

Interview with Meredith Monk Spring 1991

Alan K. Anderson: When did you begin meditating?

Meredith Monk:

I started doing Shambhala Practice in 1985. I taught at Naropa Institute in the seventies and I had done a little sitting then, but I didn't really do it as a personal discipline. I went to the lectures when I was teaching there and thought a lot about those principles. I feel like I've used those principles a lot in my work since then.

AKA: Did you feel that the principles of meditation were in conflict in any way with your art?

MM: I didn't feel that way. The reason I started doing the practice was because of some knots I was getting myself into in my life. I kept on making prisons I couldn't get out of, so I knew I had to do something very drastic. I remember going to my first Shambhala Level One and I almost burst out into tears, it was such a relief. I remember the teacher saying at the time, "Yes, Sometimes you really have to get to that level of desperation to do this." So, right away, I was pretty clear about why I was there. And in terms of the art work, I work from that sense of quiet anyway, so meditation was a good partner to my work. In New York---particularly where there are so many distractions---that kind of discipline is very helpful as a centering exercise to enable me to work more quietly in this environment. And I never considered it at odds with my performance practice, which is a different practice. All in all. I find the two disciplines to be quite integrative.

AKA: Yes, I was probably drawn into meditation more by the parallels I drew to performance than by anything else.

Do you practice regularly?

MM: Well, for the last year, I've been working very hard on an opera I just did for Houston Grand Opera and that has been so demanding that I haven't done a regular sitting practice. In a way, it's an ironic thing because it was so much stress, and that's when I should have been doing the sitting the most. It's very hard having enough hours in the day with a project of this size to get myself calm enough to sit down in the first place. Now that I've finished that project, I'm going back to sitting again. It takes a lot of exertion, and that's the beauty of it.

AKA: It is funny that when you are the busiest, you don't think you can practice.

MM: And that's when you really need it the most! I bring my zafu with me and I usually try to sit in my hotel room when I'm on tour. I try to maintain it, but sometimes it's very difficult.

I'm also thinking a lot about Western psychology. I just feel that meditation has such a sophisticated way of thinking about the human organism and the human mind. I think that in the last 2500 years, every possible weirdness has been catalogued by the Buddhists. I don't think they miss a single mental demon. So I think that it's extremely sophisticated and very finely tuned to human nature. It makes Western Psychology seem a little gross to me.

AKA: In the Shambhala tradition, and in Vajrayana Buddhism there are archetypes that are presented to the practitioner in order to use that imagery to relate to that cool, clear, unconditioned type of radiant being that we inherently have. Such a picture of yourself can affect you in a different way than the picture of yourself that you carry around with you each day, which is a product of your past and your habits. Is there any sense of empowerment from that archetype of the Shambhala warrior that affects you in your work?

MM: Yes, the benign warrior image is very helpful. One of the reasons I started doing the practice was the realization that I was not walking through my own fear, even though I've always thought that I had a lot of courage in some areas. Sometimes a sword is necessary---not in terms of violence, but rather a cutting through with a sense of clarity. I needed to have a little reinforcement for that. Also, the idea that basic goodness contains both good and bad---that it's not a dialectic---is also important to me. It helps bring about a sense of impartiality when looking at things that helps one to keep moving ahead, or rather, keep movement going. I always know these things a lot more in my work.

I did my artwork at a very young age. I was very precocious in that regard, but very backward about living. I didn't think much about living, I just thought about doing my art. What I learned through meditation, was like learning a new language. The practice has really helped me learn how to relate. Practicing meditation is like learning a new language about how to relate.

What I do involves a lot of people. At first, my creative process is solitary, but in the process of putting things together---such as in rehearsal---I'm dealing with people all the time. I feel like it has helped me so much in seeing what the situation really is, and trying not to impose my neurosis on it. It has really made the working process more harmonious and joyful in every way, and that is as important to me as how beautiful the piece is. So I'm always trying to keep alert to what's going on in the process.

AKA When I spoke to you at an early level of Shambhala training, you said that the way you worked with people was changing a great deal, in that you were getting

performances together without relying on too much stress or speed to get things accomplished.

MM The stress is always there, and the pressure is always there, but your neurosis only creates more stress. So you work with the stress that's there rather than compound it. Having a sense of humor is also very helpful.

AKA In the Shambhala tradition, one learns to identify what were previously less-than-precise experiences---such as "awareness", or "fear", or even "precision" itself. Once you identify fear in all its gross and subtle manifestations, you enter into it, rather than avoiding it. The practice of mindfulness and awareness increases one's capacity for seeing the play of these mental states.

Do you find that there is a lot of misconception about what meditation practice is?

MM I don't talk about it too much, but I have found that most people think that everything should become beautiful and angelic once you start to meditate. They should become blissed out or cleared up. They don't see the precision, discipline and exertion that it takes. I have only been through Shambhala practice at this time. I have not done any Buddhist practice yet because I have a hard time with the iconography. The simplicity and the straight-forwardness of Shambhala is much easier for me. Things such as chanting remind me of temple and all the things I couldn't stand doing. I can stand behind Shambhala practice wholeheartedly. I am very interested in Buddhist practice and Buddhist mind, but I have been unable to approach it sincerely.

AKA It is foreign. I have been doing practices with visualization, and mantras, as well as the sitting practice that you have been instructed in Shambhala Training, but for me these practices are a more vivid---almost shocking---way of seeing your mind stray into confusion. The iconography itself is like looking at a portrait of your own mind. And it is very obvious when you fall from that.

MM It sounds very powerful.

AKA Yes. There is some real magic there. In the pantheon of Tibetan deities there are some who may appear to be very fierce, but in truth, their ferocity is filled with compassion and awareness. It is certainly an interesting model for working with one's own anger. And chanting and mantras are very connected to one's own mindfulness of speech. All of these practices are about the synchronization of body, speech, and mind, which anyone who has read the Shambhala book should find very familiar.

MM I can really understand that, but right now since my life in New York has such a quality of potential fragmentation, [laughter] that to stick to one discipline is very good for me.

AKA Do you think much about how this practice connects to your work as an artist?

MM I don't consciously think about it, but I remember years ago in the mid-seventies, after hearing a lot of Trungpa Rinpoche's talks at Naropa Institute, I did a concert at Town Hall that had such a quality of pin-pointed attention, plus total openness to the moment---loose, but as sharp as a needle. These two qualities can also be glimpsed in meditation practice, and I remember thinking that very clearly. That's what you're going for in performance. The two are very similar. You're dealing with your own judgemental mind, and you're trying to let go and forgive and just **be** at every moment completely. So judgement, or the past or the future disrupts the natural speed of that moment. It's amazing to see how those things correspond. In the piece, Facing North, Robert Ian and I use a technique called "hocketting" in which the two of us alternate notes very quickly. It's very, very fast. It took us three times a week, three hours a day, for three months to work out this little six-minute thing, and when we weren't rolling around on the floor in hysterics, the sensation we both had was that it was like meditation in action, because you can't think while doing this, thought is too slow. As soon as you think, you mess up, which messes up the other person. It's a completely interdependent form. You have to be so present that even if you get the least bit distracted, that's it, goodbye. You don't know where you are, or what you're doing. And after we had done it for three hours, we'd feel that something had happened to our brains. [laughs] It felt like the kind of exertion you would do while sitting. So, it must be seeping in there. That's all I can say. [laughter]

I also find that in the process of working, or when I get blocked, I am able to see what's going on in a much more present tense without getting completely locked up in it. I can let that go by, and go on to the next day and go on working again. That comes a lot from being able to step back a little bit and see what's going on.

AKA Yes, it seems that if there is space, everything comes up in awareness much more clearly. It's analogous to music: without rests there would not be room for the music to be heard.

MM Exactly. And I think that being artists in a time like this, we have a lot to give. It is a time that does not encourage that kind of space. It's a time that's very restless and very noisy, and it is unable to tolerate space and silence. If that is something you need to express as an artist, it's a wonderful thing to hold firm to, at this time. I believe that a lot of people have a longing and a hunger for the kind of work that affirms that kind of spaciousness and silence. So it almost seems like a political thing to me.

AKA How do you identify which part of your art is personal, and which is political?

MM I'm not an agitprop kind of artist, but I've always tried to reflect the need of the time in my work, in an oblique way. I don't try to hit them over the head with a frying pan. I do feel that we all have a great deal of responsibility to do what we can in this setting-sun world.

AKA I believe that artists who have learned from their discipline can be very helpful in educating the young by articulating what goes on in their process, or discipline. How would you define "discipline"?

MM I would say that discipline is a way of feeling a sense of continuity and a centering of focus so that one can actually sense what a growth process is. It sometimes has to do with repetition---in which one sees that there literally is no such thing as straight repetition. It has to do with focusing energy so that the growth process can be nurtured.

AKA Around 1910, William James said that an education *par excellence* would be one that would improve the faculty of bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again. This seems to be the essence of meditative discipline. So it seems to me that both the arts, and athletics are the best at saying "come back to **this**"---meaning this moment in attention. Repetition then becomes the key to freshness, which should be discipline's outcome.

How do you make things fresh during your performance?

MM That is the actual goal of performance. I must have done "Songs from the Hill" a thousand times by now. It's rare that I don't find something new and get completely involved and totally challenged by it at each performance.

AKA And is there something that you actually do or say to yourself? Are there tools that you have derived from meditation practice?

MM I just do a lengthy warm-up, and when I come onstage I ground myself, and basically, I am in that situation which is different than the one I was in the night before. As you know, if you perform very well and you are inspired, there is as much a problem getting caught up in the positive expectations as there is with overcoming negativity or dullness. So the discipline of performing is to return to *tabula rasa* as best you can, every night.

AKA How do you ground yourself?

MM I become very aware of how the energy comes from the ground into my feet, my legs, and my breasts. I try to give myself as much pause as I need before I begin singing. I try to be very simple; standing there and ready. And I have realized that an audience is so much more willing to accept that than one might expect them to be.