

LINK, Feb. 21, 2016, “Engaging the Three Wisdoms”

If there is a steady undercurrent in what I have to say today it is **tremendous gratitude**, first of course, to Rinpoche, for this invitation and for his teachings since I requested to be his student at NSS 2005. Rinpoche has been kind and generous in engaging my many questions, and especially in urging me to see great adversity and loss as opportunities to simplify my life and make a fresh start. Kongtrul Rinpoche is my guru and I am his disciple, a relationship that is defined by my respect and appreciation for his vision, and devotion to the path that he has defined for us within the Longchen Nyintik lineage. Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel is one of my closest spiritual friends and teachers; and her enthusiasm for sincerely examining “open questions” is a constant inspiration. And it is a pleasure to observe Dungse Jampal Norbu taking his seat as a practitioner and Rinpoche’s dharma heir.

I also want to express my gratitude to the MSB sangha as a whole, for the honesty, inspiration, and dedication of the many practitioners I have come to know well, to those of you whose LINKs I have listened to over the years (I have developed quite a large binder with all those notes!) and to individuals such as Rebecca Zepp, Chris Holland, Ani Nyima Dolma, Jen Kern, David Croke, and many others with whom I have had such potent life-changing dialogues. The **warmth** of this sangha is deeply sustaining to me.

I speak to you on day 59 of my first 100-day retreat, which I have undertaken at home in a renovated garage behind our Longmont, CO, bungalow. I appreciate that this invitation came to me about 2 weeks into my retreat, just as I was settling into a daily schedule. It has stimulated tremendously fruitful introspection. Many of you know that I have been caring for my husband during the past 5 years of his decline due to dementia. Right now I hold the mandala of our household with the support of five caregivers, whose help gives me about 12 hours per day of solitude. This is a fruition of my years’-long aspiration; the result of causes and conditions coming together to make it possible. As Rinpoche wrote in *It’s Up to You*, “On the path of self-reflection, you are the ultimate assessor of the beginning, middle, and end of your journey.” I feel as though I am nearing the end of my journey – at least I am in the last quarter of this lifetime. Besides observing my partner’s decline and caring for him, I keenly feel my aging, like a fire kindling in my lap. There is, as our beloved teacher and sangha sister Ani Pema Chodron reminds us, no time to lose!

I titled this LINK “Engaging the Three Wisdoms” but I might have titled it **Art as a Path of Wisdom**, and I’d like to spend the rest of this LINK talking about the 3 wisdoms primarily in terms of art and creativity, for these have been my predominant path for nearly 50 years. Last summer Mary Mooney asked me to take on the role of evaluating Rinpoche’s talks on art and creativity and eventually building a team to carry forward the project of getting them into the world in the most appropriate form. This talk is influenced by both of these: my decades-long experience, refreshed by a dialogue with Rinpoche’s vision of wisdom, creativity in general, and visual art in particular. And it is influenced by you, our artful sangha.

I don’t know how many of you would call yourselves artists in any arena, and I had thought about naming some of you. . .with only a little reflection I could think of 19 sangha members who, along with Rinpoche, Elizabeth, and Dungse-la engage in the traditional arts of painting, including thangka painting, writing books and poetry, photography, architectural design (and I didn’t count all of you skilled carpenters and builders), web design, singing, writing songs, and composing music, woodwork, public art projects, creating mani stones, and dance. My whole talk could be a litany of the beauty we create. Our centers are filled with beauty, including their handsome architecture and the warm hospitality of the residents. The Sangdo Palri Temple of Wisdom and Compassion at our retreat center in Crestone is . . . is what? Exquisite. Astonishing. Beyond words, beyond description. We are a sangha of builders, designers, artisans, and artists in every conceivable medium; and I hope that what I’m saying will speak to you.

Rinpoche has talked many times about hearing, contemplative, and meditative wisdom. I will say briefly how I understand each of these, then talk in more detail about the three wisdoms in terms of visual art.

The outer story of how I met the dharma may be described as the story of my engagement with the 3 wisdoms; AND it is totally interdependent with my study and writing about art and with studio art practice begun as an undergraduate in the late 1960s. Here is the short version, and I will come back to some of these experiences during the rest of my talk. I took the first of many meditation and yoga classes in 1968 at a particularly traumatic time of my life. Simultaneously, I studied Asian art history, including extended study of Japanese art with J. Edward Kidder, one of the preeminent art historians of his generation. AND this course coincided with my first class on world religions, where I was formally introduced to Buddhism through the lens of Edward Conze. I began yoga and pranayama practice in 1975, and after years

of study and practice, subsequently taught yoga for 17 years. I was introduced to Soto Zen practice also in 1975 with Roshi Richard Baker and Tenshin Reb Anderson, and as recently as 1994-95 practiced regularly in a zendo in Cambridge, MA. In the early 2000s, I attended classes and short retreats focused on *shamatha* and *vipassana* meditation with two Theravadan teachers, Larry Rosenberg and Narayan Liebenson Grady. Rosenberg's book on death and dying, *Living in the Light of Death*, had a tremendous impact on me. His detailed description of Atisha's nine-part meditation on death, for instance, was revelatory. So, to put a long process in a phrase, working with body and mind, my understanding of the Buddhist view deepened over decades.

While Pema Chodron was not the first practitioner with whom I studied, she was in many ways my first formative Buddhist teacher. I read all of her books before I had been part of a sangha. I began to understand Buddhist psychology and philosophy through the lens of her teachings on lojong, tonglen, fear and other topics. A significant turning point occurred for me in 2004, when I attended her program on the vigilance chapter of Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharya-avatara*. I saw a lot of younger people in suits, helping to run this program . . . only later did I recognize some of our own sangha! At the time my work as a university department chair in a contentious department had left me full of angst and aversion. Her teaching was crucial to regaining a measure of equanimity. During that program Ani Pema also mentioned her current teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. I was curious to find out more about him . . . then became his student . . . and here I am, in my 11th year of diligent study, practice, and service within this lineage. I have reflected a lot about this curvy dharmic path, to use Vanessa phrase from a few weeks ago. When the student is ready, the precious teacher appears, as one proverb puts it.

So, the **three wisdoms**. **Hearing wisdom** is learning through listening and considering if and how what I hear corresponds to daily life. I think that it can also involve looking – studying about and viewing art. This is, at least in my understanding. It is mainly an intellectual process, involving conceptual mind, language, images, and forms. Patrul Rinpoche calls it “correctly remembering what you hear.” Or, we might say, learning to correctly interpret what we see. I'm thinking of Sangdo Palri here!

Contemplative wisdom develops through a more sustained analysis and examination of the teachings in relationship to one's own life and to the outside world—essentially internalizing the knowledge gained through hearing. Elizabeth's teaching and writing are a constant

encouragement to engage in this kind of analysis using one's own experience, to reflect on such powerful ideas as doubt and faith, devotion and the role of the teacher.

For me, death is the greatest mystery and has consistently led me into contemplative wisdom. When I first read *WoMPT* during the winter of 2006, I was already contemplating the 4 thoughts that turn the mind toward the dharma. Two dear friends, whom I had helped to care for, had already died of cancer. My closest woman friend, for whom I did intimate care, was actively dying. In an 8-month period in 2005-2006, 6 people in my life died. And, in 2006 I began extensive hospice training—about 80 hours with hospice personnel and with Buddhists Andrew Holocek and Darci Meyer, among others. I served during the following years as a regular hospice volunteer, both with individuals and families and at TruCare's care center in Louisville. During Rinpoche's recent Losar talk, I was heartened to hear of plans for an elder care space in Crestone.

Meditative wisdom is a deepening of inner experience and understanding through practice—going beyond concepts and simply resting in the nature of mind. As Rinpoche put it in one of his art talks, we learn to let everything arise, seemingly positive or negative, and then relate to all thoughts, feelings, perceptions as ornaments of the nature. And this nature provides experiences of clarity and spaciousness, if we can dissolve our dualisms and ignorance.

I make no claims to have stabilized my mind. I can only say that it is not quite the same wild mustang enclosed in and tearing around a large pasture that it used to be! Practicing involves learning to how to receive, to let the mind relax and open. In the Guru Rinpoche Supplication that we recite, lines such as “may I meet my own inner wisdom guru” articulate the aspiration to cultivate this meditative wisdom. And the form practices within our lineage such as the Longchen Nyingtik ngondro and sadhanas such as Rigdzin Dupa, Dechen Gyalmo and Dugknal Rangdrol not only prepare the mind for meditative wisdom, but take us there. The whole question of if and how making art can become an expression of meditative wisdom is deeply engaging to me right now. It remains one of my major open questions!

So, back to **hearing wisdom**. As a 19-year old college student I began to study yoga. Later, my spiritual search intensified when I left a graduate program in art for the Lindisfarne Association in New York, a center founded by William Irwin Thompson. There, residents studied cultural history and religion. I was the schoolteacher for the resident children. And there I furthered my Buddhist education reading Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* and

Chogyam Trungpa's *Meditation in Action*. I sat zazen twice a day, and participated in my first retreat, a weeklong sesshin. Sitting for hours and days facing a blank wall in the meditation hall, eating meals on my cushion, chanting the Heart Sutra, and otherwise being in silence, I had a glimmer of open spaciousness, of the nature of mind, that has remained with me for 40 years.

Simultaneous with this, I began serious yoga practice and study of Yoga-Samkya philosophy, a process that led eventually to my teaching yoga for 17 years. Yoga teachers such as B. K. S. Iyengar and Angela Farmer provided a foundation for my present meditation practice. I studied with Mr. Iyengar in India and twice here in the states, and he trained me in intensive asana and pranayama techniques as well as therapeutic yoga. Angela Farmer shaped my understanding of meditation by using work with the physical body to move into more refined awareness of subtle energies of the esoteric body with its chakras and *nadis*.

I was attracted to Buddhist art the first time I saw it in a sophomore art history class. Two particular monuments of world art stand out: the Great Stupa at Sanchi and the Ryoanji Zen Garden in Kyoto. Sometimes an image or form has a long incubation in the mind and imagination. So it has been with my obsessive curiosity about the stupa. In the late 70s, I made a series of drawings inspired by the Great Stupa. In the mid-1980s distinguished Islamic scholar Oleg Grabar told my cohort of Harvard University graduate students that all of us should learn about at least ten monuments of world cultures, and not get stuck in some narrow art historical backwater. The Sanchi stupa was one of the monuments I chose to study in depth. Subsequently, I incorporated it into my teaching whenever possible.

Then, in 2011 during my work as a hospice volunteer, I had the privilege of being with a 100-year-old man as he died. We gazed wordlessly at each other until his eyes lost focus and his breathing stopped. A day later in my drawing studio, I mused about how to give form to this profound experience. Suddenly, without forethought, I was making images of Sanchi with eyes and words on the paper. A 2013 exhibition in Boulder was the fruition of two years' concentrated painting of stupas. I became especially curious about the invisible stupas where terma were put, and you can imagine how difficult it is to represent those, but I have tried!

Ryoanji is the site of one of the most famous Zen gardens, and I also studied it in depth and later taught about it. Like The Great Stupa, here was an architectural structure and physical environment that could literally embody ritual space and time, and that could act as a skillful means for developing contemplative and meditation wisdom. This garden also helped to shape

my evolving understanding of the function of the visual arts. I locate here the beginnings of my intellectual and aesthetic interest in creating contemplative space, an interest that has continued to the present.

During two trips to India in 1983 and 1993 I not only studied yoga, but also sought opportunities to visit Buddhist sites such as Deer Park and the Damekh stupa at Sarnath. Sadly, a planned trip to BodhGaya was cancelled due to religious conflict at the time. I was, however, present for Durga Puja in Pune and a Kali Ghat celebration in Calcutta. All of these experiences furthered the interconnections of art and dharma for me—my hearing and seeing wisdom.

Trained well in graduate school, and having served so many years as a university professor and administrator, I am very familiar with hearing wisdom! And having retired from years of intense professional work in the world, followed by the past two years – post-2013 flood – of furious hard work putting our Jamestown house and site back together, I am once again able to dedicate time to studying the texts and art that are so pertinent to the lineage and our practice.

Co-instructing Courses 1 and 2 of the lineage training with Peter Aucott has provided me with further confirmation that teaching is a powerful method for consolidating hearing wisdom, something that I'm sure many of you already know. We teach what we understand and come to deeper understanding through this process. Studying the Lineage Tree thangka painted by Suzy Graineas, which is part of the beautiful shrine at Phuntsok Choling, has also helped to deepen my hearing wisdom. And this thangka is also a good segue for talking more about **contemplative wisdom**.

I am drawn to the material culture of Himalayan Buddhism. I became fascinated by the complex iconography of thangkas after a friend brought me two thangkas from Nepal in 1982. One of these thangkas is of Shakya Senge, Guru Rinpoche in a pose an ordained monk who learns the Tantric practices of the eight Vidyadharas. Imagine my surprise and sense of homecoming as I entered the shrine tent for the first time in 2005 and sat down on a cushion right beside our thangka of Shakya Senge, with the very same iconography as the one I own! Shakya Senge is, of course, just one of his 8 manifestations.

I have spent years contemplating the *Wheel of Existence* thangka. In 1983 in India I purchased a **Wheel of Existence thangka** that set me on a decades-long quest to fully understand its iconography. A Bhutanese *Wheel* hangs in my living room in Longmont, and I contemplate it every day, sometimes focusing on the 12 nidanas, or one of the 6 realms, the 3 or

5 poisons and the 5 wisdoms, or karma. Yama, the Lord of Death, holds all of this in his hands and feet, a fitting reminder that death is inevitable. Thangkas became my teachers and have led me into deep contemplative wisdom.

At this point I want to mention one of the longstanding questions in my practice, which has to do with Guru Rinpoche. My inquiry to understand who and what Guru Rinpoche is within the lineage and who he is to me has been a persistent quest. I've talked with some of you, and have brought these questions into Rinpoche's public teachings. The voice of my feminist academic training reminds me that Buddhism is yet another patriarchal religious system, with mostly male teachers and greater emphasis on male deities. Despite sustained graduate study of monotheist religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I never believed in God or a divine creator. I never believed in deities existing somewhere else, outside of consciousness or the mind. At moments, especially earlier, the Buddhist tradition has seemed thoroughly theistic, with deities and supernatural beings such as the buddhas, bodhisattvas, yidams, dakinis, and protectors who have special powers. Just who are they and what do they represent? Yes, Padmasambhava was an actual person who lived in the eighth century and traveled to Tibet to teach. But the miraculous stories about him have turned him into a being with magical powers, like Jesus or Muhammed.

Understanding that Vajrayana Buddhism is based on a sacred cosmology that developed in ancient Tibet leaves me with many questions that I know others have grappled with as well. I aspire to be open to new ways of thinking: to view the deities of Vajrayana Buddhism, not as reified beings, but as manifestations of qualities I cultivate through meditation practice. To read the hagiographic stories filled with miraculous and supernatural events as ways that practitioners sought to convey complex subjective experiences. To understand the idea of devotion to lineage gurus such as Padmasambhava as a way of acknowledging that others before me have struggled with confusion, doubt, and mental and emotional distress. The brilliance of the Buddha's teaching is that he urged us not simply to believe what he said based on blind faith, but to find out for ourselves what the nature of the mind is. Skillful means requires that I not anticipate how or when this awareness will stabilize, but simply practice with mindfulness, and compassion.

For several years, I studied traditional thangka painting with Cynthia Moku at Naropa and in her studio. And beginning in 2010 I did many drawings of Guru Rinpoche using traditional *tigse* or iconometric diagrams. I decided to take my questions into the process of

painting Guru Rinpoche as my first formal thangka. When, at last, I thought I had arrived at a suitable image, I showed it to Rinpoche who suggested that I paint him without the mustache. I have really liked the androgynous image that subsequently evolved. After preparing a traditional frame and canvas, I copied one of my drawings and began to paint the thangka. This is a slow process, as many of you who have studied thangka painting know! It is taking years!

I continue to take my inquiry into study and practice. I regularly recite Guru Yoga, which is the penultimate part of the ngondro; work with the visualizations; try to embody the full power of the 4 abhishekas; read about, and contemplate vajra pride, pure perception, and sacred world. All of this is slowly working on my mind, reshaping my habitual patterns of thinking, creating a small – new – space for deeper understanding of the inner wisdom guru.

So, working on this thangka is my first example of practicing contemplative wisdom through making art. Building a meditation garden at our place in the Rocky Mountain foothills where we lived from January 99 until 2013, also gave me ample experience moving from hearing to contemplative wisdom. Many questions gripped me. How might art become an ecological and spiritual practice on the land? How does artistic practice become an expression of contemplative life? How might art become an integral part of daily life instead of a commodity for the luxury market? The most important question is, how should one live? Over about 15 years in Jamestown, I explored these questions while carving 17 major marble sculptures, all with texts and all of which I placed on the site.

COFFIN In January 1999 when we moved to Iyvdell, David and I discovered a massive concrete block—two feet tall, three feet wide, and ninety inches long—buried in a pile of junk in a corner of the property. We positioned it along one edge of the garden overlooking the creek, and immediately began to call it "the coffin," as it resembled a sarcophagus. After searching for a stone, I settled on a 1200-pound slab of Italian Carrara marble. Then my challenges began. Because of a number of deep gouges on the surface, the stone was hard to polish. At one point Chris Riggert helped with this arduous job. There were so many letters in my planned text that I knew it would take years to carve them by hand. Finally, I transported the *Coffin* to a monument company in northern Colorado where we made a template, sandblasted the text, sprayed it with paint used especially for stone, and cleaned it off. The result was astonishing. Inscribed with lines from Shantideva's "Confession" chapter of 8th-century *Bodhicharyavatara*, the shallow letters gleamed on the gray and white surface.

“Today at least I shall not die,
 So rash to lull myself with words like these.
 My dissolution and my hour of death
 Will come upon me ineluctably.
 So why am I so unafraid,
 For what escape is there for me?
 Death, my death will certainly come round,
 So how can I relax in careless ease?”

The process of carving stone is a profound exercise in mindfulness and one-pointed attention. In the end, this stone was, for me, a powerful exhortation to practice. And for years, lying on it was part of my daily practice of making friends with the undeniable reality of death. After the 2013 flood I thought that this stone had permanently disappeared, but one day a former student was helping to clear debris and called me over to see a tiny triangle of marble sticking out of the ground. He said “let me get a shovel and get this out.” I looked at that corner of stone and laughed. We dug the damaged but whole stone out, another friend later built a sled for it, and then another brought his backhoe to lift the stone from its sandy bed. Eventually we placed it out of harm’s way on an upper terrace in Jamestown. I miss my daily practice with it.

ALTAR was the most anthropomorphic sculpture that I have carved. Nine shelves with rounded edges dipped and glided around three sides of the stone. A single abstracted breast emerged near the top, a reference to cancer. A text was inscribed on one polished side. When completed, it stood on a turning pin, atop a sandstone base and gorgeous onyx pedestal, five and a half feet tall. Like 2 other monoliths I had carved, *Altar* could be rotated by the viewer. The impetus for carving this stone was the experience of six deaths in an eight-month period that I already mentioned. *Altar* was meant to honor these individuals and I also hoped that viewers might put small objects on its shelves, the way visitors leave offerings at a kiosk near traditional Buddhist stupas. With its engraved text declaring "*This Precious Human Life*," it definitely served me as a daily reminder to contemplate the 4 Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma. It took more than 4 years to complete the ALTAR stone, and it disappeared in the flood. 15 of my sculptures were broken or buried. But losing that particular stone . . . well, I’m sure you can imagine the impact. To put it mildly, this is one of the most powerful experiences of impermanence that I have yet internalized!

Through drawing and painting with water media, I have engaged another of the challenging questions of my practice. Before I joined the sangha, I asked Kongtrul Rinpoche a

Vajrayana neophyte's obvious question: what does devotion mean? Having been a student of both Theravada and Mahayana teachers over several decades, I had heard little of devotion. His answer had to do with appreciating and serving the vision of the teacher, as well as cultivating the aspiration and commitment to wake up. This made sense to me.

Devotion has both outer and inner forms. I know I'm going to state what many of you already know! In a Personal LINK from October 2005, Rinpoche talked about outer practice and the question of where we put the mind. Ideally, we focus the mind on the teacher and lineage; on a vision of bringing authentic buddhadharma to the west; on finding purpose and meaning by being connected to something larger than the self and personal attachments. Inner practice helps us to find and experience the sacred world and the mind's own nature. Devotion is a skillful means to give meaning and transform one's life, and is essential for realization.

In another more recent talk in 2014, Rinpoche talked about devotion as an antidote to ego – though ego is critical for daily life as a way and means. Prayers are an expression of devotion, for they transform the mind, help one to find ease. Faith and devotion are thus an entry point for finding and engaging the nature, an entry point for non-dual awareness. The main thing is to see what devotion does to our mind-state and well-being. In *Light Comes Through* Rinpoche offers a more general view of devotion which resonates deeply with my experience in the sangha and with him as my teacher. There he wrote that realized beings are independent as practitioners, confident in the view of practice. They (or shall I say “we”?) realize the true nature of mind that is unobstructed and unconfused, yet carry a profound sense of appreciation for the source of this awakening. I have come, slowly over time, to understand this. At moments in the shrine room or shrine tent, I have felt overcome with my love and appreciation – or shall I say simply, my devotion – for our guru, the lineage, and this path. In those moments, I “peer through the doors of devotion,” as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche put it in his ngondro manual, *Not for Happiness*.

Listening to talks about devotion and reading about others' devotion have been meaningful, but I have cultivated my devotion mostly through studio work. During years of intensive ngondro practice, I created a visual record of my activities – being on the cushion, prostrations, reciting mantras, esp. Vajrasattva and Vajra Guru mantra, and such. I stopped making that visual record after nearly 2 years, before I was done with the daily practice . . . the result was a 35-foot long scroll that I called *Practice Map*. During another period, also about two years, I worked on a drawing called *Compassion Practice*, reciting and writing prayers over and

over again on a 5' x 6' sheet of black paper, 21 layers in all. This turned into quite an arduous practice in itself! This past year I began another such large drawing, this time writing aspiration prayers such as the “King of Prayers.”

More recently I began a series of 100 practice cards. I first encountered the idea of artists creating 100s of images in a series when I studied the art of 19th c. Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, both of whom painted or printed 100 views—Mt. Fuji, the work of 100 poets, views of Edo. Artist and Naropa professor Robert Spellman inspired my first series of 100 drawings of Ivydell, the site where we lived in Jamestown. Later I painted 108 *Cantos for This Place*.

Working on these Practice Cards, which are related to Rigdzin Dupa sadhana practice, has led me into the question of whether creating “form” images can be an expression of **meditative wisdom**. They certainly act as meditative aids for me, like the cards used in both our ngondro and sadhana practices. After I had been creating these for a while, I realized that the cards are similar to tsakli or initiation cards, which are miniature Buddhist paintings, usually produced in sets of 6 to 100. Traditionally used in ritual empowerments and in the training of monastics, they also can be used to create mandalas, transmit teachings, act as visualization aids or substitutes for ceremonial items, and they can be used to help a dying person through the bardos. A wide range of subjects are depicted in tsakli—from main deities, yidams, and protectors to their various power attributes and appropriate offerings. Whereas thangka paintings usually depict such subjects in detail, tsakli are unique in that they generally focus on just one item at a time. Subjects are similar to thangkas, but simplified due to their small size. For instance, my thangka of Guru Rinpoche shows him with all of his attributes, but one tsakli might have just his robed body. Another card might depict his khatvanga, another his dorje, another the offerings, and so on.

To come back to my question: Is meditative wisdom always associated only with on-the-cushion practice, or can making and using images, either abstract or with forms, be an expression of meditative wisdom? Put another way, must all art always remain simply a pointer, like the proverbial hand pointing at the moon in Zen Buddhist art? In his book *Old Path, White Clouds* Thich Nhat Hanh tells a story of the Buddha: The Buddha says “my teaching is not a dogma or a doctrine ... my teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. A thinking person makes use of the finger to see the

moon. A person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon.”

Just before beginning this retreat, I saw artist Laurie Anderson’s new film *Heart of a Dog*. Some would say that it was a finger pointing to the moon, but for me it was the moon, a direct expression of meditative wisdom. I sat in the small dark theatre scrawling on an index card throughout the film. On one level the film is an extended meditation on the deaths of her beloved animal companion, her mother, and her husband Lou Reed. Yet, *Heart of a Dog* offers its viewers pith instructions for living and for meditation practice. “What are our days for?” she asks. “To wake us up.” “Let me learn how to feel sad without being sad,” she says at one point. What is a worthy life goal? “To live in the gap between thoughts, feelings, and experiences, which is luminous and empty, recognizing everything as the play of your own mind.” Anderson intones: “Recognize this . . . recognize this . . .” Then she evoked the “mother” meditation: “Try to find a moment when your mother loved you, then remember that all sentient beings have been your mother.” Life,” she says near the films end, “is a pilgrimage towards death and love.” I left the Boedecker Theater in an altered awake state. Anderson used a narrative method, not an abstract one, to express and evoke meditative wisdom.

Similarly, it would seem to me that the Dalai Lama’s Secret Temple in Lhasa, with its many frescoes documenting dzogchen practices, expresses both contemplative and meditative wisdom. I have not been to Lhasa, but have studied the murals in an important book that HH Dalai Lama sanctioned. The same is true of the paintings from a text called *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*. Yes, both are skillful means to aid meditation, but I think they are more than that too, for the artists who created them & for the practitioner who uses them.

In many of Rinpoche’s talks on art and creativity, he talks about his abstract painting as a post-meditation practice, deeply intertwined with formless meditation. Although he has not said this directly, *I think* he might link form images to form practices such as ngondro and sadhana, and formless or abstract images to maha-ati and dzogchen practices. Obviously there is much to reflect upon and ask Rinpoche about here. For me one of his significant musings is about how art and meditation nurture each other; they are never in conflict. If one spends time with one more than the other, this is up to each of us. At the end of one’s life, looking back, to have forsaken part of one’s passion, for dharma or for art, would leave a person unfulfilled. At the end of my life, looking back, I will see the path of one who explored the interdependence of dharma and art.

A few final comments about how I serve MSB, and how I balance the three pillars of Study, Practice, and Service. In addition to working with Rinpoche’s art and creativity talks since last summer, for 5 years I served as the primary manager and cook for Lotus Café at Phuntsok Choling, and I continue to assist with the mechanics of arranging catering and cooking when needed. I began to help out in the Café during my second MSB program, after overhearing Greg Seton say that he needed help. I serve as a member of the PCMT, a course instructor within the lineage training, and a chöpon assistant during tsoks and drupchos. When not in retreat, I host a tormo team and gatherings of sangha sisters. For years I attended nearly every work/service day at Phuntsok Choling before and after programs. I of Guru Rinpoche appreciate Rinpoche’s statement that “*By doing lhaksam service—hand in hand with...study and practice—our potential to become bodhisattvas in the world will unfold.*”

I know that our service, study, and practice have many goals, but being a bodhisattva in the world seems like a most worthy one! I have always loved to study, which is obvious from what I’ve been saying. And practice? I remember Rebecca Zepp’s comment to me during our very first conversation: This is a *practice* path. Now I know what she meant . . . I am on that path! One of my very current questions is how to ease or release my achievement mind, when I am counting prayers all the time.

I hope that you can make sense of what I’ve been saying about art as a path of hearing, contemplative, and meditative wisdom. Art *is* a doorway for me, a “boat, raft, and bridge,” as in our morning prayers. Perhaps it is also the other shore. I am eager to hear your questions and responses.

Resources:

- VDKR art books and talks on art and creativity
- Exhibition catalogues – Jacob & Haas *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*
- J. Haas, *Smile of the Buddha, Eastern Mysticism and Western Art*
- C Trungpa Rinpoche, *Dharma Art*
- Barbara Dilley, *This Very Moment*
- Laura Anderson’s film, *Heart of a Dog*
- Robert Spellman’s website (and course notes)
- Joan Anderson’s website and monthly “magazine”

- Cynthia Moku's website and thangka ptg/studio instruction
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path, White Clouds*
- Book of images and texts, *Dalai Lama's Secret Temple*
- Book from David Croke, *The All-Knowing Buddha, A Secret Guide*