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'Comfortable with being Uncomfortable' or 'You, Me & The Latency…'
A Conversation with Stephen Nachmanovitch *(via Zoom, 31 July 2020)*

Stephen Nachmanovitch is the author of two books on the creative process, *The Art of Is* (2019) and *Free Play* (1990). He performs and teaches internationally as an improvisational violinist and at the intersections of performing arts, multimedia, humanities, ecology, and philosophy. He has taught widely on creativity and the spiritual underpinnings of art, and has had numerous appearances on media, at universities in many countries, and at music and theatre festivals.

ANTON KRUEGER: I've just been loving your latest book *The Art of Is*. It's so full of interesting leads to follow up on and links to dive into, like discovering Glenn Gould's radio documentaries and finding out about Al Wunder. The book was an explosion of hypertexts, bursting with connections and links to other things.

I've now got all these notes and highlights from the book printed out here, as though I've tried to capture it, nail it down it down in some way; which is pretty much the opposite of the spirit of improvisation. So, I guess the first question is how to prevent this from becoming overly conceptual, how does one prevent it becoming like any other academic exercise, to keep it alive? This relates also to teachings in the Buddhist tradition, which comes across very strongly in your work. Concepts like 'stillness' and 'equanimity' and so on; how does one prevent these from staying concepts?

STEPHEN NACHMANOVITCH: What happens is that life slaps you in the face. It's always possible for anything that you read or learn to become stilted, and to become a nice package. As I talk about in the chapter about 'Stamping out Nouns'. Your life comes along and shakes you out of those concepts, so that if you're in any way responding to what's really happening to you, you cannot remain within the concepts.

Whether it's academic writing or popular writing, it can seem that people are safely staying within the outline of concepts that they've prepared; but as soon as you walk out of the room at any time – let alone in the year 2020, when the whole world is being slapped around by

these awful circumstances – you can't simply remain at the conceptual level. You have to learn how to practice improvising without the script, because the script is worthless. You need to practise without the safety of a curriculum.

ANTON: Sure, there's a kind of false safety in that academic sense that the classes are prepared, everything is contained. I resonated a lot with your ideas on creative writing… Can you hear me all right? It seems to have frozen up a bit...

STEPHEN: I'm getting a little bit … at certain points, your voice sort of cuts out into a kind of metallic static, but that's part of the medium…

It's interesting because, like everybody else, we're talking by Zoom. And that has the enormous advantage that you and I can meet in an approximation of face-to-face between the United States and South Africa without having to burn a lot of carbon. So that's wonderful. But on the other hand, the Zoom medium is full of these kinds of latencies and dropouts. And what I've learned from this medium is that you have to welcome this…

In fact it's part of what we're talking about in the realm of improvising and mindfulness. You can try to ignore the glitches and the latency of the medium, pretend that they're not there and act as though this were a normal conversation. Or you can welcome the glitches and the latency in as an equal partner in the conversation. So if this conversation between us seems like a duet between the two of us, it's actually a trio between you, me and the latency.

ANTON: Sure, it's also highlighting what we bring to the table. When any two people meet, we bring our own equipment: we're a certain age, we might not have slept that well; maybe our battery's a bit low, or bandwidth is thin. So you bring your own perceptive mechanism into the meeting and this has now been highlighted by us having machines that assist us in communicating... It's more obvious that there's no neutral meeting area, we always bring ourselves along.

STEPHEN: Right, and that's why my book is called *The Art of Is,* because we are here, communicating through this medium with its latency, with its glitches and with its benefits, and we are here – 'we' is here – with whatever state of awareness or health or mindfulness or distraction that we might have. And that's why every conversation is an improvisation.

ANTON: Your title reminded me of Byron Katie's book, *Loving What Is* (2002). Do you know it?

STEPHEN: No, I don't know that book, I'll have to look for it.

ANTON: Her entire proposal is premised on asking yourself: 'Is this really what's happening? Or is it some kind of thought I'm having about it?' And moving to complete acceptance of whatever it is that's happening. It's quite lovely. Anyway, I wanted to ask you about your Buddhist influences. Are you a card-carrying refuge-taking Buddhist?

STEPHEN: Yes, *(laughs)* ...I'm a 'card-carrying, refuge-taking Buddhist'. I like your phrase a lot. I'm sort of connected both to the Zen tradition and the Tibetan tradition. And there's a lot to learn from both of them that we really need right now. And, of course, you don't have to be a 'card-carrying refuge-taking Buddhist' to benefit from those perspectives and those practices.

ANTON: I was interested in Zen initially. It appealed to me because it seemed so straightforward. I never thought I'd get involved with this Star Wars world of Vajrayana and the deities and so on, but somehow that's what I got linked up with…I think we've frozen again…

STEPHEN: Yeah, we froze again...

ANTON: Maybe I should ask my wife to go offline, it might help. Excuse me, I'm going to shout out the window here for a moment...

STEPHEN: I'm with you. *(laughs)*

ANTON: *(Calls out window):* 'Sorry - are you on YouTube? We're struggling here with the coming and going... Thanks...' *(Comes back to screen)...*Let's see if that might help a bit....alright well that bit's definitely going into the transcript....

STEPHEN: Yes, of course...*(laughs)…* I have a chapter called 'Interruptions and Offers' which is exactly about that. We're talking about an interruption in the internet circuit; but the noises, the distractions, the random elements that we usually like to subtract are actually there, and we can take them as extraordinary teachings.

ANTON: That reminds me of the 'synthetic dirt' which Peter Brook writes about in *The*

Empty Space – how German engineers, when they were first creating electronic music, tried to fabricate the scratch and dust, because otherwise it sounded too clean…

The other thing I relate to your idea of the 'interruption' is the notion of the 'gap', or creating an opening that allows something to come in … a little bit of breathing space…To be honest, I feel a little bit full up at the moment. I've got all these quotes and notes and I just want to fill up all the space with, I don't know, showing you how clever I am …

But let's talk more about mindfulness and improvisation. What is your understanding of mindfulness? How do you define it?

STEPHEN: Well, mindfulness is an activity that is available to you when you go beyond the need to define. When you go beyond the need to instantly react to whatever is around you. In the Tibetan tradition, they call it 'the leisure and opportunity inherent in a human life', which is so rare. And, it's not just a human life because dogs and other animals can model this for us: when you're able to take a brief moment to be present with what's going on and where you are, and learn from that moment where nothing is happening.

ANTON: *(A lengthy pause, where Anton tries to take in the moment as this is happening...)* I wanted to also ask about what sometimes seems to be a conflict or contradiction between the figures of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas as compared to the wilder Western figures of Pan and Dionysus. Is there a contradiction between the lustful, reckless abandon of the Greek deities, and the serenity of the Buddhist path?

STEPHEN: On the new Bob Dylan album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020), the title of the first song is from Walt Whitman: 'I contain multitudes'. And there's no reason not to contain multitudes. You bring up the ancient Greek Dionysian versus the calmness and solidity of Buddhist practice, but within the ancient Greek tradition, there was the Apollonian and Dionysian. Those contrasts between the stately and the stable and the clear and the quietly aware of everything around you; versus the wildly dancing dervish. That's present in the inherent contradictions of the ancient Greek traditions as well. And in Buddhism, whether it's Zen or Tibetan, you have the same contradictions: you have these wild characters like Yamantaka, and these

demons who go gobbling up delusions; and then you have this supreme calmness of contemplation. And in Zen, you have also the supreme calmness of contemplation, but then you have these sort of wild characters in the koans, the teachers smacking their students upside the head for teaching reasons. A lot of the koans in the Blue Cliff Record and other collections in Zen are full of pratfalls, slapstick and inherent contradiction between those two aspects of life. Life is full of both of them.

ANTON: That maybe leads into another area I've become curious about in terms of improvisation, which is about control. The issue of 'control' might be put in a binary with different things: control / chaos; control / surrender; control / freedom. What does it mean to give up something controlling you?

I loved the idea you put forward of the French word '*controller*' that you define as a kind of 'hovering' – it doesn't settle on any one thing. The other reference that comes to mind was your dramatization of steering a car. If you got into an argument with yourself at every 'mistake', getting upset about every little 'too much to the left' or 'too much to the right' – you'd crash.

STEPHEN: Leaving space for making a mistake at every moment?

ANTON: Exactly. But okay, let me just throw it out there: tell me more about 'control and freedom'.

STEPHEN: Oh, we can talk for weeks about that question. It's so rich. First of all, when you talk about the car metaphor – you and I are both sitting in chairs. And if one is looking at the video of this conversation, we're both wiggling around a little bit and shifting our posture as everyone does when they're sitting in a chair. And even if you're sitting in a meditation posture very, very still, you're still shifting your posture by very tiny amounts. That's how we sit up, by constantly correcting right for left and left for right. And front and back. Our body is continually in a degree of motion. And your body knows how to pull the leftward tilt back up to the centre by pulling to the right. Driving a car, you're constantly moving the steering wheel back and forth by tiny amounts in order to drive straight. So this is the basic activity of all life forms going back; three and a half billion years or more of constant feedback and self-regulation.

It's natural, which means that every organism and every cell within every

organism knows how to do it. Okay, then you add a certain type of consciousness to that natural activity as people do, and suddenly you're slapping yourself in the face: 'Oh, I turned to the right when I should be going straight'. And we can spend our entire lives slapping ourselves for making mistakes. Shinryu Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Centre, said 'Life is one continuous mistake'. He was following Dōgen from the 13th century who said the same thing.

Control is very interesting. When I was an undergraduate student in the 1960s at Harvard University, I was in the Psychology Department, and home base for me was on the 11th floor of William James Hall, which is the big psychology building there. On the eighth floor was a man whom you've probably heard of called BF Skinner.

ANTON: Behaviourism?

STEPHEN: I consider Skinner in some ways to be the ancestor of Facebook and many of the more negative aspects of modern cyber life. Skinner came up in the 1930s, and he and Watson and others were reacting against what had come before. We had William James in the United States, who was very much into the scientific analysis of the spiritual dimensions of life. And the behaviourists said that, 'Nobody can know anything about inner life or spiritual life' and 'This is all very unscientific', and 'The only thing that we can study is behaviour'. And so then Skinner spent his life studying learning experiments with rats and pigeons.

ANTON: Stimulus-response?

STEPHEN: The whole business of reinforcement and reward and punishment, which has now translated all over the internet into likes and dislikes, and the little dose of whatever is injected into your bloodstream every time somebody clicks –

ANTON: Endorphins.

STEPHEN: Yes. Skinner defined psychology as the prediction and control of behaviour. When I was an 18-year-old student, I regarded this as kind of a demonic thing *(chuckles).* And I still do….This idea that the purpose of social science is to predict and control behaviour.

And in a strange way he was very successful, but also maligned and discredited in many ways. In the generations after his death, with the rise of

social media and the conducting of all kinds of policy through surveys, we're living in kind of a Skinnerian world. So the idea that you can control behaviour in one group, that you can grab an organism, whether it's a human being, a pigeon in a learning experiment, or the entire Earth's environment – grab hunks of the land, the water, the air, and control them and say: 'Okay, we're going to extract what we consider to be the good stuff, and we'll throw away the rest'. This notion of control is very toxic.

What I found interesting, as an opposite form of control, is that French word '*controller'*, where you're just sort of monitoring what's going on. You're noticing your posture, you're noticing how your body feels, you're noticing what's happening out the window, you're noticing what's happening in your society, and you're not trying to grab it and make it do something. Because, of course, your knowledge of what to grab and what to make it do – even if you have good intentions – is really imperfect at best. Suzuki Roshi said that if you have a cow in a pasture, the way you control it is just by sitting down and paying attention to it.

ANTON: The word 'control' does come up in teachings on meditation. In Tibetan texts, they seem a lot more straightforward in saying that we're trying to 'master our minds'. I've noticed they temper it a bit for Western audiences because 'control' is seen as too rigid, or maybe because we're so freaked out with trying to be good behaviourists and so forth. I heard a talk by Ringu Tulku where he said, 'In meditation, we're trying to control our minds', but then he stopped and hesitated and said, 'Well, that isn't really the right word'. But still, we're trying to not be subject to the comings and goings of the negative emotions washing through us that are causing problems. So that's an inner control we're cultivating. How does this relate to what you're saying?

STEPHEN: Oh yes, absolutely. It goes back to probably as old as the universe – the process of feedback by which organisms function. If I grab an instrument here *(picks up a violin)*, and if I put a finger on a string and *(plucks a tone)…* Is that tone in or out of tune, whatever that means? Well, it means that you have a finger which is able to slide up and down. And if you make a sound that you wish were a different sound, you slide your finger down a little bit. That's control.

Control isn't: 'I am perfect, I know through endless hours of practice, just

where my finger goes'. Control is: 'I place my finger on the string, and I pay attention to the resulting sound. And then I can adjust it by minute amounts over minute amounts of time'. And so the people out there who are listening might feel that I have this exquisite 'control' of the instrument, but actually, I'm constantly doing exactly what we described before in terms of posture of sitting in a chair.

ANTON: I've never made that link with Skinner and social media. I guess that also has something to do with the rise of public relations and advertising, the world of social engineering, of 'making friends and influencing people'. How to get what you want – sell a car, or get somebody to like you – by manipulating them in some way. Earlier, you used an outrageous word, 'demonic', and it may be accurate here, that this is a kind of black magic. Because maybe you can get what you want from people, but there's a cost – they might hate you for it.

STEPHEN: And, of course, there are very profound implications in the political realm, and certainly in the politics of our time right now.

ANTON: What is your take on the whole intensification and polarization of the political landscape at the moment?

STEPHEN: Well, I mean, it's very, very intense in my country (the U.S.). What's happening now, in many cities, is a very sad story. But it's also happening in many other parts of the world in various ways. Even without the COVID pandemic, the state of the world is really precarious as the ecological crisis intensifies, as the danger to humanity as a whole intensifies. The economic systems that have found a dominant place in the world over the last 40 years have turned out to be extremely unhealthy for the vast majority of people on planet Earth.

And with social systems under stress, you often get what my teacher Gregory Bateson called schismogenesis. Splits occur within a society which are self-reinforcing, and which self-intensify. And when people are able to exist within a relatively limited bubble, those splits are amplified by social media and information systems, and they become more intense.

We're living in a world where nothing is certain, where nothing is really stable. And people crave the comfort of certainty, they look for certainty through authoritarian leaders or authoritarian systems, or religious belief systems that

provide an absolute answer. It's much more difficult to sit there in a stable but dynamic way. This is what an improviser learns in performance. You learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. You learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and comfortable with the fact that you're creating something, either by yourself or with other people that may or may not last.

Those who are not comfortable with being uncomfortable may find themselves gravitating towards either political or religious systems that give them the kind of certainty of rules and a fixed reality that they can hold onto. I can see how tempting it is even though the results are not very healthy (not for the planet, nor for humanity as a whole).

ANTON: In your book there's a beautiful painting with the words 'Nothing Forever'. I took a photo of that and stuck it on my Facebook page a few days ago, and I noticed the mixed responses. Some people gave smiley faces and some people posted sad, crying faces. I'd seen it as something light – 'The Pandemic isn't Forever', whereas other people were reading it as 'Life is Short'.

STEPHEN: The compassionate response is to recognize how natural that range of feelings is. That painting was created by my friend John Marron, and 'Nothing Forever' is really about death. My wife is a physician who's in palliative care and hospice medicine. Sometimes, when I tell people what she does they'll look at me with sad eyes as though I was saying that my wife is dying. When, in fact, what she's doing is she's recognizing the existence of death, and helping people. And I will die. I'm a healthy 70-year-old at the moment. I did have open heart surgery last year. So I had a moment of being close to death. And at some point I'll have a moment of being close to death … and actually die.

That's part of existence, just as birth is part of existence. The question is: How do you react to it? Both of my sons were born at home with midwives present. The midwife, Ina May Gaskin, said of women who are experiencing the extreme pains of labour: 'Do I regard this as unspeakable suffering? Or do I regard it as an interesting sensation?'

ANTON: In your book you also speak of your friend Herbert Zipper, who said something similar. I've had a toothache the last few days, and I was trying to implement his advice of regarding it as interesting.

STEPHEN: Well, let's put it this way, you certainly don't go 'Oh, I have a toothache' and that's it. You go to the dentist. You certainly try to get help for whatever issue you have. You certainly accept treatment, and treat yourself. But you also don't pretend that you can go through life without any suffering because no one ever has. So you get the help you need, whatever practitioner might help with your problems, and you get their help as well as it can possibly be given; but at the same time you don't pretend that this is the end of everything.

ANTON: It reminds me of that saying 'pain is inevitable, suffering is optional', that the suffering is the extra bit we add to the pain, the second arrow…

Another question I did want to get to was about creativity and enlightenment. In some places it seems that for you there's a similarity. You describe creativity as a 'letting go', letting go of obstacles, rather than gaining something extra on top of what we already are. Similarly, Nirvana is also sometimes seen as not something extra, but a letting go of what's holding us back, the clouds obscuring the sun, and so forth. So, to get to the question: is there for you a link between enlightenment, creative inspiration and improvisation?

STEPHEN: There sure is…*(laughs)...* If I were to summarize all of the work into three words: improvising, impermanence and imperfection.

On the concept of enlightenment... If you're thinking of some opening up to perfect consciousness of everything in the universe and perfect equanimity and some sort of perfect sainthood…well, good luck trying to find that. On the other hand, if you're able to have even a moment where you are somewhat equilibrated, where you're somewhat compassionate, where you're somewhat able to see the bigger context of things – that is extraordinary. And similarly for creativity. Are you aiming to be Shakespeare or Beethoven? Or are you able to make something every day that is kind of interesting, and that is kind of beautiful, and that kind of benefits other people?

I say in *Free Play* (1990) – whether we're talking about artistic accomplishment, spiritual accomplishment, scientific accomplishment – it's great to sit on the shoulders of giants; but don't let the giants sit on your shoulders…there's no room for their legs to dangle down.

ANTON: (*chuckles)*…I was wondering if you could say something about bodhicitta

and improvisation.

STEPHEN: Bodhicitta? Well, *'bodi'* refers to awakening and *'chitta'* is mind. Behind both of those phrases there's a great deal of complexity, but to do practice that gives you awareness of what's around you is bodhicitta. To do practice that gives you awareness of what's around you in such a way that you can react compassionately to whoever is around you is bodhicitta. To do practice that enables you to act compassionately to those around you in such a way that helps those around you, themselves, do practice, that gives them a greater awareness of what's around them, that they can use to help people around them, that is bodhicitta… and so on and so on.

ANTON: I like that, it feels more gentle than the more formal definition of 'wanting enlightenment for the sake of all beings', which sounds a bit more like an ‘ought’ or a ‘should’. Being aware of the environment is a bit gentler, more open.

STEPHEN: Well, the two are interrelated. The notion of attaining enlightenment for the sake of all beings, to our Western minds, that certainly sounds kind of grandiose. And it's the practice of Avalokitesvara, who's the bodhisattva who says 'Whatever attainment I have made, I will not go there, not taste the fruit of that attainment, until I have seen that every other sentient being in the universe has gone ahead of me…'

ANTON: Every blade of grass –

STEPHEN: Yes, every blade of grass. And that is an extraordinary frame of mind. But it's also possible to see that frame of mind as…like a writer saying, 'Can I compete with Shakespeare today?'... And it's not a competition, it's just practice. It's just being you, and breathing as you, and being able to open up a little bit more, so that you can have the capacity to do a little bit more good in the world.

ANTON: I liked the definition you give in your book of originality not as something different or new but as going back to 'origin' or source... I was thinking a bit around an ethical basis for creativity. There’s this idea one gets from Buddhism, which the Dalai Lama often refers to, of a 'basic goodness'. (I suppose the technical term would be 'Buddha Nature'). I was wondering if improvisation relates to this idea of basic goodness. When we do get out of our own way, is there something

good that emerges, that we can trust, that is going to be of some benefit? You mention also demagogues who use improvisation, where what's coming out is not necessarily of benefit.

STEPHEN: Yes. At the beginning of the *Art of Is,* I referred to the tyrants, who are often skilled improvisers. Improvising, creativity, innovation – any of those words is not inherently good, and they're not inherently evil. They're related to context. They're related to one's intent, even if your intent is imperfectly realized. So I bring up that question at the very beginning of the book. And really the entire rest of the book is an attempt to delve into that question of 'What are the ethical dimensions of creativity?'

Of course, it's a question that everyone has to answer for themselves, but what I find is that those elements of life that make for creativity itself: listening to other people, being quiet, paying attention to the environment, these are clues. Paying attention to the sensations that you experience are clues and keys to responding in a decent way to what is around you.

You know, for as long as you can be quiet, the more likely you are to actually perceive what it's like for other people and for other living beings. So then when you aren't quiet and when you're actually seeing something or creating something, you have a greater chance of responding to how those beings are, and responding in a way that's in tune with the context of life… There's a Zen grace before meals and one line of it says 'We eat to support life'.

ANTON: That reminds me of a prayer we used to do at a Chan temple near Pretoria where I used to teach English. Their grace had five considerations, one of which was, 'to consider the sources of this food'. So when you start to think, there's a very long inter-connecting chain, which includes the people who provided the petrol for the trucks that drove the oats, and so on…

STEPHEN: Yes, you can look around the room wherever you are, and every object that your eye falls on comes from all of those innumerable pieces. And that is the emptiness of inherent existence. It's that they're full of everything except a self – limited existence all by themselves as nouns. And so the more we're able to see the objects and the living organisms around us in that way, the more we're able to open up in a creative way and contribute something. And you have to embrace the

complexity with a sense of connection to all human beings. That's the ticket.