

Beauty as a Gateway to Wisdom

by *Srivati*

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Talk given at Taraloka Retreat Centre, Great Gathering 2000

‘Sometimes when we are approaching Truth, you have to let go of things.’

This morning after breakfast I had a crisis. And I have let go of the talk that I had written, before I came here. Because it didn't fit! And it didn't feel right. And because of what Parami said, things are in a state of flux for me at the moment and I felt I had written a talk that I would have given last year. But I am not the same person I was last year. So...I am going to begin with a poem:

What I Wrote

*What I am looking for is as elusive
as the word for the taste of kiwi fruit.
What I do or say will start a ripple,
I drown in the responsibility for waves.*

*The older I get, the more scars I have.
Every line tells a story.*

*I brush my hair, but my mind remains tangled.
While my back was turned, the lilies opened.*

I've chosen that to begin, because it sort of sums up that state of paradox that connects with our talk from last night. That is where I find myself at the minute. I am not quite sure who I am. I am not quite sure what I think about whether the arts can be a way of moving towards wisdom. I don't know what I think. I don't know if I am going to be able to give a talk that covers everything I want to say to you. I don't know whether I am going to be happy at the end of this talk that I have communicated something of what is very important to me. So I am taking a risk here, and I am just going to launch myself, based on the few scribbles I have in front of me.

So Kulaprabha last night said to us: "Could we think of an image perhaps for the paradox that is perhaps at the centre of our lives". And what came to my mind was a Turner painting. I don't remember the name of it. But I remember going to see it in the old Tate Gallery. It's a storm. I think it is a ship at sea in a storm. You might know it. It's...I think it is a fairly square painting. It's like a swirling vortex of colour. It is sort of, like a hurricane almost. But at the heart of it it's very still. And I feel that sums up the conundrum I find myself with ongoingly which is being torn between my restlessness, my desire to engage with people, my love of activity and my hunger for reflection, stillness and a deeper relationship with myself. And that painting seems to just have it all. And yet I get lost. I end up off around the edges when I am looking to move towards the middle. So in a way, the reason why I feel rather topsy-turvy at the minute, to a large extent I can blame the arts for that. It's the arts fault. If I hadn't engaged more wholeheartedly with my appreciation of them and my practise of the arts I would not be standing here, feeling the way I do right now. Because of that I don't know quite what to

think anymore. And my big question I want to know the answer to is: *can the practise of the arts take me all the way to wisdom?* I think it can. I think particularly if you are a maker and you engage with it wholeheartedly, put yourself on the line, in the same way we do with our spiritual practice, I think it can. But I think even if we engage with it say in the realm of appreciation I think it can support our spiritual practice. I think it can take us in the right direction.

But there are other questions connected with it: *is there a direct or an indirect method? And am I up to it?* I have made a promise to myself that I am going to prioritise writing in my life. I have changed a lot of conditions in my life, so that I can. I now I have got nobody else to blame if I don't do it, but me. As like only *I* am getting in my way right now. And that is part of the challenge I find myself faced with at the minute.

So I'd like to say to you that I am in recovery. I am a member of *A.A.A.* - *The Arts Administrator Anonymous* society. Whereby I have been somebody who has taken great delight in helping facilitate other people's creativity. I am now trying to set up conditions for my own, and I don't know, as I say, if I am up to it.

And what I want to commit myself to is the arts as a practice. Not a hobby. Not just entertainment, although there is an awful lot of enjoyment that I am also looking for. But actually as a practice, as something that can change me, because the arts have already changed me. And I want to see how far I can go with it, and I don't know, as I keep saying. I don't know, that's it, maybe that's all I should say.

I don't know. (laughs)

So...I am reading some Rumi poetry at the moment. And I came across these lines a couple of days ago. '*Beauty surrounds us, but usually we need to be walking in a garden to know it.*' Now, for me I think the arts are part of my garden. I love nature and gardens, but I also feel that with the arts I am learning about beauty. And you can only learn about beauty *from* beauty. That is something that Kathleen Raine once said. But what *is* beauty? It is not a very popular concept, that's for a start, not in the world of the arts currently I don't think. I think that what beauty is, a marriage between pleasure and meaning. If you try to think of an experience of beauty that you've had, in whatever way, in friendship, in nature, through the arts, there is usually something emotionally positive happens. You like, you enjoy what you see, It moves you positively. But it is also somehow a sense of your understanding being stretched as well. And, I want beauty in my life. In fact, I want to be seduced by beauty. I am hoping that through my engagement with the arts I am going to render myself more and more receptive to *truth*. And I am willing to be quite promiscuous for this to happen. I am willing to experiment with different forms of art and my own practise with the art to help that happen.

So sometimes the arts just give us an experience. We don't go looking for it. But we listen to a piece of music, I have had that experience, I have listened to a piece of music, or going to a play or seeing a film, and it hits me with this experience of beauty, or something in that direction. But its also via going looking, going seeking, that experience of beauty. And it is not always in its obvious places. I think, for myself, there is a whole range where I might find that. And it ranges from what you might call 'high art' – so for example, before I ever saw a *Rothko* painting, I'd only seen reproductions on a postcard. And I didn't like them. The looked boring and dull. Until again I went to the *Tate Gallery*, and went in to that room they used to have there that was just all *Rothko* paintings. And I found myself sitting down, and

stopping. Because it was like walking into a cathedral. And it had a very strong effect on me that I hadn't anticipated at all. It was very beautiful. Very unexpected. And then, there are the *Terminator* films. I didn't go to see the *Terminator* films, you know Arnold Schwarzenegger and all that, when they came out because I thought that was not my kind of a film. And then my good friend Abhayasuri introduced me to the *Terminator* films. And I am so glad she did, along with the *Alien* films, which I also like. (*Audience laughs*) Because although there is a lot of violence in those films, there is something archetypal going on in the stories that really engages me and I want to dwell more in an archetypal realm. I want to have access to what lies beyond the mundane, so I find myself enjoying, of all people, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Who would have thought it?

I want to be more receptive. I want to be more open, and my experience has been the arts has helped that change.

Most of all at the moment though, what I am looking for is to be able to dwell in the present moment. I am increasingly aware of how much I am looking backwards or looking ahead. I am too much in the past or I am too much in the future. And again the arts, the appreciation of the arts and attempting to write poetry has helped me be more here, more now. And I am thinking back to when I was in Montana last summer. I did a solitary retreat there, and it was a very beautiful experience. It's a beautiful place for you who haven't been there and I would recommend it as a solitary retreat venue, by the Blackfoot River.

I had three weeks experience of contentment and I think it was because I had reached a point in my life where I was able to really sit still. And so I am going to take another risk and read you another poem, which is called '*Montana Flowers*', from that retreat.

*Restless at my desk
and seeking the quiet moment,
I want the red tulips to open,
as if to crawl inside would give me rest.*

*But this is not tulip country.
Outside on the rocky hills and pasture,
the flowers are intense small spots of solitary colour.*

*Dancing yellow glacier lily,
Vivid purple shooting star,
and gentle lilac and yellow pusk
make me stop and bend to beauty.*

*High on the cliff tops,
I could be carried away by the big skies'
dwarfing of my little life;
but smaller still, the tiny flowers on the ground
remind me of my feet,
and that when I stop reaching for it somewhere else,
the quiet moment is always right here, now.*

This is going all over the place! For me having experienced, for example, reading a poem, or trying to write a poem, what I notice afterwards is that my experience becomes more vivid. I

become more aware, more awake. So for example after I had written the first draft of this talk and I'd been browsing through my poetry books to find some good quotes for you. I went outside in the evening for a walk in sunny Bow, near Mile End tube in the east end of London. And there was the most stunning sunset, purples and pinks. And, lo and behold, the archetypal realm descended because the Pearly King and Queen of Stepney walked down my road! (*audience laughs*). I have never seen them before. (For you who don't know pearly queens and kings wear a lot of sequins on black outfits and have feathers in their hats. I don't know what else they do...)

So there is something repeated in my experience, that if I have engaged in the arts appreciating or making it makes my own awareness more vivid, more appreciative. And that appreciative awareness is Bodhisattva territory. Bodhisattvas don't get in their own way, by wanting this and not wanting that. They just appreciate people and things for what they are. Which means they can just care. They can just love. And it seems to me that if I can engage with the arts increasingly wholeheartedly I might gain that perspective of getting out of my own way just by appreciating more and more.

So I have been putting myself on the line recently and saying to myself and to other people: "I would like to write, I would like to see if I can do it." And it is very like when I started learning to meditate. There are a lot of comparisons. For a start I have to sit still. I don't find that very easy. I have to be quiet. I like talking. It requires serious effort and dedication and persistence. A blank sheet of paper is very scary. But I also need a light touch, the ability or the willingness to be flexible, to play, see what happens. And also again, as with meditation, a willingness to sit with tension, so for example trying to write a poem, there is the tension of the things that need to be done, the people that I need to see and my desire to write a poem. Then there is also the internal tension of a *form*, for example, and a *content*. How do those things go together? And there is also the aspect of learning to let go, as with meditation. If I come with things to wilfully, in a to goal oriented way, it won't happen, and it's the same with writing poetry. So writing so far, I am a novice, has already helped me find that still place that I have been looking for, because I am looking more closely, I have slowed down. It also helps me think more clearly. I don't think I am very good at reflecting. But I find in the act of writing, not just in terms of poetry, that's how I do my reflection, is with pen and paper. And it helps me to see more clearly because I am looking more closely. I am finding I may learn to sit with paradoxes, not easily, but something has changed there. Let's put it this way: I am less uncomfortable with conflict than I used to be.

But most of all I think engaging with writing is helping me be more *authentic*. Because if I or anybody else tries to write a poem or paint a picture for that matter, or any other creative activity, from their *head*, it doesn't communicate to the audience. Where as if we can come from the root of our experience and then, through whatever form we chose, find out more about it, and then send it out in to the world I think we are more likely to communicate.

I have done quite a few storytelling workshops, with Jayamati, as have some others here. And he is always patting and rubbing his belly and encouraging us on the workshops to come from there, in the storytelling. I think it's the same with any creative act. It's a bit like for those of us who inspired by Bhante's vision and are involved in the arts, his book '*The Religion of Art*' is very important to us, because he communicates in that the essence of what we are talking about now. But it would not work for me, to try and write my poem with Bhante's '*The Religion of Art*' in one hand and my pen in the other. That won't work because I'll be inauthentic then. Because I would be trying to achieve an idea of whatever it might be.

Whereas if I start from my belly or my heart, or just a detail that I am giving my attention to then I am more likely to follow the tread through, to effective communication.

So for example in a poem that I wrote recently, I am not going to read any more poems because I don't have the time, but this poem is about my dad, my real dad who died when I was two years old. And, so I am in the writing period, and I have been struggling and I can't do it. And I have been feeling despondent. Negative mental states have set in. I've gone to bed one night and I've decided that whatever happens the next morning it's important that I just *do* it, like meditation. Sit down with a blank sheet of paper. And I'd recently received a blown up picture of my dad, when he was in a uniform, he was in the fleet air army, which is the flying air army of the navy. And I decided that was going to be my material. I wanted to write about my dad. But I sat down with a blank sheet of paper and I thought: "I can't do it, I can't do it. I have no ability. No inspirations" etc. So I thought "No. You promised yourself". So I picked up a book of poetry, and I read someone else's poetry. And I got very absorbed by this particular poem, I can't remember who it was by now, but then I noticed after my enjoyment of it that it was a sonnet. And I thought "Oh, I'd like to write a sonnet". I had only tried once before and it was not very good. And it just felt that that was going to be the right shape for this poem that I didn't know what it was yet. So I spent that morning sitting down with the picture of my dad in front of me, and the idea of a sonnet in my mind, knowing what the form was, and worked. And it was one of the most absorbing, concentrated mornings I've ever had! 'Cause I was dealing with material that was very close to my heart, very poignant as you can imagine, and had this form that I had to wrestle with. How was I going to say which I might want to say with that shape? And then there was another stage to it, which I wrote it, I finished it and I thought "Oh, yes, I think that's almost sort of what I want to see. I showed it to a friend, she made a couple of comments. And I thought, "Yes, she is right, I need to change this". And even though it is in this little book that I've produced as a fundraiser, and I probably will change it and I'll have subsequently more feedback for some poet friends of mine, I can see there is still room for it to be improved so... These poems which I have been trying to produce they are ongoing processes in which I meet myself. I wrestle with form. I sit with the tension of how to put it all together, and something happens I can then communicate with to other people. And this, perhaps, that poem, however good it is or isn't, I couldn't have said what I've said in it in any other way. It had to come out *that* way. So if you are interested, sorry, if you're interested in reading it, it's the last poem in this book: "*Five Pounds in the Dining Room.*"

Also, another area for me to consider is *ethics*. For example there is a poem in this book, which is about my step dad, with whom I have not always had an easy relationship. When I was putting this little book together, I had to think about: "How would he think, reading a poem, though even though his name isn't mentioned and even though it's done in a particular way, he might work out is about him?" What do you do in that instance? What's the best thing to do? I had conversations with my mum. She said: "He won't probably even think about looking at it". Cause she bought a copy. And I talked with Mallika who is one of my kalyana mitras. And we had a very interesting conversation about 'whose property is a poem?', and so on. So what I decided in the end was, its in there, its called '*Let sleeping dogs lie*'. And I talked to my mum and I said, "If dad does read it I want you to tell him, or put him in touch with me so I can say that it is not about now, it's about then. You know, he and I have changed our relationship over the years. But I needed to express what my feelings where then. And I have done it in that poem to a certain degree.

There is also this area of paradox that we have been looking at. I find that, and this is a very interesting area for me at the moment, there is a particular poetic form called a *ghazal*, which I don't know much about. Manjusvara introduced some of those to us on a writing retreat, and that poem I read in the beginning is a ghazal. And I believe they are a Sufi style. And they are couplets, they don't necessarily have any connections with any other couplet, and that unleashes something in me, it allows me to express what I don't know. You have a series of couplets you know. Little two liners where, or even within the couplet, where there isn't necessarily an obvious connection, I get to say what I don't know. I get to express my uncertainty, I get to express my confusion. And then I know it better. So I find that very useful as well.

So the truth is, if we are talking about how the arts perhaps can lead towards truth. The truth is I am scared. I've set myself on a path now, a particular aspect of a path I've been on for a while, that I don't know where it's going to take me. (A bit like this talk really.) It's not neat and tidy. But I've got the wisdom of others to guide me and I've got the great works of art I can refer to guide me as well. And also increasingly in the FWBO, there is more and more support, and appreciation of the arts as a practise. Because although Sangharakshita is a writer, and is a great appreciator of the arts, it's not always been the case in the FWBO that people have been encouraged to engage deeply in their arts practise, and that is different now. So, I'm interested in transformation, I'm interested in the truth, and I think that the arts could help that in the following ways.

I think the arts can help transform me and other people. Because I think they speak to our *emotions*. Because they speak to our emotions and our minds, through our imaginations. I think I would define an imagination, which we've all got despite what some of you might think, you've all got an imagination. I think an imagination is like a *heart-mind*. It is where they come together. And I think through the arts, which come from the imagination and speak to the imagination, we can strengthen the imagination. And interestingly, Sangharakshita correlates the imaginative faculty with *shraddha* or faith. So that is a faculty we need to develop if we want to realize our goals. Also connected with that if that the arts can transform us, because they work on the level of desire. We are all desirous beings. We all desire and want different things. That's a fact of our human nature. I think, because the arts appeal to our desire, we can actually use them. We can get utilitarian with the aesthetic. To refine and strengthen what our desires are and where they are pointing to.

Gampopa's definition of wisdom is '*analytical appreciative understanding*'. And I think that is lovely. That it is not just analysis, It's *pranja* as something we all know by now. It's that there is wisdom and compassion in it. And I think the arts can help us cultivate that appreciative aspect.

The other thought I've got noted down here is: I think there is a great potential in the arts for us to learn *generosity*. I think the arts are a potential of communicating the Dharma very effectively. Those of you who have seen certain rupas by certain order members, or who have read certain... I will give you specific examples: Ananda's poems to Vajrasattva has been a great source of inspiration to me. It is very beautiful. But there are also indirect things that FWBO practising Buddhists are creating which also connect with our hearts. Lalitaraja, or Julia Clark's dance communicates *interconnectedness*. You can probably all think of your own example, whereby we can learn, through the arts, where people could perhaps be connected with the Dharma who hadn't come across it before. So generosity, and the practise of generosity or *dana* is important, and Ratnasambava is one of my yidams. And I am just

starting to realize that I might be starting to discover a different way to be generous. A different way to give.

Because the world needs *Truth*. I want to develop the ability to see the truth in myself, so I can share it. Whatever little glimmers or little mini-insights I might get, I'd like to share those. We need the truth because of the suffering that is in the world. The fact of suffering is part of that truth. So I want to develop a wise heart and a kind mind. I want to wake up, basically.

So I am going to finish with a quote, from the last verse of a poem by William Stafford. William Stafford is an American poet (again introduced to me by Manjusvara and Ananda). Who proves to me (as if I needed any proof of it), you know, that Buddhists don't have a monopoly on truth. And here's one, he has a wise mind, or a wise heart and a kind mind. And one thing that I would like to tell you that he has said that I find very useful in terms of developing a writing practise, is his idea of *the Golden Thread*. He talks about where do you start from, in terms of making art. Well, you start by picking up the end of a golden thread. Which is any detail you give your attention to. You know, cause art isn't all squeaky, clean and shiny. Sometimes it's raw. Sometimes it's painful. But if you pick up that end of the thread and just follow it through without pulling too tightly or letting go, it'll lead you through, I think he quotes Blake, '*The Gates of Jerusalem*'. So he's talking about finding a way towards truth by following where our attention goes, wholeheartedly.

So the verse is from a poem called, *A Ritual to Read to One Another*, Which some of you will know.

*'For it is important that awake people be awake.
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.'*

Thank you.