Exploring Zen Buddhism

The most important part about creating artwork is the message the artwork conveys. The message is also the most difficult part—that is, finding creative ways to convey a message through art is not so simple. Anybody can write a pretty- sounding poem; however, the challenge is how to stimulate the readers’ minds in order for them to look beyond the words and understand what underlying point the poem is trying to convey. Anybody can mesh matching colors together, but not everyone can channel a message through those colors and patterns. Throughout my Buddhism project, I struggled to compose meaningful poetry and paintings that conveyed a significant message that reflected the essence of Buddhism. I also tried to find a cohesive way to portray that message in a way that any audience could grasp and apply to their own lives. Not only did I aspire for my art to reflect Buddhist teachings, but I also wanted it to portray my interpretations of those teachings and their importance to my life, as well as the feelings I was encountering as I completed my project.

Some poets spend years editing and perfecting a poem, sometimes only to be dissatisfied in the end—that is because poetry is the most intense, succinct form of art. Every single word in a poem must be perfect, or else the message could be lost or, worse, misinterpreted. I, obviously, did not have the luxury of perfecting a poem for years. However, many of the poems I wrote did not make the cut for the final portfolio, and I could spend up to an hour attempting to perfect a single 3- word line, to make sure it was just right. Otherwise, my message would be lost in translation.

Before I started writing poetry, however, I had to harness my creative energy through what I was learning about Buddhism. The point of this project was to find inspiration for the ultimate goal of creating a meaningful poetry portfolio, and I started seeking that inspiration through various Buddhist writings. I knew I couldn’t just jump into writing poetry without learning about Buddhism through actual practice in the form of meditation, as well as reading about the Buddha’s teachings and mantras. Before I even started my freshman year at UC, I began reading “Buddha’s Little Instruction Book” by Jack Kornfield, which included a mantra on each page. So, as a pre- writing exercise, I began reflecting upon each quote, expanding on how the quote related to my life as well as what I was learning about Buddhism. After reflecting on about eleven of those quotes, I began exploring the Buddhist practice of meditating at the Zen Center as well as on my own. I found that meditating, both sitting and walking, opened my mind and instilled a calm throughout my body—I started experiencing feelings and sensations that I had never encountered before in my hectic life. I’ve found that meditation gives me a way to truly relax and clear out my worries or anxious thoughts I may have at the moment. Once I started meditation practices, I began writing a blog- like reflection in which I documented my innermost thoughts, feelings, and fears about continuing Buddhist practices such as meditation, yoga, and acupuncture. I began to pair my hands- on experience with my thoughts on a book entitled *Hardcore Zen,* a fast- paced, enthralling memoir of a rock musician’s exploration of Buddhism and Zen life. I found that his feelings were incredibly similar to mine, and this connection between his world and mine stimulated a burst of creative energy.

As I began writing in a stream- of- consciousness form, letting all of my thoughts and feelings about my new Buddhist experience flow, I felt overwhelmed with inspiration for a series of poems, which would reflect not only the essence of Buddhist teachings, but my own experiences with Buddhism, as well.

The first set of poems that I wrote was of my favorite type of poetic genre—found poetry. Found poetry involves “snipping” words out of an already existing work and re- arranging them to form a new work of art, extracting a new meaning and giving new life to the words. I love playing with new combinations of words and phrases, and found poetry allows me to do that in a profoundly hands- on way. Although I have written dozens of found poems, each one I write teaches me something new, whether it be discovering the meaning of a new word or finding a creative, unique way to utilize a word to its full potential. Found poetry allows me to explore original word- doctoring that I otherwise would not have come up with, had the words not literally been cut out, ready to be physically moved onto a new canvass so that I could breathe a new life into them. In found poetry, the positions of the words on a page are as important as the definitions of the words themselves, defying the traditional rules of grammar while still retaining a significant meaning, creating a cohesive and meaningful work of art.

Each of the found poems in the beginning of my portfolio is titled after the *New York Times* article that I cut the words from, in order to give proper credit. The first poem of the portfolio, “Anyone Out There?,” is appropriately placed as the initial jumping- off point of the poetry collection, because it not only represents my original apprehensions about exploring Buddhism, but it also reflects and essential Buddhist teaching: there is more to the Universe than what we can see, but what we can see and grasp is just as important as forces that are seemingly out of our reach. The final line of this poem,

“you and me

alone

in this

experimental

universe,”

sums up the meaning of this poem, reflecting my fears, emotions, and what I learned about Buddhism, in a single line. The second found poem, “Cheers Minus the Beers: Let’s Drink to Small Talk,” serves a couple of functions: first, it follows how my original skepticism about some aspects of Buddhism transformed into an utter fascination of the Buddha and what he represents, as my “consumed mellow riff” slowly became an enthrallment with “flourished infused syrup.” Secondly, the poem strives to follow the life of the Buddha, or the “yoda barkeep,” as well, as it attempts to detail the vast difference between the Buddha’s life as a prince, “a vivid empty glass” who “eshew[s] exclusive cocktails,” and his path of enlightenment as he becomes “vaguely anonymous.” The final seven *New York Times* found poems, although all of them are constructed entirely differently and describe different things, are all, as a collective, as well as each individually, meant to reflect the Buddhist fascination with the little miracles of nature and life, and how those worldly miracles are balanced with powerful, outside forces such as karma, nirvana, and enlightenment.

Not only did I write nine found poems based on articles, but I also wrote four found poems based on the mantras in “Buddha’s Little Instruction Book.” I chose to do this because, although both sets consist of found poetry, they are drastically dissimilar but at the same time complement each other perfectly. While the first set captures the essence of Buddhism and channels it into more abstract poetry, the second set takes the Buddhist teachings and transfers them straight to paper. I found that the metaphorical underpinnings of the first set make a perfect match to the literal interpretation of the second set.

However, I felt that even though I was utilizing the art of found poetry in a different way than I had in the past, I still wanted to create poetry in a way that I was totally unfamiliar with. By doing that, I could learn how to represent the same thoughts using new forms. The first new form of poetry I chose was fairly obvious—the Haiku. This was the clearest choice of how I should begin to branch out, because the Haiku is the most widely embraced form of poetry in the practice of Zen Buddhism. This type of poem requires a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern in its total of three lines. Since Haikus are poems that deal with the wonders of mature in everyday life, I chose to write a set of four poems, each one echoing the spirit of each of the four seasons. I initially thought that this endeavor would be a simple one, because I would only have to write twelve lines for four whole poems. One the contrary, the shortness of each poem made writing the set much more difficult and time- consuming, because I had to replicate the quintessence of an entire season in just three lines. I toiled over each line, making sure that every word contributed equally to the meaning of the poem and to the entire set. I found that writing just three lines is much more difficult than writing thirty, in that it takes serious discipline and time to be succinct. In the end, I managed to depict the calm of winter, the freshness of spring, the soul of summer, and the richness of autumn in a way that took advantage of each syllable and squeezed the meaning out of each and every word.

The next poetic form I chose to explore was the Ghazal, which I found to be incredibly rewarding for many reasons. A Ghazal is a poem that transforms a single word of phrase multiple times throughout the poem, placing it at the end of the second line of each couplet. I brainstormed a list of possible words to choose, and, ultimately, I chose the phrase “the Buddha.” By repeating the same phrase over and over again, I discovered the various ways a single word can be transformed. Not only that, but following a strict poetic pattern regulated me in a way that did not restrain me, but actually allowed me to turn the chaos of the words in my mind into a controlled masterpiece. Both the Haikus and the Ghazal disciplined me to regulate my poetry in a conducive way. The free verse poetry that I chose to write next, on the other hand, forced me to think outside the box in a way that I never had before. Free verse poetry is my favorite form of poetry, because, as the name suggest, it allows me to do anything I want to with words. I can organize them in any way I want, and I have a dictionary full of words at my disposal. However, the freedom that free verse poetry allows for also implies a high standard for the poetry itself, because since I have the entire world that I could put on paper, I better make it perfect and worth my while. Free verse poetry is, indeed, my favorite—but it is also the hardest form for me to master, because it essentially has no form. Each free verse poem that I wrote is meant to reflect my hands- on experience with Buddhism and how it related to my life. The first free verse poem, which is untitled, pairs a Buddhist mantra to events in my own life that reflect what that mantra means. The second two poems, entitled “Meditation” and “Acupuncture,” describe my emotional and physical feelings as I discovered these two Buddhist traditions. Finally, the last set of poems I wrote combined the structure of Haikus, the liberty of free verse, and the treasure- hunting of found poetry in a cohesive, unified way, while also embodying the core of the memoir, “Hardcore Zen,” a book depicting a journey that I felt wholly connected to throughout my exploration of Buddhism.

Once I completed my blog and my poetry portfolio (which, in the end, was comprised of over twenty blog entries and about twenty- five poems), I was ready to begin creating paintings based on those poems and my experiences. My goal was to reflect the meaning of each poem in its complementary painting, while also adding other significant elements in order to add greater depth to the sense of the poetry without detracting meaning from the words themselves. Unlike the poetry, I did not plan every word and line to flow perfectly together—I just started painting what I was feeling, and, coincidentally, it flowed perfectly all the same. For the New York Times found poetry, the paintings were as striking and colorful as the nature they describe. One of the paintings, which I painted using only grass, leaves, and my hands in order to reflect the beautiful life it represents, includes a clover embedded underneath the paint, which adds texture and creates a greater depth to the artwork. By adding pieces of nature to the paintings themselves, the found poetry transformed into found paintings, taking what nature has given us and turning it into something significant and beautiful all the same. The next set of paintings I did work together, coming from the final set of poetry in my portfolio. They all have similar color schemes, incorporating the color black, which represents the suffering of the Four Noble Truths, and adding splashes of color, meant to represent a break from the cycle of suffering, or Nirvana. Every line of a poem must have the ability to stand alone, and my paintings illuminate each line. All in all, this project was incredibly rewarding. Not only was I able to start a personal meditation practice through my studying of Buddhism, but I was also able to take what I learned and transfer it into everlasting artwork. I definitely see myself utilizing all of the mantras and teachings of the Buddha in my everyday life, as reflected in my blog, as well as continuing meditation practice as a way to restore calm and relieve stress for the rest of my life.