

PERSPECTIVE: The Art of Buddhism

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“How do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Practice, practice, practice!”

This aged quip started me thinking, recently, about the similarities between the practice of the Daishonin’s Buddhism and that of art.

For one thing, the word itself: *practice*. Do you know how to say “I chant” in France? On a trip to Paris some time back, I asked several members. They said, to my surprise, that there is no common verb for chanting. The usual translation of “to chant” is “to sing.” One could say “*intoner*” — to intone — but it’s not a familiar word, and few people use it.

What they do say is “I practice” (*je pratique*), which seemed odd to me at first, but soon made perfect sense. We practice. That’s what we do. Not all we do, of course, but the most fundamental part.

Neither Buddhism nor art are meant to be dabbled in, casually, just to pass the time. On the other hand, motivated only by curiosity, we may pick up a paintbrush or pen and discover that what began as doodling becomes a passion that changes our lives. I myself began chanting “just to see,” until I found out that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was what I’d been seeking all my life.

Some Buddhist leaders have used the analogy of a three-legged stool whose legs are faith, practice and study. If one leg is missing, the stool will not stand. Study, whether of history, technique, Buddhist writings, even the daily newspapers with their windows on the world, enriches what we do, be it creation or simply the art of living.

But practice is twofold. We practice for ourselves as well as for others. On one hand, the artist works to perfect his (or her) art. More than that, the artist does it for the sheer, total joy of the effort itself. The brush, the piano, the word processor or the marble calls to the artist, and the artist cannot resist. Which may explain why Shakyamuni believed, at first, that those of the world of Realization (or Absorption) could not attain Buddhahood — they would be far too busy enjoying themselves!

By the time he preached the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni must have seen that the artist’s drive to communicate, to share art with the world, was at least as powerful as the need to create it.

Which brings me to faith.

Faith, for me, is the most important of the three legs. It is the power that makes me strong. It gets me up in the morning with the belief, or at least the hope, that the sun will rise again. It gives me courage to move, to take chances, to try something new. And it can free my imagination so that I can find the answers I seek.

“But what if I have no talent?” someone may ask. It doesn’t matter. The little boy who gave his mud pie to the Buddha and was reborn as King Ashoka did not stop to evaluate his creation. There was something he needed to make and something he wanted to give.

Not everyone is born with a passion to create art. But all living beings need to create, whether it be a bird’s nest, a three-act play or a happy child. What matters is giving something of value to the world.

As Buddhists — and artists — we have the duty and the gift to illuminate the way.

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