

Art as a means of spiritual elevation

By Yonten Rabje

"Art is the most rapid vehicle, after prayer, for connecting directly with one's Buddha-nature."

Yönten is a Buddhist monk living at Samye Ling Tibetan Centre where, in retreat, he began to draw and paint for the first time in his life, and soon developed a passion for his artwork. He describes himself as a man obsessed with faces, seeing them in every object, never wasting any materials. His pictures, painted stones and wax creations are annotated with profound messages, often humorous, many reflecting his own Buddhist philosophy on existence. He exhibits his work in his Art Shed where he lives, with any proceeds going to 'Rokpa', a charity that provides humanitarian aid to remote rural areas of Tibet.

I lived an entire life until yesterday according to the dominant aesthetic and philosophical principle of our western culture, namely, that "Art is an aim in itself". This principle aims to protect the independence and freedom of art and the artist. So far, no problem! In Italy we also say this in a more concrete way: "Art doesn't recognise an owner or a banner, still less any borders". But Art is not only a means of free expression; Art is also a means of satisfaction, otherwise it is not living. Slowly, slowly it becomes arid in its content and in the long term it dies out. Because Art, unlike other means of intellectual production, is an activity that is essentially of the spirit, or of our Buddha-nature. The spirit does not feed on bread alone: it lives on feelings. So, when one's feelings are unpleasant or even neutral, the spirit is out of matter and matter alone is heavy and flat. The absence in the artist of a spiritual life prevents him from seeing the presence of the spirit outside him.

I first encountered Buddhism only eight years ago in Spain while on a bike tour from Italy to Morocco. At that time I entered the Gelupa Buddhist community (based on the tradition of the Dalai Lama) in the Sierra Nevada and began to practice this faith because it gave me a reason to live. After 6 months I came to Britain to learn English. From London I travelled with my bike to Scotland where I knew of another Buddhist community, Samye Ling - the kajupa monastery and Tibetan Centre in Eskdalemuir, Dumfriesshire. Eighteen months after my arrival I entered the 4-year retreat. Some 6 months later my mind began to have visions, and I began to paint. This was how my visionary art first began - at the considerable age of 59 years old! After coming out of retreat I opened an exhibition of my visionary art at Samye Ling, in support of our charitable trust, the Rokpa Trust, which helps Tibetan communities.

If the motivation is pure, as one creates Art in order to express oneself, then the maxim "Art is an aim in itself" automatically becomes a means of spiritual elevation because the Artist is genuine and sincere, and this, sooner or later, becomes conducive to practicing a faith (whether one already has one or encounters a new one). Of course, Art created in this way is enormously satisfying. If it is not so, it is because the Artist uses his or her Art just to achieve fame, money or success, enslaving his Art to those passions which he has to liberate in order to be happy or satisfied with himself.

The observations I have described here are not an intellectual deduction about myself. Rather they are the fruit of personal experience, extraordinary in itself. Every time I am so-called 'creative', whether through my painting or through something else, I observe that there are some points of spontaneous origination, which always surprise me because of their perfect correspondence with the basic idea of my work. It is exactly in such moments that I kneel down and thank my Buddha-nature because it has let me both conceive and realise my artwork without my own conscious knowledge. I have no technical skills. I had never painted or even held a brush before in my life. (As in all my activities I remain an outsider, or an "autodidact", as I prefer to define myself). This spontaneous origination happens every time I have an empty mind, that is, when I find myself in front of a so-called "white page" or blank canvas. (An empty mind in our relative world is not to be confused with an Enlightened mind, which reaches emptiness. The latter is a mind full of wisdom and awareness, the former is the opposite: a mind which is as ignorant as the "I" mind.)

There is no artist in the world who hasn't experienced in his or her life the terror of "the white page"! It is also said that there is no poem better than that of the "white page" because it expresses the silence which is the most perfect form of our spirit or Buddha-nature and which is so hard to find within oneself. "Silence?" exclaims the poor perplexed Artist, who is as ordinary as any other sentient being in the world (and a potential Buddha). Instead of relaxing and meditating on it, he contracts his mind and becomes depressed. In a desperate attempt to create something, he tries to fill that terrifying white page or blank canvas as best he can, even if it is only with dirty marks or daubs, in the hidden hope of receiving the message which will provide the key to the entire work. Here it comes spontaneously, but where does it come from? The self doesn't know exactly, but it knows from experience that it will happen.

In Buddhism, we know it comes from Emptiness, which is itself Form and vice versa. The presence of faith within the Artist is essential because Art itself is a magic activity of the spirit. This is why I say art is the most rapid way, after prayer, to connect with our selves.

The next day or even a long time afterwards, when perhaps he has totally forgotten that awful scribbling, coming across it accidentally or not, he screams

out at the miracle! The daubed picture, or the simple outlined motif or poem, now speaks to him and he begins to compose the spreading signals in a harmonic composition, until perhaps he comes to create his so-called masterpiece.

This is the power of meditation. It clears the mind of the emotional clouds, like those of the Scottish sky, letting the sunshine of one's Buddha-nature, or spirit, shine through. Some will ask themselves why one should even distinguish this, when it is enough simply to be grateful for the received gift and amen! This is the moment in which one has to bow one's head, and ask for forgiveness for one's pride having allowed one's unconscious to dare so much; or on the contrary, for having doubted that one were capable of conceiving that initial scribbling as a masterpiece. Creation itself is a mystical moment in which the mind opens, and the intellect is dazzled by the light of one's Buddha-nature, leaving one feeling profoundly humble. (In recognizing the limitations of every sentient being, resides the secret to acquiring wisdom - which is profound knowledge pervaded with love and compassion.)

Loving Art is loving all sentient beings, because Art itself is a source of love and compassion. Art as a means of spiritual elevation is automatically the Art of true freedom, because the Artist connects directly with his or her pure mind. Art can become "the most rapid vehicle" to connect with ourselves, through the language of the spontaneous images that arise from within us. This is the means of expression of the primordial man (like the language of the caveman!), its images being so much more mystical and genuine than the language spoken by the ego mind! It is why visitors to my Art Shed are enchanted by the magical effect of my genuine Art which is very, very poor, as I use only recycled materials. I don't exaggerate when I say that there are few people who do not go away expressing some big emotion in their eyes.

As Judith McNicol has written elsewhere, "This is an Art with the purity and integrity that comes from the innocent wisdom of its creators. It is an Art that touches the spirit", or one's Buddha-nature!

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Note: (*One's Buddha-nature is the nature of an enlightened sentient being who has been "awoken", who can then see things as they are without the dualistic mind - an illusory entity which we call 'I' or the Ego - polarising perceptions into good or bad, correct or incorrect, love or hate, etc*)

BIOGRAPHY

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