

## **“If You Depict a Bird, Give It Space to Fly”: On Mind, Meditation, and Art**

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*“We are led to believe a lie  
When we see with and not through the eye.” (William Blake)*

*“Feeling is a rebound or echo from contact [contact between a sense organ and its object]. It is symbolized by a man with an arrow through his eye. It is a very penetrating experience.” (Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche)*

What is mind? What is perception? To whom do we give the authority to show us our minds and ourselves? Increasingly Western culture has given that authority to the sciences: psychology, neurophysiology, brain research, evolutionary theory. The portrait that they paint is of a mind inherently separate from the world, a mind which struggles continuously to build mental representations and develop skills so that it can fulfill its originating value, which is to survive and reproduce. Yet humans have a sense that they know themselves and the world in a more direct, real, alive, even meaningful, way than this. When we are deeply struck (for example, when the terrible climax of a tragedy is known and felt as incomprehensibly, timelessly perfect), we seem to have a glimpse of something else, of something other than survival -- in fact, of something other than the way our mind usually functions, or the way we think it functions.

Both meditation and the arts tap into this basic intuition; thus, I will argue, meditation and art can illuminate each other and can do so beyond particular artistic styles or practices. Furthermore, in this way, both art and meditation may have a great deal to teach to contemporary psychology and cognitive science, more, perhaps, than vice versa.

My basic claim is that it is the special province of the arts is to show people themselves in a mirror which reflects their ordinary self image in the light of these broader and deeper intuitions. How? The arts are both created and appreciated by the activity of the senses and of the thinking mind. According to some meditation traditions (particularly later Buddhism) activity of the senses and of thoughts are inherently double-faced: they arise from and can point back either to their surface confused habitual mode of operation, which is what humans are conscious of most of the time (and which is reflected in most of the portraits of mind in our psychologies), or to a deeper, more panoramic, and more immediate wisdom way of knowing, feeling, and being. Such an underlying nascent wisdom mode is said to be always available, half glimpsed, by everyone.

Let us explore three aspects of this wisdom mind in relation to the arts: 1) Humans as a directly felt part of the natural world. 2) Humans as beings that are part of humanity. 3) Humans as part of that which is said to be inexpressible but of supreme importance.

A series of contemplative exercises are the centerpiece of each of the following sections. You are invited to do as much or as little of each as you like. Some of them may remind you of experiences that you have already had or may trigger understanding just by reading the exercise without the need to do anything extra. The exercises are provided because the searchlight of the present topic is on the art quality of ordinary mind and of ordinary life itself.

Furthermore, the paper is intended to be evocative -- like its subject matter. For example, the term “intuition” is used, not in a technical sense, but as a means of pointing the reader to his/her own

experiences of these matters. Claims are broadly but briefly sketched to invite contemplation of their import. This does not mean that the paper is hermeneutical, political, or “post-modern.” Granted that there are great variations in what the creators and consumers of the arts in different times and cultures have thought and said about what they were doing, and granted there are many subgroups within each Eastern tradition which offer different doctrines and practices -- those matters are the legitimate subject of a different sort of analysis than is being carried out here. I am claiming is that humans have a mode of knowing themselves and their world that is more basic and deeply rooted than the habits of mind which we usually deploy and that art, at its best, can provide glimpses and connections to that realm of psychology. The reader interested in exploring such a perspective might want to bring to mind those works in the arts which have most deeply struck or affected him or her in the past and think about the categories which follow in relation to experience of those personally potent works.

### I. Humans as a Part of Nature

For both standard psychology and a certain kind of common sense, the perceiving mind is obviously separate from the objects it perceives. Is it? Where is your consciousness; do you feel it to be confined behind your eyes peering out at a separated world? Always?

Meditation in most traditions serves not only to calm and focus the mind, but to begin to integrate the person: to bring body, mind, and action together, to bring the senses and their objects (the seen, heard, thought...) together. There is a basic mode of knowing which knows the knowing self, mind, body, and environment as one panoramic whole. Don't we all have glimpses of this independent of any formal meditation experience?

One type of intuition of one's integration with nature is the experience of one's body and mind as part of a panoramic expanse. Suggested contemplative exercises:

- a) Gaze out (or imagine you are gazing out) from a height such as a highway vista point or hillside. Allow the mind to expand outward in all directions, including behind. Feel the surround and oneself in it. Keep on expanding.
- b) Pick a time when you are working intensely (or re-live such a time for a moment). As you finish or come to a break, stop! and let the mind expand into the senses and environment.
- c) What has given you an experience of panoramic knowing in the past? Go there.

There are many art works which can strike the senses in such a way as to throw the mind into a momentary sense of panorama. Chinese landscape painting from its inception has specialized in visions of great mountains, rivers, valleys, and vistas among which are blended tiny human houses and figures. Architecture and landscape design can be natural modes of conveying such experiences. Narratives too, although typically verbal, have imagined settings. Perhaps because in both verbal and pictorial presentations, the setting, the figures, and the action are all presented in the same imaginative modality (such as brush strokes or the author's words), the audience can more readily apprehend and participate in the mutual determination of figure and setting than in real life where our ordinary assumptions and habits hold sway.

A second kind of integrative experience of oneself and other humans as a direct part of nature arises from the energy level of experience. To know oneself as the movement of chi, or energy, is perhaps most obviously and directly the province of music and dance. If you engage in either of these forms or in a martial art, the next time you are doing your practice (or, right now, imagining your practice), you might pay special attention to the way in which mind, as well as body, appears to you. Or try the following: deliberately do, or remember doing, something that is constraining and renders you seriously impatient. (Trying to do sitting or standing meditation longer than you feel like it might be just

the right trigger. Or maybe right now you're getting impatient reading this book.) Let it build up, then tune into the energy level of that impatience. Where is the energy and where does it go -- and where and what is the mind?

The sense of humans and nature as chi energy can also be conveyed pictorially. This may be by means of content: think of mountain landscapes with rushing streams and waterfalls or of winds tearing at trees and human clothing. More likely it is conveyed by design and the quality of brush strokes (think of Van Gogh.). Likewise in narrative it is the quality and style of description that paints things in their energy aspect; think of the writing style of Hemingway:

*"In the late summer of that year, we'd lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plains to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving, and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterwards the road bare and white except for the leaves."*  
(Hemingway, 1957, p. 1).

Perhaps it is because humans already have the ability to know themselves directly as an interdependently arising part of the energies of nature that they would ever think to propose a naturalistic science or naturalistic philosophy in the first place -- or an account of human origins such as evolution. However, when this intuition is expressed in the form of art, it appears to have the power to awaken a form of knowing of a different quality with different implications than does its scientific expression.

Suggested exercise: try contemplating some scientific theory about humans that you believe -- what faculties of mind do you use to do this, and how does it feel? Are you doing it with the head? The "heart"? The "spirit"? How does this compare with the faculties and feelings in contemplation of art (such as Chinese landscape painting or Van Gogh)?

For many, the scientific version seems to lead the intellect to the conclusion that we are mere products of nature and as such without value or meaning; that is, it tends to cut off the rest of the knowing that goes with this intuition. (The Christianity-versus-evolution debate, which might seem to address related issues, has tended to be framed in terms of doctrine, not the psychology of knowing.) My claim is that when the underlying human knowledge of oneself as part of nature is evoked, it is anything but nihilistic. For example, this poem by Mary Oliver:

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
the prairies and the deep trees  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,*

*calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.* (Oliver, 1992)

## II. Humans as a Part of Humanity

Who has not had the experience, “There but for the grace of God go I”? Who has not felt at some point amazed at being confined to just one small life which somehow happens to be one’s own? (As the protagonist of Ethan Canin’s story “Accountant” puts it in the final denouement of that remarkable character portrait: “I suppose I was wondering, although it is strange for me to admit it, why, of all the lives that might have been mine, I have led the one I have just described.”-Canin, 1994, p. 56.) Who has not been deeply moved, perhaps life changingly, by visual images or narratives of other humans -- even fictional ones? We don’t particularly need a contemplative exercise to get in touch with feelings of connectedness to other humans, do we? Just as the manifestation of our selves and our knowing minds are an interdependent part of environments, so they are literally interdependent parts of other living beings. One recent account in psychology speaks of the simultaneous interplay of human interactions, such as those between mother and infant, as *intersubjectivity* (Trevarthen, 1993). Buddhism points to the way in which a deep realization of interrelatedness naturally manifests as compassion. As Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

*Look deeply: I arrive in every second...*

.....

*I am the frog swimming happily in the  
clear water of a pond,  
and I am also the grass-snake who,  
approaching in silence,  
feeds itself on the frog.  
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,  
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly  
weapons to Uganda....*

.....

*Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and my laughs  
at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door of compassion.* (Nhat Hanh, 1987)

But why is it that humans take such delight in identification with representational characters in fictional worlds? Evolutionary psychology offers some practical reasons in terms of training for real world action. The earliest Buddhist psychology of the Abhidharma suggests an additional possibility. In these texts it is argued that the sense of a solid and enduring ego self from whose vantage point we usually experience life (and which is credited with causing all our troubles) is actually built up out of five *skandas* (heaps) consisting of a dualistic sense of body, feeling, perception, habits, and consciousness. Perception (and the resulting habits and consciousness), from the point of view of the ego mind, always filter experience through personal hopes and fears. But it is further taught, and particularly emphasized in later Buddhism, that that is not necessary, that there is an underlying mode of immediate perception without the bias of hope and fear concerning one’s self. Note that this is not a state of indifference (one of the egoistic states of feeling, according to the Abhidharma system) but rather an appreciative mode of

knowing one's experience, whether it be positive or negative experience, as it immediately occurs in its full vividness. The appreciator of the arts and of fictional narrative always knows, at some level, that (s)he is not the character in the art work. Thus (s)he can fully identify with and participate in the vividness of that character's life and world without the pervasive filter of self interest. By that slight of hand the reader or viewer may perhaps be caught off guard in a glimpse of the potentials of a more direct mode of knowing. (This is actually not complicated: the claim is simply that there is a basic mode of knowing which is direct and appreciative and is accessed whenever one's ego mind ceases to get in the way.)

Contemplation: Pick a live situation or remember one in which you were interacting with another person or group with at least some tension. Let the mind expand to include oneself and the other(s). Notice that edge of concern about oneself and "how am I doing?" in that interaction. Then do the same while reading or remembering reading a (perhaps favorite) narrative about a tense interaction. How do body and mind react in these two situations?

III. Humans as a part of inexpressible, unthinkable openness and "sacredness".

What can be said about this? It is the gist of it all. (It may sound somber but humor is as good as haiku for flashing openness.) The problem is that, by its very nature, whenever you turn to face into or try to actively pursue this ground of the mind, this "mind of don't know," what you see is something else. But the arts can do a great job of getting through to us because they can slip it to us sideways so to speak. This may be done by a number of means:

#### A. Timelessness

Consciousness tends to be obsessed and controlled by time: the past, the future, memories, reliving of defeats, replays of emotion -- good and bad -- plans, hopes, worries, fears, boredom...But there is another way of knowing time.

Contemplations: Recall an experience where time seemed to stand still or where life seemed to be complete in a single moment. It might be a moment of great personal meaningfulness such as a near-death experience or a moment of love (Joan Baez sings, "Speaking strictly for me, I could have died right then..."); or it could be in a completely ordinary moment, such as walking down the street. Or it might have been a moment of art. Second, although normally such experiences cannot be provoked, but you might try, for a moment, "recollecting in tranquility" some previous period of personal turmoil.

Tibetan Buddhism calls this other way of knowing time the fourth moment ( Tib. *dus bzhi pa*), described thus, "All phenomena are completely new and fresh, absolutely unique and entirely free from all concepts of past, present and future, as if experienced in another dimension of time." (Khentse, 1970). An analogous description of time figures in many experiential reports of *Zen kensho* (realization). [A Course in Miracles](#) brings a similar sense of time into a Christian context. These wisdom traditions tell us that every moment is like this, born afresh with no past from a timeless source.

How can such experience be conveyed by the intrinsically temporal arts? Perhaps visual mediums inherently have the power to strike the viewer with enough force and vividness to momentarily cut through the ongoing conceptual mind. (Some Buddhist yogic systems portray direct channels linking the eyes with the heart -- museum directors take note!). Verbal narratives, which by definition unfold through time, have various devices for collapsing time. One means is the climax -- Oedipus gives an earthshaking cry and tears out his eyes. Or the entire plot may be drawn together in a denouement - even good mystery stories do this. Or there may be a moment, perhaps even in one's recollection of the work, in which the perfection of the form of the entire piece strikes one vividly -- (as with, perhaps, [Silas Marner](#) or the film [Rashomon](#). Can you think of other literary devices? Music may work with time in ways analogous to narrative. Many pieces of classical music have narrative-like climaxes. But note: years

ago a recording was released called Great Moments in Music. It contained the death music from La Boheme, the death music from the Romeo and Juliet ballet, the climax at the end of the Emperor Concerto, and so on. It was ludicrous! Perhaps we need “the whole catastrophe” stretched out in time in order to collapse time and bring a sense of completeness -- in Taoist terms “rectification” - to the world of phenomena.

### B. Realness

Contemplation: It may be difficult to evoke a sense of direct experience because it is so close. It is like looking for your eyeglasses when you are already wearing them. But you might think of this as your last moment alive. Focus on the senses: the last visual image, the last sound, the last thought, the last pain. Do the memories or perceptions have a different quality than usual? Alternatively remember an experience where an art work made you feel hyper-real - more alive, more yourself. (Curiously it might have been a work depicting feelings of meaninglessness and unreality such as *L'Etranger* or *Catcher in the Rye*.) Shouldn't indulgence in the arts have the opposite effect? What is going on here?

Buddhist mindfulness practice emphasizes being present. One cannot feel real if one is lost in memory, wishes, plans, autobiography -- even if one amps up the stimulation, which is our culture's usual strategy for trying to make ourselves feel real. Knowing in Tibetan Buddhism's fourth moment is said to be direct and unfiltered. It bypasses one's personal egoistic story. Artists talk about seeing nature and people directly in a way that is vivid, ungraspable, even “authentic.” To be sure, art can lull one into mindless somnolence, but it can also capture and hold the attention, making the viewer or reader a true witness. And that witness, knowing (s)he is not literally in the world of the artwork, may even be lured into bypassing the personal ego story and joining directly into the felt direct reality portrayed through the artist's vision, whatever that may be.

We don't generally believe talk about direct knowing, at least not with our cognitive minds. How can any experience be unmediated and free of time when we can so plainly see that the present experience is the result of who I am, my beliefs, feelings, expectations and all my past experiences? Isn't everything conscious filtered through our concepts, categories, and cognitive representations? This may be true (and wisely seen), but it applies only to the *content* of the present experience. According to Buddhist teachings, while all of the interdependent past can be causally gathered into the microcosm of the moment of present experience, that does not mean that the basic mode of apprehending the present moment is somehow filtered or distorted or abstractly representational. Think, instead, of the present experience (for example looking at a painting in a museum) as enriched by past experience (including information in the museum catalog or painting display labels), as a harvest of the fruits of life rather than as something that corrupts the viewing experience. Consider: what debates in the art world might the distinction between the content of an experience and its mode of apprehension address or clarify?

### C. Freedom

What could give humans an idea such as freedom? After all, psychology and cognitive science seek determinate accounts of the mind. According to later Buddhism, each moment is inherently timeless, open (“empty”), and free (“self liberated”). Both meditation and transmission from dharma teachers are designed to point this out.

Ah, but the arts do too. Humor is one of the most immediate ways. Laughter releases! Think of times that it did it for you. Hearing about people who have everything but still feel miserable also seems to release, as in our fascination with tales of tortured movie stars (and with the life of the Buddha!). And shock releases. In real life, we may be too busy coping with the implications of a shocking experience to notice the open instant, but think of the effect of the juxtaposition of images in a haiku, or, for that matter, those beloved scenes in classic horror movies where the audience screams. As a matter of fact every moment releases; this is one of the open secrets of life.

Contemplation: Try to catch the sense of what is happening when something strikes you as really funny. Or, can you catch moments of shock, even little ones, or remember some? What's the difference in your reaction between the shocks of life and those engendered by art?

#### D. Coming home: Inherent value

The values most touted by our institutions are conditional ones: success versus failure, pleasure versus pain, good versus bad. Yet there seems to be a haunting intuition that there is something more than that -- or less, if you will. Take for example the concept of unconditional love. How many westerners blame their mothers for not having given it to them (and with advances in sexual equality, fathers too)? How many theological wrangles in Western religions have been generated by the need to reconcile the illusive intuition of an unconditional God with the conceptual demands of conditional anthropomorphic imagery?

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, as well as all the major Western religions, explicitly point beyond conditionality. Later Buddhism is particularly clear in the assertion that what is unconditioned, the primordial or original mind -- "no mind" - is our fundamental state, what we are right now, not any particular or special experience. That is one reason why mindfulness, rather than withdrawal from the senses, is a basic practice in Buddhism. When we realize this wisdom, it is said that the phenomenal world, including the false sense of self and all the other problems and degradations of life, are experienced as the timeless perfect radiance of that basic ground. Be that as it may, most long-term meditators (as well as POWs and the like) do report that they are kept going by some illusive sense of basic, unconditional positiveness.

Contemplation: Maybe the best we can do intentionally is to notice that tinge of resentment at the world for its conditionality -- at parents, spouses, children, jobs, and the disappointment when meditation or other spiritual practices don't yield the expected experiences. Where is that intuition that there's anything else? What sort of knowledge is that?

The problem with primordial unconditionality is that, since it is not a separate thing and not any particular or special experience, it cannot be found or known by any of our usual ways of looking or knowing. It cannot be an object of the senses or of thought since senses and their objects are part of it, and it cannot be the end result of striving for a goal since the goal is already achieved. One traditional simile is that it is like looking for a lost horse that you cannot find because you are already riding it.

Herein lies the effectiveness of the arts. Riding the lost horse is just the activities of life itself in all its various manifestations. That is what the arts present. In daily life even as one strains towards values projected outward, the arts can portray that very life in a way that subtly proclaims that to be alive and mortal and have experience and, yes, suffer, is already very much to the point -- from Shakespeare's King Lear bellowing to the "oak-cleaving thunderbolts" to Buson's (translated by Robert Haas, 1994):

Sparrow singing -  
its tiny mouth  
Open

#### IV. Implications

1. Artists (and everyone who spends time reading, looking, and listening to their offerings) should feel empowered and proud. Meditation and the arts have no less than awake mind and essential humanity itself to give to people, to society, and, yes, to our cognitive sciences. Generally the humanities are wont to genuflect before the sciences. Not here. Artists, don't ask, tell!

2. Meditators and would be meditators should take note of the arts. As Eastern meditation comes increasingly into western cultures, meditation is practiced more in lay life than in monastic settings. Thus there is much discussion of “the yoga of everyday life.” The arts, it was suggested here, already have a genius for presenting daily life in all its manifestations in such a way that these manifestations can be glimpsed as what meditators might call wisdom mind at play. Present-day meditators might well contemplate the arts for pointers, well polished by centuries of use, on what a yoga of daily life could practically mean.

3. Psychologists and cognitive scientists should take seriously both meditation and the arts. Are not psychology and cognitive science supposed to be about real people and real minds? Yet from the point of view of the Eastern psychologies, what they have so far studied is the habitual “surface” mind. Finding changes in blood flow in the brain when people perform some meditation technique is fine (did anyone really think that the body was not involved?), as is being able to fit a thesis about art into a theory one already has. But these do not begin to exploit what meditation or art might have to offer. They do not allow either discipline to tell its own story. In this paper I have tried to sketch how both meditation and the arts may provide clues to a different, more inclusive, and perhaps more basic, psychology.

4. Critics and scholars of the arts should notice the possible contentiousness of the claims made here. There are obviously different levels to the relationship between Buddhism and art. Many of the chapters in this book emphasize the vivid and suggestive parallels between Buddhist teachings and contemporary styles and practices in art. But meditative art doesn't have to be any particular style of art. Sophocles is as good an example as John Cage. Art that focuses on consciousness, or that fragments images, or that creates environmental installations can be excellent and potent art, but such styles are the product of our particular historical and cultural concerns. They may be one way, but surely not the only way, to tap awake mind, and they need not be taken as the sine qua non of Buddhist insight.

5. Of course the arts can put us to sleep as well as wake us up, so critics (and our critical minds) should understand that, yes, discrimination is to be much valued. What kind of art is *not* awake? Think about your least favorite form of art. (I have a particular vendetta against the style of fast cutting used in TV, which I feel violates the natural awake qualities of the eyes.) Discernment is needed here, just as it is in evaluating meditative or religious experiences. How can we judge?

6. Creators -- and this means everyone -- should feel empowered and proud. From the point of view of the mind of the present moment, we are all ceaselessly creative artists. When you talk to a friend or, for that matter, when you pause for a moment and chatter begins in your head, are you reading those words off a teleprompter?) In some forms of Buddhism, each gesture of daily life is considered art. Art at its best presents a recipe for awake daily life. May we all be able to tap into that.

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