existence free from territorial biases, means that a person 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 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. The mind is always open, flexible and inquisitive.

Another aspect of the contemplative viewpoint is the orientation toward art in everyday life. The artistic process is not isolated; art is a part of one's whole life and effects every part of one's life. From this point of view, the whole world and one's existence can become a work of art. Rather than isolated experiences of artistic or spiritual inspiration, there is 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 you do. Creating a particular work of art as opposed to art in everyday life has a

honing quality. There is attentiveness to a particular experience, a refining and articulating. Creativity in everyday life is more diffuse, not so meticulously focused, and yet powerful because it is so pervasive.

Basically, from a contemplative point of view, the education 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 or "isness" develops. Out of that comes an opening of the heart. When your body, speech and mind are synchronized, there is more synchronization with your senses. You see, hear, and feel more clearly. Sitting practice opens your apertures, 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. So it could be said that fully conscious dancing is contemplative dancing.

Sitting and Dancing

The juxtaposition of sitting and dancing creates an opportunity to view the mind and body in reference to each other. You could say that sitting practice is the most simplified form of dancing. Because the activity is simple, it heightens our awareness. The body is still, one is following the breath and the mind becomes one-pointed. Also one is made well aware of the contrast to this, the agitated body, erratic breath patterns, the wild mind. This you could say is de-synchronization, but it also provides the opportunity to be conscious of what exactly is going on.

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 you can say there is a goal.

The Heaven, Earth and Man Principles

In teaching and working with creative process the principles of heaven, earth and man have been extremely helpful. Most Eastern art forms are based on these principles. They are the essence of the creative process from a contemplative point of view. It has been of great interest to me to see how this approach can expand and enliven contemporary approaches to choreography and composition.

Heaven is the space of mind that is open, includes all possibilities and from which first thought arises. It is unconditioned and has no definitions or characteristics. Because it is no specific thing, there is the possibility of anything and everything. Likewise, 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, the space of all possibility, 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. It has to do with the skillful means, resources and capabilities available to one. 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 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, 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. Why create art? Ask a tree why it grows, why a flower blooms or a wave rolls in. It's an inevitable expression, and as such a celebration of life. Not in a self-conscious way but out of sheer necessity. 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 whom 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.

Journey Art

My interest in art is as a transformative journey. It is art as a practice and path. Each creation is a rite of passage. As one insight is revealed new horizons open up to be explored. One of the things I have been looking at is what Eastern and Western art traditions have to offer us. Art in the East is based on traditional forms that are passed down generation after generation. In the West, the individuality of the artist is emphasized. In the East, arts are contemplative in essence and serve to uplift. The Western tradition offers us the possibility of uniquely individual expression. This has led to therapeutic uses of movement and perhaps an understanding of how the raw guts can be transformed into wisdom. Both these approaches have much to offer. My interest is in bringing them together in some path of training and practice.

Aside from the contemplative approach that pervades the Naropa Institute, two things in the environment of the Movement Studies Department have given me chance to explore this. One is the emphasis on process rather than product that has been present since the department's inception. The other is the advent of dance therapy into the department. The fundamental viewpoint seems to be that the creative process is not merely to come up with a finished product but that the process itself is awakening, healing and enlightening. There is an allegiance to wholesomeness in one's activity and creating a sense of upliftedness in the product. In teaching students and observing myself this has been fascinating to see happen. As a teacher it seems so much more vital to present not the answers but a sense of path.

That creativity has to do with both expression and communication means that there is an inward journey and an outward path. That there is an inward journey is a fairly accepted idea about art. What I think needs more examination is the nature of the outward path. In most understandings of art this would mean your training, skills, use of form, structure and compositional devices, the tools of your trade. In this viewpoint it means those things, of course, but it also has to do with your allegiance to awareness and genuineness.

What is put out as art is often very confused and coming from a lot of pain. Even when art seems beautiful or magnificent, the lives of those who do it are often very confused. Our Western heritage as artists comes from the bohemian lifestyle of the 1920's: the image of an artist as poor, suffering and degraded. There's an accepted view that artists are neurotic. Somehow that has become tied in with the notion of creativity. The contemplative viewpoint says that art could be part of your everyday life and that is based on coming to wholeness.

In the process of going inside one encounters things that are very painful and confusing. It is a very raw experience. You are exploring virgin ground. The space of heaven is vast and therefore accommodates both neurosis and wisdom or insight. This is where the aspect of journey art comes in. What you might choose to say might be some wretched, painful aspect of your life that is expressed more as a therapeutic outpouring rather than what could be called art. With the contemplative approach this is acknowledged as a place on the path. From observing both my own path over the last ten years as well as students going through this year after year, it has become quite clear to me that this is where the path begins - with an intense surfacing of emotional states. Slowly over time, sometimes over years, there is the effect of onion skin layers being peeled off. The deeper layers are not as crude but have more subtlety and sensitivity. There is not the feeling that emotional states have the upper hand but that they are worn as ornaments, the particular coloring or flavoring of one's expression. This only comes with a sense of the acknowledgement of this as path, applying artistic disciplines and one's growing awareness. When the disciplines of the creative process are applied, it transforms a personal and private mode into an artistic or universal one. In fact, it has always been amazing to me that pieces that have started from a deep sense of personal pain have grown into works with a great deal of humor, joy and delight.

Heaven, Earth and Man in Practice

At this point it seems appropriate to elaborate a little more on how the principles of heaven, earth and man work together in practice. My observation is that some people can't stop long enough to really experience heaven. They are caught up in wanting to do and do not allow themselves to luxuriate in that open space of all possibility. Basically, there is a lack of trust. Instead of trusting that the space will provide the answers, they fall back on their habitual ways of doing things. My experience is that this is dull, narrow and not nearly as delightful a way to create. Then there are those who completely indulge in the space of heaven. They can't pin anything down. Every time they come into class they have another ten ideas of pieces they would like to do. Before I knew of the heaven, earth and man principles, I used to call this initial period of creation the chaotic period. This seems an appropriate labeling if, in fact, heaven is not connected to earth. Another pitfall of focusing on the heaven principle, and with the contemplative approach in general, is that it creates a self-consciousness that is debilitating. One feels awkward, groundless and uncomfortable with whatever gesture one puts out. I have been known to call it contemplative constipation. This sense of being

stopped in one's tracks is a sign of a deepening awareness and the sense that you are questioning the whole basis of your egotistical actions. However, it is not possible to create from that state of being. It seems, in fact, highly appropriate to do nothing for a while. On the other hand, it also has to do with the heaven principle not connecting to earth. There is a rigor to the earth principle that cuts through a tendency to indulge in self-introspection. In certain instances introducing speedy, highly active situations creates a need for spontaneity that cuts through habitual patterns by going below the cortex.

The earth period is as important as the heaven period, particularly if you are to see this as a path, a practice. In the earth period you are pushed more. My understanding is that here is where the artistic devices of one's medium are put to use, the vision is manifested, given more concreteness. It is important to understand that earth is always ventilated by the space of heaven. In fact these principles are not merely sequential but never exist in isolation from one another. They are happening both sequentially and simultaneously. They can happen on a large scale, such as creating a city that would take years to manifest, or they can occur on a moment-to-moment basis such as having a thought to do something and then going and doing it.

Once students have the idea they want to work with, bringing it to earth has something to do with putting it through the various filters of their movement and personal knowledge. How does the idea respond to space? To time? What changes happen when you change the dynamic? What is the kinesthetic experience as you start to move the idea? What are the associations for you at emotional, intellectual, metaphorical and symbolic levels? What are the underlying layers of meaning? How does it resonate at different levels of your being? How does using other media, a text a costume, a projection, clarify and heighten your intention? In some sense, the seed idea is put through the test of these and other questions, or filtered through these aspects of one's consciousness. What happens is growing awareness, a transformative process. Along with this is a growing objectivity, a concern for what is being put out, a refinement. Though one may have started in an indulgent state, it moves toward art. Working with the materials and the form actually creates the space necessary for the transformation. My experience is that each piece I have done with this kind of attentiveness has started at the edge of my awareness and pushed it through to some revelation.

My particular interest with the earth principle, in terms of this discussion, is how it furthers awareness. How do pain and neurosis lead to insight and wisdom? Without going into a detailed account of all the possible ways various compositional devices and such can do this, I could simply say that it is the act of doing something attentively. One is inspired or moved to work on a particular idea, a first thought that has arisen from space and one sticks to it. We could think of it as conscious rehearsing: What is being put out? What feedback does that give? How can it be changed? What other compositional devices would help me say more what I mean? Is what is being manifested really the vision in my head? How has working things through on a practical level helped to inform the vision? How is the vision fleshing out? Am I saying what I mean to be saying? Do I believe myself? What does it need more of? Less of? Rehearsing in this way demands that you make a total psychophysical commitment to the moment of gesture. That commitment allows the next moment to arise spontaneously. When there is a lack of commitment to the moment, there is no clear next move. It's a constant search for the movement that will reveal who you are, not hide it: to dare to expose the inner dance.

One of the things that happens in this process is that there is a growing objectivity. This very personal, private thing you have been carrying around starts to put on some clothes and go public. The act of dressing it up, deciding what clothes it should wear, makes you examine it, scrutinize it and, more importantly, get the full flavor of it.

In terms of creative process, the principle of man has to do with style, the characteristic manner of expression of a given individual. It also has to do with the big picture, the overall form or structure of a piece. Both of these aspects are what are the links or connecting factors between heaven and earth. Attentiveness to one's style helps to join heaven and earth and, in turn, paying attention to the joining of heaven and earth makes one more aware of one's style. What are the methods, forms, skills one uses to make manifest one's vision? How does one choose to structure things? How does the form enhance the vision?

Creating is about owning the fullness of experience and then letting go. It is about being highly trained and letting that fall away. To do this you need a way to find the open spaces in your mind and body and then surrender to the spontaneity of the moment. There is a constant balancing of emptiness and form, space and structure. There needs to be an understanding of the basic elements of movement and composition, which are called upon spontaneously. Ultimately it has nothing to do with learned behavior but is an opening to the impulse that arises from space.

Conclusion

This is the beginning. There is more to be explored. Over the last ten years my path as a student of contemplative disciplines and path as a teacher, dancer, performer and creator have been inextricably linked. The possibilities of exploring self and art seem limitless.

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