

MIND MOON CIRCLE

Spring 2011/ Life and Death



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Life and death

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Cover: Buddha cradling a rat skeleton found when building at Kodoji during the March samu. Sent by Tony Coote. Photo by Glenys Jackson.

Editor: Koula Frantzi

The next issue of *Mind Moon Circle* (Summer 2011) will be concerned with our imagination. How has your Zen practice flavoured, coloured, designed, coached, constrained, frustrated, and possibly ennobled our lives? Please send your poems, plays, short stories, drawings, musings, reflections, photographs and jokes to Brendon Stewart br.stewart@uws.edu.au by the end of January.

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Life and Death

Paul Maloney



Nembutsu, Kamakura, Peter Bursky 2011

Most of our life is taken up with thoughts of the past or dreams about the future, and all of these focus on the "I" as ego. In concentrating on the ego, and its desire for security, we lose sight of our true nature.

The Surangama Sutra tells us:

From the beginning-less past right up to your present existence you have mistakenly regarded a thief as your own son and your changeless original nature has thus been lost to you. Because of that you have been transmigrating through the cycle of birth and death. (Quoted in Hakuin p. 67). Because we are ignorant of who we really are, we resort to a doomed clutching on, at all costs, to a cobbled together and makeshift image of ourselves that has to keep changing in order to keep alive the fiction of its existence. In the process we become more and more impoverished, lonely, cut-off, alienated. (Sogyi Rinpoche)

The ego, with its hard protective shell must, at some time, be left behind. It is a state that must be transcended, if our nature is to realise its full potential. Otherwise the ego becomes a prison. If we remain locked in our shells, we crawl around in the darkness of the dank earth, while up above is the warm light of the sun and the endless sky in which to fly. And were drawn to the light if only we pay attention to its call.

I once paid attention to that call. Back in 1966 I had the urge to get away by myself. I went to the Whitsunday Passage and spent two weeks on a desert island. In the beginning the worst part was not having any books!! But gradually I settled down to a simple daily routine. Then, on the tenth night I sat looking into the fire and became clearly aware that I was full of

anxiety. And I asked myself the simple question, 'Why am I afraid'? And this question sank deep into my mind and I went to sleep with it. I woke up about four in the morning, and the answer was clear to me. I had this mental impression of a great stone castle with six gates (the senses). And I went into each of them and followed the passageways to the centre. The six gates to the castle, they all led to nothing . There was no one home!!

I realised I didn't have a self, and I had never had one, that there was no one to be afraid for, no self to protect. I also realised that the wind, trees, ocean, everything were my brothers and sisters, we were all manifestations, different forms, of the same reality. So death was nothing more than an ice-cube falling into the ocean from which it had first arisen. For what seemed to be the first time in my life, I was at peace.

After this insight I moved to north Queensland for three months, sat on a beach and started practicing zazen for the first time. The reality we seek is nothing other than the world of our daily experience. But it can only be this when we establish our self in this transient world.

Zazen puts reality into focus by its purity and directness. By melting and dissolving the frozen ego zazen gets us flowing again as we regain our "nonbinding mind". Zazen enables us to realize the Self that is the reality of life.

By letting go of our thoughts about "I" when doing zazen, we wake up to the reality of life which pervades the whole universe. So when Gautama the Buddha attained enlightenment he was able to say, I attained the Way simultaneously with the whole world and all sentient beings. Everything - mountains, rivers, trees, grass, attained Buddhahood.

The basic fact is that the Self is living out non-dual life that pervades all living things and everything which exists. As the Self I am not alive, I am life. It is an error to believe that the ultimate reality of life is something other than oneself. We all live out the reality of one life, all living things, all existence, is living out the reality of one life which is all pervading.

Viktor Frankl recounts the death of a young woman he met in a Nazi death camp. He writes that even though this woman knew she would soon die, she remained cheerful. 'I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard', she told him. 'In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual matters seriously'. Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, 'This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness'. Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. 'I often talk to this tree', she

said to him. Frankl was startled and did not quite know how to take these words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations?

Anxiously he asked her if the tree replied. ‘Yes’, she said. What did it say to her? He asked. She answered, ‘It said to me, “I am here. I am here. I am life, eternal life”’. I recall one morning in Tokyo many years ago. I was in the Aikido dojo, absorbed in sweeping the floor before practice started at 6.30. Suddenly, a bird flew past the window. I realised quite clearly, the bird is not alive the bird is life. When we fall into illusion and get locked into the belief/feeling of ourselves as small, powerless individuals, then the Self becomes clouded over. By letting go of these thoughts/feelings life becomes pure and clear. However this realisation does not free us from causes and conditions. Our human freedom is not freedom from conditions but rather freedom to take a stand on whatever conditions might confront us. Dharma practice is process of growing up, maturing as a human being. And we do this by opening ourselves to life. Because the practice is about growing up, it is something that we must freely choose to do. In the face of the transitoriness of life, we are responsible for using the passing opportunities to actualize our potential and to realize values. In other words, we are responsible for what to do, whom to love, and how to suffer. We have to hold our life the way we would hold a butterfly, unrestrained, with an open hand. We must risk it flying away, risk losing it any moment. And that is how we need to hold the people whom we love, leaving them the freedom to depart at the moment of their choosing. Just as the phrases in a piece of music succeed one another from moment to moment, coming from nowhere and going nowhere, so the point instants of existence succeed one another. As the Cosmos, and all that is in it, is a song, it can only be experienced as the present moment. And, like a song, it has no substance. It just is when it is. So when the Paul note stops, I will no longer exist. Not that I will go anywhere, any more than the sound of the bell goes anywhere when it fades away. And this brings to mind a beautiful story.

Once long ago a group of seven wise sisters was walking through a graveyard on the outskirts of Rajagriha in India. One of the sisters pointed to a corpse and said to the others, ‘There is a man’s body. Where has the man gone?’ ‘What!!’ another said in disbelief. ‘What did you say!’. With this, the sisters all realized the truth and were instantly enlightened. (The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin)

It is said that Indra, Lord of Devas, was moved to shower a rain of flowers down upon them, and offered them three wishes.

But that is another story. Let me leave you with a question.

When the four elements dissolve, where will you go?

Here is a letter from **Anne Buescher** that I would like to share.

Dear Paul,

On Friday morning a sentence popped suddenly into my mind: "**Life lives itself on its own terms**". Over the following hours these seven words gained such a strength that they literally pushed every other thought aside. And then, in the afternoon, something happened.

While walking down Victoria Road there was this something called "I", that wasn't "I" or an entity at all, but just a part of the huge flow or better the huge 'being-ness' it moved through or just was in. This "I" knew that it was breathed by life, that its heart was pumped by life, that every organ, every single cell was operated by life, that this "I" didn't have anything else to do than to move life or be life because it was life. And there was this constant hammering in my head: 'Life lives itself on its own terms' and a huge sense of relief and freedom and happiness came with it. This "I" didn't have to do anything because in fact "I" couldn't do anything except just being this GIGANTIC life. There were no obligations to any set rules or conventions but just this deep knowing that the only but most challenging and most binding obligation there is, is towards life.

On the other hand there was a heightened awareness of this person called, who was certainly separate from everything that surrounded her, people and cars and trees and more people. We were all separate entities but then on the other hand no entities at all. Everything was expression of LIFE. Everything had the same value, be it a car, a leaf, a person, a dog or a teapot, but everything was at the same time totally different from each other, a different and unique expression of life. I felt like skipping and shouting: Life lives itself on its own terms! On the other hand there was this gratitude and seriousness and an overwhelming sense of devotion because everything was so simple but then so complex at the same time.

In the evening my house mates and I went to the cinema. We saw Ang Lee's new movie about two cowboys falling in love with each other at the age of 19 in the early sixties in the US. It is one of these stories where love just hits and people struggle and fight and try everything to get rid of these feelings that seem so inappropriate, but all the fighting is so useless because Life lives itself on its own terms. And I saw why all our ideas of control of feelings, thoughts, people, situations are so utterly ridiculous because Life is such a powerful force.

After the movie I felt like wandering off by myself and huge waves of tears came. Love in all its facets is not only the fabric everything is made out of but for the first time I saw the duality in it so very clearly; the enormous beauty and the enormous pain that comes with it. Not love and hate are the opposites but duality sits in love itself. It sits in everything itself, everything is form and emptiness, is bliss and pain. We perceive the world as dual but actually duality is only a concept, in reality it doesn't exist. I hope it doesn't sound too confusing.

There was more, but that seems to be even more difficult to talk about.

Skeleton Woman

Subhana Barzaghi

We were walking along a white ribbon of beach,
following the chorus line of foam, sand and surf.
You were skeleton woman,
completely oblivious to any onlookers stunned gaze,
as if it was perfectly natural for a skeleton
to be walking on Bilongil beach.
You floated through this world with exquisite grace,
delighting in ordinary simple things,
unafraid to play with the treasures entrusted to you,
yet utterly detached from life's enticing grip.

I have no idea how it happened
but in a timeless fashion,
you merged into me –
I disappeared in you.
I became skeleton woman.
It was then that I knew
I must be there to witness
your last breath.

On that day,
you took my hand in yours
and stroked your thin translucent cheeks
that receded peacefully into those bare bones of light.
But it did not end there,
the loving mysterious presence
that held us both,
that holds us all in an effortless palm,

is the psalm that is still with us now.

*Written for Mona Wurtz who died of stomach cancer at Sangsurya in October 2005.



Old Trees, Kumano Kodo Trails (photo: P.Bursky)

A Mystery

Sally Hopkins

“I am come that you should have life, and have it more abundantly”, Jesus said. What is Life?

Buds on the magnolia tree three doors away are swelling. Wattles are flowering yellow. The last leaf on the frangipani has fallen and the stumpy branches are all exposed. The magpies are nesting.

I guess everyone has had my fantasy of trying to make everything just right and then freezing it. Spring time forever! ~

Plastic flowers should warn us. Fixed ideas, fixed responses, where is the life? Midas’s golden touch was deadly. Yet living green shoots perish.

Birth, the arising of the new, like swelling buds, a new baby, a sunrise, holds hope for us all. Yet hope can be problematic. This moment- whatever it is, whatever follows,- is what there is. Hope can move our attention towards the future , and who knows about the future ,except that no baby stays the same, no dawn lasts , no delight is permanent?

As Alberto Caeiro’s poem says:

“Yesterday’s nature is not nature.

What is past is nothing and remembering

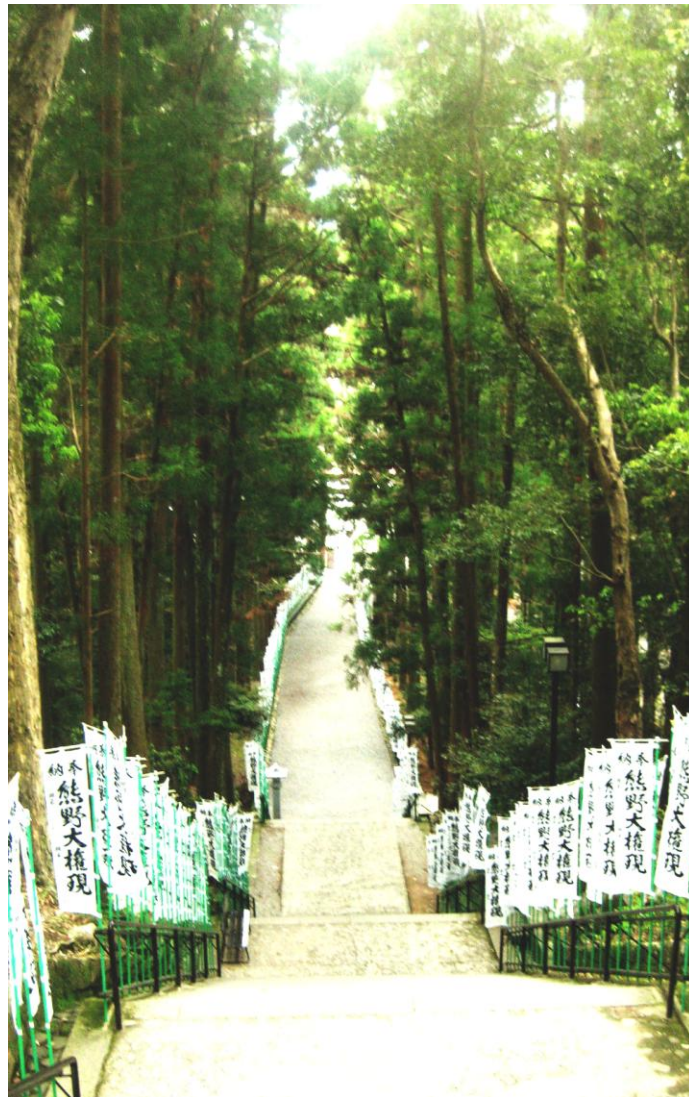
Is not seeing.”

I wasted years and years, more dead than alive, wishing to be where I was not: back in San Francisco, in England, with my first love. Happier! I look at a photo given me recently, of all my brothers, my parents, first sister-in-law, first grandchild and dog, backed by a great Almond tree in full white flower, taken 52 years ago .My parents and the dog are dead. The baby, gestating in my now ex- sister-in-law, hung herself. The rest are 52 years older and the Almond tree gone. “And yet, and yet...”, as Ikkyu wrote.

It can feel deathlike to lose what is loved. Not This! Yet the more I try to protect this self from all that arises and falls away, the drearier, the more life-less, life is. Plastic grass. This! The fresh moment, is what there truly is- however unwished for. Loss. Grief. Fear. Terror.

Boredom. Tears. The mayhem of the world, with all our greeds, hatreds and madnesses. There is life here, whatever we imagine!

Sitting zazen, breathing, sitting with the dying, have made some things clear. Every moment comes fresh. Looking ahead, who knows? The more we look ahead, or look back, the more we miss Right Now. Each moment, each breath, comes - a birth! But it can't be held, however much I wish- everything falls away. Yet, there is the next moment- Fresh! The more I sit with this, the more clearly I come to know that Life itself is BIRTH-DEATH, BIRTH- DEATH. Always arising, always falling away. The more I can release my hold on ideas of myself, and others, of how I want life to be, or don't want it to be, (greed, hatred and ignorance) the more lively, the more musical, the more joyful life is. No certainties. No stable ground beneath our feet. Always birth. Fresh leaves. Always death. The stability of no-stability. This breath, this dissolving cloud.



Kumano Steps, Kumano Hongu Taisha (photo: Peter Bursky, 2011)

A Wreck of Muttonbirds*

Gillian Coote

1) September

Exhausted on their journey south
beset by storms,
they fall to sea,
and float to shore.

2) October

Along the tide mark's dark wet sand -
smooth pebbles, shells -
and seagrass ribbons
wrapped around plump
cream-grey birds.

Tantalising, poised for flight,
their sand-jammed beaks held down.
Beached, all washed up,
all gone to ground.

Floppy necks,
fascinator feathers fanning,
nuggety nor-easter
ruffling soft down.

3) December

Up against the dunes,
some carcasses poke through
dry sand.

4) *January*

They walk the beach,
their Labrador supremely pleased,
absconding with his special stash of wing.
protruding like a louche cigar
between his lips.

5) *February*

The child has found a
perfect circle of white bone.
It's delicate and strong.
She brings it home.



Bird Skeleton (photo: Gillian Coote)

*In September 2010, thousands of muttonbirds fell into the sea along the coast of NSW, exhausted by their encounters with headwinds and severe storms, an event known as a 'wreck'.

Reflections on *The Master Songman: An Australian Koan*

Allan Marett

Back in 1987 – almost 25 years ago now – I wrote an article for the Summer issue of *Mind Moon Circle*, entitled “Dôgen, Maralung and the Flowers of Emptiness.” It was an exploration, from the point of view of Zen practice, of a story that I had been told the previous year by the Aboriginal songman, Alan Maralung. More recently—about three years ago—John Tarrant, who had been my teacher for a number of years in the 1980s, wrote to me to say that he had put my Maralung story in the Pacific Zen Institute’s miscellaneous koans. He subsequently wrote asking my permission to include the story in the second edition of his book *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*. This is what he said: “As you probably know, koans are my big thing and I’m interested in developing new ones. Which is why I used your story about Maralung as a koan. It’s interesting to people.” Here is the version of the koan that, following some to-ing and fro-ing between us, he published under the title: “The Master Songman: an Australian Koan.”

The song finds the singer Maralung

In a place called Barunga in the Northern Territory of Australia, there was a traditional singer named Maralung. He took dance troupes around to traditional places. The ghost of a master song man called Balandjirri and a bird called Bunggridj-Bunggridj gave Maralung his songs. The master song man [Balandjirri] lived so long ago that nothing of his life is known. In the outback you see mysterious moving lights, will o’ the wisps called Minmin; they are thought of as spirit lights and have their own creation stories and dreaming, but are considered to be dangerous.

One night Maralung was sleeping, watching a Minmin light. The light was blue and green and white and fell down across the sky from west to east. Balandjirri and the bird, Bunggridj-Bunggridj, appeared and set off after it. They followed the light and got a song there and then they came into the camp where Maralung was sleeping. Balandjirri said, “Get up, I have a song to teach you.” The dreamer woke up and the master taught him the song. The bird sang too. The song was in the ghost language so humans could sing it but only spirits could understand it. Maralung told the story:

He got those...what do you call them...corroboree sticks. They just appeared there. They were enormous those corroboree sticks. Fuck me dead, they were huge. That didgeridoo player, he sat down about as far from me as [your] chair. Balandjirri called that didgeridoo player, 'son'. It wasn't a short didgeridoo, it was enormous. And he played that didgeridoo right there for me.

"Don't lose this song, you keep this one," said the old songman, "I sang this song for you. It's yours." He spoke kindly like that.

"All right."

"OK, you've got to remember it properly, this good song, this Minmin Light of yours."

He went back and I continued to sing after he'd left. But fucking silly bugger, I fell asleep. But don't you worry, I'll get it. Maybe one or two, three, four, five...if he shows me...six, seven, eight, nine, that's it.

So the next night Maralung dreamt again and it happened the same way. Again the master and the bird came into his dream and woke him and sang for him and again he fell asleep afterwards. But this time in the morning he remembered the song.

Now, here is the question. Maralung knew the difference between dream and waking. So, was the master song man really there or not? How will you prove it?

Although in this version John has pruned the original story a little, the elements to which I responded in my 1987 article are still all present. Indeed John's koan point, "So, was the master song man really there or not and how will you prove it?" is very similar to the questions I posed: "did the songman really see Balanjirri. Did a man really come and sit down with him, make clap-sticks materialise from thin air, and teach him a song?" The major difference is that John demands a response: "how will you prove it?" Probably for this reason (since teachers assiduously avoid revealing the response they require from a student to a koan) his teisho on the case does not focus on this koan point, but on other matters—so let me deal with this first.

John's take on this story is indicated by the title that he gives his teisho: "Finding your song." For him, finding the song is like finding the solution to a problem. He writes: "A lot of things we do might be like finding a song in a dream. If you want to solve a problem, your

situation could be like the dreamer's in the koan. ... Problems start out looking to be either A or B and neither seem desirable. But if you see the problem from the back side, or at another level, it may not seem like a problem any more. The move is like finding a song. A song could also be an idea for a book, a solar energy panel, a way of helping a child with a problem—anything you might want to bring into the world.” (172-73)

Later in the chapter, in the section on working with the koan, he elaborates more specifically on the way in which solutions to problems resemble the song in the story: “When you need something, and you don't quite know what you need, you can get more than you asked for and be drawn into a larger stranger world. The Minmin lights are dangerous; the bird and the ghost go to a place where there might be demons, but that's where you have to go to get the song—to a place beyond what you have ever known before ... the master songman and the bird take risks to aid the living singer. That danger and weirdness might be good for our lives.” (175-76).

Now it is also clear that John sees the process of receiving the song as akin to working with koans, which is, in a sense, at type of problem solving—one that cannot be undertaken using the intellect alone. He writes, “as I see it, the world arrives out of what is unknown and unimagined. Everything just appears as it is, coming towards us; it is a gift, not a product, and it stumbles over us, crashes into us, comes to fetch us. I suppose it helps to show up without much going on in our minds. That's the discipline—the part about not having much going on in our minds.”(177)

What does John mean by “the discipline” here? He is of course referring to our meditation practice: the process that prepares the mind for an encounter with the unknown, the inconceivable. The idea that meditation quiets the mind in order to prepare it with an encounter with the unknown is something quite fundamental not only to Zen but to Mahayana Buddhism and indeed Buddhism more widely.

The Indian sage, Nagarjuna writing around the 3rd century AD said that nirvana is “the calming of all representations, the calming of all verbal differentiations, peace.” (MK 25:24; Nagarjuna 1977; Williams 1977). “The characteristic of reality [*tattva*],” Nagarjuna says, “is to be not dependent on another, calm, not differentiated by verbal differentiations, beyond discursive thought, without diversity.” “Not dependent on another” here means, you know it for yourself alone, to use Wumen's words; Nagarjuna is essentially making the same point as John Tarrant, namely that by calming the mind, though practice, we allow the true, empty

nature of the world to shine forth. Patrick Kearney in the course of teaching a Vipassana retreat last year put this very succinctly: “As the chatter dies down it allows the wisdom to come up.” This calming of the mind allows, poetry, songs, paintings and koans to illuminate the world of essential nature. This perhaps is why we are so sensitive to art and music after a period of intense meditation such as that which we experience in sesshin.

John Tarrant is in fact very precise about the way which the Maralung’s acquisition of his song from the deceased songman resembles working with koans : “a long-dead master songman and a bird made a raid on the unknown. I have often imagined koans as vials of ancient light; in this image, when you get the vial open, the light shines out and everything you see shines too. You can think about koans as conversations that come out of the dreaming, out of the place that art comes from, that the universe is born from...”

So in summary, John’s teisho explores the story of the birth of Maralung’s song as an example of a productive encounter with the unknown. Like all good teisho, it does not, as I said earlier, address the main koan point, namely (to use John’s formulation): “ So, was the master song man really there or not? How will you prove it?”

When I wrote my reflections on this same story in 1987, I had no reason to avoid trying to shine light on the point that has become the koan in John’s account. Indeed it was precisely the question of whether the song-giving ghost, Balandjirri, was really there that interested me: it was the focus of what I wrote.

The story of the Minimin light had been given to me on my very first visit to an Aboriginal community in mid-1986; needless to say, on that occasion I encountered a lot of things that I didn’t understand, but for some reason, it was Maralung’s encounter with the song man that grabbed me. Six months later, during a sesshin with Aitken Roshi, the question of whether the song man was really there or not came up in response to one of Aitken Roshi’s teishos, Ultimately my engagement with this question prompted a significant shift in the way I perceived the world—in much the same way as a koan might. Aitken Roshi then encouraged me to explore and to write about my encounter with this previously incomprehensible aspect of Aboriginal reality, and at his suggestion I began reading Dôgen, beginning with Hee-Jin Kim's paper on Dôgen's use of language (Hee-Jin Kim, “The Reason of Words and Letters”: Dôgen and Koan Language', *Dôgen Studies*, Honolulu, 1985, pp.54-

82). It was Kim's readings of Dogen that ultimately opened up a way for me to talk about what I learnt from the Maralung's story.

The grit, if you like, in the story for me was not (as it was in John Tarrant teisho) the part about the ghostly songman Balandjirri obtaining the song from the Minmin Light Dreaming—stories of liminal characters (usually ghosts like Balandjirri) acting as intermediaries between the world of the Dreaming and the ordinary world of living humans are not uncommon in the published literature about Aboriginal mythology and I was familiar enough with this literature to be able to comfortably slot that aspect of the story into a familiar framework. Nor were the details of the song-giving process unfamiliar to me; I had already read numerous accounts of ghosts singing new songs to songmen in dreams (indeed this is the way that new songs are usually acquired), thought I have to say that Maralung's story is probably the most detailed account of this process to have ever been recorded. No. What troubled me was the part of the story that says "then the ghost Balandjirri and his spirit familiar, the bird, Bunggridj Bunggridj came into the camp where Maralung was sleeping. Balandjirri said, "Get up, I have a song to teach you." The dreamer woke up and the master taught him the song."

Initially I thought that Maralung had literally woken up and that even after he had woken up, the dream images of Balandjirri and Bunggridj Buggridj were still visible to him, as a sort of phantom or illusion. In fact, as I later discovered, this was a misunderstanding on my part. In fact what Maralung did was to wake up *within* his dream—a phenomenon known technically as "lucid dreaming." Lucid dreaming, the ability to wake up within a dream and control it, are part and parcel of shamanic skill world wide, and Australian shamanic songmen like Maralung were no different.

But my initial misunderstanding actually proved very productive, since the apparent impossibility of this aspect of the story impelled me into a deep contemplation of dreaming and its relationship both with the world of waking consciousness and awakened consciousness (*bodhicitta*). What prompted me to turn my attention toward this story, I seem to remember, was Aitken Roshi's teisho on another story about sound and dreaming, namely Case 25 of the Wumenguan.

Yang-shan dreamt that he went to Maitreya's realm and was led to the third seat. A senior monk struck the stand with a gavel, and announced, "Today the one in the third seat will preach."

Yang-shan arose, struck the stand with the gavel, said, "The truth of the Mahayana is beyond the four propositions and transcends the hundred negations. Listen, Listen" [Strike the stand].

If the truth of the Mahayana could be conveyed by a single gavel stroke in a dream, what did this imply about the song sung by the ghost of a long-dead songman in the dream of Alan Maralung??

For Dôgen, the world of the dream state and the world of the waking state were equally real:

Inasmuch as the wonderful Dharma of the buddhas is communicated only between a buddha and a buddha, all dharmas of the dream state as well as of the waking state are equally the real nature. In the waking state there are arousing the mind, training, enlightenment, and nirvana; and in the dream state there are arousing the mind, training, enlightenment, and nirvana. The dream state and the waking state are respectively the real nature; no largeness or smallness, no superiority or inferiority, has anything to do with them¹².

So, did Maralung really see the songman or not? Dôgen's "all dharmas of the dream state as well as of the waking state are equally the real nature" seems to imply the affirmative. That is, fundamentally the coming forth of the universe in the dream state is as real as its coming forth in the waking state. This was pretty much my conclusion in 1987, and it is fine in so far as it goes. But there is another side to it, which I will come to later.

But first, a few words about how dreams are regarded within Buddhism, since while in some contexts—for example, Yangshan's dream about going to Maitreya's realm—dreams seem to have a positive connotation, in others they do not. According to the Buddhist scholar Paul Harrison, "Mainstream Buddhist sources show little interest in dream practice, or the spiritual significance of dreams and their interpretation" (cited in Paul Williams 2009: 40-41). Indeed, in the Theravada, dream often functions as a metaphor for delusion.

The situation in Mahayana is quite different. Since in mainstream Buddhism, sutras are technically supposed to be the utterances of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, or of preachers who were authorized by him to teach, the canon was effectively closed off upon the Buddha's death. The appearance, more than four hundred years later of Mahayana sutras that

purported to record the words of the Buddha, might be seen therefore as somewhat problematic, at least from a traditional viewpoint. But in Mahayana traditions such as Zen, “the Buddha” is interpreted as something much broader than the historical person, Siddhartha Gautama : “this very mind is the Buddha” say Ma Tsu in Case 30 of the Wumenguan; according to Dong-shan in Case 18, Buddha is “Three pounds of flax” and according to Yunmen in Case 20, a dried shit-stick.

Historically, Mahayana texts have sought wisdom in sources that are much wider than the utterances of the historical Buddha: recently I wrote an article in MMC about how those most central of Mahayana texts, the Prajnaparamita sutras (of which we chant an abbreviated version), are said to have been given to Nagarjuna by the king of the Naga serpents deities. Harrison points out that early Mahayana sutras often talked of deities and nature spirits visiting forest dwelling hermits, often just before dawn, and giving them significant revelations. And as Paul Williams comments in his book on Mahayana Buddhism, “visits by deities just before dawn point to the revelatory significance of dreams” (2009: 41). Indeed, throughout Mahayana Buddhism, dreams are, as we have seen, regarded as significant sources of wisdom. Williams summarizes some of the literature on the significance of dreams in Mahayana Buddhism (Intro fn78), which ranges from the so-called Dream Yoga of Tibetan Buddhism to the dream diaries of the famous Japanese monk Myōe Shōnin (1173-1232), which means that they might, I guess, have been known by Dogen. It should not surprise us, therefore that in oldest of the Prajna Paramita sutras, the Astasahasrika (8000 verses) Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, which was written somewhere between 100BC and 100AD, nirvana is characterised as being ‘like an illusion, like a dream.’

Before leaving the topic of the differences between Mainstream and Mahayana Buddhism with regard to the authority of the historical Buddha and the authority of dreams, I’d like to mention something that Patrick Kearney said at a recent retreat. Patrick posed the question, “Is the Buddha real? Did he really wander around and do all these mysterious things?” Notice how similar this is to my question, “did the songman really see Balanjirri. Did a man really come and sit down with him, make clap-sticks materialise from thin air, and teach him a song?” Patrick’s response is interesting, because it not only reveals an intriguingly contingent attitude to the mainstream Buddhist canon for someone in the Theravada tradition, but also suggests that enquiring into the reality of characters in stories (including, one might assume, Maralung’s story) might be rather pointless, even silly. “To me, that question (“is the Buddha real) is as silly as asking was Hamlet real. Did he really wander

around Elsinor castle conversing with the ghost of his father The point is, Hamlet is great literature. So what you do is enter that world and when you enter that world, Hamlet is real. So for me the Buddha is a figure in a literature. And I enter that world, and in that world he is real. So, that's all the reality I need.”

In the traditional Buddhist literature 'illusion' in the sense of something non-existent that is only imagined —this of course includes characters in stories and literature—was traditionally expressed by the word 'kuge', 'which originally meant in Buddhism "sky flowers" , "flowers blooming in the sky," and, by extension, "illusory perceptions", "unrealities", etc'¹³. Dôgen, however, imbued the word 'kuge' with a new meaning which, to use Kim's words, “goes beyond the narrow confines of traditional diction and usage, and penetrates to the intricate interior of these significations'¹⁴. By exploiting an ambiguity inherent in language itself, Dôgen was able to point to the fundamental reality of what we call 'illusion'. The word 'ku' in 'kuge' means not only 'sky' (thus ku - sky; ge - flowers) but also 'emptiness'. It is the ku that we chant in the Heart Sutra when say "shiki fu i ku, ku fu i shiki; shiki soku ze ku, ku soku ze shiki" (form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form; form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form). By his use of the word 'kuge' Dôgen points once again to the fact that just as there is fundamentally no distinction between the world of dream and the world of awake, so too there is no fundamental distinction between what we call 'illusion' and what we call 'reality'. Both are equally the coming forth of the buddha-dharma.

There are indeed a number of ways to study the flowers of emptiness: seeing by dim eyesight and seeing by clear eyesight; seeing by a buddha's eyesight and seeing by a patriarch's eyesight; seeing by the Way's eyesight and seeing by the blind's eyesight; seeing by three thousand years and seeing by eight hundred years; seeing by a hundred kalpas and seeing by immeasurable kalpas. Though each of these ways sees the "flowers of emptiness," the "emptiness" is already variegated, and the "flowers" are also manifold¹⁵.

To Dôgen's list we might perhaps add "seeing by an Aboriginal songman's eyesight.”

In 1987, I answered the question, “did Maralung really see the songman or not?” in the affirmative, and cited Dôgen to back me up. But returning to that question now, 25 years later, I feel a need to qualify that response, for in so far as all dharmas are fundamentally

empty, that is have no independent continuing existence, we could equally say that they are not real. When, in 1987, I said that Maralung really saw the songman, I certainly didn't mean to imply that the dream image had independent continuing existence—that really would be silly. After all, it is precisely in dream that insubstantiality is most clear. It is in the waking state that we have difficulty in recognising the emptiness, not only of all phenomena, but also of ourselves.

Writing as a young man – I was only in my 30s in 1987—I was so strongly struck by the way in which the insubstantiality of the vast empty world resembled the insubstantiality of dreams that I fell into a sort of trap. In the final analysis, there is an important distinction to be made between the dream world and the world of ordinary events (that is the waking world). While on one level things may be the same, on another they may not. Leaving aside cases (like that which we have been discussing), where dream events have consequences in the waking world—Balandjirri gives a song to Maralung in dream; Maralung sings the song in the waking world—so long as they remain contained in the dream world, events in dreams tend not to have any real consequences. Or to put it another way, actions in the dream world tend not to have the same karmic force as actions in the waking world. In dream you can make love to whomever you want; you can slaughter whole villages if you like and you'll probably get away with it. You may not even remember that you did it.

But no matter how enlightened you are, how clear your dharma eye, how clearly you see into emptiness, if you try those things in the waking world you will almost certainly land yourself in hot water. Precisely because of its dreamlike quality, our first glimpses into the vast empty universe can lead us to think that we can act with impunity – as we might in a dream. But to make this mistake is to invite disaster; is to open the door to foxes and demons. That is why, in the Wumenguan, the first case, Zhaozhou's dog, which is about realization, about seeing into emptiness, is followed immediately in Case 2 by a story about the unavoidability of karma. In Case 2 you may remember, we meet an old man who has fallen into 500 hundred lives as a fox—a terrible fate by East Asian thinking—because he asserted that a fully enlightened person, the person who can see into the emptiness of all things, could avoid karma, could escape the law of cause and effect. But emptiness is only half the story; one side of the die (to borrow Wumen's words yet again).

Every zazenkai, on Monday and Wednesday evenings and on every day of sesshin we recite the Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra; I myself recited it hundreds of times in the course of

my pilgrimage in Shikou. The principle message that is conveyed by this sutra is that the world of emptiness is not separate from the world of form. There can be no emptiness without form; and there can be no form without emptiness. And why is it that the vast unconstructed and unconditioned world of essential nature is inseparable from the constructed world of form and karma? When I asked Aitken Roshi about this, he simply said, “that is a great mystery.” I guess I would simply say, “that’s just how it is; how could it be otherwise?”

Keizan response is:

Though we find clear waters raging to the vast blue sky of autumn,

How can it compare with the hazy moon on a spring night:

Most people want to have it pure white,

But sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind.



Fujisan (photo: Peter Bursky 2011)



Sexton Bourke (photo sent by his wife Pamela)

Sexton

Chris Hodges

wet tyres
on the grass
two fingers on the brake
one on the clutch
that big smile
ride on
friend.

Sexton's Birthday

Helen Nixon, 1999

He stood still in the still dry night
While the stars hung waiting above
And the moon glowed heavy on the horizon

Square hands gripped the smooth wooden spade then
Suddenly swung and the blade bit
Clean into the thin green rim of this earth

He dug into the thick colours of the world
With a rhythm of years
Fifty spadefuls of rich loam and hard rock
Fell and crumbled, and still he dug

And strained to look down deep as he dug
Searching the mud and dust
Patiently lifting the layers until

A light wind stirred and ruffled the grassy edge
Lifting his sweat instantly into the cool dry night
And in this moment, turning and lifting his face,
His soul swung with the stars.

Ancestors

Will Moon



Buddhapada, Mt. Fuji. (photo: Olivia Mulic)

When I was asked to do this talk it was difficult to come up with something that I thought would be suitable. When I thought about it I realised that I have a deep sense of not knowing, not knowing anything, and this is the very nature of Zen.

So what should I talk about? Well I could talk about my practice; I've been doing that for a lot of years so I could talk a bit about what I do. But that on its own is probably not that interesting so I thought I'd also talk about my hobby, which is archaeology. So this is a bit of a talk about my practice and my hobby. I've tried to describe some parallels between the two and things that I've learnt through doing both.

Around 10 years ago I wandered into a small overhang out on the Colouli Range in the Wollemi National Park and noticed the drawings of flying fox on the walls. There was a strange fascination with these ancient drawings made at a time when it was a very different world. The drawings seemed to be the last traces of a way of living from a period of long ago, yet there was a feeling of almost being able to reach into the past and understand the story of the drawings. It seemed just out of reach. It seemed to be a window into something that couldn't really be understood or grasped. There was a sense of privilege to have been allowed to stumble upon these motifs, normally left to remain hidden to the world and to fade away in time. This then created a curiosity to see what else lay hidden in the shelters of the ridges and gullies throughout the vast tracks of the Wollemi wilderness.

The first time I came across a shelter it was a surprise. For many years a friend of mine had an interest in the rock art in his local bush. I used to go exploring with him and had a bit of a passing interest. I started to get a feel for where to look and what to look out for. From the

day I was in the Wollemi and found the flying fox drawings I went deliberately exploring for sites, alone at first and then with Sue a number of years later. In a way our journey into the shelters in the Wollemi is similar to the Zen journey. Sometimes the exploring is very rigorous, bashing down through the vine entangled gullies, getting covered in leaches and ticks and often not finding anything. This often happened when there were high expectations, almost as though I needed to be taught that what I want and 'what is' are not always aligned. Then on other occasions I would go without any real expectation and just keep wandering along through the bush, at the end of the day, around the last corner there would be an old shelter with its walls adorned with the odd drawings of these ancient ancestors.

Koan practice has felt a bit like this at times, in fact a lot of the time. There may be that initial understanding that arises when we are not expecting anything. There is a temptation at times to think that's enough and to rush onto the next Koan. But really it's like the start of the journey with the Koan. For some koans its a bit like exploring for sites, we have looked up one valley and there's something interesting there, but then there are more valleys and there are ridges, all with the potential of uncovering something new. Each valley and ridge is our own lives there to be explored. Another analogy is like peeling away the skin of an onion, as we peel away each layer there is more to be found. It reminds of a talk that I think Subhana gave some years ago where she said that the monks in Korea only have one Koan that they work with throughout their life, all the time deepening their understanding through this one Koan.

Sometimes when I was out in the bush I found nothing and other times after a lot of hard work I would stumble into some remote cavern only to find the walls adorned with strange figures, faint hand stencils, wallabies, snakes, echidnas and fish. I had a sense of entering a holy place and would often bow in respect before departing. It was like entering an ancient temple where the walls were adorned with prayers, images and stories from the past, communicating a message of wisdom, or providing a small window back in time to a different way of life. The drawings or paintings were not the product of an artist trying to impress, it was very clear that they were drawn in an egoless way, rather they often seemed to communicate the sacred.

It wasn't all about the art, it was also about the presence of the people. We would crawl across the floors of the shelters looking for the small stone tools, the remains of campfires or

what had been eaten. An old shell, some charcoal, remains of resin from the grass trees, an axe grinding groove.

Something that seemed odd and surprising became evident after a while. Approaching a shelter I could feel whether it had been used before we even entered it. Sometimes I would say to Sue that the ground has been walked, or this ground has not been walked, there won't be anything here. Before seeing any signs of occupation in the shelter we could often feel the presence of whether people had been there. Persevering on the basis of the feeling we would often uncover the evidence after some searching, if it wasn't immediately evident.

Picking over the pieces, trying to piece together the story, a story that could never be fully put together. But whose story was it? It seemed at times to be the uncovering of my own story. The pieces I uncovered were the pieces of my own story. The story of the cave dwellers, the people of the Wollemi was my own story. In a similar way, working with a Koan, the story of the Koan, it becomes our own story, it reveals the landscape of life in ways not previously imagined. Like crawling over the cave floor, exploring all the dark corners, turning over the charcoal and ash. In the same way in our practice we turn over the stones and include the dark places and we find our own nature. For a lot of years in my own practice, more than I care to remember, I didn't bother to look into the dark corners or to turn over the stones and leaves. I only looked at the sunlit bright spots which only made up an incomplete story. What I feel works for me now is a combination of Koan practice where I try to embody and live the practice and an awareness of thoughts and emotions, fears, resistance, anger, tension and reactions. I find that this is needed in order to shine some light into all of the dark corners and under all of the stones and leaves and to see these places as our own nature. This is not always an easy practice.

The more I sit with koans often the more layers seem to peel away and the more is revealed. Just sitting with it, deepening the understanding, embodying it. This way it is more likely to transform things in ways that matter, so I'm not so easily led astray by the delusory mind.

The transformation can seem to be an incredibly slow process at times. It seems to be tied to an emotional capacity to contain what we experience or understand, otherwise it stays at head level and doesn't seem to filter down through our life so that we start to live it and it lives through us.

When I have felt my pain, my fears and resistance then I can be more open in a natural way to allow things in, allow things to shift and change in a more organic way. When I'm not

looking at something that wants attention, like a fear, I notice that I'm pushing more to maintain attention and that kind of attention is pushing against the vulnerable. An old favourite of mine is if I feel like someone has done something unjust to me I can get caught up in all kinds of stories about how unjust it seems. When I look closer, below the anger there is usually fear. Then just being with the fear observing the tensions and tendency of the mind to go off on its stories I can understand the process and the feelings and not get so caught up. Then there is more acceptance of myself and the person I am upset with, there is more completion and more of a wholeness to the practice. My process seems to be that I need to learn this over and over again.

Back to the Archaeology!

During our exploration of the sites in the Wollemi there was an unshakeable sense that the ancestors that created the art and left their traces behind as stone tools and other artefacts were my own ancestors. Logically it didn't make sense at first. Logically we would need to go back perhaps 100 or 200 thousands year or more for a common ancestor. But from the essential perspective our eyebrows are entangled as Wumen points out.

Initially it wasn't easy for me to reconcile the experience that my ancestors are those ancestors that drew on the wall of this cave. After all my genetic ancestors came from Europe and to claim that my ancestors were those that walked this land and lived in these caves flies in the face of that logic.

From the Zen or essential perspective it is clear. The logical perspective and from a scientific approach we separate and partition things and the boundaries lay with our genetics and our genetic lineage.

My ancestral mystery is my own mystery, not separate. Without names and conventions the barriers fall away, the boundary of DNA slips away, as does the cell wall, the blood and vessels, the skin and hair, which slips away to the air and earth, and away to form and no form. After all who owns this DNA? From where do we start and finish? Is our true skin the array of galaxies and dark matter? Both this and beyond this. . Any claim to exclusive rights to Ancestry seems to not hold up from an essential view point. We may think that the events that led to me sitting here are far removed from the cave dwellers of the Wollemi. But are they really? The net of Indra is vast.

I can't deny my ancestors are from Europe any more than I can deny they lived on Colou Range in the Wollemi. Am I not all the DNA that ever was? All of mankind our ancestors. I am the drawing and the hand that drew it. The bones, the stones and the charcoal.

Picking over the pieces, trying to make sense of the story, I am picking over the pieces of my own story, and uncovering this story.

Whenever I leave these old shelters I bow in veneration to the dead, and to the mystery. In a sense their story is left for me to uncover, whether it was in the deposit on the floor or drawn on the walls. Uncovering this story, this mystery, I was uncovering my own story and my own mystery.

A slice

Sally Hopkins

This day
cold hands, damp feet.
A flock of wheeling Currawongs,
black/white,
whoop into the melaleuca ,
whistle to the stormy sky
while
a little Fantail
waves its feathers
in the flowering wattle's light.
The swollen creek batters
tree ferns,
gouges dirt , beats rocks,
wraps plastic on budding callistemon,
tosses bottles into the reeds.
Magpies, sharp eyed,
silent,
hold nesting twigs
in their beaks,
and the rain pours down.

Just Seeing

Greg Try

The foolish reject what they see,

not what they think;

The wise reject what they think,

not what they see.

-Huang Po

This is one of my favourite Zen quotes. Something that seems fairly simple to relate to, like the saying, ‘don’t believe everything you think.’

It says don’t get taken in by all your thinking, by the contents of your mind. By all the thoughts, beliefs, opinions, prejudices etc. They might be necessary to some degree, but handle them lightly.

I read a story about Shunryu Suzuki roshi, who once lay down and had one of his students, put a heavy stone on his chest. He said, right now this stone is a lot more real than all the thoughts going around in my head.

Obviously he was saying the same thing as Huang Po, the foolish reject what they see – they reject their immediate direct experience, and go with what they think – what they believe.

In chapter 7 of the mind of clover (not discussing the faults of others) Aitken roshi writes;

‘To cut off the mind road is to experience total silence, so that circumstances can be seen clearly and taken in cleanly, each one fresh and new. Not to cut it off is to continue projecting one’s own confused images on the world and then to cling to them...The realised mind is at rest, and deals with things as they are the ghost mind is noisy and deals with its own creations.’

John Gray, the British philosopher said; The question is, can the point of living as a human being be simply to see. That is to say to look at the world to see it as it is or as close as we can get to seeing it as it is, the finding in it perhaps what is of beauty in it. Can humans adopt seeing as the meaning of their lives?*

*From transcript of a Compass show.

Flow/My hands/Death/Breath

Sue Bidwell

Flow

Sitting at the bedside
while the breath fades ...
watching, listening, being.
The ordinariness is calming;
life's timeless journey flows on.

My hands

In my hands,
my mother's hands;
her imprint within me,
flowing through me
to my children, and theirs.

Beginning and ending;
an arbitrary view
which flies in my face
when I look at my hands.

Death

Is death waiting there for me
at the end of the road
when my journey is done?

Perhaps death walks beside me
every step of the way
so close, yet unseen.

But death's not out there,

for where is out there?

Living and dying – how intimate!

‘When death comes, there is nothing more that you can do.
You fold your hands and go where you have always been’¹.

Breath

We slip into the world
when our time comes,
take our first breath,
and a lifetime begins.

A tidal flow
a bellows of air
shared with worms and whales,
bats and birds, you and me.

In, out, in, out,
mostly ignored
til emotion invades and crushes;
chest heaving, sighing, sobbing...
then settling.

In, out, deep, slow;
with attention, I watch it,
feel the flow of it,
rest with the rhythm of it,
then forget it once more.

But each cell holds the truth
of impermanence,
is awash with the flow

¹ Sokei-an Sasaki, cited by Christmas Humphreys, *The Search Within* (London, The Theosophical Publication House Ltd, 1082), p. 97

of coming and going.

So when our time comes

we take our last breath

and slip out of this world

...and we are the wind blowing through us,

and 'the snow falling,

each flake in its appropriate place'².

Janet Selby, *New life*



² 'A Zen Master', cited by Christmas Humphreys, *The Search Within* (London, The Theosophical Publication House Ltd, 1082), p. 91

Life and death is a grave matter

Koula Frantzi

Life and death is a grave matter. Is it? There are periods in life when anything newborn and anything that passes away acquires a huge importance in our thoughts and feelings and colors our reality in dramatic tones. Our personal and collective stories are marked by these events that later on are recalled and reflected upon again and again, forming entities and identities which feel fixed and concrete – and that's fine. Again there are times when we look back to what we call past and we see that old dramas have lost their sharp edges – their intensity has gone; they have been transformed into something else. We wonder how we came to assign so much space and power to that person, that scar, that idea, project or phase of our life. We can now let them rest in peace. We can play and make jokes with them, or paper boats and let them sail away. We can return to this moment, the here and now, and continue with our life – and that's fine.

I grew up in a place where the dead were very present in the rituals of everyday life. Photos of them decorated the walls of my family house. Aging women were always dressed in black till the very last day they drew breath. Ever since a massacre that took place during World War II, the entire town has been (and still is) in a seething grief that has not been properly processed and recognised. Yet the town, having been burnt down in the war, was rebuilt, people from other places moved in, and new life sprang from the ashes. And that irreversible event had created a kind of spirituality in those left behind. A certain ambiguity, a contemplative mood, a lightness in the way they deal with matters of life. Having spent my first 18 years in that atmosphere it took me a long time to decode its perplexing messages and even longer to realise its impact on the patterns that shaped my own life.

I came to Zen practice in a spirit of lightness. What appealed to me in the first Zen group I joined in Athens in 1984 was a celebration of energy, creativity and life. Zen meditation was taught as part of personal development courses in the group, which was led by my first teacher Kostas Foteinos and had many participants although – back then – in a cultural context which welcomed neither psychotherapy nor Eastern traditions, on both religious and political grounds. Three years later the way I was perceiving the world came crashing down, and the fact that I had in the meantime abandoned my newly discovered practice had played its part in that. On the surface everything was fine and exciting: a collaborative book I was working on was published, I had left my teaching job to start a PhD, my salary had risen and I had plenty of free time. But inside I grew restless and unhappy. When a couple of very intimate relationships ended abruptly, I got overwhelmed by confusion and panic. I isolated myself from others, I became self-destructive and I wanted to die. Soon I got seriously ill and my death wish became very tangible.

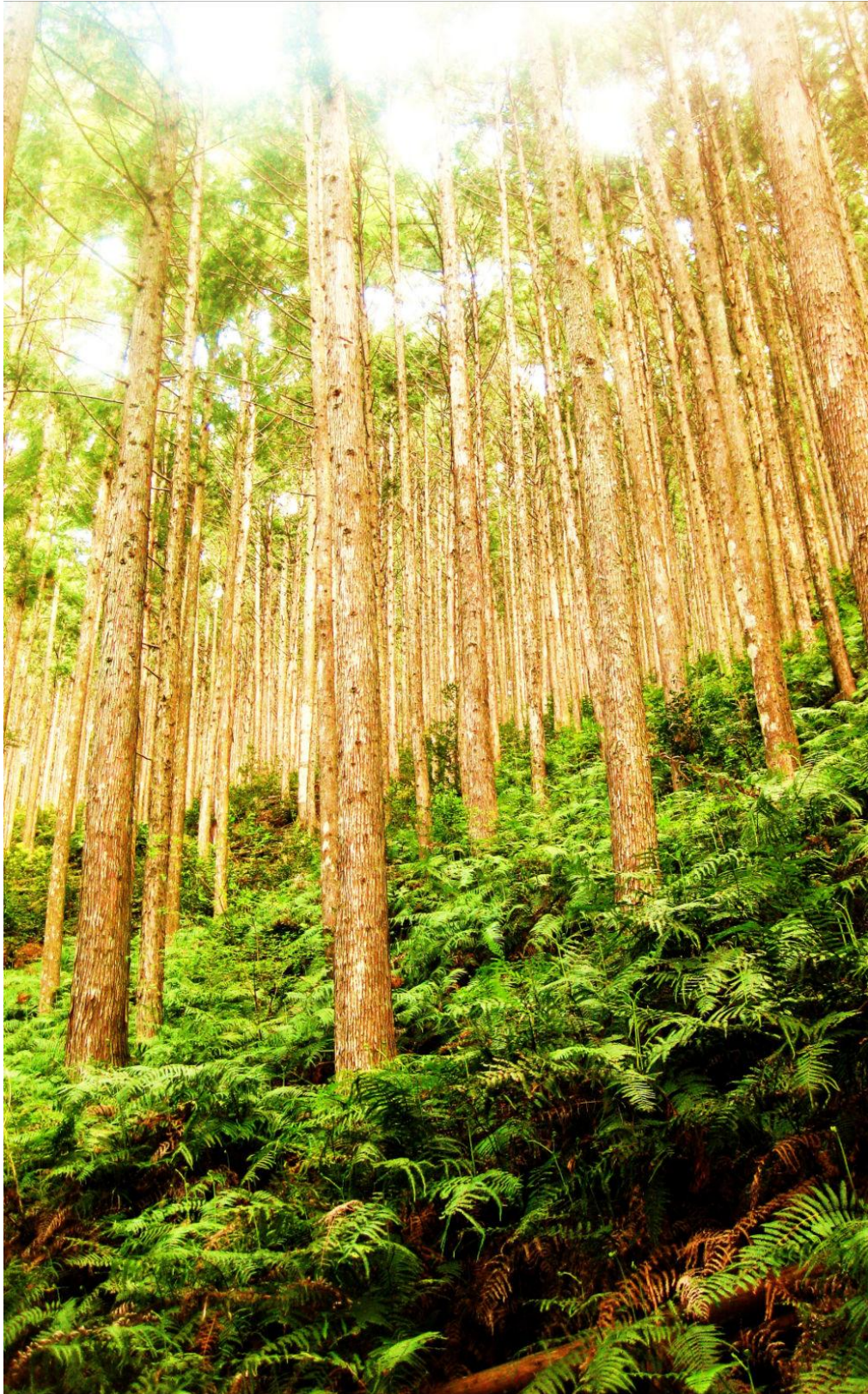
Death is not always a matter to play with and nor is life. It was very lucky for me that I rejoined my Zen group at that point, the sole place where people would recognise that what I was going through was a very serious matter. I was lucky that no one there downplayed my ailment by encouraging me to simply let go and see life in a positive light. Instead I remember my teacher shouting at me “You’re holding the sword like a corpse!!” during a Kenzo exercise; it was one of the most insightful statements I have ever heard.

Life sprang again from the ashes, and for that I owe a lot to my Zen practice. It took me places whose existence I had no idea of, and one of them was Australia. It has accompanied me in good and bad times, deepening or soothing my sadness, at times fuelling and at times evaporating my passions. It feels like an anchor, a canoe sailing down the river or resting quietly at the banks. Today the waters are still and the sun is shining. Tomorrow there are storms and rain, the boat is shaking and the river is muddy. And it is always a relief to step in and sit still in the midst of everything and nothing.

Again back in the late 90s, when I returned to Greece I learned my teacher had fallen ill; but in the meantime, under his guidance and through their research with participants and terminally ill people, the group developed a method called ‘existential fear’, which combined psychology, bodywork and Zazen to investigate matters of death and life. It held that existential fear is activated whenever circumstances and significant others challenge something that a person holds very dear; something so to say vital for his or her existence. This can be subjective and it may not make sense at all to others. Maria Foteinos (Kostas’s wife), who in 2009 published a book³ where she presents the method, mentions that her own fear surfaces whenever she is being asked ‘not to take initiatives’. My own fear is triggered when I am asked ‘not to change faces’. Every time that a significant other asks me to remain as they have known me, and I behave in order not to upset them, I instantly migrate to an inner space where I feel immobilized. In serious cases, I create a life crisis; in minor ones I feel alienated and angry.

Zazen has helped me a lot in exploring that frozen and gloomy space, in getting in touch with it, going into it as deep as I can stand, in forgetting, forgiving, and leaving it behind. It is a mysterious process, non-linear, full of unexpected gifts and sometimes unwelcome discoveries, as there is no guarantee that things will work out or go in my favour, or of what and who awaits afterwards. And over the years this idea of existential fear has served me as a peculiar alarm (Koan?), which I can sit on, breathe to, sleep with, and which lets me get on with my life with more awareness of myself, others and circumstances.

³ Maria Foteinos, *Kostas Foteinos-Café Ecole: The Fascination of Psychotherapy*. Athens: Café –Ecole Publishing, 2009.



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