How does one find the “inner core of self” described by Lawrence Kramer? Under the hectic pace of modern life our “inner core of self” can become numbed by the repetition of everyday work routines. In general, there are two ways to escape this numbness, and find again one’s “inner core of self.” One way is to do something different, such as being creative. Perhaps the most extreme example of this approach is the Dada movement in the early 1920s. The ideology of Dada was to do something abnormal and bizarre. Doing something different sharpens one’s awareness.

Another way to find one’s “inner core of self” is to stop, freeing the mind from the fast pace of modern life, and then to try to listen to one’s surroundings. The reason why John Cage’s “Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds” (1952) is shocking is that it helps people realize the possibilities and the variety of surrounding sounds. Finding the changes and differences in one’s surrounding makes one aware of one’s own subjective existence.

Listening actively and carefully to music starts with the latter approach. The “careful” here doesn’t mean being precise in theoretically analyzing the music. Instead, it means to immerse oneself in the music, to become intensely aware of the physical sounds and patterns, and how they change overtime. The realization of subjective existence emerges from the deep identification during the listening.

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Descartes once said, “I think, therefore I am.” When immersed in the music, it is more accurate to say, “I become the music, therefore I am.”

The first movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Opus 131 presents two different kinds of happiness. The first happiness is participating in the beauty of the physical sounds. One is suddenly immersed in the beauty of “nature.”

This happiness is transient. After a while, one realizes that one cannot hold on to the beauty. One starts to reflect about how tiny and insignificant we are compared to the entire world, how a human being is just like a drop in the sea. There is a beautiful Chinese phrase that describes this: a human being is like a small single grain of rice that flows on the wide sea. People become lost when they can’t find any direction in a “wide sea.” (How about those heroes and immortal figures? They were brave and accomplished, while they were alive, but a long time after their death, they leave no trace in the world.) So one experiences sorrow when one recognizes the transience of beauty.

One of my favorite Chinese writers, Su Shi, who was writing in the 11th century, expressed two metaphors to respond to this sorrow. A human being, he said, is like the water in the river that constantly passes away, while not really disappearing. Another metaphor Su Shi used is that the life of a person is similar to the life of the moon, which seems to change to different shapes at different times. In reality, however, the moon doesn’t change at all -- it just goes in a circle.²

If we see the world as constantly changing, we realize that nothing stays the same, even for one moment. Therefore we don’t have to be sad for the beauty passing away and the world changing, because the rule of nature is constant change.

Everything in the world is in a circle and balanced - - things come from nothing and

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² Su Shi, First Prose Poem on the Red Cliffs (“Chi Bi Fu”) (written in 1082, translation is available in the following website: http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/readings/su_shi.htm)
end in nothing. The water changes but remains the same. The moon changes in a circle. The old passes while the new comes. If one accepts this philosophy and abandons sorrow, one may enter a second happiness, the true and broad happiness. This happiness is for everything. One stands above the stresses of a hectic life and obtains a different kind of happiness.

The feeling of a fundamental truth of subjective existence is offered in the first movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Opus 131. (See attached score for the complete movement.)

Listen to movement 1.

In the passage below, this fundamental truth is expressed as a moment of silence.

Listen to this passage.

In this passage, the cello is the main “character.” The deep cello solo shocks me. It gives me the impression that the cello is narrating a short story, quietly and thoughtfully. The cello seems to narrate a “plain story” without sudden rises or falls.
Maybe it’s just because the cello has experienced so much that it now appears subdued.

In this one special moment, there is a kind of silence, or “hesitation.”

Listen to the moment of silence.

At this particular time, the rhythm doesn’t follow the rising trend. It stops and goes down a little. And then it returns to the rising trend. For me, the music is alive even though the cello solo only lasts for only a few seconds. The first time I listened to this passage, the cello seemed to lead to me to a place of absolute silence. Perhaps this is the “mysterious state” or the “divine state.” It is a transient moment, but enough.

In this place of absolute silence, I am only aware of the silence and of the state of “Being.” This state of “Being” has nothing to do with the outside world. In this state, one’s awareness--or soul--is temporarily outside of the body. Just as one may put oneself in another person’s shoes, under this state of “Being,” one looks at oneself from a different perspective. In this state, one is in the position of a bystander. The clarity--or perspective--appears as a kind of truth of subjective existence.

This state of clarity is so difficult to describe, some people have called it a state of super-consciousness. In a way, super-consciousness is the opposite of unconsciousness. In the state of unconsciousness, people tend to forget about anything rational and ultimately become part of the ecstasy of the physical moment. This is the Dionysian spirit. But in super-consciousness, the Apollonian spirit - - clarity of perspective - - prevails.

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Super-consciousness is the awareness of subjective existence--of its beauty and its transience and of its being part of the world. That place of absolute silence expressed by cello solo illustrates this state of clarity--of a kind of knowledge.

What is left after one experiences the state of clarity and of “Being?”

In my opinion, time is constantly passing away, but it is not necessary to chase after it, or to hold on to it. Every passing moment has its meaning or “footprint,” which we can cherish. The world is an endless space--“a wide sea”-- and the search to reach every piece of land is endless. But that doesn’t mean we are going to stop searching and leaving “footprints.” We have to continue searching. The space of the world contains all the footprints we have left on it - - all of the passing moments of time.
QUARTETT
für 2 Violinen, Bratsche und Violoncell

L. van BEETHOVEN.
Dem Baron von Stutterheim gewidmet.
Op. 131.

Quartett No. 14.

No. 1. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo.