

The Artist

One of the most difficult Buddhist topics to talk about is that of meditation experience. Note that I said “meditation *experience*,” not “meditation” or even “mindfulness,” as it is popularly known today. There are a great number of books on “meditation.” Buddhist meditation is accepted by almost all the world’s major religions. It is seriously studied and used by mind scientists who are beginning to treat it as if it is their own invention or discovery. Even global corporations like Google are using it to promote themselves¹ – for many of us here, we are like emperors with our clothes stolen and still smiling at our nakedness. And, of course, many of us speak and debate about it as if we are experts or serious meditators.

It is even more difficult to talk about the experience of dhyana (Pali, *jhāna*). In some ways, we are fast losing this vital mental skill of early Buddhism. After the Buddha’s death, the monasteries became large, well organized and wealthy, but less focused on meditation, if at all. With the rise of writing and its use in later Buddhism, teachers and writers started writing about fabulous samadhis, giving them grand long names, but they are neither about meditation nor concentration – they are mostly about some philosophical notions of their authors.² Today, as we elegantly “modernize” Buddhism, with some monastics becoming academics and psychology experts, taking up salaried jobs and becoming socially engaged, their professions have effectively displaced meditation and monasticism. One priestly CEO, who owns property and racing horses, even quipped with hubris, “Times have change!” But for whom?

Despite all these challenges, we still have the living presence of Buddhist meditation. We still have good meditation teachers living today, and we need to learn all we can from them. Then, there are those who experience some kind of deep meditation, but might not know it to be deeply rooted in the Buddha’s teaching, especially in terms of aesthetics, the nature of true beauty. It is this second kind of experience that we will examine here.

Simply put, the true artistic experience or creative moment that holds the essence of beautiful writing, poetry, art, music, movements, spirituality, and, even scientific insight, are closely related to the Buddhist notion of the focused mind of calm and clarity. In short, this is the mind of **the genius**.

Notice how the geniuses of history like Wolfgang Mozart, Frederic Chopin, John Keats, Vincent van Gogh, and F Scott Fitzgerald have given us great gifts of beauty in its various forms, often at *the cost of their very own lives*. **Mozart**, an Austrian musical child prodigy died poor at 35, never appreciated when he was alive. **Chopin**, the greatest of the Romantic musicians, suffered serious ill health most his creative life and died at 39. **Keats**, one of the greatest English poets, too, was unappreciated in his life-time; he died of tuberculosis at only 26. **Van Gogh**, one of the greatest artists of all times, was a man of deep spiritual sensitivity, who died sad and mad.³

¹ See Reflection, “[How Buddhism was invented](#),” R354, 2015.

² See Andrew Skilton, “[State or statement? Samadhi in some early Mahāyāna Sūtras](#),” *Eastern Buddhist* 34,2 2002:51-90.

³ See Reflection, “[Starry night](#),” R368, 2014.

Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* to earn the wealth to marry his wife, but she later went mad. Still, he continued to make great sacrifices to support her while she was institutionalized.⁴

These great geniuses seemed to care little about their health and lives, toiling to create beauty, and hoping that people would appreciate them, and so support them. Or, some kind and generous patron would give them a vital life-line so that they could work at what they are best at. In an important way, this reminds us why we need to be kind and generous to renunciants who are true to the Dharma, living simple and moneyless moment-to-moment lives, undistracted by the world.

Those renunciants live their lives mastering the Dharma, delving deeply into mental cultivation, and nurturing profound insight wisdom. They are the spiritual virtuosi who are content with just the way they are. If we do not dutifully give them the 4 supports of clothing, food, shelter and health, they would not prosper long, and so our lives would be spiritually poorer.

For, the arhats and true renunciants would not do anything for a fee, even as a life-support, nor have any dealings with money or wealth.⁵ They would naturally live as long as life lasts, even without the basic supports. Like a comet or a rare blossom, they fade away, unseen, unheard.

Both the fragile geniuses of the fine arts and the vibrant virtuosi of renunciation are true Artists. They are Artists in the sense that they provide us with the means to enjoy visions of beauty and truth, and perhaps to tap our own genius and see beauty and truth in our own lives. The geniuses of the fine arts and the virtuosi of spirituality are true to their art when they attain moments of deep stillness and profound joy.

The geniuses of the arts express their genius through the medium of the senses, especially sight, sound, movement and thoughts. We first enjoy their artistry, and are then moved to know them better as persons. And having known them better as persons, we go on to appreciate their works even more richly. We know how the art geniuses have suffered greatly to give us their genius. If only they had lived happily, and still brought forth their genius! May those artists of today live happy lives, and so beautify our own.

Profoundly creative people, the “Artists” – the writer, the poet, the painter, the musician, the dancer, the spiritual, the mystical, even the scientist in moments of deep insight, even us when we are truly in love – experience these moments when “the Muses” touch us. The Artist immortalizes beauty and truth in his works, actions and words – we call them “works of art.”

The true Artist, then, is able to experience moments of deep and direct feelings of true reality, when the movement and structure of time and space break down, as it were. We then disintegrate and merge with that artistic work – that eternal now, here and forever, fully alive in the immediate reality of beauty and truth.

The spiritual virtuosi who are true renunciants, on the other hand, directly experience beauty and truth in their meditation. They express beauty and truth in their very lives. They are themselves *literally* moving works of art!⁶ That is, if they are true renunciants who live the moneyless

⁴ See Reflection, “[The Great Gatsby](#),” R355, 2014.

⁵ See eg **Kasi Bhāradvāja Sutta** (Sn 1.4), SD 69.6.

⁶ See eg how the arhat Assaji, merely by his serene presence, converts the wanderer Sāriputta: see [SD 42.8 \(1.2\)](#).

and selfless lives of profound wisdom and natural compassion. Their daily lives are truly free of “busyness” and worldliness. Then, they are the embodiments of spiritual beauty and truth.

The mere presence of such spiritual Artists exudes peace and pervades the whole ambience with love and light. Even the worst of us, with the darkest of lives, are likely to shine in such light, and see ourselves as new beings, capable of renewed goodness.⁷ These are the shifting moments that transform lives. This is what we should be seeking – the liberating light of these radiant beings, the true offspring and descendents of the Buddha and the great arhats.

When they have left our presence – and they must, as renunciants and radiant beings – we are still nurtured by our memories of them. Even as we recall them, we joyfully feel their presence, and we ourselves emanate the Dharma light by which to clearly see and know the Buddha word still in our midst.

This light is like a bright candle, even a single one, can burn and cut through the darkest gloom that otherwise blinds us from the suttas, the true teachings of the historical Buddha. As the light pushes apart the veils of dark ignorance, it reveals a bright space of learning and knowing, where we feel a timelessness that frees us from the fetters of self and views. We begin to understand what impermanence really is. We have only heard about this before, but now we know and see it. We have become an Artist, too.

R419 Simple Joys 282
Piya Tan ©2015

⁷ See eg how the Buddha dramatically converts the serial killer *Āṅgulimāla*: see **Āṅgulimāla Sutta** (M 86), [SD 5.11](#).