# XIII

# Meditation as Art, Art as Meditation

## *Thoughts on the Relationship of Nonintention to the Creative Process*

(2006)

When I was first learning about Buddhism, I was in college, and I approached it the way I approached most things then. I knew how to go to school and I knew how to study and I figured that I could master meditation the same way I could any other course. I went to a Buddhist summer camp in Boulder, Colorado—a summer *institute,* actually, called Naropa Institute—where any number of scholars and writers and artists and meditation teachers were gathered in what was to be the first of many such summers introducing Buddhism into



Western culture. I took many courses that summer, in Buddhist meditation, psychology, philosophy, and culture while secretly searching for a topic for my upcoming senior thesis in psychology, but I became increasingly frustrated at my failure to master the meditation techniques I was being taught.

My roommates at Naropa, randomly assigned to me by the institute, were twins from Long Island whose parents, Holocaust survivors, ran a fruit and vegetable business in their hometown. These twins took a dim view of most of Naropa's teachers, put off by their self-importance and grandstanding, and, after a bit of time, began making early morning trips to Denver's wholesale fruit and vegetable markets, bringing back cases of fresh cherries, peaches, and other produce that began to fill our townhouse apartment. They watched me in my fruitless pursuit of wisdom until one day one of the twins pulled me aside and offered to teach me to juggle. He handed me a couple of oranges and we got to work. After several days of steady practice, I managed to get the hang of it. Keeping three oranges in the air, I noticed a change in my mind. It was relaxed, yet awake. Open and alert. Not lost in thought, but very aware. My arms moved without me, the oranges orbiting my gaze. Suddenly, all the meditation instruction began to make sense. My introduction to Buddhism was under way.[1] This shift in consciousness is one of the things that links the otherwise disparate worlds of art, therapy, and meditation, three areas of human endeavor where process is as important as product, where the ability to willingly enter psychic territory that most people would rather avoid tends to pay off, where "identity" can be more of an obstacle than an achievement.

Freud was also aware of how helpful this shift can be. In his most explicit instructions to physicians practicing psychoanalysis, he cautioned that the most important method was to

simply listen without bothering about keeping anything in particular in mind. Freud was trying to loosen up his followers, to get them to listen with their "third ears" rather than with their thinking minds so that they could make intuitive leaps rather than ponderous progress. The composer John Cage said the same thing in different words in his advice to musicians and composers. He wanted people to listen to all sounds as music, rather than picking and choosing the so-called musical ones. He famously composed pieces of silence, in which the ambient sounds rose to the surface and became a naturally occuring symphony. Cage was trying to free musicians from their ideas of what music was, just as Freud wanted his analysts to listen without trying to fit what they heard into a preexisting schema.

When I first stumbled across Buddhist thought and practice, I did not know very much. I was interested in psychology but found Freud, at that time, to be too difficult, too far outside my own experience to be readily intelligible. Buddhism, on the other hand, spoke clearly and succinctly about my problem. Life is filled with a sense of pervasive unsatisfactoriness, the Buddha proclaimed in his first teachings of the Four Noble Truths. The only way to deal with this dissatisfaction is to learn how not to cling. Changing the way we relate to experience, learning how to not refuse sounds that are not musical, is the key to the Buddha's path. And meditation is the way this change is practiced and learned.

When I met my first Buddhist meditation teachers, I was not yet twenty-one years old. I was good at writing papers and taking tests—I knew how to solve math problems and do research in the library—but in meditation I found something new. I often think that the way I responded to meditation is similar to the way artists feel when first exposed to their craft,



one they will make use of for their entire lifetime. Meditation gave me something to throw my whole self into, the way one has to do when painting or taking photographs or making ceramics or playing music. It is a formless art, but one that requires the same diligence, patience, experimentation, immersion, and risk of failure as any other. I was seduced by meditation. It gave me something to engage with, practice, hone my skills with, and explore, and it required everything of me—the more of myself I put into it, and the more I could lose myself in it, the more it gave me back.

## The Transfiguration of the Ordinary

When I met my wife, who is a sculptor, it was immediately clear to me that although she did not have a formal meditation practice, her time in her studio was her version of meditation. The way that her process required her to be open to herself, to find a balance between control and surrender, to push into the unknown while being conscious of her reactions but not subservient to them, all spoke of what I knew from meditation. It turns out that this confluence of Buddhist thought and Western artistic process is something that has been of interest to artists since Buddhism was introduced to the West. In this chapter I would like to give some sense of this by tracing one particular arc, one that began in the mid-twentieth century with the travels of D. T. Suzuki, a Japanese writer and lecturer on Zen Buddhism, to New York City. There he gave a series of lectures at Columbia University that were attended by a number of soon to be prominent artists, writers, musicians, critics, psychoanalysts, poets, and philosophers, influencing, in a mostly hidden way, the course of modern art and culture. While the psychoanalysts Erich Fromm and Karen Horney

were known to have attended, so did many other aspiring artists of every medium. Let me quote from the philosophy professor and art critic Arthur Danto's description of Suzuki's influence.

> The class met one day a week, in the late afternoon, in Room 716 Philosophy Hall, where departmental seminars were held. There was a very long table. Dr. Suzuki sat at the head of the table, with a blackboard to the left and behind him, though I don't remember him using it. Those who did not find a seat at the table sat in uncomfortable wooden chairs around the wall. In those days, not only was smoking allowed, it was expected. Dr. Suzuki did not, obviously, address hordes. My sense, inevitably vague, is that there would rarely have been as many as forty auditors. Many of those who came were artists, like the sculptor Ibram Lassaw and his wife, or Philip Guston and John Cage, who used to come together. But these are things I learned after the fact. At the time I knew no one who belonged to the Suzuki crowd. Some intellectual historian must one day try to identify the attendees, as has already been done with Alexandre Kojève's course on Hegel, at the College de France. I think Suzuki's course played a role in New York much like Kojève's did in Paris. It helped redirect the way those who were thinkers actually thought. Someone may have kept track of attendance. It would be of interest to know, for example, if J. D. Salinger actually attended, since he is said to have been influenced by Suzuki. Thomas Merton was definitely there.



I cannot pretend to have known Dr. Suzuki himself at all well. He was not an inspiring speaker, however inspired one might have been by his subject matter. He was not especially saintly in manner, but rather urbane, which was just what one might expect, given the values of Zen. But he did look like a Japanese painting of a monk, though he dressed in what is referred to as "business attire" on invitations. Neither was he a witty person, despite his knowledge of koans and what one might term their logic.

From what people told me, Dr. Suzuki kept saying pretty much the same things each time he offered the course—he was, after all, a professor. But that did not keep people from coming back, year after year, to hear it all again. Maybe, in the end, repetition was the point.

I am sure that there were not only artists in Dr. Suzuki's course, but in a way I think I understand what they were after. Let me say, though, that in the 1950s I would naturally have thought in terms of New York School painting when I thought about Zen. Zen went with the gestural way that painters engaged with their work at the time. Today, I can recognize that Zen was more a matter of attitude than performance.

It was not, however, until the 1960s that the wider meaning of what I learned from Dr. Suzuki—if not from his lectures, then from his books—found its way into my philosophy. I would not have been able to see this in terms of 1950s paradigms. The direction of art history itself changed in what I

think was a radical way. Whether Dr. Suzuki helped cause this change, or merely contributed to it, is not something anyone can say with certainty. But the people who made the changes were themselves Suzuki's students one way or another. In any case, the meaning of Zen for me came when I had in a way begun to outgrow it.

I am thinking of John Cage and, in particular, of Cage's effort to overcome the differences between music sounds and mere noise. (Danto, 2004, pp. 54–56)

Danto's description helps to set the stage for what I want to present. Suzuki introduced a generation of artists to Buddhist ideas: in particular, to the Buddhist notion that it is possible to train the mind to overcome its usual prejudices, its habits, its conditioning, its preconceptions, and its obsessive preoccupation with language. While appealing to his audience's intellects, Suzuki encouraged them to be suspicious of those very intellects—to find ways of reaching into their unconscious, into the realm of pure subjectivity that we think of as inner space. "But let a man once look within in all sincerity, and he will then realize that he is not lonely, forlorn, and deserted; there is within him a certain feeling of a royally magnificent aloneness, standing all by himself and yet not separated from the rest of existence. This unique situation, apparently or objectively contradicting, is brought about when he approaches reality in the Zen way. What makes him feel that way comes from his personally experiencing creativity or originality which is his when he transcends the realm of intellection and abstraction" (Suzuki, 1960, pp. 30–31).

Suzuki gave his listeners the Zen ball and they proceeded



to run with it. He let them see that they could make art when they took their selves out of the equation, that the cultivation of nonintention did not inhibit creative production but set it free. He laid the foundation for Cage's exploration of chance operations, for Rauschenberg's combines, and for Pop Art's (in Danto's words) transfiguration of the commonplace. This ability to be present while getting the self out of the way is the great discovery that meditation makes possible. We think we are necessary but are startled to find out that we are not.

In Buddhist language, the experience that becomes available when we learn to put ourselves aside is called emptiness, but it is not an empty emptiness or a void, it is rather a full emptiness; the word itself derives from the Sanskrit term for a pregnant womb. As the Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor has described it, "Emptiness is not a *state* but a *way*. Not only is it inseparable from the world of contingencies, it too is 'contingently configured.'" To experience emptiness is not a descent into an abyss of nothingness nor is it an ascent into a separate realm. It is a recovery of the freedom to configure oneself as an intentional, unimpeded trajectory through the shifting, ambiguous sands of life" (2000, p. 21).

## The Music of Changes

This freedom to configure oneself unimpeded by repetitive cycles of obsessive habit is one of the foundations of the artistic process. John Cage listened to D. T. Suzuki's lectures and proceeded to adapt what he heard to the composition of music. He learned to take his own likes and dislikes out of the creative equation so that he could more fully attend to the cycles of nature. "I have always tried to move away from music as an object," he said, "moving toward music as a process,

which is without beginning, middle, or end. So that instead of being like a table or chair, the music becomes like the weather" (Nisker, 1986, p. 4). In his later descriptions of his own process, he sounds like a most accomplished teacher of meditation. He managed to forge an integration between art, life, and meditation that has reverberated throughout the culture.

"In the early 1950's," Cage said, after attending two years of Suzuki's lectures at Columbia,

> I began using chance operations to write my music, and after I became acquainted with the *I Ching* (the Chinese Book of Changes), I used it extensively. I apply chance operations to determine the frequency, amplitude, timbre, duration and placement of different elements in my music. The chance operations allow me to get away from the likes and dislikes of my ego, so that I can become attentive to what is outside of my own psychology and memory. By using chance operations I am accepting what I obtain. Instead of expressing myself, I change myself. You might say I use chance operations instead of sitting meditation practice.
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> I have never engaged in sitting meditation practice. My music involves me always in sitting so that any more sitting would be too much. Furthermore, by the time I came in contact with Zen I had already promised Arnold Schoenberg that I would devote my life to music which is concerned with the sense perceptions. So my meditation has been through my music, where I am trying to get rid of my likes and dislikes and open myself to the flow of experience. (Nisker, 1986, p. 4)



Cage's experiments with what Buddhism calls "bare," or naked, attention had a profound influence on the cultural landscape. In a subtle but irrefutable way, he introduced Buddhist thought into artists' consciousnesses. He opened up the idea of an inner creative process in which artists learn to give way to their art, becoming fluent, as he said, with the life they are living. Listen, for example, to how he influenced the poet John Ashbery's process:

> There have been many times in his life when he felt completely stuck, when the poetry seemed to dry up completely, but the longest and worst began shortly after he graduated from college and lasted more than a year. Then he happened to go to a John Cage concert and heard "Music of Changes"—nearly an hour of banging on a piano alternating with periods of silence, as dictated by a score that Cage had put together using the *I Ching* so that it would be determined by chance rather than by his choice. The music seemed to him to be full of powerful meanings and the idea of composing by chance made him think about writing in a completely different way. It made him want to go right back home and start work. Ever since, he has felt that what he calls "managed chance" is the right method for him.
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> Ashbery compares his poems to environments, the idea being that an environment is something that you are immersed in but cannot possibly be conscious of the whole of. They are akin in this sense to environmental art, where, as he puts it, "You're surrounded by different elements of a work

and it doesn't really matter whether you're focusing on one of them or none of them at any particular moment, but you're getting a kind of indirect refraction from the situation that you're in."

This is not modesty—he doesn't want people not to pay attention. Rather, he's trying to cultivate a different sort of attention: not focused, straight-ahead scrutiny but something more like a glance out of the corner of your eye that catches something bright and twitching that you then can't identify when you turn to look. This sort of indirect, half-conscious attention is actually harder to summon up on purpose than the usual kind, in the way that free-associating out loud is harder than speaking in an ordinary logical manner. A person reading or hearing his language automatically tries to make sense out of it: sense, not sound, is our default setting. Resisting the impulse to make sense, allowing sentences to accumulate into an abstract collage of meaning rather than a story or an argument, requires effort. But that collage—a poem that cannot be paraphrased or explained or "unpacked"—is what Ashbery is after. (MacFarquhar, 2005, p. 88)

## Night Painting

We can feel the Buddhist influence in Cage in his music, and in Ashbery in his poetry. What about painting? Let me quote from two other artists who attended Suzuki's lectures, artists who configured their own unimpeded trajectories after being introduced to Buddhist thought: Philip Guston and Agnes



Martin, artists who, at first glance, could not be more opposite. First, Philip Guston, lecturing at the University of Minnesota in 1978, more than twenty-five years after attending Suzuki's Columbia lectures:

> I would like to make some comments, but not about what my paintings mean. That's impossible, totally impossible for me to do. I'm certain that professional art writers could do it much better than I could. Besides I have developed a tendency to disbelieve what artists say in their official statements. Nevertheless I will try to be as candid as I can be.
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> I feel that strongly believed in and stated convictions on art have a habit of tumbling and collapsing in front of the canvas, when the act of painting actually begins. Furthermore, I have found that painters of my generation are more candid and provocative in their casual talk and asides, and funnier too. Mark Rothko, after a mutual studio visit said, Phil, you're the best storyteller around and I'm the best organ player. That was in 1957; I still wonder what he had in mind. So many articles appeared with words like sublime, and noble, and he says he's the best organ player around. Franz Kline, in a very easy bar conversation in the fifties said, "You know what creating really is? To have the capacity to be embarrassed." And one of the better definitions about painting was Kline's. He said, "You know, painting is like hands stuck in a mattress."
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> In a recent article which contrasts the work of a colour-field painter with mine, the painter is quoted as saying "A painting is made with colored paint on

a surface and what you see is what you see." This popular and melancholy cliché is so remote from my own concern. In my experience a painting is not made with colours and paint at all. I don't know what a painting is; who knows what sets off even the desire to paint? It might be things, thoughts, a memory, sensations, which have nothing to do directly with painting itself. They can come from anything and anywhere, a trifle, some detail observed, wondered about and, naturally, from the previous painting. The painting is not on a surface, but on a plane which is imagined. It moves in a mind. It is not there physically at all. It is an illusion, a piece of magic, so what you see is not what you see.

I think in my studies and broodings about the art of the past my greatest ideal is Chinese painting; especially Sung painting dating from about the tenth or eleventh century. Sung period training involves doing something thousands and thousands of times—bamboo shoots and birds—until someone else does it, not you, and the rhythm moves through you. I think that is what the Zen Buddhists called kensho and I have had it happen to me. It is a double activity, when you know and don't know, and it shouldn't really be talked about. So I work towards that moment and if a year or two later I look at some of the work I've done and try to start judging it, I find it's impossible. You can't judge it because it was felt.

What measure is there, other than the fact that at one point in your life you trusted a feeling.



You have to trust that feeling and then continue trusting yourself. And it works in a reverse way. I know that I started similar things in the past, 20 to 25 years ago, and would then scrape them out. I remember the pictures I scraped out very well, in fact some of them are sharper in my mind than the ones that remained. Well then, I would subsequently ask, why did I scrape them out? Well, I wasn't ready to accept it, that's the only answer. This leads me to another point: it doesn't occur to many viewers that the artist often has difficulty accepting the painting himself. You can't assume that I gloried in it, or celebrated it. I didn't. I'm a night painter, so when I come into the studio the next morning the delirium is over. I know I won't remember detail, but I will remember the feeling of the whole thing. I come into the studio very fearfully. I creep in to see what happened the night before. And the feeling is one of, My God, did I do that? That is about the only measure I have. The kind of shaking, trembling of . . . "That's me? I did that?" But most of the time, we're carpenters, we build and build, and add and prepare and when you drag yourself into the studio, you say, "Oh, that's what I did. It's horrible. All of it has to go." This is one of the last minute touches. Often at the moment you're playing your last card and are ready to give up, another kind of awareness enters and you work with that moment. But you can't force that moment either. You truly have to have given up. And then something happens. (McKie, 1982)

Another kind of awareness. A double activity. Both Guston and Ashbery describe something that meditation makes possible: a kind of attention that emerges when the impulse to make sense is resisted, when feelings of embarrassment are not suppressed, when the random events of ordinary life are noticed rather than screened out, when the proscriptions of language and conceptual thought are circumvented. As Stephen Batchelor describes it in his analysis of a second-century Indian philosopher and poet named Nagarjuna, "As a poet, Nagarjuna gives voice to the freedom of emptiness *from* within. He is not interested in confirming what is safe and familiar, but in exploring what is unsettling and strange; the letting-go of fixed opinions about oneself and the world can be both frightening and compelling. Although such emptiness may seem an intolerable affront to one's sense of identity and security, it may simultaneously be felt as an irresistible lure into a life that is awesome and mysterious" (Batchelor, 2000, p. 24).

From the perspective of the psychotherapist, an analogous method has emerged as the cornerstone of psychoanalytic listening. While it has been cultivated outside the rubric of Buddhist thought, it, too, is predicated on the ability of the mind to attend outside the matrix of linguistic fixation. This is described very clearly by one of Britain's most influential psychoanalysts, W. R. Bion, in a monograph entitled *Taming Wild Thoughts:*

> Freud was extremely impressed with Charcot's statement that when you do not understand a situation, when you cannot perceive what the diagnosis is, you should go on until the obscurity begins to be penetrated by a pattern, and then you can formulate what the pattern is that you see. With regard to ourselves, we are confronted with what seems to be a single individual. Our attention is usually focused on a recently developed capacity of the human being, namely his capacity to elaborate and use articulate speech. It is obviously a very powerful and useful achievement. But while we are in the frame of mind in which it is possible to command the use of relatively recently developed techniques like articulate speech, we also have to contend with the many obscuring words, thoughts, sounds, physical feelings, physical symptoms, in order to excavate the underlying, basic, and fundamental feature. . . .
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> We do not in fact know who the person is today, tomorrow with whom we are meeting. What we already know and what the patient already knows is of no consequence or importance; the past is past, and anyhow that term is part of the convenience of articulate expression. (Bion, 1997, pp. 35–38)



## The Silver Cord

This willingness to be befuddled seems to be one of the most common marks of the enlightened consciousness. You can hear it in Guston's shaking and trembling "That's me?" as well as in Bion's frank admission of ignorance in the face of a seemingly single individual. In the words of Agnes Martin, it shows up in a different form. Martin, who passed away at the

end of 2004, was yet another pioneering artist whose vision was irrevocably altered through her attendance at Professor Suzuki's class. She was much more of an ascetic than Guston, or even Cage, but she, too, recognized in her artistic process something akin to the Zen consciousness that Suzuki lectured about. "The intellect is a hazard in artwork," she wrote. "I mean, there are so many paintings that have gone down the drain because somebody got an idea in the middle" (Martin, 1992, p. 165).

> The artist works by awareness of his own state of mind. In order to do so he must have a studio, as a retreat and as a place to work. In the studio an artist must have no interruptions from himself or anyone else. Interruptions are disasters. To hold onto the "silver cord," that is the artistic discipline. The artist's own mind will be all the help he needs.
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> There will be moving ahead and discoveries made every day. There will be great disappointments and failures in trying to express them. An artist is one who can fail and fail and still go on. (Martin, 1992, p. 93)

> Happiness is unattached. Always the same. It does not appear and disappear. It is not sometimes more and sometimes less. It is our awareness of happiness that goes up and down.
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> Happiness is our real condition. . . .
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> When we see life we call it beauty. It is magnificent—wonderful.
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> We may be looking at the ocean when we are aware of beauty but it is not the ocean. We may be in the desert and we say that we are aware of the "living desert" but it is not the desert.
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> Life is ever present in the desert and everywhere, forever.
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> By awareness of life we are inspired to live.
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> Life is consciousness of life itself. (Martin, 1992, pp. 135–136)



There is a way of understanding the making of art that links the worlds of psychoanalysis and meditation. At its root is a conception of the unconscious as something other than just the repository of forbidden libidinal urges. The Buddhist unconscious, pointed to by D. T. Suzuki in his lectures and picked up on by Cage, Guston, Ashbery, and Martin, is defined by its lack of attributes and seeps seamlessly into the mystery of aliveness. That is why "emptiness" is the safest descriptive term for it: it is easiest to define by what it is not. The experience of this unconscious is something that meditation aims for, but it is just as retrievable through the modality of art, or even psychotherapy. Listen to the contemporary British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describe his version of it:

> Freud's description of the unconscious suggests that we are lost in thought, and yet people come for psychoanalysis to find out where, or who, they are. . . . With the post-Freudian Freud they are likely to be at cross purposes. Adults, after all, don't tend to go out with the intention of getting lost (though it's not obvious why they don't). Nor do people want to pay good money to realize how clueless they are. Being all over the place, or being seen to be, is traditionally considered to be something of a

> drawback. Symptoms, like insights—pieces of self-knowledge—at least allow one to identify oneself, to make "I am the kind of person who . . ." statements. But if, as Freud suggests, to "have" an unconscious is to be, or to make oneself radically odd to oneself—to be always in and out of character—what is the analyst supposed to be doing to (or for) his patients? To make them more knowing, or enable them to tolerate, or take pleasure from, their clouds of unknowing? Show them that they are afloat on their ignorance, buoyant sometimes, or help them swim for shore? "To improve society spend / more time with people you haven't / met," John Cage advises. You can't help but do this, Freud says, because the person one hasn't met is also always oneself. (Phillips, 1996, p. 15)

The person one hasn't met is also always oneself. Suzuki was a messenger from another time and place who reminded a generation of this basic truth. The people who heard him most easily were artists. The art that they made, and the artists they in turn have inspired, continues to carry his message, asking us to question ourselves instead of settling into complacency, to open ourselves instead of closing down around what we already know, and to embarrass ourselves instead of worrying what other people think. Artists, like psychoanalysts and Zen teachers, are people who can fail and fail and go on.

## Note

1. See Epstein, *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart,* New York: Broadway, 1998.



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