

Calligraphy as a spiritual 'Way'

Since my early days as a calligrapher, calligraphy has meant more to me than “beautiful handwriting.” Hints about the nature of this ‘something more’ came from my first teachers, Lloyd Reynolds, who instructed me in the classroom, and Edward Johnston, whose books I read. As a student of Lloyd’s I took to heart his citation, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing!” and his compelling words, “Caress the letters lovingly onto the page.” Equally striking as his ideas, Lloyd’s own italic handwriting seemed to actually embody the intangible qualities he prized so highly: vital force, rhythm, harmony and life-movement. (See fig. 1) Indeed, written symbols drawn by his hand seemed to celebrate life just as vividly as they communicated information! Moreover, the very same qualities of vigor and energy were, I believed, those to which Edward Johnston referred when he declared: “Our aim should be to give letters life that we ourselves may have more life.” Thus, from these two seminal teachers I derived the view, if stated by neither explicitly, that letter-making was a larger, more meaningful endeavor than I had at first imagined: an undertaking by which one infused form with the energy and sensitivity of one’s own vital life spirit.

Upon completing the above studies I was still ignorant as to how I should train myself to develop this kind of calligraphy, and neither subsequent instruction nor reading offered assistance. A step toward my aim came unexpectedly from a Professor of Asian Art at the University of Washington. Glen Webb, who was also a lay Zen priest, presented a day-long class “Calligraphy as a Spiritual Discipline in the Zen Tradition” to our newly formed local calligraphy society. (Seattle, 1976) As Glen ground his ink, he told us his training at the Zen temple was primarily concerned with the practice of meditation: of redirecting our habitual mental activity in order to gain greater sensitivity and self-awareness. Since beginners, we learned, often find seated meditation painful and boring, the temple’s master prepares them by prescribing a ‘toy’ or aid. Thus, the artforms of painting, bamboo flute and calligraphy are assigned as spiritual tools, or disciplines, to help the novice to quiet an overactive mind. Although as a professional calligrapher I did not engage calligraphy for this reason, I had enjoyed such an experience; it occurred particularly when I concentrated upon the tactile and kinesthetic aspects of drawing strokes. I concluded that if calligraphy, whether Asian or Roman, was practiced with this kind of mental focus, it could be considered meditation. (As an aside Glen noted that most professional Japanese calligraphers—in a culture in which calligraphy is the highest artform—are trained in temples.)

Nonetheless, my quest did not lead me to a Zen temple, and my understanding of calligraphy as meditation went no further at that time. Meanwhile, my work as a calligrapher grew slowly and then seemed to halt abruptly. After 25 years as a professional I became deeply dissatisfied with my progress. Determined to pursue every opportunity to enhance my skill, I studied with renowned

calligraphers and returned to teaching. To accommodate students who were short on time, I offered a 2-session class, “Calligraphy with Ballpoint Pen & Pencil: Italic Handwriting.” Through exercises which focused upon movement, separate from work with form, we explored the energy of the hand-written line. We also paid careful attention to feedback from touch as our hand and arm interacted with the writing tool and surface. The connection between calligraphy and meditation was thus reactivated and I created a proposal for a class entitled “Calligraphy as Meditation.” When it was rejected, on the grounds that the school’s insurers did not permit classes containing the word ‘meditation’, I decided to delve further into my twin topic.

Fortuitously, through this research the ‘something more’ I’d felt early on that calligraphy promised gradually revealed itself to me. For artistic and spiritual growth—the enhancement of both calligraphic skills and self-awareness—it would be essential to cultivate consciousness itself: to increase the mind’s sensitivity to personal experience. Unforeseen to me, I’d embarked upon a journey of self-discovery in my desire to develop as a calligrapher. This larger project, I learned, was not without precedent: in the Japanese tradition, arts such as calligraphy are undertaken with just such an intention—as a ‘Way’ to self-knowledge. Although Roman calligraphy has not developed methods for such an endeavor, Johnston’s bold statement of our aim—“to give letters life that we ourselves may have more life”—unmistakably implies such an entwinement. Neither do we readily find such methods in the precincts of Western culture where the search for self-understanding and vitality generally take place: in philosophy, the humanities, psychotherapy and religion. Where then, does one seek a key to this spiritual enrichment? For me, guidance and methods were discovered in texts about Buddhist thought and practice. The following ideas, influenced by these readings and others from science and psychotherapy, are offered for discussion, in the spirit of exploring the potential of Roman calligraphy as a ‘Way’.

In starting our exploration I would like to examine the very definition of our calligraphic goal. If we state “beautiful handwriting,” we may be inspired and motivated; however, this common, seemingly innocuous definition might equally cause us to construe our goal as a fixed and solid thing. And, should we view it as such, as a widget to be produced, we might ignore or reject potentially fruitful avenues of expression or inquiry which seemingly stray from the goal or go beyond it. Although, in a product-oriented culture, emphasis upon the thing may be consistent, in the realm of creative work emphasis must reside in the moment-by-moment process of creation. Only in these moments can one develop and express one’s fullness of energy, feeling, skill and understanding: for the calligrapher, the substance of vital life and line. Unfortunately, a product orientation’s concern for future results may rob the calligrapher of the very focus and attention needed to create vibrant works of art.

Another pitfall of product-oriented ‘conditioning’ may be the common propensities toward self-doubt and fear of failure.¹ Fortunately, such habitual patterns of thought need not thwart artistic progress if we train our minds to become aware of them as mere thoughts, insubstantial and transitory. By regarding thoughts in this way it is possible to prevent identification with them. I would like to borrow the term ‘mindfulness’ for referring to this kind of mental training—“to keeping one’s consciousness alive”.² Mindfulness involves a state of mind which is “alert and ready to handle ably and intelligently any situation which may arise;” it is well-suited to “focusing all one’s attention on one’s work.”³ If we consider our experience of daily life and of art as determined by the quality of our consciousness, we are propelled to acknowledge the above concern with mental development.

To develop mindfulness it is beneficial to cultivate what Buddhists call ‘beginner’s mind’. The oft-told tale of a seeker who approaches a master for instruction helps to illustrate this concept. Raising his cup for the master to fill, our seeker becomes alarmed when the master continues to pour tea even after the cup has been filled. Demanding an explanation for this behavior, the seeker is told his mind is already full and making an effort to instruct him would be futile. Likewise, a student of calligraphy brings a mind filled with past instruction to a new teacher, or brings past experience with handwriting to calligraphy. In this latter case we might assume the same pen hold for handwriting is suitable for calligraphy and, by so doing, block investigation of this crucial aspect of calligraphy. Alternatively, an open mind makes it possible to explore pen hold and to develop a *calligraphic* pen hold; a hold that, while changing for various styles, also maximizes the flow of tactile and kinesthetic feedback from contact with the writing surface. Interestingly, both the scientific and Buddhist traditions find an open and receptive mind essential, and both stress the importance of adopting an attitude of ‘uncertainty’ or ‘not knowing’ to exercise it. Strangely enough, by employing such an ‘ignorant’ state of mind, my calligraphic skill and confidence have grown.

From considering the mind of the student in the learning process, we turn naturally to the role of the teacher. A beginner in calligraphy has, at best, little basis for evaluating an instructor’s skill—whether as teacher or practitioner. Therefore, until experience is gained, the beginner’s mind might ideally be characterized as one of poised alertness: open to instruction yet retaining the right to doubt or question. Let’s consult another story from Buddhist tradition for insight into the issue of educational authority. When the Buddha visited the town of Kalama, its residents voiced their confusion to him. They noted that many teachers had addressed them, but that each seemed to contradict the other. The Buddha advised them not to depend solely upon the word of others, but to seek direct, personal experience as a significant part of the educational process. His own teaching included specific methods by which to gain greater consciousness for spiritual development.

Looking at our own field of calligraphy, I’d like to consider the methods available to today’s students. Methods by definition correspond to goals and are devised to help achieve them. If we wish to continue producing calligraphy at its current level of development, then existing methods will suffice. If, however, we desire a deeper investigation of calligraphy’s potential, then, I believe, we need additional methods. Let’s consider the two faces of Roman calligraphy at present. Although a highly developed craft, calligraphy yet lacks methods for training a calligrapher to make strong strokes and letterforms, let alone refined ones. As an emerging artform, it is a largely unexplored territory awaiting discovery. Given this situation, I persisted in my own explorations and eventually stumbled upon principles and methods that have led to a path of direct experience. In the following paragraphs I’ve attempted to articulate them for the purpose of guiding and encouraging fellow calligraphers.

The Principle of Meditation

Meditation is a process of focusing the mind upon an object to develop mental awareness. In Buddhist practice, the breath is usually chosen as this object. Calligraphy provides several possible objects upon which to concentrate: stroke, breath and stroke, pen-hold, arm movement, finger sensitization, etc. Whether the focus is upon such an object, or the breath as in traditional ‘spiritual’ training, mind and body are united and reciprocal; they become one in the act of meditation.⁴ In meditating upon an object—paying attention to a bodily act such as breathing or drawing a stroke—one trains the mind to be fully present, or ‘awakened’. Each moment may thus be encountered consciously, ‘mindfully’, and not enacted automatically, robotically, with the mind elsewhere. Through breath

meditation training, the basic act of life—breathing—is transformed from an unconscious act to a conscious one. I propose that calligraphers regard stroke-making as the basic act of letter-making and aim to bring it to complete consciousness. Just as a meditator employs a variety of breathing techniques to develop focus and the ability to fully experience each moment, so, too, the calligrapher may apply stroke-making methods for this purpose. Toward realizing this aim I have written a book, *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey*,⁵ which offers exercises for stroke exploration.

The Complete Development of the Calligraphic Mind

Calligraphy is a complex activity involving many skills. To understand its forms we must learn to analyze the visual relationships that determine calligraphic form. Such relationships include proportion, scale and pen angle. In addition, to ‘embody’ these forms we must gain physical control of an unfamiliar two-cornered instrument by learning to engage its dynamics: the pressure and friction generated in the interactive process of moving it in space and making contact with a surface. To develop the concentration needed to attend to these varied activities, simultaneously, requires mental training. Unless the beginning calligrapher has already engaged in drawing, which combines the visual, tactile and kinesthetic senses, she will be unable to attend to all three as needed. The usual emphasis upon the visual sense alone in calligraphic instruction restricts attention to one dimension of the art while neglecting the other two.

Both the beginner and developing calligrapher need to also cultivate the tactile and kinesthetic senses to fully understand calligraphy and express it as an art. Likewise, the growth of concentration is essential if a calligrapher wishes to practice with a fully perceiving mind—a mind capable of processing information from the interaction of the visual, tactile and kinesthetic senses. Fortunately, concentration, like a muscle, can be strengthened and stretched by working it! By including stroke exercises in our calligraphic practice, which focus upon the tactile and kinesthetic senses, we enable the mind to develop perceptual strength with all three senses.

Feeling: A Process of Interaction

Sensitivity to touch grows as we bring awareness to our fingers: as they hold-touch the pen in the act of making contact with the writing surface through movement. Via the pen, the fingers ‘touch’ the writing surface. (Finally I could appreciate Lloyd Reynolds’ enjoinder to “Caress the letters lovingly onto the page.”) Since touch is experienced through movement, an awareness of the arm and shoulder exerting pressure and producing friction greatly expanded the sense of corporeal involvement and ‘embodiment’. Unexpectedly, in the process of engaging my shoulder and arm, in addition to my fingers, ‘feeling’, as in sensation—signals from the senses—became ‘feeling’, as in emotional feeling. Just as the words ‘touch’ and ‘move’ may shift in meaning from sense perception to emotional state, so, too, purely physical-perceptual calligraphic acts expanded into ‘felt’ acts. Now, strokes truly had the potential to become expressive gestures. Awakening to this dimension of calligraphic experience was like finding a calligraphic ‘rosetta stone’—through it the marks of letterform could be translated by felt, gestural motion into living, ‘embodied’ line!

Rediscovering Practice and Discipline

By approaching calligraphy as a Way—a spiritual tool or discipline—practicing became satisfying in itself. The effort of discipline became more like a discipleship; daily, I was motivated by a desire

to discover its teachings. Thus the terms ‘practice’ and ‘discipline’ were freed from their common, and at best ambivalent, connotations. By employing calligraphy as meditation, a Way of training the mind in awareness and concentration, I found a path to directly experience its vital nexus—the interplay between mind, body and writing tools. Applying principles and methods from Buddhist tradition to this calligraphic interaction both supports and strengthens an effort to investigate my life more broadly—to cultivate awareness, self-knowledge and vitality. As Edward Johnston must himself have known, through the process of giving life to letters we ineluctably give greater life to ourselves.

Notes

1. Some of my private students begin lessons by expressing such concerns and we recognize that part of their learning process may involve psychotherapy or ‘mindfulness’ training.
2. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh. (Beacon Press Books, 1987)
3. Ibid, p. 14.
4. Ibid, p.23. “Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind, the element which reconciles our body and mind and which makes possible one-ness of body and mind.”
5. *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey*, Gina Jonas. (Published by Gina Jonas, 2006. Available from John Neal, Bookseller: 1-800-369-9598 and Paper & Ink Arts, Ltd.: 1-800-736-7772)