

ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: RECONCILING THE CARTESIAN MIND-BODY SPLIT

Abstract

Artistic creativity reconciles the Western Cartesian mind-body split by expressing inner body wisdom and making it public for all to experience. Expression of inner emotional and sensuous wisdom reveals the interconnectedness of all existence and what we do to one affect the whole. In the act of artistic creation, the artist's heart, hand and mind work in tandem and the Cartesian mind-body split is healed, transforming self and others.

Easter philosophy has not forgotten the interconnectedness of inner body wisdom and the intellect. In the act of creation, the artist discovers the ancient truth that both modes of knowledge are equally important as universal truth is found in the beauty of the art medium. The arts across cultures, time and place are a shared phenomenon of our humanity and may foster understanding and empathy of the human condition and our place in the world.

The seventeenth century set up the western division between mind and the body with Descartes, but the body has been negated in favour of the mind at least as far back as Plato and Aristotle. For at least 2,500 years this imbalance has culminated in domination over nature, Western globalization and exploitation that threaten our very existence. War rages over scarce resources and fuels the greed and consumerism while 'third world' countries starve and suffer the consequences of war and poverty. But many artists have always known that the mind and body are equally important and artistic creativity can heal the Cartesian mind-body split.

Artistic creativity and appreciation of the arts makes inner body knowing public. By inner body knowing I mean the wisdom residing in the shadows of body memory. Artistic creativity makes the invisible visible as Merleau-Ponty has pointed out and the art work preserves this knowledge for all to see. Artists who

create from innerness challenge the assumption of superiority of mind over the body by expressing emotional inner wisdom that cannot be revealed in any other way.

Intellectual and emotional dualism is deeply entrenched in Western culture and critiqued by many people. The Dalai Lama has said Western culture's mind-body fragmentation has almost atrophied our connection to inner emotional wisdom and the heart, leaving the individual alienated not only from the self but other living beings. In the East, the philosophers Confucius and Lao Tzu did not fragment mind from body as in the West and retain the age-old knowledge of the complimentary interconnectedness of the masculine (yin) and feminine (yang) energies. Yin and yang are mutually dependent on each other and these energies are in constant flux as they dance along a line of continuum seeking balance and harmony.

In the East the yin-yang relationship of the Tao is expressed by *ch'i*, the life force and universal vital energy that manifests the whole world. *Ch'i* is connected to the breath which gives us life as it enters and leaves the body and is central to the thinking of both Confucius and Lao Tzu. The Chinese pictogram of *chi* is the same as for wisdom and for the sun and is also a beautiful metaphor for sincere innerness expressed through the artistic process.

Artistic creativity seems to involve connecting with *ch'i*, energy in, what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) calls a life 'flow' that can be accessed within the body. The expressive artist connects to a universal flow when creating and *ch'i* or flow

in artistic creativity but it can also be accessed in the act of meditation as well as prayer. By anchoring our attention to our breath and letting the turmoil of ego mind pass by, we experience our interconnectedness to all that is. When we know that we are a vital part of all creation it gives us a deep sense a security that feels much like love. Meditation is a dialogue within us, as one part observes the other, that results in an exchange of ideas; much like artistic creativity gives the artist. It requires that we are totally present to our feelings and emotions and we listen to our inner voice. Listening to inner body knowing connects us with what it means to be alive.

When we learn to listen to our own inner emotional wisdom we may also learn to listen to other people's emotional and intellectual dialogue. Really listening with empathy can establish a dialogue between different people that may result in a better understanding when we are confronted with differences of opinion. This holds great value for global culture as we learn to listen with compassion to each other. Listening with empathy opens up the possibility of learning about ourselves and others as we encounter thoughts, values and judgments which may be different from our own. It is especially important that a dialogue between men and women cross culturally is established in order that we may begin to understand essential differences in perception of the world.

Artistic creativity and the way of the *Tao* allow the experience of *ch'i* and this universal flow and flux of form and pattern can teach us the values of living a authentic individual life within a healthy community. The patterns of *ch'i* is a

feminine quality that connects us to our inner nature as well as nature around us. When the feminine *yin* is balanced by the masculine *yang*, all things are possible. Lao Tzu taught that all things are in process and nature is constantly renewing itself. Death follows life and life follows death and life is a never ending ebb and flow of becoming in a constant cycle of return.

The expressive artist experiences the world with awe and wonder, like a child at play, an why not? As children play they learn about their world and see the beauty all around in everything that exists. Jesus also said that we had to become as little children leaving our ego rationality aside for a time to experience the heaven that is all around but men do not see. He was speaking of the beauty of the Earth which continually regenerates itself in a never ending cycle of life, death and new life.

In the East, Taoism is inclined to see life more as an art than a science and the focus is on the moment with “concern for concrete details of immediate existence as a basis for thinking about generalities and ideals” (Ames:116). In the West, it is the artist who knows that life should be lived as a work of art, not only for the self but for others equally. There is no excuse for a culture as rich as ours for letting people starve and live on the streets, no matter what the ‘reason’. We are all accountable for each other and what happens to one happens to us all.

It has been said that “reality is self-causing and we should be self-aware that “particulars are not random and chaotic” (Ames:125). Each time we walk past a beggar on the street we seal our own fate, if karma and the Bible are to be

believed. Ames speaks of “responding with awareness to what is objectively so” and that living life as art involves “choices [like] those of the artist addressing her canvas...responding with an awareness that enables one to maximize the creative possibilities of self [and the] environment” (Ames:340). It is often the artist who sees with an aesthetic eye what is going on and this inner emotional knowledge informs all artistic expression.

The Dalai Lama travels the world encouraging people to engage their ‘heart-mind’ what I call innerness that resides within the emotional and sensuous body. Engagement with ‘heart-mind’ enables us to feel empathy and compassion for the suffering of others that “involves cognitive and affective consciousness [and] intellectual awareness and moral awakening” (Tu Wei-ming:180). It seems to me that it is empathy and compassion that is so sadly lacking in our postmodern world as we hurry by the outstretched hand averting our gaze and cross the street. Confucius, Jesus and many others so long ago knew that our inner feelings are the basis of “knowing, willing and judging...humanity in its all embracing fullness ‘forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” (Tu Wei-ming:180-185).

We are all born artists with an innate ability to imagine and create our own reality. The spark of the divine *ch'i* or flow is within us all, we need only listen to our inner body wisdom. Expressive artists have always known that inner and outer reality are closely intertwined. The arts embody the *ch'i* energy and share its universal life force with others. The artist expresses inner wisdom the only way she

knows, through the artistic medium which reveals valuable knowledge that could not channel the flow of artistic creativity that teaches there is a better way of being in the world.

Artistic creativity and appreciation of a work of art cleanses the dust from our perceptual mirror in order that we can see who we really are; a part of a greater whole that is intimately interwoven and interdependent. Inner body knowing balanced by the rational mind reconciles the Cartesian mind-body split that may bring harmony between Eastern and Western world-views. If we visualize a global paradise where people live in harmony with nature and other beings Western culture needs to rebalance masculine and feminine energy, a natural law that in the East has never forgotten. The Earth is bountiful and forgiving as are most women, given half a chance. Nature constantly renews itself, season after season, and the ability to return from the brink of disaster is not only possible, it is absolutely necessary for continuation of life as we know it. It is time to reevaluate our priorities and realize that we are responsible for our actions as well as for the plight of the less fortunate, whether they live in our inner cities or across the globe. 'What goes around comes around' the ancients warn:

'Do what thou will --- as long as it does no harm'. Simple yet profound.

Gerda van de Windt (2006)

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