



Creativity & Spiritual Practice ~ Amy C. Darling

Acupuncturist, Herbalist, Health Educator & Artist

I've been practicing Zen since 1996 and training here at Tahoma since 2000. One vital learning from my years of Zen study and practice is distilled in Shodo Harada Roshi's remarks about *kufu*. *Kufu*, Roshi explains, is often translated as 'creative invention' expressed in a dynamic and unrehearsed way. As I understand it, *kufu* is the quality of responding naturally and spontaneously to whatever life presents with one's whole heart-mind. In my best moments, I bring this spirit of *kufu* to painting. Below, I've offered some other observations and musings I believe apply to *zazen*, to painting, to my acupuncture practice, in fact all things in life.

- **When I try too hard, things don't flow.** There is more tension in the muscles in my hands, those in my neck and back, even my face. My brush work is less confident and more contrived. It's the same in *zazen*. I am always exploring how to maintain clear effort and intention without tightening the spaces between my ribs, around my heart, through my back and body. Things flow best when I don't take myself too seriously. In painting, I allow the Mountains and Waters to paint themselves. In *zazen*, I allow myself to be breathed by the world.
- **In every moment, I can start anew.** Watercolors aren't the most forgiving medium for reworking, although I find some space to play. I can and do pause frequently to take stock of what I'm doing. At any moment I can peel away the top sheet of paper and start fresh. I may return to the discarded painting later. I may relegate it to the recycling bin. In *zazen*, I can also start anew. At the bottom of any exhale, I can bring fresh bright awareness enlivening and clarifying my mind.
- **We do nothing alone.** It's great when cheerleaders volunteer. Sometimes, I have to ask for the support I need. I am blessed by people in my life who encourage me. Being asked to participate in this show was a gift of support. And from those I trust, I can receive critical feedback, like 'hmm, not entirely convinced by that water, that mist.'

Sangha {community} is one of the three treasures of a Buddhist Path. While our striving on the meditation cushion may appear like an individual effort, actually we're not separate at all and fully dependent on everyone around us. The inspiration of someone else's posture holds us upright. When we perceive another is struggling with the breath or the body, we can lend our support by sitting like a mountain. The care of the *Tenzo* (head cook) and all the kitchen helpers feed us and allow us to persevere. The head monk keeps track of time all day long, allowing us to simply follow the schedule and sink into the 'school of fish', moving as one body in Zen training. In all our worldly activities, we cannot truly accomplish anything alone.

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- **Keep growing.** These days, I'm trying to teach myself how to paint water. Having no formal training, I don't know how to render a still expression of a what is fluid. Like in *zazen*, it works best when 'I' get out of the way. When I let go of my ideas or apprehension about how to 'create water' and I simply allow the color, texture, and light of an image to emerge through the brush, suddenly there's water. When I bring freshness, laughter and humility, all the better. Again and again, it's all new, a fresh edge, a fresh unknown. On the cushion, while remaining fully open and receptive to things just as they are, I open to bring a fresh, bright Mind to *zazen*.
- **Know when it's time to rest.** Rest is not always so prized in American culture or in Zen training. In the painting studio I can endlessly tinker, adding detail or lifting paint off a piece. And yet the more I work, the muddier an image appears. Sometimes, I push myself so hard that I cast aside a certain reverence for the sacredness of this body and how it allows me to paint, to do acupuncture, to live this life. Even in preparation for this show, I went through a period of weeks pushing too hard. My body started to communicate that 5-6 hours of sleep wasn't adequate. In Shantideva's *Path of the Bodhisattva*, rest is actually one of the four energies that support enthusiasm and determination in a Buddhist Path. I keep learning this one again and again. On an individual watercolor piece, it's good to know when it's time to set the brush down; to get outside into the garden or for a hike. Built into even the most intensive Zen training, there are brief periods for eating, for exercise and for resting the body.

I continue to learn every breath of every day how to manifest *kufu*, how to live this life. In this exploration, I try not to take myself too seriously. I'm never alone in any undertaking. I benefit from pushing my edges and from knowing when to rest. And right here, at the bottom of this very exhale, I remember I can always start fresh.

June 25, 2014

Dogen's Mountains & Waters *actualized in watercolors*

“Mountains and waters right now actualize the ancient Buddha expression. Each, abiding in its condition, unfolds its full potential...Because mountains are high and broad, their way of riding the clouds always extends from the mountains; their wondrous power of soaring in the wind comes freely from the mountains.”

~ Zen Master Eihei Dogen

July 2014 (collaborative show)
Tahoma One Drop Zen Monastery
Whidbey Is., WA

November 2014 (solo)
Miro Tea
Seattle, WA

Amy C. Darling is an Acupuncturist, Herbalist, Health Educator and Artist who lives in Seattle, Washington. She began practicing Zen in 1996 and has trained regularly at Tahoma One Drop Zen monastery since 2000. Having been an artist her whole life, she has only recently dedicated herself more fully to watercolor painting inspired by study of Dogen's lyrical *Mountains & Waters sutra*. All current works are renderings of photographs taken in her many years hiking in the Cascades. Complete show will be displayed in November.

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