

SIGNIFICANCE OF DHYANA YOGA IN TRADITIONAL ART

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Writing about the Indian approach to art and its creative process E B. Havel with reference to yoga defined it as ‘a philosophical system’ as different from a spiritual exercise, which (the former) is adaptable to all forms of mental and physical activities. It inspired all - the poet, the artists, and the musician and also the mystic”¹ Indian art has been essentially idealistic and conceptual. The artist’s search for the formal image transcends the physical barriers and goes deeper through the process of *dhyana-yoga* or meditation. It is akin to a spiritual exercise whereby the flow of our experiences is guided to reveal the essence of a phenomenon leading to intrinsically a genuine creative activity. Taking it to the higher level the *Upanishads* even said, that the supreme Lord entered into the warmth of meditation for creating the manifold world. It is not only the secret of artistic creation but also of the divine creation. It is for this reason that the artists regarded spiritual intuition and the spiritual grasp as the fundamentally determining feature of his activities activity.”² Thus, it was an inherent requirement of the Indian tradition of art that the artist or *shilpi* dwells deep into the domain of *dhyana* (meditation) to discover the visual image of the concept or the divine ideal – whether Vishnu, Shakti, Buddha or Mahavira.

Plato, the Greek Philosopher, comes very close to the Indian concept of *dhyana* or meditation as an essential aspect of the true creative activity. While talking of the Absolute Beauty he called it “... a supersensuous spiritual essence which is discerned by the mind when thrown into ecstasy”³ In this process the mind transcends the physical barriers of likeness and bestows the cosmic charm to the figure or the Absolute Beauty. According to Kalidas, the king while looking at Malvika’s portrait pointed out the lapse of contemplation (*dhyana*) resulting in the loss of the grace and sweetness of the subject.⁴

Transcendental vision or intuition has been regarded as an essential element in process of visualization of the image bestowed with its intrinsic abstract attributes. It is only through *dhyana* that the artist can translate the abstract qualities into formal images. The Indian art envisaged ‘Spiritual contemplation’ as the correct method for founding the artistic ideal of the Divine as different from the ‘contemplation of human form’ (the Greek tradition)⁵. Thus ‘artistic allegories’ for the use of symbols became the prominent vehicle of the Indian art in fulfilling its purpose. Perfect identification (*Mithila Samadhi*) has been regarded as essential as per the Hindu canons of art for creating ‘true likeness’, “Thus the practice of Hindu Art is a discipline of meditation which eventuates in the skills of operation and techniques (*silpasthanakausalya*).⁶ It was the delineation of the spiritual essence, the idealized intuitive vision, and the mental creation on which great emphasis was laid by the Indian artist in all forms of their creative activities.

The extreme example of the Indian approach is best represented in the invention of *yantra* (the geometrical symbols) used in the Vedic rituals which had been regarded as “.... more appropriate symbols of universal process than any icons suggestive of human limitations.....”⁷ The icons are the transformed forms of the supreme invisible from which reveal of its own will to men who cannot apprehend. They (or images) are merely the symbols of gods – the outward form of the *mantras*.⁸

The great Indian *Philips* (sculptors) while carving on stone meditative postures of Buddha, Boddhisatvas, and Jain Tirthankaras, first conceived of the icons vested with divine virtue before translating them into visual images or icons with the help of symbols of expressive postures of eyes., hands and body, realized through *dhyana* (meditation). As Radhakamal Mukerjee remarked, “Oriental sculptures over steps anthropomorphism, and seek nothing more and nothing less than the expression of the beyond reached by cosmic meditation with none of the limitations set by measurable human goals and ideals.”⁹

Visual contemplation is an important feature of a true artist. Among the indispensable qualities of a good artist enumerated by the *Samarangana – sutradhara*, powers of intuitive contemplation or meditation (*prajna*) are considered as one.¹⁰ Reference to yoga and *dhyana* in connection with image-making also occurs in *Sukranitisara*, “it is for the successful accomplishment of this practice (*yoga*) of visual – formulation (*dhyana*) that the lineaments (*laksana*) of images are prescribed. The human-imager (*pratimakara*) should be expert in this visual contemplation, since thus, and in no other way, and verily not by direct observation (*pratyaksa*), (can the end be achieved).”¹¹

The 19th-century Indian aesthete Croce comes close to the oriental philosophy of art when he writes that arts are intuition. In his book, *Aesthetics* Croce refers to art as vision or intuition. To him, intuition and expression are spiritualistic aesthetic syntheses. He believes that everyone can experience the internal illumination which occurs when he exceeds. Michelangelo, the great Florentine artist asserted that he paints with his brain, not with the hands. We come across an instance in Chinese Art where spiritual illumination is given greater emphasis. *Ch'an* (or *Dhyana*) meditative school is said to have a significant role in the development of painting in China. *Ch'an* is believed to have been introduced in China at the beginning of the sixth century by Indian patriarch Bodhidharma. This meditative school had a close affinity with Taoist tenets. Taoists believed that spiritual illumination could only be obtained by relieving the mind from intellectual dross and opening it to the spiritual illumination from the individual sources rather

than the universal. As a result, the type of painting that developed at this time allowed the immediate realization of the intuitive vision, the sudden spiritual experience. The latter was also the goal of the *Ch'an* school of meditation.

Thus, accordingly, a perfect work of art can only be created when there is a harmony between the soul and the body, the conscious and the unconscious mind. This state of harmony can only be achieved by meditation or *Dhyana Yoga*. One can see across several instances in the traditional oriental art which reveals the significance of meditation or *dhyana* for subtle expression of the artist's internal experiences. Occidental art also comprises of such similar instances where intuition or internal illumination is widely given importance regarding artistic expression. The process right from experiencing, beauty up to artistic expression is quite abstract. It originates in the intuitive vision of the artist. The faint images of the unconscious mind when one finds expression on the surface of the conscious mind, cause one to experience absolute beauty. Meditation or *dhyana-yoga* plays an essential role, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously in the creative process throughout.¹² Not only fine arts but the Indian architecture also betrays this truth. Writing about Indian architecture, Percy Brown remarks, "In the same way the outstanding quality of the architecture of India is its spiritual content. It is evident that the fundamental purpose of the building art was to represent in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people. It is mind materialized in terms of rock, brick or stone."¹³ Materialization of mind is not merely a mechanical process but it involves the realization of the essence – the pure and absolute beauty inherent is a phenomenon around us through *dhyana* which seeks manifestation in the materialized forms, be it in lines and colors or bricks or stone. It lies at the roots of the ancient Indian art and architecture.

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