



ART
and
SPIRITUAL
PRACTICE

*a pathway
towards
consciousness*

DAVID ULRICH

Art and Spritual Practice

A Pathway Toward Consciousness

A Book Proposal



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David Ulrich
1565 St. Louis Dr. Honolulu, HI 96816
808.721.2862
pacimage@maui.net
www.creativeguide.com
blog: www.theslenderthread.org

Overview

What can be gained through the practice of art and engagement with creativity? Many benefits are well documented in the realms of innovation, personal development, and creative problem solving. Entertainment and popular culture also evolve quickly through the flames of the creative impulse fueled by a democratic society that highly values individuality and personal expression. Creativity and art can assist us in living more authentic lives, help us traverse the many challenges, joys, and realizations of the spiritual path, and deeply serve our evolution as individuals and as a society. I also strongly believe that a deeper understanding of the creative process is necessary for our spiritual survival in this era, which the Dalai Lama has characterized as an “age of degeneration.” If approached with integrity, arts can offer a return to humanitarian and spiritual values.

Art and Spiritual Practice: A Pathway Towards Consciousness details—in both practical and theoretical terms—the means by which an individual can use the pursuit of art as a genuine spiritual practice. It can function as a path towards inner growth and expanded awareness. Ecumenical in approach yet drawing upon many source teachings, especially Buddhism and the Gurdjieff ideas, the book is designed to highlight the use of art for a higher purpose—in the service of our spiritual quest.

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

- The gradual unfoldment of our wholeness and spiritual nature
- Meditation in motion; the deepening of attention and presence

- Expanded awareness and heightened perception
- The discovery of our latent individuality—our unique talents, skills, and obstacles
- The cultivation of the still clarity of the mind and the transformation of our emotions
- The fostering of compassion and a deep appreciation for others;
- An opening towards wisdom, genuine intuition, and inner guidance;
- A growing awareness of the radiant beauty and deep contradictions of life
- The gradual awakening of consciousness.

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

John Daido Looi, Abbot and spiritual leader of Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills, another long-term student of White's and author of the *Zen of Creativity*, was deeply touched by White's teaching. He writes of his experience upon encountering White's work: "I didn't yet have any sense that art might be a doorway to serious and transformative spiritual practice, but something more than good technique drew me to Minor's work. Minor was a "straight photographer": he didn't manipulate his prints during the developing process, yet his images transcended their subject. Looking at his photographs, I felt myself being pulled into another realm of consciousness. Minor's work pointed to a dynamic way of seeing, a new way of perceiving."

Four Broad Streams of Thought

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

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

2) *A Way of Balance*. The body, mind, and feelings; each has its own intelligence and makes its unique contribution to the process. Creativity calls us to become more whole and centered within ourselves. When the body, mind, and feelings are working in balanced synergy, with each doing the work it was intended for, a channel opens, a conduit appears for the voices of intuition and conscience—which are often the true guiding forces of our creative expression. The simple every-day efforts toward balance and integration can gradually lead towards clarity and invite the inspired moments of understanding and wisdom that grace our works. Paradoxically, through the discipline posed by the materials themselves, and through seeking a balance of energies required

for the creative act, we may have glimpses of the radiant unity of existence, our own innate goodness, and deep compassion for the world and others.

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

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

4) *A Way of Devotion*. Unlike purely intellectual pursuits, creativity can be a transformative discipline. As we open to the larger mysteries of existence, resting in the stream of awareness, even for moments, we are transformed: stunningly, gratefully, unforgettably. We give up the dream that we are, take down our shields to the forces that surround us. Realizing the Creative in ourselves is ourselves. This begins the Way. Creativity, then, becomes a path toward the great Way of transformation. It encourages us to stand in front of infinity, not-knowing, slowly simmering into radical openness through our everyday practice and inward efforts. It teaches nonattachment to the ego and nonidentification with the final result.

The rare, illuminating moments which reveal the unity of existence are attracted through our inner work, our creative practice, and our strivings toward consciousness. Ken Wilber calls

this perception “One Taste,” the experiential recognition of the All. Here we earn hints of unitive consciousness revealing the radiance of what is; that appear through the cracks in our conscious mind—active fissures which are widened through creative work.

Creativity enlightens the proper attitude between our actions and our work. We express our initiative and effort, then stand back and allow the process to unfold, aligning ourselves with the flow of life itself. Through art, we learn about the laws of life and the possibilities inherent in being human. The creative process unfolds in every moment—in nature, with the earth itself, with humanity as a whole, and in the cosmos—on a scale and dimension vastly larger than our personal expression. Yet we are not separate from these energies. Through creativity, we become participants in a greater whole—we are a part of it, and it is a part of us. Finally, creative expression helps us discover who we are and brings us closer to ourselves. Through art, we make a vow to grow.

Complementary Titles

A *rt and Spiritual Practice* was written with two target audiences in mind: the mainstream mind/body/spirit market and the many devoted seekers that follow genuine teachings, especially the various sects of Buddhism, the Gurdjieff work, yoga, and the growing adherents of transpersonal psychology. Between overly complex works on art and creativity written by philosophers or art historians and limited, idealistic, over-simplified treatments of the theme lie a broad region of need. Many people are drawn to various art forms, and many intuit that creativity can be a path of inner development.

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

On the lighter side, a plethora of mind/body/spirit books proliferate that highlight creativity and the use of art for self-help. Some of these are best-sellers. However, these books tend towards a highly introductory view of art. They serve to get one started on the creative path, but lack the depth and dimension to fully support the long-term discipline, self knowledge, and rigor needed for the genuine spiritual search. They have proven to well serve the early stages of creative growth. The most popular of these introductory texts are *The Artists Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, by Julia Cameron (Tarcher/Putnam 1992) and *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg (Shambhala 1986). The durable *tour de force* of these introductory books is *Rainer Maria Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet* (numerous translations and publishers).

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

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

While many books grace the marketplace with an implicit treatment of the theme, relating creativity to self-growth, very few books provide an explicit examination of the ways in which art can function as a genuine spiritual discipline. *Art and Spiritual Practice* is the first book to equally address both the theory and practice of art as a spiritual discipline. Using examples and anecdotes drawn from the history of art, and written by an artist and art professor, the book paints a broad and comprehensive canvas that weaves together meditative practice with many points of entry for the reader, artists and non-artists alike. Each chapter in *Art and Spiritual Practice* closes with a section titled *Creative Practice* to realize the ideas in action.



About the Author

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

He is currently the Program Coordinator and Professor at Pacific New Media, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. He has taught hundreds of classes and workshops on photography, creativity, and visual perception in colleges, art schools, and workshop centers nationwide. For fifteen years, he served as Associate Professor and Chair of the Photography Department of The Art Institute of Boston and recently served as Chair of the Art Department at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. He earned a BFA degree from Tufts/School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, an MFA degree from Rhode Island School of Design, and is listed in *Who's Who in American Art*.

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

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

Recently, Ulrich was the coordinator and co-editor of the ambitious and highly successful project, *Through Our Eyes: A Photographic View of Hong Kong by its Youth*, where the principles of contemplative education were tested on 170 students from throughout Hong Kong, resulting in a book and several exhibitions. He was one of the three principal photographers for the project and book, *Kaho’olawe: Na Leo o Kanaloa*, which documented the Hawaiian island of Kaho’olawe, sacred to the Hawaiian people and used for ordnance training by the US military for 50 years. The corresponding exhibition was installed at various museums, including the Smithsonian in 2002, with 375,000 total visitors in attendance.

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



Marketing

A *rt and Spiritual Practice* was written to attract the large mind-body-spirit audience of educated readers, particularly those interested in Buddhism and other teachings, those engaged in art and any creative pursuit, and those who seek greater meaning in their lives and work. The author is an experienced and inspirational speaker, teacher, and workshop leader and intends to help market the book in the following ways:

1. Promote the book through frequent lectures, classes and workshops. The author has educational contact with hundreds of individuals per year and is willing to sell the book in relevant classes and workshops as well as through his speaking engagements. To view his workshops and speaking engagements, please visit his website: www.creativeguide.com.
2. Highlight *Art and Spiritual Practice* on his blog on creativity and consciousness, www.theslenderthread.org. The blog was created in 2011 in anticipation of the eventual publication of the book and has 750 page views per month in the first four months of its existence. With greater search engine optimization, he is targeting 2000 page views monthly.
3. Create a section on the author's website: www.creativeguide.com to feature and sell the book. The website currently has 1900 page views per month and would be optimized for greater traffic to assist in the marketing of the book.

4. Continue to write regular articles for *Parabola* magazine, a high-quality, internationally distributed quarterly on spiritual traditions that has a broad readership. The author has written articles that were included in last four issues as well as periodically over the past 15 years. *Parabola* would feature excerpts from the book as well as publish a book review. Submit excerpted articles to *Tricycle*, *Shambhala Sun*, *Yoga Journal*, and others for potential publication.
5. With the publisher's potential assistance, conduct a national book tour with speaking engagements and mini-workshops in targeted cities nationwide.
6. The author is highly experienced with radio and television interviews, and would work with the publisher in developing media outlets for promotion.
7. The author has an extensive network of 1600 names on an email list, a growing social media network on Facebook and Twitter, as well as access to larger professional networks of contacts through his work at Pacific New Media, University of Hawai'i Mānoa. Upon publication of the book, the author would use social media and these mailing lists to actively promote the book.



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Chapter Outlines

INTRODUCTION

The introduction opens the questions that are explored throughout the book. What is the highest and best use of art? What are the ways that art can be used as a form of meditation, of prayer? How can an active engagement with the creative process assist our efforts toward awakening, toward growth of being and consciousness? And how may art and creativity serve our alchemy of transformation? The introduction outlines three principles that may point the way toward one's search for wholeness and consciousness through the creative process: *Know thyself; As above, so below; Thy will be done.*

The last section of the introduction describes the author's experiences that prompted him to write this book including a brief summation of the teaching he received from photographer Minor White on heightened awareness and creativity.

Chapter I: KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

Chapter One explores the discovery of a “path with heart” and outlines the relationship between one's personal path and the great way of transformation. It develops the means by which art and creativity may function as a true path. The chapter examines the key elements—explored in greater detail in succeeding chapters—of using art as a genuine spiritual discipline. The chap-

ter closes with an experimental exploration of viewing the existence of levels in art-making through the filter of the seven stages of spiritual unfoldment represented by the chakras, or subtle energy centers within the body. It follows Chögyum Trungpa's wisdom in discerning between the art of the rising sun, and that of the setting sun.

Chapter II: ON ATTENTION

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

Chapter III: THE WAY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

“Know Thyself.” Socrates words resound with an inner force as clear and direct as their first utterance over twenty-five centuries ago. This chapter details five of the chief means of revealment where art can function as a way toward self-knowledge. It includes key passages from the author's interview with artist and Buddhist monk Mathieu Ricard: “Really 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.” The work of creativity becomes a challenge and a practice—a means of developing a subtle and sensitive awareness, capable of observing oneself in action.

Chapter IV: THE FIELD OF SILENCE

“It is my belief that creativity arises from stillness.” These were the initial words spoken by Nicholas Hlobeczy in my first photography class in college. The language of art is vibration and impressions that enter us through the senses, and through the still clarity of the

mind. The chapter examines how impressions enter us more deeply, with greater vividness and force, through receptiveness, maintaining awareness within ourselves and staying in touch with the silence within. The chapter explores the state of active stillness which is likened to a magnet, bringing us into a deeper relationship with the moment and drawing to us the energies and influences we need for our work and development — and for a true response. The practice of art encourages us to be in the moment with the whole of oneself.

Chapter V: EMPATHY AND PROJECTION

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

Chapter VI: THE ALCHEMY OF CRAFT

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

Chapter VII: THE COURAGE OF BEING

The chapter addresses the kinds of courage that are integral to the creative process, and that are necessary ingredients of the spiritual quest. It teaches us to strive toward authentic

expression, a commitment from the deepest layers of one's being—and to cultivate the courage of compassion. The chapter explores the impermanence of phenomena and the teachings of many spiritual masters of “using death as an advisor.” Five types of courage that are essential to the creative process are outlined: the courage to see, making the vow to grow, overcoming adversity, polishing one's spirit, and cultivating faith, hope, and love.

Chapter VIII: THE SCIENCE OF THE REAL

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

Chapter IX: AWAKENING CONSCIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Approximately 92 books are cited or used as reference.

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

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

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Chapter One

Knocking on Heaven's Door

A path with heart. Isn't this what we seek—a genuine and practical approach toward the spiritual quest, toward true growth of being and heightened awareness? Most of us aspire to find a means of learning life's many truths — one that serves our need to participate in a larger whole, that challenges our conditioned personality, and that simultaneously invokes and nourishes our deepest impulses. A true path has heart. It engages the feelings, emboldens the mind, and activates the natural intelligence of the body. It befits us. We wear it well, with pride and natural dignity. And, no matter how many years have passed, it is timeless, never dated, like our favorite shirt or our best walking shoes. Journeying our path, we come home to ourselves—we may become who we are.

Legitimate spiritual teachings are available to the sincere seeker. Most of these wisdom traditions admit to the need for our practice to take place in the midst of our lives, not on a secluded mountain top, but at the grocery store, the bus stop, in our workplace and homes—and in the presence of others. A genuine teaching is transformative. It encourages a transformation of being, inner growth, and an alchemy of transfiguration—the turning of base metals into gold. Unfortunately, many settle for purely translative teachings, those found through ideas alone, which

address the mind and may activate the feelings, but lack the means of methods of a true practice.

If we dare to approach the challenge of a true evolution of consciousness, we need a pathway to the Great Way of Transformation, a key to penetrating the mysteries of the chain of being of which we are an integral part — a means of mounting the dragons toward heaven. While a path is not the Way itself, it feeds into the Way as a tributary feeds a river. The Great Way implies a simultaneous flowing with and against the current. We resist the pull of our mechanical, unconscious mode of living and navigate against the stream through the effort of attention, not allowing our ego and false personality to dominate. *And* we flow with the current, as a river flows into the sea, by deepening our contact with the real and participating in the higher, transcendental energies that underlie our potential.

A path does not exist on its own. It is deeply related to our aspirations, our wish for growth, and our predilections. A path lies within the context of a teaching. It represents a way of working with the ideas transmitted through a genuine teaching. A real teaching is organic; one part of it is intrinsically related to its other parts. To accept one piece and reject another based on subjective desire and ego attachment destroys the living influence of an integrated tradition, defined over thousands of years of practice. Ideas of force and power magnetize our potential and serve to deconstruct or sidetrack the ego and conditioned personality, helping them find their rightful place. The ego, threatened by the incisive edge of transpersonal wisdom, is not equipped to discriminate truth from falsehood, decide its own shaky future, and navigate a direction for the whole of our being. Joseph Campbell once remarked that he was something of a maverick, having studied extensively the means and methods of many of the world's mythic traditions. And he acknowledged the likelihood of not having evolved inwardly as he could have if he followed one teaching and fully engaged its methods and practices.

Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, the teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, esoteric Christianity, Yoga, as well as other perennial teachings have penetrated to the West and maintain open doors to those seekers wishing for an evolution of consciousness. All of these traditions contain the potential for transformative, inner development, offering both an integral philosophy and practical methods to assist one's search. Most of these teachings are given in a contemporary context; we are asked to use the activities of our lives as a means, a path, to fully engage their intrinsic perspective and disciplines.

The Way of the Warrior, Zen and the Art of Archery, the Tao of Physics, Everyday Zen—even tennis and golf—many navigational tools have been offered to assist our practice in the very midst of our daily interactions, using the raw materials of our life as the fertilizer, the ground through which the seeds of a greater being are planted, germinate, sprout, and grow. Chop wood—carry water; these become a means toward enlightenment. It is not what we do; rather, it is the attitude with which we approach our activities that makes the difference, that constitute the line between deep sleep and the initial stirrings of wakefulness. Can we bring an alert presence into the thick of our lives? What will help show us the nature of our sleep? What will assist our efforts toward growth of being?

It is important to be clear—on this point, and at this juncture. There is no intrinsic difference between any life-affirming activity approached as a means toward growth. Be it gardening or motorcycle maintenance, art or business; all activities are equal to one another, and all contain the potential to function as a path toward knowledge and awakening. However, as don Juan acknowledges: does this path have heart? If the answer is no—for oneself alone—then another path must be found. What is a true path for one individual may leave another high and

dry. There is food unique to each of our needs. The other question, and one that begs an answer in today's world: is this path filled with hope, with the possibility of a compassionate relatedness with nature and other human beings? Or, is this activity morally bankrupt? Does it harm oneself and others? While I hesitate to even write these criteria—they seem so commonsensical—but the hallmarks of a true path are found in its potential to positively serve our own growth and development, to help others, to contribute to the evolution of human society, and to engender healing of the planet itself.

We must be careful not to delude ourselves, and we must acknowledge our lack of knowledge and objective perception. It is said, for example, that Judas played a significant role—perhaps the most significant amongst the disciples—in the drama of Christ's betrayal and crucifixion. We cannot know how the history of the world needs to be enacted, in the truly objective sense, and we often do not know what role we need to play. Yet, within us, we have an inner sense of discrimination. We have the capacity to know inwardly whether our activities truly serve our real needs and those of others. Ideally, we hear the voice of conscience when we are engaged in activities that lack integrity and higher purpose.

What then is the measure of a true path? What are the elements we need for true growth of being and expansion of awareness. According to don Juan, a true path has heart. We do not have to work to like it or follow it. It finds us. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, "it is a great and demanding claim that chooses us and calls us to vast distances." Second, a path provides a means toward self-knowledge, offering the conditions to observe our many layers of manifestation and multi-dimensional potential. Third, our path provides a means of inner, transformative work, of discovering our essential nature, seeing and challenging our ego-dominated false personality, and engaging the full range of our energies. It is a way of seeking balanced growth, attending

equally to the development of the mind, body, and feelings, leading to the realization of our true potential—awakening conscience and consciousness. And finally, our path is a means of making a difference, of contributing and occupying our role within the larger fabric of the world.

A path contains the possibility of magic, of experiencing levels of reality not commonly available to us. It asks us to live a good strong life, to challenge our shortcomings, and to open to another order of being. Through our path, we may dream the impossible dream with some assurance that it is actually possible. We may come to know the wonder and multi-dimensional reality of existence. All paths are the same, yet our path is the one for us.

Can art and an active engagement with the creative process become a true path? An even more fundamental question might be: what is creativity? There are many answers to this question. Some say creativity is bringing something into being. Others say the creative act is found through work with materials, shaping them to our will and intent. Some psychologists feel it is largely a compensatory act. Still others feel it is self-expression, which often scantily masks the vigorous assertion of ego and false personality. A good deal of contemporary art is, as Ken Wilber says, “the ego in drag.” Many seekers believe that art is a means of opening to our higher natures and participating in the passage of finer, deeper energies that lie within us, pass between us, and take place on a different level than mundane existence. Ken Wilber offers a useful matrix to view art. Does the artist see the world through the eyes of the flesh, the eyes of the mind, or the eyes of the spirit? However, all of these answers seem incomplete; they attempt to pin down something that defies linear thought and rational explanation. In these essays, I do not intend to offer answers. I hope to merely raise questions and outline a means of approach for the practice of art as a path toward awakening — and for creativity as a way of life.

This book will examine five key elements of using art as a genuine spiritual discipline.

These elements are not mutually exclusive; they co-mingle and influence each other. Readers will find hints of one contained in another. Please view these as a continuum, where combined, they reveal the largesse of art to inform and encourage the full spectrum of our humanity.

1. *The practice of perfecting an art or craft is akin to the practice of perfecting one's self.* The intelligence of the senses, the wisdom of the feelings, and the clarity of the mind are challenged and called forth. Creativity involves an active participation of all three of these essential components of our being. The nature of our imbalance is immediately thrown into relief when we attempt to shape a pot, formulate lines of verse, or play a leading role. We may be relying on thought when the receptivity of feeling is asked for, or we may be caught in emotional reactivity when clear thinking and refined movements are required. Creative work liberates us from the dominance of the unruly mind, opens us to the subtle knowing of the body and feeling nature, and helps develop an inner, unifying attention. It invites the lucid flash of an intuitive response, one that arises from strengthening our inner connections. When mind, body, and feelings work in harmony, a finer quality of energy is called forth, where we connect to the unconscious and the deeper parts of our nature. Creativity challenges us to bring our component parts into accord, into a synergy, where all function together, doing the work each was designed for. A potential wholeness of being is encouraged.

2. *Art is a means of self-knowledge.* An active engagement with the creative process provides a measure of our talents, skills, and potential as well as our limitations and shortcomings. When we seek to create, to express our deepest hopes and aspirations, to convey our vision of the world, we are called toward a state of clarity — a witnessing of ourselves, our manifestations and

motivations. We see ourselves reflected through the mirror of the process itself and through the artwork, the tangible results of our efforts. Almost immediately, we are given the opportunity to perceive our unique shape, a visible outline of our nature and energies. Over time, we may begin to recognize where we naturally excel, where our genius and true calling resides. We encounter our angels as well as our demons. Like the groundhog anticipating Spring, we see our own shadow, where our difficulties lie — our challenges and chief obstacles. Through creativity, we are blessed with a medium that can show ourselves to ourselves, that can open the door to our essential nature and bring us to the threshold of our potential. And we can definitively observe the often hidden influence of our conditioning, what we have inherited from our upbringing and from the culture that helped define who we are.

By navigating through the stages of the creative process and not shirking from a sustained, committed involvement with an art form, we are called to transcend our ego and conditioned personality. We are asked to grow and participate in the sometimes joyous, often challenging, path of learning.

3. Art and creativity are a vehicle, a conduit for a passage of energies to flow within and through us. “Sing through me O Muse,” begins Homer in the *The Odyssey*. Creativity asks that we be open, become transparent, and simply get out of the way. As we clean the smoky glass, crack the window to let in light and air, we become receptive to the hidden parts of our nature and the finer, deeper energies that interpenetrate all things. Creative work encourages the appearance of the Muses, the exquisitely-lucid, elusive songs, the defining visions and voices that arise from deep within. And, no, I am not exaggerating or kidding. These energies are real, verifiable, and may pass through us to be expressed in a work of art. Their substance may be elements of our own

unconscious, or maybe they are comprised of collective forces mirroring a vision of the world through the receptive soul of the artist, writer, or scientist. I do not claim to know. Yet what is clear is that the artist, at times, can see through the eyes of the spirit, offering glimpses of unitive insight, clear notations of the conditions of nature or human society, and prescient reflections of the future.

The artist is a transparent veil, through which the visions and insights of a society may pass. For example, Black Elk of the Lakota Sioux had a series of visions at nine years of age that prophesied the fate of his people. Or our visions may be more personal, offering flashes of realization and understanding that serve our own individuation, the process of becoming ourselves. In either case, through art, we may give birth to an epiphany of insight that has the capacity to deeply nourish ourselves and others, challenge existing conditions, or reveal elements of the noumenal, invisible worlds within and without us. What needs to be born into the world through us?

4. *The artist is the mirror of society.* A work of art is a child of its times. While artists often draw their inspiration from the details of their own lives, we can rarely separate a work of art from the era of its creation. Artists take the material of their own life or era and universalize it, placing it in a form and structure where it communicates and becomes meaningful to others. While Earnest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Maya Angelou write of their own lives and the particular shape of their impressions and experiences, most of us will find relevance in their observations. Maya Angelou, when teaching a class, begins by writing on the blackboard: "I am a human being. Nothing human is alien to me."

The nature of culture, the challenges of society, the legacy of our conditioning, the joys

and suffering of the individual, the politics of identity, and the universality of human striving can all be clearly expressed, in symbolic or literal terms, through art. This comprehensive eye, receiving and revealing all aspects of the human condition, is part of the greatness of art. It gives to the artist a wide, embracing attention that extends beyond oneself, that opens to an impartial yet impassioned vision of life.

Through the practice of art, the needs, ills, and strengths of society may be compassionately, or angrily, uncovered and expressed. Gurdjieff and others believe that the artist is an antennae, an early warning signal of what needs to be addressed by the culture. Kandinsky wrote, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, that the artist is likened to the bow of a ship, a true avant-garde, penetrating into the mysteries of existence and the particular conditions of an era, while the rest of the culture follows. It is widely acknowledged, for example, that Picasso prefigured the modern age — the violence of massive world wars, the suffering and brutality imposed on many, and the alienation of the individual, the state of disassociation from ourselves so prevalent in the Twentieth Century—in his epic painting, *Guernica*.

5. *Creative practice encourages silence, an alert attentive presence.* Creativity can be a form of meditation, of striving to engage our deeper energies, unblock our interior pathways, and activate our inward presence. Penetration into the vast mysteries of the great chain of being can only happen through a field of silence, a finer more rarified vibration than is found in the conditions of ordinary life. Artists seek attunement to the transcendental through refined juxtapositions of words, evocative combinations of color or sound, and enlivened dramatic movements that, according to photographer Paul Caponigro, “soar above the intellect and touch subtle reality in a unique way.” Who is not touched by a Bach fugue, by the paintings of Van Gogh, by the

deep insights into human nature of Shakespeare, by the works of art left by ancients: the sphinx, pyramids, and Gothic cathedrals, or the poetry of Rumi and Rilke? Who is not transported through certain forms of art into worlds within worlds? Many examples of this type of art can be found throughout the history of human endeavor.

In this sense, art reveals what can be as well as what is. Through the artist's work with heightened attention, something is called forth and revealed—an insight into human potential, a world closer to the divine—through the doorway of impressions that invoke and nourish our deeper nature. Jean Erdman, dancer and wife of Joseph Campbell, remarked: “The way of the mystic and the way of the artist are related, except that the mystic doesn't have a craft.”

In spite of the revisionist efforts to “update” curriculum, to make it more meaningful and relevant for today's students, I, for one, am profoundly thankful to have received an education that included the classics, that offered contact with glorious works of art and literature that have informed the human race for decades, sometimes even centuries. These works that have survived the ages offer hope and genuine insight, reveal our timeless capacity for resilient growth and profound awakening, and give a universal perspective on the shared challenges inherent in the human condition.

Levels of Art: An Experimental View

Creativity exists at the intersection of worlds. Through the creative act, we attend to two worlds simultaneously: the inner and outer, higher and lower, or the self and Other. Our path becomes a means of interacting with the dual currents of life, the vertical and the horizontal. Life goes on, with or without our awareness. The flow of events and the passage of time, as it drives us here and there, represents the horizontal dimension. However, within this powerful current, we

have a choice. We can make the effort to deepen our attention, strive toward growth of being and consciousness, and open to the transpersonal energies that interpenetrate existence. It does not matter what we call these energies: nature, god, the life force, or the universal. Our awareness can deepen and expand to include this, the vertical dimension of life.

In my estimation, a fundamental and widespread fallacy has deeply infected our contemporary attitude toward all aspects of the world. Simply stated, this belief proclaims: everything is equal, everything is on the same level, and everything is perfect. Nothing is ever out of place in the universe. Well, what about us? What about our lack of attention, the dominance of our egos and false personalities, and our inability to call forth a deeper and higher consciousness at will? Clearly, something is wrong. Something is amiss, out of balance. We are not present most of the time. We may wish to be here, present to the myriad dimensions of life, but it takes persistent efforts, over a lifetime, to realize our aim of inner wholeness with the corresponding growth of being and consciousness.

As a society, we no longer recognize a hierarchy of energies; that some energies are finer, deeper, and more worthy of striving toward than others. Many individuals no longer acknowledge the existence of the sacred, of higher levels of being than are found within our ordinary, mundane lives. In traditional societies, leaders were chosen based on their wisdom and personal evolution, not on their media savvy or their glittery personalities that spout seductive, charismatic words. In the Tibetan culture and others, the political and spiritual leaders are one and the same, chosen by signs and symbols arising from a deeper source.

We are the cult of the personality. Our lives are easy, comfortable, perhaps too much so. We are not often asked to challenge ourselves, to move beyond our conditioning and its manifestations. And even when we do make the effort, it is often a scantily masked manifestation

of the ego — we want a better or more abundant life or conditions that we somehow feel that we deserve. We rarely consider that it is our responsibility to serve the spiritual dimension, not the other way around. Our intuition and higher impulses do not exist to indulge our petty and mundane desires. Rather, we should strive to heed the call of the subtle, inner voices, those that come from a deeper source containing the genuine capacity to guide our actions and inform our awareness.

To fully engage the spiritual search, we must embrace the existence of different levels, the vertical dimension, the variable scale of finer and deeper energies that permeate ordinary existence. The vertical dimension of life intersects the horizontal flow — our awareness simultaneously opens inward and outward, ever deepening and expanding — as in the symbolism of the Christian cross. Ken Wilber calls those that do not admit to the nested levels of the great chain of being as “flatlanders,” where everything is on the same rung of the ladder. This is actually a popular belief today. We refuse to acknowledge that some energies — and some people, by virtue of their diligent work and conscious evolution — may exist at different, higher stages of growth than ourselves.

While all men are created equal, not all people are equally developed spiritually. There is a scale of being ranging from the course to the fine, from dense earth-bound vibrations to the music of the spheres. Human beings occupy a certain place within this great chain of being. We stand on the threshold of self-consciousness, with hints perhaps, but only hints of the deeper levels of “objective” or “cosmic” consciousness spoken about in the world’s great wisdom traditions. We may, or may not, grow toward an awareness of the subtle, causal realms. Clearly, that is an individual decision based on one’s desire, will, and predilections.

A pathway, then, is a means of penetrating the deeper, higher levels of existence. In

our stubbornly democratic society, I feel compelled to ask you to read the word “higher” in a metaphoric sense. If, in truth, the deeper layers interpenetrate all levels of existence, as I believe they do, and our role is to “peel back” the layers of the onion, then using the word higher is misleading. I use it here in a symbolic sense.

It has been said time and again: The saint can understand the artist, but the artist cannot understand the saint. This implies levels of being, where the artist, through their craft, may penetrate some distance, but a true mystic, a true saint may penetrate even deeper into the mysteries of existence.

Clearly, when we are in the presence of an evolved man or woman, something is given. There is an energy in the atmosphere, subtle yet palpable. We feel that a hidden potential is awakened in us by their very presence. Doesn't this take place in the presence of works of art as well. Through some works, we are deeply nourished and enlivened, while with others, we may feel drained and depleted. Are not some artistic acts and products at a different level than others?

I know that I am treading on dangerous ground here, raising questions that call for exploration, but offer no easy answers. G.I. Gurdjieff believes that art is measured by its objectivity not its subjectivity. In other words, the goal of self-expression is a lesser god, a lesser aim than discovery and expression of Self. How may we explore this? Is this idea verifiable? Many societies have treated art as an expression of collective truth, a measure of moral ideals, a means of calling forth the gods, and a method to achieve as well as reflect the fruits of an expanded consciousness. Through what lens can we view the role and function of art? What mode of seeing will help us explore the existence of varying levels, the nested energies that lie within the world of art and symbolic expression?

The controversial Buddhist teacher Chögyum Trungpa was perhaps the first in

contemporary times to make a clear distinction between styles art and their relationship to one's inner being. In the insightful essay, *The Art of the Great Eastern Sun*, he distinguishes between art that grows from wakefulness and compassion as being reflective of the rising sun, and art that grows from aggression and artificiality, which includes much entertainment, as an expression of the setting sun. He claims that an enlightened society gives credence primarily to the art of the Great Eastern Sun, the rising sun, the impulse towards goodness and awakening.

In his excellent biography, *Chögyum Trungpa: His Life and Vision*, Fabrice Midal relates Trungpa's views on hierarchies of being. "The difficulty in conceiving of hierarchy as a positive force is part of the relativism, or even the general derisive attitude that marks our time. Take, for example a museum in which the intention is to make no distinction between a masterpiece and a nonmasterpiece, because in this way of thinking they are all the same. There are no masterpieces, only different people's criteria for evaluating. ... When confronted with an art object, if we always ask, "What value does it have for me?" we end up doubting any claim of authentic greatness. It is in this sense that the "relative" view is problematic."

What I propose here is an experimental concept, and one that I have contemplated for many years, but has not yet stood the test of full verification. At the very least, what follows provides a matrix to locate the production and viewing of works of art on a sliding scale of development. This structure extends the questions asked by Ken Wilber. Is a work of art created through the eye of the flesh, the eye of the mind, or the eye of the spirit? Is the artist's expression predominantly sensual, conceptual, or transcendental? Or, perhaps more to the point, can art combine and blend these functions? Clearly, some works of art have the capacity to uplift, to help transport us into the subtle realm, toward a greater dimension of experience. The greatest art, I believe, does not negate but includes the lower levels, celebrating and honoring the ordinary.

These works of power and grace often incorporate deeply sensuous and rigorously conceptual elements in their expression, and, at the same time, transcend the mundane and open to the higher. In my estimation, the basest forms of art are those which exist on one level only—conveying the dulled vision of a flatlined world. One example might be to make a definitive distinction between art and entertainment.

Chögyum Trungpa views most entertainment as “setting sun” art. “Since you feel so uncheerful and solemn, you try to create artificial humor, manufactured wit. But that tends to bring a tremendous sense of depression, actually. ... There is no respect for life in the setting sun world. The only respect that you can find there is in the brotherhood of human beings who are trying to combat death with the wrong end of the stick.”

The world of popular entertainment views its actors, writers, directors, and musicians as “artists.” Of course, relatively speaking, this is true. But, can we view the *Seinfeld* show as being on the same level as the plays of Shakespeare? Or do popularized, lusciously-produced coffee table books of syrupy landscape pictures rival the paintings of Van Gogh or O’Keeffe? Somehow, I do not think so. Actually, I believe, most people do not think so. Why don’t we make these kinds of firm distinctions and informed judgments on a societal level? For whatever reason, it is clearly an unpopular and undemocratic exercise to even think in these terms. Ken Wilber offers a satiric perspective: “Isn’t this view... terribly elitist? Good heavens, I hope so. When you go to a basketball game, do you want to see me or Michael Jordan play basketball?... When you pay sixty-four million dollars for a painting, will that be a painting by me or by Van Gogh?”

All excellence is elitist. And that includes spiritual excellence as well. But spiritual excellence is an elitism to which we are all invited. We go first to the great masters... But their message is always the same: let this consciousness be in you which is in me. You start out elitist,

always; you end up egalitarian, always.”

If we wish to grow inwardly, if we wish to assist in the evolution of the society of which we are a part, don't we need to challenge these existing “democratic” assumptions that deny genius and decry earned excellence? I remember arguing the point vehemently with a girlfriend that art and music contained different levels, on a scale from higher to lower, sacred to profane. She, like most, could not see beyond the tastes and conventions of her generation to contemplate other realities, other forms of expression that may surpass present trends. For example, I recently read a poll of the greatest rock and roll songs of the Twentieth Century. In this millennium-fever newspaper article, they expounded knowingly how these songs, mostly created in a mere four decades from the 60's through the 90's, were among the greatest works of art that the world has seen. Huh... say what? I have pondered often how the arts of a civilization reflect the pervading values and beliefs of a people, and wondered how the great age of romantic composers, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, seems to have existed within a narrow time-frame, never to be repeated. Have there been musicians in the West to equal the grace and power of their works since then? Does rock and roll contain an equivalent spiritual weight as the symphonic music of an earlier era? I simply do not know, but I suspect not.

Can we view Andy Warhol on the same level of spiritual meaning as we do Van Gogh? Or is Pearl Jam at the same level as Bach?

How do we locate works of art on a scale of being, mirroring the cosmos itself, ranging from the fine to the course, the sacred to the secular? Probably the most precise matrix is to view the existence of levels in art-making through the filter of the seven stages of spiritual development represented by the chakras, or subtle energy centers within the body. The term chakras derives from the Hindu discipline of kundalini yoga. They are known in esoteric Christianity as the seven

seals and, in Western science, correspond to the endocrine glandular system. They are located within an invisible channel of energy, loosely following the spine from the base up into the crown of the head.

These seven centers represent functions that govern all aspects of our existence: the basic survival instincts, the specific quality of our thought and feeling, the nature of our interactions with others, and the degree of realization of our deepest aspirations and potential. They represent the stages of spiritual development, ranging from lower to higher, from the fulfillment of our most basic needs to our most transcendent possibilities. Each chakra contains a quality of energy that may be fully open or blocked, influencing our individual potential and challenges. Furthermore, it is widely believed that the degree of activation of each of these centers corresponds to our level of awakening and state of consciousness.

The first three chakras relate to our lower, animal functions: survival, sexuality aligned with procreation, and the will to power, the impulse toward personal achievement. These three centers are located in the lower half of the torso, within the pelvic basin.

The fourth chakra governs the heart, the opening to compassion, empathy, and a higher quality of feeling. The activation of the heart chakra is the gateway to the three higher centers, representing, in the words of Joseph Campbell, “ a field that is properly human and spiritual, pursuing aims and ends beyond range of the physical senses.”

The three higher chakras, located in the throat and head area, vitalize the higher functions of communication and creativity, opening to will, conscience, and consciousness.

Each chakra contains its own level of vibration, and corresponds to both a color and a musical note. When we listen to music, for example, we can experience how the sound strikes and activates certain of these centers in the body. Ken Wilber writes in his journals, “The effects

that different types of music have is fascinating. Rock music, no question, hits the lower chakras (perhaps 2 to 3, sex and power.) Rap music is often street survival music (chakra 1). The best of jazz (say Charlie Parker, Miles, Wynton) is 3 to 4.

The great romantic composers (Chopin, Mahler) are quintessential 4th chakra, all heart emotion, sometimes drippingly. Haydn, Bach, Mozart, later Beethoven, push into 5th or 6th, music of the spheres, or so it seems to me. You can actually feel your attention gravitate to various bodily centers (gut, heart, head) as these musical types play.”

In experiencing the vibrational frequency of the chakras, we can directly perceive the tangible physical and psychological effect that different works of art have on us. Some uplift, some awaken our sexual nature, some point toward the ills of society, some offer the potential for healing and inner integration, while others hint at the music of the spheres.

Partly experiential and partly speculative, the following is a brief description of each of the seven chakras and an experimental look at how their unique energy imprint corresponds to different genres of expression and to specific works of art.

Level One: The root chakra

Location: base of spine, adrenal glands

Color: red

Element: earth

The purpose of the root chakra is survival. It represents the basic life sustaining functions — the will to survive, to initiate action, to sustain oneself on the physical level. Its predominance denotes a mesomorphic individual, oriented to physical action and feats of endurance. Its negative manifestations may be greed, materialism, and overextension.

This chakra represents the adventurer and explorer. Its expression through art can be seen in the action/adventure film genre, novels of exploration and triumph, the brave hero overcoming all odds and surviving in spite of great adversity. Heavy-metal rock and roll, rap music, and African drumming all appeal to this chakra. Deep drum beats, lower bass notes, and dramatic action activate the root chakra. The level of vibration is strictly material and earth-bound. The positive expression of this center is found in movement and dance, a participation in the essential rhythms of life.

Trungpa states that ordinary aggression is anti-art, and is rather clumsy and crude. However, he claims that when aggressive actions are combined with deep awareness, they can be transformed. “If you relate with your anger and aggression in such a way that it also inspires a work of poetry, there must be some generosity involved of at least some kind of awareness. So art is not just creating beauty, it is anything workable and rich.”

Homer’s *Odyssey* and Rene Daumal’s *Mount Analogue* are action/adventure novels that incorporate this level, but far exceed it, symbolizing the archetypal hero’s journey, the spiritual quest that survives multifarious trials and tribulations. Many Hollywood style action films, replete with brawny deeds, narrow escapes, and much violence, remain on the purely physical level—entertainment through gross titillation. Our national obsession with athletic prowess, and “reality-based,” survival-style television, grows from an imbalanced emphasis on physicality. Complete forms of expression, like choreography and action painting, deeply involve the body’s intelligence, but transcend it with content that exists on different levels simultaneously.

Level two: The sacral chakra

Location: the lower abdomen, the gonads

Color: orange

Element: water

The sacral chakra governs sexuality—the urge to procreate and merge with another. The lesson of this chakra is creating a healthy relationship with the sexual impulse and our expression of physical desire. This chakra represents the lover and the passions that enliven our endeavors. Without passion, there can be no full expression; the light of passion must be then focused into flame. Photographer Edward Weston writes: “The flame started first by amazement over subject matter, that flame which only a great artist can have—not the emotional pleasure of the layman—but the intuitive understanding —relating obvious reality to the esoteric, must then be combined to a form within which it can burn with a focused intensity: otherwise it flares, smokes and is lost like in an open bonfire.” And Ralph Waldo Emerson mirrors the same thought: “If the man create not, the pure efflux of the deity is not his. Cinders and smoke there may be—but not yet flame.”

The negative expression of this center is what James Joyce calls “improper” art, or art that excites desire for the object represented. For example, Joyce believes that advertising is pornographic in that it employs desire for the wrong means: to incite possession of the object. This is even more pronounced when sexuality is used as a means to sell everything from cars to food. The positive expression of this chakra in art is found in the artist’s passion for form, in the art of the erotic, or art with a strong sexual component, such as Henry Miller’s and Earnest Hemingway’s novels, Georgia O’Keeffe’s flower paintings, and Edward Weston’s photographs of shells and vegetables. Latin literature abounds with the passion of life, such as in the novels of Isabelle Allende or Gabriel Garcia Marquez. We see the expression of the sacral chakra in popular musical ballads, in music with a strong, sexually-driven beat, such as the Rolling Stones, and in purely abstract painting that celebrates form and some improvisational jazz melodies.

Level three: solar plexus chakra

Location: the solar plexus, between chest and navel, the pancreas

Color: yellow

Element: fire

The solar plexus chakra governs the will to power, mastery, and achievement. It is the seat of personal authority and relates to the development of self-esteem, the discovery of one's individual self as distinct from others. Positively expressed, it represents pride in one's accomplishments and a healthy integration of ego and self-respect. Its negative manifestation is the desire to control or conquer others, to diminish their values and convert them to one's own viewpoint. We see this reflected in war and overt conflict, as well as in the actions of religions such as Christianity that have sought to subjugate and dominate others according to their beliefs. Tales of cowboys and indians, war stories, dramas about cops and robbers, good guys and bad guys: so much popular entertainment of the day relates to this kind of so-called "heroic" subjugation of one group to another. Another subtle form of the negative expression of this chakra may be seen in art that attempts to proselytize, advancing one's own views as more deserving of attention than other ideologies. Trungpa believes that "one of the things that we should overcome in order to be an artist is aggression." And he believes that artists can even be critical of society and its conditions with compassion, and without "sarcasm and crudeness."

In art, we may view the wide range of autobiographical inquiry, leading to the early stages of self-knowledge, as an expression of this stage. Julia Cameron's popular book, *The Artist's Way*, fosters an interest in creativity as a means of enhancing self-esteem and offers a "creative recovery" program that outlines the use of art to re-discover one's authenticity and self-respect.

The aim of self-expression in art is a function of this chakra. It represents the discovery and expression of the initial stages of self-development, that of personal potency within the society and world-at-large.

This is our center, the hearth of our physical being, the solar plexus. Art that celebrates self arises from this center: Jazz melodies, documentary work focusing on the physical realities of the world, and manifold types of autobiographical expression. Walt Whitman's epic poem *Song of Myself* initially evokes the energies of this chakra, but surpasses it and moves directly into the realm of the universal. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself. And what I assume, you shall assume. For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. "

Level four: Heart chakra

Location: heart area, center of chest. thymus gland.

Color: green

Element: air

Here we reach the region of the heart. The first three chakras govern physical realities: survival, procreation, and mastery—the "animal powers" according to Joseph Campbell. At level four we come to the pivotal center, the doorway to our higher potential. The upper centers can only be entered through the vibration of the heart, on the currents of a refined quality of feeling, engendering compassion and empathy, acceptance of self and others. As the inner energies move through the invisible channels of the body, they are transformed, refined, uplifted. When the heart center is activated, a finer frequency of vibration is experienced, one that magnetizes us to our higher possibilities, and that opens to faith, hope, and love. The symbol for this chakra is the six-pointed star, with two opposing triangles, one pointing upward, the other downward,

symbolizing the intersection of forces and energies that characterize human potential.

When we open the heart, art elevates to a new level. Through moments of awakening, artists may apprehend the radiance of the world, infusing their creations with acceptance, beauty, compassion, and yes, even love. Beauty, in this context, is the recognition of a divine order that underlies all things. We see the positive expression of the heart chakra in works that genuinely open the feeling nature: the music of Beethoven, paintings of radiant landscapes, portraits attempting to see into the eyes of the soul, film and literature on the subject of love, and, of course, much poetry. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which are at once love songs and alternately speak of the artists relationship to their own soul, represent some of the greatest examples of art from this center. Tibetan monk Mathieu Ricard recounts the impulse towards art that arises from the richness of the heart in the introduction to an exhibition of his photographs: "There is indeed a cost for taking a picture rather than simply living the fullness of the here and now. But the wish to share the richness of one's experience wins out over the desire to prolong such serenity for a few more precious instants. May these images be a homage to beauty!"

The negative expression of this center is overt sentimentality, breathless emotionality, sappy love stories, Hallmark cards, and sickeningly sweet paintings of externally beautiful landscapes set in paradisiacal terms. This type of syrupy art abounds here in Hawai'i. We somewhat disdainfully refer to it as "resort art." In the movies, where everyone lives happily ever after is another example of the superficial expression of this chakra.

Level five: Throat chakra

Location: Throat area. Thyroid gland

Color: sky blue

Element: sound and space

This is the seat of higher will, intent, and communication. It is at the level of the throat, the larynx. It represents the will to surrender to a higher order, a healing of our animal nature, a cleansing of the “doors of perception.” Joseph Campbell indicates the work here as: the “turning about of energy,” the turning inward toward a mastery of self — an opening to the transcendent impulse, the application of will and intent to serve a higher master than our animal urges. It governs the spiritual search and the longing for contact with deeper levels of reality than those available through mundane existence.

This chakra rules voice and sound, communication and creativity. Creative application of this chakra may be found in the work of craft, where we attempt to perfect the means of our medium, to inwardly listen and conform with the nature of our materials, and to subtly guide, mid-wife them toward the desired end of our expression. The craft guilds of the middle ages, the Japanese pottery traditions, and the master calligraphers of China serve as excellent examples of this kind of inner work. In this stage, we watch, listen, and wait for the guiding visions and voices that will inform our works. Like the Zen swordsman, as we perfect our craft, we perfect ourselves. Our aim is to be fully present, continually alert in readiness, yet expecting nothing, waiting to be guided into action.

We strive here toward a balance: of surrendering our will to the larger forces at hand and simultaneously applying our intent to shape the materials. The sculpture of Brancusi is a marvelous example of the reciprocal relationship between surrender and intent. Brancusi notes: “While carving stone, you discover the spirit of your material and the properties peculiar to it. Your hand thinks and follows the thought of the material.

My last two Birds ... are the ones in which I came closest to the right proportions — and I

approached these proportions to the degree that I was able to rid myself of myself.

When you create, you need to join yourself with the universe and the elements. Yet, to achieve something, you must be yourself and not destroy yourself... “

This is the center of the creative impulse, the discovery of our true purpose, and the coming into accord with a deeper order. As we begin to understand what we are here on earth to accomplish, we strive to serve this vision. Thy will be done.

Negative expression of this chakra may be found in the widespread misuse of creative energy. We see this everywhere in film, television, and music that exploit humanity's basic goodness, that promote the seven deadly sins. And we find this in the glorification of the individual, once the pinnacle achievement of western culture — the separation of personal identity from the group or tribe, and the honoring of individual potential. This has been diminished and demeaned to a narcissistic self-absorption promulgated by all segments of society, but especially within media and popular entertainment. The wildly successful TV show, *Seinfeld*, bears witness to this phenomenon: a group of thirty-somethings obsessed with the petty details of their own lives, where nothing really matters, cynicism abounds, and no guiding purpose or larger abiding aim is in evidence. It is self-absorption extraordinaire.

Level six: Third eye chakra

Location: Center of forehead. Pituitary gland

Color: indigo, midnight blue

Element: light

This chakra relates to intuition, wisdom, and vision. It represents our genuine connection to the spiritual world, that which exists beyond time and space — the One, unchanging reality. It

represents the higher functions of the mind and the deeper layers of the unconscious. Intuition, moments of epiphanal awakening, enlightened realization, and acting in light of one's insight are controlled by this chakra.

Art and music that arises from this region is transcendent and has the capacity to uplift, to evoke the direct experience of a deeper order of being. It is the art and music of the spheres, where the artist may be merely the vehicle for the statement, where something passes cleanly through them. This type of art conveys the discovery and expression of Self, rather than mere self-expression. It transcends the strictly personal into the realm of the universal, addressing timeless elements of the human condition.

The longing for consciousness and the awakening of conscience are ruled by this center. Inner vision, psychic ability, and the capacity to perceive energies that lie beneath surface manifestations arise from the activation of this chakra. Many poems by Rumi and Rilke, the visions of William Blake, the music of Bach, and the later paintings of Mark Rothko and Georgia O'Keeffe bear witness to the work of this chakra.

Here is found the language of myth, symbol, and allegory. Many of the world's sacred texts, the *Holy Bible*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *I Ching*, the *Way of the Bodhisattva* and the *Bhagavad Gita* may arise from this source. Works from this center surpass the ego and serve the higher parts of our nature. Its negative expression is subtle and insidious, appropriating intuitive insight and enlightened vision for purely personal, selfish ends.

Level seven: Crown chakra

Location: Top of head, pineal gland

Color: violet

Element: pure thought, inner light

The crown chakra governs consciousness; it is the “I Am” center, the seat of unity with life and god. It represents a seamless merging with the subtle, causal energies that surround us, interpenetrate us, and pass through all living beings. This chakra represents “cosmic” or “objective” consciousness, where we perceive the divine radiance of all things — where we become one with our creator and with all beings.

Expressions through art from this center are rare indeed. Once again, we find the maxim that the saint can understand the artist, but the artist cannot understand the saint. This is truly the region beyond art, beyond expression.

However, there may be hints of this form of consciousness expressed in certain works: the pyramids and the sphinx, the Gothic cathedrals, forms of sacred chant and music, and pure vibration or color. Although most of these works were evolved by generations of individuals, traces of cosmic unity may be found in Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, the parables of Jesus, the teachings of Buddha, certain poems of Rumi, and the music of Scriabin.

On this level, perhaps, art is not enough. The pure light of consciousness, the “I AM” within, and the unbearable pure radiance of being may not be expressible in physical form.

The closest that I personally have come to this form of consciousness has been in relation to nature, witnessing the forces of the natural world. Looking at the stars on a clear night, viewing the unending scope of the ocean and sky, an ancient oak tree, and even a simple flower; all remind me of my nothingness in the face of the immensity of existence, and alternately serve to awaken the realization that I am a part of this world; all of its energies exist within me, that I am a microcosm of all creation. As the world breathes, so do I; as the world contains the unbearable radiance of being, so do I; and as the world simply is, so am I.

It is rumored that Paul Klee, upon finishing a painting would simply hold up his hand next to the work. If the painting could somehow maintain its life and integrity in the face of the marvels of the human hand, he considered his efforts to be successful. I can think of no better inner measure to evaluate works of art, or indeed, any of the fruits of human endeavor.



Creative Practice

TRY: While looking at a work of art or listening to music, observe where the sounds or visual impressions resound within you. Try to stay in touch with your body. Be still. Stay within and be receptive, permeable. See where the impressions strike you — in your belly, in your heart region, in your throat or head? What chakras/centers are being activated? What energies are opened within you through contact with this work of art or music? Are the impressions life affirming? Do they enhance your deeper potential; do they stimulate your lower passions or your higher aspirations; are they poisonous to your being or enlivening?

TRY: What is your path with heart?: What activities nourish your search for a deeper experience of life and of yourself. What activities do you return to — again and again — that are natural and a part of your very being? Where do you find the greatest satisfaction, the greatest challenge? Where do you find the greatest potential for growth?

Remember don Juan's explanation when Carlos Castaneda asks: "But how do you know when a path has no heart, don Juan?"

Don Juan responds: "Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as

you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question.... Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good. If it doesn't, it is of no use. ... One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong, the other weakens you.... A path without heart is never enjoyable. You have to work hard even to take it. On the other hand, a path with heart is easy; it does not make you work at liking it.”

TRY: Discriminate. This is of utmost importance today when choosing influences that may assist your inner growth and development. What calls you—I mean, really calls to you from the depths of your being? What influences and practices are real, connected to an organic whole, a real teaching? Can you find a primary source—in the midst of the smorgasbord of watered-down second and third generation influences that grace of the shelves of numerous new-age bookstores and the listings of workshop centers?

We have within us an inner measure, capable of separating truth from falsehood. Exercise this capacity wisely. We also have within us a magnetic core, able to attract to us the impressions and guidance we need for our personal evolution. Something in us truly knows what it needs for its nourishment and growth. Find that place within. Do not rest until you do. Seek out people, books, works of art and music that you are akin to by virtue of your identity and being.

Find the seeker within. Be vigilant and unrelenting until you find what you really need. To connect with the spirit of the search, read *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse and *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, by G.I. Gurdjieff.

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, Matthieu 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.”

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.

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 revelation 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.

Chapter Nine

Awakening Conscience and Consciousness

Artists 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-like 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-membering, 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 — like 220 volts through a 110 circuit — and these energies can rend the artist's psyche. Recall the many tortured artists throughout the annals of 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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1565 Saint Louis Dr.

Honolulu, HI, 96816

808.721.2862

email: pacimage@maui.net

website: www.creativeguide.com

blog: www.theslenderthread.org