

**Music and the Liberal Arts**  
**Address to the National Association of Schools of Music**  
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**Christopher B. Nelson, President**  
**St. John's College, Annapolis, MD**

Thank you. It is an honor to be with you this morning. I think I am an unlikely visitor in your midst, as I may just have the least musical experience of anyone in this room. But I take some comfort in knowing that to be human is to be musical, and that I may thus rightly claim the familiarity with music that belongs to any human being.

I would like to unpack that little observation today in the context of our calling to teach music in our colleges and universities, particularly in those schools that place a high value on teaching the liberal arts. I come from a college that is devoted to liberal education and has in place an all-required four-year curriculum for every one of our students in the study of great literary and musical works. All of our students study mathematics (4 years), laboratory sciences (3 years), language study in ancient Greek and modern French (4 years), seminars in many of the great classics of history, philosophy, literature, theology, and political and social sciences (4 years), and last but not least, music for two years. In their freshman year, they learn basic musical notation and the reading of a musical score. As a large chorus, they all sing some of the great choral works. In their sophomore year, all students meet in small tutorials to investigate rhythm in words and in notes, ratios and musical intervals, and considerations of melody, harmony and counterpoint. They study in some detail the inventions of Bach, the songs of Schubert, the operas of Mozart, the masses of Palestrina, and the instrumental works of Beethoven. The climax of their musical studies is a six-week concentrated examination of the St. Matthew Passion.

In my remarks this morning, I would like to take you through an imaginary Convocation Address to incoming freshmen who will be studying music in a liberal arts framework. I will interrupt that Address to take us on a digression into what I see as the aim, content, heart, and public context of a liberal education, and its possibilities for self-transformation, before returning to close out my welcome to those incoming freshmen.

**Music as a Liberal Art**

When I welcome students to St. John's College, there are always some who ask why they have to sing and study music. My answer is always the same: "You don't HAVE to study music, you GET to study it. And you will learn to love to sing—or at least learn to love hearing your classmates sing. Just wait and see!" .... And they do come to love this activity of musical learning!

I would like to imagine that every college president or academic dean might occasionally welcome their college's freshmen with this reminder of something their students already know but have probably given little thought to—that they are musical beings. The Address to those freshmen might go something like this:

“Welcome to our College! Over the years, I have found myself musing that this is a particularly musical college, and I finally thought I ought to reflect out loud as to just what I might mean in thinking that. That is my intent this morning.

“Each of you has experience with music; it has lifted you up or soothed you; it has angered or frightened you; it has lightened or burdened the spirit, distracted your attention, moved your feet and your arms, inspired an act, or aroused a love; it has transported you to another time or place, or moved you in some way without your quite being aware of it. Music pervades our lives and always has. It has power. It has sometimes taken you outside of yourselves and at other times taken you deep within. For these reasons, it has often been associated with things divine.

“Not only have you had experience of the effects of music, many of you have brought music with you to the college because it plays an important part in your daily lives. You carry your iPods, MP3 players, and smart phones, playing classical music and opera, popular tunes and rock, jazz and blues, country and western, hip hop and rap. You hum, sing or play your favorites to yourselves or with others. You dance to it, sometimes throwing yourselves into the rhythm and beat. Music has its place when you are alone or with others. It serves as friend and refuge.

“Why is this? How can we come to understand the power that music has in our lives? What does it mean that we are somehow all musical beings? That to be human is somehow to be musical? That without music we would be less than human?

“Music has always had a special place in the literary tradition. Music was among the seven liberal arts as they were studied in the Middle Ages. As you will recall, those seven liberal arts were divided into the trivium, the arts of communication and language: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the quadrivium, the arts of counting and measuring: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. It turns out that music has mathematical elements that appear to be at its root. There is, for example, a correlation between the musical intervals in our everyday songs and the length of a string that can be plucked to play those sounds. In other words, we have physical phenomena, musical sounds, that have a mathematical form. Thus, there may be something in music that is grounded in nature, not just in our sensibility, suggesting a model of the very mathematical physics you will be studying in your physical sciences laboratory. Music makes the claim that it can be studied objectively. And this causes us again to ask in what way nature might be as musical as we human beings are.

“We read, listen to, study, or perform great works of musical imagination that constitute the heritage of mankind, just as we do the great works of literary imagination. They have sprung from many civilizations and have spanned the centuries. They are the building blocks and cornerstones of our edifices in the humanities, arts and sciences. When I speak of works of musical imagination, I mean any work that might be said to belong to the ancient Muses, works of poetry or of musical or artistic composition, where the chief work of the author, composer, artist, or performer is the making of powerful images or likenesses of things.

“Consider some of the great masterpieces of musical imagination that we will help you explore, like Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. Measure by measure, the mathematical elements are analyzed, the melodies and harmonics studied, the rhythm and meter explored, and the lyrics and gospel text applied. If we are ever going to get a sense of the possibility of mathematical physics to explain an emotional or spiritual response, it will be in our study of

this masterpiece. It is indeed a passionate work of art, and it begs the question what Bach's music has to do with the Gospel of Matthew? Does the music have a power over the listener that the Bible does not have over the reader? And is this good or is it downright heresy?

“You will listen to and study Mozart's Don Giovanni or The Marriage of Figaro. Who are these human souls that step out onto the stage and sing the music that belongs only to each of them, songs that reveal their character—or shape it—in time, over the course of the opera? What is the relationship between the music and the words? Consider the words alone and they are pretty poor examples of literature. But set them to this music and they soar! They are playful or tragic; they tug at our heartstrings (Ahhh, the Contessa! She does it for me.) In Mozart's hands, they are invariably beautiful. Whatever makes them beautiful? Are there elements of beauty as there appear to be elements of music? Are the two related? And what about the “ugly”? Are things ugly because they do not have the same concord with nature that beautiful things do, that they are in discord with nature? Is the beauty of a musical composition to be found in the mathematical order of the piece, or is it more complicated than that?

“What I am talking about with respect to music is the kind of thing I might say about any of the other liberal arts we study in our colleges because we are convinced that you must have some experience in practicing all of them to understand what it means to be human. You need to be practiced in the arts of speech and communication as well as in the arts of observation, measurement and reckoning, including an acquaintance with the elements of music in order to have some reasonable insight into the human soul and the world in which it dwells. And there is no better way to practice these arts than in the study of the best and most beautiful examples of them—in the study of great works that deserve our attention, our interest, and even our love.”

Let me pull myself away from my freshman pulpit before I get too carried away in front of an audience who knows these things all too well. And of course you may speak this way to your music students and performing artists, even as you are also there to give them instruction in the performing and fine arts: composition, conducting, voice or instrumental training, and performance art (posture, dramatic presentation, projection, and style.) But I have lamented not hearing mention of the study of music by most champions of the liberal arts, nor hearing it held out as essential for a liberal education. For this reason, I thought you might appreciate the sound of the message delivered by a pure amateur like myself. I would apply the term amateur in both its colloquial sense and in its original meaning as a “lover” of music.

I have opened my talk in this manner because I imagine that in a world of specialization, of student majors and faculty departments, we all too often separate out the liberal arts as a group of subjects other than music that serve other useful purposes, too often under the soporific label of ‘general education’, or worse, ‘gen ed’, a term that does not seem to carry any meaning for most. And as I understand that most of you serve at institutions that expect a liberal arts ‘component’ to be included in your students’ course work, I thought I would take a crack at unfolding what I think a liberal arts education is.

### **The Aim of Liberal Education**

The aim of a liberal education is the cultivation of the individual's intellect and imagination so that the individual can thrive—so that the individual can perceive his or her highest ends

and acquire the ability to achieve them. A liberal education is literally an education in the arts of freedom. It is intended to free the learner from the tyrannies of unexamined opinions, current fashions and inherited prejudices; it also endeavors to enable a learner to make intelligent, free choices concerning the ends and means of both public and private life by cultivating the art of reason and disciplines in analysis, argument and interpretation. As all men and women possess reason, and as their happiness and success requires that they learn to use their reason well, a liberal education is essential to the well-educated adult and to all who aspire to lead happy and successful lives. It is, as it should be, available to all of our citizens.

“Life,” “Liberty,” “Pursuit of Happiness,” “Available to All”: these words are familiar to all of us, as they echo the founding principles of our nation, born in the struggle for and love of freedom. Providing a liberal education is higher education’s way of giving life to the kind of declaration of independence that we want our citizens to own in their souls. Liberal education does not belong just to those of us who call ourselves liberal arts colleges, but liberal arts colleges are nonetheless peculiarly American institutions because they aspire to help their students achieve just the kind of freedom of mind I have described.

In order to achieve such freedom, a student needs a sufficiently well-rounded education to develop the skills and habits of inquiry to explore those deeply human questions: What sort of being am I? What kind of world do I inhabit? What kind of life should I shape for myself in that world? and What is worth seeking? These are not questions in the province of any one or two or even three of the academic disciplines in our colleges and universities; they pertain to them all. Am I merely a collection of molecules and a product of my genes, or am I not also a political animal, a rational being, and a person of spirit? Do I live in a world that operates according to certain physical laws or is everything subject to uncertainty and the application of probability functions? These are questions that surround our lives. For these reasons, a liberal education requires study in mathematics, language arts, the physical, sociological and biological sciences, philosophy, political science, history, literature, theology, and of course, music—perhaps also the fine arts, if one can uncover elements and foundations to their meaning. All of this subject matter concerns the human being or the human world surrounding that being.

Inasmuch as we wish to foster personal and social responsibility in our students we make efforts to help them develop the intellectual virtues of courage in inquiry, caution in forming opinions, candor about their ignorance, open attentiveness to the words of their colleagues, industry in preparation, and meticulousness in verbal translation and mathematical demonstration. We want them to develop a life-long commitment to pondering the question of how to live well.

We also want our students to have the experience of living in a community of learning. We expect that the moral virtues we require of them in their life on campus—consideration for their colleagues and decent and respectful dealings with others—will prove transferable to their future lives as citizens of this or any country.

### **The Content of a Liberal Education**

I have described what one such curriculum might look like that would seek to accomplish these purposes, and you can imagine that the course of study at a college like St. John’s can be quite rigorous, requiring the study of Ancient Greek and Modern French; Euclidian Geometry, Newtonian physics and quantum mechanics; Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas,

Chaucer and Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Descartes, Hobbes and Locke, Kant and Hegel, Austen and Woolf, Mozart and Wagner—to name a few. We don't pretend to teach anyone how to think, but we give our students many occasions for refining thought in conversation with others in small classes designed to encourage student participation instead of note taking.

Only by studying across such a broad spectrum can a student acquire an appreciation for the interconnectedness of things and escape the narrow cubby-holing that early specialization can so easily bring about. We want our students to leave our colleges with a better understanding of the whole human project before they specialize in a part of it. How else will they be able to make sense of the strange things they will encounter in trying to understand better what is at the root of any particular branch of learning? I say “strange” because we find that all roots converge, something that is not always apparent in a study of the branches. In other words, the kind of education I have described is designed to prepare students for any vocation they should choose, in part because it is rooted in studies that are elemental and essential to studies in all or most branches of knowledge, and in part because it is designed to help the student ask the right questions to make an intelligent choice about the life the student wishes to live.

### **The Heart of Liberal Learning: The Path to Freedom**

Learning is an activity fired by the desire to know. For it to flourish a deep love of learning must be cultivated. All of us have experienced the liberation of pursuing a question, reading a book, or undertaking an exploration for the sheer love of the activity itself. The greater the intensity of our desire, the deeper we are likely to pursue our learning. I am confident that all of us in higher education recognize that love of learning is a good, even if we are not convinced that the cultivation of this love ought to be the primary reason for our institutions' existence. I hope to make the case that it ought to be.

Many of us have given quite a bit of attention to developing mission statements and writing plans to achieve those missions in our departments or our colleges. Such statements set boundaries for our work because we neither can nor wish to be all things to all people. We educate for a calling, for citizenship, for service, for leadership, perhaps within a framework of a particular tradition. Boundaries like these are necessary for institutions, but by their very nature they limit the possible scope of students' imaginations. On the one hand, we, as educators, need to lay out a plan for our institutions' work; on the other hand, such a plan is inherently limiting to our students, just when we expect them to stretch beyond their own prejudices, opinions, and limitations of background.

We should ask ourselves whether we are doing all we can to encourage a love of learning, or whether we have established institutional and disciplinary boundaries and goals at the expense of the liberation of the human soul in each of our students.

We need to prepare the young to make their way in a world where boundaries are vanishing—they must be able to exercise independence of judgment and to adjust to the rapid changes in their world. They need to be prepared to work with others who have a similar capacity to engage in problem-solving and solution-finding across traditional disciplines. They need to learn the value of the question that opens paths to new learning and the danger of the easy answer that closes them. In other words, we need to help our students become liberated from boundaries rather than defined by them. This is the kind of freedom that a liberal education

makes possible. And I don't think that a liberal education is possible without a love of learning for its own sake.

So what is required to cultivate this love of learning? And what makes it possible to be a liberally educated human being, skilled in the art of being human?

I find myself turning to Michel de Montaigne, whose essay "On the Education of Children" offers loads of good advice on the nature of learning:

"Let [the student] be asked for an account not merely of the words of his lesson, but of its sense and substance, and let him judge the profit he has made not by the testimony of his memory, but of his life. Let him be made to show what he has learned in a hundred aspects, and apply it to as many different subjects, to see if he has made it his own. It is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge food just as we swallowed it. The stomach has not done its work if he has not changed the condition and form of what has been given it to cook."

And later:

"Truth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later ... The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterwards they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. His education, work, and study aim only at forming this."

If we are meant to be the bees that plunder flowers to make something that we can call our own, we had better be able to find the flowers that make this possible. They are the great works of literary, artistic, and musical imagination that have survived the test of time because they are timeless. They form the foundation for the thoughts and discoveries that follow; they are often deeply beautiful; they speak to the great human questions that help us understand both the world about us and the world within us. They help us reflect on the choices we have in these interconnected worlds, and they help us decide upon the lives we wish to make for ourselves with care and wise deliberation.

If we consider our learning materials as food for digestion, we surely want a banquet set before us, the time to digest what is there, and the opportunity to test each morsel before deciding to reject, accept, or incorporate it within us. To make it our own requires an environment in which our teachers exercise restraint in pressing their authority. The faculty needs to allow students the freedom to chew on their own questions and form tentative conclusions that they may later reject as ill-considered.

The reward of learning simply for the sake of learning itself is a kind of fulfillment we call happiness. And this happiness is something we should want for all of the students attending our colleges and universities. It is the pursuit of this happiness that ought to lie at the heart of this nation's public policy as so aptly proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. And so it ought to be with us in our educational institutions that we make every endeavor to help our students cultivate a love of learning for its own sake. Even the by-products of this activity are worthy of our humanity: finding a vocation that will sustain us, and exercising the duties of citizenship to protect these freedoms in our democratic republic.

## The Public Good of a Liberal Education: A Foundation for Public Policy

Liberal education serves a public good by helping to bring thoughtful adults into the world—adults who are free to think for themselves and free to choose paths they consider to be best rather than those that are easiest or most popular. Any sound public policy must support such an education. Let me state the argument in a nutshell:

Our nation's foundation rests upon the principle of the intellectual freedom of each of its citizens; the country's political, economic, moral and spiritual freedoms are all derived from this intellectual freedom, and its political, economic, moral and spiritual strength depends upon it. We are a nation built upon a respect for the individual and a trust that our citizens are capable of self-government.

For the sake of our country, we therefore need our citizens to have an education in our democratic traditions and foundations, as well as in the arts needed to question and examine those very foundations so that we may keep them vibrant and alive for us against attack or atrophy. There is a real tension between these two goods. The traditions, customs and laws of the nation are sometimes at odds with the very things that encourage the autonomy of the individual citizen who might question them. But this tension is healthy in a free republic.

A college education that will strengthen this tension will serve this nation well because it will help us educate independent and self-sufficient citizens who will be fit for the freedom they enjoy in our country. Providing the access and opportunity to as many as possible to undertake such an education will serve that public interest.

If we prize the individual in our society and value the ways an individual may become self-sufficient, we ought to support the many and various means our colleges employ to help their students become independent and strong. In the end, independence of mind in our citizenry will strengthen our nation. The well-educated citizens will also come to understand the need for the kind of interdependence necessary for a society to function. Education in the arts of freedom and self-sufficiency make the promise of America possible.

You will note that I have not stated that a first principle of public policy ought to be global competitiveness in the marketplace, or financial supremacy, or military superiority, or international leadership in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. All of these things are good, but they will follow upon any sound investment in the broader public policy I have mentioned. They require that we acknowledge first the source of our historic strength in these areas, and that this strength comes from our commitment to a liberal education, which is prior to an education in workforce development because it cultivates the independence of mind and soul that will ensure success in these endeavors.

This in turn requires that government learn to respect the strength and independence of our educational institutions. Our colleges and universities should be left to determine for themselves the qualifications of those admitted to study and those who do the teaching, as well as what should be taught, how it should be taught, and how the teaching and learning should be assessed.

Our peer review process of accreditation is, I believe, one of our greatest strengths, and I would fight to maintain and improve it rather than tear it down or turn it over to government control. We may need to do a better job of strengthening public confidence and trust in this system of self-regulation. Where there is cause for mistrust, we need to remove the cause. Where the lack of confidence comes from a misunderstanding, we need to increase public awareness of the strengths of the accreditation process.

Let me add that I think nothing is more destructive of the spirit of ‘learning’ than the demand for ‘achievement’ that is at the root of the accountability movement in this nation. We measure the things that can be measured, usually by counting the things that can be counted, forgetting that the formation of judgment and the liberation of the human soul are more complicated than a simple quantitative transaction. Do I really care how our students score on some international test that I had no part in devising—when instead I see evidence on the ground of that my students are learning and loving to learn too?

To be sure, achievements on a spelling test or an algebra quiz in class will help me simple diagnostics—is the student ready to move on or do I need to repeat and recall some things that will be sure to have them in a sufficient position to move on to the next level of study. The further we remove student assessment from the student-teacher relationship, the more harmful the test is likely to become. Talk of a better way to drive the innovative and imaginative spark out of our young!!

I have come to the point where I will consider refusing to acknowledge that our colleges are really NOT mission driven institutions, but are rather learning centric communities. Do we really seek to ‘achieve’ a mission, or to provide an opportunity for our students to make their learning their own?

### **Liberal Education and the Possibilities for Institutional Transformation**

I think there is little I need add to make the case that a liberal education equipments one to function in a world of change—that it provides the spark for innovation. But a few examples of how this comes about might be fruitful. And here I think I can return to the examples from our musical tradition.

If we in our institutional settings sometimes experience a resistance to change, we need to ask ourselves whether a kind of sedimentation has set in or whether we have good reasons for resisting change—reasons that are grounded in a fertile learning environment where we are all expecting of ourselves what we expect of our students—that we stretch ourselves and examine our opinions and traditions in the face of reason and the desire to chart a new course for the sake of the journey, for the joy of the ride, and the satisfaction of achieving a new end. Of course, each new end will then only serve as the beginning of the next search for meaning.

Consider the revolution in music that took us from Gregorian chant to the counterpoint of Palestrina, or from the concord of Bach to the discord and shifting silences of Thelonius Monk. I hinted earlier at the connection between beauty and taste. Often when we are confronted with a piece of music that is strange it is not to our taste; it is foreign; it is somehow ‘off’. But the beauty of a great musical work is not always immediately evident. It must be studied and pulled apart for its structure to become apparent, even for its form to be heard properly.



I remember when I first heard the music of Charlie Mingus, a musician well trained in classical music and the gospel tradition. His clashing harmonies were hard on my ear until I studied the overlapping structures within the compositions and learned to appreciate an incredible sophistication of order and underlying structure not apparent to me until I worked at it. Somehow, my openness to learning about it helped his new atonal jazz to become beautiful to me.

It is a lesson to me that change happens freely and easily when we are open to learning—when we teachers are practicing the liberating arts that we preach and teach to our students. This suggests that we invest robustly in faculty development and study opportunities, not just to sharpen our skills and further our special research interests but to open our minds. This takes me back to those earlier reflections on the heart of liberal education found in the lively engagement in learning for the sheer love of it.

We live at a point of tension between two goods that work at cross-purposes with one another. If we take no institutional position at all and permit just anything to go on in the classroom, we are saying that nothing matters, that anything is just as good as any other—and I do not believe that any of us believe that in our hearts, that it makes no difference to us in our personal lives what we do and what is done to us. On the other hand, if we are so rigid that no institutional and academic innovation or change is permitted, we suffer atrophy and a slow death. Students are likely to leave uninspired to learn, because for the student learning is always about the “new”, the thing unknown but desired.

The paradox is that a tradition must experience change or else it will die. As architect-artist John Diebboll puts it: “In the world of archetypes, our imaginations must collectively create a new synthesis of techniques, materials, and forms in order to nurture this aspect of change. Then, as we create change within the rules of the tradition, we feel a change in ourselves as well.” (John Diebboll, Forward to The Art of the Piano) Another way of saying this is that if we expect our students’ souls to undergo such a transformation in the process of learning, we might reasonably expect our institutional ways to undergo a similar examination and transformation from time to time.

And now, after this long digression on the power and possibilities of a liberal education, and the conditions necessary to support it, let me complete my address to that incoming class of freshmen on the power of music.

### **The Power of Music**

“It has been said that ‘music is the union of the rational and the irrational, of order and feeling. . . . By shaping feeling, music shapes the whole human being.’ (Kalkavage, Peter, The Neglected Muse, American Educator, Fall 2006) In Plato’s Republic, music has its place in the education of the young, as an aid in the formation of character, an habituation that is useful in the training of the soul but not in its education. This education of the soul is better served by philosophy, a love of and pursuit of wisdom, which Socrates in this dialogue calls the greatest music of all.

“Such is the power of music to grab hold of the soul that Socrates warns us of its dangers. ‘So then,’ Socrates says to his young interlocutor, Glaucon, ‘isn’t this why upbringing in music is most sovereign? It’s because rhythm and concord most of all sink down to the inmost soul and cling to her most vigorously as they bring gracefulness with them; and they make a man

graceful if he's brought up correctly, but if not, then the opposite.' Socrates points to 'rhythm and concord' for the source of music's power, not its tones, intervals, melodies, and harmonies. Is he right in that? Do we think he is right about the power of music for good and for ill? How might we study music to avoid the bad and pursue the good?

"These are questions we are compelled to ask in our musical liberal arts programs if we are ever to come to understand ourselves. And what is the difference between the image-making of the poets, artists and musicians on the one hand and the image-making of the philosopher on the other --- whose image of the Sun serves as a metaphor for the Good, of the Cave for our everyday dwelling places, and of the Divided Line for our path to Wisdom—a divided line, by the way, that looks as if it might bear the mathematical properties of a monochord in our musical laboratory?

"Finally, let us not forget the power of music in praise of the Almighty. Music has been said to be the prime mode for the praise of God by the Hebrews and for lifting the hearts in our Christian churches. The words sung in these hymns may speak to the intellect, but the tonal structures call to our passions. (See Brann, Eva, Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening, lecture at St. John's College in Annapolis, November 4, 2011) You will read of David, warrior, king, and musician, but also an instrument of God. You will read the Psalms and sing their songs. God the Muse, man the instrument! How depressing this message must be for the wholly self-sufficient spirit that would have mankind be the ruler of our world—that would have us resemble the gods? What kind of freedom comes from obedience to God, from becoming God's instrument? Or do men and women gain their freedom only from *disobedience*—something for you to consider when reading Milton's Paradise Lost? These are both real questions.

"In the end, our purpose in teaching music at this college, in the words of one of our St. John's tutors 'is to improve ... [our] students' aesthetic taste: to introduce them to truly great music in an effort to beget a love for all things graceful and well formed. [We] hope that the study of music begets ... a habit of searching for causes and details of beautiful things, and that the love of beauty will nourish the love of knowledge and truth. [And we] hope they will strive to imitate in their day-to-day lives the virtues of harmoniousness, proportion, good timing, ... grace, and 'striking the right note' in thought, speech, feeling, and action.' (Peter Kalkavage, "The Neglected Muse", The American Educator Fall 2006)

"To our freshmen, we welcome you to a world of exploration into the nature of man and the universe and the interconnectedness of the world of the intellect and the world of emotion, the world outside us and the world within. Enjoy the liberation of mind and soul that we hope this exploration will bring for you."

Thank you.