



A CONVERSATION  
WITH Rosalyn White

## PAINTING IN THE DHARMA

“In Tibetan Buddhist art there are many guidelines one must follow for the proportions and iconography, and the process is seen as a devotional one.”

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*Pavi Mehta was responsible for my first visit (May 2019) to the Nyingma Institute's Conference Center, Ratna Ling. Would I be interested in participating in an intimate circle with some of the conference center's staff? Pavi and Viral Mehta of ServiceSpace would be anchoring the circle. I jumped at the opportunity.*

*The drive north from Oakland along Hwy. 1 on a splendid Sunday morning was spectacular. Arriving finally, high along a ridge overlooking the Pacific, I was stunned by the beauty of the place. Fellow ServiceSpace volunteer, Chris Johnnidis and I were met warmly and led to a large room where we took our places in the circle.*

*Pavi opened with a couple of minutes of silence and for the next two hours we all participated in an exchange of rare sincerity. As I listened, I was struck by the sensitivity of each person, most of whom were strangers to me. It was my introduction to one of the Nyingma Institute's projects and it's where I met Ratna Ling's co-director, Rosalyn White. Some months earlier, Pavi had mentioned meeting White—a longtime practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism under the guidance of Tarthang Tulku—who, for close to fifty years had painted most of the traditional images needed by the institute in its many forms.*

*This interview, in which my wife, artist Rue Harrison participated, is one of the gifts of Mehta's graceful, and seemingly endless, use of skillful means.—R. Whittaker*

**works:** I thought it would be interesting to get a little bit of your background. All four of your grandparents are from Russia and you end up being born in Tennessee.

**Rosalyn White:** That's right. My dad was a lawyer and his first job out of college was at the Tennessee Valley Authority Hydroelectric power plant. He worked there for two years. I was born shortly after they got there.

**works:** Then your dad got involved in the Kennedy Administration somehow.

**Rosalyn:** He went to law school at the University of Nebraska with Theodore Sorensen, who was one of Kennedy's close aides. When Sorensen was working for John Kennedy as a senator, my dad was invited to come and join the staff. So we moved to Washington. Then when Kennedy was in the White House, he asked him to join the staff.

**works:** So you must have gone to high school in Washington D.C.?

**Rosalyn:** I did—well, in the Maryland suburbs.

**works:** And you got interested in art in high school?

**Rosalyn:** Yes, but I'd done some art before that. When I just a little girl, my mom sent me to take some art lessons. One of her friends had seen one of my pieces and put it in an art show of children's work.

**works:** So what are your earliest memories of getting interested in art?

**Rosalyn:** When family and friends would come to visit us in Washington, D.C., one of the tourist attractions my parents would take us to was the National Gallery of Art. I remember being so in awe of the building and the wonderful collections. It's still my favorite museum to visit. In my last year of high school, I started drawing and found out, “Oh, I can do this!” I think that's when I started getting interested in exploring the field.

**works:** It must have been a pretty significant interest because you decided to go to art school.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. I was supposed to go to Antioch College, but I came out to California in the summer before that for a visit. I just loved it as soon as I got here. I thought, okay, this is my place to be, and then I decided to go to school out here. It was in 1969. There was a lot of buzz about San Francisco, you know. I had some friends here and decided to stay.

**works:** In 1969 there was still a lot in the air from the hippie era. Did you get involved in that at all?

**Rosalyn:** Yes, somewhat. I was attracted to the free-spiritedness of it, especially growing up in Washington where things were a little more conservative. I was just attracted to the openness of the ideas.

**Rue Harrison:** What was CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts] like when you were there?

**Rosalyn:** Well, for me it was good because it provided some structure. There was all this change in the air and you could get carried away. But CCAC was kind of grounding. There were a lot of studio classes, and that helped because you're doing something concrete. It was fairly rigorous in the expectations for the students and forced me to focus on the work.

**Rue:** Were you mostly in painting and drawing or did you go into other media?

**Rosalyn:** I was like a kid in a candy store! I did not study printmaking or glass blowing, but I did almost everything else that was offered! I actually started out as a sculpture major, then studied weaving and pottery, photography and filmmaking. But by the end, I'd become focused mainly on drawing and painting.

**Rue:** I read that you came to the Bay Area about the same time that Rinpoche did.



**Rosalyn:** Yes. We both came in 1969, but I didn't meet him for two or three years.

**works:** I wanted to ask about that. You found him through Tail of the Yak, that little store on Ashby Ave. [Berkeley], right?

**Rosalyn:** Do you know that place?

**Rue:** Yes. It's still there and I love it!

**works:** So tell the story of how that happened.

**Rosalyn:** I was attracted to the store. They had beautiful Tibetan carpets, which I'd never seen before. They're small, just about 3' x 6' and very colorful. At the time I was studying weaving and they really spoke to me.

**Rue:** We have one that has a tiger on it.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. They have animals such as tigers and dragons and other Tibetan motifs such as lotus flowers on them. I went in and talked with the shopkeepers. The shop was run by a couple of

[Doing 100,000 prostrations is one of the five preliminary practices.]

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“As I remember, you can do about 500 in an hour. So I would do about an hour a day. You count them with a mala—it’s like a rosary—and you have a little notebook where you keep track. It took me about a year, I believe.”

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students of Tarthang Tulku. One of them encouraged me to go and meet him. At that time he was meeting people on Wednesday afternoons. So I went and met him and later started taking some of seminars that he was offering.

**Rue:** And he had that house in the Berkeley Hills?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. It’s called the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center. It’s right near the UC Berkeley stadium. They had already gotten that building by the time I met him and that’s where he was doing his teaching.

**works:** Let’s go back to the Tail of the Yak. There was always something slightly mysterious about that place, I thought. Do you think there are these subtle things we sometimes pick up on? Maybe I’m making too much out of it.

**Rosalyn:** Oh, no. I think very much so.

**works:** It was your entry into this whole life.

**Rosalyn:** Right. I think it was the Tibetan art that drew me into the teachings. Then the ideas, and the

experience of meditation I had through Tarthang Tulku’s seminars, further interested me. It was like, “Oh, I’ve never felt this calm and this peaceful.” And the art hinted at the more complex and profound teachings. Also in the early years, there were some Tibetan art shows that his organization put on. One was at Grace Cathedral and one at Lone Mountain College in San Francisco. Another one was held at Live Oak Park in Berkeley. These exhibits of Tibetan art truly inspired me.

**works:** You went through four years at CCAC. They were good years?

**Rosalyn:** Yes, they were!

**works:** That was an incredible time. I lived just a few blocks from the Haight Ashbury in those days. And so CCAC helped you not get carried off the deep end.

**Rosalyn:** So you know what I’m talking about. [laughs]

**Rue:** But there’s something about how the ‘60s and being in art school—in a way, it’s almost like a cult of the individual—*my* work. Then you walked into the Tail of the Yak and something in you was prepared enough to be able make this leap that’s not at all about the Western approach to art. There must have been something powerful that you met. Can you say something about that?

**Rosalyn:** You are so right to point this out. In Western art, you have almost unlimited freedom in what you’re allowed to portray, and the emphasis is on creating your own unique and innovative vision. In Tibetan Buddhist art there are many guidelines one must follow for the proportions and iconography, and the process is seen as a devotional one. It’s an offering of your efforts and talent to create something that will inspire others to look inward and perhaps take some steps on a spiritual path. Tibetan artists do not sign their names on their work. The process is more about letting go of one’s ego rather than embellishing it.

**Rue:** It seems like you were attracted to the teaching—the deep calm you experienced and all of that. Or did you feel a deep connection with Tarthang Tulku yourself?

**Rosalyn:** I felt a deep connection to the teachings and also felt that Tarthang Tulku was the right teacher for me. I had not really been seeking a spiritual path, but once I met Rinpoche, I found that everything he taught about Buddhism and its practices spoke very deeply to me.

**works:** I'm interested to hear about your relationship with thankas and the actual art making. I imagine your relationship with Rinpoche deepened and you asked to be a student of his.

**Rosalyn:** Yes.

**works:** He must have asked you to do the five preliminary practices, but were you doing any illustrations and paintings before that?

**Rosalyn:** I started the preliminary practices first. This was while I was still in school. At that time, to become Rinpoche's student was a formal process. It took me three attempts until he said yes. At that time, our sangha was having four ceremonies a month at Padma Ling. So we'd participate in the ceremonies. And at that time, we were also doing the preliminary practices.

**works:** One of them is the 100,000 prostrations. That catches people's attention.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. I'm really glad I did them when I was young. [laughs]

**works:** Just talk a little about carrying out that practice.

**Rosalyn:** As I remember, you can do about 500 in an hour. So I would do about an hour a day. You count them with a mala—it's like a rosary—and you have a little notebook where you keep track. It took me about a year, I believe.

**works:** Did your inner relationship with the prostrations change at all going through that?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. Prostrations develop your sense of humility, which allows you to open to the deeper meaning of the teachings. In traditional Buddhist texts, they talk about how we can be like a cup that is turned upside down, providing no receptivity for receiving

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the teachings. By giving up some of our pride, we can turn the cup over and have a vessel for receiving the teachings.

It has to do with breaking down the separation we have with other beings. Instead of seeing ourselves as separate from others, we see that we are just one of the many millions of beings in our universe. It helps us appreciate our connection with others and that actually can bring us greater joy than when we try to maintain a separate and often superior view of ourselves.

**works:** I recognize something in what you're describing from my own sitting practice. There's a transformation that can begin where you can become more open to something much larger.

**Rosalyn:** I think it leads into the concept of compassion. In Buddhism we talk about the “two wings of enlightenment,” which are wisdom and compassion. The wisdom is what you develop through meditation practices, and then compassion is the active quality where you do something of help in the world. I think the prostrations are kind of the initial step to act compassionately and open you to doing something of



benefit for the world. Then ultimately, I think the more you can do what's of benefit to the world, the more it benefits you.

**works:** With that, I think we've jumped all the way from the '60s to today and almost 50 years of your practice. And during that time you've done a tremendous amount of art for Dharma Publishing and Odiyan.

**Rue:** So much! I mean, you were very modest when you were talking to me last night. You've done so much!

**Rosalyn:** In the early years, I lacked the confidence to work quickly and effectively. My nature was also to be rather lazy. But in the Tibetan view of life, we have very little time to accomplish something of value. So our teacher, Tarthang Tulku, is always pushing us to accomplish as much as possible in our limited time. It often felt like being chased by a tiger, but looking

back, I deeply appreciate being pushed beyond my limits time and again. I'm born in the year of the rabbit, according to the Tibetan calendar. Rabbits run, and then they stop, and that's when they rest. So I've had to find my laziness in little pockets.

**Rue:** You know, having so many deadlines and so many projects, if you wanted to develop, both spiritually and artistically, you were given so much, so many challenges. It's just incredible how many things you had to design and draw and paint and figure out.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. There are three main schools of Buddhism: Theraveda, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Theraveda, practiced in Southeast Asia, is connected to the Buddha's direct, early teachings. Mahayana, developed later in Japan and China, focuses on meditation practices and understanding the nature of mind. Vajrayana, practiced in Tibet and Mongolia, focuses on direct realization through extensive meditation practices and acts of service. It is called the steep path because it offers a very vigorous path to become enlightened in one lifetime.

**Rue:** So that would mean commitment—and clearly you're very committed—and a lot of meditation, but also acts of service? Is that where the dynamism would be?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. You develop your wisdom through meditation, and compassion is developed through your work—working selflessly and endlessly [laughs]. All the time!

**Rue:** I read that for five years you didn't paint anything, you just drew. Was that an apprenticeship?

**Rosalyn:** The traditional way of learning Tibetan art is to draw with a tiny brush and ink. The idea is that you get very good at being able to draw these very fine lines. You are also learning the iconography, the motifs and the spirit that the art portrays. After the five years of training, you are allowed to move onto painting.

**Rue:** I have a very minimal experience with this because I studied and took an icon class. Just the whole thing of being in an attentive state and trying to make perfect straight lines or perfect curved lines—that's a pretty spare and demanding practice, right there.

**Rosalyn:** Yes, it is. But I loved it! [laughs] If I had just been using a pen it would not have been as nice. But drawing with a brush is just beautiful. I love working with brushes for the drawings or the paintings. And in Tibetan art, after you finish painting your shapes, you outline everything with very fine lines which gives a very sharp and clear finish to the work. All that fine brush practice starts to come in very handy!

**Rue:** Did you have a teacher? How did you learn?

**Rosalyn:** Tartang Tulku guided me. He's not an artist himself, but he has a very keen sense of what the art should look like. He has a finely developed aesthetic sense. I'd start with tracing block prints or other traditional Tibetan drawings and paintings, and he would give feedback: "Oh, no! That's too big! That's too small! More graceful! Stronger! Bolder!"—things like that.

**Rue:** So there'd be a block print and you'd have a piece of vellum and then your ink and your brush—and nothing in between the brush and the tracing. Not a line drawing or graphite or anything?

**Rosalyn:** I used a light table, and would work on drawing paper, not vellum. Sometimes I would trace the image in pencil and then go over it in India ink. But as I got a little more experienced, I would just go directly in ink, except for certain areas that were a little complex, I would draw them first.

**Rue:** Oh, I've worked with a light table. I'd have a sketch that I'd done and then I'd do a drawing over it. It's different when you have that confident support of what you want to make underneath. There's a little freedom even though you're tracing. The drawings can actually be quite different, in a way, from what's underneath, and they're still within the form. Is that the kind of thing that Tarthang Tulku would see in your work, like "this one is closer to the right energy and quality"?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. He'd encourage that, actually. If the one I was tracing was not as graceful as it could be, he would ask me to make it better.

**works:** So let's say that Rinpoche had encouraged you that way, or given some criticisms of that sort.

Can you say more about the kind of improvements he'd be guiding you towards?

**Rosalyn:** What he was really trying to have me develop was a way to express my best inner qualities and talent through the art, with as little ego as possible! He tried to encourage a gracefulness and freshness to the designs, while also being bold and expressive and innovative. I still needed to work within an iconography that had a lot of specificity, but over time I learned how to be true to both the traditions and the innovation that was possible within it.

The critiques I received about my work were often very direct, and that helped greatly with getting the ego out of the way! After sweeping my ego up off of the floor, I was usually ready to approach the work with a fresh perspective that would inevitably greatly improve the results, often in spite of my initial resistance to the ideas. This art needs to be coming from a deeper level than from your ego for it to be authentic.

**works:** This is a fundamental difference between Western art and the kind of traditional art you're talking about.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. The way I was taught in art school is more like it's important to develop your own vision and do something creative that has never been done before. You know, be on the cutting edge. So yes, it is different than that.

**works:** It's dramatically different and, in the West, I don't think we can understand it without some training or being part of some spiritual path. This discipline and submitting to the criticisms of your teacher—would you say something about the benefits of that path and where it can lead you?

**Rosalyn:** I think what it does is clear away your limitations. It allows you to have much more access to your deepest inner strengths and then to be able to use those for the benefit of your art, or for the benefit of helping others, because you are not protecting your ego. You are not hiding. Everything comes out into the open. [laughs] So that is freeing. You can just get out there and do what needs to be done.

**Rue:** I'm thinking of the training this morning that

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George Wiegand gave. He touched on how there are all these outer attractions, and then there’s the inner that we never see because we don’t develop it, and we’re not aware of it. And, in a way, you’re saying that this art practice with the thankas is similar. You have to find a way to go into a deeper part of yourself in order for this kind of beauty to emerge. So a really different feedback loop is needed. Is that a way of speaking about it?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. It’s similar to this space you enter when you’re in meditation. You still have all your faculties, but you’re using them in a different way than in our day-to-day life. You’re using them to support your deeper connection to the energy, the spirit of the world, other beings, the environment, and so I think when you can tap into that energy with the art, it has more power. It speaks more deeply to people.

In fact, I’ve seen a lot of Tibetan art, because I study it. There is some art that’s maybe not as beautiful, or the artist was not as accomplished, technically, but so much heart comes through in the work. It’s like “Wow! Who did this art?” There’s a liveliness and spirit in it. I think that’s what you’re pointing at. There’s definitely a connection between those two.

**Rue:** When I took the icon class, there were these little folds on the angel’s garment and I started to have fun painting them. The teacher came around and stopped. He said, “What is that?” He could see that I’d gone off. [all laugh together]

**Rosalyn:** I know what you’re saying. It’s like the ego, maybe, getting carried away there. “Oooh. Look at these.” [laughs]

**works:** I remember reading somewhere about a Zen student learning brush painting. He would do countless paintings, practicing. There was a big stack of them. The master would come over and start flipping through the paintings. Then he’d stop suddenly at a painting and point. “Ah. There!” Then he’d keep flipping through the stack, and suddenly stop again and point at some strokes. “Ah. There!”

**Rosalyn:** [laughs] Yes, I remember showing a drawing of a figure in an extensive landscape and getting the feedback: “That one hand is well-drawn.”

**Rue:** I want to make sure we talk a little about sacred geometry. You teach that, so how do you approach that with Tibetan thankas?

**Rosalyn:** There is a grid that they use for drawing the Tibetan art figures. It shows how many units high and wide a figure, and each part of the figure, should be. These are actually prescribed in texts that show how the art should look. It’s part of the structure of how to learn, and also to keep things from getting too distorted or personalized. That is just one level, the very basic level.

In Tibetan art, what we are aiming to show is both macrocosm and microcosm at the same time. For the macrocosm, if we look in the right way, we can see the beauty and balance in our outer world portrayed in a painting. We see the four elements in harmony. There’s going to be fire—something showing heat—and earth and air and water—all of the elements are there. The figures are going to be there in a very balanced way. There’s going to be a beautiful landscape, or suggestion of landscape. This is a macrocosmic depiction of the external world in perfect balance. It points to the kind of experience you can have within your own mind, and that can be a reflection of this—a more personal, or the microcosmic, world in balance.



This is what it looks like in your mind's eye, and this is what you can experience in yourself through meditation, getting in touch with this ground where everything is balanced and beautiful. So that is what the geometry is about, and the imagery in general. It's pointing us in this direction. Sometimes the Tibetan paintings are called "maps to enlightenment." They are a graphic depiction of the enlightened mind.

You can talk about it. You can write about it—the openness of the mind—but sometimes, and for some people, seeing it is a little more direct, or quicker, or easier to understand. It's like when your heart and mind are really open, and you're relaxed and not held in by your ego, this is what emerges. It's just another way of showing people the path.

**works:** So I'd like to go back to "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." I mean, it could be difficult to say anything about that, but are you willing to give it a try?

**Rosalyn:** When I lived in Berkeley, we chanted the Heart Sutra every day. The essential verses to me are: "Form is emptiness, emptiness itself is form; emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness."

To me, that is the Buddha's teaching in a nutshell. In a sense, we are form, we are made up of molecules and atoms, but so is the space around us, and the chair, too. Can we be aware that we are all just made up of these molecules in this magic show that is the world? We are not necessarily so different, or separate. We are really just part of this continuum of existence. When we can keep aware of this, it keeps us less focused on "Oh, poor me. I have all these problems."

Instead, it can be, "Okay, this is life. Life has problems. Life has challenges." Then there is this flow between us and others and our environment that happens. So it's just changing your perspective. It's like these mirrors in our cars at night; you flip it up and you see it one way, flip it down and you see it another way. You put your glasses on; you take them off. It's a different perspective.

Most of the time we're in this little bubble where we have all these problems and we're separate from the world and everybody else. But if we can just flip it open like, "Okay, I'm just part of this continuum of existence," then it makes a difference in our perspective and in our view of ourselves and our life.



**Rue:** And that's where the practice comes in, because you can't keep that perspective unless you're working to help create the connection with the sense that is also another way to look at everything.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. Because for some reason, as human beings, our default is this more closed state. [laughs]. You have to make an effort to open things up. I don't know why. It's just the way we're made. But if you make the effort, then life gets so much better; it gets much richer and more dynamic and fulfilling. But for some reason we keep doing it the hard way.

**works:** It seems that I'm kind of spring-loaded to always come back to this bubble that you mentioned. But that's the practice, right, struggling with this?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. I think all of us, even those of us who have been practicing for almost fifty years, have this tendency to close down and let our ego create shells for us to hide in. Sustained and concentrated periods of meditation seem to be one of the best antidotes to this. It's very common in the Tibetan tradition that when you finish the five preliminary practices you

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go on silent retreat for three years, three months and three days. And meditating like that, for long periods of time, you can get into a really deep space where the spring-loaded thing does not happen so fast. You just get really open. I’ve done various retreats from one week long to about two months long. You get to a different level of consciousness, a different space. It almost gets hard to talk again because you’re in this really different state of mind.

There are wonderful stories in the Buddhist canon, including those about the eighty-four Mahasiddhas in India. They each met a teacher and were given a practice. They mostly practiced the teaching for up to twelve years and through that became enlightened. It is possible to transcend that tendency to close ourselves off to our deepest selves and our profound connection to our world. But for most people it takes really concentrated time in meditation away from the distractions of daily life. But it is possible to make great strides towards this, even with a short meditation practice each day.

**works:** We read earlier about how much you love thanka painting. Would you say something about that?

**Rosalyn:** Well, I really like painting with the brush. There’s something very nice about the flow of it.

**Rue:** The little tiny brush?

**Rosalyn:** We usually use a larger brush to fill in the larger sections, but after you’ve painted the forms, you go over and outline everything with a very tiny brush. It crisps things up nicely. I like working with the brush and the fluidity of the wet medium. Also, working with the Tibetan iconography is very inspirational. It is very detailed and precise, but you just plug away at it, one section or form at a time, and then at the end of the day you sit back and say, “Wow! Look at that! How did this image emerge?” [laughs]

Of course, you’re struggling—“Is this the right shade of this color? Is it too strong for what else is going on there?” You’re struggling with those aesthetic decisions. But those are kind of fun, too. But mostly, the imagery is so beautiful to work with. It’s very satisfying to complete a painting and find that it has the ability to inspire others as well as the artist who painted it.

**works:** Did you paint any of these thankas here?

**Rosalyn:** That one [pointing] and those three against the wall. That first one, the original is 4’ tall by 6’ wide. It’s from a mural in the Odiyan Temple showing the life of the Buddha. There are seven different images and this was the final one. He’s passing away and becoming enlightened at the same time.

**works:** And those other three are reproductions, too?

**Rosalyn:** Yes. Usually I work about 32” tall by 22” wide. Actually, I have one here that I’ve just started if you would like to see it. [retrieves a framed, stretched piece of fabric and we walk over to a window] This is one of a series of six paintings of great Tibetan teachers. You can see the drawing is on the back. I just hold it up to the window in order to be able to see through the canvas. [demonstrates] I use a technical pen to draw the lines because the ink is waterproof. First you transfer the drawing onto the canvas and then it’s best to paint the background first. You do the sky and the hills and then start working on the clouds and then the figures. You do the faces last.

**Rue:** How long will it take you to finish this one?

**Rosalyn:** Something this complicated I used to do in a month or two. I started a series before I came here six years ago and finished a couple of them, but now I have very little time to put into the art.

**Rue:** When you were doing a lot of this kind of work, would you have a whole morning to work before you had other duties?

**Rosalyn:** When I was doing artwork full time, I was able to get a lot done, finishing a painting in one to two months. I use silk because it's more stable than cotton. A lot of Tibetan paintings are on cotton, but when the humidity in the air affects them, they can sag.

[We return to sit where we began the interview.]

**works:** Have you ever heard of Agnes Martin?

**Rosalyn:** I don't know of her.

**works:** Well, she stands out in her spiritual approach among American painters. She was quite famous, but not for that. Anyway, she said many things I find deep and wonderful, but one thing comes to mind: she called her work impersonal. So that corresponds to having to get past the ego, somehow. And she said, "All art is about beauty." Does any of that resonate for you? And how does beauty fit in here?"

**Rosalyn:** I am very aesthetically oriented and need to have beauty around me. I think that beauty and spiritual peace are connected. That's one reason we try to make Ratna Ling Retreat Center, which is associated with the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, as aesthetically pleasing as possible. It helps people relax and open their senses. I think that when you come in contact with natural and created beauty, it can open your heart and help the ego defenses relax.

**works:** Yes. We need a big definition of what beauty might mean. Maybe twenty-five years ago I heard a Tibetan Buddhist, Lobsang Rapgay, talk about "aesthetic thought." He didn't really explain what that meant, but he said some things I've never forgotten. Finally I contacted him a couple of years ago. He agreed to an interview, and I asked him to explain what he meant by aesthetic thought.

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**Rosalyn:** I think I read your interview. He's a psychologist?

**works:** Right. I think what he said might relate to "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." He said that when your mind becomes completely quiet and spaciouly open, then a healing spark of light can be seen. He'd say that if an artist is in that state while making the art, then something might be in the art as well. I think you've already said as much today.

**Rosalyn:** Yes. When you are in that open state, you're more attuned to aesthetic qualities. You may draw them more into your life and can give them more to others. You're more aware and in touch with that level of reality.

**works:** Does this happen to you in the course of making a thanka? When you're quiet enough inside, does something take place in you that's like joy?

**Rosalyn:** Oh, yes, definitely. Sometimes it's like a little ebb and flow between aesthetic struggle and the joy you find once that's resolved. The images in the thankas become my friends, my guides, in a way. When you've spent one or two months painting a



Buddha or a Tara, you have a deep connection to their being. You understand the meaning of the symbols in a very personal way.

**Rue:** After all these years of working with this imagery, now do you work from traditional compositions or are you at a point where you kind of make your own compositions?

**Rosalyn:** I do both, depending on what my teacher has asked for. This one, for instance, [pointing to a

giclée reproduction] is from a set of traditional block prints. It was a vertical composition which I converted to a horizontal one. But sometimes I still do copy an existing drawing, or sometimes I will be asked to do an original drawing.

**Rue:** So you're still in contact with Tarthang Tulku? He's available at times?

**Rosalyn:** [laughs] Yes. But it's more like I'm available to him, when some artwork is needed. ♦