

Preface

This is an exploration and definition of my spirituality and beliefs. I have been considering and attempting to define my spiritual self in great detail recently, and found this assignment to be an excellent opportunity to better explore and synthesize my concepts and research. In order to explore the topic as broadly and deeply as possible I posed the general inquiry; “What are my beliefs?”

I think it is first important to both define and identify why people have spirituality and beliefs. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh states in his essay “*Present Moment, Wonderful Moment,*” and I concur, “People have spirituality to alleviate the pain of worry” (Essential Writings,18). This is to say that spirituality acts as an insurance of sorts. It allows one to feel that their place in the world is intentional and that they are in the hands of something greater that will ultimately guide their path. As humans, in a largely unexplained environment, our innate curiosity turns to unease, which turns to worry and fear. So if we can account for at least some of the unexplainable, then it will cease to be of concern to us. Spirituality, in my opinion, must also allow one to detach themselves from the material and have enough faith in something greater that they can be as an open book, and allow what comes to them to inform their actions. In this way I can move through my life with fluidity, as opposed to being consumed by challenge and struggle.

In my day-to-day life I try to seek out and attain the most happiness for myself. In order to do so I adhere to Buddhist and Taoist philosophies that revolve around living as presently as possible and accepting the unchangeable hardships of life. This harmony with my surroundings and circumstances does not come at the cost of personal integrity; I simply attempt to look for happiness within my surroundings, as opposed to focusing on the negative aspects and becoming consumed by disdain. Such painful and inevitable realities as death are things that we cannot seek to change, and I would rather live harmoniously with these realities than spend a lifetime in fear and discomfort. On a more micro scale I will certainly confront discomfort, if it is in order to better my overall surroundings, but becoming drawn into conflict with no relevant outcome is pointless.

Beliefs and Spirituality

My beliefs predominantly revolve around ethical egoism. I believe in doing what is best for myself, what will bring me the most overall happiness. While this may sound selfish it is in keeping with my belief that in the end, when all is said and done, I die alone. Why then, would I not strive to be the most contented that I could be when that time comes? This is not to say that this comes at the cost of other people. Others, and their needs, matter to me very much. So that personal contentedness, which I ultimately seek out, will most likely include, in at least a very small part, the fulfillment of others. I base a portion of my happiness on whether or not those who I care about are also content. Seeing them in pain or sadness affects me greatly.

This ultimate happiness cannot be achieved if I am to spend any time investing myself in anger. Anger detracts from my general happiness as it is a product of discontentedness and focuses me on the downsides of my circumstances. I cannot afford to waste any of our short time that we inhabit human forms on earth spent in this emotional ugliness. “Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed...” (Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to*

Fearlessness, 9.) When I am enraged by my circumstances, I try to step back from the immediate happenings and collect myself. To combat what frustrates me with an outburst of rage will only increase the ugliness of the circumstance, which ultimately decreases my personal happiness. So if I can confront the situation with calm, thoughtful composure, then I will ultimately better my circumstances.

Hatred, anger, angst, worry, fear, sadness, and restlessness are just a few of the negative emotions that permeate throughout our surroundings and easily find their way into our mentalities. Life is not an easy or anywhere near painless experience. Those who let life get the best of them in the life-long grapple with its downsides would cheat themselves of the opportunity to better their experience. As Pema Chödrön says: “Don’t let life harden your heart.” (*The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness*, 3) This applies to my belief that I cannot afford to spend time in anger. If I were to allow the overwhelming discomforts of life to influence me more than the subtle beauties it would be counterintuitive to my philosophy.

A vital technique for finding the greatest happiness possible in the present moment is to exist only in the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh writes: “Do not lose yourself in the past, do not run after the future.” (*Essential Writings*, 17) By this he means that we should always focus on what is at hand, what is presently surrounding us, as opposed to being held back from progressing by regret for things that have been or sorrow for may never be. Focusing on, or being distracted by, regret and worry detract from the beauty that can be found in the present moment. It only drives me deeper into the bottomless hole of anger and frustration, counter intuitive to my goal of attaining as much personal happiness as possible, day by day.

There are only three major components of life, according to the Buddha’s teachings: “Impermanence, egoless-ness, and suffering” (Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness*, 22). If these three facets can be understood fully and accepted then at least I could find peace with them.

Impermanence is perceivable in our day-to-day lives, and possibly the most frightening of the three components, even more so than suffering. The knowledge that every beautiful moment and happening in our lives that constitute our momentary happiness and all that we experience will fade away, is a demoralizing prospect, as it speaks to the impermanence of happiness. I dwell on this far too heavily yet never fully accept it. I strive to live in harmony with this impermanence and practice letting go of the past and moving with the flow of the channels of life.

Egoless-ness is to detach one’s mind from any concept of self. If I am egoless then... This is another step towards accepting impermanence, focusing on the spiritual rather than the physical, and mastering control of the mind. Once I am able to move beyond the ever-impending fact that I will one day no longer walk this earth, and can focus on my happiness in the present, not the physical discomfort I suffer, then I will take another step towards contentment.

Suffering is another omnipresent facet of life. I want to accept suffering, not fight against it. Fighting against anything detracts from my overall happiness. In relation to all three of these facets, I want to move with the ebb and flow of life, in keeping with the Taoist philosophy; “Like water, Tao flows effortlessly, changing its expression according to circumstance, without ever giving up its inner nature” (C. Alexander Simpkins, and Annellen Simpkins, *Simple Taoism: A Guide to Living in Balance*, 66).

I strive to be content, and ultimately I see no other way than to accept what I cannot change. If I cannot force my circumstances to be better, I can find happiness within my circumstances. “The Buddha taught that flexibility and openness bring strength and that running from groundlessness weakens us and brings us pain.” (Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness*, 13)

Artistic Process

How did I connect my spirituality to my artwork? I chose to express my discoveries and analysis of my spirituality through a spiritual “self-portrait.”

My incentive for working with paint was due to the fact that I am fairly inexperienced with the medium and saw an opportunity to further develop that practice in my artistic “tool belt.”

Explicit religious imagery correlated, too literally in my opinion, to the topics I was studying and formulating beliefs around. I struggled to understand how best to express my spirituality in imagery and define it aesthetically. I moved away from the concept of literal imagery such as lotus flowers and golden halos and began to research stylistic influence in greater depth, thus combining elements of my spirituality with an element of self and binding it all with the art form. I chose monochrome color-field painting as my medium partially because it seemed the most unconnected to any particular religiously connected art practice. As Kandinsky says: “Efforts to revive the art-principles of the past will at best produce an art that is still-born” (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1).

I resolved to think outside the box of physical representation and approach my artwork more abstractly and less representational. Another line from Kandinsky’s text attracted my attention: “A first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul” (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 23). I began to consider moving away from representational painting and try to create a work that spoke for itself by best portraying my spirituality. So, in a sense, my artwork is a very representational piece in abstract form.

Midway through my spiritual research and formulating the belief oriented portion of this paper I realized that the focus of the spiritual beliefs that I adhere to dictate that I live in the moment, open-mindedly, as a blank canvas prepared to let its surroundings inform it, while maintaining its integrity. In reading the portion of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in which Kandinsky discusses color and form, I came across the concept that black is representational of absolute discord, devoid of possibilities for the future, akin to death, while white is representational of eternal discord, but with possibilities for the future, akin to life. “White is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities... A totally dead silence, on the other hand, a silence with no possibilities, has the inner harmony of black.” This concept is also much akin to my spiritual beliefs, that while the circumstances around me create discord, I must seek the possibility within the circumstance in order to find happiness for myself.

So I turned my focus to trying to express this in my art piece. Another passage from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* drew my attention: “[The] essential connection between color and form brings us to the question of the influences of form on color” (Kandinsky, 28). This prompted me to consider the physical shape that my painting would take more deeply and the answer seemed obvious; A canvas with my own body’s height and width, 70.5” by 17.25”.

Now that the form was accounted for I turned to considering color and settled on a white color field to best express my spiritual self-definition. I researched in great extent monochrome white color-field artists and artwork. In clarifying my intent for choosing white I came across a passage Paul Jenkins wrote in 1962; “I paint marvels instead of scenes...” speaking to the abstraction of my content, “...I don’t paint what God did, I paint what God is to me.” And speaking to my content, which seeks to express my spirituality as it embodies me, not as it would subjectively be perceived. I would hope that my piece invites the viewer to experience my spirituality as I do and share in that experience with me.

While the observation that for all intents and purposes my piece is, at its core, a “blank canvas” makes it easy to dismiss the work, the same physical observation invokes many more, if not endless, possibilities. “The wide range of possibilities (including impossibility) of interpretation of monochrome paintings is arguably why the monochrome is so engaging.”¹ It is for these reasons that I would not dismiss the “emptiness” of my piece. Rather, I would have it perceived as pregnant with possibility for both the physical and the imagined.

Conclusion

I set out seeking to create a piece that best expressed myself as a spiritual being. I feel that this far more conceptual, rather than literal, finished product best represents my spirituality. It also allows the viewer far more room to enter into the piece and interpret it for themselves, also as a reflection of my own spiritual beliefs.

A definition of my own spirituality has been something I have sought to create for a long time. I would say that I succeeded in deepening my understanding of self and better formulating my spirituality and beliefs through this research and art making process. As a viewer, meditating on this blank canvas can possibly create a reflection of my soul-searching and art making process. I have concluded for myself that to exist in harmony with my surroundings I must be as open to them as possible, as present as possible. Much in the way a shadow is present on a white surface.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monochrome_painting

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