



Mind Moon Circle

*Zen and
Indigenous
Traditions*

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This issue explores *Zen Approaches to Indigenous Traditions*.
Much of the text arises from a symposium day held at Sydney Zen Centre
in September 2006.

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Cover Three rocks on Gulaga (sacred mountain of the Yuin people).

Do the stones remind you of some aspects of Zen? The Three Treasures? The Three Bodies of the Buddha? When we have been with Uncle Max on Gulaga we walk in deep silence from the Energy rock to this formation....[no one can visit these sites without an Indigenous guide] In the bush this column of rocks is huge and awe-inspiring....

Uncle Max says that this formation is about where we come from, who we are, and where we are going. It is also about us being between, say, hot and cold, or any opposites [non-duality?]

Photo: Caroline Josephs

Editor Caroline Josephs

Next issue We are family and ...

What do you see when you see your family in you? What do you see when you see yourself in your family? Tell us about your experience of practice with family. Tell us about your practice in the continuing stream of life.

Please send contributions to Nigel Pearn [firstnigel@ozemail.com.au]
or Sarah Kanowski [skanowski@ozemail.com.au]

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Origin and Context

On Sunday September 10th 2006, a Symposium was held at Sydney Zen Centre on *Zen Approaches to Indigenous Traditions*.

Over the years Sydney Zen Centre has touched into and worked with Indigenous issues and traditions. In the late 1980s Maureen Smith (Minmia) came to the Centre to give a talk and later some of the women joined her at a camp on land out of Canberra. We have walked with Gilly and Tony to the wonderful Aboriginal cave above Kodoji on a number of occasions. Uncle Max has given teachings at Gorricks in 2001, arranged by Gilly. Allan Marett has shared his deep knowledge of Indigenous song at sesshin and other occasions such as the opening of Kodoji. Caroline Josephs has given storytellings and presentations and led workshops on Indigenous storytelling, and organised trips to Royal and Kuringai National Parks, and to Gulaga and Biamanga mountains with Uncle Max which many Zen students have attended.

The day at the zendo in Annandale was intended to extend dialogue with Indigenous traditions through a Zen perspective.

Four presenters were invited:

Uncle Max (Dulumunmun) Aboriginal Elder of the Yuin nation of the far south coast of NSW

Allan Marett (Professor, currently Professor Emeritus in Musicology, University of Sydney Professor of Ethnomusicology, School of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Charles Darwin University.)

Mari Rhydwen, (Linguist, Aboriginal Languages Consultant in the NSW Dept. of Education)

Caroline Josephs who completed her doctorate research work on sacred oral storytelling - including both Zen, and *Yolngu* Indigenous Australian storytelling (north-east Arnhemland).

Since that day of the symposium in 2006, much has happened in Australia. 2007 saw the 'Intervention' into remote Indigenous communities under the Howard government. And a great deal of public discussion and debate around that, which has highlighted Indigenous issues. With the end of 2007, a new Rudd Government was ushered in with a different and more consultative approach, to Indigenous affairs.

The offerings in this issue of MMC give the flavour, some of the history, different and rich perspectives on what it means to be an Aboriginal person in this country....and how it impacts on our Zen practice....

They are offered in the spirit of the oral traditions from which they spring.... on the page.

Gassho,
Caroline Josephs

Acknowledgements

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Janet Selby for her poster for the day....

Jill Steverson, Paul Smith and Gail Burrell-Davis for the fabulous work – the arduous job of transcribing from CDs

Subhana for all her help in arranging the day....

Doug Mason for his great help in doing the formatting.



*Four presenters left to right:
Dr Caroline Josephs,
Dulumunmun (Uncle Max
Harrison), Professor Allan
Marett, Dr Mari Rhydwen*

Photo: Sarah Kanowski

Dulumunmun, Uncle Max Harrison's Talk

Uncle Max: I don't call myself an Australian. I guess you'd look on me as just being rebellious. But, but I'm not. I look on myself as just being a *Yuin* man, 'cause that's my country, where I was born. And I would never want that to be removed from my heritage. I would never want that to be taken away like most of my tongue was. Most of my tongue was stripped from my forebears. Well it wasn't stripped, they weren't allowed to teach, to be taught, and talk it so they could teach us young kids, and ah,... now it's so hard for us to get back....

Even to me with my children and my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren I would use words with them and they would look at me gob-smacked and say, "What'd you say Pop?" and I'll say, "Oh!" I'll forget that I'm talkin' to my bloodline that don't hear these words used in everyday household use. So that is detrimental to their spiritual growth and understanding of their cultural beliefs and their spiritual connectedness. So I've got to sit down, and, and tell a story... And sometimes I find my nieces and nephews, when I do the same with them, talk to those, to those *burriss*, and I'll say, "Look, you used that word," and I'll have to reprimand them, and I'll say, "you used that word but you're not sayin' it right." See. if you say "*ngarndhi*", the word now is goin' and gettin' just another way, and it's, it's goin' as "*narndi*", **not "*ngandhi*"**. See, and is what I'm trying to look at.

Ah the word, "*nganamurra*", see, now "*nganamurra*" it's an object. If I was sittin' down talkin' to my children. If I say to them, "Can you get me that *nganamurra* over there?" see, and I'll say it like that, and they'll know exactly what I want. And then I can say, "Oh, get me that other *nganamurra*." and they'll still know exactly what I want. See and I'm askin' for 2 different objects. So, so the sacredness of that word goes to both areas of that object. Now that word is startin' to be just twisted a little bit, they'll say "*nunamurra*". See. Now the "ng" is gone out of the "*nganamurra*". It's gone into "*nunamurra*". And that's not right.

It's like if you look at the English dictionary you'll see *where, wear, we're... to, too, two*. What bloomin' "two" are we talkin' about? See. What word are we talkin' about? Is it *where, wear* or *we were*?

Because our languages weren't written they were verbalised and they were, well spoken, and from the mouth to the ear was such an important thing for language, not from the eye to the ear. 'Cause from the eye we look at a book to understand that word... the eye to the mind.

So, I guess goin' in to other people's homelands is still a bit hard. Take Redfern [suburb of inner Sydney] for instance. Why did you think there's so much spiritual unrest in Redfern? I'm not makin' excuses for the Koori people in Redfern, but if you look at where they come from... You can see a lot of the younger ones now can say that they're from Redfern. People my age and a bit younger can't say that they come from Redfern. And you look at the same problems anywhere in this city. You know of different nationalities and the spiritual unrest that is goin' on 'cause of walkin' on land of sacredness and nobody's takin' no notice of what the mother is tryin' to say to them.

Since Christmas, or just a bit before Christmas I done 20 smokings [purification ceremony] around this town. 20 smokings! People asked me to go in. They looked on me as the ghost-buster! Oh my goodness! I think, ah, I'm not a ghost-buster! "Can you come and get rid of these spirits?" And then when I get and talk to them I'll say, " Why do you want to get rid of them?" And when I find out what's happening what I'm findin', is stuff like this... Through that spiritual onnectedness...because some of the sacred trees have been cut down. They don't even realise... And then the biggest surprise, of all, is the backyards. That's where nearly all the problems are comin' from. All the lovely landscaping that they're doin' in there. Now what, what I'm findin' and what I'm gettin' through to me is most of the landscape stuff -- where've they gotta get it from? They gotta go out into the country, they gotta get, outta the creek , the creek beds and everywhere like that... And what they're pickin' up is stones, and bones as well. And the bones are not animal bones. It's of my ancient ancestors. This is where a lot of the problem is comin' in with people, and they don't even realise it. All they know is that there's a spirit there and it's annoyin 'em. Of course that spirit's gonna annoy 'em...if it's removed from its place of sacredness.

So then you look at the uproar of someone graffiti-in' the cenotaph...it becomes headlines. And that thing was there... what? 50-60 years? It's built there. And it's built there for the sake of war.

For the sake of killing! You see some of these things...it amazes me!

I can talk like this because I had a brother that was in the War. I had an Uncle that was in World War I. It was only 9 years ago that my brother got his name on a honour roll. Wasn't even recognised. I don't think my Uncle's name's even there. On an honour roll. World War I, and World War II, so you know, the recognition of some of our deeds never looked at. And I wouldn't want 'em to be looked at in that respect of goin' over to kill. So the land that they fought for and defended was New Guinea and Gallipoli! Left their shores to go and fight there. See, these are the kind of things that amaze me.

And then in the 60's and 70's when we marched up the streets and talked about 'Land Rights' we were ridiculed. Just talked about land rights! And our place of land rights was our freedom to go from here to there -- to go campin' on the shore, on the beach. To be able to go through private property...all the places that we knew. Where we used to camp and fish, and hunt, and go and practise some of our ceremonies. We were shunted, we were hunted off these places. So that part of land rights was so important to me -- of havin' the freedom to *walk*. Not owning land. Not havin' ownership. But just that freedom to be able to go and practise, and sit under a sacred tree where we could do our ceremonial stuff and our spiritual stuff.

I'm lookin' at this relation here [holds up branch with leaves]. I actually look at...from the bottom of the bush and you just keep comin' up. And you look, and then you see the little fruits on it and then you see the tiny little leaves and the bigger leaves. And the teachings that I was taught -- of when you sittin' out in the bush and you watch the medicine that can go up there. You understand that medicine when it goes up there. When it's just about in full, and all your toxins come up and then you get these little young leaves like that and it's ready to push it all out. And then you have this, you have this wonderful healing components that's in there. It could be in the bark, it could be in the sap, it could be in the wood, it could be in the leaf, it could be in the blossom. And just these simple little things what I had to sit with...with five masters and me, and talk...and that's what they were. They were masters! They weren't teachers. 'Cause these old men what handed me down a legacy that is over 80,000 years of knowledge and wisdom. Just to be able to understand a simple little thing like that. Of your healing. Yourself, , or else you have to go to a doctor to get a prescription. To get a drug that is made up synthetically.

So, when I look at those little fellas like that you know, and I think, "Yeah!" And the gift that Corakori wind spirit dropped. Corakori wind spirit gave us that gift so that Jill can bring it in here. We can start lookin' at the growth of that. And we can start lookin' at, and then we can take it to a wider scale and look at the damage of clear felling in countries because people want to clear everything. What they don't understand is that those trees walk the same land. They drink the same water and they breathe the same air as what we do. As a matter of fact they give us the air. They change the carbon-monoxide -- the tips of those branches changes the carbon-monoxide so that we can breathe freely. So the singing for that, for that branch for those branches, or for the tree, for the root of the tree is such an important thing. When you sing that song of sacredness about that, about that particular tree or that particular *ngantjarra* you know, medicine. And once you start to look at that medicine that's comin' through and the understanding of it, and how to use it and when to use it, then you don't use it just when you're sick. You use it at special times through the year when you start lookin' at your family and seein' what they got to offer. Seeing what they are offering you to take. "Take me," they're sayin', "I'm ready for you to take me and utilise me." So when I take people out into the land I say, "Let's go out onto the land and watch the land talk to us." And you'll see some jaws drop. But that's what it's doin' -- it's *talkin' to us without a voice*.

Our land does that all the time, our water does that, our wind. Grandmother moon, Grandfather sun. They do that, all the time. They show us things, what's happening. And they're talkin' to us at a constant level. And what do we do? We completely ignore what the mother, the land is telling us. All the wonderful blossoms. What do they call that... 'asthma'. How did we combat that? 'Cause we had stuff to go before those blossoms came to make people get those sneezes and wheezes and coughin', you know and splutterin'. So it's simple little things like that of living with the land. It's not there anymore. Because our people have become refugees in their own homelands. They're not out there now, livin' on it.

There's plenty more, you know, there's plenty more about water, I've been talkin' about water for 36 years or more. Now what's up? 36 years I've been talkin' about water. Nobody would listen to me. You know I was just a silly blackfella. You know, "What's 'e talkin' about?", "Idiot!" But

where I seen it happening is where I used to go, to where the water's birthed. That's where you see the things happening. Or not happening now. You think, "Ooh, that's not too good!" A lot of the cut-off points are done by lots of roads and that. You see we're so caught up in progress [noisy minor vs aeroplane sounds] and the only way to look at that has been progress to hell! That's about it. Nowadays they're lookin' at this fella up here...what do they call him? Ozone layer. Up there's OK, it's down *here* that isn't. That's why that's like up there because down 'ere is a problem. And these are the things that we just don't understand. But once you can feel the vibration in your land or go to the sea. Stand in there for a while and she can tell you something. She will give you a good insight. You just go and stand and let her wash up on you, with your eyes closed. And you'll get those vibrations. Those messages. And it's so simple. So simple to understand that. Because what do they invent? That little thing, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, you know? Um... dot dash thing? [morse code]...Morse code, see! And I don't know how long that that was invented. But our morse code is two clap sticks [claps], didjeridu, singin' into the land, singin' into the water. And your vibrational movement is such a powerful thing. That we didn't even realise. You walk up a steep hill and it's gettin' a bit hard goin'. You get a friend to walk behind you and just touch you on the back, don't push ya, just touch ya', and boy! you'll pick up speed. And then you tell 'em to take their hand off your back and you'll stop! We don't realise sometimes the power of healing and the energy that we have in our hands. We never realise that. We wait until things happen to us before we start running to doctors to start gettin' fixed up. That's like, with my knee goin' there and every time that I come up to my thigh I can get as far as the hip and then I lose my vision 'cause I know that it's structural. And I know that there's some messages that are gettin' cut off goin' down my spine. Goin' right through me, through my neural system. So what am I doin' wrong there? These are the things in what I'm questioning myself with, all the time. I'm takin' supplementary stuff just to get rid of the pain but I must try and heal myself and what's causin' that? Same as I done this arm. That was gonna be amputated. But that's a different story. That's a big, big story that one. And that's all through these fellas 'ere. Watchin' them. Watchin the toxins move up so I can take 'em. So that's what the land offers to us. It offers us everything of convenience. And yet, at times, we never seem to thank her.

You'll see people goin' to church and they'll pray for rain. Why pray for rain? Why pray to God for rain? All those things are in place. The creation, the Creator has created those things in place -- like the wind, *Corakori*, that's why we've got this word wind spirit. Come and blow that rain towards us. Watchin' tree plantings I watch that... and it goes because of the sake of planting trees. And that's fine, but you don't plant it out of right respect. You plant it for the sake of plantin' it, and puttin' more trees up! Nobody sings the land first. Nobody sings the birthplace of that country, of that tree that's bein' planted. Nobody's lookin' at which way that songline or leyline is runnin'. You're just plantin' trees willy-nilly. See, you plant those trees in the right direction you take the rain to where it's needed. But then again, if you become farmers you don't want those trees there, you know they become a hindrance. So these are some of the little things that were taught to me by my masters. And, I will never forget 'em. They made me look at the Mother with ancient eyes. Not mine. But with ancient eyes. And it was so understandable when I started to see these things happening around me.

I might just close off there and ...thank you.

[Thank you Uncle Max]

Opening her beak
grey butcher bird
sings all the colours

Diana Levy

[Grey butcher bird was the totem Diana was given when on Gulaga with Uncle Max.]

Caroline Josephs' Talk: Making String, Stringing Meaning, Plying Story...

Caroline: You were talking about country, Uncle Max. And loss....

I want to tell you about an experience evoked by your talk. When I was in Arnhem Land -- the very first time I went up there, I was sitting in women's shelter with *Yolngu* women. The shelter is made of upright poles and hessian, and bark -- covered with branches as a shade shelter. The women sit on the sand inside. I'd just arrived -- I'd been to the shop the day before, in Yirrkala, the Aboriginal town a little distance away from where we were all camping, whitefellas and Aboriginal people, in a large stringybark forest. I'd bought a little necklace.... I was standing in the women's shelter, watching them making baskets and mats. And one of the women looked up and pointed to the necklace around my neck, and said, "I made that!". And I said, "Oh, that's wonderful.". You know it's a piece made of an oval of pearl-shell, with a beeswax dob to hold it on to the string...string is made from bark of a tree. So it seemed to have everything as far as I was concerned. Out of the blue -- I hadn't really considered what I said next...it just popped out. I said, "Can you teach me to make string?" It occurred to me that that would be the simplest thing to be able to learn. The young woman I had spoken to pointed to another older woman, and said, "Djerrickngu, she can ... teach you." So they began to teach me to make string, I'll tell you about that a little later. But, as we were doing this you know, with the rubbing on my thigh the two plies which is made from the bark, we started to chat... I said, "Where's your country? Who are your people?". Just the sort of things that women would normally talk about anyway when you're sitting down together. And then they asked me, "Where your people from?" So quite casually and briefly I began, "Oh, one set of grandparents came from Latvia, and went to Scotland, the others from the Ukraine and from Poland and went to Manchester in England. And they had to move because of progroms, driven away... they were Jewish. Later, the families migrated to New Zealand, and to Sydney.

And quite suddenly the women on either side of me put down the string and what they were doing, and on either side of me they started stroking me like this [stroking down the arms on both sides]... and kind of singing, a kind of a wail, "Ooooooooooh, ooooooooooooooh, ooooooooooooooh..." And then they said, " We know... what it's like... to lose country." And I was totally transfixed, because I'd never experienced anything like this in my life. In some deep way, I then knew why I was there in that strangely remote place with these women. Later I discovered that this singing, wailing, was a grieving, a crying for country ...which only the women do...crying songs....

Later on in the Garma festival we were led down a dark path in the evening and told, "No cameras, no flashlights, no torches," and we are led into a space where there is a sandy floor but you can't really see very much ...and asked to sit down. And you can feel that there are other people in the dark. And we're in amongst the stringy barks and the stars are up above in an enveloping dark sky. And then out of the silence that descends there comes a crying, these plaintive crying songs. And a group of women are wailing and crying... It makes every hair on your body stand up! When their voices fade away into the silence little lights come on revealing the prints they've made of the stories of their own country. Each is framed and attached to different trunks of trees...illuminated, each by a little light, all the little lights come on and show those pieces of their country, those pieces of their stories. I feel unable to move...caught in a kind of awe. And something else.... It felt incredible...Oh! quite quite beautiful.

So how did I get to be there in Garma? In 2002 was the first time I went to North-east Arnhemland and to Garma, the public Festival where *Yolngu* people share their culture with many people.

Let me take you back to the time when I lived on the South Coast... and it was not long before I was going to go up Gulaga [Uncle Max's sacred mountain on south coast] with Uncle Max, for the second time. I was living in a house in the bush, in a place called Guerilla Bay, and I went to open my door and there was a python in mid-air at waist level, reaching into the space across the door. And I shut the door. And I looked out and I thought, "I can't believe this!" It was, in fact that year there were more pythons than there had ever been in the 25 years I had been going to this place. And the snake began to insert itself up into the jamb of the door. And there was a window in the door... so I'm up on the chair looking out, and going "Go away, go away, this is not your place!" Real whitefella stuff, you know. But, later that snake and snake stories began to inhabit my dreams. And then I woke up one morning and I remembered that way back, some 20 or more years before, I had been told a snake story by an Aboriginal man I'd met in Darwin.

In 1979 I was at a conference -- a national arts conference -- and Wandjuk Marika who was a law man from Arnhemland, *Yolngu* musician and artist, came up to me after my presentation and thanked me for the story of the rainbow... I'd been talking about the project that I'd been working on with educators and teachers across Australia. And I talked about it in terms of the strands, the different colours, all these different groups, different art-forms, all these different things. And so he came up to me and shook me by the hand and thanked me for the story of the rainbow serpent, for the rainbow. And then we got talking, and we talked and talked for quite a long, long time, I don't really know how long but I think hours and hours, he told me three of his own stories in very little versions (his Dreamings), but one of those was the Rainbow Serpent story and, as I later discovered that's also called the *Wagalag Sisters Story*. He also gave my children Aboriginal names then. (It took a long time for me to understand what all this meant). And so when I was down in Guerilla Bay on the NSW south coast -- the python visits re-evoked for me the Rainbow Serpent story from Arnhem land. I went down into the garage and I opened up my notebooks, 'cause I used to keep detailed notebooks in those days, and read this story that he'd told me. And so that began me on a journey where I began to talk to anthropologists, and I talked to Allan as an ethnomusicologist about this story and I ask myself and others, 'Can I tell this story? I'm trying to find a way into the story and I'm beginning to be a storyteller. Can I tell this story?' I was told by a lot of people -- like curators from the National Gallery where they had 60 years of paintings from this story that *no, no* I could not tell this story. And over the years as I read and I talked to more people I discovered that this is a very big story. These stories are never told except in the country from which they have come -- out of the land. And each particular of the story is related to a part of country -- to *that* rock, that waterhole, that particular, specific place. And only one part of it might be told as part of one ceremony. But another episode might be told if it's a different kind of ceremony. This story of the Rainbow Serpent is associated with three big ceremonies. It is a story for both men and women. Five different clans in five adjoining territories are the custodians of these stories. The story is a journey. It's the creator women coming from the South, crossing through the country, and various things happen along the way. They create language. They bring things into being by naming them. The different clans are represented by different beings in the story beginning to speak to each other. As they would in a ceremony -- where all the elders, the custodians of this story come together for a special ceremony. They actually meet and they work out who tells which parts and how, and whose role it is for various things to happen in ceremony (which is a re-telling, a re-evoking of that Ancient time in the present). And so I discovered all this and then I was fortunate enough to be invited to the Yothu-Yindi studios to sit down with a small group of people (Aboriginal dancers, musicians, with anthropologists, curators, researchers, dancers and so on...) and then to go to Garma and to hear more stories...and later to be 'dropped' into the story in a strange way...but maybe that is for another time....

So... I'm at Garma, sitting in the women's shelter, and at that stage I was still wondering about this big *Wagalag Sisters* story and the Rainbow Serpent... I knew I couldn't tell the story, I had no right to tell the story, and I also knew that in Indigenous culture you can't assume a right to know.

It's like in our Zen practice. We can't assume we have a *right* to know. It's something that we have to look very deeply into, to find the pieces, to earn through our own efforts what's what, to gain insight. So Zen stories are given in partial ways that are oblique. And we have our own *koan* system which has a kind of form of what I might call 'sacred/secret' around what happens in the *dokusan* room when we meet with the teacher one on one. And we work sometimes with those stories of our ancients, the Ancestors. And what do we do? We work our way into those stories. We inhabit, we dwell in those stories, in the same way as Aboriginal people do as they're singing and dancing and telling the stories. We step in, we become the ancestors as closely as we can...not always easy to be those people from the stories that we hear.

I want to tell you a little bit more about this string. We have something similar in Zen. We talk about 'threads' (as in 'red thread' for example. We have 'sutras' which are like binding -- which we chant. These connect us to each other and to all beings, and beyond... In *Yolngu* country, string is about relatedness....It links people, and it may link places....it links me to that place as I twine it on my thigh...it links me to the bark of the Kurrajong tree .. The fibre is stripped from inside of the bark and then torn into finer pieces, like so [demonstrates with pieces of fibre]. And then the two plies are woven together, plied together on the bare thigh with the heel of the hand [tshu tshu tshu tshu sound as the string is rubbed on thigh]. Takes a long time. Do we do that in Zen? Plying the dualities?? With the *Yolngu* women, Gulumbu and Djerrkngu... I made this piece

of string [laughs] which took me days. My rather rough first attempts Later Gulumbu gave me this one which is very special, with pieces of possum fur in it [holds it up]. And this is also like the places in the story -- the steps in the story are related. We talk about meaning, which joins one thing to another. And sometimes in Zen we talk about no meaning.

I want to finish with a story which is told at Garma, the public festival in which *Yolngu* share their culture.

I've been fortunate enough to be there three times now. A few of you have been there too.... Galurrwuy Yunipingu tells the story at the beginning...to set the theme for the festival... It's what *Yolngu* call an 'outside' story. There's *outside* knowledge, and there's *inside* knowledge. And the outside knowledge will be offered to everybody. And people will get what they get from that story. And that story is analogous or parallel with an inside story. And so Galurrwuy tells this at the beginning of Garma which is a festival of about one thousand people (more now I think) - 500 Indigenous people from all over the Top End of Australia, and international visitors and non-Indigenous people. In the years when I was there whitefellas were called *balanda* and are now called *ngyapaji*. Words get changed for various reasons (perhaps because it may sound like the name of someone who has recently died, for example).

Galurrwuy, the boss man of ceremonies at Garma Festival...tells this story of two clans - which could be also seen as blackfella and whitefella - meeting

The story of Ganbulapula goes like this:

In that eternal time-place Wangarr, which in English we often call 'the Dreaming', a ceremony was held at the very place we now call Gulkula, and where Garma is held.

This was when those who are now animals still had the form of spirit people. The ceremonial manager was Ganbulapula. He was the singing man. It was a Damal'mi ceremony, a funeral ceremony and an initiation ceremony for the Matjurr people, whom we now know as fruit bats. The Damala spirit people and the Matjurr spirit people were the dancers.

As a funeral, the ceremony was a grieving for the divisions of the past.

Decorated log coffins in the centre of the ceremony ground were waiting to receive the bodies of the dead, lying in a shelter of leafy boughs. As initiation, it was also a ceremony looking to a new future. Initiating young men into manhood, a healing of the divisions of the past, an affirmation of a group determination to go on together.

And during this ceremony that old man, Ganbulapula, he was lusting after all the young Damala women who were dancing. He was going off with one young woman after another. They were making love in the bushes. They were doing this during the ceremony! And eventually this began disrupting the ceremony.

Outrageous behaviour! And everyone was noticing and having an opinion. They began fighting and disagreeing amongst themselves. Putting the blame on the man and/or on the girls. Remembering past grievances. Slanging matches; unseemly behaviour; passions aroused. The ceremony was becoming a shambles. The confusion and conflict were hardening past divisions, disagreements.

Seeing this, that old man Ganbulapula did something extraordinary. He picked up one of the painted log coffins waiting there to receive its body, saturated with cultural meanings. And he flung it. Eastwards and a little to the south. It landed in the sea; at Djalambu. And its meaning flowed outwards there. You can see the area when you look in that direction from the edge of the escarpment at Dhupuma [a place where fresh water meets the sea]

The action lifted people's eyes from the mire of disorder, disagreement and bitter division. In that unprecedented flinging of the decorated log coffin, that unexpected ejecting of what we might call intellectual property' into a new context, a new network of cultural meaning was created. The action generated the possibility of a future, different from the past.

The chucking of the coffin was a signal for re-figuring the world. The Matjurr spirit people took on the form of the fruit bats, which is how we know them today. The Damala people became sea eagles. And in the ways that fruit bats and sea eagles relate today we see that story of the sexy old man going off with those Damala girls. Sea eagles lurk around a fruit bat colony watching for

foolish bats that stray too far from their group. They swoop down and carry them off one by one.

I felt that it might be appropriate to tell this story today ...a Yolngu story of how we bring the dualities together ... We can tell it here and re-create Garma, even re-create in some ways Zen and Indigenous coming together and re-configuring our world, re-configuring knowledge, sitting down together, as the anthropologist, Stanner, said, 'As one company'.

Thank you.



Ganbulapula on the
bunggul (dancing
ground) at Garma,
North-East Arnhemland

Shell from the midden -
With our black
Ancestors -- feasting.

Caroline Josephs

Uncle Max on *Kin and Family*

Uncle Max: I was just thinkin' when you mentioned that kinship thing. My old mum who passed away about four years ago. She reached the ripe old age of 99. And if we were in camp, sittin', and there was this stranger would walk into camp, Mum would always say to them... She would never ask their name! Mum would always say to them, "What's your *ngali*?" And, *ngali* meant meat, and of course meat is skin. So she would be askin' you know, "What's your skin?" In that language. And they would say, "Oh, Aunty I'm Goomera", or "...possum" or "*waribungal*" or "*garri*" which is slang for, well whatever! And Mamma used to sit there and think for a while and then she'd say, "Oh, then old Uncle so and so up the north coast is your grandfather." And they used to look at her and say, "Yeah Aunty, how'd you know that?" "You got the same skin!" She'd walk away and leave 'em. See!

But that was somethin' that my sisters regret because they used to have the shame factor. "Oh Mum don't talk like that!" they'd say... "Don't ask 'em where they come from and what skin they are, what their *ngali* is!" Oh, 'n, she used to get wild at the girls, you know, "You fellas should sit'n listen, not feel shamed of your kinship!" That's what she'd be tryin' to teach 'em.

And that kinship now everyone's scramblin' and goin' back into documentation now instead of holdin' the law of kinship themselves. They're, goin' back and they're thinkin', "Oh, yeah that old fella there..." when they're lookin' up in the birth and death thinkin', "That old fella there could'a been my great grandfather", or somethin' like that, you know.

Or they could just go straight back into it without all that, all that documentation. You see the documentation is you, see? The documentation is you! You're that leaf on the tree that makes up the family tree. You're a part of that family tree. You're the one that should know that branch. You gotta go backwards, to the roots of that tree.

And that's what Mum knew. 'cause she knew, she knew all those people from North Coast to South Australia. That's a lot of territory. And that's a lotta' black fellas walkin' that land. But she knew it. And, two of my sisters used to call her 'Mum generation', 'cause she knew nearly all these generations.

Now those girls are regrettin' it now that they never stuck their bums in the dirt with mum and just listened to who was related from there to there, how did this fella 'ere become our Uncle or our Aunty. That's not even takin' time now today, you know. The first thing people talk about as family is immediate family. Just what you can see. And you should look beyond that. Because that immediate family isn't the one that got you sittin' in this room. See. It's the one that's before you. And before that.

So when you look at your great-grandparents...I do my communication with my grandfather who passed over at 104. And I keep tellin' him, and sayin' to him... I said it to Mum, "Even now I'm gonna pass you Mum. I wanna pass you Pop" which is 104. I'm aimin' for 105 or, even if it's 104 and 1 month[laughter].....

Because of that kinship that's held there in that eldership role, my children today might say to the granny, "Why you doin' this, whatt'a ya doin' that for? I'll ring Pop up and tell'im!" And these 28- and 38-year-old grandchildren would say, "No, no, no Mum Don't! No Dad! Don't tell Pop! Don't tell Pop!" See! What they're sayin' to their mother and father is, Don't tell me [Uncle Max]! What could I do? I'm up 'ere and they're down in Melbourne, and down the south coast, and throughout Victoria. . But when I get near 'em, or if they're in the room and I get 'em on the phone. And I might just say somethin', just give 'em not a scolding but just a little talk. You know I'll say, "Have a look at the spirit of your mother or your father now, see what's happening there." See. "They're concerned about what you're doing wrong. Now, I don't want to know what they've [you've] done wrong because that's your problem, see. But what I want you to do now is to not contaminate Mother and Father's spirit with what you're doin' wrong. So, if you've got any other stuff to come out, just tell 'em now." Then I'll hang up. And, this is another phone call, "Oh Dad that worked, whatever you said to them".

"What did you say to them?" I said, "Nothin' but truth." See. Nothing but truth. And show 'em about spirit. How spirits can be contaminated through the actions of others. And if you think about it, that's exactly what can happen. You can walk out that door, goin' from here today, and feelin' so

happy with what you've just come outta. You can walk out there and say to someone, "Hi, g'day!". They'll look back at you and say, "What's so bloody good about it?!" Bang! And it knocks ya. If you allow it. See. So to maintain your spirit of self and your spirit of today, you maintain that, and you hold that to your most valued esteem within you. Don't mind about the words comin' from somebody else.

See I was a wild lad when I was about 17 or 18 and I had all these fellas pointin' the finger at me once you know. And they're yellin' "Yeah look at the black fella! Eh, Nigger!", and all this 'n that you know. And they were pointin' at me see, you know. Well I looked at 'em and I said, "Well there's, four or five there... I can probably take on about two to three" I just waited around and looked around and they were still pointin' and talkin', you know, and while they're doin' that I'm lookin' around like this you know. And one of them said, "He's too bloody dumb to know that we're talkin' about him!" and they walked away, see. I gave 'em a hollow victory, 'cause they had nothing to taunt... They had nothing to taunt. But the one thing that they forgot was that I had a mind like an elephant. And that I can recognise people. So one by one, you know, I walked up to them later you know, and that's another story see. When I walked up I said, "Eh, was I the black fella you was talking about?" "Oh no mate it wasn't me it was the other fellas." And all this kinda stuff went on "Oh, ok! You remember that next time you're in a mob, 'cause I got a mob of black fellas just over the hill there." And that terrified 'em... there weren't nobody.

I try to teach the young men when I take 'em out bush about reactions to taunts. "Yeah... but 'e called me... this! Uncle." And I'll say, "Why, what's the word?"

And they'd tell me the word. You know, I'd say "Well, I don't know that language." "Uncle, it's just the language that they said to me!" and I say "Well, I don't know it." "That's a foreign language!" and I walk away, see. And I'm tryin' to teach 'em that! That abuse is their foreign language. Let 'em keep it. Don't take it, see. And it's worked for a fair few young men who used to just react. Or used to end up in Long Bay or Silverwater [prisons] when they were called these names and they'd react. I used to tell them, "If you react, who's gonna be first to be grabbed, and pinched and charged? It's you! Not them fellas!" And so a lot of them are startin' to learn about the taunts and the abuse. It's hard, but there's a lot of 'em, a lot of the hot heads that I get is startin' to learn. That's not our language.

Caroline: It's interesting Uncle Max that I just had a memory of when I was a kid at school, quite young. I used to go about your colour in the Summer, because I spent all the time at the beach, as I do. And at school I used to get taunting, a kind of chant, "You're an Aborigine, you're an Aborigine." and so I go home crying, and not want to go to school....

I remember also, when my daughter was in Japan and she was a head taller than most of the other students in the school and she had the same thing but it was the Japanese word for foreigner. Which it just escapes me...[chorus: "Gaijin"], Gaijin,. "Gaijin, gaijin, gaijin." So she'd go home to her Japanese mother crying because, this was a term of abuse.

I remember also when I was little, and I'd be this, dark colour in the summer --going with my Aunt in Melbourne, where I was staying with her. When we met her friends I always had to pull up my dress to above where my costume suntan line was to show that I was white.

Uncle Max: Yeah, just to prove it.

Caroline: Prove that I didn't have some black blood because it was like the *opposite* of what you would've experienced probably ...now I think of it ...it made indelible the sense of being an outsider to the community.....

Uncle Max: Yes, you've been isolated.

When I look at the statement of our fearless leader [Howard] wants everyone to learn English when they come to Australia. [Currawongs off in the distance...] Oh that blew me a bit, you know. Some of the people started talkin' *Nguwin* [?] and, and teachin' that. And, and the older people who had forgotten it, when the little ones were goin' home speaking language... yackittyackittyackin... Mums or dads, uncles and aunties saying, "Hey, hey, speak English! We can't understand ya!"

Oh my God! You know. I thought "He's speaking your tongue you dill!" Sit down and ask that little one. "Hey! It's somethin' that you have left. Or it's somethin' that you weren't allowed to be taught." So, I just keep tellin' 'em, "You've gotta teach the grown-ups, to speak the tongue again,

so they can keep talkin'." So the little ones grow up with it...It's like in any other cultures, you know. That's, that's the important part of it. Is keepin' it in that family group...

Mari: In terms of the practical things with teaching Aboriginal language (and this is also related to the connection with land)... Back at the office people are thinking that the part of the idea of doing Aboriginal languages in schools is to improve English literacy. And we have to sell it like this. Otherwise the schools don't want it. They have to see that this is going to have a good educational outcome in terms of English literacy. It took me ages to get it... the idea with the white education system is that the kids in school can get an education and then they can get a job. And the jobs of course are in Sydney and places like that. I'm working with people who don't want to be in Sydney. They don't want to leave their land, they want to stay there. They even want to stay in Goodooga, which to most people seems amazing because Goodooga is (as I discovered when I drove there on an empty tank of petrol) a place where there isn't even a petrol station. [laughter] Goodooga is just there on the Queensland border. It's got a population of about 400 people. There's not even a shop in Goodooga and it's 76 kms I think from Lightning Ridge, and there's a school there, and there's a pub and the pub sells milk and bread. But all the shopping actually has to be done in Lightning Ridge and most people don't have cars. So don't ask me how they do the shopping! I really don't know. [Caroline: Probably hitchhiking] [Uncle Max: or walk like me from Goodooga to Walgett!]

And, it used to be a place where there was shearing and there was work, rural you know pastoral work, in Goodooga -- but the cotton industry in Queensland's taking all the water, so there's no water in the river there. There are no farming happening. And there's no work in Goodooga...very little work at all... You start to see the connections between people living on land and what's happening to the land because of our daft economic activities. But also the reality that most of the people who are in Goodooga are the people who've always been in Goodooga, and they don't want to leave Goodooga. And they're not gonna leave Goodooga. So you have to start thinking in a different way, "What can we do to make things happen, make life a bit easier in Goodooga?" And there's a fantastic bloke out there who's teaching language really well...He's a young fella...young to me anyway... And he's been learning the language and teaching it there. But he thought of himself as somebody who couldn't be a teacher or anything, but he's doing the teaching so well and now he's starting to sort of think about doing training, and then it is reasonably well paid work to be able to do teaching. So it does help a little bit in communities where there's not much happening. The other thing that's happening -- because of the situation of kids coming home and learning language and the adults sometimes not having had that access -- trying to get TAFE courses or community-run courses happening at the same time, so that everybody in the community's got access to language learning.

Uncle Max: I went out there in about '76. I was out there earlier and I was at Brewarinna there probably about '51, I met up with some of the people there, and that's when the mission manager gave me ride to Goodooga. I wanted to go to Walgett. But no, they took me to Goodooga because I had to get off the mission at Brewarinna.. The mission is where black fellas are... I thought, I've gotta get off! So, they put me on the back of a truck and I said, "How far's Walgett away, bud?" They said, "Oh, it's a bit down from Goodooga." [laughter] So ah, so I got to Goodooga and the manager let me off the truck, and I jumped off and, and then I seen this signpost, and I think it was nearly a hundred miles. So I had to start walkin'. I thought, "Oh, this is no good! I'd better get a ride back to Brewarinna." So I stayed there at that turnoff where they let me off ...I was hitchhikin' back...when the mission truck come past with all the black fellas on it... And he went straight past me, and they was all wavin' to me...they thought I was wavin' to them, but I wanted a ride back to Bre'... [Brewarrina] ...Then I had to walk all the way until I got five miles from Walgett and then someone came along in a horse 'n buggy and gave me lift for the five miles. So actually I didn't walk from Goodooga to Walgett.

But, Brewarinna -- when I was there in 1950 or '51, everyone was on the river bank. And then in the 70's, they had all these houses up from the river. I thought they'd be happy that they had these houses. But in 1978 when I went back out there on the land rights issue I got out there and these nice new house that [had been] built...all this fibro and wood and that on the high land was now wrecked. And the humpies built back down on the river banks again. It was just incredible...they moved 'em again, see from where they thought was appropriate for them. Put 'em up there without askin' 'em, you know. And they done that all over the country....

Allan Marett: I just wanted to say thank you for clarifying these relationship things and how

important it is actually to know these, to know even if we don't invoke a system of "skins" as it were, that allows us to relate and to call each other, 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' or 'brother' and 'sister'this is one of the things that's come out for me very strongly today, and it always does when I'm dealing with Aboriginal people, is that the sense of relatedness is really important in building communities, and, in building academies -- what I call 'true academies' as well...thinking about, how people have related to one another and related to the earth as their mother in this place for so many tens of thousands of years. If we can take that into our practice, if this is one of the things we can learn as we build our Sangha -- that's something significant to learn.

Uncle Max: That's the first step to reconciliation.

Allan: So I'm very grateful for all the things that people have said about family and relatedness this morning. It's really so important to be reminded because of the way that the world gets us to behave out there - so conducive to forgetting that. Thank you.



Uncle Max leading a group of
Zen students on Gulaga.

Photo: Caroline Josephs

Will this forest be
Wisdom for the
unborn grandchild?

Caroline Josephs
[in the Tarkine Rainforest threatened by Gunn's mining]

Questions Following the Presentations by Uncle Max and Caroline Josephs

Subhana: So now would be a good opportunity - given that Uncle Max and Caroline have given us a beautiful opening - with stories and connections. No doubt some of you have questions. Let's have a question and answer time and if you both would be happy to respond to questions that'd be great.

Uncle Max: If you think of a silly question, ask it [laughter] because someone next to you mightn't ask a silly question.

Caroline: Can I just tell a short story about Uncle Max? It is about relationship and I think it is pivotal.

When Uncle Max and I were with a group staying at my house at Guerilla Bay where I used to live [on the south coast of NSW]...we took a group down to the beach before dawn. I can tell this story can't I, Uncle Max?

Uncle Max: Yes.

Caroline: Uncle Max asked us to stand in three rows, and face the East. We were on a beach in the beautiful little cove with great rocky cliffs at the southern end. In the cold and dark of pre-dawn, Uncle Max asked us each to give gratitude to Grandfather Sun for the warmth, for replenishing plants, for whatever occurred to us that we felt grateful for in our hearts - in relation to Grandfather Sun. And so everybody talked about some aspect of that. And at the end Uncle Max said "Through the Mother!", and the sun burst up over the horizon, full, blindingly bright, warm, spectacular!

And the thing that remained with me was not only the feeling of that warmth, but the *specificity* this is my *Grandfather*? This is my *Grandmother*, the Moon... And there's *Father Sky* and *Mother Earth*. These are *particular* kinships. That is what remains. Very special.

Uncle Max: Yes they all play a part don't they? Grandmother, Grandfather, 'n Mother, 'n Father. They're our principal grandparents and parents. And we look at those four, Mother Earth - who births everything for us. We look at Father Sky who carries the water and the oxygen for us to breathe. We look at Grandfather Sun who warms the planet, warms our body, gives us light so we can see, raises the food that Grandmother births and raises most of our relations, all our plants and trees.

Then we look at Grandmother Moon who moves the water, but it goes just a little bit further than that with Grandmother Moon. I think it's 75% water that's in our bodies. When She's comin' into that full being, things happen to a lot of people...that's why they become 'luna-tics'. You look at the weather we just had you know. The full moon is what causes all that. But then again we look the most precious part of all our beings is Grandmother Moon and that's the birthing. Without that woman-time none of us would be here. That plays a very important part of the energies in the songs that go for Grandmother Moon. So it's not just somethin' there that gives us light so we can see in the dark, or put up a rocket there and land on and claim victory. It's a lot more than that. She goes from Mother Earth to the outreaches of outer space And although we're earthly people we've gotta try to comprehend why those stories are like that.

Those wonderful guys, a couple of priests from America who came on our trip to Guerilla Bay and Gulaga with Caroline, said to me that night "Aah, Uncle Max, we didn't know that Aboriginal people were Sun worshippers?" I said, "We're not!" They said, "Then why did we go down and give thanks to Grandfather Sun?" I said, "Didn't you hear what I said, you know? Grandfather Sun is supplying the food that we're about to eat and givin' us warmth and light. And, I said, that's what we give thanks for. All those things".

You've gotta remember that Grandfather's still in here. [knocks on wood] In there. You put a match to that, you'll have him here in an instant. Heating, burning. See these are the things when we light those sacred fires to sit by. And you've gotta understand why that fire's sacred and it's gotta be carried for two days without goin' out.

Just say, if I said to Allan, you are the keeper of this sacred fire. All us tribe we've got a two-day journey - you gotta carry that fire. Now if Allan doesn't hold that law with respect to that fire

instead of havin' a two-day journey you can end up havin' a six-day journey. Because what happens the sacredness of that fire that we've carried, and Allan could be 200 metres from where he's gotta put that flame down and start that sacred fire again. But if it's gone out and I look at Allan and I'll just shake my head, and say "No mate!" "Back you go." Two days back, and another two days forward!

So that's an important part of your duty is you respect holding this sacredness given to the wardens. Holding that sacredness of all - these things round us.

Subhana: I think what comes across really strongly is the, the sense of *relational* aspects. The relation to the sun, Grandfather Sun and the Moon and the Gum Trees and its kinship...

Uncle Max: All kinship!

Subhana: That relational aspect and the sense of sacredness about the Earth that we in the modern urbanised western culture have largely lost. That sense of sacredness. It's become land and environment as a commercial kind of commodity. And it's lost - that deep relational connection - and I think that's what we need to discover - not just here in our practice in the Zen centre but in the global sense. If we cannot respect nature and have that deep sense of relation to it then we are just going to destroy the planet...

Uncle Max: That connectedness.

Subhana: We've lost that connectedness. And I think this is so important, that sense of sanctity, that sense of sacredness about nature, the very Earth that we walk upon.

Caroline: Wisdom - that you were talking about, Subhana, at the beginning I felt very deeply sad that we're losing at such a rate and probably Allan and Mari will talk about it more... I was privileged to go to Arnhem Land and I realised that everything has very specific relationships ... within the tribe your stories, your relationship to everybody else within the tribe, your dreamings, everything has very specific relationships that locate you, so that when you're dis-located like Uncle Max was talking about, like many Indigenous people are, and many migrants are in a way, that's part of the problem I think, that we become exploitative of the land because we've migrated from where we've been for generations and then lost out stories too....we no longer have that fit -- our identity, our connection, through place....

Archie Roach [Australian Aboriginal singer] tells the story of going back many years later to his country in Victoria after he's had a lot of problems in whitefella world.... And an old man rushes to meet him and embraces him. And he sits down with this old man, an uncle, who tells Archie the stories of his place and where he's been born. And later Archie says, "I knew there and then where I fitted in the story. That old man...*he put me back in the Story*. It changed everything in his life, because he knew then where he fitted in relation to everything.

Uncle Max: See! One of the things about stories like that, and identity. Identity is such an important thing also. I don't identify with the Koori flag, because the brother that done that comes from the central desert. Red dirt. Black people. Grandfather Sun. A lot different here on the Eastern seaboard. A lot different. But I'm grateful for that flag, because it gave all the Koori people... all the Eastern seaboard people seen that flag and they knew it would become their identity. So what they've done, is they've identified themselves with the flag and if you look right back into that, it's the colours of the flag which add the full meaning to them. To most Koori people. And a lot that were ashamed to say that they were *Koori*, *Murri* you know, *Noongar* and *Nunga* [local blackfella names for different groups of Aboriginal peoples] all them people,

When that flag was birthed in that sense, a lot of the fair-skinned Aboriginal people then identified. A lot of them that were runnin' around 'n hidin' under the pretence of black skin 'n sayin' that they were Indian, identified their Aboriginality. A lot of them that identified themselves as Chinese, began to identify themselves as Aboriginal. You see? Castes that were put on 'em...it was horrendous. It didn't make our people feel whole -- bein' 'quarter caste', 'half caste', 'three-quarter caste', and all this... 'full-blood' ... crap. You see. I can't go into that caste thing because my blood is runnin' full of dreaming, 'n stories, and tradition. I just can't understand it you know, when this caste gets put on people.

You was gonna say something, I'm sorry...

Speaker: I want to ask you a question. When you said that the toxins come up in a plant and go to

the end and then I come out and pick that and make use of it, do you mean specifically toxins?

Uncle Max: When you look at a fruit you watch it... So I'll put it this way... first you look at your fruit tree and it hasn't got much fruit on it. See? And then by the time it's ready to bear fruit then you'll probably see blossoms. Right? And then they sort of all go, and then you see these little things comin' out and then you have this little fruit. But if you take that little fruit and you eat it before it's ready, what happens? You get sick. So what's happening? How I was taught was this part of it is that the toxins are all comin' up the tree trunk, through the barks, the saps, right to the end where you just about to have that fruit, you take that fruit instead of pluckin' it off... you shake the branch three times and if it falls off it's yours. Right?

I got caught with it see. I was up this plum tree and I was up there you know and [munching sound] you know, and Grandfather's seen me and said, "Duramanmun, what are you doin' up there?" I said, "I'm havin' some plums, Pop!" Yeah, 'n 'e said, "Oh well, go ahead. But first of all," he said, "Did you ask the tree for it?" I sort of looked around at 'im, I'm sittin' up in this plum tree. And I'm gettin' stuck with the spikes 'n that on the plum tree, and, and hurtin' and I said, "No Pop, no! I'm in the best spot 'ere, what you know I can get these ones here?" He said, "No, did you ask the tree for the fruit?" And I said "No." Well he said, "I suggest you jump down, and ask the tree." So I got down, I was standin' there, and I was lookin' up at the tree and I was sayin', "Eh tree, can you give me some fruit please?" And nothing happened! I looked around at 'im and I said "Pop, it's not givin' me anything!" And he said, "Well there you go, you can't have it!" And I said, "Oh well," But he said, "If you wanna go ahead and climb back up there and get stuck with the prickly things in the plum tree," he said, "And have a big feed," he said, "We'll have to give you some, ah..." There was some grasses that I didn't like! That just pass through you. "And then I'll give you a lot 'o that," he said "You'll be like that moo-cow down there grazin' in the paddock," he said, "With this grass that I'm gonna give ya." And I said, "Oh no, no, no, no Pop, I won't have it!" He said, "Right'o! Shake the tree three times." So I shook what I could. No plums fell off! And that's when I realised the tree wasn't ready to give fruit to me.

I realised, when I was up the tree and gettin' stuck with the prickles and with the plums, that I was gettin' punished. Little things like that...

One of the most daunting ten days of my, of my teachings is when I had these five masters and we went out for these ten days. And there was total silence. And everyone was doin' somethin' and I didn't know what to do. But I had to watch all the language and then I knew then what I had to do. So they got me to understand the silence of language. And, and not being told, but to tune in on things around me. You know I had five old men there to tune in on - who had this wonderful gift of pushin' out stuff for me to understand.

Even on the banks of the Snowy River once, I remember -- I was about seven I think it was -- and we was all in camp. There were a couple there that didn't have children - they would stay in the camp and look after all us children while everyone went out into the fields corn pickin' or diggin' potatoes or, pickin' beans 'n peas or doin' all the manual farm work for all the farmers. These two wonderful old people were left to look after us. Now there was about 20, 30 *bullis* [young ones] in camp and, and this gorgeous little old man and his lovely wife. Uncle Foster 'n Auntie Bessie. Uncle Foster, he had this lovely smile. He had a beautiful singin' voice. Auntie Bessie was a big woman and she was jovial. She had a good singin' voice. And they were beautiful. And then Uncle Foster said to me, "Grab the billy can," he said, "And go down to the river and get a billy can 'o water!" So I grabbed a billy can and the other kids were around playin' 'n I run down the bank, skippin' down the bank 'n singin' 'n, and I went down and I dipped the billy can in the water and I came back up I and I put it down in front of Uncle Foster and I said, "There Uncle!" And I was just about to skip away see 'n he kicked the billy can over. He said, "Grab two billy cans now and go down and get more water." Uh? I thought, "Well, an accident." I grabbed the two 'n back I went down, this time not so much skippin' but down I went, watchin' the other kids 'n and I dipped these two billy cans in the river and back up, see? "There Uncle!" [sound of... *bnk, bnk*] Two billy cans 'o water gone. So there's three billy cans of water now that were kicked over. And he said, "Grab the bucket, and take it down and fill it!" Now the bucket was an old square kerosene tin with two 'oles in the side and bit of wire around for the handle. He said, "Take the billy can and fill it up!" So down I go. This time there was no singin'. So down the bank I go, and I got down on the sand and I looked back up you know I looked around everywhere, Now one thing that never entered into my mind was, "What a cranky old man..." Because Uncle Foster had this beautiful smile. And he was a lovely man. And the first thing that I thought was, "What am I doin' wrong?". See this is how

they taught them. "What am I doin' wrong?" Not you know, "What's up with 'im?" But, what am I doin' wrong? because there's now three billy cans of wasted water. So I got down and, and I sat in the sand there and I'm startin' to dig yer hole and I'm sittin' down 'n watchin' everything 'n I watch all the water come into the hole. And I sat, and I sat and there was no whistlin', "Come on, up here with that water", nothing like that. And then I got the billy can, and I got into the water-hole that I'd dug into the sand, and I filled the bucket up. And I looked up the bank, and I looked at this big bucket you know, and I thought, you know, "Oh geez that's a big bank!" And, and I'm flexin' my little muscles like this, and I've stood over like that and I've filled the billy can up 'Cause I knew that one was heavier than the other it'd be pretty 'ard, see. But, but I'd have to have my two hands on the bucket and try and get up, see. I'm flexin' my little muscles and I stood over the big bucket like that and then I heard this voice up on the bank "Leave it, Dulumanmun, leave it! I'll come and get it". Uncle Foster. So he come down the hill. And I thought, you know he sent me down for three billy cans 'o water now I got a bucket of water and a billy can of water you know, and 'e is comin' down to get it! And then, and then he grabbed the big bucket. And then I was just about to grab the billy can and he said, "No," he said "you do somethin' else. I'll take this up." So then he took the billy can and the bucket up to the camp. So what could I do? Oh I suppose I can get a bit of wood to take up. So I went and done that, see. And as I was walkin' up the bank I looked back down at the river. And the amazing thing I looked back down, and I said "Now what did I do wrong?" and all that. And then as I looked back down into the sand and into the hole that I dug, there was one powerful message come through. And it, it was just how Grandfather hit the water, 'n boom! You see, even gatherin' water, it sacred. See, what I was doin' I was rapin' the river by just goin' down and that's why he kicked the things over. But when I dug the hole in the sand and let it filter through I was takin' it, with respect. That's what that old man was teachin' me, without tellin' me. So, I could've been there all day. Runnin' up 'n' down, runnin' up 'n' down.

That was a valuable lesson for me. And then I looked back and I think, "Oh yeah! How many times did I come down and get water with the men?" And Aunties and Dad and Mum, you know. I was always told how I had to dig that hole and let the water come in and then take it. Not just go down and take it out like that. But, my little mind was where the other kids were up on the bank see. You know, that made my little legs go down three times. That's the thing, how they were teaching me.

Subhana: Well thank you for that beautiful story. We might just stop for a bit right now, have a pause moment for drinking a cup of morning tea respectfully or whatever you want. We don't have our favourite watering hole to go and visit.

Uncle Max: You want to use...

Subhana: chlorinated water from the tap.

Uncle Max: you want to use the tap as sacred, you know you just tap it and the water comes to ya. But the tap comes from the mother.

Subhana: So let's have it.

The drying up
of the songs
and then the dam

Diana Levy
[Warragamba dam or Lake Burragorang,
source of water for Sydney]

Fluoro colours in Arnhem Land,
Gove airport mother and daughters--
dress, drinks bright pink, orange, blue,
hair being brushed, the warm breeze
of "language", soft strokes, Yolgnu Matha

Maggie Gluek

[in Arnhem land where son Hugh and daughter-in-law Louise were teaching]



Drawing: Whale Dreaming Aboriginal Rock Engraving,
Royal National Park, from walk with Uncle Max, 2007.

Janet Selby

Uncle Max: Singing the land

Uncle Max: When you sing the land, when you're planting trees or when you want to call up rain, you call on the appropriate spirits.

I'll just give you a little story.

It's the first time I seen my mum sick, just some twenty odd years ago and I hit the panic button. I dunno what space I was in, to go in such a panic because my mum was sick. Before long I had everyone gathering there and we had this big barbecue, and as mum was sitting in the chair rocking, she was holding this little baby and her eyes were closed and she was rocking with this little one in her arms and I walked up and I kissed her on the forehead and I said, "Mother did they give you a cuppa tea yet?" See it was the first thing you would ask my mum ...did she have a cuppa? A feed later, you know, so I said to her, "Mum, did anyone give you a cuppa?" "Yeah," she said. "Yeah," "What about a feed, Mum?" "Yeah I had some." She was still there rocking away with this little one in her arms and then I looked at her, and I said, "Mum, whose *burri* is that there you got? And mum just keeps rocking. She said, "Oh I don't know...but it's me!" That statement made me feel so hypocritical because here I was having this 'last supper' for my mother and I didn't realize...but she lived on for twenty years later, with this last bloomin' supper ...I hit the panic button when the first time I thought I was seeing her there sick, yet, she was still sitting up in a chair looking after a *burri* and that was one of the fifth generation that she had in her arms and see that statement that she made, "Oh I don't know, but it's me!"...that really made me look at everlasting life.

It really made me understand why my grandfather said to me when I was climbing up a tree one day, "What are you doing up there?" and "Get down!" and I jumped down off this tree and again he came up with the same thing as what he said to me about the plum tree and he said, "What are you doing up there?" and I said, "Oh, I was just up there swinging, Pop," and he said, "Did you get permission?" and I said, "No, Pop." and he said, "Well why didn' ya?" He came at me like that and I said, "Well Pop I didn't think I needed permission to climb up on that tree because that tree is dead," and he went livid! "DEAD, DEAD YOU CALL THAT TREE DEAD?" and ooh... and then his voice, I thought, 'Oh boy! Put my foot in this one.' So I come over and then he sat down and we were doing something and then he said, "Oh I'm going to make a fire and swing the billy ay, see, and he said, "Tell you what Dulumunmun [Uncle Max's Yuin name]...Go over to that tree," he said, "And get some dead limbs, so I can put them on the fire." So I went over and I grabbed them and I put 'em on the fire. We were sittin' down and we had lunch sittin' around the fire and then he poked all the ends in and the lovely coals and he looked at me and he said, "Hey, you know that dead tree?" and I said, "Yeah." He said, "You better pull it out of the fire now." All there was there was these red glowing coals in the shape of the log that was there and I looked at him and I said, "P...P...Pop, I can't!" and he said, "Why not?" Grab that dead limb there in the fire." I said, "POP It's not dead" And then I said, "It's ALIVE!"

And he said, "Aaaah..." and poured himself another cuppa tea.

You see that wonderful wisdom and teaching for me .. how they done it...It seemed crude and rude, but by gee! It was spot on, you know, just simple little things like that see, and again, as was demonstrated in Allan's song of the spirit talking to the living, or the living talking to the spirit -- either way that these things happen and I live my life by it.

Look my eldest son who was 42 years of age when he committed suicide...in 2000. I still see him walking past, eh? I just catch him as he's just going past like that and I look and he says "Hi Dad," and I say, "I'm O.K." See I'm talking to the spirit. That "I'm OK", 'cause by Jesus, I know he's O.K., although he took his life...When he took his life and I was talking to my sister-in-law who rang me up from down Victoria and the first thing that I said, "I forgive you son." That was the first thing that came out'a my mouth "I forgive you son." I never asked the question, "Why, did you do it?" You ask that one question, 'why?', and you put too much stuff up in the air you're looking for too many answers, see, and the reason why I said, "I forgive you, son"... because of the pain that he put on the rest of the family and when you're looking at five generations, of living generations today. (There's four now, because Mum's just gone), but by gee, there was five at that time when she was living. She died a couple of years after him. So when you look at the pain that went through all those people that loved their Uncle Tony... all them little *burris* right up to the

older ones... they all understood that, and they were the ones that were going to be in pain, Anthony, was out of his pain... so the thing we had to do then was do ceremony to release his spirit.

So that communication with the dead is one of the most wonderful things that I keep going into all the time, and I keep understanding and I keep learning and I get the knowledge and the wisdom from them spiritual elders who just keep clipping me under the ear you know, and putting me on the right track when it comes into my teachings. So that kind of practice I do is with teachings and communications is what you do through song. It's true most other funerals and that, when they go into the church they're singing a song, they call it hymns and they're thinking about meeting up with their maker, you see, and yet when we want to practise our traditional spiritual beliefs we will get ridiculed for it. We cannot enter the ground of sacredness. The indentation of the singing into the ground, singing into the rocks, singing into the water, the indentation of that, of that spiritual stuff that's gone in there, is so hard for people to believe.

It's hogwash when you see that poor old blackfella saying, "That's a sacred tree," or "That's a sacred rock," and they say, "Garbage! Oh gee, what a lot of garbage." People cannot understand our spiritual connectedness to the spirit of that tree, to the spirit of that rock, to the spirit of that water, or of the wind, what you got in the sea. It's something that's so hard to explain to people and get people to understand, not to believe, but understand our traditional practices of spirituality, our traditional practices of getting in touch with spiritual ancestors that's gone, long before, and we've gotta prove ourselves all the time.

Even today I've gotta prove that I'm an Aboriginal. If I'm going for something, someone will stick a bit of paper over the counter to me and I look at it and I say, "What's that?" They say, "Oh Mr Harrison, you'll have to fill that form out and you'll have to get that signed by a community person. It's to give you identity as an Aboriginal person." I look, and I take the paper and I'll tear it up in front of them. I drop it back on the desk, and I say, "Don't insult me, please. Don't insult me." and I'll walk out.

The story of getting my passport ...I haven't got a birth certificate. I've got a licence and different other things, but I was born near a sacred waterhole, down past Ulladullah or a place called Bawley Point [south coast New South Wales], beside a sacred waterhole so... I never had a birth certificate but in 1996 I decided to go across to Japan to meet over there with some of the Indigenous Japanese, the Ainu people, and I thought, "Oh yeah, I better go meet the brothers over there and the sisters and I went into this big office here... this big building here in Sydney... I walked in and they said, "What can I do for you?" and I said, "I would like a passport to go overseas." They said, "You need some documentation. What's your name?" I started emptying out my pockets, my wallet, and I put them all there so neatly in front of me, -- my licence, my Medicare card, my pension card thing, and I had this big cheesy grin on me and I thought, "That'll be it". They said, "You've got to have a birth certificate." I said, "I've gotta what?!" "You've gotta have a birth certificate." and I walked round and I looked around like that, and I said to this young man I said [tapping chest] "Here, I'm here!" and he was so sincere in his job that young man, so, he said, "I'm sorry, sir." he said, "But ah, look you have to get someone to identify you." and I said, "Look over in the corner over there there's a black woman and a white woman they know me, want me to call them over and they can tell you who I am. I'm the same fella that's on that form up there." But you see it just wouldn't wash with him, and I stood there and I stood there, and the young man said, "Look I'm sorry, Mr Harrison, but I've got to go for lunch." I said, "Oh, O.K." and I grin to myself, but I say, "I'll be still here when you come back, buddy." And I was. So I thought now you showin' me something, so I'm going to show you something now, eh? You teaching me a lesson here to have the proper documentation, so I stood there and when the young man come back, I say, "How did you go with the lunch?" and he said, "Oh look, Mr Harrison, I thought we went through all this," and I said, "Oh yeah, we did but not quite, eh?" So in the meantime I was there for about two hours -- so I thought this young man is a hog for punishment, so then, "Look," he said, "Look there's nothing I can do." I said, "Well, go and get your supervisor," and he come back with his supervisor and he said, "Yes Mr Harrison, what can we do...?" and I said, "Gee ay... That's good. Somebody else knows me," and I'm trying to show this young man you know? See? Supervisor says, "Ah, what's the problem?" I said, "This young man won't give me a passport. I've gotta go and meet some people over in Japan in about five days." "Oh gees," he said. So he started talking to me. "Look," he said... you know he started to explain everything and he said, "Look how could you prove yourself that you are who you are?" "Well..." I said, "I can walk outside, grab

somebody and whack 'em and the police would come and arrest me and would take my fingerprints... I think I had my finger prints taken before... That can identify me! I can do that but I don't want to do that. There's still two women sitting over in the corner there -- that black woman, and that white woman. Those are people that can come and identify me. Or you can do this, see!" So I threw everything back on them.

I said, "Back in the thirties there was this farmer who had sheep and cattle. I'll give you the location of it and you can find out ...because remember, buddy," (I said to this supervisor), "That we as Aboriginal people were counted then as **fauna**, hey! So what you'll find in that ancient stuff is that when blackfellas lived on that white man's property... if a black woman had a child whether it was a boy or a girl they would put it down as such, "a black 'gin' had a black boy child", see, and that's how we were sort of... *identified*." so I said, "So you can do that. You've got five days you can find that out, see, I'll go and you's can do all that, see", and they said, "Hang on, we can't do that." "You'll have to do it," I said, "No, I haven't got the brains to do that. I haven't got the techniques that you people have got, so you do it." And he looked at me, and he scratched his head and said [big sigh], "What the hell?." he said...took my file, put the thing on, stamped it, and I walked out there, and I said, "You still don't want to see those two women down the back?!"

That was one of the most frustrating three to four hours I've ever spent standing in front of a counter, you know, but that's the garbage ...I guess its not garbage, but that's the kind of stuff that I've been through in not been recognized. 'cause Aboriginal people have got no credibility, zilch, until it takes people of understanding, people of a bit of clarity, and people that's just got a bit of spirituality to start to understand. They're some of the things that go on with Aboriginal people and getting my drivers' licence... well the old sergeant chucked the licence at me...and he said, "Now give me two pounds!" I didn't have to go for a driving test because they couldn't catch me in my old bomb driving through the bush. They used to chase me so they said, "Go on get yer licence, mate".

Some of the stuff that we gotta endure you know to prove our being, and people say it's a lot better now. I still don't see it, some parts are getting OK... we've got to get fair dinkum'. Now, there's lotta things that still need to be dealt with. There's still the 'them' and 'us', 'us' and 'them' ... Here's still all this, instead of 'we,' that's what I say to people, you know, we walk the same land, we drink the same water and we breathe the same air, and when we walk the same land and if you look at the land that we walk on and you see it getting raped and you start to looking at the coloration you see the brown, blacks, yellow, reds, and whites coming up from it...It's the same pigmentation of the skin that's all around the world, the same pigmentation of the skins all around the world. So we're all walking on the Self -- that's our belief. We come from earth. We go back to earth. So yeah... it's lots of little things that can happen....

How we going? What's happening? Anyone got some questions?

Subhana: That'd be a good idea, there's been a lot that's been shared today rich and beautiful and meaningful. I'm just wondering if cause there's we haven't heard much from other people here, be wonderful to hear any kind of comments, or things that you appreciate or things that you've learnt or things that you would like to ask about or reflect back on, experiences that you've that you've had would be quite useful Uncle Max.

Jill: I was thinking a little bit, about what you said, Mari, about your experiences when you were in the bus and being the only whitefella in that bus and I was thinking how important that experience is for us when we are in a completely different culture.. when we are the only one ...to understand what it is like for Aboriginal people who are often the only one... just that learning -- to have that experience of being the minority...I'm thinking in London, where sometimes you're in communities where you're the only white person...In Sydney perhaps that's not so much the case...

Caroline: Just a thought...Perhaps not in Sydney (except some parts of Redfern maybe)...I remember when I was in Brewarrina in the early eighties and my partner was helping to get twenty houses built for the people of 'Dodge City'. There were no places that the Aboriginal people could go to in town and they had just had built the first Aboriginal community hall. My partner and I were the only white people invited to the first dance in this hall. The Aboriginal people weren't allowed to go to the clubs. They were in the process of banning them from the parks. Many of them lived on 'Dodge City' which was next door to the town dump with no bus service to the town, It was quite a long way to town... 'Barwon Four' was the old mission station on one side of the

town and 'Dodge City' was on the other side...Barwon Four had no services supplied by the town - no rubbish collection, no nothing, no running water, no sewerage, no proper roads so that every time it rained you'd get bogged. We stayed on Barwon Four at one stage (the only whitefellas) and you just couldn't believe that here was a town at that time 1200 Aboriginal people and about 800 whites. It was a humbling experience to be the only whites in that community hall for the dance, and at Dodge City when invited there, and also staying on Barwon Four. (We sometimes stayed in a boarding house with this lady called Myrtle who used to say things like "They should all be run outta town!" That was her view, or, "They should all be shot!") Difficult times for the Aboriginal people there. Sorry Mari....your question....

Mari: One thing I realise I didn't actually make clear about being on the bus -- the feeling that I was in a totally different place... People were speaking a language which, although based on English -- seemed quite different, and what people were talking about was quite different, but these were all people -- some of whom I knew -- who worked in schools and in the schools they behave there in a way that makes them fairly invisible -- none of that was actually manifesting in the school. They were just fitting in quietly into the white school system but it was when they were all together on the bus...I think they had just forgotten I was there...It was like this *other world*... the world shifted over because we were in the bus, instead of in the place where the conference had been taking place...It was that sense of there being a world that isn't normally visible to people like me ...suddenly manifested when the doors of the bus shut. The world I had been looking for in the Northern Territory, was right there.

Allan Nash: I spent a year, a couple of years ago, working for the Land Council up in the Kimberley—working with Aboriginal Elders helping negotiations with the government and protecting Sacred Sites and so I went there to give my expertise to help the Aboriginal people cope with that pretty complex system they were forced to deal with. I was really aware of a total clash of cultures ...every aspect of what I was doing was just totally impossible because the first thing that we talked about was protecting sacred sites and the problem is: what's a site? White people think OK, you draw a line around here...[but] you'd have things like areas where people would start preparing for a ceremony then they walk to there, and there'd be parts here which would be for some people a sacred site, then there'd be another track going through it which was part of another group's sacred area... and as soon as you even talked about a 'sacred site' you weren't on the same planet because the concept of a sacred site wasn't even in the white people's view. Even to negotiate. So how do you protect it? What you were going to protect is different. You talk about 'compensation claims'—one of the most ludicrous conversations I had about it was about this. We were sitting there, some of the Aboriginal Elders and myself, and across the table these government people. They were trying to convince us about extending the Ord River scheme. When they do irrigated farming they do what they call laser leveling. They go out with lasers and they just totally flatten the land and every feature, laser it to within an inch. It's flattened because when you do irrigation, it has to be dead flat and this was what they were going to do to the country you know, and then they were telling us across the table about how this was going to be really beneficial for Aboriginal people because of all the work, it would bring, all these health services and all these great services up there, and this would be really great. And we would just sit there and we almost laughed, it was so tragic, but it was also so stupid that you almost laughed, because you can guess the answer if you asked Aboriginal people, "Would you rather have all these white people go away and not have the services or would you like to have your land totally destroyed and have these wonderful services?" The other thing -- I came away learning some priorities from the Aboriginal people too. It wasn't just about helping them and about issues. I think people have mentioned earlier some of the lessons. One was the total valuing of family as important to everyone and I started to see and admire that, and started to say, well, we got our priorities wrong you know. If you've got a sick child and you still go to work 'cos you need a job or something, that's crazy. We were the ones that were acting very crazy, not the local people and there was continuous criticism of people not coming to work because they had family business to look after. So aspects of that, and understanding that connection to the country, seeing the destruction of country in farming and the attitudes about that and people wanting to just be at peace with the country. I started to really get a sense of the values of the people reflected there. Also, the other thing people have mentioned is the lack of materialism which was very interesting because the government kept saying: you've got to get a job, you've got to have money so you can buy refrigerators and lounges and the people weren't interested. They want all that stuff sometimes, they want some stuff, but they don't want to live a life that involves having *stuff* - and mostly in that climate people didn't want to sit in

houses anyway. They wanted to be in the bush and I soon found that out.

Uncle Max: Well they sleep on the verandah, don't they? ...even with the houses.

Allan Nash: Who wants to sit in a house when you can sit down under a tree? Such a nice place to be. I found that out when I was trying to organise meetings. Every time I organised a meeting it was hot and they (the government people) wanted to go in an air-conditioned place and everyone would go, "No I want to be by the river, I want to sit under a tree." They didn't want a meeting inside, after awhile the government mob started to appreciate that too, and think, "Yes it's much nicer under a tree in this climate, having a meeting. It works much better than sitting in a stuffy building." So think I walked away from it too and realised that there is something that we can take away and it's those priorities about family, about connection to land, all those things I think are something we had in the past too. In our past, in our long tradition, family was more important than it is today a lot of those things we had once too and we lost that. I think they are fairly universal things, and it really reminded me of that. I came away changed from the process of starting to value those things I learned from that process.

Uncle Max: One of the first hand-backs of land rights was down at Wallaga Lake and I think Neville Wran was the Premier at that time and they wanted to know where were we going to have the hand-back thing. Where were the deeds and title going to be presented? And could we get a big hall in the nearest town? I said, "Oh no we gotta a big hall. We got a big place. And what we done is, they gave me some money cause I was chairman of the first Land Council then so they gave me some money to build a structure so I built the structure but I got all these young men and I gave them a good bit a money to build this structure. We went and we done a lot of ceremony and we got a lot of trees, got a lot of poles -- gathered all them on a truck, and then all we went and broke different branches like this, off different trees, and we done a bough shed what we called a 'bough shed' and just threw all the bushes all on the top you know and on that stinking hot day no one was hot, and the politician was looking at this and saying, "This is better then air conditioning," and I said, "Brother it's cheaper too!" But we had this gigantic building, this gigantic cover so we could be under and they was worried about "Is it going to rain when we get down there? Could we all get wet?" and I said, "Look hey don't bring rain into it. If you wanta bring rain we'll go walk up the mountain and we'll get rain, for we'll do a song and dance! So don't let that enter us," Just our funny little ways sometimes of dealing with stuff...

Subhana: I want to share a lovely little story -- talking about singing to the animals and the rocks and the land. I lived on a community for 20 years in the bush up in Northern Rivers [Bodhi Farm] and we had a lot of snakes in that community -- all kinds of snakes, from very poisonous snakes to the carpet snakes,. And the carpet snakes were very much loved in this community and in fact we used to have a little ritual every year, because the house often would get full of mice. The mice were really annoying because they would just eat everything, and so we had a little ritual in the song that we would sing, to sing to the carpet snake. And every year I would sing to the carpet snake and each house would have their little song to the carpet snake "Please, Please come! Come to my house! Be my guest!" It was amazing because every time that I sang that song to the carpet snake sure enough the carpet snake would come along in the next week or so, and make its home in the rafters, and sit by the fire and it was a much loved guest because it would keep the mice problem under control and we never had to worry about it after that. It was interesting the carpet snake would just move from one house to the next house to the next, around the farm. So the carpet snake ended up being our 'totem' for the community and we had beautiful long skeins of the snake skins lost every year. I often used to drape them around my rafters and of course people from the city would come and they'd just think... 'Whoa! these weird people singing to snakes like that!' but it was just like working with nature...Some of the carpet snakes were really really big carpet snakes like eight, nine feet long and

Caroline: like that [hold out hands to indicate the circumference, about 7 inches]

Subhana: I think you saw one...?

Caroline: I did, I experienced several of them when I stayed on Bodhi Farm one time, particularly that huge one. It was gigantic -- about six inches diameter and about ten feet long. It was well fed. That big snake, it was in the house next door to the visitors' centre and people had invited me for a morning cup of tea and it was sitting in the sun along the balustrade of their verandah and everyone was pretty much ignoring this enormous python, fat like that, but every time, I spoke, it lifted up

it's head and turned its head towards me, so I figured that it didn't know me too well, and I didn't know it too well, so... I moved my chair about two metres inside the door, but everyone else was quite happy with the snake close by and it ignored everyone else's voice but mine....the newcomer.

Uncle Max: Yes, I was with some of the mob from the Tanamai Desert come and met up with my mob at Crocodile Hole between Kununara and Halls Creek and I was invited to go up there to a ceremony and of course Crocodile Hole was only a little waterhole... but I got there and they told me it was a beautiful place... plenty of water and fairly big water hole and so I decided to go down that night to get some water to boil the billy and as I went down I shined the torch like that and I looked around this big waterhole and all these orange eyes were all looking at me, Oh my god, this is why they call it Crocodile Hole. A lot of freshies see, this is OK mate. They were 'freshies' [freshwater crocs are not carnivorous or man-eating]

Gilly: Uncle Max, what do you make of the stingrays tail piercing the heart of Steve Irwin?

Uncle Max: Yeah, Oh Boy! See I think he was out of his depth - oh gee, that's a pun isn't it? Although he was a nature-loving guy... but nearly all his stuff that he wanted to do was on land hey? ... while crocodiles are in water but a lot of the other stuff see he spent a lot of money on land all around the world you know millions of dollars to give the animal kingdom that safe haven... yet he goes in over the top of a stingray and he's over zealous...He used to get excited, "Crikey!" probably pointing down at the fellow down below but coming over the top of those guys is really a *no no* because then they can turn -- and whack! and that's exactly what happened....



Drawing: Grandmother
Angophera in Royal National Park
from walk with Uncle Max 2007

Janet Selby

Mari Rhydwen's Talk: *Aboriginal Language, Oak Tree in the Courtyard*

I'd like to start by acknowledging that we are on land of the Eora Nation and to acknowledge the Elders and Ancestors past and present and also the Elder we have with us here today from another Nation.

When I was thinking about this talk I felt rather baffled as to exactly how to bring together two different aspects of my life in a coherent way. They are aspects of my life I don't really like talking about -- they're also both major parts of my life that I've tried, unsuccessfully, to jettison. Both Zen and Aboriginal language work are areas where there's a lot of unknowing, where answers and logic and theory don't quite work, and I have had to learn to rest in the relief of not-knowing. So, I realised all I could do was tell some stories, and hope that in some way it makes some sense.

For those of us who practise Zen, not being able to talk about it is something that comes up again and again. It has been lovely having this massive tree here¹ because I was thinking about koans and the bafflement we face when first encountering koans such as, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?" Bodhidharma is the person who brought Buddhism from India to China and is an important figure in our tradition.

"Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?"

"Oak tree in the courtyard."

At some level we know this and at some other level it completely confounds us. What does it mean, "Oak tree in the courtyard"? The notorious impenetrability of koans. No barrier at all really. Serendipitously Women's verse that accompanies this leafy koan goes,

*Words do not convey the fact;
language is not an expedient,
Attached to words, your life is lost,
blocked by phrases you are bewildered.*

Yet I'm going to keep talking [laughter].

Aboriginal matters are a different issue. I immediately came upon the question of politeness and respect when I started working in Aboriginal languages. For example, when I would ask someone as part of my research, "What do Aboriginal people think about this?" or, "Why did so-and-so do that?" the answer would always be, "I don't know, perhaps you'd better ask them." I realised that one of the things that people will not do, in any of the communities where I have worked, is talk *for* somebody else. People speak for themselves and you can't explain somebody else's behaviour and you can't say why somebody else did something—which is of course quite an awkward problem when you find yourself somewhere you are supposed to be writing a thesis! There I was, trying to find out and write about people, and one of the first things I learnt is that this is something that I am not supposed to do. So how am I going to get round that? Actually, when I did end up writing my thesis, I made it very explicit that I was writing about my own experience, and I wasn't speaking for anybody else.

As with koans, when I first started working in Aboriginal languages, I was confronted by things that I didn't understand, just as I was baffled as I was by "Oak tree in the garden." I remember working with a woman called Lily up in Barunga. She had three daughters and I had two daughters and I remember talking to her, saying that Bee was like this, and Lucy was like that. I was really just trying to engage her in conversation and I said, "What are your daughters like Lily? How are Bonita and Lorraine and Bibi different? How do you see them?" She looked at me completely nonplussed and said "They're exactly the same." And you know it stumped me. It stumped in just the way a koan stumps you. I couldn't make sense of that, "They're exactly the same." And of course Lily seemed just as baffled by my question as I was by her answer.

I'll move on now to my failed attempts to jettison both Aboriginal language work and Zen, but first some background. Subhana reminded me that a lot of people here don't know much of my history

¹ Gilly brought a vast gum tree branch to the event.

and probably a lot of you don't know that I used to be married to this man on my right (Allen Marett). We met in the UK. I grew up in Wales and went to university in London where I studied Anthropology and Linguistics and I met Allan there and we ended up coming to Australia. When I came to Australia, having studied Anthropology and Linguistics, I thought, "What's really interesting about being in Australia is Aboriginal things this is what I want to find out about." So I would ask people, "Do you know any Aboriginal people?" And nobody did. Nobody I'd met knew anything about Aboriginal languages or whatever, so really I thought the only way to find out about it was to do a course. I suppose that was because Allan (Marett) was working at a University (and you can develop a slightly blinkered view of life when you work at a University for too long) and I thought that the only way that I could actually find out about things Aboriginal was to study Aboriginal people. So I enrolled to do a Master's and the first thing that I did was go up Barunga, east of Katherine. Allan and I both went up there together and I was working on language and he was working on music and that's where I met Lily, who I mentioned before, with the daughters. One of the things she said to me was, "Oh you poor thing you didn't have to study us, you could have just come and talked to us you didn't have to go to all that bother!" Anyway—oh, dear, this is getting to be a long story—I started off doing the Master's really because I was interested and I wanted to find out things for myself but, you know, things happened and I found myself actually having to support myself in the middle of a PhD. What I had initially thought I was just doing for interest, was suddenly what I had to do more seriously, as work. I was too far in, to come out again. So, even though I hadn't really ever thought that I would work in Aboriginal Languages, suddenly that was what I was doing and there was no way back. I finished my PhD in Sydney and went to live in Perth. At that time I was—I fear this is turning into a very personal story! This is quite odd because I've got my ex-husband there (indicating Allan Marett), current husband there (indicating Allen Nash) and I am just about to talk about somebody in the middle [laughter and, in the background, Caroline: "We can all relate to that." Sarah: "That's all right, after the recording I'll make sure you all stay friends!"] I went to Perth because I had met Mudrooroo in Sydney. Mudrooroo, as many of you will know, and was known as Colin Johnson originally, and may or may not be Aboriginal but was Aboriginal at the time when I met him. [Laughter. Subhana: "This story is getting weirder".] I went to Perth with him. He was the Head of Indigenous Studies at Murdoch University. I actually finished writing my PhD while I was there. He is a writer and he taught me the best thing anyone has taught me about writing which is, "Just sit down and do it. You start in the morning and then you write and at four o'clock you stop and that's how you write."

But he also told me, "We don't want you whitefellas working in Aboriginal things. It's up to us to do it. Its time now for white people to stop studying us and we're going to our own studies, and we're going to study the languages ourselves," and I said "Right, OK, I think you're right about that." So at that point I had a research fellowship and I studied Welsh language loss and became interested in language loss generally and I worked on that. Then I went and taught linguistics at Murdoch. I was particularly interested in cultural change and language loss but I didn't focus on Aboriginal languages. I decided, "I'm not going to work with Aboriginal Languages I'll leave that to you mob." But there was a big national study of language education in schools, on best practice in language education and maintenance. They were doing it for Chinese, and they were doing it for Japanese and Italian and so on. I happened to be among a group of people in WA who were planning it. There were high level educators from all over the country and yet they were totally ignoring Aboriginal Languages. I said, "You can't talk about language maintenance in Australia, talk about maintaining Greek and talk about maintaining Mandarin, without talking about whether you maintain the Indigenous languages of this country because if you're not maintaining them here, where are you going to maintain them?" I just went off on one of my spiels like that, and people said, "Well yes of course. You'd better do it then hadn't you?" So I found myself working on Aboriginal languages once more. I was really trying not to, but if I didn't put up my hand and say, "Hey we've got to do something about this," it wasn't going to happen. So once again, I found myself back into doing that until I decided to jettison everything and headed off on a boat for a few years. I think I have completely lost where I was supposed to be going! I was going to read something from this book which was based on my thesis, because it reminded me of something you said Uncle Max. Then I'll come back, if I remember, to where I was before.

When I was up in the Northern Territory, the second time I was up there, I was in Bulman and I worked with a wonderful woman whose name was Nellie Camfoo. She was an Elder then, she's still there isn't she? [Allan Marett: "I think so"] I'm telling you this, well, it will be obvious while I am reading it to you.

I am in an ambivalent situation this time I don't have my kids with me so I can't hang out with the younger women and their children, I certainly can't hang out with the men, so I spent a lot of time with Dora. (I called her Dora in the book because I sort of fictionalised people in that, anyway this was actually mostly based on Nellie.)

We seem two of a kind she spends more time alone than any Aboriginal woman I have known and she wants to find out about me. On the nights when she's alone I sleep at her place on the verandah next to her and in the cover of darkness we swap our stories, It's women's talk about our first sexual experiences "But don't put that in your book!" I don't. But I remember how we laughed about our lost innocence, lost ignorance. We talk about men. Funny, it's the one thing you can talk to women about anywhere and laugh or cry at the same things.

Other times our talks range over a number of topics. One day Dora is evidently very frustrated with me, with my stupidity, she's been telling me she can't understand munanga, [that's whitefellas] and their attitude towards cars and money,

"They still floating around when we're 6 feet deep." I am perplexed after all I had been raised to see this as a benefit of money? Isn't that how dynasties are made? Yet for Dora the fact that people's possessions, the ones they gain from mining her country will outlast them is evidence of munanga stupidity.

"Oh you mean when we die it doesn't matter how much money we've got, how many cars, how many houses, when we die, we die with nothing, naked?"

"You got him, you got him!" she cried with relief. So that was it, somehow I had been looking in the wrong place for my understanding. After that things got easier. We talked about culture. Dora tells me that all Aboriginal people have one culture. This came up because I read her a David Uniapon story. I often read her books by or about Aboriginal people, and when I asked about food rules and some people not ever eating totemic animals she told me that food prohibition only applied at specific times before ceremony, saying of the story "No that's different way. We all got one law but different way". I on the other hand am munanga along with other whites, Japanese, Chinese and Africans and she tells me we have no culture, "only rock and roll." I feel a bit offended at this, I hasten to point out that I have more than rock and roll, so she challenges me, "What gives your life meaning?" I talk about my Buddhist practice, our precepts and practices, and about Dharma. ('Dharma, in its literal meaning, refers to something that retains a certain character constantly, and becomes the standard of things. In Buddhist teaching it signifies the universal norms or laws that govern human existence and is variously translated as 'Law' or 'Truth'.(Yuho 1976))

I am not suggesting there may be a direct connection between Aboriginal law and Buddhism but rather that when Dora talked about law, thinking of Law in the Buddhist sense rather than in the Western secular sense made it easier for us to exchange ideas. I could understand, We all have one law but different ways", if I thought of Dharma, and the various Buddhist cultural traditions for upholding it. Moreover, it is understandable that she thought we had no Law. Very little information about non-Aboriginal people that permeates remote Aboriginal communities would point to a knowledge of Dharma. We talked about our respective "Law", our responsibilities towards it and the universe it encompasses, the impossibility of defining or describing it in words or grasping it in its entirety and the fact that it is maintained by the actions of an interrelated web of life. We had found a way of talking to each other.

(From: Writing on the Backs of the Blacks: Voice, Literacy and Community in Kriol Fieldwork University of Queensland Press, 1996)

I think that speaks for itself I won't say any more about it.

I'd been thinking and working in these areas, then I'd gone away from working with Aboriginal languages, completely away from Australia. When I moved back, I moved to the east coast of Australia but took up formal Zen practice again with Ross (Bolleter). Then, just about at the same time Ross gave me permission to teach, the job that I'm currently in came up and I moved to Sydney and that's really been the focus of my life to a large extent ever since. Recently an Aboriginal Languages syllabus had been introduced into NSW, so Aboriginal Languages are taught in schools. It's not supposed to happen, and, if I can help it, certainly doesn't happen in schools unless the school and the community are working together in consultation and community people go into the schools to do the language teaching. And it is almost invariably language taught on-

country. As you were talking about before Uncle Max, you have to use the language in the country where it is spoken. Occasionally there are other examples, for example in Sydney, in some schools near Redfern people are teaching children Wiradjuri with the agreement of Wiradjuri Elders and the local community because they are people that have come from Wiradjuri country. I think there's a situation where they might be teaching Wankumara in Bourke, but that's only because there's been a big shift, a kind of refugee movement as it were. My job as a language consultant in the Education Department, is to advise, and provide professional development and support, for language teachers. There's a French consultant, there's a Japanese consultant and so on. Because this is new, there weren't people who were qualified teachers of Aboriginal languages and who also knew about the political situation of Aboriginal languages and so on, I mean there weren't very many people around to do this job.

So my work is to support Aboriginal languages teachers and that includes everyone in the whole team in the schools around NSW. In those teams there will be often the classroom teacher (who may or may not be an Aboriginal person) and there will be Aboriginal Education Assistants, and there will be Elders who come in to do the lessons in some places, or in other places it might be younger people who are community teachers who have been learning the language who are teaching it in the school. It's very difficult to support people in isolation and what I was doing when I first took on the job was to get people trained up a little bit in how school things work, because it is a meeting of different ways of educating. What I was often doing was bringing community people and classroom teachers in and we were talking about how people learn language. We really start building up connections and networks of all the schools in one area where they're talking one language, or related languages, and get them supporting each other. If I take the example of Gamilaraay, where some schools have got a really good program going, I wanted to start getting those people who've got the really good programs talking to the people who are thinking about doing it, who maybe haven't got so much experience, get them together. I decided to hold a preliminary Gamilaraay meeting in Moree. I got about sixty people to a two-day workshop in Moree, to have a look at setting up Gamilaraay language programs in schools around there. It was actually quite funny because when I got there everybody from the Department of Education Regional office and from the Catholic Education office had left town because, I was told, they were all so scared. There weren't any Language programs in Moree and there are a lot of upset people there because it's been a very difficult town. But it is bang in the middle of Gamilaraay country and I thought, "Well, if we are not talking about language there, how are we going to do anything?"

My job is really to do with people, and it's something I come back to all the time, that it's really about making connections. That's the point, to build the connections and do something that has some healing power and the first thing you have to do is listen. A lot of these meetings can be a bit nerve-wracking because there's a lot of anger and a lot of pain and that's where you start from. It was a very, very difficult meeting that we had in Moree for two days but a couple of months later there was a community meeting in Tamworth, two hundred and fifty community people at that meeting, and I was one of the few non-local people who went along. People wanted to talk about language and again it was difficult, a lot of anger, but the local schools in Tamworth and Moree are now talking to each other and talking about language and you just build it up slowly and get people together and start people talking to each other. So that's really the nature of the job is to find ways to open spaces for things to happen, for possibilities, so it's quite interesting.

I'm working closely with Muurrbay Language Centre in Nambucca and Uncle Ken and a group of teachers up in that area. We're making a film because there were training films for language teachers, Indonesian Language classes or Japanese Language classes, and everyone was saying to me, "Why haven't we got any films of Aboriginal Language Classes?" Part of the reason was, because there hadn't actually been classes to film but also it's quite tricky putting a film together. If anyone has watched the film about making *Ten Canoes*, [film on Yolngu story] which I watched the day before I went up to start on the Gumbaynggirr film, you will understand!. It all started off in a nerve-wracking way a bit like the making *Ten Canoes* when I went up to Nambucca for the first meeting with the film makers, who came down from Byron Bay. They turned up and I got to Muurrbay Language Centre and there wasn't anybody there. "Did you want us here for a meeting?" Hardly anyone had turned up and I wanted to say, "Well that's why I sent an e-mail every week for about the past three months saying, 'You will be at the meeting on Monday won't you?'" So rounding people up and setting up meetings all over the place—I spent a lot of time there.

One of the things that I do find when I go out of town, away from Sydney, I'm always speaking much too fast and much too much. It always takes me about a day to realise that, and to slow down and shut up. I do this work, and that's what I need to be doing at the moment, but I don't want to be not practising Zen, not teaching, even if I'm not sitting in a Dojo and giving Dokusan. So one of the things that I really work with at the moment is asking, what does it mean as a Zen practitioner to be working everyday and what difference does awareness of that make? This is why, as some of you know, I've been setting up Lifework which is for people who feel they're a bit too busy at work to do socially engaged Buddhism and to find ways of doing that in the work place. I think there's always an opportunity, no matter what your work is, to be doing that. So I don't quite know how, but that's what I'm doing, again in the spirit of not-knowing.

I'd just like to finish off by saying this morning, one of the dangers is of forgetting, of losing that connection, that is an aspect of practice. It was an aspect of life on the boat and I was thinking about it this morning, because I did listen to Kerry's program. [Kerry Stewart, ABC Radio program, *Encounter*] I don't know if anyone else heard it, but there was an interview where she was talking about the nuns, forest nuns in Korea where there were tigers, and the tigers would just walk around the place and they didn't eat the nuns. I just felt I'm missing tigers in my life. When I was on the boat I felt as if I had tigers in my life, that real connection with the natural world that comes if you're in it all the time. It's quite difficult to find the balance if you are living in a city and going to work in an office, especially in a bureaucracy, and I feel that without that practice it's easy to become disconnected. When I went to Tamworth for this big community meeting I was on a bus and I was the only whitefella on the bus and for the first time in Australia I really felt as if Australia was a foreign country. When you come to Australia from England from the UK, as I did, you come to Australia and everybody's speaking English, the first appearance is that Australia is a Western country and there I was in Tamworth in New South Wales and I was very, very conscious of the fact that I was in a different place. So one of the things that I am trying to do is find the ways of connection and to understand what it is. One of the things that's most noticeable when I go there is I'm the only person who hasn't got six cousins in the room! The connection of kinship, people talk about it, but it's absolutely vitally *there* every time I go out to the country to any language group, to any school. It's not an abstract notion of connectedness, and it's not an abstract notion of kinship, with the land or with people. It's real. It's solid connection and its lived connection all the time. It's real cousins and sisters and so on, everywhere. [Maeve: can I just interrupt you? You mean it's a warm connection that's the sense I'm getting from what you're saying -- a warm connection as opposed to...] Mari: No, what I'm saying is that it's literal connection. You go to a meeting in Tamworth and they've brought people from all over the place, from hundreds of miles around, and they ask each other, "Where you from?" and then, "Oh well you're one of the...." I can't think of the family names, but it might be, "So your one of the Williams's? My mother was a Williams from such-and-such a place." Everyone will find out how they're related to each other and it's a literal connection, that's what I meant, and I didn't realise that somehow. I've been immersed in it now all over NSW, all over Australia, spreading far beyond state boundaries, obviously, I mean it's literally all over Australia.

In the *Guardian Weekly* recently somebody wrote about Bangladesh saying,

My friend Nisit and I having one of those long conversations, exploring each others ways of life. He tells me how he goes home to visit his family in the North once a month. He's a college lecturer but despite this erudition when Nisit visits his mother everything changes. There he is no longer a 40-year-old pillar of the educational community, he's merely a son. If his mother instructs him to come home at 9pm, then he does so. And if he arrives home late he's quite naturally reprimanded. Why doesn't he tell his mother not to interfere? Why not have a frank exchange of views, clear the air? Oh no - the answer is simple. So simple, it almost pains Nisit to have to spell it out for me. This is impossible, because his mother has spoken. And she deserves better than this, she has earned this infallibility through the years of parenthood. As a consequence it's surely obvious that she can't be contradicted. (From: Andrew Morris Guardian Weekly September 1 2006)

This so much resonates with the experience of working with Elders. People do not contradict Elders, they show respect to Elders, and what comes out of this, is that this sort of family connection, this respect for people and this respect for older people. This respect for older family members is so common, it's so fundamentally human, and **we're** the odd ones when we've lost it.

And this is what the article concluded. The writer said,

I am astonished at the generosity of heart shown here. Family is family, and its a duty to do the right thing by a guest. There is nothing more to say. It is a true indicator of how important people are to each other - and who knows, perhaps this talent for humanity, the respect for family and openness to receiving relatives are all different facets of the same diamond.

This jewel has, in many other countries, already become a museum piece. In a darkened room, crowds of open mouthed onlookers round the glass case, gazing in silence at the spotlight gem, trying in vain to remember what it once conjured up.

And this again is my experience. I felt very alone in Tamworth at that time, when I was one of the very few people who wasn't actually related to anybody and I was the only whitefella on the bus, and what was every one was doing was looking out for everybody else making sure that nobody got left behind, making sure that that everyone was included. It was that generosity of spirit, connecting everyone and including all of us, that was so powerful there. And so much in contrast with the sort of situation that I often found myself in when I come back to Head Office and it's the other world. I'm back in the world of bureaucracy and exclusion and competition and so on.

So I think that's probably where I'll stop. I don't know why, but there's just one verse from Dongshan's Five Ranks that seems to be relevant, and I'll just read it to you and leave it at that.

*Not falling into being or non-being—who can be in accord with that?
Everyone longs to leave the eternal flux
Not just to live in harmony but to return and sit by the charcoal fire.*



Allan Marett and Joe Gumbula perform wanga at Kodoji.
Photo: Rob Scott-Mitchell

Buddhist Resonances in Australian Aboriginal Song

Allan Marett

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the place where we are sitting has been a place of learning and the imparting of wisdom for millennia. As we sit here in this Eora country, listening to Uncle Max and learning from one another, we honour it as a place of insight and knowledge. By thus honouring this place we open our hearts to the deep and intimate relationships between all beings. I particularly wish to acknowledge and honour my own Aboriginal teachers, almost all of whom are now resting in deepest samadhi. I feel an enormous debt and feel great sorrow at their passing.

Ever since I began working with communities in Northern Australia, my approach to Aboriginal knowledge has been informed by my Buddhist practice. I quickly figured out that things went much more smoothly if I practised mindfulness when sitting and listening to people singing or talking. This way of being seemed to allow me to drop into a similar space as the Aboriginal people I was with. Ever since then I have been reflecting on the relationship between my understanding of Aboriginal song and my practice in the dojo. As time has passed and as I have spent more time in the company of Aboriginal people, and more time on my cushion, each has increasingly informed the other.

Today I want to talk about two ways in which our practice as Buddhists seems to resonate with traditions of wisdom that I have encountered through Aboriginal song. The first has to do with taking care of the ancient ground. This is important to Aboriginal people and Buddhists alike, and at the deepest level we share similar understandings about the ancient ground as the foundation of being. Secondly I want to talk about the way that our ancestors look after us. In the Daly region of northern Australia, I have been carrying out research since 1986, there are many songs about the ancestors caring for the living. These songs express the ancestors' empathy and sympathy for the living and enact an intimacy between the ancestral world and the world of the living. As Buddhists, we too acknowledge and draw on the wisdom that has been passed down from our ancestors and at a deep level we are inseparable for them, seeing with their eyes, our eyebrows entangled with theirs.

I am going to begin by singing a *wangga* song from the Daly river region of Northern Australia. I sang this song about looking after country for the first time at the opening of the Kodoji Temple at Gorricks Run. I sang it again at the Hazy Moon sesshin in March 2006 and then, at Subhana's request, began teaching a version of it to sangha members who were attending the sesshin. Every evening we sang together and then on the final night of we sat around a fire and sang and sang and sang, and then we sat together for a long time as the embers faded—it was as if nobody was ever going to move from that place. We just sat there in the black night with the song resonating in our hearts. Now the song has become part of our liturgy and is inscribed in our sutra books.

Throughout this process I have been keeping Frank Dumoo, the senior leader for the Walakandha *wangga* tradition, informed about how his song is becoming part of our tradition, and at every step he has given his blessing. It is with his permission that I sing this song today.

Before I sing, let me say a little about the song, which was composed by a woman called Maude Dumoo. Maude is Frank's sister-in-law. It is about an important hill called Yendili, which is the country of the Marri-tjevin people. Yendili is prominent landmark, a flat topped mesa that you can see from miles out to sea and from every direction on land. Yendili stands for the Marri-tjevin. It is a very important and iconic site.

I will sing the song first in Marri-tjevin and then in English. I then change it, in order to bring it down here to this ancient ground on which we now sit, at the same time honouring our Ancient Ground Temple. I then return the song to its original form, to Marri-tjevin and to Yendili, where it belongs.

Yendili Yendili arr-girit-ni
Yendili Yendili arr-girit-ni
Ee, ye-ngina

Yendili Yendili you will look after it

Yendili Yendili you will look after it
Ee, my children

Ancient Ground Ancient Ground you will look after it
Ancient Ground Ancient Ground you will look after it
Ee, my children

Yendili Yendili arr-girit-ni
Yendili Yendili arr-girit-ni
Ee, ye-ngina

What have the Marri-tjevin people told me about that song? It was originally sung to Maudie by one of her deceased ancestors, an old man whose name was Bob Wak. The words of this ancestor call on the living to look after their country. This country is the ancient ground from which people are born, from which their conception spirits emerge and to which they return to at death. There are many ways in which people look after country, by calling out to it when visiting it, by burning off the grass in the dry season, by hunting and foraging on it and by calling out to it in ceremony. Songs quite often include calls to country and the ancestors who inhabit it, for example, there is a song that goes:

The waves are crashing on my descendents. Truwu ! My dear country! Walakandha!
The old Walakandha ancestor Mun.gum peeps out at them from behind a beach
hibiscus. Truwu! My dear country! Walakandha!

“Truwu” refers to an important beach in Marri-tjevin country. The expression “nidin ngina,” which I translate as “my dear country” is often translated in English as “Poor-fella (or poor bugger) my country”. It expresses deep nostalgic longing for country—a sort of “ache” for country. “Wallakanda” is the name that living Marri-tjevin people call their ancestors, but it is also what the deceased ancestors call the living. country, as you probably know, is alive. There is a lovely song by a recently deceased songman, PM, where he talks about the trees and the grasses on the top of Yendili Hill, standing up, as the hair stands up on the back of your neck. Somebody had died and the country responds with this electric intensity.

There is another song that is about one of the really important springs at Yendili drying up when my teacher Frank Dumoo’s mother died. The way that Frank’s family told people about the death was to sing this song:

I’m hearing bad news. The water at Yendili has dried up.

One of the things that I did when I was finishing my book, *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts* was to take the book back to the communities and read it to the people that I had writing about. It’s a current ethnographic fashion, but it keeps you honest. I was surprised to find that people were not particularly interested in hearing my interpretations. They *were* interested in correcting errors of fact—“No that was not his mother but his mother’s sister!”—and to help me with matters of protocol—“you can’t say that publicly.” I would read and ask, “Is that all right?” and people would either say, “That’s OK, that’s fine” or they would say “Mmm, better you don’t put that in the book.”

While people were interested in making those sorts of corrections, however, they did not offer comments on my interpretations of songs. This is because I was expected to take responsibility for the presentation of my understanding—whatever that was. In time I came to see that the way I had come to understand about songs and what they mean was based on a relationship—between me and my teachers—that mirrors the relationship between the living and the ancestral dead who give songs to living humans. These songs are usually received in dreams, and the texts of the songs often reflects the dream-vision of the living human who is receiving the song. For example, one song records the words of the song-giving ancestor thus:

What have I come here to do? I’m going to sing this song to you and then go back. Now you sing it.”

Sometimes these dream-visions are recorded in stories rather than songs, as was the case with Alan Maralung, whose song giving ancestor, Balandjirri sang to him in dream and then said: ““I have given you this song now. It is your song now. Don’t you forget it!”

In every case, the living songman has to take what has been given to him and then shape it

appropriately for the use of the living. When people perform these songs in ceremony, everyone understands that although the knowledge has come from the ancestral realm, the way that the living songman performs it reflect *his* understanding of the ancestral words—which are usually in a sort of ghost language only understood by songmen—and *his* understanding of how to appropriately deploy the song in human affairs. The parallel between this process and the process by which I have come to understand songs is that I have been given certain knowledge by my teachers and it is up to me to shape and deploy it in ways that are appropriate for my mob. The people who give me knowledge no more want to comment on my understanding of it than the ancestral world wants to comment on how living songmen use what they are given. So long as there are no major breaches of protocol, each is responsible for unfolding his or her understanding in his or her own way.

But let me return now to the question of the ancient ground and examine it from a Buddhist perspective. Here we have so many possible interpretations. I'm choosing to focus on just some of these. When we as a sangha talk about ancient ground, our thoughts naturally go to our temple, Kodoji or Ancient Ground Temple, at Gorrick's Run. We might also reflect on the fact that the land that we live in, Australia, is very very old and that people have been living on this ancient ground for a very long time. We also reflect on the ancient ground of our own being, that we come to know through our own practice—that coming forth of ourselves as the whole universe, fresh and vibrant in every moment and yet profoundly ancient. In this moment we touch something that has been there from the beginning.

There is a lovely *wangga* song that captures this sense of what has been called by some writers on Aboriginal culture “the ancestral present.” It was sung by an old man, Maurice Ngulkurr, who passed away some years ago. I find it hard to sing this song—I'm liable to burst into tears—because it's a song that I used to sing for his sister in the months after he died. We might be driving out of town to go fishing and she would say, “Can you sing that song of my brother for me?” That old lady passed away herself three weeks ago. Her funeral was last week so... so it touches me this song...I am going to sing it anyway.

Wulumen kimigimi kavulh-a-gu

“Wulumen” is Aboriginal English for “Old Man. “Kimigimi” means “he does it”. There are very often words in Aboriginal languages that have a broad semantic field that is focused by context. So “he is doing it” could mean “he is singing it”, it could mean “he is dancing it”, it could “he is blowing a didjeridu,” “Kavulh” means literally “he lies” and the suffix “-a” is a perfective marker that places the action in the past. “Gu” is a focus marker. In the poetic context of the song the whole sentence means, “that which the old man is doing now has been lying there from the beginning.” That is, the present action of singing/dancing/didjeridu-playing is no different than the bedrock of ancestral singing/dancing/didjeridu-playing from which it springs—what we are doing now is what he, that old man, has always done right from the beginning. So for the Aboriginal people, ceremonial practice brings forth the ancient ground of being in a way that resonates with the ways that we bring forth the ancient ground in our practice. This is how I understand it. There seems to me to be a very deep connection between the sort of wisdom that is expressed in *wangga* songs and some of the deepest wisdom of our Buddhist tradition.

Let me turn now to the theme of ancestors caring for us. I am shortly going to sing you the song about Truwu that I referred to earlier. Like other *wangga* songs belonging to the Marri-tjevin people, this was given to the living by one of their Walakandha ancestors. One of the main contexts in which the living sing it is the final mortuary ceremonies, know in English as “burn rag ceremonies,” where people say their final good-byes to their deceased relatives. This usually happens about 18 months to two years after the person who is the focus of the ceremony has died. At these ceremonies the belongings of the deceased are burnt to release his or her spirit, which is believed to continue to dwell in the “rags” after death, and will become dangerous if not sent away. Various other ritual acts, including singing and dancing are performed to coerce and cajole the spirit of the deceased person to move away from the society of the living and to join the community of the ancestral dead. The songs that are sung at that moment emphasis the interpenetration of the worlds of the living and the dead in ways that are comforting to both the living and the dead. The living “look after” the dead by performing ceremony and the dead “look after” the living by providing them with the ceremonial means—songs, dances, ritual acts—to do so.

In listening to the song, you need to remember that the words were originally given to the living by a Walakandha ancestor, and that he also addresses the living as “Walakandha.”

The waves are crashing on my descendents. Truwu ! My dear country! Walakandha!
The old Walakandha ancestor Mun.gum peeps out at them from behind a beach hibiscus.
Truwu! My dear country! Walakandha!

So here the Walakandha ancestor articulates his sympathy for his living Walakandha descendents, using the metaphor of the waves crashing down on them to symbolize the exigencies of life. Remember, these songs are associated with grief.

There are a number of songs where death is talked about in terms of waves hitting people. Here is another where a grandfather sings for his dead grandson, Tjagawala.

Tjagawala! A breaker has hit me.
Tjagawala! A breaker has hit me.
Grandson! Dead! It's hit me.

When I think about the way that our Buddhist ancestors support us, it seems to me that their primary act of compassion is the conveying of the Buddha mind and the liberation from suffering that this brings. This is what *we* sing, at the beginning of the Heart Sutra, “Avalokishvara [our great compassionate ancestor] practising deep prajna paramita clearly saw that all five skandas are empty, transforming anguish and distress.”

Sometimes ancestral compassion can take very specific forms in our lives. Recently, at a time when I was finding things a bit rough, I had a waking vision in which I was seated in the middle of a mandala. The mandala was made up of all the Buddhas and teachers of past, present and future arrayed around me and supporting me in the midst of my distress. The experience resonated deeply with the expressions of ancestral support found in the *wangga* songs I sing.

And the ways in which our ancestors look after us is essentially the same as we look after each other. When sangha members support sangha members, or members of the maha-sangha, we ourselves embody the compassion and wisdom of our ancestors.. So I see this intimacy between the ancestors and the living as another way in which Aboriginal wisdom resonates with ours. Our tradition talks about intimacy with our ancestors in such powerful ways. The Wumen-kuan says, “You walk hand in hand with all the ancestral teachers and the successive generations of our lineage. The hair of your eyebrows entangled with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears.”

The reasons why Aboriginal song seem to resonate so with our Buddhist practice is somewhat of a mystery to me. Is it just because I approach these traditions as a Buddhist that I find such resonances? Or is it that these ancient traditions retain wisdom that has been obscured in western civilization? Or could there be some historical connection between Aboriginal ways and Buddhist ways? After all, trade between the Muslim state of Macassar and Aboriginal people on the north coast of Australia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has left an indelible mark on *Yolngu* ceremonies from NE Arnhem Land, where some rituals include the chanting of the name of Allah, the use of curved swords and the use of Islamic ways of structuring music. Given that Buddhism flourished in Java for a very long time—between the seventh and fourteenth centuries—and given that more recent contacts between Aboriginal people and people from south east Asia have left a clear mark on Aboriginal ritual in NE Arnhem Land, who is to say that similar contact may not have happen during the earlier period, and that these contacts did not leave traces in Aboriginal thought? Although it can never be more than speculation, it is intriguing to consider the possibility that the dialogues that we are having today between Aboriginal people and Buddhists are not be the first such dialogues to have occurred on this ancient land.

Turrunburra winter morning

White everywhere
No river. No other shore.
Only the trees close by
casuarina, fig, lept, wattle.

Birdcalls -
crow, currawong, willie -
breaking through the dull rumble
of traffic on the bridge.

From time to time
all the way
from Balmain,
the deliberation of fog horn.

In the room
a squat speckled teapot,
bamboo handle
the song of green tea,
filling two white mugs
warming lips and throat.

The navigation post
emerges, scarlet,
Gutei's finger.
And the shimmer
of muffled sun.

Gillian Coote

[*Turrunburra is the Aboriginal name of the Lane Cove River in Sydney]

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