



# 'Losing Self'

## Exploring the Connection Between Art and Meditation

by Dh. Kiranada



I came to meditation through art. The first time I sat with meditation instructions, I went into a deep pristine place where "self" was gone, where there was no separation, where I merged into that inner space. I knew I had been there before many times with my artwork. There was no "me" on the cushion as there had been no "me" at the end of the brush, no ego even working with the judgment of what color should come next, where the line should go, whether this was worth doing. I became as hooked on meditation as I was on art, on moving materials around on paper, canvas and cloth.

For years I looked for breadcrumbs of experience, droppings from others who could share with me their knowledge about art and meditation. I searched the work of psychologists, meditation teachers,

*Kiranada went off for a year of silence to a small hut on the Coromandel Peninsula of New Zealand.*

the writing of fellow artists thirsty for an explanation of what I experienced. I asked in art workshops that I led if anyone had ever experienced "losing self," of merging. I was thrilled when up to 75% of the advanced students said yes. We shared something – ineffable, yes – but there. Many of us know this experience from childhood but have forgotten it. We now watch our children or grandchildren lost in play and can remember that place.

I was encouraged to find the writings of psychoanalyst and pediatrician D.W. Winnicott who spoke of a clear interrelationship between art, psychotherapy and meditation. "All three disciplines thrive when the curious, in-between state of bare attention is allowed to become dominant," he said. In that in-between state, that transitional space, that formless experience, a bridge can be kept open

between imagination and everyday experience.

A 2004 *Tricycle* magazine article cited Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow," the optimum experience of happiness when people are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters, an experience so enjoyable that people do it at great cost to themselves for the sheer sake of doing it. I learned that flow experiences dominate the lives of artists, athletes, musicians, chess masters and even surgeons.

This I knew: that place in my meditation that I could drop into where nothing else was more important, when I could stay seated, unmoving, even if the ceiling fell in, a feeling that I was sitting with what really mattered. Even concentration was gone. Everything outside was just unreal, not true reality.

I had found this in the art process, too. I wondered if the “absorptions” – as Ayya Khema, a Buddhist teacher, calls the jhana states of ecstasy, calm, contentment and

From these musings we have the Triratna Buddhist Community where Dharma study is entwined with the emotional positivity of the arts and ritual. Both can be paths

birthright for all of us.

I carried all of this with me into seven solitary retreats, until it seemed imperative that I take a longer quiet time of contemplation to follow my reflections and the dropped breadcrumbs of others and explore further the connection between art and meditation.

So in July of 2014, I went off for a year to a small hut on a windy precipice on the Coromandel Peninsula of New Zealand to discover, to explore silence, to know myself better, to be quiet and reflective, and to investigate all of this. Art is done in silence. I had been drawn to this idea of silence, of a solitary life and its possible fruits, for decades ever since I saw a film in my teen years about the Birdman of Alcatraz and his solitary confinement.

I asked myself what would happen if I sat alone in a confinement of choice on a ridge for 360 days. Would any art come from it? Any insights? With many questions I sat, meditated, immersed myself in clouds, took my tea into the bush, and asked to learn what it had to

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*Appreciating beauty in impermanence, Kiranada watched leaves transform from green to gray to yellow.*

## ***... Dharma study is entwined with the emotional positivity of the arts and ritual. Both can be paths to awakening.***

stillness – were a link. I wanted to understand where my art experiences fit in with these Buddhist studies of self and the bliss of transcending.

I am still researching this. Could these art experiences be first or second jhana? Is there a connection between what artists and meditators experience, between art and meditation? Something that we are still discovering? Are the contemplative arts in some way a stepping stone to awakening as the Zen arts tell us?

Moving to Japan I learned of The Way (Dō). I heard monks encourage western practitioners to study enlightenment through following the Zen arts rather than the arduous 18 hour zazen sits that were usually proscribed. Could this be true? Could studying Sho-dō (the Way of the Brush) or Cha-dō (The Way of Tea), even Aiki-dō (The Way of Ki Energy), be ways to transcend and reach the ineffable? Different routes?

Returning to the USA after 18 years abroad and still on the trail of art and meditation, I found more connection to this ineffable route in the work of our Triratna founder Bhante Sangharakshita, a poet himself. I learned of his struggles early on while training in India, the struggles he experienced between time on the meditation cushion and Dharma writing, the work of the intellectual and the joy he found through participation in and appreciation of the arts. He asked himself if involvement with the arts could lead to enlightenment or was it only indulgence. Through personal explorations he found a deep and valuable integration between these two aspects of head and heart.

to awakening. Increasing our exposure and appreciation of art and the natural world around us can have some definite impact on the life of a Bodhisattva.

Like Sangharakshita, I, too, had questions about the paths to enlightenment that were not the usual. While some young people show early artistic talent, that discovery and intense focus can separate them from others. I have grown to believe that art/creativity is a birthright for all, not something to be indulged in only by the talented few, those gifted in art areas. To truly “see,” to increase our awareness of line and color in our environment, our awareness of balance and repetition is not something only gifted artists can do or should do. I grew to believe that the joy and bliss that comes from this is a



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teach me. I asked if I could live more fully in the moment. Could I wake up to being grateful, appreciative? Through my life in the arts I knew that to be creative is to let go. I wanted to find silence. I listened and watched and took it in, creating with what I had.

I opened my ears and my eyes in new ways, remembering again and again a refrain from a favorite poem, "Mind Set Free" by the 14th century Zen master and poet Shutaku (1308-1388) who lived at Nanzen-ji Temple in my beloved Kyoto:

*Mind set free in the Buddha realm  
I sit at the moon-filled window  
Watching the mountain with my ears,  
Hearing the stream with open eyes.  
Each molecule preaches perfect law.  
Each moment chants a true sutra.  
The most fleeting thought is timeless.  
A single hair is enough to stir the sea.*

With eyes wide open and ears receptive, I took in that landscape before me. Thoughts bubbled up, and I remembered how to let them go and become the landscape: a leaf, a piece of bamboo. I remembered how to transfer that to art, to paper. I remembered the ancient Japanese wisdom about "The Way to Draw Bamboo."

*First, draw bamboo for ten years.  
Then become bamboo.  
Then forget all about bamboo  
When you are drawing.*

Become a bamboo! I knew that when you focus and really look at something, you actually can fall in love. I remembered a one-inch crack in the tile floor at a Java monastery that I noted every day on my walking meditation and how it became a tiny fish, a vertebrae in my mind that was transferred to a cut stencil, that worked into four pieces of rozone/wax-resist art work.

I remembered a leaf I passed everyday on my meditation path in New Zealand that I fell in love with. I watched and noted it over 11 months. I saw its transformation, watched the insect bites enlarge, its glossy green color dull, blemishes and stains enlarge from green to gray to yellow. I realized that this leaf was aging just as I was aging. Falling in love, appreciating the impermanence of life, I grew to note the simple beauty all around me.

I remembered others in a solitary life and how even when all was taken away, when all was destroyed, there was beauty to see. I found

## Making Art a Part of Your Life and Daily Practice

by Dh. Kiranada

When I gave a talk for Triratna's Urban Retreat this past fall on "Arts and Beauty," I was asked to include some suggestions on what we might do in our own urban and rural environments to make art part of our lives. I share these ideas with you:

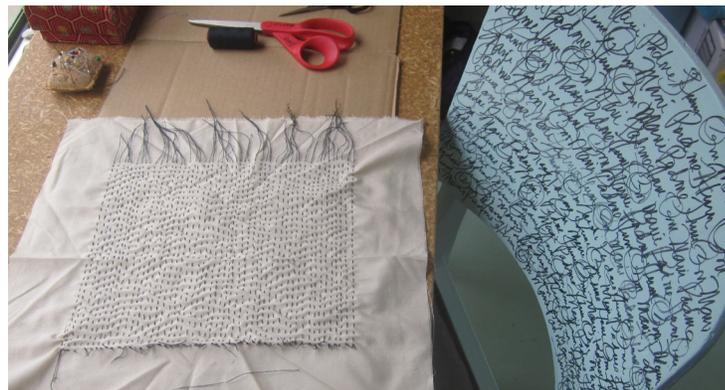
- Simplify. Clean your space for new views.
- Take an art class, a drawing class or a design class, not to become proficient, to produce masterpieces or become an artist, but to learn to see, to appreciate what surrounds you. Learn to see line, color, pattern, texture, variety and contrast and to feed your emotions.
- Encourage others and appreciate what they have created. Buy art. Give it away.
- Note the beautiful in each day, not only when the glorious sun shines through the fall leaves, but also when it is deliciously rainy, damp and full of puddles, moving gray clouds or mist. Yummy. Nourishing.
- Celebrate the changing seasons. Create from the bounty. Cook a new dish for friends. Create a collage of found materials. Build a shrine to the season, a woodland stupa of found rocks.
- Have a weekly "art date" as Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, suggests.
- Go to a museum and spend time with just one or two paintings only, alone. Take them in.
- Go to a concert or listen to a fine recording and absorb all the subtle levels of melody and rhythm.
- Go to the woods, to an urban park, to one tree, a blade of grass or twig and see what it has to tell you. In the inner city, even a bit of odd machinery, a jumble of trash or a smudge of graffiti has a message, beauty.

solace in my research about others confined in the harsh conditions of solitary confinement:

- Nien Cheng, who fell in love with a small spider and its miraculous web, connecting with it daily during her six years in solitary confinement in Shanghai.
- Robert Stroud (the Birdman of Alcatraz), who discovered a small bird nest in the exercise yard and made it his life work over 43 years of silence in prison at Leavenworth, Kansas, and in Alcatraz, California.
- Dr. Edith Bone, who translated poems she had memorized into the six languages she knew over the seven years she was held in a frigid, dark cell in Hungary.

All three found beauty in their environment and creative ways of handling the most severe conditions and survived – whole – because of it.

I reflected on finding that creativity in my own environment. What floated into my consciousness was a trip with my teenage daughter to the Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand years ago. After days of tromping through jungle-like thickets, crossing rivers, meeting tribesmen with guns on their backs, feeling echoes of a long-gone Vietnam War, we arrived in a high village. After a little unpacking, we each went our own way to explore. I soon circled round and discovered my daughter (who disavows any art talent herself) there on her knees surrounded by a gaggle of small children, working the earth, smoothing the brilliant red, iron-soaked dirt, making lines and patterns in it. Each child pressed a vibrant green leaf from nearby shrubs into the earth patterns creating an amazing abstract painting there on the ground with available materials. No shared language, no pre-planning, yet a cooperative project. It was a dazzling piece of art that still so



While on retreat, Kiranada stitched cloth and painted mantras on a chair.



Away from her usual art materials while on a year-long retreat, Kiranada created a Buddha collage of the tiny stickers collected from the fruit she ate.

many years later I see in my mind's eye as a glorious environmental painting in the hills of Thailand.

And I, there in New Zealand, away from my usual art materials found my own ways to express creativity. Collecting tiny stickers from every piece of fruit that came into my hut over the year, I created a Buddha collage from it in the last weeks. I painted mantras on rocks. I painted mantras on a chair. I stitched cloth, pulling up threads, recording. I watched. I listened.

I wrote of this in my journal, Notes from a Year of Silence: "A year on a precipice in the wilderness of New Zealand. Alone, I look, listen and explore silence. Working with needle and Ahimsa (non-harm) silk, I consider how to 'record' silence, how to make silence visible. I look at the capacity of cloth to absorb, to mute, to hold sound between the tines of thread, silence woven in and held.

"I look at the work I have created with silk and dyes and see the ruffles and ridges of silence embedded in the weave; silence – quiet and pristine, yet articulated. Woven, stitched,

pulled, marked with plant essence, with plant residue, with dyes; silence in my hands; silence in my fingers, listening – hearing with my eyes, watching with my ears."

And so I went to a mountain with questions, with years of research and study, with observations of art processes and my own mind. I went to a hut on a precipice with all of these thoughts, there to watch and consider, to let go, to dissolve into the rising mist, to transform into the waning moon, to fall in love with a tattered leaf on a meditation path. Art. Buddhism. Samsara. The jhanas. Impermanence. Joy and bliss.

*Kiranada, artist, lecturer and author, found Buddhism after arriving in Kyoto in 1981. Returning to the USA she was ordained in the Triratna Buddhist Order in 2009. Kiranada has exhibited her art in more than 50 exhibitions worldwide and delights in coordinating the Contemplative Arts Program at Aryaloka.*