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GESTURES TOWARDS EMPTINESS:
AN EXPLORATION OF RITUAL WITH
REFERENCE TO BUDDHIST
TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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GESTURES TOWARDS EMPTINESS: AN EXPLORATION OF
RITUAL WITH REFERENCE TO BUDDHIST TRADITION AND
INNOVATION

by

LUISE HOLTBERND

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in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

LUISE HOLTBERND

GESTURES TOWARDS EMPTINESS: AN EXPLORATION OF RITUAL WITH REFERENCE TO BUDDHIST TRADITION AND INNOVATION

This thesis is a cross-relational enquiry into the nature of ritual as the subject of arts-based research. It can be described as ritual-led; or as an artist's manifestation of ritual. The core of the submission consists in an exhibition, comprising 30 pieces of framed, wall-hung artwork; 3 artist's books; some small-scale sculptural work and a documentary film.

The research is concerned with parallel, related disciplines and modes of working: visual art, music, general ritual studies, pedagogy and the practice of Buddhist meditation and ritual. The following areas are being addressed:
1. The context of ritual in general, and Buddhist ritual in particular, both as traditional practice and in a contemporary setting.
2. Tradition and innovation as complementary forces in the evolution of ritual.
3. The interplay of pedagogy and art in the emergence of a body of work.
4. The effects of a personal life-crisis (contracting diabetes type 2) on the course of study; i.e. the discovery of ritualised artmaking as a form of healing and catalyst for increased artistic productivity.

The foundation of the enquiry is both theoretical and practical. The experimental visual artwork employs a variety of techniques and media: ashes on paper; papermaking; wood pulp; and watercolour. The written thesis entails an analysis of process and outcome in each series of works, seen in relationship to Buddhist and educational disciplines. A four-year period of pedagogical developments in small and large-scale groups is documented, surveyed and evaluated. The conclusions are based on reflections of a holistic nature, integrating the different modalities of working and indicating the context of the studies within contemporary society.
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AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without the prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

Presentations of art work:
2003: Exhibition at Glasgow Buddhist Centre
2004: Exhibition and research seminar at Dartington art gallery
2005: Exhibition at Botanic Garden Visitor’s Centre, Glasgow

Conferences:
2001: ‘Scotland year of the Artist’ conference in Edinburgh
2004: PARIP conference in Edinburgh
2005: Arts and ecology conference at Dartington College of arts

Word count of main body of thesis: 60,000

Signed...

Date...
INTRODUCTION

Given the importance of my artwork as the core of my submission, I suggest that the reader may want to view the 'slideshow of main works' and the documentary (appendices 1 and 2), before engaging in any further reading; almost as if making the tour through an art gallery, before settling down to explore what led to the emergence of this work.

The story

I am starting with a short history of my life (one of many possible versions) to show the confluence of family background, religion, music, ecology and ritual that have led to my interest in the subject of my practice and my thesis. I invite the reader to take the time to get an impression of my life from its beginnings in Germany to the point of starting the research, to be able to view this project from my perspective.

My parents were both "good Catholics" and there was not a Sunday that wouldn't have seen us in church. Not to go to church on a Sunday was seen as a minor sin, the accumulation of which would lead to a prolonged stay in purgatory. From between the age of 5 and 18, I must have attended about 850 church services, including extra ones at school; weddings; funerals, and when I played the organ for my first paid job as a teenager. The rhythm of the mass is still ingrained in my being: its Kyrie and Gloria, Sanctus and Benedictus; kneeling, standing, sitting on cue; the eternal sameness of the antiphonal dialogue between priest and congregation. "Der Herr sei mit Euch!" - "Und mit deinem Geiste." All that was required, apparently, was to go through the motion of it, but I needed to know what it all meant - how come the thin white wafer people received at "holy communion", was the body of Christ? It had something to do with my sins and Jesus dying for them, but really it was a mystery. At home, my two younger sisters and I approached the mystery by "playing church", using mints instead of wafers, but mum didn't like us doing that. The message was: playing with holy things was taboo.
There is a photo of me and my sisters on the day of my first holy communion. I am wearing a handmade white dress; my sister's dresses are pale blue and pink. I smile self-consciously into the camera, awkwardly holding my white handbag in both hands, and the expression I read in this young face is one of lost innocence, of consciousness split between doer and witness. I had held high hopes for this initiation rite, of mystic union with god, etc., but the true meaning of the occasion seemed to be of a more social nature. These were some of the dilemmas and contradictions in my young life that I could not gracefully hold and ritual was amongst them: intriguing, powerful, stale, uplifting, hypocritical, not to be questioned.

Up to age 6, I had no problems with rituals; they were an unquestioned part of many aspects of our family life: prayers before and after meal times, before going to sleep ("Make that we will have a healthy little brother or sister, Amen"), lullabies, singing songs at large family gatherings. Our extended family would meet frequently at birthdays, weddings, funerals, etc., After the eating, drinking, playing cards, gossiping, politicking, everyone would meet in the evening and sing folksongs with improvised harmonies. There were also a few four-part choral settings everyone knew and my uncle Jupp, who was a choirmaster, would start us off with the first chord: S, A, T, B. On very special occasions, a three-part women's choir would be performed: "Hebe Deine Augen auf", from Mendelssohn's Elias. My mum had sung it with her sisters and she taught it to us when we were in our early teens. I am sure the general emotional effect this produced was not just caused by the devotional quality of the music itself, but by the passing on of a tradition. It is quite likely that my experience of these family gatherings is a strong contributing factor to my interest in participatory, improvisational, ceilidh-like ritual events.

I have also some rich memories of 'Allerheiligen' and 'Allerseligen' (All Saint's Day) when family groups gathered in a dark graveyard which was adorned by a myriad of tea lights in red plastic containers. There would be about sixteen of us,
processing to the grave of Auntie Hannah (who died in the last week of the 2nd world war) and to the grave of my grandmother, praying and singing as we surrounded the little earthen rectangle of earth, shrubs and red lights. For a child it was as powerful a confrontation with the mysterious and dark forces of the ancestors as I imagine tribal rituals to be. I was particularly awed by the labyrinthine aspect of the graveyard – the possibility of getting lost in the dark.

I learned to play several instruments: recorders, piano, cello, church organ, and took part in our family ensemble, a choir and a youth orchestra. All through my childhood and adolescence I performed a lot; in churches; at functions; in concert halls, and participated in competitions. There was no question of not choosing a musical career, and so I enrolled for the study of music teaching at high schools, at Folkwang Hochschule in Essen. It soon became apparent that I had a lot more to learn beyond just teaching music. In many ways I was ill-prepared for life in a city environment and I suffered from depression during the first 2 years of my life as a student. The shadow aspects of my childhood asserted themselves and needed to be healed. Some travelling in the south of Europe and Morocco opened a sense of freedom and spiritual potential, but I didn’t know how to keep that thread alive within the superficiality, competitiveness and alienation of our consumer society. I still vividly remember the shock of seeing the pervading unhappiness, misery and tightness in people’s faces on returning to Essen after my travels. I struggled with the anonymity of city life, feeling desperately lonely.

Luckily I found a few good friends who pointed me in helpful directions. I chose a period of study (for myself), in psychotherapy, and started to engage in a variety of arts activities that emphasised creative expression for personal development. For a while we did a lot of work with masks, imagining them, building them, bringing them to life through music and dance, and performing with them. We were like a tribe, engaged in healing and celebratory rituals. At university, I changed course to the study of “Rhythmics”, a form of music and movement education developed by Jaques Dolcroze. This proved to be one of the most valuable influences in my life. We spent hours playing and improvising in the
fields of music, dance, theatre and the visual arts, with various degree of structure and inter-disciplinary connection. We also learned how to devise appropriate structures for teaching in a variety of group settings. Although there was little explicit therapeutic interchange, these years of study had a major integrating effect on my personality. I was particularly intrigued by the power of self-awareness - how you could direct your attention to different aspects of your experience. Awareness, for example, can be directed towards:

- Different parts of the body
- The physical space;
- The people you play with;
- Aesthetic qualities of sound and movement such as timbre, rhythm, texture and formal shapes, etc.;
- Thought-processes and feelings including internal ‘imaging’.

I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on the subject of “masks - accessing unconscious energies” and my degree-show was a multi-disciplinary piece involving the performance of a composition for solo cello, movement incorporating the cello as an object, and slides showing details of the body of the cello. I smoothly transitioned into post-student working life, having taught cello and piano since the age of sixteen and all through university. With my boyfriend, who was a photographer, and a few other artist friends, we took over the running of a small, semi-rural alternative art-school near the Folkwang Hochschule. We lived and worked together, kept up the beautiful old building and offered a programme of arts events. I started to teach Rhythmics there and also at adult education and community centres. Although I enjoyed my lifestyle, I had a vague sense that I wasn’t doing with my life what I should be doing. That’s when Buddhism entered my life.

I had by then long given up on Christianity, but had kept a meditation stool from some early introduction to meditation I had received from a Benedictine monk during one of our compulsory school “Exerzitien” (lit. exercises, a period of retreat). A friend invited me to a Buddhist retreat weekend, and not only did I find
some kind honest and deep-reaching communication on that event, but also that the Dharma (the Buddha's teaching) consisted in truths I had always intuitively known. It presented clear ways to realise those truths through various practices; meditation being one of them. On the return train journey from that first retreat, I again "saw" people's faces, this time responding to their suffering not with depression, but with a love I had not felt before. I also perceived with visionary clarity an underlying beauty in everything. Meditation wasn't easy at first, but I persisted and implemented it into my life, together with Yoga, as a new set of daily disciplined practices. In time I learned more about the workings of my mind, its confusions and possibilities, and particularly appreciated learning to develop and ride the subtle, physical, psycho-spiritual energies that meditation and Yoga give access to. Although there was much in Buddhism I responded to very enthusiastically, I also experienced a fair amount of doubt about some of its more formal or institutional aspects as expressed in this movement (The FWBO, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order).

One area I struggled with, not surprisingly perhaps as an ex-Catholic, was the way ritual was being performed, particularly in the form of the "seven-fold puja". It wasn't so much the content, evoking different spiritual moods like worship and confession, but the archaic language and call-and-response format employed to convey that meaning. Mantras were being chanted as well, and although I sensed the spiritual potential of these monophonic repetitive chants, they rarely worked for me. With my inner ear, honed through my musical training I heard these mantras clad in harmonies that touched my heart. The outer ear perceived dullness and a depressingly sinking pitch. As in my early church days, I found it hard to believe that people really connected with what they were saying or chanting, and they seemed to "get into it" in a way that I was suspicious of. Were they unconsciously looking for some kind of sub-individual group trance experience? (Like many of my contemporaries I was very sensitive to anything remotely reminiscent of Nazi methods of indoctrination.) Or was it just my own limitations that got in the way, an inability to really let go; to surrender? And then, sometimes at the end of a puja, there was an undeniable, palpable shared
silence, which I experienced as a genuine spiritual communion between the present practitioners and with some higher power. This was the start of years of discussion, experimentation, investigation of ritual in the FWBO, because I decided to get more fully involved, doubts and all.

At the age of 25 I “went forth”, like the Buddha had done, leaving behind my friends and family, my possessions and work, and started a new life, dedicated to my spiritual search. After a rather difficult start in Croydon, working and living in a slightly cultist urban centre, I moved to ‘Taraloka’, a Buddhist retreat centre for women in Shopshire, which provided me with a thorough training in Buddhist living. Our semi-monastic lifestyle offered a daily programme of meditation, work, group meetings and provided opportunities to develop friendships, go on retreats and do Dharma study. My work area was building and maintenance and I learned how to lay concrete floors, put in new windows, brick up holes and build beds. I spent a whole blissful summer re-pointing outside walls, shifting my self-build scaffolding along the red old farm buildings we were converting, practising mindfulness in action with the repetitive movements of chisel and trowel.

Missing opportunities for creative expression, after four and a half years I moved to Glasgow, which was then, in 1990, designated European City of Culture and started to work as a self-employed Yoga and music teacher. I was hoping to get ordained as a Buddhist, and had been going to long training retreats for a few years. But I was struggling with my resistance to some of the institutional aspects of the process, including the many rituals we did on retreats. About that time, I had a dream.

I am part of a group of tourists visiting the abbey of Bingen, in Germany. My attention gets drawn to a side chapel, where the remains of Hildegard of Bingen, the famous 13th century mystic, abbess, writer, composer, healer are kept. She is seated in a glass case, dressed in regal silks and brocades, her slender, bejewelled hands folded one on top the other. As I look at her, she seems to come alive, her hands are moving slightly, and she opens her eyes to look at me. She has the beautiful blue eyes of a Bodhisattva, shining with an exquisite mixture of wisdom, compassion and humour. Telepathically I ask her whether she knows me (although I feel recognised and ‘seen’ by her anyway). She answers: ‘Of course I know you, you are one of my nuns.’ And I feel she is pleased for me to be a Buddhist.
On waking, I felt something of significance had happened. My personal myth had become more conscious and clear: I was to embody an integration of Western and Buddhist culture and I was to be led by archetypes: the priestess, the artist, the queen, the bodhisattva.

In 1984, I was invited by the women's ordination team to be ordained, and the ordination ceremony was performed in the context of a retreat by Sanghadevi, the former chairman of Taraloka and senior member of the order. She gave me the name Ratnadevi, which means 'jewel goddess' and she explained that my many qualities and skills were like facets of a jewel which I could use to benefit other human beings. The more I offered myself to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), the more my gifts to others would bear the qualities of Enlightenment. Quite a myth to realise! I felt truly initiated, some definite spiritual changes had been set in motion by this ordination ritual and I felt amazingly happy and radiant for many months, if not years afterwards.

As an order member, new fields of work and creative expression opened up for me. Continuing the East/West theme I started to do abstract paintings on Buddhist subjects. With a couple of other artistically inclined order members I started to lead arts retreats at various venues, which usually involved several art forms and culminated in elaborate rituals. Apart from these more fringe-type activities (in terms of the movement), I also led study groups and taught meditation both at city centres and retreat centres in the UK, Ireland, Germany and the States. In 1983, a group of order members formed with the aim of examining, and perhaps reshaping the way we do puja and other rituals in the FWBO. This was an exciting development to get involved with and I soon took on a convening role for this group. We experimented and looked at questions like: What are the constituents of a ritual? What are the qualities of music/chanting we are looking for in Buddhist ritual? A recurring area of investigation was the question of 'refinement' versus the 'elemental', of the thrilling' versus the 'stirring'.

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During the 90s, I also developed an increasing interest in ecological issues which led to a course on ritual at Schumacher College in 2000. I was interested in how the arts and ritual can lead to a felt recognition of our belonging to the complex networks and communities that make up our world. For several years now I have, together with my partner actively been pursuing the vision of setting up an eco village in Scotland, called 'Bodhi'. Our guiding principle is ‘mindful living’ – in harmony with ourselves, other beings and the environment; a concept that includes the practice of ethics as well as aesthetics. I led a choir in Glasgow, and over the years developed several experimental choral performances, using movement in a ritual way not unlike Meredith Monk (who was also trained in Dalcroze method). In 2000/ 2001 I was artist in residence at the Glasgow Buddhist Centre, as part of 'Scotland Year of the Artist'. The title of my project was 'Rites and Rituals'. And I also started the current research at Dartington College.

**Confluence**

Clearly, the life-experience that preceded my period of research was layered through more than one mode of thinking and being. At this early stage in the thesis, I should perhaps list some of the major 'shaping influences' because these interconnecting tissues of life and work are seminal to the nature of the journey taken; the practice and the theory. The following headings delineate the main features of these experiences and backgrounds, namely:-

- an early Christian conditioning with religious and social rituals seemingly still reasonably intact and effective, but even then inciting questions and doubt;
- my chosen new path, Buddhism, and an ambiguous attitude towards its rituals;
- a multi-arts background that lends itself to ritual explorations;
- an evolving interest in ecological concerns;
- devising collective rituals as part of my role as a teacher ; and
- my emerging visual art practice.

Such seemingly disparate experiences and influences beg the question and issue of cohesion and unity. My continuing research (and practice) in ritual, has
been the gravitational core of my concerns to make an holism from the sum of these parts.

One of the questions I ask myself most frequently in the course of my research is; how does this research, and my approach to it, relate to what is most important to me? Life is short and I don't want to waste it in empty ritual, doing things for their own sake. Does ritual, and does this research ritual, actually help me to lead a spiritually healthy and meaningful life? And does it make a contribution to the understanding of ritual for a wider community of artists, spiritual seekers and others who care about the quality of life on this earth? These questions seem to need constant re-visiting, as it is so easy to lose sight of the essentials. The usefulness and vitality of ritual, in the context of this project, was to be put to a test shortly after commencing the project, when I developed diabetes type 1. Later on in the thesis (year 2) I describe how I brought an art/ritual approach to the repetitive measuring of my blood sugar levels, thus dealing creatively with fears and anxieties.

**Context**

I discovered that my research ran parallel to a U.S. based program called 'Awake: Art, Buddhism and the dimensions of consciousness.' From April 2001 to February 2003 arts professionals, artists and others came together in Green Gulch Retreat Centre in California, to 'investigate the relationship between the meditative, creative, and perceiving mind; and the implications of Buddhist perspectives for artistic and museum practice.' When I read the book that came out of this program: Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art (ed. Jaqueline Baas and Mary Jane Jacob 2004), I was thrilled to recognize many of the questions that have been guiding this research. The Awake consortium coined the expression "the art-life paradigm", as a most alive and relevant concern regarding the relationship between creative practice, in and out of the art studio (or art museum). Marcel Duchamp and John Cage are perhaps among the earliest American artists who, influenced by Zen, began to see that 'everything in the
world is worthy of our attention, and to understand this - our attention- is the
creative act.' (Buddha Mind 2004:20).

There are two Buddhist concepts or truths in particular that have inspired many
contemporary artists, including myself: first, the interconnectedness of all
phenomena, and secondly, their ultimately 'empty' nature. Some modern
scientists see the world in much the same way:

Consider a vortex in a stream of flowing water. The vortex is a structure made of an
ever-changing group of water molecules. It does not exist in a classical Western
sense; it exists only because of the flow of water through the stream. If the flow
ceases the vortex disappears. Harold Morowitz (biophysicist), quoted by David
Selby in Resurgence magazine Oct 2004:22

David Selby describes phenomena (people, other-than-human life forms, places,
countries) as co-evolving manifestations of a multi-level and multi-dimensional dance of
ultimately indistinguishable internal and external relationships. As part of this 'dance',
always keeping in mind its ephemeral nature (hence the title; ‘Gestures towards
Emptiness’), I attempt to shine light on some aspects of Buddhist influenced art
and ritual, on the research process itself, and myself as the researcher.

Perhaps I should try to position myself within the Buddhism - art continuum. Am I
a Buddhist who makes art, or am I an artist who happens to be a Buddhist? Or
does it matter? For the Western trained artist Bill Viola, encounters with
Buddhism in Japan changed the way he worked profoundly.

Until that point, my definition of success in art was measured within the confines of
exhibiting in galleries, museums, or alternative spaces. In Japan, it was beginning to
sink in that perhaps art resides in life itself, that as a practice is derives from the
quality of experience, depth of thought, and devotion of the maker, not the virtuosity
of the object or the success of its presentation. Bill Viola in Buddha Mind 2004:49

In the Suntory museum in Tokyo, during an exhibition of treasures from a
Buddhist temple, Viola watched an old lady offering silk scarves to a whole row of
dime-sized figures of Kannon (the Bodhisattva of compassion) and bowing to them
with great reverence. He felt like someone who had been admiring the outer form of a
computer for all these years without ever having switched it on. (Buddha Mind 2004: 248)

My own Buddhist and artistic development have largely co-evolved; each feeding
upon an interchange and flux between one and the other. But as a result of such
a fusion between the two, a similar tension can arise between a so-called
professional (scholarly) approach to ritual, and that of a more natural and intuitive theory and praxis. Could I run the risk of losing whatever genuine devotion I have developed, within (or despite) Buddhist ritual, by analysing it? What effect would ritual in art making have on my Buddhist practice? One noticeable effect of the intensification of my artwork during the research period was a certain amount of lessening of time spent in silent sitting meditation, both at home and on retreat (although the thread of sitting meditation remained unbroken). However, the practice of mindfulness and reflection in everyday life has perhaps increased, as I became more aware of how I can use ritual and ritual art in awareness-enhancing ways.

It is interesting that the question of ritual does not seem to feature strongly at all in the 'Awake' contemporary Buddhism /Art discourse, though under the heading of 'performance', Sanford Biggars conducted a group improvisation in a Zendo, using bells. Each person was not stuck in their own space in an egoistic sense. As an experience, I think it achieved a meditative state among sixteen people all together (Buddha Mind 2004:210) This kind of event and description of atmosphere could easily apply to 'rituals' I have led for many years. The term ritual seems to be viewed with much suspicion in many modern, even spiritual or Buddhist contexts, which reflects peoples' unease with some aspects of organised religion, belief, and doctrine. Yet there seems to be a need for a range of experience that traditionally is facilitated by ritual. A Buddhist like Stephen Batchelor (who wrote 'Buddhism beyond Belief') chose to complement the inward-oriented practice of meditation with something he felt to be more expressive, like photography. He sees this art-form as a means to take mindfulness into whatever life presents.

For the first few minutes in meditation...you feel in your body that you're somehow framing the world in another way. The same is true in taking photographs. One needs to get in to a contemplative frame of mind in order to have that sharpness of attention, that focus, that precision. And this requires a willingness to see things other than the way we see them habitually. Stephen Batchelor in Buddha Mind p142

For a Vajrayana Buddhist practitioner, chanting Mantras would have exactly the same result - these kinds of rituals are designed to achieve a continuity of
mindfulness practice and resist the 'routinisation' of life. I feel that my work with ritual could go some way to re-establish ritual as a mode of practice for contemporary Buddhist-inspired seekers and art practitioners by showing that it can be a rich, integrative, conscious and creative act that 'gets to places nothing else quite touches' (comments of a ritual participant). A distinctive mark of my explorations is the fusion of personal art-work with an emerging pedagogical practice; the latter with groups. The fusion of these two most effectively brings the spirit of ritual alive. I see myself as part of the new current of 're-enchantment' (Gablik) that, propelled by ecological concerns, places high value on replacing dualistic and materialistic thinking with a more holistic way of life.

One of the lessons of this research consists in an acceptance that it is not a neat, linear process but that it, like quantum world science, has to employ complementary, mutually contradictory accounts (Peat1995: 233). In this context, it is also worth pointing out the limitations of language in general, which perhaps tend to fix phenomena into objects and categories. Peat, for example suggests that Indigenous tribal people's languages tend to be more verb and relationship-oriented, which is truer to the flux and vibration of our ever-shifting world. The Algonquin peoples in North America have verbs with over a thousand endings. (Peat 95:222) It is hard to imagine quite what it would feel like to be part of such a process-vision of the world, underpinned so powerfully by language. Such a language would be a more adequate tool for describing the processes of ritual and art-making, which are multi-level and non-linear, both logical and intuitive.

A fully understood idea is a dead idea. My work has taught me that places of shadow are far more interesting than fully illuminated rooms. The creative process has its roots in a state of confusion, unclarity and non-understanding that precedes all insights. This "cloud of unknowing", to quote the title of a thirteenth century classic book on Christian mysticism, is for me the highest state and most energised time. It is the still turbulence of three-thirty in the morning - nothing happens on the surface but everything is going on underneath. It is the time of risk and the time of unification between art, science and all creative activities. Its centre is personal transformation. Not only is this awareness necessary for the genesis of new thoughts but it is this process that all works of art must actively re-create in the viewer if they are to move us beyond the confines of time and place.' Bill Viola, in: rites of passage 1996:46
Both as a Buddhist and as an artist/ritualist, I place a high value on the kind of experience described here. Being concerned with the existential themes of life and death, it is important to me not to offer any glib answers to either myself or others, but to dwell in a space of enquiry. Meditation could be described in that way too - as soon as one tries to appropriate any insight or blissful experience, its truth diminishes. How can any form of expression approximate that which is, and should remain, illusive? With this kind of questioning I am of course in the company of spiritual seekers from all ages.
PART 1: A MAPPING OF RITUAL

If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn form the cold hard mouth
of the earth .......

from: Elizabeth Bishop, At the Fishhouses

Here, I am laying out the territories I am journeying through in my evolving understanding of ritual in theory and practice. The subject of ritual is vast and forms the subject of research in many different fields of knowledge, such as social anthropology, sociology, religious studies and the performing arts. I am neither a social scientist, nor a Buddhist scholar and I am not aiming here to advance knowledge in a strictly scientific sense. My understanding of ritual is greatly influenced by my creative practice of it, which is usually not the case in academic forms of ritual studies. This naturally limits the time and energy available for more theoretical research, whilst bestowing to the project a certain passion and immediacy derived from personal immersion in the subject matter. It became clear though, that in order to understand the nature of ritual in more than superficial ways, I needed to give considerable time and space to an exploration of ritual theory. The structure of the first three, more general chapters is inspired by the anthropologist Catherine Bell’s ‘Ritual, Perspectives and Dimensions’, who most admirably introduces ‘systematically all of the issues, debates, and areas of inquiry that comprise the modern study of ritual.’ (Bell 97:267). This is followed by a more in-depth exploration of the more specific areas central to my enquiry, i.e. ritual in the Buddhist world, the arts, and ecology. My hope is that my choice of
structure will allow for a certain order and clarity, whilst permitting a fluidity that can encompass not only the overlaps between different chapters, but also the organic, two-way flow between theories and an emerging arts practice.

Definitions and Aspirations

What is ritual?
The answer to the question of what ritual is, shows more about the historical context and assumptions of the person who gives the answer than about the nature of ritual. It is outside the scope of this thesis to provide a thorough comparative analysis. So what I am describing here are just a few examples of definition-like statements from contemporary ritual studies, with the purpose of opening up the field of inquiry.

Ethologically speaking, ritual is ordinary behaviour transformed by means of condensation, exaggeration, repetition, and rhythm into specialized sequences of behaviour serving specific functions usually having to do with mating, hierarchy, or territoriality. Schechner 1993: 228

Moving from these observations of ritual in the animal world, to human behaviour:

A collective ceremony is a dramatic occasion, a complex type of symbolic behaviour that usually has a statable purpose, but one that invariably alludes to more than it says, and has many meanings at once......Ritual may do much more than mirror existing social arrangements and existing modes of thought. It can act to reorganise them or even help to create them. Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 5

And now a statement that brings out ritual's complexity of symbol and meaning, as well as its relationship to both existing and new modes of thought and behaviour:

In the repetition and order, ritual imitates the rhythmic imperatives of the biological and physical universe, thus suggesting a link with the perpetual processes of the cosmos. It thereby implies permanence and legitimacy of what are actually evanescent cultural constructs. Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 8

Here Moore and Myerhoff refer to the ordered ways in which ritual binds human beings into a greater whole by way of similarity of repetitive rhythm. They also point to its legitimising effect in regard to social constructs. The next two
A ritual simultaneously imposes an order, accounts for the origin and nature of that order, and shapes people's dispositions to experience that order in the world around them. Bell 1997: 21

Ritual is the medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of power, authority and value. ... the fundamental efficacy of ritual activity lies in its ability to have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things. Bell 1997:xii

I chose these statements partly because they emphasise aspects of ritual that are of interest in my practical work: the aesthetics of formal principles, the embodiment of meaning, and the dynamics of tradition and change. If I have to align myself with any definition of ritual, I would choose the last quoted sentence from Catherine Bell. The aspect of embodiment is important to me, because I am an advocate of spiritual, political, and ecological change. Change does not happen on the level of concepts; they need to be translated into physical action. Ritual is action, it is not just theory or belief. If the function of ritual is not just to preserve tradition (as is commonly assumed), but also to initiate and establish change, then it can be a powerful agent for this purpose now. Rituals play a certain role in the lives of engaged, modern Westerners in a variety of situations: in religious settings; in self-development workshops; in political or ecological activism, and in many other secular situations. These people are less concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy, but with issues of personal fulfilment and planetary change. I want to make a contribution to this ground-swell of positive thinking and creative action by helping to maximise the effects of ritual through the influence of my own ritual-inspired art work; the group work I lead, and my evolving theoretical understanding.

Ritual and Play

Those who see ritual primarily as a solemn and serious occasion may view playing, in ritual, with caution. I think it is a worthwhile consideration that ritual
can be a playful activity. The cultural anthropologist Andre Drooger suggests that people repeat rituals because they offer diversion and satisfaction through the playful creation of a relevant alternative reality. (2004:137). This other, emerging reality has its own parameters (variation, contradiction, inversions, etc) that invites improvisation and experimentation. According to Dutch historian Huitzinga, two distinguishing marks of play are, firstly, that it is has no practical usefulness other than its own enjoyment, and secondly, that it follows acknowledged rules. (Huitzinga, in his influential 'homo ludens', 1956:205)

Whilst the first characteristic shows its closeness to the arts, the second brings out its similarity with ritual. Like ritual, play sets itself apart from the flow of ordinary activity; it draws a circle around a closed and homogenous world of its own. The ritual space is like a playground. In both we may see mimesis: copying the movements of animals or human beings. In both we find the elements of repetition, of multi-sensory experience, and both operate in a field of 'make believe'. Ritual and play share a mental state that allows absorption whilst at the same time knowing that one has created a special reality. Differences between the two are possibly a greater spiritual purposefulness in some rituals (Huitzinga 1965:27), or a greater propensity to the abandonment of the play-activity (through influences from 'real' life, or 'rule-breaking', where one or more members of the play-group leave the 'rules' of the game and disturb the pattern of the play), but the similarities between the two certainly outweigh the differences.

On many of the smaller retreats (8-20 participants) I lead, I tend to encourage the playful aspects of rituals: by modelling a certain non-ceremoniousness myself; by making the rules transparent and by allowing room for creative expression. Some of the presentations that people have devised on these retreats display a high degree of playfulness, yet there is a depth of purpose and meaning there as well that clearly identifies them as rituals. An example is the balloon game (on the 'air ritual' retreat, year 4), where the participant wrote limiting self-beliefs on balloons and popped them, after we had all tossed them about for a while, mockingly shouting out sentences such as: ‘You are not good
enough!

One function of play is its experimental character. Unencumbered by responsibilities, there is freedom to try out and rehearse various solutions within a field of tension. So to some extent the playfulness in these smaller ritual retreat and workshop settings can function as a means of testing ritual possibilities for larger, more formal Buddhist ritual occasions, where greater formality is required.

The Spectrum of Ritual Activities

There are as many ways of dividing ritual activities into categories as there are theorists. For example, the professor for performance studies at New York University, Richard Schechner, draws a 'ritual tree', that shows the rise from genetically fixed forms of ritual in insects and fish, to fixed and free forms in birds and mammals, to social ritual in non-human primates, to human ritualisation, from where it branches into social, religious and aesthetic ritual. (Schechner 93:229) I don't know whether contemporary biologists would agree with this categorisation, so I feel on safer ground limiting my research to the human domain. I am following here Bell's distinction into six types, that refer to human ritual exclusively: rites of passage; calendrical and commemorative rites; rites of exchange and communion; rites of affliction; rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals; and political rituals.

Rites of passage

Also sometimes called 'life-cycle' rites, rites of passage mark the major events that shape the life of a human being, such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death. The ceremony may or may not coincide with the actual biological event, i.e. a girl's initiation ceremony could happen at a later stage than the start of her menstruation, or a funeral is celebrated months after the death of a person.

Indeed, life-cycle rituals seem to proclaim that the biological order is less determinative than the social. Physical birth is one thing; being properly identified and accepted as a member of the social group is another. Likewise, the appearance of facial hair or menses does not make someone an adult; only the community confers that recognition, and it does so in its own time. Bell 97:94
Rituals that time and time again honour the most intimate and perhaps bewildering experiences in people's lives, (such as birth and death), are an opportunity for a society to affirm its value systems, making them seem non-arbitrary, and to allow individuals to find their place in the overall order of things. Some scholars have theorized that there is a deep human impulse to take the raw changes of the natural world and "cook" them, in the words of Levi Strauss, thereby transforming physical inevitabilities into cultural regularities. This impulse may be an attempt to exert some control over nature or to naturalize the cultural order by making physical events into elements of an embracing conceptual order of cognition and experience. Bell 97:94

Such meaning-bestowing rites of passage seem to have not lost their appeal in modern times. In fact some people even feel the need to go beyond the usual traditions, and celebrate occasions such as the point when the children leave home, or entering the age of the 'crone'. I am not married to my partner, but after 10 years of relationship we decided to create our own celebration of 'love and friendship, between us and between us all', (as we called it on our invitation card), in the circle of friends and family. We clearly felt the need for a 'life-cycle' ritual.

My experience of ordination, or initiation as a member of a Buddhist order, constituted a powerful rite of passage, replete with the oft-quoted three stages of Arnold van Gennep: first one leaves behind the social group and one's old identity; secondly, goes through a stage of non-identity before thirdly, admission into another social group with a new identity. (Van Gennep 1960:65) The 'spiritual death' (that is, the losing of one's old identity) aspect of the experience was marked by withdrawal into a private, silent space after the 'private' ordination ceremony, followed a few days later, by a 'public' ceremony during which the new name was proclaimed. There is a more esoteric meaning to the ritual as well, where the new affiliation is perceived to be not so much with any group, but with the pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which stand for aspects of one's own enlightenment potential. Still, the old texts use the language of social
relations to describe this act of commitment, speaking of becoming 'a son or daughter of the noble family of the Buddhas' (Bodhichariyavatara).

When leading retreats (whether on ritual or not) I sometimes draw attention to the awareness of the rite of passage aspect of that experience. One leaves behind the familiarity of ordinary life, with its security of certain roles and habits; to find oneself 'in limbo' for the period of the retreat, whilst following a programme of meditation that might well unsettle one's sense of certainty about oneself and the world. Finally one returns from the retreat, into the world, carrying the potential to make life-style changes out of a transformed sense of oneself.

Calendrical Rites

Like rites of passage, calendrical rites connect a social order with periodic natural occurrences. They can be distinguished in terms of seasonal and commemorative celebrations. Seasonal rites are anchored in the activities of planting and harvesting for agriculturists, or grazing and moving the herd for pastoralists (Bell 97:103). Typical ritual activities for farming societies consist in making offerings to ancestors or deities at the time of sewing seeds, and returning the first fruits to them at the time of harvest, together with communal feasting. Commemorative rites recall important historical events, like Guy Fawkes Night in the UK, or the Fourth of July in America. Religious traditions tend to define their whole year through a series of commemorative rituals that become one great narrative of the lives of their founders. Following this repetitive round of festivals can instil a strong sense of what it means to 'be a Christian', or to 'be a Buddhist'.

In the context of this research, celebrations such as Buddha Day (celebrating the Buddha's birth and enlightenment), or Parinirvana Day (celebrating his passing away) have been welcome opportunities for me to experiment with new forms of communal ritual. I have also chosen the winter and summer solstices to instigate ritual events, and have found that these seasonal occasions have lent themselves perhaps more readily to rituals that reflect and effect change on a
personal level. The reason for this may be that they are more overtly linked with change in the natural world, so they become clear metaphors for inner processes; i.e. ‘from dark to light’. These messages are not overlaid by religious symbolism which appeals to a certain group of people, who are looking for ‘spiritual experience without religion’, and who form part of my ‘ritual clientele’. There is of course an overlap between calendrical and commemorative rituals; Buddha Day, for example falls on the first full moon day of May, which is the beginning of the rice planting season in India. Bell thinks that such rituals easily shift their emphasis back and forth, subtly evoking themes of cosmic renewal alongside themes of historical commemoration. (Bell 97:109) The fact that I lean towards rituals, or ways of doing ritual that offer space for expression of the more personal and elemental, (as opposed to the more institutionalised and social), becomes a frequent theme in this enquiry.

The ever-repeating rhythms of day and night, summer and winter, and the rituals we attach to them offer themselves as subject for artistic exploration. In his 5-panelled video installation Catherine's room, Bill Viola shows a woman on her own, going about her daily activities: washing herself and doing Yoga in the early morning light, sewing during the morning, writing in the afternoon, praying in the evening and resting at night. Through the window of the room we see a tree going through the seasons of the year; from spring flowers to bare branches. The slight slowing down of the film speed adds to the impression of living in ‘ritual time’, where the repetitiveness of the actions mark, celebrate and defy the passing of time.

Rites of Exchange and Communion (and some reflections on magic)

Whether the purpose is to avert evil, placate gods, achieve communion, reconstruct idealized kinship relation or establish the proper reciprocity of heaven and earth, the offering of something – first fruits, paper money, or human beings - has been a common ritual mechanism for securing the well-being of the community and the larger cosmos. Bell 97:114
To give something to a god or other higher being, with the expectation of receiving something in return, is one of the best-known and most-practised forms of religious ritual. The return expected can be of a specific material nature, such as rainfall or success in love. This expresses a utilitarian attitude that some scholars used to associate with manipulative magic. *Magic flourishes whenever man cannot control hazard by means of science. It flourishes in hunting and fishing, in times of war and in seasons of love, in the control of wind, rain and sun, in regulating all dangerous enterprises, above all, in disease and in the shadow of death.* (Malinowski 62:261) Frazer drew out certain mechanisms and principles typical of this kind of ritualisation, such as 'like produces like' (pouring water produces rain), and 'contagion' (harm a hair and it will be felt by the person whose head it belonged to). (Frazer1922:11)

The attitude behind the ritual of making offerings could be more non-utilitarian; a seeking of a sense of communion with the deity (or principle) evoked, and an asking for blessings. The Hindu and Buddhist practice of 'puja' can serve as an example of this type of ritual practice. For early theorists (like Malinowski, Tyler and Frazer) it was important to distinguish between this 'higher', 'purer' form of religion, as opposed to that 'lower' form of magic, where practical outcomes are expected. In this evolutionary view, 'real' religion and science would eventually supersede magic. (Bell97:47) These distinctions are now seen as hindrances to the study of ritual, tied as they are to historical biases and prejudices.

'Offering making' represents a significant theme in the body of my practical work, both in my visual artwork and ritual group work. The symbol of the bowl acquires a particularly heightened meaning both as receptacle for an offering, and as representative of a higher reality itself. I resonate with the old Indian saying: *If the Highest Reality did not manifest in infinite variety, but remained within its solid singleness, it would be...something like a jar.* (Abhinavagupta, Tantraloka. In Mookerjee 98:80) With its similarity to a pregnant womb, a full jar has also been associated with the feminine Divine (20). When I place a bowl (in either two or three- dimensionality) onto a background, I deliberately make a link with an ancient ritual practice (and I
don't mind associations with magic). Science and technology may have freed us of some ignorance and fear as regards natural phenomena, but also created many new problems, such as escalating global warming. What will help us now? I am not naively suggesting a 'back to ritual' salvation plan; instead my work signals an openness to enquire into our perceptions of reality. Investigations into how rituals work can open up some interesting insights. Magical thinking does not necessarily mean delegating responsibility to some exterior agent, but can actually be an effective tool to harness energy for action.

*The Dinka herdsman, hurrying home to supper, knots a bundle of grass at the wayside, a symbol of delay. Thus he expresses outwardly his wish that the cooking may be delayed for his return. The rite holds no magic promise that he will now be in time for supper. He does not then dawdle home thinking that the action will itself be effective. He redoubles his haste. His action has not wasted time, for it has sharpened the focus of his attention on his wish to be in time. Douglas 1966:79*

But you never know: the intensity of the herdsman's wish to be in time for supper may also have a direct effect on his wife at home. Parapsychological phenomena like telepathy are starting to be taken more seriously in academic circles, even if repeatability of tests still remains an issue. (Hyman, R. & Honorton, C.) So when I make an offering with an intention of ecological healing, I remain agnostic about its relationship to any possible results, whilst observing any psychological or practical effects with respectful interest. As Xunzi (3rd century B.C.) said:

*The meaning of ritual is deep indeed. He who tries to enter it with the kind of perception that distinguishes hard and white, same and different, will drown there.*

in Bell, 97

**Rites of affliction**

The previous discussion on magic leads on to rites of affliction, rites that deal with unfortunate conditions that one either brings upon oneself (through sin or karma); that occur naturally, such as menstruation and childbearing, or those that are apparently due to the influence of spirits. Rituals are needed to re-balance a
state that has been disturbed; they heal, exorcise, protect and purify. An example from ancient China illustrates how people ritually and vigorously dealt with the affliction of draught: statues of unresponsive gods would be taken from their cool temples and set to roast in the sun so that they would know firsthand the suffering of the people and do something about it. (Bell 97:115).

Whilst Western medicine's idea of healing is based on an understanding that looks primarily at the individual body-system, other healing practices see the individual as part of the community and the environment, and they address spiritual and emotional matters as much as physical ones. When I became ill with diabetes, I used some ritual artmaking as a way of coping with this disturbance of balance. It was an effective tool, enabling me to see the illness overarched by a spiritual perspective (fuller explanations in part 3). Ceremonies at the end of retreats and workshops often involve formulating hopes and wishes for the healing of oneself, the group and the world. People tend to make things that are symbolic of their aspirations or at least write them down. It is this aspect of embodiment that is a distinguishing mark of ritual. Being witnessed by others is another important factor in the efficacy of this type of ritual, as it brings in the element of solidarity. The group will support the individual's endeavour whilst also acting as a moral mirror: one wants to be seen as someone who fulfils one's intentions.

**Festivals and political rites**

There are many other important types of rites that have however less bearing on this study. I want to just list some of these categories for the sake of completion; there are fasting and feasting rites, festivals, processions, carnivals, and political rites, such as military parades. According to Catherine Bell, they 'involve, simultaneously, the display of both the hierarchical prestige social system and the interdependence of human and divine worlds.' (Bell 97:128)
Characteristics of Ritual-like Activities

People in modern Western society tend to distance themselves from ritual, seeing it as tribal, superstitious, and unnecessary. They may be reluctant to use the word 'ritual' to describe events such as the opening ceremony of the Olympic games, or codes of social greeting. However, as the contemporary anthropologist Mary Douglas explains:

As a social animal, man is a ritual animal. If ritual is suppressed in one form it crops up in another, more strongly the more intense the social interaction. Without the letters of condolence, telegrams of congratulations and even occasional postcards, the friendship of a separated friend is not a social reality. It has no existence without the rites of friendship.....it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts. Douglas 66:97

Theorists often separate religious from secular ritual, which is in many ways an obvious distinction to make. In religious ceremony, the relationship with an underlying spiritual system of belief is obvious and explicit, whilst secular rituals are connected with specialised parts of the social/cultural background, rather than all-embracing truths. If one is interested in showing general characteristics of ritual action however, drawing this distinction is not necessary. In fact one can learn a lot about the rules governing ritual by looking at 'ritual-like' activities in broader ways, that includes the religious and the secular; the public and the private; the routine and the improvised; the formal and the casual; the periodic, and the irregular. So, drawing on Catherine Bell, I will be looking at the following categories that pertain to both sacred and secular rituals: formalism, traditionalism, disciplined invariance, sacral symbolism, and performance. (Bell 97) I was also attracted to Moore and Myerhoff's listing: repetition (of occasion, content, form), acting (as opposed to spontaneous behaviour), stylisation (using extra-ordinary objects or using them in an unusual way), order (though moments of spontaneity may be scheduled in) and staging (evocative, attention-commanding presentation). (Moore and Myerhoff 97) But it seemed to me that C. Bell draws on more far-reaching research and includes some of the other categories.
**Formalism**

Formalism is one of the main characteristics of ritual, and one may say that the more formally an activity is executed, the more ritual-like it appears. Formality, in ritual, consists in the deliberate restriction of expression in speech and gesture, as well as a certain rigidity and constraint in behaviour generally. With less choice of modes of expression, the content of what can be communicated is also limited, often to generalities, which may be one of the reasons why social functions with all their etiquette can often be perceived as boring. Formalisation is a way of assuring a certain social acquiescence to the status quo; when people don't question the style of a meeting, they implicitly accept the content. Someone who tries to challenge the content within a formal setting (when critical discussion is not part of the rules of the game) is forced into the role of a disruptive rebel. Highly formalised behaviours are often closely linked with social hierarchy and authority, as an effective means of upholding traditional power structures. This is probably one of the main reasons why creative spirits within a society tend to feel uneasy in formal gatherings, of both religious and secular nature, and try to avoid them.

On the other hand, the employment of formal restrictions can, as in any work of art, lead to ritual 'performances' of compelling beauty, showing 'a metaphoric range of considerable power; a simplicity and directness; vitality and rhythm'. (Basil Bernstein, quoted in Douglas 73:55) If one attempts, as I do, to create new forms of ritual within a religious tradition, one can be faced with the considerable challenge of trying to match a high degree of aesthetic attractiveness and formal strength, which has been honed through the ages. People like to be part of, or witness a well-rehearsed, smoothly running ritual performance, be it a puja, a classical concert, or a funeral. They want their rituals to display a certain formal gravitas, which heightens the specialness of the situation.
Traditionalism

Formalism and traditionalism often go together to evoke a sense of a ritual being rooted in times immemorial. Judicial regalia in the court room, the use of academic robes on formal occasions, and the wedding dress are all examples of a traditional formalism that seeks to transcend current history and evoke eternal values. (Bell 97:147). A ritual that lacks any reference to tradition might be seen as unsatisfactory by many people, or might not be experienced as ritual at all. Maintaining a custom such as serving a particular kind of food at certain festivals (i.e. the Christmas pie) constitutes an essential component of the occasion, without which it is 'just not the same'. In her book 'Towards an anthropology of consumption', Mary Douglas makes some fascinating observations about the way we use choice of food and consumption habits to both uphold and change ritual order. Even a solitary eater is sharing an intensely social, cultural process; he unthinkingly adopts the sequential rules and regulations of the wider society; the man who uses a butter knife even when he is alone, even if he doesn't dress for dinner. He would never reverse the conventional sequence, beginning with pudding and ending with soup, or eat mustard with lamb or mint with beef. But one can also proceed, through consumption activities, to get agreement from fellow consumers to redefine some traditional events as major that used to be minor, and to allow others to lapse completely. In England, Guy Fawkes Day comes forward where Halloween used to be. Christmas overshadows New Year in England but not in Scotland, and Mother's day still hovers on the brink of recognition. (Douglas & Isherwood 79:43)

Within our discussion of 'tradition and innovation', it is particularly interesting to note that we are prone to view a tradition as imbued with the patina of the ages, when it was actually only very recently established. The ceremonials of the British monarchy tend to be described by journalists as 'thousand year-old tradition' when, in fact, they go back no further than the end of the 19th century, when a number of clumsy, older rites were extensively revised and elaborated, while many new ceremonies were completely invented. (Bell 97:148). Likewise, the pujas most frequently used in the FWBO were devised by Sangharakshita (partly based on old texts, partly newly created) in the 1960s, yet many people bring to them an attitude of reverence like one has towards ancient texts. In devotional rituals, one wants to generate feelings of awe and respect, which are usually related to that
which is old and therefore proven to be worthy of admiration and emulation. If these processes remain unconscious, people can hold strong views about 'not tampering with tradition', even when this tradition is being created before their eyes.

**Invariance**

*How did we come to believe these small rituals' promise,*

*that we are today the selves we yesterday knew,*

*tomorrow will be?*

from ‘Habit’ by Jane Hirschfield 2005: 22

The characteristic of invariance (repetition or iteration without alteration), is of particular interest in this enquiry since so much of (Buddhist) ritual practice consists of repetitive and invariant action whether commonly described as 'ritual', (as in devotional mantra chanting), or referring to other regular practices like meditation. Not surprisingly, repetition features strongly in some of my artwork and devised rituals. I will show in part 3, how my work develops in a serial way, using iteration and variation. Repetition has both a stylistic and historical element, as it is also the means to uphold tradition through the ages. So it bears strong relevance to our discussion of tradition and innovation, and I will discuss it here in some depth.

**Routine or ritual? Notes on self-awareness**

One question soon arises as one examines repetitive action: when can it be defined as ritual, and when is it routine, habit, or compulsion? C. Bell suggests that unless the characteristics of precision and control are also present, actions are simply 'routinised'. (Bell 97:150). But I can think of precise, controlled, repetitive actions, like practising scales at the start of a piano practice, which would seem to me more routine-like than ritual-like. I am proposing that the
presence of a quality of awareness pin-points the defining difference. This means I am not only paying close attention to the details of the activity, but I am also aware of the place of the practice in the overall context of my life and aware of the quality of my mental state, i.e. I am self-aware. In other words, the routine activity of practising scales can sometimes be lifted out of a semi-conscious fog of habit and acquire the heightened meaning of a ritual, where I am present in a holistic way. The mental effort/non-effort required to do this, lies at the heart of mindfulness practice recommended in all spiritual traditions, which is why we find so much repetitive practice within them.

Trance and self-awareness

Another psychological effect of repetition is to induce a trance-like state. From a trance theory perspective, any repeated cognitive object loop induces a trance with a consequent disabling of cognitive functions. (Wier, Dennis R., web page) It seems that two seemingly contradictory mechanisms are at play here: repetition can both enhance and 'disable' cognitive function. As far as I am aware the relationship between these two functions has not been fully explored. My guess is that it is exactly the combination of both a relaxed, trance-like state together with self-aware attentiveness, which characterises a ritual mood. I know I am experiencing it when I am dwelling in an integrated state of body/mind, feeling both a sense of control and surrender as regards the task in hand, a sense of deliberation and effortlessness, of discipline and spontaneity. It is slightly different from the 'flow' state described by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997), in that it is not 'self-forgetful'. It is not just an immersion in an activity, but also a knowing about that immersion.

Discipline and the 'Ego'

Disciplined routines are not just used by monks and musicians, but by institutions like schools and the army, with the general purpose of shaping individual dispositions into a particular social mould.

*Effective socialisation attempts to transform what is ordained and permitted – that is, the 'rules' – into what is taken for granted or even desired, a sense of the right
order in which one feels at home. ...there are multiple, redundant, and invariant routines that shape bodies and minds by repetition and disciplines of self-control. From the basic requirements of punctual attendance and alert responsiveness to bells, to the subordination of ego through uniformity of dress or submission to authority, it is clear that the most important things learned in school are not in textbooks. Bell 97:152

This function of disciplined, invariant action; of bringing the individual will under social control, can be viewed with suspicion and dismay, particularly when one sees it used in the service of totalitarian, cultic and fundamentalist groups. But it also serves the necessary function of socialising a human being in a positive way, empowering her or him to take their rightful place in society and to benefit from that alliance in countless ways.

For a spiritual seeker, voluntary submission to a regime of disciplined practice such as a code of monastic practice, might serve a slightly different purpose: that of seeking a level of freedom and happiness greater than the level attainable by following the 'ego's' every whim. This does not necessarily mean splitting body and mind, as Western observers who are brought up under the influence of a Cartesian world view are often ready to assume. Here is an example of this assumption, by Bell: The control of one's physical self that is promoted by the monastic discipline is designed to subordinate the demands, desires, and indulgences of the body and thereby encourage the greater discipline needed to control the mind. (Bell 97:151) In my experience, a repetitive practice of meditation, for example, is not so much about 'subordination' of the physical, but a clarity of purpose that leads to a build-up of subtle, blissful mind/body energy and insightful living. However, a monastic within a Western tradition might well be more inclined to polarise body and mind, than someone influenced by Eastern traditions, but these distinctions are perhaps not so clear these days. One finds Zen influences in Christian monasteries, and much of what is counted as Buddhist practice in the West, is heavily influenced by unconscious Christian-influenced attitudes. (The Dalai Lama frequently comments on the presence of self-hatred among his Western followers, which is not known to the same extent in Tibet.)
It can be very useful to be able to distinguish between these two forms of the subordination of an individual's will through disciplined invariance. Is it a self-directed, spiritual choice, or is it part of a more or less enforced socialisation process, or is it a mixture of the two? The resistance against participation in religious ritual that I encounter in myself and others may be partly to do with a failure to separate the two.

Repetition and boredom

Whether disciplined, repetitive, ritual action is used to pursue social, artistic or spiritual aims; whether the taming of the 'ego' serves a harmonious group, a perfected work of art or the attainment of Enlightenment, the one problem that needs to be dealt with is boredom. Many peoples' perception of ritual today is connected with a lack of vitality and authenticity, particularly with regard to its characteristics of formalism and invariance. Rituals, both in religious and secular contexts, are often characterised by solemnity and monotony. Some priests in religious services, for example, adopt an artificial, drawling tone of voice, which can make it hard for the participants to stay present.

Fernanda...lent the general her sandalwood fan to help him defend himself against the stupefying ceremony. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, (in 'The general in his labyrinth') describing a scene during a church service.

Having led many rituals myself, I am aware of the skill needed to strike the right balance between a certain distancing formalism, and authentic emotional expression. For a master of ceremonies the personality needs to get out of the way to a certain extent, in order to become a channel for experiences of a more universal nature. The ritual participants will sense whether, for the celebrant, this is a felt reality or whether he or she is just pretending. The required skill is very similar to the skill of an accomplished performer. Within an artistic context it is obvious that such skills need to be developed during long periods of training, with some teacher feedback, and are perhaps also (rather more diffusely) dependant
on talent. As the more artistic dimension of training for ritual leaders is minimal (within my experience of religious communities) it is no wonder that the aesthetic quality of rituals can often seem unconvincing and unappealing. So, as with the more mundane example of practising scales, it is not repetition as such which might render an activity 'stupefying', but the way repetition is used or not used to breathe life into the form, in varying and subtle ways. It is only then that repetition can give access to that sense of participation with a rhythmically ordered universe, which is the underlying purpose of ritual. (Repetition in nature is rarely of clockwork-like precision; I contemplate the traces of waves on the beach with pleasure, because of the subtle modulation of difference within sameness.)

Ultimately though, the issue of boredom is perhaps just as much the ritual participants' as the leader's responsibility. In our consumer society our attention span tends to be short and we want to get something out of everything we are doing. According to the philosopher Lars Svendson, boredom arose once human beings became aware of themselves as individuals, needing a sense of meaning.

_Boredom can be understood as a discomfort, which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied. In order to remove this discomfort, we attack the symptoms rather than the disease itself....Svendson 2005:31_

He found that the words 'boring' and 'interesting' appeared at about the same time. We need the stimulation of 'interesting', superficially meaning-giving experiences, to avoid a confrontation with existential emptiness. 'Working through boredom' can therefore be seen as an unglamorous, but heroic act of gaining access to a deeper level of meaning, an act that may be undertaken deliberately by the ritualist.

_When Tibetan Buddhists undertake to perform 100,000 prostrations, say, they do not expect to be getting something out of it all the time. Part of the point of such a massively extended practice is to be able to keep going even when one's inspiration dries up and one feels that one is just going through the motions._ Sangharakshita 1998; 122

How does one resolve this tension between faithfulness to the chosen object of one's attention and the desire for fresh stimulation? Whether one makes an
attempt at changing the outer form, or persists with the project, or whether one quits it altogether, these decisions are among the major shaping influences in the discovery and development of one's individuality.

This discussion of 'boring' and 'interesting' is pertinent to the crafting or making processes in art. Many of these tasks are unglamorous and without immediate rewards and this may be a reason why fewer and fewer people engage with traditional art media and processes. Working through the 'boredom threshold' is significant for artists who, like me value the 'objectness' of their art rather than merely the concept or idea in it. Fewer people in fact, engage with the manipulation of materials in their lives at all; we buy things ready-made and throw them out rather than mending them. This results in less understanding, love and care for our material world.

**Sacral Symbolism**

What makes an object appear to be possessed by a special, sacred significance, and another object not? Some religious objects become sacred by rituals of consecration – before that, a statue is a mere shape made of clay. Sacredness is a quality of specialness, not the same as other things, standing for something important and possessing an extra meaningfulness and the ability to evoke emotion-filled images and experiences. (Bell 97: 157) Sacred objects are also found in secular contexts. One can look, for example, at the significance of the 'flag' as a symbol for a diffuse yet emotionally powerful sense of belonging to a nation. Most people feel that it should be treated with respect and in a ritual way. For the anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake, 'making something special' is to be found at the very beginning of the development of human culture, in both ritual and the arts. It takes ordinary things and makes them more than ordinary, heightens their emotional effect, or – to say the same thing – uses sensual/emotional ways of drawing attention to them, thereby emphasising their importance and significance... (Dissanayake 1992:99). As a ritualist and maker of things, I am interested in the subject of sacredness, particularly since I use the symbol of the offering-bowl so persistently in my work. For me, the bowls have a certain presence, bestowed onto them by my symbolic understanding and ritualistic
handling of them in both the making and the framing (which is a kind of enshrining). They hover between an earthly, material realm and a realm of inner meaning. James Elkins, Professor of Art History at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, used the term 'hypostasis' to describe this phenomenon. *Ordinarily paint is a window into something else, a transparent thing that shimmers in our awareness as we look through it to see what the painter has depicted: but it is also a sludge, a hard scab clinging to the canvas.* (Elkins 2000:45)

**Performance**

The performance character of rituals is a well-researched subject (see Innes 1981, Schechner 1990, Turner 1982, 1986), comparing the similarities between ritual and theatrical performance, and to some extent with play. Performance employs the human ludic capacity, which Victor Turner describes as a modus to catch symbols in their movements, so to speak, and to play with their possibilities of form and meaning. (1982: 23)

**Multi-sensory**

Performances generally have a multi-sensory character, employing visual imagery, sounds, olfactory stimulation (i.e. incense), tactile experience (performance of gestures, such as clapping in secular performance, or bowing). By these means, performers and participants alike are both cognitively and emotionally highly stimulated, which provides a receptive basis for the communication of messages of intellectual, spiritual, social and political importance. Effective learning happens when one is not just told something but can experience it through all the senses, and when there is not just passive seeing or listening, but also doing. Many of my ritual experiments with groups are motivated by the desire to enliven experience by broadening the scope of sensory experience that is customarily available in FWBO rituals. I encourage people, for example, to make things for offerings, adorn their bodies, use their voices more freely, play musical instruments, and to move their bodies in dance-like ways.
Distancing

According to the sociologist Thomas Scheff, ritual performance can act as a means of 'catharsis', of a collective management of stress. It works similar to the game of 'peek-a-boo', which has three stages: 1. the evocation of stress (that of separation); 2. a distancing device (the baby knows that the mother has not really gone); 3. the discharge of the stress (the baby laughs). (Scheff 1979:115) I don't agree with Scheff's statement that ritual usually develops around recurring sources of collective distress as, apart from mourning and healing rites, we also find more celebratory or devotional types of rituals. I find that his model nevertheless sheds light on some elements of ritual in an interesting way. His exposition of 'distancing' in particular is relevant in the context of this discussion of performance and ritual.

At aesthetic distance, there is a balance of thought and feeling. There is deep emotional resonance, but also a feeling of control. If a repressed emotion such as grief is restimulated at aesthetic distance, the crying that results is not unpleasant: it is not draining or tiring - the person feels refreshed when it is over. The same is true with fear, anger, and embarrassment. Scheff 1979: 64

A healing release of emotion, as in a mourning ritual, can happen when one is both a participant in, and observer of one's own distress. One distancing device is simply the presence of others in a collective ritual: The mere presence of others serves to keep at least part of the individual's attention in the present, focused on the other persons. Furthermore, collective catharsis is facilitative: the laughter of the others signals to the individual that permission is given to laugh; the normal rules which serve to repress emotional discharge are relaxed. (Scheff 1979:153)

I am interested in this question of 'aesthetic distance', as Scheff calls it, of being both immersed in, and observant of the experience. It can describe an action as ritualistic without necessarily involving any of the other ritual characteristics relating to hierarchies and traditional formalism, (and which therefore can arouse resistance in modern Westerners). Could a ritualistic state simply be described as 'being aware, whilst being fully emerged' in an activity? I have asked myself this question often during the process of making art, and during other activities.
that are part of this research. Even whilst typing this, as soon as I ask myself the question: 'is this ritual?', I find that I am primarily turning towards an investigation of my present mental state. What kind of awareness is present whilst I am sitting at the computer? Most of the time I find that I am focusing in a way that lacks this 'distancing', broader dimension. I am not aware of my body posture, for example. So the answer as to whether I am involved in ritual activity, would have to be 'No'. I am in 'work mode' – this is about getting something done in time, about achieving results and this has not got the 'timeless' quality of play and ritual. There might be moments however, like when I am approaching the computer with the intent to write, take its cotton cover off and have a quick glance at my emails first (to place myself into a wider context). This is a kind of opening ritual, with a more holistic dimension, as long as I am not just acting 'in automatic pilot'. A ritual is primarily marked by the quality of self-awareness. However, at least one other feature of ritual needs to be present as well; a special kind of framing.

Framing

By setting something apart from 'ordinary' life, by giving it a 'special' place, time, and style, one says: 'Pay attention – something of significance is happening here.' Through framing one creates a complete and condensed, if somewhat artificial world (Bell 1997:160), a microcosm of order and meaning. In ritual performance, one looks at a reflection of the world, not as it actually is – a reality hard to grasp in its complexity – but at a reduced and simplified version that offers a coherent interpretation. This interpretation can then be projected onto the world, giving meaning to it, and, as a side effect, also validating the performance. An illustration of such a framing device can be seen in the seating order, and the extent and manner of movement permitted during a religious ceremony. In a Theravadin temple, the ordained monks, nuns, and the laity sit in a clear hierarchical order, with the most senior monks closest to the Buddha figure (and a more senior nun further away than a junior monk). Only the lay people go up to the shrine to make offerings. In many religions, men and women sit in strictly
segregated areas of the temple, church or mosque. In the FWBO, people of any rank or gender often sit in facing rows, looking at each other, rather than the Buddha (expressing, according to Sangharakshita, the importance of spiritual community). But there is no strict etiquette, the seating arrangements are open to variation, depending on the preference of the leader. I sometimes sit in a circle with people (symbol of equality), placing a candle into the middle. In some rituals, I encourage people to move in irregular, random ways (see my description of 'Parinirvana Day' in part 2). All these ways of framing the occasion speak of different views on hierarchical order.

The flexibility or rigidity with which these ritual conventions are upheld might also express different paradigms with regard to chaos and order. It is interesting to speculate whether members of an organisation that cannot tolerate much deviation from the standard ritual frames might also entertain views on reality that favour ordered rather than chaotic phenomena. This does seem to be the case in invariant Christian liturgies, which are centred on a god who created a universe according to an intelligent plan. But this correlation does not seem to be evident in Buddhism, where traditional monastic life can be very highly ritualised, yet the teachings emphasise an attitude of personal enquiry.

*Can separate, indivisible particles be the ‘building blocks’ of the world? Do they really exist, or are they just concepts that help us understand reality? Buddhist research is, above all, based on insights perceived through direct life experience, and is not bound by rigid dogma.* Matthieu 2001: 9

Perhaps the disciplined ritual framing of Buddhist monastic practice provides a necessary structural container for a state of mind that is open to unsettling questions such as those. Similarly, in some of my artwork, framing is used to hold textured surfaces that show the random nature of some natural phenomena. (see Blue Bowl, Year 4, plate 55).
Ritual Styles

It is a common assumption that tribal peoples' lives are richer in ritual than modern societies', and that the density and type of ritual is related to how 'primitive' or 'evolved' human consciousness is found to be. But Douglas showed that this is far from being the case; there are traditional societies with little ritual, and with understandings that chime with contemporary views. (Douglas 1973: 35) For the pygmies of the Ituri Forest in Africa, for example, the 'divine' is understood as a spiritual presence that can be found or evoked from within oneself. Their rituals enable individual input, invention, and authentic emotional expression. In a modern society like Japan one can find many rites that externalise the divine and favour rituals where individual expression is less desirable than adaptation to traditional forms. For Douglas, degree and style of ritual is not linked with evolution of consciousness, but with social organisation. This is interesting from the point of view of emerging styles of ritual in modern Buddhism. I often find that people, engaged in discussions of ritual styles, distinguish between more primitive, tribal forms of ritual, and more refined 'high church' forms. I think that this discourse would benefit from a more thorough and differentiated exploration of ritual typology and I will therefore present a fourfold model that roughly follows Catherine Bell's outline, whilst incorporating observations on Buddhist ritual. (Bell 1997:185)

Appease and appeal

The first type; 'appease and appeal', consists of frequent ritual actions with the aim to placate gods, spirits and ancestors; to secure their protection and blessings and ward off their anger. An example of this is the Haitian religion of Voodoo, where people believe that whatever happens to someone is the result of often malicious or capricious spirits. By making offerings to feed and honour them, one can cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship. Elements of this type of belief are evident in Christian churches, which still have officially appointed exorcists. Shamanistic belief in spirits with its 'appease and appeal' rites can also be found side by side with monastic practice in traditional Buddhist countries.
such as Thailand, where a substantial part of the monk's duties consists in assisting in such ceremonies. Their relationship is a complex one, as Terwiel in his study of 'monks and magic' shows:

The wind, the river, a tree, a house and a monastery can all be related to anthropomorphic beings, each with specific likes and dislikes. A farmer learns to be polite and pleasing to the most important among them. ...The most important activities which are reputed to generate magical power are the uttering of sacred words and meditation. Both monks and laymen can perform these activities. The monk's power is generally considered to be stronger, but he is limited in his application because of his superior ritual position. A monk should not lower himself to supplicate the unseen powers. That is why monks can consecrate a bowl of water at a marriage ceremony, but a lay ritual specialist is needed to present the couple to the ancestors. Terwiel 1975: 275

Cosmological ordering

The second, more theatrical type of ceremony is concerned with the celebration of the harmony between human and divine realms. These are found in hierarchical political systems such as monarchies and have the purpose to unify all its elements into one cosmologically rooted whole. Traditional China has stately performances that display much pageantry, confirming the god-like position of the emperor, and the place of everyone else. In the decorum of Tibetan Buddhist rituals, featuring elaborate robes and head-dress and taking place in lavishly decorated temples, we can perceive echoes of this type of ritual.

The relationship between these two types, 'appease and appeal' and 'cosmological ordering' can be an uneasy one. On the one hand, an official religion has its roots in the local, shamanistic traditions and there is a continuum of practices that include the needs of the herdsman and those of the king. The local gods have their place at the lower end of the cosmological ordering. But on the other hand, 'the establishment' would try to control and eradicate the 'lower' form of spirituality, which is experienced as potentially undermining the proper order of things (so certain practices would be banned). In India, a country particularly rich in ever-evolving religious symbols, one can trace a fluid interchange between tribal and state religious practices.
Deities and systems aligned and ostracised in one age become benevolent and respectable in another. Durga Katyayani, the dark fierce aboriginal goddess of earth and forest grove, is eulogised in the Devi Upanisad, when the Puranic male gods sing her praises. Jayakar XII

**Ethics and Morality**

The third type of ritual style, ethical-moral, is to be found in broad-ranging religious communities that are not identified with regions or nations. At the core of religious practices in (Protestant) Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, are admonishments to 'right' ethical behaviour and generally ritual is seen as less important than in the previous two styles. Protestantism in the 16th century saw ritual as shallow, empty forms, disconnected from genuine spiritual experience and purity of soul. The reformation was partly a passionate debate on the meaning, function and form of ritual. The rejection of old rituals which are seen to be limiting and rigid is a common feature of any cultural/spiritual innovation. The revolutionist sheds rituals because they not only convey a sense of collective history and meaning, but also perpetrate institutional power and oppression of the individual.

There are some schools of Buddhism that fall more clearly into this category than others. For Theravadin Buddhists, adherence to the precepts is of great importance and the flavour of the rituals is generally austere, with little sensuous distraction. But as we have seen, Tibetan Buddhism is very rich in myth and ritual. A ritual practice most Buddhist schools have in common is the chanting of the 'refuges and precepts', often in Pali, as an expression of commitment to leading an ethical life. Loving kindness, generosity, simplicity and contentment, truthfulness and mindfulness are among the qualities every Buddhist aspires to embody.

**Personal spirituality**

*Control in any form is harmful to total understanding. A disciplined existence is a life of conformity; in conformity there is no freedom from fear. Habit destroys freedom; habit of thought, habit of drinking and so on makes for a superficial and dull life. Organised religion with its beliefs, dogmas and rituals denies the open entry into the vastness of mind.* Krishnamurti 1976: 14
I chose this quote because it expresses a view apparent in different cultures and different times; that religion with its institutional trappings, including ritual, inhibits the individual's quest for meaning and liberation. Goeffner analyses the effect of Lutheran Protestantism on contemporary Western consciousness. The cyclically and ritually ordered time is dissolved, by concentration on the immediate encounter with God, into a chain of moments of decision and testing, while the cyclical succession of generations is dissolved into one person's individualisation before God. The smallest unit of society - the individual - becomes, tendentially, the sole and thus the highest authority by way of postulate of immediacy. (Goeffner 1997:32) In other words, since Luther we have the tendency to think that we don't need any intermediaries or institutional support for our relationship with the sacred, an attitude that goes along with scepticism against ritual. This doesn't mean, however, that we now live in a de-ritualised society. Goeffner's thesis runs as follows: We move within an unrecognised ritualism, as illustrated by two extreme manifestations: a) a ritualised anti-ritualism; and b) a change in a traditional rite brought about by naïve, inflationary ritualism.

Many people lead a self-styled spiritual life outside established religious institutions, and they may choose to practise ritual as part of that (and indeed it then becomes a matter of choice rather than of obligation). Some might belong to the New Age camp, others might loosely align themselves with a more established tradition such as the Quakers. Their belief is often non-theistic, aiming for a tangible sense of self-empowerment. They are likely to avoid doctrine and ethical teachings in favour of experimental ritual forms that allow expression of personal commitment and change. Ritual design often borrows, without any theological qualms, elements from various ethnic and religious traditions. When rituals are perceived just as tools for self-development, loyalty to any one tradition is seen as irrelevant. This can be problematic in two ways. The cultural groups these rituals are taken from might well feel that their tradition is being exploited; some indigenous North Americans are starting to complain about the appropriation of their ceremonies (i.e. the use of their tradition of 'vision quests' as part of self-development seminars). And indigenous rituals introduced
to Westerners without sensitivity and adjustment to a completely different context, can potentially be harmful. An example of this, I experienced myself during a seminar on ritual at Schumacher College (2001), where participants were being asked to stay, naked, and buried in the ground for several hours to experience an African earth ritual. It was in February and the temperature was freezing. What in the tropical savannah would have been experienced as an 'earth cradle', here was perceived as 'grave'.

It is tempting, since hierarchical thinking is so deeply entrenched in our Western mind, to arrange the styles of ritual and spirituality discussed in this chapter in an upward rising fashion, culminating in the free spirit of self-responsibility. But, together with the philosopher Ken Wilber, I have my doubts:

*We intend to explore a sensitive question, but one which needs to be addressed – the superficiality which pervades so much of the current spiritual exploration in the West, particularly in the United States. All too often, in the translation of the mystical traditions form the East (and elsewhere) into the American idiom, their profound depth is flattened out, their radical demand is diluted, and their potential for radical transformation is squelched. .....the roar of the fire of liberation is transmuted into something more closely resembling the soothing burble of the California hot tub. Wilber 2000:25*

Wilber suggests a model of spirituality that distinguishes between a horizontal movement of creating meaning for the self, and a vertical movement where the very concept of the self is put in question. Only very few exceptional individuals are able to face the ultimate challenge, where transformation is not a question of finding solace but of finding infinity on the other side of death. (Wilber 2000: 27) For him, ritual practices are part of the horizontal plane, of arranging oneself with reality. The truly authentic seeker would not need any of these 'magical practices, mythic beliefs,' etc. Wilber does not despise, however, these forms of human expression, advocating an 'integral approach', that honors and incorporates many lesser... practices – covering the physical, emotional, mental, cultural, and communal aspects of the human being – in preparation for, and as an expression of, the ultimate transformation into the always already present state. (Wilber 2000: 32)
This question of self is relevant for artists who work beyond the notion of 'self-expression'. Some artists have deliberately "erased" all physical evidence of the self from their works for fear of delusion and position themselves as humble witnesses of the world, not interpreters. The Boyle family come to mind – a family of artists who make cast and painted facsimiles of areas of the earth, usually 1-2 metres square, wherever a pin is randomly stuck into a world map. In parts 2 and 3 of this thesis I discuss in what ways my work is made up of 'gestures towards emptiness' or ego-lessness. For example, I often try to get out of the way of the piece and 'let it make itself', particularly in the ash series (year one and two). Submitting myself to just a few shapes and exploring their potential in series of work and studies is perhaps also expression of a certain humility.

**Tradition and Innovation**

'People think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done, maybe because one slip-up or mistake and the whole ceremony must be stopped and the sand painting destroyed. ...But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the ageing of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle’s claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing.' Leslie Marmon Silko, in 'ceremony'

*Change the unchanging ritual and there will be no point of rest. Michael Tippett, in 'midsummer marriage'*

Should rituals be repeated exactly in the forms transmitted through time, or do they need to change, to stay alive and potent? What are the issues at stake in a discussion that has heated tempers in many periods of religious history (see the emergence of Protestantism) and concerns ordinary people now (even in a simple question as whether to wear black for a funeral). In this chapter I look at these questions in more general terms, before attending to issues of tradition and innovation within the FWBO in a later chapter.
A paradox

Changing or inventing a ritual seems to some people, experts and ordinary people alike, a contradiction in terms. As we have seen, rituals tend to present themselves as unchanging, time-honoured customs that preserve a reassuring view on the place of human beings in the universe. Early social anthropologists, in the wake of Durkheim saw rituals as endlessly repetitive, as being performed again and again, year after year, cyclically celebrating and renewing a going social group through the restatement of its fixed cultural forms.' (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:34) This view of ritual is built on observation of small traditional societies, where an all-embracing religion is seen to affect every aspect of social life. This view perpetuates a myth of cultural unity and social continuity, a myth of unchanging tradition and of shared belief. Within this framework, if the human origin of a ritual were becoming transparent, and people were seen to make changes, the very basis of that society would be undermined. We do not want to see our rituals as products of our imagination, the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff wrote. If we were to catch ourselves making up rituals, we may recognise all our most precious understandings, the precepts we live by, as mere desperate wishes and dreams. (quoted by Bell 1997:224).

Despite this deeply ingrained resistance to ritual innovation, we can see many instances in modern society, where change is actually happening. Religious institutions such as the Catholic Church are revising liturgies to be (literally) more in tune with modern times. New groupings like the women’s movement or the Green movement are devising their own rituals. And in any case, the view that ritual in traditional societies has remained unchanged for long periods of time turns out to be flawed, in the eyes of modern anthropologists. Some analysts now see ritual as a particularly effective means of mediating tradition and change, that is, as a medium for appropriating some changes while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity. (Bell 1997:251)

I think that beneath this discussion lies a paradox that is perhaps one of the reasons why rituals can command a certain fascination. Rituals address our
insights, hopes and fears regarding both permanence and impermanence. When one ritually marks the return of the seasons, the stages in the life of an individual, or an anniversary, it is possible to gain an impression of permanence, of non-change. One can rely on the re-appearance of long hours of sunshine, spring after spring. The invariance of the ritual matches this experience. But on the other hand, time passes and we can't but notice the ageing of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, and we can't but notice that we are older every year. (I remember my adult relations who met each other only on the occasion of an anniversary, inevitably remarking on the fact that they had aged.) The customs may stay the same, but the people celebrating them certainly do not. So this is how the paradox appears: the fixed, secure frame of the ritual allows a contemplation of impermanence, whilst at the same time trying to deny it. (The same theme was evoked in a film installation by the artists Dalziel and Scullion in the Edinburgh Gallery of Modern Art showing the sculpture of an angel against the backdrop of 24 hours of changing weather and light.) Ritual may have its roots in these vital concerns surrounding death and hope of permanence: fossilised traces of the first burials of Neanderthal people, 60,000 years ago seem to indicate a belief in some kind of afterlife. One late spring or early summer people had lain him to rest on a bed of yellow, red, white and blue flowers, grape hyacinth, rose mallow, hollyhock, bachelor's button, groundsel. The flowers may have been chosen for medicinal reasons, since all of them are or were believed to have healing powers. (Pfeiffer 1982:220) So it may well be that discussions of ritual change can trigger strong reactions because it touches our fear of mortality. 

Oral and literate

Studies show that rituals in oral societies best serve their function of enhancing and at times enforcing cultural attitudes if they are continually brought into alignment with current communal circumstances, whilst showing a convincing continuity with remembered rites. Rituals in these societies can easily change, without anyone taking much notice. (Bell 1997:203) With the emergence of the written word however, any variation from the traditional canon shows up more easily and turns into a more debated and fraught issue. This is noticeable in the
ethical-moral types of religion, where ritual is an enactment of normative guidelines. Liturgical changes here are protracted affairs, requiring much study and discussion. This distinction throws light on the complex processes of innovation I am involved with as part of a large institutional framework (see 'ritual in the FWBO'). Changing rituals in small, more informal settings, is easier; there is less emphasis on the preservation of a written canon of texts (even if the people I work with are usually 'literate').

**Implementing change**

Anyone involved with the process of ritual innovation, will probably encounter the following issues:

- Within the given ritual, what is its most essential part (and should therefore be preserved) and what is more arbitrary and can be changed to fit in with changing social customs?
- Should one try to avoid 'frivolity': change based on little thought and care that leads to perhaps only fleeting change, unnecessarily upsetting the ritual order?
- Should change happen 'from the bottom up', i.e. evolving from the needs and actions of ritual participants, or should they be implemented by the leaders and ritual experts?
- How can one build 'ritual competence', so that new rituals have aesthetic appeal and gravitas?

One can glean some insight into the creation of new rituals by studying methods used in the former Soviet Union (Bell 97). The designing of a new rite followed certain stages, starting with the production of a 'script' by a collective. This was rehearsed by the creators and performers, and revised until it felt right. Then the rite was gradually introduced to the public, carefully supported by media coverage and advertising. The ritual would of course contain familiar symbols, which made it more likely to be accepted. The response to the rite was monitored and some elements, like songs, became part of the school curriculum to build 'ritual competence'. An elite corps of ritual specialists emerged, as the usefulness
of ritual in the service of political education (or manipulation) was becoming more and more apparent.

We have all seen what ritual in the hands of fascists like Stalin or Hitler can do to individual autonomy, which is one of the reasons for 'ritual caution' of many people these days. This brings us to another of the paradoxes around ritual; we can feel strongly attracted to it whilst being extremely weary of it. Minimising religious ritual in one's life might not protect us from exploitation. Unconscious quasi-religious sentiments may be triggered in secular situations, where individuals could become vulnerable to exploitation. An argument could indeed be made that greater personal experience of the dynamics of ritual would make it more likely to spot such tactics.

Having surveyed the landscape of ritual in a more general way, we are now moving to an exploration of ritual in Buddhism

**Buddhist Ritual**

*And if you have no ceremony, no habits, which may be opulent or may be simple but are exact and rigorous and familiar, how can you reach toward the actuality of faith, or even a moral life, except vaguely? The patterns of our lives reveal us. Our battles with our habits speak of dreams yet to become real.* Mary Oliver 2004:10

**The Awakening of the West**

In his excellent book of the above title, Stephen Batchelor traces the 150 years old history of the meeting of Buddhism with the Western world. This is a world that accepts the multiplicity of perception, the insubstantiality and contingency of reality, the disturbing, fragmented, elusive, indeterminate nature of the self, the pervasive confusion and anguish of human consciousness. Buddhism seemed to 'fit like a glove'. Many advocates of Buddhism, from Schopenhauer onwards, have been impressed by the compatibility of its doctrines with their own way of seeing the world. *Within the last hundred years the teachings of Buddhism have confirmed the views of theosophists, behaviorists, fascists, environmentalists and quantum-physicists alike.* (Batchelor 1994:273)
Yet it is hard for us to understand what Buddhism really is.

*What is it really? The answer is; nothing you can put your finger on. The Dharma is irreducible to 'this' or 'that'. ...Buddhism cannot be said to be any of the following: a system of ethics, philosophy or psychology; a religion, a faith or a mystical experience; a devotional practice, a discipline of meditation or a psychotherapy. Yet it can involve all these things.* Batchelor 1994:274

Batchelor's emphasis on the Dharma's elusiveness strikes a chord with me and I want to raise it as a motto over this exploration of ritual, in as far as it is an exploration of Dharma. It is well expressed by a Buddhist poet friend who wrote the following poem on seeing my 2004 art exhibition 'Gestures towards emptiness'

*not what's said
not what's not said

not the way it's said
not the way it's not said

in the mouths of poets
nothing is being said

as water makes its own course
words find their route to the heart

Gerry Loose (unpublished letter to me)

Perhaps the most vital aspect of Buddhist ritual, overlaying its sociological and cultural dimensions, is its ability to open a door to this more mysterious

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dimension of being. Not surprisingly, it is a dimension that finds little mention in academic studies; but let's not forget that people don't engage in ritual in order to 'appease and appeal', or because of its 'ethical-moral' function. They do it because it can tangibly lift their spirits and bestow a more meaningful dimension to life.

Why ritual in Buddhism?

Buddhism is the fastest spreading religion in Europe, appearing in many different guises and emerging cultural adaptations. This time in its history presents a great opportunity to ask questions about the place of ritual in Buddhism.

One day an old man was circumambulating Retina Monastery. Geshe Drom said to him: 'Sir, I am happy to see you circumambulating, but wouldn't you rather be practising the Dharma?'

Thinking this over, the old man felt it might be better to read some Buddhist scriptures. While he was reading in the temple courtyard, Geshe Drom said, 'I am happy to see you reciting scriptures, but wouldn't you rather be practising Dharma?'

At this, the old man thought that perhaps he should meditate. He sat cross-legged on a cushion, with his eyes half-closed. Drom said again, 'I am so happy to see you meditating, but wouldn't it be better to practise the Dharma?'

Now totally confused, the old man asked, 'Geshe-la, please tell me what I should do to practise the Dharma?'

Drom replied, 'To practise means that there should be no distinction between the Dharma and your own mind.'

In: Batchelor 94, p279

This story appeals to the modern Western truth seeker who is attracted to Buddhism because it seems to distinguish clearly between essentials and its cultural clothing; between the goal and the way leading to it. There are other, much-quoted similes from the Pali Canon with a similar message: leave the raft behind that carried you across to the other shore. Don't look just at the finger that points to the moon. So it can come as a bit of a surprise, perhaps, to find some form of ritual in every school of Buddhism, to varying degrees, some 'closer in spirit to medieval Catholicism than anything in present-day Christianity'. (Revel
Jean-Francois Revel, the philosopher asks of his son, Matthieu Ricard, the Buddhist monk: ‘Isn’t there something rather irrational, external, and mechanically ritualistic about Buddhist practice that over the centuries has perhaps been grafted on to the wisdom of the Buddha?’ Matthieu replies:

_The meaning of the words that are chanted always invites contemplation. This is particularly true in Tibetan Buddhism. If you look at the content of a ritual and at the texts that are recited in it, you’ll find it’s like a guide containing all the different elements of Buddhist meditation – emptiness, compassion, and so on._ Revel and Ricard 1999:224

He is saying that Buddhists use ritual in a highly conscious way, which in my experience is often not the case. Despite best intentions to reflect deeply on emptiness and compassion, more likely than not the ritual recitation will become mechanical at times. One could argue that it is exactly the effort that is needed to stay alert, that leads to deepening of concentration and the development of 'faith'. (Within the context of ritual 'faith' means, according to Sangharakshita, _observing certain things very carefully and mindfully; one is circumspect and scrupulous... in the way one goes about devotional practice._ (Sangharakshita 1998:121) Faith in Buddhism has nothing to do with believing certain doctrines, nor is it solely described by a feeling of devotion or pleasure. It is a state in its own right and has to do with care, responsibility and respect, and the ability to keep going even when there is no reward of pleasure.)

The above dialogue between the scientist father and Buddhist son highlights a real quandary. The forms of much Buddhist ritual are typical of the 'cosmological ordering' and 'ethical-moral' styles as described above; endorsing a particular hierarchical order and 'right' behaviour, placing more importance on collective than individual experience. Yet the mindset of the individual Buddhist practitioner may fall more into the 'personal spirituality' category, looking for authenticity of expression, and maybe, ultimately, surrendering of the 'self'.
It is interesting to follow the development of a 'sceptical Buddhist' (his term), Richard Hayes, Professor of Buddhist studies at McGill university, Montreal. In his 'Land of no Buddha' (Birmingham 1998) we follow his journey from critically diminishing the rituals of Zazen to setting up a meditation group without altars, images, statues, incense and bells. I became convinced that any ritual at all, even as seemingly innocuous as ringing a bell, was inimical to the kinds of positive mental states that meditation is supposed to help cultivate. He realised however after a while that the absence of rituals led to almost no sense of community. His rejection of ritual came out of fear of creating an artificial bond created among people who have not really very much in common, but later came to trust the genuine friendships between Buddhists. He started to value ritual for giving concrete shape to abstract ideals in a way that simultaneously disciplines the body, voice, and mind and provides an occasion for certain emotions to arise. (Hayes 1998:250f) What previously seemed like self-deception to him, he now values as a kind of play-acting, which works as rehearsal for positive behaviour. By repeating an act of the imagination over and over again, with ardent conviction (like making an offering to a Buddha statue) one gradually shifts it into the realm of the real and some genuine transformation happens, that is, one becomes more generous.

I asked a Buddhist friend what she gets out of ritual, and she said: It allows me to re-connect with the greater whole, cosmically, globally, socially, and personally. In ritual I can drop the burden of individual isolation. But ultimately I want to use ritual to go beyond ritual. We agreed that performing rituals can seduce the practitioner to stay content on a certain level of comfort (similar to Wilber's exposition). But it is hard to stay focused on 'absolute truth' in the abstract; rituals help participants to support and renew their commitment to the realization of very far reaching truths, such as expressed in the Heart sutra:

*Form is not other than emptiness,*

*Emptiness is no other than form....*
Not even wisdom to attain!

Attainment too is emptiness.

I don’t think there are easy answers to this question as to why ritual, in its more formal, liturgical style is needed in Buddhism. I respect views like that of one of Sangharakshita’s Tibetan teachers: ‘Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life’. Apparently he was referring to the need of Westerners for frequent fresh stimulation by new practices, to people’s low boredom threshold, to an attitude of spiritual consumerism. He said that Insight could only arise when the ground is prepared to a considerable depth, by sticking with a particular practice for a long time. (an unpublished talk by Sangharakshita)

And I am also grateful for the example of spiritual masters breaking with convention and displaying acts of ‘crazy wisdom’.

Crazy wisdom is the wisdom of the saint, the Zen master, the poet, the mad scientist, and the fool. Crazy wisdom sees that we live in a world of many illusions, that the Emperor has no clothes, and that much of human belief and behavior is ritualized nonsense. Crazy wisdom understands anti-matter and old Sufi poetry; loves paradox and puns and pie fights and laughing at politicians. Crazy wisdom flips the world upside down and backward until everything becomes perfectly clear. Nisker 1991:78

The house holder, the monastic, and the forest renunciant

In order to further the understanding of Buddhist ritual behaviour in general and as regards my own practice, I would like to introduce another categorising model, this being one by a Buddhist scholar, Reginald Ray. He presents a 3-fold differentiation of social organisation in historical Buddhist India, into householders, settled monastic renunciants and forest renunciants.

...in the monastery Indian Buddhism provides laypeople with an ongoing, stable, reliable, conventionally respected institution with which they may enter into regularised relationships. Through textual scholarship monastics assure the laity of the legitimacy of their spiritual understanding, preserve the traditional texts, and make important contributions to the doctrinal integrity and a public articulation of Buddhism....They provide the training ground for the next generation not only of Buddhist monastics but also of forest renunciants, many of whom come from the ranks of the monastics....
Whereas the responsibility of the monastics is to the spiritual needs of the laypeople and the continuity of tradition, the forest renunciant is free of these kinds of obligations and conventions. But s/he is

*under another kind of perhaps more rigorous obligation, namely, to follow the Buddhist path to its final conclusion. This function is ultimately what maintains the integrity of Buddhism as a tradition. The renunciants' relationship to convention, either social or religious, is uncertain, and they are quite ready to offer critiques of the foibles of both institutionalised religion and societies. Such teachers are often depicted as powerful and unpredictable and therefore as dangerous*. Ray 1994: 437f

So we get a sense of a balanced system: there is the large group of householders, from whom spiritual aspirants are recruited and who support those that devote themselves to spiritual practice fulltime. Then there is the group of monastic practitioners who uphold the traditional teaching both in terms of meditation and study. And finally the solitary meditators who are not hampered by the restraints of group values and family ties and whose practice can therefore potentially reach greater intensity and depth. (Although it is debatable in my view, whether great spiritual insights and transformations cannot also be achieved by practising the Dharma under ego-challenging 'household' circumstances such as bringing up a child, or living one's life in close proximity to others within a monastery. By having things one's own way as a hermit one could easily fool oneself as regards one's spiritual achievements)

I can see myself in all these roles and recognise the benefits and tensions that can arise in the interface of these different functions. I often feel impatient with a kind of institutional dullness and slowness in organisational settings, yet I also want to take advantage of the many benefits of spiritual community, both in terms of what I gain and what I can give within its framework. I am interested in a wide, eclectic experience of life, yet I yearn for the depth that non-distracted, single-minded practice of one thing can bring. I want to spend time alone and want to share myself freely with others. The different types of ritual work I do as an artist
on my own; as a member of a spiritual community, and within a wider not explicitly religious community, are expressions of these different realms of interest.

Ritual can be found in all three of these domains in traditional Indian society. For the householder, rituals are called for in all the ways we have described in 'the spectrum of ritual activity': around major life passages like birth, coming of age, etc, as seasonal rites, as rites of blessing and healing, and as various festivals. Often a member of the clergy will administer these ceremonies, although there might be some competition with the local shamans. In the monasteries, rituals of a spiritual nature punctuate time, on an hourly, daily, weekly, monthly basis and will often feature the recitation or chanting of lengthy texts. As to the rituals of the forest renunciants, who have strong links with folk shamanic practitioners, one will find the 'appease and appeal' type. In his extensive study 'Civilized Shamans', Geoffrey Samael points out the similarity of the Indian 'Tantric Siddhas' with the more numerous 'Crazy Siddhas' in Tibetan society. (Samael 1993:303f) Both the more conventional lamas and the more roughly behaved, trickster-like siddhas are asked to perform rituals for the laypeople. The siddhas are seen as having great magical powers, but they are also famous for a 'generalised rejection of customary behaviour' and may just walk out of a ceremonial situation. They are also characterised by 'an inclination towards bizarre modes of dress' and the use of mimes, songs and epic tales during the course of teaching. Buddhist societies have depended on these unconventional figures for necessary spiritual renewal.

I find myself positioned between being a respectable member of a Buddhist institution (who might be asked to lead a ritual during a public celebration) and the free-spirit maverick (who plays and experiments, alone or with people on small retreats). Like the siddhas, I use song, story and poetry as ritual forms in the 'puja ceilidhs' which I include on retreats. On my own, I might chant some traditional Buddhist chants, but certainly not every day. Sensitive to the
habituation factor, my choice will often be not to perform any actions I don’t have the presence of mind to really fill with meaning. But I have an open mind as to what form my practice might take. Perhaps one day I will rise to the faith-testing challenge (see previous quote by Sangharakshita) of the traditional Tibetan practice of performing 100,000 prostrations.....An important part of this investigation is the question to what extent my arts activities are part of my ritual Buddhist practice.

**Self-development, self-surrender, self-discovery**

Yet another way of analysing Buddhist ritual, overlapping with the models outlined previously but focusing more on spiritual experience than social context, can be based on a study of ‘three myths’ of spiritual endeavour, as presented by Dharmachari Subhuti, a senior member of the FWBO, (in Maddhyamavani 04). He suggests that a spiritual practitioner is likely to follow one, or a combination of these myths or views, at any one time. The first approach is one of self-development, which requires us to make an effort to change ourselves so that we become more and more like the Buddha. The second is one of self-surrender: one allows oneself to be taken over by the Buddha. The third is the myth of self-discovery: Buddhahood is understood as having been one’s own deepest nature from the very start. All one needs to do is to wake up to that fact.

Subhuti draws a tentative correlation of these modes with the three major yanas or schools of Buddhism. The Hinayana, historically the first school, emphasises an attitude of striving, of replacing ‘unwholesome’ mental states with ‘wholesome’ ones, and it outlines a systematic path of, sometimes arduous, self-development approach. The Mahayana, whilst acknowledging the importance of this kind of systematic work on oneself, also introduces the practitioner to an array of Buddhas and Buddhisattvas, whose compassionate influence we can open ourselves to in an attitude of self-surrender. And finally, in some forms of the Vajrayana, particularly the Indo-Tibetan traditions of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, one recognises the ever-present purity and luminosity of one’s own mind; it is simply a matter of letting it emerge, of self-discovery.
This (very simplified) exposition invites reflections on the place of ritual in any of these modes of practice. The main arena for ritual is found in the second, myth type traditions of the Mahayana (or ‘Greater Vehicle’) traditions, which includes the ‘lower Tantras’ of the Vajrayana, and culminates in Pure Land Buddhism, (where the mere chanting of the name of the Buddha Amitabha guarantees rebirth in his paradise). These schools are extremely rich in ritual, not just of the more formal kind of pujas, but people’s whole lives are suffused with ritual actions like mantra chanting, spinning of prayer wheels, making offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This spirit of self-surrender goes hand in hand with a richly imaginative and symbolic approach to the practice of meditation, involving detailed visualisations of enlightened figures.

One may visualise the Bodhisattva Vajrasattva for example, made of white light, seated on a white lotus flower above one’s head and bestowing rays of white, purifying light falling through the crown of one’s head, to fill one’s being with bliss. What is important is to let go of ego-attachment by practising an attitude of giving, receptivity and self-surrender; immersing oneself in an atmosphere of love and devotion. The figure of the Bodhisattva can be seen as a symbol for this spiritual attitude. She has dedicated herself to working ceaselessly for the welfare and ultimate deliverance of all sentient beings from the ‘wheel of becoming’, the endless round of birth, death and rebirth caused by craving, hatred and spiritual ignorance. At the same time she knows that there is no-one there doing the saving, and no-one there to be saved - the mysterious and essential Buddhist teaching of Sunyata, which found a great re-vitalisation in the Mahayana traditions.

Buddhism has been described as ‘mysticism without god’ - the realisation of Nirvana, the unborn, ineffable, transcendental state, lies in the reach of every sentient being. This might not necessarily be apparent to the uninitiated observer of the devout worshippers of the Mayayana. The picture changes when we look at Pali-Buddhism, with its emphasis on self-development. The monastic
practitioner would mainly just dedicate himself to the ardent practice of pure conduct and meditation. Sangha gatherings would typically include meditation; the chanting of the sutras, and a monthly practice of confession. As we have seen before, the monks also perform rites for the lay population; rites for the sick; to protect households and blessings of all kinds.

In Dzogchen, the third of these modes of spiritual experience, the Buddha's teachings of the inherent emptiness of self and all phenomena find their expression in the practice of 'Pure Awareness'. A true adept of this method finds herself dwelling effortlessly in a state of luminous spaciousness, both when meditating and when not formally meditating. It is a state of non-duality: self/other, inner/outer, samsara/nirvana, all these polarities have been transcended. If all phenomena, including the subjective sense of self, are recognised as an empty display of space and light, one is free. (Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. 2002: 119) To arrive at this blissful state of being, the practitioner will have undergone many years of disciplined training and ritual practice in the other two modes described here, and will in fact combine them to some extent in her daily practice. When one dwells in Pure Awareness however, there does not seem to be a need for any formal expression of ritual, neither inwardly nor outwardly.

Here we are touching again the paradox surrounding ritual: it can both obstruct and give access to 'Truth'. The American Dzogchen master Lama Surya Das gives a list of advice to his Western disciples, that ranges from mindfulness instruction like walk slowly upon crunchy snow to encouragement of more expressive ritual: Sing, chant or pray till you totally forget and lose yourself; then stop and drop into a moment of inexpressible 'isness', completely beyond concepts, stories and strategies. (Lama Surya Das 1997: 83f) He had the good fortune to live with his teachers in Nepal and witness a way of life where there was a mantra for walking through a door or eating a meal, just as there was a mantra for using the toilet. These mantras were significantly more than mere words or empty rituals performed mechanically by rote. They were used to bring a practice of mindfulness, meditation and gratitude into everything that was done.
It seems that we are not able to simply tap into and dwell in states of suchness, without some aids that could be termed rituals. As Shenpen Hookham, a contemporary teacher of Dzochen says; ritual becomes a kind of language that we can use to express out deepest aspirations. (2004:1) Personally, and as a child of the 20th century, in a way I'd prefer to be able to do without those aids. I am subtly prejudiced against ritual because of its associations with ecclesiastical pompousness, hierarchical abuse, etc. I favour the model of self-discovery. It is very easy however to fool myself and attempt 'formless' meditation, when I am not ready for it - the result is a rather dull drifting on the surface layers of consciousness. I need the discipline of fulfilling a form, to some extent, by using particular concentration techniques (like focusing on the breath). And sometimes I also need imaginative stimulation through ritual visualisation practices, putting myself in devotional relationship to something bigger than me, thus expanding, softening and opening the heart/mind. There can be a lot of power in a ceremony because of the way it can act as a focus for the adhistana or blessing power of the lineage. (Hookham 2004:2) At some point however, I feel the strong desire to abandon all form and just dwell in the moment, open to whatever arises, without rejecting or appropriating anything, just being in an empty, clear, blissful and compassionate space.

We see that the play between pure, wordless, imageless presence and expression in form is evident all through the history of Buddhism. A practitioner of any school is likely to move through phases when the disciplined adherence to form is of crucial, character-forming importance, through phases when all this striving for self-improvement (that could lead to self-importance) needs to be let go of in exchange of receptivity to grace, and through phases of not doing anything (nor not doing anything, nor both, and not neither - to quote the mind boggling wisdom of the Sutra of Golden Light.)

In making art, similar dynamics of self-power and other-power can be at play, illustrated by this quote by the famous Japanese potter Shoji Hamada:
If a kiln is small, I might be able to control it completely......But man's own self is but a small thing after all. When I work at the large kiln, the power of my own self becomes so feeble that it cannot control it adequately. It means that for the large kiln, the power that is beyond me is necessary. Without the mercy of such an invisible power I cannot get good pieces. ...I want to be a potter, if I may, who works more in grace than in his own power. You know nearly all the best pots were done in a huge kiln. quoted in: Taitetsu Unno 1998: 223

*Ritual in the FWBO*

**Some history**

The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) was founded in 1967 by Sangharakshita, an Englishman who spent 20 years in the East. During that time he received teachings from all the major Buddhist traditions. Having returned to Britain in the mid-1960s, he saw the need for a new Buddhist movement. He wanted to create something faithful to traditional Buddhist values while being relevant to the modern world. He based the new movement on the core teachings that underlie all Buddhist schools, creatively applying those principles in the contemporary West. The FWBO is now a fast growing international movement with centres in over 20 countries.

A new Buddhist movement needed some ritual (to help transform 'intellectual understanding into emotional experience' as it says in the FWBO *puja* booklet), so, seeing himself as a translator between East and West; between the traditional world and the modern, he devised a series of new *pujas*. Some of these texts were closely based on traditional Theravadin and Mahayana sources and others he composed himself. The mode of recitation he introduced was one of 'call and response'; the leader calling out one line, to be repeated by the congregation. Most of the texts are spoken, while the traditional 'Refuges and Precepts' are sung in a simple plain-chant mode. He also introduced a series of traditional monophonic *mantras*, repetitive 'sound symbols', as he described them as, connected with certain Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. He had received
these mantras as part of initiation ceremonies with important Tibetan teachers, and left them unadulterated.

**Traditionalisation and innovation**

It is fascinating to observe how quickly a new ritual creation can become imbued with the patina sheen of tradition. After less than 40 years of performing *pujas* in this particular way, many people in the FWBO feel a strong loyalty with it and are relatively resistant to change. One is reminded of the quote of Michael Tippett's 'A Midsummer Marriage' (already mentioned earlier): *Change the unchanging ritual, and there is no point of rest*. As a young movement, the FWBO is currently undergoing an intense period of development, where the founder has stepped back from any institutional responsibility. There is a general mood of questioning, debate and experimentation with new organisational structures; a movement towards less hierarchy and decentralisation. So it is not surprising that in such unsettled times there is a call for some 'rest' in ritual. It seems to be a comfort for people to be able to 'do a puja' at the end of the day, knowing that everyone present will know it by heart, and no explaining needs to be done.

With hardly a stone of the FWBO's history and the life of Sangharakshita remaining unturned, there has been, so far, little systematic examination of ritual. In the mid-nineties a group of order members (including myself) met a few times to attempt a re-evaluation of Buddhist liturgy. But, not surprisingly given the complexities of people's responses to ritual and of decision-making processes, no common understandings and recommendations were reached. It is worth pointing out that in the FWBO the level of openness to experimentation is actually very high compared to other, more traditional Buddhist movements in the West. *For the short term at least, the enculturation of Theravaada Buddhism in Britain is likely to proceed through small readjustments rather than substantive change because of the overriding desire to remain firmly within the Theravaadin fold. The cultural skills required for the continuing negotiation of this particular cross-cultural enterprise will reside in the ability of many persons to adapt, as Shils describes it, "without a sense that anything essential has been renounced."* (Sandra Bell, www.globalbuddhism.org) My impression is that within...
the FWBO there is a high element of trust in the essential vision of Sangharakshita: that at the core of one's spiritual life lies a commitment to the three jewels (the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha,) and that there are many ways to express this commitment within an ever-changing socio-cultural context. Ritual in this movement is therefore adhered to less rigidly than in some of the schools like Theravada, Zen and Tibetan Mahayayana, in which the 'cosmological ordering' and ethical-moral' styles of ritual are prevailing. Within the FWBO one will find some ritual experimentation on smaller retreats, on festivals in Buddhist Centres, and on large ceremonial gatherings. One group called ‘Buddhafield’ specialises in outdoor events and has been particularly adventurous, for example including native American Indian rituals such as ‘sweat lodges’ as part of Buddhist retreats. This may be an expression of the urge to reach back to more nature-oriented forms of rituals, a trend that I will explore more fully in the following chapter.

I have been creatively involved in many of these situations during the course of this research. My aim is to coax people into a way of expressing themselves in ritual that is more truly participatory and goes hand in hand with a high degree of awareness and creativity. The skill I bring to this is partly derived from my training as a musician, which has its roots in the classical, settled monastic tradition of the Christian church in fact. But I also come, to stay with Ray's model, out of the forest to the monastery and the lay people, to let others benefit from skills and sensibilities that have been developed through many solitary hours of artmaking.

Ritual in Art

_I spend my time very easily, but wouldn’t know how to tell you what I do…..I am a "respirateur" a breather. I enjoy it tremendously._ Marcel Duchamp (quoted in Buddha Mind, p20)

_The place felt good; he leaned back against the wall until its surface pushed against his backbone solidly. He picked up a fragment of fallen plaster and drew dusty white stripes across the backs of his hands, the way ceremonial dancers sometimes did, except they used white clay, and not old plaster. It was soothing to rub the dust over his light brown skin; he rubbed it carefully across his light brown skin making a_
spotted pattern, and then he knew why it was done by the dancers: it connected them to the earth. Leslie Marmon Silko, in 'ceremony'

It is a remarkable phenomenon that many modern artists feel drawn to exotic spiritual practices and ancient sacred images, artefacts and ceremonial sites as sources for inspiration. Since the early 20th century (with its increased mobility and opportunities for travel), artists are effected by Eastern spirituality, even if they often reject institutional religion. The art curator and art activist Lucy Lippard’s explanation for this is ‘nostalgia’: not only for those periods we now imagine offered a social life simpler and more meaningful than our own, but also for a time when what people made (art) had a secure place in their daily lives. (Lippard 1983:4) It was with some dismay (as an atheist), that she recognised her eager exploration of pre-historic sites as an exploration of the collective component of the origins of art – which lay, of course, in religion. She also saw that if art is now for some people a substitute for religion, it is a pathetically inadequate one because of its rupture from social life. She wrote her book 'overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory' which reviews the work of a multitude of artists, partly to suggest the restoration of symbolic possibility in contemporary art. (Lippard 1983:5) Her attitude towards this observed trend is both encouraging and critical. Some artist will borrow ancient or ‘primitive’ elements to express content that modern art language has no tools for. Some may just plunder exotic artefacts for their vaguely mysterious qualities. Others work more from the inside, arriving at primal images from their own needs.

Like Lippard, I believe that art, politics and religion can move people to action through emotion (8). In workshops and retreats, I often incorporate the making of a symbolic representation of an intention for a behaviour change, which people then offer (to their own Higher Self, the Buddha, the community or the world) in a simple ceremonial. As a Buddhist artist interested in these areas, I have perhaps a certain advantage over artists who don’t have such a natural social context. The symbols and ritual forms I use in my work have evolved from within my
spiritual practice as part of an alive spiritual community, and they can be effective as tools for change at least within this community – but hopefully also within a wider field.

Before looking further at the use of ritual elements in contemporary art, I'd like to investigate the roots of the relationship between ritual and the arts in a little more depth.

**Origins of art and ritual**

Ellen Dissanayake states that ritual and art have the same roots: at the core of both lies its value for the survival of the human species; it is a biological necessity. Human beings made things ‘special’; they adorned their tools and other life-serving implements, for example, to reinforce their importance and to assure their careful use. ‘Making special’ was equally important in ritual ceremonies.

*When language was used poetically (with stress, compelling rhythm, noteworthy similes or word choice), when costumes or decor was striking and extravagant; when choruses, and recitations allowed vicarious or actual audience participation, the content of the ceremonies would have been more memorable than when left “untreated”....At the same time, the fellow-feeling arising from the mutual participation and shared emotion was a microcosmic acting out of the general cooperation and coordination that was necessary for small groups to survive in a violent, unpredictable world. Ellen Dissanayake 1992:56*

It is interesting to note that the aesthetic elements chosen to make something special also indicate something as ‘wholesome and good’, by bearing visual signs of health and youth, such as smoothness, glossiness, warm or true colours, cleanness, fineness. Dissanayake finds that most, if not all, societies value agility, endurance, and grace in dance; sonority, vividness, and rhythmic or phonic echoing (rhyme and other poetic devices) in language; and resonance and power in percussion. There are also elements that appeal to the cognitive faculties: repetition, pattern, continuity, clarity, dexterity, elaboration or variation of a theme, contrast, balance, proportion. These qualities have to do with comprehension, mastery, and hence security. This emphasis on ‘wholesomeness’ at the root of ritual and art fascinates and reassures me as an
artist who does not fit into a certain contemporary art scene that exhibits much discordance (see also 'making ugly').

To summarise, we can find striking similarities between ritual and art. Both are compelling (performed to affect individuals emotionally), deliberately non-ordinary (unusual language and intonation), using exaggeration (slow movement), repetition, elaboration (a profusion of flowers), extravaganzas (gathering a large crowd), stylisation (bows and clapping). Thus both ritual and the arts are formalised. They are also both socially reinforcing, provide feelings of individual transcendence, are bracketed off from ordinary life, and both make use of symbols. Thus, an artist's practice is interwoven with ritual, both in studio work (more about this in Part 3) and presentation in the public realm in galleries, museums and public spaces.

**ritual in contemporary art**

While Dissinayake offers 'making special' as a motif for the pre-historic ritualist/artist, the contemporary ritual-inspired artist may be spurred on in quite different ways.

'**making ugly**'

Looking at the catalogue of the major 1995 Tate exhibition on the theme 'rites of passage', which brought together the work of eleven contemporary artists, I am struck by the fragmentation and distortion of many of the presentations, with a seeming prevalence of isolated and estranged body parts (Louise Bourgeois, Susan Hiller, Miraslav Balka). Julia Kristeva, Professor of Linguistics at the Universite de Paris, and practising psychoanalyst has this to say about the exhibition:

_I think this desire for eccentricity manifested by the artists on show does stem from the concern that is at the heart of sacred rites - to take into account that which is marginal to a structure, dirty: 'I am going to concentrate on this dirtiness so as to find a representation of it, and when I have found a representation for this_
Kristeva sees our world go through a crisis that religion in its 'ossification, inflexibility and dogmatism' is not able to solve. Art is seen by many as the new religion, which offers an arena for coping with 'abjection'. In her view, this necessarily has to be a solitary, therapeutic path. '..we need to come as close as possible to the crisis, to accompany it and produce individual works because that is the predicament we are in, in a kind of pulverisation and solitude. It would be a mistake to try and obliterate the fact with misleading promises of a new and easily obtained community.' Kristeva has quite a slanted perception on what is 'at the heart of sacred rites'. Dealing with dirt is certainly one aspect of it (one that Douglas elaborates in her seminal 'Purity and Danger'1966.) Today many theorists would argue that connection with a larger reality forms the essence of ritual. But connection is perhaps not the strong point of the represented artists. Kristeva's viewpoint clarifies for me why I have a reluctance to join in with a certain type of collective religious ritual - many things are not well for us, and they have to be addressed, not glossed over by ceremony. I am more optimistic than she is though, in my general assessment of religion - I am finding in Buddhism exactly the tools I need to deal with 'dirty' stuff. For me, this process of purification, healing and harmonisation takes place both in solitary practice (based on meditation), and in collective situations (through some kinds of ritual). Like the artists in 'rites of passage', I consciously and deliberately join with my inner distress, rather than move away from it (which is of course the instinctive thing to do). I don't use my creation of art in quite that way, although I am sure there are some therapeutic elements in it. My 'gestures towards emptiness' are primarily offerings, made to delight, whilst also inviting reflection and resonance with ecological concerns.
‘making together’

Individualism is a hallmark of modern society and the artist as solitary genius can almost be seen as its figurehead. I don’t want to malign the idea of the individual and of individual freedom; after all it has led to much valued social and political freedom: liberation from feudalism and voting rights, for example. But I am finding that the art/ritual connection throws open a lot of questions around the position of the artist in relation to the community, ownership and stewardship of the earth. In 9th to 14th centuries Japan, poets met and composed ‘renge’ together, a collective poem often addressing the subjects of nature and impermanence. (This form has recently enjoyed a revival in contemporary writers’ circles and I have participated in this form of collective art-making myself). In the egalitarian (Pygmy) Mbuti hunter-gatherer tribe it is rare for anybody to make a basket, an axe handle, or anything else, by themselves; at some point somebody else will invariably reach over and continue to weave the basket for a while.....this process is a way of ensuring that possessions are not entirely made or owned by own individual. But can be claimed or borrowed by others. (Kenrick, 1999:160) The Mbuti’s relationship with the forest mirrors their relationship with each other in work, hunt, and ritual; cooperation and sharing are at the heart of their social and economic experience.

The sculptor Peter Bevan, my second supervisor, described a similar experience whilst doing some collaborative art work in India, with the sculptor Ganesh Gohain. People will gather to watch and often intervene to try to help, or present an alternative, “more correct” procedure for some activity going on. Privacy was not a priority. This instinct for “joining in” in India, was remarkable and perhaps is also a mark of their culture, in which the cult of the individual has not been strong. (Although, it is not in evidence in most of the artists I met who seemed to be dining out on their “individualism”, I suppose in emulation of artists of the West). (personal communication 26.2.2006)

While I am not suggesting we imitate the hunter-gatherer or the Indian way of life in all respects, I do believe that we need to urgently examine our notions of separateness or interconnectedness if we want to survive on this planet.
Contemporary science, and systems theory in particular, has shown that the notion of a separate, distinct self cannot be upheld any longer. *Our very breathing, acting and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy and information that move through us and sustain us.* (Joanna Macy 1991: 188) But large sections of our society, particularly those that perpetuate capitalist market driven ideologies, choose to ignore this reality. Within the field of ‘engaged art’, particularly as part of the Feminist Movement, notions of collaboration have been explored for the last 30 years (Suzanne Lacy, in Buddha Mind 2004:102). But overall, the art scene seems to favour art that can be marketed easily, i.e. that doesn’t have complicated ownership issues to contend with.

In ‘conversations before the end of time’, Suzi Gablik talks to her friend Ellen Dissanayake about the lack of a communal aspect to art making today, *that is not connected in any profound sense with the world, but is used more as a kind of solace, or retreat, from it.* (Gablik 1995:42). The very fact of her writing a book that consists in dialogue with others bears witness to her view, that it is time for artists to move beyond the mode of monologue, where artist or writer imposes images or ideas on the world, *but nobody can really answer back.* (Gablik, 1991:113) The philosopher Richard Shustermann contributes to the conversation by stating that *the idea of confining art to what we hang on the walls is a pathetic failure of theoretical as well as artistic imagination.* (in Gablik 1995:265)

There is now in the UK a considerable movement for “inclusive”, community-based art. It is taught in some Schools (eg. Glasgow School of Art and Dartington College of Arts) and supported by Government (Arts Council) funding. In fact, most funding for arts require at least a consultative role if not more, on the part of the audience, host community, ‘users’ or commissioners of the art. Now galleries and Museums are required to have substantial ‘inclusive’ education programmes and policies. (see Gormley’s ‘Domain Field’ as an example) However, it is still true to say that artists are subject to and the subject of, art market forces.
In the process of this investigation it is becoming clearer why I am drawn to create ritual art that includes everyday living and the community and to gain more confidence in its validity and relevance in a broader, artistic, social and ecological context. In '60th birthday', for example, I made a piece of art together with my partner, as a birthday celebration for him. Most of the collective rituals I lead, evolve in a process of shared decision making. The question of ownership is answered in ceremonies where the offerings of the participants are burnt or poured into a stream, then given back to the elements, from which they came. Like many of the artists partaking in the ecological discourse about earth stewardship, I do try to make an income from my art. But I am glad to also offer some of my work as a facilitator of rituals for free, as it keeps the questions and tensions in the area of ownership alive. Ultimately they concern the way we see ourselves as part of - or outside of - the universe and whether we try to honour or to dominate it. Gregory Bateson did not hold back his strong feelings in this matter when he wrote:

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral and ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit..... If this is your estimate of your relationship to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. Bateson 1973: 436

Domain field

Anthony Gormley's piece 'Domain Field', which I saw in August 03 at the Baltic in Newcastle is an inspiring example of a new work of art by a well-established artist that links life, community and spirituality. In 'Domain Field', hundreds of inhabitants of the city offered to become part of the project, letting their whole body be cast in plaster, and then witnessing the inner space of the form being sculpted into a web of welded steel rods. The experience of visiting the exhibition is one of partaking in the artistic process. As I wander with my friend between the strangely animate, yet mostly empty figures, sometimes standing still, then
turning, walking, I am aware that we become part of a moving sculpture, or choreography, potentially witnessed from the balcony (where we were the watchers just a few minutes ago). The sculptures are made of air, steel and light, whilst our appearance is of greater density, moisture and colour, yet I sense that the distinction between them and us is not very great. I am moved by my vivid perception of the personalities of the figures; their life stories seem so obviously written in the postures and shapes of the bodies, just as in our own. One can't help but wonder what one would look like oneself as an airy, spiky figure - which aspects of one's being would thus become enshrined for posterity. Gormley's installation is a space of enquiry, questions seem to linger in the luminosity reflected by the metal surfaces. What is the relationship between the individual and the group, how are we separate and the same, what does it mean to be dead or alive, to be fully involved in the business of living and yet standing back as it were, in reflective self-awareness?

I haven't found the word 'ritual' mentioned in the exhibition texts, but for me there is no doubt that we are moving in a ritual space: fascinating, alarming and inevitable. Wrapped in cling film, covered in plaster and then cut out of their encasing shells, they would have to endure, not only extremes of temperature change as the plaster set, but also the brief period of sensory deprivation this entailed. (Darian Leader, 2003:14) This reminds us of the liminal period of the ritual process as described by van Gennep, a phase characterised by sensory disorientation. This is perhaps the extent to which we, in the sophisticated West, will voluntarily undergo the hardships of a rite of passage....

Ritual theatre and the search for the 'universal'

Some of the devised rituals on my workshops and events have been described as 'performance art' and so it is useful to look at ritual aspects in recent theatre developments. Ritual performance artists today are often interested in the spiritual/subjective effect of the action on the 'performer', and are searching for a ritual language that transcends the particulars of the current culture. Colin Innes
in his study 'Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant-Garde' asserts that many performing artists today are searching for ritualistic or mythical archetypes to incarnate emotions so deeply felt that they become universal and transfigure the individual by a return to the roots of human nature. (Innes 1981: 23) For Grotowski, for example, the goal of drama was to re-evoke a very ancient form of art where ritual and artistic creation were seamless. (in Schechner 1993: 246) His method of theatre work was to sift through many practices from different cultures, to find that which was 'universal'. These were then ritualised into a new, repeatable sequence of exercises. The work has been described as 'gruelling', physically and psychologically extremely demanding. He was aiming for an intensity that led to a change in consciousness in the actors. Interestingly, he gradually dispensed with an audience, so that the performance became ever more like a ritual. The performer is not a man who plays another. He is a dancer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres. .... Degenerated ritual is a spectacle. I don't want to discover something new but something forgotten...One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation. (Grotowski in Schechner 1993:256)

Like Grotowski, I am motivated by the urge to turn the ritual experience into one of self-transformation. A retreat programme creates the intensity necessary for some kind of catharsis and I will usually offer a certain amount of artistic training, some of which is based on ancient movement forms such as Tai-chi. The absence of spectators, which is a natural element on a retreat, allows the participant to enter into the experience 'just for him/herself'. Where a group of people are the main 'actors' and the majority are in a spectator role, the existential, transformational element is usually less strong. The search for the 'ancestral' can take the form of chanting some ancient Buddhist verses, thus cultivating the connection with the past. I don't feel the desire to create a new system of spiritual/artistic training, as Grotowski has done, nor do I want to submit ritual participants to great hardship. I am sufficiently accepting of the Buddhist framework (with its teaching of a 'Middle Way' between denial and indulgence) to trust the overall balance of spiritual practice within it. But I do
sometimes regret the lack of greater artistic skill in people who perform ritual on retreats. Grotowski's description of 'outside aesthetic genres' fits my ritual experiments well. They are not exclusively performance, ceilidh, religious ceremony, activist empowerment, or psycho-drama, but can have elements of them all.

A language of organicity

Like Grotowski and other ritual-influenced artists, I have been fascinated by the question as to whether there are ritual/artistic forms that have an almost archetypal quality. If these forms could be found, they would be attractive to many people, who, by participation in these new/old rites, would form a temporary spiritual community, independent of any particular creed or time. I have been aware of this search in my own creative work both in the area of composing mantra-like pieces for rituals and in my visual artwork. As my musical contribution to the body of work presented here is relatively minor compared to the visual artwork, I had to limit myself to an investigation of this topic in relation to the latter. This movement of rooting back to ancient or essential forms has expressed itself both in the choice of symbol and symmetry, as well as texture. In some of my work I have been drawn to natural textures such as caused by the running of water. It is almost like a reaching back to a time before human beings (and their rituals) started to impact on the earth.

This desire is perhaps similar to that which brought Ted Hughes, as he worked with Peter Brook's 'theatre of ritual', to try and create a new language. It was aiming to 'magically' effect the listener on an instinctive level in the same way that sound can effect the growth of plants or the patterns of iron filings. (in Innes 1981:23). His special language was designed to aid the organic unity of content and form in his play 'Orghast' (1971) and address the levels where differences disappear, close to the inner life of what we have chosen as our material, but expressive of all people, powerfully, truly, precise.
So we find, in contemporary art, a rooting back; not only to tribal, archaic sounds and movements, but further to the very rhythms and patterns of life. In some ways it provides an alternative to the integrated rituals of earlier more holistic societies. Whilst many present day secular rituals are based on the lowest common denominator (waving hands and repetitive songs during a football match, the Olympics, a carnival), within the context of the arts we find skill, subtlety and intricacy. It is not easy however to get the mix of ritual ingredients right. Orghast was not a success, apparently, because its search for the origins missed a level of general cultural understanding and alienated the audience. If ritual is aiming to facilitate a sense of connectedness with life, then perhaps the football crowd has got it right. Waving their bodies and arms in the rhythm of the chants, they become ocean, field and sky.

**Rituals for Survival**

Transfigured by ceremony, the truths we could not otherwise endure come to us. George Mackay Brown, quoted by Cathy Galloway 2003

When all is said and done, it is only love for the world, and desire for rich, sensory contact with the beauty of its smells and textures that will save us. Gablik 1995:180, quoting James Hillman

I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.....It has always been necessary, and more than ever, now it is. Otherwise we won’t make it. We won’t survive.” from ‘ceremony’ by Leslie Marmon Silko

**The present ecological situation**

Most people in the modern West will be well informed about the ecological dangers we are facing today. Global warming is starting to cause sea level rises and weather upheavals, leading to human deprivation and loss of habitat for many species. Drinking water is becoming a scarce resource, possibly replacing oil as a future cause for war. The seas are chemically contaminated and overfished. Rainforests are disappearing, giving way to dramatic species loss and desertification. Ozone depletion, human overpopulation, genetic experimentation, the list goes on.....We have known the facts for decades – why are we not
managing to halt these potentially suicidal developments? Some people think it is too late anyway; our effect on climate change is similar to that of the asteroid impact 65 millions years ago that led to the extinction of half the earth’s species, including the dinosaurs. Nothing can now stop the accelerating melting of polar and glacial ice; a temperature rise of 8C by the middle of this century is probable, so we might just as well have a proper nuclear programme, as James Lovelock tells us, never mind unresolved matters of waste and safety. The Greens don’t seem to understand that without electricity, civilisation would collapse. (Guardian 31.12.05) I am sad that he thinks electricity is the main requirement for civilisation. It is the limited type of civilisation we saw in action after the ‘Katrina’ catastrophe in New Orleans, where violence immediately broke into the gap opened by the breakdown of civil structures. Despite those grim predictions of doom, I am committed to developing more dignified civil and spiritual attitudes such as compassion, contentment with little and taking global responsibility, which includes facing the question I asked earlier: why don’t we act more wisely, fully, urgently? Joanna Macy, an American Buddhist ecologist has some useful and enlightening comments regarding our psychological responses to impending global disaster. She wrote at a time when nuclear war was an imminent danger: As a society we are caught between a sense of impending apocalypse and the fear of acknowledging it. In this “caught” place our responses are blocked and confused. (Macy 1983: 5) We fail to fully acknowledge the current ecological dangers for a variety of reasons:
- fear of suffering pain and distress (our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional)
- fear of the scale of the problem (we feel impotent)
- fear of being forced to change consumption habits (we don't like having to give things up)
- fear of appearing morbid (feelings of anguish and despair for the world can appear to be a failure of stamina or even competence)
- fear of appearing stupid (we should not complain about a situation, unless we have a solution)
fear of guilt (through our lifestyle we are accomplices)
- fear of causing distress (reluctant to burden our loved ones with our inklings of apocalypse)
- fear of provoking disaster (superstition that negative thoughts are self-fulfilling)

Beset by all these fears, we may wonder whether our feelings of depression and despair are not manifestations of some private neurosis, and take recourse to psychotherapy for a solution (a modern day healing ritual). But this remedy can easily re-enforce the sense of a separate self and does not necessarily enhance the sense of connectedness with life that is more likely to engender ecological action. I think that among all the possible directions we can take to enable ourselves to not only face the problems more squarely but also to take effective action, the role of spirituality deserves particular attention.

The role of religion

Creating disturbance within the environment is not a new experience for human beings, and we have through the millennia developed methods of restoring balance and harmony, partly through the use of ritual. This is true not just of hunter-gatherers, where regular and frequent ritual interaction with the spirits serves as a constant reminder of the interdependence of all life forms, but also of settled, aristocratic societies such as 8th century China. After a period of excessive deforestation and hunting in the Yellow River valley for example, people realised that they had to change their ways, and stop exploiting their environment. An extensive ritual reform regulated every detail of their behaviour. Gradually this religious discipline transformed their mentality, so that a spirit of moderation and self-control replaced the former wasteful excess. (Karen Armstrong in the Guardian Weekly 23.12.2005) This wise restraint only lasted four centuries, when the Chinese had an industrial revolution and the abuse of the landscape started again. Taoism has had a moderating effect for 2000 years, and is today at the forefront of grassroots-level environmental work. The Daoist priesthood today encourages its millions
of followers to cultivate new forest cover to repair denuded landscapes and to preserve wild habitats. (Anthony Alexander, in Resurgence magazine No.234).

If we look to religion as a means of restoring ecological balance, we have to be careful which one to choose. A religion founded on a creation myth that bestows license to human beings to dominate the world and perpetuates a dualistic attitude might not be the most obvious choice. It seems that, next to Taoism, Buddhism is one religion that has the potential to provide some of the necessary insights and tools to help shift ecological attitudes. Paticca samupadda or 'dependent co-origination' lies at the heart of Buddhist understanding. It points to the interconnectedness of all things – nothing has a separate existence (which is one way of defining sunyata). Everything in the universe vibrates with everything else. With these perceptions Buddhism lies close to modern science, for example Lovelock’s Gaia Theory, which states that the earth is a homeostatic living organism that co-ordinates its systems in response to environmental changes. (Lovelock 1991)

'Depth ecology' and the 5 viniyatas

Deep Ecology or 'depth ecology' as it is variably termed, as a movement and a way of thinking, has generally been contrasted to conventional environmentalism, and especially to approaches that focus only on alleviating the most obvious symptoms of ecological disarray without reflecting upon, and seeking to transform, the more deep-seated cultural assumptions and practices that have given rise to those problems. Rather than applying various 'band-aid' solutions to environmental problems, adherents of deep ecology ostensibly ask "deeper" questions, and aim at deeper, more long-range solutions. (David Abram 2002:1) Depth ecology is a movement that unites scientists and artists alike in an intense love for nature. It is characterised by an attitude of heartfelt humility as regards our place in the world; we are but one of the earth’s creatures, one of many other of her awe-inspiring natural designs and systems. Depth ecology seeks a radical change of perception, that views nature not from a separate standpoint, but from an embeddedness within it:
And you might awake one morning and find that nature is part of you, literally internal to your being. You would then treat nature as you would your lungs or kidneys. A spontaneous environmental ethics surges forth from your heart, and you will never again look at a river, a leaf, a deer, a robin, in the same way. Ken Wilber 2000:21

Yet it is not, romantically, just about *eating berries in the sunlight*, as Gary Snyder points out.

*I like to imagine a 'depth ecology' that would go to the dark side of nature - the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite. Wild systems are in one elevated sense above criticism, but they can also be seen as irrational, moldy, parasitic.*

Our psyches are like these eco-systems, complex, diverse, and full of information that can be used for change. If *shame, grief, embarrassment and fear are the anaerobic fuels of the dark imagination,* as Snyder says, then our raw feelings regarding the ecological crisis can become part of our creative response. We can learn to transform the very fears that let us shrink into self-protective passivity, into wholehearted, creative living, that includes enthusiastic, active care for the environment.

I would like to offer a particular Buddhist analysis of the mind and show how it can be applied in the service of ecological action. The *Abidharma* development of early Buddhism consisted in the categorisation of a vast body of teachings on the nature of the mind and the universe. Here we find listed the 5 *viniyatas*, or object-determining mental events: first there is *chanda*, interest, then comes *adimoksha*, intensified interest that stays with the object, then you need *smrti*, or continuity of attention, fourthly *samadhi*, sustained engagement, and finally *prajna*, penetrative understanding. *Chanda*, the first of these mental events means inspiration, drive, enthusiasm. We need more than the knowledge of facts or a sense of duty to stimulate the desire to change our behaviour. Our emotions need to be stirred, through an appeal to the sensuous and an awakening of the imagination. In order to really know that *our nature is nature* (as Wes Nisker [1998:4] puts it very succinctly) and to allow ourselves to fully sense our intimate relationship with the natural elements that we are part of, the use of arts-based methods of enquiry and celebration is invaluable. In conjunction with factual
knowledge, they can spark the initial rise of enthusiasm that can lead to an openness to changes that challenge well-engraved ecological attitudes and behaviour patterns.

But feeling inspired is not enough; the other viniyatas describe what is necessary to sustain one's efforts. Adimoksha is like the attitude William Blake called 'Firm Persuasion', a sense of dedication, based on inspiration: My fingers Emit sparks of fire with Expectation of my future labour, he writes to his patron, promising his hard work. Smruti is mindfulness, in the sense of continuous application of our efforts. This means remembering what we set out to do (i.e. turning the lights off when leaving a room, or separating waste for recycling). Samadhi is meditation, in the sense of absorption. Meditation leads to contentment, being satisfied with simple things, consuming less. Enjoyment comes from within rather than seeking continuous outside stimulation. Prajna is penetrative understanding, or wisdom. In terms of ecological awareness, it is the felt sense that we are all part of a living system and profoundly interconnected. It is intrinsically coupled with compassion.

I lived for hundreds of years as a mineral,
And then died and was reborn as a plant.
I lived for hundreds of years as a plant,
And then died and was reborn as an animal.
I lived for hundreds of years as an animal,
And then died and was reborn as a human being.
What have I ever lost by dying?
Rumi, version by Robert Bly

This exposition represents an example of a spiritual perspective on change that can lead to clear comprehension of the ecological emergency and compassion for the human and animal suffering that comes in its wake. Such an approach addresses the personal and political/environmental levels, in science and the
arts. It insures 'sustainability', both in the sense of living in a way that doesn't compromise the quality of life for future generations, and also in terms of being able to maintain one's efforts over a long period of time without losing heart.

Eco-art

Longing is almost loving and surely losing. David Buckland in ‘Art from a changing Arctic’

I want to dwell a little more on the role the arts can play on the environmental stage. The ecology and art connection is a growing field of interest, with an increasing number of study courses, conferences, exhibitions and books devoted to the subject. Whether creating land art, video art, performance art or more conventionally framed art, the explicit intention of many artists is to elicit in the viewer an affinity with nature. It can be argued that this reason for artmaking is as old as 'civilisation' itself, with depiction of nature taking the place of the lost immersion in it. (Matilsky, Fragile Ecologies, 1992) The difference today is that some artists also attempt to mobilise the desire to preserve and protect nature. But this mission can pose some problems.

One question inevitably arises in eco-art discussions: 'Is art making not like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?' Another concern is how to make environmental art that does not in its own way contribute to environmental problems, through choice of polluting materials, travel, disruption of ecosystems, etc. And yet another issue is to do with avoiding a high moral stance; 'constantly telling people off' as the writer Ian McEwan put it. He was part of a team of artists and scientists setting out on arctic expeditions to Spitzbergen, in order to witness the effects of global warming. (see film 'Art from a changing Arctic' 2006). He sees the role of the artist in telling 'human scale stories' of impending disasters caused by climate change. Watching big horror movies doesn't make people change their actions. He wants to get on the consumer's side, admitting how 'weak, stupid and lazy' we all are, and owning up to 'the pleasures of wasting the planet'. He admits that the expedition can be seen as 'an encapsulation of the problem', where artists get 'a shot at the arctic' for a few weeks. In the end, all
that eco-art can perhaps do, is to help us to 'bear the weight of the future', as McEwan puts it; a statement I resonate with. Eco-art can bring some enjoyment to the struggle with these heavy-weight environmental issues.

Whilst I would not describe myself as an eco-artist, some of my work falls into the category of eco-art. My piece 'The Buddha’s robes: recycled' (plate 20) for example shows a patchwork of yellow, handmade paper, textured by an underlying array of rags. This refers to the monastic custom in the Buddha’s days, to avoid wastefulness by repeatedly repairing robes. Once a robe deteriorated beyond a condition in which it may be worn with decorum, it must be recycled and employed in other ways, such as a floor mop. (Harris 2000:125). Buddhism, like other religions, endorses attitudes such as simplicity and contentment, which are aspects of an anti-materialist outlook that forms part of a modern ecological strategy of living sustainably. The writing on my piece reads: with the ceasing of craving, suffering also ceases (a saying of the Buddha).

Eco-rituals

So finally we are approaching the question of ritual in the context of ecological change. Karen Armstrong makes a case for the necessity of a spiritual approach. In the ancient world, assiduous religious ritual and ethical practice helped people to cultivate their respect for the holiness of the Earth. If we want to save our planet, we must find a modern way of doing the same. (Guardian 23.12.05) As an ex-catholic nun, it is not surprising that her description of ritual is that of the ethical-moral type; a type that is no longer acceptable or attractive to many people these days. But this does not mean that ritual is generally of no use for a re-vitalisation of respect for the natural rhythms of the cosmos. As we have seen in this 'mapping of ritual', rituals can serve many purposes and can take many forms. Given that ritual has, from the beginning, allowed human beings to enter into a creative relationship with the environment, it would be surprising if suitable rituals could not be found that are part of 'a modern way'.
Sticking to the comforting rhythm of our weekly Sunday paper, we may read tragic news about species loss without letting it disturb us. Perhaps this kind of habit-like ritual is necessary in many ways; otherwise we would be floundering in social and existential chaos. But the type of ritual I am more interested in is consciously devised in order to achieve certain aims. Like the environmental anthropologist Rappaport I think that it is an excellent tool for ecological purposes. In his book 'Ritual and Religion in the making of Humanity' (1999) he suggests that ritual can be a means to establish a new paradigm that is grounded in an ecological worldview.

Ritual has been used by different groupings within the ecological movement, from neo-pagan to Buddhist activists, to affect personal change; to reinforce the cohesion of the group; to give a sense of empowerment, and to strengthen a worldview of interconnectedness. 'The council of all beings', developed by John Seed and Ruth Rosenhek in 1985 is an example of an eco-ritual that has been used in hundreds of workshops. ('Thinking like a mountain' 1988). The effectiveness of ritual as eco-political strategy lies in its feature of embodiment. Standing in a circle with others and holding hands does not just communicate wholeness and equality, but lets it resonate in the body. The metaphor of the circle is translated into a somatic knowing. Ritual works in this way, whether used for conservative religious or political purposes, or whether used in subversive, creative and culturally critical capacities. (Grimes 1990:21). It is interesting to observe that the same people who reject ritual in one social context, are open to it in another.

What is the shape of the new eco-rituals? We can assume that they will have some 'ancient' elements, to make them feel like 'proper' rituals and some new ones. Who devises and revises them? How can they most effectively become carriers of a new worldview? In a time where gene-technology threatens to create a world that above all is marketable (for example cube shaped water melons, that can be packed into crates more efficiently), what are the patterns of
the new rituals? Are they rituals that preserve intricacy against the uniformity of globalisation, or will they need to be simple and easy to pick up? Will they allow creative expression of individual freedom or repeat patterns of uniformity? Will they be 'gestures towards emptiness', or continue the illusion of fixed, separate selfhood? I am trying to answer some of these questions in my practical work as an artist and ritualist, as well as clarifying further the relationships between ritual, Buddhism, art and ecology, which form the landscape of this inquiry.

PART 2: THE ENQUIRY

Out there beyond all ideas
of right & wrong doing,
there is a field.
I will meet you there. Rumi

In Japan for an international conference on religion, Campbell overheard another American delegate, a social philosopher from New York, say to a Shinto priest, "We've been now to a good many ceremonies and seen quite a few of your shrines. But I don't get your ideology. I don't get your theology." The Japanese paused as though in deep thought and then slowly shook his head. "I think we don't have ideology," he said. "We don't have theology. We dance." Campbell 1988:introduction

Relational Enquiry

Part 2 addresses the research question, and elucidates the methodology and process patterns of this enquiry. The cultural critic and theorist Mieke Bal (2002: 5) puts forward the view that interdisciplinary, practice-based research must find its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than methods. Concepts are dynamic and flexible, allowing a type of analysis that follows the emerging and complex findings of creative practice in ways that are sensitive to its aesthetic character. The type of enquiry I am conducting could be termed 'relational'; a fluid form of
research that possesses its own rigor through intense, continuous reflection. It interweaves theory, autobiography, pedagogical interaction, artwork and Buddhist practice in an ongoing way, allowing understandings to rise; fall away, and re-form in new ways. There is a similarity with the processes that shape ritual over time. Old approaches can show themselves as empty of meaning and one needs to have the courage to stay in the interstitial space between the known and the unknown to let new meanings and forms emerge; ones that are sensuously potent.

Writing about ritual may seem like an anomaly: surely the point of rituals (at least the more personally transformational ones as opposed to the mere social ones) is to do them wholeheartedly, to be utterly absorbed in them, to lose oneself in them? I think the view that reflexive and critical self-awareness interferes with the state of 'flow' associated with ritual is limited. In play, there is a complex relationship between the attitude of 'let's pretend' and 'surrender' within the framed reality. Eliade described shamanic trance as an archaic technique of controlled ecstasy, stressing the shaman's training in conscious manipulation of transformational states, whose voluntariness and predictability in no way destroy or render them inauthentic. (Myerhoff 1990: 247) The argument can also be applied to the process of enquiry in ritual and art; it does not have to exclude the vitality, mystery and total absorption associated with their performance. As a researcher/meditator/artist, I can be enfolded in sensuous and relational processes, whilst sensitive to insights lingering at the edges of conscious awareness.

The Title

The initial title for my thesis and research 'An exploration of ritual with reference to Buddhist tradition and innovation' acquired the prefix Gestures towards Emptiness. This change, made some time in year three, gave a meaningful umbrella to the whole project: ritual generally, my own art work, the group work, the thesis, and the whole of my Buddhist practice. It invites a play with words, pointing to one of the essential questions in this research: is a ritual action an 'empty gesture' or a 'gesture towards Emptiness'? I see 'Emptiness' as a
fullness of spiritual experience without the ego agent that tends to label, appropriate or fix it. It is a way of describing a spiritual goal without falling prey to end-gaining. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary's definition of empty 'containing nothing; not filled or occupied', not surprisingly sticks to the negative meaning of the term, and is done with it quickly. Buddhists have a lot more to say about emptiness, or sunyata, and different schools have, over time, developed an increasingly subtle understanding of it. The process of understanding is one of self-transformation that includes all aspects of one's life, and in particular, the practice of meditation.

Gradually, by carefully practicing each stage in the meditation progression until some real experience of each of level of realization [of emptiness] has arisen in the mind, one's understanding deepens and the conceptualizing tendency loses its tight hold on the mind. Gradually the mind becomes more relaxed and open. Doubts and hesitations lose their strength and begin to disappear. The mind is naturally more calm and clear....It is like waves on an ocean that simply come to rest by themselves. No effort is required to still them. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche 2001: 78

Even if Buddhist literature offers rich examples of the praise of emptiness, its realisation presents the highest aim of spiritual achievement, tantamount to gaining Enlightenment, or Insight; a state beyond conceptualisation. It is therefore difficult to put into words. On this side of enlightenment, it can seem presumptuous, and on the other side or 'shore', one might not feel the need to say anything about it. So I feel tempted to leave it at that, in the context of this thesis. However, I feel encouraged by the master of words, Gary Snyder:

Rather than dismiss language from a spiritual position, speaking vaguely of Unsayable Truths, we must instead turn right back to language...We move mentally as in a great landscape, and return from it with a few bones, nuts, or drupes, which we keep as language....It is a part of our body and woven into the seeing, feeling, touching, and dreaming of the whole mind as much as it comes from some localised "language center". Gary Snyder 2000: 2

The emptiness I aspire to realise, I sense as an absence (of a limited, fixed 'ego'), and also as a positive, luminous, expansive state of being that transcends all opposites (i.e. self and other, body and mind, self and environment); a state of
deep peace that relates to this whole, wild, richly textured universe with understanding and compassion.

So, in what way does my work manifest ‘gestures towards emptiness’?

**gesture** n. 1 a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning. 2 an action performed to convey one’s feelings or intentions: a kind gesture. an action performed for show in the knowledge that it will have no effect. [i.e. an empty gesture!]

towards prep. 1 in the direction of. 2 getting nearer to (a time or goal).

Using my hands and arms during artmaking, I perform repetitive and mindful gestures. The rituals I design with people - drawing into sand, pouring water, dancing around a fire - consist of such gestures. The tapping of these words onto the computer can be perceived in the same way. In a metaphorical sense, everything connected with this research on ritual is a gesture, both ‘in the direction of’, and, hopefully, ‘getting nearer to’ emptiness. There is a movement of acquisition (of materials and knowledge) and a movement of surrender, of letting go of any achievement. Around the time of starting this thesis I found myself on a retreat, making an offering to the Bodhisattva White Tara, consisting of a white, empty vase made of paper-mache; feather-light and ephemeral in character. Incorporated were hand-written words describing aspects connected with this project, like 'Dartington', 'mantras', etc. The vase gave expression to the movement of bringing something into being in time, whilst aware of its ultimately timeless nature, a paradox described beautifully by T.S.Eliot in the Four Quartetts: a Chinese vase moving perpetually in its stillness. I had the urge to dedicate everything connected with the research to the realisation of emptiness, as working towards a prestigious award could easily lead to a goal-oriented, grasping, and narrowing attitude that runs counter to my spiritual values. I have also used ritual occasions throughout the duration of this process to affirm and strengthen my motivation for this undertaking, which is to intensify and mature my explorations of ritual in order to enhance my own skill and understanding and
make a useful contribution to others. The rituals of burning offerings (and working with the ashes in subsequent artwork) are expression of the same dynamic of creation and dissolution. On a more day to day level, I find it helpful and even inspiring to remind myself that my morning rituals, or habits are an integral part of this undertaking. A cup of tea in bed, washing myself, bodywork, preparing my little shrine, some chanting, sitting meditation, breakfast, all seamlessly fit into this context.

The Research Questions

Questioning is part of the ongoing dialogue between theory and practice. Some of the questions and the issues leading to their formulation, have already been mentioned in the context of exploring ritual more generally (in Part 1) and more appear in the discussion of the practical aspects of the research, in Part 3. In Part 4, I attempt to charter the development of the journey. Here is a summary of some of the questions.

General questions:
- What is ritual; what are its marks, functions and styles generally?
- What is the role of ritual in Buddhism; in different schools and modes of spirituality?
- In what way is ritual relevant in the modern West today?
- What are the issues of change and innovation?
- How does my work relate to recent developments in the converging areas of Buddhist ritual, arts, science and ecology?

Relating primarily to working in group settings:
- What are issues relating to the employment of contemporary performance practices in the creation of new Buddhist rituals?
- Which structures best allow and contain individual creative expression?
- Should change happen 'from the bottom up', i.e. evolving from the needs and actions of ritual participants, or should they be implemented by the leaders and ritual experts?
- How can one build 'ritual competence', so that new rituals have aesthetic appeal and gravitas?

Relating to my artwork:
- What are the origins of arts and ritual?
- Where are ritual influences to be seen in the work of other contemporary artists?
- How does my illness (diabetes) effect both the nature of my artmaking and its relative importance within the field of research?
- What are the formal characteristics of ritual evident in my work?
- What are the connections between science, ecology, spirituality and art?
- In what way are the processes of artmaking ritualistic?

Relating to the overlap of personal and communal aspects:
- How are the different types of practical work; i.e. individual artwork and pedagogical work, related?
- Which questions, formal elements and methods are specific to each area and which make the transition from one to the other, and why?
- How did the pre-dominance of visual artwork in the final submission evolve?

**Modes of Research**

Under 'modes' of research I understand ways, methods and tools of enquiry, among which the following have proved most useful in the course of the work:
- journal recordings of my personal memories and dreams, from both before and during the research period.
- studies of the work of other artists and ritualists, both in personal contact and through reading, performance, exhibition.
- reading about theory and practice in relevant fields, particularly Buddhism, arts, anthropology, ecology.
- fieldwork and observation of natural phenomena like weathered rocks, tree bark, sand formations on the beach, clouds, etc
- documentation in digital photo and video of the work processes, both in the studio and the shrine room (with groups). I found them a useful feedback tool, informing the creation of new work.
- making sketches and preparatory studies.
- informal questionnaires for the evaluation of group rituals.
- note-taking and written documentation associated with and arising from critical reading.

**Locations**

I don't have a separate place for doing my artwork, using the kitchen and part of my study/bedroom. This has the advantage of being able to turn towards the work spontaneously and so integrating it into an ongoing practice of mindfulness (which I see as one of the most relevant qualities of ritual). It sets the boundaries for the size of the work and thus channels the possibility for a deepening process. The disadvantages are dust and mess everywhere..... There is a similarity here with the work conditions of Paul Klee, who worked in a tiny kitchen. Related to this spatial limitation he produced, like myself, mainly small scale work and experimented with different media. There are other similarities with his work, which I explore on pages 99/100.

The collective rituals have happened in a variety of settings: shrine rooms in urban and rural Buddhist centres, in the UK and Germany; large performing spaces; in gardens; allotments; in woods; and by rivers and lochs. With few exceptions, my personal work is made in indoor spaces, but I am glad to have the balance of collective outdoor rituals, as it helps to connect with the natural elements, which are an essential aspect of many rituals. I have been contemplating doing more outdoor artwork at various stages of my research, but as I live in the city, this would have meant an awkward disruption of my more mundane rituals of living and working. I think the onset of diabetes probably
effected my preference for indoor work as well, as it took about a couple of years to adjust to it, during which time I had established a way of working.

**My Individual Ritual/Art Work and Collective Ritual**

There are clearly two main arenas for the practical aspects of this research - my studio-based artwork, and the work with groups of people, as a pedagogue, friend, deviser and facilitator of rituals. I am looking at processes that are unique to either of these fields, and also reflect on how they mutually affect each other.

**Methodological aspects of the collective rituals**

The collective rituals I have led, and been part of leading, cover a range of settings: with small, intimate circles of friends; with just one other person, to retreats of around 20 people and to large, hall-filling celebrations. They have lasted from 20 minutes to 7 days, and several months (including preparations). I have led events where the theme of ritual stood in the foreground, and rituals that were only part of other events. One thing they all have in common is my encouragement to participants to express themselves creatively. Sometimes this took the form of just bringing a favorite poem or song to share, or to improvise vocally and instrumentally with chants and mantras. On other occasions, people devised their own, transformational, performance-like rituals, which could also involve the whole group. Sometimes I took a stronger leadership in suggesting certain frameworks - this work is more immediately linked to my own artwork. In order to evaluate the events, I sometimes handed out informal questionnaires.

The areas I was most interested in were:

- How did people experience the process of devising and partaking in the rituals generally?
- Which aspects of the rituals were most important and why?
- How did people experience the freer forms of ritual compared to more traditional ones?
- Was there any noticeable effect of the rituals afterwards?
People on the whole were very willing to co-operate and to become part of my research in this way. Reading peoples' stories was very moving in some cases. The writing-up process may well have enhanced the effect of the ritual.

**My art practice**

**Techniques and materials**

Looking at the whole body of my visual ritual/art work, I can see that it falls into three groups, according to the primary artistic techniques and materials employed.

1. Ashes with pigment on paper, letting running water create natural textures.
2. Handmade paper and paper pulp on board or paper.
3. Wood cellulose, alone and in combination with the other techniques. This work includes sculptural elements.

This categorization largely overlaps with the chronological sequencing in Part 3 of this thesis. Thus, the ash work falls into years one and two; the papermaking into year three, and the work with wood cellulose into year four.

**Sources and Inspirations**

Paul Klee saw nature as his chief source of consolation and described it as the 'the power that maintains'. (Verdi 1991: 18) This is true for me as well, and although I live in a city flat, I use frequent, at times daily visits to our allotment to stay in touch with this 'maintaining power'. In our secluded corner plot, bordering the river Kelvin, I perform movement rituals like Tai chi and Yoga to greet the morning sun, before doing a sitting meditation, next to our vigorously glossy bay tree. Contact with the soil, movement and meditation connect me to this breathing, expanding and contracting matrix of life that I am part of. Ritual in the process of making art serves a similar function. The regular place of arts activities within my rhythm of activities; the repetitive nature of some of the techniques employed; the use of (sacred) symbolism and the serial development of work all fulfil the purpose of placing myself within certain ordered, and at the same time sensuously enriching
systems. The influence of nature is particularly discernible in the detail of texture that makes geological processes, such as weathering, visible on paper. My pieces express an "earthbound" visual aesthetic in their physicality, with watery associations and evocations of the felt sense of vessels, minerals, shells, cells and fossils. They exhibit processes of observation and record, of the collection of "evidence", of residue. Much of the symbolism in my work derives from my experience and practice of (Buddhist) ritual: the mandala, implements such as offering bowls and the primal shapes (square, circle, triangle) that make up the image of a stupa. The influence of ritual can also be recognised in the repetitive nature of most of my work (both as regards the rhythmical structure of an individual piece and the serial development of the body of work as a whole), as well as the abdication of personal expressionism in the service of a certain formal stringency. My work represents a merging of these two influences; nature and ritual, sensuous textures and abstract shapes, outward sight and inner vision.

Developmental processes – series and studies

In his introduction to Paul Klee’s pamphlet 'On modern art', Herbert Read explains that Klee *defends the right of the artist to create his own order of reality. But this transcendental world...can only be created if the artist obeys certain rules, implicit in the natural order.* (Klee 1966:22) Like Klee, I am drawn to following 'certain rules', in order to show what is typical, rather than what is individual. This search for general patterns and principles leads me to a serial approach to artmaking that allows an in-depth exploration of relatively few visual elements. My palette is largely limited to blues and reddish-browns, the colours of sky and earth. The shapes I use are mainly the hemisphere, the circle, and, more rarely, the triangle and square. My work evolves through variations on these themes, playing with parameters such as rhythm, colour, tone, placement, etc in a highly conscious and at the same time organically unfolding way. The element of repetition inherent in this approach serves as an essential means of spiritual/artistic discipline (as has been explored in Part 1). It forms the basis for a creative process that is not
concerned with expressing a temporary, subjective emotional state or with the representation of nature. I don't spend time choosing what to paint; rather the creative process is carried along by necessities arising from the art materials and images themselves. Solutions of the self-imposed formal problems can seem, at the same time, inevitable and mysterious. A.S. Byatt, in her novel 'Whistling Woman' talks about the adequate intelligence of the Master [Vermeer]. Who had set himself problems only he could solve, and had solved them, and made a mystery. (Byatt 2002:419)

My background in rhythmics, which provided a thorough immersion in principles of improvisation in music and movement, no doubt plays an influential role in making art in this systematic, and naturally evolving way, where formation is as important as form. This approach to creative work is by no means unique. Klee noted in his diary: ...to adapt oneself to the contents of the paint box is more important than nature and its study. (in: Geelhaar 1973:49) For him, as for the other musician/painter, Kandinsky, the creation of works of visual art was similar to the creation of music, evolving like natural organisms, according to natural laws (Kandinsky, in Geelhaar 1973: 49). Monet's serial paintings of water lilies and haystacks are variations of light and colour, testifying, as a complete body of work, the artist's desire to penetrate to a deeper knowledge of nature. He felt that the true meaning of a single work was only to be found when viewed in relationship to the other pieces in the series. In a similar way (according to Edward Cowie, in a tutorial January 2006) the strength of my work appears most clearly when taken as a whole.

In my work, the relationships between the individual pieces and the manner of their connectivity bear witness to an artist's life profoundly shaped by the practice of meditation and Buddhist reflection. The pieces communicate a certain simplicity and stillness. Combined with a quality of 'full-bodied-ness' and sensuous richness viewing the work can give (as some people have told me) an experience of satisfaction.
In order to show these overall shaping processes of the work I have chosen to include, as part of the visual documentation in Part 3, a selection of studies and sketches.

The generic forms

My artwork has produced a number of generic forms: Circle, semi-circle, triangle and square. I discuss all of these to some extent as they occur in individual pieces, in Part 3. Here are a few more general reflections on them.

Nature rarely presents 'perfect' geometrical forms, and neither do I. My circles are more like pebbles than marbles and there are no straight edges except in the framing. Nevertheless, there is an instinctive attraction to these shapes (and I am here in the company of many other artists). It can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to control nature, to find order in chaos. (This motivation can, of course, also be attributed to the performance of ritual more generally.) Anthony Gormley and Rachel Whiteread in response to the Arctic landscape in Spitzbergen, produced white rectangular shapes (made of ice and cardboard respectively). Gormley created a conscious 'counterpart to nature' (in: Art from a changing arctic) using rectilinear shapes suggestive of a coffin and a cave-like human dwelling. Whiteread filled the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern (2005) with a landscape of box towers, some more obviously ordered than others. She said that nature is both 'regimented and chaotic' (in : Art from a changing arctic).

Looking at the whole body of the work, I notice the re-occurrence of the shape of the hemisphere as perhaps one of the most striking and enduring features. It can be interpreted as straightness folding. Whereas a straight line communicates a one-directional, intellectual stance, a curve indicates movement and change. In my work it appears as mountain, lake, cup, gate, mask, if one wants to see it in a representational way, or more abstractly, simply as halves of a disc. The shape of the bowl appears more frequently than any other: a symbol for receptivity, and
as such, a part of the shrines of many traditions. *Divinity is signalled by the rounded earthen jar, heavy-laden with water, the fluid of life.....* The making of the pot or image is conceived of as in itself an offering, or as an act of self-consecration to the deity. *Mookerjee, 1985: 20*

Inherent in the shape lies a dynamic tension derived from the implicit possibility of the wholeness of the circle, the resolving of opposites of male and female, earth and sky, etc. I am playing with the opposite direction of the curves and the tension between the two. In some of my pieces, the open form of the semi-disk resolves into the complete, full (or empty) circle. It would not be possible though to depict only wholeness - it seems that the creative process needs to open up the tension between 'the 2' (as opposed to 'the 1') again and again. I find the symbol irresistible; it seems to be one of these archetypes that one finds in all cultures, particularly in religious contexts (the arches of church windows, the cup or bowl). In Tibetan Buddhism we find the term *samputa*, which literally means a hemispherical bowl, or the hollow space between two bowls placed together. Tibetan renderings of *samputa* imply either 'perfect union' or 'mystic embrace'. (Dudjom Rinpoche. 1991). There are reverberations of these curves throughout the body: from the white moon in fingernails to the scull cup; from the arches of the feet to the dome of the diaphragm. In the third phase of my research I found myself creating circles with holes in the middle, which, when split into two, become arcs. Overall, there is a pattern of oscillation, like breathing, between open and closed forms.

**Representation or abstraction?**

Much of my work cannot easily be classified as representational or abstract and I would like to suggest that the differentiation is not as important as it may seem. Abstraction is usually understood as a generalised formula distilled, through an intellectual effort, from the particularities of a phenomenon. But in art, abstraction can have a different meaning. According to Bridget Riley, Paul Klee was the first artist to point out that *abstraction is not an end, but a beginning. Every painter starts with the elements - lines, colours, forms - which are essentially abstract in relation to the pictorial*
experience that can be created with them. A colour in painting is no longer the colour of something but a hue and a tone contrasting with other hues and tones or related in shades and gradations. (Riley 2002:15) When I look closely at a painting by Van Gogh I see an abstract dance of colour and shape that seems similar to my own pictorial language, and only when a more distant perspective coalesces the marks into 'sunflower' or 'wheat field' the representational aspect of the work seems to suggest a major difference. When the 20th century saw the emergence of 'Abstract Art', it was mainly the 'abstractness of picturemaking' (Riley 2002:16) that rose to the surface.

Ritual in the process of artmaking

I will describe this more fully in Part 3, but it is worth mentioning here briefly the ritual aspects of making art. I bring consciousness to processes that many artists will be familiar with, whether or not they deliberately set out to explore ritual. In particular, repetition is a hallmark of much artmaking, as in the rhythmical applying of brush strokes, the chiseling of wood or marble, etc. Many artists also value the ritualistic nature of 'preparing the canvas', of setting the ground. In my work, these repetitive 'observances' are to be found in the rhythmic quality of papermaking; the moving of water and paper in the ashwork; the creation of hundreds of small discs and bowls: kneading, rolling out, casting, drying, sanding, staining and sanding. In some of the work, these almost mechanical operations lead to other more deliberately creative and searching activities. I find that the way I treat the more routine parts of the process have a bearing on the overall quality of the artwork. Like any ritual of a repetitive kind, there are two ways it can go: I can get lulled into a semi-conscious state, or I can enhance my state of mind into a calm lucidity. Becoming aware of the ritual character of the routine activity becomes like a trigger to apply mindfulness. As a result, I will work with the formal and thematic questions inherent in the work at hand in a more energetic, grounded and lucid way.

Some of the pieces show the traces of the ritual activity in a direct and non-adulterated way: the blood sugar drawings and the series 'in the rhythm of breathing' and 'life spirals'. They are records of actual ceremonial happenings
and perhaps speak to the viewer with a certain immediacy that almost makes him/her a partaker in the ritual.

PART 3: THE BODY OF WORK

Part 3 contains descriptions of my practical work, split into 4 sections, according to the 4 years of the research period. Because of the volume of the work produced, it would take up too much space to list and describe every piece individually. In some cases, I discuss artwork and ritual events in groupings according to a particular theme that is relevant for this discussion.

Year One

*I don't think there is any point in reproducing the sacred rituals of the past which are not very likely to bring us towards the invisible. The only thing which may help us is an awareness of the present. If the present moment is welcomed in a particularly intense manner, and if conditions are favorable....., the elusive spark of life can appear within the right sound, the right gesture, the right look, the right exchange. So, in a thousand very unexpected forms, the invisible may appear. The quest for the sacred is thus a search.* Peter Brook 1995: 71f

'Exploring ritual' retreat, January 2001

This event formed part of my 'Scotland Year of the Artist' residency within the Buddhist community in Scotland. During a week-long residential retreat at Dhanakosa (a Buddhist retreat centre in the Trossachs), I devised rituals that employed contemporary performance art practices to deepen people's connections with the endangered natural world. Like the land artist Andy Goldsworthy, who took photos of people throwing ashes into the air, I have been fascinated for a long time by the way people's actions can show chaotic patterning in nature. In movement workshops I would give instructions to a group, such as: choose a place to stand in the room, so that overall it looks like the natural sprinkling of trees on a hillside. One by one, change your position, in relation to others and the group. Play with the rhythm of stillness and movement, in response to the whole happening. Such
improvisational structures ask for a high degree of awareness of oneself, the whole group and the possibilities of rhythmical ordering in space and time. Partaking in such a process one feels empowered as an individual (free to make many choices), whilst attuning oneself to and letting go into the dynamics of a larger whole. The experience of standing, quietly, waiting for the intuitive impulse for movement to arise, has the ‘rightness’ of a natural process, of a leaf falling at just that point in time. It is the embodiment of the philosophical view that human beings can experience both individual self-consciousness and a sense of participation in a greater social and cosmic whole. Compassionate ecological action can arise out of this ‘supreme identify’, as Ken Wilber puts it. *The more you contact the Higher Self, the more you worry about the world, as a component of your very Self, the Self of each and all.* (Wilber 2001: 290)

To prepare for the rituals, I led some movement workshops and initiated discussions on the nature of ritual. As in Jerzy Grotowsky’s ‘poor theatre’, there were no spectators; we were like modern shamans, conjuring elemental powers for personal and ecological change. People also felt excited about being part of an artistic/spiritual experiment. Helped by the overall retreat programme of meditation and living/working together, there was a sense of ‘letting go of the ego’, into a bigger perspective that included the group, the environment, and an aesthetic appreciation of the rituals (see participants’ comments). The rituals happened outside, during a particularly cold spell, in the midst of ice and snow.

**Instructions**

**RITUAL I**

Choose a freestanding tree and stand in a circle around it.
Develop a sense of loving connection with the group and the tree. Let these feelings of care channel into a part of your body, say your right elbow, or your belly.
Move towards the tree, touching it with that part of the body, imbuing it with loving kindness.
Be aware of your relationship with the others, as you start to walk at the same time. Notice people’s different speed of walking toward the tree and the kind of sculpture you create collectively.
Hold the position in stillness, for a few breaths, till someone starts moving away from the tree.
Move back into the circle to a position slightly further in clockwise direction. Repeat this process for as many times as feels right, each time choosing a different part of the body.
RITUAL 2

This ritual happens at the shore of a loch, or a lake, or the sea (which are liminal places, twilight zones between two worlds). It involves throwing things: depending on the conditions, it could be pebbles or shells into water, skimming pieces of ice onto a frozen surface, or stones onto a frozen surface covered with snow.

Collect a pile of stones (or other objects) and stand next to it, close to the shore, facing the loch. The stones are at the side of your throwing arm. Any number of people can participate - be aware of the spacing between you, it could be either even or uneven.

Stand in a neutral position and become aware of yourself, the others, the surface in front of you. A sense of ‘being in the moment’.

When the time feels right, pick up a stone and throw it onto the surface. Immediately come back to neutral. Everyone observes the movement, sound and visual pattern caused by the action.

At any time, after stillness has been reached, another throw can happen. Any number of people can act simultaneously, so several stones can be thrown more or less at the same time, creating different ‘chords’ of movement and sound.

Allow yourself to relax into the process, so the decision whether you throw or stand still arises organically and is subliminally informed by an aesthetic awareness of the whole happening. Be precise and stand very still, as long as there is still some movement on the surface of the loch.

When all stones have been thrown, the ritual comes to a close.

RITUAL 3

Plate 3a
Plate 3b
Plate 3c
One of the participants walked a spiral onto the frost covered ground (plate 3a) and created a sculpture of ice slabs in the middle. She devised this ritual, where one after the other, we carried a nightlight into the centre and placed it onto the ice. (plate 3c) The light symbolized our spiritual aspirations. The spiral stayed visible on the grass for several months, as participants of other retreats kept walking it, and traces of other, straight-line walking meditations combined with its pattern (plate 3b).

RITUAL 4

The scene of this ritual was a snow covered old orchard. I wanted to explore the way paths form organically within a landscape.
Choose your path through the snow, circling stationary objects, i.e. either trees or standing people. When you come across the trace of another path, follow that for a while, thus re-enforcing it. If you want to stand, choose a spot already established.

Some comments from participants:

- ...establishing a network of connected nodes, like neurons.
- ... by work paths and little-known byways, we map out our lives..
- ...awareness of vision, sound and texture were heightened and a sense of beauty and stillness awakened. ...softened the rather bleak mental states and feelings of isolation I came with.

The event is documented through video (CD 2:32) and three artist's books, called ritual 1, 2, and 3 respectively (part of degree show).
Experimental ritual group, June - October 2001

I met with 5 other Buddhists in Glasgow for 6 days over a period of 5 months. Our aims were to practice ritual together in experimental ways, bringing in contemporary performance practice, both for our own benefit and to develop new ideas for Buddhist rituals at festivals. We were open to both 'perform' for others to watch, as well as exploring participatory structures. The members of the group were not trained in performance skills, but keen to learn. I had introduced improvisational movement and music techniques on workshops in the context of retreats before, but, like Richard Schechner, I was frustrated with workshops because it takes too long to learn the training technique. In performance work, you carry it through to some kind of rhythmic conclusion, which is the public performance. (in Kaye 1996: 158) On the 'exploring ritual' retreat described in the previous section, the 'rhythmic conclusions' were provided by the daily rituals, as well as the watching of the film material at the end of the retreat. I was curious to see whether I could do something similarly satisfying in an urban situation, working over a longer period of time. Another question that interested me was the relationship between the group members' personal ongoing Buddhist practice and the experimental work itself. They were amateur performance artists, but expert meditators and ritualists. If I introduced just a few training exercises of movement and speech and evolved some simply structured actions, would people be confident to 'be themselves' and relax into the mood of ritual, without the embarrassment often felt by amateurs in performance situations? I did also consider devising some ritual happenings outside the conventional shrine room of the Buddhist centre, in order to create a participatory 'puja play'. The response of most people in the group was that they were happy to 'perform' in a Buddhist setting, but not in a more public one.

Rather than give a complete account of the group meetings, I will focus on just one day (the fourth in the series) as an example of the kind of themes and structures I employed.
- Reporting-in about the effects of the previous meetings on our Buddhist practice at home. Some people have performed their own ritual gestures in front of their shrine, others have been more aware of the ritual aspect of daily actions. One woman commented on how she had to make an effort to avoid even her freshly invented ritual gestures from becoming habitual. Generally, people noted that they were more spiritually aware.

- Guided meditation on compassion for oneself, all other beings and the earth.

- Free writing, leading to devotional verses that are expression of a dedication to caring for the earth. The sentences people found were: *Embedded in the web, I dedicate myself to the beauty of life. A smile that never runs out of heart. Offerings to the precious guru. We are all fragments of stars. I offer myself for the benefit of the world.*

- Finding gestures that express those words in movement.

- A ritual where we take turns to perform our own little dedication ceremony in front of a shrine.

- Sharing of the experience. The ritual seems to touch everyone very deeply. (For me, the authenticity of expressing deep concerns, in my own language, in my own gestures, and being witnessed by others, feels extremely satisfying.)

- After lunch we collectively free-associate words connected with the earth, and find 12 words each.

- A movement improvisation, using the elements of walking, standing, gesture and the words within a precise framework of correlation (too complex to describe in detail here)

The group experiences the improvisation as satisfying; the walking movement patterns show connectedness, flow and randomness, whilst the gestures communicate a sense of individual devotion. The words create a tapestry of earth imagery.

**Evaluation:**

The group members benefited personally from the ritual experiments, reporting an enhanced understanding of the connections between the arts, ritual, Buddhism and ecology. Some of the ideas developed in the group led to rituals
in larger, more public contexts (i.e. the ‘Sangha Mandala’ retreat described in the following section). My initial questions around professionalism and the place for public ritual performances remained largely unresolved, partly because the group did not last long enough. It discontinued partly for practical reasons; 2 people had other commitments. (Some of the members became part of similar projects later on, including the ritual described next.) However, it was gradually becoming clearer to me that the performance-oriented rituals I was exploring, were heavily dependant on me as the teacher/facilitator, and as such not easily repeatable, nor likely to become part of a general ‘ritual culture’.

‘Sangha Mandala’ ritual, November 01

A mandala is a matrix or a model of a perfected universe, the nurturing environment of a perfected self in ecstatic interconnection with perfected others. Thurnann 1998:127

As part of a weekend Sangha festival at Dhanakosa with about 60 people, a small group of four, including myself, performed a participatory ritual around the figure of a mandala. I described the mandala both as sacred space, as a symbol of the spiritual community, and as symbol of an inner path of self-transformation. In the ritual, everyone present formed an outer circle around the circular shape marked on the floor with a red cloth. The 4 ritualists, dressed in white, entered the mandala on behalf of everyone present. They circumambulated the circle in slow, mindful walking and performed ritual gestures at the four cardinal points, i.e. North; South; East and West. The large group was invited to support the ritual by chanting the mantra ‘Om’.

This relatively short ritual, forming part of a series of celebratory activities was generally received well. It is interesting to note that the symbol of the mandala re-appeared in my artwork in year four. The event was not documented in film or photo because I was not confident that it might not disturb the atmosphere. I will write more fully about the issues around ritual space and use of the camera in part 4.
‘The Dance of the Elements’, October 2001

This was the 3rd in a series of retreats at Dhanakosa with the same theme and team (I co-led with my partner Larry Butler, and an order member called Amoghavira). I often use the elements earth, water, fire, air and space as framework on retreats, as they are a well known framework both in Western culture (though usually listed in a different order, and without the element space) and in Buddhism. They also offer themselves as subjects of eco-ritual exploration, which have the aim to re-awaken a sense of our own nature as nature (to quote again the Buddhist writer Wes Nisker). The 5 elements are represented in two widely known Buddhist symbols; the stupa and the mandala of the 5 Buddhas. In the stupa (a symbol we used on the previous retreats), the elements are ordered vertically, showing increasingly refined levels of energy, resting on the cube shape of the earth at the bottom. (I created a 3-dimensional stupa at the end of year 4). In the mandala (which we chose as the framework for this retreat), the elements are depicted on a horizontal plane, associated with one of the five Buddhas each. The mandala aims to be a complete representation of one’s spiritual world, encompassing 5 poisons, 5 colours, 5 wisdoms, etc. The 5 elements in this context, offer a gateway to accessing qualities and attitudes that are helpful in the context of meditation and the leading of a spiritual life generally. Earth, for example, can stand for groundedness and confidence, water for fluidity of approach, fire for enthusiasm, air for lightness of touch, space for expansiveness, to name just a few possible connections. (Tenzin Wangyal 2002)

The retreat structure
The retreat brought together various forms of expression: chi kung, yoga, authentic movement (see explanation p102), writing, meditation and ritual. Each day was devoted to the exploration of one of the elements, with yoga and chi kung providing more traditional approaches, while the movement improvisation and writing allowed people to give expression to their felt connection with the elements in creative and personal ways. In the afternoons we had talks where
people were introduced to the *Five Buddha Mandala* - each of the Buddhas being associated with one of the elements. All these threads came together in the evening *pujas*, which were preceded with an opportunity for checking-in about one's personal experience of the retreat in small groups. There were also 3 meditation periods every day.

**The rituals**
The daily evening rituals, performed around a central *mandala* shrine, contained a mixture of more (FWBO) traditional and experimental structures. They followed a simple pattern: short meditation; shared reading of traditional *puja* verses describing and celebrating the qualities of the Buddha of the day; chanting the 'Refuges and Precepts'; chanting the Buddha's mantra, during which offerings were made, then finishing with another traditional text. The offering part was the most innovative ingredient, consisting of movements people had developed or which evolved spontaneously, whilst moving around the *mandala*. Material offerings were also presented in the form of incense, candles, flowers, stones, etc..

The *puja* varied from the standard way of practice in the FWBO (see 'ritual in the FWBO') in the following ways:

1. The puja verses were not recited in call and response, but read by volunteering individuals sharing out the verses. This avoids the monotony of the call and response format and makes full attentiveness easier.
2. A simple instrument, an Appalachian dulcimer, accompanied the verses. (Usually musical instruments are not used.)
3. Making movement offerings. Usually people's movement during pujas is limited to bowing to the shrine while offering incense. Broadening out the scope of movement quite radically to allow for personal expression, presents a major departing from tradition.

**Some participants' impressions:**
I asked some of the participants to write about the retreat, with an emphasis on the ritual aspect. I told them that any observations would be useful, including benefits and difficulties. My intention was to use their comments as a starting point for devising a more systematic questionnaire for future ritual events. I will give their comments a relatively large amount of space here, as I find them evocative of the retreat. No other forms of documentation exist for this event because at this stage of the research, I was unsure about the use of a camera.

As some of the comments show, on this retreat there was an issue around self-consciousness anyway, even without the intrusion of the camera.

-..... My strongest memories and images almost entirely made up of those during rituals in the shrine room. People were like a fire, performing their personal rituals every night; some were big bold orange flames, dancing and prostrating across the floor; others more modest in their expression, dancing quietly, at the edges. Having had practically no experience of ritual before I came I can make no comparisons, but saw the form as fluid, without rigidity. Room for unique expression in a safe, shared, focal frame. It remarkably wove everyone together whilst letting each person stand alone. There was room for people’s sadness, fear, happiness, joy, and hilarity. It challenged me deeply- I struggled to be sincere, as I felt like a performer. I also recognised the opportunity to let go of old inhibitions and “act” truthfully. I questioned people’s authenticity - were they too feeling like performers? How valuable is it? It is a platform on which to explore inner beliefs and meanings. It gives the performer in us all permission to come out and see what is beyond the curtain. It is a useful release whilst working with inner experiences of dance and movement - somewhere to “tie up” all the loose ends. As a process of devotion in Buddhism I’m not so sure I saw its value.

This participant, a woman in her forties, clearly valued the experience from the point of view of individual, expressive processing, whilst being unclear about the devotional aspect. The issue of authenticity was a major area for learning.

-.....My ritual must come from me (like in Authentic Movement) - if it comes from outside, it feels imposed, or an empty copy. A very delicate and sensitive tuning is necessary for a feeling to grow. For that to happen, I must first feel relaxed. Therefore it cannot take place if I feel self-conscious. In many ways the retreat helped me to understand my own self-consciousness. I found myself crying out for my own undivided attention, to notice myself and what I needed, instead of what I felt others expected. For me there was some confusion and tension about the relationship between the personal and the collective, which was never quite resolved, but I was definitely finding a place within a collective ritual that was a safe and good place for me to express something of my own. It was like a collective breathing - quiet, with each other and with something else. Devising our own rituals, rather than the traditional puja, seemed to be more delicate, come more from a sense of lightness and play which felt more true to me, and from where big feelings of connectedness can grow. I trust where these feelings are coming from. There was an abundant use of colour and light, childlike things like shiny foil stars, elephants and horses, stones and paper flowers appearing round the mandala; it was delightful and surprising, as well as powerful and magical and gave me an understanding of the Buddha mandala which I never got from reading.

The ritual affected my retreat by keeping me very buoyant, alive and energised. There was a rich abundance, like an infinite nourishment that never became thin or scarce which made me feel very safe. Strong energies that seemed to move something in me on a very deep level, causing change. Whenever a difficulty came up for me on the retreat, the answer seemed to be hanging around and present itself in the next activity, without it even necessarily having to be voiced. After the retreat the ritual continued to affect me in that I felt very well and warm inside. It seemed to have confirmed my belief in beauty and energy, the magic of life, and lessened my self-doubt.
For this woman, a mature art student, authenticity and individuality were areas of struggle and growth, which she welcomed within the overall supportive and spiritually enriching context.

- Earth - I never knew earth was so alive till I sprinkled those handfuls into the offering bowl last night. Cool and moist and fragrant and dark and really alive. The Vairocana puja got quite weird - 'there's a lot of space' said Ramadevi 'just use it' - I had a strong urge to be a lion again - actually I wanted to go around sniffing people - I quickly squashed that impulse - I just took a leisurely pad up to the shrine - felt a good connection there. I got a strong sense of Padmasambhava at the end of the closing ritual - though the ritual itself I found quite alienating - too much showing off and giggling going on - I do have a strong sense of what is and isn't appropriate during a ritual - hooting and braying I find really out of order.'

This man also raises issues around expressiveness and authenticity, as well as appropriateness.

Psycho-spiritual aspects

This section can be read as a response to some of the issues raised by the participants. It feeds into points of the enquiry laid out in 'a mapping of ritual'. They represent a 'fleshing out' of some psycho/spiritual aspects in the light of the practical retreat experience.

Self-consciousness: As we have seen, ritual theorists have different views on the subject of self-consciousness, or the embarrassment from knowing that one was observed (Oxford Dict.). One can also understand self-consciousness as 'self-awareness'. Perhaps self-consciousness includes the 'embarrassment resulting from observing oneself'. Some say it spoils the ritual; others say that self-forgetting and self-consciousness are in dialogue with each other. Using Authentic Movement (AM) on this retreat seemed to influence people in this respect. To give a very brief description of AM: it is a kind of movement ritual, characterised by working from inner impulses, with closed eyes and with another person as witness. It includes writing and verbal exchange at the end. The aim is to allow the individual to move 'authentically' from deeper layers of their body-mind. We used it on this retreat as a preparation for ritual expression in the context of puja. It was very interesting to observe that within the AM sessions, people relaxed into the process, aided by the function of the 'witness', a person observing with non-judgemental attention, thus modelling an ideal, positive inner
witness. During the shrine-room rituals however, when people were encouraged to bring in their movements with eyes open and in front of everyone, it seemed that many people experienced some degree of self-consciousness. If everyone performs the same, predictable action, as in conventional ritual, there is little room for this kind of awkwardness. (But then we have to deal with the habituation factor explored in the chapter on 'invariance'. It is harder to resist the pull to half-automatic repetition of meaningless words. One can easily drift into a state of sub-individual drowsiness.) Several questions arise for me here: Can the experience of self-consciousness be seen as a healthy sign of honest inquiry, of the move from the known into the unknown? And in that way, does a more risky (in terms of group acceptance), individualised ritual participation perhaps constitute a more truly Buddhist practice (which places great value on individual responsibility)? The concept of liminality may be of interest in this context, a term first used by van Gennep (1992:65), as the transitional state of the 'rite of passage'. It describes a state of being between two stages of social/spiritual identity, of being neither here nor there, an uneasy sense of suspense, being 'in limbo', or 'bardo'. A retreat situation can be seen as such a rite of passage, including its liminal aspect. Coming on retreat a person looks for changes s(he) both desires and fears.

Standing alone. Often, a retreat involves periods of silence that deepen and intensify the inner experience of oneself, sometimes leading to uncomfortable feelings of aloneness. Within a traditional puja as part of the retreat programme, which includes straightforward chanting and reciting texts with others, some people may welcome some relief from the burden of self-inquiry. They don't look for more intensity through creative expression. For others, however, participation in such devotional group activity can seem contradictory to the spirit of standing alone in the face of the not-knowable. For example, some modern Buddhist teachers, such as Christopher Titmuss and Stephen Batchelor, to my knowledge use a minimum of ritual on their retreats. This attitude might be influenced by the rules laid down in the Pali Canon (the earliest records of Buddhist teachings),
some of which refer to the avoidance of dance, music and similar forms of sensuous expression. There is a price to pay for this weeding out of ritual elements - a lack of opportunity to engage the imaginative faculty with its inspiring and integrating effects. So it seems that offering opportunities for individual artistic expression, within the context of a communal ritual, would solve the problem and offer many advantages, namely:

a) there is no hiding in a group, one is thrown back onto oneself and the imperative for self-awareness.

b) the richness of colour, sound, movement and the evocation of archetypal symbols provide deep and lasting nourishment.

c) deep transformations are facilitated through the use of personally meaningful symbols.

Transcending the ego. There is an argument in Buddhist circles (similar to the discussion of sensuousness mentioned above), that bringing individual artistic expression into the puja encourages the ego, which may rather enjoy an opportunity for showing off and performing. The true purpose of puja however, according to Sangharakshita, is to transcend the ego.

*It is a training in egolessness and paves the way for the arising of the bodhicitta. ...Bodhicitta literally means ‘the thought or will to Enlightenment’, but the main point to grasp is that it is not someone’s individual will in the narrow sense. You do, of course, have to start off with an individual spiritual effort, but the bodhicitta is something which as it were supervenes upon that individual spiritual effort when it reaches a very high degree of purity, refinement, positivity, and openness. It is as if the stream or tendency making for enlightenment takes you over. ....You surrender yourself to it, open yourself to it, become a channel for it.* Sangharakshita 1995:106f

Sangharakshita here emphasises the ego-transcending and spiritually transforming function of shared ritual. Similarly, Dissanayake, from an anthropological perspective, states that ritualised experiences of *communitas* allow participants to feel themselves joined in a state of oneness with each other, with powers greater than themselves, or with both - a sort of merging and self-transcendence. This experience was expressed beautifully by one of the retreat participants: *It was like a collective*
breathing - quiet, with each other and with something else. This state is very attractive and relatively rare. It comes into being, in my experience, when an atmosphere of heightened awareness is created through shared activity that demand a certain degree of concentration and sensitivity; playing music together, listening to live music, dance improvisation, meditation, empathetic listening to others. It is characterised by a high degree of receptivity towards one's own inner experience and the 'vibes' in the group. This is different from an experience of being swept along with a crowd, as during a football match. I am treading cautiously here; but perhaps the first could be called supra-individual, the latter can be called sub-individual. These distinctions are made by Wilber and others who are concerned with a New Age tendency to spiritualise any 'merging' experience.

On our retreat pujas, we didn't make it easy for people to arrive at a merging experience. Instead we asked them to be highly aware of themselves; to get in touch with their own symbols for change, and express them in movement. If this took some people to the edge of comfort, it may have been a place where individual growth took place, a letting go of pride, overcoming the fear of judgement. This could be seen as a kind of training, which would eventually result in a deeper level of self-surrender in the context of ritual. As a Zen saying goes: 'The bigger the lump of clay, the bigger the Buddha.'

**puja -ceilidhs**

I coined this term 'puja-ceilidh' for a type of collaborative ritual that I started to use on many retreats, even if the overall theme was not about ritual. A 'ceilidh', in Scotland and Ireland, is a gathering where people dance, sing, and share poetry and stories. I wanted to make a link between a more spiritual and a more secular type of ritual to combine the best of both worlds; a relaxed and non-hierarchical sharing of culture, within a context that suggested receptivity to a certain depth of meaning. I ask people in a letter, before the retreat, to bring poems, stories and music (as well as musical instruments) relevant to the particular theme (i.e.
impermanence). In year one, I would often try to integrate Buddhist readings and other traditional puja elements with people’s own contributions. I spent time rehearsing with a few musicians and thinking carefully about the order of readings; I felt I was staging a performance every night. During subsequent years, I relaxed the degree of personal control and leadership. The event would still happen in the shrine-room, but became more like a traditional ceilidh and less than a puja. I will explore this development more fully in Part 4.

‘confession holders’ (200x 75 cm) paper and pine needles on Hessian

On retreats, I frequently devise ritual structures that allow people to make creative contributions to a collective piece of visual art. This effectively fulfils some requirements of ritual; it creates community with an emphasis on shared meaning. It requires individual reflection and participation; it uses symbolic action for transformational processes; it provides a frame that holds an aspect of reality; and it uses repetition (doing it every evening, and one person after the other). The idea behind this confession ritual is as follows: rather than burning a confession made during a puja immediately (which is the usual custom), one allows it to stay in the presence of the shrine-room for the duration of the retreat, thus allowing a more gradual process of spiritual transformation. Perhaps one
will come to acknowledge one's pains and shortcomings more fully because of its aesthetically pleasing appearance; so rather than pushing one's shadow away, one is encouraged to embrace it, which is psychologically and spiritually a more potent way of working with oneself. People write the confession on a piece of paper, roll it up and slide it behind one of the pine needles (plates 5a and b). I made such a 'confession holder' (plate 5c) for my personal shrine at home as well, but, interestingly, didn't really use it as a ritual tool. Just its presence as a visual art object was enough to fulfil a need for symbolic representation of transformation.

'fairy stone'

Plate 5c

Plate 6
In August 2001 I went on a three-week solitary retreat on the Isle of Mull. In the garden of the old, primitive shepherd’s longhouse I stayed in, I found a rock with a perfectly round, bowl-shaped indentation. I was told that this was a ‘fairy stone’; the farmers of old would pour some milk from each milking into the hollow as an offering to the milk fairy. With my own offering, of dandelion heads, I wanted to make a link with the mythological past of the place, and perform an artistic gesture (inspired by Goldsworthy and other land artists), related to this research.

During a walk I collect small yellow daisies and take them home to let the heads float in the granite milk fairy bowl. I take a photo. Then I add a few drops of organic soya milk and take another photo, with the carton in view. I do it with as much or little feeling as the shepherds and milkmaids of old. How important are feelings in a ritual? The next day I discover the breezy East wind has driven most of the flower heads over the brink. I clear them all away. When I arrived I actually had tried to scrape the accumulated debris from the bottom, to make it look nice and clear and ready for my offerings and killed a worm that lived in this tiny ecosystem. I feel bad about that. Diary extract 15.8.01

I didn’t pursue this type of outdoor work, mainly for practical reasons, as outlined before. Both the symbol of the bowl and the circle became significant elements of my artwork in years 3 and 4 (when I had quite forgotten about the fairy stone...).

’skin’ (32 x 21 cm, mixed media)
selected studies:

Plate 7a  
Plate 7b  
Plate 7c  

Plate 7d  
Plate 7e

This is another precursor of work that was developed more fully at a later stage. The work of an artist friend, Julie Brook, inspired me to experiment with textures achieved by letting water run through a layer of ashes on paper. I made a batch of strongly textured, leather-coloured handmade paper (long before learning how to make paper ‘properly’) and used it as a surface for the ashes. To further increase the rich sense of texture (like bark, or skin), I pinned the paper onto rough Hessian material. Using pine needles, in this way, I evoked an association with tribal art.
The ritual of confession is often associated with a dour, 'sack and ashes', self-punishing attitude, and I wanted to allude to that in the use of grey muted colours, ashes and Hessian. The wound-like openings surrounding the central
image, and the ‘bleeding’ of the ashes into the writing suggest the presence of suffering; both the effects of any wrongdoing and the ‘ego’ humiliation caused by admitting it. The central square looks like a segment of grey muddy ground, somewhere at the border between earth and water. I wanted to make a connection between ecology and confession, alluding to the exploitation of the earth’s natural resources and destruction of habitats.

You park your car in a paved expanse of a parking lot and move towards the entrance of a shopping mall. Just before going in, you glance down but do not really notice a small patch of brown earth, some exposed dirt, on the edge of an enclosed strip of landscaping. This small opening, framed like the remnant of an unhealed wound, is the only visible presence of the underlying reality of the entire fabricated structure that you will momentarily become immersed in. It is the original essence of the site, glimpsed like a momentary flash of deeper awareness that occasionally punctuates our day-to-day mind. Although now paved over, excluded, put out of sight, and only allowed to exist in the rigid landscaping that makes it conform to our own terms, it is the ground of being that supports the whole artifice. The dirt under the shops in Main Street is our collective unconscious. Bill Viola, exhibition catalogue ‘lie of the land’

The initial stage of this piece looked quite different (plate 8a); it included the work ‘skin’, discussed above, and the shape of the bowl, thus containing some elements that emerged again at later stages. In its rawhide roughness, ‘Confession’ has echoes of the work of Tapies, whose work I admire. Within the overall body of my work, it stands out as an exception; the development of my own artistic language took a slightly different development.

**Earth ritual retreat**
I have already outlined the type of collective ritual that gathers individual contributions in one piece, such as 'confession holder'. Another unifying means that I often employ is to offer a theme that people interpret in their own way. The headdress made of natural materials shown here is an example of that approach. Bodily adornment is an ancient practice that shows the ritual/art connection particularly clearly. Preparing oneself for a ritual in that way can draw attention to the fact that a ritual can be transformational. Just as one looks different, one can actually be different.

Tara Mantra

This is the manuscript of a musical composition I wrote for rituals on retreats. Regrettably it would be beyond the scope of this enquiry to analyse the use of music in ritual. All I want to say here is, that the piece expresses, in musical terms, what many of the projects in this research are about. The traditional mantra forms the background, overlaid by a devotional song to Tara. The words are taken from a traditional text that relates perfectly to the concerns of 'green
Buddhism'. Tara is compared with all the elements, a foundation like the earth, cooling like water, ripening like fire, spreading like the wind, pervading like space. The composition is on the audio track of the included DVD (1:45).

Year Two

Art is a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world. Gary Snyder, in: Urthona, Art and Buddhism, issue 16

Intricacy is that which is given from the beginning, the birthright, and in intricacy is the hardness of complexity that ensures against the failure of all life. ...Anything can happen; any pattern of speckles may appear in a world ceaselessly bawling with newness. Anne Dillard, in: Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek

Ashes and Blessings: a series of work

'Landcape 1', 'Landcape 2'. 'A Blessing', 'Music for drums and rain stick', all 39x29, ashes and pigment on paper

Plate 11, landscape 1

Plate 12, landscape 2

Plate 13, A Blessing
related pieces and selected studies:

Plate 15a
Plate 15b
Plate 15c
Plate 15d
Plate 15e
Plate 15f
I will treat these four pieces collectively as they are strongly linked through the same kind of technique. They form part of a series of works I call ashes and blessings and which I had planned to exhibit at the Glasgow Museum of Religion, St. Mungo. The show was going to include workshops on ritual and ecology, where people would burn confessions and witness the ashes used in artwork. (Although there was considerable interest from the curator, for logistical reasons the project did not actually happen.) In these pieces, I use ashes that are residues of ritual fires (from confession rituals on retreats), in combination with water and pigment on paper, creating a ‘texture of impermanence’, and suggestive of the processes of ‘weathering’. The wrinkles and rivulets on paper seem like skin on an ageing person’s hand; tree bark; the scree patterns on a mountainside, or the traces left by receding water on a beach. I wanted the paintings to create an ambience of simplicity and light, suggesting the ‘blessings’ of purification after confession. (With hindsight, I see that I had to move on to other media to achieve that sense of lightness, as the nature of ashes as a medium is heavy and opaque.)

The process of making the work is ritualistic, not just in the use of ashes that are residues of transformational fires, but in extensive use of the water element. I let water run on the paper, rhythmically turning and tilting it, like the passing of the
tides and seasons. In a way, I let the painting paint itself, although I also make many choices of material, colour and form. There is an interplay of preconceived ideas (evolved and tested in studies) and the reality of how the medium behaves on paper. Often I experience a sense of awe and admiration for the beauty of the natural textures emerging, as well as an apprehension of their 'chaotic' nature. In the experiencing and balancing of the tension between control and surrender, the making of the work seems to be an extension of the basic human drama: being conscious amidst phenomena that run their inevitable course towards dissolution. As the work unfolds, the underlying whiteness of the paper is revealed, symbolising a spiritually pure dimension of being, that is always present and only temporarily obscured.

Like many artists (for example, Susan Derges and Richard Long) I am drawn to working with the complex, chaotic patterns found in nature. Derges has done this in seemingly scientific, experimental ways, sending sound waves through photographic paper, using strobe light, tanks of frog spawn, etc. (Kemp 1999). But the most essential feature of this approach seems to be letting the work make itself, and to arrest the process at the point of dynamic equilibrium,.... the edge of chaos, where physical processes display the greatest complexity and are extremely sensitive to small changes.(Bright,2000) I want to show nature as a self-organizing system, delicately poised between order and chaos. It is this poise which stimulates the emergence of new forms of order, like a perfectly balanced, elegant ritual, seemingly eternal, but part of the consistent flow of the change that is life. Whereas music for drums and rain stick shows a border-less randomness (except the picture frame), the other three images display variations on the shape of the semi-circle, a symbol that repeats itself throughout the entire body of my work.
'Left empty' (27x27cm, ashes and pigment on paper)

plate 16

studies:

Plate 16a  Plate 16b  Plate 16c
'Left Empty' is one of my favourite pieces; its appeal lies in an intriguing combination of chaos and order. Under the influence of water, sprayed onto the painted matter, the ashes have arranged themselves in a completely haphazard way. It looks very much like nature, as if no human hand was involved in the making of it, which is true in a way. I hardly touch the surface of these ash pieces with any mark making tool, allowing natural laws, in this case the law of gravity to exert its influence. The empty central circle has the appeal of a 'fairy ring', a circle of mushrooms in the midst of the pleasing medley of the natural environment, as Gombrich describes it. (1979:5), or of a perfectly round stone amidst all the irregular ones on a beach. People have always put special meaning onto natural objects or phenomena that stand out through their
symmetry, making them into shrines and integrating them into rituals. It is not that circles, per se, are rare in nature - sun and moon are ever-present examples. Gombrich explains that order in nature comes about where the laws of physics can operate in isolated systems without mutual disturbance. So a stone thrown into a still pond will radiate ripples, unless there is a current or a breeze. Our attention is alerted by the fairy ring because it is the unexpected presence of order in an environment of countless interacting forces.

Ritual on FWBO day, April 03

This event presented an opportunity to experiment with ritual innovation in a large, institutional setting (CD 8:29). FWBO day is held every year for anyone in contact with this Buddhist movement, and in 2003 it took place in York Hall, London. Around 400 people attended a programme of talks and celebrations. A celebratory puja formed a central part of the day, which was, for the first time, experimental in character (i.e. not a traditional 7 fold puja, recited line by line in call and response.) This year an adventurous order member, Maitreyabandhu conceived the idea of something different; he invited 10 musicians in the movement to compose a piece for voice and instrument, on the theme of compassion. I suggested getting involved with some liturgical experiments that involved a choir, instruments and the congregation. I experimented with letting the audience chant a simple mantra in a round form, accompanied by percussion and occasional 3part harmonised overlays from a choir. Another piece consisted in the performance of a traditional devotional reading in an antiphonal style, alternating reader, all, choir and instruments.
Here are selected comments from some partakers, that give an impression of how people feel about ritual developments.

.....we are going the right way I think...the mantra worked but I was wondering if we could open it up more for a more free form for various people, i.e. chanting and prayers sang out as in Sufi tradition - just a few order members - over chanting - also less songs, more story, more varied interaction.

.....I have to say, although I am very grateful for the efforts put in by order members like RD or VK to prepare the chanting and music, I do wonder whether such elaborate preparations are desirable or necessary for this sort of collective chanting. .....i suggest we keep it simple and deliberately unmusical, and not have a division between 2 groups of celebrants, those that know the form, and those that don't. Maybe, in order to recreate chanting, we need to go to a more primitive space (long vacated, in the West at least), closer to the football pitch and folk music than the church choir stall and classical music.

.....I very much enjoyed being there and having a particular role to play. As a musician I found it very satisfying to be involved as a composer and a performer. I also was strongly aware of it as a ritual, rather than 'just' a musical performance. The mantra is still with me several days later. My experience of being up on stage with the musicians was a mixed one. I think it would have been much better from the point of view of collective ritual if we had been down there at some position around the stupa. But I liked the ideas you came up with, and enjoyed the textures that happened. I heard from 2 people that they thought it was more of a performance than a ritual. I heard that somebody found the string writing in the verses a bit sad, too 'minorish'. Personally, I thought that it was poignant, and uplifting in it's sense of suffering.

.....I was put off by having to listen to such a long introduction before the puja. It should be more straightforward.

..... I really like what you did with the Avalokitesvara mantra - it was so beautiful - I felt karuna [compassion]very easily as I watched everyone circumambulating the stupa. Unfortunately, I found the eight offering songs too much to take in ... but well done for the thing as a whole ...

.....I'm sure you are not the only person to thank, but I did want to communicate my appreciation of the FWBO day puja. I found it delightful and transporting, and it left me with an aching heart - surely a good sign.

..... What I appreciated most about the ritual were the Verses to Avalokitesvara and following mantra with the opportunity to make offerings. I loved the cello music especially and thought that worked very well with the choir and verses, combined with everybody's participation in the refrain. There were too many musical offerings however. They were all interesting, but I felt I was at a concert and not able to clap. I would like ritual to involve me more than just listening, not by performing as I don't have time to practise, but more in the way the Verses to Avalokitesvara.
'Implementing change' revisited

I would like to draw out a few points from these and other comments I heard, and in that way continue the discussion from the chapter on 'implementing change' in Part 1. Whilst many people seemed to appreciate the new forms, there was controversy around several elements:

- **Explaining and rehearsing before the puja.** I think this might be particularly difficult for people who expect a ritual to feel ancient and somehow 'given'. My recommendation would be to keep such introductions to a minimum and to rehearse in other contexts if at all possible. Otherwise the important 'framing' of a ritual becomes blurred, resulting in lesser spiritual receptivity.

- **Participation.** One reason for the standard 'call and response' format people in the FWBO are used to, is its straightforward facilitation of participation. The forms I have devised allow for a different kind of participation, which consists in the antiphonal interjection of certain lines. To minimise the amount of learning and rehearsing, these interjections are repetitive, but in principle they could also be more varied. I think there is a generally favourable reception of this model in the movement (it has apparently been taken up by other puja leaders in the FWBO).

- **Refinement versus primitivism.** This distinction has frequently been made in the discussion of ritual changes in the FWBO. It might go hand in hand with a criticism of 'cosmological ordering' and 'ethical-moral' types of religion, with their agenda of maintaining institutional structures. There is a desire to root back to the original spiritual vision that underlies a ritual form, and an assumption that simple, archaic ritual forms would be close to that experience. Whilst I share these concerns, I am not in favour of 'football crowd' primitivism. The spiritual vision of the Dharma is extremely subtle, and a ritual needs to formally correspond to that in some way.

- **Elitism.** There was some concern about the distinction between the ritual experts and other participants. It is shame that not all of us are ritual experts in the way of tribal communities; change in ritual would then happen very organically. A new variation of a tune would appear out of a generally loose,
improvisational style of chanting, and if people felt that it enhanced the ritual mood, it would be taken up by others, repeated, and thus almost unnoticeably become part of the 'ancient' ritual. The current attractiveness of 'chanting and drumming' workshops on spiritual festivals arises perhaps out of a need to be part of such a naturally musically communicative community. It might well be that new forms of ritual will emerge from there and become part of the 'main stream'. I think that my current reluctance to continue with experiments like the above stems partly from an uncertainty about the best approach to change. I don’t really want to be part of an elite setting things up for others. Yet I also believe in a kind of refinement that is sometimes hard to find in jamming sessions.

- **Performance.** Several people commented on the performance character of the puja, regretting their lack of involvement. Maitreyabandhu who commissioned the 8 compositions, realised afterwards, that it would have been better to stage them separately in a concert. Spatial arrangements are also important in this regard – in the hall we used a stage for the musicians that was too far away from the main shrine.

**Wessak, May 2003**

Wessak is a major Buddhist festival, celebrating the Buddha’s enlightenment. I devised an arts-based ritual that involved about 200 people over a period of one month, culminating in a festival day at Dhanakosa retreat centre. With the help of others, I produced strips of orange/yellow coloured paper displaying a line-drawing of the Buddha on one side and verses about enlightenment on the other side, leaving room for people to write down their own aspirations. These were folded into little booklets for people to carry round with them, if they so wished. During the festival ceremonies, people were asked to hang them up next to the shrine as an offering, tying them into long garlands gently turning in the air. Mantra chanting I had devised accompanied this offering section of the puja.
The event is an example of the type of ritual I explained earlier (see 'earth ritual retreat' – drawing people's individual expression together in one central, visual arts based idea. It worked well in this larger format too, partly because I put a lot of care into the preparation of the event.

Working with the traditional saffron colour range might have led to the making of 'recycled, the Buddha's robes' several months later. (see 'eco-art', Part 1)
Blood sugar drawings

In May 2003, shortly after FWBO day, I was diagnosed with diabetes (type 1, or insulin-dependant), which led to a certain degree of withdrawal from public occasions for a while. Part of the management of diabetes consists in blood sugar testing. This involves pricking a fingertip to draw a drop of blood, which I hold against a measuring strip that is inserted into a little computerised device. I was intrigued by the question to what extent this clinical action constituted a ritual, and whether it could become part of the healing process for me (in the sense of psychological adjustment and recovery from the shock – the illness itself is not curable, only manageable.). Observing my mental states around testing, I saw that I used it as more than just a medically useful device that gives me information necessary for making decisions about insulin injection and food intake. I turned to it almost automatically at times when I felt in some way slightly uncomfortable, either physically or emotionally. Watching the digits of the current glucose level turn up on the computerised device after a countdown of 5 seconds, felt almost like some kind of magical or divine reassurance. Not-knowing and fear are replaced with certainty. Diabetes specialists warn against obsessive testing, and I can see why; diabetes sufferers have to constantly watch their bodily sensations very closely in order to avoid states of high or low blood sugar, and it is very easy for anxiety to become part of one's personality.
I introduced an element of creative choice into the process, by blotting the remnants of blood left on my fingertip on paper or other materials (i.e. a sugar cube). In plates 21a and b, I used a pencil to draw around the finger. The resultant shape I interpreted as a gate; as an opportunity for stepping into greater awareness. This was a way of ritualising the experience: my awareness was heightened, as I became more aware of various levels and aspects of the experience. My mind played with creative possibilities - how many different ways of disposing of superfluous blood, other than licking it off, can I invent? The process became a theme with variations. Among the formal characteristics of art/ritual listed by Dissanayake, I might also employ stylisation, exaggeration, elaboration. So I used the arts to stem the lure of obsession by introducing a healthier but related kind of ritual. (see more on this subject in the discussion of 'healing circle', year 4)
'Sangha' (20x38cm, watercolour)

selected studies:

Plate 22

Plate 22a
Plate 22b
Plate 22c
Encouraged by my second supervisor, Peter Bevan, I experimented with the diary-like nature of the measurements, playing with different kinds of colour-coding (plate 22b). I also made little lino-cuts of a Buddha figure, the gate shape and of a watery pattern. Combining these symbols in various ways, I alluded to the connections between a drop of 'my' blood; the element water in the universe and the already mentioned 'enlightenment' opportunities of the diabetic ritual. All these elements led to the making of 'Sangha', perhaps the most overtly 'Buddhist' of all my pieces (although the oblong format is reminiscent of church windows). It is also among the brightest pictures in terms of colour hue. Originally it was part of a Triptych (pl 22a was another part of it).

A birthday present and solstice offering

Like the blood sugar series, the occasion of my partner's birthday became an opportunity to blend the arts ritually with ordinary events in my life. I wove a basket to give to him, made out of long pine needles (from trees just outside our flat) and filled it with messages (such as 'do nothing', 'beginner's mind') on small pieces of folded, handmade paper. This gift was a great success: Larry still uses it, 2 years later, as part of his meditation rituals, unfolding and refolding the
messages, one a day. This overlap of research and personal relationship felt very satisfying.

Plate 24

A similarly integrating occasion was the making of a collective solstice offering with friends. We embedded our hopes for the following year into a wheel shaped hanging, which then circulated through our homes throughout the year. We used found natural objects and little 'treasures' like buttons and bits of jewellery, creating a rich symbolic tapestry.

**Water ritual retreat, July 2003**

This was a short, 5 day retreat at a Buddhist retreat centre in 'Sauerland', Germany, situated at the steep North slope of a densely forested hill, and it was the second in a series of ritual retreats based on the elements. The theme of water presented a challenge in so far as there was hardly any natural water feature in proximity of the property, just an almost dried up stream down the path. (We had a children's 'Plantschbecken', a paddling pool to serve as a possible centre piece for our ceremonies.) There were 10 of us on the retreat, all women and experienced in Buddhist meditation. It was very hot for the whole period of the retreat.
Rather than following my previous method of suggesting certain ritual structures for others to partake in, I took a different approach. I encouraged people to devise their own rituals, alone or with others. My function was more as a facilitator and less as a leader. I was prepared to surrender some of the influence, power and control of the leadership position, thereby encouraging initiative, creativity and self-confidence in the participants. Previously, I had often created structures that allowed participants to make creative contributions as part of a whole ‘gestalt’ of some form or other. Here I opened up the whole retreat as creative context, where everyone took responsibility for the appropriateness of their suggestions, taking the whole situation into account. It might well be that my all-pervasive need for blood sugar control had an influence in that development – I was glad to surrender control in other areas of my life.

DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS:

Preparation:

- On the first evening of the retreat we perform a simple ceremony to honour the cancer death 2 days ago of a young woman most participants have known. We know that people at different places on the earth are celebrating her death simultaneously at that time. After 2 friends have talked about their deceased friend, we chant the mantra of her favourite Buddha and one after the other we place a nightlight to float in a large bowl of water. I talk about funeral rites in various cultures, where the dead body is placed in a boat to float out to sea or down a river. Perhaps this ancient rite honours the instinctive knowledge that we are born from water, and return to it.

- The next morning we focus in more on the group and as an opening ritual, I invite retreatants to pour water they have brought from their home environment into one vessel, symbolising our coming together. They also each have an opportunity to talk about their associations with water. At the end of the morning session someone waters the plants in the house with the water we have brought, symbolising the nourishment and growth aspects of spiritual practice.

- We talk about ritual, water and the Dharma. Water dissolves dirt, softens all kind of materials, attacks its containers, contains traces of other elements, evaporates, solidifies into ice, goes underground, rises into the sky, recycles itself constantly, makes life possible, connects, heals.... There are Buddhist water similes: The Dharma as rain cloud, bringing welcome coolness and nourishment to all kinds of plants, who absorb it according to their individual needs and capacities. Dharma practice dissolves the tensions of craving and aversion and invites you to ‘go with the flow’ of the way things are, to welcome change rather than to resist it.

- I lead people through a guided visualisation designed to help people to get in touch with ideas for their ritual, or rather to let the ritual find them. This is followed by a period of writing. I talk about the process of devising a ritual as a creative arts process, where it is necessary to be on one’s own at times, and useful to invite comments at other times.

- We discuss possibilities of ritual forms; they could be traditional, crazy, outside, indoors, using any materials, movements, sounds, instruments, alone, collective, meditative, active.

The Rituals:
The rituals people devised can be grouped into 4 categories:
1. **traditional ritual in unusual environment**
   One person chose to lead a 7-fold puja, leading us in a procession to a place in the woods.

2. **psycho-dramatic performance**
   Three women were inspired by the idea of the ‘river of life’, and asked the group to help them to enact certain key stations or emotions in their life’s path towards their spiritual goal. This happened non-verbally, with the use of some hand-held instruments and some chanting. Two of these stories unfolded outside by the little stream, moving slowly upstream, and one in the shrine room.

3. **collective symbolic action**

   ![Plate 25](image)

   We had four collective rituals, that used water symbolism in very simple, effective ways. One woman led us through a process of reflection on past difficult experiences, which we wrote on paper, which was then folded into boats, and set to float, and subsequently sink, in the paddling pool. Another ritual, on the theme of cleansing, consisted in mutual massage and bathing of our feet, again in the pool, while chanting a mantra. Simple and delightfully spontaneous, bizarre and irreverent, it brought together the profound and the ridiculous.

![Plate 26a](image)

![Plate 26b](image)
One shrine room ritual was particularly effective for me and led to a deep, insightful period of meditation. We sat in a circle, each with 2 glass bowls in front of us. Simultaneously, we each poured water from one bowl into the other, empty one, and then passed it on to the person to our left. Having received the full bowl from our right hand neighbour, we commenced pouring again. This process repeated itself over and over, and became a meditation on the qualities of water, an aesthetic appreciation of the sounds and sights, a reflection on the koans of empty/full and receiving/giving, a felt sense of interconnectedness.

In a similar vein, we had a final ritual of scooping the water used for rituals up with our hands to water plants outside. Reflections on letting go - one can’t hold onto water, it runs through one’s fingers. On sharing the fruits of the retreats with others.

4. performance art
This was my ritual contribution to the retreat, and it was inspired by the natural formations of pine needles on a court yard beneath the house, accessible though a long, steep flight of stairs. It reminded me of the flow of ashes in my paper work, not least because a fire place containing old ashes was situated in the centre of the place. I used those ashes to create grey bands or stripes on the ground, in-between the bands of natural flow patterns. Then I asked the women to dress in white, and to carry water down the steps, again and again, and 'water the ashes', letting the rivulets find their own way, forming patterns like the adjacent natural ones. The symbolic idea behind this ritual performance was to enact the process of re-inspiring oneself after periods of dryness. It was a very hot day, and more than before I realised just how dry and desolate ash is. For life to spring from it again, it needs to be soaked in water. Walking up the steep steps to the source of water represented the effort one needs to put in: regular awareness practice. People very much connected with the idea behind the ritual, which was gratifying, but I was not too pleased with the visual result. The ashes didn't behave in the way I had envisaged, and the whole process didn't take as long as planned. As I had arranged for one of the women to take photos to document the happening, there was an element of self-consciousness present that didn't allow me to get completely absorbed. (One of the developments through the research period has been the realization that the documentation can become part of the 'play' of ritual, and that complete absorption is not as important as I thought it was.)

Some comments from retreatants:

...... I got a lot from our talks about creativity, art and meditation; I had not been aware before that it can be a creative process to develop a ritual. It's better than just to meditate. I like to put into question again and again what has previously given me protection and security. Something about overthrowing rules was important for me.

...... I really enjoyed the way we were living together so harmoniously. I often feel as if I am temperamentally not suited for Buddhist practice, but here I felt affirmed. It is possible to integrate passion and meditation. Views about what it means to be a Buddhist were thrown overboard - anything is possible. Still, I chose the more conventional ritual of the 7fold puja; I need direction.

...... At the beginning I felt quite insecure and hemmed in - in the 'river of life' rituals I wasn't sure about my role and I felt it was all to psychological. At the same time I knew I need to get out of my head, I need a new approach. Eventually the tears started flowing and I felt refreshed and closer to people. Now I feel I swim in a insecurity - trust continuum.

The comments showed that my purpose of facilitating an enhanced experience of ritual through experimentation seems to be fulfilled to a large measure. Similar to rituals discussed before, some people find the situation psychologically demanding, yet able to see the benefits of working through the difficulties.
Year Three

*In the repetition and order, ritual imitates the rhythmic imperatives of the biological and physical universe, thus suggesting a link with the perpetual processes of the cosmos.* Myerhoff 1990:56

**Gestures towards emptiness: offering bowls series**

I will now discuss a series of artwork with shared formal and inspirational characteristics: the technique of handmade paper, the symbol of the bowl and the use of white, blue and earth colours.

**Paper making**

Paper is made of natural substances, like plant fibres or silk. The fibres are first separated by mechanical action, then suspended in water and collected on a porous mould. It has been used for ritualistic purposes as far back as the Aztec culture in the form of *paper clothes, paper hair, strips on poles, paper masks, paper awnings, paper sacrifices burnt to thank gods who warded off illness.* (Farmer 1982:7) It has served as a base for writing or drawing sacred texts and images in Egypt (in its precursor form, papyrus) and China 2,000 years ago. Papermaking has become established within contemporary art since the 1960s and many artists, who see themselves primarily as painters like Mark Tobey and David Hockney, have also created series of paper works.

The processes of papermaking are very repetitive, thus inviting a ritualistic frame of mind. Practising mindfulness, I attempt to be aware of every aspect and detail of the processes involved: above all the sight, sound and touch of water; the eddies created as I submerge the frame and deckle; the time it takes for the water to drain from the frame; the weight of the pulp; the rolling action of couching the sheet and the glistening of the wet, freshly made sheet.
Making offerings

These works are about 'making offerings' and thus hark back to the 'appease and appeal' type of rituals that have been discussed in Part 1. Making offerings is a prevailing ritual practice, found in all cultures from the most 'primitive' to high church religion. Whether bits of food wrapped in banana leaves are placed into tree forks, or votive candles are lit in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary, the
intentions behind these actions are similar and betray deeply human needs. One wants to recover what is lost; heal what is damaged; live in harmony with the spirits or gods that be; placate them; request their support and protection and honour one’s traditional obligations towards them. I remember being captivated as a child by colourful Christian Thanksgiving ceremonies, including processions to outdoor shrines, lavishly decorated with fresh produce from the fields and larders.

I liked the idea of presenting offering bowls in a semi-literal way, as pockets on paper that could actually hold something material. (The edges of the pockets are worked into the paper at the pulp stage.) By leaving them mostly empty however, I ask the viewer to imagine that possibility, thus in fact mentally making an offering. (When I say 'mentally', I mean to include something like a subtle physical gesture.) Buddhist shrines typically feature a row of 7 bowls, often filled with water that is regularly changed. They represent the seven traditional offerings made to an honoured guest in India; water to wash, water to drink, perfumed water, food, hard and soft, flowers, and music. In my piece ‘seven traditional offerings’, I symbolised these gifts in the colours and textures used in the pulps. It felt like a humble thing to do, just placing 7 bowls in a row at the bottom of the page, like at the foot of a shrine, leaving the space above it empty, preferring not to spell out what or who the recipient of the offerings might be — just the beautiful, slightly wavy, creamy white paper, made with mindfulness.

A function of making offerings is to soften the 'ego'; that part of us that swings into action most tangibly when one doesn’t get what one wants. By cultivating the art of giving, one reverses the tendency to grasp and hold onto things. Spiritual teachers will often emphasise the importance of imagining the offering, warning their students against the dangers of literalism. In all types of offerings we have to use our minds and energy to make the offerings real. The actual offering is given on the imaginal level. The physical offering is the ritual that supports the actual, energetic offering. (Tenzin Wangyal 2002:55) This fluctuation between the embodied and the imagined can be sensed throughout my body of work.
Variations on a theme

Seven traditional offerings. (75x55cm)

Plate 29

Seven offerings 1 and 2 (38x38cm)

Plate 30a  Plate 30b

White bowls (39x39cm)  Floating offerings (39x39cm)

Plate 31  Plate 32
Seven offering bowls (30cmx20cm)

Orange bowl 1, 2, 3 (33x26cm)

Opposites (32x28cm)
offering, 2 bowls, white bowl, bowl with single wave (12x12cm)

related pieces and selected studies:

Plate 36  Plate 37  Plate 38  Plate 29

Plate 40a  Plate 40b  Plate 40c  Plate 40d

Plate 40e  Plate 40f  Plate 40g  Plate 40h

Plate 40i
Rather than looking at each piece in this series separately, I will list the principal parameters of variation at play in the development of the work. One can see a similar process in the work of Mark Tobey; a large number of his paintings consist of variations on the theme of the cup. It is interesting that he too is an advocate of meditation, which he saw as the ideal state to be sought for in the painting and certainly preparatory to the act. He also said: When we can find the abstract in nature we find the deepest art. (Tobey 1997)

- Number. I show either one, two or seven bowls. One central bowl symbolises the individual and wholeness. Two introduces a tension; they are a pair, but always different from each other. For example, one is opaquely present, the other just as an outline. One is the 'right' way up, the other is turned upside down. Seven is made up of four and three, which in some traditions are seen as symbolic for the earthly and the sacred.

- Placement. The single bowls can be central, or slightly higher or lower. Rows of bowls are either solidly lined up at the bottom edge, or floating more ambiguously in the space, but always firmly related to the horizontal plane.

- Colour. We find variations on blues, whites and earth tones, with some pinks. Colours suggestive of nature. I am playing with the inversion of colour in fore and back ground.

- Size. Slight variations in height and breadth of the bowls break the monotony of repetition.

- Tone. Within a row of bowls some will have a stronger tone than others. Some pieces have a more distinct difference in tone between fore and back ground, others are more blended.

- Texture. There are variations of plain colour, and speckled textures, created by the composition of the pulp, and different surface textures resulting from the choice of cloth in the pressing process, as well as the overlapping of sheets. I revealed the smooth inner surface of some bowls, by turning them over, once the drying process was complete, thus juxtaposing rough and
smooth qualities. This became an important symbolic gesture 'towards emptiness'.

- Rhythm. Playing with the expectation created by the repetition of a row of bowls I introduce gaps, inversion of some shapes, 'filling' of some of the bowls.
- Inversion. I am playing with the position of the hemi-sphere, so it is either like a bowl or like a mountain.

'shrine piece' (65x67 cm, handmade montbretia paper)

Plate 41a

Plate 41b

Plate 41c

When I first learned the art of paper making (from the papermaker Jacki Parry), I had access to large vats allowing me to 'pull' A1 size sheets of paper, such as
the one used for 'shrine piece'. This work built on the idea of the 'confession holder' I had used on retreats before. Jackie and I made the pulp from *montbretia*, a herbaceous plant that grows in profusion on our allotment. I use this piece at home as background to a Buddha figure, occasionally changing the offerings I place into the folds. By arranging these objects (dried flowers, folded paper that might contain a message), I can enter very naturally into a devotional state of mind. Several of my art pieces have this element of arranging as part of the making process (laying out paper bowls, or discs in later work) – like wanting to prepare an offering in the most pleasing way.

**Dharma** (29cmx29cm, handmade paper, abacca,

*There's only

one poem:

this is it.*

Cid Corman. 1999

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Plate 42

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I use the poem by Corman in my Yoga and Meditation classes occasionally. It's like a Zen Koan. This piece of artwork could be an illustration of it. Actually, it is a bit of a happy accident – being the back of the piece I set out to make. I called it 'Dharma' (ultimate reality or truth), partly because of its colour blue, which is traditionally associated with the Dharma jewel, and because of the indirect way it emerged. Insight cannot be approached directly, either. The piece has a certain boldness and freshness, yet also subtlety. The warmly textured pearl white paper lets the background blue just shimmer through. The blue of the central circle is of intense brightness, enhanced by the surrounding halo of pure white (where there is no blue at the back). The handmade, irregular edge of the circle softens the geometry of the piece without losing the sharp edge.
For a celebration of Parinirvana, the Buddha’s passing away (see CD 9:26), I devised an installation in the main shrine room of the Glasgow Buddhist Centre, consisting of hundreds of hanging, leaf shaped pieces of handmade paper. I worked with a group of people on this, teaching them how to make paper and design their own leaf shapes. Working through a process of writing, we arrived at one-word-poems on impermanence, which were stencilled onto the paper. At the time of the festival, participants were encouraged to walk meditatively though the installation, at times stopping and engaging in an improvised reading of the
words they could see, or which they added of their own. Included were the names of people who had died during the previous year. This ritual drew on previous projects, such as the shrine hangings on Wessak; paper making, and the ritual performances on the first retreat discussed here, 'exploring ritual'. I particularly enjoyed the quiet, highly reflective, poetic and mindful character of this event.

Textures of Impermanence

'Longing for water' (67x32cm, ashes and pulp on paper)

Plate 44a

'Red flow' (14x78cm, pulp and pigment on paper)

Plate 44b
'Echo of red flow' (86x28cm, pulp and pigment on paper)

Plate 44c

Related work and selected studies:

Plate 44d

Plate 44e
In this group of works, I pick up the thread of 'letting the work make itself', which had fascinated me in the ash series. How could I use techniques and processes of papermaking as a means of revealing natural processes? I did some studies on how to capture the movement of water in the process of 'pulling' a sheet (pl 40 b and c). But I found I was more drawn to exploring the 'textures of impermanence', the wrinkles, ridges and rivulets that appear when I push the wet paper and let it dry. Reading Joan Didion's novel 'The year of magical thinking' threw light onto my pre-occupation with textures that suggest transience. The book is an account of grieving her husband's death, a sudden and fatal heart attack, occurring whilst their only daughter lay in a coma in an intensive care unit. Since her childhood she has found meaning in geology, in the constant changing of the earth, the unending erosion of the shores and mountains, the inexorable shifting of the geological structures that could throw up mountains and islands and could just as reliably take them away.( 2005:190) She imagined her husband's death as a convergence of two meaning-bestowing tracks; the geological with the personal. For her, personal meaning lay in the repeated rituals of domestic life. Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Yet despite these beliefs and imaginings, she was unprepared for cardiac arrest at the dinner table. Making images of impermanence is my own way of coming, artistically and ritually, to terms with death; of merging the geological and the personal.

Within my overall body of work, the images stand out in format and scale; they are my 'long pieces.' I was testing whether elongation would enhance the
perception of natural process and flow. The red colours in 'red flow' and 'echo of red flow' relate to blood as life energy, whilst adding ashes to the pulp in 'longing for water' gives an appearance of grey dryness and alludes to fears of environmental destruction. In 'echo of red flow' I lifted the band of pulp (after it had dried) off the paper and re-placed it next to the traces left by the pigments in the pulp. This made another type of natural process visible: water draining downwards, pulled by gravity, and marking the edges of air-bubbles caught in the 'couching' process.

A comment by my supervisor, Edward Cowie, led me into the next phase of the development of my work. He said that he missed seeing traces of me making the pieces. I realised that I was trying to hide the fact that I was manipulating materials to make them look natural. In 'red flow', for example, I tried to make it look as if the ripples or ridges had risen out of a homogenous plain. The action of pushing the pulp actually leaves the background paper visible. I painstakingly covered it with more pulp, joining it seamlessly with the curves of the ridge (a tricky process, as paper pulp is extremely fragile). Plate 45c shows the piece that constituted a break-through to a different way of working. The main message here is the actual gesture of making the piece; showing clearly the traces of my fingers as I pushed the pulp. This approach connected me with one of the earliest ways of ritual art making; of drawing into sand using one's fingers (or a stick). Aboriginal and North American Indian artists still use this method of mark making today (as do children of all cultures).
In the rhythm of breathing 1 and 2 (32x8cm, paper pulp on paper, ink)

Plate 45a

Plate 45b

Related work and studies:

Plate 45c
Plate 45d
Plate 45e
The title refers to the gestural dimension of the work: 'Ah - it was done in the rhythm of breathing'. It also alludes to 'mindfulness of breathing' meditation, an ancient spiritual exercise found in many faiths, where one focuses on the breath as a means to become more concentrated and fully present. I have been watching my breath daily in meditation for the last 22 years, and find no end of fascination with it. It is such a wonderful way of experiencing both the ordinariness and wonder of being alive in a breathing, interconnected world. The making and appreciation of the piece can both be seen as a form of meditation. A concentrated meditative state is characterised by one-pointedness, intense physical and mental pleasure, and lucidity of mind. A Buddhist would use this finely honed mind/body to gain deeper insight into the way things are:
impermanent and insubstantial. The aim is not to wallow in negativity, but to reach freedom from the suffering that comes with expecting unrealistic things from the world. This vision of freedom is expressed in the smooth, shiny, intensely blue background. The colour blue evokes the expansiveness of the clear sky. It is used in Vajrayana visualisation practices as the ground out of which all phenomena arise and into which they merge back again, as a symbol for shunyata. I feel strongly drawn to using that colour in my artwork, finding it calming and mysterious.

The foreground has quite a different texture, it is gritty, wrinkled, pale, opaque - our incarnate, mortal, everyday self. The ritual of making the work links these two dimensions; the everyday and the transcendental. I push the cool, wet pulp with my fingers, feeling the smoothness of the glossy, inked background, and with each breath creating a new opening that reveals the brilliant blue. The pulp rips at the edges, and forms wrinkles just the way mountains fold up under pressure. The trace of this action remains as 'permanent' documentation that effects the viewer. We interpret the marks in a variety of ways: we may be intrigued and guess at the processes and treatments that caused them. Or we may view them symbolically; as shapes interpreted as gates, masks, mountains, a vaulted ceiling of a temple, or as heads of people, reaching towards the sky that we instinctively also perceive as a dome.

While there are opposite qualities in fore- and background (i.e. glossiness and opacity), they also share certain characteristics, just as there is ultimately no split between samsara and nirvana. Both show a blue-white range of colour, a regularity of rhythm, and certain simplicity. I enjoyed making the first layer of the piece, watching what ink does on paper - how rows of bubbles were created as if by magic, when I put a second wash over the first (not quite dry) one. I am reminded of the beauty of shells, of gourds, of dewdrops at the edge of a leaf. These natural, accidentally serial marks are echoed in the regularity of the second, richly textured layer, the realm of the man-made, hand-made, down to
earth, less alluring perhaps, but more concrete in its three-dimensionality. Vision and everyday reality - the work vibrates with that tension, but also conveys a sense of stillness, through its repetitive, peace-giving gestures. Repetition generally can have a soothing, comforting and perhaps even soporific effect (i.e. rocking a baby to sleep). In these pieces, the calming effect of repetition is balanced by the freshness of the colours (mainly blue and white) and crisp edges between fore- and background.

‘60th birthday’ (59x59cm, montbretia paper pulp on paper, acrylic paint)

I used the same technique (i.e. pushing into wet pulp on paper) for this piece, a collaborative ritual birthday gift for my partner. I prepared the background and 'couched' the sheets of pulp onto it, then faintly marked the lines of a spiral. I asked him to push into the pulp, starting from the centre, once for every year of
his life, and saying out aloud one thing that happened then. The spiral symbolism signified the complete, yet emergent aspect of a life in any moment. The choice of colours was inspired by similar considerations as in the previous pieces; telling the 'mortal' story of a life, in the muted, tan colour of naturally wilted plant material, against the phthalo-blue background of emptiness. The tone is lightest in the centre, darkening towards the outer edges. This graduation re-enforces the sense of movement a spiral transmits. While the life-story unfolds from the centre out, the lighter blue of the centre draws the viewer in. Offering the possibility of reading the movement in two ways was a conscious design element of this birthday ritual; it alludes to the mysteriousness of time, which is also expressed by T.S Eliot when he says, in the 'Four Quartets': *In my beginning is my end.* Speckles of gold-glitter in the pulp celebrate the 'special occasion'.

The performance of the ritual was characterised by high intensity; whatever mark Larry made with his finger, was irreparable. Total alertness was necessary. Larry had to remember details of his life (the gift was a surprise and he didn't have time to prepare himself), whilst placing and pacing his actions within the emerging spiral. I slowly turned the board to assist him, and also took photos and video clips. This was not a laid-back birthday celebration, such as singing 'Happy Birthday' and blowing out candles, but a highly charged piece of collaborative work. The material result, a framed piece of artwork, does what a ritual does: it marks and makes special a particular moment in time, both acknowledging and refuting its impermanence.

Many people who saw the piece, commented that they would love to do something similar; so, about a year later, I worked with a group of people on the 'Life Spiral Project' (see year four).

**Fire ritual retreat**

A poet friend, Gerry Loose, carved the phrase *flames flower* on a commemorative stone, for the ritual planting of a *kaki* (persimmon) tree in the Botanic Gardens,
Glasgow, at the summer solstice 2002. This tree is a descendant of the only persimmon tree to survive the atomic bomb blast in Nagasaki in 1945. This 2-word poem inspired me in the devising of a fire ritual retreat I led in Germany, the third in the elemental series.

If there was a shortness of water in the year before (when water was the theme), we are blessed with rain and thunder for the first day of this event. I follow the format of the previous retreats, building a sense of tradition. A first ritual on the first evening, where people burn something they have brought from home, ends up in hilarity, as we shelter under trees and take turns running to the smoking fire to make our offering. The next day I lead people through explorations in movement, free writing, musical improvisation and guided visualisation to help them get in touch with their own relationship to fire and find their own ritual. I feel very confident in this approach now. I don’t talk about ritual theoretically at all, which is, in a way, surprising given that it is the subject of this study. What comes across and inspires people, I think, is an example I set of crossing easily into forms of expression that fall into the realm of the arts and ritual, embodying a more playful and symbolic way of being. I trust more and more that people know instinctively how to devise a ritual. They tell me that they feel appreciated and empowered. The atmosphere deepens over the days and we feel we are taking part in something of significance.

The rituals which people devise are clearly expression of working with powerful themes and emotions. One person stages an authentic movement-based ritual inspired by Hiroshima, dancing, covered with ashes, within a circle of fire. The other group members witness the ritual and, at the end, offer water to wash off the ashes.

Plate 47a  Plate 47b  Plate 47c
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The rituals which people devise are clearly expression of working with powerful themes and emotions. One person stages an authentic movement-based ritual inspired by Hiroshima, dancing, covered with ashes, within a circle of fire. The other group members witness the ritual and, at the end, offer water to wash off the ashes.
A young woman makes great progress in understanding certain psychological issues that hold her back. She simply burns an offering of rolls of paper with personal writing, adorned with natural objects.

An older woman deals with her fears around death and sickness, by drawing the words on pieces of cardboard, for everyone to hold and meditate upon, and finally to burn.
Year Four

'Healing Circle' 1 and 2 (42 x 42cm, handmade paper, blood, charcoal pencil)
'Row of blood sugar readings' (30 x 21cm, handmade paper, blood, charcoal pencil)
These pieces revisit the theme of blood sugar readings and blood marks on paper. 'A row of blood sugar readings' shows the markings in a linear and sequential way again (not unlike the calendar-like marks on a prison wall), but this time using my own hand-made paper, and presenting just the one line of blood prints and finger outline. I had made the sheet several months earlier, and when it fell into my hands again it was one of those moments of illumination, of knowing exactly what I wanted to use it for. I felt excited by the juxtaposition of colours; the turquoise-blue of the sea; the brick-red of dried blood, and the burnt-black of the charcoal. Water, blood and ashes again, the life-and-death symbols I have developed over the years, brought together in this relatively simple image. I particularly valued the resonance of blood with water and clouds (water vapour), by superimposing the blood prints on the wispy blue border (where the two sheets of white and blue paper pulp merge) thus linking the earthy with the ephemeral.

In 'Healing circle' the blood spots and readings appear in a more haphazard way, without the finger outline. By now, year 3 of diabetes, the importance of a sense of linear progression, of measurement, has given way to an acceptance of the all-pervasiveness of blood sugar control, even if the filming of the repeated actions of blood glucose measuring still emphasises the element of repetition through time. (CD 11:45) The readings are in the centre of a mandala, a white circle within a blue square, and they tumble about in no particular order. The blood spots are echoed by the (circular) water marks in the double-layered blue background. During the period of filming the numbers all pointed in the same direction. It was only when I stopped the filming and started the 2nd piece, that I saw the numbers had to be written from different angles for the pieces to work. This lack of a singular viewpoint adds a sense of uncertainty, which is held within the strong geometrical certainty of the mandala.

The work has a quasi documentary character (showing the traces of direct, immediate action: blood sugar readings during a period of about 4 weeks) and for
me, exudes a real-life, real-blood tension. For the viewer who knows nothing about the diabetes background, there will be some questioning: what are these numbers all about? Do they perhaps allude to an ancient map of the firmament? Or are they part of a game? The image appeals to and synthesises both the intuitive and conceptual faculties. It feels very satisfying having connected my illness with the symbol of the circle. Each time I add another mark of my own blood onto the pristine white centre, surrounded by the rough textures of the ocean-blue, it feels like touching base; a coming home; an acknowledgement of belonging to life on earth with its different kinds of orders, both regular and irregular. I am stepping into a healing circle/square of archetypal depth. Roundness...generally symbolises a natural wholeness, whereas the quadrangular formation represents the realization of this in consciousness. (M.-L. von Franz 1978: 324). At the same time, there is a presence of disorder or chaos, unpredictability, in the blood sugar readings and their placing on the ground. Order and chaos co-exist.

_Why is the brain chaotic? Perhaps because the computational constraints involved in memory dynamics and perception require a large amount of flexibility. Chaos provides dynamics that are at once ordered and innovative._ Ricard Sole & Brian Goodwin 2000:139

This element of disorder (contained within a highly symmetrical order) is more reassuring than my previous neat and categorised rows, as if a part of me knows that it is ultimately more life sustaining. My intuitions are affirmed by the findings of complexity theory (even if I don't understand the mathematics involved).

_...brain dynamics might involve multiple attractors and ...a coherent and flexible information processing system requires both order and disorder to operate._ Ibid.: 145

In order to deposit the drop of blood on the paper, I have to make a few aesthetic choices: where exactly will it go; which direction is the number going to face and how big is the lettering going to be? In other words, a creative space opens out around an otherwise utilitarian, and potentially upsetting experience, which constitutes a kind of 'healing' – not only in the sense that I might take medical action according to the reading (i.e. inject more insulin), but in accepting the illness, and each moment of it, as part of a meaningful whole.
Yet the piece is not just about my own personal healing: there is a sense of global relevance about the appearance of a circle. J. Campbell points out that in the middle of the fifth millennium B.C., when the first villages and cities had developed out of the small scale human communities of hunter-gatherers, in pottery styles balanced geometrical organisations of a circular field made their appearance, with a binding figure in the centre, symbolising the integrating principle: a rosette, a cross, or a swastika. (Campbell 72, p63). He interprets the emergence of these symbols as expressing a desire to feel again like 'the total human being' of a simpler, non-compartmentalised way of life. My images relate to this desire also. In their geometrical simplicity and colour homogeneity, they offer a 'whole'some and soothing visual environment, yet, hopefully avoid sentimentality by including some real-life, reflection-stimulating disturbance.

'Healing circle' stands in a developmental relationship to my previous ash piece 'left empty', which shows an 'empty' white inner circle surrounded by irregular red traces of running water. There is a formal resonance between them in respect to colour, shape and mark, by making use of the element, water. 'Healing circle' also started with a blank centre, which, as if the right time had now arrived, was gradually filled with the blood prints and numbers. I have written about 'healing circle' in more detail than about most other work, which reflects its importance in the context of the body of presented work. I consider it as one of my most resolved pieces, inviting both philosophical and aesthetic engagement and dialogue.

'Earth Mantra' (37 x 37cm, wood cellulose, pigments, acrylic ink, linen thread, on paper)

Marveling at the nest of stones found by the river. An assembly of natural objects who have undergone the same geological processes and have stayed together throughout: a family of pebbles. I didn’t take any of them. Diary extract from solitary retreat, 14. 3. 05
Inspired by the work of Heather Cowie, I am starting to work with 'art mache', a mixture of wood cellulose and glue that is available in powder form. It is both light and hard, unlike paper, which is light and relatively fragile. I like the sculptural element, actually making 'things' with a more tangible physical substance, which I can use almost as game stones to play with on paper, until I arrive at the final composition. There is a wonderful potential of capturing, and making explicit, natural processes (as I did with the ash drawings). The material shrinks a fair amount during drying, so that a formerly wet, smooth surface becomes dimpled. By applying paint and sanding it down again, I achieve a texture evocative of natural textures such as granite or eggshell.
Working with wood cellulose is like making cookies; it involves mixing the dough, rolling it out, cutting our shapes, and putting them somewhere to 'cook'. I first started working with the material on a solitary retreat, and I felt the simple, repetitive actions fitted in well with my programme of meditation, walking, etc.. Right from the start, I found myself creating simple, slightly irregular, circular shapes with a hole in the middle. This central hole recalls the theme of emptiness that suffuses the whole research. For a while I experimented with stringing the discs together, and I rather enjoyed the title I gave those hangings: 'a String of Mantras'. I created several mobile-like hangings, one quite elaborate one with writing on each disc: 'embrace the (w)hole'. (picture). This became a bit of a mantra, chiming with insights:

*embrace the whole circle, both halves, earth and sky, the pleasant and the unpleasant, embrace the hole, the abyss, death, boredom, loneliness, the incomplete, embrace this hole in the disc, let life flow through it like through the spinal cord.*

Embrace both sides of the coin. Diary extract 20.3.05

I worked towards a piece of 108 'mantras' (a number traditionally used for mantra chanting), suspended from a large hoop (see sketch pl 52c). But eventually I abandoned that idea; I couldn't get away from the association with commercial mobiles (which often use discs made of natural materials, i.e. mother of pearl), which somehow didn't give enough intensity to the work. (I saw Calder's mobile-like constructions in the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago; the shapes and colours he uses are less obviously reminiscent of organic objects than mine, which may contribute to their success.) 'Earth Mantra' is an outcome of this experimentation. Like 'Healing Circle', it shows a random arrangement of similar
shapes within a circle, within a square. The colours are clearly earth inspired, with a pre-dominance of Indian Red (or of dried blood). The shapes can be read as blood cells viewed under a microscope, perhaps. I love the subtle relationships of textures and colours, they do for me what a walk along a pebble-strewn beach does, taking me out of myself to connect me to something simpler and bigger.

_The main theme in ritual is the linking of the individual to a larger morphological structure than his own physical body._ J. Campbell 88, p72

In a sense, I have made the discs, but there is so much room for 'accident' in their emergence that I hardly feel I can claim them as my own. They are obviously stitched to the background paper (with dyed linen thread) as if otherwise they would continue floating on the surface, arranging and re-arranging themselves, like stones on a riverbed. The stitching continues around the circle, echoing the speckles of the paper, embedding the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional.

Studies and related work:
'Liquid Gifts' (45cm x 28cm, ashes, wood cellulose, pigment, acrylic ink)

related pieces and studies:

Plate 53a
Plate 53b
Plate 53c
During the making of 'liquid gifts; I was aware of the implications of straight or curved geometry. Ritual has a linear dimension: it goes somewhere, in relationship to its socio-cultural context. It also curves in on itself, it is something in its own right; self-referential and self-organised. 'Liquid gifts' exhibits curved forms within a line. And the hemi-circle contains both the curve and the line. The circle, which is a symbol in other work, is like meditation experience, which can be an experience of 'just this'; 'just now'; 'just here', opening a door to timelessness. In contrast, the row can be seen as a symbol for ritual, for repetitive bodily action in time; but action that is leaning towards that which is timeless, and beyond expression.

It is an experience, daily repeated, which leads towards integration, and to an expansion of consciousness which gives rise to perception of the whole. Ajit Mokerjee 1985, Ritual Art of India, Thames and Hudson London 1985, p9

The viewer's attention in 'liquid gifts' moves not just horizontally, but also vertically, attracted by subtle trickles of water through a layer of maroon coloured ashes. These can be read both as ascending, like offerings rising towards the gods, and as descending, like blessings from the gods. The regularity of the rhythm is broken by one 'escaped' trickle, a maverick, which forms an important element of the work. Without it, the composition would lack the captivating and engaging tension, that I wanted to achieve. The mottled textures, hollowness and fragility of the bowl shapes are, again suggestive of natural objects: bird eggs,
snail houses, crab shells, etc. The colours show my usual earth and sky palette, the paleness of the blues contrasting with the density of the maroon. I painted the background and box frame, turning the whole piece into a shrine-like object.

The work stands in a clear evolutionary relationship to my previous works, particularly the 'seven traditional offerings' series. Here the bowls have become more three-dimensional, evolving from the previous, only slightly off-the-surface paper shapes. I experimented with actually making bowls (pl 53a and b), but found that they were too obvious, even with natural materials worked into them; as though there was nowhere to go with them, in terms of artistic inquiry – their utilitarianism was too strong.

'Granite Bowl' (36cm x 20cm, ashes, pigment, acrylic ink, wood cellulose)

'Blue Bowl' (42cm x 16cm, ashes, pigment, acrylic ink, wood cellulose)
Culture isn't the opposite or contrary of nature. It's the interface between us and the non-human world, our species' semi-permeable membrane. R. Maybe 2005, p23

Like 'liquid gifts', these pieces spark curiosity: I notice that people tend to come very close up to the glass frames to minutely examine these bowls, and inevitably the question is asked: what are they made of? They look like made of stone, yet they seem to float. Above the bowls, we see window-like, oblong, rising shapes. The images hold opposites: Looking into oneself as into a still bowl, and looking out into the moving world. Another polarity captured here is that between the receptive, holding, feminine, and the rising, active masculine principles. They are united by the chaotic nature of the textures, similar, but different: the speckled patterns on the bowls are more static, reminiscent of ancient granite, whereas those on the 'windows' seem to rise or fall, showing the traces of more recent elemental (watery)impact. These images do have a Christian feel to them - like looking out through church windows. The bowls are
like church fonts – an association I explored in another, sculptural piece (pl 53d). I painted the box frames to make them into shrine-like objects. There is a sense of worship about them – worshipping the nature of reality, the paradox of its ever-flowing stillness.

'Treasure' (34cm x 34cm, mixed media on handmade paper)

She lifts one pebble, another,
into her pocket.
From time to time takes them out again and looks,
These few and only these. How many? Why?
The waves continue their work of breaking
then rounding the edges.
Walk slowly now, small soul, by the edge
Of the water. Choose carefully
All you are going to lose, though any of it would do.

Jane Hirshfeld, extract of: On the beach. 2005:91

I am experiencing immense and surprising satisfaction working with gold as a colour. (Even though the 'antique gold' enamel paint I chose has a more coppery, red tint than true yellow gold. And it is debatable whether the metal gold is a colour at all...) It relates to the inner spiritual centre of being: rich, glowing, precious. I took more time over making this piece than many others; many hours of patient stitching with gold thread, and taking care over all kinds of details, such as the varying stitch length, many coloured silks in the border, the different degrees of roughness of the paper edges (relatively smooth outer edge, and the more choppy edge of the inner quadrate). It felt like creating a very special, intricate offering. At this point I would like to express my appreciation of the artist Heather Cowie whose work and comments have been influential in the development of my work, particularly in the use of stitching to fix objects onto paper.

At the time of my ordination I was initiated into a golden form of the Bodhisattva Tara, and although I have not done the formal visualisation practice for a long time, I am sure there is an influence, particular since I have a golden statue of Tara on my shrine. Other associations are: the treasure at the bottom of the sea, coins of antiquity, and, as with 'Earth Mantra', a rock pool. It also reminds me of the little outdoor installation I made in year 1 of the research: an offering of dandelion flowers in a stone 'fairy bowl' on Mull (pl 6). The golden discs are contained, again, in the form of the mandala, which is of course a symbol found in many cultures. Peter Gold explores the overlap of Tibetan and Navajo symbolism:
The mandala is almost always a visual expression of the perfect pattern in all things and a prime metaphor of the quest of the spiritual hero toward the central still point in a changing world. Peter Gold 1994:134

Mandalas in the Tibetan and Navajo traditions are extremely rich and complex representations of reality, the human mind and society, involving many symbols attributed to the 4 cardinal points. In my artwork and ritual projects I find a move towards simplicity; towards what is essential and out of which the specifics of a particular action might emerge. This is a slightly different approach from the suggestions of some C.G. Jung – inspired writers, like J. Campbell, to draw personal mandalas that include different, specific aspects of one's life, as a way of pulling them all together and into relationship with the universal. (J. Campbell 88, p217) I am more interested in evoking the power of natural patterns and geometry, the oneness of the circle, the four-ness of the square. I want to show perfection in integration with imperfection. In ‘treasure’ I allude to the cardinal points through little, stitched gates, and I leave a gap in the circle, room for the ‘trickster’ to enter, for the untamed, unorganised.

Indigenous science expresses the harmony and balance of nature by sacred numbers. These numbers are never static, they cannot be exhausted though abstraction and logical analysis....within the heart of the Indigenous harmony there is always room for the trickster. The circle contains a gap to allow the unexpected to enter. D.Peat 1996:177

So what has been the psycho/spiritual effect of working with all these mandala figures, on myself? During the period I was working on this piece, I had a couple of powerful lucid dreams. One was of a more psycho- dramatic kind, featuring my (now dead) father. Without going into the details, it became clear to me that some of my resistances in the creative process clearly have to do with the abuse I experienced from him. There was both a feeling of outrage, and a sense of relief and clarity in the dream, in admitting this to myself and others. So by bringing into lucid dream awareness this damaging childhood relationship, my psyche was obviously setting the scene for some psychological healing, or perhaps celebration of healing that has already taken place to some extent. The other dream had a more spiritual, existential and mysterious flavour.
I stand in front of a gate, too high for me to reach. The gatekeeper opens the doors for me, to reveal a kind of stone rosette, richly ornate with mythological imagery. In the centre are two crossed tools. These surprise me, as I associate them with Marxism. Then I am drawn up into and through the circle, into a kind of tunnel, where a sequence of images unfolds in front of me, and I move through them, like through chapters and themes in a life. Eventually I find myself standing on the ground again, completely disoriented and dizzy from the trip, not quite recognising myself, and also thrilled. Dairy extract, 17th July 05

This dream alludes to a process of deep transformation through a kind of dying. I enter into it through the symbols I have been exploring in my visual artwork: the rosette and the gate. As I recount the dream now, the meaning of the crossed tools suddenly becomes clear: it is about working, about overcoming resistances to work and finding an approach to work that integrates discipline with creative playfulness. I think it is the intensity of work on the PhD in particular, together with the themes I am exploring, that throws up this kind of dream. Here are a couple more diary entries, one before and one after the dream, that are occupied with the subject of work:

26. 4. I am tired because the world is so ugly. Keeping the grieving at bay is tiring. There are not enough wild places left, where trees grow where they happen to grow.

12. 8. Why work? Why work now? Do I understand what 'now' is? If I understood 'now', would I work?

I work now. Because it is the only time there is. This moment, noisy and glorious, last if not lived consciously. This bunch of faded flowers, planted, protected, loved, thrown away and forgotten.
‘Sacred’ (36x36cm, mixed media on hand made paper)

I have used triangles as forms in my work before, but not in any dominant way. Like the circle, the triangle symbolises integration: the two ends of a horizontal line rising to join at one point. The shape has connotations of sacred buildings: steeple, stupa, pyramid: symbols of organised religion. The half-discs that form the building blocks are more reminiscent of natural forms however, snail houses, adobe houses, none exactly like the other. The shape in the middle can be read as a circle, as the coming together of opposites, with an emphasis on the lower, bowl-shaped hemisphere. It is hard to avoid reading it as ‘the eye of god’ however, and I had some trouble with this interpretation, yet this central eye-like
shape seemed important to include in the piece. Then I read J. Campbell's interpretation of this symbol, which is the 'eye of reason', and reason 'has to do with finding the ground of being and the fundamental structuring of the universe'. (Campbell 88:39) It is the reason that needs to inform a new symbol for the planet, a symbol that overcomes divisions of nationality, religion, race etc.

My picture is placed in this field where reason and emotion, the man-made and the natural dance with each other. There are square corners, yet ripped edges. In this piece, in addition to the techniques described in 'treasure', I also employ printing, and there is greater variety of shapes and colours than in most of my other work.

*Life Spiral Project*

Plate 58a  Plate 58b  Plate 58c  Plate 58d

A 3 day residential workshop on Arran, in May 05, with 5 participants, all members of a peer support group I am part of.

Conceiving of art as meaning-making activity that takes place in a relational space sets the stage for art to be of service.....When does the artist take control (aesthetically for example) and when give up control? Does the very process of art-making block natural empathy for example, in the same way that analyzing can distance the professional helper? Bearing witness demands personal strength grounded in a belief-base – generally provided by religion, not art. Suzanne Lacy in: Buddhaind in contemporary culture 2004:110

This event varies from the other projects described here in that it can not really be classified as Buddhist, although most of the members of the peer group meditate and some have been on retreats before. The programme included some meditation, but overall the atmosphere was more 'worldly', with some alcohol being consumed at mealtimes for example.
The main purpose of the workshop was for everyone to perform the ritual of the 'life spiral' I had created for my partner Larry's 60th birthday. It was an attempt to translate some of my artwork (the 'Breathing' series) in a fairly direct way into a group context. Normally the group is peer-led, and an extra area of inquiry was how it would affect everyone when one group member took the lead. The process started a month before the residential weekend with a preparatory afternoon, for which I sent out this information sheet.

INFORMATION ON LIFE SPIRAL RITUAL (as basis for discussion and creative changes)

THE VISION
To celebrate our lives, whether on a birthday or not (the idea was born on Larry's 60th), in the presence of friends. Appreciating each year we have lived so far. Getting an overview, understanding patterns, seeing where it all started and where it might go. Expressing in colour, texture and movement the flavour of our lives as a whole. Embracing impermanence.

I have set certain parameters like the basic process, using paper pulp, and the form of the spiral. Within these formal restrictions everyone can unfold their creative ideas in terms of their chosen colours and textures.

DESCRIPTION OF RITUAL
Each person has prepared a square board with a painted background and a top layer of wet paper pulp. A thin line has been created into the pulp, separating the fibres, in the form of a spiral. The group sits as witnesses around the celebrant, who faces the board, which can be easily turned on a small table. Starting from the centre, she pushes her finger into the wet pulp, once for every year, creating an opening that reveals the background. As she performs the movement, she says what happened that year, just a short sentence, spoken on one breath. When she has arrived in the present, the whole group meditates (and whatever else spontaneously evolves).

STAGES OF THE PROCESS
preparation. creative writing: 'The texture of my life is like.....' 'The colour of my life is like........' 'My life opens into.....' 'My life is held by...'

things to collect: These exercises should give you some ideas as to the materials you might want to use in the pulp. Organic matter or anything else that can be broken down by a blender and mixed into the porridge-like substance. Things like glitter are effective. We will use recycled paper for the pulp, so collect all sorts of papers you find interesting. You will need the equivalent of about 6 thick sheets of A4 paper in the colour you want. One can mix colours in the blender by using different coloured paper.

We also need boards (B&Q), primer, acrylic paints or inks, brushes, jars, washing up plastic bowls, 2 or 3 blenders, paper making frames, water or poster colours and paper for sketches.

on the W/E we will decide an overall program that allows for sketching of our life spiral and start writing our life story.

- priming and painting the background.
- we need to come up with a schedule that allows 2 or 3 people at the time to prepare their pulp and 'couch' it onto their board. It will stay ready for use for a few hours.

the actual ritual will probably happen in 2 sessions.
Examples of comments from participants

Larry: The whole weekend felt like a ritual - preparing food, choosing materials, having two teams - one supporting the other, meditating together. The actual ritual of pushing the pulp and making a statement was a simple but important preparation. Even the camera gave an added dimension of ritual. My background I chose was bluey-white watery with swirls, inspired by a recurring dream I had when I was about 3 or 5 years old - the dreams always gave me a feeling of bliss and abandonment and letting go. My foreground was a rich deep red reminding me of my father's 1948 Ford, maroon convertible; with a sprinkling of yellow buttercup petals for light relief in my over-busy life; the deep red is the alive colour of oxygenated blood, vibrant and full bodied like wine.

Rosemary: I experienced the project as stimulating, fun, and I amazed myself by just how simple the process of making paper is - that I could do it with rapidly emerging confidence and delight. The ritual dimension for me was the actual rhythm of breathing life story telling time, when the whole group was focused with me on my recreating my life in the paper.

Irene: I gained insights into specific aspects of my character, .... it affirmed my belief in ritual as a therapeutic tool. My choice of foreground, background, all seem intrinsically linked to the ritual aspect of the project and of unconscious processes unfolding and being reflected in the visual art form.

Evaluation

I was interested in how the emphasis on learning an arts technique fitted in with the ritual element, and how taking the lead within a peer group would affect the situation. Judging from the feedback, overall people enjoyed the event. The learning process was intense for people, who had not done much art before, and the ritual went deep in terms of personal, and group process. The art-making and ritual aspects were experienced as flowing well together; as in the rhythm of the papermaking itself, the pushing of the pulp, etc. The process of finding colours and images for the artwork opened up people's imagination, which lent depth to the ritual. I was pleased that the filming was experienced as well integrated into the ritual. I am not sure how 'spiritual' an experience it was - my impression was that it was as important to people to be able to hang a self-made piece of art onto their wall, as I was to go through a process of self-transformation. I am sure the event would have felt very different had people let go of the picture in the end, returned it to the elements, as is the practice on Buddhist retreats. On the one hand, they may not have put so much of themselves into it, on the other, there
might have been a greater sense of freedom. (The same could be said, of course about this research on ritual. The fact that I am producing work for sale as part of it has an impact that might, or might not interfere with its spiritual benefits. I will discuss this issue a little more fully in part 4) For future art/ritual events, I would probably de-emphasise the product result aspect, and encourage people to reflect more on the process itself.

I had not been sure whether I would attempt to make a spiral myself, as well as leading the whole process. Since it seemed on the last day, that the ritual preparations were going according to schedule and there was actually a little time when my teaching input was not needed, I decided to go into the process for myself. I wanted to ‘produce’ my own piece, both in order to participate in the ritual as a part of the group, and to include in the body of work for this research. In hindsight I saw that this was a mistake: it was too stressful to teach everyone the papermaking process, lead the ritual, film the event, and do the ritual myself. I actually disliked the piece I made and destroyed it some time afterwards. I also run into some interpersonal difficulties with one of the group members, probably because ‘aesthetic considerations’ and time pressure were getting in the way of empathy (see S. Lacy’s quote). In hindsight, I would allow more time for such a project and allow more time for on-going feed back and reflection.

**Air Ritual**

A 4 day retreat in Germany, July 05, with 10 participants of different levels of experience of Buddhism.

As on the previous three elemental retreats, I conducted a ritual opening session to connect with each other and the theme: air. This time I have asked people to bring something from home for everyone to smell. It is noticeable how rich both the English and German languages are in terms that refer metaphorically to our experience of air: sniffing each other out, getting a whiff of something, etc. The ritual creates a light, and delightful atmosphere right from the start. People bring: herbs from the balcony, an old scarf, washing powder, incense, a rice cake, an
old empty tin that held arts materials, a vial of perfume. We start to pool our knowledge of the element air. It is connected with speech, communication, and the throat centre. The breath is ‘prana’, life force. It connects us to other life forms in a cycle of gas exchange. In Dzog Chen, physical movements are recommended to control and balance the air element – to avoid the instability of too much air, and the stagnation of too little. (Tenzin Wangyal 2002, p45)

On the first day, I offer a workshop of movement and voice improvisation, leading to painting, to guided visualisation, to writing, to sharing with the whole group. Out of this wealth of possibilities, people develop their own rituals over the course of the retreat.

The Rituals again fall into categories like:

- enactment of personal journey (one woman works on her fear of flying and a visualisation of being picked up by a bird)

- traditional Buddhist ritual (one woman translates a puja from English into German and ‘premieres’ it)

- shamanic influences (a rich concoction of outdoor events, involving fires, ashes, feathers, petals, seeds, stone beating, wild dances) (plate 59g)
games (a woman writes limiting attitudes onto balloons, which she eventually ‘pops’, after the group has played with them for a while)

- (playing with a large cloth)

performance art (installation of white tissue paper, a shedding of a skin of tissue paper)
The retreat was a deeply affecting experience for people: even more so than the previous ones perhaps. Those new to this kind of retreat were in tears at the end and said what a life-changing experience it was; they had never before experienced such openness, closeness and friendliness in a group before, nor believed that they could be so ‘creative’. Those more experienced commented on the freshness and ‘zaniness’ of it, the relief of ‘being allowed’ to play, show emotion, be like a child again, whilst at the same time allowing for the depth and subtlety of meditation and insight.

For me, the retreat was a wonderful time; I actually found myself in ‘dhyanic’, blissful states of mind a lot of the time, both in and out of meditation. This time I didn’t attempt to devise a special ritual of my own, which in the previous years I had felt compelled to do, partly as an attempt to bridge the artistic and educational aspects of my research. I fully accepted the leading of the retreat as my spiritual, artistic, ritualistic, creative expression. Making connections for people between a playful ritual (like playing with balloons that have unhelpful inner attitudes written on them and popping them) and meditation (‘notice unhelpful inner comments, treat them lightly, let them go in their own time...’) felt like a delightful creative challenge. Going for a walk with a participant, connecting with their life story, and guiding them towards their own ritual, felt like a privilege. We were entering ‘ritual time’, and within its potency for renewal and change, I was able to weave into the retreat all the threads that have influenced this research: ecology, arts, Buddhism, community, and healing. On the basis of the
learnings of the previous years, I managed to find a sustainable and effective balance between leadership and freedom.

**Jewellery (wood cellulose)**

Adorning the body, using natural objects such stones and feathers, is a basic form of ritual expression found in all cultures and ages. As the pieces I had made out of wood cellulose looked so much like objects found in nature, it was an obvious step to make jewellery, using that medium. The pieces are like weathered objects found on a beach, or semi-precious stones ground by natural forces into semi-discs. The shape is also reminiscent of the medicine bags worn by Native Americans.
Relatively simple and unframed, this wall piece 'just is', as my second supervisor, Peter Bevan put it. So I will just let it speak for itself....
Based on Indo-Tibetan elemental symbolism, the stupa integrates the natural elements; earth, water, fire and air. These are symbolised by the square, circle, triangle and semi-sphere respectively. It is an early symbol for the Buddha, of
whom no representational images were made for several thousand years. Within the body of my work it is a new departure into more sculptural work, although I have created two-dimensional stupas for many years.

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

T.S.Eliot. Four quartets
PART 4: THE JOURNEY TAKEN

Inhaling, I take the world inside myself

Exhaling, I give myself to the world

Emptied, I live within myself, live without self

In Voidness supreme

Inhaling, I take the world inside myself

Exhaling, I give myself to the world.

Emptied, I experience abundance

Formless, I fulfil the form.

Lama Govinda

This enquiry is like a smoke ring which is made up of nothing but air marked with a little smoke, as Bateson says (1977: 246), turning in upon itself, assuming a certain separation from its environment, before vanishing back into it. It is like the inward curve of a bowl, holding nothing but emptiness, and perpetually moving in its stillness, as T.S. Eliot puts it in the Four Quartetts. I have been meditating for many years on form and formlessness, emptiness and the nature of self, the rhythm of giving and receiving, inhaling and exhaling (I carry Govinda's poem always around with me). All aspects of this enquiry are in subtle, and sometimes obvious ways imbued with the flavour of my spiritual practice, and are in fact, aspects of it. My spiritual journey has been significantly shaped by this undertaking, as I explored how ritual can either be 'an empty gesture' or 'a gesture towards emptiness'.

One of my original motivations for taking up this research was connected with wanting to see changes happening in the way ritual is performed in the FWBO. I also was looking for a framework that would allow me to pursue my multi-strand artistic activities within a unifying, clarifying, supportive and challenging context. My curiosity about the dynamics of ritual, particularly the relationship between tradition and innovation led me to a course of extensive theoretical study of ritual, and a series of practical experimentation within various group settings. Gradually
the focus of my work shifted, however, to intensive engagement in visual artwork and I consider this as the core of my submission. In the following paragraphs I will summarise my main findings, related firstly, to this ambient environment of study and group work; secondly, to my artwork; and thirdly, to the various interrelations between the two, background and foreground, as it were.

**The theoretical and experiential environment**

The first part of this thesis presents a general map of ritual, highlighting areas of particular relevance for the practical dimensions of the research. I explored an array of definitions, characteristics and styles; thus assembling a rich tapestry of information, including the changing understandings of ritual in history. Among the aspects of particular interest and relevance in respect to the development of the practical work were the similarities between play and ritual and the prevailing characteristic of repetition. These are synthesised in the formal devise of 'theme and variation', which became a main feature of my way of working. 'Offering making' emerged as another core theme that links my creative work, both that on my own and with groups, to ageless ritual practice. I directed attention onto three fields of ritual application in particular: Buddhism, arts and ecology. The discussion of the need for different kinds of ritual in different types of spirituality shed light on my work within the FWBO and the place of ritual in my own life. Ritual activity revealed itself as the creation of formal contexts for the encounter with that which transcends form; it is however often exploited as a mechanism for exerting power and control. I looked at the place of art and ritual as part of dealing with the current environmental crisis. Art can direct us to seeing the beauty of what we might be about to loose, and perhaps galvanise some protective action. Eco-rituals can be positively humbling, rectifying our fateful planetary dominance by letting us experience our interconnectedness with all life.

Interwoven with the study of ritual, my work with groups of different size and purpose, have led to the employment of different forms of ritual and styles of
leadership. The largest group has been about 200 people on FWBO Day and working within this relatively orthodox context has presented me with all the challenges one can expect when one tries to 'change the unchanging ritual'. Smaller, more informal groups have proved themselves as less complicated situation for ritual exploration, particularly when this purpose is made explicit. They allow room for more fluidity and responsiveness within the ritual process, less fixed leadership structures and the establishment of shared meaning. There is always a certain awkwardness around ritual when one assumes a shared sense of meaning, which is not really present; this is the common situation in our fragmented society and I found it also to be the case on large, orthodox Buddhist celebratory occasions. This was one of the reasons why I stepped back from involvement in such situations to some extent in the latter part of the research period. I am aware however of an expressed need for liturgical reform in the FWBO, and I have at this stage not decided whether and how I will respond to it. My attempts to influence FWBO ritual in the direction of more creative participation have had some effect so far, particularly as regards musical innovation: there is now a greater openness to antiphonal structures of chanting/reciting for example. Some of my mantra compositions and improvisational structures have also become part of the repertoire. More generally, I have contributed to the emergence of a climate of openness towards ritual innovation.

Within the context of smaller retreats and other more informal situations, I have experimented with a variety of different ritual structures, starting with 'exploring ritual', where I used performance methods to realize a vision of movement-based ritual performances embodying principles of natural order. In this instant I felt like a spiritual and artistic teacher/director, holding a lot of responsibility and control. The development of my approach over the years can be seen as a gradual relinquishing of this control, offering structures with increasing room for personal invention, and seeing my role more in supporting people to devise their own rituals (i.e. the 'air ritual' retreat in year four). This approach has generated
rituals of varying types (to some extent resistant to classification), serving people in their self-defined spiritual needs, some more therapeutic, some concerned with connection, with grief, with beauty, and so on. Questions around authenticity and self-consciousness that arose in rituals that were partly staged by myself became redundant, as retreatants became fascinated and absorbed by the creative and spiritual challenge of devising their own ceremony. This person-centered approach corresponds to the general development in the West of a more personalized spirituality, and avoids a possible resistance to prescribed ritual. The implications of this style of ritual play can be a loss of the feeling of devotion towards teachers and teachings of the past, with its sense of historical embeddedness (unless people choose to enact traditional rituals, of course). Another possible drawback is the avoidance of a certain kind of spiritual training associated with rising to the challenges of repetition. And lastly, the aesthetic attractiveness of the self-devised ritual depends largely on the individuals’ sensibilities and experience.

Thematically the rituals in whose creation and performance I have been involved, have been about the issues that have always inspired and necessitated ritual: the big context (however one names it), our connection with the natural world, impermanence. They were about creating and embodying meaning, about finding shapes and rhythms that create a resonance between us and the world we live in. The philosopher Robert Innis said about rituals: *We give ourselves to them because in the deepest existential sense we find ourselves embodied in them.* (2004: 208) The same is true of course for the creation of art.

**My artwork**

Whilst during the first 2 years of this project I was pre-dominantly concerned with issues of Buddhist tradition and innovation within a pedagogical field of activity, the emphasis gradually shifted to my personal artwork, so that in the final year I only led one ritual retreat. I started to produce an extensive body of work, which I showed in two solo exhibitions and one group show. I am certain that an
important reason for this shift is to be found in the lessening of my artistic control in the group work. As an artist I needed to fulfil my need for depth, subtlety and long-term development of ideas. (I also received a considerable amount of encouragement from my supervisor, Edward Cowie, re-enforcing this direction.)

There are some differences in these two types of work, of course, the main one being that between working alone and with others. But essentially they are similar; in both art and ritual I create symbolic affinities that connect to the roots of the numinous and an ecological sense of a whole. They influence the quality of my existence, shaping me as I shape them. In my artwork, as in my ritual work, I articulate and select aspects of the chaotic and dense possibilities of the reality I am part of, to temporarily identify myself and 'it'. In an ongoing process of making and reflecting, I create a world in images and re-appraise them in the light of lived experience.

During the journey of making things I went through a phase of 'letting it make itself' (in the ash series), thus expressing respect for natural processes, a loosening of the control humans have exerted on the earth. Then I started to make paper, which involves processes of dissolution and re-constitution, tearing-up and re-forming, like the movements of death and creation in the universe; mountains rising, folding, being washed to the bottom of the sea, waiting for another slow upsurge. I learned about the differences between habit and ritual in the repetitiveness of the paper making process. I discovered the possibilities of painting with and into pulp. Using my fingers to push rhythmically into pulp felt like a deeply satisfying ritual gesture, connecting me with the beginnings of art - drawing directly into the earth. Then I turned the main symbol that had emerged in the work into sculpture; I made bowls out of wood cellulose and placed them onto the paper. At some point I went through a period of printing little Buddhas into arches, or gateways - inspired by paintings of hundreds of Buddhas on the walls of Buddhist monasteries (see 'Sangha'). I abandoned this more literal approach to ritualistic art-making in favour of artwork that is free of conventional
religious iconography, to be receptive to artistic ideas arising from a more open field of enquiry.

In my work I was playing with parameters such as colour, tone, rhythm, texture, density etc, to modulate the repetition of similar things: of bowls, of gates, of blood prints, of pieces in a series. This type of ordering points to the nature of ritual, of art, culture, and of life itself. Which is the pattern that connects all the living creatures? asks Gregory Bateson. The anatomy of the crab is repetitive and rhythmical. It is, like music, repetitive with modulations. (1979) The evolution of complex forms of life on earth depend on a form of re-creation that doesn’t just produce an exact replica of the original, but allows for genetic ‘errors’ that could be developed into new forms over time. Making art follows similar laws. It is the ‘mistakes’, the accidents that often lead to new ideas. By making many objects of the same kind, I was able to use chance events in that way.

Co-emergence

I want to look briefly at some of the ways processes, ideas and symbols flowed through the different levels of my work; theoretical research, pedagogical applications and visual-artistic output. (To some extent I have written about these connections in Part 3). In rituals in which I took strong leadership I played with the random order I also explore in my artwork. This is evident in the ice and snow performance rituals of year one, and many of the collective visual art oriented rituals later on, expressed in an organic, unpredictable patterning in time and space. The tension between conscious directing of processes versus letting go of control was a common theme of both arenas of work during the whole research period.

The dome or cup shape can be found throughout the visual artwork, but seems to not have taken root in the group ritual work; unlike the form of the circle that appears frequently, as an almost archetypal ritual organisation (people gathered
around a fire). The theme of making offerings however (which finds symbolic expression in the bowl shape) is a current that flows through all aspects of this research project. There was a certain amount of crossover as regards artistic techniques, from my artwork into the realm of collective ritual. I made installations using handmade paper, and working with pulp – the ‘life spiral project’. There are also examples of technical ideas originating in collective situations, like the ‘confession holders’ being transferred into visual art projects: working pockets into paper, which evolved into the work with bowls on paper.

The most striking link between the individual and more group-based arenas of my explorations is the formal devise of ‘theme and variation’. This kind of patterning is also present in the rituals of contemporary hunter/gatherer tribes (see Drooger in ‘Ritual in its own right’ 2004:144). Drooger shows that the Wagenia, on the banks of the river Congo, possess a symbolic repertoire that they experiment with and vary according to occasion and circumstance. The deliberate and playful control of the given parameters of a ceremony or work of art belongs to the essential characteristics of ritual. Ritual mutates through the ages through the play of sameness and difference.

**Dreams and transformations**

As I started working on this retrospective of the thesis I dreamed of playing the cello in a church again, with my sisters.

*But things are badly organised, there is no organist, and no priest. The small choir is disorganised; my attention lingers on two black women singing with obvious enthusiasm in the soprano and alto sections. Another choir member suggests that surely now it was time for them all to do some movement, having listened to music for so long. Since nobody else steps forward to take a lead, I suggest we have a dance to improvised drum and cello music, followed by a meditation. People seem to be happy with that idea and the improvisation starts, at first at a rather sluggish speed, which I push into double speed after the first phase ends.*

The dream reminds me of the family, church and music background where this ritual exploration started. This formerly whole world has disintegrated, but has left me with skills and knowledge that, together with the experiences accumulated through meditation, bodywork and multi-disciplinary improvisation put me into a
position where I can respond flexibly to people's ritual needs. I am not a different kind of priest, however, still operating from within a dualistic and hierarchical system. My expertise is offered more humbly, yet confidently, from within the matrix of the group, and it is imbued with an internalised understanding of the integration of body and mind. The energy and enthusiasm released through this integration is symbolised in the dream by the black women and the doubling of speed.

The fragmentation of the old socio-cultural system does not relate just to my own past, of course, but to society as a whole. This enquiry has considerably deepened my understanding of what is sometimes called 'the new paradigm', which can perhaps be summarised by David Bohm's theory of the 'implicate order', the idea that everything enfolds everything. To see that everybody not merely depends on everybody, but actually everybody is everybody in a deeper sense. We are the earth, because all our substance comes from the earth and goes back to it. It is a mistake to say that it is an environment just surrounding us.... He said this in an interview during a conference called 'Art meets Science and Spirituality' (1990). This meeting place is of course also the playground of ritual. In some ways this new paradigm is an old one and uses well-established training methods, mainly the tool of mindfulness. The exploration of ritual has added weight to the insight that living the mindful way is a sacred way of being in this world, with or without the safe container traditionally provided by more elaborate religious forms. (Lama Surya Das 1997:52).

There have been periods of doubt and awkwardness as well, at times feeling a bit like the nature writer Richard Mabey, questioning what he is doing indoors writing a book about nature instead of immersing himself in his wood (2005). I have also watched myself participating in fairly conventional Buddhist rituals, wondering whether I would be able to ever again let go into them. (What I find is that I can actually participate in a more relaxed way now. When I come across 'bad' rituals, I just shrug my shoulders without suffering much from that awful 'cringe' feeling of going through the motion of something. I just play with it internally....). The biggest personal crisis that has affected this research has
undoubtedly been the appearance of diabetes. It has led to a certain withdrawal into a more private space and may well be a reason for devoting more time to artwork rather than leading retreats. I had a dramatic dream at a time when I was briefly hospitalized because of a diabetes-related emergency. I was using my body to urgently press down freshly made handmade paper leaves, as if to pray to be given the time to complete this work.

One of the noticeable elements of this project is its integrative nature; it brings together different modes of expression (music, movement, words, visual art), different fields of research (anthropology, Buddhism, science, arts, etc) and different roles (artist, teacher, student, researcher, meditator, friend, lover). One could say it is characterized by a playful seamlessness. The apparent simplicity of the work is based on consciously facing, and to some extent resolving, various existential and formal polarities: order and chaos, simplicity and complexity, abstraction and representation, the opposite shapes of cup and dome, open and closed forms, process and result-orientation. I hope the viewer is not just emotionally affected but also drawn to participate reflectively, stimulated by a rich conceptual and spiritual layering.

**Looking ahead**

During the final stages of the writing process of this thesis, in August 06, I went on a 10-day solitary retreat in Dorset. The following series of work evolved out of my meditation experience on this retreat and I am including it here as it signifies both, an integration of the themes and symbols developed during the research period, and a glimpse into future developments. Apparently, for some artists the work of analysis and verbal articulation connected with PhD research can have the effect of blocking the flow of artistic creativity. I am glad to find that this does not seem to be the case for me. To the contrary, the conscious reflection on the processes and forms of my artwork have led, after a few months of incubation during which I mainly engaged in writing and working on the documentary film, to a re-emergence, from some deep part of me, of familiar visual ideas in new forms.
'Meditation 1-7' (12x12cm, watercolour)

plate 63a

plate 63f
These watercolours draw on the visual language I have developed over the past 4 years. The gate or cup shapes, running along the page in a more or less linear arrangement are expressive of the rise and fall of the breath and of other sensuous or mental events I observe in meditation; events happening in time; coming into being and falling away. These marks are in relationship to the central circle (symbol of suchness, or emptiness, or timeless presence), leaving it uncovered, sometimes dissolving into it. The images are alive with the kind of diversity one finds in areas of transition in nature; such as between water and land; zones where different eco-systems meet. (Perma-culture experts are particularly interested in investigating areas like marshes or riverbanks.) In this series of artwork, I play with creative possibilities in the transition between line and circle; between broad brush sweeps and delineated crayon marks and between background and foreground. 'Meditation 1' was the first of the series, and to me manifests the spontaneity of a Zen poem (Zen poetry is also particularly concerned with the theme of transition). It bears most of the characteristics of 'wabi-sabi', the ancient Japanese principle of aesthetics; a
beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, incomplete, intimate, unpretentious and simple. (see Koren 1994:41). Yet while things 'wabi-sabi' (like tea pots) often display a certain murkiness and earthiness, these small watercolours have an airy and luminous quality. Perhaps they indicate a movement from the more earthy and watery textures of most of my previous artwork, to an expression of the elements fire and air (similar to the thematic progression of the ritual retreats in years one to four). In the subsequent images of this 'meditation' series, I tried to understand and capture the essence of what made 'meditation 1' so convincing and appealing to me. They show a greater degree of deliberation, they play with the constituents of colour, line, fore and background, full and empty, etc, but some of them lack, perhaps the same sense of spontaneity.

A noteworthy development in this new series is the fact that I actually made marks with brush and crayon on paper. It is the expression of a certain confidence, perhaps derived from the observation of natural processes in my previous artmaking, where my interventions were often less direct. I was able to allow nature, as it were, express itself through my hand with a certain immediacy, organicity and freshness. The series is called 'meditation' but could equally have been called 'ritual'. The repetitive rhythms of the marks in each painting, in dialogue with the singular central circle encapsulate what ritual is like: formal, rule-bound expressions in time that attempt to mediate an experience of an Ultimate Freedom that is beyond time. This reason for ritual can easily be obscured and the forms become ends in themselves. But where the spirit of ritual is truly alive, one will find a certain playfulness of expression.
Coda

At the beginning of my research I had expected to submit mainly text-based outcomes based on theoretical studies of the relationships of Buddhist ritual and art-making, drawing on my long-standing experience as a teacher and facilitator, using ritual contexts to generate musical, dance and visual responses. I was particularly concerned to create a reflective discourse on issues arising from contemporary transformations of ritual, in relationship to their traditional forms and functions. But in the course of the first 2 years of studies, the emphasis gradually shifted from a theory- and pedagogy-based approach to practice-led research. I started to produce a body of experimental visual artwork, a development that was intensified through the contraction of Type 1 Diabetes at the start of year 2. The ritualistic flavour of my artwork crystallised in a fusion of diabetes control with repetitive and mindful mark-making using my own blood.

During years 3 and 4, the group-based work gradually diminished in quantity to a certain extent, whilst acquiring more ludic, small-scale and person-centered characteristics. In that period I developed a progressive and systematic series of visual artworks, using different kinds of materials and processes, mainly paper based, but also sculptures and body-adornments. The connections between ritualised processes and serial development of artwork came prominently into the focus of the enquiry. The shaping processes in time became more interesting than the finished product. The outcomes of these studies and practical experiments has produced:

- an extensive body of mixed media works, mainly on paper;
- various 3-dimensional works;
- a large body of sketches and ‘models’ for work in progress;
- digital film documentation of workshops and retreats under my direction;
- a written thesis dealing with the interplay of studies in ritual and the emergence of treatments of form derived from ritual activity.
In its holistic approach, merging my different roles as Buddhist practitioner of 30 years experience, artist, pedagogue, ritualist and ecologist, this research makes an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge, in the fields of ritual studies, contemporary art and Buddhist ritual. It demonstrates and critically examines new, contemporary contexts for the ancient ritual/art continuum, presenting ritual as a both continuous and ever-changing phenomenon.

I hope that the description of my personal journey encourages others to utilise the power of ritual in the act of creation. My art tells of a slowed-down, mindful approach to life; one expressive of a certain simplicity, fullness of pleasure in colour and shape, satisfaction in harmony, and contemplative calm. I would like such art and ritual to find a place in today's world where the continuation of life-supporting conditions is seriously threatened. I would like it to complement social, environmental and political action with an experiential perspective of playfulness, connection with nature and our ancestors, aesthetic enrichment, supportive community and spiritual resourcefulness.

The process of this enquiry has been personally transformative: it has been the catalyst for the discovery of myself as a visual artist; one whose inspirations are linked to the practice of meditation, an attitude of enquiry and pedagogical work. It has awakened a joy in sustained study and has loosened many previous, more linear and dualistic understandings of processes and realities in an appreciation of a more systemic view of interconnectedness. The reflections on stability and change, order and chaos; those 'koans' of this research will, no doubt continue to provide the creative ferment for my future artistic activities.

In the spirit of 'Gestures towards Emptiness', I would like to offer the results of this research towards the achievement of the degree of PhD.
GLOSSARY

FWBO: the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, a modern Western Buddhist movement founded by Sangharakshita.

Mantra: a syllable or series of syllables that manifests specific spiritual qualities, usually associated with certain Buddhas.

Puja: a Hindu or Buddhist ceremony of worship, usually involving chanting and the offering of incense etc.

Stupa: a construction symbolic of the Buddha and the natural elements earth, water, fire, air and space/consciousness.

Shunyata: 'Emptiness', a central notion in Buddhism. It doesn't mean that things don't exist, but that they have no independent substance.

Theravada: the Hinayana school of Buddhism, founded in Ceylon around 250 B.C.E. It regards itself as the school closest to the original teachings of the Buddha. The emphasis is on the liberation of the individual, through a life of monastic discipline and meditation.

Mahayana: 'Great vehicle'; the second large school of Buddhism, emphasising the emptiness of all things and compassion.

Vajrayana: 'Diamond vehicle'; the third major school of Buddhism, developing out of the Mahayana and characterised by profound ritual practices.

Zen: A school of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in China in the 6th and 7th centuries. It stresses the importance of the Enlightenment experience and values sitting meditation as the shortest way leading to it.
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