Chapter Three

The Way of Self-Knowledge

Know Thyself." Socrates words resound with an inner force as clear and direct as their first utterance over twenty-five centuries ago. These two simple words lie at the heart of the world's great teachings and have had a profound impact on the thought and inquiry of western civilization. What do these powerful words really mean? How do we approach this vast and essential task? And for our purposes: does an active engagement with the creative process assist in this endeavor?

The only reliable means of approaching these questions lies within the realm of attention, the mysterious property that liberates our distinctive human birthright—the potential for self-consciousness. The human condition is distinct in that it provides the possibility for a consciousness that can be fully aware of itself and its manifestations. Yet we stand only on the threshold of this possibility. Through the very imperative of his words, Socrates acknowledges the longing and the need to open oneself to the inner quest. Implied in his statement is one simple fact: that self-knowledge requires an active effort. We must strive toward a comprehensive self-awareness without making the assumption it is a trait that we already embody. There are levels, degrees of self-consciousness, and it is a lifelong effort to penetrate the veils that hide us from ourselves.

The creative process provides rich material to assist in our search for self. As artists, we are fortunate to have a medium that can invoke and reveal the shape of who we are. However, not wanting to diminish the manifold dimensions of art, I acknowledge its power to reflect upon political, social, and environmental realities. Common sense dictates that the gradual realization of self takes place concurrent with the discovery of the world around us. It is a reciprocal, relational process. But very often, especially in the early stages of working with an art medium, we are drawn toward self-awareness and asked to employ the richness of creative work in the service of our growing search for self-knowledge.

In an interview I conducted with Tibetan Buddhist monk, prolific writer and photographer, Mathieu Ricard, he reminds us of the need for witnessing the results of our artistic efforts with an attitude of questioning. He claims that artists often confuse creativity with spontaneous expressions of one's habitual tendencies and particular conditions. "Creativity is all too often just a manifestation of your emerging tendencies. You are this way or you are that way. And these emerging tendencies come out through your creativity. The artists says, 'look at me.' It is selfish and narrow-minded and can be confused with knowing the nature of your own mind. It does not free us from our conditioning or from ignorance, nor does it help develop loving-kindness and compassion. Really looking at these emerging tendencies, looking at the tendencies of your own mind is very exciting, more interesting than going to the movies. Learning to shed the skin of one's habitual tendencies, conditioning, and negative emotions—and discover the real nature of your mind—is true creativity."

Moreover, Hindu philosopher Ravi Ravindra writes in his excellent commentary on the Yoga Sutras that self-knowledge begins with our own individual conditions but

inevitably leads to a recognition of our shared human condition. “Self-study may begin as a study of very personal and quite particular likes and dislikes, but very soon we discover that self-study is in fact a study of the human condition as it is expressed in our individual situations.”

Through the creative process, we remain in question. An active involvement with an art or craft serves to remind us that we are incomplete, that we are engaged in the process of our own creation and searching for the truth of ourselves.

Who am I? Why am I here? What is my own: my path, my calling, my role—what am I to be? These questions often lie at the core of our early efforts with a creative medium. And no matter what direction our mature work assumes, these questions continue to have importance and bear resonant meaning over the course of our entire lives. It is through the state of being in question that discovery and growth arises. As soon as we assume that we know, something in us is lost and dies, shrivels up into a shell of inert impenetrability and loses its living quality. To question is life itself. Remember Rilke’s words of guidance in *Letters to a Young Poet* , “Try to love the questions themselves.” Or, as Chögyum Trungpa says, “The question is the answer.”

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On a New Year’s eve—forty years ago—I gathered with some of my peers at the home of our photography teacher, Nicholas Hlobeczy. Young and eager, we embarked on an evening of looking at photographs, listening to music, and sharing vital conversation. A holiday spirit prevailed, lubricated with wine and fueled by our deep longing for creative

expression. We each showed our newest work, our youthful most-polished efforts, waiting, wishing, hoping for positive response from Nicholas. I remember being nervous about what I was showing and felt inwardly that something was amiss. Even then, an inner measure existed that could sense but not fully identify the features of a subtle imbalance. It was as if I was knowingly and happily living a lie. Some part of me did not want to be found out, even by myself—especially by myself. But mostly, I consented to this false pretense since I had no idea where the vague sense of deception was to be found.

As we each showed our images that had been made with care and as much technical expertise as we could muster—work that emulated the great photographs of the day—Nicholas was visibly unmoved and quiet. We, on the other hand, applauded each other's efforts. We drank more wine in celebration of each other's remarkable abilities—and at such a young age, we thought, to be making such interesting images.

Nicholas finally started leafing through the prints and proofs scattered throughout the room, shown in relief against the dark oriental rug. He had this annoying habit of not being suitably impressed with us, simply saying "huuum" again and again. Recognition gradually dawned in him as we observed a growing clarity and sparkle in his eyes.

He gathered up all of our finished prints and casually placed them in a pile beyond the reach of our eyes. Several small proofs and stray images, tangential to our serious efforts, remained in the center of the room. "Little pictures," he said, with no explanation or introduction. "Little pictures," he repeated with force and emphasis as he picked them up, one by one, holding them where we could all see and observe them carefully.

He eventually continued with his response: "Pictures from essence, of child-like perceptions, real pictures of who you really are." It was true. The small pile of "little"

pictures were real. They were an accurate reflection and struck a note of truth. They were not about ambition or polish or future greatness. They were about reality, a genuine portrayal of the present, and they reflected our authentic selves. As a result, they were unimpeachable—and remarkable—in precisely the way that we wished and hoped that our other images might become. This experience gave us something to aim toward.

One set of images — the "little pictures" grew directly from our essence. The other set of images were full of the strivings of our ego to be good, to be admired, to be like the masters, and to be applauded. In a moment we saw and deeply appreciated the difference. For the very first time, I caught a glimpse of my youthful, bombastic ego and its desire to be liked and recognized. And, with clarity, I saw something of my true nature. It was a small glimpse, to be sure, but it rang of integrity and not false pretense. We were, on the one hand, embarrassed by our ego's antics, and on the other hand, extremely grateful for this important discovery, this moment of understanding that Nicholas revealed.

Nicholas continued: Can we make "little pictures?" Can we practice non-doing and simply allow our images to find us? Can we bring to light what is really our own—in truth, he said, not in imagination?

Turns out, we stayed up all night on that New Year's eve and ventured out to make photographs at dawn, with the singular intent of being open to the images that may find us. I made a picture of a floating window on a Spanish-style house that was later double-printed, combined with a negative of light reflections on ice. It came as a revelation, the strength of my connection to the image. It honestly felt like my own—one of the first decisive moments to find its way through my camera aligned with my heart and mind. When I drove home later that day, I felt that something had changed in me, a significant

inner measure had been uncovered for the very first time—an experience that has never left me.

I have come to understand that authenticity is not a permanent state; rather, it is a *direction*—something to aim towards. Our conditioning is very strong; our egos are inwardly dictatorial, wanting to be liked and admired. Our self-image often goes to extremes, towards either congratulatory inner adulation or to scathing self-recrimination.

Our essence, what is real in us, speaks in whispers. It is often hidden beneath well-constructed personalities. We are a mixture of essence and personality. Yet, we see certain ways of being, certain interests, certain ways of expressing ourselves, certain ways of interacting with the world and others, that we can call our own. These inner conditions have a different ring. They are resonant. They sound true. They *feel* more right. We need to be vigilant and attentive, waiting, watching, for the appearance of ourselves. Often our greatest challenges and greatest strengths reside together in this vibrating region of authenticity.

Over the next several weeks and months, I continued to cultivate the tight kernel of strength and courage I needed to withstand this newly-discovered, all-too-frequent bare honesty towards myself and others. It was a frightening yet highly revealing experience. I was scared out of my wits by the contradictions and complexes that began to emerge into my field of awareness. However, my demons were fortunately not alone. Maintaining my persistent efforts to genuinely observe myself, a lucid inner voice, accompanied by a clear lightness of being, made its quiet, definite appearance. I was inexplicably led to a new experience of myself, resulting in a new body of photographs. I don't know what to call it—my intuition, inner sense, the small voice within—none of these seem accurate. It was a

blend of all of the above, taking the form of an inner dictate that gave only one choice—to obey. I prefer Jung's phrase: the *daimon* of creativity. My *daimon* would coach me to drive here or walk there, and make images from an exact vantage point.

Without fail, a series of remarkable images were revealed. Images that needed—almost demanded—expression through a camera. What astonished me about these pictures was the precision in which they reflected my inner world. It is as if the shape of my soul and other core elements of my being were directly, almost scientifically, revealed. The symbolic language present in these images was—and remains to this day—profound. These visions were gifts for which I can take no responsibility. They arose from my longing, my wish for self-revelation, though not from any conscious, expressive intent. My only intentional effort consisted of following the path wherever it may lead and remaining open to the clear, distinct voice within. I was guided cleanly and directly.

I could not have conjured up these images and their precise symbolic language had I tried—nor did I fully understand them. Yet, after many years of living with them, they revealed themselves as exact transcriptions, accurate without a fault of aspects of my essential nature. They were lucid messages from the interior. While this experience was repeated in different forms over the years, this small set of images remains a touchstone. They represent one of my most important discoveries of the role of creative expression in revealing and uncovering core features of myself.

Over time, I came to feel that this way of working was limited, as it ignored the power of photography to address the integrity, complexity, and sheer wonder of the world itself. Today, moments of illumination will spontaneously arise on the heels of inner work that help me along the way and assist my understanding; but, as often as not, they reveal

insights that serve to help others or mirror the collective atmosphere. These experiences have established one fact that remains firmly planted in my awareness: without some degree of awakening and self-realization, we can do nothing, serve no one. Without the discovery of a sensitive inner measure, the appearance of moments of conscience, knowing when our efforts are right and true, our lives lack meaning and can do more harm than good. One of the initial precepts of the spiritual path is: *do no harm*. And William Segal concisely states: "It is the awakening of Self that brings unselfing." No matter where our journey in art leads us, it is built on the singular foundation of the quest for self knowledge. From that, all else proceeds. The creation of art follows the cultivation of a broad awareness of self.

One distinguishing feature of this period of time following that New Year's eve: I was sitting quietly, meditating on a daily basis, and making an active effort to maintain an awareness of myself during parts of the day. My wish to awaken was great. I tried to stay within my body, receive the silence—and listen within. This effort of attention felt like a "knocking on heaven's door," opening to a source of wisdom lying just beyond the threshold of my consciousness, that seemed to waiting, wishing to reveal itself to me. This wisdom, this knowledge, I suspect, is always there—it is we that are absent most of the time.

Mathieu Ricard illuminates the true nature of inspiration and intuition. "Sometimes with nature or with art, you experience greater insight, a real moment of enlightenment, or a luminosity that connects you with the world or nature or others. By understanding the nature of your own mind, you naturally come to what we call intuition and insight. These moments come from your practice, from developing loving kindness

and compassion, and they are moments of what I would all genuine wisdom. Consciousness is an experience. It goes deeper and deeper into the experience, behind mental constructs and behind the veil of your emerging tendencies. You come to your natural wisdom. So intuition or inspiration is really the experience of your own wisdom. It is like seeing a small patch of blue sky amidst the clouds—and you try to widen that patch through personal transformation."

Accumulated Insights of Art

It is widely affirmed that working with an art or craft, or engaging any activity with passion and care, is a path toward self-knowledge. In *The De-Definition of Art*, art critic Harold Rosenberg attests to this condition. "… The individual arts, in whatever condition they have assumed under pressure of cultural change and the actions of individual artists, have never been more indispensable to both the individual and the society than they are today. With its accumulated insights, its disciplines, its inner conflicts, painting (or poetry, or music) provide a means for the active self-development of individuals—perhaps the only means. Given the patterns in which mass behavior, including mass education, is presently organized, art is the one vocation that keeps a space open for the individual to realize himself in knowing himself. A society that lacks the presence of self-developing individuals—but in which passive people are acted upon by their environment—hardly deserves to be called a human society. It is the greatness of art that it does not permit us to forget this."

What does Rosenberg mean when he refers to art, with "its accumulated insights, its disciplines, and its inner conflicts," as providing a means for "the active self-

development of individuals?" What can creativity offer an individual on the way toward self-knowledge?

1.) Art is a search for what is our own—our essential nature, the kernel of our true individuality. Our genuine beliefs, innate talents, and deepest inclinations can be discovered and seen clearly through the lens of a creative medium.

Authentic expression unfolds from the search for and the gradual revelation of self. The inherent longing to become who we are, the sheer discovery of what rings true to ourselves represent the initial stages of the artist's way. An acorn will never grow to be an oak tree without the nourishment and conditions proper to its nature. To know what feeds our unique nature, helping it thrive and grow, is an art of the highest order.

In a society that values materialism and rational thought, a healthy percentage of artists strive to preserve and protect creative endeavors as a haven of integrity. An active engagement with art begs the following questions. Does the work align with who we are, at our deepest level? Does it ring true? Does it arise from inner necessity?

How do we recognize the true kernel of our individuality? At times, it manifests as a vague inner call that will not go away, subtly but persistently nudging our lives toward its source. In other instances, it makes a forceful entry into our consciousness as a gifted moment of revelation or through an acute passion and poignant longing that can neither be denied nor ignored. All too often, a multitude of distracting impulses impede authentic expression. The desire to be liked and accepted, the doubts and insecurities that cloud our essential nature, and the intense pressure from teachers and purveyors of taste to align

with the artistically-correct trends of academia or the marketplace are bedeviling forces that serve to wrest us away from ourselves.

The key to our uniqueness lies in discerning our own deepest interests, our own approach to content, and our own manner of expression in terms of medium and style. We don't need to look for it; we need to uncover it. It is part of who we are. Several criteria are helpful. First, Chögyum Trungpa and Alan Ginsberg formulated a dictum about writing poetry: "First thought, best thought." One of the truisms about the artistic work of children is that they are marvelously spontaneous and creative, but don't know when to stop. Often, their initial impulse gets long covered over with effusive drawing or writing or shaping, and the elegance of the originating impulse is swamped. We are much the same. We need to look at our beginnings. What led us to a particular medium in the first place? What are our original marks, initial thoughts, or beginning impulses? We often find truth about ourselves here, in the beginning, in the "first thought."

Creativity offers a genuine practice, a discipline that brings forth our essential nature. We seek to know and express our predilections, the inward leanings that constitute the seeds of our individuality. We know in some part of ourselves when our work is true, when it comes closer to the center, and when it is in accord with our deepest selves. If we examine the mature work of many artists, a thread can be found, like a string of pearls that unfolds back to their early efforts. Creativity is a distillation. According to Edward Hopper, "In every artist's development, the germ of the later work is always found in the earlier. The nucleus around which the artist's intellect builds his work is himself… and this changes little from birth to death." And, speaking of childhood, Joseph Chilton Pearce

perceptively notes: "Adolescents sense a secret, unique greatness in themselves that seeks expression."

In teaching art, I have observed this phenomenon frequently. One senses, one knows—it resounds in the air— that there is something in each student that is continually seeking, even demanding, expression. I love teaching basic photography and children's classes for this reason. Early on, a sense of innocent spontaneity prevails. The work is naturally right and true—though it lacks rigor and refinement. Then comes learning, for better and worse. As students explore the techniques and language of a medium, along with studying the work of mature practitioners, something of essential value is often lost or submerged. On the road to mastery, they enter a region, a no-man's land, where they gain skill and virtuosity, but lose sight of their child-like curiosity, wonder, and the bold, naked expression that characterizes their early efforts. Their hard-won understanding overwhelms their sense of self and the spontaneity of their expression. Well and good… for a while only. One must struggle with learning and experimentation in order to come back, to recognize the clear call and resonant validity of the originating impulse. Noted theatrical director Peter Brook notes: "As always, one has to go into a forest and back to find the plant that is growing besides one's own front door." Through learning, one returns to the beginning, to an authentic, refined expression—but on a more elevated level. Students are eventually able to integrate their knowledge, their growing technical expertise, and their awareness of the visual language with their life experiences, observations, passions, and aspirations.

I believe that our truest works and most significant accomplishments grow out of our inmost predilections. When we align with who we really are, a subtle change begins to

occur; a new-found quality of both freedom and responsibility makes its long-awaited appearance.

Observing core elements of our style, we are, in reality, perceiving our own inner shape or sound. We cannot, as many vainly attempt, willfully assert a unique mode of expression. Real style is organic, growing from every piece of our existence. It is a refined blend of our inclinations, experiences, conditioning, and genetic code. When we actually look at our work—really look—it is uncanny. We will see certain forms and shapes, particular ways of using color or sound, consistent patterns of words or movements that repeat themselves over and over again. And these core forms and shapes are there virtually from the beginning. It often comes as a moment of revelation when we first observe this phenomenon and decisively discover the flavor of these familiar, repeating elements that constitute our own unique language growing cleanly out of ourselves. Poets speak of finding their voice, painters and photographers speak of finding their vision, and musicians speak of hearing their music within.

Within the art classroom, it takes no more than two or three weeks for the teacher to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, which works belong to who. This happens even in classes designed for beginners. These underlying dynamics find their way to the surface very quickly. However, it takes a much longer time for the young artist to recognize these repeating elements in their own work. The value of other people's responses and honest feedback is immediately apparent. Two heads are better than one.

When do we come home? An inner measure exists. We know or sense in some part of ourselves when the work is true. We must stay in touch with this inner form of knowing, this finely tuned discrimination. We employ our senses, feelings, and intuitive

capacity. The subtle shades of difference of when the work is off-center, or when it strikes a deep accord within is indistinguishable to the mind alone. As I write, for example, I am sifting and examining words and phrases, sensing my relationship to them. Moments of accord arise, though more often than not I feel distant, unrelated to myself and the unfolding work. A moment comes in the darkroom, when making a photographic print, where I see the developing print and say "yes." That is all that is needed—a simple affirmation that the finished print evokes the qualities I sensed were possible. The closer we come to ourselves, the more we know, in some essential yet unknown parts of ourselves when the outer expression mirrors the inner direction. Content and form correlate directly with our beliefs, attitudes, and every element of our being.

2.) Not only does art mirror our essential characteristics, it is also a means of observing our conditioned personality—the legacy of our upbringing, education, and the unique compilation of our experiences. Creative work reflects the whole of our personality. What we experience in our lives will eventually make its way into our creative expression. All art is autobiographical, to one degree or another, and has its seeds in the particular nature of the artist's experience. The way it shows itself is highly instructive. For example, the deeper meaning of an event or an experience is not always immediately apparent — we must turn to the unconscious to reveal its significance. The hidden parts of our nature communicate through dreams, waking visions, and works of art. We may examine our works of art with the same kind of analysis that we give to our dreams. Often, they arise from the same place within and speak a similar language.

In viewing our own work or that of others, art reveals much information otherwise unavailable to the surface mind. The contents of the unconscious, the many layers of our conditioning, and the accumulated residue of our experiences are often mysterious to our conscious awareness. What we see reflected in our works of art can be a profound learning experience, a means of plumbing our own depths and discovering/interpreting the inner meaning of outer events and circumstances. Further, art can prefigure our own experiences and the conditions of the culture. Through art we may have glimpses into the future.

Many times I have observed mysterious elements finding their way into my work—even in works and projects that are inherently outer directed. Upon closer examination, or assisted by the response of others, I may see that these elements mirror some condition of my life in the present, past, or future. Giving careful attention to details of my work often leads toward greater understanding of myself and the meaning of my experiences.

Creative work is a form of self-portrayal. It manifests the nature of our individual experiences, the challenge of our collective conditions, and the shape of our innate being. No matter what our mode of inquiry—autobiography, realism, fiction, or non-representation—we often see a good deal of ourselves reflected in our works. On an obvious level, our passions and commitments are the guiding forces that generate the content of our work and bring it into being. In witnessing our efforts, if we cannot maintain a sustained commitment to a body of work, what does this mean? Either its content is not deeply related to our experiences and aspirations, or—and this is often the case—it strikes too close to home. Where there is great resistance often lies our greatest power and possibility.

Whether we intend it or not, our works reflect both our angels and demons. The closer we come to a full and honest expression of our experience, the more energy resides in the work. The moment when we recognize how many layers of our psyche actually infuse our works often comes as an awakened shock that shakes loose a heightened experience of self, opens to the lucid call of conscience, and engenders a deep sense of responsibility. The degree of energy that we invest in the work, the extent of our passion, is an inner measure of the work's potential value. When we are able to put ourselves fully on paper, or celluloid, or canvas, the strength the experience is compelling, no matter what parts of our nature we are expressing. And this came as a surprise to me—the moment of revealment is equally strong regardless of whether it is our angels/allies or our demons/shadows that are being activated and mirrored.

Many hidden elements of our inner world find their expression through our work: the lopsided shape of our ego, our childhood complexes, our deepest wounds, and our unconscious projections. Whatever form our creative endeavors assume, we will consistently encounter the unknown contents of our psyche—our shadow selves will stand and greet us again and again. The creative process asks that get acquainted with these hidden parts of our make-up, cultivate acceptance, and strive to integrate or transform them, rather than allowing them to unconsciously impact literally everything that we do. In working with students, as soon as I see their images or any type of creative work, immediately a greater understanding of who they are falls into place.

The same dynamic holds true in our response to the works of others. When we feel a compelling, energetic communication with the work, when something is strongly

evoked, it is often the case that we are seeing a part of ourselves. We are the world and the world is us. Our affinities and repulsions contain important clues to self-knowing.

The photographs of Diane Arbus, for example, of midgets, circus freaks, and those that live on the fringe of normal society were regarded by her as self-portraits. She strongly identified with these individuals due to her own psychological conditions, feeling a kindred oneness with their dignity and suffering (Arbus committed suicide in 1971). When we look at these harsh, strobe-lit photos, we may also identify elements of ourselves mirrored in the bizarre scenes and the unusual individuals portrayed.

While art is far more than therapy, it is nonetheless deeply transformative. It awakens sight and insight, engendering confidence in the authority of our genuine observations. Creativity deconstructs the ego and aligns us with truth, however painful and disconcerting that reality may be. Offering the potential to function as a profound healing force—for the individual and society—the creative process forms a broad, fertile pathway to release and understand our traumas, disappointments, losses, and challenges. When we externalize our suffering into a work of art, it is a means of digesting the experience, coming into a different relationship with it, and releasing some of its painful or negative energy.

Art, literature, and film abound with evidence of the artist's deeply-felt agonies and ecstasies, challenges and triumphs, distilled into works of creative expression. And a curious phenomenon exists: when the viewer experiences the work, resonating with the artist's experience, it functions as an affirmation and a form of healing. We feel connected, part of the human condition, when we see our intensely private concerns shared by others and articulated in their work. We are reassured and our experiences are deeply validated.

Edward Weston's later photographs from Point Lobos, made after the onset of Parkinson's disease, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, composed when he was nearly deaf, and the poetry of Rilke, born of great suffering and out of his intense longing for the real, reveal poignant and impassioned highly personal experiences that transcend the artist's individual circumstances. They have transformed their private moments into a timeless and archetypal expression. In each instance, we see the fragility and dignity of the human condition against the backdrop of life's exquisitely vast and impersonal universality.

3.) The creative process asks that we strive toward a balanced development. While a correlation may exist between creativity and madness, the greatest art arises from the search for wholeness of body and spirit. Artists encounter their world deeply and intensely—extending well beyond neurosis. It may be that Van Gogh was saner than most of us, opening himself to deeper, transpersonal layers of consciousness. But in the end he was simply human, incapable of withstanding the powerful forces and mystical energies running through his veins—akin to putting 220 volts through a 110 volt circuit.

An active engagement with art reveals the nature of our imbalance. One of the very first things we observe is the dominant features of our constitution. Body, mind, and feelings; each must be equal participants in the creative act. And for most of us, these are out of balance and unequally developed. One or another of these core elements is prioritized and favored. In western civilization, many individuals sharpen their mind at the expense of the rest of their being. Here in Hawai'i, with the prevalence of surfers, divers, and outdoor enthusiasts, there are countless adventurers with highly developed hard-bodies, but who shirk from the disciplined work of the mind. Likewise, artists are

often at the mercy of their feeling nature, prioritizing this function over the rigor of the mind or the knowledge of the body.

There is a natural intelligence of each part of our nature: mind, body, and feelings. Through work with a creative medium, our natural talents and limitations come into full view. We are given hints of wholeness while suffering the nature of our fragmentation and lack of balance. Gaining mastery of an art or craft compels us to observe clearly which of our parts are inherently more evolved and which are in need of attention and development. The objective demands of an art medium will not let us off the hook — asking that we attend to our inner development in a balanced manner. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Diane Arbus, Sylvia Plathy, Earnest Hemingway, Judy Garland, Van Gogh, and Gauguin are just a few tragic examples of troubled artists whose imbalance reached epic proportions. If we wish to open to the empowered voices and transpersonal forces of the Muses, we must have a stable, balanced foundation. Otherwise any form of extreme imbalance can tear us apart. There is no value for oneself and others in embracing the romantic myth of the long-suffering, tortured artist. Rather than flowing with the current of our particular imbalance, passively accepting how we are, we must try and make the effort to undertake our own completion. After all, it is the balanced work of the lower three centers that invites a connection to the higher, that opens us to finer currents of energy.

How is it for each of us? We may find, for example, that we can outline our concerns with conceptual strength and intellectual rigor. Yet to convey the words, the painted image, or the musical composition with an evocative grace of feeling may be very difficult. Or we may find our emotions are strong, empathetic, and responsive to the surrounding world, but we lack the intellectual force to clothe our perceptions in an

expressive form and structure. And as is often the case with young artists, we may have genuine insights and observations but remain divorced from the subtle sensitivity of the body and not be sufficiently versed in the language of the senses to craft our works with elegance and refinement. The growing interest in arts and crafts, gardening, T'ai Chi, yoga, and non-competitive sports is a means of returning to the body and learning to engage its natural intelligence.

Other inner conditions are observed as well. The shape of our inner landscape emerges with great clarity and directness when we work with an art or craft. Many find that their creative impulses are free and effusive, with numerous projects on the table, but they lack the discipline to complete them. Others may be highly disciplined and focused, but find it difficult to be loose or spontaneous enough to engage free expression.

It has always been hard for me to work from assignment, to conceptualize my concerns in advance and effectively use the technical means to manifest my original vision. I find it easier and more natural to respond to the world through a camera, working freely and directly, then critically viewing the finished results. With words, I write to learn and explore, rather than knowing the precise nature of what I will express.

Science embraces two kinds of logic, inductive and deductive. Inductive logic means that we begin with a premise and use the process to verify the original thesis. Deductive logic means that we allow the process to unfold, and from the results, we infer our conclusions. The creative process incorporates the same dynamics. Some artists begin with a concept, a clear vision of where they are going. They then gather their materials, outline their concerns, and use the process to manifest their original conception. Other artists do not initially know exactly what they wish to express. They are energized by

standing in front of a virgin canvas or the sheer blankness of the page and asking the question: what can I offer to fill this void, and what does this emptiness call forth within me? They simply begin in a free and spontaneous manner, allowing the energy of the moment to dictate their actions. The growing work gathers momentum and builds to a crescendo of expression and realization. Conscious intent, balanced with spontaneous discovery arising from the process itself—these two modes are not mutually exclusive; they interact and deeply inform each other. Though most artists strive to incorporate both, it is a useful exercise to examine the two poles of experience separately and ask: what fits our temperament? Where do our predilections lead us?

At times, our natural inclinations can be fully embraced, flowing with the current rather than against it. At other times, we may need to challenge our preconceptions and ingrained habits in order to reach new heights of experience and expression. For example, writing is not a natural activity for me. I do not always enjoy sitting at the keyboard, attending to my thoughts and feelings in this manner. But writing is the appropriate vehicle for my questions and insights of the moment. For the sake of growth, I continue in spite of my resistance, attempting to stay open to the process and what it has to teach me.

4.) Art reveals our cultural heritage and collective conditions, allowing us to observe the societal attitudes as well as generational standards that have influenced us literally from birth. Among today's artists and critics, massive attention is paid to the connotative signs in works of art that, when deconstructed through a rigorous theoretical matrix, treat images as a cultural text. That is to say, images are about images — the fashions, tastes, and attitudes of contemporary society are witnessed through media, advertising, and pop

culture. Art then becomes a simultaneous mirror and critique of the culture-at-large. Critical theory examines how both the overt content and the underlying, contextual elements of our expression are deeply influenced by the strictly external aspects of our identity: our upbringing, ethnic background, economic status, gender roles, sexual orientation, or health conditions. Without jumping completely on the bandwagon — embracing human character as only defined by externals — we must admit a self-evident, but easily overlooked truth: we are children of our epoch. There can be no doubt that cultural factors drive many aspects of our creative expression, and these elements are exceedingly difficult to recognize because they are so deeply ingrained into our conditioned personalities. But it is a highly useful exercise to observe our artistic efforts through the lens of our cultural attitudes.

The nature of our experiences derived from gender, ethnicity, and all forms of our personal orientation underlie our works. As a teacher, little doubt exists when I observe such things as evidence of sexual or psychological abuse, forms of prejudice, economic conditions, or health conditions in student work. It is far more difficult for the student to recognize these subtle, hidden elements in their own works.

At the deepest level, collective truths may be discovered and expressed by the artist. For most of recorded history, the principal function of art was transpersonal. Strictly personal expression was a lesser god. While this will be explored thoroughly in succeeding chapters, it does suggest another cultural factor that deeply influences the art of the present. Individual, self-expression is the favored artistic modality in western society. Mathieu Ricard writes of this in his insightful introduction to his book of photographs,

Monk Dancers of Tibet: “In the west, we usually understand creativity to be the expression of the impulses that arise from personal subjective experience. For the contemplative this approach is not necessarily creative in its fullest sense because that subjective experience itself is limited by basic ignorance. Thus what one considers to be an original creation is often the result of exploring one's habitual tendencies and impulses that maintain the vicious circle of samsara, the wheel of existence. Innovation, as we usually understand it, does not necessarily free from ignorance, greed or animosity, or make us better, wiser, or more compassionate human beings.

From a spiritual point of view, true creativity means breaking out of the sheath of egocentricity and becoming a new person, or, more precisely, casting off the veils of ignorance to discover the ultimate nature of mind and phenomena. That discovery is something really new, and the intense, coherent and joyous effort which leads to it is not based on an arbitrary and egocentric attitude. In fact, sacred art is an element of the spiritual path. It takes courage to practice it, because its goal is to destroy the attachment to the ego.”

5.) Art is a means toward the discovery and expression of Self. At its deepest level, the creative process transports us into universal, transpersonal realms. It is highly paradoxical. Through creativity we may be privileged with moments of realization of utter formlessness, emptiness, Oneness. Yet we deeply recognize our embodied nature, the forms that grow from our true nature. Formlessness and form are two sides of the same stick. We empty the cup to reveal the inherent contents. We discover the self — world-

born and earth-bound — to challenge and transcend it, revealing the Self — unborn and unbound. As a child, I remember knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that "I" am not my name, do not live only in my body and personality, that "I" reside here only temporarily and am vaster than my particular conditions. Yet "I" incorporate — and somehow need — my unique personal conditions. Creativity helps us find our way back to what we already know, already are, always have been, and always will be.

The discovery of the higher parts of our nature—our dharma, our true path, our Self our own particular place of giving and receiving—that can come only from us—may be discovered and expressed through art. A true path fully incorporates the lower but penetrates deeply into the higher. It is only through our Self that we may know and express the not-self. We have the definite advantage of history when viewing the works of other artists, musicians, and writers. We can know the nature of their mature contribution. We can see where their greatness lies. We can identify what unique quality they had to offer, where they could function as a conduit for higher currents to pass through them, giving form to a vastness that profoundly nourishes oneself and others.

A moment comes for the artist, often late in a career of continual research and experimentation, that the work becomes distinctively one's own, infused with one's very being. Walt Whitman was an unknown writer and journalist, generating unremarkable prose, until the undocumented bold awakening from which bloomed the unparalleled, epic poem Leaves of Grass. And the elegant, silence-filled, color field paintings of Mark Rothko followed decades of unimpressive, awkward work inspired by his interest in the myths of antiquity.

Constance Hale, in *Sin and Syntax*, observes: " Be simple but go deep. The exquisite "cutouts" of Matisse and the elegant line drawings of Picasso came late in long careers of painstaking work and wild experimentation. In writing, as in painting, simplicity often follows considerable torment."

It is nothing less than a form of alchemy. We cannot hasten the long, slow, simmering process that brings boldness, economy, and elegance to the forefront. Following their innate vision or voice, artists can become permeable to deeper layers of reality within and without— continually refining, distilling, searching for what rings true. The forms that pass through us may arise from a myriad of sources, from deep within and from the vibrations of the atmosphere itself. The personal and archetypal elements of the unconscious open to the artist's receptive eye and hand. To examine one's work as dreams or messages from the interior and to regard one's expression as an *individual* discovery of transpersonal conditions is enlightening. The shocks of awareness and recognition of the nature and source of our visions are at once humbling and empowering. We invite and encourage these persuasive insights—and learn deeply from them. When the forms or words resound, they are as much for others as they are for oneself. In this region there is little distinction between self and other.

Where lies our own true genius? What is our mature expression that derives from our unique nature? Where can the energies of life pass through us transparently? What can we give to others, to the culture, and to ourselves? These questions can only be answered through further questions and attending to the process itself, through work and effort, vision and examination. What do we continually return to? How do others respond to our

works? What elements consistently nourish ourselves and others? What persists in our expression through various times in our lives, through different mediums and projects?

It is organic. A long-term, committed involvement with the creative process may reveal the answer to these questions. Again, we must return to an inner measure, an intuition, a sense of discrimination—a feeling of rightness of what we are doing. Something in us knows where we belong, where our most significant insights lie. Our creative work is an ongoing means of discovering what is real. We strive to come home. An inner anxiety exists when we are distant from truth, and an inner sense of accord emerges as we get warm. We sense, smell, taste, and observe our activities. Does it feel right? Does it imbue ourselves and others with life-affirming or compassionately challenging impressions? We continue to learn. Learning about oneself is a life-long task. There are no easy answers. We must stay in question, not accept the easy or comfortable answers, and refuse the path of least resistance. Above all, we must be stubborn, persistent, and open to discovery.

We may see that an implicit order exists in our lives, always leading us toward what we need, toward what we are. We resist so many of the conditions of our lives, yet often in retrospect we see the absolute necessity of this experience or this sadness or joy. If we stay sensitive to the intimations from within, we are led to where we belong. This is the only advice I can give: stay open to yourself. It will lead you where you need to go.

A moment comes in our creative work, a moment of awareness transformed into an image, a turn of phrase, a part of a painting, or even an entire project. Something passes through us cleanly and directly. It nourishes us profoundly, and upon sharing the work with others, we discover it feeds them as well. Yes — we exclaim — this is closer to the

truth. This is something of our birthright. This is something of our dharma, our true path. This is something that is surprising, astonishing, magical, and miraculous, even to ourselves. We know it when we see it, yet could not predict it in advance.

The answers lie within. We know, but we don't know. The voice of the master, the true guide or teacher within is separated from us by the thinnest of veils, but for most of us, it takes a lifetime of work to penetrate the masks that hide us from ourselves.

Impartial Seeing

Returning to Socrates admonition, know thyself, one central question emerges that begs exploration. If we wish to know ourselves, who knows and who sees? From where does self-observation arise? Where does self-knowledge originate? Is it from the mind? Is it a function of the ego? Is it part of our ordinary, everyday awareness? What part of ourselves can see and know the other parts?

With western culture's predominance of the mind, we often confuse self-knowing with introspection. The mind thinks about itself, or the mind reviews the feeling nature, or it examines the state of our bodies. But a true moment of self-awareness does not come from the mind alone. In the previous chapter, we established the need for inner clarity and the development of an impartial witness, without which we can neither accurately know ourselves nor discriminate the results of our creative efforts.

What constitutes clear seeing? What criteria define a moment of genuine observation? Gurdjieff's successor Jeanne de Salzmann teaches, and this is consistent with my own experience, that a moment of self-knowing contains three defining characteristics. First, it is simultaneous, which means it takes place in the present, observing an event as it

happens, not a step ahead or behind. Second, it is impartial, which means it does not judge what is seen or wish that it were different; it accepts what is without wanting to change it. And third, it is objective, which means that it sees things how they really are, not how we want them to be, or hope that they could be, or think what they might be. It sees the truth of the now apart from our evaluation or comments.

We have all experienced states of self-awareness where we are connected to the present moment, seeing it clearly and inhabiting it more directly. In situations of great danger or stress, in moments of love and awakening, in contact with the forces of the natural world, or in front of sublime works of art, we may come to a lucid inner clarity and an embracing awareness. In these moments, we are more fully present to ourselves and we witness the event with a detached, disinterested awareness. It is, in de Salzmann's words, "a look from above." "I have the power to rise above myself and to see myself freely… to be seen. My thought has the power to be free.… Thereby, its true aim is revealed, a unique aim: to think I, to realize who I am, to enter into this mystery."

In actuality, we are our awareness—the Seer *and* the seen. Modern physics has discovered a phenomenon that signals a radical paradigm shift in our world view. Science can now verify that the presence of the observer and the methods of observation have a measurable affect on the process being observed. This discovery serves to definitively demolish the subject/object split so prevalent in western thought. In other words, consciousness has an observable and measurable impact on that which it observes. Seeing itself becomes the principal means of self-knowing and the catalyst for a true inner change of conditions. When light enters the dark places, a chemical action occurs — bringing forth an alchemical transformation and genuine growth of being.

At its best, art invites seeing — within and without. Like the sun, spreading its welcoming rays over the earth, we regard what is, without giving priority to any one thing but giving equal attention to all. We see and accept reality beyond subjective preference. All too often, our egoistic likes and dislikes are employed as a measure of works of art or as a means of evaluating our own efforts. This is an odd and pervasive cultural distortion, one that deserves a radical dismantling. If we are governed by ephemeral and illusory persuasions — the mere coloration of the ego — what room do we leave for conscious, objective awareness? The challenge put forth by the creative process is distinctive: that of learning to see. And seeing transcends opinion. Its possibility lies in a deep sense of acceptance. Going beyond our subjective orientation yet witnessing and making use of our unique experiences aligned with our genuine talents is the work of creativity. We open. We look. We accept. Seeing and knowing ourselves in the moment, flowing with change and shifting conditions; regarding our works with impartial acceptance, striving to know the reality of what is; through the action of seeing itself, we become more connected and whole.

Creativity is a call to conscious awareness. The work of creativity becomes a practice — a means of developing a subtle and sensitive awareness, capable of seeing oneself in action, cultivating an attentive presence in the midst of our lives. Art provides a measure, a direct reflection of our awareness in the moment.

Creativity brings forth one essential question, asked in different ways and presented under many guises. To approach this question lies at the heart of the creative process.

Who am I

Creative Practice

TRY: Sift through your own archives: picture files, sketchbooks, or notebooks. Examine and respond to your own work. Lay them out, view several years worth on the floor or a large table at a single glance. What rises to the top? What images, sketches, stories, or paragraphs do you keep returning to? What feels like your own? What feels like a transparent reflection of your attitudes, concerns, and way of being?

Edit these from the rest. You may only have several pieces that, like cream, distill themselves from the group. Keep these as a touchstone. Pin them on your wall or place them where you can see them on a daily basis. These works are instructive and nourishing. They have the capacity to renew and re-activate the connection to your inner sources. When you encounter them regularly and out of the "corner of the eye" — over breakfast, or while on the phone, or in the stray moments of your life — a new understanding of the works may be revealed. Looking in this way can bypass the mind's propensity to provide its continual commentary on your impressions. You may see and feel them more clearly.

You may try this with the work of others as well. Keep a clipping file of pictures, quotes, or articles that deeply move and inspire you. This may assist in finding your own authentic expression. A literary agent recently asked me: what writers do you admire who are working in the same genre (non-fiction) as yourself? Keep their books next to your computer. Use them as a guide and as an inner measure.

TRY: Experiment with an artistic expression of one of your most significant life experiences. Paint, write, draw, or make photographs about the salient features of the experience — and approach this from the heart. This is not easy. At times, you might need to digest your experiences apart from creative work, while at another time, you are moved to immediate expression. See if you can distill the experience into a work of art. Follow your predilections — as to whether you work literally or symbolically. Simply see what happens. And keep trying, maybe over periods of time.

Natalie Goldberg reports on attempting to write about her father's death. After the event, she tried several times a month, to no avail. "I was exploring and composting the material," she writes. Then suddenly, "a long poem about that subject poured out of me. All the disparate things I had to say were suddenly fused with energy and unity — a bright red tulip shot out of the compost."

She describes the necessary digestion of our experiences as "composting." From the digestion and decomposition of our myriad experiences comes a rich, fertile ground for creative work. Goldberg continues, "Out of this fertile soil blooms our poems and stories."

TRY: Be transparent. Get out of the way. Allow your expression to move through you; let your images find you or let the words form themselves. Make "little pictures" or "little stories" from a simple, child-like perspective. Don't try so hard.