Several years ago, in a quest to understand what sacred images meant to others, I talked with a Tibetan monk who was part of a traveling group of mandala artists. He was touring the United States with those from his monastery in order to raise awareness about Buddhism, mandalas, and to gather funding for their relocated monastic home in India. His
monastery offered a free clinic for anyone in the local area who requested healing. He explained that each morning, before opening to the clamoring crowds, the monks would gather quietly behind closed doors and meditate until they could visualize directly in front of them the Blue Medicine Buddha, who is the embodiment of healing. The figure was so close, according to the monk, that were the Buddha on a physical plane of being, the monks could have reached out to touch him. This meditation on the divine allowed the monks to open the clinic and be with the people in a manner that internalized the Buddha as a source of powerful healing.

I have thought about this story--not just the vivid imagery of a blue, touchable Buddha--but the serious tone in which the information was relayed to me, off and on for many years. I have thought about how difficult it is to shut out the sounds of suffering and generate the compassion, the confidence, and the spiritual counsel that are necessary to heal whatever appears in one’s path. I have looked at countless images of the Blue Medicine Buddha since that time, imagining what the monks envisioned in their daily meditation, and have wondered with awe, how this vision enabled them to unite in a common goal and work tirelessly from sun up to sun down.

So deeply did this story affect me that although I am neither Tibetan nor Buddhist, I have tried to paint the Blue Medicine Buddha many times, and each time, I failed. I cannot do justice to an iconographic knowledge that I have not lived, except through another’s story. While I knew that in hospitals and clinics throughout Southeast Asia the image of the Blue Medicine Buddha has been instrumental in healing, and that the great spiritual teachers have quite often been medical healers as well, I am also aware that it was not this information that made me want to paint the Blue Medicine Buddha. I wanted to know this grounded center, this Buddha that offers healing as a balance of spiritual and physical dimensions. The eventual outcome, however, was quite different than I consciously planned. I began to see how painting to know the center of anything often opens connections, grounds one in humility and also compassion for all that is not so centered in one’s personal, communal world.

I should explain that I am an artist and also an art educator. Both the actions of painting and teaching are so deeply engrained in my being that when I sense difficulties in my art making, I become mindful that the same challenges often surface in my teaching, and vice versa. One is a metaphor for the other. I only begin to know my nature because of that which speaks through the process of painting, through the medium itself, and through what I visualize.

The work that follows is a phenomenological journey which explores the personal terrain of art making and teaching as gnosis. A lot of my time has been spent in “just sitting” or shikantaza, as noted by Stephanie Kaza (1993), as a way to open to the story that needs telling. When a researcher is able to understand through direct experiences rather than a cognitive explanation, it is more likely to be the case that one can be mindful of “the habits of language” (10) that distance us with idealism, stereotypical thinking, and oversimplification. It is not easy to stay with a painting, for example, that seems to want a different resolution than the straightforward portrayal I had in mind. It is not easy to teach students to let go of many preconceptions they have about how they will be a teacher. Both of these challenges often found me “just sitting.” As Kaza notes in her own research on trees, when one studies the way that mountains are mountains, and trees are trees, “one sees them explode into all the phenomena that support their existence” (11). Thus enriched,
the trees become more than isolated objects, the mountains are no longer separated from
the landscape, and the observer, should one sit long enough to understand, is transformed
into a participant.

In this short work, I begin by exploring *gnosis as a way of knowing* that is direct,
embodied, and embedded in the active imagination that is so essential in teaching and art
making. Second, I consider how *compassion as a way of knowing* can develop within a
cosmology that recognizes the dependent, relational quality of everything that manifests.
Last, I propose that *releasing as a way of knowing* opens the teacher and the artist in the
most profound way to understand the experiences that occur in the classroom and beyond.
As I let go of the outcome in my painting of what I thought would be the Blue Medicine
Buddha, for example, I simultaneously became present once again to the idea that *not*
knowing is often as valuable as accumulated knowledge in both teaching and art making.

**Gnosis as a way of Knowing**

Gnosis is a kind of knowledge generally considered to be based on direct, personal
experience and subsequent insight into ultimate reality and the nature of the self. While
gnosis may or may not be connected with Gnostic beliefs, there does seem to be a corollary
present between Eastern thinking, in some strands of Islamic thinking (Corbin, 1978;
Cheetham, 2005; 2003), Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism,[2] with Western Gnostic[3]
knowing. These views note that individuals are participants in a drama of immense cosmic
proportions, and that this insight is most often available through experiential knowledge
called gnosis (Hoeller, 2002). In contrast to gnosis as an intuitive, participative way of
knowing, we find *episteme* as the practical and indispensable, day-to-day know-how that
allows one to calculate how quickly one might earn a degree online, or determine the
optimum time for in vitro fertilization, or even to compute the amount of money one must
earn in order to retire and maintain various creature comforts. This view of knowledge,
although useful in certain instances, has predominated the educational setting “with data
rather than doing” according to educator Brent Davis (2004) and no longer seems
sustainable as a major focus for education. If we teach solely to transmit knowledge, the
task is Sisyphean in this age of information. However, if our goal in education is to
reacquaint ourselves with ways to change how we can be *present* with each other and all
life on Earth, the challenge is one of attention and response as a growing discernment of
relationships. If gnosis suggests to us that we could enhance and promote mindful
participation and knowledge-as-insight, then it seems useful to consider how this
awareness develops through an understanding of what the imagination is and its function in
our daily experience.

Tom Cheetham (2005) is a contemporary scholar who has clarified the *mundis imaginalis*,
the imaginal realm, of French philosopher Henry Corbin’s lucid yet complicated
discussions. Cheetham reveals Corbin’s thesis: that we are always functioning from within
our imagination and that the physical, literal reality of daily living is but one aspect of our
capacity to imagine. In this view, the challenge is to become mindful of a larger
cosmology without forgetting that our ordinary existence is also known to us through the
imagination. Corbin believed that by contemplating the way all of us live within
imagination, we come to know how the Other is also us; and to understand that the borders
between what we call the self and what we perceive as everything else are less easily
marked than our ego might have us believe. Cheetham notes that in the mystic *Shi’ite*
Islamic thought which Corbin studied, this is known as the Science of the Balance, *ta ’wil*,
because this kind of contemplation seeks restoration between the physical and spiritual
worlds. So in this view, imagination can never be equated with fantasy, an other-than-real invention; it is the way that all sensation and cognition originate and worlds are born. Imagination seems to be, as art educator Howard McConeghey (2003) notes, “is as real as the physical function of sight” (19) and as necessary as any other physical sense.

Entry One: Painting the Center

The form of the Blue Medicine Buddha is in the center of my canvas, draped in saffron robes, sitting on a lotus of a thousand petals. I have many images of this bodhisattva before me, and I examine their subtle variations in much the same way that I used to scrutinize recipe photos as a novice cook. I know, for example, the right hand should hold the healing myrobalan plant, and the left should offer the bowl of healing nectar to the viewer. But this Buddha, like so many others I have painted before him, does not seem authentic. The essence of what I am seeking to present will not remain in the image, although I have fought hard to keep it there. This Buddha is no different—it is not what belongs here in the middle.

Slowly I mix white and yellow. I paint over the Buddha, thinking I have once again spent hours meticulously painting this blue bodhisattva only to begin again. Now the lapis lazuli color is obliterated in the central light source of my yellowish white paint. This time, however, it is different. My brush meets the trees I have already painted around the place where the figure once was. The soft yellow color is no longer content to stay in the center. It is spilling, opening, and connecting with the other parts of the painting. Something in me gives up the cognitive and sensory perceptions I had been clutching as verification that the Buddha I am painting is what belongs in the middle of this work. In imagination, where the soul searches for truth, I know what must happen next in the painting. The Blue Buddha, through my many portrayals of form and then non-form, is asking me for a more complete connection with everything we both love in the world before I can begin to put the essence of this bodhisattva in the painting.

Opening to Compassion

Many authors and theologians have talked metaphorically about the need to preserve our relationship with the Earth and all living things on the planet. Thomas Berry (2006) refers to the Earth as a sacred community; Linda Olds (1992) champions the image of a bejeweled net of Indra as a way to explain our relational status with all life on Earth. Sallie McFague (1986), Grace Jantzen (1984) and Gabrielle Dietrich (1996) refer to the Earth as the body of God, while Henry Corbin (Cheetham, 2005) notes the Earth as an angel. Regardless of the metaphorical view, understanding that we have a challenge to both connect and care for the Earth and each other is prominent in my thinking when I train teachers, or try to express an idea visually.

Psychologist Robert Sardello (2001) suggests that the care of the world begins with our actively remembering the world’s presence through consciously imagining the Earth as a living being. He clarifies that we need “the ability to sense inwardly the inner qualities of outer things as existing in relation with one another” (48). We have come a long distance from this perception in education today, and imagination in teaching must once again return to the generative space that educator Brent Hocking (2001) notes is critical to success in education. What is it that shapes a group of students taking a course into a community, for example? It does not happen because they all elected to sit in the same room at the same time, as any professor can attest. It is also not the leader or the teacher or the guide who creates a feeling of community solely through her own doing, but rather it is
the imagining that there is a convivium that connects, that imagines itself, however temporary, as a whole class. Building class community requires surrender (Pinar and Grumet, 1976) to imaginative possibilities of action, of structure, and even of the meanings that cannot be created without others. Art educator Julia Kellman (in press) employs the metaphor of being “poured out like water...lavishly spent, completely used” to describe how it feels to be a teacher in the service of others. Her image is one of active giving, without thought of how it will be received, or even used.

I have sometimes observed in students and in myself how challenging and uncomfortable it can be when one feels less than prepared or knowledgeable. It is though we assume that everyone is always expecting expertise. During the time period that I was struggling with the presentation of the Buddha, I was teaching an art education methods course. I remember a day that a student’s demonstration on paper marbling was going quite badly. He had not experimented ahead of class with the variety of additives that can be used to marble paper in an oil-water suspension. To further complicate the scenario, when he turned to me as ‘an expert,’ I could not remember, even though I have taught marbling in several ways a number of years ago, which methods have worked the best in my experience. My initial reaction was one of confusion and disappointment in myself over something I felt I should have been able to recall.

With this awareness of my own frustration, also came an acceptance of how it might be for the student to be struggling with all the paper marbling options, feeling quite inadequate in a room full of perceived knowledgeable peers, and not knowing a ‘best solution.’ When I felt this, and truly saw how it was for him, it seemed as though something opened not only in me, but in the entire class. We gathered the needed materials and began experimenting until we could teach each other the various kinds of marbling. There was no longer a judgment on who did or didn’t know what to do, but an opening of the heart that supported how we imagined a class could ‘be’ together and self-instruct.

For many years, teacher educator Genét Kozik-Rosabal ((2001) has advocated and used a personal process transformation approach with pre-service teachers. She notes that personal transformation is not as likely to occur because of written reflections on teaching (which are often superficial and full of remorse over perceived inadequacies). Instead, change in how we relate to others in a teaching environment comes from our immediate awareness of our thought patterns, our physical and emotional responses while they are happening. This is a deep inner listening, and most certainly an embodied kind of gnosis that cultivates a place to be with others. Through this kind of mindfulness, we can listen to how we think and how we respond bodily and emotionally. This enables us to also listen to others in the same way, which in turn, generates community. As I earlier noted Corbin’s work on imagination suggests that we can not know the Other until we have imagined that the border between self and Other are less distinct than we had previously conceived, the same is true of gnosis in the classroom. If it is based on direct experiences available to all and felt by all, how can we continue to clutch a view of finite knowledge-as-learning so tightly?

Sardello (2001) explains that our work in the world today is “a matter of re-education, of learning through the world, of developing the capacity to find out what is needed in the moment in particular situations, of not knowing [my italics] in advance what to do.” (171). He suggests that this occurs as an immediate perception, when we are open to it. The kind of mindfulness that Sardello, McConeghy (2003), Corbin (1978), Kozik-Rosabal (2001), Levin (1989) and a host of other contemporary scholars from many disciplines are talking
about as essential is the kind of deep listening that I call the sound of attention (Gradle, 2007); it is what grounds our practice as teachers and artists who can dialogue with students and artworks without becoming alarmed that we frequently find ourselves emptied, not knowing, poured out completely before we can hear the whole story.

Entry Two: Listening to the Empty Center

The unfinished painting has been sitting on the easel for a few months now. It is positioned so that I can see it as I walk through the hallway, on the way to anywhere else. There is no escape. I look at its yellow-white center where the Buddha once was, and I am aware that I am struggling to know how to do something that I feel I “should” know how to do. I cannot let go of “should-ness.” This painting wants so much more from me than most. It wants me to dive into the middle and feel what is missing from the inside out. The greens and dark browns that hover and swirl around the center are a spiraling darkness, as though the once-and-future Buddha I still yearn to paint might be emerging from a cave. But what else comes from such hidden places that could regenerate this work? Perhaps I need to consider that, too. It could be water that is needed here, not just to nurture the growth of the trees that are spiraling around the center, but to spill out in its life giving capacity to the entire painting.

I imagine underground reservoirs and hidden forest streams, swift rivers and nurturing tide pools, deep, unseen oceans and sacred baptismal vessels. Now I am understanding that it is water that wants to be painted here as a life generating force that connects this work to the yet unseen Buddha: it must emerge from what is contained and hidden to what is seen and given, and from what is seen, to what is still imagined. I think that I am being touched, awakened by this Buddha who is not even in the painting right now.

Releasing as Gnosis

The prolific author and philosopher, Jacob Needlebaum (1982) has told the story of the young Hasidic Jew who asked for an explanation from his Rabbi regarding the wording of the Deuteronomy verse 6:6: And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart. The student asked the teacher why the writer had used the phrase upon the heart, rather than in it. Needlebaum explains that the Rabbi’s answer reveals a basic understanding of the way we always arrive at gnostic knowledge: “All that we can do is place them on the surface of the heart so that when the heart breaks, they will drop in.” (136). It seems that the occasions of being broken, frustrated, and disillusioned with ourselves as artists, teachers, learners, lovers, friends, and family members often address subtle ways the heart opens and flourishes.

There are many things that cause the heart center to open to imaginative possibilities in a way that enables the individual to recognize their own growth. In art making with future teachers, for example, it is often true that the imagination can be awakened when there is a willing suspension of judgment, or an ability to delay closure to ideas and seek more options, and a healthy respect for uncertainty (Gradle, 2007, 2006; Green, 2006). This is cultivated by an imagination which is ‘used’ as though it is a muscle, or a sensory organ in Corbin’s (1978) use of the term. Poet John Keats[5] believed that the capacity to imagine is actually strengthened when one has little concern for immediate sense-making (which I take to mean no self-judgment on the ideas conceived) or verisimilitude to the observable world. The process of staying within the imagination engages the individual so completely
that the questioner becomes one with the query (Avens, 1984/2003), which is also a defining characteristic of gnosis: It is a way of knowing and questioning that is inseparable from being and is its own becoming.

In last year’s curriculum course, I explored with students the way that rituals and ceremonies might be used as a kind of performance art that has tremendous meaning, and also has the ability to create bonds within the classroom. I, too, created a ritual in which I wove students and trees together in the woods that runs through our campus. I took a long spool of ribbon and unwound it slowly, round the trees, through the center of the circle, between the students, to the accompaniment of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. When the music ended, I dropped the spool of ribbon and walked away, without looking back. Later, in the students’ comments on the piece, I learned that this one action of letting go, of leaving them to determine what would occur next empowered them to see themselves as in charge—not only in charge of the untangling—but symbolically empowered to create their own destiny as teachers. As I read comment after similar comment, I let my own ideas go on the outcomes of this course. As Hocking (2001) notes, in his thoughts on teaching as renewal rather than reform, I felt a shift from teaching them to teaching with them—I was part of the text just as much as the trees, the music, the class members who stood silently in the circle and allowed me to pass between and among them and the slowly awakening spring forest. The interplay of all factors became a dynamic that celebrated a release in how we saw curriculum, envisioned a relationship with the world and each other, and opened consideration of how we might teach with each other through gnosis.

Entry Three: The Grounded Center

I am finally finished with the painting and I now understand that the Blue Medicine Buddha, as well as everything else in the painting, has been talking to me the whole time. I just wasn’t ready to give up my attachment to how I thought it should look. The Buddha that wants to be here is softer than I thought it would be, both a form, formless, and forming: connected to the mystery that is manifesting around him in the world. Just as Corbin (1978) notes that the mystic’s heart seems to hold the child, the essence of this emanation is about growth that occurs slowly. He does not look at me, this Blue Medicine Buddha. But he doesn’t need to, or even want to, because I am also right there in the center of this work.

I no longer need saffron robes to house the Buddha. And I have stopped searching for the correct gesture of the extended arm. The image that is here now is what is needed because it is at peace with all that is. How could a Buddha ever be painted with distance from the world around him? How could the colors of the Buddha, the luminescence, the tranquility, and the giving, flowing nature not also be what was reflected outside the Buddha? And how could what the Buddha offers be anything but the chance of renewal, my own Buddha nature in the egg that shimmers in quiet delight? This is the essence of the Blue Medicine Buddha I was seeking to understand for so long. Heart of becoming, hands of giving, seated on a lotus, connected to the world.

Conclusion

The imagination resides in the heart, and so when one goes looking for ways to understand the world--models of this or that--we often fail if we are not vested in opening our own hearts. Through this phenomenology of “just sitting” and allowing the slow growth to unfold, I know that I learned more than I taught and I sense in my visual work a direction that might have been there all along, but it needed my willing and silent attention. Like the
poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1996), I see gnosis as having a certain hidden-ness built into the searching for what is valuable—it is not easily dredged. And yet, as Rilke so aptly notes, what he seeks is also what appears already manifested in the future of his own imagining:

*In deep nights, I dig for you like treasure.*
*For all I have seen*
*That clutters the surface of my world*
*Is poor and paltry substitute*
*For the beauty of you*
*That has not happened yet.* (124)

[2] I mention Mahayana Buddhism here because the Blue Medicine Buddha is an emanation of the divine that comes out of this tradition, as noted by Hoeller (2002).
[3] There are scholars who would separate Gnostic tradition from gnosis, claiming that the former is a fixed religious orientation, and the latter is simply a kind of knowledge. Hoeller suggests that this view is changing rather rapidly since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scriptures, circa 1945. It is more frequent now that scholarly orientations recognize that Gnostics have never been reliant only on the second hand knowledge of someone else’s mystical gnosis, but have always been, and continue to be informed by their own direct experiences with the world, their teachers and texts, and the relational qualities that are intuited from these connections.
[4] This Personal Process Transformation is a useful beginning for cultivating awareness and encouraging students to stay in the present moment with their thoughts, bodily tensions, and feelings. Kozik-Rosabal’s directives for using this approach are found on pp. 115-116 of her chapter in the compilation *Unfolding Bodymind* (Eds. B. Hocking, J. Haskell, & W. Linds).

**References**


**About the Author**

**Sally Armstrong Gradle** is an art educator, researcher, and artist. She is the Art Education Program Coordinator in the School of Art and Design at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Gradle teaches art education courses within a program emphasis that examines and extends the context of art-making into community settings. She graduated from the University of Illinois (UIUC) in 2004 with a focus on spiritual practices in art-making. She completed her MA at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1979 and has been a classroom teacher or an art teacher in the schools in the decades between her degrees. Gradle’s area of research includes place-based, sustainable art education and the integration of contemplative practices in teaching, learning, and research. Her articles, and particularly her chapter in the *International Handbook of the Arts in Education* on ‘Spiritual Ecology’ (2007), offer a look at the expansion of art education into stronger ecological, contemplative and visionary practices.