



# **ART OF LIVING**

***FROM PHILOSOPHY TO ACTIVE SELF-TRANSFORMATION***

A guide to finding a contemplative discipline that suits you.

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## FROM PHILOSOPHY TO ACTIVE SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Why the art of living? How does a life from that perspective differ from a life in which that aspect is missing? I believe the answer to this is the presence, or lack thereof, of *sense and cohesion* in our daily activities. Sense is the aspect of our life that makes our actions cover a broader terrain than our own interest and the cohesion strongly determines whether our actions have a constructive cumulative effect, or in other words, if we are capable of building something during our life and making it bloom.

In this article, I would like to introduce the reader to two publications by authors that have become special to me, not just because of their work, but also because of the way in which they manage to put their writings into practice. First of all, “De verborgen bloei, over de psychologie achter spiritualiteit” (The hidden bloom, on the psychology behind spirituality) by Dr Han de Wit, my Buddhist friend before whom I have taken both my refuge vow and my bodhisattva vow. Secondly, “Filosofie met de vlinderslag, de daoïstische levenskunst van Zhuangzi” (Philosophy with the butterfly stroke, Zhuangzi's daoist art of living) by Woei-Lien Chong, which I believe is *the* guidebook for the art of living for the next few decades.

I believe the information in these two books form the blueprint for life as I have been able to shape it for myself: a life full of joy, despite the many bumps on my path. Because that is the major value of a life led from the perspective of the art of living: it enables us to wear both good times and bad equally as jewellery. Because that is the difference with a life led from a non-spiritual or egocentric perspective in which a person circles their own fears and desires, bounced back and forth between hope and fear and a life led from courage, fearlessness and warriorhood, the domain of the art of living.

The key to such a life is in finding one or more contemplative disciplines that can function both as a guideline and an anchor point in our life. Guide and reference in a time in which opportunism and consumerism predominate and an ideological bankruptcy looms. This can be found in a number of activities, as long as they meet certain conditions. One of the most important conditions is the *absence* of rivalry, competition and short-term goals and the *presence* of a teacher or guide. The disciplines need to act as a road or path along which we can shape our life.

## CONTEMPLATIVE DISCIPLINES AS METHODS OF ACTION

The practise of activities that serve as support for our desire to lead a more spiritual or enlightened life

is a well-known

phenomenon within

Buddhist teachings.

By connecting ourselves to these disciplines with a

high degree of

commitment, they will

influence us and we will

start to experience a very

therapeutic effect.

The refuge vow marks the beginning of the Buddhist

path, while the

bodhisattva vow marks

the access to the

Mahayana Buddhism.

## Conditions for the art of living

What exactly are the conditions that determine whether we are practising the art of living or whether it is a voluntary pastime? We have seen above that the activities themselves need to have a number of features and, perhaps more importantly, lack certain features, if they are to qualify for the label of *contemplative discipline*. However, there is another thing that is crucial in making this distinction: the motivation with which we approach and/or practice a certain activity. As Meister Eckhardt already stated in the 14th century: "There are no sacred labours... We make the labours sacred" (or not, of course... M.J.). The important book "Spiritueel materialisme doorsnijden" (Cutting Spiritual materialism) by Chögyam Trungpa also extensively addresses the human, individual motivation for practise, and it turns out to be crucial to the type of fruits the practice will bear.

Nowadays, if we come across an activity that appeals to us, we often think "*I'll take care of this in no time*", not necessarily because of laziness, but from the idea that it is I, or the person itself, who will carry out the discipline and have a certain amount of control over it. We often find encounter this dualistic idea when formulating our motivation, us versus the other, in this case an activity.

How big is the surprise when it turns out that with a contemplative discipline, we are not supposed to take care of it at all, but that it is supposed to "*take care of us*". In other words, we are supposed to be guided by the meaning of the discipline and what its practice does to us. It could very well be something different from what we had hoped at first...

Another necessary aspect of a contemplative discipline is the fact that we make the decision to keep practising this activity for the rest of our lives, instead of thinking 'well, we'll see how long I'll enjoy it...' or 'gee, I don't know...!', 'yes, but...!'

In other words, we create the space for the discipline in order to experience its effects to the fullest. A life path filled with the art of living!

What is actually being sketched out in these aspects is the necessity of a certain modesty, a certain degree of openness regarding the effects of the practise. If we follow the path filled with our own expectations and desires, these disciplines will have little to no effect on us, other than us sometimes enjoying ourselves or becoming annoyed and sometimes not, and we would be back at an opportunistic approach. Humility and the willingness to make ourselves "empty" before starting down a path is therefore found in all of contemplative literature, regardless of the specific origins.

When we think of a contemplative discipline, we might first think of things such as Meditation, Tai Chi, Aikido and such, but if we look at the aforementioned conditions, it turns out there are far more activities that qualify for this label. For example, playing a musical instrument is another such thing. A certain instrument is often "chosen" at a young age, without being able to recall that motivation today. We will often say that we probably "intuitively" made a decision. If we then keep playing that instrument for a longer time and continue down the rest of the path that comes with it, if you will, i.e. learning the basic techniques, exploring the other study material etc., it seems a similar development occurs inside of us as the one we have seen before. Every musician will agree that from time to time the instrument of his/her choice seems to have a will of its own and that all your attempts to force your will upon the instrument only seem to have the opposite effect and that humility is the only thing that seems to work at that point. This phenomenon also has a more esoteric version in the form of the ancient Zen story of "taming the ox", in which going down a contemplative or spiritual path is nicely illustrated from start to finish.

We have now also introduced a term, 'spiritual', an often-used and highly coveted word in these modern times. As soon as we add this term to anything, it immediately sounds worthy of recommendation, regardless of what it is about. In this context, it is therefore imperative to further study and define this term. To do so, I like to use a description from the books of Dr Han de Wit. He explains the term using various perspectives from which you can observe the world around you. The so-called *mundane* or *egocentric* perspective and the *spiritual* perspective. In the first perspective, our perception is primarily formed by that which we wish to see, and is formed by our own needs and desires, often at that specific time as well. If we observe the world from a spiritual perspective, we try to look at the situation more as a whole and we try to create room for every element present there, instead of only our own self-interest. In that sense, it is this perspective or this view that brings us more and more into contact with our humanity and our ability to lead a meaningful and cohesive life, which is of vital importance in experiencing our life as *art of living*.

We see the same in the visual arts, regardless of the type of discipline. Every serious professional artist knows a similar development with regard to his/her work. The constant dialogue/confrontation with a work of art follows an identical pattern and the eventual outcome or design of the work will have changed its appearance several times over the course of the creative process. So the same human qualities and skills of modesty and humility will be developed here as well, often regardless of whether people want it or not...

Of course, there are countless activities that can be experienced in a similar manner, including the different performing arts, theatre, ballet and other forms of dance. It is up to the practitioner to find out and determine whether his/her activity is included in the term 'art of living'.

However, there is an area that we have to seriously consider, and that is how our decisions as an adult will determine the future decisions of our children. After all, as an adult, we are capable of making independent decisions on our life path, and although a certain kind of upbringing has a stimulating or restricting effect on choosing a spiritual life path, we are still free to do so. It is this fact that places opportunism in a wholly different light. As adults, we are the role models of our children, and we will have to guide them through our actions, meaning that through the choices we make in practice, more so than through what we say and claim. So if we want our children to make choices through humanity and an open view of the world and all its phenomena, we will have to teach them that. This means that we have to expose them to matters that promote these elements and protect them from matters that oppose them. The latter in particular will be looked at with suspicion nowadays. In a time of wealth of distractions and possibilities, it may at first seem criminal to keep some of these "gains of modern society" from children, but we would do well to be very careful of what we bring our children into contact with. Not for a substantive or moral reason, but for what it does to the mind of this vulnerable group. The choice of a constructive, mind-expanding art of living is strongly impeded if a child only comes into contact with opportunism and consumerism during their upbringing, with a lack of a healthy counterbalance.

So we have to teach the child to "distinguish and connect", as the *I Ching* so aptly puts it. However, this will only be successful if we ourselves make such choices and offer their results to the reality of the child. There is no sense in simply talking about it, just as there is no sense in speaking of a contemplative discipline without taking note of it in the practical reality. We will have to "start acting contemplatively". Practise it ourselves and sharing the results with our immediate surroundings, with our own children first.

Unfortunately I have to say that I am often confronted in my work with the absence of any notion of this matter; perhaps understandable, but no less worrying. We as parents will have to protect the next

generation from ideological bankruptcy and offer them sufficient alternatives to make healthy and well-informed choice on their life path. That is our duty.

If we succeed, we and our children will be one step closer to a more enlightened society and one step closer to securing our acquired mental wealth instead of squandering it more and more.

We live happily in a time in which it is not only possible to obtain all kinds of different nonsensical information, but information regarding the art of living and the contemplative disciplines is also amply available. Let's take that knowledge with both hands to create a healthy counterbalance. The more information is available, the more careful we will have to handle it. Our country also has an extensive selection of disciplines we can practise in this context in order to equip ourselves for this fine task even more.

I hope this article can be of service to you in the progress on the paths you have chosen. Seek and thou shalt find...

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