The Art of Presence:
Contemplation, Communing and Creativity

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Anne O’Keeffe
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This is to certify that:

(1) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the MASTER OF CHOREOGRAPHY (by Research) except where indicated.

(2) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

SIGNED BY:

Anne O’Keeffe

DATE:
The Art of Presence:
Contemplation, Communing and Creativity

1. Introduction

Real spirituality has its feet in the mud and its heart in heaven.

Leonard Cohen¹

This writing reflects on the making of a dance theatre work called *Song of Longing* and is an exploration of the intimate relationship between spirituality and creativity. *Song of Longing* was presented at the Victorian College of the Arts from July 9-12, 2008 with performers Karen Berger, Melissa Jones, Kate Middleweek, Dianne Reid and myself. The work was made in collaboration with the cast, who participated in a process centred on improvisation. *Song of Longing* was a synergy of dance and unaccompanied singing.

This writing is an investigation of my ongoing exploration of movement, singing and improvisation, informed by Buddhist philosophy. Both the writing and the performance mirror an embodied practice - making tangible themes and concepts that have emerged into consciousness. In the following, I draw out central interests including the ‘life-world’ of the artist and its influence on the creative process, the concepts of spirituality, spirit and ‘flow’, the experiential focus of this inquiry, improvisation as presence and the value of art as healing and therapy.

Though I write with the subjectivity of the practitioner, I aim to draw on the broader fields of research in these areas and to connect with the creative practices of other artists. To this end, a conventional survey of the literature has been augmented by the unconventional – including writings and teachings on Buddhism and other spiritual practices, documentaries

and visual art. Interviews with artists in Australia and India and thoughts from the performers are also included. Woven together, these modes of research have formed a rich tapestry of inquiry and awareness.

1.1 Art and the Life-World

It is important to give context to this writing by outlining the life experience, or ‘life-world’, which led to the Song of Longing project. The ‘life-world’, as Husserl asserts, is ‘…the world of our immediately lived experience…’. My life experience profoundly influenced the project – it was the ‘field’ that nourished a deeper engagement with spirituality and led to the recognition of its centrality in my creative practice. This subjective experience clarified values, thoughts and ideas, inspiring the creation of a work to explore and frame them.

The project was precipitated by encounters with mortality: over a two-year period, my father and two other close family members died. I recognised that the only constant in life seemed to be loss and change and that I had no control over this. The awareness of death became a spiritual turning point: it caused me to look at my life, to see it as finite and to ask questions about what I was doing and where I was going. Above all, I had a deep recognition of impermanence and a profound sense of groundlessness.

This encounter with death inspired a deeper interest in the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, which I had been studying for eight years. Buddhism threaded itself through my life and arts practice – as improviser, performance-maker and teacher. I pondered intersections between spirituality and creativity in private studio practice - through improvisations in dance and song, accompanied by writing. Through an embodied exploration, I began to recognise parallels between Buddhist philosophy and creative practice, motivating me to begin a project that was initially a meditation on mortality.

1.2 Contemplation and Consciousness

Spiritual practice, in our predominantly secular society, is the exception rather than the norm. The topic of spirituality can at times evoke negative responses - from misunderstanding, to fear and cynicism - based on one’s view of religion. However, I seek to provide context for this research by defining my perspective on spirituality and the spirit. In my experience, spirituality is the personal, subjective dimension of religion, primarily concerned with one’s ultimate nature and purpose.

Spirituality involves contemplation and cultivation of one’s inner life, in the quest for self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Spirituality involves practices, such as meditation, which encourage embodied dialogues with sensations, emotions, thoughts and perceptions, with the goal of experiencing integration and harmony in oneself, and relief from pain and suffering. In many spiritual practices, one aims to transcend the egoistic self, in order to discover one’s ‘true’ sense of self, or the truth of one’s own being.

Spiritual practice emphasizes commitment to others, to the broader community and the environment. As the Dalai Lama suggests, it aims to bring into balance ‘…the pursuit of our own happiness and that of others.’\textsuperscript{3} Universal values such as truth, morality, empathy and compassion are promulgated, encouraging the possibility of non-dualistic relationships with others. As psychotherapist Thomas Moore asserts, through spirituality ‘…we reach for consciousness, awareness, and the highest values…’\textsuperscript{4} striving for an ethically mindful way of being and living in the world.

Spirituality concerns itself with that which is perceived to be beyond time and the material


world. Mythologist Joseph Campbell suggests that all people are searching for a way of experiencing the world that opens us to ‘…the transcendent that informs it, and at the same time informs ourselves within it.⁵ Spirituality has the potential, therefore, to expand one’s awareness of ‘…the dimension of mystery…to realize the mystery that underlies all forms.’⁶

The word spirit is derived from the Latin spiritus, meaning ‘breath’, to blow or to breathe.⁷ In today’s usage it refers to the ‘…animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms.’⁸ It is the incorporeal, immaterial substance or energy present in all living things, usually implying sentience, intelligence and consciousness.⁹

**1.3 Spirit of the Moment**

This sense of spirit as vital life energy found in all matter resonates for me. In my creative practice, this notion of spirit is experienced through improvisation. When present in the moment and trusting the body, an animated, vital force becomes apparent. This vitality is discovered when every cell is engaged in the act of moving and attention is fully focused. In these moments, the sense of spirit as consciousness is present - I am aware of an immaterial energy that animates, yet transcends the corporeal body in which I am contained.

Spirituality seeks to address the problematic mind-body dichotomy, aiming for integration between all aspects of the self. Improvisation can also provide the experience of integration - mind and body in harmony, in a state of constant flow. In my experience, this state of flow can feel as if the body is a vessel - as if the movement is coming through, and not

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⁶ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid. Available online).
⁹ Ibid. Available online).
from the body. Dance therapist and film-maker Michelle Mahrer suggests this is similar to riding a wave:

…it’s like a surfer…they talk about finding the moment where they are just one with the wave – we’re talking about the same thing when we’re just one with the dance…I’m no longer the instigator of this dance, but I’m just riding the dance itself. I am the dance. I’m both the dancer and the dance.10

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi describes ‘flow’ as a mental state, in which ‘…psychic energy flows effortlessly.’11 His concept of ‘flow’ was developed following interviews, in which several people described their ‘flow’ experiences using the metaphor of a water current carrying them along.12 Flow is characterized by a ‘…state of complete involvement…’13 - an absorbed concentration in which one is fully present in the moment. Action merges with awareness – subject and object are fused in non-duality. Awareness becomes heightened to the point of transcendence - where there is an absence of ego or self-consciousness. Instead, there is a feeling of being ‘…part of something greater.’14

In improvisation practice, I perceive this absorbed concentration, the dynamic sensation of flow and the sense of being part of something greater, as spiritual concepts. These concepts are often referred to in spiritual literature as touching the ‘Divine’. The Divine generally refers to powers or forces that transcend human capacities, ‘…relating to, or proceeding directly from God.’15 At times, I experience the state of flow in improvisation as transcendent. The sense of ‘self’ or ego drops away, replaced by a deep connectedness to the fabric of life, of which all things are a part. Improviser Nancy Stark Smith articulates

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13 Ibid. Available online).
14 Ibid. Available online).
this phenomenon as an ‘…energetic meeting (that) seems to touch the soul along with the body.’\textsuperscript{16} For me, this touching of the soul, in the Kantian sense, suggests the embracing of the unknowable, as well as the knowable.\textsuperscript{17}

1.4 Sensation as Communion

For the purpose of this study, my primary spiritual reference point will be the philosophies of Tibetan Buddhism; augmented by other Eastern and indigenous spiritual beliefs. His Holiness the Dalai Lama asserts that, in Buddhism ‘…the purpose of spiritual practice is to fulfil our desire for happiness.’\textsuperscript{18} Through meditation, or ‘mindful-awareness’, Buddhists are called upon to explore what Pema Chodron calls ‘…the depths of human suffering and human wisdom, coming to know both these elements thoroughly and completely.’\textsuperscript{19} In Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness and presence are pathways to awareness - achieved through embodied dialogues with the breath, sensations, feelings and perceptions.

The Buddhist attention to perception and emphasis on embodiment has parallels with the theory of phenomenology. The practice of meditation is a corporeal dialogue, encouraging the practitioner to engage with feelings, thoughts and perceptions through the sensations of the body. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes meditation as the practice of presence, a way of ‘…keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality…’\textsuperscript{20} Attention to the breath is vital in this process, as it is the bridge that ‘…connects life to consciousness, (and) unites your body to your thoughts.’\textsuperscript{21} In my experience, the process of meditation has the affect of deepening awareness of myself, and the world around me. The connection with the fabric of life deepens – there is a sense of oneness with all that is.

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\textsuperscript{16} Albright, A. C., Gere, David (2003) \textit{Taken by Surprise; a Dance Improvisation Reader.} (Middletown, USA, Wesleyan University Press). A Subjective History of Contact Improvisation; Notes from the Editor of Contact Quarterly, 1972-1997 by Nancy Stark Smith. Pg 156.

\textsuperscript{17} Kant, I. (2008/1781) \textit{Critique of Pure Reason,} (M. Muller, Trans.) (USA, Penguin).


\textsuperscript{19} Chodron, P. (1997) \textit{When Things Fall Apart; Heart Advice for Difficult Times,} (Boston, USA, Shambhala Publications). Pg 17.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. Pg 15.
In improvisation the process is similar. Improvisation can be viewed as moving meditation, involving, as improviser Ellen Webb suggests ‘…being fully awake to the present moment.’\textsuperscript{22} It can be seen as embodied mindfulness – a process of attention, awareness and flow, through an integrated body/mind. Through improvisation, it is possible to enter an energetic conversation with oneself and one’s environment, through pathways provided by the senses, feelings and perceptions, and heightened by attention and reflection.

Primarily, therefore, this study was a phenomenological or empirical one - involving a deep, embodied engagement with a field of life experience, a choreographic process and with the research this provoked. The process was initially subjective, with the sensing, intuited body informing a growing awareness. The creative process was a phenomenon with which I conversed through the body, breath and senses, becoming one with it. Merleau-Ponty describes this process of sensory immersion:

\begin{quote}
As I contemplate the blue of the sky…I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into its mystery…I am the sky itself…my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

In this theory of phenomenology, deep sensory immersion involves the dissolving of duality and the integration of subject and object, similar to Csikszentmihályi’s theory of ‘flow’. Merleau-Ponty draws parallels between the dissolving of duality and spirituality, asserting that in the same way a Christian perceives the sacrament as an opportunity to be one with God, so too ‘…sensation is literally a form of communion…’\textsuperscript{24} with the perceived object. The concept of sensation as communion resonates deeply for me. In both improvisation and spirituality, I am led, through sensory dialogue, into communion with the

\textsuperscript{22} Albright, A. C., Gere, David (2003) \textit{Taken by Surprise; a Dance Improvisation Reader}, (Middletown, USA, Wesleyan University Press). For the Taste of an Apple; Why I Practice Zen by Ellen Webb. Pg 240.


focus of my attention. As Merleau-Ponty asserts, the body is central to this process - it ‘…is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is…the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’.’

The creative process was further deepened through collaboration. A generous community of cast members and colleagues contributed their feelings, thoughts and imaginings to the evolving work. We were mutually committed to identifying, understanding and interpreting our experience in relation to particular themes and ideas. The quest for objectivity involved, as phenomenologist David Abram suggests ‘…a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects.’ This multiplicity of sensations and perceptions gave rise to the phenomenon of the work, creating a ‘…single, ever-shifting fabric.’ The collaborative process was an inter-subjective, interdependent one - a complex web of dialogue and communion, grounded in life experience.

1.5 Art and Spirit

This research was profoundly influenced by a sabbatical to India in July 2007, with the intention of interviewing artists about spirituality and arts practice. Indian classical dancer and singer, Sriparna Adhikari (Rita), suggested that most art in India was integrated with spiritual pursuit. Her concerts began with an invocation to Hindu Gods, with the intention of bringing their qualities into the performance and ‘…identifying oneself with truth.’

Rita asserted that the aim of Indian dance and music was to ‘…connect with, soothe and sanctify the inner being of self…’ - creating the ground for a dialogue with the Divine.

Artistic Director of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, Lobsang Santen, expressed his commitment to preserving and promoting Tibet’s unique tradition of performing arts – such as Tibetan opera, folk dance and music. Lobsang described Tibetan folk dances as

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25 Ibid. Pg 235.
27 Ibid. Pg 39.
29 Ibid. 10/7/07.
‘…prayers to Buddhist Gods or Goddesses…’\textsuperscript{30}, embodying peace and compassion in flowing, reverent movements. Tibetan opera was described as complex morality tales, similar to the Ramayana, articulating Buddhist philosophy through dance, drama and mask. Lobsang saw Buddhism as part of the fabric of life, with Tibetan arts ‘…reflecting Buddhist principles.’\textsuperscript{31}

Norbulingka Institute, focusing on Tibetan visual arts, also demonstrated this communion between spiritual practice and art through woodwork, silk painting, sculpture and appliqué. Many of these artists were Buddhist monks, whose monastic studies included engagement with arts such as mandala construction, decorative painting and stylised dance/drama. In this context, the intention of art was to create ‘…an atmosphere of peace…’\textsuperscript{32} inspired by Buddha’s teachings. In Buddhism, spirituality found expression through prayer and art.

Through interview and observation, I noticed the presence of spiritual belief in Hindu and Buddhist art. Art and spirituality were interdependent - informing and perpetuating each other in intimate communion. Qualities of peace and harmony seemed emphasised, indicating that the ‘…transcendence of all dualities…is synonymous with the ultimate spiritual goal of Hindus and Buddhists.’\textsuperscript{33} All this affected me deeply, inspiring me to strive towards a life in which the spiritual and artistic were entwined. This was a process of recognition, affirmation and celebration.

\subsection*{1.6 Art as Antidote}

The integration of spirituality and art in India provoked me to observe Australian culture in a new way. I noticed a world of fracture and discord, full of people who had, as Joseph Campbell put it, ‘…stopped listening to themselves.’\textsuperscript{34} Spiritual teachers, philosophers and psychologists, such as Thomas Moore, suggested that we lived ‘…in a time of deep

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Santen, L. (2007) Interview with Lobsang Santen: Spirituality, Arts Practice and Performance. IN A. O'keeffe (Ed.) Dharamsala, India. 27/7/07.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 27/7/07.
\item \textsuperscript{32} (2009e) Norbulingka Institute Webpage. Available online (accessed 5/2/09).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Moyers, B. (1988) Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth. USA, Mystic Fire Video. Episode 1: The Hero’s Adventure.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
division, in which mind is separated from body and spirituality is at odds with materialism.'

We seemed increasingly disconnected from each other and our environment, with suicides, divorce and crime rates escalating and, as social analyst Pria Viswalingam asserted ‘… a false reality built around…consumerism, that really isn’t in touch with what’s most important in being human.’

He laments ‘…we’ve nearly given up on God as a guide. We’ve replaced a complex pursuit of the Divine, with the mundane pursuit of the worldly.’

From my perspective, Western values were placing great emphasis on material gain, with little emphasis on inner peace and happiness. Consumerism and technology seemed to be taking us away from inner contemplation, into a never-ending spiral of desire and acquisition. There was degradation of the environment all over the world, widening gaps between rich and poor and wars over limited resources. I read voraciously, seeking reasons for these dilemmas. Moore asserted: ‘When soul is neglected, it doesn’t just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning.’

Our spirits seemed to be crying out for sustenance.

From my perspective, making art with a spiritual focus could be viewed as an antidote to some of these challenges. Art could be seen as a connective pathway into the self, allowing inner contemplation to be the basis for outer expression. A collaborative creative process was an opportunity to develop relationships with others, rather than isolation. The process of finding common ground with a group of like-minded artists could cultivate some of the more ethical human values, such as empathy and compassion. Artistic endeavour could help broaden awareness of our interdependence with the environment – it could even be an exploration of the great mystery of the Divine. The process of making of art, as art therapist

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37 Ibid.

Shaun McNiff suggests, could be ‘…the structure for a sustained therapeutic experience.’\textsuperscript{39} This was my intention for \textit{Song of Longing}.

\section*{1.7 Integrating Art and Spirit}

\textit{Song of Longing}, therefore, became an exploration of the longing for wholeness and connection with the environment, with oneself, with others and the Divine. It investigated the quest for ‘enlightenment’ or awareness, through isolation and inter-connectedness, transition and transcendence. \textit{Song of Longing} was influenced by spiritual cultures, where art represents ‘…the unending human quest for spiritual sustenance and inspiration.’\textsuperscript{40}

Music for the piece consisted of ‘songs of longing’ sourced from Tibet, Spain and Bulgaria. The circular, repetitive form of the chant grounded this vocal landscape. Often used in spiritual practice, the chant is intended to make the mind more peaceful and receptive, thereby ‘…preparing the ground for transformation’.\textsuperscript{41} Original compositions, improvisations and environmental sounds augmented this, with the purity of the human voice the emotional centre of the work.

Improvisation was the heart of the creative process. This began with discussion of key themes, often inspired by stimulus such as visual art, writing or poetry. Improvisation would result, leading to further discussion and score refinement. According to content, some sections remained improvised in performance, while others became set. My intention was to activate material from the deep unconscious, prioritising presence and authenticity.

My overall intention was to place the audience in a meditative, sensing, feeling state, taking them on a journey from disconnection and isolation, to connection, happiness and peace. \textit{Song of Longing} was intended as a ritual in which movement and music were medicine for the soul - an antidote for a disconnected world.

\textsuperscript{40} Menzies, J. (2007) \textit{Goddess; Divine Energy}, (Sydney, Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales). Pg 9.  
\textsuperscript{41} Rinchen, G. S. (2007) Tibetan Buddhism Oral Teaching. IN A. O’keeffe (Ed.) Dharamsala India. 30/7/07.
This writing investigates the making of art from a spiritual and creative perspective. Through an experiential exploration, parallels are drawn between aspects of spiritual inquiry and creative process - such as impermanence, interdependence, identity, transformation, mindfulness and presence. Each chapter explores threads of awareness that form the fabric of an artistic and spiritual journey. The articulation of the process reflects, as philosopher Albert Hofstadter suggests ‘…the search for and…finding of truth of being and, ultimately, of truth of being of the spiritual person himself, truth of spirit.’

Chapter 2 explores our connection with nature and art as manifestation of the ephemeral. Chapter 3 discusses art as an exploration of identity, personal evolution and transformation. Chapter 4 investigates art as collaboration, community and communion. Chapter 5 explores the concepts of presence, transcendence of ego and non-duality.

But first to Chapter 2 and the consideration of the transient beauty of life and art…

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2. Impermanence and Interdependence

Live in simple faith...
Just as this trusting cherry
Flowers, fades and falls

Issa

Precipitated by experiences of death in my family, the *Song of Longing* creative process began with an interest in the transitory nature of life. I noticed time passing and seasons changing, keenly aware of the temporality of existence. Questions arose, fuelled by the recognition of aging and mortality. How should I live when loss was inevitable? How could I prepare for death? How could I live my life passionately and truthfully? I found myself living much more in the moment, noticing my surroundings and feeling a persistent longing to be in the natural environment. I sought opportunities to be in quiet contemplation, with the past and future collapsing into the moment. As a creative practice, I would sit and write:

13/5/07
* I sit and watch the sunset. It begins golden orange at its core, the clouds above flaming and elongating in the wind. The sunset is all around me – 360 degrees of it. To my right, left and behind are soft lilac clouds tinged with deep pink, these deepen as the sun falls, then pale off gradually to the softest of grey, with a delicate blush of musk…

Contemplation in the natural environment became a daily ritual. I noticed a desire to immerse myself in my surroundings - to comprehend nature, time and the seasons through the body, breath and senses. From day to day, I became more attuned to my environment, appreciating its beauty and complexity. I watched the sky, the birds and the changing colours of the sea. I observed the cycle of nature outside my window, as a plum tree evolved from bud, to flower, to fruit. I noticed a sensation of conversing with the environment, feeling my body, as phenomenologist Abram describes ‘…ceaselessly

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This process of spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself…'. This process of connection with nature began to stimulate trust in life’s endless cycle of growth, transformation and renewal.

Many spiritual practices encourage communion with nature and celebrate the dynamic cycle of the seasons. The Japanese animist philosophy of Shintoism for example, is deeply connected to the earth. With its roots stretching back to 500BC, Shintoists venerate natural objects, such as rivers, mountains, rocks and trees. ‘Shinto’ means ‘…the way of the Gods…’ and is ‘…a religion of the heart…’ - a personal spirituality, rather than a religion adopted by the state. Shintoists believe that supernatural powers created natural wonders and that the spirit of these beings, and their Divine attributes, still exists within them. As such, the objects themselves are revered and paid due respect.

Spiritual practices such as this emphasise our interdependence with the environment, encouraging respect for the natural world. Conversing with the environment, I experienced a softening of duality, allowing a deep connection with nature through the body and the senses. From my perspective, this was a spiritual process, enabling me to contemplate an inner sense of self, while simultaneously deepening my connection with nature. I found myself exploring Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘sensation as communion’ and began to notice the energy, spirit or consciousness in myself and in the landscape.

This chapter acknowledges the spirit of the landscape and explores the body’s capacity to commune with the environment through the vehicle of the senses. It discusses notions of impermanence, interdependence and the cycle of life and outlines the processes through which these concepts were investigated.

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2.1 Conversations with the Environment

To explore these ideas, I developed an improvised studio practice called ‘Gathering and Sending’. This involved visualizing the studio as a living, breathing organism with which I could converse. On entering the studio, I would improvise with the environment, ‘…gathering energy from the space and sending energy to the space’.48 Imaginatively, the space was visceral, alive. I could affect it and it could affect me, we were of the same fabric. The body became a field of sensitivity - an antenna picking up on the energy, spirit or consciousness inherent in the space. The proximity of one’s body to walls, floor and ceiling, the temperature of air on one’s skin, the sensation of surfaces - all became stimulus for the dance.

This score evolved to include the visualization that I could interact with people who had come and gone from the studio, whose energies still lingered as ‘…unseen forces in the air…’49 or were imprinted in the seemingly immovable brickwork surrounding me. Even in the bricks and mortar themselves could be traces of those who had made the bricks or felled the trees and before that the living earth of the bricks and the living tree of the timber. I found it a profound practice to commune with the space in this way. Through the sensing body, I explored interdependence and non-duality with the environment – I reflected it and it reflected me.

This visualization was enhanced by the notion that my energy could travel beyond myself – that the boundaries of the corporeal body could not contain it. I imagined energy as similar to the vapour trail of a plane passing through the sky, or a bird’s flight path made visible. These images stimulated awareness of the dynamism and subtlety of energy, enabling this conversation to deepen. As improviser Deborah Hay describes, the score became ‘…a dialogue with all there is.’50 Through moving meditation, I felt affected by all things seen and unseen, animate and inanimate. Gathering and Sending became a ritual - the starting

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49 Ibid. 10/5/07.
50 Hay, D. (2000) *My Body, the Buddhist*, (Middletown, USA, Wesleyan University Press). Pg 55. This phrase is the basis for a score Hay uses in her practice.
point of all rehearsals on my own and with others. Reflecting on this score, Dianne Reid suggested ‘…we have the capacity to affect the world beyond ourselves.’

*Gathering and Sending* was informed by Min Tanaka’s *Body Weather* work, which sees dance as a reflection of the constant state of change inside and outside the body. Tess de Quincey, a performer for six years in Min Tanaka’s Butoh company, brought the technique of *Body Weather* to Australia. She describes it as the ‘…energetics of exchange…’ encouraging a deep listening to oneself and the environment simultaneously. De Quincey sees dance as ‘…being in dialogue and…creating environments of exchange.’ Through a *Body Weather* exercise called ‘wind’, she illustrates this process:

…the image is that you are a plant in muddy ground with deep roots
you are pliant, like a reed – with viscosity, juicy but holding emptiness…
your partner gives stimulation into your body as wind
your body follows the point of entrance and the length of the stimulation as far as it lasts…but you can’t refuse
you have to accept.

This exercise, similar to *Gathering and Sending*, suggests an exchange or dialogue between the body and external stimuli, with a focus on authenticity of response. The holding of ‘emptiness’, also a Buddhist term, suggests the receiving, sensing body is completely open to each stimulus, rather than pre-conceiving or planning a response. It suggests a deep listening to inner response and outer stimuli simultaneously and a relaxing of the mind to be true to that response. This parallels *Skinner Release Technique* with which I have also engaged - described as ‘…the dance of letting go.’ Being open and ‘letting go’ allows the

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53 Ibid. Available online.
54 Ibid. Available online.
dancer to be sensitive to ‘...the energies that move through and around us.’

2.2 Spirit of Place

In my experience, Body Weather and Skinner Release Technique both explore the notion of energetic exchange - the dialogue between what is inside the body, with what is outside the body. This notion of conversation with the environment is intrinsic to Aboriginal culture, in which there is no duality between human and landscape. In 1988, I had the experience of living in an Aboriginal community in the Pitjanjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in Central Australia. Every night there were ‘inma’ (corroborees) where performers and audience were transported into a heightened world ‘...where Ancestral beings are manifest, a world where the events of the Ancestral Past are relived, brought into present time.’

I participated in some of these events, learning dances and their accompanying Dreaming stories and song-lines. Many of these described the adventures of a giant Ngintaka (goanna) who, in ancient times, stole a grinding stone and created the surrounding landscape while being chased by tribes’ people. These epic dreaming figures, part human, part animal, left ‘...their essence, their life-force...’ in everything they touched, ‘...making the land itself sacred to those who would follow them...’. These Dreaming stories were ‘...the law in the land...’ and sharing them paid homage to the environment and its spirit-inhabitants.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell, who devoted his life to understanding myths and Dreaming stories of many indigenous, animist cultures, asserted that ‘...what the myths are for is to bring us into a level of consciousness that is spiritual.’ From my perspective, the inma in Pitjantjatjara culture brought performers and audience into a spiritual level of consciousness. Dancers, singers, the living earth and the unseen spirits inhabiting the earth

56 Ibid. Available online).
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
were in communion, entwined in the creative act. This was a dynamic, interdependent conversation in which there was no duality between life and death, landscape and human, art and life.

In contemporary Western culture, we seem, as Abram asserts, to have lost this ‘…ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth.’ Our culture is strongly informed by Judeo/Christian values, central to which is the story of Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden for eating an apple. From my perspective, a symbolic separation occurred between God and Man, God and Nature and Nature and Man in this moment. This duality between the environment, humanity and spirituality has come to define our culture, perhaps contributing to the destruction of much of the planet’s natural habitat, the extinction of flora and fauna and radical changes in our global climate. We have raped and pillaged the living earth on which we rely - as if we are not a part of its fabric - to the point where, as environmentalist Tim Flannery suggests ‘…the situation has become quite dangerous for humanity.’

In Aboriginal culture, however, ‘…the sensuous world itself remains the dwelling place of the Gods, of the numerous powers that can either sustain or extinguish life.’ Based on these beliefs, Pitjantjatjara people respect and pay homage to the nurturing earth through their art, constantly acknowledging and re-affirming their interdependence with it.

2.3 Empathy and Compassion

As the creative process continued, I began to bring representations of my contemplations in nature into the studio, such as stones, shells, leaves and feathers. In Gathering and Sending, our embodied conversations began to extend to the natural environment outside the room, as well as inside. Expanding on earlier visualizations, we consciously sent our energy not just to the walls, but through them – interacting with the clouds moving across the sky, the

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rustling of leaves in the trees and the melodic song of the birds. The danced dialogue inherent in the score became fuller and more inclusive.

While improvising Gathering and Sending, Kate and I also engaged in ‘tonglen’ Buddhist practice. As Buddhist nun Pema Chodron describes, ‘tonglen’ in Tibetan literally means ‘…sending and taking…’ and involves the concept of breathing into the heart, taking in the ‘…pain and suffering of ourselves and others…’ and breathing out love and happiness to all. Its aim is to release ‘…our tight hold on self and to care for others…’ through developing empathy and compassion. The first stage of tonglen, similar to Body Weather practice, is ‘…emptiness or openness…’ – creating the conditions whereby the breath (and the psyche) can accept and alleviate suffering. Kate and I explored tonglen as a visualisation during Gathering and Sending – breathing the environment in and sending healing energy out. This practice further enhanced the score, deepening its qualities of dialogue, interdependence and non-duality.

The awareness of interdependence with the environment prompted me to attribute a natural element to each dancer that would become their ‘totem’. The element related to themes in each of the dancers’ solos and acknowledged the importance of nature in their stories. My intention was to use the element to activate the sense memory and feeling states associated with each story, placing the dancer in the immediacy of the experience. Kate was attributed water, Melissa: wind, Dianne: fire and Karen: earth.

2.4 Fleeting Transcendent Moments

As a consequence of regular engagements with the natural environment, I began contemplating what I called Fleeting Transcendent Moments. In my experience, these moments involved the heightening of one’s senses and the feeling of being fully present in the moment, with the past and future dissolving. They had a transcendent quality to them -

66 Ibid. Pg 55.
67 Ibid. Pg 58.
68 Ibid. Pg 56.
a feeling of being part of something greater than oneself, beyond the limits of material existence. The sense of ‘I’ would disappear, replaced by feelings of connectedness and non-duality with the environment. As Abram articulates, there was also an embodied awareness of the mystery of the universe of which we are a part, ‘…a sense of wonder at fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand.’

I audio-recorded each dancer speaking about similar moments and for each person this was an experience in nature. I asked them to move through the space, while verbally recounting the story – with the intention of going back into the being-ness of the memory. What aspects of the experience were most vivid? What did they see/feel/taste/hear/smell? Could the immediacy of the ‘sensation memory’ be re-created through movement and words?

Binding these stories was the ‘…recognition of the living body’s centrality in all experience…’ and the vital role of the senses when experiencing our environment. In each story, the incorporeal spirit was uplifted by the sentient body’s complete engagement with the natural world. I asked each dancer to create movement that encapsulated their experience and connected them to its sensory qualities. This became the basis of the Fleeting Transcendent Moments section of the piece that began as set phrases, then deconstructed into improvisation. The choice of improvisation as its final ‘form’ reflected an intention to explore the concept of presence and to touch upon the transcendent qualities inherent in each story.

This section culminated in the construction of an ephemeral mandala made with a collection of sticks, stones, feathers, seeds and shells – some from the Pitjanjatjara Homelands. In Tibetan Buddhism, a mandala is a ‘…visual prayer and also a symbolic universe.’ Mandalas are usually constructed from coloured sand, which monks form into intricate patterns. Each grain of sand is ‘…charged with the blessings of the ritual

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process…’ creating a vast storehouse of spiritual energy. Each mandala is a ‘…sacred mansion…’ - home of a particular deity - who symbolically represents and embodies enlightened qualities, such as compassion. The deity, and the mandala, are recognised as pure expressions of the Buddha’s enlightened mind. Tibetan Buddhists believe that through the observation of the mandala, the symbolic meanings and qualities it embodies can be absorbed through the body and into the consciousness of the viewer. The witnessing of the mandala is a kind of nourishing dialogue - allowing the viewer to absorb, integrate and even ‘become’ the qualities it represents.

The mandala in *Song of Longing* was also influenced by the ephemeral art of Andy Goldsworthy, whose work directly participates with nature. His sculptures of leaves, stones, wood, snow, icicles and feathers reflect the transience found in nature, as each work ‘…grows, stays (and) decays.’ Goldsworthy believes that nature is in ‘…a state of change and that change is the key to understanding.’ With reference to his art and Buddhist ritual, our mandala became a way to express the symbolic universe of *Song of Longing* – it was a visual prayer, containing the residue of work made together. Natural objects were placed in radiating patterns within a circle of earth - a simple ritual acknowledging the significance of the natural environment in the piece.

My interest in representing the environment in *Song of Longing* was ultimately to understand and accept the fragile, delicate beauty of impermanence. Time would absorb the mandala, just as it would absorb all things, including the performance itself.

**2.5 Sound, Time and Cycles**

To support these themes of nature, interdependence and impermanence, environmental sounds were used in *Song of Longing* - as stand-alone sound-scores and as support to the live singing. As we had discovered when exploring *Fleeting Transcendent Moments*, nature was the place where we as a cast had felt most present. My intention in using

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73 Ibid. Available online).
74 Ibid. Available online).
76 Ibid. Available online).
Environmental sounds, therefore, was to bring the viewer into a fuller sense of presence by using sounds that evoked memories of contemplation in nature. Environmental sounds supported each soloist with their ‘totem’ element - the sound of a waterfall for Kate, stormy wind for Melissa and a raging fire for Dianne.

Environmental sounds were also used to explore the notion of time. For example, in *Fleeting Transcendent Moments*, all environmental sounds used in the work were layered together, to create a multi-textured, dynamic piece of ‘music.’ Fire and wind was used to ‘wipe the space clean’ – as a sonic means to cleanse the space of all that had gone before, as time eradicates all things.

Birdsong was also used in the piece. On daily walks in my urban environment, hours were spent listening to birds. I noticed the way they seemed to be communicating with the environment around them, with songs signposting the end of a day, or the beginning of a new one. I decided to use a single blackbird’s song at the end of *Song of Longing*, as a metaphor of the cyclical nature of time. For me, this delicate, repetitive song suggested the fragility and continuity of life. It embodied a personal hope that life somehow would continue after death – that some sweet song would still remain, echoing into eternity.

### 2.6 Transience and Eternity

Improvisation was central to the *Song of Longing* process. Complex scores were developed using layers of visual imagery and physical instructions, with some sections remaining improvised and others becoming set, according to their content. *Gathering and Sending* was performed as improvisation – reflecting its content of moment-by-moment interaction with the space and each other. *Fleeting Transcendent Moments* began set in performance, then deconstructed into improvisation, linking back to *Gathering and Sending* - returning to notions of movement as pure energy, transcending time and space. Group sections, such as *Lotus Practice*, had set pathways in space, with the time element shifting in the moment. Songs were also improvised, such as Dianne’s accompaniment - echoing her shifting emotional landscape. With the theme of the ephemeral in the piece, it was logical for improvisation to be central to the process - in this way content and form were integrated.
The Buddhist text the ‘Heart Sutra’ is a teaching, exploring the notion that: ‘Form is
emptiness. Emptiness is form.’ This is an expression of the paradox that all form, or
matter, is ultimately nothing and all ‘nothing’, or emptiness, has the potential, under the
right conditions, to become ‘something’ – to take form. Particularly in the face of time, all
things, all events, are something and nothing simultaneously. Improvisation embraces this
paradox. Complete attention to each moment acknowledges its reality or ‘now-ness’, yet at
the same time each moment evaporates. My commitment to using improvisation in *Song of
Longing* embraced the philosophy of the Heart Sutra. It reflected an acceptance of
impermanence - of time passing and seasons changing - of energy and matter in constant
flux. It also reflected, as Nachmanovich suggests ‘…acceptance, in a single breath, of both
transience and eternity.’ Each moment dissolves, yet time itself is ongoing.

2.7 Evolving Recognitions

*Song of Longing* began as a personal struggle with death, aging and the impermanence of
life. However, as the creative process progressed, awareness of the cycle of life developed,
informed by spiritual practices and indigenous cultures. The piece became an opportunity
to embrace and respect the environment, recognising one’s interdependence with it. One
became aware of the sensing body ‘…continually improvising its relation to things and the
world.’ This sentient sense of being, and being in the world, became pivotal to the work.

In Aboriginal culture, spirit is inherent in oneself and in the landscape. Inspired by this, I
sought to commune with this sense of spirit in ourselves, in the environment and with each
other. Art in indigenous cultures celebrates the ephemeral, while simultaneously embracing
the notion of time as eternal. The use of improvisation in *Song of Longing* allowed us to
explore this paradox of transience and eternity, contained in the moving moment. These

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(New York, USA, Snow Lion Publications). Pg 43.
Inc.). Pg 21.
(New York, USA, Vintage Books). Pg 49.
embodied explorations inspired the belief that the vital, animating principle of spirit or consciousness could perhaps travel through time, even as our bodies succumbed to it.

*Song of Longing* became a celebration and affirmation of the beauty of the fleeting. The cycle of life, the sense of life as a ‘constant becoming’, the passing of time, yet time as eternal – these were all themes that echoed through the process and into the resulting work. From my perspective, our ability to be in harmony with the natural environment, our acceptance of time passing and the recognition of eternity – all this is the stuff of spirit.

A significant aspect of the spiritual dimension, for me, is one’s ability to experience connection with, rather than separation from one’s environment. This sense of non-duality can be experienced through embracing the notion of interdependence and can be reflected in embodied conversations between the environment and oneself. As Abram describes:

> The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth…

These dialogues suggest that we, and all things, are part of the ongoing cycle of life. And this communion with nature not only encompasses what is seen, but can also embrace the vast mystery of unseen spirits and energies gone before.

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80 Ibid. Pg 46.
3. Art as Awareness of Self

If you want peace and purity, tear away
the coverings! This is the purpose of emotion,
to let a streaming beauty flow through you.

Call it spirit, elixir, or the original agreement
between yourself and God. Opening into that
gives peace, a song of being empty, pure silence.\textsuperscript{81}

Jelaluddin Rumi

The \textit{Song of Longing} creative process was based on the belief that art, as Hofstadter suggests, is an expression of the search for ‘…truth of being.’\textsuperscript{82} From my perspective, art can be an expression of one’s inner life, of the search for one’s inner truth. Creative endeavor can facilitate the ‘…uncovering and revelation of being…’\textsuperscript{83}, fuelled by a desire for self-knowledge and the longing to express one’s spirit truthfully. Art is the vehicle, as Hofstadter asserts, through which the ‘…primal thrust of the will-to-be (strives) towards its own truth.’\textsuperscript{84} The making of art can be a way to understand the self and the world more fully – to come to a deeper awareness of what it is to be human.

Arts practice, from my perspective, is a manifestation of this search for the truth of oneself. In my own practice, this has resulted in particular aesthetic principles and methods that place human experience at the centre of the creative process, with the intention of bringing the authenticity and integrity of personal truth into the light. The truth of self, and of self in the world, can be expressed through aesthetic choices, as one strives, as Hofstadter suggests, to bring ‘…inner subjectivity to outer objectivity.’\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. Pg 172.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. Pg 190.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. Pg 16.
These aesthetic choices are informed by an interest in Expressionism, which seeks to depict subjective emotions and responses to events, thereby giving form to feeling.86 It is also influenced by my training as an actor, which focused on truthful expression of one’s inner life. Based on these interests and experiences, I use methods such as conversation and improvisation to explore personal truth, from which movement and vocal material are developed. This process is inspired by the work of choreographer Pina Bausch, who directs her attention ‘…not to how people move, but to what moves them.’87 My intention in Song of Longing was to connect movement and singing to deep inner motivation. From my perspective, this process allowed personal truth to be at the heart of the work.

In my experience, the process of giving form to feeling can be transformative, as it can lead to revelations of the truth of one’s being. As an embodiment of inner life, creative process can accelerate one’s spiritual, psychological and emotional evolution, through awareness and reflection. This chapter explores art as the manifestation of the revelation of being, and articulates the process through which these concepts were explored.

3.1 Alchemy and Transformation

The solo sections in Song of Longing were an expression of the awareness of self and the truth of being. In an emergent process, the solos arose from and reflected each performer’s lived experience, and were intended to express the theme of spiritual, psychological and emotional evolution.

Alchemy, by Brett Whiteley, was one of the inspirations for the theme of personal and spiritual evolution. In my interpretation of the painting, Alchemy depicts the process of transformation of the self. Transformation, in this context, refers to change and conscious

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progress in development.\textsuperscript{88} For me, the painting is a metaphor of the progress of life as it flowers, unfolds and dissolves, beginning with the image of two enormous copulating figures in a sea of surging blue. The sexual act gives birth to explosions of life, as creatures crawl onto land and down winding roads.

The centre panel is dominated by the word ‘IT’, with images to its left in reds and pinks - eggs in a nest, a picture of Jesus. The landscape gradually turns yellow, highlighted by figures of Aboriginals and birds in flight. Images of domesticity - a house and loaf of bread - lead to a sparse landscape of rocks and animals, until the painting culminates in a burst of white and gold in the left hand corner. The work is enhanced by objects collected from nature such as nests, a cicada and feathers, and hand-written text including:

\begin{quote}
…Alchemy  
The Grand work  
To bring together all the previous  
TRANSMUTATION  
Or God?  
…The thread is the Transmutation.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

The term ‘transmutation’ is used in the medieval art of alchemy – a philosophical and spiritual discipline involving the ‘transmutation’ or conversion of base metals into gold. In what was essentially a symbolic process, ‘base metal’ represented the unenlightened self, while ‘gold’ represented ‘…the transformed spiritual self.’\textsuperscript{90} The alchemical process was symbolic of the ‘…deep inner longing to find our true spiritual nature…’\textsuperscript{91} and the ultimate goal of alchemy was inner transformation and ‘…the attainment of enlightenment.’\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{89} Whitely, B. (1972-73) Alchemy. Sydney, Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. Pg 149.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. Pg 146.
Alchemy, in my interpretation, is a metaphor of the transformation or evolution of the self, and suggests an ecstatic union with the Divine in its culminating explosion of gold. While painting the work, Whiteley writes in his journal: ‘The quest is the transmutation of self.’93 The concept of transmutation, or transformation of the self, was a central theme in Song of Longing. Through the creative quest, I sought revelation and illumination of the truth of being. From my perspective, the making of art is an alchemical process in which human experience (‘base matter’) can be ‘transmuted’ or ‘transformed’ into spiritual ‘gold’ – enlightenment or awareness.

These notions were the initial stimulus for the solos. I was interested in the nature of human experience, particularly the causes of human pain and suffering, and how this could be transmuted or transformed through the vehicle of awareness. These concerns are central to the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, which asserts that the purpose of spiritual practice, as the Dalai Lama states, is to fulfil our desire ‘...to be happy and to overcome our suffering…’.94 I was interested in the ways each dancer had overcome personal difficulty and achieved happiness through self-knowledge and awareness.

3.2 Longing and Fulfilment

Central to the solo processes was an investigation of the theme of longing – defined as a ‘…strong persistent yearning or desire, especially one that cannot be fulfilled.’95 According to Nachmanovich, longing is related to the word desire, from de-sidere: ‘…away from your star.’96 In the mystical branch of Islam known as Sufism, desire means ‘…elongation from the source, and the concomitant, powerful magnetic pull to get back to the source.’97

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97 Ibid. Pg 165.
Sufism, ‘source’ is God (or the ‘Beloved’) and in this philosophy, all longing ultimately reflects the yearning for unity with God, or consciousness.98

In many forms of art I had noticed the theme of longing as a spiritual concept - particularly in the poetry of Sufi, Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273). Translator Coleman Barks asserts that Rumi’s work reflects a philosophy that ‘…we are here to follow the mysteries of longing beyond where they lead.’99 Rumi often speaks of longing in his poems, with this representing the desire for union with the ‘Beloved’. In Zen Buddhism, the archer seeks to become one with the target, to feel, as Nachmanovitch asserts ‘…the interpenetration of self and object…’.100 Rumi’s poetry and the Alchemy painting share this philosophy of non-duality - the human being seeking to dissolve in unity with God, or consciousness.

The theme of longing was discussed with each dancer. They expressed longing for loving relationships or children, for stronger bonds with family or community and for deeper understanding of themselves, or God. These conversations suggested that longing lay at the heart of the human condition, and that all longing seemed to be about the need for union or completeness with self or other. I asked the dancers to locate the ‘…place in the body where longing resided…’101 and this body part was used to initiate movement through improvisation. These improvisations became embodied dialogues with longing, allowing us to understand the concept more fully. Kate spoke of being ‘…caught in the middle of what we long for and the longing itself…’102 and Dianne experienced the ‘…tension between what we have and what we want.’103 The inherent tension in the state of longing became reflected in movements of reaching and retracting the body.

98 In Sufism and other spiritual practices, these terms are interchangeable. Rather than God being seen as a separate human-like figure, God is viewed as immanent in human beings themselves, represented by consciousness, or human awareness, which includes sensations, perceptions, thoughts and emotions. (Flanagan, Owen. "Consciousness" in Honderich, Ted. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, University of Oxford Press, 1995, Pg 152.)
102 Ibid. 15/7/07.
103 Ibid. 26/9/07.
I then developed an exercise called *Yin/Yang/Centre*, based on the Chinese philosophical concept of yin/yang. Yin, referring to the feminine and yang, to the masculine, are ‘…a pair of complementary forces, that act in the universe unceasingly.’\(^{104}\) The symbol of yin/yang illustrates how seemingly opposing forces are intertwined and interdependent, giving rise to each other in turn. The concept speaks of the dynamic interplay between opposites, suggesting that ‘…nothing can be so completely itself that is does not contain something of the opposite.’\(^{105}\) This concept of unity in duality arises in many faiths and philosophies, including Sufism, Buddhism and Hinduism. I was interested not just in the tension between opposites, but also in the harmony that could be found between them.

The *Yin/Yang/Centre* exercise involved giving stimulus to the body by a facilitator, which was responded to in movement by the receiver. In the moment, the dancer could choose to surrender to the direction and pressure of the hand (‘yin’-feminine), resist it (‘yang’-masculine) or find a ‘middle way’, in which these two elements were in harmony (‘centre’). The facilitator then withdrew, leaving the dancer to improvise with the notion of longing using the *Yin/Yang/Centre* structure. The score resulted in an embodied conversation between centred-ness and off-centeredness, surrender and resistance - notions that seemed inherent in longing. With its exploration of duality and non-duality, this score became a foundation of the evolving solo pieces.

The theme of longing was also explored vocally. Karen and I researched ‘songs of longing’ in many traditions - discovering the Ladino songs of the Sephardic Jews, Celtic and Bulgarian songs and the contemporary vocal work of artists such as Meredith Monk and Lisa Gerard. ‘Songs of longing’ were composed to complement movement explorations, and vocal improvisation used to explore the notion of being ‘on’ and ‘off’ centre. Karen would establish a gentle, repetitive motif representing the stability of self, while I juxtaposed this with fractured, discordant sounds, representing the off-centred-ness of longing. Practicing this improvisation, I noticed my desire to return to the ‘antidote’\(^{106}\) of


\(^{105}\) Ibid.

Karen’s calm melody and release the painful longing embodied in the discord. In my experience, the ultimate longing seemed to be the need for peace and harmony in the psyche – and this became a significant theme in our evolving work.

### 3.3 Buddhist and Hindu Symbol Systems

As the solos developed, I decided to incorporate Buddhist and Hindu symbol systems that supported the over-arching theme of spiritual, psychological and emotional evolution. As described in Chapter 2, each dancer had an element attributed to her, relating to her story. In Buddhism and Hinduism, there are five archetypal elements defined as ‘…essential energy forces that sustain the world…’

In Buddhism and Hinduism, there are five archetypal elements defined as ‘…essential energy forces that sustain the world…’

- earth, wind, fire and water. The fifth element - ether - is the spiritual element, thought to ‘…permeate and vivify the other four.’ Ether defines non-matter - that which is beyond time and the material world. In Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, the five elements are essential to all physical, sensual, mental and spiritual phenomena. They are also seen as vital components of the human body, and the maintenance of physical and psychological health is ‘…a matter of keeping balance between them, just as balance (is) needed in the outside world.’

Each dancer was also ascribed a ‘chakra’, relating to her story. ‘Chakra’ is a Sanskrit word meaning wheel or disc, and is an esoteric concept referring to wheel-like vortices that, according to Hindu tradition, are energy, or ‘prana’ centers located within the ‘subtle’ or etheric body. Seven chakras are believed to exist, located at different points in the body – the base of the spine, the genitals/lower abdomen, the navel/solar plexus, the heart, the throat, the brow and the crown – and are considered focal points for the reception and transmission of life force energy. Each chakra relates to a state of consciousness, from ‘…sexual desire at the lowest point through spiritual fulfillment at the highest…’ and they correspond to the ‘…hierarchy of developmental needs recognized by modern

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108 Ibid. Pg 108.
109 Ibid. Pg 108.
110 Ibid. Pg 182.
111 Ibid. Pg 183.
Psychologist Abraham Maslow defines a hierarchy of human needs through the chakra system, suggesting that the lowest chakra defines sexual needs, the second chakra safety, the next three social, ego and autonomy respectively, with the upper two representing the needs for self-actualization and transcendence.

These symbol systems informed each dancer’s story with rich layers of meaning. The elements provided supporting imagery, while the chakras specified parts of the body that became further instigators for movement, as well as sites for spiritual, psychological and emotional awareness, informed by Maslow’s theories.

3.4 Art as Revelation of the Truth of Being

The solos were generated through an intimate process with each dancer, beginning with verbal conversations, leading to improvisation based on imagery and physical instruction. Further conversation led to score refinement and clarification of content, with the piece finally set or scored, according to its themes. Leonard Cohen asserts that he sings ‘…from a kind of thorn in (his) side, which may just be the human heart aching in its particular predicament. And all art is an effort to address that aching.’114 The solos were an attempt to explore personal ‘aches’ and to highlight growth in oneself as pain was transformed through awareness. Each solo revealed a unique story in itself, but was also part of the larger picture of human spiritual, psychological and emotional evolution.

For the purpose of this writing, I will concentrate on two of these solos: Dianne Reid and Karen Berger. A description of the processes associated with Kate Middleweek and Melissa Jones can be found in the appendices.

Dianne’s element was fire and her chakras the lower abdomen and solar plexus. Her solo explored how personal tragedy can lead to engagement with art – driven by the longing for

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112 Ibid. Pg 183.
113 Ibid. Pg 183.
personal expression. An initial sharing of life experiences inspired research into artist Frida Kahlo, who passionately expressed her inner truth through her painting, revealing qualities of vulnerability and courage.

Born in Mexico in 1907, Kahlo was severely injured at 23, when the bus she was travelling in collided with a streetcar, impaling her on a rod of metal handrail. This accident resulted in severe injuries that forced her to endure a series of plaster casts, metal corsets and other medical treatments all her life. While initially confined to bed, she began to paint - beginning with self-portraits.\textsuperscript{115} Kahlo maintained: ‘I never painted dreams…I painted my own reality’.\textsuperscript{116} Her work expressed her life - such as her response to physical pain, her life with husband Diego Rivera and reactions to his affairs, the loss of a baby, the death of her parents and her own fear of death. Her painting revealed and embraced the spiritual, psychological and emotional complexity of her inner life.

Based on this research, the notion of entrapment in a physical predicament became the initial inspiration for the solo, with Kahlo’s imagery interweaving with Dianne’s personal experiences. Initial improvisations explored a ‘…broken body inside a plaster cast or metal corset…’\textsuperscript{117}, with Dianne discovering movements of self-flagellation, as she fought restriction. Kahlo’s intense longing for union with Diego inspired further improvisations, with Dianne exploring the notion of being ‘…impaled on longing…’.\textsuperscript{118} Kahlo’s paintings showed juxtapositions between barren landscape, symbolising her physical pain and lush foliage, representing ‘…dreams pushing out of her.’\textsuperscript{119} To reflect this imagery, ‘tendrils of movement’ were layered into the solo, becoming ‘creative escape routes’ from the established restriction.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid. Pg 114.
\textsuperscript{118} This phrase is from the poem ‘Martha’s Dream’ written by Dianne on July 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2007. The complete poem can be found on Dianne’s website at: \url{http://www.hipsync.com.au/blog/?m=200707}
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 23/4/08.
Bodily restriction became a metaphor for physical and emotional pain, with the turning point of the piece the ‘unzipping’ of the ‘plaster cast’ from Dianne’s body, leaving her naked and vulnerable. The pain she had embodied had moved through her – there was no further need for struggle. This journey was supported by a vocal improvisation exploring off-centred-ness, with the desire for creative expression symbolised by the sound of fire. Having released her suffering, Dianne’s accompaniment finished with a private, fragile song, as she looked out on a ‘new landscape’.  

Karen’s element was earth and her chakras the root and crown. In her process, initial improvisations explored the territory ‘…between the two extremes of root and crown chakras…’ resulting in ‘…a dialogue between heaven and earth.’ This stimulated research into the shaman in animist cultures, described by Abram as ‘…the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and the more-than-human worlds…’ Shamans communicate with the spirits on behalf of the community, ‘…ensuring the greatest possible attunement between the human community and the animate earth, between the familiar and the fathomless,’ Shamans ensure ‘…that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal…’, with the achievement of balance viewed as ‘medicine’ for the community.

This information was complemented by research into the Hindu goddess, Kali, who symbolises ‘…the inevitability of Death…’, but also the creative vibrancy of life. Kali is represented as naked and free from illusion, with four arms representing the cycle of destruction and creation, the death of ignorance and the dawning of knowledge. Kali’s purpose is to reassure humanity that we can achieve: ‘…freedom from fear and the transcendence of time and death.’ Both Kali and shamanistic practices represent non-

121 Ibid. 26/4/08.
122 Ibid. 14/5/08.
123 Ibid. 14/5/08.
125 Ibid. Pg 256.
126 Ibid. Pg 7.
128 Ibid. Pg 134.
duality and the integration of opposing elements: life and death, darkness and light, heaven and earth. I was interested in creating a kind of ‘spiritual teaching’ - a lesson on non-duality. Using a vocabulary of mudras derived from Buddhism and Hinduism, Karen became a ‘…conduit for universal energy …’\textsuperscript{129} - a goddess speaking directly to the audience in movement and song.

Karen’s solo was intended as a turning point in \textit{Song of Longing}, through which all the threads of the work could be resolved and released. Her solo explored the need for acceptance and integration of all aspects of the self, to achieve peace and harmony in the psyche. Through a ‘shamanic ritual’, Karen acknowledged and integrated the five elements and the seven chakras, as a way of achieving balance between the internal and external worlds. The circle of white earth she drew around herself represented the eternal in Zen Buddhism and acknowledged the importance of a reciprocal relationship with the earth.

The solos represented a stage in the life of each woman, depicting the evolution of the spirit and psyche as they progressed through life. Melissa’s piece explored being stuck in a cycle of repetitive thoughts and emotions. Kate and Dianne’s solos explored the potential to be released from pain through self-knowledge and awareness. Karen’s piece symbolised transcendence from suffering, through integration and acceptance. They were separate women with separate stories, yet they were also ‘one’ woman – with each solo representing a stage of life’s journey. Each solo was a revelation of the truth of one’s being on the path to enlightenment, or conscious awareness.

3.5 The Flowering of Spirit

The image of the lotus became the symbol of spiritual growth and enlightenment in \textit{Song of Longing}. In Buddhism, the symbol of the lotus represents the journey of the spirit and is, as Joseph Campbell asserts ‘…the symbol of Divine energy and Divine grace’.\textsuperscript{130} From the


depths of a muddy lake, the lotus seed germinates - the stem growing up through the water and bursting into air, to be nourished by the sun’s warmth. This journey represents the development of the human psyche as awareness is gained, and symbolizes ‘…the soul rising from the confusion of matter into the clarity of enlightenment.’\textsuperscript{131} In this context, enlightenment refers to wisdom or understanding that enables clarity of perception. Enlightenment involves the deepening of consciousness and the recognition of non-duality as the nature of existence. The lotus in full flower represents the flowering of the spirit into the clear light of awareness.

Inspired by the metaphor of the lotus, Karen and I developed an improvised movement practice called the ‘Lotus Practice’. Based on a Butoh exercise, it involved lying on the floor and using the lower belly to initiate a slow, controlled spiral upwards to our feet. Maintaining connection with the belly, the spiral would then reverse back down to the floor. This simple score was taught to the cast, becoming a regular group practice. Visualisations of the lotus in its stages of growth enhanced the score. We noticed how hard it was to ‘push through the soil’, the ease of ‘rising through the water’, and the ‘zenith’ of the flower’s journey as it opened to the sky.\textsuperscript{132}

I asked the dancers to draw a mandala of their life experience that became another layer of the score. This produced a profound shift in the way it was practiced – some sections became difficult, while others flowed freely, according to the life experiences revealed. The \textit{Lotus Practice} became a metaphor for change, experience and time passing. To emphasise these themes, shifts in time were added as a final layer, with the intention of creating a kind of time-lapse photography. The \textit{Lotus Practice} was performed as simultaneous solos, supported by a sound-score of forest sound effects, depicting morning, noon and night in a repetitive cycle.

Karen and I then composed the ‘Lotus Chant’ – the vocal version of the \textit{Lotus Practice} that opened the show. The \textit{Lotus Chant} was a liturgical song, containing ‘horizontal’ and


‘vertical’ melodic lines. The repetitive horizontal drone represented ‘Om’ – the eternal sound of the universe in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Juxtaposing this, I sang the ascending and descending vertical notes, representing the rising, flowering and dissolving of the lotus, and mirroring our physical practice. This opening song was intended as an invocation and a dedication. The song brought the space and the piece ‘into being’, invoking the metaphor of the lotus and the possibility of enlightenment into the performance. Inspired by the Buddhist tradition, the song was also a dedication to ‘…the benefit of all sentient beings.’

In *Song of Longing*, the *Lotus Practice* and *Lotus Chant* were over-arching metaphors of the theme of spiritual, psychological and emotional evolution, echoing the evolutionary stages inherent in the solos. The rising, flowering and dissolving of sound and movement represented life experience and the growth in the psyche as awareness is gained. The symbol of the lotus represented the cycle of life and death, the passage of time and the eternal nature of existence. Above all, it represented the potential for the flowering of the spirit into enlightenment - through revelation and illumination of the ‘truth of being’.

### 3.6 Evolving Recognitions

The creation of the solos in *Song of Longing* allowed me to deeply investigate the nature of experience and awareness. My intention was to reveal what Hofstadter calls ‘…the motions of the human soul…’ on its journey towards enlightenment, or self-knowledge. The four solos were intended to demonstrate the dynamic process of life, as each woman explored an aspect of her life experience. The creative process was an alchemical one, allowing us to transform the ‘base matter’ of experience into illumination on the ‘truth of being’.

The making of art can be viewed as an opportunity to explore and reveal the truth of oneself. As McNiff suggests, through the integration of ‘…artistic expression and

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133 This term derives from the Tibetan Buddhist teachings at Tara Institute, Melbourne, as taught in 2008 by Tibetan monk Geshe Doga. In this tradition, meditation practice generally begins with this dedication.
psychological reflection… the creative process can involve a deep investigation of the complexity and fragility of being human. Through exploring one’s own humanity, it is also possible to reflect on universal aspects of the human condition - such as longing, fulfilment, growth and transformation. The body and voice, as Dianne Reid suggests, can be viewed as containing ‘…the residue of our history…’ and are perhaps the ultimate vehicles through which to express one’s inner life. One’s humanity can then be shared with honesty and integrity in the ritual offering that is performance.

From my perspective, the process of revealing one’s humanity through art can result in a climate of openness and vulnerability for both performer and audience. When this climate is created, it can give permission to the viewer to touch their own vulnerability and reflect on their own experience. By placing the viewer in touch with their inner life, awareness and integration can occur, creating the possibility of healing. As McNiff asserts, art can be a means through which we can ‘…trust and open ourselves to the medicines of creative expression.’

For me, this willingness to be open and share our humanity, as Kahlo did, has ever-increasing value in an alienated world. To explore and express oneself emotionally, psychologically and spiritually has the potential, not only to be transformative for oneself but also for others. Understanding and awareness is the basis for growth and transformation. And awareness is the vehicle through which human consciousness can evolve in being and knowing.

4. Collaboration, Community and Communion

Virtually every spiritual tradition distinguishes the self-clinging ego from the deeper, creative self: little self as opposed to big self. The big self is transpersonal, beyond any separated individuality, the common ground we all share.\textsuperscript{138}

Stephen Nachmanovich

Community, collaboration and interdependence were themes that engaged my attention strongly in \textit{Song of Longing}. A community, defined as a group of interacting people living in a common environment, relies on common values as the basis for social cohesion.\textsuperscript{139} The evolving themes of the work united us as a cast and as a community, becoming our common ground. The solo sections, exploring stories of pain and transformation, were juxtaposed with notions of empathy, compassion and mutual support, through the creation of a ‘community of women’. In the world of the piece, private inner reflection was balanced with social interaction and cohesion.

The inter-subjectivity of this process was reflected throughout the work and expressed in the final performance. My intra-subjective perception of the emerging themes was deepened through the reciprocity inherent in collaboration with the cast. The collaborative process was, as Abram articulates ‘…an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience…’\textsuperscript{140}, responded to and experienced by ‘…a multiplicity of sensing subjects.’\textsuperscript{141} The collaborative process involved constant inter-subjective dialogue, deepening our empathy and interdependence as a group. Collaboration and community then became themes in the piece itself, resulting in a synergy between process and product.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. Pg 38.
My intention was to create a community based on notions of empathy, compassion and co-operation. I was committed to presenting a world in which compassion and interdependence were primary – as an antithesis to the intolerance, hatred and violence dominating the nightly news. *Song of Longing* was intended to affirm and celebrate these gentle qualities, strongly influenced by Buddhist philosophy. The notion of compassion - seen as an antidote to personal and collective suffering - was of particular interest to me. Developing the skill of ‘compassionate communication’ is viewed as the most advanced of Buddhist practices.\(^{142}\) Buddhist nun Pema Chodron speaks of the challenges of this process:

Really communicating to the heart and being there for someone else…means not shutting down on that person, which means…not shutting down on ourselves…It means accepting every aspect of ourselves, even the parts we don’t like…Only in an open, non-judgmental space can we acknowledge what we are feeling. Only in an open space where we’re not caught up in our own version of reality can we see and hear and feel who others really are, which allows us to be with them and communicate with them properly.\(^ {143}\)

Chodron’s explanation of compassion suggests that, in a climate of non-judgement, self-knowledge and self-acceptance can lead to more compassionate communication with others. Within this process, ‘maitri’, or ‘loving-kindness’, is central. ‘Maitri’ is a Sanskrit word directly translated as ‘…unconditional friendliness.’\(^ {144}\) Compassion and maitri were the principles on which I based my notion of community. Based on this, the self-knowledge and self-acceptance explored in the solo pieces created a ‘compassionate climate’ in which the ‘community’ could come together in openness, empathy and kindness. This was an interdependent world – where the spiritual, psychological and emotional health of each individual affected and nourished the group.

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\(^{143}\) Ibid. Pg 79.  
\(^{144}\) Ibid. Pg 21.
My ultimate intention was to create a harmonious world. The dualistic elements of pain and joy, life and death, separation and togetherness, could be integrated and brought into balance – echoing the themes explored in Karen’s solo. This chapter investigates community, compassion, interdependence and harmony in *Song of Longing* and the methods through which these notions were explored.

### 4.1 Compassion and Community

*Rest/Comfort* was one of the sections in *Song of Longing* that explored these ideas, performed by three women varying in age. *Rest/Comfort* was initially inspired by the paintings of Gustav Klimpt such as *The Virgin* and *The Bride*, depicting communities of mothers and children entwined in sculptural forms. While working with Melissa, I decided to create ‘rest positions’\(^{145}\) based on these forms, to explore the human need for comfort and relief from pain and distress. These ‘rest positions’ were then transferred onto the trio and linked with ‘nurturing physical contact’\(^ {146}\), developed through an improvisational score I devised called *Sacred Places*. In this score, a facilitator places their hands on the forehead, heart and belly of a partner - inviting the receiver to rest the mind, calm the heart and deepen the breath. Similar to *Yin/Yang/Centre*, the receiver then improvised, exploring movement informed by the memory of the touch.

I then set this material, with the three women simultaneously placing their hands on each other’s heads, hearts and bellies in a series of gentle, nurturing movements, while attempting to breathe ‘as one organism.’\(^ {147}\) To accompany this, Karen and I sang a Ladino song that was a conversation between a mother and daughter. We developed harmonies with the intention of creating a calming lullaby – ‘calling’ the women into communion, harmony and rest. *Rest/Comfort* evolved into the ‘antidote’\(^ {148}\) for Melissa’s solo, contrasting its isolation and dis-ease with the soothing metaphor of touching and being

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\(^{146}\) Ibid. 7/3/08.

\(^{147}\) Ibid. 1/5/08.

\(^{148}\) Ibid. 14/4/08.
touched. With empathy and compassion, the community of women moved together to calm each other’s distress.

*Wise Women*, which followed Kate’s solo, also became an antidote in *Song of Longing*. This section began as a song for the three oldest women of the cast, sung while walking a pathway through space. As the collaboration evolved, the metaphor of the labyrinth emerged in discussion. I then researched the labyrinth, finding it to be ‘…an ancient spiritual tool, used for the purpose of prayer, meditation, reflection and contemplation’.

The labyrinth is an ancient universal symbol - a winding pathway leading the ‘seeker’ into its centre and out again. It appears in almost every culture in the world and represents ‘…an inner journey through the confusing and conflicting pathways of the mind until the seeker reaches the centre and discovers the essential reality of his or her own nature.’

Through collaboration and discussion, *Wise Women* evolved into a metaphoric representation of the nature of life. Life seemed to be a ‘constant becoming’ – a gradual unfolding of self-awareness and a flowering of consciousness. *Wise Women* became a representation of a community of women experiencing the journey of life together and singing of the wisdom gathered along the way. It became a walking meditation, in which we entered and left the ‘path of life’ together.

Whereas the solos explored the personal pain and transformation of the individual, the group sections portrayed the role of community as support for the individual within this process. My intention was to suggest that all human beings share the same journey of pain, growth and transcendence and that essentially we are all the same - interconnected and interdependent. The solo and community sections worked together to explore a world where awareness and acceptance of self and compassion towards others was possible. This

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151 Ibid. Pg 62.
153 Ibid. 24/5/08.
utopian ideal reflected my Buddhist values and beliefs and was offered as medicine for the cast and the audience.

4.2 Love and Dissolving: Art as Intimacy

According to Moore, isolation is an increasing problem in the Western world, with suicide, mental illness, alcohol, drug dependence and violence on the rise. He asserts that ‘…ancient psychologists taught that our own souls are inseparable from the world’s soul…’\textsuperscript{154} and that we have ‘…a spiritual longing for community…’\textsuperscript{155} From my perspective, community cohesion and cooperation have rarely been more important, as we struggle to come to terms with a variety of growing global challenges. In \textit{Song of Longing}, the collaborative process inherent in the work, as well as its themes, sought to embrace the healing potential of community.

Improviser and dance teacher Gabrielle Roth speaks of these notions in relation to her work. Roth leads ‘ecstatic dance’ classes called \textit{Five Rhythms} in New York, inviting participants to enter into the flow of ‘…the rhythm of the universe.’\textsuperscript{156} Roth’s work is influenced by shamanic practices in traditional cultures, such as the practice of entering trance states to access Divine information for the purpose of healing. Roth asserts that we have a ‘…deep hunger for community…’\textsuperscript{157} and suggests that it is only in the last few centuries that we have lost this profound sense of community and tribe. Instead, the sense of separation seems to be the order of the day:

\ldots We come from all our separate little lives and our separate little identities and our separate little worlds and I think we need to really feel…that we’re part of something much bigger…\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid. Pg 208.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
Central to Roth’s work is the invitation for the individual to connect with, rather than be separate from others. In this connection there is the opportunity to let go of one’s personal story to feel part of a ‘bigger picture’. Trance or ecstatic dance, used in a variety of spiritual practices around the world, has this aim. In Sufism, chanting, whirling and rhythmic dance are used as vehicles to transcend the personal, unite the community and embrace the Divine. Whirling dervishes such as Ibrahim Halili, speak of the importance of dissolving the ego in this process:

Oneness means the absence of ‘I’ – instead of ‘I it is ‘we’. (In) The Modern world, most of us…are slaves of our egos so we are not free…you can only be free when you lose your identity, when you lose your ‘I’, your ‘me’ and your ‘mine’ and you become ‘we’, ‘us’…159

According to Sufi philosophy, when ego attachment to personal pain is released, it is possible to embrace the wider world and feel connected with it, rather than isolated in one’s own story. Mahrer concurs with this. For her:

…dance is the way I connect with the bigger universe - with the vaster, with the bigger than me, bigger than my little ego, bigger than this one-dimensional reality that we mostly live in, in our material world. And dance for me is my pathway into the larger consciousness…of which we are all a part.160

To experience the union with consciousness that Sufism and other spiritual practices encourage, the attachment to the sense of ‘Self’, the sense of ‘I’, must be transcended.

This dissolving of the boundaries of the self can also be experienced in the process of falling in love. As Nachmanovitch articulates, the experience of love can allow us to feel ‘…that we are not bound by our skin, that the circumference of self can be moved or

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159 Ibid.
penetrated or dissolved in union with another.’\textsuperscript{161} Some psychologists, such as Howard Cutler, believe that that this process is ‘…an unconscious attempt to recreate the experience we had as infants, a primal state in which the child is completely merged with the parent.’\textsuperscript{162} There is evidence to suggest that infants ‘…do not distinguish between themselves and the rest of the universe…’\textsuperscript{163} - with no sense of where ‘they’ end and ‘the other’ begins. As the child grows into their sense of self, separation and isolation from others then develops, based on the ego and the definition of ‘I’. Later, as an adult, some may feel the desire to return to ‘…the state of bliss in which there is no feeling of isolation, no feeling of separation.’\textsuperscript{164}

My intention in \textit{Song of Longing} was to explore the intimacy of union that lies at the heart of community, spirituality and love. In my own experience, the dissolving of the boundaries of the self and the release of ego attachment to the sense of ‘I’, allows for a more expanded state of consciousness and a deep feeling of connection with all things. From my perspective, this longing for connectedness is central to the human condition and to experience this brings peace and harmony to the psyche. Leonard Cohen believes that ‘…one of the highest callings of the musician…is to prepare people for love.’\textsuperscript{165} I share this philosophy and saw \textit{Song of Longing} as an opportunity to explore love of self, others and the Divine. As Cohen articulates: ‘In the end, it really is about love and about affirming the existence of love.’\textsuperscript{166}

\textbf{4.3 Performance as an Act of Giving and Receiving}

From my perspective, performing can also be viewed as an act of love. The impulse to create can be seen as arising from the desire to see and be seen, to know and be known and

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid. Pg 107.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Ehrlich, D. (1997) \textit{Inside the Music; Conversations with Contemporary Musicians About Spirituality, Creativity and Consciousness}, (Boston, USA, Shambhala Pulications Inc.). Pg 199.
to enter into unspoken dialogue with the community of the audience. The careful placement of image, gesture, sound and song can all be viewed as acts of love, with the performance space creating a heightened field for this exchange. As Nachmanovitch suggests, the performance space can create the potential for union between audience and performer in the immediacy of the moment:

There is a quality of energy in the room that is very personal and particular to those people, that room and that moment…The skin-boundaries become semipermeable, then irrelevant; performers, audience, instruments, the room, the night outside, space, become one being, pulsing. \(^{167}\)

My intention for *Song of Longing* was to create a space in which this dissolving of boundaries between audience and performer might become possible. This demanded a non-egoistic approach to devising and performance, with the work presented as a ‘gift’ that could ‘hold’ or ‘embrace’\(^{168}\) the audience. The late Jeff Buckley speaks of ‘…tender communication (that) is so alien in our culture, except in performance. There’s a wall up between people all day long, but performance transcends that convention.’\(^{169}\) For me, performance is an act of giving and receiving – from performer to audience and audience to performer. In this exchange, there is indeed the profound potential for tenderness and for the recognition that, as human beings, we have similar longings, hopes and fears.

When attending performances and performing, I long for this profound feeling of connection - to feel a part of something bigger than myself. I long for a harmony between what is expressed and given and what is seen and received. When the barriers seem to dissolve between audience and performer, I am moved by the intimacy of this communion. This process has a spiritual quality for me, for in the moment the ‘I’ dissolves, there is only

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‘we’. In that moment the performance becomes, as Ruth Zaporah suggests, ‘…a collective experience, the audience and performer meeting in clear space.’

4.4 Evolving Recognitions

During the Song of Longing process, the most profound expression of intimacy occurred after each performance. Behind the curtain, the cast spontaneously would hold each other in ‘…a five-pointed star…’ for a few minutes – all of us breathing quietly into its centre with our heads together. This silent ritual became a tender holding of the journey we had shared. As Karen Berger put it: ‘…that moment felt far more important as an end to the show than the audience clapping on the other side of the curtain. I felt like we’d been on a journey together, that had satisfyingly ended.’ As Dianne Reid suggested, all the facets of the self, represented in the solo pieces, were now ‘…together as one piece.’ A journey begun in solo isolation had ended with the intimacy of interconnectedness, leaving us feeling as if we were ‘part of something greater.’

As identified by Moore and Roth, there seems to be a great yearning for this sort of intimacy and community in the world today and a hunger for a unified, universal consciousness. Isolation seems an increasing problem in our community, indicated by high rates of suicide, depression, homelessness and violence. Increasingly, if we are to believe the barrage of media stories on these subjects, we are concerned with these issues. From my perspective, there are many people calling for a paradigm shift and expressing their longing for greater degrees of connection, compassion and love.

Through creative practice, I satisfy my needs for these deeply human qualities. The making of art involves, what McNiff calls ‘…the collective effort to advance human

172 Ibid.
174 See Campbell, Moore and Vishwalingum in Chapter 1.
understanding.’\textsuperscript{175} Through inter-subjective dialogue and close collaboration, the creative process can be viewed as a way to deepen understanding, not just of the themes of a work, but of the nature of community itself. Bound by common aims and objectives, a group of collaborators can become aware of their interdependence and interconnectedness. United by common goals, a creative community can experience the healing quality of connectedness, through acts of intimacy and reciprocity.

Meredith Monk, vocal artist, choreographer and Buddhist, makes work that is concerned with ‘…human connection, about people needing one another and rejoicing in the discovery of their interconnectedness.’\textsuperscript{176} The *Song of Longing* process and final performance was similarly intended as a celebration of human connection, empathy and intimacy. From my perspective, these concepts are essentially spiritual in nature. Spiritual practice strives for an ethical way of living and being in the world, emphasising non-dualistic relationships and compassion for others. Through cultivating community and affirming connectedness, creative process can embrace these values.

The making of art and the ritual of performance can be a dynamic process of compassionate action, offered as a gift of hope. It can be viewed as a way to commune with others with compassion and respect – collaborator to collaborator and performer to audience. And through this gift of sharing, there is the potential for the nourishing antidote of love.

\textsuperscript{176} Ehrlich, D. (1997) *Inside the Music; Conversations with Contemporary Musicians About Spirituality, Creativity and Consciousness*, (Boston, USA, Shambhala Pulications Inc.). Pg 73.
5. The Art of Presence

Attention is the key to transformation - and full attention also implies acceptance.\textsuperscript{177}

Ekhart Tolle

As this writing has evolved, the concept of presence has arisen as central to my life and art. Presence can be defined as a state of being in which, as Steinman suggests, we are aware of ‘…everything that is happening inside and outside…’\textsuperscript{178} of ourselves. In my experience, presence involves a focused quality of attention and a heightened sense of awareness. This heightened awareness can allow preoccupation with the past and future to drop away, leaving one attentive to each moment as it arises. The state of presence can lead to complete absorption with the task at hand – subject and object can become integrated. When deeply present, there can be a break in the flow of thought and an inner stillness, emptiness and openness in oneself. The state of presence, in my experience, is most deeply felt during meditation and when improvising.

Presence is a concept that psychologist Csikszentmihalyi speaks about in relation to personal happiness.\textsuperscript{179} In his theory of ‘flow’, happiness is achieved when there is complete absorption and attention to the moment - when action and intention are aligned. The state of ‘flow’ involves being open to and accepting feelings and sensations grounded in the now, rather than projecting the mind into the past or future. Personal transformation and change is achieved through full integration and acceptance of the self in each moment, involving ‘…opening yourself up and…delving deeply into yourself.’\textsuperscript{180} In this context, being fully

\textsuperscript{177} Tolle, E. (2004) \textit{The Power of Now; a Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment}, (Sydney, Australia, Hodder Headline Australia). Pg120.
\textsuperscript{178} Steinman, L. (1986) \textit{The Knowing Body; Elements of Contemporary Performance and Dance}, (Boston, USA, Shambhala Publications Inc). Pg 91.
present implies a complete acceptance of oneself – all feelings, sensations, thoughts and perceptions. As the practitioner learns to ‘…enjoy and find meaning in the on-going stream of experience…’\textsuperscript{181} happiness and fulfilment can become available.

Spiritual teachers of many traditions also prioritise presence in spiritual development - such as Ekhart Tolle who sees it as ‘…the key to the spiritual dimension.’\textsuperscript{182} In this context, attention to the breath is pivotal to presence, viewed as the vehicle through which one can connect to the very essence of their being. In Buddhism, the practice of meditation is the method through which presence and connection to self can be achieved. As Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh asserts: ‘Buddha taught that the past has already gone and the future is yet to come; that we find life in what is happening now. To dwell in the present is truly to return to life.’\textsuperscript{183} Through paying attention to the breath, the meditator interacts fully and completely with life - moment by moment.

In the \textit{Song of Longing} process, my commitment to the concept of presence was reflected in the extensive use of improvisation. Improvisation was used as a method of devising movement and vocal material and as a performance modality in its own right. Throughout the process, my private studio practice involved improvisation followed by stream-of-consciousness writing, informed by meditation and attention to the breath, sensations, perceptions and emotions. Discoveries made in this state of acceptance and awareness fed into the evolving work.

From my perspective, moment-to-moment attending can allow one to draw upon the intuition – the faculty of attaining direct knowledge or cognition, without evident rational thought.\textsuperscript{184} With the mind ‘out of the way’, it can become possible to draw upon the deep layers of the psyche. As Blom and Chaplin assert, improvisation is ‘…a way of tapping the


stream of the subconscious without intellectual censorship, allowing spontaneous exploring, creating, and performing.¹⁸⁵

In my experience, improvisation can also open the possibility of touching the spiritual realm. When fully surrendering to an impulse, one can experience oneself as a channel for other forces to come through – forces that seem to transcend human capacities. As Blom and Chaplin articulate:

Artists often speak of trusting their intuition to guide them, or even more radically of becoming a channel through which the vast creative forces of the universe can speak. The creative act thus takes on a life of its own. By becoming the instrument, rather than the master, we gain access to broader realms.¹⁸⁶

This concept of presence, with its potential to access ‘broader realms’, underpinned the creative process of *Song of Longing*. Presence ultimately became a theme in the work, as we explored the importance of transcending the past and future to be more fully in the moment. This chapter explores the concept of presence and draws parallels I have noticed between improvisation and meditation, creativity and spirituality.

### 5.1 Improvisation and Non-duality

From my perspective, improvisation involves being in a state of ‘flow’ where the senses are heightened, attention is focused and intuition can be accessed from moment to moment. Through this practice of spontaneous response, the most interesting and unexpected material can arise. As improviser Stephen Nachmanovich states, improvisation involves ‘…making unconscious wisdom available to consciousness.’¹⁸⁷ Unconscious images and feelings can arise in the moment, accessed without censorship from deeper levels of the psyche. This ‘unconscious wisdom’ can be viewed as connected to the core sense of self,

‘…that which is fully and originally ourselves.’ In *Song of Longing*, accessing this original and authentic part of the self was essential, particularly in regards to the solos. My intention was to explore each individual’s deepest longings – and through the intuitive practice of improvisation, we were able to touch these private landscapes and bring them into the light.

In moment-to-moment play, the body, its impulses and the integrity of the unconscious have primacy. In the flow of moment-to-moment response, the mind, subdued by the impulsive body, can rest. Through improvisation, a profound level of embodiment can be achieved, where mind, body, breath, sensation, emotion and imagination are of one fabric. As performance improviser and teacher Ruth Zaporah asserts: ‘We talk about the mind and body as if they were separate, but in fact it’s our attention that’s split. Through improvisation practice, awareness expands to hold the entire self.’ Improvisation is a ‘…discipline of spontaneity and awareness...’ through which the mind and body, and all they contain, can be integrated.

Improviser Nancy Stark Smith suggests that this process of integration is similar to meditation, as it ‘…keeps bringing you back to your physical sensation, synchronising your body and your mind…because it is in the present moment that they’re both meeting…’ The meeting of body and mind can produce a state of non-duality - of *being* in the work, rather than *doing* the work – a deep, multi-layered immersion, where awareness and action, process and product are of one fabric. Meditation is used in many spiritual practices, such as Buddhism, as a way of overcoming duality between body and mind, self and object. In many forms of meditation, attention to the breath is a pathway through which non-duality can be achieved, as inner self and outer world are brought into alignment.

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188 Ibid. Pg 13.
5.2 The Body, Breath and Being

Improvisation is a practice of heightened awareness and focused concentration. In Buddhism, this deep state of absorbed concentration is called ‘samadhi’. In this tradition, samadhi can be developed through the practice of ‘mindfulness’. Mindfulness is used in meditation, referring to observation and awareness of sensations, thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Attention to the breath is considered the pathway to mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned teacher of mindfulness, asserts that the breath is ‘…the vehicle to unite body and mind and open the gate to wisdom.’\textsuperscript{192} The meditator is instructed to: ‘Breath slowly and deeply, following each breath, becoming one with the breath.’\textsuperscript{193} When the mind wanders, attention is brought back to observing the breath. This technique, similar to improvisation, is one of disciplined awareness. Both are concerned with presence – they are focused on ‘…keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality.’\textsuperscript{194}

In Buddhist practice mindfulness is often associated with meditation, however, this quality of attention can be applied to any activity. Mindfulness is a practice of letting go of the past and the future to be fully in the present. Mindfulness implies living a life of awareness – of being in each moment fully, absolutely in the NOW. Life and the moment are seen as synonymous – ‘…the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life…’.\textsuperscript{195} In my own experience, the practice of mindfulness encourages me to deeply appreciate each moment – whether that be improvising, creating work, or drinking tea. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests:

Drinking your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the whole world revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing towards the future. Live the actual moment. Only this actual moment is life.\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid. Pg 35.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid. Pg 11.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid. Pg 15.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid. Pg 30.
The ultimate aim in practising mindfulness is to achieve the state Buddhists call ‘no-mind’. In this state, the constant chattering mind is absent, making way for intuitive, spontaneous response. Ruth Zaporah describes the state of ‘non thought’ in improvisation as being restful and calm.\textsuperscript{197} She describes relaxing into the moment, losing all sense of self and locating a ‘place of silence’ to which she is repeatedly drawn.\textsuperscript{198} Tolle asserts that all artists ‘…create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness. The mind then gives form to the creative impulse or insight.’\textsuperscript{199}

When one is able to access ‘no mind’ and can work from inner stillness, it can become possible to give full attention to the unfolding creative process. While choreographing \textit{Song of Longing}, I noticed that when there was a gap in mind chatter, the silence gave rise to a deeper intuition - the work would speak to me, rather than me speaking to the work. I would enter a place of deep listening and \textit{being}, rather than \textit{doing}. My deepest intention for the process was to bring my meditation practice into the rehearsal room – to breathe, let the mind rest and allow the intuition to take over. My intention was to widen the spaces in which ‘no-mind’ could occur - abandoning myself to the mystery of the creative process and only using the mind when form or structure was required.

In Buddhist philosophy, samadhi, mindfulness and no-mind are best achieved when the ego is not present – when, as Nachmanovich suggests ‘…the self-clinging personality somehow drops away.’\textsuperscript{200} The intention is to bring oneself into the present through letting go of attachment to the sense of ‘I’. The sense of ‘I’ can bring with it pre-conceived notions of how one ‘should’ be, what one ‘should’ do – the sort of conscious thoughts often referred to in Freud’s structural model of the mind as egoistic. My intention was to let go of these concerns – allowing my self, my life and the work to integrate. When able to do this, I experienced a sense of emptiness, openness and oneness with the evolving work and a deep immersion in what was unfolding in the moment. Attention and intention became fused –

\textsuperscript{197} Albright, A. C., Gere, David (2003) \textit{Taken by Surprise; a Dance Improvisation Reader}, (Middletown, USA, Wesleyan University Press). Pg 22.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid. Pg 22.
\textsuperscript{200} Nachmanovitch, S. (1990) \textit{Free Play; Improvisation in Life and Art}, (New York, USA, Penguin Putnam Inc.). Pg 52.
like a child absorbed in a game.

Central to this fusion of attention and intention was the notion of surrender. I noticed that to become one with the process, I had to surrender ‘…my identity…and the illusion of control…Without surrender and trust – nothing.’\textsuperscript{201} When I was able to surrender to, and trust the evolving work, the work flowed through my body, breath and being and I was able to flow through the work. In these moments, duality dropped away - there was no separation between the process of creating and what was being created. At times, I felt that I was emptiness itself, a conduit for something larger than myself to come through. In these moments, deep presence allowed the impulse to flow \textit{through} me, rather than coming \textit{from} me. As Nachmanovich asserts: ‘Only unconditional surrender leads to real emptiness, and from that place of emptiness I can be prolific and free.’\textsuperscript{202}

5.3 Presence and Transformation

From my perspective, presence in improvisation, creative practice and life can lead to deep levels of trust, emptiness, openness and acceptance in oneself. The practice of presence can encourage one, as Tolle asserts, to ‘…accept what \textit{is}, because you cannot give your full attention to something and at the same time resist it.’\textsuperscript{203} Presence involves saying \textit{YES} to life: presence is the practice of accepting all offers. In meditation, improvisation, art and life, embodiment can be seen as the key to achieving presence. One must fully inhabit the body and breath in order to be anchored in the ‘now’.

Presence, as an embodied state of surrender and acceptance of each moment, is the cornerstone of many spiritual practices. It is believed that through embodying, embracing and accepting oneself, it is possible to transform human pain and suffering, through understanding and awareness. In this context, ‘transformation’ refers to a positive change

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid. Pg 144.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid. Pg 144.
or improvement in oneself.\textsuperscript{204} In Buddhist terms, transformation is achieved through meditation. Through meditation practice, personal suffering can be transformed into peace and inner stillness, through sustained attention to and acceptance of the self. Attention and acceptance are regarded as transformative agents – able to dissolve attachment to the past or future, by constantly bringing the practitioner back to the present. This ‘witnessing’ of sensations, feelings and perceptions can allow insights to arise, leading, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests ‘…to healing and emancipation.’\textsuperscript{205}

From my perspective, the work of improviser Deborah Hay encompasses this same commitment to notions of surrender and acceptance in each moment. In her work, Hay seeks to explore spiritual values\textsuperscript{206} and recognises that dance is ‘…always and already sacred in the way it conjoins body and consciousness.’\textsuperscript{207} She speaks of embracing all aspects of herself in her work, demonstrated by her use of mantras as improvisation scores such as ‘…where I am is what I need…’\textsuperscript{208} and dance ‘…as a dialogue with all that is.’\textsuperscript{209} Some scores are moving meditations, such as ‘…the whole body at once is the teacher.’\textsuperscript{210} Hay describes this score as:

\begin{quote}
\ldots a way to shift immediately into meditation, to get out of your mind…If I am listening to my whole body at once as teacher, my mind is still. The mind is the whole body at once. Registering and surrendering, registering and surrendering.\textsuperscript{211}
\end{quote}

As Hay suggests, improvisation as the art of presence can embrace all things. All aspects of the self, contained in the body, can be accepted. All aspects of life can be embraced – both the tragic and the joyful. In my experience, improvisation and meditation both encourage

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{206} Hay, D. (2000) My Body, the Buddhist, (Middletown, USA, Wesleyan University Press). Pg 54.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Ibid. This appears in the foreword written by Susan Leigh Foster, Pg xvii.
\item \textsuperscript{208} Ibid. Pg 104.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Ibid. Pg 55.
\item \textsuperscript{210} Ibid. Pg 103.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Refshauge, J. (1996) Dialogue with Deborah Hay by Jane Refshauge. Writings on Dance; Exploring the New Dance Aesthetic, 14). Pg 68.
\end{itemize}
this full acceptance of life and oneself. Through embodiment and acceptance of thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, it is possible for one to gain insight into one’s being - creating the possibility of positive change and transformation in the self. This brings us back to Brett Whiteley’s *Alchemy* and his reference to ‘transmutation’. According to Tolle, the esoteric meaning of the ancient art of alchemy is ‘…the transmutation of base metal into gold, of suffering into consciousness.’\(^{212}\) Presence can be seen as an alchemical practice – a moment-to-moment process through which experience can be transformed into conscious awareness.

5.4 Evolving Recognitions

In my life and arts practice, transformation is facilitated through accessing the state of flow – of being in the body and breath so fully, that I become, as Nachmanovich suggests ‘…a vessel or conduit through which a transpersonal life force flows.’\(^{213}\) This state of pure surrender can dissolve duality – the course of the river cannot be stopped or changed, one can only go with its flow. As Michelle Mahrer describes:

> …every cell is moving, or the flow is going through every cell…until you reach this bliss state…for me…the flow is always ecstatic, because ecstasy implies a sense of oneness and connection to the whole.\(^{214}\)

In my experience, improvisation, meditation and the practice of presence facilitates this state of flow. One’s spirit can be nourished by the sense of connection and integration between inner self and outer world. Deep immersion, surrender to the impulse and release of egoistic self-consciousness can result in feelings of happiness. Since ancient times, spiritual masters of many traditions have pointed to the ‘now’ as a key to the spiritual dimension. As Tolle asserts, this dimension ‘…is a realm of deep stillness and peace, but


also of joy and intense aliveness.\textsuperscript{215} To be alive is to be in the here and now – and this is also a place of profound creativity, through which the intuition and unconscious can be accessed.

To be present is to be fully embodied and the very act of full cellular participation in life is spiritual for me. From my perspective, being in the moment, whether meditating or improvising, is a dynamic, life-affirming act – there is vulnerability and courage in embracing all that makes us human: our sensations, feelings, thoughts and perceptions. The naked act of conversing with oneself in the moment enables awareness to arise and integration to take place - pivotal to the process of growth and transformation. And it is through the body and in the moment that we evolve, in a constant becoming, towards self-realization, peace and happiness.

Concluding Thoughts

I think that art has the potential to be a healing force in society. In many cultures it is closely aligned with spiritual practices, and doing it can be transformational. So I spend a lot of time thinking about how art can be functional. Short of going into a monastery, I believe that creating art is one of the most spiritual things a person can do.216

Meredith Monk

Through a process of reflection and distillation, I have come to realise that the creative process is the vehicle through which I contemplate the world and my being in the world.

It is an opportunity to clarify one’s own identity - spiritually, psychologically and socially. It deepens one’s connection with others through collaboration and empathic dialogue, as shared understanding is discovered through creative endeavor. This process can also deepen one’s connection with the environment – the natural, social and constructed spaces we inhabit. And finally artistic process can be an exploration of a particular state of being - of deep presence and awareness. This conclusion is an opportunity for final crystallisation and insight, as I discuss these observations.

The making of art provides an opportunity to open to oneself and understand oneself more fully. Hay observes that dance can be ‘…a dialogue with all there is…’217 – it can embrace who she is to the very core. In this way, as Monk and Hofstadter suggest, creative process has a spiritual aspect – it is a way of expressing ‘…absolute spirit in its immediacy…’218 through cultivation of one’s inner life. From my perspective, the inner life of the human being is imbued with spirit – the immaterial, yet essential part of oneself that is manifested in our connection and relationship with everything around us.

Creative process can also stimulate a form of ethical mindfulness - responsibility to oneself and the world we inhabit. For me, this came about through the recognition of my connection and interdependence with all things. As discussed in Chapter 2, this recognition was informed by Buddhist philosophy that suggests that spirit, or consciousness is immanent in all things and that we are all part of one complex, interconnected fabric. The awareness of interdependence allows, as Moore asserts, for the possibility of ‘…a richly elaborated life, connected to society and nature, (and) woven into the culture of family, nation, and globe.’ Creative process can result in an expanded awareness of the outer world, as well as deep inner reflection.

6.1 Resonance and Reciprocity

The process of realising a performance work with a spiritual and transformational focus can bring together like-minded people. In *Song of Longing* a sense of community developed through shared dialogue on common themes, enhanced by the collaborative modalities of movement and singing. With such emphasis on collaboration, what emerged into consciousness came from a complex matrix of action, reaction and reflection. In this way, the art-making process arose from a series of relational, reciprocal acts - grounded in the ‘life-world’. The making of art can be an inter-subjective process, with the work arising from what Abram calls ‘…a collective field of experience…’.220

The *Song of Longing* process involved a sustained, inter-subjective interaction between five collaborating women. Movement and vocal forms manifested, disappeared and reformed, to finally be presented, after much deliberation, in a series of performances. This tenuous, yet vibrant process reflects a methodological commitment to finding movement and vocal forms for things that were not wholly known or apparent. We were searching in liminal territory for the expression of concepts or experiences that were difficult to define in words.

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We sought an embodied resonance that reflected an inner or felt sense of being. This is not always a state of equanimity, rather it is, as Chodron notes ‘…a matter of being fully engaged with whatever comes to our door. We could call it being completely alive.’

6.2 Spirit of Presence

The capacity to perceive and recognise how we are moment by moment in our daily lives is connected to what we term presence. If presence is a heightened state of embodied awareness in which, as Steinman suggests ‘…our inner reality and outer context are both taken into account…’ then I am interested in developing processes that deepen this. In one aspect that I call deep presence, I seek to embody and converse with all sensations, thoughts, feelings and perceptions, whilst letting go of egocentric judgment. For me, this kind of presence is of vital importance if I am to truly engage with life, with others and with the world around me.

Presence is central to Buddhism – particularly the practice of meditation. Mindfulness, or deep attention, and the state of no-mind – open, clear mind, unfettered by habit - are qualities I seek to cultivate in meditation and improvisation. Mindfulness, as Csikszentmihalyi outlines, enables action to merge with awareness. This deep state of attention is viewed as inherent to the process of creativity - for in this attentive, present state, spontaneous response can flow.

Mindfulness, in Buddhist philosophy, also cultivates the ability to observe the self as a witness. Through the objective observation of the subjective, truth can be recognised and perspective gained. This process of awareness, as explored in Song of Longing, allows painful feelings to be released and transformed. Tolle suggests that ‘…through sustained

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attention and thus acceptance, there comes transmutation. As I found, mindfulness - or the art of presence – can transform suffering through the alchemy of insight. It can then become possible to achieve some degree of psychological peace and harmony, through distance from one’s own ‘story’.

6.3 Art and Healing

The process of manifesting personal truth through a creative project can have a healing affect on those participating - particularly a process that focuses, as McNiff suggests, on ‘…integrating artistic expression and psychological reflection…’ Deep understanding of self and of self in the world can result in feelings of wholeness and integration. Integration is described by Mahrer as a state in which we are ‘…connected and balanced to our larger being…where everything is in harmony.’ This sense of harmony can be experienced when life and art are of the same fabric. As described in Pitjantjatjara culture, art can allow non-duality to be experienced through the convergence of art and life, past and present, spirit and human. This integrated approach to the making of art can open the heart to the possibility of dialogue and communion with all things.

From my perspective, the making of art is an opportunity for integration, openness and connection. Art has the capacity to inspire deep connection and awareness of oneself, of others and the wider world. It can create space for connection - touching the inner sanctum of the spirit and at the same time heightening awareness of the realm beyond the self, both seen and unseen, known and unknown. The gift art can provide is the presence felt in its presence – contemplation and connection allowing the inner and outer world to be touched and felt. The making of art, for me, is a sacred act, allowing wholeness and integration to be experienced in oneself. In this way, creative process has the potential to be profound and transformative medicine - facilitating positive growth and change.

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Art is wedded, inexorably, to its cultural context. *Song of Longing* was intended as an antidote to the disharmony and disconnection perceived in the modern world, exploring counter-narratives of connection, compassion, intimacy and harmony. The project was a microcosm - a utopian world reflecting the values, beliefs and ideals of the artist. Underpinning this was the influence of Buddhist and Hindu art, in which ‘…the secular and the sacred are really inseparable…’. Art can be a means through which non-duality can be explored between life and art, inner life and outer world, self and other.

**6.4 The Mystery of the Moment**

Yet there is a broader context to life and art that remains elusive. This is what Kant called the unknowable – the great mystery of life and death that lies outside our comprehension. Joseph Campbell asserts that it is ‘…important to live life with a knowledge of its mystery and of your own mystery.’ Humankind is preoccupied with life and its finiteness, with many constructs of faith attempting to explain what is not understood. But my experience of this ‘mystery’ is found in moments when I suspend questioning and focus on a deepening attention and immersion in the immediacy of being. In this state of moment to moment attending, I let go of concerns for what was or might be. Through presence and embodiment I can surrender the need to ‘know’ and embrace the mystery of self and the universe.

Perhaps in the moment it is possible to touch life’s great mystery. As discussed in Chapter 5, the ‘flow’ of improvised response can result in the dissolving of the boundaries of the self, detachment from the cultivation of a self-concept or ego and the merging of subject and object. This state of surrender can be viewed as a way to touch both the known and the unknown. Cohen maintains that we ‘…all want to dissolve. We all want that experience of forgetting who we are.’ From my perspective, the creative journey can define one’s identity, yet paradoxically, one’s identity can also ‘disappear’ in the act of moment-to-moment attending.

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moment response. The process of improvisation can open us to what lies beyond identity, beyond the ‘I’ and as I have experienced it, the sense of being as pure breath, pure energy, pure consciousness - transcending time and space.

Perhaps the moment holds the mystery of life and the universe. The moment holds everything and it holds nothing. The moment holds the past, present and the future. The moment, paradoxically, is timeless – perhaps the ‘now’ is the closest we can ever get to eternity. As Nachmanovich suggests ‘…when one surrenders in vast emptiness one is perhaps better equipped than ever to be and act in tune with the ways of the universe.’

230 Song of Longing began as a meditation on mortality, but evolved into a profound appreciation of the vitality, beauty and mystery of life. The project and this writing are expressions of gratitude for life’s great mystery and for the gift of life in this moment.

As I continue my journey in life and art, I hope to cultivate emptiness, openness and attentiveness to embrace the present more fully. I hope to embrace the fragility and magnificence of life with tenderness, saying ‘yes’ to everything that arrives at my door. Through deep attention to each moment, I hope to evolve in being and knowing.

And I hope to continue to celebrate life’s great mystery through the synergy of art and the spirit.

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Appendix 1

SONG OF LONGING SECTIONS

1. Lotus Chant
2. Gathering and Sending
3. Goddess Gestures
4. Kate – Solo
5. Wise Women (‘Molichta’ song)
6. Melissa – Solo
7. Rest/Comfort
8. Lotus Practice
9. Dianne – Solo
10. Karen – Solo
11. Healing Hands (‘Peacock’ song)
12. Fleeting Transcendent Moments
13. Mandala
14. Lotus Reprise (Kate)
OMITTED SOLO PROCESSES

Kate Middleweek

Kate had water as her element and the heart as a chakra point, with her piece exploring the emotional territory of grief. The story central to her piece was connected to the natural environment of a waterfall. This became a key image – with Kate instructed to ‘…allow the experience to flow through and out of you, like water.’¹ Rehearsals focused on building a vocabulary based on the qualities of water, intended as a metaphor for grief. The memory of the waterfall environment provided a three-part structure for the work – the first section informed by a cave behind the waterfall, used as a metaphor of isolation. Section two used the image of moving through the water as a symbol of the processing of experience. In the final section, Kate arrived into the open air, breathing deeply – ready for a new chapter in her life.

The song for Kate’s solo was intended as her ‘inner voice’ - a soothing, repetitive mantra. The journey of the piece was of healing and renewal, with her heart ‘washed clean’ and sorrow transformed to peace and acceptance. Speaking of the process, Kate said that her experience ‘…was framed, it was dived into and then it was worked through.’² When the performances of the solo had finished she found herself ‘…stepping into a new, fresh self…’³ with stronger legs.

Melissa Jones

Melissa’s element was wind and her chakra point the throat, with her solo exploring fear, anxiety and the primal need to find one’s own voice. Using the throat as an initiator, improvisation revealed tension shifting through the body, emotions arising around ‘not being heard’⁴ and the motif of the ‘silent scream.’⁵ The painting of The

³ Ibid. 3/9/08.
⁵ Ibid. 7/3/08.
*Scream* by Edvard Munch was used as inspiration to deepen these themes, with a ‘character’ emerging consumed by anxiety and paranoia, but who could not speak or communicate. Extreme dynamic shifts were layered into the score – with the body and the breath held, then released. A violent windstorm during the rehearsal period deepened this further, with Melissa ‘taking the storm into her body’\(^6\) to produce movement that was erratic and unpredictable. This erratic movement was juxtaposed with a ‘deep rest’\(^7\) position lying on her side that the character could not sustain.

The form of Melissa’s piece was circular – reflecting the inability of the character to break free from her prison of fear. Melissa’s song was the sound of wind in a fierce storm, echoing her turbulent inner environment.

**Anne O’Keeffe**

Though I did not have an extended solo, I saw my role as the ‘witness’ of the piece, with my chakra the third eye. My intention was to embody awareness, insight and the ‘eagle’s perspective’ – as if observing the piece from above. My element was ether, with its qualities ascribed to both voice and movement. Defining myself as ‘the space between the cells’ I visualized my movement and voice going over, under and through the action. The element of ether and this visualization reflected both my roles as performer and director.

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\(^6\) Ibid. 3/4/08.  
\(^7\) Ibid. 15/3/08.
Kate Middleweek - *Solo*

Karen Berger - *Solo*

Dianne Reid, Melissa Jones, Karen Berger, Kate Middleweek, Anne O’Keeffe - *Mandala*
Appendix 4

**DVD Documentation**

Attached to this written thesis is the DVD documentation of *Song of Longing*.

Please note that this begins with four minutes of the artist (Anne O’Keeffe) speaking about the work, supported by footage of the rehearsal process.

Following this is the full performance of *Song of Longing*. 
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O'Keeffe, Anne

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