I THE WAY OF THE FLOWER

One day, instead of giving his usual lesson, Buddha sat in silence. Hundreds of his followers waited for him to say something. After a long time, he held up a single flower and said, “Here is the true Way.”

August

I arrive at my teacher’s house after dark. It is hot and humid inside so she has drawn open the balcony door to catch some of the gusts of wind that blow through the city. The rain falls more intensely on the roofs and sidewalks, giving warning that the typhoon is drawing nearer. It will hit in all its fierceness tomorrow afternoon. Tonight, before my ikebana lesson, I kneel on the tatami matting in front of my teacher’s flower arrangement. The heavy face of a raggedy sunflower sits before a tall proud banana leaf. The bright plane of the leaf is broken by lemon-yellow discolouration and tiny holes where insects have nibbled on its green flesh. The bottom
part of the pliant leaf has been torn away—by wind or by human hand?—leaving it wounded and asymmetrical. An evergreen sprig of privet peeps out from behind the battered but still-strong banana plant. From my kneeling position, I bow down before the flowers. The pungent smell of the moist rice straw on the tatami matting rises to meet my face. I wonder how the second rice harvest will survive the coming storm.

New Year’s Day

I view my friend’s flower arrangement: A heavy snow cloud of white baby’s breath hovers over blood-red camellia blossoms, waiting for the right moment to fall. Earlier that day, I visited a shrine where two thousand warriors lay buried. Like everyone else there, I prayed to the kami-sama, or shrine god, wishing for good luck in the coming year. As we walked down the shrine’s steps past the many stone lanterns, we could clearly see the volcano, Sakurajima, its three peaks looking as if they had been powdered with a thin covering of rice flour. Suddenly, the volcano exploded, the terrifying boom stopping everyone in their tracks, the force of the blast pushing a grey plume of dust and rock high into the sky.

March

I walk barefooted along the temple veranda, surprised by the silky coldness of the boards. Over the centuries the dark wood has been polished smooth by thousands of human feet. I pass by a wet, green grove of bamboo, azalea, moss and rock. I am about to make my way inside when I notice that some twisted plum branches have been placed in a stone urn by the doorway. Their impossibly delicate blossoms signal that spring is already here. I pause a while longer in the winter garden.

April

When I think of ikebana lessons, I am stirred by memories of the innocent seductiveness of flowers, the clipping sound made by the secateurs, the cool surface of hand-thrown, ceramic vases brimming with water, the fresh smell of discarded leaves and soft blooms piled on sheets of old newspaper, and the quick movement of my ikebana teacher’s hands. “Do you see how vulnerable a tulip becomes when you curl back its petals this way?” she asks.

August -- Leaving Japan

I know how far a bulrush stem bends before it breaks. I know how a blue iris bud uncurls, revealing its yellow heart. I know how a lotus leaf tips, trickling rainwater out of its cupped centre. I know how cherry blossoms fall from their lichen-covered branch. I know the brittleness of knotted kiwi wood. I know the turmeric stain of perfumed lily pollen.
II  OPENING TO THE SENSUOUS

My beginner’s attitude towards ikebana was goal-oriented. I was concerned solely with the beauty of my final arrangement, and with making comparisons between my work and that of others. In fact, I often felt inadequate when I saw the exquisite arrangements of the other students. I did not realize the importance of being in the moment, whether I was arranging flowers or cleaning up. As a westerner with little experience of meditation, I was completely baffled by the seriousness with which the students would sweep the tatami mats after class, and puzzled by the slow deliberation with which they washed out their vases before putting them away. These activities were performed with as much sincerity as the flower arranging.

As the weeks passed, I began to notice small things during my lessons—the slight difference between the front and the back of a single iris leaf; the sparkle of grey stones as I placed them at the base of my arrangement; my fingers slipping over a vase’s slimy interior as I rinsed it under running tap water; the bristles of the hand brush rasping against tatami.

After a few lessons, my teacher, whom I called Sensei, told me that it was important to look at plants in their natural environment so that I would be able to understand how they grew, how they moved when the wind blew through them, how the face of a flower turns toward the sun. As I went on my daily walks past gardens and fields or through the woods, I began to feel a special joy. The beauty of the natural world seemed so much more intense, colours were more vivid, and forms more dynamic. I never discussed these euphoric feelings with my ikebana teacher. What mattered most to her was that I simply practice ikebana regularly.

There is a Zen saying:

Before Zen, mountains were mountains and trees were trees.

During Zen, mountains were the thrones of the spirits and trees were the voices of wisdom.

After Zen, mountains were mountains and trees were trees.
It is the mundane, repetitive, procreative, cyclical qualities of everyday life that the *ikebana* student is encouraged to dwell upon. What my teacher was trying to develop in me, and in all her students, was an increased awareness of everyday lived experience.

The ritual of *ikebana* is a physical expression of humility, respect, and reverence for the earth, for life. It is an art that garners meaning through repeated performance, through cycles of creation rather than acts of completion. The performance of the art of *ikebana* opens, and is symbolic of the opening of, the practitioner’s heart-mind (*kokoro*) to the mystery and wonder of the sensuous now. One comes to knowledge not by trying to grasp and control it, but by letting go and moving into the unknown. Instead of attempting to conquer and colonize knowledge, one continually opens up to the world, engaging the moment with increasing intimacy and intuitiveness. This opening to knowledge is an ongoing process—even highly accomplished Zen teachers approach their practice with a sense of studentship.

### III THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

Awareness of the “sensuous now” is often called “mindfulness.” Mindfulness is not really a state of mind; it is a dynamic process of becoming. This process is so important because it alters the way in which the practitioner perceives the world, and herself as part of the world. The development of mindfulness is “not about the isolated self in the isolated moment” (Tomm, 1995, p.115). Rather it is “a life-long process that is never completed but continually opens up new possibilities for greater connectedness to oneself, other people, and the natural world of animals and things” (p. 15).

*Sensei* never talked about mindfulness, and never appeared to “teach” it in any overt way. *Ikebana* practice was characterized by what seemed to me at first to be repetitious action. This repetition was, in fact, sacred ritual. *Sensei* would show me a new style and then I would practice it over and over again for months, sometimes years on end. I studied *ikebana* in Japan with *Sensei* for three years, and at the end of the third year I was still intensively practicing even the most elementary of skills and styles. At first, I felt as if I were being asked to merely copy. But I was not really copying; I was re-creating.

This process of re-creation is completely absorbing. It draws the practitioner deeper and deeper into the mysterious realm of creative time and space, where the mind “opens” in order to maintain union with the flowers, and then enters a state of embodied oneness in which the dualistic boundaries between the practitioner and the object of practice (the flowers) blur and disintegrate. Brennerman, Yarian and Olson (1982) call this process of re-creation “imitation of an archetype” (p. 93). They write:

Imitation is to be distinguished from rote copying. Imitation means here the act of opening to and participating in the archetype, as an act of conscious dedication to bringing it into material manifestation. In rote copying, the practitioner can be removed and work in a purely mechanical fashion. Imitation calls for uniting with the archetype in consciousness and seeing it as an object worthy of one’s total service. (p. 94)

Or, in the words of the photographer Minor White, “I make objects sacred by the quality of my concentration” (cited by Brennerman, Yarian & Olson, p. 82). This kind of unconscious consciousness is also known as transparent mind or perfect concentration (Joaninha, 1998).

When the “artist” enters the work in this spirit, the result is a new creation, a reinvestment of the sacred archetype. No two images of the same archetype are exactly alike—as would be the case if it were a matter of copying—but the dominant impression is of a powerful and living image of the collective tradition (Brennerman, Yarian & Olson, 1982, p. 96).
In *ikebana* “the reinvestment of the sacred archetype” is achieved through the re-creation of the traditional styles of the Ikenobo School. Each of the traditional styles has its own characteristics, qualities, and conventions. Yet, each time the practitioner creates an arrangement, she finds herself improvising on the style. No two branches or flowers or grasses are the same. Each is unique, although familiar, to an experienced practitioner. The skill of the *ikebana* practitioner lies in the way she responds to the materials in the moment. Mark Epstein (1995), a Buddhist psychotherapist, writes:

Rather than promoting a view of self as an entity of place with boundaries, the mindfulness practices tend to reveal another dimension of the self-experience, one that has to do with how patterns come together in a temporary and ever-evolving organization. (p. 142)

Every few months my teacher would give me a book on *ikebana*. She ordered these books especially from the Ikenobo School of *ikebana* at the Rokkakudo Temple in Kyoto. Each one contained detailed guidelines for various styles and technical advice on all aspects of *ikebana*. I would devour each new book seeking to learn something new, something I did not already know, but I was always slightly disappointed. I asked Sensei politely, “Could you give me each book before I begin a new style, please? That way I will be able to read all I have to know about each style first.” Sensei always nodded and smiled, but she continued to give me each new book only after I had gained considerable firsthand experience. I yearned for the certainty of the written word, for the comfort of the printed page, but what Sensei wanted to teach me was not to be found in a book. Mindfulness must be directly experienced by the student herself as a physical and experiential, not solely intellectual or cerebral, process of becoming. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1995) point out, in Buddhist traditions knowledge “is not knowledge *about* anything. There is no abstract knower of an experience that is separate from the experience itself” (p. 26).

**IV THE FULLNESS OF EMPTINESS**

When a practitioner creates an *ikebana* arrangement, the flowers arouse her senses; she can smell, touch, hear and see the natural world and its cycles of life and death, perceiving intuitively the chaos and order in living systems. The practitioner is mindful of the primal relationships between human beings and the earth, and the earth’s cyclical flow of energy. By arranging flowers, *ikebana* practitioners make these invisible bonds visible and tangible. For example, the bud is highly prized in *ikebana*. Heavy with hope, it expresses a blissful potentiality: that which is not yet, but will soon be. In Japan, people gather around lotus buds, awaiting the glorious moment when they will pop open in the summer heat. As summer turns to fall, and the lotus flower has already blossomed and died, its pliable green leaves begin to yellow and curl. When used in *ikebana* arrangements, the imperfect beauty of these blemished, dying leaves bear poignant witness to the passing of the seasons.

The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1995), calls our
interconnectedness with all things “interbeing” (tiep hien). He writes:

> When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence. It “inter-is” with everything else in the universe. (p. 11)

These simple teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh are profound indeed. Notions of the individualistic, atomistic, independent self, which are still widely prevalent in North American society and which permeate its major institutions, are obviously no longer valid or tenable if one believes that there is no permanent self or entity independent of others. In Zen, the self is understood to be a complex web of interrelationships with no clearly demarcated “I”—the self is a fiction. This understanding of the transience and impermanence of life, and the fictional nature of our self-identities, is called “emptiness.”

For many, the idea that there is no persisting, inherent, individual nature can be distressing. Yet, an understanding of the impermanence of all things is all one can really count on. Life and death are part of one whole, where “death is the beginning of another chapter of life” (Sogyal, 1993, p. 11). In Tibetan Buddhism the word bardo is used to describe the states between life and death and rebirth when the possibility of enlightenment is greatest. Bardos are “occurring continuously throughout both life and death” (Sogyal, p. 11). Indeed, every moment of life is a bardo. This knowledge is vital and transformative. Sogyal Rinpoche writes:

> Every time I hear the rush of a mountain stream, or the waves crashing on the shore, or my own heartbeat, I hear the sound of impermanence. These changes, these small deaths, are our living links with death. They are death’s pulse, death’s heartbeat, prompting us to let go of all the things we cling to. (p. 33)

Paradoxically, if we welcome these small, daily deaths we may feel more alive. We loosen the grip of the atomistic notion of self, and open to the sensuous richness and mystery of the everyday world. The practice of a meditative art, such as ikebana, helps to cultivate an intuitive understanding of the fullness of emptiness, and a deep reverence for the interconnectedness of all things. This understanding gives rise to an experience of communion, communion being a sense of non-dualistic consciousness and participation in the world that nourishes one’s desire to act with love and compassion.

V A SOFT-HEARTED PEDAGOGY

The knowing self can only exist in relationship. As Gregory Bateson (cited in Epstein,
1999) says, “It takes two to know one” (p. 102). Knowledge is created through direct, intimate relationship, or non-dual communion, with another. Because of its relational nature, one cannot possess or gain knowledge, one can only do or perform knowledge. Thus, knowledge can be thought of as conduct (Trungpa, 1996), or social improvisation (Hershock, 1996).

The wisdom of skilful Zen art practitioners lies in their vibrant responsiveness to the social and the environmental. Through continued deep engagement with the processes of creating and learning, students of the Zen arts develop the sensitive improvisational skills required for such social and environmental reciprocity. The practice of a Zen art is in itself a non-dualistic improvisational pedagogy in which mind and body and heart are brought together through practice and tradition. As Sensei commented about the development of my practice, “Before, you looked with Western eyes. Now you feel with a Japanese heart-mind (kokoro).”

The accomplished Buddhist artist, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1996), defines art as “being able to see the uniqueness of everyday experience” (p. 27), and believes that art “is not an occupation; it is our whole being” (p. iix). The Zen artist’s medium is the stillness and movement of everyday life. The way in which we go about all of our everyday activities and rituals—washing, dressing, eating breakfast, brushing our teeth, sleeping—is expressive and communicative of our embodied mindfulness. Thus, every aspect of a practitioner’s life may be thought of as an improvisational art, a recursive flow of creativity, which in turn creates the artist.

The aim of improvisation is not the negotiation or regulation of “an agreement about how things are, but rather the creation of a novel harmony through jointly articulating a new world” (Hershock, 1996, p. 76). The harmony of improvisation is a generative interplay, with no particular end goal, in which the individual, isolated self ceases to exist, and in which knowledge and meaning arise in playful partnership and mutuality. The unceasing changes in our improvisational conduct give rise to an infinite multiplicity of meanings.

In a curriculum characterized by multiplicity “what counts are not the elements, but what there is between, the between, as a site of relations which are not separable from each other” (Delenze and Parnet, cited by Aoki, 1996, p. 11). What lies between are marginal, fecund, creative spaces of difficulty, ambiguity and ambivalence, spaces between life and non-life, between the known, and the unknown, between universals and particulars (non-universals), even between the possibilities and impossibilities where inspired newness is ongoingly constituted and re-constituted. (Aoki, p. 12)

Such pedagogical spaces offer a doubled potentiality: simultaneous opportunity for growth of new self and loss of old self, an endless process of nascency and mortality, becoming and unbecoming. Feelings of destabilization—a sense that one has been cast adrift from all that is familiar, safe and known—may arise in students and teachers who find themselves in a pedagogical environment characterized by a multiplicity of meaning, the impermanence of self, the transience of all knowledge, and the flux of conduct. Yet the experience of constant pedagogical comings and goings, the continued travel in and out of an awareness of emptiness, the ebbing and flowing of knowing, unknowing and between-ness are an unavoidable part of all learning and change in consciousness.

Suzuki (1959) proffers the remark that “a certain sense of loneliness engendered by travelling leads one to reflect upon the meaning of life, for life is after all a travelling from one unknown to another unknown” (p. 255), and he relates the following travel story:

When Dogen (1200-1253) came back from China after some years of study of Zen there, he was asked what he had learned. He said, “Not much except soft-heartedness (nyunan-shin)” (p. 275).

Suzuki continues:

“Soft-heartedness” is “tender-mindedness” and in this case means “gentleness of spirit.” Generally we are too egotistic, too full of hard, resisting spirit. We are
individualistic, unable to accept things as they are or as they come to us... When there is no self, the heart is soft and offers no resistance to outside resistances. (p. 275)

A travelling life

Several years ago I immigrated to Canada, moving first from Japan, then to two different cities in Ontario, then finally to Vancouver. Although I had to move from one continent to another, then right across the breadth of North America, my three large boxes of carefully stored ikebana materials travelled with me each time. They contain Japanese vases of varying shapes, colours and textures for use with different ikebana styles, my hand-made ikebana secateurs, wires and tapes of different thicknesses, several manuals and reference books, my own personal journal documenting every arrangement I created, each entry containing notes on the date, the flowers and type of vase used, as well as a detailed sketch of the final arrangement. And, of course, there are the photographs of many lessons, of my arrangements, my teacher and her work, and my classmates at the New Year’s ceremony at the shrine. Nowadays I rarely use my ikebana materials, but I would never dream of leaving the boxes behind, or of giving away or selling my vases. Although I have become caught up in the busyness of graduate study, teaching, and research, and have not made time for the practice of ikebana, I treasure the contents of these three boxes. I know that some day I will practice ikebana again. But why do I cling to these unopened boxes of possessions that I no longer really use?

I live in a small apartment crowded with books and papers—the usual detritus of academic life. Yet, the presence of the sealed boxes in my storage closet is strangely comforting. As a teacher educator and doctoral student in the area of curriculum theory, I am all too aware of the prevalence in North America of dualistic, technical-rational, corporatist approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. My three “ikebana boxes” contain more than fond memories of times past. They are talismans of another powerful, transformative educational paradigm. They remind me of a soft-hearted pedagogy, a pedagogy of intimacy, a pedagogy of the sensuous now. They remind me that it is possible to live a playful, engaging pedagogy, created in a spirit of studentship, mindfulness and compassion, a pedagogy that nourishes tender hearts.

References

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**About the Author**

Alison Pryer has taught in German and Japanese public schools, as well as in the Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia. A recent doctoral graduate of UBC, the focus of her research is non-dual pedagogy and the embodied self. In the last four years, she has also been conducting research on the Canada-wide “Learning through the Arts” project.