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An Interview with Dorothy Iannone

Q&A with a Buddhist artist

By Noa Jones | SPRING 2013



Photograph by Janine Shulz

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Profession: Artist

Age: 79

Location: Berlin, Germany

Your home is so beautiful; these macaroons are delightful; everywhere I look there is either a piece of art or something artfully placed. In a way, my apartment is my kingdom: it's filled with inspiration and it is a great support.

You seem to be a citizen of the world, but really you are American originally? I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1933.

And what brought you here? When I gave up a fellowship to study for a doctorate in English Literature at Stanford University in 1958 and married James Upham, a painter, we moved to New York, and in the same year I began painting. We traveled the world together. In 1967, on a trip to Reykjavik, I met the artist Dieter Roth, with whom I began an intense romantic relationship. And in 1976 I received the Berlin Artists' Grant and moved to Berlin, which has held me, now for one reason, now for another, ever since.

How did you get into the dharma? What attracted you? There was a period, almost 30 years ago, when it seemed my body did not want to cooperate with my mind. So I considered learning some sort of meditative technique. But then I thought, if I'm going to do this, then I should go directly to the source. In the late 50s I had read Alexandra David-Neel's *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, and after that whenever I encountered obstacles on my path I thought to myself, at least half seriously, Tibet!

Many years later, a very dear and close artist friend who had some years earlier become the student of Dudjom Rinpoche told me that I should come to hear a certain young lama give a teaching. "You'll like him," he said, "he's your type, ironic and witty." Perhaps that was Robert Filliou's way of introducing me to the dharma. And that was how it happened that in 1985 I went to a retreat in Cornwall with Sogyal Rinpoche, and a whole new world became a part of my mindstream.

Were you raised with any religion? Yes. Until I was about 18 years old, I attended the Catholic Church Sunday Mass regularly. If one wanted to receive Holy Communion, one had to go to Confession on Saturday so that one's soul would be in a state of grace. On this particular Sunday, I had not been to Confession, where the only mortal sin I would have had to confess was the habitual one of having made love with my boyfriend. When the bell sounded for Communion, without knowing even one moment before that I was going to do this, I arose and walked to the altar with the other communicants and received

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But I was interested in religions, especially in the spiritual traditions, and I read a lot over the years. I was really inspired by the Gnostic Gospels, for example, when they were first published. I think that spiritual ideas infused my life and my work, though I had no formal practice.

How has dharma practice influenced your artwork, if at all? Do you mean how has the practice itself influenced my work, or do you mean the teachings? If the former, then the question is really complex, because presumably an artist is in that big, wide-open space anyway when she is creating. Sogyal Rinpoche says artists are tantric while they are making their art, but the rest of the time they are ordinary people. Or did you mean how did whatever changes the practice made in my being influence my work? This is maybe what you meant.

Dharma practice has changed me in the sense than an almost abstract longing for unity has been given a hitherto unimaginable "form." So if I'm changed, my work must be too.

But somehow the effect of the practice and the effect of being in the master's presence and receiving the teachings seem difficult to separate. I could say, though, that my dharma experience has made me consciously aware of the process of creativity: for instance, when I'm working, how my mind is held empty of thoughts, at ease, and somehow the "answers," one after another, arise.

More literally, I have sometimes used figures inspired by Tibetan Buddhism in my work—Milarepa or Tara—or I often integrate images with texts, written in my own particular language that are inspired by the teachings. In these texts especially, ways have arisen of bringing my subject and the dharma together. My work has always reflected my spiritual journey and at the same time, it seems, illuminated that path.

Someone said that your whole life has been a spiritual journey. What do you think they meant by that? I think that remark was a response to a comprehensive look at my work. When I was young, I aspired to complete intimacy with my partner, but as I evolved, I understood it was ultimate union with the beloved that I was seeking, and later, I called it ecstatic unity. Some years after meeting the dharma, I was moved to read in one of Chögyam Trungpa's works that ecstatic unity is another term for enlightenment. Somehow the stages along my life's journey were transformed into film and text and imagery and song. Anyway, that remark was made in this context.

You were in Japan before you became a Buddhist. How did that change your outlook? When I was living for a season in Kyoto in 1962, I came across the works of R. H. Blyth, his volumes on haiku and especially *Zen in English Literature*. From these books I came away with the feeling that I myself was a Zen person, so much did I sympathize and identify with the attitude that was communicated through the examples from literature. It never occurred to me, though, to learn meditation. When I wasn't reading or visiting the numerous Zen gardens, I made half-abstract "flower arrangements," collages from handmade Japanese paper. Perhaps one could say in retrospect that this was my own form of meditation. Sometimes while I worked, I even sang duets with my Japanese canary, whose cage was hanging just above me.

Your work is not simply erotic. It's about love and connection. Has your Buddhist study changed the way you look at love? Unconditional love has moved to center stage now, where, without my knowing, it was always headed. But it still includes Eros and mothers and children and friends and patrons and colleagues, even strangers, and everyone else that I have ever celebrated.

As you approach 80, what are your thoughts on death and dying? I hope at the moment of death I will remember the master. I've become aware if, after every time something potentially dangerous happens to me, my first thought as I went into red alert was of the master. And I end my evening prayers with the wish to live long enough to bring my life, my work, and the dharma together, and that whatever I do be of benefit to all beings. As for dying, what can I say, I hope that whichever way it comes, I'll be able to do it well. I know that the completion of a work of art is always a wonderful feeling. Let's see.

Iannone has two solo exhibitions this spring, in London at Camden Arts Centre and in Paris at Palais de Tokyo, Galerie de Multiples. Siglio Press, Los Angeles, is preparing, for publication in spring 2014, a book of her collected writings and visual works. Also in Spring 2014 a retrospective of her work will be held at the Berlinische Galerie.