

# Art is how we live

**Dharma Talk by Sister Jewel**

**29 June 2013 at a retreat for artists at Findhorn, Scotland**

Dear friends, good morning. We had the joy to be a little bit part of a conference at Findhorn the last few days. It was on communities and how to strengthen them, on how to build community and to acknowledge, to treasure what is happening all over the world in intentional communities. The opening plenary was by Robert Gilman who was giving the context of human history, where we are right now in the evolution of our species and the need to evolve spiritually in order to survive. He said something in his talk that struck Sr. Hai Nghiem and me: “There are no environmental problems, there are only environmental symptoms of human problems.”

## **Art for survival – Art as social activism**

I want to begin this morning by looking at art in the light of the hugeness of the dilemma we are facing, and how that comes from our minds. How can our art, our tremendous creativity and expressiveness be in the service of our very survival? Art in the service of transformation and healing – of ourselves, our families and communities, our world.

Peter Sellars is someone who inspired me a long time ago when I was at university. He spoke about art being a thermostat, not a thermometer: not registering the climate of our culture but influencing it, having a real impact on the direction of culture, of politics. So I applied this idea in my research on Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art, to study the role of this art form in Brazil. Was it just being impacted by society and adapting to society’s values, or was it influencing society?

Sellars teaches courses at UCLA on art as social activism, art as moral activism, and he says: “Art is about creating a space in the world that doesn’t exist,” but which very much needs to be brought into the world. And looking at our current state of affairs in the world, he says that art must be involved in politics. Because right now we don’t have real political movements, we don’t have something that is creating the change that needs to happen. He says he has been “disappointed by the failure of arts in the last 25 years, to in any way humanize the country we are living in. None of our art has been good enough.” He is talking about the United States.

As an example of taking the arts into society, truly engaged in the issues of the world, in 2002 he did a play based on the *Children of Herakles*, the classic Greek play written by Euripides. He uses it as a way to portray the suffering of refugees and immigrants worldwide. Because in this play the children of Herakles aren’t allowed into any city except finally into Athens. In the different places where he performed this play, he had as his cast real refugees and immigrants of the city playing the children of Herakles.

And off-stage he organized dinners for the authorities of that town to meet with and talk

to these actors. He said at a 2004 production in Vienna: “Believe me, this was the first time the Minister of the Interior of Austria had a dinner with three African refugees living in the streets.” These dialogues helped shift people’s perceptions of refugees. They were no longer seen as “people who could be generalised about. Now they were three real people with three very real stories.”

I think when we look at our art it’s also important that we ask ourselves: What are we here for? What is our purpose in this life? And I think we are here to wake up. We are here to be part of a collective awakening, to contribute what we can to each of us waking up. And that means seeing beyond our idea of ourselves as a small separate self and touching something much bigger and greater. I think our art needs to be motivated by this really deep aspiration, this deep wish. The word we use in the Buddhist tradition is *bodhicitta* which is the mind of love. The mind of commitment to our own deepest truth and goodness, and the confidence in these qualities in others as well. It’s a big responsibility, and it’s a beautiful call. It’s not playing it safe or staying in our comfort zone, but really being willing to be called forth, accountable to what’s going on right now in our societies.

Chogyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, says: “Genuine art tells the truth.” If that’s the tragedies of refugees, of homelessness and hunger and global warming, or whether it’s a more personal truth of our own grief, our own struggle with how to be true to ourselves, how to really listen to what’s there and honour that, to have integrity with it – bringing that into the world. Whatever it is on the spectrum of personal to public – we want to tell that truth.

And to do that, we need to not be too sure what we mean by the word ‘art’ or what we mean by the word ‘artist’, and break open the limiting elements of those words. Because I think art is really who we are, how we live. It is every aspect of our lives, not just what we create or what we present to others.

### **Creating a beautiful past**

They once shared that we need to create a beautiful past in the present moment, something we can relish in the future when we look back on those moments, something that can nourish us and others deeply. This is the art of mindful living, of taking seriously each moment of the day: it’s not a moment that is there for something else, it’s not a transition or a superfluous moment in preparation for something truly important. Each moment is the most important moment. That is the broadest understanding of art that I think is the most liberating: it is our life, our whole existence and nothing less. The Balinese say, we have no art, everything we do is art.

I was leading a retreat with another sister and two brothers a few years ago in Botswana. One of the brothers had brought a tea pot and tea cups, and when we stopped for our first little meeting at the airport before arriving at the retreat site, he used boiled water with loose green tea – it was a real tea ceremony to begin our meeting. And I thought, *that’s so impractical. I would never travel with a very breakable tea pot and tea that you have to wash first, then strain, pour out the water, then let it steep. And these very breakable*

*delicate little cups...* But it really changed the atmosphere when he did that for us. And he did it several times throughout the trip. When we would sit down to meet and plan the next day, he would prepare a real tea for all of us. I was quite impressed.

And at the end of the retreat we had a treat, we were taken to a waterfall nearby. There was a little lake we swam across in order to walk up to the waterfall, and he was swimming across the pond with a bag on his head. I was wondering, *why is he doing this?*, because it's not an easy thing to do. And we climbed up to the top of the waterfall, and out came the tea pot and the tea cups and the hot boiling water, and he served us fresh tea on top of this waterfall! And I love remembering this experience, because it's really this experience of creating a beautiful past – really taking care of the present moment!

### **Blur the boundary between art and life**

I invite us each to think about this: Maybe we can choose one thing we can do today and tomorrow while we are at the retreat, something very daily, very basic. To cultivate a habit that maybe we want to continue at home, we can just do this one small thing artfully, with our whole being, with all our mindfulness. Or even if it's 50% of our mindfulness or 80 %, that's fine, too, we do the best we can. We do it in a sacred way, grounding ourselves in it here. Then we can take it home with us, it will help us to get into that place at home.

It may be walking up the steps: We just want to walk up the steps and kiss the stairs with our feet with reverence for the steps, like these old Victorian magnificent steps here covered in plush carpet – how nice for our feet! It may be opening a door and really being there to open the door. It may be sitting down and drinking our tea – doing this one thing with as much awareness as we can. It may be brushing our teeth, or washing our dishes, or putting on our clothes, making our bed, noticing that we can put our fork or spoon down in between bites and just rest as we chew our food. So maybe you think of just one thing you want to be aware of in these two days that can anchor you back home.

Cultivating these kinds of attitudes is what blurs the boundaries between our art and our life and invites us to be more and more in touch with the source, allowing us to be creative and express ourselves as artists throughout the day.

Chogyam Trungpa says about this: “The name ‘artist’ is not a trademark. The problem of the modern age is that everyone has become merchandised. Everybody is a mercenary and everybody has to have a label, you are a dentist, an artist, a plumber, a dishwasher. And the label of ‘artist’ is the biggest problem of all. Even if you regard yourself as an artist, I request you not to write ‘artist’ for you occupation when you fill out a form. From my way of thinking and from what my training tells me, when you have perfected your art and developed your sensitivities, you cannot call yourself anybody at all. Being an artist is not an occupation: it is your life, your whole being. From the time you wake up in the morning, when the buzzer in your clock rings, until you go to bed, every perception you experience is an expression of vision—the light coming through your window, the hot water kettle boiling to make tea, the sizzling of the bacon on the stove, the way your children get up with a yawn and your wife comes down in her dressing gown into the

kitchen. If you limit that by saying “I’m an artist,” that is terrible. It is showing disrespect for your discipline. We could safely say that there is no such thing as an artist. There is just art—dharma art, hopefully.”

You may know this story: A journalist came wanting to interview Thay. He had a chance to be in Plum Village, follow Thay around, observe Thay growing lettuce and gardening and working around the grounds. The journalist said: “Thay, you write such good poetry, why do you waste your time growing lettuce?” And Thay said: “I couldn’t write that poetry if I didn’t grow the lettuce.” These moments of inspiration, of really receiving some message coming through us that we transmit, they come out of very ordinary, but very extraordinary everyday moments where we are just there, doing the practical real truth of our life, whether it’s lettuce or washing dishes or e-mailing or texting. Those things can be the womb of creativity if we know how to do them artfully. So there’s no separation between our life and our art.

### **Relaxing with the unknown: Mindfulness is about trust**

I also want to ask us if it’s true that we create art. I think it’s more accurate to say we are one condition that helps it to manifest and that no one thing gives birth to something else. We can only be part of many conditions that allow something to arise. So we do our best: We train, we practice, we give ourselves good conditions for these seeds to be watered, but then we have to let go. It’s not finally up to us. We can’t control what’s going to happen.

When conditions are sufficient and we do our best, then art, beauty, harmony arises, it manifests. But if there aren’t enough conditions yet, then it’s still waiting. We just continue to practice and train, and we don’t take it personally. This means being okay with not knowing, with not being able to determine the outcome. Even when we put our best into something, things might not happen the way we expect, but that’s not important, although everything around us tells us that the outcome is the important thing. But it is about cultivating our capacity to be with whatever is, and to relax into whatever is there, even when it is not at all what we have wished for.

We had a very wonderful opportunity to be with Joanna Macy yesterday morning for a 3-hour workshop. She started off speaking about gratitude, and she said “Don’t think that gratitude is dependent on external circumstances. You don’t feel gratitude because everything is going well around you, although that’s important to recognize and acknowledge. We especially need to be grateful when things aren’t going the way we want them to.”

This is our challenge as—what shall we call ourselves now, as we are not supposed to call ourselves artists?—as people: to stay in this receptive, open place, not fighting what’s happening, and keep showing up, doing our best with the best of ourselves. And when we can’t do our best, doing our best to accept and have compassion with ourselves, too. The conditions are not sufficient at this moment, that’s also the truth, the reality, and that’s also fine. Our practice is to not pull away, not withdraw from what we are asked to do.

## **The Surrender business**

If we can let go and be in touch with the fact that we are channels, we are in the process of midwifing something much greater than us, much greater than our ego-idea of what needs to come into the world. If we can stay in that humility, we can be part of manifesting things that we could never have planned so beautifully or so perfectly.

I often come back to the feeling that mindfulness is about trust. To be mindful is to surrender and open to what is in this moment, just to relax, not trying to make our art and our life fit in a certain way.

Stephen Nachmanovitch who wrote the book, *Free Play* is an improvisational violinist. He said, “As an improvising musician I’m in the surrender business, not in the music business.” So we have to relax. And I think part of being able to relax is being willing to fail, being courageous enough to make mistakes. It’s not easy.

Once I had to give a dharma talk with a brother at a retreat for teachers with 250 people. Thay only leads one activity a day, like giving a talk or leading a public peace walk. That day he was leading a peace walk in the afternoon and so the two of us were assigned to give the talk instead of Thay, as we had often led retreats for teachers. I was so intimidated by this—to give a talk is one thing, but to stand in for Thay... And I was organising the retreat and had workshops to coordinate in the afternoon—I was not in the best place to give a talk that morning.

I only had to do half of the talk, but I felt I did terribly. I felt I was so stuck in this fear, looking at myself from the outside for the whole time, so I couldn’t just share my enthusiasm for what I wanted to share. And of course the brother was so relaxed and so free and funny, and as he was talking I felt worse and worse about what I had shared. And that’s part of it: not doing what you know you can do, not being what you feel is your best, not being what you think other people need or want you to be. But I didn’t die, and nobody else died! Okay, it wasn’t a very great talk. Nevermind, keep going, keep practicing—it’s not personal, the conditions weren’t sufficient.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said about this coming back to a place of silence inside of ourselves, of not needing to strive, this surrender, letting go and allowing space: “Be quiet, free from the obsession with ‘what next.’ In the silence something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception.” So this obsession with ‘what next’, this uneasiness with nothing to do, not knowing the outcome: It’s so important to get comfortable there, in that space of ‘I don’t know, I might fail, maybe nothing comes out when I open my mouth.’ If we can hang out there, everything is possible, because we are willing not to be in this place where everything has to be controlled in a certain way. We can live our whole lives in this way, trying to make everything small and tidy. But that is not inspiring, that is not the art we need right now to survive as a species.

And this relaxation, this not needing to do something, not striving, this being quiet with ourselves, it helps us to be more grounded, and also to touch our humility, this ‘I really don’t know and it’s okay.’ And that allows us to really connect with others, to collaborate,

to work with others really freshly, with great openness, to discover together with others.

Wonderful cultivator of artists, Julia Cameron, writes “When we have this humility, what we share with the world is much more accessible, it’s much more inviting because we are really close to ourselves.” ‘Humble’ shares its etymological root with the word ‘humus,’ the earth. We are close to the earth, we are close to ourselves, so then other people feel close to us and what we share in our work. And as we relax we also trust our own voice. She says, it is much easier to collaborate with others when we are not trying to prove something, to be somebody.

Thay has a beautiful calligraphy that says, “You already are what you want to become.” I think it is a real practice to bring that into our lives, and it is a real gift we can also transmit to others: Not trying to be anybody, but really coming back to rest in what we already have, what is already there. Basically it is more a process of uncovering that, of waking up to what is already there in us, not looking for it somewhere else or striving to develop it. It is there! So we want to trust this goodness, this greatness, this Buddha-nature that is in us and in everyone.