

# art & thought

FROM READERS

A forum for you to share about your creative process, and how it functions as part of your spiritual life.

DEAR EDITOR,

I am responding to the prompt of whether I consider art to be my “principle spiritual path.” I started drawing as a means to express myself at age 12. In a sense, it was the first real path that led me out of feeling somewhat trapped. Art gave me a voice, it gave me vision--the ability to see things and value what I saw, and to remain open-minded. At 45 I am still following that path of seeing and making work, but it seems more spiritual now.

The path of artistic expression has never led me to a place of conformity or of relying on formula, and I’ve never made a priority of pleasing other’s sensibilities. (Although my wife has a certain way of directing me at times, and is the biggest and best critic that I have!)

Daily meditation has expanded my sense of the interconnectedness of life. Even the smallest things have great value, and when one pays close attention, all things begin to have a voice, a way about them, a playfulness, which sparks one’s imagination with wonder and awe. Any really good art starts there, with the feeling that one is being introduced to an original nature, a nature where the possibilities of awakening become more than just speculation. This is a very special place.

Thanks,  
John Kristiansen

DEAR EDITOR,

I was very happy to see two of your featured artists in the last issue (“Dharma & Art”) debunk the theory that creativity can be an authentic spiritual path, in and of itself. As a practicing artist for 13 years now, and one specializing in “spiritual” themes, I am in wholehearted agreement with John Daido Looori, Roshi and Joseph Goldstein, who “doubt the possibility that creative work alone, outside of the context of religious tradition or spiritual practice, can lead the practitioner toward genuine self-realization.”

From the complete lack of spiritual maturity in artists from Benvenuto Cellini (16th Century) to Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollack, to my own experience as a full-time artist, where daily “creativity” can often feel like a mixture of dentistry and underarm scratching, I have no reason to believe that creating art, in and of itself, leads anywhere



*Open Hand*, ballpoint pen, colored pencil and white-out, 2001, by John Kristiansen



*Albanian Refugee*, oil on canvas, 2001, by Tom Block

more spiritually impressive than does ditch digging or waiting on tables.

In fact, I have always been concerned that non-artists *perceived* the act of creation as some kind of “spiritual adventure.” For instance, some time back, my brother, who is a psychologist, was talking about catatonic states and then he said, “You know, like when you paint—like when you’re completely engulfed in a singular experience.” As romantic as this sounded, I assured him I had never experienced such a state during my daily artistic practice.

Ultimately, the negative aspect of perpetrating the idea that the creative process is somehow a spiritual one is that many people who are not artists become afraid to even try to explore this aspect of their characters. After all, they don’t experience creativity as a spiritual event and—assuming that this implies that something is wrong with them—they can easily convince themselves that they have no talent, don’t understand art, are somehow creatively inept, etc.

The practice of art certainly does offer a special experience—though not a mystical one—to anybody, regardless of technical or creative “aptitude,” and I find it upsetting that what I consider a fallacious attitude of “spirituality” hovers over the creative process—ultimately scaring off potential practitioners.

I am enjoying your magazine very much—and the special point of view that it brings to the discussion of art.

Thank you,  
Tom Block

*Tom Block’s “Art & The Mystical Vision” appeared in Wild Heart Journal’s Spring/Summer 2001 issue.*

#### EDITOR RESPONDS:

*On the contrary, people who have always been shy about their creative expression are more apt to feel safe when they consider it to be an integral aspect of their spiritual life. In that context, the first things to go are ideas of good or bad. All heartfelt expressions of the true and original Self are inherently valued. There is much child-like play and freedom in that for beginning explorations of the creative process.*

*I have had many, many moments while art-making, music-making, word-making or dancing when I have indeed entered the mystical dimension in its most ordinary sense: times when my concentration was so focused that I had no attention left over for my mind to maintain its non-stop storyline and dramatic narration of my life.*

*For however long it lasts, I experience only the flow of spontaneous creative energy passing through the spirit and bodymind. For the artist—as much as for the ditch-digger—any action performed completely and with wholeness of Being becomes part of one’s path; all activity can be a hidden, quiet doorway to the simple and ordinary Presence of this worry-free moment.*

Send us a short (one page) statement with examples of your work, but please understand that we can only publish a few of these each issue. We tend to receive lots of visual art and poetry, so we are particularly interested in other creative forms. Perhaps you are a prophet of 7th grade English, an innovative seamstress, a futuristic bank teller or a singing cabdriver?

