

Expressive Nature by Dana Marshall

How has Buddhist spirituality influenced my art and relationship to nature?

Buddhism and Art are like threads of DNA that have been woven into the very fabric of my life. I have been practicing and studying Tibetan Buddhism for over 40 years. This way inspires my art making path.

I will share the artwork from my exhibition **Expressive Nature** (Kasteel Groeneveld, Summer 2024) of three different bodies of work made over a period of three years.

First I would like to begin with a story about how I first came in touch with the Buddha dharma - the teachings of the Buddha. The year was 1972 and the place was Tail of the Tiger in Vermont. My father arranged for me to receive meditation instruction from the Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who was instrumental in bringing Buddhism to the West. I was ten years old at the time. The title Rinpoche means precious jewel or teacher.

Rinpoche and I were alone in a room and he asked me why do you want to meditate. I thought oh no you caught me on the first question. I said, "I don't want to meditate, my daddy wants me to". There was then a long pause. Clearly Rinpoche was not going to give me meditation instruction if I didn't want to receive it. So I asked "Can I go play now?" He nodded and said yes. As I was leaving we looked at each other and through non verbal communication I said I will come back when I am ready and he said I know you will.

Seven years later I was ready to explore meditation and I jumped into the deep end of a one month long intensive retreat at the age of 17. It was a powerful experience and that is when the Buddha Dharma entered my blood stream but I didn't want to be a Buddhist I wanted to be an Artist!

So I went to the School of Visual Arts in NYC and the next four years developed my skills as a fine art photographer graduating in 1985 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. While attending art school I was also training in the practice of meditation and studying the Buddha Dharma. Dharma means teachings, truth or path.

In 1988 at 25 I went to a three month long Buddhist Seminary where we studied and practiced the three yanas or vehicles of Buddhism; Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

In 1989 I moved to Amsterdam and attended the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten, a post academic, two-year international artist residency with a focus on research and experimentation.

Since then I have been weaving the path of dharma with the path of art making. The themes of interconnectedness, impermanence, appreciation for details in nature, beauty and basic goodness are guiding principles in my art and life.

How has my art path been inspired by being a Buddhist practitioner?



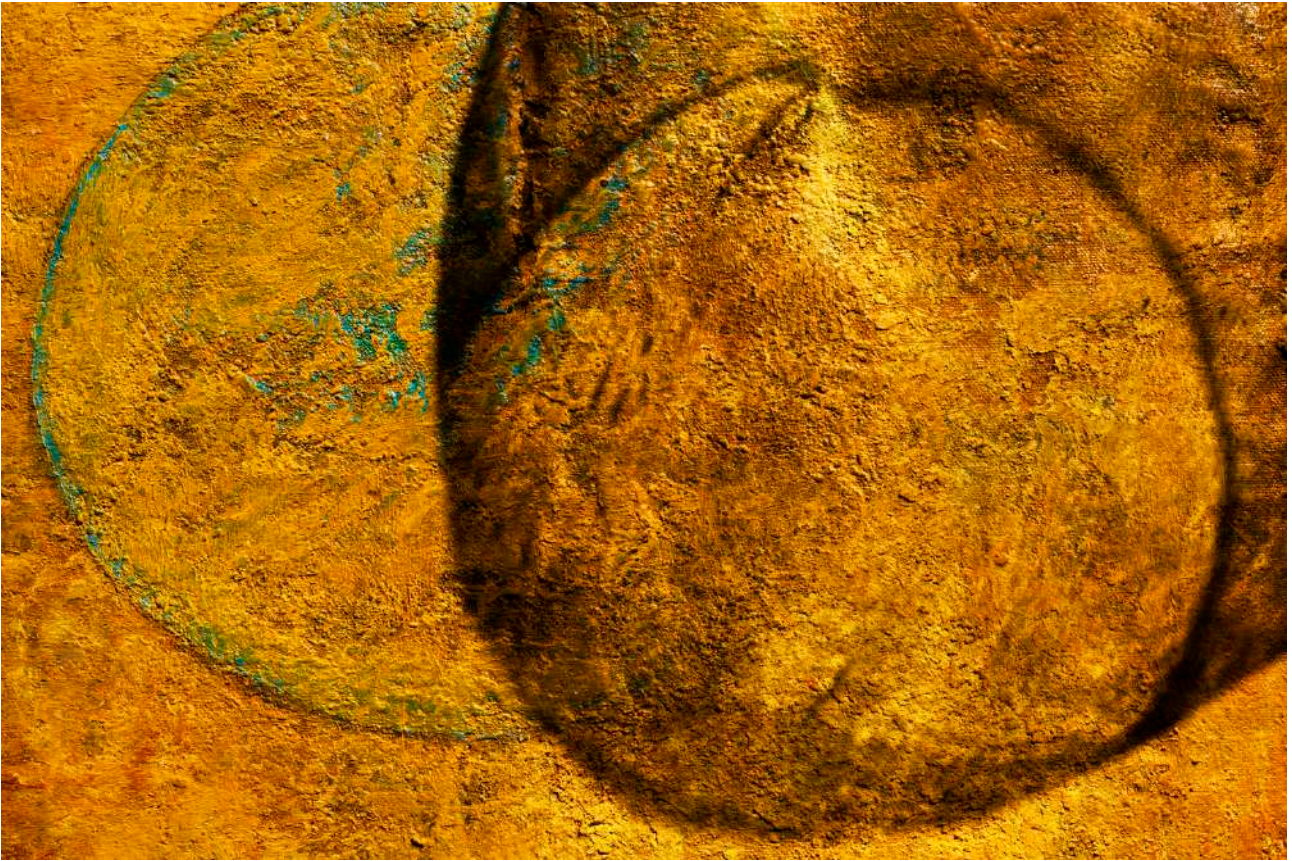
© Dana Marshall from the series [Dissolving the Boundaries](#)

Transformation is a common thread that connects my spiritual and artistic journeys. The Buddha dharma teaches how to transform confusion into wisdom by using obstacles as fertiliser for the path of wakefulness.

That approach has shaped how I create: Embracing the beauty of imperfection and impermanence and seeing the sacred in the ordinary. I have been trained to lean into the open space of not knowing and be led by creation itself.

The artworks in **Expressive Nature** explore light, texture, colour, nature and brilliance through the mediums of painting and photography. I create still life's and work primarily in the studio. The objects used are taken out of their narrative context, allowing the viewer to experience something familiar in a new way.

The work explores the boundary between real and imagined and offers a visual experience that is rich and expressive in nature. I use photography like a chef uses fire to melt the individual ingredients into a whole, like alchemy transforming metal into gold. The imagery is becoming more abstract, leaving behind the reference point of an object and venturing into the realm of the senses.



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How has my work evolved over the years?

Since I found my voice as an artist in my second year of art school I discovered that I had an affinity for creating a world and exploring that world with my camera.

My work happens in stages. There is a painting phase, a collecting phase and a phase where everything comes together, the photography phase. Although there is an element of control because I work in the studio and make still lives, there is actually a lot of discovery, chance and magic.

The collaboration with chance takes place in the studio and extends to everyday life through the way things speak to me. This aspect of chance is something I ride and thrive on as an artist. My process blurs the line between the real and imagined with a reverence for beauty and the mystery of life.

The visual language that has developed over the years is tactile and sensory, based on painting, collage and photography. I combine natural objects with textures and rich colours. The work is fertile, lush and abundant, playing the edge between decay and bloom, thing and no thing.



© Dana Marshall from the series [Luminosity](#)

How do I come up with my ideas?

My process is discovery AS creation. My work does not begin with a concept but rather with a question. The question is: 'What if'?

My eyes and ears are open, my antennae are up. I draw inspiration from my life, but also from books, conversations, my meditation practice; the breadcrumb trail of my existence. I never know exactly where inspiration will come from, but I have trained myself to be open to it when it does.

It's part commitment, part intuition and part magic. You can talk about it, think about it and plan all you want, but there always comes a point when you have to walk to the edge of the diving board, hold your nose and jump. And that's exciting.

What do I want my work to evoke in the viewer?

What drives me to make the work is curiosity and longing. A longing to connect with the unseen and somehow make it visible. Making art is a way to give voice to the unspeakable.

My intention with my artwork is to connect the viewer to a sense of wonder and appreciation for beauty, impermanence and nature. Both nature outside, but also to one's true nature. Ultimately I hope that it brings people into connection with their own basic goodness when they look at the work.



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What is the relationship between basic goodness, my art and nature?

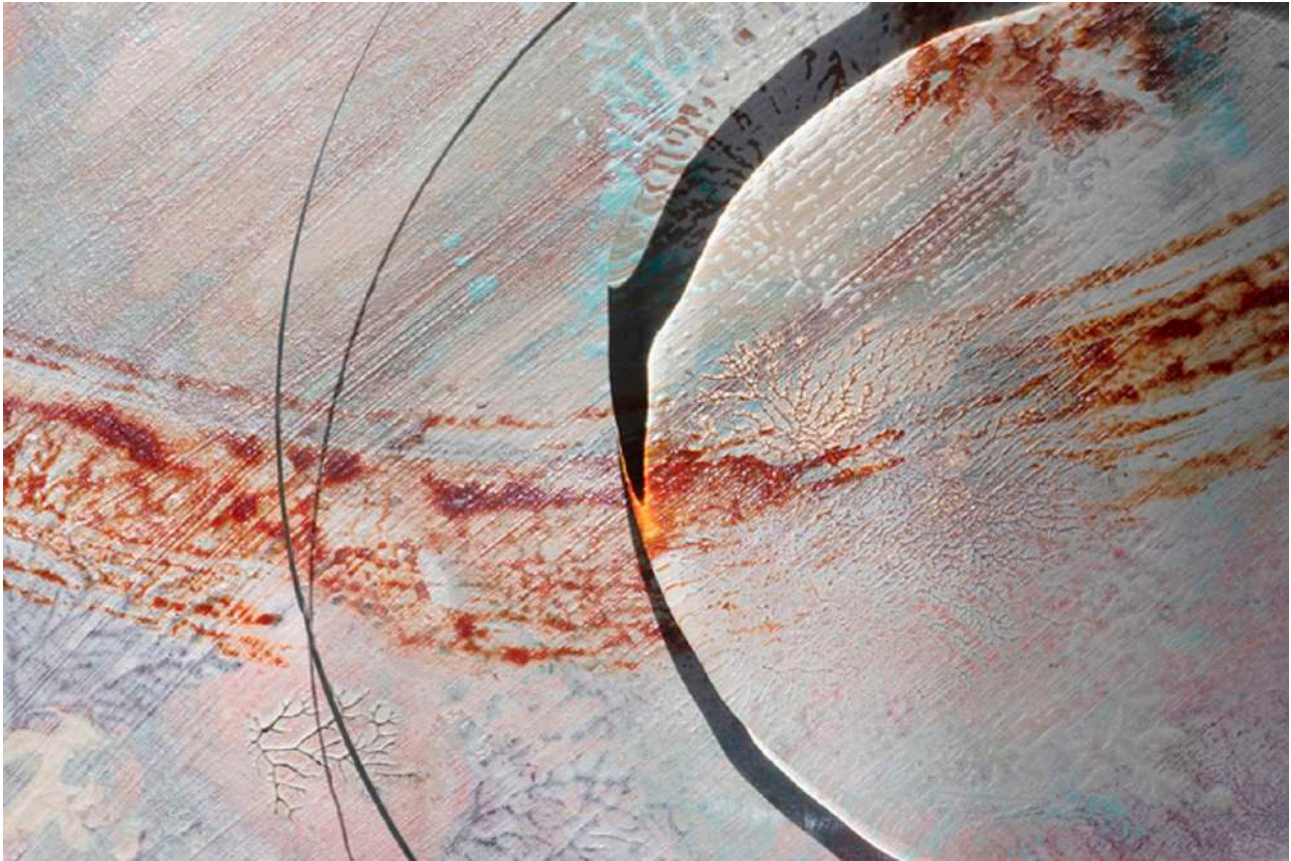
What is this basic goodness that I am referring to? The premise of basic goodness is profound and simple at the same time. It is connected with an open, fresh, warm, intelligent, compassionate aspect of our being but it is easily missed, covered over, or taken for granted.

Basic goodness is a term coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who escaped from Tibet in 1959 and witnessed the complete devastation of his country. Rather than this destroying him he came out proclaiming teachings on basic goodness as a way to benefit society.

My art work is an expression of that connection to basic goodness. It is that connection that fuels the art and my life. Meditation practice helps me to connect to an unconditional confidence that is not dependent on outer circumstances. This manifests as unfolding expression. When I am tapped into that then the art can be free. It almost creates itself.

The dharma practice and teachings are like food for this process. The work in **Expressive Nature** is expressing this nature, it is expressing this basic goodness.

In conclusion I would like to acknowledge that the world is in turmoil. Now more than ever, it's important to reconnect with our inherent goodness, as it can bring light to these dark and uncertain times. By recognising the beauty and preciousness of life, we can inspire and uplift both ourselves and those around us. It is time to remember what cannot be destroyed, what is unconditional, transformative, and powerful.



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I'll conclude with a quote from Leonard Cohen — poet, songwriter, and Zen practitioner.

"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

Dana Marshall, May 2025

Biography:

Dana Marshall is a visual artist, born in Brooklyn, New York and living and working in the Netherlands since 1989. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in NYC (1985) and pursued postgraduate training at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (1989-1991).

Her work is in public and private collections;

Tate Gallery (London), Victoria and Albert Museum (London),
Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco) ,
Getty Center (Santa Monica),
Bart Hartkamp (Amsterdam), Manfred Heiting (Malibu).

For an impression of Dana's work visit: www.dmarshall.nl