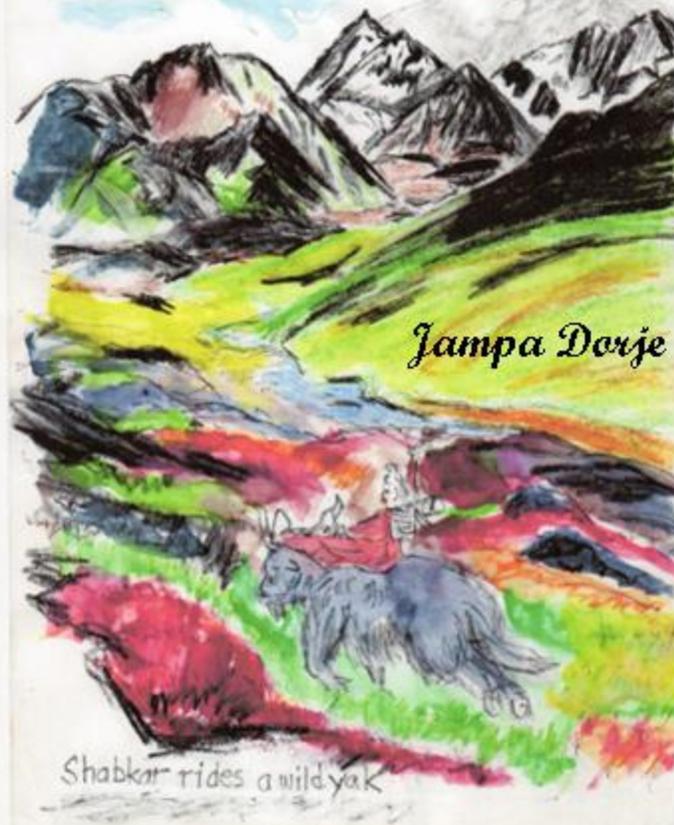


*Art is meditation
Meditation is art*

Jampa Dorje

Shabkar rides a wild yak





ART IS MEDITATION
MEDITATION IS ART

Jampa Dorje

Kapala Press 2017 Ellensburg

Artwork and photo of the Darwin Davis sculpture by the author

Essay originally written for Dr. Matt Altmari's
Philosophy of Art Class, CWU, Ellensburg, 2016

Revised, 2022



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For Lu Auz

In this essay, I will reveal how the activity of consciousness for a viewer of art can be considered an informal practice of mindfulness meditation and, in turn, how a formal practice of mindfulness meditation is an aesthetic experience. I will compare Eastern and Western descriptions of meditation experiences and aesthetic experiences to show how the approach of mindfulness meditation, as described by cognitive science and Tibetan Buddhist practices can enhance the enjoyment of art, and how theories of Western philosophy are useful in understanding Eastern meditational practice, as well as to enhance the creative process.

There are a complex set of interrelated components which make up the world of art. Museums and their curators, critics, art historians, philosophers (What would art be without theory?), gallery owners, auction houses, concert halls, bookstores, coffee houses, churches, parks, streets, subway platforms, wherever paintings can be hung, poetry read, music played, dances danced;—and then there are the artists, art viewers, and, of course, the artworks. John Dewey compares art to language. He notes that each art has a language of its own. “The hearer,” he writes, “is an

indispensable partner. The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it...There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to” (A 211). A visual language is a system of communication using visual elements. Just as people can verbalize their thinking, they can also visualize it using a diagram, a map, or a painting that involves elements such as line, color, form, motion, texture, pattern, and space.

On one side of the equation, we have the viewer, the transmutation of the viewer’s consciousness, and that which the artist has expressed; and, on the other side, we have the artist, the process of making the painting, and what the artist wants to express. Somewhere, in between, is the artwork. Benedetto Croce writes, “The artist produces an image or picture. The person who enjoys art turns his eyes in the direction which has been pointed out to him, peers through the hole which has been opened for him and reproduces in himself the artist’s image” (CP 116). For Croce, what we feel, what passes through the work of art, is what is important. Art does not represent emotion; it expresses emotion. The matrix of a meditation involves the meditator, a non-active space (awareness), and the inner expression of feelings, sensations, and ideas. Those practicing meditation are attempting a close and harmonious interrelationship with themselves to experience and, in turn, understand their feelings and ideas. In this sense, a meditation is also an aesthetic experience.

I am a thinking being, and I can ask questions about the nature of my very existence in the universe. I might ask myself, as Martin Heidegger asks in his famous question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Heidegger argues that Western thinking has lost sight of the significance of the meaning of Being. Human beings take their existence for granted, and do not understand what it means to Be. For Heidegger, there is a difference between beings, spelled with a lower case “b” and Being. The first deals with separate things (things that can be described) and the latter helps explain with how these things are understandable as things. In this sense, Being (with a capital “B”) is more of a verb than a noun. The real question, for Heidegger, is what is it to be a being, and he feels that an artwork can give a viewer an insight into this kind of knowledge. I am not arguing for the correctness of Heidegger’s idea, only that it is one way of looking at an artwork that resembles a mindfulness meditation. A meditator is a being, for whom the meaning of Being can be experienced in the process of meditation.

The meditator finds what Buddhists call the” monkey mind”—the chatter, the static, the tumbling of thoughts and feelings, without seeing the background, the nature of mind, the ground of consciousness. The main difficulty is in observing the mental process, let alone is in being able to think about thinking, The means to this end lie with mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation can be done sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, although beginners tend to fall asleep in the prone position. Keeping your back straight is important for form’s sake and for helping you to breathe evenly. Take a breath and notice your breath. Don’t change your breathing but focus on the sensation of the air moving in and out of your lungs. As thoughts come into your mind and distract you from observing your breathing, acknowledge those thoughts and return to focusing on your breathing. Don’t judge yourself or try to ignore distractions. Merely notice that

your mind has wandered and bring your attention back to your breathing.

The trick is to develop a disinterested attitude about physical and mental discomforts and remain interested in the process of meditation. The key is to relax, and this is accomplished by what might be called a process of constructive rest to bring about an attunement of the activities of the body and the mind. In meditation, as mentioned above, there are two sides of the practice. The first, *Vipassana*, in the Buddhist tradition, means insight into the true nature of reality where impermanence, suffering, and the absence of any unified sense of self are realized to be our human condition. *Samatha*, in the Buddhist tradition, is the practice of calming the mind and allowing the formation of conceptual frameworks (ideas) to be diminished. As shown above, this is done by practicing the kind of single-pointed meditation most done through the practice of mindful breathing. The combination of these two approaches to the mind, in the Western cognitive sciences, is called mindfulness meditation.

Training this monkey mind is discussed by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in their book, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*:

How can this mind become an instrument for knowing itself? How can the flightiness, the nonpresence of mind be worked with?...The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is not to become absorbed but to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning...[As] the meditator again and again interrupts the flow of discursive thought and returns to be with his breath or his daily activity, there is a gradual training of the mind's restlessness. One begins to see the restlessness as such and to be patient with it...Eventually meditators report periods of a more panoramic perspective. This is called awareness (24).

Although not a typical practice while viewing art, it would be helpful to develop the *samatha* focus, since the average time that many viewers look at a piece of artwork is between two and three seconds. Conversely, looking at the mind in a more playful fashion, like one looks at a painting, would take some of the heavy ponderousness out of the meditational procedure.

Questions will arise concerning the artist's intent, the artist's life experience, and who or what influences the artist's art practice. One can compare the artwork to other artworks (standard categories) and how they differ from those categories, compare the artwork to other works by the same artist, compare the works to other works in the same gallery, look to see if there is a narrative or whether the work makes a statement or is a symbol of something else. And then, there is the artwork's construction, how the paint is applied, its texture, the colors and shapes in the composition, whether the composition is balanced, if there is one perspective or many or none. Whether information from a broader context is used to better understand a piece of art or whether one stays within the formal constraints of the artwork itself, the viewer's personal interaction and response to the literal and expressive qualities of the artwork are engaged.

These questions about a work of art can also be asked about a meditative experience, about the meditator's own awareness, of her mental and emotional activity. What color is the mind? Does

the mind have a shape? Where do the thoughts/feelings appear from? Where do they go? Is there a steady rhythm? Is there clarity or are the thoughts/feelings muddled? Is there a point of view? Who is viewing? Where is the viewer in all of this? For Buddhists, there is no isolated, permanent self that is a viewer. This has been a contentious point for many Western philosophers and psychologists. There are some post-structural philosophers who reject this belief, and new research from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and artificial intelligence has also revealed the tenuousness of this belief in an integrated self. Daniel Dennett presents a model of consciousness based on information in his book, *Consciousness Explained*:

There is no single, definitive “stream of consciousness,” because there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theater where “it all comes together” for the perusal of a Central Meaner. Instead of such a single stream (however wide), there are multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things, creating Multiple Drafts as they go (253-54).

The multiple drafts are the different ideas that arise in the mind and are held for a period. An idea arises; then, this idea liberates itself, and another idea arises. Ideas keep arising, until enough data are accumulated to form a more comprehensive understanding; then, the earlier ideas are abandoned. Likewise, in Dzog Chen (or Ati Yoga in the Tantric Buddhist tradition), concepts are resolved in openness, or self-liberated. In his *Treasury of Natural Perfection*, the 14th century meditation master, Longchen Rabjam, better known as Longchenpa, writes:

*Here is the essential meaning of resolution in openness:
Coming from nowhere, abiding nowhere and going nowhere,
External events, unoriginated visions in empty space, are ineffable;
Internal events, arising and released simultaneously,
Like a bird's flight-path in the sky, are inscrutable (15).*

In the activity of an aesthetic experience, the viewer looks at a painting and finds that this is a space for the play of consciousness, a place to get lost, a place to spend time and learn something new. The viewer, becoming a thinking Eye, can experience the painting as communicating something in a different language than words through the aesthetic experience. With practice, the viewer can sense another Eye sitting behind this eye, a primal Eye, sometimes referred to as the Third Eye, or gnosis (in the sense of insight into the metaphysical basis for the ground of consciousness). This is the ground of the ground, that which, no matter how it is supposed to be, isn't and yet is experienced as present awareness, a kind of self-reflective cognitive emptiness. Again, Longchenpa, describes thoughts resolved in pure vision:

*The intangible Samadhi that lacks any field of meditation,
Pristine, simple, intrinsic gnosis,*

*Consumes all events in consummate resolution,
And all experience spent, itself is consumed.
Since the consuming or non-consuming is resolved in absence,
Its existence as ineffable is never in question.
What is, is a vast non-referential panorama,
All experience consummate, 'no mind!'
And that is the yogin's delight! (113)*

Concentration brings about a blockage of external and internal distractions, and the normal experience of time, as moving from one moment to the next, is transcended, wherein the yogin shares the same consciousness as the Buddha. Thought does not cease; indeed, if it did, you'd be dead. Awareness of the nature of mind is present, but the attachment to ideas and feelings are overcome and cease to be of primary importance and begin to recede into the background. If the mind wanders, no matter—an artist might suggest you shift your focus to the negative space. Or, take this printed page you are presently reading, and think of the white space as “contemplative awareness” and the printed words as “ideas” or “feelings” in consciousness. If all the ink that the words are made of was pressed together at the corner of the page, it would take up a very small area of the white space of the literal page, and in terms of the focus of the mind (bare awareness), the ink (ideas) could be considered as insignificant.

In his book, *The Psychology of Contemporary Art*, Gregory Minissale reports that “various psychological studies suggest that creative insights occur in the state when the mind is relaxing from tasks that require our full attention. Normally, it is assumed that it is harmful to the learning process for the mind to wander or that errors can occur in the processing of information if attention is not paid to details. However, as Minissale points out:

In an art exhibition, in the process of examining a particular artwork, or when watching a film, there is no pressure to process incoming stimuli in a particular order, and quite often mind wandering is encouraged (240).

The mind wanders, and then, comes back into attentiveness; and when this attentiveness is extended over a period of time, a sense of losing of oneself becomes a state of absorption. In a mindfulness meditation one tries to observe whatever comes into awareness, feelings and thoughts, without holding onto or pursuing them.



An experiment: I posit my extended viewing of Darwin Davis's untitled sculpture in front of the Language and Literature Building on the CWU campus. My viewing has both objective and subjective elements:

This metal sculpture is made of a rising, continuous, visual line. This "line" is formed of fabricated steel with a dimension of eight inches on each side. The line rises six feet from a concrete base and curves outward three feet and returns in the opposite direction before turning in a converse direction and then curving again upward to a height of fifteen feet. The sculpture has a strong design element, reveals fine welding technique, and displays a natural patina of rust. I walk around it, and it seems to change shape, the vertical and horizontal converge into different patterns and shapes, as my movements around the sculpture seem to compose it, bringing different aspects of the sculpture into view as a form of active involvement, helping me to feel the sculpture's dimensionality, and this perceptual awareness is accompanied by intuitions of passing time, time seeming to unfold in experience and space within what I perceive in the immediate present being a retention of perceptions just past, and this retention in the present overlaps in the perception that is coming to be, not isolated from others or fixed alone in time but flowing into each other, continually becoming different, going nowhere, and I returning to where I began with the sculpture not having moved from where it began.

Here, past, present, and future coalesce in my meditation, as I process ideas and impressions. The usual way of looking at art does not normally involve breathing exercises and is generally just a random looking at an object until the viewer "gets" something from it. With the use of a more developed meditational approach, a deeper aesthetic condition presents itself. This is not a cognitive state but an intuitive state of consciousness, arrived at through a creative process of looking. Here, the mind can wander and become an aid to experiencing a level of reality that is free of all endeavor, where appearances and sensations are neither good nor bad, where everything can be experienced without naming, without discursiveness, without fixation, and without any point of reference. This is where meditation and art viewing coincide, and the utterly ineffable

experience of body and mind is unified.

Dzog Chen takes the mindfulness meditation a step further, where the viewer simply cuts through the ego with direct experience, after having the nature of mind pointed out by a master;—then, one sees that the relative and the absolute are concepts of the mind. The essence of mind is emptiness (transience, impermanence), but still awareness manifests. The same is found to be true for the nature of reality. The essence of objects is emptiness; yet their nature is to arise spontaneously in the mind. As Longchenpa says in *The Treasury of Natural Perfection*, “When nothing whatsoever is perceived as real in essence, the duality of delusion and freedom from delusion is resolved, and thereupon we lose any preference for samsara [the relative] or nirvana [the absolute]” (116). In this sense, the meditator is a disinterested viewer of self and other.

The aesthetic experience can be characterized mainly by disinterestedness, as Kant supposes, and this is true for the meditative experience, as well. But the focused aesthetic and meditative experience also produces what Baumgarten calls a vivid experience and Longchenpa calls a clear, luminous experience. It could be said that all experience is aesthetic experience, based on the perspective that all experience is perception. Like Croce, I take the position that art does not exist independently of the experience of art. Therefore, an understanding of the aesthetic experience is important in arriving at a definition of art.

George Santayana, in *The Sense of Beauty*, developed the idea that an aesthetic experience is one that does not involve pleasure for a specific part of the body, but is rather “a lifting out of ourselves” and an appreciation that involves no wish to possess what is being appreciated:

A first approach to a definition of beauty has therefore been made by the exclusion of all intellectual judgments, all judgments of matter of fact or of relation (20).

Aesthetic and moral judgments are classed together in contrast to intellectual judgments; they are both judgments of value, whereas intellectual judgments are judgments of fact. Santayana makes a distinction between aesthetic and moral values, between work and play—work will be action that is necessary and useful, while it will seem that the play is frivolous. To the contrary, he argues, “For it is in the spontaneous play of his faculties that man finds himself and his happiness” (27). It is in the contemplation and appreciation of beauty that man is most himself.

The interplay between mind openness and mind focus is echoed in the concept of play by Friedrich Schiller. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (a collection of letters addressed to Friedrich Christian, a Danish prince, at the end of the 18th century), Schiller tries to show the development of mankind through a series of stations, from the physical to the rational, and he believes that the aesthetic experience will develop a human being’s moral behavior. In the fifteenth letter, Schiller claims that “play” is the principal expression of the human spirit and that it reconciles the divisions which civilization has produced in the human condition. Schiller divides the creative impulse into the desire for sense (the body), the desire for form (the mind) and the desire for play. He believes that the development of the play impulse reconciles the dichotomy:

Reason demands, on transcendental grounds, that there shall be a partnership between the formal and the material impulse, that is to say a play impulse, because it is only the union of reality with form, of contingency with necessity, of passivity with freedom that fulfils the conception of humanity (77).

How to raise human consciousness to this level is the challenge, but a sustained aesthetic appreciation of reality and the nature of mind through meditational stability would be a start. Meditation allows one to freely relate to both the inner and outer worlds.

. . .

I have shown that the process of a formal meditation and of an art viewing experience are much alike. It seems to me that the process of creating an artwork also has a meditational component once bodily movements come into play. In terms of applying meditational techniques to the creative process, as well as the psychological process, I have worked at deconstructing my identity using Tantric Buddhist meditation using deep visualization and mantra in my traditional three-year retreat combined with the literary device of playing with multiple personas.

In this post-postmodern age, one of the tenants is the continued dismantling of structures and analysis of them from different perspectives. If we have abandoned the idea of an author, if the concept “author” is dead, as suggested by Roland Barthes and echoed by Michel Foucault, and I am writing my autobiography in a third-person persona, and the role of this subject, and the subject of the subject, in this pseudo-biography is another persona, masked by the author, something like an *authonomous* (half-anonymous and half-known) being is calling me to account for myself; and this, then, challenges my assumption of being free and autonomous in the world, as well as in the writing. If I peel away the layers of the façade of the author, I find a dialogue with myself as I experience the world.

In Tantric practice, the emphasis is on the intrinsic purity of all being. The process of receiving a transfusion of information from a tutelary deity through meditation involves two stages, creation and completion. Deity practice does the purifying. The visualizations of the creation stage undermine one’s sense of the solidity of the material world. In these practices, the true nature of mind is beyond intellect and description, and it is the power of devotion that allows the practitioner to accomplish the practice. Recognizing that the visualization of the creation stage is an illusion, the wonder of this creation dissolves back into the ground. The use of the deity, called a *yidam*, is to tether the mind while it is in the process of purifying mental obscurations, such as the idea of a permanent ego, or self. Each of the five buddhas in the deity mandala represent a kind of wisdom and meeting these wisdoms allows each practitioner a means to deconstruct the paradigm of a permanent self. This process of deconstruction can be thought of as a kind of play activity, an activity that involves active meditational practices in the process of creation.

Over a period of years, parallel to my Buddhist practices, I have played with developing a number

of literary personae: Bouvard Pécuchet, a critic; Jubal Dolan, a gangster-type; Rychard Artaud, a collage artist; Jampa Dorje, monk and scholar; and Thuragania, a lesbian, pre-Socratic philosopher. They each have their own body of artwork—paintings, poems, novels, critical works, and letters—and the personalities of these characters seem aligned to the weakness and strengths of the five Buddha deities. The white deity of the Buddha Family is intellectual; the red Padma Family deity is magnetic and dramatic and tragic. Blue Dharmakaya deity purifies with space. The yellow Ratna deity is artful and nurturing. The green, All-accomplishing One is powerful and successful, and each liberates the self from attachment and clinging.

After much practice, I wind up with five literary personae/tutelary deities occupying my empty consciousness continuum, and I recognize that there is only the text out there, as there is no here in here. This author must be a reflection in your mirror-like mind.



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