The four meanings of Inspiration

By Ven. Piyasilo

FOR some months now, I have been enjoying the literary section of the New Straits Times and the writings of Salheen Ben Joned, Wong Phui Nam, Lim Chee Song, Otto Steinmayer, and many others. Every Wednesday edition of the paper.

Reading their articles has become a sort of continuous education for my interest in art, literature, poetry and the expression of the human spirit.

Not only have I cut out those pages and kept them for constant reference, but the principle of tasting their poetic minds (or should I say hearts) has never failed to be a constant lesson, an inspiration to my own mind-heart, now that I have completed a volume of my own thoughts and am planning an anthology I have called Life Reversed (1991).

I especially miss Salheen Ben Joned's contributions, or his piquant candour and courage, and would like to dedicate this reflection on inspiration to him.

No true poetry is without inspiration. Inspiration is the life-blood of all creative work: music, painting, drama, and so on. Inspiration is the force behind the truth and beauty expressed, all of which constitute creativity.

There are four meanings of the word 'inspiration': the physical, the psychological, the social, and the aesthetic. In its physical sense, 'inspiration' is the act of breathing in, from the Latin inspirare (to breathe), from which we get the English words 'inspiration' and inspiritus (meaning spirit, breath). Specifically, inspiration means 'in-breath' (Pali anaham), while expiration is 'out-breath' (Pali apnaana).

Being mindful of one's in-breath and out-breath (anapana sati) leads to mental cultivation and concentration leading to the experience of heightened awareness. One is usually more refined consciousness known as 'mental absorption'.

This is not only the experience of profound mental calm: it is the height of creative ecstasy. If art is taken in the aesthetic sense — as the expression of experience and beauty — then, this is where art and religion merge or at least cross paths.

Art has been defined as anything which conveys beauty. If driftwood, beautiful as it may appear, is a work of art, why not? If the artist, by the very act of creating, has made an object identical or similar to the driftwood, it is then an artwork. But the twist here is, however, that the natural driftwood should be regarded as art if the artist (or anyone for that matter) perceives it as beautiful.

If we take the word 'art' in a different sense, it is the work of the artist: anything which is new, harmonic, beautiful, is called 'art'. If we take the word 'art' in a different sense, the term subha means shining, bright, beautiful, auspicious, lucky, something good.

What distinguishes a work of art from the common?

A work of art is, first and foremost, a piece of work; it is human-made. It is precious because it is rare, unique. Not everyone could paint another Mona Lisa, even if one could, it would not be as valuable for it has already been done.

Another factor is change. Life is change. Human societies change. Art tries to preserve a kind of window of permanence through which we can view, with a wholeness, or at least some of it, as experienced by the artist.

The world as it is is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Art, inspired work, was created for a brief moment at least. It gives us a powerful vision beyond the thingness of life, beyond this wholeness, or at least some of it, as experienced by the artist.

Art is a human need without which one but is an empty pictureless frame of reference. Indeed, art is the natural expression of life's conflicts seeking to resolve themselves.

The most important characteristic of art that inspires us, that is egoless and selfless. We see the artist not as a poet, the painter, the musician is dead; we enjoy the poetry of a poet of a bygone age. The work of art on the wall belongs to the person who created it; for then he carries it forever with him. A work of art, in other words, is a trigger for noble emotions.

Suppose that an artist were required to describe his 'Mona Lisa' as being impersonal (some of the paintwork is cracking), he would then make him feel unsatisfied. About feeling, he has no control but change and unsatisfactoriness, he realises that there is no self, no real painter behind the painting. What he creates, he has created it. And that is what makes the Mona Lisa what it is.

If a picture causes the observer to have a sacred feeling, then it is pornography, a poor imitation of the beholder's eye.

By the same token, one can say that a work (or graphic) object created with skillful consideration, be desensitised. If a lustful teenager sees an attractive naked female, he would naturally be interested, but a surgeon operating on the same female would be more interested in her clitoris, the only sexually mindful of the body.

Here, to be 'sensually aroused' means to have the desire to acquire and enjoy an object, and to go on enjoying it in a possessive (albeit) manner. This process is initiated by a single thought: 'What does that take? However, with skilful consideration, that one un-wholesome thought would not be able to take control of one.

While beauty is the quest of art, religion also brings beauty and ugliness (and plainness) as tools of spiritual liberation. In skillfully considering what is ugly or plain as being the Truth: Characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-satisfaction, that is a beautiful, in the sense of being 'good' by way of bringing one closer to the true nature of life.

Beauty, in other words, has a purpose, and that purpose is liberation. It is a wholesome choice we must ourselves make.

If this reflection refers to the experience of a possession by the power of a spiritual reality that enables the inspired person to see and communicate supernatural truths, in both the religious (Judaism, Christian and Islam) and the artistic sense, it is a catharsis of the religious experience. The religious sense, the artistic experience, that is the 'religion of the book'.

For charismatic religious, that is, those centring around hallowed individuals rather than scripture, inspiration is regarded as a divine experience that qualifies them to receive and communicate supernatural revelations and which endows them with certain miraculous powers, eg. healing.

With regard to the social meaning of inspiration, I would like to apply the Weberian analysis of the three types of religious: the ascetic, the mystical and the prophetic — on a more personal and societal level, both the religious and secular dimensions.

According to the ascetic level, one becomes inspired by being motivated by the belief that salvation, or at least benefit from suffering, entails some form of renum-
citation or withdrawal from the 'world', from social and psychological ties with the family, from all creatively interests (Weber, The Sociology of Religion, 1963).

One with ascetic experience believes that with withdrawal and self-mastery comes liberation from suffering. Socially engaged asceticism is the conviction that self-development should come before people-helping, or at least while helping others one should not neglect one's own spiritual development.

Social engagement inspired by the mystical experience entails a contemplative way of life where one renounces mundane interest but accepts the world around one with humility and compassion. The socially engaged mystic not only sees all life as one, but is guided by the vision of a better world and life to come. The mystic's main interest is the quest for the knowledge and the contemplation of that wisdom to society.

The third motivation for social engagement is the prophetic experience, that is, the belief that one is serving as an agent for a challenge to an unsatisfactory, even evil, social order. Such an action is guided by a vision of ultimate standards or a higher purpose. The socially engaged prophet, through his own exemplary life, is concerned with ethics and justice.

The viewer's perception of beauty is that which makes the Mona Lisa what it is.

From the aesthetic angle, inspiration is regarded as the act or power of moving the intellect or emotions. In Western literature, this is gained through the invocation of the Muses in classical Greek and Latin epics.

The word 'aesthetics' was coined by Alexander Baumgarten and first appeared in his Reflections on Poetry (1735). He was a follower of the Rationalistic school of philosophy under the influence of Rene Descartes (the father of modern Western philosophy) and the German Gottfried Leibniz.

Baumgarten observed that Descartes' distinction of "clear and distinct ideas" restricted cognition to conceptual knowledge (i.e. involving only the mind), and thereby excluded sensory and perceptual cognition (found in poetry and the other arts). Drawing upon the Greek word for perception (aisthesis), he coined the term 'aesthetics', by which he meant the science of perceptual cognition.

According to Baumgarten, the greater the perceptual clarity achieved in a poem, the greater is its poetic perfection. In simple terms, a good poem or a true work of art is one that immediately and effectively conveys an experience of beauty to one's senses (seeing, hearing, etc.), which is mentally felt, raising at least momentarily the quality of one's life.