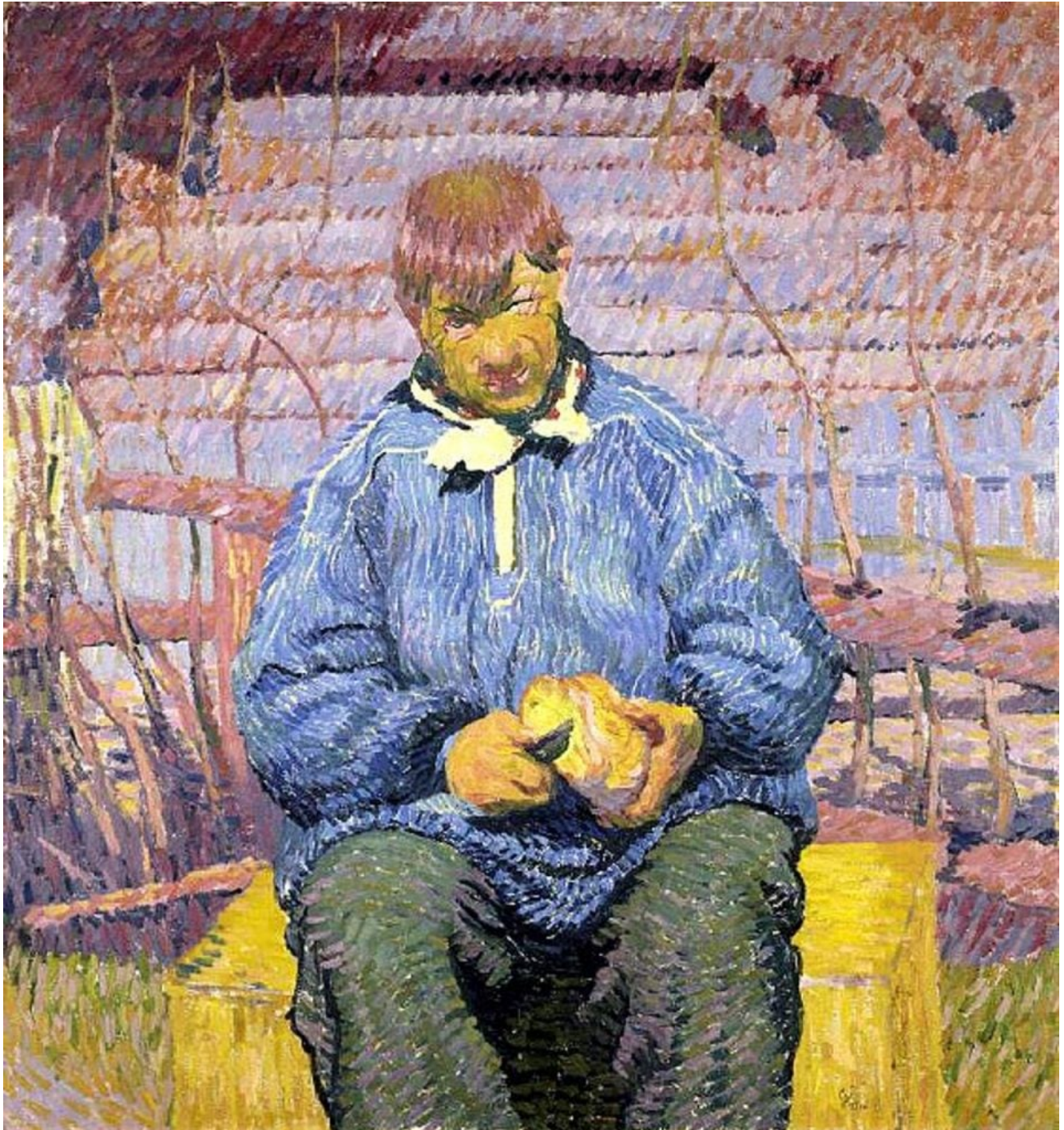


How to Become Bread

by [Paul Illidge](#) (June 2024)



Bread– Giovanni Giacometti, 1908

Many years ago, through a friend of mine, I had the opportunity to talk with a Buddhist monk named Shunryu. Or

rather, he talked and I listened. His words and ideas were so meaningful to me that I have always remembered them, and tried to live by them. At the time I was leading a difficult, harried, confused and confusing life, and was yearning to begin the journey to find calmness and serenity. Here is what I remember.

“Buddhism is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine. If we become too busy and too excited, our minds become rough and ragged. If possible, we should always try to be calm and joyful, and keep ourselves from too much excitement. Usually we become busier and busier day by day, year by year, especially in our modern world.

“If we revisit old, familiar places after a long time, we are astonished by how greatly these places and we ourselves have changed. This is natural. But if we become overexcited about how much we ourselves have changed, how we have become completely involved in our busy, changed lives, we will be lost. If our mind can remain peaceful and constant however, if we can keep ourselves from being overcome with the excitement of the busy, noisy changing world, even though we are in the midst of it, our minds will remain calm and stable.

“If we can continue in our effort to practice meditation, our character will be built up. When our mind is always busy and excited, there will be no success in building true, peaceful character. Building character through meditation is like making bread—you have to mix it little by little, step by step, and moderate temperature is needed.

“If you know yourself well enough, you will understand how

much temperature you need to build the qualities of character you want to achieve. But if you get too excited, you will forget how much temperature is good for you, and you will lose your way. This is very dangerous.

“Buddha was not interested in the elements comprising human beings, or in metaphysical theories of existence. He was more concerned about how he existed in each moment, and compared building character and becoming enlightened as akin to making bread.

“Bread is made from flour. How flour becomes bread when put in the oven was for Buddha the most important thing. How to become an enlightened person was his main interest. The enlightened person is some perfect, desirable character for himself and for others. Buddha wanted to find out how human beings develop this ideal character, how sages in the past became sages. In order to find out how dough became perfect bread, he therefore made it over and over again until he became successful at it.

“We may not find it so interesting to cook the same thing over and over again every day. It is rather tedious, most of us would agree. If we lose the spirit of repetition it will certainly become quite difficult. However if we can keep our strength and vitality, if we can remain observant, and careful, and alert—if we can put the dough in the oven and watch it carefully—we will learn how the dough becomes bread, and we will understand enlightenment.

“We are not so concerned about what flour is, or what dough is, or what a sage is. Metaphysical explanations of human nature are not the point. We should not be idealistic in finding our spiritual way. But at least we should be interested in making bread which looks and tastes good.

“Enlightened Buddhist practice is baking over and over

again at a temperature that is right for us until we find out how to become bread. There is no secret in our way. Just to practice meditating and thereby put ourselves into the oven is our way.”

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a “fascinating story” (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a “gripping and intricate read” (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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