

Meeting Rivers Series - 7

Art, Meditation and the "Other"

By Dr. Jyoti Sahi*

Recently, on a visit to the U.K, I was staying in Malvern, in Worcestershire. While I was there, friends took me to the "Golden Valley", where we visited Dor Abbey, an old Cistercian foundation. A picture of this valley had hung in the home of C. S. Lewis when he was a child, and at a time when he lost his own Mother, to whom he was deeply attached. This image of a valley through which flowed a pure mountain stream, appeared to the grieving child, like a glimpse into heaven. It was to this valley that many years later C. S. Lewis took his wife, who was terminally sick, as a kind of belated honeymoon.

When I returned home to India, I brought with me a CD of the film "Shadow Lands", which describes the last period in the life of C.S. Lewis, when after spending a lifetime studying Romantic Love in literature, and having written eloquently about the "Problem of Pain", he was suddenly confronted by the inexplicable and unexpected personal experience of both falling in love, and then having to experience the pain of separation from a dream that he felt he had only just glimpsed. This was his "shadowland". I must say I was moved by this story, in that it presented a radical openness to the gift of love, and yet recognized how such a gift can never be possessed, and is experienced in the ambiguity of shadows, both projected, and realized. What we feel so poignantly as the gift of love, is so often obscured by our own struggle to find the "true Self", beyond the very attachments which liberate us from the closed shell of our own self-absorption, opening us to the shock of loving another person.

I have been thinking a great deal about the relation of art to meditation. What is meant by meditation? It seems to me that meditation is not just a technique, anymore than yoga is just a set of physical exercises. As I understand meditation, it is a state of openness—a kind of space, or gap, in which the individual person experiences the gift of life, unconditional and surprising in the sense that it comes effortlessly, without conscious striving. Like breath, it is a natural process that follows a rhythm of receiving and giving, that is the warp and weft of life.

The Bhagavad Gita speaks of not being attached to one's fruits—and in Yoga there is the concept of Aparigraha, not grasping or wanting to possess. To surrender or give up the very gifts that one has received, is mysteriously the only way in which we can preserve the offering of love. Meditation must surely be related to love, if it is not to be simply a state of self-absorption, a turning in on oneself, and avoiding the demands of the "other". A true meditation is an opening out to a wider, more inclusive horizon—a freeing of the self from its encaged limitations. In that sense meditation would inevitably lead to compassion, a concern for the world in which we live, and the needs of others. But in so opening oneself, there is also a risk to the self. The self becomes exposed, vulnerable, to all kinds of forces that now penetrate into the enclosure that we usually keep guarded, in an effort to protect the self from getting hurt.

In a sense meditation can be called the "shadow land". That is to say, it is here more than anywhere else, that we are called to face our own shadows. To love is also to discover the shadows, that lurk even in the light of this new consciousness, and openness to a world outside the self. The shadows represent our ambiguities, our unresolved projections of unfulfilled desires. It is the shadow that wants to cling, to possess the "other".

I have argued that art can be a kind of meditation. The imagination provides a space for an inner dialogue to take place. In this dialogue it is necessary to be completely open, to be ready

for the unexpected and unforeseen. It is through this readiness, this sense of always waiting for the "gift" of a power that we call love, that the work of art is born, and nurtured. But it is in this waiting that there is also the great pain of not knowing what will happen, and always being on the threshold of an unknown world. This is what C. S. Lewis also had to face in his personal life, being laid open as it were, by his own exploration into the magical world of the creative imagination. It was his stories, his creation of a virtual world of make-believe, that brought him face to face, quite unexpectedly, with a woman who was very different from him, with her own broken heart, and shattered hopes. Again, it was his ability to imagine that engaged him in an apparently harmless act of altruism. He stepped out of his normal, safe world, to help her in her suffering. But it was then that a reality broke in on them both, which was to shatter the shell of a safe and conventional environment. He risked so much, and in the process gained a new and deep friendship, but also a pain which was not just a theoretical "idea", but was something so experiential that it threatened to destroy his own Faith in a loving and caring God. He was faced with the existential terror of his own frailty.

The dream, or accompanying "vision" of a Golden Valley of unexplored beauty, is like a visiting angel—both transforming and dangerous. To trespass into that magical world of the imagination, is like forcing ones way into a cupboard full of memories, like entering again into the womb, and being born again into a new dimension of life. But such a journey is potentially world-shattering; what it might lead to, the individual cannot imagine. It is like stepping over the edge of a present, comfortable and familiar existence. And that is to risk everything. What we are given we are also asked to give up. We have to sacrifice everything in order to step out of what has been both a sanctuary and also a prison. We have to trust in a force of life that we can never rationally understand. It sweeps us away into the tide that stretches far beyond our present horizon. To enter into this meditation, is to be willing to die.

At this level art as meditation, or meditation as art, becomes a landscape of which we do not possess a map. We do not know where we are going, or what will be demanded of us. All the old myths described in the language of the imagination and mystery, this "other" world of the inner journey. In the very act of stepping into this stream, I realize that I do not know where the current will take me. But there is also no stepping back. It is almost as though this creative work, this vision of a new creation, is like a vocation. We have been called to be a new type of explorer, into the world of inner possibilities. We have now to trust in a Providence that we cannot gauge; a Creative Will in whose hands we are only instruments. There are only two options: either to resist, and in the process lose the very life that is the soul of creativity, or be willing to be like an empty vessel into which an energy beyond the individual's power to grasp, is poured into the heart, transforming our world in a way that we cannot foresee. All that we can do is to be humble, and be ready to receive all, and be changed by what we receive.

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