



INQUIRING MIND

A SEMIANNUAL JOURNAL OF THE VIPASSANA COMMUNITY VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2 SPRING 2002



REVEALING THE VISION
ART & DHARMA

Artist Alex Grey has aroused the interest and imagination of many spiritual seekers and practitioners. Although popularly known for his depictions of the human body in "X-ray form" (finely detailed anatomical studies interlaced with overlays of energy systems), his work is a rich amalgam that includes references to ancient Tibetan Buddhist sources. After a life-changing experience of the "Universal Mind Lattice," he decided that a vision of sacred interconnectedness was the most important subject of art. Invariably people tell him that his paintings remind them of their own transcendent experiences.

Grey's paintings have appeared in venues as diverse as the album art of musical groups TOOL, the Beastie Boys and Nirvana; covers for Newsweek magazine; the Discovery Channel; and recently in an article about his work and life in the New York Times. His work has been exhibited throughout the world, including in a recent midcareer retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, and are chronicled in three books: *Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey (Inner Traditions)*; the recently released monograph *Transfigurations (Inner Traditions)*; and his philosophical text *The Mission of Art (Shambhala)*. He lives in New York City with his wife, the painter Allyson Grey, and their daughter, actress Zena Grey.

Steven Rayle and Laura Tennen spoke by phone with Alex Grey at his studio in New York City shortly after September 11.

Shades of Grey: An Interview with a Visionary Artist

Inquiring Mind: How do you anticipate September's events working out in your art?

Alex Grey: The day of the impact and for days after, I did drawings in my journal of the towers exploding and bodies falling—bodies in flames, bodies blown apart, holding hands—seen from the perspective of someone on the ground looking up, the bodies falling toward you; and also from the perspective of the still-standing but burning towers. In the sky above the towers there was a kind of angel-like being. It was huge—a conveyer of souls.

There were a bunch of artists' studios in the World Trade Center towers. I heard about one artist who died in the disaster, an African-American named Michael Richards. Nearly his entire life's work was destroyed—but not all of it. There was a self-portrait sculpture being exhibited elsewhere that looked like St. Sebastian, but instead of being penetrated by arrows, he was being penetrated by airplanes. That's one of the most astonishing precognitive artworks ever made.

Not at that same level of vision, but in my painting *Gaia*, done twelve years ago, there are two airplanes flying over the twin towers. They are on the right side of the painting, where there's a world in flames and

environmental decay featuring my home skyline of New York.

IM: Art and artists of all kinds are going to be needed to help us interpret these events and sort out the fear and confusion. I suppose that's always been a function of art, but it feels especially necessary now.

AG: It has already resulted in a beautiful eruption of street aesthetic. On sidewalks all over New York—which is probably home to the most artists in the world—shrines and collages for loved ones, impromptu sculptures, and pictures have gone up and become the people's memorial. When mortality becomes obvious, there's cause for reflection and deepening one's inquiry into why we're here and what life stands for.

IM: Which brings us to Buddhism.

AG: An exemplary tradition for facing up to one's mortality. That's how I was introduced to Buddhism some twenty-five years ago. My friends Mark Epstein and Ellen Perlman knew that I was working in a morgue. They had been reading the *Path of Purification* by Buddhaghosa, in which he describes many different meditation objects, ten of which are corpses

in various states of decay and dismemberment. Theravada Buddhists went to the charnel grounds to examine their own minds and their attachments to the body and to reflect on the impermanence of the flesh. In the face of the brevity and preciousness of our lives, we become more authentic, and the bullshit falls away. Buddhism encourages us to get on with our practice and become better human beings.

IM: What originally propelled you to work in a morgue? Or was that more happenstance?

AG: No, it was deliberate. I was interested in confronting the reality of our mortality, which seems to be shut away in our culture. We all die, but we rarely see a dead person, except on film or television where there is an aesthetic distance and the smell and feel of the corpse is not palpable.

IM: It sounds almost like Buddha's story, about his first glimpses of sickness, old age and death. It's that same journey.

AG: We're all on that journey, and when we actually do confront getting sick, getting old, having loved ones die, those events send us on the spiritual path.



IM: But you didn't wait for death to visit you. You took it on at the morgue.

AG: I also wanted to study anatomy, which comes from being inspired by artists like Leonardo and Michelangelo. There just aren't that many places for an artist to go and dissect the physical body.

IM: You use a lot of Buddhist images in your work, such as *dorjes* or mantra syllables. Do your meditations include some of the images that you translate into your art?

AG: My practice in the Vajrayana tradition is oriented toward visualizations, like guru yoga with images of Guru Rinpoche. A number of my paintings have been transcriptions of visionary experiences that were catalyzed by doing such contemplative practices: The whole *Nature of Mind* altarpiece I did was inspired by a few years of *dzogchen* practice. One morning it all just arrived as a sequence of visions. As soon as I drew one image, I saw the next one, until I had drawn a complex seven-stage journey of a wanderer discovering the path, being introduced to their own true nature, embodying that truth, and then reentering society. Because of the sequential imagery of a "seeker on the path," that altarpiece is indirectly related to the Zen "Ox-herding Pictures." In the central panel, the practitioner has a visionary ego-transcending enlightenment freakout where the outer sun and inner sun become non-dual. The yogi then brings the light inside himself. It's a little too mysterious for me to dissect with a whole lot of clarity.

My paintings are somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations, or visionary riffs, on Buddhist practice, and so they fall outside of traditional Buddhist art. My work presents a kind of American mongrel Buddhism with influences from Hieronymus Bosch as well as the great Zen masters or *thangka* artists.

IM: In *thangka* art the subject matter and even the proportions of the images are formulaic. That's obviously not what you're doing.

AG: For most of the sacred arts of the various world religions, it is the formulas and prescribed methods that turn the art-making and viewing into legitimate meditative practices. Traditional sacred art is not about being original. It's about cultivating a disciplined relationship to a lineage of wisdom and vision that is preexisting.

Yet there's always some invention that goes into any artwork. If you had ten different people do a painting of Guru Rinpoche according to the same canons of proportion and using the same colors, each one is still going to be individual and different. But traditional sacred arts like icon or *thangka* painting don't emphasize those individual differences. Instead, they seek a relationship with spiritual reality through the practice of the art.

The interpenetration of dimensions of reality in my work relates to *thangka* paintings. *Thangka* artists paint both the natural world—trees, rocks and grass, animals and people—and the visionary dimension, the *sambhogakaya*—*devas* and *dakinis* dancing in the sky, peaceful and wrathful deities surrounded by flames, or a Buddha floating on clouds. There may be many mandalas or cosmograms of different kinds within the same picture. The Buddhas inhabit all the

infinite dimensions of being that all of us inhabit but may not be aware of. *Thangkas* help us see those dimensions.

As in *thangka* art, I'm also attempting to evoke the complex interlacing of the physical and subtle visionary dimensions of awareness. By working with the subject of a person meditating and connected with an infinite net of light, or dying with their soul floating away from their body through a tunnel to the clearlight, I'm working with a symbology of light that points toward the causal spiritual ground of being. That's really my point: to try to visually map the dimensions—body, mind, soul and spirit—for both the individual and the collective.

My artwork is based on visions, and since meditative practice is part of my life, it has affected my visions. When I was introduced to vipassana meditation, it was extremely helpful for centering and noticing our nonstop, distracting little voices. I wasn't as attracted to the more ascetic and rigorous Zen meditative practices. Because my mind is a riot of images, I got entranced by the Vajrayana tradition and the sophisticated development of the imagination through Vajrayana practices. And because I am an artist who likes complex and radiantly imagined work, *thangka* art drew me toward Tibetan Buddhism.

Then I read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, studied many texts, and took teachings from different lamas. I became a more serious practitioner after reading John Reynolds' translation of the Guru Rinpoche text *Self-*

Liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness. It brought on a visionary experience unlike any other, really opening me up, and through reading it I also found my teacher, Namkhai Norbu.

IM: Many of your images have an obvious Buddhist or Eastern source, but often they are in the context of a visionary matrix suggestive of the psychedelic experience. Would you care to say anything about visionary substances? I know it's kind of a sensitive subject to talk about in print.

AG: I've always been outspoken in my admission that psychedelics, or as many people prefer to call them these days, entheogens, have played an important role in opening up the spiritual dimensions of my mind. I grew up in a Methodist Christian family that attended church and read the Bible. In my early childhood, I remember staring at a picture of Jesus whose eyes continued staring at me as I walked past it. My parents left the church and turned away from religion and God when I was ten. After we left the church there was kind of a void, and I questioned, "Is there a God or not? Is life completely empty and meaningless?" In my teens and early twenties I was an existentialist atheist, an admirer of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Prior to meeting my wife, Allyson, I was an angst-ridden artist. I'd been doing a number of bizarre performances involving polarities and had gone to the North Magnetic Pole and just returned from that

Continued on page 28



Shades of Grey

Continued from page 9

frozen tundra. I was twenty-one years old and completely broke. I thought, What am I doing? I'm searching for something, maybe I'm searching for GOD. I met Allyson on my first LSD trip. So my spiritual rebirth and meeting my partner for life happened on the same night. I can't turn my back on that. Allyson has been the physical doorway to infinite love, which is God, which is spirit, the transcendental ground of wisdom and compassion from which Buddha taught. If I hadn't tripped with her, I might never have discovered that.

On that first trip, with my eyes closed, I felt like I was spinning in the dark in a spiralic tunnel made of mother-of-pearl. There was a light shining into the curl of this moist tunnel. I was spiraling toward the light, a numinous light just beyond the curve. All of the polarities I had been dealing with previously through my performances were resolved in this tunnel, my "spiritual birth canal," a metaphor for life. Every shade of grey was included in the spiral; it showed me a way that polarities could become united.

IM: Alex Grey!

AG: Yes, I changed my name because of that experience. And I've continued to speak supportively about entheogens because they were important for me and so many others. It's a closeted subject for many in the Buddhist and other spiritual communities. Many people have had mystical experiences through meditation and have not used entheogens. But if there were a proper legal and sacramental setting for them, the use of entheogens could help more people.

Of course, there is no "instant enlightenment," and tripping does not automatically create a more compassionate, wiser person. The rave culture, with its use of ecstasy and acid, has some positive artistic and spiritual side benefits. But it also has the potential for an utterly hedonistic immersion in samsara without integrating the love and insights into one's daily life.

IM: So an entheogen may not be a path unto itself but rather a way to inform one's own path, if one is doing the work.

AG: Yes. It's a powerful spiritual tool, though not right for everybody.

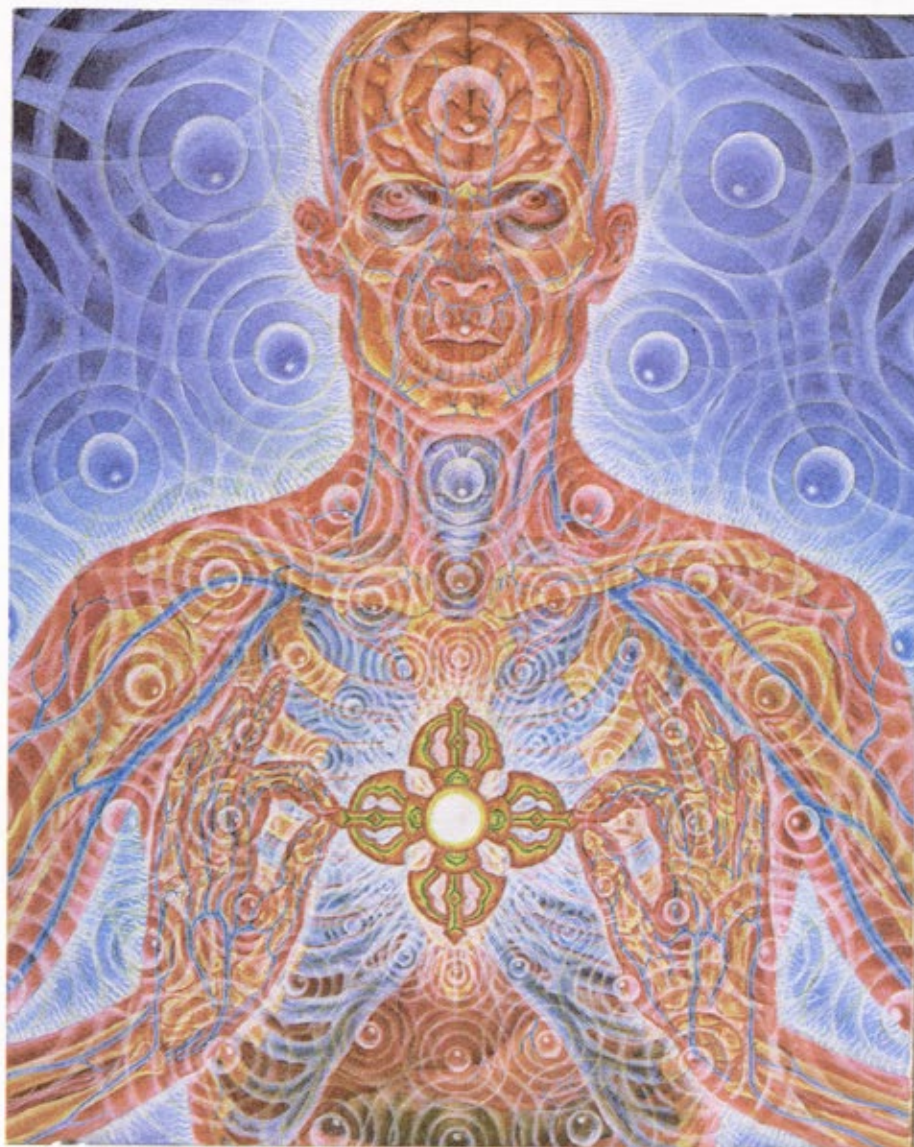
IM: Any projects you'd like to share with the readers?

AG: I worked with a great fellow named Allan Hunt Badiner on a book of essays and artwork called *Zig Zag Zen* about Buddhism and psychedelics [see review on page 35]. Essayists include Jack Kornfield, Lama Surya Das, Rick Fields and many American Buddhist teachers. Artists include Francesco Clemente, Mark Rothko, Mariko Mori and many other visionaries whose works relate to Buddhist practice or the use of entheogens.

IM: How about the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors and your new book, *Transfigurations*?

AG: The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors will be a permanent public space for my work *Sacred Mirrors* and others of my most appreciated pieces of transformative art. We're designing a new sacred architecture for the chapel. It will be a space for contemplation, cultural events and ceremonies, housing a vision of tolerance and reverence for all life and encouraging the spiritual transformation of each individual. It will be a place of initiation, a space to birth a new understanding of World Spirit.

Transfigurations, my new art book, goes into themes presented first in my book *Sacred Mirrors*. *Transfigurations* is designed to reflect the soul's journey through material-world encasement, the pleasures and the despair, and to portray stations toward recovery of the divinely illuminated core. The book spans my entire career as an artist. I've continued to paint in an X-ray-type figurative style, detailing the subtle energies that flow between people and their surroundings. In the last few



years I've been painting a series of visions of figures formed from a meshwork of fire, and eyes that show spiral galaxies through the windows of the grid—rather straightforward symbols of cosmic consciousness.

Many artworks are reproduced and discussed for the first time in *Transfigurations*. These include *Adam and Eve*, two dawn humans holding apples and psychedelic mushrooms with the "serpent" tempter as a seven-headed kundalini snake spirit enticing them onward in the evolution of consciousness, and *The Nature of Mind*, a seven-paneled Buddhist altarpiece introducing a person to their own true nature. There's a sequence of twenty-four images called *Buddha Embryo*, which starts out with a prayer about choosing your parents and becoming a buddha by taking on a physical body. It depicts the stages of embryology from zygote to fetus, showing the multicellular wonder that we are in the full glory of radiance, as if a buddha were incarnating. *Transfigurations* also includes my portrait of the Dalai Lama and other works inspired by Buddhism as well as many more that point toward a universal spirituality. It's my intention to point beyond the specifics that divide us to the universals that unite us. ☯

For a description of the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors project, see www.sacredmirrors.org. For autographed copies of books or posters or other communications, contact Alex Grey at www.alexgrey.com.

Steve Rayle is a medical doctor and writer interested in consciousness and energy. He practices in Tucson, Arizona. Laura Tennen lives in Tucson, Arizona, and as a freelance editor provides editorial services to writers worldwide.

Dark Days Continued from page 21

The short course in *paṭicca samuppāda*, or the Buddha's discovery of dependent origination, can be stated:

When this is, that is; this arising, that arises.

When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.

This teaching is intimately tied to the natural law of karma, or cause and effect. Because we love our freedom to move around, our cars and our petroleum-based lifestyle, there is strife in the Middle East. Conflict among religion is an issue, but oil and wealth and greed are perhaps larger issues. Sad to say, we all worship at the church of consumerism. And the karmic result of this new religious fervor is envy and hatred. If as a nation the United States flaunts its wealth and power, of course people will resent us.

But we also live by man-made laws. Human law encompasses ideas of justice. Perpetrators of terror are due some kind of legal justice. Nations who coerce other nations militarily or economically deserve justice. A friend asks correctly, "Whose justice?" That is an important and unsettling question. Since justice is never pure, we may have to work it out by trial and error. And there will be errors. Simply bringing all parties to justice will involve dogged negotiation, political wrangling and the likely use or threat of force. This is a moot point since the imposition of force by air and land has been going on for months. It was begun long before nonviolent approaches to international persuasion had been exhausted.

But our first responsibility is to attend to our nation's actions. National policy and actions are in fact our own individual action. We and our children, along with the children of Afghanistan, will bear the fruits of a misguided policy of violence. We must find ways to stop the so-called "war on terrorism" and urge our leaders to turn to the United Nations, the World Court and other respected international bodies. Every avenue of dialogue must be tried. It is never too late to cease the kinds of massive violence we are experiencing and save lives. Since we have a voice, we should use it.

At the same time, I know that "justice" in this case will not heal deeper wounds at the root of terrorism. Justice is not really about healing but about attempting to establish balance. Justice herself is depicted as a blind woman holding scales. Blindness may suggest evenhandedness, but it certainly is not the precondition of insight. Only non-hatred and non-exploitation can open us to healing. Each day innocent beings suffer and die around the world just for being born in a particular place, or into a particular religion, or with a certain skin color. When we let go of egoistic and self-centered views, we see right away that these beings are ourselves. So we should practice the perfection of generosity. If, as the Koran says, faith is rooted in patience and gratitude, generosity is itself the root of gratitude. We are grateful for whatever freedoms and well-being we have in the United States. We wish this for all beings, even our bitterest opponents. And so we must act out of generosity, which engenders further gratitude.

The billions of dollars we are spending on hostilities now, the billions we have spent (and earned!) arming all sides, if directed to food and education, would transform the world within our lifetime. Today the U.S. government spends just

To meet another human being
is to be attentive, open, vulnerable.
It requires being in the simplicity
of what you are experiencing...

When you meet another in the
simplicity of being, understanding
and communion will be there.

Vimala Thakar

Psychotherapy for Individuals and Couples

Joan Fenold, MFT is a licensed psychotherapist and consultant in Berkeley and San Francisco. Her work is influenced by and includes intersubjective-relational, existential, Buddhist and non-dual understanding. She is a CAMFT Certified Supervisor and has completed trainings with The Psychotherapy Institute, The Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy & The Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis North.

510-848-3372



one-tenth of one percent of its gross national product on nonmilitary aid, much less than many poorer nations spend. Foreign aid has been shrinking year by year. We could be showering Afghanistan with food, medicine and humanitarian aid. We could help Africa turn the tidal wave of AIDS with the drugs that Western corporations hold patents on. We could sign on to international treaties addressing global warming, land mines and other issues that most of the world's nations agree on. Such action would build real solidarity and friendship in the international community. Generosity is the true policy of kindness. Nothing is lost, and much is gained by enacting generosity instead of war.

Generosity also means responding personally: helping our neighbor who may have lost a loved one on September 11; supporting the women of Afghanistan and those fleeing the bombing; listening to a friend with whom one disagrees; visiting a local mosque. These small acts may never feel sufficient to turn the tide of sorrow, yet they allow each of us to step forward with open hands.

Again and again we must turn to one of many paths of faith. I practice the Buddha Way, which means to me meditating, chanting, dedicating merit and tasting the cool and empty flavor of existence. Every faith tradition I know of is based on wisdom and respect for life. At their core, each upholds the principle of avera, non-hatred. The notion of "my religion" gets us all tangled up. This practice is hard work. The inner tangle is a painful knot in my breast. I can feel it as I write. The outer tangle winds around me like twisted vines. Manjuri's diamond sword of wisdom can cut through the tangle, but we must wield it with great compassion. So we work from inside out and from outside in. Zen Master Ummon said, "Medicine and sickness cure each other. All the earth is medicine. Where do you find yourself?" Asking ourselves Ummon's question, we very carefully pick up Manjuri's sword without a single thought of violence. Our practice, our struggle, is for the happiness of all beings, that each of us may act for the good of all including ourselves, that we may all live in safety, free from fear and distress. ☯

Thanks to Jon Watts, Gil Fronsdal, Santikaro Bhikkhu, Laurie Senauke and Richard Peterson.

Alan Senauke is a Soto Zen priest and teacher in the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. He lives with his wife, Laurie, and their two children at the Berkeley Zen Center in California. From 1991 to 2001 he was executive director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. He has also been a student and performer of American traditional music for more than thirty years.

INSTITUTE OF IMAGINAL STUDIES GRADUATE SCHOOL & RESEARCH CENTER

M.A. AND PH.D. PROGRAMS IN PSYCHOLOGY A WEEKEND PROGRAM

The Institute's psychology curriculum draws on spiritual traditions, mythology, somatic practices, deep ecology, social critique and expressive arts.

- ◆ Learning Communities meet one weekend per month for nine months and one week in the Summer.
- ◆ Programs are designed to meet the educational requirements for the State of California Psychologist and MFT Licenses.
- ◆ Advanced standing program for students with an M.A. degree.
- ◆ Applicants may enter with a B.A. degree in areas other than psychology.
- ◆ Financial aid is available.

Imagination is the eye of the Soul

— Joseph Joubert

To receive further information on Public Programs or Graduate Programs, please contact the Institute.

LOCATED IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA
47 SIXTH STREET ♦ PETALUMA, CA 94952 ♦ 707-765-1836