

INSCAPE: THE WAY IN

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The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins introduced the concept of "inscape" to the English language, a word he coined to indicate our access to the beautiful and profound, the way into allowing the mind to rest naturally. Scholars tell me Hopkins keyed on this concept from the work of Duns Scotus, another of my favorite poets. I can't say I agree with most scholars as to their interpretation of what Hopkins meant by "inscape." I have my own understanding and will use that.

Inscape to me is a natural sign (a signal in our busy life of distractions) that gets our attention and carries us within to rest in the nature of the mind, however briefly. That rest is crucial.

Another way to phrase this is that an inscape is the signature of the beautiful, a sign that catches the eye. For example, on a nature walk, when I finally get outside my busy day and try to relax, it takes time. An inscape is that sign or bit of beauty that first catches my eye and carries me out of distraction and into the spatial-ness of the moment. Immediately I slow down, calm down, and find rest in that beauty. I am suddenly more at peace and beyond the rush of time once again. I am free. I call these avenues (or ways within) "inscapes," as I believe Hopkins did.

I used the example of a nature walk to illustrate inscape at work, but we search out inscapes wherever we are and in whatever we do. Without these instantaneous moments of rest, without some beauty we could not go on. These nanosecond events are essentially timeless connections to the true nature of the mind, which is beyond time -- eternal.

I attempt to create inscapes in language as I write. Inscapes are our way inside this instant, through the particular here and now, and thus beyond time to a moment of pure rest. I call it the vertical dimension. The horizontal is our linear life story, the vertical the inner dimensions. For example:

Every sentence tells a story from left to right, from the first to the last word, but along the way the combination of words, pitched one against another in the sentence, creates peaks and valleys of attention (awareness). These can be inscapes, ways into the timeless aspect of a moment.

Inscapes are designed (like pit stops at a raceway) to attract or flag us down along the horizontal or linear line of our life and guide us within to allow the mind to rest, however briefly. The mind is not limited to rest in naps or in sleep at night, but much more so in these briefest of moments through inscapes of beauty that un-distract us into the experience of pure rest. We escape by inscape and heaven knows we need the rest.

These inscape moments are nothing new to any of us. We find and use them all time to get essential rest or we would go nuts. It is helpful to become aware of what we are already naturally doing.

Inscapes are an integral part of what is called Vipassana (insight) meditation, where this concept of directly looking at the nature of the mind is learned and practiced.

Of course I, like you, have made use of inscape moments all my life. However, it was only when I began to consciously practice them through close-up and macro photography that I learned to look through these moments instead of just "at" them. Their effect was compounded by iteration and focused concentration until I began to see through the object I was photographing and look instead at the true nature of the mind. That is where all the rest there is "IS."

These moments catch our eye or catch our ear and in a nanosecond deconstruct our distraction and supplement life with space and expanded time in which we then dwell. That's the point: to render the mind openly at rest.

[Photo taken by me while practicing insight meditation.]



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