

SPRING 2022 ANGO ART PRACTICE: TRUST IN BUDDHA NATURE

Tell a Better Story: Inspiring the Impossible

There is a wonderful excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice declares to the Queen of Hearts, “One can’t believe impossible things!” The Queen responds: “I daresay you haven’t had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for a half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

It’s rather easy to accept old stories as truth. If you look very closely at the exquisite rugs of the Navajo weaving masters, you might notice there is always an imperfection. This ‘flaw’ is by design, creating a place where the Great Spirit can continue to enter. Likewise, any story we tell ourselves is unfinished, open, a part of the web of life—and Spirit has an opening with which to work.

Stories are one of the most effective—and uniquely human—ways of conveying simple and profound truths. The Buddha was a master storyteller, and teachers and practitioners throughout the ages have told and heard stories that turned their minds, opened their hearts, released their attachments, and shifted their ways of understanding.

For this Spring Ango Art Practice, let us all take up the power of storytelling and narratives as skillful means: spinning tales that help us be *less* invested in, and attached to, our sense of self—stories that convey their message simply and invite the reader to see themselves in the tale. We will be inspired through our study of the *Lotus Sutra* which contains some of the most important stories—parables—of Mahayana Buddhism.

How does a story stop being about you and become universal? How do stories help illuminate the path? We *need* stories that enrich our shared humanity, that reveal how a flaw might just be a gem. Feel how this happens in the spirit of the *Lotus Sutra*.

The challenge will be to delve in as honestly as possible into the search and trust the creative process. This is a practice of learning how to embrace and work with, rather than block, the energy that wants to express itself. Make space for emotions and feelings, memories, direct sensory input. Dreams also have a way of bringing new stories, details and energy. This is where the story finds us and becomes a gift to be given away and shared with others. Perhaps it will even be a surprise to yourself and a liberation of sorts. The best stories you have are yet to be revealed.

A few possible prompts that may help you get started—

Did you ever come close to death?

What were the circumstances of your birth?

Have you ever been accused of something you did not do?

Who was a teacher that was important to you?

What is a lesson you learned from a friend?

Write of a journey to a phantom city.

What is your burning house situation?

What story comes to mind that involves one or more of the elements:

A story of a child looking for a lost parent (or vis-versa)?

If you like start with an opening lead sentence. For eg: *When the journey began long ago...* Or *Who could predict...? The most memorable aspect was...*

A Way to Begin

—If you're not sure where to start, read over the list of prompts and try journaling or freewriting on any that spark your energy, or interest. Write for 20 minutes straight. You could also try recording yourself telling a story aloud, making it up as you go. (simply practice the process)

—You can stay with one of the prompts all Ango, take up a few of the prompts, or let one of your own prompts emerge.

—Most stories follow the same basic structure: they begin with a conflict/complication, this is developed, and then bring it to resolution.

—'It's all in details'. Enjoy the precision of highlighting specific details, tones, textures as far as you can stretch your imagination and see what happens.

—Long, messy, unedited, unfiltered drafts may help to get things out and refine your ideas, but short stories will be better than long ones in the end. You may want to go full out in early drafts, and then distill your story down to a page or less.

—You may wish to explore poetry, prose, verse, a dialogue, metaphor and simile as the practice unfolds. Your story could lead to accompanying drawings, paintings, photographs, perhaps a song or chant, a sculpture or into a movement that goes along with the narrative. 'How many impossible things can you find before breakfast?'

At the end of Ango we'll have a story sharing. Hopefully you can memorize the core of your story and offer it live, freewheeling and embodied, in 3-4 minutes.