

Art And Spiritual Practice: A Pathway Toward Consciousness

A Book Proposal
by
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*Art and Spritual Practice:
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Overview

What can be gained through the practice of art and engagement with creativity? Many benefits are well documented in the realms of innovation, personal development, and creative problem solving. Entertainment and popular culture also evolve quickly through the flames of the creative impulse fueled by a democratic society that highly values individuality and personal expression. But, we must ask the question that many teachers pose to enlarge our understanding — and what else?

What is the true purpose of creativity and art? Can they assist us in living more authentic lives? Can they help us traverse the many challenges, joys, obstacles and realizations of the spiritual path? Can they serve our inner evolution and the necessary evolution of our culture? I believe so, and I also strongly suspect that a deeper understanding of the creative process is necessary for our spiritual survival in this era, which the Dalai Lama has characterized as “this age of degeneration.”

Art and Spiritual Practice: A Pathway Toward Consciousness details—in both practical and theoretical terms—the means by which an individual can use the pursuit of art as a genuine spiritual practice. It can function as a staircase to the way, a pathway towards consciousness, when it is aligned with the means and the methods of genuine teachings. Ecumenical in approach yet drawing upon many source teachings, especially Buddhism and the Gurdjieff ideas, the book is designed to highlight the use of art for a higher purpose — in the service of our spiritual quest.

Art, in the context of the book, is meant to refer to any activity approached with creativity, care and attention. Employing the practice of art as a spiritual discipline can assist in the following ways:

the gradual unfolding of our innermost essence;
the deepening of attention and presence – meditation in motion;
the heightening of awareness and perception;
the discovery of our latent individuality – our unique talents, skills, and obstacles;
the development of a still clarity of the mind and the transformation of our emotional nature;
the cultivation of compassion and a deep appreciation for others;
the opening towards wisdom, genuine intuition, and inner guidance;
the growing awareness of the radiant beauty as well as the deep contradictions of our earthly existence;
and the inner search for wholeness of being and the awakening of consciousness.

Art and Spiritual Practice reflects the journey of a student. While not overtly autobiographical, the book arises from a thirty-year involvement with art as a transformative spiritual path. In the 1970's, two individuals were credited with relating the practice of art to genuine spiritual teachings, primarily Buddhism. Chögyum Trungpa founded Naropa University in 1974, based on principles of contemplative education that employed a comprehensive use of art within the educational process. And in 1970, photographer Minor White expanded his teaching mission to national workshops and a creative photography lab at MIT, that explored heightened awareness and Zen practice in the creation of art. I had the good fortune to work with Minor White as a student, assistant, and friend. In the last three years of his life, I assisted White in editing his *Visualization Manual*, a workbook that offered a comprehensive overview of his insights derived from forty years of teaching awareness through art.

John Daido Loori, Abbot and spiritual leader of Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills, was another long-term student of White's and a fellow photographer in several of White's workshops. He writes of his experience upon encountering White's work: "I didn't yet have any sense that art might be a doorway to serious and transformative spiritual practice, but something more than good technique drew me to Minor's work. Minor was a 'straight photographer': he didn't manipulate his prints during the developing process, yet his images transcended

their subject. Looking at his photographs, I felt myself being pulled into another realm of consciousness. Minor's work pointed to a dynamic way of seeing, a new way of perceiving."

Four Broad Streams of Thought

Art and Spiritual Practice summarizes the insights that Chögyum Trungpa, Minor White, and many other artists, teachers, and spiritual leaders have developed over the past thirty-five years in relating art to a spiritual discipline. The four broad streams of thought explored through the book are drawn from extensive research, personal experience, and careful observation of the efforts and discoveries of numerous peers and students.

1) A WAY OF GROWTH. Authentic creative expression is a way of encouraging our inner growth, and a means of mirroring back to us the development that takes place. It is a reciprocal relationship. As we engage the creative process, we are thrown into relief and we encounter the particular shape of our psyche and inner energies. Our potential and our limitations reveal themselves. Our demons are called forth, often with a force that shakes loose our reluctance to acknowledge and intimately know them. We are challenged to stretch and grow. We attempt to integrate and transform, but not ignore, our shadow selves—and to move beyond our deep-seated habit patterns that govern our automatic selves.

The practice of perfecting an art or craft is akin to the practice of perfecting ourselves. We can only express that which arises through direct experience. If we wish for a fullness of expression, we must strive toward fullness of being. Expression follows being, not the other way around.

2) A WAY OF BALANCE. The means and methods of working with an art form are an outer measure of our own energies. Through creativity, we witness our own fragmentation and particular form of imbalance. The body, mind, and feelings; each has its own intelligence and makes its unique contribution to the process. Creativity calls us to become more whole and centered within

ourselves. Cultivating a broad, embracing awareness, we may connect the disparate pieces of the creative act: our tools, ourselves, and the process itself.

When the body, mind, and feelings are working in balanced synergy, with each doing the work it was intended for, a channel opens, a conduit appears for the voices of intuition and conscience—which are often the true guiding forces of our creative expression. It seems paradoxical, but these simple every-day efforts toward balance and integration will gradually lead us toward clarity and invite the inspired moments of understanding and wisdom that grace our works. Through the demands posed by the materials themselves, and through the balance of energies required for the creative act, we may have glimpses of the world's radiant beauty, our own innate goodness, and deep compassion for the world and others.

3) *THE SEARCH FOR SELF*. Creative expression encourages the discovery of Self and brings us closer to our essential nature, our original face. It is a means of discovering our place and our true calling. We strive to be open, to become transparent and receptive to the guiding impulses from within. Creative work is a discipline that may call forth the deeper parts of our nature. What we call inspiration or the muse—that which visits us when we are receptive and open—is a manifestation, a lawful result of our efforts with ourselves and our medium.

Likened to traditional disciplines, working with a craft can be similar to the mindfulness and gathering of attention that takes place in meditation. The lightness of being that arises through the creative act is simultaneously serious and playful. The creative act is one of liberation, one that asks us to go deep within, and ultimately beyond ourselves. When we strive to transcend our perceived boundaries, a new quality of feeling emerges: a joy, a clean sense of satisfaction, a sense of being right and true. When the heart opens in this way, we recognize the possibility of a new, heightened sense of being—one that is limited only by our deep-seated inner attitudes of habitual thinking and reactive emotions.

The rare, illuminating moments which reveal the unity of existence are attracted through our inner work, our creative practice, and our strivings toward consciousness. Ken Wilber calls this perception “One Taste,” the experiential recognition of the All. Here we earn hints of unitive

consciousness revealing the radiance of what is; that appear through the cracks in our conscious mind—active fissures which are widened through creative work.

4) A WAY OF DEVOTION. Unlike purely intellectual pursuits, creativity can be a transformative discipline. As we open to the larger mysteries of existence, resting in the stream of awareness, even for moments, we are transformed: stunningly, gratefully, unforgettably. We give up the dream that we are, take down our shields to the forces that surround us. Realizing the Creative in ourselves is ourselves. This begins the way.

Creativity, then, becomes a path toward the great way of transformation. It encourages us to stand in front of infinity, not-knowing, slowly simmering into radical openness through our everyday practice and inward efforts. It teaches nonattachment to the ego and nonidentification with the final result.

Creativity enlightens the proper attitude between our actions and our work. We express our initiative and effort, then stand back and allow the process to unfold, aligning ourselves with the flow of life itself. All activities, when given our full attention, are analogous to the organic processes of growth and development. Through art, we learn about the laws of life and the possibilities inherent in being human.

The creative process unfolds in every moment—in nature, with the earth itself, with humanity as a whole, and in the cosmos—on a scale and dimension vastly larger than our personal expression. Yet we are not separate from these energies. Through creativity, we become participants in a greater whole—we are a part of it, and it is a part of us.

Finally, creative expression leads us back to the hidden, more essential parts of our nature, our innate vision, our true voice. We know it when it begins to emerge, yet could not predict its sound or coloration without the assistance of a physical medium that reflects our myriad energies. It helps us discover who we are and brings us closer to ourselves. Through art, we make a vow to grow.

Complementary Titles

A *rt and Spiritual Practice* was written with two target audiences in mind: the mainstream mind/body/spirit market and the many devoted seekers that follow genuine teachings, especially the various sects of Buddhism, the Gurdjieff teaching, and the growing adherents of transpersonal psychology. Between overly complex works on the spiritual dimension of art written by philosophers or art historians and limited, idealistic, over-simplified treatments of the theme lie a broad region of need.

Some of the more popular and significant books are written by art historians and appeal mostly to committed artists and art history researchers. These books are excellent, though largely theoretical (often formatted as highly illustrated coffee-table books) and not geared to assisting individuals in deepening their own artistic pursuits. Notable among these books are *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, by Roger Lipsey (Shambhala 1988), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* by Maurice Tuchman (Abbeville Press 1986), *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today*, by Jacquelynn Baas (University of California Press 2005), and *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, edited by Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (University of California Press 2004).

On the lighter side, a plethora of mind body spirit books proliferate that highlight creativity and the use of art for personal development and self-help. Some of these are best-sellers. However, these books tend towards an idealized and highly introductory view of art. They serve to get one started on the creative path, but lack the depth and dimension to fully support the long-term discipline, self knowledge, and rigor needed for the genuine spiritual search.

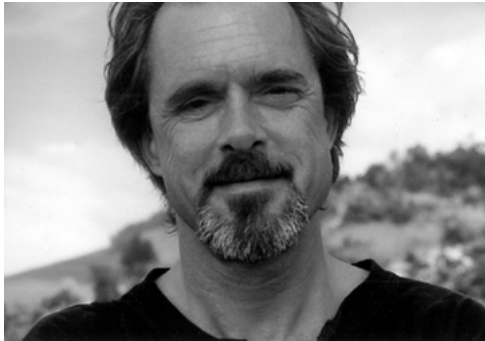
However, they have proven to well serve the early stages of creative growth. The most popular of these introductory texts are *The Artists Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, by Julia Cameron (Tarcher/Putnam 1992) and *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg (Shambhala 1986). And, of course, the durable *tour de force* of these introductory books is *Rainer Maria Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet* (numerous translations and publishers).

With the exception of source teachings by Chögyum Trungpa, most of the competing written material for *Art and Spiritual Practice* exists only in the form of short essays in compilations, periodicals, and books whose primary focus is on other topics. French scientist, author, photographer, and Buddhist monk Mathieu Ricard writes a masterful introduction on art and the spiritual path in his book of photographs, *Monk Dancers of Tibet* (Shambhala 2003). Ken Wilber includes two illuminating chapters on art from a Buddhist perspective in *Eye of the Spirit* (Shambhala 1998), and contributes an excellent forward to Alex Grey's, *The Mission of Art* (Shambhala 1998). *Parabola* magazine has published numerous articles on the higher purpose of art over the years, including essays by the author of *Art and Spiritual Practice*.

Only two books currently offer an in-depth treatment of art as a spiritual discipline: *Dharma Art* by Chögyum Trungpa (Shambhala 1996), and the *Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life* by John Daido Looi (Ballantine 2004). While Trungpa's book is wide in scope and profound in its depth, consisting of a compilation of published material and formal talks, it remains largely theoretical and does not offer individuals points of entry for the actual practice of art. And Looi's excellent book on creativity is largely practical, offering numerous points of entry for the reader, but lacks the broad theoretical dimension that places the work of creativity into the context of contemporary art practice. Looi's book is symptomatic of much contemporary Buddhist-inspired art in general; meditative practice is treated with rigor and depth, but the art theory and practice is rather weak and undeveloped.

Art and Spiritual Practice is the first book to equally address both the theory and practice of art as a spiritual discipline. Using examples and anecdotes drawn from the history of art, and written by an artist, seeker, and art professor, the book paints a broad and comprehensive canvas

that weaves together meditative practice with many points of entry for the reader — artists and non-artists alike. Each chapter closes with a section titled *Creative Practice* to help realize the ideas in action. Both accessible and inspirational, *Art and Spritual Practice* brings an in-depth view of contemplative education, and its many dimensions, to the theory and practice of art.



About the Author

David Ulrich has investigated art and spiritual practice for 30 years. As a photographer and writer, his work has been published in numerous books and journals including *Aperture*, *Parabola*, *MANOA*, and *Sierra Club* publications. His photographs have been exhibited internationally in over seventy-five one-person and group exhibitions in museums, galleries, and universities.

David Ulrich is currently a Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. He has taught hundreds of classes and workshops on photography, creativity, and visual perception in colleges, art schools, and workshop centers nationwide. His teaching incorporates key elements of the creative process, assisting individuals of all walks of life, ages, and cultural backgrounds. For fifteen years, he served as Associate Professor and Chair of the Photography Department of The Art Institute of Boston. He is a workshop leader at Pacific New Media, University of Hawai'i at Manoa. He earned a BFA degree from The Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston, an MFA degree from Rhode Island School of Design, and is currently listed in *Who's Who in American Art*.

David Ulrich is uniquely qualified to address the themes found in *Art and Spiritual Practice*. The genesis for the book took place over thirty years ago when the author assisted the renowned photographer Minor White in editing *The Visualization Manual*, an unpublished manuscript that details White's teaching methods derived from over forty years of teaching Zen practice through photography. Other circumstances have forcefully intervened in the author's life

as well, not the least of which was the loss of his right, dominant eye in an impact injury at the age of thirty-three. He writes: “Fearing the loss of my capacity to see and photograph, and with all hope to the contrary, this blow helped to awaken my own innate consciousness. Losing an eye and facing the resulting need to learn to see again, this time as an adult, assisted the growth and development of my awareness—and helped me better understand the function and process of sight. Above all, I learned to not take vision for granted. It was a profound learning experience, one that continues to this day. The experience was traumatic and painful—like nothing else I have ever experienced—and a great privilege.”

Recently, Ulrich was the educational coordinator and co-editor of the ambitious and highly successful project, *Through Our Eyes: A Photographic View of Hong Kong by its Youth*, where the principles of contemplative education were tested on 170 students from throughout Hong Kong, resulting in a book and several exhibitions.

In 2002, Ulrich published the first in a trilogy of three books, *The Widening Stream: the Seven Stages of Creativity* (Beyond Words). All three books may be viewed on his website: www.creativeguide.com. The author is an experienced lecturer, teacher, and workshop leader. He is willing to promote the book through his frequent speaking engagements, classes and workshops.

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Chapter Outlines

The introduction opens the questions that lie at the heart of the book. What is the highest and best use of art? Can art be a form of meditation, of prayer? Does an active engagement with the creative process assist our efforts toward awakening, toward growth of being and consciousness? And how may art and creativity serve our alchemy of transformation? The introduction invokes three principles embedded in the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa's metaphor for art, *The Great Eastern Sun*, and outlines three sacred dictums that may point the way toward one's search for inner evolution through the creative process: *Know thyself; As above, so below; Thy will be done.*

The latter section of the introduction outlines seven principles of contemplative education for the study and practice of art and briefly details the author's experiences that prompted him to write this book.

Chapter I: KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

Chapter One explores the discovery of a “path with heart” and outlines the relationship between one's personal path and the great way of transformation.. It develops the means by which art and creativity may function as a true path. The chapter examines the key elements — explored in greater detail in succeeding chapters — of using art as a genuine spiritual discipline. The chapter closes with an experimental exploration of viewing the existence of levels in art-making through the filter of the seven stages of spiritual unfoldment represented by the

chakras, or subtle energy centers within the body. It follows Chögyum Trungpa's wisdom in distinguishing between the art of the rising sun, and that of the setting sun.

Chapter II: ON ATTENTION

Like the Zen swordsman in a state of perpetual readiness, an artist prepares through an inward tuning of energy. This chapter asserts that attention is the fundamental requirement of the creative act. It addresses the means through which art and the creative process may assist in the cultivation of conscious attention. The chapter explores the unique challenges offered by different art mediums for the development of attention.

Chapter III: THE WAY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

“Know Thyself.” Socrates words, derived from the Delphic Oracle of ancient Greece, resound with an inner force as clear and direct as their first utterance over twenty-five centuries ago. This chapter details five of the chief means of revelation where art can function as a way toward self-knowledge. It examines the particular quality of self-observation characterized by the witness — the seeing of oneself — and how that differs from ordinary introspection. The chapter asserts that creativity is a call to conscious awareness. The work of creativity becomes a challenge and a practice — a means of developing a subtle and sensitive awareness, capable of observing oneself in action.

Chapter IV: THE FIELD OF SILENCE

“It is my belief that creativity arises from stillness.” These were the initial words spoken in my first photography class in college. The language of art is vibration and impressions that enter us through the senses, and through the still clarity of the mind. The chapter examines how impressions enter us more deeply, with greater vividness and force, through receptiveness, maintaining awareness within ourselves and staying in touch with the silence within. The chapter explores the state of active stillness which is likened to a magnet, bringing

us into a deeper relationship with the moment and drawing to us the energies and influences we need for our work and development — and for a true response. Photographer Alfred Stieglitz writes: "To me, all *lived* moments are equally true, equally important. Thus, only in being true to all moments, can one be true to any. It is in this sense that I say that I am the moment, but that I am the moment with all of myself.

When I am no longer thinking, but simply *am*, then I may be said to be truly affirming life. Not to know, but to let exist what is, that alone, perhaps, is truly to know."

Chapter V: EMPATHY AND PROJECTION

The chapter addresses the complex balance in creativity between projection of oneself onto works of art and the need to be receptive, becoming sensitive to one's materials and remaining open to the guiding voices or visions that may express themselves through one's work. Both poles of experience, projection and empathy, are vital to the creative act. The chapter offers guidance on understanding the metaphoric and symbolic content of one's works and discovering the mutual exchange between oneself and the outer world.

Chapter VI: THE ALCHEMY OF CRAFT

Chapter VI explores working with materials — the sheer craft of one's endeavors — as a direct means of approaching the path towards one's own innate perfection. "Chop wood, carry water," becomes a way of transformation if applied to the making of art. It describes the creative process as a measure of one's energies and a challenge to one's capabilities. At the heart of craft lies the living exchange between oneself and the materials. Through bringing our works to completion, we work on bringing ourselves to completion. Five key principles of a way of working are explored in depth. The chapter closes with an experimental correlation between the stages of the creative process and the developmental steps of the mystic way, as outlined by Evelyn Underhill.

Chapter VII: THE COURAGE OF BEING

The chapter raises the questions: what kinds of courage are integral to the creative pro-

cess, and is courage a necessary ingredient in the spiritual quest? Can we strive toward authentic expression, a commitment from the deepest layers of our being? The chapter explores the impermanence of phenomena, and the teachings of many spiritual masters of “using death as an advisor.” What can the inevitability of our own death teach us? Five types of courage that are essential to the creative process are outlined: the courage to see, making the vow to grow, overcoming adversity, polishing one’s spirit, and cultivating faith, hope, and love.

Chapter VIII: THE SCIENCE OF THE REAL

The chapter highlights some of the ideas brought by Buddhist teachers on the difference between relative and absolute truth, or art that reflects our habitual tendencies versus that which reflects genuine wisdom stemming from an experience of primordial unity. It also addresses the similar ideas espoused by G.I. Gurdjieff on the division of art between subjective and objective expression, and explores the language of vibration found in color, tone, musical chords, and words. It raises questions that are challenging for the contemporary artist. Is art a subjective language or an objective science? Does the language of color, form, and sound as well as myth, metaphor, allegory, and symbol have universal implications? The author views this division of subjective vs objective art as an axis, a continuum, where works of art, and one’s own creative efforts, are located somewhere on a scale between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Chapter IX: AWAKENING CONSCIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

“Where there is no conscience, there can be no art,” spoke Alfred Stieglitz. The chapter develops the theme of using art as a means of discovering the long buried voice of conscience and to assist in the awakening of consciousness. It develops new models for creative individuals: the artist as shaman, mountain climber, and higher altitude guide — the artist as *bodhisattva*. The chapter describes how artists strive to be conversant with the gods and how they wish to taste life fully and deeply. And within the creative process, these things are not contradictory; they deeply inform and guide each other.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Approximately 87 books are cited or used as reference.

All chapters close with a three to four page section titled, *Creative Practice*, consisting of questions for self-examination and explicit tools, exercises, and suggestions to help readers experience the content of the book through their own lives and work.

Art and Spiritual Practice is a completed manuscript and currently consists of approximately 84,000 words.

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