

Spring in Israel

Varda Bar Nir

For as long as I can remember I have liked to paint. In grade school my teacher always encouraged my creativity, assigning me projects for decorating our school. I am a self-taught artist, and during the last few years I have been a member of a group of painters in my hometown.

Being able to free myself through art is a gift. So is meditation. Both actions give me the opportunity to look inside and reflect on my state of mind. They also give me the opportunity to practice “just do it,” which is the medicine to cure me of doubt, uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and thoughts that paralyze me.

Through painting I practice Zen meditation. That moment of action frees me from myself. When I paint I am

ment in its simple existence, in its clear evidence—a true mirror of me. Then when the right moment appears, the painting is finished and I come back to reality.

I would like to share with you a very special time when I participated in a project that joined families who had lost loved ones serving in the Israeli Army together with artists who would create artwork for the families, to commemorate those who had died. The idea of visiting one of these families filled me with self-doubt about my ability to face them. What would I say? How would I translate what I heard and felt into the artwork?

But as I learned from my Zen practice, you just do it and be in the moment. Then the situation is simple.

When I visited, only the mother agreed to talk to me at first. Then slowly the father joined the conversation. Together they told me about Aviv, their son who had lost his life in action sixteen years ago, when he was only nineteen years old. After listening to them carefully, learning about Aviv’s life, his hobbies, his friends, what he liked and disliked, I went home to digest this experience.

It was not an easy process. Time passed and nothing came up. Finally, loyal to “just do it,” I started to sketch some ideas on paper. Then I started painting on the canvas, then painting over the painting, trying to bring out my true feelings by asking myself who Aviv was and how could I best portray him. What image would present hope, love, light, and compassion?

By getting completely into the process of painting for the family, my clear mind inspired me to create this painting. The family loved the image

of a field full of red anemone flowers, and it is now hanging in their home. The name Aviv means spring. The action of painting allowed me to touch this family’s heart, arriving at this moment. ♦

Varda Bar Nir was born in Israel in 1950. She is married to an Israeli and is the mother of three daughters and grandmother of four sons. She started practicing Zen about ten years ago when she joined the Kwan Um School of Zen’s Hasharon Zen Center, which is led by Yuval Gill JDPSN. She took ten precepts in 2018 and is now a dharma-teacher-in-training.



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totally in the action. I am the painting. I enter a special state of mind through which I can express my creativity and experience serenity. I become unaware of time, without drinking or eating, not knowing who I am, not asking what am I, just doing: the movement of the hand, the angle of the body, the sharpness of the eye, moving forward and backward in front of the canvas, sometimes for hours. Often, my hand moves by itself, and what appears on the canvas is something not planned. My artist’s knife scratches, sweeps, touches gently, trying to catch the mo-