

Art Practice Spring 2020 *Mountains and River Sutra*

From the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* (Carl Bielefeldt translation)

The countenance (of the mountains) is completely different when we are in the world gazing off at the mountains and when we are in the mountains meeting the mountains.

The Buddha has said, "All dharmas are ultimately liberated; they have no abode." We should realize that although they are liberated, without any bonds, all dharmas are abiding in (their own) state.

"The stone woman gives birth to a child in the night". This means that at the time when the "stone woman gives birth to a child" is the "night" We should understand the true nature of the "birth."

Although we say that mountains belong to the country, actually they belong to those who love them. When the mountains love their master, the wise and the virtuous inevitably enter the mountains. And when sages and wise ones live in the mountains, because the mountains belong to them, trees and rocks flourish and abound, and the birds and beasts take on a supernatural excellence. This is because the sages and wise ones have covered them with virtue. We should realize that the mountains actually take delight in wise ones and sages.

Art practice—live expression—is to make intimate contact with the body-mind of yourself and your subject, to enter the reality the words point to and ‘get totally wet.’

The Japanese poet Basho in the 1600's spoke about the mystery of observing, deep listening and expression in this way:

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about bamboo. And in doing so, you must let go of your preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry (expression) arises by itself when you and the object have become one, when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden light glimmering there. However well phrased your poetry may be (however well executed or technically efficient your expression may be), if your feeling isn't natural—if you and the object are separate—then your poetry (expression) isn't true but merely an accurate counterfeit.

When we watch from the outside and think we are on the inside, we have not entered the life we are in. We create a subtle but deadly mental distance that puts a screen over our understanding, over our eyes. Art practice can be the antidote for "watching," giving us a way to become more attuned and unified with these mountains, rivers, this great earth, and the entire miracle of being alive. To enter in such a way brings us closer to what Basho calls the *hidden light glimmering* in all things.

For this Spring 2020 Ango Art Practice, try to locate yourself within the "mountains and rivers" of your place by immersing yourself in the elements, outdoors, and within sensory contact and aliveness of the earth, sky, wind, light, water, space. Begin by quietly reading these passages from the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*. Allow each line to sit in your mind as a meditation, without trying to figure them out conceptually. Turn to one that speaks to you and carefully consider the reality Dogen is pointing to. Sit with the passage and memorize it so you can absorb it more deeply. Then allow an expression to reveal itself and come to life in your chosen medium: on paper, in movement, sound, photography, poetry, prose, video, sculpture, fibers, etc.

Practice this as your meditation, so you don't get intellectually caught in the passage. Also, remember this is a creative practice, so there is space for reflection and examination, for allowing the dharma to stretch your mind of inquiry and understanding and bring you to a state of wonder. Sometimes we can get lost in the goals of practice and the words that describe reality rather than living into their meaning.

You may want to work with one passage for the full Ango or select a different phrase for each month, the point being that you develop and deepen your understanding and contact with the Earth that is your home, wherever you are and whatever form it takes, i.e. urban or rural. At the angos conclusion, bring 4-6 pieces or a 3-5 minute presentation to share with the sangha at the sharing at the Monastery and Temple. If you can't attend in person, you are welcome to mail your work to the Training Office at the Monastery or Temple and we can post it for you. (At ZMM on 5/21 and ZCNYC on 5/22.)