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**Buddhist Meditation as Art Practice:  
Art Practice as Buddhist Meditation**

Su-Lien Hsieh

PhD

2010

**Buddhist Meditation as Art Practice:**  
**Art Practice as Buddhist Meditation**

Su-Lien Hsieh

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of the requirements of the  
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Fine Art

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of meditation on art practice. Its basic hypothesis is that Buddhist meditation can expand creative capacity by enabling the practitioner to transcend the limits of everyday sense experience and consciousness. Artists engaging in meditation develop a closer, more aware relationship with their emptiness mind (*kongxin*), freeing them from preconceptions and contexts that limit their artistic creation.

Because this practice-led research focuses on how to expand one's freedom as an artist, I use two models to explore studio practice, then compare and contrast them with my own prior approach. A year-by-year methodology is followed, as artistic practice develops over time. The first model is studio practice in the UK, the second is Buddhist meditation before artistic activity. The research took place over three years, each representing a distinct area. Accordingly, in area 1 (the first year), I compared studio art practice in the UK with post-meditation art practice; in area 2 (the second year), I compared studio art practice in the UK with prostration practice at Bodh-gaya, India plus meditation before act activity; in area 3 (the third year), I compared studio art practice in the UK with entering a month-long meditation retreat in Taiwan before practicing art.

By Buddhist meditation I refer more specifically to insight meditation, which K. Sri Dhammananda has described as follows:

Buddha offers four objects of meditation for consideration: body, feeling, thoughts, and mental states. The basis of the Satipatthana (Pāli, refers to a “foundation” for a “presence” of mindfulness) practice is to use these four objects for the development of concentration, mindfulness, and insight or understanding of our-self and the world around you. Satipatthana offers the most simple, direct, and effective method for training the mind to meet daily tasks and problems and to achieve the highest aim: liberation. (K. Sri

Dhammananda 1987:59)

In my own current meditation practice before art practice, I sit in a lotus position and focus on breathing in and breathing out, so that my mind achieves a state of emptiness and calm and my body becomes relaxed yet fully energized and free. When embarking on artistic activity after meditation, the practice of art then emerges automatically from this enhanced body/mind awareness. For an artist from an Eastern culture, this post-meditation art seems to differ from the practices of Western art, even those that seek to eliminate intention (e.g. Pollock), in that the artist's action seem to genuinely escape *cogito*: that is, break free of the rational dimensions of creating art. In my training and development as a studio artist, I applied *cogito* all the time, but this frequently generated body/mind conflict, which became most apparent after leaving the studio at the end of the day: I always felt exhausted, and what was worse, the art that I created was somehow limited. However, my experience was that Buddhist meditation, when applied before undertaking art practice, establishes body/mind harmony and empties the mind. For this artist at least, this discovery seemed to free my art as it emerged from emptiness through the agency of my energized hand. It was this, admittedly highly personal, experience that led me to undertake the research that informs this thesis.

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# Buddhist Meditation as Art Practice: Art Practice as Buddhist Meditation

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction to research motivation**

### **1.1 Background, aim, and questions**

I have always wanted to attain freedom of art. By ‘freedom of art’ I do not mean doing whatever I want, but rather the kind of freedom from mental and physical constraints that in turn permits freer creativity in my painting and calligraphy. I was therefore motivated to investigate an approach to art practice that differed from what I had learned in my earlier artistic training (at, for example, Winchester School of Art, 1997-98) by the application of Buddhist meditation.

The purpose of this research, then, has been to investigate whether practicing Buddhist meditation can truly develop freedom of art practice, and how this freedom of art practice differs from general art practices. While conducting this research, I always asked myself, ‘How can I free my art?’ and ‘How can I improve my daily art practice?’

### **1.2 Methodology**

To investigate meditation’s effect on art practice, I experimented with three different approaches to art practice in three different environments and compared them with conventional, day-to-day studio art practice. This methodology is widely known as ‘action research.’

What is action research in art? Wanda T. May, Janet Masters, Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead describe it as follows: ‘Action research is the study and enhancement of one’s own practice’ (May 1993:114).

[T]he project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated (Masters 1995).

Supporting practitioners, as they engage with their enquiries and learn about their work, and become deeply involved in learning about mine, have helped me to see that generating theories about work must begin within the work. It is no use importing preconceived ideas of how practices will fall out: things simply do not work like that. Creating ideas begins with practice; it is important to critique one's own theory against the wider theories in the literature, but it seems self-evident that the kind of theory, which will help us improve our social situations, has to arise from learning about the practice from within the practice itself (This is not, however, to deny that propositional theories can prove valuable insights which can be integrated within our logics of practice.)

This view is quite contrary to the dominant opinion that an empirical body of knowledge exists which can be applied to practice. (McNiff and Whitehead 2002:4-5)

Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask: 'What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?' Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning, and influence the learning of others. These accounts come to stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish. (McNiff & Whitehead 2002:7)

I integrated my art practice within Buddhist meditation practice and investigated different levels of meditation in order to improve my art practice. My methodology thus utilized meditation to investigate art practice. Moreover, within this 'meditation-as-art-practice' I conducted these experiments at three different levels, in three different environments, to compare them with ordinary studio art practice.

Moreover, each level of the investigative process may be viewed as a spiralling cycle

of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on my art practice. The process did in fact closely parallel Kurt Lewin's description of research that 'proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin 1946, in Hart and Bond 1995:15). This basic format of a spiral of steps lives on in the design of many action research studies. A simple diagram of the action research spiral is shown below:

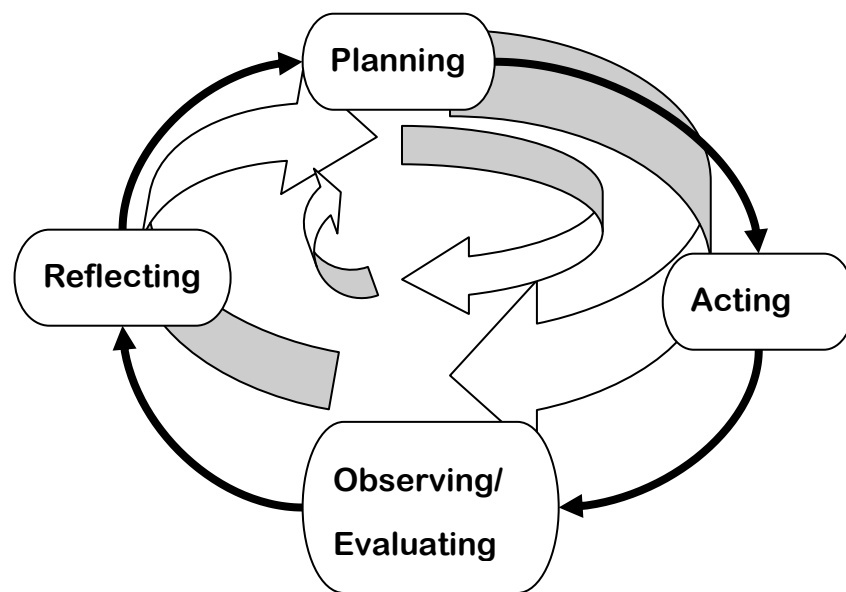


Fig.1.1: The action research spiral

Diagram from: [http://www.rdsu.soton.ac.uk/documents/Action\\_research\\_newsletter.doc](http://www.rdsu.soton.ac.uk/documents/Action_research_newsletter.doc)

During this spiralling cycle of action research, I continuously asked myself: 'What am I practicing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?' and finally, 'Does my art demonstrate the effectiveness of meditation-as-art-practice?' Although the questions seemed to arise naturally from the practice, they were now also supported by the action research.

I should add that action research in art and Buddhist meditation have certain similarities in terms of process and purpose, and so they are quite compatible. It is likely

that few conventionally trained artists realize this. However, Ken Wilbur, the proponent of what he calls 'Integral Theory,' which draws heavily on Buddhist thought, has described meditation in terms that should immediately bring to mind the action research spiral:

Meditation is, if anything, a sustained instrumental path of transcendence. And since--as we saw--transcendence and development are synonymous, it follows that meditation is simply *sustained development* or growth. It is not primarily a way to reverse things but a way to carry them on. It is the natural and orderly unfolding of successively higher-order unities, until there is only Unity, until all potential is actual, until all the ground-unconscious is unfolded as Consciousness. (Wilber 1999b:109)

Therefore I envision that the main contribution of this research is in demonstrating how Buddhist meditation practices may be applied to art in order to yield positive results that differ from those achieved by Western artists who have sought to subvert the grip of *cogito* on their creative practices. An example would be the Surrealist painter Andre Masson who explored the potential of automatic drawing and, in order to generate reduced states of consciousness, experimented with both drugs and long periods without food and sleep. Later in the thesis I will explore examples of Western artists such as Masson who challenged the controlling influence of the rational mind as well as some contemporary practitioners who promote forms of art based on Buddhist teaching. However, all these examples differ from my project in that, as far as I am able to ascertain, the ambition is always to produce artworks. In contrast, my ambition is to conflate art production and meditation as a Buddhist technique with Buddhist, rather than artistic, goals. Indeed, in this emergent Buddhist practice meditative and art processes revolve around each other in a continuous upward spiral.

This spiral process, in the present research project, took place at overlapping times in

three areas of my artistic endeavour. It may be diagrammatized as follows: (see fig.1.2)

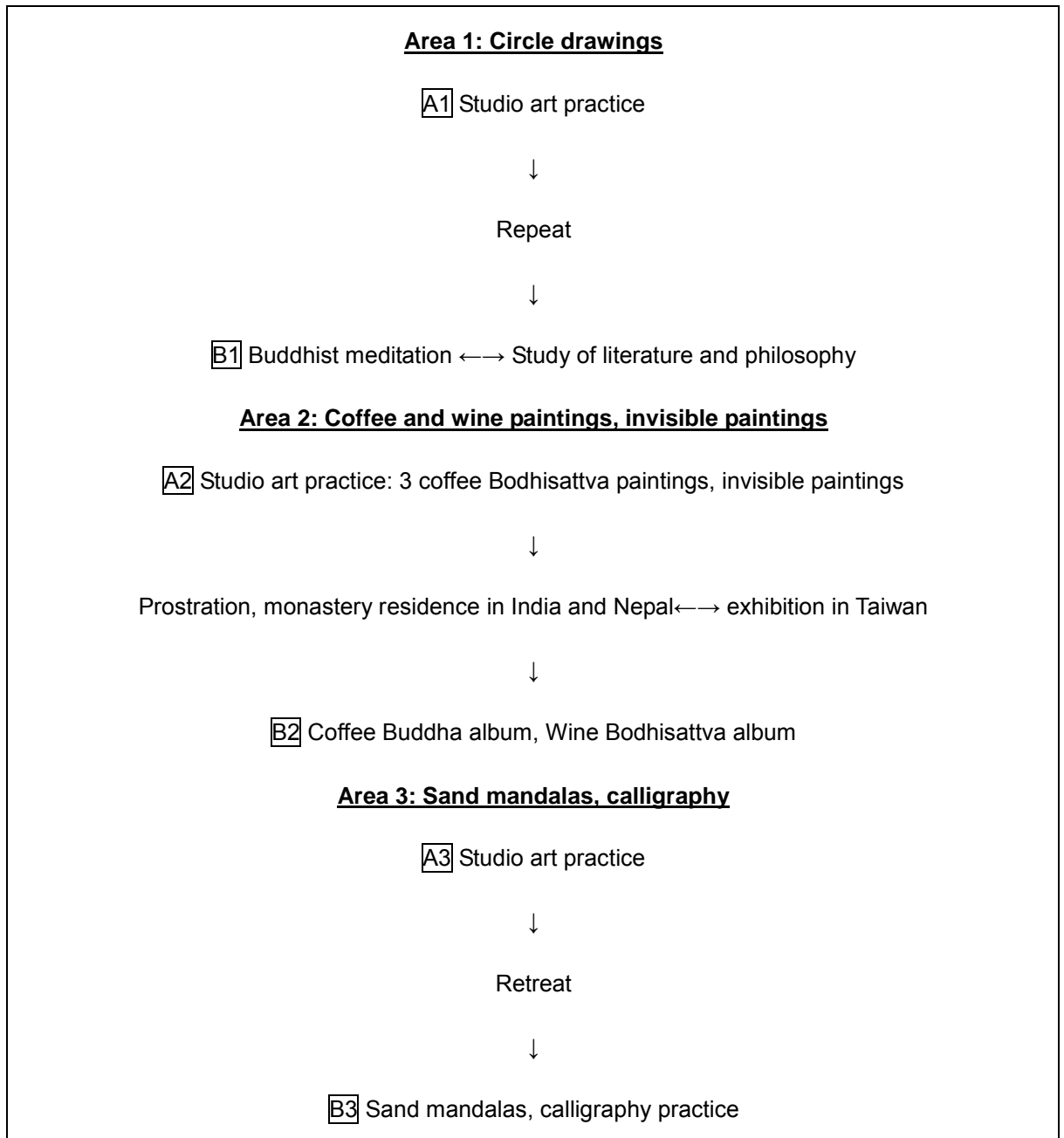


Fig. 1.2: This research spiral process.

In Area 1, I focused on drawing circles symbolic of the lotus. Area 2 consists of my paintings of Bodhisattva or Buddha in wine, coffee, and invisible media; Area 3 consists of my work with sand mandalas and calligraphy. Each area involves art practice before and after some form of meditation practice, and each corresponds to a chapter in the present study.

### 1.3 The plan of the present work

In Chapter Two (corresponding to Area 1 of the diagram above), I compare the ordinary studio art practice of drawing circles on one hand with day-to-day meditation within day-to-day studio art on the other. The drawing of circles may seem extremely simple, but the act contains many layers of meaning and implication. Besides the circle's traditional Buddhist association with the lotus, there are additional philosophical and historical associations in the West (for example, ancient Egypt), not to mention the practical considerations involved in the act of creating one. One of the aims of circle drawing is to discover and mark off what is internal and what is external. However, the repeated drawing of circles is also an act of meditation in which one concentrates on the formless and mindless. I eliminate any goal, even mindfulness of mindlessness, and time, space and suffering disappear.

My art practice thus reduces the distinctions of body / mind and inner / outer as well as delimiting influences. The act of circle-making (creating a distinction) and the act of meditation (eliminating distinction), as they are repeated, leads to moments in which unity is created, image and consciousness are combined, the experience of ego is reduced, and I lose the bounds of time and space. The circle becomes a metaphor for the freeing of the body / mind from the boundaries of intuition, the achievement of a balanced stillness.

In Chapter Two I pause to consider repetition in art practice in the light of an idea that Edmund Husserl discusses in *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic* (1900-1901): the unity of perception and lived experience through objective time. It is an idea that I can appreciate, based on my own experience, but I find that Husserl does not go on to prescribe how one might unify that perception. Although Husserl finds that time forms the basis for unity between the intentional object of perception and the ego, he regards the human being as natural, a being that cannot escape the sphere of the problem of object perception and the single stream of ego-consciousness. In his *Idea: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1931), he discusses 'the self-suspending of the

phenomenologist,' being disconnected from the natural world, and eidetic spheres of the transcendent order, which would surely bring 'pure' consciousness, but even so, he regards the human being as remaining grounded in the natural world of phenomenology.

Husserl's point of view forms a sharp contrast with the Buddha Sakyamuni's teaching that sensory perception (seeing, tasting, hearing, smelling, touching) is illusion, and that the mind of consciousness is one of emptiness. To achieve the mind of emptiness, Buddha taught meditation, which involves 'full awareness of breathing,' a practice that is very immediately physical. There was no mind / body division for him. This seemed to provide a ready model, so I decided to integrate meditation into my art practice and see what happened.

A key aspect of repeating the circular brush strokes that I derived from the symbolic lotus (as introduced in Chapter 1 above) is that each repeated action is new. It is similar to breathing in that with each cycle of inhalation and exhalation, the breath is different. Each breath exists in its own moment, and each moment is new. Likewise, each repetition of my circles is new and never quite the same. The circles may show the apparent phenomena of internality and externality, but I am not looking for phenomena. Rather, I am looking for the inner stillness of each moment from which I create art. The circles may be understood to represent the mind at discrete moments in time; each is similar, but not quite the same. They are neither one nor many, and any meaning contained therein is deemed to be held in the ego consciousness.

In Chapter Two I thus compare two kinds of products: those coming from ordinary studio practice, which emphasizes practice through repetition, and those coming from the blend of meditation with ordinary studio practice. We shall see that the latter become near-perfect circles (see Figs. 1.3 and 1.4 below).



Fig. 1.3: Pre-meditation/art practice/2005 (Area 1A)

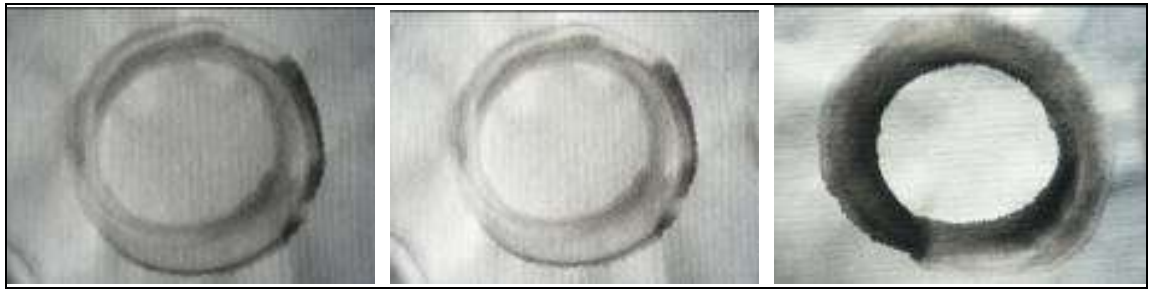


Fig. 1.4: Post-meditation/art practice/2005 (Area 1B)

The final part of Chapter 2 includes an interview with my classmate John Lavell about his research, entitled: 'The power of naming: co-option in studio-based creative practice'. My art practice of repeated action is very similar to Lavell's, as both of us intend to research the phenomenology of time-consciousness through action across long stretches of time.

Chapter Three is divided into two sections. The first section discusses my initial studio practice in the creation of my *Seeing and Unseeing: Is It Coffee or Is It Bodhisattva?* between September 2005 and July 2006. I was extremely attracted to an ancient painting of the Bodhisattva Pandmapani (Fig. 1.5) reproduced in Benoy K. Behl's *The Ajanta Caves: Artistic Wonder of Ancient Buddhist India* (1956). I thus made three copies of this image, using coffee as a medium. Through repetition, I was able to explore the relationship between ego-consciousness and intuition in the body/mind.



Fig. 1.5: Bodhisattva Padmapani

While executing these paintings, I asked myself why each copy could never be the same. How would the variance relate to the state of the body/mind? If I remain the same person, with the same body/mind and the same habits, why is each painting different? Who, then, am I? Am I one or many?

I chose coffee as my medium because it is something that people drink and smell every day. Although they might not see the Bodhisattva image every day, and in fact might never have seen this particular Bodhisattva image before, people would still be able to recognize the Bodhisattva while not recognizing the coffee. Clearly, the body/mind is separate from the image. If so, where is the body/mind? We are thus forced to observe the 'I' or 'me' as being inside cognition and sense perception. The repetitive act is a process of exploring the supporting conditions for knowledge and vision ascribing reality to things that are seen, deep-rooted obstructive habits (often taking the guise of intuitions or assumptions), and so on. Therefore, this ambiguous experiment allowed me to understand the problem of people's perceptions of the body/mind and consciousness.

Section one of Chapter Three goes on to discuss my experience of residing in a Tibetan monastery at Bodhgaya, India, and at a monastery at Kathmandu, Nepal from October to November 2006. At Bodhgaya, I participated in an exhaustive ritual that

required 10,000 prostration sequences over 13 days. Completing 1,000 prostrations took more than eight hours per day. Again, this ritual action may itself be considered a kind of meditation, since there is no time left for anything else. It is an intense practice for developing emptiness of mind.

Through physical action in meditation, one eliminates contingencies, limits, the seeing of the eyes, and the causes of intention; eventually one develops the emptiness of mind (even of seeing) needed for art practice. The idea of 'seeing and unseeing' in art practice recalls Sartre's idea of belief as the consciousness of belief. Belief-consciousness is similar to sub-consciousness or Husserl's pre-given consciousness. At the same time, it recalls Buddha's teaching about the eye seeing the darkness of the bright moon. Even on a moonless night the mind will tell the eyes that the moon is still there. Hence in this section I will also discuss the problems of sense-consciousness and material consciousness.

I then resumed working in my studio at Taiwan, and from November to December 2006, I once more picked up the theme of Buddha and Bodhisattva painting. I executed an album of approximately 29 images of the Buddha in coffee, and an album of approximately 27 or 28 images of the Bodhisattva in wine. As the titles of the works indicate, however, they ask whether the colour is produced by the coffee and wine—the point being that the media and the works, like all objects, are in the world of phenomena, and that the truth of emptiness is emptiness. As we shall see, the works produced post-meditation exhibit a greater harmony between 'Bodhisattva' or 'Buddha' on one hand and 'coffee' or 'wine' on the other. One might say, in Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, the medium has become the message (McLuhan & Lapham, 1964:7).

In the second section of Chapter Three, I discuss an experiment with a series of art works entitled *Being Becoming Nothingness*. At the same time I produced the coffee Bodhisattva paintings, I was conducting another experiment: I produced a painting of the Bodhisattva in Bristol Fluorescent paint. Without the presence of UV light, the unassisted

eye will see nothing more than a fuzzy outline. Because the image is so hard to see, the 'mind's eye' will go on to construct its own image, which may be quite fanciful. This demonstrates that when the body-based seeing subject has lost direction, the ego-consciousness begins to steer it. The eye will continue to scan the fuzzy image up and down in a wavelike motion, but the seeing is controlled by ego-consciousness. I, then, practice meditation before art practice.

Chapter Four discusses the third area of my artistic practice: calligraphy. I have been trained in the Chinese art of calligraphy since childhood, but for many years I felt frustrated at the seeming impossibility of making any further improvement. Again, a crucial transformation took place during my experience of retreat and intensive meditation in India and Nepal. Before this, while still in Newcastle (September 2005 to January 2007), I had completed several dozen calligraphic works on Chinese paper, as well as one small album of calligraphy. After India and Nepal, I resumed the practice of calligraphy while also doing a solo retreat of my own, in a house located in Yangmingshan National Park, Taiwan. This resulted in the production, again, of several dozen calligraphic works and one small album.

Chapter Four is divided into two sections. The first revisits the development of body/mind unity through sand mandala practice and discusses the main point of concentration-breathing in and breathing out-in greater depth. At Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, I received further training in meditation, specifically toward achieving unity of body/mind consciousness and emptiness of mind in art practice, by studying the practice of making a sand mandala. The making of a sand mandala demands absolute concentration, a focus on maintaining steady breathing, and the elimination of extraneous images from the mind. The making of a sand mandala is extremely challenging, because if you keep your hand too close, your breath will make the sand spread everywhere; if you try holding your breath, then you soon become light-headed and blurry-eyed. However, stretching your arm out and keeping your hand distant is not an option, because then it becomes impossible to deposit the sand grains in

their proper place. Focusing on the control of breath is thus absolutely necessary, otherwise the mind becomes distracted by these considerations of the hand's position, its handling of the sand, and so on. By entering the meditative state and focusing on the breath, one empties the mind, makes it still—and only then does the creation of the sand mandala become possible. Philosophically speaking, it is a demonstration of phenomena—the 'visual field and tactile field' (Husserl [1907] 1997:68) emerging from emptiness.

In the second section of Chapter Four, I compare my pre- and post-retreat calligraphic practice and the works produced. I also discuss my retreat at Yangmingshan. As indicated above, during my conventional day-to-day studio work in Newcastle, I became increasingly frustrated at my lack of development in calligraphy. Even those unfamiliar with Chinese calligraphy would be able to discern the problem I was experiencing with my calligraphic practice. Figure 1.6A shows a page of Chinese characters that look both heavy and static.

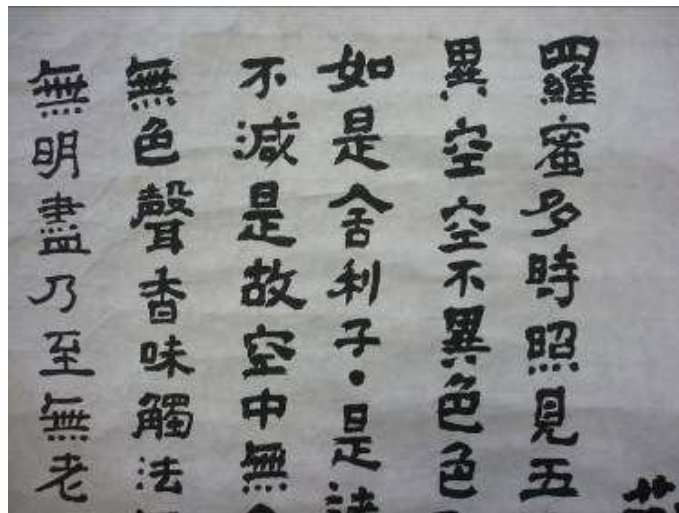


Fig. 1.6A: Pre-meditation calligraphy practice

At this stage, because the hand that holds the brush still lacks a genuine fluidity of movement, the lines themselves lack the fluid grace that is so essential to the calligraphic art, to the point that they sometimes become quavery. Moreover, there is a certain

unevenness or imbalance in the way the characters are spread across the paper. This indicates that my mind was overly preoccupied with line and form, and with conscious attempts to control them. I failed to attain the 'unity of perception' that would enable me to take in the entirety of the paper before me—both the black forms and the white voids.

The action research or retreat into Chinese calligraphy took place from October to December 2008 on Yangmingshan, where I was able to find a place of solitude conducive to the combined practice of meditation and art. On Yangmingshan I practiced chanting, insight meditation, sitting meditation, walking meditation, and prostration, and in each I adopted the breathing exercises I had learned. Therefore in Chapter Four I compare these exercises, citing sutras on breathing and meditation, with techniques of Chinese brush painting and calligraphy.

As I emptied my mind of distractions and achieved higher states of awareness through meditation, and as I released myself from the restraints of ego-consciousness, I could reach the state of emptiness and selflessness from which the practice of art could develop and grow in a manner like that of traditional Buddhist descriptions of the lotus. The consciousness of art practice emerged from and balanced with the non-consciousness of meditation (see Figs. 1.6B and 1.7).

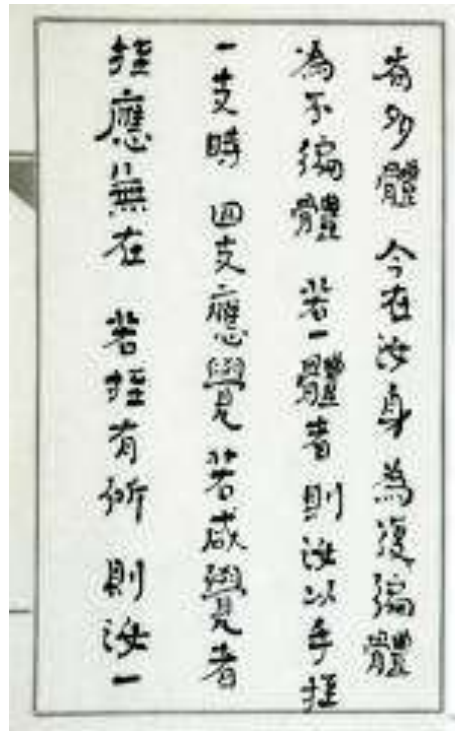


Fig. 1.6B: Post-meditation calligraphy practice

Meditation is, if anything, a sustained instrumental path of transcendence, and even though in practice it is not easy to recognize such metaphysical changes to the body/mind, they will, I maintain, be manifest in the practice of art. That is, if transcendence is the attainment of a high level of body/mind awareness and development, then meditation is a means toward sustained development or growth in everyday creative life. The calligraphic works that I produced during this period show marked improvement.

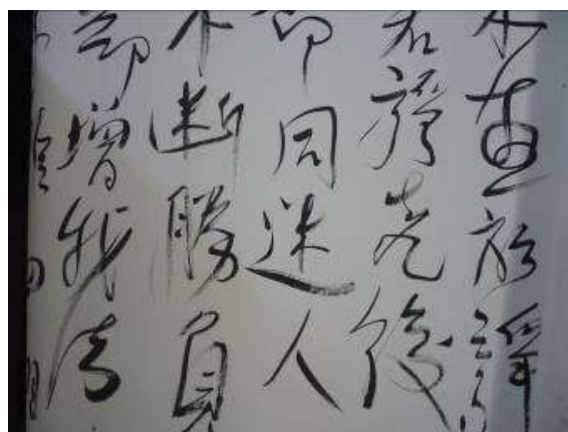


Fig. 1.7: Post-retreat calligraphy practice, 2008

In Chapter Five I offer my final conclusions, answering my starting questions, 'How can I experience freedom through my art?' (that is, arrive at a point at which my practice as an artist is not bound by material, physical or mental conditions), and, 'How can I improve my daily art practice?' (that is, how can I develop a creative routine in which, on a day-to-day basis, I make my mind still and empty?). The answer stems from this combination of Buddhist meditation and art, which allows the art to emerge from nothingness.

I attach an appendix discussing an exhibition of mine entitled 'The art practice of 0 and 1.' It includes a personal statement accompanying the exhibition as well as the text of a statement written by the curator, Jau-lan Guo (Thomas E. Smith translated these into English).

## Chapter 2

### Repetitive Action

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the symbolism of the lotus in Buddhism, my initial research into breathing meditation, and the transformation in my art practice of the lotus into a circle that is then repeated, in a process that may be described as meditative on the one hand and repetitive, an act of endurance, on the other. I will then go on to discuss other artists who have adopted similar ideas and techniques.

#### 2.2 The lotus



Fig. 2.1: Lotus



Fig. 2.2: Lotus pod



Fig. 2.3: The emptiness of sacred lotus

According to the *Avatamsaka-Sutra* (*Flower Ornament Scripture*), one of the best-known Buddhist scriptures, 'The world of the lotus flower is the land where the

Rocana becomes the Buddha. There are a myriad countries for each lotus flower.’ (Taisho Tripitaka, T40, No. 1813, p. 605c14) Another scripture, the *Wuliang qingjing jing* (*Scripture on Immeasurable Clarity and Stillness*, a part of the *Shorter Sukhavativyuha* or *Amitabha Sutra*), states, ‘The Buddha of Immeasurable Clarity and Stillness is born in the lotus flower in the pond of seven treasures.’ (Taisho Tripitaka, T12, No. 361, p. 291c26) In Buddhism, the lotus flower symbolizes the pure land of perfect joy and rebirth. The fundamental scripture for the Tiantai sect of Mahayana Buddhism, for example, is the *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* (*Dharma Blossom Sutra*), and the specific ‘blossom’ is the lotus. The wonder of the lotus flower is that it can represent the way all things can live; as shown in Fig. 2.1, the lotus grows from mud, but the blossom is perfectly unsullied and pure. Moreover, because the stems and the seed pods of the lotus have holes in them, as can be seen in Figs. 2.2 and Fig.2.3, it can represent the idea of the emptiness at the heart of all things.

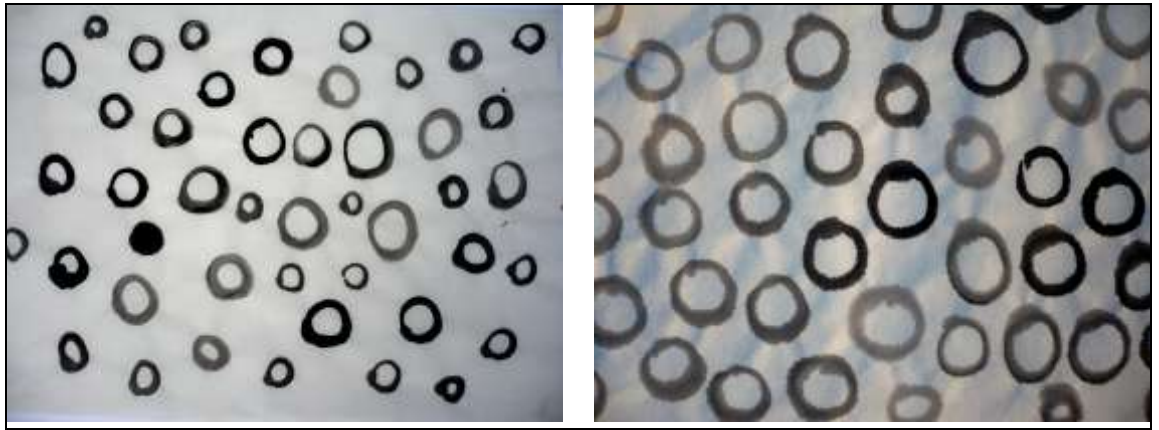
While the Buddhist symbolic meaning of the lotus originated in ancient Indian religious thought, the use of the lotus symbol and lotus patterns were already widespread in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. Representations of the lotus changed as these traditions interacted and influenced one another. The scholar of Buddhist aesthetics Lin Liang-yi writes in *Adornments and Patterns in Buddhist Aesthetics* that ‘early Buddhists based the importance of the lotus flower on plant fertility.’ (Lin Liang-yi, 1992:72) The *Shennong bencao jing* (*Shennong’s Herbal Classic*), which dates back to the Warring States period, contains a description of the health-preserving effects of medicine made of lotus root. In his *Bencao gangmu* (*Outline of Materia Medica*), Li Shizhen (1518-1593) lavished even more praise on the lotus flower: ‘The lotus flower grows in mud but is not sullied by it; it lives in water, but is not drowned by it. The root, stem, flower and seed all differ from common things. Their purity can be used to cure, and everyone will benefit thereby.’ (Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*, fasc. 33, p. 20, *Siku quanshu* ed.) He also provides ample descriptions of the lotus flower’s curative effects on the body.

The lotus flower's long history may also be glimpsed through the archaeological record. Lotus seeds dating back to the Neolithic period 4,000 years ago have been found at a site in Yuhang, Zhejiang province. Carbonized food and two lotus seeds have been found on a platform at a Yangshao Culture site discovered in Dahe Village in the northern part of Zhengzhou, Henan. Measurements suggest that these finds date back 5,000 years. Finally, a 10 million-year-old petrified lotus flower has been found in the Qaidam Basin. No wonder the lotus flower has been called a 'living fossil' among plants.

Throughout human history, and at many places around the world, the lotus has been represented in art, which indicates that people have always felt strongly attracted to this plant. Painters have thus used their fertile imaginations to imbue their lotus images with poetic meanings, suggestive of regional lore and religious beliefs. Among cultures influenced by Buddhism, with its rich lotus symbolism, artists for centuries have spent considerable energy creating lotus images, and so it has become a visual icon with unique significance. Likewise within the Chinese painting tradition, which emphasized the linear qualities of our visual world and the use of brush and ink to express states of mind, there is a long history of expressing the spiritual quality of the lotus.

### **2.3 The relationship between the lotus and the circle**

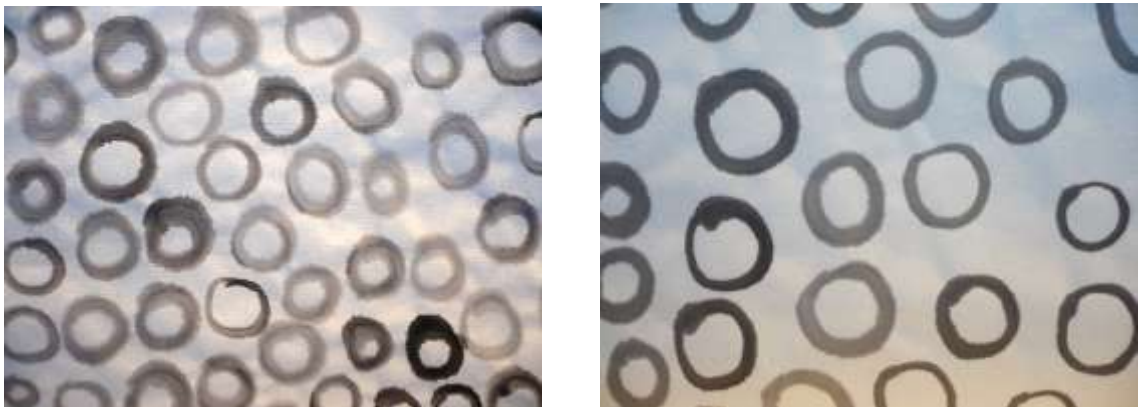
As a Buddhist artist who grew up in the so-called 'country of lotus,' I have long been aware that lotus root, when cut, shows an empty hole, and that the stem has a similar cavity running from root to flower. Even the central pod of the flower, once the seeds are removed, shows a beautiful pattern of empty holes. Of course, these cavities always reminded me of the state of emptiness that I hoped to reach eventually through meditation, and in fact the plant as a whole already represented for me the stillness at the centre of experience. Thus I was inspired to make drawings based on the lotus plant, particularly the flower (see Figs. 2.4 to 2.8 below).



Figs. 2.4 and 2.5: From pre-meditation art practice, 2005



Fig. 2.6: From pre-meditation art practice, 2005



Figs. 2.7 and 2.8: From pre-meditation art practice, 2005-2006

I explored the lotus by drawing the circle over and over again. The individual circle is an abstraction of the lotus blossom in its fullness, while the multitude of circles together suggests the holes in a lotus pod, so in this regard these circles held appeal for me as a kind of two-tiered abstraction—at once a lotus cross-section and a macro, bird's-eye view of a lotus pond. Once I recognized the two-tiered nature of this abstraction, I was further attracted to it, since the individual circles then became 'figure' and 'ground' at the same

time: are they (solid) flowers, or are they empty holes? Meanwhile, each circle that I drew helped me understand the ever-transient flux of the body/mind, which contrasted with the stillness I experienced through my experiments in meditation practice. My interest in the meditative potential of the circle is, perhaps, a version of the ancient tradition that links the simple circle to depictions of the Dharma eye in Buddhist art.



Fig. 2.9: The dual inner/outer aspect of circles, 2005

Thus when I began to draw the circle I tried to create a shape that is very simple and very complicated at the same time (Fig. 2.8). When my eyes focused on the curving line that I was drawing, on the one hand my eyes could follow the forming circle as a single shape—I already saw before my eyes a simple ring-like form. On the other hand, there simultaneously appeared an inner and outer shape to the completed form—I now saw a double presence, a complicated interaction between two types of circle—an outside ring and an inside space (see Fig. 2.9, which illustrates black rings and pink, imperfect inner circles). These dual mental perceptions were approximate, and they always resulted in approximate shapes: neither the outer ring nor the inner circle was perfectly circular in the geometric sense. But this lack of geometric perfection was precisely what allowed a simple repeated shape to become an experiment in Buddhist meditation, and why I could turn an artistic practice into an exercise in self-awareness. As I drew I became increasingly aware that each circle's dual aspect could be used as a vehicle for contemplating the ongoing process of the body/mind's sense of what happens inside the body and in the world outside—called 'interoception' and 'exteroception' in cognitive science, (Fig. 2.10). Of

course, in Buddhism a great deal of attention is placed on the body-mind relationship.

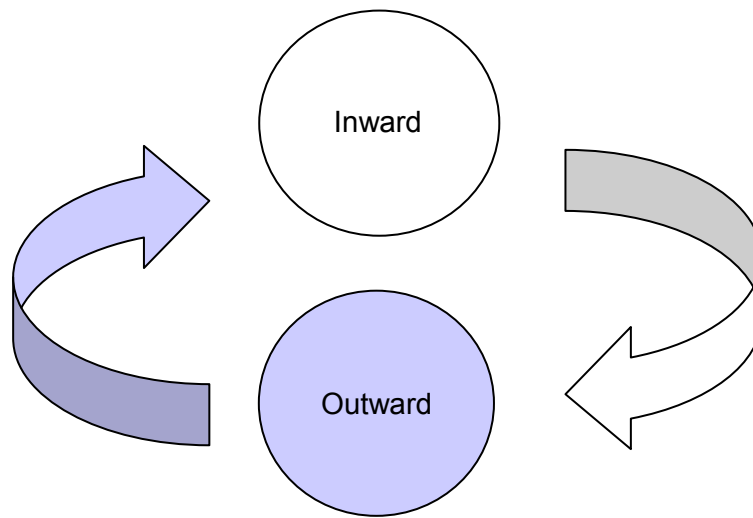


Fig. 2.10: Inward and outward arcs in the human body/mind (idea by Wilber 1999c)

Illustration drawing by Sulien in Newcastle (2005)

Because the curved lines of the brush are never quite the same on repetition, the emptiness and fullness of each circle are likewise never quite the same. I may have used the same kind of paper, the same brush, the same Chinese ink and water, and the same simple movements of arm and wrist, but the results varied widely. The experience of this on a day-to-day basis routinely impressed me with the truth of the Buddha Sakyamuni's teaching on 'the illusory appearances of all passing phenomena which vanish wherever they arise'. (Han Shan [1546-1623] translated by Lu K'uan Yu 2006:86)

Why did the results always appear so differently? The answer is that my desire to draw a perfect circle as symbolically pure as the lotus was mixed with the conditions of production (my physical actions and the materials I used). In Buddhism both the causal ambitions of the mind and the bodily conditions through which the mind tries to act are considered to be never stable. When brought together, as when I repeatedly drew circles, the results always led to different appearances. Surely this is what Sakyamuni meant by 'the illusory appearance of all passing phenomena'. Even when I varied the technique and

attempted to create circles with the ink-drop technique, my circles, as they came into being, never became actual circles, except in the most crude and approximate sense (Figs. 2.11, 2.12, 2.13). They were circles that ‘vanished wherever they arose’. To an artist-meditator who had become alert to the illusory nature of mental phenomena (that is, one’s internal world of appearances and responses to external stimuli), the routine work of drawing circles was a method for developing an understanding of the appearance of all forms.



Fig. 2.11: From pre-meditation art practice, 2005-2006



Fig. 2.12: From pre-meditation art practice, 2006



Fig. 2.13: From pre-meditation art practice, 2006



Fig. 2.14: From pre-meditation art practice, 2006

The ever-changing dual apparent aspect of the circle, which has both ‘form and emptiness’ (see Fig. 2.14), helped me contemplate the Buddha's question: ‘If void-ness is your seeing, since it has already become your perception, then how can it be empty? If an (external) thing is your seeing and has already become your perception, how can it be external?’ (Han Shan, translated by Lu K'uan Yu 2006:151). It seemed to me that if meditation can take the form of a routine drawing practice that generates a sense of ever-changing emptiness within an ever-changing circle-like form, then I could also begin to discover how to empty myself within the drawing and perceiving of shapes. My artistic engagement with the double-ness of the circle would perhaps eventually become a way of emptying myself, and at that point I would have freed myself of ego.

## 2.4 Day-to-day studio art practice

I have a straight body and fingers circling around a brush

Turning the brush through ink to penetrate Chinese paper

A nervous act is attached to emotion

And

Many designs fly in the mind

When I repeat, doing the same circle, symbolic of the lotus

Many images come and go like clouds in the mind

When I repeat, doing the same circle, symbolic of the lotus

It is the Dharma of the eye

And then

The trace passes the starting point, passes the end of the circle

With the sense of the consciousness of mind

Or

With the sense of the consciousness of my nerves

However

I am bound by emotion

And

Where does the emotion come from?

Nervous sensitivity at the touch of an object

Therefore

Something beyond the feeling of 'words'

But the feeling of 'words' is not made by nerves

And

Another question

Where is the mind?

Who feels and who makes words?

(Note written 18 December 2005 in Newcastle)

In my day-to-day studio practice, I was only interested in returning afresh to the creative act in an aware, alert state, even though entering the studio itself often seemed to be a repeated act springing from intuition, habit, and memory (Fig. 2.15). Since I was a Buddhist, of course, my aim had been to free myself of the mind and physical body, so in the studio I also tried to overcome intuitional controls or limits on my artistic behaviour. First I tried to direct my activities so that I can enter a state of 'intuitive awareness'.



Fig. 2.15: From pre-meditation practice, 2006

Hence I did not seek inspiration from the sensory and intellectual realms of my body/mind or from habits and memories in the stream of intuition. When I painted I wanted to get to the essence of intuitive awareness and to free my imagination from body/mind. To some extent the process would be similar to Husserl's 'eidetic reduction', by which one pursues true knowledge by freeing oneself of presuppositions.

Perhaps an artist can achieve a kind of freedom when he or she uses drink and drugs to loosen the hold of reason and inhibitions. Such an artist would then attain a transient freedom within art practice, and discover intuitions and their relationship to maximum 'possibility', i.e., the fullest realization of personal memories and imaginations from the past. At that moment the intuitions (coming from habit and memory) are reflected in action and seem freed from boundaries. For the non-Buddhist, the artist has become a free being, at least for a time. However, from the Buddhist perspective, the action of art practice of using drugs or alcohol and so on to loosen consciousness is still an illusion, because it is habit and intuition-based.

Thus in my day-to-day art practice I had always rejected using drink and drugs (and still do), but still my drawing seemed to come immediately from intuition (habit). I repeatedly drew circles or dropped ink in circular shapes, and though both approaches yielded approximately the same marks through manipulation of brush and ink, all the marks seem to have been produced haphazardly. I was still missing the 'happy medium' between absolute geometric perfection (which would, after all, be impersonal and mechanical) and the kind of ordinary, run-of-the-mill circle that one would expect from some person with a brush. I wanted the circles to achieve a kind of 'spirit resonance' with one another, something that could not be achieved from building on past memory or personal habit alone. Each circle would have to 'admit' that the ink spreads differently each time and that it marks the differences of ever-varying intention, even though it is in close harmony with its neighbours.

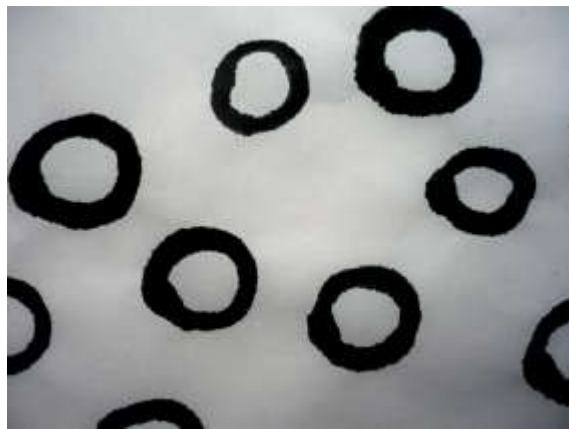


Fig. 2.16: From pre-meditation practice, 2006

In fact I perceived the changing form of each circle as I completed it, and I could concentrate on producing each circle as directly and simply as possible (Fig. 2.16), but I still could not consistently produce pure circles because my senses and perceptions were intruding. Buddha has said: 'Form and Mind and all causes arising therefore, all mental conditions and all causal phenomena are but manifestations of the mind'. (Han Shan in Lu K'uan Yu 2006:57). So could I draw a circle without the mind? Would it be possible to let

the mind be empty in art practice?

I was beginning to realise just how independent the process of perception is from the bodily mechanisms that provide sensory stimuli of external things, like circles drawn in black Chinese ink. The senses exist apart from phenomena. My aim in drawing circles was that it would eventually lead to Buddhist stillness and emptiness and enable me to unify my senses with the perceptual and phenomenological workings of my mind. If I could achieve this state I would be able to draw perfect circles through the harmonic interaction of my outward senses and my inward phenomena: these would function together as automatically as breathing, and the perfect circles would be repeated over and over again without conscious effort, and without ego.



Fig. 2.17: From post-meditation art practice, 2006

Since making the act of brushing the circle the equivalent to meditation, I have been able to let go of all my desires, all my worries and all my fears during the act; I allow my emotions to evaporate. I try to achieve through the act of drawing a still and empty mind in which my visually-oriented thoughts are the lotus, producing circle after circle in harmony with the act of meditative breathing in and breathing out. Once I made the drawing of circles a meditative practice (a state in which the moving of a brush becomes as contemplative an act as moving my breath in and out), body and the mind have, little by little, achieved unity, as reflected in Fig. 2.17 and in contrast to Fig. 2.16, for example. Later,

in Chapter 3, we will turn to a Western view of unified consciousness in the work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). This is widely seen as a non-Buddhist understanding of the mind/body relationship equivalent to the meditative state I have described above. For example, Martinus Nijhoff, the Dutch commentator on Husserl, describes the philosopher's understanding of consciousness as a mental state in which one is not occupied by the ego, or even the senses; rather consciousness is a condition in which one has become harmonious and unified physically and mentally. I will explore the details of this interesting Western philosophical process in my next chapter, but first I wish to support my ideas about meditation and drawing with a general concept of harmonised consciousness, a state of mind that is difficult to achieve in everyday life without practices that enhance one's mind/body relationship. Nijhoff comments: 'In an era where transplantations are commonplace, the body becomes experienced as replaceable, part by part' (Nijhoff 1997:58). Yes, the body often seems to be no more than an ad hoc assemblage of working parts, bound eventually to fail, and it is neither harmonious nor still. However, I would argue that through the meditative practice of drawing circles a state of unified consciousness can be achieved.

## **2.5 The methodology of Buddhist meditation practice**

My meditation practice, which I learned from Venerable Buddhist Master Cheng Chen-Huang in Taiwan in 2004, is based on breathing (Fig. 18). When I exhale, I visualize the exhaled breath beginning at my abdomen, passing through the chest, and leaving my body through the nose-tip. At each stage I mentally 'let it go.' This is the pathway of each exhaled breath.



Fig. 2.18: Sulien seated in meditation

When I inhale, the beginning of the breath is at the nose-tip, the middle of the breath at the chest and the end of the breath at the abdomen, and then I mentally note that the breath circulates through the right and left buttocks, the right and left legs, to the right and left feet. This is the pathway of each inhaled breath.

I take note of the 12 points of each breath-cycle—abdomen, chest, nose-tip, then nose-tip, chest, abdomen, right and left buttocks, right and left legs, and right and left feet—to make the mind firm and still, to limit extraneous mental activity so that mindfulness and self-awareness can easily arise while the body relaxes. After my attention settles on these 12 points, I can then let them go, and concentrate only on the nose-tip or upper lip, where the air passes. I need not follow the breath but just focus my mind at the nose-tip in front of me. There is no need to think of anything special. I just concentrate on this simple task for now, with continuous presence of mind. There is nothing more to do, just breathing out and in. Soon the mind becomes peaceful, the breath refined. The body/mind lightens and warms up. This is the proper, simple state for the work of meditation, which I practice day-to-day (Fig. 2.19).

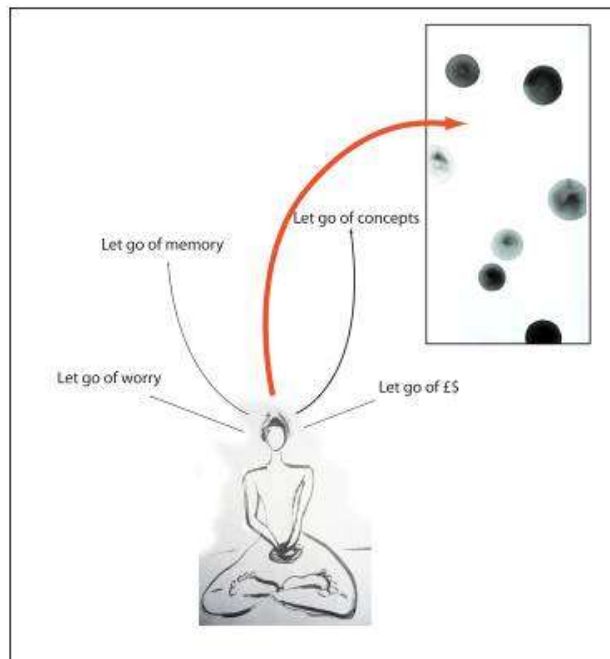


Fig. 2.19: Letting everything go in meditation, before art practice, 2005-2006

When I first direct my mind's focus to my nose-tip, the breathing may still be rough and shallow, but I do not seek to control it. Instead, I just need to look at it for the breathing to become calm and steady. It takes some time. At the beginning, one's mind still tends to wander. Odd, insignificant memories float up. Wilber has very clearly described this beginning or entry stage of meditation: 'Months can be spent "at the movies" watching the subliminal submergent re-emerge in awareness and dance before the inward eye'. (Wilber, 1999b:179) In the Buddhist view, one must let go of these, since they are illusory, impermanent, and passing tales.

I may adjust my meditation posture to suit different weather conditions. If the weather is cold, I simply sit in a chair and rest my feet on the ground. If the weather is warm, I sit in the lotus position on a cushion on the floor. In either case, I concentrate my entire body/mind on breathing in and breathing out.

My approach to meditation may be described as 'receptive' more than 'concentrative.' In Wilber's description of these two types of meditation, and the way in which a guru overcomes old resistances and encourages new transformations via both approaches, he writes, 'In concentrative meditation, the special condition has a defined form; in receptive

meditation, it is “formless”—both are enforced special conditions, however, and the individual who drops his formless or defocal awareness is chastised just as severely as the one who drops the koan’. (Wilber 1999b:177; koan refers to the oral traditions, stories, parables, etc. that are used to illustrate truth in Zen Buddhism)

After my body is relaxed and warm, and mind is clear, light, and peaceful, I will continue to sit in meditation for around 45 to 48 minutes before I start to paint, so that I reach a state of deeper ‘insightfulness’ (mind concentrated and receptive, yet free of cogitation), greater energy and silence.

When I loosely hold the brush over the Chinese paper, I breathe in, and from the time I begin to turn the brush around the circle to the time the brush returns to the starting point, I breathe out. To describe this meditative drawing as a kind of breathing is apt, because my meditation focuses awareness on the ever-changing patterns of my breath. ‘When the practitioner breathes in or breathes out and contemplates the essential impermanence or the essential disappearance of desire or cessation or letting go, he abides peacefully in the observations of the objects of mind, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life’. (Thich Nhat Hanh. 1997:8)

After I began the meditation practice, the drawn line of the circle turned out to be somewhat thicker than before. The evidence for this even showed up on the back of the paper—the ink seeped through. But most importantly, the interior and exterior circle lines of the rings of ink were much improved (compare Figs. 2.20 and 2.21).



Fig. 2.20: Pre-meditation, 2006



Fig. 2.21: Post-meditation, 2006

## 2.6 The physical aspect of Buddhist meditation

As illustrated in 'Zen and the Art of Happiness' (Fig. 2.22), Richard Davidson (far right) took a PET scan on the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Davidson has conducted several experiments comparing the brains of monks who meditate with those of people who do not. In one, he found electrical activity in the left-hand frontal lobe of meditating monks' brains. In another (below left and right), he found high levels of gamma activity associated with positive emotions in the brains of meditating monks, but far less in the brains of ordinary people who tried to meditate while being scanned (from 'What makes you happy?', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, October 2, 2005).

The health benefits of meditation have been well-known for some time, and as the science continues to improve gradually, the findings are popularized through in-depth feature reporting in magazines like *Time* (Fig. 2.23, cover of the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2003 edition).

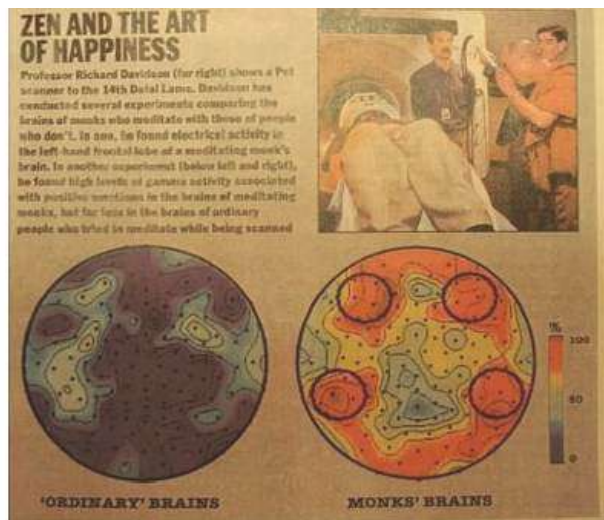


Fig. 2.22: Zen and the Art of Happiness



Fig. 2.23: Time (August 2003)

Prof. Fred Travis of Maharishi University attached four leads to four points on the scalp of an experienced meditator who practiced Tibetan Buddhist meditation. The meditator was capable of a very high level of concentration. At the beginning of the meditation, the brain waves (the front and back brain are charted in red and yellow

respectively) were still very active, but as the meditation progressed the brain wave activity attenuated, until the waves became calm and steady (see Figs. 2.24.1–4; <http://www.mum.edu/tm>).

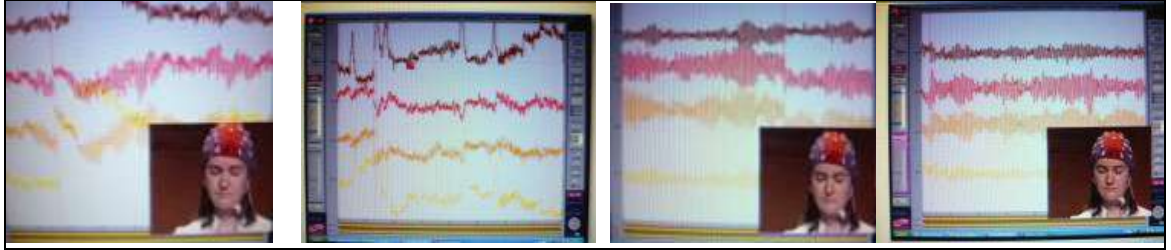


Fig. 2.24.1

Fig. 2.24.2

Fig. 2.24.3

Fig. 2.24.4

Fig. 2.24: Brain patterns during meditation

## 2.7 Meditation practice as art practice

Any state of unified consciousness involves an awakened ‘sense of no time’; my routine of practising drawing circles emerges from this ‘timelessness’. As I have mentioned earlier, my intention is that when each circle is drawn on the paper there is stillness in my body/mind. This art practice is an activity that combines concentration and relaxation, and my circle practice progresses simply and effortlessly by meditation (Fig. 2.25).



Fig. 2.25: Post-meditation, 2006

For Husserl transcendently pure consciousness means reducing phenomena under contemplation into pure consciousness; pure consciousness is without ego control. Therefore, Husserl's getting rid of the ego seems quite similar to the Buddhist emphasis on non-self and meditation with an empty mind. As meditation and art practice were repeated and integrated, I discovered that my breathing was gradually becoming deep, inward, and calm. This differed greatly from my earlier studio art practice, when my emotions and stray thoughts and perceptions still interfered with my movements. Buddhists teach that since all phenomena come and go, it is best to just 'let things be' without trying to hold on and use force. If the artist is immersed in phenomena, he or she works with conditions imposed: the body that we are feeling, the perceptions of the mind, the emotions, the concepts, and so on, and they build up and are compounded. Everyone has noticed that the mind's creations are always moving and fluid; the mind is looking for something, so it wants to change whatever conditions it finds itself in, and its desires rise and fall like waves. Too often it fails to find the stillness and emptiness from which everything emerged.

## **2.8 Overcoming intuition**

Before merging meditation and art practice, I often found that while drawing a circle, even during the action of turning the brush, my mind and physical body were going separate ways. At this point, the circles were coming from intuitive, reflective action: intuitive in that it arose from acquired physical habit that no longer required deliberate thought, and reflective in that it was somehow dependent on something else. As a result the circles and the sequences lacked consistency of pattern. The marks of the brush on paper never lie: they repeatedly demonstrated the conscious ego's habitual reliance on intuition and the appearance of things in the present (Fig. 2.26), compare with the (Fig. 2.27) from that evidence, I came to understand the habit of intuition, which is very deep-seated in the conscious ego. In Buddhist teaching, however, 'intuition' itself is

reflective of past memory and experience, and so exists in time.



Fig. 2.26: Pre-meditation, 2006

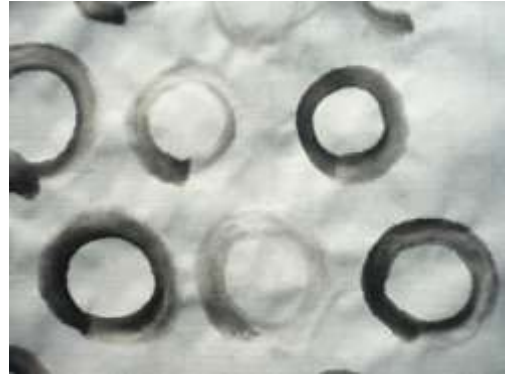


Fig. 2.27: Post-meditation, 2006

Therefore, when the intuition functions (and it always does so without deliberative thinking), it is directly reflected in the action. The intuition follows past habit, but as it manifests itself in action it continues to feed back on and build up the conscious ego. Such intuition might not involve definite feelings and practices of touch built up by habit, but even so, I was still engaging with my memories and the power of my imagination in reflective action, so in this case my artistic intuition was still not letting me gain access to true freedom. There was still a boundary.

We may contrast this with what Husserl points out about the possibility of 'intuitive unity': 'In spite of the lack of connection between objects of perception and objects of imagination, an intuitive unity of a kind which can contribute to the (relative) determination of individual objects given in experience is still possible'. (Husserl 1948, rpt. 1973: 174) Husserl still allows for intuition, but in Buddhist meditation, intuitions must be overcome, for they are reflective outgrowths of the realm of outward appearances. They are the inward objects to which the mind is attached, just as the senses are the outward objects to which the body is attached. The Buddha once declared, 'Form and Mind, and all causes arising there from, all mental conditions and all causal phenomena are but manifestations of the mind'. (Han Shan in Lu K'uan Yu 2006:57). My earlier studio practice in drawing circles

may have been frustrating, but it was instructive because I became keenly aware of this truth. By entering meditation before practicing art, and finally integrating meditation and art practice, I established mindfulness only of breathing in and breathing out so that there was no space for intuition, and hence no chance for my body and its movements to be affected by intuition. The circles no longer emerged from intuitive and reflective action (Fig. 2.27). In the end, the action was unified with the breathing in and out of meditation.

Now when I attune myself to the breathing cycle in meditation I can contemplate the impermanence of the lotus. When I move the ink-laden brush and make circular lines one after the other on the paper, I can contemplate the unfixed nature of the symbolic circle. My enhanced understanding of the circle is equivalent to my enhanced awareness of the lotus. The lotus blossom becomes a circle full on the outside and empty on the inside. The repetition accentuates the purity of the emptiness I experience. Thus the essence of the Buddhist lotus is given expression.

## **2.9 Comparing with other artists: abstract expressionists, performance artists**

Many other artists past and present have tried to escape the perceptual and conceptual boundaries of their creative practices. While there are isolated examples of artists challenging the controlling influence of the rational mind (a single example from many would be the 18<sup>th</sup> century sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt), it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that whole schools of artists began to explore deliberately altered states of consciousness. By the end of World War I, European culture was ready to embark on Dadaism, Surrealism and Expressionism. The Surrealist painter André Masson (1896-1987) created 'automatic drawings' while under the influence of drugs or altered states of mind brought about by deliberately depriving himself of food and sleep. Masson's drawings are products of an artist who had been physically and psychologically wounded during World War I and who exhausted and starved himself to access intuitive resources

not available to one who treats the production of art as a creative skill bounded by established aesthetic principles. The outcomes of these experiments (as in, for example, Fig. 2.28) are sometimes difficult to 'read' because of their unexpectedly tangled contours.

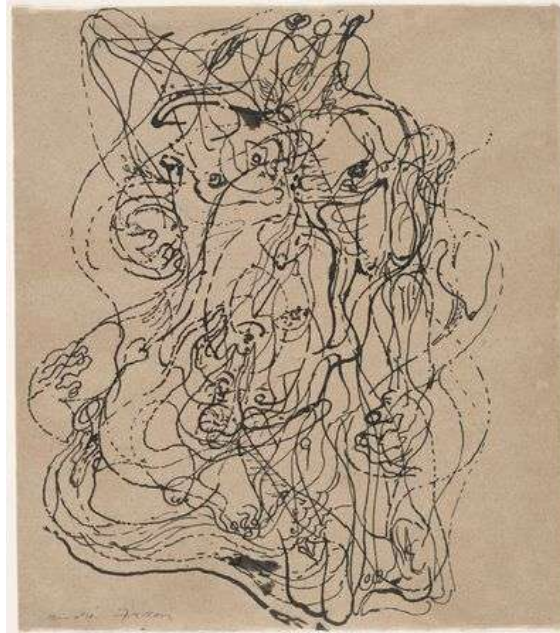


Fig. 2.28: André Masson, *Automatic Drawing* (1924)  
[[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9\\_Masson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Masson)]

Modern European art, and Western contemporary art practices in general, developed from the fertile experiments of the experimental art movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of which Masson is a typical example. The Surrealist's automatic drawings prefigure celebrated examples of the improvised gestural methods, known as 'action painting', of artists such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956).

Jackson Pollock, seeking greater freedom in his art and escaping from the established routine of presenting forms and colors in broad strokes, developed the idea of painting by dropping or flinging paint from the brush (Figs. 2.29, 2.30). He discovered that this technique resulted in a freer expression of the paint on the canvas. He thus placed his canvas on the floor so that on which he could let the paint alight, and he would not have to distort the form of each drop or streak. He preserved the originality of each drop.



Fig. 2.29: Jackson Pollock, 1950



Fig. 2.30: Jackson Pollock, *Number 23* (1948)

Although Pollock went a long way in eliminating intentional thought in the painting process, including in the physical movements required to produce the art, he did not eliminate it entirely. He was still bound by the control of intuition and the idea of drop painting. In the end Pollock used alcohol to lose the consciousness of the body/mind, a technique that gives the illusion of emptiness.

Franz Kline (1910-1962), a close contemporary of Pollock, produced a large number of abstract black-and-white paintings with broad, sweeping brushstrokes that remind many viewers of Chinese characters, though Kline denied the connection and had never studied Chinese calligraphy. The strokes appear to be very free, spontaneous, and they are undeniably powerful, but Kline actually practiced them extensively on drafts before producing the final paintings. In 1960, the art historian Werner Haftmann described what happened when Kline shifted to the larger formats:

When Kline attempted to transfer his symbols to larger formats, his body movements enhanced the power of his lines, which acquired an amazing expressiveness. The cosmic existence, a vast oppressive space, seems to invade the pictorial field; the framework of heavy signs seeks to withstand it, to resist its weight or to strike back against the crushing power of the void. (Haftmann 1960: 352)

Kline's emphasis on the spontaneity of movement and gesture and Haftmann's insight on the way these paintings evoke the vastness of the cosmos and its powers indicate that Kline may have possessed an outlook and method similar to artists working from a Buddhist perspective, like me. He was definitely exposed to Eastern art and perspectives through fellow painters and other contemporaries—it was 'in the air', so to speak, but there is no indication that he ever seriously immersed himself in the study of Buddhism and meditation. Kline's practice was similar to my work in the studio insofar that a long period of practice and of 'training the hand' preceded the execution of the finished works.

Both Pollock and Kline, it should be noted, admired and were influenced by the work of an older contemporary, Mark Tobey (1890-1976), who was explicitly interested in Eastern religions. He accepted the Baha'i faith early in his career and retained great openness toward the study of Buddhism, meditation, calligraphy, *haiku* poetry, and so on. In 1934, he visited China and then Japan, where he stayed for a month in a Buddhist temple to study Zen, meditation, and calligraphy. He once wrote:

'Let nature take over in your work.' These words from my old friend Takizaki were at

first confusing but cleared to the idea – ‘Get out of the way.’ We hear some artists speak today of the act of painting. This in its best sense could include the meaning of my old friend. But a State of Mind is the first preparation and from there this action proceeds. Peace of Mind is another ideal, perhaps the ideal state to be sought for in the painting and certainly preparatory to the act.

This is not easy to accomplish, but in a highly industrialized and competitive society it could be a fine antidote. Not to look for fine draughtsmanship nor fine color – perhaps no color – but directness of spirit will become for us a new point of view as the arts of the East and of the West draw closer together. (Tobey 1958:20)

Tobey was certainly one of the earliest prominent Western artists to have had his perceptions and even his approach toward painting profoundly informed and influenced by Buddhist teachings, and his assertion on peace of mind tallies with my own developing approach at this time.

Although the Buddhist-influenced arts of Japan had been influencing Western art for a long time (e.g., van Gogh and *ukiyo-e*), beginning in the 1950s in San Francisco, conditions became ripe for an explosion of interest in Buddhism and its practices among artists. First, there was a sizable Asian population, and second, an understanding of Zen Buddhism was being disseminated through the works of pioneering translators, teachers and scholars like Kenneth Rexroth, Shunryu Suzuki and Alan Watts (Kowinsky 2004). Watts had an especially strong influence through his regular radio broadcasts, an influence that he himself acknowledged:

It is therefore also said – perhaps with truth – that my easy and free-floating attitude to Zen was largely responsible for the notorious ‘Zen boom’ which flourished among artists and ‘pseudointellectuals’ in the late 1950s, and led on to the frivolous ‘beat Zen’ of Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, of Franz Kline’s black and white abstractions, and of John Cage’s silent concerts. (Watts 2007: 248)

Each of the people Watts mentions incorporated Zen Buddhism somehow into their artistic

practice. The composer John Cage's (1912-1992) celebrated silent piano piece *4'33"* is now considered a classic expression of Zen-influenced thinking, as it leaves each listener completely free to 'hear' whatever he or she wishes to—the stirring of audience members, the ambient noise in the performance space, etc. Cage also developed aleatoric composition, i.e., composition in which chance and randomness plays a role: an open acceptance of chance elements is one of the distinguishing features of Zen-influenced art. The silence in some of John Cage's compositions found their visual counterpart in the blank white spaces of his paintings (Cage 1963; Munroe 2009).

Cage, who also happened to be a great mushroom enthusiast, is known to have deliberately endured the pain and danger of eating small quantities of poisonous (not deadly) mushrooms that he believed would help him achieve a heightened state of consciousness. The heightened consciousness was produced through the sheer force of his thinking or belief (*cogito*) in overcoming the mushrooms' effects.

A painter who, like Pollock, is celebrated within the tradition of creative experimentation is Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). He was severely alcoholic through much of his career; later in life, though he managed to stop drinking, he continued to produce paintings, drawings and sculptures while suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Even in the late works (Fig. 2.31), de Kooning retained a remarkably solid grasp of the line. In each period there was a release from conscious intentionality, though judging from the works' critical reception, the earlier means of release seems to be favored.



Fig. 2.31: Willem de Kooning, *Untitled* (1988)

By the 1960s it had become accepted that avant-garde artists should, if they were to maintain cultural progress, continually step beyond the perceptual and conceptual limits established by previous generations of artistic experiments. At this time, artists began to explore the nature of consciousness through experimental practices such as performance art and installation art. For example, Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) stretched artistic boundaries through his highly ritualistic performance works which involved bodily and mental endurance. In his 1974 performance piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (Fig. 2.32), Beuys flew to New York and was taken to the gallery by ambulance. He wrapped himself in a heavy cloth, held a shepherd's staff, and remained in a room with a coyote for three days, during which time the coyote tore the cloth to shreds. At the end of the performance, he left for the airport, again by ambulance. This way, he managed never to touch American ground during his entire stay.



Fig. 2.32: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974)

Several performance artists today continue in the tradition of putting themselves through extremes of physical and mental duress in the course of their performances. Their efforts are not intended to produce a lasting artwork that may be collected, bought and sold in the conventional sense—they rather seek to work a transformative effect on themselves and their viewers as well. Alistair MacLennan, for example, developed sustained works that pushed the limits of physical endurance (Fig. 2.33). Once an ‘actuation’ (his term for his performances) involved starving himself for six days, another involved sitting in a small greenhouse and slowly blowing black balloons until there was no space left; many involve sleep deprivation. (see, for example)

([http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art\\_id=1088](http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art_id=1088)). Marina Abramović also subjects herself to feats of extreme physical and psychological endurance, as in her recent *The Artist Is Present* (Fig. 2.34), as she investigates the interrelationship between performer and audience. In some of her earlier works, she put herself at great personal risk. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), she lay prone on a table for exactly six hours. Seventy-two objects were arranged around her, including matches, saws, nails, and even a loaded gun, and the public was invited to use them to do what they ‘desired’ on her body. Toward the end of the

performance, some members of the public became aggressively abusive, cutting into her stomach with razors, scratching her, and putting the gun to her head (she still carries scars from the performance), but she remained impassive to the end. For Abramović, the transformative power of performance art stems from the fact that it does not involve fakery, as in theater—the knives, blood, and emotions are real (O'Hagan 2010). For Stuart Brisley, performance art is just one part of a very diverse artistic endeavor, but it is the part for which he is best known. He engages the audience in a way that induces a release from conventions of social behaviour. His *Helsinki Vanitas* (Fig. 2.35) involved remaining inside the plywood hut for seven days. That MacLennan and Abramović are both seem keenly interested in Buddhist meditation and practice different forms of it, though primarily as a means of preparing and conditioning themselves for performance.



Fig.2.33: Alastair MacLennan, at undisclosed territory # 2 (2008)

Photo: Jahan (Lemah Putih)

[<http://www.lemahputih.com/undisclosed/p03-undisc0801.html>]



Fig. 2.34: Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present* (2010)

[[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina\\_Abramović](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramović)]



Fig.2.35: Stuart Brisley, *Helsinki Vanitas* (1996)

[[http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/32/90s/Works/Helsinki\\_Vanitas/page:10](http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/32/90s/Works/Helsinki_Vanitas/page:10)]

There is no sign of performance art, including the stream that involves acts of endurance, fading away or falling from favor. Several up-and-coming artists studying in Britain today, like Stuart Herring and my own colleague on the practice-led PhD programme, the artist John Lavell (whom we shall discuss in detail below), attempt to escape the boundaries of their own bodily presence through extreme acts of endurance or repetition in performance.

## 2.10 Comparing with other artists: Stuart Herring

Stuart Herring, a performance artist, is noted for having immersed himself in water for prolonged periods of time (Figs. 2.36, 2.37). He wears a formal white shirt and pants and leather shoes, and to prevent himself from floating to the surface, he ties a large rock to his waist. He breathes through a tube in his mouth. Despite the discomfort of being confined in a small space, surrounded by hard objects, and being immersed in rather cold water, he manages to stay there for two to four hours. What is the relationship between his breathing and his physical and mental states? Does he focus his awareness on the freedom of his breathing, which is the only thing that is free during these acts of endurance? Herring explains as follows:



Fig. 2.36: Stuart Herring in performance, Newcastle, 2008



Fig. 2.37: Stuart Herring in performance, Newcastle, 2008

'I stand about three meters from the front of the tank. I slowly focus on the water, paying attention to the refracting light, and playing against the aquamarine blue. After a moment the audience sink into the back of my peripheral vision and the sound of the room falls silent. There will be a brief time until I take a step toward the tank when the time comes I know I'm ready to take it to the next stage. I step over the edge of the tank and submerge the bottom half of my body in the water. As soon as I have positioned the breathing tube in my mouth, I fully submerge myself. I have now entered the confinement. I can no longer choose to hear the room. I can not see even if I wanted to open my eyes. After a few seconds I have calmed myself, I have adjusted to the environment. I start to think of the outer tank and slowly picture moving in from the outside. Eventually I focus on the surrounding water. Still moving in, my mind reaches the outer layer of my own physicality. After full concentration on this layer is complete, I carry on with my journey further to the core of myself. Once I have reached my most inner layer I start to concentrate on matching my breathing pattern to the rhythm of my heart beat. After a while of consciously doing this it becomes a task of automatic response, and at this point I concentrate so hard on such a level that I'm almost unconsciously conscious. All thought

seems to flat-line. I reach the state that I will be in for the duration of the performance, until this state is broken by a lapse of concentration. Once I have reached this level I have no thought in my head—just a faint feeling of well-being. It's an escape from the worries of my physical form, allowing me to feel more aware of my inner person. At this point I place too much thought on this, forcing for a deeper level, but as I will for myself to go deeper instead of just being, and allowing myself to move into it in my own time, I break the concentration ejecting me back to the situation and forcing me to end the performance'. (Stuart Herring, statement, 2009)

Herring's performances demonstrate how one can direct and focus consciousness inward and thereby escape from worries, distractions, and 'mental movies', to the point of apparent unconsciousness, until concentration breaks and he emerges from the water. But they are acts of endurance, and all the things around his body are designed for discomfort and even pain, so that, if one observes carefully, his breathing gradually becomes more rapid. The clarity of his inner consciousness is thus gradually diminished, the sense of inner peace is lacking, and in the end he can no longer endure the condition to which he has submitted.

In that regard, Herring's practice differs sharply from Buddhist meditation focusing on the breath cycle. For instance, when I sit in the lotus position, with my body straight but relaxed, I too will inevitably feel some discomfort and pain. However, as I understand how to 'just let go' of my body and consciousness, I am no longer dominated by thought. I no longer think of this or that concerning myself, the thought of 'pain' no longer controls the 'self', and to the same degree the 'self' is freed to focus on breathing in and out, with clarity and unsurpassed tranquillity. The art that emerges later is produced within this state of clarity and unsurpassed tranquillity of mind/body.

## **2.11 Comparing with other artists: John Lavell**

The idea of interviewing John Lavell came about after sensing that his creation of his

marvellous and potent forms, which are almost mechanical in their regularity, had to do with mental or physical endurance, and with repetition in his day-to-day practice. Of course, as he persists in creating the marks in his studio art practice, they begin to accumulate the force of sensation around him (Figs. 2.38, 2.39). Having learned that his work is informed by the study of criminology, I chose to begin by asking him about it.

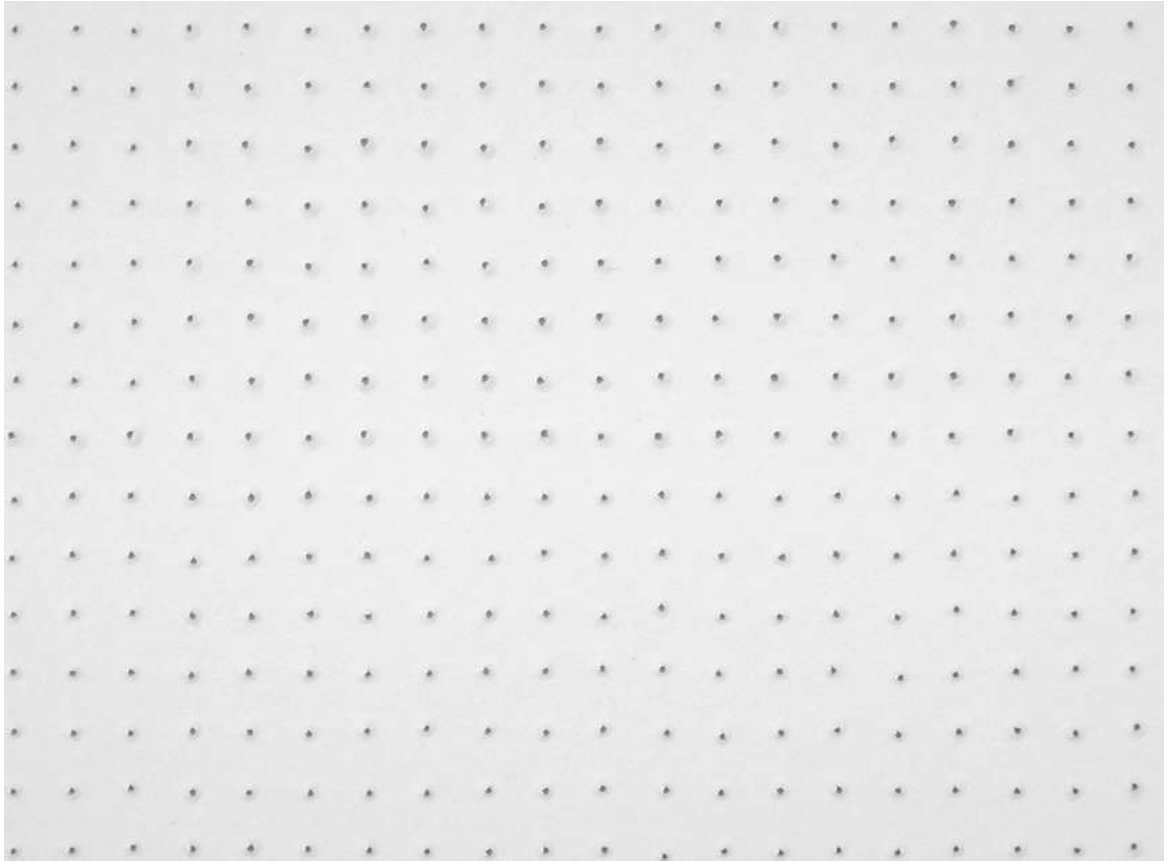


Fig. 2.38: John Lavell, *Wound Pattern Analysis* (2007-2008), detail; on paper

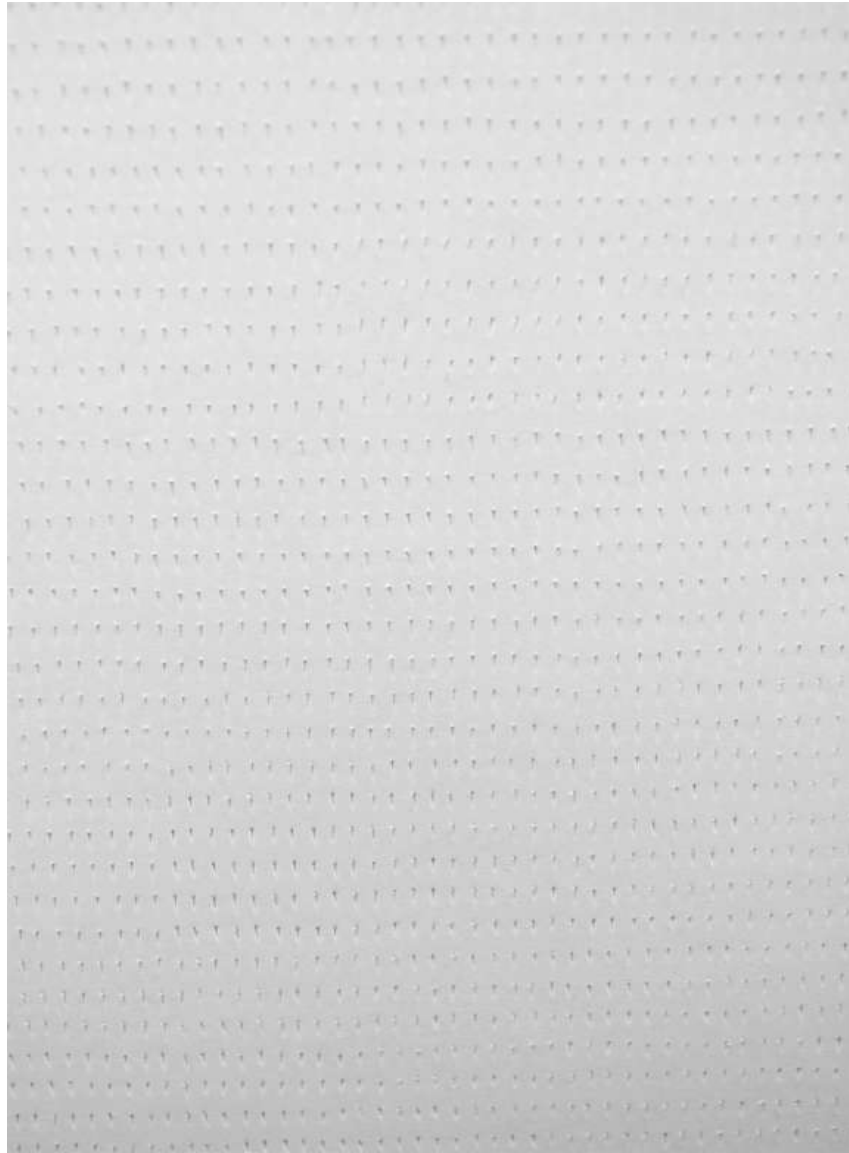


Fig. 2.39: John Lavell, *Sharp Force Injury* (2008), detail; on paper

Su-Lien: What ideas in criminology influenced you in the making of the images?

Lavell: Initially there was an interest in how things are viewed by science, particularly the way things are put into classification systems, and taxonomies, ordered and labelled. I thought it would be interesting to look at another area obviously connected to science but with another outcome of the activity. I was struck by the dominance of the visual in some areas of crime scene investigation and how this field of often extreme, seemingly random behaviour is catalogued, documented and interpreted. I felt there was a similarity with studio practice behaviour. The more I looked at the field the more analogies or similarities seemed to occur. Then when studying criminal profiling and coming into contact with

notions surrounding serial, repetitive offending, I felt I had found a potentially very interesting intersection of ideas.

Su-Lien: Is this why your work is so repetitive?

Lavell: Yes, but also the original idea was to collect my own 'evidence' as a form of trying to interfere with the systems in much the same way as my earlier work tried to undermine scientific authority. However, as I collected marks, punctures, holes, etc., I realised that by repeating, let's say a knife wound several times, you're holding it up for comparison, in much the same way a manual of forensics would give examples of a particular wound with a term for that particular type. By repeating it 10,000 times or more I thought it would become a sort of useless document or field book (manual) that perhaps would lead to questioning the classifications involved. The other interesting element for me here was documented interviews with serial killers, who talked about their activities as a repetitive, learning and refining process that keeps driving them on to the next act.

Su-Lien: So in the work do you try to control completely the marks you are making so that they appear to be the same?

Lavell: My intention is to repeat the mark, control the pressure, angle, depth, etc., but there is always something that interferes with what I am trying to do. There are sections when things are going smoothly, I suppose you could say getting into a rhythm, and the marks 'settle' into a similarity.

Su-Lien: Do you think of the marks as the same?

Lavell: No, not really, it's impossible for me to see them that way anyway. The most 'alike' marks are always different, and a lot of them are very different indeed. In fact as far as I am concerned they are all different.

Su-Lien: Do you have a sense of what you want to create? In each mark? Are you clear, conscious and precise?

Lavell: Yes and no. I have a very clear idea of the overall image I want to make in that I make formal decisions about balance, composition and density of mark making. I want to

make attractive, beautiful, and intriguing objects, so it is a conscious decision. I might intend to do the same mark, but I know that it is impossible—I am not a machine, and there are all sorts of influences at work: posture, mindset, materials, the chance happening, accidents. Sometimes it feels very meditative, or I'm not conscious of working. Other times I'm listening to music on my iPod.

Su-Lien: What do you mean by 'accidents'?

Lavell: There are 'accidents' I can live with, different pressures or angles of the needle, or even a rotation of the tool so there is a clearly opposite mark or back to front. I can even manage a change in thickness of cardboard under the paper, which causes a ragged type of mark. However, [if there are] marks in the wrong place, out of sequence or tears or rips, I just throw the piece away. I never try to repair an accident.

Su-Lien: How do you feel when working on a piece?

Lavell: As I mentioned before, it depends on lots of things. I think what is nearly always in my mind is that if I finish without making the 'big mistakes' I will be pleased with the end result. So although I am not meditating on the moment by moment event of piercing or whatever, there is a certain discipline involved. Also, there are stages where I have to pull myself back to what I am doing in case I force an accident, forget to move the paper for example or the backing sheet of cardboard which usually results in a rip or tear. Sometimes I think, 'Oh well, only 20,000 to go', or something like that. One very significant event that occurs is the halfway point, when for some reason things seem to be much closer to a finish than another 50%, if you see what I mean. Things seem to speed up. Maybe because I can see a significant result or pattern or confirmation that it will look like what I planned or composed.

Su-Lien: Does your relationship change with the work as you progress and complete it?

Lavell: Again, as I said before, halfway is definitely a milestone for reasons I mentioned. Perhaps there is a mental reason why halfway is a big deal for the human mind.

Of course I do get bored or frustrated, but I couldn't really say at what point. Naturally I would rather know something is wrong, or for something to go wrong earlier rather than later, but I have made mistakes at the 50,000 mark stage and not thrown myself out the window about it. What I find interesting is that the smaller, and inevitable mistakes are perhaps an element of what makes these pieces (to me anyway) very beautiful. You could tie in all kinds of serial criminal behaviour analogies to this way of thinking or ways in which forensics can operate, you know, things like the fragmentary experience becoming a whole, piecing together evidence, identifying marks and wounds by their 'signature', the similarities and dissimilarities (interview conducted on 2/Feb/2008).

In many ways the artist is identical with the act, because the act is what brings the artist's views and interpretations into reality, and it must endure or persist to some extent for work to be completed. Some repetition is inevitable. In Lavell's case, this is greatly magnified.

Lavell's art puts me in mind of discussions on time and being in that branch of philosophy known as phenomenology. Specifically, I am reminded of Husserl's discussion of time-consciousness or the intuition of time:

In order to grasp a succession of representations . . . it is necessary that the representations be the absolutely simultaneous objects of a knowing that puts them in relation . . . and that embraces them quite indivisibly in a single and indivisible act. ... The intuition of an extent of time occurs in a now, in one time-point. (Husserl 1991: 20-1)

Lavell succeeds in capturing how discrete acts over time are 'embraced' in a single representation. There are repeated representational acts that exist in temporal sequence. Without the intuiting, the repeated act is simply a series of discrete events, and the object becomes something that is constantly in flux. If he were not to embrace discrete, enduring acts into a whole, there would be only meaningless repetition.

Enduring acts create their own behaviours and memories, each having qualities.

Husserl speaks of the orientation and quality of intuited bodies as follows: ‘Each body is constituted in an orientation, and implies above all else (actually, as a mere different expression for the same thing) that each body is given to intuition in a kind of “quality,” in a “location,” which has its dimensional modifications’ (Husserl 1997:276). When Lavell places each of his marks at a specific location, they are placed there in accordance with his desire or intention, and from his judgement of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ placement. With each mark, Lavell creates a time-point, a thing existing in time and space, and with each sequence of marks, he creates a sequence of time-points, from which time-consciousness becomes possible. The marks or time-points form what Heidegger calls an ‘extant sequence’:

The time that is known as the now and as a manifold and succession of nows is an *extant sequence*. The nows appear to be intratemporal. They come and go like beings; like extant entities they perish, becoming no longer extant. The common experience of beings has at its disposal no other horizon for understanding being than that of extantness, being at hand. ... Time becomes the free-flowing runoff of a sequence of nows. For the common conception of time this process is extant, just as space is. Starting from this view, it arrives at the opinion that time is infinite, endless, whereas by its very nature temporality is finite (Heidegger 1988:272).

However, as an artist who spends much of her time contemplating marks of various kinds, I both agree and disagree with Heidegger in this regard, for the sequence of time-points is not time itself—just an overlaying or amassing of discrete moments. However, I agree with his insight that time and the extant sequence are phenomena, and that people can easily fall into misconceptions concerning the existence of time and phenomena. A person who does not question the existence of such basic things would be more likely to feel obligated to predefine them and box them in somehow—to begin, for example, with a specific number in mind and making the corresponding marks in an act of endurance,

during which all kinds of emotions may be felt.

My art practice thus differs from Lavell's in that I do not begin a series of marks with a goal of the finished product looking a specific way (I did not anticipate that my circles, post-meditation, would become thicker); I rather strive to eliminate emotion and the workings of the mind, and eliminate the striving as well. In the absence of mind, I eliminate suffering, time, and space. Above all, I do not count: once a person begins to count, time intrudes. The process of my art practice is one of 'reduction': the experience of ego is reduced, so I do not feel bound by time and space, and each moment creates a unity of concept and consciousness.

When I execute circles my brush is well-moistened with several types of black ink, and the ink spreads, just as a lotus blossoms, on the rice paper. I do not let thoughts of 'I want it this way' or 'I want it that way' to preoccupy my mind; I do not persist in 'wanting' anything. Instead there is only a sense of confidence and trust, and a certain fearlessness that comes from such trust, so that I relax and eliminate ambitions associated with self-conscious design. Tension also disappears. I concentrate only on the single act of breathing. The beginning and end points of the stroke spontaneously coincide to form the circle in union with the act of breathing in and out. I trust the ink to spread as it does. Sometimes, if my mind is stimulated by an imagined image, I will recognize its fleeting nature, its temporality, and alert to that, I let it fade away. If I can really achieve the elimination of motive, purpose, barriers, time, and space, then I will, at least for a time, achieve freedom of being.

The diagram below (Fig. 2.40) is an attempt to map out progressive degrees of creative boundary-breaking and to position myself on it relative to some of the other artists discussed above.

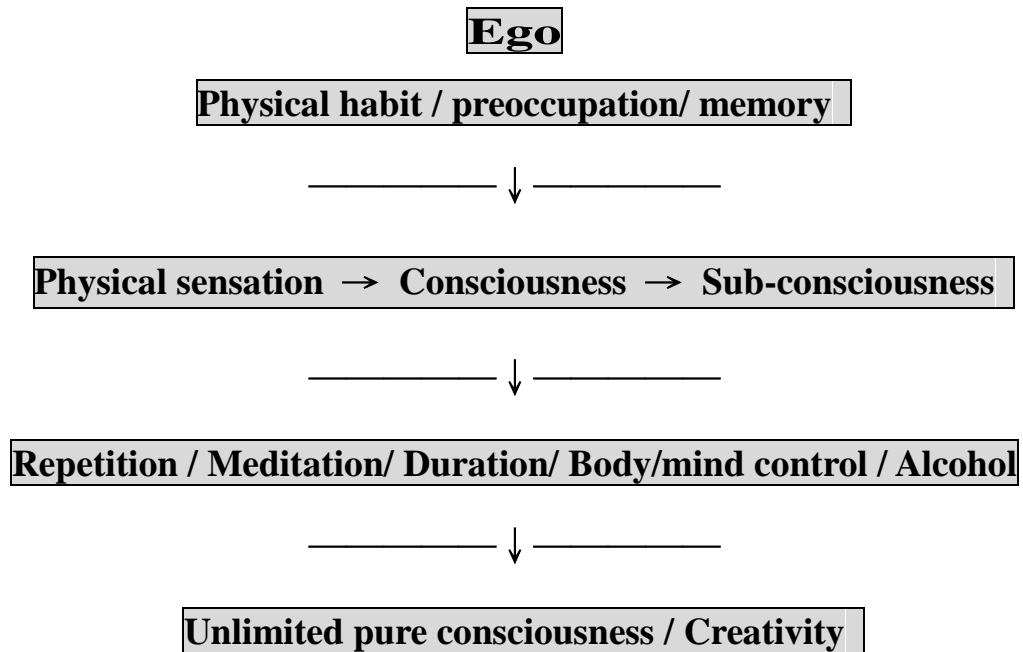


Fig. 2.40: A model of different ways to look for creativity

I started out seeking to achieve creative freedom, wanting to discover how to create art while relaxing and being aware at the same time. The repetitions of the circles were intended ultimately to overcome repetition. However, even the wish ‘I want to be free’ is something that comes from the conscious ego, and how could I free myself of that? For me, due to my background, meditation was the natural choice, and it did help me achieve greater perfection in the circle (Figs. 2.41, 2.42).

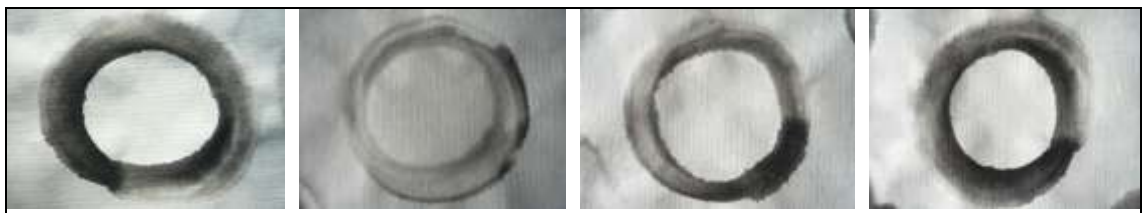


Fig. 2.41: Post-meditation, 2006

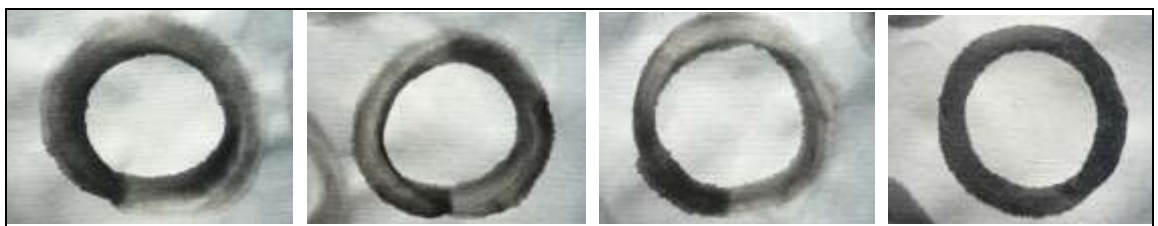


Fig. 2.42: Post-meditation, 2006

## 2.12 Chapter Summary

An important part of my regular artistic practice consisted of using the Chinese brush and ink to paint circles on paper, because of the circle's symbolic meaning within my Buddhist heritage. However, for a long time I failed to achieve mastery, despite repetitive practice. I thus began to precede the practice of art with intensive meditation, and then I gradually combined meditation with the artistic action itself, primarily by carrying core meditation practices, especially the concentration on breathing in and out, into the artistic action. Through repeated art and meditation practice, I discovered that my circles came to better represent the sign of the lotus, for they truly emerged from an empty mind in the midst of ever-changing phenomena—exactly what the lotus is supposed to represent.

In my earlier art practice, before I applied Buddhist meditation, I was in fact quite similar to other artists like Stuart Herring and John Lavell whose works involve acts of repetition and endurance: outward phenomena, habits, memories, and so on, which are always in a state of flux, continued to affect the performance. I differed from performance artists such as Abramović and MacLennan in that I was more interested in producing tangible artworks instead of inducing interaction with a viewing audience; I did not put myself at physical risk, nor did I really push the far limits of endurance and repetition.

After applying meditation, I was able to concentrate the body/mind to achieve harmony, stillness, and abundant energy. I knew then that combining meditation and art practice would allow me to reach a much higher level of consciousness. In this regard, I was more similar to the Western artists like Mark Tobey and others frequently based in San Francisco who had also discovered the effectiveness of applying Buddhism and meditation, in one way or another, in the creation of their artworks. They may not have been interested in endurance, but they drew upon many of the same ideas that I was exploring.

With this background information, I was ready to take the next step: residing and studying in monasteries in India and Nepal.

### **2.13 Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Stuart Herring and John Lavell for sharing their experiences of art practice and performance.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Being and Nothingness**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss how visual perception relates with and informs my art practice, specifically with respect to Buddhist images, and how my art practice is itself a study of visual perception. Visual perception is inherently limited, so my practice of art is inevitably limited by this. In Buddhism, the limited and contingent aspect of visual phenomena has always been recognized, so I wanted to explore Buddhist meditation further, and to develop body/mind awareness to enrich my art practice, so that I might approach the goal of reducing, if not entirely eliminating, the constraints on it. I anticipated that enhanced practice of Buddhist meditation would help me achieve unity of body and mind, and that this would benefit my art practice. I therefore spent a period of time residing in monasteries to practice more intensive, advanced forms of Buddhist meditation. The first part of this chapter (Sections 3.2 to 3.5) discusses my experiences with depicting Buddhist images with visible media, while the second part of this chapter (Sections 3.6 to 3.7) discusses a closely related area of my artistic practice involving invisible media. In each area, the intensive forms of Buddhist meditation proved helpful, and I was able to incorporate them in my art practice. After pausing to discuss my reflections on consciousness and the senses in Section 3.8, I offer my conclusions in Section 3.9.

#### **3.2 Seeing and Unseeing: Is it Coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva?**

Whereas in the previous chapter I discussed one area of my art practice focusing on the lotus, my purpose here is to discuss another area—representations of Buddhist figures, such as Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, specifically the image of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, the ‘Lotus-bearer’ (Padmapani is one of the names for Avalokitesvara, ‘Infinite Compassion’). The 6<sup>th</sup> century image of Bodhisattva Padmapani in Cave 1 of the Ajanta

Caves, India (see Fig. 3.1) has been widely reproduced, and it has become a deeply cherished part of the Buddhist heritage. Because of the position of the lotus, both empty and non-empty, I was naturally drawn to it.



Fig. 3.1: Bodhisattva Padmapani, Ajanta Caves no. 1

I decided to conduct an experiment with this iconographic image: I would test ‘seeing’ and ‘unseeing’ in art, the relationship between what the senses tell you (sense consciousness) and what the mind tells you (mind consciousness), by taking something that is very ordinary and familiar to everyone and transforming it into that image. I chose coffee, which people see and taste every day. Thus from September 2005 to July 2006, I reproduced the Bodhisattva Padmapani several times using coffee as the medium (see Figs. 3.2-3.4). As I had expected, people only recognized the Bodhisattva—they could not recognize the coffee. So what is the ‘truth’ of what is before us? Is it coffee? Is it the Bodhisattva? Are we ‘seeing’ or are we ‘unseeing’? The ‘truth’ has become something that the eyes tell us (‘Look! It’s the Bodhisattva!’), though some people might bring a more reductionist perspective (‘It’s the form of the Bodhisattva in some medium of coffee and ink’).



Figs. 3.2, 3.3, 3.4: Three copies of the Bodhisattva Padmapani (pre-meditation, 2005)



Fig. 3.5: Is it Coffee or the Bodhisattva Padmapani? No. 3 (2006)



Fig. 3.6: Is it Coffee or the Bodhisattva Padmapani? No. 2 (2005)

The three pre-meditation images that I created as a part of my regular art practice, before the application of more intensive approaches to meditation, also display some variation, even though they are close copies of the original image from the Ajanta Caves. This further suggests a kind of syllogism following Buddhist logic:

∴ The Bodhisattva Padmapani is not the three images.

The three copies are coffee.

∴ The coffee is not the Bodhisattva Padmapani.

I recognize that there are similarities here between my coffee Bodhisattvas and artworks that provoke tensions between perception and expectation. For example, Rene Magritte's (1898-1967) famous painting *The Treachery of Images* depicts a smoking pipe with the sentence written below, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. He calls attention to the fact that what the viewer has before him or her is a painting, not a pipe, even though it looks like a pipe. If Magritte had somehow worked from my way of thinking about the Bodhisattvas, however, his caption probably would have been different: 'Est-ce l'huile ou est-ce une pipe?' The open-endedness of a question would be preferable to a blunt statement.

A celebrated work of conceptual art, *An Oak Tree* by Michael Craig-Martin (born 1941), appears to be a glass of water on a shelf, but the artist insists, on the label attached to the exhibit, that the viewer is looking at an oak tree. The label contains language that closely echoes statements on the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Roman Catholic Church, a denomination in which the artist was raised. According to this doctrine, the bread and wine taken during the Eucharist actually become the body and blood of Christ, even though they may appear to the senses as being no more than bread and wine (this doctrine also differs from those of other Christian denominations, which hold that only Christ's spirit is present in the bread and wine, or that the bread and wine are only symbols). Craig-Martin thus calls attention to the similarity between the process of transubstantiation and the gallery

viewer's willing suspension of certain sensory evidence while viewing representational works of art: those landscapes then 'become' the scenes they depict. One could easily say that Craig-Martin is poking gentle fun at both Catholicism and representational art, but one could just as easily say the opposite—if people's willing suspension of belief in certain settings is easily understood and perfectly acceptable, then the leap of faith required for acceptance of the transubstantiation in a church should be considered equally acceptable. Likewise, if the artist says it is an oak tree, the viewer must get used to the idea that he means what he says; if a priest says the wine is Christ's blood, the congregants must accept it. Craig-Martin thus challenges our faith in the authenticity of artists.

Again, Craig-Martin *asserts* something that the viewer is expected to accept or reject, which differs from what I do with the coffee Bodhisattvas. I present the question. Craig-Martin also works within an ironic tradition, a tradition in which there is a dogma that becomes subject to questioning, while I work in a tradition that at its best is capable of encompassing and swallowing up its own ironies. In Roman Catholicism and Western religions in general, God is an absolute—one cannot get rid of Him (or Her, or It)—but in Buddhism there is, for example, the well-known Zen koan originating with Linji Yixuan (d. 866), 'If you meet the Buddha, kill him' (*Linji lu*, T. 47, no. 1985, p. 500b; see also the translation in Watson 1999:52).

I was mindful also of the distance between the image in the book that I copied from in Newcastle, UK and the original image in the Maharashtra region of western India, but it did not bother me, as I have understood that images are always in flux. Even the original image in the Ajanta caves has changed since it was first created, and it will continue to change until it eventually disappears with age or is lost in a calamity. Buddhists have always understood that the image in the Ajanta caves, let alone any image that I might produce, is not *really* the Bodhisattva Padmapani. The ephemerality of the original image, and all the images deriving from it, are thought to express the ephemerality of things in general—a core idea of Buddhism. For some reason, this notion of things being in flux

causes deep anxiety among many people. In the West, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), for example, has written at length about the way simulacra and signs have replaced meaning and reality in modern culture, and how the simulation of reality now dominates human experience in a process that he calls the 'precession of simulacra' (Baudrillard 1994:1). Many of these insights correspond roughly to ideas in Buddhism (the simulacra functioning as 'illusion' in Buddhism), but Baudrillard uses pejorative terms ('lost', 'rot', 'disappeared') to describe the new 'hyperreality' of simulacra, as opposed to the (better) way things were in the past. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), to cite another example, spoke of the 'aura' of an artwork being lost through the endless stream of reproduction through photographs (Benjamin 1934). As with Baudrillard, his choice of words when describing the process is revealing: 'withers', 'tremendous shattering of tradition', 'liquidation'. For a Buddhist, however, the illusory quality of things, their simulacra and auras have always been with us—it was already so at the time of Sakyamuni. Thus we may cherish the image of Padmapani, but the very acknowledgement of its ephemerality liberates one from becoming overly attached to it, and it liberates an artist like me to copy it without anxiety.

When I did the first of these paintings, I was still thinking about which aspects of the original I should retain, how to keep any personal feeling at bay, and how to work with the coffee. When I started working on the second, the lights went out, so I lit three candles for illumination. This effectively forced me to concentrate and screen out noise from outside. Still, I was striving to concentrate, so I did not really feel myself to be at liberty. When I was doing the third, I was in a bit of a hurry and was running out of time, so I started by spreading the coffee at random, letting accident, which is free of consciousness, play a role. I felt some joy at the result, since it incorporated causation from some unknown factors.

Thus there is considerable variation among my copies of the Bodhisattva painting, though they are all made after the same original. People can immediately see that the images resemble the original and one another, but they are not identical; they are not the 'self-same object' in a phenomenological sense. This creates a certain tension that may be

expressed in another syllogism:

∴ The Bodhisattva Padmapani appears in Bodhisattva Padmapani 1, 2, and 3.

Each of the Bodhisattva Padmapanis (1, 2, and 3) are distinct from one another.

∴ Bodhisattva Padmapanis 1, 2, and 3 are not Bodhisattva Padmapani.

Even though I set out with the intention of creating three copies of the image from the Ajanta Caves, to let them appear as the original, they are still distinct from the original and from one another, because each of the three represent different experiences which in turn differ from the experience of the creation of the original image. However, there was a *commonality* of intention behind the original and three copies.

Again, some of the things I was exploring here may be further illustrated by writings of Edmund Husserl. Husserl distinguished the noetic (that which experiences) from the noematic (that which is experienced), and described the noematic as always being contingent, dependent on, or bracketed by the noetic. (The parallel here with Buddhist teachings about the world should be readily apparent.) For Husserl, there is always a distinction between an object and its presentation in any particular instance, the distinction between the subject of predication and the predicates ascribed to it. He writes, '[In] noematic description of what is meant, as such, and at the time, . . . the self-same intentional "object" evidently separates itself from the shifting and changing "predicates".' (Husserl 1913, rpt. 1931: 365). In other words, 'self-same object' splits in one's perception and shows continuous division and separation, not only in the viewer's 'eye' but also the viewer's (internal) experience of it in the mind.

Other artists have conducted similar experiments. For example, the Swedish artist Cecilia Edefalk has executed a series of paintings based on a photograph of Laurel and Hardy; in her 'Another Movement' series, she depicts the same couple again and again (see Figs. 3.7 and 3.8). 'In an interview from 1999, Edefalk herself explained this:

'Repetition is a means of emphasizing the unique quality of painting. Copy has long fascinated me. I repeat every work within a group of works individually. Repetition allows one to express totally different things.' The difference between the original and the copy becomes meaningless' (Breuvart 2002:102-3). Although she explores the same thing in each copy, each copy remains a different product presenting its own evidence to human senses. This is, in fact, a very natural phenomenon.

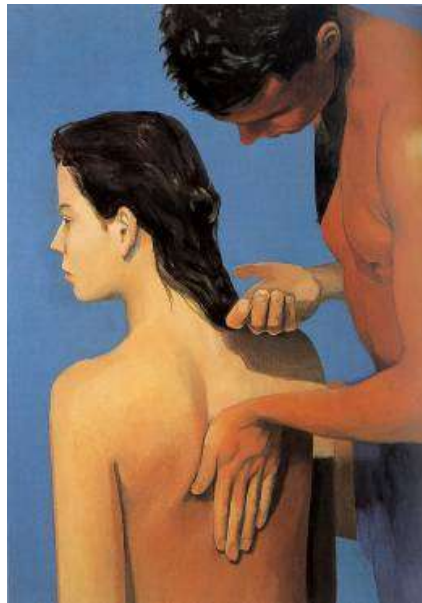


Fig. 3.7: Cecilia Edefalk: Another Movement, 1990 (from a series of 7 paintings)



Fig. 3.8: Cecelia Edefalk 'Another Movement' series in exhibition

In my art practice, I am always trying to transform the 'I' of ego-consciousness and achieve self-same unity. However, such unity is not easily accomplished, because environmental phenomena are always impinging on the mind. I concede that these phenomena present many possibilities, and in fact, in my usual art practice, they are often responsible for generating the most interesting aspects of the resulting work, because of the movement within motivation. As John Dewey points out, 'Every experience, of slight or tremendous import, begins with an impulsion ... Impulsions are beginnings of complete experience because they proceed from need; from a hunger and demand that belongs to the organism as a whole and that can be supplied only by instituting definite relations (active relations, interactions) with the environment' (Dewey 1934, rpt. 1958:58). Hence, I understood that there were things I could not control. Nevertheless, experience provides that which allows one to understand the relationship between self and environmental phenomena, and the evidence appears in the resulting image.

Therefore, from this act I had three copies of the Bodhisattva Padmapani as art products, and each was different from the original one ( $1 \neq 1$ ). No one could tell they were coffee. I had worked hard to make them look like the original ( $1 = 1$ ). I used transparent paper copies from the photo in the book, expanded them, and used them as the basis for the paintings on Chinese paper. Even though much of the process was mechanical, and I strove to look at the image consistently throughout the process, and applied the same conditions of brush and ink, the method inevitably encompassed the possibility of differences in phenomena. I had distinct experiences each time, crossed with the intentionality of an ambition: while I painted the Bodhisattva, I *wanted* to be aware that there is the Bodhisattva and the non-Bodhisattva; while I spread the coffee, I *wanted* to be aware that there is coffee and non-coffee. Certainly it was a worthwhile exercise. It was repetitive, like Edefalk's series, but repetition—even obsessive repetition—does not mean diminished creativity. The contradiction between creativity and obsession is only an 'apparent contradiction' (see Storr 1976:122).

In this practice, the evidentiary data presenting itself to the senses is clearly an iconic representation of Bodhisattva Padmapani, and the indexical representation is coffee, invisible or formless to the observer. The conscious human mind grasps at the illusion and disregards the substance—something that Buddhism has long taught:

... like a man pointing a finger at the moon to show it to others who should follow the direction of the finger to look at the moon. If they look at the finger and mistake it for the moon, they lose (sight of) both the moon and the finger. Why? Because the bright moon is actually pointed at; they both lose sight of the finger and fail to distinguish between the states of brightness and darkness. Why? Because they mistake the finger for the bright moon and are not clear about brightness and darkness. (Han Shan in Lu K'uan Yu: 2006:60)

Furthermore, one cannot say that the development of the three paintings, one to the other, represents a linear process, because they were being influenced by other subtle alterations of consciousness. It is almost as if there had been three different persons painting the Bodhisattva, each with her own perceptions, acts, and interactions with the environment. Then, am I just one person? Are there three persons in me? Now even the meaning of a single 'self' or 'I' becomes problematic, and that applies as well to viewers who see only the Bodhisattva and no coffee. Even if the viewers are aware of the coffee medium, they experience a continuous cognitive flipping among perceptive levels: now they see only coffee, now they see only the Bodhisattva, now both, now neither (if their minds wander). Being mindful of such things, the Buddha argued as follows:

If seeing is an object, you should also see my seeing. If you can do so why when I do not see things, do you not see my non-seeing? (Even) if you do so it will not be real but your false seeing. If you do not see my non-seeing, it follows

that your seeing and mine are not objects. If so, why cannot your seeing be YOU? Again if when you see an object you grasp at it as such, it should also see you; if so that object and the nature of seeing will mingle and you, I and the world will be in complete confusion. (Han Shan, in Lu 2006:65-66)

Even when the paintings are shown together, the very complexity of the motifs and the experience of viewing them suggest that they are outward phenomenal changes, and that the perceiving mind changes along with those changes, thereby masking the fact that they have no inherent existence. Buddha Sakyamuni taught:

Just look at the grove and stream in Jetavana Park; is it form that creates the eyes' seeing or vice versa? If the organ of sight creates form, when you see the void, which is not form, form would vanish, which means that nothing would exist. Then if form is no more, what can be used to reveal the void? It is the same with the void. If form produces the eyes' seeing, when you see the void which is not form, your seeing would vanish, which means that nothing would exist; then who distinguishes the void from form? Therefore, you should know that neither seeing nor form nor the void has a place of abode, and that form and seeing are false and are neither causal nor conditional nor self-existent. (Han Shan, in Lu 2006:97)

### **3.3 Further thoughts on intentions and names, images and limits**

I contemplated what I had done, teasing out all the implications. In this series, I began with certain intentions. What do the original intentions reflect? I included a personal ego and a subjective attitude, a self-identity of personal characteristics; I brought in my own ego in the interest of what I was doing. The same might be said of artists in general. They identify with the creative act and suppose that the realization of the work presents their own

interpretation or version of things. In the art field this concept seems also to be linked closely with the idea of liberation: the artist wants something, and the mind turns and runs free with the idea, which is firmly planted in the conscious ego. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was exemplary in this regard, because while he probed the boundaries of art, he came up with the insight that art can be an idea that makes sense instead of a 'standard art object. By pondering what is called art, he realized that it is based on cognition and intent. Hence he was able to produce his ready-made sculptures like *Fountain* (1917; see Fig. 3.9), which is a standard urinal. The work expresses an idea or an argument: that things are identified in certain ways, even distinguished from other things and endowed with value, purely because of cogito and intentionality. In fact we are only making a distinction in the names we give things. If so, then what is name of the game of naming? The act of naming by human beings is an expression or presentation of the ego, and the eyes are focusing on things that Husserl calls 'ego-acts', the ultimate intention of which is self-evident. For example, if the ready-made sculpture of the urinal had not been already been named a urinal before Duchamp came along, then it would not have been named a fountain, either. But if it were to present itself as a urinal and we knew nothing of Duchamp, then we would name it a urinal, not a fountain. 'Urinal' is a name only, and 'fountain' is also a name only. Things in themselves are without names. The naming makes the human ego apparent.



Fig. 3.9: Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* (1917)

Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACSI. London 2005

The intention-filled ego-consciousness occupies its own version of an object and finds new ideas in every act of attention. It offers its own version or interpretation of that which means to be new. Objects that come fresh from the studio are also new: new images of ideas, the results of acts of attention. From one image to another, each presents its own version or own interpretation of things, but only jumps from one limit to another limit. Ultimately, as Sartre once observed, these limits thwart the artist's desire for freedom: 'Once the distinction between the simple *wish*, the *representation* which I could choose, and the *choice* is abolished, freedom disappears too' (Sartre 1958:483).

I then gave some thought to the limits of perception. The thinking process is a steady stream of images and ideas that begin to make sense only after the ego-consciousness steps in, synthesizes and assembles the images and ideas, and bundles them into compounds that may be interpreted and expressed. The mind is never fixed, since it is preoccupied by bundling and rebundling the compounds. The images and ideas consequently fade in and fade out. What seems even self-evident in the thinking mind is an illusion of thought and image, which come and go like waves. Humans function in this chaotic stream only because there is a rational ego that puts all these things together coherently. No wonder it tends to justify its own existence and give itself special status, but in so doing, it begins to lose the truth about its perpetual contingency.

We may contrast this with the Kantian view, in which the self's judgment carries with it the conviction of truth. 'In Kant's words, the "I think" must be capable of accompanying all my presentation.' (Husserl 1913:133) But human perception is limited, as shown by people's failure to see the coffee in my Bodhisattva images. They came to the images expecting images, not coffee, and sure enough, that is what they saw. So the experience of nature, and of natural appearances, is still bound by consciousness, which is always in flux. Likewise, the things in the world are themselves always in flux. Nothing is really steady or fixable in the eye; nothing is really old or new.

Buddha's disciple Ānanda once approached the Buddha with a statement that indicated that he was attaching too much importance to the mind and forgetting that the ego is deeply a part of the seemingly self-evident world. He said, 'I am using my own to search for it exhaustively; I conclude that which searches is my mind.' (Han Shan in Lu 2006:41) The mind could not be found in the natural world, and Buddha had shown him that it was colouring the world with his own perceptions, just like one can 'see' a moon if one's mind thinks it is there.

If that is the case, then what about the artist producing art? If everything 'out there' is coloured by our minds, where does this leave the art? Obviously an artist does something and produces a result—there is more than ego and cogito. So where do those images come from? From where in the body springs those ideas and images, whether conscious or unconscious?

We may consider what occurs upon waking from a dream. We see objects in dreams, and after we wake up these objects remain in our memories, even though the act of dreaming is finished, and the perceivers were not even our waking selves. Moreover, these may produce results (if we choose to depict or describe them), and when doing so, we do so consciously, even though they were first generated in sleep. The ego-consciousness always tends to do this image-to-image conversion, which leads to the acts of expressing oneself and presenting appearances.

When Marc Chagall (1887-1985) prayed to God every day to be capable of generating good ideas for his paintings, he was acting on the belief that the self and mind are limited and not completely free. However, in doing so his mind was already framing the idea of God, an infinite being that (as Peirce once wrote) is impossible of being immediately present in the mind, like a 'four-sided triangle', but that can still be represented and thought of (Peirce 1991:14-5). It would seem that Chagall had no difficulty generating images. After all, like everyone else, his mind was generating images, some utterly fantastic, but he did have to deal with physical limits and constraints.

Then I realized that there is a kind of dissonance between what the mind generates in names, words and images and what the physical body generates. There is no problem with the mind's generation of images—it is a natural process. Likewise, Buddhist artists for centuries have been quite happy with creating images, like that of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, and recognizing them as such. Would there be a better way of reducing the body/mind dissonance, as Chagall had desired?

### 3.4 Residence in a Tibetan monastery

I conducted an experiment on creativity and repetition while residing in a Tibetan monastery in Bodh-Gaya, India from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 (see Fig. 3.10). I attempted to concentrate on emptying the conscious mind during the period of residency and seeing how it affected my art practice and whether it would resolve the dissonance described above.



Fig. 3.10: Bodh-Gaya, India



Fig. 3.11: The Bodhi tree (pipal tree)

What better place for a Buddhist artist to embark on a journey of self-exploration than

Bodh-Gaya, India, the birthplace of Buddhism? This is where, in either 588 or 592 B.C., Prince Gotama practised meditation under the Bodhi or pipal tree for 21 or 49 days (sources differ), found enlightenment, and was henceforth called the Buddha or the Enlightened One (see Fig. 3.11). It is said that when he took his seven first steps after enlightenment, a lotus sprang from each step. The place is still full of mystical energy, and people come from all over world not only to see where the Buddha was enlightened but also to observe rituals and study deeper meditation practices, particularly prostration practice (Fig. 3.12). Prostration practice developed from the ancient awareness of the linkage between physical movement and sensation and the clarity of mind. Since I was attempting to overcome limitations caused by what I perceived as a dissonance in this regard, I thought that prostration practice would be helpful, so I went.



Fig. 3.12: Bodh-Gaya, India

What exactly was involved in this ritual of prostration? My aim was to complete the full sequence of 10,000 prostrations in 13 days (Fig. 3.13). I already had some experience with prostration, but advanced practitioners, like the Tibetan monk who was also completing the cycle during my time there (Fig. 3.14) can complete the sequence in fewer days. I allowed myself extra time, realizing that as a novice I would not be ready for the full physical exertion all at once. Thus in each of the first three days, I only did 600 prostrations instead of the traditional 1,000, taking a slower pace and letting my body get used to it. The first day still seemed easy, but by the second and third days my whole body was stiff, and it seemed a tangle of burning aches and pains, which made it very difficult to bow down. I plopped on the wooden board awkwardly, and my mind was still preoccupied with counting. Sweat streamed from every pore and soaked the board. My mind was constantly telling me to stop the torment. However, on the fourth day, the pain lessened and my body felt soft and pliant. I could extend my body straight on the wooden board, touch my forehead to it, and straighten my arms to form a lotus blossom with my hands, so that during the next eight days I was able to do 1,000 per day, and on the final day I even did 1,200. At that movement, body and mind were like mud. There were only my palms, empty and opening like lotus blooming. I call that a moment of attaining pure consciousness: I felt humble and without ego (that is, the energy to do the prostration did not seem to emerge from the self, which in fact had seemed to have disappeared entirely), and compassion was rising.



Fig. 3.13: Su-Lien in prostration practice, Bodh-Gaya



Fig. 3.14: Tibetan monk prostrating, Bodh-Gaya

The form of meditation involved in this is quite different from the one described in the previous chapter. Whereas that form of meditation is done in stillness, with concentration on the breathing cycle, this form proceeds by physical actions, from standing with palms pressed together to kneeling to stretching oneself out on the board, forming the lotus, then reversing course until one is standing again. The outcome is similar though not completely the same: by completing the cycle of actions one achieves a state of deep meditation or mindfulness, and with mindfulness comes greater freedom of mind and no more self-confusion. When I had eliminated confusion, I could listen to the sound of the silence of the inner world, without interference or distraction by sounds of self-confusion or self-conflict. There was a focus on the actual process of action, on the sweat flowing onto the wooden board, on the degree to which that sweat indicated the sweat from my body, clothes, and hair. In other words, this mindfulness helped me be more deeply aware of that present moment. My state of mind gradually became still as the 'I' of cognitive thought diminished to nothing and true Buddha-consciousness arose. Because mind and body were both utterly concentrated on the immediate action, I reached greater harmony.

In retrospect, after performing 1000 prostrations every day, changing the fundamental condition of 'I am' seems to have been an inevitable outcome. What I appreciate about Bodh-Gaya was the level of concentration and mind-body unity that I attained, which (as we shall see) was useful in the practice of my art. In any case, I woke up each morning surprised at my inner stillness and quietude.

Another insight from Bodh-Gaya, after putting myself through the extreme of physical

exertion, is that everyday life excites the mind, but its opposite, the shadow of death, does also, and one must be aware of both with an attitude of equanimity, turning from one to the other like turning between consciousness and unconsciousness. This may also be applied in the practice of art. The shortness of that moment of existence between breathing in and breathing out, as far as I am aware, does not make any difference. I am always conscious of that, and I suppose this comes through in my paintings.

My life at Bodh-Gaya consisted not only of prostration. During my 13 days there, I woke up each morning between 4:30 and 5:00. After eating breakfast (all meals were vegetarian), I walked to the temple, bowed and prayed, then walked in meditation for around 15 minutes around the Bodhi tree, repeatedly chanting 'Om Vajra-dharma Hrih,' timing the words to my movements. That also served as suitable preparation for the prostrations that followed. After completing 1,000, I used a Chinese brush to draw the image of the Bodhisattva (Fig. 3.15) repeatedly. My mind was virtually silent, untroubled by thoughts of quality, depth and height of image. I used coffee but did not think of it as coffee, and when drawing the Bodhisattvas, I did not think they were Bodhisattvas. Because the mind was still and empty, the practice of my art was not bound by material, physical or mental conditions, and so I felt free (Fig. 3.15, 16, 17, 18.).



Fig. 3.15: Coffee / Bodhisattva (post-meditation, 2006, India)



Fig. 3.16: Coffee / Bodhisattva (post-meditation, 2006, India)

I noticed other changes as well. After 1000 exhausting prostrations per day, my movements slowed down, and my feet tread smoothly on the ground. I used my eyes to see and that was all—no other images appeared in my mind except what I saw. Colour was only colour. Higher levels of consciousness did not bother to intrude and modify it.

My physical senses also became extraordinarily acute. The proof of this came during the fifth day, when I ate lunch at a Tibetan restaurant and detected the smell of mutton. My meal was supposedly vegetarian, and the people there insisted that it was. They seemed sincere, so despite my suspicions, I ate it. Only 30 minutes later I began to vomit, and continued doing so through the following afternoon and night. I did not have any medicine to calm my digestive system. Fortunately, the next morning I felt much better, and I was able to do the day's prostrations, though I felt somewhat stiff. I interpreted the incident as signalling the diminution of my ego.



Figs. 3.17, 3.18: Coffee / Bodhisattva (post-meditation, 2006, India)

In the final six days of the prostration sequence I was fully awake to both outer and inner phenomena (by 'inner phenomena' I refer to things that occur within the mind). I had a sense of my consciousness and physical body being separate. I discovered during this period that even when I was still, I could still sense myself going through the positions of kneeling, prostrating, and standing, as if the mind were repeating the drama far away. At that point, I could only wonder: Where is the mind? What things link it with physical reality, and how?

Nevertheless, I found that the conjunction between any two inner and outer phenomena, arbitrarily chosen, was essentially the repetition of the breathing cycle. The cycle of breathing in and out continues even one is unconscious. Once I became aware of this, I could concentrate on and control it without effort, with a still, silent mind—whether walking around the Bodhi tree, prostrating, or painting. The thought of self had gone beyond time and meaning, so that when I painted the Bodhisattva, there was only the painting in process but no one working on the painting. This was the first time I had allowed the 'big self' to fade—the mind was focused on only breathing in and out, without any thought of emptiness or non-emptiness; the body's senses had grown acute, attuned to the most subtle things; the movements were made smooth. If I sweated while sitting in meditation, there was only sweat; when it was sunny, there was only sunlight. When I went through the prostration cycle, I felt no pain or fatigue. Although I was very sweaty, the 'I' was unperturbed, uncritical, and accepting.

Curiously enough, when I picked up the brush to paint the Bodhisattva, I did not follow any iconic image as I had before. I needed only to follow a kind of instinctive mental and physical impulse, and it appeared. Mind, brush, and body followed the one constant of the breathing cycle. It seemed as if my consciousness, body-sense, even all the cells were one lotus blossom ( $1 + 1 + 2 + 3 \dots = 1$ ) blooming again and again. The feeling was one of unparalleled clarity and unity. The practice of my art brushing the lines of the images, mixing the coffee with water, spreading it on paper, and so on had reached a state of

stillness and mindfulness for the first time. Limitations of the self were overcome, as well as the sense of competing with the self, by concentrating on breathing and not watching and cogitating upon the brush.

### 3.5 Is Wine the Colour, or Is It the Bodhisattva?

My experiment with coffee and the Bodhisattva Padmapani concerned the perception of form and substance. After my experience in Bodh-Gaya, I decided to conduct a similar experiment that involved colour: I painted the Bodhisattva with wine (Fig. 3.19). I chose a good Rioja. Observant Buddhists are supposed to avoid alcohol, so I thought wine would be an ideal medium for expressing the emptiness of form and colour.



Fig. 3.19: Bodhisattva (post-meditation art practice, 2007)

I have tasted wine, so I know wine, and I can recognize wine when I see it. Now when I look at my wine-paintings of the Bodhisattva I say, 'There is the Bodhisattva in wine,' or 'There is the wine in the Bodhisattva.' But what I see is the image of the Bodhisattva—I do

not see the wine, and the feeling and taste of wine has long disappeared. In fact, even as I was executing these paintings, I often forgot the wine in the Bodhisattva. It seemed only to be the form of Bodhisattva. Even though I was both seeing the Bodhisattva and making him visible through the wine, I did not see the wine. The feeling or the taste of wine was already entirely outside of my thoughts; there was only my visual perception, involved in the practice of making art (Figs. 3.21 and 3.22). Somehow it seemed that I was missing something. If I gave deliberate thought to the wine, then the Bodhisattva disappeared; if I relied on what I was seeing, then I saw only the Bodhisattva and not the wine.



Fig. 3.20: Glass of Rioja

Figs. 3.21 and 3.22: *Is Wine the Colour or Is It the Bodhisattva?* (2007)

I understand that all worldly phenomena tastes, forms, things, colours, even emptiness or void when given a name are only phenomena of appearance, not true mind. 'All phenomena are manifestations of the mind, and ... all worldly causes and effects,

either direct or indirect, take shape because of the mind'. (Han Shan in Lu 2006:44) Thus, if I (and any other viewer as well) see only the wine or only the Bodhisattva, this is not the 'fault' of either: it can originate from only the mind that is naturally disposed to distinguish and discriminate among things what Husserl has called 'a pre-giving-consciousness'. Moreover, this 'pre-giving-consciousness' or 'sub-consciousness' or whatever one might wish to call it is not the true mind, which would have its own nature independent of sensory data. While Husserl argues, 'There must be an original constitution of the object ... which, as a pre-giving consciousness, is prior; in the most proper sense it is not actually *pre-giving* but is a consciousness which apprehends precisely already in terms of objects' (Husserl 1913, rpt. 1931:25), I disagree: How can an inanimate object (Husserl was discussing a tone) have consciousness? However, the idea for using wine led to the intention for using it in my art practice, and I cannot fully explain where it came from, except to say that elements of the sub-consciousness and ego were also involved, that it sprang already intentioned from a store of the sub-consciousness or Husserl's 'pre-giving-consciousness.' Husserl meant to focus on what may be called a special kind of 'reflection' in 'pre-given-ness', but the 'pre-given-ness' is already in the mind's store. That means the store is also limited, but by virtue of being limited it may be reflected on and used in art. One may reflect on finite past experience in order to renew it. For example, if we look at Henri Rousseau's *Virgin Forest with Setting Sun* of 1910 (Fig. 3.23), we may say that Rousseau began with a certain intention and a special 'reflection' on elements or objects stored in his pre-giving-consciousness. He took these objects and 'intentioned' them, based on his limited personal experience. After all, he had never actually seen a jungle except in reproductions, and the resulting image is 'impossible' in the sense that the objects' relative scales do not match anything in the world. It was Rousseau's sub-conscious that made the picture real.



Fig. 3.23: Henri Rousseau, *Virgin Forest with Setting Sun* (1910)

What did the wine / Bodhisattva experiment accomplish? I began with the humble awareness that the materials, my body, and mind are conditions, and therefore limited, and with this awareness I can begin to 'let them go' and free myself from them, much as I do with the breath as I visualize it circulating through the body. Then, while painting the Bodhisattva with wine, body and mind achieve stillness and emptiness, and I am no longer bound by the substance of things.

It may seem paradoxical that I strive to develop the true mind, which is still and empty, while creating art. How can emptiness of mind make it possible to create art in practice? This has been a very difficult question for me, and I have not discovered any specific explanation or method for it. If the mind were to achieve real nothingness, the sub-consciousness would also disappear for good, and so would the art. This suggests that the state of emptiness, in practice, must be temporary. Then how long should I maintain mental non-creativity? Thus far, I have been starting out with meditation, prostrations, and chanting, then moving on to the art, at which point I do not focus particularly on the subject or conscious motives. Rather I let the pieces of desire and imaginations go I do not cling to a small image, since that would limit my freedom. The

emptiness of body and mind achieved during meditation does not entirely persist, since the sub-consciousness is always there. For example, when I think of why I chose to paint with wine, certainly one of the reasons is that I simply enjoyed the colour. Why this is so I cannot explain: it was as if I was predisposed to like the colour. I recognize this as something emerging from the sub-consciousness, that it is a form of my own. If I let go this form of my own, then my ego-consciousness fades, and to a corresponding degree it is liberated.

Therefore, when I do art, I also need more time for meditation, so that when I return to the art I have greater physical energy and emptiness of mind, that is, fewer limitations imposed by material things, physical functions, sensory perceptions, etc. The body and mind are always in need of objects to react to and be conscious of: seeing occurs because we see something, feeling occurs because we feel something. Likewise, when I enjoy the colour of wine, it is because I see it, and because it is there to be seen, and because the habit of liking or disliking things will be a part of my sub-consciousness as long as I exist. I acknowledge these things, and balance such things with the emptiness achieved in meditation. I concentrate on breathing in and out, let go of the substance of things while doing art, and thus being liberated. So the wine is wine and colour, but it is also the Bodhisattva (Fig. 3.24).



Fig. 3.24: Wine / Bodhisattva (post-meditation, 2007)

### 3.6 Being becoming nothingness: pre-meditation practice in invisible drawings

I now return to pre-meditation practice (September 2005 to July 2006) in a related area of my work as an artist, which consists of depicting Buddhist figures with chemical media that is visible only under UV light. I started with the intention of executing the paintings without seeing what I was painting, as a means of exploring the vacuity of visual perception (Fig. 3.25). For paint I mixed commercially available 'Bristol Fluorescent' powder with glue and water, to a consistency that would make it applicable by a Chinese brush.



Fig. 3.25: Chinese paper under ordinary and UV light

The initial idea of painting a Bodhisattva with invisible media developed after talking with my supervisor, Prof. Mary Mellor. When I mentioned 'being' and 'emptiness', she mentioned Sartre's 'being and nothingness'. The words 'being and nothingness' lingered in my mind, and suddenly I was struck by the potential of using invisible media to explain or express my own philosophical ideas in my art. I considered Sartre's statement about consciousness and belief: 'I cannot limit myself to saying that my belief is belief; my belief is the consciousness (of) belief. It is often said that the act of reflection alters the fact of consciousness on which it is directed'. (Sartre 1943, rpt. 1957:74)

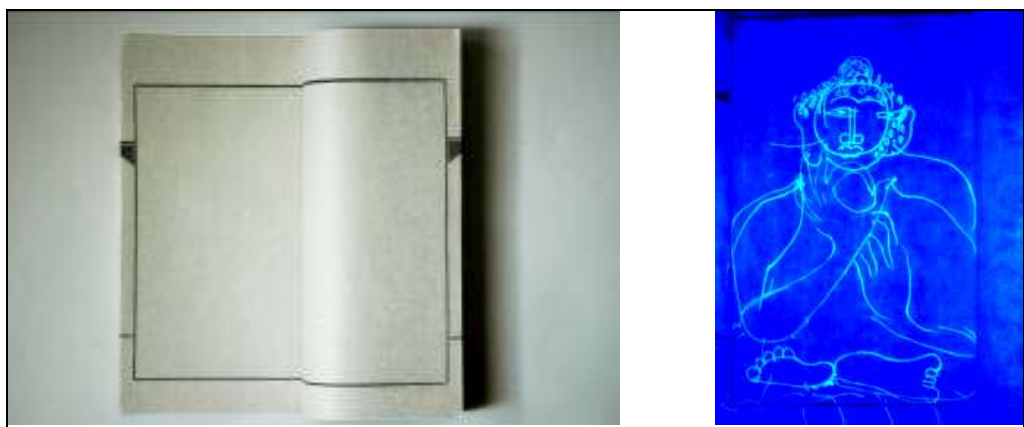


Fig. 3.26: From pre-meditation general studio practice in Newcastle, 2006

I began to experiment with using Chinese brush and paper, but instead of using traditional Chinese ink (or coffee or wine), I tried various mixtures of Bristol Fluorescent

powder, which is invisible under ordinary light and appears only under UV light, with other materials. The ordinary Bristol Fluorescent paints did not work well with a Chinese brush, so I had to try out various other mixtures and materials before I arrived at the right blend of white wood glue and water. The paper on the left side of the album is blank, while the paper on the right side bears the image (see Fig. 3.26). To see the difference, a UV light must be switched on.

How does the UV light relate with the human eye and with the phenomenon of visual perception? How do consciousness and perception arise? This part of my art practice experiments with the elements of consciousness and perception both essential in day-to-day studio art practice and the relationship between art and one's own mind/body. Viewers need to rely on an UV light to guide their eyes so that they can trace the lines, and then they construct the image in their minds. The synthetic nature of perception is thus illustrated. The Bodhisattva becomes a chimeric two-in-one image/blank. This experiment is thus somewhat similar to 'blind drawing' but with key differences. First, blind drawing, as it is usually done, is considered a practice that, in its best examples, yields a still-recognisable image that possesses a kind of highly desirable looseness or freedom of line, but I was seeking greater precision of detail. Second, blind drawing yields a conventionally visible drawing, but in this experiment the image remains unseen until the introduction of UV light, so in this regard, the viewer must also 'participate' at the blind stage. Third, unlike 'blind drawing,' my eyes can see the paper and motion of my hand; however, the image is visible only in my mind, and my hands have to follow.

Nevertheless, my hand at this stage still could not work properly, or rather the coordination between my mind's eye and hand was still somewhat lacking: the lines I drew were very unsteady, and the quality of the image, once exposed under UV, was compromised, even though I tried to hold the image of the Bodhisattva icon bright and clear in my mind. There was clearly a lack of control (Fig. 3.27, 28).



Fig. 3.27, 28: Pre-meditation art practice (2006)

At this point I was in a situation described by Husserl:

If our inquiring regard is directed to mental processes they will generally offer themselves with an *emptiness* and *vague remoteness* which make them useless for single or eidetic findings. The situation would be different if, instead of those mental processes themselves, we were interested in their mode of givenness and if we wished to explore the essence of emptiness or vagueness itself which, for their part, become given in such cases with the fullest clarity rather than vaguely. But if something itself vaguely intended to, e.g., the obscurely hovering object of memory or phantasy, is asked to deliver up its essence, then what it delivers up will have to be something imperfect; that is, where those *intuitions of single particulars* which are the basis for seizing upon an essence have a low degree of clarity, the *seizings upon the essence* likewise <have a low degree of clarity>; and, correlatively, what is seized upon is, in respect of its sense, “*unclear*.” it is hazy, indecisively separated both internally and externally. (Husserl 1983:153)

If I were painting a 'Being' Bodhisattva with ordinary ink, my body and mind would work together as they ordinarily do, but here my eyes cannot follow the lines being drawn. An act such as this illustrates that even though the senses may seem to be entirely separate from the mind, they are actually one, because when the 'mind of the senses' is blocked, the 'mind of conceptual consciousness' arises. Perception is inextricably related to consciousness. Consider also what happens after the viewer knows that an image is actually on the page, after the UV light is switched off: the 'Nothingness' Bodhisattva is still there, in the viewer's consciousness. Again, it is like 'seeing' the moon on a dark night. Seeing remains, regardless of external conditions, as the Buddha pointed out to Ānanda: 'Why are light and darkness still seen? As they differ, it follows that the seeing is beyond creation and annihilation: if so, how can the seeing be the same as light and darkness?' (Han Shan, in Lu 2006:117)

If mind and senses are well-integrated, as one would reasonably expect them to be, it should also be possible to express the Bodhisattva with utmost clarity without having to look at the lines. It should be possible to use the 'mind's eye' (consciousness) to guide the motion of the hand and brush. But in ordinary practice, the mind is unsettled, so it inevitably begins to grasp and identify images, and flip from one image to the next like channels on a television, and even lay claim to them ('These images are mine')—and so the image of the Bodhisattva is lost.

By painting the Bodhisattva this way, I am also exploring the origin of consciousness. Does it arise from the seeing, the eyes, the Bodhisattva's form, emptiness? If, as Sartre indicated, 'belief is the consciousness (of) belief,' then belief would correspond to the ego-based consciousness. In the absence of an object of belief (that is, when the UV light is off), the ego-based consciousness would be still, lacking anything to latch on to. With an object to perceive and believe in (when the UV light is on), the ego-based consciousness arises. This implies that belief is a misconception of the object.

Accordingly, in one of Buddha's dialogues with Ānanda, he said:

‘As you have said, there is no essence of seeing with an independent nature apart from phenomena. Now if there is no perception in the things you point out, I now ask again: As you and the Tathāgata sit in this Jetavana Park, when you see the wood and all externals including the sun or moon, if there is no essence of Seeing which can be picked out from them, tell me which one is not the seeing?’ Ānanda replied: ‘Of all things seen in this Jetavana Park, I do not know which one is not the seeing. Why? Because if the trees are not the seeing, why do I see them? If they are the seeing, why are they trees? If the void is not the seeing, why do I see it? If the void is the seeing, why is it empty? I too have thought carefully about all this and now conclude that each one of them is the seeing’ (Han Shan in Lu 2006:70-71).

These ideas are quite similar to what Sartre has said about the ‘fact of being seen’ (Sartre 1943, rpt. 1957:74) and what Husserl has said about the need to see both phenomena and emptiness. The latter pointed out that perceived objects are components of perception: ‘The perception of a surface is not a surface; and yet an object does appear in the perception, and this appearing object is characterized as a surface’. (Husserl 1997:14)

### **3.7 Monastic residence, Nepal**

In the first section of this chapter I discussed my stay at a Tibetan monastery in Bodh-Gaya from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006, which had so strongly influenced my coffee and wine Bodhisattvas. Here I would like to relate my experiences in the next part of my journey, which helped me overcome the difficulties I had encountered with the invisible images.

After leaving the Tibetan monastery, I took a hard three-day bus journey to Kathmandu, Nepal. From 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> October I stayed at the Guest House of Shechen

Monastery in Kathmandu to observe the artistic activities of the monks and view *tanka* and Mandala paintings. Shechen Monastery is a replica of an important Tibetan monastery that was destroyed during the Chinese invasion of Tibet. At this new monastery, I observed students doing Mandala paintings. First they chant together and pray, then they paint, then they chant and pray again. The Mandala paintings that they execute are similar to my Bodhisattvas, so it provided a fortuitous opportunity for me to make progress on my own.

On 28<sup>th</sup> October, I went to Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery, which is located near the Shechen Monastery, and stayed there for two weeks, until 10<sup>th</sup> November. While there I woke up very early each morning, then entered the worship hall for *puja* (ritual acts of worship chanting, prostration, etc.). I listened to the chanting of the monks until midday, then took a break until 2:00pm, and then meditated for one hour. After meditation, I began to draw the invisible Bodhisattva. The first time was not very successful, because the weather was warm and sunny so that when my hand held the brush it cast a deep shadow. I was still a bit restless, so my patience was reduced (Fig. 3.29).



Fig. 3.29: Post-meditation (October 2006)

I went out to walk around, and suddenly I was struck with the realization that perception occurs when an inner object (in the body/mind) touches an external object, and that emptiness is the flip side of consciousness. So I walked back to my room and sat in meditation again. I tried to let go of any remaining restlessness, let go of the image of Bodhisattva, let go of the intention to create art, and so on. I could focus appropriately on

the breathing in and out, and the quality of meditation was much deeper, since I could bring my mind to the state of not wanting, not seeking, and not pursuing. With the mind empty, I had arrived at the flip side of consciousness, so that awareness of phenomena had disappeared, but the evidence of the empty mind / consciousness was everywhere. This empty mind / consciousness does not fit the mould of individual human beings, and is inexpressible in words or symbols. Rather it is a pure nothingness, an infinite space that never ends.

My body was seated in meditation and mind concentrated on the breathing in and out, but in no time the mind wandered again. I then paid attention to the place where the air first passes in the nostrils. Afterward I found that from moment to moment there was emptiness and stillness. My whole body was warmed up and full of energy.

After meditating, being conscious of surpassing clarity in mind and body, I picked up the brush again. As before, my eyes did not see through the passage of the lines, so the eyes' seeing had become a conscious perception of emptiness. The 'being Bodhisattva' in practice was not created by deliberative thought or through the seen internal object. All lines were drawn in both consciousness and stillness, i.e., consciously but without intentionality, thought, or ego.

In ordinary art practice, the art produced emerges from a determined object. It is much like the situation described by Husserl regarding 'determinations':

Each individual action has its result in these or those predicative determinations, and the total action has its total result in the complete predicative knowledge of the object. What emerges here as regards determinations (predicative determinations) of the object is not merely what is accepted, what is received on the basis of affection in the turning-toward; rather, it is everything which is intentionally characterized in itself as a *product of the ego*, as *knowledge produced by it* through its cognitive action. (Husserl 1973:201)

However, based on my experience of executing invisible Bodhisattvas through meditation, there is no predicative determination: no inner object comes down into the physical object, which is not seen by the eyes in any case. Instead, sight follows the trace of the brush, and the brush follows the cycle of breathing in and out. Also, the contingencies of the physical environment are no longer a distraction but are fully integrated, so that the warm and sunny weather, the layout of the room, and so on are woven into a vast, unified emptiness / consciousness (compare pre- and post-meditation works in Figs. 3.30, 3.31 and Fig. 3.32: and in Figs. 3.33, 3.34).



Fig. 3.30, 31: Pre-meditation (2006)



Fig. 3.32: Post-meditation (2006)



Fig. 3.33: Pre-meditation (Oct., 2006)



Fig. 3.34: Post-meditation (2006, India)

This form of art practice, emerging as it does from meditation, is not an accidental creation of conscious thought or intentioned experience, but is done with full awareness within the painting. This is borne out by the images of the 'Being Becoming Nothingness' series completed in the monastery, after I had completed the *puja*, meditation, and prostration, when compared with those done before there are fewer and fewer accidents in the paintings of the object of the Bodhisattva (Figs. 3.35 and 3.36). I do not intend to destroy the form or generate phantasy through the elimination of ego consciousness, as is sometimes done in Western art practice (Pollock through alcohol, Herring in performance). Instead, I have used Buddhist meditation to develop inner stillness and awareness of body and mind and bring it into my art practice.

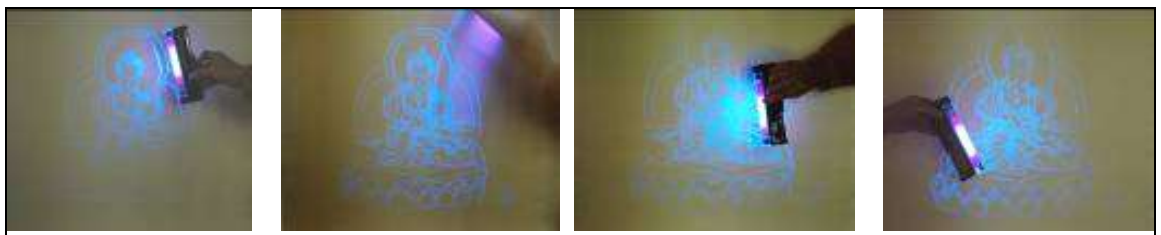


Fig.3.35: Showing the Bodhisattva with the UV light



Fig. 3.36: Post-meditation, Nepal (2006)

One big difference between my cognition-based pre-meditation art practice and post-meditation art practice is that the former still emerged from the conventional process of cognition, described by Husserl as follows:

In genuine cognitive interest ... the ego wishes to know the object, to pin it down once and for all. (Husserl 1973:198)

The goal of this [cognitive] activity is not the *production of objects* but a *production of the knowledge of a self-given object*, therefore the possession of this object in itself as that which is permanently identifiable anew. (Husserl 1973:200)

The latter, on the other hand, does away with the desire to know something once and for all. In fact, it does away with desire, thought, and perception to focus on only breathing in and

breathing out. In a manner of speaking, even the art practice is no longer art practice—and so the Bodhisattva appears, a being from nothingness. Jamgön Ju Mipham (1846-1912), a master of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, wrote:

Our opponents say that, on the relative level, the pot is empty of pot, because they think that if it were empty on the relative level, it would simply be nothing. Why then do they not go ahead and say that the pot is truly existent? Valid cognition operating on the relative level inevitably establishes the pot as a truly existing pot, in the same way as it establishes the Three Jewels and the principle of karmic cause and effect. In short, these people have not the slightest comprehension of the united level of emptiness and dependently arising phenomena (in other words, the incontrovertible appearances of the relative truth, which are by nature empty and yet appear unobstructedly). They simply repeat their much cherished formula that phenomena are empty of true existence. (Jamgön Mipham in Padmakara Translation Group 2002:170)

An essential part of my art practice in the 'Being and Nothingness' series is the need to clarify why emptiness is central to Buddhist ideas on phenomena. If, as Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-c. 1328, quoted in Wilber 1999f:311) pointed out, 'God is a being beyond being and a nothingness beyond being,' then my 'Being and Nothingness' series is an attempt to come to terms with and to express what is 'out there' in a fundamental sense.

### **3.8 Further philosophical reflections: consciousness and the senses**

Whence consciousness? We have seen how perception through the sensory organs arouses consciousnesses, and that the mind is continuously stimulated by these sensations. These sensations, moreover, are neither existent nor non-existent, somewhere between objects and consciousness. For example, in a dream of eating a golden apple, the dreamt apple (object) does not exist, and the sensations of seeing, tasting, and smelling it,

and hearing the crunch, and feeling it on the tongue, are all a part of the dream. After waking, one can still recall all these sensations, even though they are false ones, and then the dream is placed in memory, where it can inform the ego-consciousness in subtle ways that are effectively delusionary. Or, for example, if someone speaks about a past sadness, the subject-matter exists for the speaker, but as he or she talks about it in the present, only the memory of it remains, and no object presents itself to the eye of speaker and audience, though the sound of the speaker's voice will be sensed by the ear. For both speaker and audience, the sensory input will stimulate the consciousness so that it reconstructs the sadness, and they will all 'think' about how much suffering there was. If we attempt to pin down where the object really is, its existence becomes tenuous at best. Ultimately we may say the sad story exists, and minds that see the story exist, but their presence does not alter the fact that the sadness that existed in the past no longer exists in the same form, though ego-based consciousness may delude the mind into thinking otherwise, and so the delusions and confusions in the phenomenal realm proliferate.

In Husserl's view, the ego has both the desire and ability to remember, and the desire to represent a past occurrence. When one is awake, the ego attempts to vivify memories by connecting the intermediate parts, 'until it finally has the entire occurrence before itself in a closed sequence of memories in which each individual part can be assigned its temporal position. But even this *active remembering* is possible only *on the basis of associative awakening which has already taken place*'. (Husserl 1973:179) Husserl called this his analysis of the 'theme of a phenomenology of presentifying consciousnesses'. (*ibid.*)

I do not believe the memory's representation of a moment to be true awareness. Although, like everyone else, I do have a conscious memory of Bodhisattva images, in my art practice I strive to keep them at bay through meditation, because they are illusory. Any image that emerges comes not from conscious perception or reflection, but from emptiness, and I do not engage my ego-based consciousness in order to control it.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

I had long practiced Buddhist meditation and practiced art, though I had not fully integrated the two. In this chapter I discuss two closely related areas of my artistic practice: the painting of Buddhist images with a common, easily recognizable medium (coffee) and the painting of Buddhist images with invisible ink. Both initially developed as part of my day-to-day artistic practice. In both areas, the resulting works did not quite succeed in conveying my ideas on sensory perception and consciousness. Thus as part of the action research cycle, I visited Buddhist monasteries in India and Nepal, where I learned and practiced more intensive forms of meditation that I was then able to incorporate into my art practice.

This chapter has shown, from the evidence of my art practice in Buddhist images in both visible and invisible media, that after intensive meditation the paintings achieve a unified harmony that would have been impossible to attain if the conscious mind had been allowed to control the process. No clung-to or assembled mental image or object passes down from the mind; rather I work from the emptiness of mind, which is much more liberating. Eyes follow the brush, the brush follows the breathing in and out, and all contingent conditions in my immediate environment, even the sun and wind, become elements of the achieved unity.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Sand Mandala Practice and Calligraphy Writing Practice**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter, like the previous one, may be divided into two parts. The first (sections 4.2 to 4.4) describes my experience and practice creating sand mandalas in a Buddhist monastery. The second (sections 4.5 to 4.8) describes successive stages in my calligraphy practice—beginning development, pre-meditation practice, post-meditation practice after retreat in a monastery, and post-meditation practice after retreat on Yangmingshan in Taiwan. My experience with the sand mandalas was instructive in developing a high level of mindfulness and concentration on breathing. However, achieving a ‘break-through’ in calligraphy, which has always been a major part of my art practice, proved more difficult, and it required two ‘action research’ stages of retreat. In the end, I was able, through combining my art practice with advanced Buddhist meditation techniques, to produce calligraphy that would have been otherwise impossible for me to create.

#### **4.2 Emptiness (nothingness) and phenomena: initial attempts to practice the sand mandala during monastery residence**

When I was staying at the Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery, I was much impressed by the monks’ sand mandalas, which represent nothingness and phenomena at once. They express the Buddhist idea of things becoming representations or ‘signs,’ and then reverting to nothingness once the mandalas are destroyed. For example: the simple mandala shown in Fig. 4.1, which looks like a lotus, represents something iconic. In Western terms the sand of the mandala represents the ‘index,’ and the conventional abstraction of the lotus in the mandala represents the ‘symbol’. Even so, the index material is the most ‘common’ thing of all (what is the number of grains of sand on a beach?), yet extremely ephemeral, subject to change at the slightest breeze or disturbance. This is used to express the

emptiness or 'nothingness' of itself, and indeed of phenomena in general: all is nothingness. This is why Buddhist monks frequently create sand mandalas, using sand that is so fine that it is almost like powder or dust.

Of course, as an artist and as a Buddhist, I could not but want to try my own hand at creating a sand mandala as an offering (Fig. 4.1). I used very fine, pure white sand. When I started, I kept my body some distance from the wooden board to draw a single line, which alone required the accurate placement of thousands of grains of sand. I could not get the line straight. Although my eyes observed the process (which made the sand mandala unlike my invisible drawings), my hands seemed maladroit or awkward. At this point I was clearly aware that the object of my perception was independent of the physical thing itself (the sand), because the individual grains verged on imperceptibility. I drew closer to the board as I tried harder to place the sand correctly, but the sand spread everywhere, because my conscious mind and breathing were not yet working together. I was still working from deliberate, conscious effort, but not obtaining the desired result. I considered this to be an excellent lesson on the meaning of 'concentration' and 'mindfulness' and the purpose of meditation.



Fig. 4.1: Emptiness and phenomena: sand mandala after repeated practice

I understood then that making a sand mandala is a task that, paradoxically enough, fails if approached with deliberate concentration and effort. The mandala collapses when the mind focuses on form; it becomes very much bound by concentration. Afterwards, when I tried to focus instead on controlling my breathing in and out at the point of the nostrils, then suddenly the line became straighter, and the sand did not spread too much.

The making of sand mandalas has always been linked with techniques of breath control in meditation. The practitioner concentrates on a point, usually either a point below the nostrils or at the diaphragm, instead of on an area like the chest or abdomen, and the breathing becomes a kind of still, relaxing exercise by which the mind, body, and breathing are brought into unity. According to Luang Por Ajahn Sumedho, a Buddhist monk and abbot of the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery near London:

It is not necessary to develop concentration to the point of excluding everything else except the breath. Rather than to create a trance, the purpose here is to allow you to notice the workings of the mind, and to bring a measure of peaceful clarity into it. The entire process—gathering your attention, noticing the breath, noticing that the mind has wandered, and re-establishing your attention—develops mindfulness, patience and insightful understanding. So don't be put off by apparent 'failure'—simply begin again. Continuing in this way allows the mind eventually to calm down. (Sumedho 2004)

As Sumedho points out, it is not necessary to be in a deep trance only an inner stillness and this applies to the making of sand mandalas as well.

As evidence I need only point to the way Tenzin Thutop and Deshek, two Tibetan monks, created sand mandalas (Figs. 4.2 to 4.7) for an exhibition at the Yager Gallery, New York from February 22<sup>nd</sup> to March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001. As one can see in these photographs, sometimes the monks work very close to the mandala, but the sand or powdered minerals

do not spread everywhere, even though they are not wearing masks, because they are controlling (not holding!) their breath. Furthermore, the monks work quietly and with the kind of graceful movement that bespeaks a kind of stillness within movement. The process of creating this particular mandala required several weeks, which itself is an indication that the monks have, in their concentration, transcended time.



Fig. 4.2: Preparation for a sand mandala



Fig. 4.3: Sand mandala details



Fig. 4.4: Proceeding from the center



Fig. 4.5: Making borders

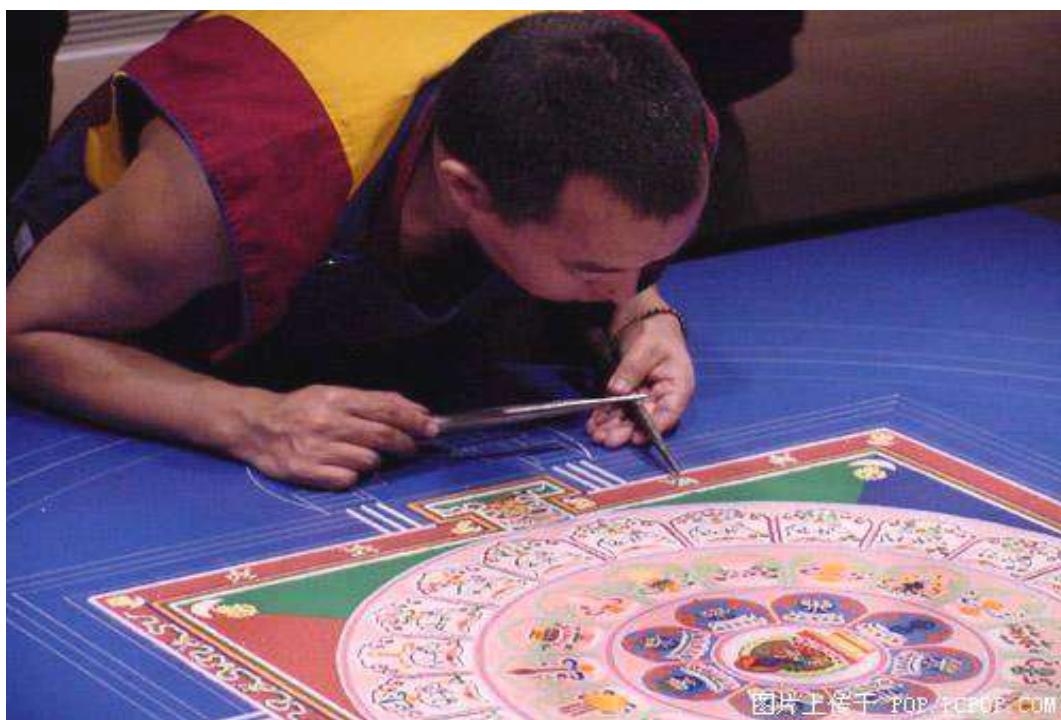


Fig. 4.6: Working close to the sand



Fig. 4.7: Working close to the sand

### 4.3 Interview with a monk

In November 2006, to learn what the differences were between my own initial sand mandala practice and that of the monks, I had the following interview with the monk at Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery, Nepal who taught me how to make sand mandalas:

Su-Lien: How does one practice meditation (which is stillness) when practicing the sand mandala?

Monk: This mandala practice is also meditation on the data of the six senses, meditation on the five sense organs, and meditation on the six consciousnesses.

Su-Lien: By the data of the five senses, you mean what comes from the five organs and the mind, which is then attached to the five perceptions in consciousness?

Monk: The five organs are a mirror, and the data of the five senses are the images in the mirror, while the five perceptions of consciousness are the reflexivity of the mirror.

Su-Lien: Does this mean that what is in the mirror is an illusion? If the reflected image is an illusion, then logically is the one who is looking at the mirror an illusion too?

Monk: All is emptiness. They do not truly exist. So when a monk is doing mandala practice, there is also a physical and mental practice of emptiness too. For example, when the monks close down the six senses, then the six senses' perception is sealed too, and then there is a unity.

Su-Lien: I have also thought, how could the body and mind have two kinds of feeling?

Monk: Of course, if there is contradiction in oneself, then it must come from a lack of unity.

When monks do a sand mandala, they are not conscious of the non-existence of the form, they are not conscious of the non-existence of the physical body. Instead, that pure awareness wipes out the concept of body and of external object. The sand mandala is perhaps the best means of achieving perfection. If you get much restless or agitated, just relax, practise being at peace with yourself, and without necessarily listening to the voices of the mind. In my opinion, the best consists of

attaining emptiness of the body so that it can be free from all restraints, and then attain emptiness of mind, so that it can be all-pervading, and results in freedom.

#### **4.4 Mandalas, compoundedness, and the emergence of phenomena from emptiness**

Whereas the Buddhist concept of nothingness as the basis of phenomena is well-known, the corollary of this idea—that phenomena revert to nothingness—might not be quite as well known. However, if we pause to consider any given object that presents itself to our senses, we understand that it is always composed of something else. For instance, a rock is composed of minerals, which are in turn composed of molecules, then atoms, then subatomic particles, at which point matter becomes describable only in terms of statistical probabilities and wave forms. Sand mandalas are intended to exemplify this compounded quality of things. When one first views a sand mandala, it presents itself as a symbolic representation of the cosmos, and it is a thing of exquisite orderliness, symmetry, and beauty. If the viewer takes the trouble to scrutinize it up close (and hold the breath!), then the fine granular nature of that reality begins to dominate his or her perception of it. The compounded quality of the mandala in space becomes apparent.

But the mandala expresses temporal compoundedness as well. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, in his commentary on the Middle Way (*Madhyamakāvatāra*), has said:

A compounded phenomenon always has a beginning. If there is no beginning, there is no act of compounding. Then there must be a state of dwelling or remaining; otherwise, again there is no compounding. Finally, there must be an end to the act of compounding. Even if I drink a cup of tea, there is a beginning, middle and end. For example, if there is no end to the act of drinking, there can be no concept of drinking a cup of tea, because you are always drinking, you

are stuck there! So there is a beginning of the beginning, a middle of the beginning and an end of the beginning. You can say that the end of the beginning is the birth of the remaining, and the death of remaining is the birth of the death. The death of the death is the birth of the birth. Even if you have nothing, then there has to be a beginning of the nothingness — there is no space. As I drink a glass of water, it is the beginning of the emptiness of the glass. Then there will be a remaining of the emptiness, and soon the death of emptiness and the beginning of filling with coffee! It is also the beginning of going to pee! (Dzongsar Khyentse 2003:21.)

Just as any compounding must have a beginning and end, it must also have endings of beginnings, beginnings of ends, and so on, as Khyentse Rinpoche indicates. Therefore, when people turn their attention to the sand mandala, they may typically think of this mandala as having taken a certain period of time to cover a certain space. They misconceive it as being something ‘achieved’ or ‘arrived at’ when the period of its making reaches an end. Certainly the time and space are necessary, but the mind of the casual observer will pay attention only to the mandala as it appears when the monks finish making it and ignore that there was ‘a beginning of the beginning, a middle of the beginning and an end of the beginning.’ Even while looking at a still-incomplete mandala, the ordinary mind will attempt to envision a completed one. Conversely, even after seeing the mandala destroyed, the ordinary mind will attempt to recall it intact. It is always fixated on the results of success, virtue, beauty, and so on, so it leaps ahead and backward over time and space to form what it thinks ought to be. Of course, this kind of thinking ‘runs against the grain’ (so to speak) of Buddhist teaching on the nature of phenomena and emptiness, and that is why the monks’ destruction of the sand mandala is just as essential as the making of it (see Figs. 4.8-11).



Fig. 4.8: Celebration upon completing the mandala



Fig. 4.9: Sweeping away the sand



Fig. 4.10: Leaving the scene



Fig. 4.11: Contemplating the dusty remainder

We might contrast the Buddhist view in this regard once more with Husserl's phenomenology, particularly his ideas concerning the 'visual field and tactile field' (Husserl 1907, rpt. 1997:68) of time and space. His descriptions and explanations of these fields are distinctively centered on ego-based perception:

The time that pertains to every thing is its own time, and yet we have only one time. It is not just that the times of things are integrated side by side into a single linear extension, but, rather, different things or processes appear as simultaneous, although they do not have times which are alike in being parallel but have one time, numerically one time. The situation is not here like that in the case of multiple fillings of space, where visual and tactile filling coincide. Instead, we have separate, non-coincident things, which yet are and endure in the one identical span of time. (Husserl 1907, rpt. 1997:69)

The visual and tactile fields are bound by time and space, but the integration of these fields for an individual's construction of time and space takes place with the conscious mind in control. Husserl basically describes the functions of the 'ordinary mind,' the mind of the ordinary person viewing the mandala, or what remains of that mandala, but he does not prescribe a method of getting beyond or behind it to perceive the nothingness from which things and phenomena emerge and re-enter. The ego is always present.

However, creating a sand mandala, in practice, is achievable only with tranquillity and stillness of mind, with ego held at bay. (Sweeping it away, by contrast, may easily be done with the ego firmly in control). Furthermore, the creation of mandalas takes place successively—the monks make and destroy, make and destroy, and so on, to express the constant emergence and dissolution of things, phenomena, entire universes, forming and breaking like waves without end. Through their ritualized actions, the monks re-enact a process that is occurring not only on a macrocosmic scale but also at every instant in which things impinge on one's awareness. The implications are profound, and one might perhaps draw a parallel to the way things are in the world today: whether it is the orderly world described by scientists or the scintillating numinous world described by mystics, it emerged from nothingness and reached its 'beauty' through the absence of ego, but the workings of ego always seem to leave it somehow damaged.

According to stanza 191 of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Middle Way) of Chandrakīrti (sometimes written Candrakīrti, c. 600-c. 650):

The three worlds, all arising from conditions,  
Are said with certainty to be compounded.  
That these are empty of themselves  
Was taught as *emptiness of the compounded*.  
(Padmakara Translation Group 2002:95)

To this Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche (1846-1912) commented: 'Since they arise from causes and conditions, the three worlds are certainly said to be compounded. The fact that the three worlds are empty of themselves is said to be emptiness of the compounded.' (Mipham in Padmakara Translation Group 2002:317). So far, there is nothing to indicate an un-compounded thing, since all things are produced by conditions. Only emptiness is un-compounded. Accordingly, emptiness causes phenomena to disappear, and to arise. The origin of phenomena is itself empty, the void-ness of nothingness.

Sartre, who famously explored similar issues in *Being and Nothingness*, came very close to the Buddhist idea when he wrote:

...[W]e cannot grant to nothingness the property of "nihilating itself." For although the expression "to nihilate itself" is thought of as removing the last semblance of being, we must recognize that only *Being* can nihilate itself; however it comes about, in order to nihilate itself, it must *be*. But Nothingness *is not*. If we can speak of it, it is only because it possesses a semblance of being, a borrowed being, as we have noted above. Nothingness is not, Nothingness is "made-to-be," Nothingness does not nihilate itself, Nothingness "is nihilated." It follows therefore that there must exist a Being (this can not be the In-itself) of which the property is to nihilate Nothingness, to sustain it perpetually in its very existence, a *being by which nothingness comes to things*. (Sartre 1943, rpt. 1957:22)

Where Sartre differs from the Buddhist view is that he ascribes a kind of agency to Being that nihilates Nothingness. The Buddhist would simply ask him, 'So where is the origin of that Being? Whence arises that Being?' When I look at the sand mandala, I understand that it has no inherent existence or being the phenomenon of its existence is constantly changing. The sand mandala presents the action of emergence and dissolution, a

phenomenon that itself has no intrinsic existence; it is not time, not space, not even a thing, but that is precisely what is essential.

#### **4.5 Day-to-day calligraphy practice in the studio**

I have long experience with calligraphy, an art in which I developed very slowly, but I never abandoned it even when I studied abroad (see Fig. 4.12). I started learning it when I was six years old, and my grandfather was my first teacher. Every day I woke early, and my first task in the morning was to grind a stick of ink on an ink-stone. My grandfather asked me to do it but never demanded or forced me to do this. I realized only many years later that it was a sort of instruction by non-direction in the ability to empty the mind. I recall that once during my early training he came back after 20 minutes and, without looking at the ground ink liquid, picked up the ink stick and examined it. A look of dissatisfaction crossed his face. 'There's a bit of a slant on one corner,' he explained. 'That means you did it with a rash mind—you don't have any inner stillness.' My grandfather went on to tell me that writing calligraphy is a kind of *gongfu* (*kungfu*) and that the brush needs to be free. The brush could be a sword, it could be a hoe, and so on. Then he said that calligraphy presents the form from the formless origin of one's mental consciousness, so the first thing to do is to understand who you are without asking who you are: just directly enter a kind of nothingness with no 'I', 'me', or no one 'up there' writing calligraphy. Then you can be totally free.

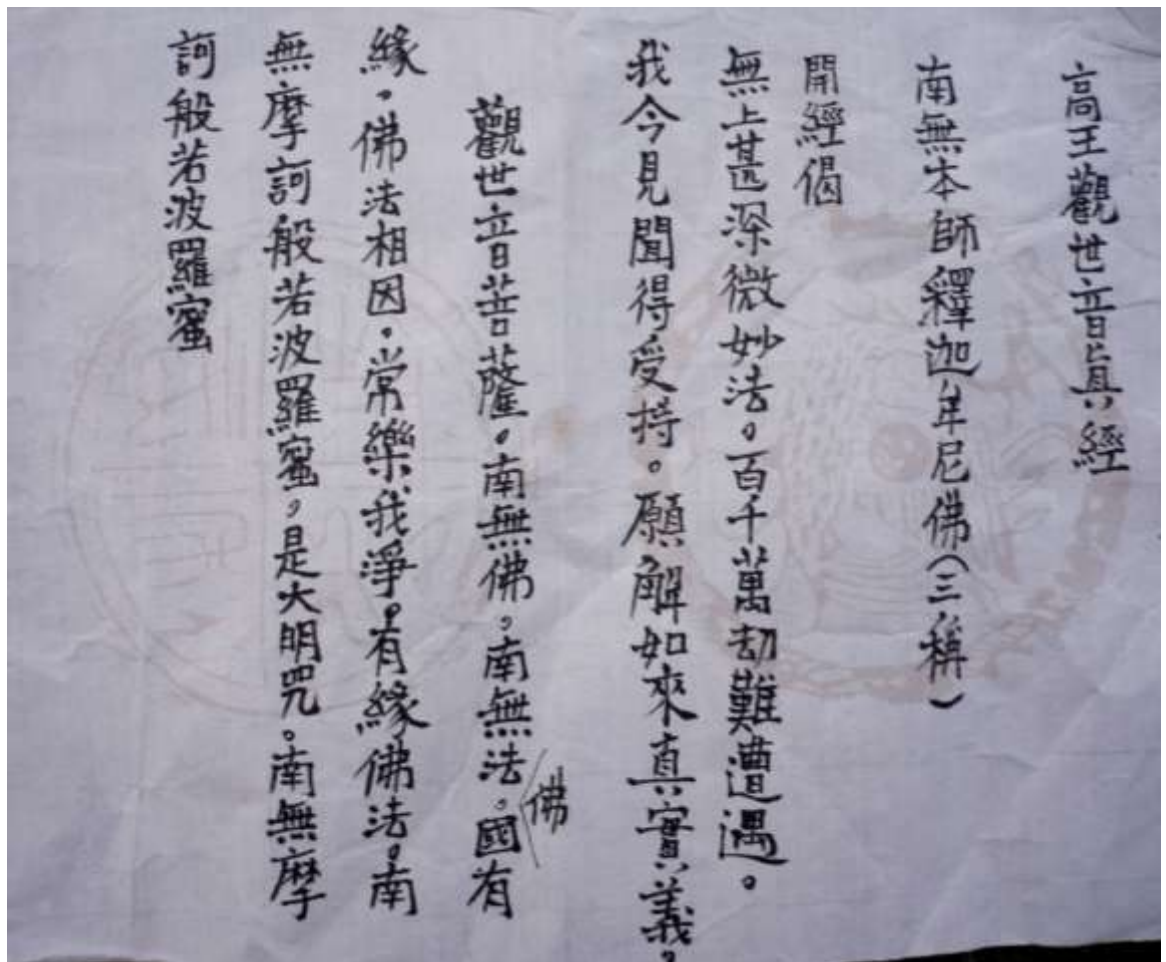


Fig. 4.12: Calligraphy writing practice (non-meditation), France, 2004

Later, when I went to high school and studied fine arts, my classmates and I were required to practice calligraphy for three years. During that time I developed an understanding of line, space, and how they related to each other. Calligraphy consists of not only expressing the fundamental meaning and form of each character but also transforming the lines and spaces that they inhabit and linking them word-to-word, space-to-space into a broader cohesive whole that will appear somehow perfectly 'fitting'. Thus a calligrapher gives consideration to the words of the line and to the spaces at the same time. It would seem that the black of the lines create the spaces, but in fact, if there had been no empty space to begin with, the black of the lines would be impossible to create. Many would-be calligraphers fail to understand this and cling arbitrarily to the 'model' of black lines 'creating' the empty spaces, and of the self evoking knowledge of the

proper forms to execute the proper forms. In such calligraphic practice, the choice of words, the styling of characters, and the spacing of the lines would seem to be entirely free, the objects of free choice, but in the end they are not. They have not escaped thinking, intentionality, motivation, and so on.

To understand the basic aesthetic or essence of calligraphy, then, it is necessary to affirm its unthinkability or lack of consciousness. It may start with the same forms in practice (the Chinese characters), but the essence of calligraphy is the transcendence of form, line, space, and so on. If the calligrapher focuses on the content of those forms, he or she is being directly controlled by the ego, motivation, volition, or habit, and is not transcending anything. To transcend those forms, lines, and spaces, one does not abandon them—they will always be with us. Rather, one transcends the self, and then the practice of art becomes free. This is how the essence of calligraphy is achieved.

Although Husserl does not explicitly describe any specific practice of calligraphy, he does accurately capture the practice of a calligrapher who has not yet overcome the self. He describes the process of how the forms are used, arbitrariness, and unthinkability, but still volition for him remains central:

For this it is necessary that ever new similar images be obtained as copies, as images of the imagination, which are all concretely similar to the original image. Thus, by an act of volition we produce free variants, each of which, just like the total process of variation itself, occurs in the subjective mode of the 'arbitrary.' It then becomes evident that a unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures, that in such free variations of an original image, e. g. of a thing, an *invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all. (Husserl, 1973:340-341)

This accurately describes my earlier 'pre-meditation' calligraphy. There were the invariant forms of the characters in my mind, my production of free variants of those forms by acts of volition, and so on. However, the process of calligraphy moves very swiftly along with the brush. As one proceeds ahead word-to-word, line-to-line, things are always changing, and there is no real time to think, design, and frame one's intentions. Husserl speaks of 'volition,' but in calligraphy there is really no time for volition to interfere or at least, there *should* be no time for volition. Consequently, if one were to examine any particular recurring character in my earlier calligraphic works, it would be true, as Husserl says, that they show a 'unity' that 'runs through this multiplicity of successive figures.' Likewise, any particular work of mine from this period shows a certain stylistic unity among the characters, and across the whole of the composition all the words are obviously written by the same calligrapher. But they still fall short.

Even though, on an intellectual level, I understood calligraphy and how it should be approached, I still had not achieved it in practice. I was still bound by considerations of the line and the form, space-to-space and line-to-line, and even though I practiced calligraphy every day, my development had stalled for years. It was very frustrating.



Fig. 4.13: Mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' (pre-meditation), October 2005



Fig. 4.14: Smudged characters (pre-meditation), 2005

Once during my first year of doctoral study, while I was engaged in calligraphy practice (see Figs. 4.13-14), I remembered what my grandfather had said about calligraphy being form on the surface, but formlessness on the inside. Afterward, during my daily practice of calligraphy in the studio, I tried to focus my mind on the line of passage without seeking deliberately to control the brush, but when I examined the outcomes, their structures and forms still showed the same problems. One after another piece of calligraphy practice paper baldly revealed intention and habit playing havoc. The left-falling strokes (*pie*) and right-falling strokes (*na*) lacked grace, for example, even though I had been writing them hundreds or thousands of times. Each form seemed rigidly the same, and why was this so? I could also recognize that the brush was being forced to fall into line because of the intention to present the force of the line after all, the force of any particular stroke or line is related to how one holds the brush and turns the brush but wherever the line is dominating the brush's movements instead of the brush unleashing the force of the line, *that* is where cogito has seeped into the calligraphy. In such places the brush seems to 'want to' make the line through the inside of the paper, space-to-space and line-to-line relationships become bound, and the words bring emotion from the unknown (see Fig. 4.15).

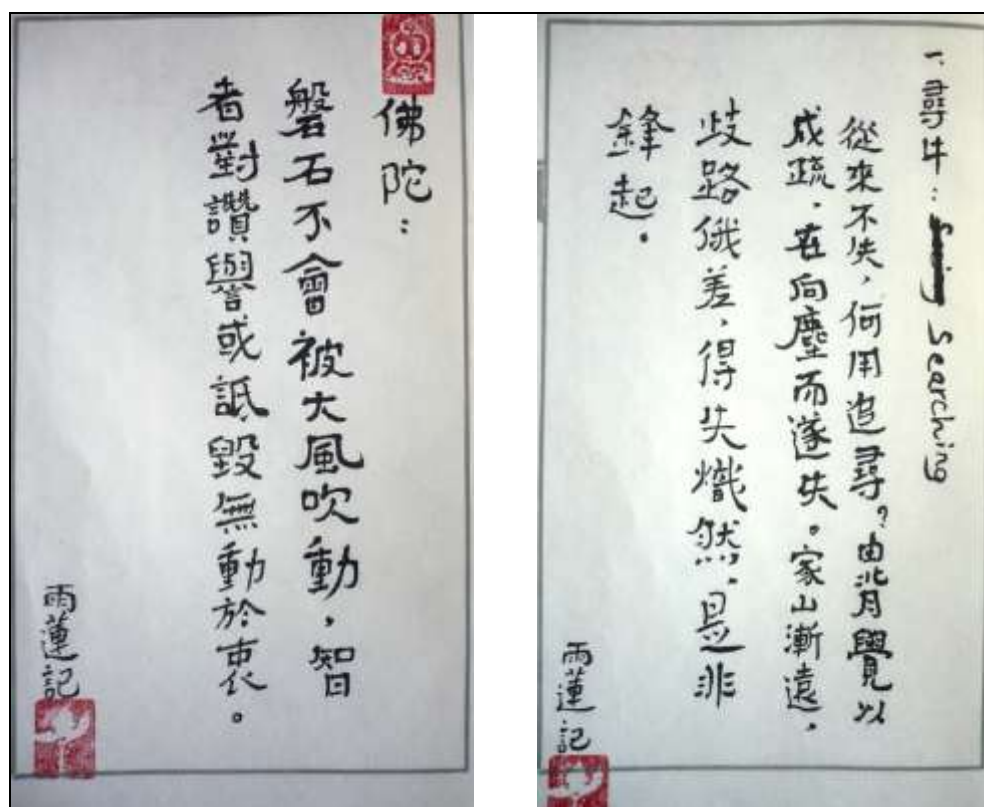


Fig. 4.15: From pre-meditation practice, 2006

It seemed that my practice of calligraphy was still an act proceeding from cognition. It was not yet proceeding from the mindless, so that freedom could not unfold. I thought that my calligraphy practice still mirrored what Husserl said in his comparison between ‘cognitive action and practical action’: ‘The path to the goal can be simple, consisting in a simple act, or it can be complex, proceeding through interim goals which are intended in specific acts of will and have the character of being of service to the dominant “aim.”’ (Husserl, 1973:201). Furthermore, when I attempted to ‘relax’ while practicing calligraphy by closing off cognitive thought and emphasizing freedom of movement (Figs. 4.16a and 4.16b), but still without combining calligraphy and meditation, the results actually deteriorated somewhat. The strokes became quavery, the application of ink uneven (e.g., the first large character *guan* in Fig. 4.16b), the spacing among the lines also uneven, and so on, so that the overall effect is one of haphazardness or inconsistency. To me, this indicated that the attempt to achieve real freedom in the calligraphy through deliberate

effort to turn off the mind's cogitations would not work: the outcomes were still constrained by the personal or mental constraints of the calligrapher.

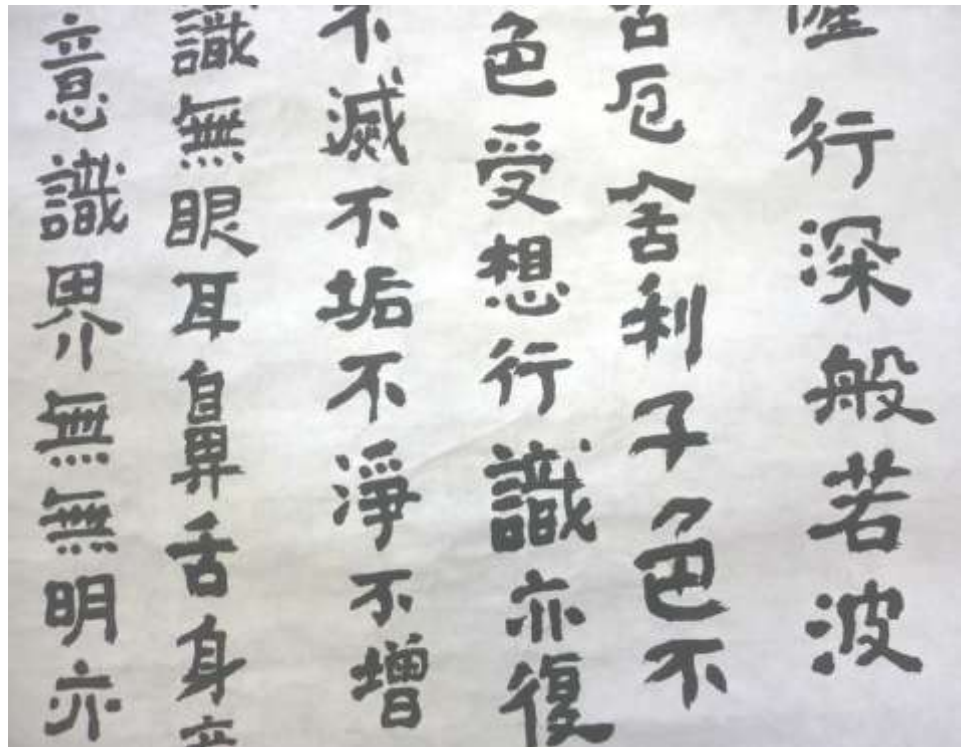


Fig. 4.16a: The Heart Sutra, 2005 (from pre-meditation practice)

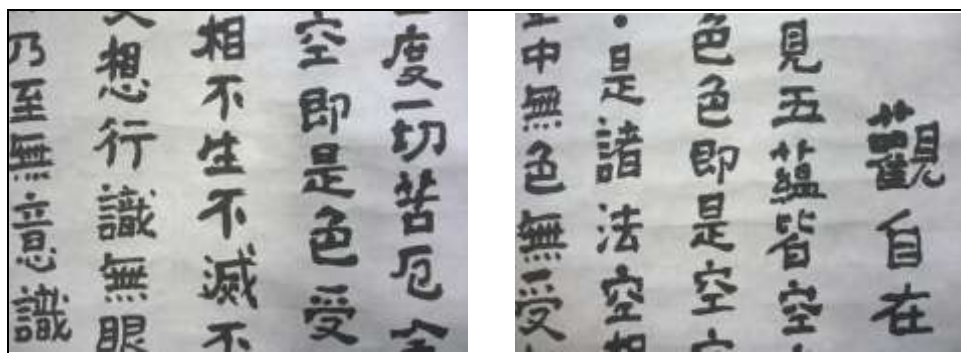


Fig. 4.16b: The Heart Sutra, 2005 (from pre-meditation practice)

#### 4.6 Residence at Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery for calligraphy practice

When I was in residence for one month at Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery, I began to practice more intensive forms of Buddhist meditation and combine it with my practice of calligraphy. After leaving the monastery, I realized that I still had not progressed enough, so

I returned to my studio to continue the cycle of intensive meditation, followed by calligraphy practice, for another month (Figs. 4.17-18).

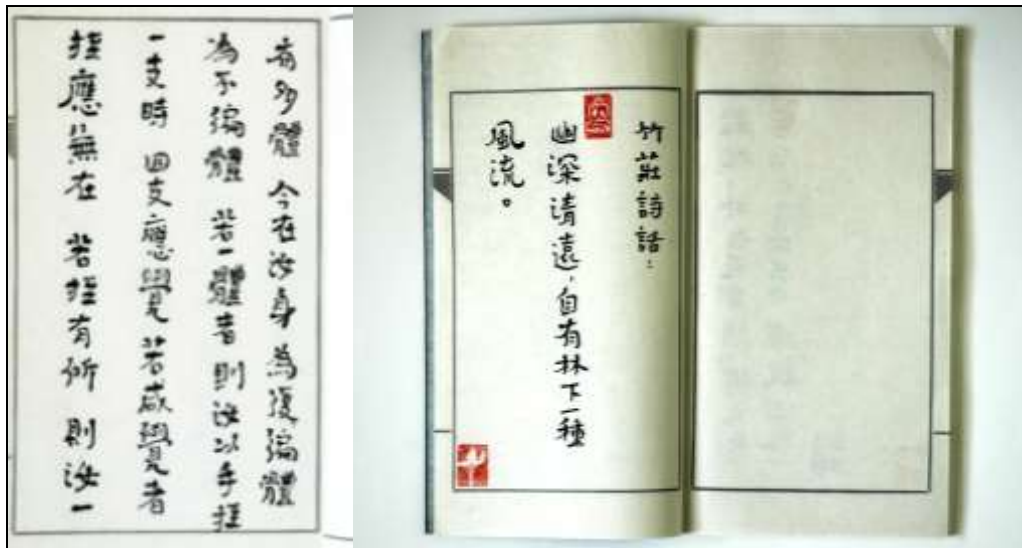


Fig. 4.17: From post-meditation practice, 2006



Fig. 4.18: From post-meditation practice, Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery (Nov., 2006)

During my stay at the monastery I had a chance opportunity to look at an authentic work of calligraphy by the Monk Hongyi (1880-1942). I could see it for only ten minutes, but I was extremely impressed by the nonflamboyant feeling of the strokes and spaces. His

calligraphy has a nearly unparalleled smoothness and limpid quality. It exemplifies the ideal of integrity of internal calligraphic form. That is, if one were to scan over a given work and look for the reoccurring characters, one would find that each occurrence of a character may vary significantly, yet not detract from the consistency of the work as a whole. Such integrity of form cannot be achieved through deliberation or the intervention of conscious effort. If it were, then the recurrent characters would appear to be more rigidly similar to one another. Now I had seen other works by Hongyi a long time before this and had kept the images in my memory, as I had liked them. I had also tried to learn from and copy them, as calligraphy students always do. However, my own calligraphy did not seem to be influenced by him. After seeing Hongyi's work for ten minutes and embarking on a programme of meditation, however, my calligraphy did appear to get closer to his (see Figs. 4.19-20, comparing my work with that of Hongyi). This indicates that Buddhist meditation before calligraphy had succeeded in putting my mind in the proper condition of complete emptiness and peace, so that my brush began to be freed, and the forms of my characters, stroke-to-stroke, line-to-line, space-to-space, were released instead of being controlled. My own character and style in calligraphy practice were thus better expressed.

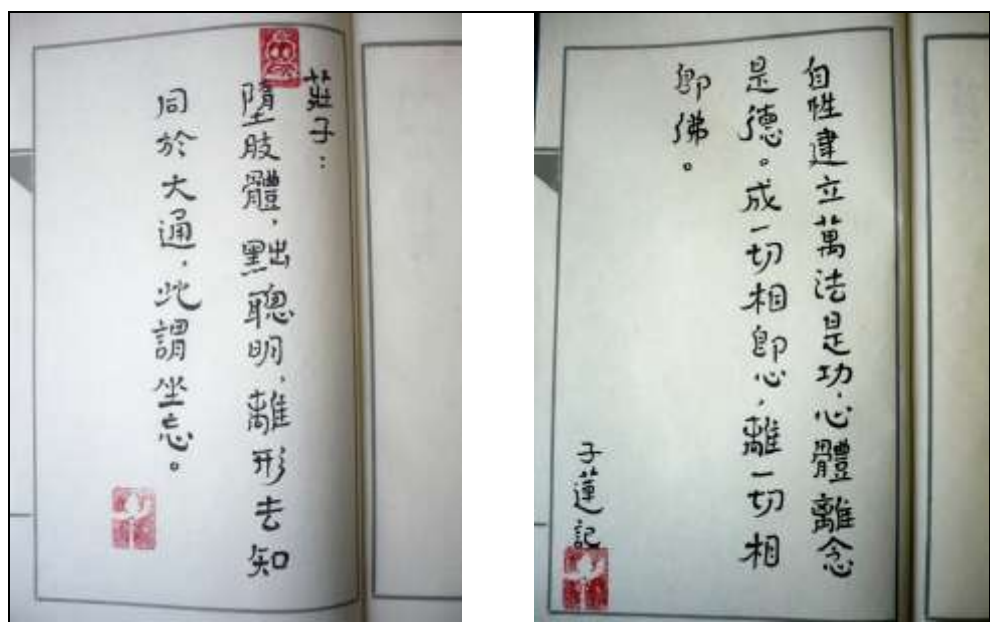


Fig. 4.19: From post-meditation practice, 2006

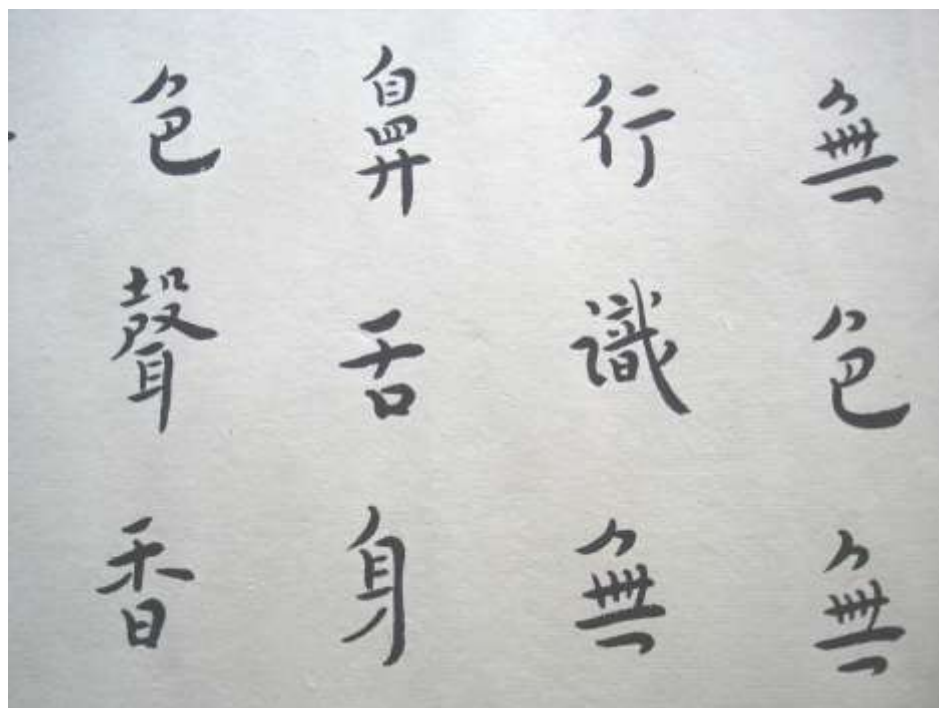


Fig. 4.20: Calligraphy of the monk Hongyi (1880-1942)

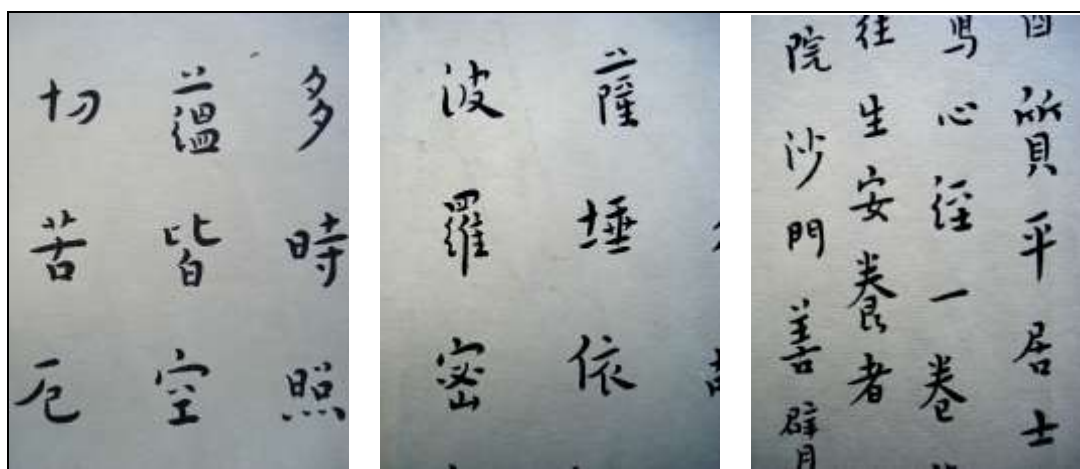


Fig. 4.21: Calligraphy of the monk Hongyi (1880-1942)

When other people who were familiar with Hongyi's work recognized some similarity between my style and that of Hongyi and commented on it, my feeling at first was one of 'I am lost' and 'I do not know who I am.' But on reflection, I realized that this is what I had sought all along. If the 'I' or 'me' exists, then how can it be lost? How was it that I was able to learn more effectively from a ten-minute encounter than from more than a decade of

struggle of copying and study? When I was practicing calligraphy in the study, where were my intentions, and where were my mental phenomena? I contemplated what a monk at the monastery had told me: 'First, in the winter, look at the steam rise from your teabag. How and where does it emanate from the tea-bag? See how the steam rises and then how it disappears. If the steam is staying someplace, then where is it staying? If it is moving, then where is it moving to? Now, as the monk Thubten Pema Tenzin tells you, the mind and thoughts are like the steam' (from my notes, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2006).

I also reflected on the idea motivating most calligraphy practice: the practice is designed to get the practitioner 'into' a form and then out of it. What remains is the 'I' or 'me' that presents it, which implies that the self exists or the ego exists. (This is a very strange idea, because if the 'I' had chosen the form and the 'I' had given up the form, then what remains is the same as 'I' and 'me.' There was nothing created by that 'I' and 'me'—there was only the 'I' and 'me.' This is the same kind of problem that Husserl wrestled with.) Therefore, I ceased worrying about becoming somehow typical or similar to someone else, because what it meant is that the 'I' or 'me' was becoming willing to open up a space for learning, and even though this typicality or similarity with another existed, a shadow of the 'I' or 'me' had inevitably emerged. However, this shadowy 'I' or 'me' was not the conscious ego. Rather, it was the combined conscious ego plus sub-consciousness, which is like Husserl's 'pre-given-consciousness.' This pre-given-consciousness unfolded the visual data in the consciousness and the intentions (subjectivity), so that outer forms could be captured after a short, ten-minute learning experience—but the pre-given-consciousness still presents itself (see Fig. 22, 23), because appearance is caught by the consciousness, and vice versa. This consciousness is also similar to Sartre's description of the consciousness using the metaphor of a different self existing, but it is concerned with its own existence, like Sartre's 'being-in-itself'.

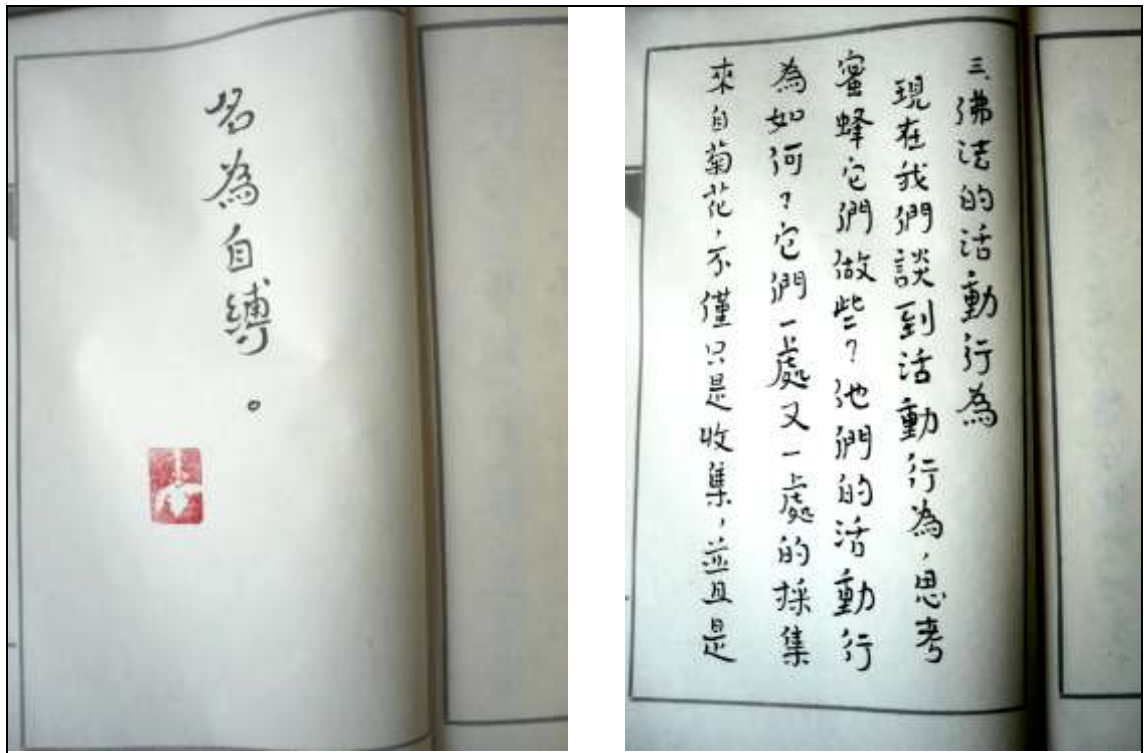


Fig. 4.22, 23 Post-meditation art practices, 2006.

To return to the steaming tea-bag, for example, the steam that rises from the tea-bag represents appearance, but it is consciousness that reveals the steam's appearance. This means that consciousness exists, but consciousness arises by the appearance of phenomenal things, which also implies that consciousness is limited, i.e., the self is not free. Thus, if asked how I was able to grasp Hongyi's calligraphy so well after only ten minutes' observation, I would say that meditation had let me see the steam rise.

In Buddhism, the creation of things is not thought to be best accomplished through causes and conditions, since causes and conditions are viewed as limitations. Likewise, my art practice cannot really be translated into rational trains of thoughts or ideas with all the causes and conditions laid out for scrutiny. My works are best understood as having been accomplished, ideally, through the emptying of consciousness. Each image is the product of physical movements and the unfolding of time, and yet I believe that the body/mind of the meditating artist can reach a state of inner and outer stillness through their spatio-temporal actions. This poem from the *Buddhāvataṃsaka nāma mahāvaiṣṭhīya*

*sūtra* (*Avatamsaka Sutra*, fasc. 19, pp. 615-616), also known in English as *The Garland Sutra* or *The Flower Ornament Sutra*, captures what I mean:

It's like a painter  
Spreading the various colors:  
Delusion grasps different forms  
But the elements have no distinctions.

In the elements there's no form,  
And no form in the elements;  
And yet apart from the elements  
No form can be found.

In the mind is no painting,  
In painting there is no mind;  
Yet not apart from mind  
Is any painting to be found.

That mind never stops,  
Manifesting all forms,  
Countless, inconceivably many,  
Unknown to one another.

Just as a painter  
Can't know his own mind  
Yet paints due to the mind,  
So is the nature of all things.

Mind is like an artist,  
Able to paint the worlds:  
The five clusters all are born thence;  
There's nothing it doesn't make. (trans. Cleary 1993: 451-452)

This poem had an effect on my research. At the beginning the poem describes colour as one of the elements, but the elements are not differentiated or related to one another. A painting is not made by consciousness, but it is made by the mind, which is empty and immeasurable. This means the object itself is made up by the elements, and that the elements 'exist' and are 'empty.' Logically, the self also belongs to the elements, so the mind also 'exists' and is 'empty.' Art is created through that unknown 'emptiness'; logically, the thinkable is already known in prior experience, so new art creation is not cognisant of that emptiness. This is why the influence of the monk Hongyi in my post-meditation calligraphy practice appeared somewhere deep inside my mind. Even though I practiced meditation, there was still some consciousness grasping at things in the depths of my mind, so that my mind was not yet completely empty.

I decided then to conduct another experiment of retreating into my practice of calligraphy, with the aim of creating art from the mind of emptiness.

#### **4.7 A Month-long Calligraphy Retreat (September 2007)**

I wanted to discover how one might free oneself for art practice, so I carried out another experiment, retreating for one month to focus on meditation and calligraphy. Attempting to proceed from mindlessness is a Buddhist idea, but it is also echoed by Husserl when he speaks of reducing trust in phenomena in order to enter into direct intuition of the eidetic, so it seemed a logical choice for me. It proceeded from my earlier experiment with the 'coffee Bodhisattvas,' which showed that when the viewer sees coffee, he or she does not see the Bodhisattva, and vice versa. (Similarly, if one were to touch the

forehead to a knee, the mind focuses only on the head or the knee, but not both at the same time, meaning that the mind cannot concentrate and achieve emptiness.) But I had learned from my earlier experiments that the mind is not only one and not many. When my mind starts to worry about the choices before it, then I can eliminate that worry by suddenly thinking of the Bodhisattva. This is similar to Husserl's reduction of phenomena, but it is also a way of empathy. After all, there are still other phenomena. However, my retreat was a way to empty my mind, and then I would use this empty mind to establish my creative art practice.

For my retreat, I chose an isolated place still owned by a private landlord in Taiwan's Yangmingshan National Park. It was a ten-minute walk from a monastery, in a small, well-lit room. Water came from a nearby mountain stream, and there were many leafy plants that I could eat. Except for Master Cheng Chen-Huang, who provided guidance, no one else was allowed to enter, come to visit, give me food, and so on. (People who go on such retreats cannot do it truly alone: they need guidance.) While there, I had certain practices that I had to do each day, such as one hour of walking meditation, chanting the mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' 30,000 times (approximately three hours), and completing 500 prostrations (approximately three to four hours). In the morning and afternoon I had one hour of still meditation, and there was another one hour of meditation before bedtime. I was so busy that sometimes, if I worked too slowly during the day, then in the night I had difficulty finishing everything that I needed to do. During that retreat, I could not do any reading, singing, or painting. As for diet, I did not miss eating meat, because I am vegetarian, so I just ate whatever edible leaves I could find. I could not cut my nails and hair, but I could shower. Although I slept late, I was much too busy to think of other things or to daydream, and I had no time for fear, even when a typhoon came.

This place seemed to be outside of 'time.' There was no yesterday, today or tomorrow, just a kind of now, a perpetual present. Before beginning the retreat, I did not know exactly how vigorous the walking meditation, prostration, and chanting practice would be, but I

already knew how to develop in meditation, and I was no longer at the beginning phase. My legs no longer felt pain from the lotus posture, because I knew that the body is an object called Sulien that is not really me, so that whenever pain did appear, I simply looked at the pain, and suddenly it was gone. I had also several times reached a state of great energy and inner happiness, in which all the cells of my body, following the inhalation and exhalation of breath, seemed to be in perfect unity and smoothness, like a lotus blossom. But advancing in meditation is not like learning ordinary knowledge and accumulating ordinary experience, since meditation is always an entry into the unknown. Each time is new, and any time is unthinkable.

I had achieved a level of meditation in which I could look at the body/mind inside breathing, so that I no longer knew whether my general, 'external' breathing was still or still steadily breathing in and out. Thus I could see the breathing of the interior, which is very silent, and very slight, compared with general breathing, which suddenly seems too rough. When I had achieved this level of meditation, I was conscious of the parts of my body, though my mind was empty. At this point in meditation and art practice, I had reached the point at which the individual, discrete actions had been combined into a single, unified expression, in a manner similar to what Husserl had described: 'It is clear that we can already regard every partial interval in the immanent duration of an act as an "act," and the total act as a certain accordant (einstimmige) unity of the continuously interlinked acts' (Husserl 1913, rpt. 1931:366). While Husserl aimed to describe how individual actions are somehow cognitively linked to form larger actions, the Buddha taught about causes and conditions, that is: (1) the causes of objects' exteriority and interiority; (2) the causes of perception from objects; (3) the causes of cogito; (4) the causes of identity or differentiation among individuals; (5) the causes of consciousness. Husserl's unified, interlinked acts are very difficult to achieve: how can one make the interlinks? I have come to think that that is why Husserl's phenomenology in the end could not develop a solution. However, through meditation practice I can claim at least to have achieved a semblance of whole body unity

and harmony.

At another time during meditation, I reached a level at which the object of the body seemed to disappear. At that moment my breathing had become very subtle, but an image emerged in my mind. When I then looked at the image, it disappeared. This was the first time I realized that I could ignore outward phenomena and things, while the 'I,' by contrast, was empty and absolutely isolated. This was Sartre's 'being-in-itself, as nothingness' (Sartre 1943, rpt. 1957:78). In Sartre's thinking, the thing 'being-in-itself' is made a belief, as a belief is nothingness, but if the belief comes from the things of 'existence,' then it must itself exist, and then the appearance of existence is because of 'being-in-itself'; it 'exists' because itself exists, which relates to cause and effect, so that the origin of being is nothingness. This demonstrates that at that stage of meditation, I recognized that 'itself' could be an isolate. But Sartre's 'being-in-itself' could just as well be 'absence-in-itself,' which can 'come in like a thief,' occupy the space of the true self, and betray it. Thus, although Sartre seems definite that 'being-in-itself' is nothingness, the process he describes does not support this idea of 'belief' created by the cogito. This could be a danger. For example, if we have a lotus on the table, then it is because it exists on that table and we see the lotus. But during the dark of a rainy, moonless night, we do not see the moon, so the moon is 'absent-in-itself,' so there is no moon. This illustrates Sartre's statement on 'nothingness is nothingness of being' (Sartre 1943, rpt. 1957:79). I consider this to be a possible problem, a kind of betrayal of nothingness with itself. Therefore, through meditation practice I had to reveal the isolated self. Only then could I understand both the 'being-in-itself' and 'absence-in-itself' of the phenomena and mind that is existence. Only then could I bring into my art practice the 'being' of an object that exists, but with mindlessness, unity, stillness and harmony.



Fig. 4.24: From calligraphy practice, post-meditation, October 2007

#### 4.8 What am I to conclude from this research?

After the retreat, I continued my isolation for a second month. During this time Master Cheng Chen-Huang continued to teach me how to stay alone. Now I did only walking and sitting meditation, as I had before when I was writing calligraphy. However, now I was in a completely energized state, with a still mind. Sometimes, in my isolation, I worried that a thief was coming, but at such moments I just looked at the thief and then the thief disappeared, which proved to me that the mind is not only one, but also not many, because if the mind achieves emptiness, then the mind is only one empty mind. Throughout the discipline of retreat, the mind seemed to provide a guard to serve like a good watchdog. When the ‘thief’ came, the dog only needed to call up that awareness. The need provided the dog; so far as I understood, if the dog fell asleep, the ‘thief’ could show anger, desire, worry, arrogance, fear, and so on. From time to time the ‘thief’ tried to bring more and more things to come in and try to make itself become the host. The ‘thief’ could even abduct one’s awareness.

Buddha has taught the elimination of causes and conditions. Even the body is just one condition, and anything that people might do, including anything an artist might practice or create, is done with a cause, i.e., a reason, so that the outcome is presented through a condition. But it is not real of itself. Its reality is only contingent. Why does that essence matter? Through my time in retreat, I came to understand the unreality of illusory causes. During my earlier experiment on ‘seeing and unseeing’ the drawing of the Bodhisattva with UV light, I had shown that without the condition of UV-light the eyes do not see the

Bodhisattva, even though the eyes can still see things, even the darkness. If they can not see the darkness, then they will truly not see anything. This demonstrated the Buddha's teaching that 'the nature of seeing does not cease for an instant' (Han Shan 2006:77). Now, during this retreat on Yangmingshan, I found that the same holds for the mind: when the mind of emptiness was achieved, there was not a void. When sitting in meditation, the mind is emptiness but is not emptiness at all.

During this second month of retreat, I would sit in meditation, then pick up the brush to practice calligraphy, writing the words of a sutra. This time I did not think about any of the great calligraphers, since my mind had nothing to grasp in that space—there was only nothingness. I did not care if the brush was a good one or not, because I realized that it was just a condition. I concentrated on breathing in and out, so that when I started to write, the arm was the arm and the brush and the body (see Fig. 4.25).

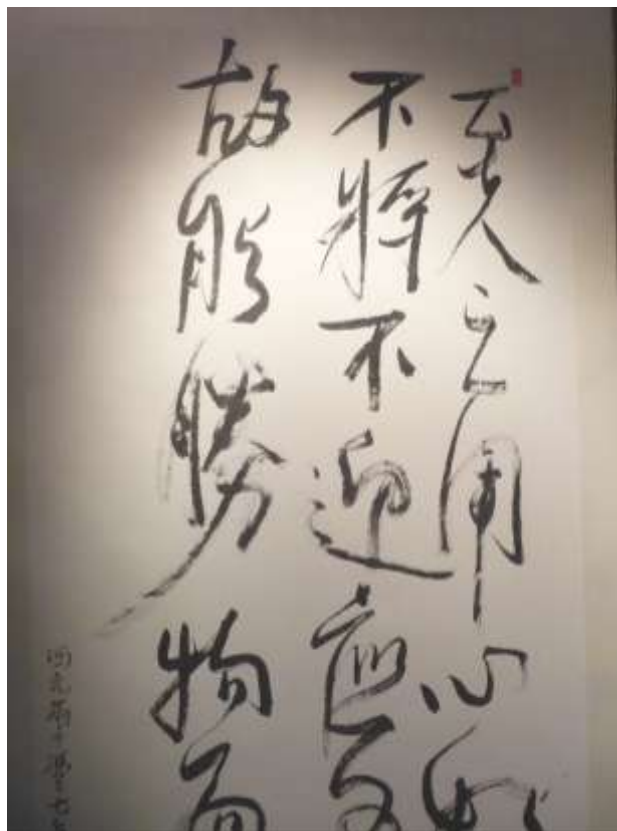


Fig. 4.25: Calligraphy practice, post-meditation, October 2007

The mind, the arm, and the brush were all one on the piece of paper. They were virtually beyond energy as they manifested forms and spaces through the strokes, and had escaped control. This was the first time I had undone the boundary of the inner and outer form through the gliding movements of the body, and it showed. For example, the passages of the brush revealed a varying, non-rigid line. As always, while brushing the characters quickly and linking each to the next, there was no time to think. However, even if the same word appeared twice in a sentence, the forms differed significantly. No boundaries appeared to constrain the calligraphic lines and links. In essence, the variations of form presenting themselves had emerged from the emptiness of mind. Furthermore, viewers who examined these post-meditation works afterward did not immediately deem them to belong to any particular style, or in the manner of any particular past master like Hongyi (though one can still say in general that they are works of Chinese calligraphy, or that the characters are written in grass or *cao* script), which indicated to me that the 'improvement' that I perceived after finishing was not purely subjective. From the phenomenological viewpoint, this would be impossible, since it would imply that *cogito* is somehow functioning inside pre-reflective consciousness. One would expect rather that after years of accumulated calligraphy practice and experience from childhood through adulthood, all this material would be stored up very well within my reflective consciousness or *cogito*, and that attempting to empty the mind to work from pre-reflective consciousness would inevitably fail one way or the other: it would result either in calligraphy that still resembled my earlier work (a failure of 'not going far enough') or nothing at all (a failure of 'going too far' and becoming catatonic). I claim to have achieved working from pre-reflective consciousness, to have escaped from what I had learned earlier, and to have produced calligraphy of a kind that was never produced before, by myself or by past masters—but the forms are still generally recognizable as Chinese calligraphy and may in fact be read. In other words, while executing this calligraphy, *cogito* must have still functioned in pre-reflective consciousness.

In the art produced during my post-retreat calligraphy practice, the brush still creates the line, as it did before, but instead of that line being unsteady, too stiff or too quavery, or inconsistent across the composition, the line has become varied, interesting, and at all points contributing to the overall force of the composition. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, the brush strokes never lie: they indicate that I am now holding and wielding the brush in a way that differs sharply from my earlier practice. While the body/mind is empty, the speed of writing is no longer controlled by it, and the form of writing is not controlled by the mind's designs, either. I am entirely aware of what I am writing, but the mind remains empty of purposive, deliberative thought.

In Heidegger's thought, the 'ecstatic' is a projection of intentionality into time to create temporality past, present, and future so that the apparent sequence or form of time is not time itself. If I were to consider this idea in light of my experiments in calligraphy, I might counter that it is not necessarily so, because I had abandoned intentionality and yet the brush moved through space and time to create marks on paper that the viewer can also experience in real time. However, Heidegger still puts the ego consciousness front and center, which is something that I find does not work in practice.

The evidence presented by the art produced from this period of retreat and meditation is that I had achieved the mind of emptiness beyond time, space, or form; that when I then practiced calligraphy (which in the mind was similarly empty), there was only the breathing in and out; and that the art products (such as Fig. 4.26) were not created through the intentionality that limits self-presentation. If it were 'ecstatic' in Heidegger's sense of the term, there would have been intentionality, but there is no intentionality, and so it is unthinkable. At this stage in my artistic development, it was entirely new.

A skeptic may well ask whether the more fluid calligraphy is proof of no intentionality. I would say that it is, in an imperfect world, the best proof available—the artwork produced is the only real artifact from the process, and as I mentioned earlier, the line does not lie. I can verbally share my experience as well, but one remains free to believe or disbelieve it. I

could also strongly recommend a skeptic to go through my kind of training, though I realize that in most cases it would be very difficult for him or her to do so, because it does require a considerable amount of time.

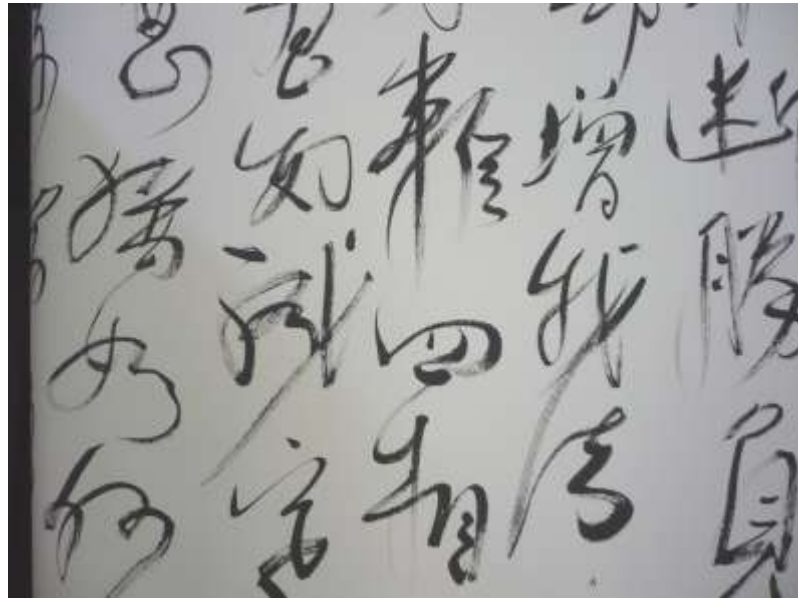


Fig. 4.26: Post-retreat art practice, 2007

The value of this retreat experiment lay in coming to terms with the notion that emptiness is not nothingness. If nothingness had no being, as in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, then I, having reached a stage of emptiness, would surely become nothing, but this did not happen. I am still comprised of fire, water, air, and earth elements. When I meditated to discover where the self comes from (as in Chapters One and Two), I realized that the self comes from such elements. It does not come from oneself, nor does it come from one's parents. Furthermore, the elements arise from 'being-in-the-world.' However, what is the elements' origin? The fire, water, air, and earth elements are invented, impermanent, arising by cause and effect. And then those four elements create the human being. In other words, the elements that comprise us are nothingness, which exists and is nothingness (Figs. 4.27a and b).

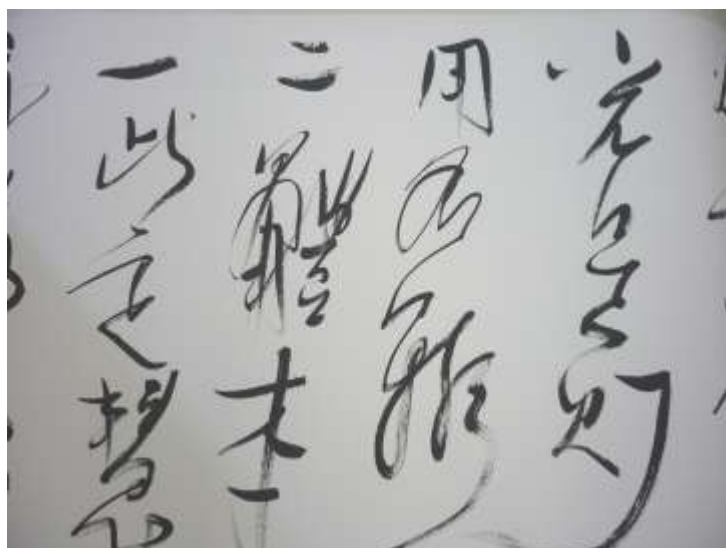


Fig. 4.27a: Post-retreat art practice, 2007

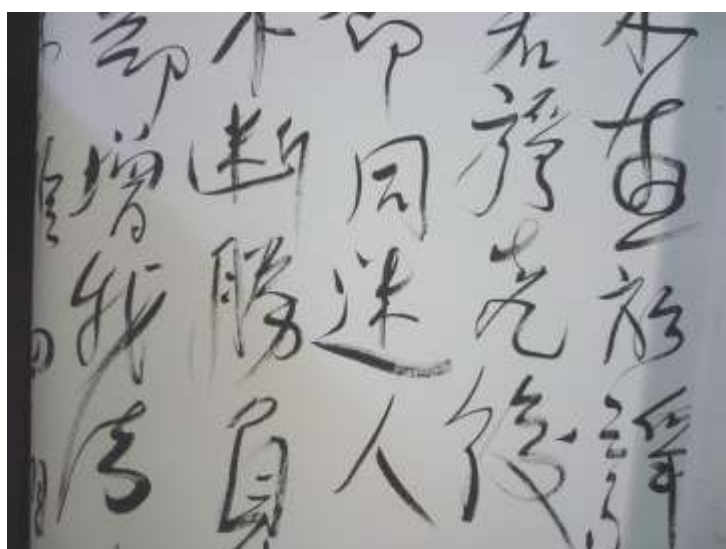


Fig. 4.27b: Post- retreat art practice, 2007

## 4.9 Chapter Summary

Since the experience from my residence at Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery had shown certain benefits to be gained by combining Buddhist meditation with my art practice, in that it increased body/mind unity, I decided therefore to do it in earnest. I then entered a full Buddhist retreat, using prolonged isolation and advanced methods of meditation, i.e., walking meditation, seated meditation, prostration, and chanting. From this retreat to investigate body/mind consciousness within the Buddhist meditation system, I achieved a

high level of unified consciousness and a much higher degree of flexibility in body/mind approaches to art.

The advantage of this action research, then, is that it brought my body/mind to a high level of emptiness and allowed me to reach previously unthinkable levels of freedom in my art practice in traditional Chinese calligraphy.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

#### **5.1 Restating the purpose**

Why did I propose this course of research? I realized that artists in general are always struggling to overcome limits to their creative activity. As a practicing Buddhist, I perceived that many, perhaps all, of the limits they face arise from the inward and outward phenomena of the mind. As originally conceived, this action research component of bringing Buddhist meditation practice into art practice would consider separate body/mind phenomena, but as it went on to observe the sources of these phenomena, it also delved into issues of developing body/mind unity. In this final chapter I will summarize the research I have described in this thesis and evaluate my findings. In doing so I will begin to explore the potential of my investigation in relation to the future development of my own activities as an artist and a Buddhist and the scope that the artworks created during this research project has to transmit my discoveries to others. The latter aim is important because research, if it is to have value beyond my own personal development, needs to be disseminated and shared.

#### **5.2 Summary of the main points and findings**

The retreat is a way of flipping over or inverting nothingness, bringing it to the fore, so to speak, so that freedom emerges through that nothingness, and the art that is likewise created through that nothingness is new and unique. This process resembles Buddha's teaching on 'revealing inceptive enlightenment.'

It may be compared and contrasted with Husserl's exploration of the 'transcendental clue,' which he defined as 'the experienced Other, given to me in straightforward consciousness' (Husserl 1950:90). My opinion, based on the experience I have gained during my research, is that Husserl resolved the issue of form and material and described

the phenomenology of self-suspending, i.e., disconnecting with the natural world, so that the eidetic of the transcendental can reach into pure consciousness. However, he regarded the human being as an individual existence as opposed to the Other, and drew a barrier between the human being and the natural order. Even though he discusses 'phenomenological reduction,' he determines that it bears on our own experience of noematic (being experienced as unreal) and noetic (being experienced as truth) aspects of existence. Judgment for Husserl then becomes a stumbling-block, due to his view that 'the Ego remains self-identical' (Husserl 1913 rpt. 1931:172). Phenomenology holds that material is natural, of course, but the formlessness of transcendental consciousness makes it very difficult to pin down.

Meanwhile, Sartre argues that 'nothingness can only "be made-to-be" if its borrowed existence is correlative with a nihilating act on the part of being' (Sartre 1943 rpt. 1957:79). I concur with Sartre that nothingness is the unique foundation at the centre of being. Through his theory we can understand the phenomenon of emptiness, but by approaching it through logic, theorizing, and analysis, he still privileges the *cogito*. Thus, like Husserl, he can describe but not prescribe how to escape the limits of the ego consciousness. How might the nothingness 'be made-to-be'? The means are already at our disposal, as practicing Buddhist monks have repeatedly shown, and as I have shown, by carrying out the nihilating act of meditating with focus on inhaling and exhaling (an act at the core of our being). The outcome is immeasurable creativity beyond thought.

My research took place over three years and focused on three different areas of my artistic practice:

1. First area: circles. In my earlier practice, I had worked for a long time with the circles, which are a part of Buddhist iconography, so I knew, on an intellectual level at least, that repeatedly drawing the circle is an activity intended to bring the practitioner to an appropriate state of inner peace, free of goals, delusions, suffering, and so on. I also understood, at this stage, that the practice of art in general is bound up by habits. As I had

practiced the circle, I had perhaps seen some process, but I was still constrained by self-boundaries, intuitions, habits, ego-based cogito, and it was apparent in the circles that I created. I therefore applied daily Buddhist meditation to this artistic practice, and the outcome was soon apparent in the circles that I produced: they were indeed better circles.

I should add also that while I was drawing the circles, my body/mind was focused on breathing in and out, so that it was in a state of unity. Also, because the body/mind was in unity and the mind in a state of emptiness, nothingness and stillness were in the mind. Phenomena had stopped their endless emergence and ceasing. With the ego kept at bay, it became possible to produce circles that were at once more perfect (hence identical) and more mutually different. I was still using the same model of the 'repeated act,' but I had reduced the inflow of sensory data, combined concept and consciousness, and freed myself of the constraints of time and space. In short, (1) I had improved my circles by combining the artistic practice with Buddhist meditation; (2) I had achieved body/mind unity by focusing it on breathing; and (3) I had freed myself of ingrained habits by emptying my mind in meditation.

On that basis, when I engaged in the repetitive act of drawing circles, which in certain respects resembles practices of repetition and duration by other contemporary artists, I freed myself of the awareness of time's passage or the need for counting. The count was always 1—it was no longer 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc. When the mind is empty and still, it is no longer concerned with sequences, counts, and the ticking of the clock. Likewise, it is no longer concerned with spatial form, so that it simply sees without passing comment, such as 'This is a park, that is a lake,' and so on. In this regard, my practice had already become different from that of the other artists that I discussed in Chapter Two.

I also contrasted my views with certain Western thinkers, such as Heidegger and Husserl, some of whose ideas coincide with Buddhist teachings. Heidegger, for example, places human beings both in and outside of time, basically because we cannot directly perceive the essence of time and can only construct it in our minds, using sequences and

positioning. However, although he speaks of transcending dualities, he never gets beyond discussing human beings in relational terms, in subject-object dualities. My essentially Buddhist view is more radical, and I can claim to have achieved timelessness in the sense that, in the philosophy of Buddhism, the act of concentrating the body/mind on breathing in and out during meditation can move the mind beyond time into a state of pure '*dharma*', a timeless present (Karunasena 2010). It is something that every well-trained Buddhist monk and practitioner experiences.

As a result, the kind of consciousness or unconsciousness that I achieve in my combined art/meditation practice is also very different from the kind of consciousness that is achieved through the ingestion of drugs and alcohol. That is only an impaired or distorted ordinary consciousness. After applying meditation to my art practice in this area, I realized that it could be extended to other areas of my art as well, but I still wondered about the role of form within the phenomenal realm. After all, I create art objects and visual forms. This led to the next set of experiments.

2. Second area: Bodhisattvas in coffee, wine, and invisible ink. In Chapter Three I investigated the role of visual perception in my studio art practice. I discussed the relationships between art practice and forms and conditions and among icons, indices, and symbols. As part of this regular, pre-meditation studio practice, I painted three images of the Bodhisattva, closely following a classic model, using coffee as my medium. This series of paintings demonstrated that people's minds in general are bound by habit, history, level of knowledge, and so on, so that they cannot recognize that the most ordinary kind of substance, something they see, smell, taste, and drink every day, has been used to represent the Bodhisattva. The paintings demonstrated the subjectivity and unreliability of seeing. Meanwhile, although I had striven to remain close to the original image when executing the three paintings, each was recognizably different from the original, and from one another, which I understood to express the constant change within the non-unified body/mind as well as the constraints of natural habit or intuition.

After a brief residence in Bodh-Gaya, I went to Taiwan, and in my studio there I executed the wine Bodhisattvas, in a manner similar to that of the coffee Bodhisattvas, but without reference to any model: after the discipline of enhanced meditation practice, I was able to dispense with models. As before, viewers could not recognize that a very common substance had been transformed in the representation of the Bodhisattva.

In my 'Being Becoming Nothingness' series, I used invisible ink to demonstrate the illusoriness of seeing and truth inferred from sight-data: the viewer is unable to see the drawing of the Bodhisattva on the rice paper, even if he or she has acute vision, whereupon the viewer's logical conclusion or 'truth' (no Bodhisattva is there) becomes false. It was a simple trick to show a deeper truth. My art practice with invisible ink was also intended to demonstrate the dependent or contingent nature of vision: once the UV light source is introduced, the Bodhisattva becomes visible. Besides corroborating the semiotic theory that symbols require indices and icons, I also expressed a truth long discussed by Buddhist thinkers, such as Chandrakirti: 'Sentient beings are as the moon's reflection in moving water. [The Bodhisattva sees] them as empty in their change and in their nature...' (Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, in Padmapani Translation Group 2003:21). However, while I executed these paintings during the course of my regular studio practice, I understood that I was still somehow constrained, so that I could not fully express the iconic signs and symbols of the Bodhisattva in the invisible medium. As a Buddhist, I then turned to more intensive methods of meditation and *puja* during a retreat and applied these to the creation of 'invisible images.' To create these fuller images, I had to achieve a state of body/mind emptiness that freed my senses and bodily movements. In doing so I established that although the concepts of semiotics and phenomenology may well explain the relationships of signs, symbols, being, non-being and so on in the phenomenal world, but without ever fully escaping that world. At this point in my meditation and art practice, I had reached the ability to 'see' and 'unsee' things at the same time, which then made it possible to achieve genuinely greater freedom in my art practice.

3. Third area: Calligraphy. I began Chapter Four with a discussion of the sand mandala in Buddhist art. During my stay at Jamchen Lhakhang Monastery I observed Tibetan monks construct sand mandalas and had experimented with creating my own. Although sand mandalas are not a regular part of my art practice, I considered this experience to be extremely instructive. First, it highlighted for me the central importance of breath control in meditation. Second, it provided further insights into the overall Buddhist vision of the way in which things and phenomena are continuously emerging from and dissolving into emptiness. I also compared and contrasted the state of mind thus achieved with Husserl's 'pre-given-consciousness.'

As for my calligraphy, my progress in this area had been stalled for many years, and in fact achieving a 'breakthrough' required two rounds of the action research cycle. At the end of the first round, much of the stiffness and rigidity of my earlier calligraphy had been eliminated, and it began to resemble an earlier master's work. I understood this to indicate that I had only approached a state of emptiness. I had reached Husserl's 'pre-given-consciousness,' which had opened up a space for learning, but I had not yet overcome dichotomized thinking. Only after a second period of retreat and intensive meditation did I finally succeed in developing a high level of body/mind concentration in my art practice, so that I was able to achieve the kind of freedom so desired by artists in general.

Therefore, my work with meditation, repetition, and ritualized action allowed me to 'adjust the balance' between mindlessness and consciousness, emptiness and being, phenomena and perceptions, the non-itself and the eidetic, so that I could approach my studio work with a fully integrated body/mind. Essentially, my task was to destroy ego and reconstruct my perceptions on the foundation of an understanding of emptiness, so that freedom could be attained. I continue to explore self-consciousness, the interpretation of visual data, the response of art audiences to finished works, the continuity of the self across art works, and so on. The process is open-ended. I can also recommend it to other

artists, on the basis of my experiences. The only requirements are the commitment to one's art and the willingness to see the process through.

It could be argued that the validity of my case that the post-meditation artwork is superior to the pre-meditation artwork rests on my subjective assessment of my own practice. In general, I stand by this position as an artist undertaking doctoral research, but with a qualification (concerning which, more below). As the artist-research Maarit Mäkelä writes in her interesting article 'Knowing Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practice-led Research' (2007), the creative process requires the artist to re-arrange 'ideas, beliefs and conceptions, and thus advance her or his knowledge, understanding and insight' (Mäkelä 2007:160). The advancement of the artist's personal knowledge is the central, and unavoidable, characteristic of practice-led research in fine art. This thesis reports on research that advanced my personal knowledge, and in recommending the superiority of post-meditation art to other practitioners I hope that the artworks themselves will prove my case 'by example', the way in which artists have always stimulated other artists. Mäkelä makes it clear that the knowledge-accumulating process in practice-led research 'strongly favours a subjective viewpoint' (Mäkelä 2007:160). I am aware that questions of subjectivity, and many other aspects of practice-led research, remain contentious issues within the academic world. The fine art PhD is still a new idea and, according to Rust, Mottram and Till in the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Review of Practice-led Research in Art, Design and Architecture* (2007), practice-led research by artists is better at raising questions than providing answers (Rust, Mottram and Till 2007:64). This understanding prioritizes the ability of artworks to challenge our assumptions, and I agree with Mäkelä when she writes that the practice-led enterprise does not use objects as evidence but 'attempts to present the objects created during the research process as arguments' (Mäkelä 2007:159). Here the artwork has its own validity as an instrument of provocation and, in this thesis, a great deal rests on the visual fact that there *is* a tangible difference between my post-meditation and my pre-meditation practice.

In this sense the artefacts I produced embody the answer to my research question.

It is also precisely this tangible difference that leads to my 'qualification' of the statement on 'subjective assessment' above: the difference that exists is not purely subjective. The subjectivity lies in my assessment of the relative quality of the pre-meditation and post-meditation artworks. Others are entirely free to disagree with this assessment.

It can be clearly seen in the three areas of practical experiment described above that my creative activities as an artist have been a method of uncovering and coming to grips with questions embedded in my Buddhist practices. At this point in the concluding chapter of my thesis, it is interesting to speculate that, in the future cultivation of my creative potential, I will think of my studio work not as an independent entity but as a form of Buddhist meditation that is closely related to the meditative routines I experienced during my retreats. In this way my research may be said to have moved me in an extended circle: I began by wondering if the limits I faced as I practiced Buddhist meditation arose through the inward and outward phenomena of the mind. My ambition as a doctoral researcher working in the context of an art school was to see if a sustained period of studio-based action research would help me achieve a greater degree of body/mind unity. At the beginning I was bringing Buddhist meditation practice into art practice in order to overcome limits of my creative activity. Once I was immersed in the demanding routines of drawing circles, or fully dedicated to the perceptually challenging experiment of painting the Budhisattvas in coffee and wine, or entirely occupied by the struggle to perfect my skills as a calligrapher, it was no longer clear that my Buddhism was at the service of my art. In fact, in the period in which I completed and submitted my doctoral project, it has become increasingly clear that I am introducing my vocation and ambitions as an artist into Buddhist meditation practice. As a result the potential context for my completed research is as much the future of meditational philosophy as it is the development of practice-led research in the field of fine art. As I complete the circle and return to Buddhism through fine

art I think back to the circle drawing with which I began my research. At the end of section 2.3 above, I wrote about these studio experiments in the following manner:

It seemed to me that if meditation can take the form of a routine drawing practice that generates a sense of ever-changing emptiness within an ever-changing circle-like form, then I could also begin to discover how to empty myself within the drawing and perceiving of shapes. My artistic engagement with the double-ness of the circle would perhaps eventually become a way of emptying myself, and at that point I would have freed myself of ego.

These words describe a creative person on a journey into Buddhist philosophy, and perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this thesis as a whole is that practice-led research in fine art, as Rust, Mottram and Till claim, often comes into its own when applied to the issues and concerns of another discipline or field of knowledge (Rust, Mottram and Till 2007:64). This circular journey is, of course, reflected in the title of the final version of my thesis: 'Buddhist Meditation as Art Practice: Art Practice as Buddhist Meditation'. All that remains is to describe the wider implications of the conclusions I have arrived at as the practice-led researcher of this topic.

### **5.3 General conclusions**

Techniques of Buddhist meditation may be applied not only to achieve higher or deeper states of awareness similar to those described and discussed by phenomenological thinkers but also to liberate the self from constraints imposed by sensory perceptions, ego-centrism, habits of thought and action constraints that artists frequently attempt to overcome in their art practice. By emptying the self through meditation, one actually obtains a keener insight into phenomena as well as a heightened level of energy for the production of fine art. The wavelike alternation of 'up' and 'down' periods is also reduced once greater mind/body unity (hence inner calmness) is achieved. With each repeated creative act, the level of energy and awareness remain constant.

The model of art research that I adopted during the course of this study applies most immediately to fine art studio practice but, as I describe above, there is every reason to believe that it will be my Buddhism, rather than my art, that becomes the final destination of my research journey. As a result, the dissemination of my research findings is as much a matter of documentation and textual exegesis as it is the public display of my artworks in exhibitions. The artworks that have been so vital to the expansion of my Buddhist meditative practices can be exhibited in their own right (this is what art is for) but my intention is to develop video and performance pieces that elaborate the Buddhist thinking that has developed through these studio activities. In this way I hope to provoke in my audiences a heightened concern for the reintegration of the self and the development of body/mind consciousness in everyday life.

## **Appendix**

**The exhibition title**

**The Art Practice of 0 and 1**

The Concept of Shui Mo (Chinese Ink) by Sulien Hsieh

**Curator:**

Jau-Lan GUO

Associate Professor

Department of Fine Arts, Huafan University

January 2008 in Taipei, Taiwan

**Translation by:**

Thomas E. Smith, Ph.D.



## The Art practice of 0 and 1

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黃炳明精心打造了一個觀察事件的情景，並向一位觀眾提出一段挑戰，還有悠長的沉默之下，觀衆看到的就是自己的觀察：一位打翻了咖啡，再繼續沉思的人在談話。黃炳明在此以這並非劇本的設計，透過與現場的時機事實上只能不可預期，這些作品總共一連3天，在展覽廳，也是黃炳明劇場十多年演出以來最壯麗的1、2、3，再次從1999，進入到全新的時代狀態。

If I am 0, can I understand 1?

If I am 1, can I penetrate 0?

In 1952, during his tenure at North Carolina's Black Mountain College, the visual artist Robert Rauschenberg produced one of his *White Paintings* as part of a performance event *Theater Piece #1* and hung it on the roof. Rauschenberg said the painting was intended to capture the dust and shadows in the display space falling on the white canvas. This white canvas marks the cognitive return to 0 in the history of Western painting. The canvas returns to 0, the recognition of images also returns to 0. Only after returning to 0 can 1 be seen, 2 accommodated, 3 absorbed, and so on, whereupon the objects from life begin to enter the realm of painting.

In the same year, the American avant-garde composer John Cage introduced his silent piece *4'33"*. During the performance, the audience heard only the sound of their own breathing, coughing, heartbeats, the wind...

The 0 of *4'33"* opened the ears of the audience, so that they heard what they had always ignored, the inconstant sounds that come from life. These sounds and noises, found everywhere in life yet formerly rejected by Western music, finally escaped the domination of melody and harmony in classical music theory. They are self-sufficient, full, chaotic, mixed, and spontaneous. After returning to 0, then there is 1, and then 2, and then 3, always rising and falling.

All these Western artists after World War II were inspired by the study of Zen. They had positioned themselves in Western art history, they challenged the traditional discourse that art was the language of self-expression and established the greatest possibilities in expressing concrete objects and sounds. However, the Taiwanese artist Sulien Hsieh's *Is it*

*Coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva?* and *Seeing and Unseeing* series aim to let viewers recognize the undependability of their senses and to go on from 0 to the heart of 0 the nothingness of the Buddhists. Here permit me to express this realm with 00, that is, the symbol  $\infty$ .

*Is it Coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva?* is an easily recognizable Bodhisattva image. It looks like most of the Bodhisattva images that one sees placed before the altars in Asian households, and one may think that it serves to preserve peace and resolve doubt. However, the artist uses a nontraditional painting technique and a questioning title that indicates that she is not presenting merely a Buddhist visual signal in our culture. The scent of coffee that one detects when viewing *Is it Coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva?* constantly alerts us to coffee's presence, and the title hints that the work is at once an image of a Bodhisattva and something made with coffee. The question that the artist lays out then is: Is it coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva? Is it 1? Or is it 2? While we readily recognize a Buddhist image, how is it that we are looking at coffee and not really seeing it? And if we recognize it as coffee, are we then rejecting it as a Buddhist image? The information provided by the senses is so unstable, so to what extent am I, dependent on the senses to interpret the world, being dominated by ordinary habit? If we continue our questioning and ask, 'Is coffee coffee?' 'Is a Buddhist image a Buddhist image?' and so on, the questions can go on to infinity, like the integers. Perhaps this infinity leads to nothingness. How can we remain clear amidst the myriad phenomena crowding before us? This is why, in her *Seeing and Unseeing* series, the artist provides a pathway back to the void.

After experiencing *Is it Coffee? Or is it the Bodhisattva?*, *Seeing and Unseeing* tests our sensory habits at another level. This is an entirely blank painting, a 0, that the artist has carefully placed where paintings are usually seen. In front of the painting, a light is set.

Without the light, the viewer sees a blank composition, but as soon as the light is turned on, the Buddha's image springs vividly to view. The blank paper is thus not an absolute blank at all, but the image of the Buddha that appears with the light is likewise unreliable. This work is like a practice with a series of 0s and 1s. If the blank paper is 0 and the hidden Buddha image a 1, then the artist has taken the appearance of 0 and 1 here and entered the channel into the deep 0, i.e.  $\infty$ . Through the instability of cognition through the senses, a pathway for getting acquainted with deep nothingness is provided. This work, which turns from the visual to sensory awareness, is like a ritual providing viewers the experience of enlightenment and the possibility of awakening it is not the simple setting forth of a conclusion. Sulien Hsieh's practice piece is not the return to 0 of art history, nor is it the existentialists' nothingness hinting at death. Instead it refers to the omnidirectional infinity and limitless changing 00 or  $\infty$ . Therefore, it is the insight that 0 (emptiness) is 1 (oneness). The premise is that if you want to know 0, you will first need to abandon ordinary cognition, that is, transform the 'self' into a 0.

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