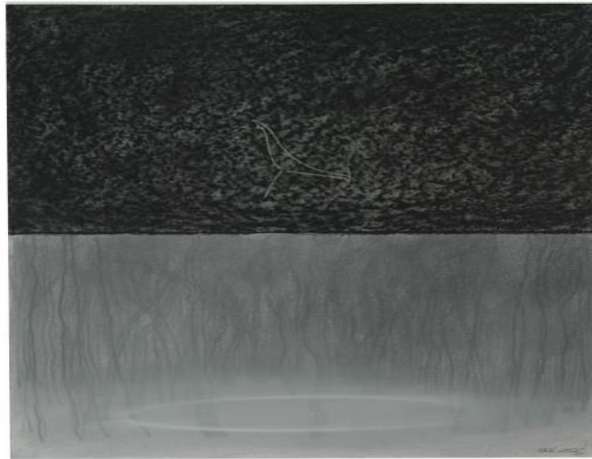


Art as philosophy: The convergence of nature, aesthetics and spirituality in Chokchai Tukpoe¹

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The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul. *Wassily Kandinsky*



A few years ago, when I first saw the artworks of Chokchai Tukpoe, one of Thailand's most original and leading contemporary artists, I was reminded of Thich Nhat Hanh's metaphor of 'clouds in each paper.'² The metaphor implies the fact of interdependence of our being and becoming; how individual existence is anchored upon the co-existence of endless factors and elements in nature that give both meaning and possibility to existence itself. While Chokchai Tukpoe's art is neither embedded in a romantic gesture nor an idealistic didacticism, the message of spiritual reflection readily finds its way into the hearts of the viewers. Perhaps there is some underlying connection between the message of the artist and his upbringing, simple lifestyle, meditation practice and philosophy of life developed within the context of the idyllic social set-up of Northeast Thailand. Isan, the Northeast of Thailand has been the home of many great meditation masters whose strict adherence to monastic disciplinary codes and practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation, bereft of ritualism, has helped preserve Buddhism in its original and pristine form.³ Today, Ubon Rachthani Province of NE Thailand, where Chokchai has lived and worked all his life, is internationally well-

¹ This paper was selected for presentation at the 19th Annual Seminar of the Philosophy and Religion Society of Thailand (PARST), January 24-25, 2015. The article has been found online by the editor, and is given here: <http://ir.mcu.ac.th/sites/default/files/036%20Art%20in%20593%20-%20604.pdf>

² The metaphor is extended quite elaborately, but here is just a section of it. "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not there, the sheet of paper cannot be there either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper are inter-are."

³ Dipti Mahanta "The Isan forest meditation tradition: A praxis of mental well-being vis-à-vis global recovery", paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak (ICUNDV) and published in the conference volume, 2010, pp. 582-600.

known for the great meditation master, Ajahn Chah and his many worthy disciples, whose austere practice in the *thudanga*⁴ tradition became an exemplary model rendering *vipassanā* meditation a living experiential path of practice and realization, not only in Thailand, but also in many parts of the world. Taking a close look at the works of Chokchai Tukpoe, we see a reflection of this socio-cultural and spiritual richness of his native place.

In this paper, we briefly analyze how this richness gets expressed through his effort at pictorial representation of the inner self; a self that envisages art in every aspect of life, starting from the very life-sustaining breath to a tiny rice seed that embodies within itself nature's nurturing power. Within the trajectory of the vital breath and the life-sustaining seed lies the entire spectrum of truth that the dhammic eye sees and realizes i.e. the dependent co-existence at the mundane day to day living and the dependent origination or the law of causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)⁵ at the level of *bhavana* or spiritual awakening and reflective understanding. Going beyond the mere play of colors and contours, Chokchai's canvases are replete with glimpses of dhammic truths – the four elements of nature, the five aggregates, the three universal characteristics of existence, the law of causality, and above all the workings of the mind that is constantly alert with perception being perpetually guided by a mindful awareness.



All his art works in the last few decades delineate one or the other aspect of the universal truths found in Buddhism. For instance, his semi-abstract landscapes partake of all the four elements of nature – fire, water, air and earth – in a vividly colorful admixture of one element merging into the folds of the other. Alongside experimentation with the materiality of media much effort is put into the rendition of near-real feeling of the four elements' individual intrinsic qualities. Thus the quality of airiness, fluidity, heaviness, heat and warmth are simultaneously experienced in the paintings.

⁴ The tradition of forest monks who voluntarily choose to follow a more austere way of life dates back to the Buddha. Besides Thailand, this tradition still exists in Laos and Myanmar.

⁵ The twelve links of the principle of dependent origination are: ignorance (*avijjā*) → mental formation (*saṅkhāra*) → consciousness (*viññāna*) → mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*) → six sense-bases (*salāyatana*) → contact (*phassa*) → sensation (*vedanā*) → craving (*tanhā*) → clinging (*upādāna*) → becoming (*bhava*) → birth (*jāti*) → decay-and-death (*jarā-marana*).



Some of his more political works from the early and mid-seventies, for instance, the work entitled “Where there is exploitation, there is resistance, ten deaths, arises a hundred thousand” (1976/BE 2519) too follow the dhammic pattern. Thus, although the individual title of the work and the content or more specifically the symbolic representation of resistance through metaphors like tightly clasped fists and bullet marks suggest his political stance and demand for social justice, yet the overall depiction of the theme in monochromatic tone of mild greenish and ultramarine defies the overtly political statement and suggests more of a mindful resistance that harbors no hatred for the exploiter or the power holder. This fact will be clear if Chokchai’s political works are juxtaposed alongside works by German expressionists like Max Beckmann and Rottluff where resistance gets forcefully expressed not only in bold black contours but the selection of hues of brown and black renders resistance the garb of both agony and vengeance.



While Chokchai’s expressionism aims for a clear political statement it does so with poise, elegance and objective reflection of the situation. This is the mark of a creative mind that is unique in its attempt at placing mindful awareness at the forefront of the creative process instead of mere artistic indulgence and aesthetic effusions, the hallmarks of most expressionist art in the West or at the global arena. It is this mindful

awareness that stimulates Chokchai to be reflectively conscious of the co-relation of all existence, and to depict this deeply felt understanding through art, not just in the finished art object/work, but through the process involved in begetting the work of art itself in both its entirety and sequential steps.

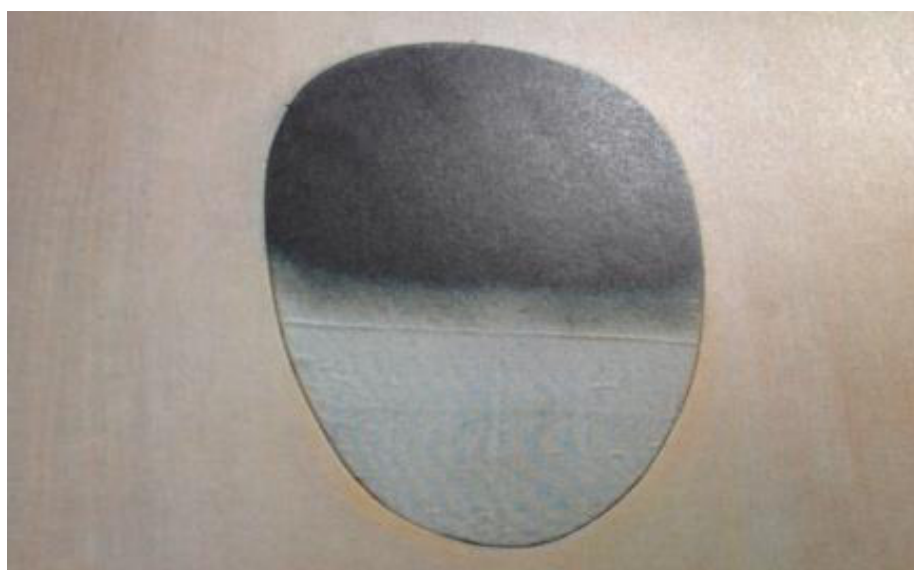
The perspicuity involved in reflective understanding of the law of causality – this exists, that exists – triggered the creative impulse in Chokchai to look simultaneously near and beyond, cause and effect, thought and its expression. This vibrant awareness is meditative and sees what an untrained mind doesn't see, sees through and beyond the husk of the unhusked rice seeds, sees the very breath of life in each tiny individual rice seed and pictorially transforms it into an art object where nature, aesthetic dimensions and spirituality merge and remerge time and again. A tiny seed of rice captures in its form the truth of the law of causality and the artist's depiction of it on a full-blown scale against the backdrop of somber tones reinvigorates the dhammic truth by making it more tangible and tactile, easy to grasp and reflect upon. Thus, the deliberate thematic choices that Chokchai has made, elevates his works to a higher level through the transformative value infused in them; his is not art for art's sake, but art with a purpose.

The transformative power of art is poignantly expressed in a series of paintings and sketches influenced by Chokchai's discovery of dhammic truths through firsthand experience of *vipassanā* meditation practice at Wat Nona Pah Pong. Like the pair of peasants' shoes revealing many truths in the life of Van Gogh, the contemplative mood in Chokchai's works stands for the inner calmness of the artist-meditator; art as a tangible extension of the inner, abstract self and varied intangible, serene moods of the artist. In these series, nature and mind are brought into a perfect union denoting the oneness of the absorbed state of mindfulness with its immediate surroundings. In its natural setting of huge tropical trees, abundant greenery and solitude, Wat Nona Pah Pong, founded by Ajahn Chah is a forest monastery unique in its emphasis on mindfulness cultivation through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation in an environmentally-friendly ambience. The physical and mental proximity to such an environment has inspired Chokchai to produce works infused with the mental state of a practitioner involved in meditation, its vibrant moods of serenity, contemplation, absorption, devotion, piety, non-attachment and equanimity. What is felt deep inside genuinely transforms the self and this inner transformation is manifested through a conscious effort at passing on the effect of the transformative power of *vipassanā* to the beholders. In this attempt lies the urge of the creative self to become fruitfully regenerative and vital.



At the pictorial level, the regenerative tendency gets manifested through depiction of the oval shaped face in multiple textures and tones. In his prime youth, when Chokchai was impressed and influenced by the form of the oval shaped sculptures of Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), the bright tonal rendition in primary hues of red and blue clearly reflected his vibrant state of mind to explore and assert. Once under the influence of meditation, the same oval shaped face regenerated, but with a more subdued tone of brown and grey and made its presence felt not with any assertive claim but with non-attachment, calmness and serenity. The inner mindscape of the artist/meditation-practitioner undergoes tremendous changes, the subtleties of which are symbolically expressed through the gradual erasing of once nearly distinct features on the oval shaped face to blurriness and non-distinctive featurelessness redolent of the state of egolessness and equanimity. In the many repetitive works on the oval shaped face, the flux of inner and outer life gets vividly captured through the juxtaposition of the featureless oval face and the fluttering *yang* seed (Dipterocarpus alatus) that symbolically stands for – playfulness, restlessness, agitation, rapture – qualities of the same mind prior to reaching the state of calm absorption.

At times the tiny Buddha image in crimson occupies a strategic place in the meager space between the dominating oval shape and the *yang* seed in full motion. Perhaps the Buddha image represents the element of faith in the contemplator. Faith is that adhesive force which binds the faithful to his belief and keeps the co-relation between the two intact. In Buddhism there is no room for blind faith. That faith is not passive acceptance and needs to be actively transformed into practice is solemnly asserted by Chokchai in the works where he strategically inserts the sanguine Buddha image between the oval shaped face and the fluttering *yang* seed. While the serene look on the oval shape symbolizes the right effort to gain control of the mind and its endless diversions, the fluttering *yang* seed represents those very diversions in all its flux. True faith arises when the contemplator sees his or her own mind, its fluctuating nature and finally gains control over its distractions, defiled moods, unwholesome indulgences and brings it to a sublime state where peacefulness reigns supreme.





The visualization of the transformative power of meditation practice is thus delineated in the form of featureless and nameless portraiture. In the series “Egg Form in October” tangibility is superseded by a self-transformative mood where mental ecology gets highlighted as against distinct features of a human face resembling individual identity in all its immediateness. The nameless (non)identity parallels the mind of a meditation practitioner whose reflective understanding of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence, suffering and non-substantiality – dismantles individual Ego and the binary of me and the other. Perhaps the ultimate purpose of these featureless oval shaped faces demonstrate the veridicality of ‘voidness’ as an aspectual characteristic of all existents and conditioned states, both in phenomenal and noumenal sphere. The internalization of this voidness which leads to relinquishing of all attachment, including the fallacious clinging to views or any standpoint actually opens up the door to the highest nibbanic state.

What is deconstructed in this series of work is the very concept of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, and the human Ego itself in all its *kammic* dimensions – linguistic (the featureless face is beyond and outside the normal speech act or art of representation), psychological (it is beyond the normal pattern of dichotomous thought processes), social (beyond any particular social group including gender categorization), ethical (it is equanimity *per se* and hence non-assertive of neither good nor evil), cultural garbs and orientations (it is universal in its humanness and so cannot be constricted to any particular race or nationality). Chokchai has very successfully delineated in the series of featureless oval-shaped faces the mindscape in the state of calmness and gradual acquirement of absorption. During contemplation through the challenge to cut off the verbal/thinking mind the metaphysics-of-presence of the individual-self disintegrates and becomes redundant all together. It is as if Chokchai has brought to pictorial realization what monastics and recluses have been asserting through their renunciant lifestyle, practice and discourses on ‘letting go.’⁶

⁶ Compare the paintings with the provocative expression of non-logocentrism in the Dhamma Talk *Study and Experiencing* by Ajahn Chah – “When our innate wisdom, the one who knows, experiences the truth of the heart/mind, it will be clear that the mind is not our self. Not belonging to us, not I, not mine, all of it must be dropped. As to our learning the names of all the elements of mind and consciousness, the Buddha did not want us to become *attached* to the words. He just wanted us to see that all this as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. He taught only to let go”.

At the personal level, this series reminds me of the truths embedded in the numerous dhamma talks of many great renunciant monks of the Thai-Isan Forest Tradition, especially of Ajahn Chah that clearly reflect the fact that the trained mind of a meditation practitioner transcends its own ego and at a higher contemplative level proceeds to deconstruct all dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the other. As is succinctly expressed in one of Ajahn Chah's exhortations – "Give up clinging to love and hate, just rest with things as they are. That is all I do in my practice. Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing."⁷ This inclination towards non-grasping and non-resisting gets powerful expression through the series of featureless oval shaped faces that Chokchai has meticulously worked upon.

Through the merging of nature, aesthetics and spirituality what gets clearly reflected in Chokchai's art is its threefold uniqueness. Firstly, his art is ecological as far as it delineates the elemental forces of nature with its emphasis on the four elements of fire, water, air and earth as well as the inner mindscape representing the mental ecology, especially the representation of changes that take place in the thinking-process when mindfulness is cultivated. Secondly, the aspect of mental ecology in Chokchai's art takes a deliberate spiritual turn both in content and rendition. A deep-felt spiritual inclination constantly guides and leads the choice of theme and experimentation with the media and pictorial surface; hence the meticulous choice of color, texture, surface all suggestive of a reflective consideration instead of random selection and aesthetic indulgence. While the reflective understanding of the principle of dependent origination perpetually guides the artist's creative impulse, the subjective self with its inner calmness gets naturally and spontaneously transmitted onto the pictorial surface and eventually emerges from the enclosed frame of the canvas with a life of its own, ready and willing to transform the viewers' mind. Taking a kaleidoscopic view of Chokchai's art, we can certainly claim that the ecological and spiritual aspects have collaborated to give rise to the transformative element in his works. His art is not creativity just for the mere sake of it, but it is art with a purpose. Art for him is a search for truth, the veridicality of existence; a statement of truth where the transformative gesture reigns supreme.

The entire gamut of Chokchai's artworks creates a feeling of contemplation and transcendence and is a hope for a world that is badly in need of transformation. His canvases are a positive assertion to such propositions like – the process of making art and viewing art can be both a spiritual as well as spiritually rejuvenating act. Just like the rice seeds and the law of causality or dependent origination have a cyclical order, the entire gamut of Chokchai's artworks takes a similar form or pattern of a circular progression than a linear representation of reality. While the thematic content of his early works represents a more individualistic stance of political correctness and a distinct participatory role in society of the artist as an intellectual, his later works attempt to undo this preliminary intention and gradually brings forth a more mellowed down tone of self-reflexivity, non-resistance, non-individualistic and finally to a non-substantialistic (*anattā*) pictorial representation where the voice that was once distinct, bold and strident has now become a voice of an egoless ego, loud in its depth and profound silence.

⁷ From the Dhamma Talk *The Simple Path*.

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