

## Chapter Nine

### *Awakening Conscience and Consciousness*

**A**rtists are the guardians of the threshold, standing between worlds, inviting passage in two directions, toward the higher and into the lower. Through our efforts to reach our deepest potential, we learn to embrace the ascending and descending forces of the universe: the upward striving toward consciousness and the descent of Spirit into materiality, interpenetrating all life forms. The way up becomes the way down. As human beings, we magnetize our earthly natures to uplift—the striving toward consciousness and we open to the finer energies that come down to meet us, informing and deepening our lower natures. In the ascent, we find the growth of wisdom and consciousness; in the descent, we find the action of love and compassion, with a recognition of the radiance found in all things.

The proverbial mountain of myth and legend functions again as a potent symbol. We seek the summit, we strive toward the immense vista of consciousness, the view from the top; but we cannot stay there. We must come back down, bringing our new-found wisdom and hard-earned understandings into the matter of our lives, to serve ourselves and others. Even though we may be graced with moments of greater consciousness and enlightened realization, it is not where we live—at least not now, not yet.

The unfinished manuscript of Rene Daumal's *Mount Analogue* contains the following notes: "You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again... So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. In climbing, take careful notes of the difficulties along your way; for as you go up, you can observe them. Coming down, you will no longer see them, but you will know they are there if you have observed them well.

There is an art of finding one's direction in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know."

Further on, Daumal makes note: "Art is here taken to mean knowledge realized in action."

As guardians of the threshold, our role is to help guide the way. To show the way, we must know the way. To reveal the details of the ascent, we must attempt to make the ascent. And once graced with moments of understanding, we must make this knowledge visible; we must strive to realize it in action—in our lives and works of art.

The artist's role is to preserve and protect the life of the spirit; to portray values that are life-affirming and reflective of our deepest possibilities. To achieve our purpose, we must also challenge existing conditions, not all of which are life-enhancing. To reveal the contradictions inherent in our culture, to mirror them back, we must deeply know the contradictions within ourselves. Our knowledge must begin with ourselves. *As above so below*. The culture is merely an aggregate of individuals, magnified into prevailing values and beliefs. We can only perceive the world to the degree that we can perceive ourselves.

Of necessity in the life of an artist is deep humility. As we look deeply within ourselves, we see both our deepest potential, our highest possibilities, as well as our

inherent contradictions and obstacles. In seeing and feeling our own contradictions, we naturally develop compassion toward ourselves and others—and this becomes a touchstone for our artistic expression. It makes no difference whether our art is critical or uplifting; true empathy and compassion for the human condition must underlie our efforts if they are to be accepted and believed.

### *A Return to Conscience*

“Where there is no conscience, there can be no art,” spoke Alfred Stieglitz. Others have said that artists function as the conscience of their times. We must develop an inner measure and discover the long-buried voice of conscience. What is conscience? And is the appearance of conscience a necessary ingredient of the creative act?

Conscience grows from feeling ourselves and from the direct experience of our conflicting natures. In the Christian gospels, reference is often made to the multitude of our conflicting natures, or the legion. When Christ encounters a man with an “unclean spirit,” he asks his name. The man who implored Jesus for help, exclaimed, “My name is legion; for we are many.” *We* are the multitude, the legion. We are not one. We are filled with different selves, all of which exert their authority at different times, relentlessly, one right after the other in endless reactions to internal and external conditions. Can we verify the existence of a stable, lucid self—our genuine individuality—something we can rely upon and count on that represents our true nature? We have rare moments of self-consciousness when we sense, feel, and know the existence of the master, the teacher within. But for most of us, these moments come in the form of gifts that are not yet part of our durable, everyday reality.

In the alchemy of human transformation, the appearance of conscience brings the sufferings that transform us, that lead eventually to inner unity and wholeness. The suffering that comes from seeing the truth about ourselves and our condition, not shirking from it, brings a taste of what is real. When we see that our will and intent are not in accord with our actions; when we see our inner contradictions and reactionary nature; when we observe the impact that our actions have on ourselves and others; when we see the multitude within, with no guiding light, no capable leadership, an army without a general, we are led toward conscience.

We feel the truth, and in feeling the truth, we are gifted with a new understanding, a new experience of ourselves. It feels real—and it *is* real. It uplifts us, though it comes through the medium of inner difficulty and voluntary suffering. We have all experienced, for instance, a traumatic event, say the death of a parent or close friend. And we see in a moment how things could have been different—how we could have honored our parent or friend more completely in life, not only in death. We feel remorse, and in that stirring of conscience lies a deep sense of acceptance along with forgiveness toward ourselves. Something within is awakened—a taste of the real, a hint of new understanding. Compassion and love, toward oneself and others, begin to make their appearance within our inner landscape.

G.I. Gurdjieff speaks of conscience: “But even a momentary awakening of conscience in a man who has thousands of different I’s is bound to involve suffering. And if these moments of conscience become longer and if a man does not fear them but on the contrary cooperates with them and tries to keep and prolong them, an element of very

subtle joy, a foretaste of the future ‘clear consciousness’ will gradually enter into these moments.”

Conscience is an inner measure. Conscience equals feeling what we are, in its entirety, with all of its terror and glory. If an artist, or indeed anyone, can hear the voice of conscience, it is a great thing. More often than not, due to the abnormal conditions of modern life and its structure of values, the inner voice of conscience is buried, separated from us by an outer crust that has been built up by our conditioning and education. As we begin to loosen this crust, and open to hearing this subtle inner voice, we discover our true measure, a sense of real discrimination, beyond judgment, beyond morality, and beyond cultural conditions or relative values. Conscience is the same for everyone. It is the voice of truth. It cannot be different for you or for me. Thou shalt not kill, for example. When conscience appears, we discover universal human values, those that relate to the sanctity of life and the need for compassion toward all sentient beings.

The creative process invites the appearance of conscience—slowly and incrementally to be sure, but it does emerge through the veil of our conditioning as we attempt to find our authentic expression. We desire the truth, and our culture needs to hear the truth. An artist with a conscience—what could be more valuable to our present circumstances? If artists and intellectuals are given over to the general greed and materialism of our times, who will become the guardians of the threshold? Who will show the culture to itself and reveal our deeper possibilities?

Through our search for authentic expression, we see and sense what is true in us and what is not. Through diligent efforts toward excellence in our craft, we see the nature of our imbalance and strive toward a more balanced, unified way of working. In *The*

*Unknown Craftsman: a Japanese Insight into Beauty*, Bernard Leach considers craft to be:

“Good work proceeding from the whole man, heart, head, and hand, in proper balance.”

As we endeavor to become whole, the resulting artwork reflects our inward efforts, contains the vibrations of our conscious strivings, and may serve to awaken the quality of search in others. Thus we might help others realize their soul’s longing. We cannot stand by and observe the inhumane conditions offered by modern life and not feel the enormous responsibility of our position.

We are the world and the world is us. When we turn a sober eye toward ourselves and the world, we cannot help but be touched. When we see a radiant landscape, something within us is awakened; when we see dead fish floating in a polluted river, something within us is mirrored. We are responsible for our world. Our attitudes and values are reflected in the conditions of the outer world. But as long as we remain blind, willing to fool and placate ourselves, nothing will change. And let us not hide behind the cloying new-age idealism of non-judgmental sweetness. Real conscience depends on seeing the truth. And polemical expression, that grows from angry wisdom, may be what is most needed in these fractured, lunatic times.

When gifted with moments of lucid vision, the clear gem of penetrating insight, we are given a responsibility—for our own evolution and that of others. The artist as seeker *and* bodhisattva is the paradigm we need; it is the only model for our times that makes any sense whatsoever. Remember Daumal’s advice: “There is an art of finding one’s direction in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.” Artists remind us of what they saw higher up. Through artists work on themselves, through their striving toward the summit—embodied in their

works of art—we may be reminded of the truth about ourselves, in all of its earthly terror and transcendent glory.

Artists seek to digest their experiences, recount their understandings, and express the truth of their Being through their works. It is often a difficult climb to the regions where inner truth prevails. Dancer Isadora Duncan notes: “It has taken me long years to find even one absolutely true movement.” If we wish to earn the title of artist, we must deeply commit ourselves, without reservation. We must accept our condition and be, simply be, where we are, taking note of the difficulties and the triumphs, offering our deeply-felt experiences to others, assisting their journey. Out of the transformation of our experiences and impressions—from the fertile soil of a fully lived life, gracefully inhabiting the valleys, plains, foothills, and summit—bloom our works of art.

It is a law of the spiritual search that we must give to others—that we occupy our place on the great stairway of being. We are intricately connected with others in objective forms of relationship. With our peers, we share the nature of the search, mutually mirroring and reminding each other toward greater degrees of awakening. Through teachers, we are given the feedback and knowledge that we need to proceed on to the next rung of the staircase. With students, we are asked to become guides—freely giving of our experience — to integrate and articulate what we know, serving others in their search.

Daumal offers his wisdom once again: “At the end, I want to speak at length of one of the basic laws of Mount Analogue. To reach the summit, one must proceed from encampment to encampment. But before setting out for the next refuge, one must prepare those coming after to occupy the place that one is leaving. Only after having prepared

them can one go on up. That is why, before setting out for a new refuge, we had to go back down in order to pass our knowledge on to other seekers.”

What better role than this can an artist play?

Artists reach toward understanding, and then strive to pass their realizations on to other seekers through their work. Many artists deeply experience their own nature and correspondingly feel the state of the world. Some express hope and offer inspiration. Some attempt to mirror human nature or society back to itself—the good, the bad, and the ugly. All are part of our world. A recent installation in Paris by Christian Boltanski, for example, of somber constructions with black fabric and coffin-life shapes enclosing photographs of decaying houses or buildings, suggest the displacement and civil devastation experienced by residents of Kosovo and other war-torn regions. This installation served the artist’s intent of being “especially sad and ugly.”

Let us review the other models available to the artists of our times.

Is the self-aggrandizement of the individual a suitable motivation for making art? Is the mere seeking of self-esteem, lowering one’s artistic goals to primarily serve oneself, a responsible stance for creative individuals? Is providing the shock of something new or different, a movement beyond the traditions of the past—the aim of the avant-garde—a valid model for the artist today? And is the pursuit of fame and fortune, becoming an art-star, the highest or best use of our energies and talents? Does the Western model of staunch individualism continue to be the best paradigm for artistic activity?

In *The Unknown Craftsman*, Bernard Leach writes of Soetsu Yanagi, widely acknowledged as the father of the modern Japanese craft movement: “His main criticism of individual craftsmen and modern artists is that they are overproud of their



individualism. I think I am right in saying Yanagi's belief was that the good artist or craftsman has no personal pride because in his soul he knows that any prowess he shows is evidence of that Other Power. Therefore what Yanagi says is "Take heed of the humble; be what you are by birthright; there is no room for arrogance."

Our societal values are often turned upside-down.

In *Forbes ASAP*, a business magazine focusing on the technology revolution, I am surprised at the answer given by many young web entrepreneurs on why they started their business and what were their principal aims or long-term goals. What was their purpose in the fulfillment of the creative impulse? Believe it or not, the answer given most frequently was to *create an IPO* (initial public offering of stock when a company goes public). Some vision, huh? It is not to create a better world, or to help develop a potent form of communication for the benefit the public, or to bring technological innovations to the masses for the sake of education and an enhancement of humanistic values. The object of their lust is to achieve wealth—to live the good life, to become famous and a billionaire by the age of twenty-eight.

Michael Malone, a business journalist from Silicon Valley, writes about the intense greed of many start-ups: "We have become selfish and self-absorbed, more interested in money than achievement, caring now only for possessions and not for our souls."

Where did these newly-minted kids grow up? And in what educational institutions? With what particular influences? Have they ever heard of societal responsibility, giving back to the culture and environment that sustains one's very existence? Unfortunately, we know where they grew up—in our midst, in our backyard, in the very educational institutions and with the media influences that we ourselves created.

These children are our children, our brethren, our brothers and sisters. We must take responsibility for these attitudes. They come from us, from our society. This is our cultural heritage.

We value abundance and material success over service and responsibility. Any culture that can, without conscience, use seven times more natural resources than developing nations—and still want more—well, something is very wrong. We are either blind or completely uncaring. Knowing this, any proper and feeling human being would want to get by on less, so that others may gain even a small percentage of the lifestyle and freedoms we enjoy.

This is why I speak of the need to awaken conscience. It is the inner measure that we desperately need for our own development and for the positive evolution of our culture. Once conscience appears, we cannot so easily turn a blind eye to the conditions of our inner and outer worlds.

What honorable aims are available—as an individual or a society? How do we become more responsible? What is the highest and best uses of art? Stages of development exist; a growing set of aims that include the lower as we make our way toward the higher. I am proposing here an experimental list of honorable aims for the creation of works of art.

- 1.) We work for the sake of self-discovery; seeking a true and honest reflection of ourselves.
- 2.) We work from a love of the materials, a passion for the individual gifts and challenges of our particular medium.
- 3.) We work to practice our attention, to strive toward an inner balance.

4.) We work for the sake of vision and understanding; to encourage insight; for the sake of the ascent; to reach the summit and remember what we saw in the moments of being “higher up.”

5.) We work because we must; we are called from within, from a sense of inner necessity as we discover what it is we are compelled to address through the content of our creative expression.

6.) We work to overcome our personal limitations and obstacles — to confront them, eventually integrating, transforming, and transcending them.

7.) We work toward growth of being and consciousness, a deeper awareness of self and the world.

8.) We work for the sake of other seekers; to transform our experiences into works of art that communicate and transmit our hard-earned understandings — to assist others along the way. To become a bodhisattva.

9.) We work out of a deep feeling for self and others, a sense of genuine compassion, striving to help heal the world and ourselves. We work for the glory of god, for calling forth higher energies.

10.) We work to allow what needs to be born into the world through us — to invoke the voice of Spirit, to express the inexpressible, make visible the invisible, to see what can be as well as what is. We work to discover, embody, and express our higher possibilities and deepest potential.

Society has an uneasy relationship with its artists; some of this is well deserved due to the nature of art and the actions of a minority of flamboyant artists. In a review of the exhibit *The Art of Dislocation*, at the Museum of Modern Art, Daniella Dooling attests that

artists need a certain isolation, cherish solitude in order to achieve a “purified state of mind and spirit that will enable them to create.” She goes on to say: “Because of their ability to transform, they are the members of the society that are most feared and venerated... Closed in upon itself, the community is unable to see itself clearly, and it is the contemporary artist who attempts to criticize, challenge, and describe it. ... It is interesting to note that although often excluding the very audience to which it is directed, most contemporary art is specifically about the outer community.”

Contemporary art has often distanced itself from the very community to which it professes to speak. The highly analytical focus, intellectual rigor, and insider language of much contemporary art is exclusionary, requiring a knowledge of art history, aesthetics, and contemporary art theory in order to understand it. The model of the artist as an isolated, aloof, and somewhat superior presence to the general public is of no value to the broader community. If artists only create their works for their peers, other artists and critics, it is no wonder those artists are feared and falsely venerated. It is a distancing tactic on the part of artists that has lost its value to the rest of society—if it had a value to begin with.

More than ever, society needs a view from the summit, or at least a vista that offers hope and inspiration, that challenges existing assumptions and beliefs; one that points the way, not arrogantly, but with great compassion and care. The artist as bodhisattva.

Society also needs a view from the trenches, from the foothills and slopes where most of us live our lives. We need to see real lives and common experiences translated to canvas, silver emulsion, movie screens and book pages. We need an art of our own, that

reveals not only where we are but can see the future and disclose our deepest, highest possibilities—from the trenches looking and striving upward. The artist as seeker.

Some of the greatest art expresses what can be, what lies within the realm of human potential, and shows what stands between us and the summit—where we come face to face with our inherent contradictions as well as our potential unity, our latent wholeness. We need an art of conscience, of inner measure and of human striving.

We reach with shaking hands and trembling hearts as we strive toward the higher regions, those that are separated from us by the thinnest of veils, making our halting passage to the next encampment on the journey.

The closing words of *Mount Analogue*: “By our calculations, thinking of nothing else, by our desires, abandoning every other hope, by our efforts, renouncing all bodily comfort, we gained entry into this new world. So it seemed to us. But we learned later that if we were able to reach the foot of Mount Analogue, it was because the invisible doors of that invisible country had been opened for us by those who guard them. The cock crowing in the milky dawn thinks its call raises the sun; the child howling in a closed room thinks its cries open the door. But the sun and the mother go their way, following the laws of their beings. Those who see us, even though we cannot see ourselves, opened the door for us, answering our puerile calculations, our unsteady desires and our awkward efforts with a generous welcome.”

If we are responsible and unfailingly sincere, perhaps the work we do, just perhaps, will contain a vibration and a resonating content that reveals something of the view from higher up, from one step further up the ladder—or from deep within the trenches

themselves—that will give hints of the Real and serve to awaken the search for conscience in the viewer.

### *The Call of Consciousness*

Modern society is stubbornly secular. We have lost our way, foregone our relationship to the sacred, severed our connection to the inherent hierarchies of life. Many individuals, including a large percentage of contemporary artists, are one-dimensional, living in the land of the “setting sun” as Chögyam Trungpa calls it, not knowing the perils and joys of ascent to the summit or the responsibilities of guiding others along the way.

What can serve to bring us back—to return our balance, renew our tenuous relationship between higher and lower, and assist in our passage up and down the mountain?

Art is a call toward consciousness—a turning toward the light. In some works of art, we find evidence of a wide and deep awareness that interpenetrates the forms, the words, or the melodies. It is mysterious, yet palpable and verifiable. The consciousness of the artist is embodied in the work... always. We sense a conscious awareness on the part of the artist, or a lack thereof, that energetically translates into the work itself.

There are degrees of consciousness; our awareness passes through certain definable stages. We begin with our true nature, our original face that we are given at birth. Through the inevitable process of socialization and conditioning, we lose contact with our real selves, becoming like those around us: asleep and out of touch with our essence, with who we really are. The first stage in the development of consciousness is the search for

ourselves, for what is real in us, a longing for return to our true nature. Thus begins the long journey of the search for self-consciousness.

Much of our inner work revolves around the awakening of a consciousness of oneself: a direct experiential awareness of our characteristics and traits, our talents and potential, our limitations and obstacles. Over time, with voluntary efforts, we may begin to have moments of awareness of the whole of oneself. Much of the content of this book, and most others on self-development, concern themselves primarily with the means and methods of coming to know the myriad layers of oneself. The early stages of creative work derive mainly from this quest for self.

Mathieu Ricard writes in *Monk Dancers of Tibet*: “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.”

We instinctively feel the presence of Spirit’s call. Imprinted deep within our racial memory is an awareness of our human birthright, the possibility of a consciousness of the whole, of the divine radiance in all things. We may even have brief moments of re-remembering, where our internal parts fall into a balanced relationship—perhaps due to meditation or inner work, or due to certain traumatic conditions that shock us out of our ordinary state of half-awareness, or due to the influence of nature or certain works of art

— and, for a moment, we see and sense that existence is One. We are aware of the whole of oneself and the wholeness of existence. Within our inherent humaneness is the potential for conscious recognition, carried on the wings of resonant feeling, of the unity within diversity. In rare moments, we are graced with this realization—not through books or the accounts of others—but through living experience. And these moments have great force, leaving their residue behind; they are unforgettable moments of true awakening.

In essence, the radiant beauty of certain works of art, the aesthetic arrest we feel in their presence, is a mere reminder of the divine order that underlies all: you, me, our neighbor down the street, our friends and enemies, the river at the edge of town, the immense vista from the mountain as well as the shopping mall, garbage dump, and highway. All are infused with the divine song of Spirit.

Commenting on the radiant beauty in all things, Mathieu Ricard states: “A Buddhist sage contemplating the absolute transparency of the mind does not feel the need to seek a particular experience. He is in constant harmony with the nature of mind and phenomena. For him all forms are perceived as the manifestation of primordial purity, all sounds as the echo of emptiness and all thoughts as the play of wisdom. He does not need to distinguish between beautiful and ugly, harmonious or discordant. For him, beauty has become omnipresent and he is fulfilled all the time. As it is said, ‘In a continent of gold, you cannot find ordinary stones.’”

Sometimes when working with an art form, in the midst of the creative process, we are graced with moments of greater presence and awareness. The gift of creativity, may at times, call forth a unitive consciousness. *This* is our birthright, *this* is our possibility, *this* is



the object of our quest; we realize in these rare moments. It is deeply humbling and enlivening.

In part due to these moments of awakening, and in part due to the existence of a central core within us (the soul?), we are magnetized to the search for consciousness. We begin to pay attention to the world around us, seeking and discovering sacred books, certain passages of poetry, special works of art—paintings and sculptures—subtle pieces of music, and above all, magnificent works of architecture or ancient monuments that serve to call us toward the light, that re-awaken these racial memories of pure consciousness, and that we are inexorably drawn to from some deep place within, like metal filings to a magnet. These works of art deeply nourish; they provide hope and inspiration, verifying the existence of the rarified atmosphere of the summit, the higher regions of human potential. The greatness of these works of art gives energy and urgency to our search.

Mathieu Ricard continues: “Spiritual beauty, such as that of the face of a Buddha or spiritual master, has a different kind of value, because it inspires the conviction in us that Enlightenment exists and that it can be attained. The feeling of inner joy which such beauty incites is free from frustration. It is this beauty that sacred art seeks to express, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Islamic, and whether its mode of expression is music, dance, painting or simple contemplation. Sacred art is not just a representation of symbols and ideas. It is a direct experience of inner peace, free from attachment to the illusory solidity of the ego and the phenomenal world.”

Why do we climb the mountain? Because it is there; it calls to us, magnetizes us, and activates some deeply known, but long forgotten place in our essential being.

We also sense instinctively that the way toward objective or cosmic consciousness, a direct experience of the whole, begins with ourselves—with the development of self-consciousness. The whole of human endeavor, most art and science, most knowledge and learning, primarily addresses our search for self and a desire to understand our place in the universe. The two sacred dictums: *know thyself* and *as above so below* refer to the human need to locate our experience within a larger context. This is where the steep climb begins.

Here lies the long work of self-observation, of recollection and self-remembering, of meditation, striving toward an active stillness and seeking inner balance.

The work of contacting the higher begins with the lower, with the development of a balanced relationship between the mind, body, and feelings. Synergy between our parts allows for an inner movement, a magnetizing influence that calls upon deeper sources. If we seek to cultivate an inner balance of forces, we need to bring our gaze towards ourselves and discover the specific nature of our imbalance.

How to find the proper way to work, to live? If we unflinchingly observe our inner constitution, we will see repeatedly that we are fragmented, that one part of oneself will usurp authority and attempt to do the work of the other parts. We may be governed by feeling when clear thinking is required. Or the mind may attempt to rationalize or marginalize the feelings. When I write, for example, I seek a balance of forces where the mind plays a dominant, ordering role; but at the same time, I ask the question: where is my body and feelings? When I can be aware of my body while writing, and give some attention to my feelings, I am more whole. The relaxation of the body serves well the work of the mind, and the feelings provide invaluable assistance in perceiving subtle shades of meaning — on how these words sound.

More often than not, we are pulled here and there. Excess tension, nervous movements, ungovernable emotions, and distracting associations, for example, often impede our ability to concentrate and work creatively. When each part of our being contributes its natural intelligence—mind, body, and feeling—we create a channel, a higher vibration that opens to the soul and attracts finer energies into the equation. The preparatory stages of spiritual work consists of seeking, through attention, a balanced inner order that opens us to higher energies and deeper realizations.

Here again, many works of art can assist us. Novels of personal experience and spiritual autobiographies such as *Mount Analogue*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the tales of don Juan by Carlos Castaneda give advice and inspiration to our search. Statues of the Buddha, Christ, and others, portraying the inner state of perfect repose and harmony, reflect the potential of balance, clarity, and order within ourselves.

Philip Zaleski writes in *Parabola* magazine on The Golden Mean: "Here sacred art, which is none other than the imprint of the subtle on the gross, that is, an earthly mirror of the divine patterns that once governed our lives and may do so again, will serve us as a guide. The glimpses of order, harmony, and balance, offered by such works can penetrate even our most mundane surroundings and our most habit-driven existence. ..."

This has ever been at the heart of the spiritual search: a striving for balance, for right proportion between the constituent members of our inner life, between our inner and outer lives, and between our total being and the Ground of Being.

The great laws of life may be uncovered and deciphered through works of art. With knowledge too subtle for mere words, great artists from all eras, all cultures, have served to express divine law in works of art. The statues of Shiva, goddess of death and rebirth, the

representations of Buddha disclosing the way of attention toward harmonious balance, and the Christ figures expressed in iconographic Christian art, showing the potential man for whom the divine and earthly are contained in true relationship, in a perfect marriage. These serve as potent examples for our processes of inner development.

Works of art help show the way, reveal the path toward the summit, illuminate the joys as well as the pitfalls of the search, give inspirational guidance toward growth of being and consciousness. Through the active self-development that is encouraged within the creative process and informed by viewing certain works of art or literature, we move toward greater self-consciousness. And the development of self-consciousness is the first step, the requisite condition for a consciousness of the whole.

Moments of “objective” or “cosmic” consciousness are exceedingly rare in our present states of being. We have little evidence of these even from works of art, save a precious few examples of sacred art and literature. However, we must keep in mind that consciousness is a continuum, a scale of being enclosing lower earth-bound energies and reaching to the music of the spheres. As we proceed on the path towards self-consciousness, the more deeply we enter ourselves and know ourselves, the more deeply we may penetrate and know the world. We may have hints and whispers, subtle tastes of connection to the “One Taste” of existence.

Special works of art may assist our efforts in this direction. Who is not called toward the infinite by the music of Bach, or by the chanting of Tibetan monks, or by the poetry of Rilke and Rumi? Who is not deeply touched, taught, and inspired by the *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, *Holy Bible* or the *Bhagavad Gita*? If these works glance off of our hard, impenetrable shells, something is very wrong, out of balance, clearly amiss.

In my own experience, I am called toward subtle moments of awakening by the experience and memory of certain works of art. One day recently, while walking on the beach, I came to a moment of wholeness. The world and I were one. No longer separated by my own skin, I was part of life, it was part of me. I witnessed my own livingness and the radiance surrounding me. It was one and the same. I felt myself breathing the world while the world breathed me.

Later, I remembered Rilke's poem in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*:

*Breathing: you invisible poem! Complete  
interchange of our own  
essence with world-space. You counterweight  
in which I rhythmically happen.  
Single wave motion whose  
gradual sea I am...  
How many regions in space have already been  
inside me. There are winds that seem like  
my wandering son...  
Do you recognize me, air, full of places I once absorbed?*

The Rilke poem, as well as the memory of the experience of walking on the beach, helps me connect more deeply to this moment—now... not then. Like poetry, our deeper experiences lie within us as a string of jewels, with an integrity and inner connection to one another outside the bounds of our mundane memory.

The memory of the poem was evoked by the experience, and the content of the poem helped to inform and extend my experience. The poem served to help me return to

myself later, with renewed attention, after the mind began to comment on the experience and usurp the inner connections. It is a subtle balance. Art can help us return to the present moment, or if we are not careful, it can lead us deeper into false imagination or into the mind's associations that sever a connection with the living moment, the everpresent now.

Art can help show us the way by helping us understand the nature of our experiences. It can bring perspective, insight, and knowledge to bear on our personal experiences, engendering understanding. The equation might be stated: knowledge combined with experience equals understanding.

We wish for active forces to move through us, informing our lives and works of art — and we strive to become conscious instruments of their passage. The history of art would suggest that it is possible for conscious forces to pass through the artist for the benefit of humanity, but the artist may be may be an unconscious pawn rather than an active participant. Very often the compelling visions that ignite artists are mysterious and powerful, beyond their conscious awareness. These are often highly disruptive energies that can rend the artist's psyche. Recall the many tortured artists throughout history. This is precisely why spiritual work begins with healing and stabilizing the body/mind, to create a reliable, open channel for the passage of forces. We must balance the lower centers to serve the higher's need to speak through us. We strive to polish our spirit, allowing for a clean passage of energies. Don Juan continually admonishes Carlos Castaneda to live as a warrior, to create a good, strong life.

Gurdjieff has said that nature casts her artists before her. Artists have finely-tuned antennas, capable of perceiving subtle intimations of what needs to be born into their

world. Conscious forces may speak through the medium of the artist. This may happen with or without the artist's awareness and consent. That is to say, artists may receive and transmit ideas or forces necessary for the evolution of culture without their active intent and conscious participation. While this is pure conjecture, since none of us can see into the soul of another, we can find examples of artists who show evidence of striving to be conscious instruments of the subtle energies that pass through them. View the life's work and read the diaries of Paul Klee, or view Brancusi's sculpture and read his aphorisms for a powerful example of this. But there is much evidence in the arts to suggest that often — in fact most of the time — artists are mere mechanical pawns of the forces that are acting and interacting through them.

Let us take the Beatles for example. Massive social and cultural changes were taking place in the early 1960's. It was a bewildering era, bereft of a clear vision for the future yet pregnant with potential. Young people, who were at the fulcrum of a changing world, needed a symbol for this profound social revolution and a common cultural language to unite them. Then came along the British musical invasion, with four young boys from Liverpool at the vanguard. They captured our hearts and minds. It became clear that, despite their boyish innocence, they carried a potent message through their unbounded energy that served to unite youth, bringing a sense of hope, idealism, and a humanistic perspective into the common culture. Larger voices may have spoken through them, adding necessary elements to the cultural milieu and reflecting it back on itself.

Yet it is highly unlikely that they themselves were conscious of what was happening. They, like the rest of us, had only an inkling of what was taking place; it was an unconscious, collective phenomenon for the most part.

The great tragedy of John Lennon's untimely death, I believe, is that he was just beginning to discover his own nature, apart from the phenomenal energy that carried the Beatles along in its wake. Through the maturation of his life and music, and through his deep, abiding connection to his closely-held family, the evidence would suggest that he was just beginning to cognize the potential of consciousness, of becoming a conscious instrument of those forces that are continually knocking on our door, waiting to be realized through our efforts, our sensitivity, and our receptivity.

While the music of the Beatles may have deeply energized a culture, did the passage of forces through them also nourish and inform their own being? For many artists, including the Beatles, the passage of finer energies through their system often comes at a great cost. Drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide, failed marriages and broken homes, as well as all kinds of neuroses and pathologies characterize the lives of many artists. Look at Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Diane Arbus, Sylvia Plath, Rilke and Vincent Van Gogh. Their personal lives were a mess. The individual Beatles were almost destroyed by their own success.

The real work of the early stages of the spiritual search is that of preparation, harmonizing and equalizing the work of the lower earthly centers — mind, body, and feeling — to create a clean channel for those energies that wish to pass through us. These higher energies and larger voices are present, always on our doorstep; it is we who are not ready, not present or fully available to them.

Whatever our particular mission in life, do we not wish to be conscious?

Who can we look toward as an example in contemporary times? Who gives relevance to these ideas in the present day?



Is art living in the light? Or are we in the midst of a period of aesthetic darkness—a dark night of the soul? Both are true, I am afraid. As in everything, it depends on your point of view. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us ...”

Does this sound like art of the day? And this was written by Charles Dickens nearly 150 years ago. Things change and things do not change. Creativity embraces deep paradox.

Jewels are found within the busy pluralism of contemporary art, but there is no apostle of the creed, no single individual who embodies the message of the spiritual in art today. In critic Andy Grundberg’s words, “... there is no longer a moral authority of unimpeachable authority who stands ready to lead us into the light.” The spiritual content of modern art is an underlying current, a sub-text, rather than the principal focus. Perhaps it will never become the main dish; perhaps it should not be. Perhaps it should remain hidden and allegorical, giving the viewer the opportunity to complete the circuit through their own work, their own inner efforts to uncover the jewels within.

Several critics and writers have advanced the idea that the whole of 20th Century art has its roots in the spiritual. Some believe that, as an underlying current, the transcendent dimension has informed and inspired much of what was important in Twentieth Century art. Early in the Century Kandinsky wrote his seminal document, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. More recently, Roger Lipsey, in *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, believes that the spiritual in modern art is a “recurrent theme... [that] embodied a stronger and wiser spirituality than we have fully

acknowledged.” And the major exhibit and accompanying catalog, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985*, organized by Maurice Tuchman, explores the varied spiritual and occult influences that deeply influenced the legacy of abstraction.

Roger Lipsey writes: “My fear today is that we are moving toward an art dominated by commerce, stripped of great ideas and aesthetic subtlety. My hope is for art and architecture with deep roots in the nature of things—a wise art in touch with Nature and the depths of human nature, gratefully aware of tradition yet vertiginously free to invent. For this, we have much to learn from twentieth-century artists for whom the spiritual in art was an open or hidden agenda of compelling importance.”

Art is a living thing. It is merely a means to an end, not an end itself. Like life itself, art is imperfect. And like us, art is incomplete. Modern art may be likened to the Tea Ceremony. Soetsu Yanagi writes of Kakuzo Okahura, author of *The Art of Tea*, who calls the Japanese Tea ceremony “the art of imperfection.” It is about our humaneness, our awkward efforts, and our irregularities.

Yanagi asks: “Why should one reject the perfect in favour of the imperfect? The precise and perfect carries no overtones, admits of no freedom; the perfect is static and regulated, cold and hard. We in our human imperfections are repelled by the perfect, since everything is apparent from the start and there is no suggestion of the infinite. Beauty must have some room, must be associated with freedom. Freedom, indeed, is beauty. The love of the irregular is a sign of the basic quest for freedom.”

I like this concept: that the art of our day is irregular, full of jagged edges and imperfections, deeply reflective of our own contradictions.

Yet moments of illumination do exist. We see them in galleries, in museums, in art studios and in classrooms. We find rare passages of beauty, truth, and inspiration in the pages of books. Subtle melodies awaken the soul in certain pieces of music. Art is a search for those qualities that make us human. It is not answered or found. We have yet to find an art of our own. Where to look? How to search?

We hold the answer feebly in our hands but not yet the question.

We have many great works that can assist our search for awakening, but we do not yet actively engage the quest—as we do not fully cognize our own imperfection or sincerely believe the naked reality: that we lack a stable, lucid inner presence representing our true individuality. Our art remains largely unconscious. Our culture supports self-delusion. It believes in the answer, not the question, and, as a whole, does not acknowledge our lack of a broad, embracing consciousness. Our culture promotes a self-placating, secular arrogance that does not support the sustained search for a guiding principle to our lives.

Like the craft guilds of an earlier time, perhaps art will return to a state of greater integrity. Perhaps not. But within any society, there are visionaries, those striving to see the whole and find their place within the immensity of existence. Many artists do endeavor to locate their experiences within universal law, in relation to the sacred dimensions of life.

Art represents a call to action, entreating a return to life-affirming and spiritual values. We need new models: the artist as shaman, mountain climber, and higher altitude guide—the artist as bodhisattva.

Through the work of becoming aware of ourselves, by inviting moments of conscience, where we feel the sheer futility and impotence of our ordinary existence

without a stable contact with the guiding voices within, we are called toward life. Moments of greater consciousness make their appearance ironically through the recognition of our ignorance. Through the forces that arise from deeper sources and pass through us, we may be privileged to learn—about ourselves and the world. We stand in genuine awe of our works, recognizing that they come through us, not from us. We are touched by the breath of Spirit infusing our works when we learn to become willing servants, transparent vehicles. We can take responsibility for the initiating effort, but not the work itself.

Looking at the stars on a moon-lit night, feeling the trade winds on my face, opening to the immensity of the sky and the ocean, I am reminded that, as artists, we cannot replicate great nature. Or can we? Why not? Human nature is very much a part of the divine plan. We are nature and nature is us. Humans have the intelligence to know in a deep part of themselves: *As above so below*. We contain all the mysteries of creation within ourselves. Through the creative process, we are called toward an awareness of ourselves. Called to an awareness of ourselves, we experience our own contradictions; the appearance of conscience arises when we see and know that, without conscious attention, our lives are without purpose and meaning. Informed by conscience, we begin to know the truth—that all we need to do is stand out of the way.

A divine intelligence fills our being, if we allow it—and if we undertake the long careful work of preparation. We may be privileged to experience moments of consciousness of the whole, of the “I AM” within and the radiance of all living things. Once we have a taste of this experience, we have no choice but to serve the soul’s longing. We search for the generating cause of these moments and bring our attention, our diligent efforts, and our deep caring to bear on the task of awakening. In moments, we sing out

loud: I am here, now, graced with life. We discover the truth of our Being, enter the great silence, and sense the divine order inhabiting all creation. We wish to sing, to share this discovery, to celebrate the moment. From this attitude we create our works. For a moment, we become true bodhisattvas.

Then the phone rings... We are lost again, reacting to the conditions of our lives. The cycle begins, again and again. Our integral intent, our awareness needs constant diligence and renewal. We need to become someone before we can let go and become no one. We become transparent; the universe expresses itself through us. The specific genre or content of our work is dictated by our essential nature yet humbly subordinates itself to the task of becoming a conscious instrument for the vast movement of energies that wish to, need to, pass through us. The world may not be the same without our participation. Can we bear this thought and not strive toward consciousness?

Artists belong to both worlds, the garden of Spirit and the controlled folly of the human condition with its attendant urgencies, strivings, and contradictions. We are not saints. Therein lies our great value. We partake of both, the rarified atmosphere of the summit with its grand vistas of enlightened realization, and the world of earthly things — the delight of the senses, the joy of desire, the pain of contradiction, the richness of love, passion, hope, joy, and grief. We speak of all things, traversing between levels. We wish to be conversant with the gods and we strive to taste life fully, deeply. Within the creative process, these things are not contradictory; they deeply inform and guide each other.

We are in truth the guardians of the threshold because we travel wide and far yet always seem to know the way home, or at least its general direction. Like Odysseus, we are unflaggingly driven, navigating toward the port of our longing, our true nature, steering

toward the hazily-seen starry horizon of Spirit's light, striving to reach our genuine human potential. And like all good wayfinders, we are unforgivably honest about the difficulties of the journey and unerringly candid about the challenges, triumphs, and ecstasies of the way ahead. We do not hold back the truth once we discover it. This is what we express, this is what we offer others. This is our value, our birthright; of this, there can be no doubt.

Do we choose to accept the responsibility of our position?

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