

MIND  
MOON  
CIRCLE

Autumn 2019 Journal of the  
Sydney Zen Centre Sangha

WALKING

Living With

FEARLESSLY

The Uncertainty

INTO THE

Of Our Times

DARKNESS



Dear friends,

It's been few eventful months since we started collating the following pages. It started with the students climate change rally which was sadly overshadowed by the tragic events in Christchurch.

This event brought up for me an emotional response which I have shared below. At the time I consulted with Subhana and we decided to change the initial theme *Dharma and Ambiguity* to *Walking Fearlessly Into The Darkness - Living With The Uncertainty Of Our Times*.

It was so encouraging to attend the *Wake Up* series of talks and workshops held in Annandale during May. And so disappointing to witness the result of federal elections with no change on climate action.

I would like to say warm *thank you* to all contributors. Thank you Gilly for suggesting to include the article by David Loy *Balancing Haven And Earth*. Thank you Gavan for giving me David's email address and thank you David for the permission to include the article in this issue.

It was inspiring to listen to Janet Laurence during Wake Up talks. I have included two images from Janet's exhibition *After Nature* courtesy of MCA.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish Gilly a speedy recovery.

With love and gratitude, Ameli

The next issue of Mind Mood Circle will be edited by Jillian Ball and Janet Selby on the theme **Zen And Aging**. Please send your contributions to: [jillianball@bigpond.com](mailto:jillianball@bigpond.com)

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# SPIRITUAL PRACTICES TO WEATHER THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Subhana Barzaghi

**H**ave you ever wondered how you will cope or what to do in these heartbreaking times? I feel worried and scared about what is happening to our world. The latest climate science information is not good news, in fact it is dire and hard to digest, like a red-hot iron ball, you cannot spit it out and you cannot swallow it. Even those who are fairly aware of global warming and its consequences are still shocked upon hearing this information. However hard to confront we all need to have our 'Holy Shit' moment because that is what is needed to wake ourselves up.

If the global temperature rises 1.5 degrees all life as we know is under threat, crops will fail, forests will repeatedly burn and be unable to regenerate, the ocean will become more acidic and will no longer be a carbon sink, the icecaps and glaciers are retreating and will melt by 2030, sea levels will rise, the Great Barrier Reef will die. It breaks my heart to think of this.

Evolutionary biologists and psychologists point out that the reasons why we fall back into denial and our business-as-usual mode is that our brains are programmed to focus on our immediate situation for survival. We worry about our kids schooling, our workloads, how to pay the bills and what to cook for the family dinner. Of course these are all legitimate concerns. This means however that we weren't programmed to focus on long-term goals into the future, so thinking about facing the existential threat of climate change is not easy to sustain, but that is what we need to do.

In 1973 at age 19, I worked as a waitress on Hayman Island on the Great Barrier Reef. On my days off, I snorkelled amongst pristine blue waters; swam amongst schools of tropical fish in vibrant coral reefs. Occasionally I was greeted by a gentle, oceanic giant Manta ray with its enormous wing-like pectoral fins. In that poised breathless underwater moment I had to remind

“However hard to confront we all need to have our ‘Holy Shit’ moment because that is what is needed to wake ourselves up.”

Like many of you, I'm deeply worried that the action to address this climate crisis seems far too slow as we hurtle towards the tipping point. The UN estimates that we have about 12 years before complex environmental systems will have a runaway escalating effect. David Attenborough warns of, “irreversible damage to the natural world and the collapse of our societies”. We are in the Holocene extinction, also referred to as the 6th mass extinction. A million species are now extinct and it is one of the most significant extinction events since the dinosaurs.

We cannot carry on with business-as-usual or afford to bury ourselves in denial or just focus on our immediate personal concerns and desires.

myself that this gentle giant was harmless. I returned to the Whitsundays for a holiday in 2008 and was shocked to see large stretches of reef bleached and dead, the waters murky and the sea life diminished and Manta rays endangered. I then realised that in my lifetime all of this had changed and my children will never see the beauty of the reef the way I had once experienced it. I find that heart breaking.

There are good news stories too; England, Ireland, Holland and Sweden and 520 Councils have declared a climate emergency. Further good news is that we already have the solutions, which are set out in the book, 'Drawdown' - A comprehensive plan to reduce carbon emissions

edited by Paul Hawken. We just need education and the political will to make the necessary changes. It's an imperative that we transition from our dependency on fossil fuel driven industry to renewable clean energy systems.

Hope is forged in the grass roots movements around the world, such as Extinction Rebellion, the New Green Deal in the US and the schools strike movement led by inspirational 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg. It was inspiring when 20,000 people primarily the youth of today, turned up at Sydney Town Hall to protest about Climate Change. While these young people are very articulate and passionately calling for action, yet we cannot wait for them to grow up until they have the right to vote. What we do now will affect their whole life.

focused on naming and processing our emotions in response to what we were hearing. Joanna Macy's despair and empowerment work laid the groundwork to create a safe place to share our grief and pain.

While it is important to take wise and compassionate action it is equally important to do our inner work, to grapple with and reflect about what we need emotionally and spiritually to face what is ahead of us. The relationship between our inner life and outer environment is a porous line, a continuum that only appears to be separate.

Through meditation and deep inquiry we are able to touch the liberating wisdom that has the power to transform the forces of fear, anger, grief and

“Practice as if your hair is on fire. People are like children playing with their toys in a house that is on fire.”

In honouring our pain for the world, Joanna Macy, Buddhist teacher, activist and writer said, “By virtue of our humanity we share these deep responses. To be conscious in our world today is to be aware of vast suffering and unprecedented peril. The source of our heartache lies less in concerns for the personal self but more in apprehension of our collective suffering - of what happens to our own and other species, to the legacy of our ancestors, to unborn generations, and to the living body of Earth” (p,26,27. 1998).

Joanna has a useful framework of 3 stages to engage with this dilemma. The 1st stage is to focus on gratitude for the many aspects of life that nourishes us. The 2nd stage is to honour our pain for the world. The 3rd and 4th stages relate to exploring new possibilities and compassionate practical actions and how we can support one another.

With the dawn of this dark horizon many people are reporting feeling; loss, anger, hopelessness, despair and anxiety. On the 2nd evening of our series of our Engaged Buddhist talks we

despair. We can transform greed and the thirst for more by recognising we have enough, by valuing and protecting what we have. Anger can be transformed into determination, a relentless, stubborn, perseverance to address injustices. The other side of fear is moral courage. A sense of agency helps avoid feelings of apathy and hopelessness. Grief can be transformed by honoring our need to mourn and connect with what we truly love and care about. We grieve because we care about our wild beautiful natural world; the platypus, the endangered species, the Great Barrier Reef, the dying fish in the Murray Darling and our children's future.

Gautama Buddha spoke about ignorance 2,500 years ago. He said:

*“Practice as if your hair is on fire. People are like children playing with their toys in a house that is on fire”.*

Never have the words of the Buddha been more prescient.

Greta Thunberg the Swedish climate activist who

has just been nominated for a noble peace prize, said on her face-book post:

*"I don't want you to be hopeful,  
I want you to feel the fear I feel everyday.  
And then I want you to act.  
I want you to act as if your house is on fire,  
because it is".*

Greta's words send shudders through me. I had my retirement all planned out and now that has been cast into a well of uncertainty. I long to spend more time writing, painting and meditating, enjoying life in the slow lane. But with the urgency and complexity of the Climate Crisis I began to recognise there is no short-term easy fix. Even if we reduce the carbon emissions today down to zero, we will still be reaping the consequences of what has been set in motion for the next 40 years. I would then be over 100. With a heavy sigh, I realise that for the rest of my life I will be dealing with climate change. The curse of awareness can feel like an iron cangue with no holes. Part of me rails against this, as this is not what I planned to do with my one wild and precious life.

The Buddhist teachings direct us to see into the causes and conditions that create suffering. If we do not address the roots of greed, hatred and ignorance then sadly we will continue to recreate the same old problems in our social, political and environmental systems and organisations all over again. Mindfulness creates a platform for insight that liberates us from our limited, conditioned, beliefs and behaviors that cause suffering.

In challenging times we're called upon to bring as much love, wisdom, courage, fierce compassion and gratitude as we can into the world. We go into retreat, sit silently not to disappear but to touch that ancient ground from which to see clearly; a spacious ground from which to step, a resilient ground from which to speak with a clear embodied voice and a compassionate ground from which to act. It is then that we begin to remember this sacred ground as our very own.

## The rise of the Shambhala Warrior or Climate Warriors

There is an ancient 12th century Tibetan Buddhist prophecy called the Shambhala Warrior,

which could be easily called the Climate Warriors of today. The prophecy speaks about the challenges we face in these harsh times and the inspirations, compassion and courage we need in order to take wise non-violent action.

"There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger and great destructive powers have arise and instruments that lay waste our world. In this era, when the future of sentient life hangs by the frailest of threads, the kingdom of Shambhala emerges. You cannot go there, for it is not a place, it is not a geopolitical entity. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors... Nor can you recognise a Shambhala warrior when you see her or him, for they wear no uniforms or insignia, and they carry no banners. They have no barricades on which to climb to threaten the enemy, or behind which they can hide to rest or regroup. They do not even have any home turf.

Now the time comes when great courage, moral and physical courage is required of the Shambhala warriors, for they must go into the very strong-holds of power, into the pits and pockets and citadels, they must go into the corridors of power where decisions are made.

Shambhala warriors have the courage to do this because they know that the problems are 'mind-made'. If they are created by the human mind, therefore they can be unmade by the human mind. The Shambhala warriors know that the dangers that threatening life on Earth arise from our own decisions, our own lifestyles and our own relationships. So at this time, the Shambhala warrior goes into training.....in the use of two weapons. The weapons are wisdom and compassion. (Joanna Macy 1998, pp.60-61.)

This prophetic message was true back in the 12th Century and is ever more true now. "We Shall Rise" is the stirring voice of the young people's strike that is mobilising a grassroots movement of Climate Warriors around the globe.

In 1996, Bernie Glassman Roshi co-founded the Zen Peacemaker Order with his late wife Sandra Jishu Holmes. Glassman was known as a pioneer of social enterprise, socially engaged Buddhism and "Bearing Witness Retreats". With a brave and compassionate heart he held retreats on the streets of New York as well as peace and



reconciliation sesshins in Auschwitz one of the most traumatized places on this earth.

The three tenants of Engaged Buddhism are: not knowing, bearing witness and compassionate action. On the street sesshins, practitioners slept and sat on the pavements, under bridges and in the parks with the homeless for seven days. Bernie said, “He learnt the most from the unknown, the things you don’t expect will come up and they will be your teacher”. Isn’t life like that, no matter how hard we try to control it to turn out the way we want it to, the unexpected guest arrives on our door-step. And yet the unknown is always a gateway through which our life keeps unfolding.

Peter Herschok formulated it in his wonderful study of Chan – “It’s not enough to see what Buddha nature is; you have to realise what Buddha nature does. What action and response emerges out of that realisation. (Chan Buddhism 2005)

The role of the peacemaker, healer, shaman or mystic is to make whole again. What does it mean to make the fragments whole? Zazen is the practice of collapsing the seer and seen into just seeing each person as the whole under a vast sky. In order to maintain this vision we need to empty our backpack of baggage, so we can live life with an open non-judgmental mind and freely embrace our seamless totality with all of life.

## Acting with Compassion

Compassion is a complex psychological state, a combination of having empathy plus kindness plus generosity plus a response to alleviate suffering. The ancient Pali word for compassion is Karuna, which can be translated as a quivering in the heart in response to our own or another beings pain. Dr. Paul Gilbert from the Compassionate Mind Foundation commented that compassion is more of an action than an emotion.

Compassion flows naturally and easily for loved ones, family or dear friends as we don’t want to see them suffer. When we cultivate compassionate presence we grow the capacity to turn towards the painful, acknowledge what is happening and reach out and respond.

An outstanding example of acting with compassion arose from N.Z. Prime Minister

Jacinda Ardern who offered care and strength to the Muslim community in the aftermath of the massacre that unfolded in Christchurch. To the Muslim community she said, “We stand with you, we are one”.

Cultivating compassion for some one who is of a different colour, race, cultural background, has different values and religious beliefs, is indeed more challenging but that is where compassion needs to be generated and applied. Compassion does not mean that we have to agree with them, nor support their beliefs or ideologies.

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh gave sublime expression to compassion in his poem, “Please call me by my True Name”, which was written in 1978 while he was trying to help the boat people who were fleeing the Vietnam war into the South China Sea. It emphasises the common humanity of perpetrators and victims alike.

*“I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself in the ocean  
after being raped by a sea pirate,  
I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving”.*

*Please call me by my true names,  
So I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,  
So I can see that my joy and pain are one.  
Please call me by my true names,  
So I can wake up,  
And so the door of my heart can be left open,  
The door of compassion”.*

This poem invites us to see the great river of pain underneath the many faces of humanity and keep the door of compassion open. If we nurture that compassion for the common humanity we are working to overcome the self-perpetuating polarisation that leads to repeated alienation and atrocities.

When we are lead by our wise and quivering heart there is a fearless presence, we muster courage to stand steady to act even when we feel scared. Having courage doesn’t mean you won’t feel scared. It is the willingness to act despite how you feel.

The power of compassion is capable of a wide embrace, it is big enough to include the joy, pain, sorrow and beauty of the world without breaking.



This practice cultivates a brave resilient heart welcoming each moment with openness.

## Bearing Witness

Our zazen enables us to sit with the joys, sorrows and sharp edges of our lives. We learn through zazen to cultivate a steady observer quality of mind, to bear witness to the fullness of this moment-to-moment experience. Over time our zazen and bearing witness makes us calmer, stronger and enhances equanimity. When this is stabilized we are not so thrown around by the difficult somersaults and twists of life. We are less reactive and can see deeply into the nature of things just as they are.

I cannot tell you how to make peace but what Zen practice can do is help you give up your certainties, live inside a question. Live life fearlessly and penetrate the unknown. It can give you strength to bear witness and heal the many beings.

## Finding your community

I've noticed when things are tough in challenging times, I want to be close to like-minded companions of the way that I can trust. I need a

space to share deeply, to grieve and to find ways to nourish and soothe my heart. I need a safe harbor to steady myself as I face the challenges in our fractured world. We need each other, to nurture the climate warrior spirit, to bear witness and respond with compassion. We have been handed a chalice, we have a duty of care, a responsibility to act to save and protect our world. As Aitken Roshi said, 'we are all in this together'.

So Bodhisattvas with your humble hands and clear eyes: practice as if your hair is on fire, practice so there is an inner and outer transformation, practice to support one another to maintain your vows to heal yourself and our world.

Practice Bearing Witness so the boundaries between self and other fall away so that we may live in harmony with one another.

Practice heeding the call to be Climate Warriors and polish your weapons of wisdom and compassion.

Practice being wise stewards of this precious green earth to save the many beings.

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# WE VOW TO PRACTICE ALL GOOD DHARMAS

Sally Hopkins

(A vow in the ceremony of Jukai.)

What is 'Good'? How do we understand it?

Dogen Zenji in 13th Century wrote:

*Long ago a monk asked an old master, "When hundreds and thousands and myriads of things come all at once, what should be done?"*

Indeed. What has changed?

**T**here is killing in Christchurch, Yemenis being starved to death, millions affected by a cyclone in the South African continent, half the insects of the world gone, loud voices talk of White race, guns, ban all Muslims; people feel free to say hateful dangerous things louder and louder and louder. Trump's tweets and Sports heroes are The news, and people complain that the train is late. The latest celebrity, film, event can distract us. And my leg hurts.

Freedom of the individual has benefited us all, a great good. Its dark side is that we are led to believe that "I" am more important than community. What I want, I need, I believe is everything without consideration for others, the group, other peoples, other species, the whole earth. If I hate you I can say so loud and clear. If I hate all who look like you or believe like you, it's my right to hate, and say so. It is my right to have as much of everything I want.

Looking back into the far far past as soon as writing evolves we learn of conflict, hatred, war, suffering, disease and death. Failure of Crops. In the 1st century BC Virgil, the Roman poet, wrote: "*Lacrimae rerum*" (the tears of things).

We are not special in our suffering or uncertainty, but there are so many more of us humans now, too many of us. In our cleverness we have done truly wonderful things, but we have made us far more dangerous. We can now destroy ourselves and half the planet and the life on it, and our conflicts are moving into space. We don't just want to be able to feed our children and survive. Enough is never enough and it is Good to want more and more. Good for the economy. Kodoji gives us a small taste of a simpler life, though we get there by car, and we didn't grow our food. We learn that we can live well when we cooperate and respect all beings. There is joy in the moment. When is more too much?

Our cultural history has given us an ancient story of Good v. Evil. It is good to fight against what we deem evil, bad, of the devil. Conflicts and bloodshed, cruelty, struggles for domination- always to be found however far back we look. "If we can get rid of what is bad, what we don't like, what threatens us- people, plants, animals; drug dealers, refugees, Muslims, dissenters, blacks, Jews, adulterers, then all will be well". Paradise is attainable. But what do we label as 'Good'?

The trouble is that good and evil run through the centre of each one of us, so getting rid of what we feel is bad (out there) will never succeed. Much of what we see as bad is indeed a reflection of parts of this small self that we have not acknowledged so we project it out onto others.

When I was about 15 the world of recorded music entered my life with a 12 inch vinyl LP of Pablo Casals playing Bach on his cello. Oh what a revelation! His cello spoke directly to the heart. Casals came from Catalonia, so he knew all about the terrible Spanish Civil War in the late 1930's. That war,

like all wars, created ripples that poison the world. Us vs. Them. The past is never truly past. Oral history's memory goes back many thousands of years. Bad deeds can be sung as good, depending where you stand. What is good? Casals said:

*"The situation is hopeless but we must take the next step".*

Each of us is responsible for that step. We will all die-no question-but right now-what is OUR next step? How do we practice all Good Dharmas?

John Tarrant offered Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi's words after 9/11. Rumi was born in 13th Century like Dogen, but in Afghanistan. He and his father fled before the conquering hordes of Ghengis Khan, who left pyramids of skulls in their wake, a million dead Hungarians. He died in Turkey, wrote in Persian. A Muslim. He wrote for time of catastrophe:

*"Sit down and be quiet  
you are drunk  
and this is the edge of the roof."*

The old master's response to the monk's question ? To our question?

"Don't try to control them".

I think this suggests, 'Don't panic. Don't take sides. Don't get distracted. Don't think you know. Try to discern 'How things truly are'. "Be quiet", in other words.

Dogen again:

*"The entire universe is the true human body.  
People outside the way regard what is not the self as self".*

We need to sit quietly and learn in our deepest hearts that we are all interconnected, that we are everything and nothing, that we all share this one earth and nothing, nobody, is capable of living utterly alone - no plant, no insect, no bird, no human. Everything depends on the earth, air, ocean, rain, sun, on others, on everything else. "We are all in this together," as Roshi used to say. Until we can take our next step with this One Mind we may just create more mayhem and suffering. We endlessly don't know enough. Answers are not clear. Dismantling over-bloated lifestyles such as ours is fraught with danger. We humans behave extremely badly when we lose what we have, lose jobs, when there is chaos. Even a power cut. We get afraid. We look to see who is to blame. We kill.

The next step? A serious matter. How to practice all good dharmas?

Paul Gilbert says: *"Compassion is not kindness. It is about confronting the reality of life and death with wisdom , and taking beneficial action."*

*"The things of this world are just as they are. The gates of liberation are open"* as our tradition says.

*"Sit down be quiet  
this is the edge of the roof."*

# A FLASH OF DARKNESS

Tony Coote

We live on the flight path to Mascot airport.

Just before 6am everyday the planes start coming in right over the house.

They come every 2 minutes with a 120 decibel roar.

We don't need an alarm clock.

Later in the day, when the sun has risen higher,  
the plane's shadow moves right over the house at around 270 kilometers per hour.

Each plane has a carbon emission rate of 90 kilograms of carbon per hour.

You experience the shadow as a flash of darkness.

You'd miss it if you blinked.

# CHILDREN OF THE WAR

Jillian Ball

**B**lack skies, sad suns, bombs marking the paper with heavy downward strokes of black crayon. One drawing in particular stands out. It was by a six year old girl, Heba, huddled in a refugee shelter in Syria where her family had fled after the bombing of their village.

Artist Ben Quilty\* sat with Heba and other children of the Syrian war inviting them to draw their experiences of Home. In one drawing, stick figures lay lifeless on the ground either side of a demolished house...two dimensional, void-like figures amongst the rubble. Stepping stones lead to a place of worship on the hill behind. Sorrowful but matter of fact. Home for Heba represents violence, destruction and death. The faces in her drawings are passive, blank, detached... they speak of deep trauma..... unimaginable despair. Suffering and uncertainty turned up to a level barely comprehensible.

Yet here is the surprising thing. Many of Heba's drawings are full of colour, bright flowers and happy suns. Maybe they hold fantasies of escape, better times...the people she loves...as she hangs onto the tenuous link of survival. How does she do that? Such wisdom and knowing for a child.

Ben Quilty's intention in visiting the Syrian refugee camp was to bring his presence to the suffering of these children of the war and not look away. He connected with the children through their drawings to get a glimpse of their humaneness in the face of darkness. Listening to their stories and listening with his heart.

This deep connection with humanity is witnessed again in the face of Jacinta Adhern (NZ PM) expressing her outpouring of grief and compassion for the families of those maimed and murdered in the Christchurch shootings.

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\* Quilty, B. (ed.) *Home: Drawings by Syrian Children*. Penguin Books, Australia, 2018.

United with thousands of people in cross-cultural and religious gatherings, she showed that love and compassion are stronger than hatred and divisiveness. Her embrace of the grieving spoke louder than the loudest words. 'We're here beside you and share your pain'.

When Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh\*\* talks about interbeing he says that when a young child is killed, we are all killed. Yet sometimes we distance our hearts from this when we live in fear and anger. The fear that aggression and hatred will win is based on what we are currently witnessing in every corner of our planet and the demise of the planet itself. And there is evidence that the destruction of the world as we know it is in the hands of regimes with mandates of greed and hatred. Thich Nhat Hanh goes on to say that the power of compassion can be as strong as the power of hate. Our task is to ensure that love and compassion prevail.

Christopher Titmus\*\*\* former Buddhist monk, writer and activist for the Green movement points to the Buddha's teaching on the uselessness of fear and hate as ways of perceiving true reality. When we grasp the futility of these mind states, there is the possibility of another way of seeing. 'Hatred does not cease with hatred. Hatred ceases with non-hatred'. In dissolving the blame and hate and the other toxins of the mind, we can muster the courage for committed action. Finding ways to engage in direct communication and bring people together is both the process and the resolution. We can then connect with each other as human beings and everything is possible.

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\*\* Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Sun My Heart*. Parallax Press, Berkeley, 2010.

\*\*\* Titmus, C. *Rising to the Challenge: A Step Towards Peace*. Tricycle. Spring, 2003.

# WALKING FEARLESSLY INTO THE DARKNESS

Sue Bidwell

**J**ust walking...one step, then another, on my life journey. Walking is an activity, an action. Thích Nhất Hạnh said 'My actions are my true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. They are the ground on which I stand'.\*

My practice helps me become more aware of my actions, more aware of the thoughts preceding those actions, more aware of the ground on which I stand...though I do a lot of stumbling. It also helps me walk on with more willingness to open to the next moment whatever it may bring. 'Don't know' mind is a completely open mind; open not only to being with the next moment, but also open to look with unflinching honesty at my thoughts such as 'he/she deserves...' (as if one can pass judgement on a person's deservedness); or 'why don't they...' (when a more open question could be 'why do they...?' or 'why don't I...?'); or 'those people...' (as if those people were other than me), and endless other 'them and me' internal dialogues.

Being open to the next moment means being open to fear if that is what appears, and recognise it for what it is. The fears are invariable brief, insignificant, generally irrational and often related to what others may think of me or say about me, but they still have the capacity to get in the way and hold me back from speaking out clearly and compassionately when I know it to be important to do so. Instead of a transient minor fear, the next moment might bring a major grave fear. Can I be open and fearless then? Can I hold those fears and walk fearlessly into the darkness? The Christchurch massacre was horrific and doubtless a terrifying experience but, try as I might, I can't feel that terror in my very bones. But what I do feel is an abiding compassion, and my practice helps me nurture, over and over, an abiding compassion for the many beings.

When I look with an open mind, is there death and destruction everywhere? Throughout the world there's unending violence, perpetrated on a grand scale in some countries by the state, in others by tyrannical corrupt leaders, and in every country by individuals against other individuals. We human beings seem to have in infinite capacity to inflict harm upon one another, as well as the earth. This reality is promulgated by many politicians and by many in the media, all of whom understand the power of capitalising on human fears. Social media is particularly adept in this area with its capacity to evoke immediate, reactive and often hurtful responses.

Yet counter to all of this, my day to day experience is that most people actually care. They care about their families, they want children to be safe and fed, they know that the earth's wellbeing is important, they want to be loved and give love, they want to be respected for who they are. I also come across people who have been denied love and respect throughout their lives and suffer enormously for it, but also care in all the same ways. So in the face of all the hatred and fear talked about, I bring to mind the humanity that so many people show through caring acts and small gifts of kindness.

Alan Paton, South African author and anti-apartheid activist, said it so clearly; "There is only one way in which one can endure man's inhumanity to man and that is to try, in one's own life, to exemplify man's humanity to man.\*\* And this requires openness and compassionate action, bringing me back once more to the ground on which I stand.

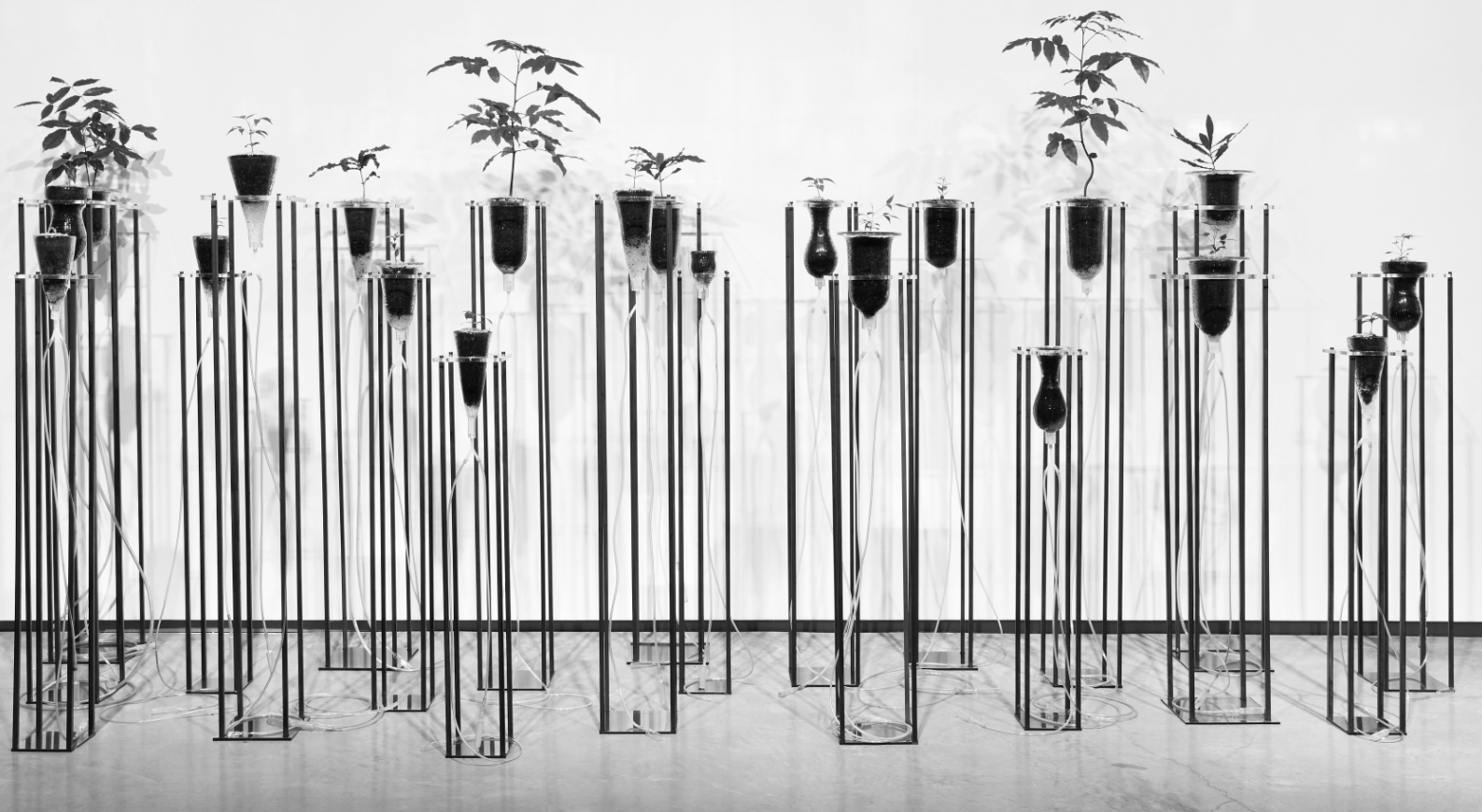
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\* Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Understanding Our Mind: 50 Verses on Buddhist Psychology*, Parallax Press, Feb 2006

\*\* Paton, Alan, 'The Alan Paton Centre & Struggle Archives', University of Kwazulu-Natal. Archived from the original on 30 August 2009. Retrieved 13 November 2009.



Janet Laurence, *Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins)* (detail), 2005. Installation view, Janet Laurence: *After Nature*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2019. 2006, rainforest plant specimens from the Rainforest Seed Conservation Project, Australian PlantBank, Australian Botanic Garden, Mount Annan.



installation view, Janet Laurence: *After Nature*, MCA, Sydney, 2019.  
Image courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia © the artist.  
Photograph: Zan Wimberley



dancing faintly now

the charcoal figures

in their shelter

# FACING THE WORST

Diana Levy

Yesterday I was talking to a friend on the phone and I was telling her that I'd recently read some fairly dire prognoses about our ability to confront the climate emergency. First of all I read Catherine Ingram's "Facing Extinction". She contends that we have little hope, as it's now too late, we've passed the tipping point where runaway change escalates and magnifies heat increases. Then I had read Jem Bendell's "Deep Adaptation: a map for navigating climate tragedy". Yes, such cheery titles. I told her that after reading the first one, I fell into a deep funk. While in this funk I attended the last in the "WakeUp" series at SZC. I felt a little out of the hopeful tone of the evening. But somehow the funk lifted. My friend asked me, how? How to hold the dissonance between perceiving doom, and carrying on with life?

I don't know. On our SZC family walking weekend, Will took us to some interesting sites. The first site was a little off the ridge, and on a rock platform there was a line of rocks. This, said Will, was the divide between two distinct groups in a Darkinjung ceremony, perhaps an initiation. He had found a similar site on the other side of the ridge. We all stood looking at it and then gradually one by one crossed the line to get a feel for "the other side". I saw that here, the rock was fractured and broken - by fires. I imagined the majesty of fire, singing and chanting, elders, new sacred knowledge being imparted in a location where the participants could be private and undisturbed. Further round the track (Jack's track) Will showed us a place where edge-ground axes had been sharpened - axe grooves - beside a naturally occurring deepish pool in a creek. When Will and Sue walk, they always have their heads down, looking for artefacts, especially along a road where the soil has been disturbed. And he found one.

*in his fingers*

*a piece of leftover*

*tool-making*

After lunch we descended to Kodoji, and visited the overhang where there are charcoal drawings. Will asked us to take our shoes off -walking barefoot is both less damaging, and more synchronous with the Darkinjung. The first time we visited this shelter I found the fragile shell of a freshwater mussel in the ashes of an old old fire. This must have been harvested at quite a distance away, and then this meal was eaten - by someone. We were quiet, but still trying to understand what these drawings represent. Janet painted, I wrote.

*dancing faintly now*

*the charcoal figures*

*in their shelter*

That way of life was smashed by the colonial project. And how will it be, if we too, the descendants and beneficiaries of successful colonisers, become faint smudges - and not even in history, that human activity? How did the first peoples react/adapt - survive? They resisted; attempted to accommodate; fought; died of strange diseases; strategised - and in the long run adapted and survived.\*

*I walk away*

*the charcoal wallaby*

*hopping alongside*

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\* The Sydney Wars - Conflict in the early colony 1788 - 1817" by Stephen Gapps 2108

We walked, in our twenty-first century walking shoes and with our marvellous walking accessories, synthetic fabric packs with clever synthetic zips, drinking bottles, the foods we'd brought created with all that modern infrastructure behind it: and we walked barefoot, feeling that soft sand, the gritty rock, the poking sticks and debris on our soft modern feet. We talked about everything as we walked together. We listened to Alex play the shakuhachi at lunchtime; admired flowers, trees, grasses, rock formations, a kanzeon in a niche, views, cockatoos. Which of this flora is going? I wondered. The bird life seemed very quiet (apart from the aforementioned survivors). It was warm for a May day. We had a wonderful time.

Steel yourself before reading Jem Bendell. I hesitate to voice his thesis - but here it is: "climate-induced societal collapse is now inevitable in the near term".

How to holding it all together? - straddle that dissonance?

*their tiny green heads*

*don't frown about the future -*

*radish seedlings*

Bendell comes up with three values, to walk into this dire future, and they all start with 'r':

resilience, relinquishment and restoration.

I see all three in the story of First Peoples here, and in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

I'm assuming my reader knows who Greta Thunberg is. To paraphrase "our house is on fire; we must take urgent action to put the fire out."

I recently attended the "Anthropocene on the Mind" forum, organised by a unit at UTS called The Anthropocene Transition Project. One of the speakers, Jane Morton who is the Australian convenor of Extinction Rebellion said this:

"The best way to deal with my feelings of rage is to take action based on my values".

And also, I plant radishes.

# REFLECTING ON UNCERTAINTY

Gillian Coote

When Ameli invited us to reflect on ambiguity, I sought the dictionary. The word derives from the Latin ambiguous - doubtful, the quality of having more than one possible meaning or interpretation. And ambiguous: open to various interpretations; uncertainty of meaning; of doubtful or uncertain nature; difficult to comprehend, distinguish or classify; lacking clearness or definiteness; obscure, indistinct.

We were going to a play called Doubt, a Parable. The playwright, John Patrick Shanley, had some interesting things to say about doubt as a state of mind. “There’s something powerful about the philosophical aspects of being in a state of doubt, of never knowing the truth, absolutely. I’m interested in this. Scepticism is a very important, philosophical position, I believe. It’s not a new thing. The model of sceptical argument and thinking was, of course Aristotle, and it is this application of the condition of scepticism to positions of certainty, this is what interested me and what I was hoping to achieve in this play.”\*

What is scepticism? The Greek word *skepsis* means investigation. ‘By calling themselves skeptics, the ancient skeptics thus describe themselves as investigators. They also call themselves ‘those who suspend’ (*ephektikoi*), thereby signalling that their investigations lead them to suspension of judgment. They do not put forward theories, and they do not deny that knowledge can be found. At its core, ancient skepticism is a way of life devoted to inquiry. Also, it is as much concerned with belief as with knowledge. As long as knowledge has not been attained, the skeptics aim not to affirm anything. This gives rise to their most controversial ambition: a life without belief.”\*\*

Shanley recalls his own school days, when he was failing, and thrown out of schools for asking presumptuous questions. “There was a teacher in

one school who was the only one who showed me compassion, who understood my rebellion, was kind to me, encouraged me in what I wanted to do. Life is not cut and dried like the law is. The law will say what is right and wrong. It is black and white. But in human life, that is not the case: life is not like that, and we have to negotiate our way through these things.”\*\*\*

In his play, he pits a ‘state of certainty’ against the conditions of doubt and ambiguity, which is the core of the drama. “There is a literal tendency in people’s thinking these days. I wanted to question that, to throw that certainty a bit, to introduce doubt.”\*\*\*\* He wants to leave the audience in a state of doubt at the end.

I wished I hadn’t read Shanley’s interview before seeing the play, and had just been swept along in the usual way, believing first this character, then that one. Looking at the evidence in my own way. What I noticed is how, knowing the author’s intentions for me, I worked harder to notice how my opinions were forming during the play. How I looked at the ‘evidence’ that’s presented by Sister Aloysius against the young charismatic priest. Evidence is a strange word, really. Evidently. It’s from the Latin, *videre* – to see; evident means obvious to eyes or mind.

In the play, Sister Aloysius has a particular position, a view of her role as headmistress of this school in the Bronx, which is that she will stand apart and be feared as the holder of rules and laws. Her teachers are to model this as well, and she rebukes a smiling, warm, new young nun, asking her to be colder, harbour suspicions, and doubt motives. The child with the bleeding nose, for example, did it himself with his biro, to get out of school, Sister Aloysius asserts.

Sister James tries to take on these traits but at considerable emotional cost to herself. She has a nightmare in which her face in a mirror is a dark blur. She can’t sleep. She feels alienated from the children, whom she loves. She tells the older

\* Interview with John Patrick Shanley, *The Good Weekend*, 2006.

\*\* from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

\*\*\* Interview with John Patrick Shanley

\*\*\*\* *ibid.*

nun that one student returned from a ‘little chat’ with the priest and laid his head down on the desk. His breath smelt of alcohol. This becomes the ‘evidence’ with which Sister Aloysius pursues the young priest, until he asks for and receives a transfer, and a promotion, to another school.

The young boy, the only black kid in the school, is heartbroken. His mother reveals that he is ‘that way’ which infuriates his father who, she says, beats the boy. ‘Just let him get to June, and he can go into high school,’ she pleads with Sister Aloysius. She doesn’t mind if the priest has ‘interfered’ with her son. “He cares about him, and he needs that,” she says. There is Sister Aloysius’ certainty, and heartbreak, and there is ambiguity, doubt and compassion.

In Shanley’s view, it’s not enough to create outrage and indignation. That’s easy. Too easy. That’s what one-sided polemic does. It’s not enough to give simple messages about life. It must be complex, contradictory and faceted, like life is. It must create ambiguities in the reader/viewer that may not otherwise have been there, pointing the way to complexity.

What is the point of writing a play or short story, or making a film? One answer is the joy of the craft. For me, making films was like a musical experience, though I don’t make music; about crescendo and diminuendo and adagio and vivace – about rhythm and colour and movement and depth and joy and pain. A celebration then, or a sounding board for others to experience joy and pain from their contact with the work, from their relationship with the work. Which is why I love Alice Munro’s stories. They create or evoke sorrow and relief and joy and regret – one becomes a responsive instrument with the work. The work is a vessel for these responses pointing to the complexities and ambiguities of living.

Writing to his brothers in 1817, the poet John Keats (1795-1821) coined the phrase ‘negative capability’ - the willingness to embrace uncertainty, live with mystery, and make peace with ambiguity. “Triggered by

Keats’s disagreement with the English poet and philosopher Coleridge, whose quest for definitive answers over beauty laid the foundations for modern-day reductionism, the concept is an articulation of a familiar sentiment - that life is about living the questions, that the unknown is what drives science, the most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious.”\*

In his letter, Keats said: ‘Several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.’\*\*

There is a field

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing*

*and rightdoing there is a field.*

*I’ll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in the grass*

*the world is too full to talk about.*

Rumi \*\*\*

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\* Maria Popova, Brainpickings

\*\* Keats’ Selected Letters, (public library)

\*\*\* Open Secret: Versions of Rumi with translations by Coleman Barks, John Moyne and Maulana Jalal Al-Din Rumi

# A PLACE OF UNCERTAINTY

Philip Long

## The Sick Rose

*O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:*

*Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

William Blake

## Case No. 2 Blue Cliff Record

Great Master Baso was unwell. The accountant monk asked him,  
“How is Your Reverence feeling these days?”

The Great Master said, “Sun-Face Buddha; Moon-Face Buddha.”

## The Earth Is Dying

**T**he Earth is Dying. There is a huge ball of indigestible plastic stuck in its stomach and scraps and minute particles of plastic are invading its subtle body. The air it breathes is polluted beyond repair. Its creaturely expression is mired in ignorance, self-hatred and deadly conflict and threatened by the proliferation of poisonous by-products and overheating. Old age sickness and death are its fatal prospect.

## A World of Pain

You can't say you weren't warned. The Buddha eschewed rose-coloured glasses and told us without equivocation (ambiguity) that all dharmas are suffering and that each of us must face the deep wrench of reality as it bends our flesh to its will. Resistance is pointless. When we are in

pain it is no use banging on about emptiness and nirvana. I have noticed how when someone is hurting and one offers reassurance that person often does not want to hear it. That person seems to be overwhelmed by pain as if it were that person's own precious self in need of recognition. Lose the pain and poof, you're gone. Oh no, not that. Offering reassurance or introducing a little balance into the scene can be met with great hostility. That person strikes back. “Never mind telling me about how my pain is impermanent. Right now I am **HURTING**.”\*

\* In the film *As Good As It Gets* Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) tells his neighbour whom he refers to as Simon The Fag (Greg Kinnear) and who is trying to encourage Melvin to pursue his feelings for Carol Connelly, a waitress (Helen Hunt): “Look, you, I'm very intelligent. If you're gonna give me hope, you gotta do better than you're doing. I mean, if you can't be at least mildly interesting, then shut the hell up. I mean, I'm drowning here, and you're describing the water!”



Ouch! But what did you expect? (Of course we are attached to pleasurable states as well. It amounts to a double bind.) The Heart Sutra says: "Form is no other than Emptiness; Emptiness is no other than Form." But it is also true that Emptiness is Emptiness and Form is Form. Let's face it - suffering is just suffering. It is PAINFUL.

In a moment of great pain the person in pain feels very alone and this makes the pain infinitely worse. That person is not alone. That each of us is alone, an isolate, is a fallacy which we often accept without question. It is not easy to shake off this little nugget of ignorance. If you are in pain right now, I will not belittle you or your pain. It is real and you are bereft. Whether it is an internal conflict and struggle, an interpersonal problem, or a sympathetic response to all the suffering in the world, man-made or natural, I, with the help of Avalokiteshvara, see your suffering and your instinctual yearning to be rid of it.

In addition to that, and not in substitution for that, I want to say: "You are in hell ... I know a way out of hell." In a scene in Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi the Mahatma* is fasting, lying near death on a rooftop in Delhi. It is the time of the great separation of India and Pakistan. Violence is rampant. A group of Hindus enters the rooftop and they drop their knives and swords in front of Gandhiji offering him the reassurance that the fighting has completely stopped. "Here! Eat, eat!" says one. "I am going to hell but not with your death on my soul." Gandhiji says faintly: "Only God decides who goes to hell." "I killed a child. I smashed his head against a wall." "Why?" "They killed my son. My boy. The Muslims killed my son." Gandhi says: "I know a way out of hell. Find a child, a child whose mother and father have been killed, a little boy about this high [Gestures.] and raise him as your own. Only be sure that he is a Muslim and that you raise him as one." The man falls on Gandhi's bed grasping him by the legs and sobbing. "Go! Go! God bless you," says the Mahatma. Gandhi is not only saying that we must make amends for our misdeeds; he recognises that we must face our demons, our guilt and our suffering directly and courageously. THERE is great healing.

## Put it in Context

And suffering, even great suffering, passes. On a recent episode of the ABC drama series *The Split* the vicar was reassuring a young woman who had been engaged to be married but was grieving because the groom had called off the wedding. The vicar said: "It will turn out all right in the end." The woman said: "But what if it does not turn out all right?" The vicar said: "Then, it's not the end!" How wide is your perspective?

## A Certain Uncertainty

The Buddha taught that the *dukkha* we feel derives from attachment to impermanent phenomena. . Impermanence, he told us, is one of the three marks of *dhammas*. We crave certainty. From time to time I find myself wondering why. What is so great about everything remaining the same? For that is what real certainty requires. Fortunately, nothing remains (the same) ever. If everything remained the same there would be literally nothing and there would be no redemption. You might even say because there is nothing, there is something. How would we enjoy a world of nothing? We need impermanence for there to be anything at all. We need contrast to be aware. But there is permanence; permanence and impermanence are in lock step. However, this permanence cannot be separated out from impermanence

It seems that the desire we have for certainty is a way of calming our mind by making the future predictable. Then we know that we do not have to adjust our behaviour in response to change. Change and our adjustment to it (our change) are stressful and stress is painful. We are programmed to avoid pain. Of course we must judge on balance whether avoiding an imminent pain will create a greater pain in the future.

So the *dharma* talks of impermanence. That is not, in the ordinary sense, certain, except to say that it is certain that the world is uncertain! When we make this apparently self-contradictory statement we are beginning to

play with language a bit and this playfulness points to an ambiguity at the heart of language and at the heart of our lives. We can even go as far as saying the dharma is certaintyuncertainty\* or, as Dogen Zenji would put it: “Impermanence is Buddha nature.”

We err when we grasp one side of a dualism and try to exclude the other. Whichever side we grasp we also grasp the other because they are not ontologically apart. This grasping is actually splitting. To keep the two poles of the dualism apart we must (try to) grasp them both. This is necessary in order to “freeze” the two poles into substantive entities and prevent them from meeting each other.

If we think that reality must be wholly certain or wholly uncertain, one being pleasurable and “good” and the other being painful and “bad”, we will opt for the good. Due to the dualistic nature of language we tend to assume that reality must be (wholly) one or the other and that pleasurable = good, painful = bad. This is the realm of dualism (that is, intellection). In dualism two poles or extremes are opposed to each other and we feel we must grasp one to the exclusion of the other.

Say you have an examination coming up. It might even be dokusan. For whatever reason you may find yourself afraid. The feared situation, the examination, has become an unpleasurable world of its own. You cannot see through or around the situation; it is opaque and eternal, that is, certain or permanent but bad. It is a brick wall on your journey (life). You are a mosquito that has come upon an iron ball. “How can I get through this?” you ask. Just now a fellow zendoid reminds you that everything is impermanent and insubstantial. The difficult situation will pass and your current fear and pain will dissipate. It has happened before and it will happen again. But you are not convinced: “This situation is different. If it goes wrong, the pain I now experience will get worse, until there is a sudden crisis and I cannot bear it any more. I will never feel pleasure again. I (my former pleasurable state) will die. And in any event even if it does pass it will recur in the future”.

It seems that we are doomed to failure if we want to change this and live a smooth and unruffled existence. Sometimes it's a bag of shit and sometimes its pure bliss. What is it?

How do we finally accept the uncertainty in our lives and in our world?

## Case No 38 of the Denkoroku

Tozan Gohon Daishi asked [Ungan]: “What kind of person can hear the sermon of no-mind?”

The Ancestor said: “The being of no-mind can hear the sermon of no-mind.”

The question is: “Where is the uncertainty?  
Is it out there or is it in our own mind?”

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\* This expression is my attempt to express the unresolvable ambiguity which lies at the heart of language and of our lives. The dualism of certainty and uncertainty cannot be resolved by conjuring up a transcendent third term which dissolves the dualism but neither can certainty and uncertainty be left apart from each other.

## Recurrence of Good and Bad

When the (depressed) skeptic in us says: “Even if the pending doom passes it will recur in the future.” What this person is missing is that, after that recurrence of doom, the pleasantness (the absence of doom) will also recur, that is, its recurrence will recur. (Mother will return.) That is certain. We cannot have permanent bliss but we need not dismiss it as worthless merely because it comes and goes. It is the desire to be absolutely and permanently free of all suffering that leads to an untenable situation.

## Ambiguity

In other words life is ambiguous. Ambiguous has two different meanings, that is, it is ambiguous! The first meaning is “not clear or decided”. It implies a hazy or blurry presentation. The second meaning is “open to more than one interpretation; not having one obvious meaning”. In this second meaning the ambiguity is unresolvable. There is no blurriness here (there is pure clarity) but neither is there a single propositional resolution. This is real clarity, true revelation. How swift is the bird, how sharp the knife! How dark the night. VIVID.

This kind of ambiguity is sometimes represented by the “ambiguous” drawing of the old woman which unprovoked and without warning changes into a drawing of a young woman and back again. We cannot force a univocal resolution which makes the drawing a drawing of a third entity possessing the qualities “old woman” and “young woman”. Even if we say the drawing is ultimately merely a patch of shapes joined together so that it can look sometimes like an old woman and sometimes like a young woman, we do not rid ourselves of ambiguity; now have two ambiguities, one between the two women and one between the two women on the one hand and conjoined patches on the other.

## UnambiguousAmbiguous

If we can relinquish our desire for absolute propositional certainty and accept the unresolvable ambiguity inherent in language and in our lives, we can enter the freedom of the nondual world where all dualisms are

dissolved (including the dualism of pain and pleasure) and where grasping is unnecessary and inappropriate. In this space the entire world is at our disposal. We move with grace from certainty to uncertainty, from the finite to the infinite, from acceptance to rejection and from pleasant to unpleasant. How to do this? We must first recognise our tendency to divide and grasp. The Buddha devised a Way for this; we only need to resolve to follow that way. That WAY is revealed in the PRACTICE. “The Buddha’s Way is unsurpassed; I vow to embody it fully.”

## The Real World

What does all this imply in relation to the uncertain and precarious world situation we find ourselves in? If we are to find a way to help resolve the evil, the violence and the danger that



seems to pervade the world we must learn to be clear-minded ourselves. If we are not, our very attempt to resolve these problems will run the risk of making things worse. I am not talking about perfection or anuttarasamyaksambodhi but about a simple recognising of our limitations and sticking points and a taking of that insight into

account when dealing with the world. The PRACTICE will take us there; it will ensure that we are on the road to opening our minds and hearts and not trying to impose our often misguided solutions on the world.

We must avoid fake clarity or certainty at all costs; this is worse than uncertainty. It is the stuff of delusion and power-over. “I will tell you what your truth is,” says the one who is certain. This requires that when we feel horror, despair, helplessness, rage and confusion in the darkness which seems to inhabit the future we make an honest attempt not to be attached to or identified with those one-sided feelings. It does not mean repressing these feelings; this will again only result in fake certainty. First, we come back to the BREATH, we regain our balance and our integrity and we leave to one side our ego which wants to big note itself by saving the world. When we are overwhelmed by the effects of uncertainty and in deepest darkness we must bring our MINDFULNESS to the situation: “There is a feeling of despair. There is a feeling of being overwhelmed. This thinking is driven by aversive emotions.”

We generally look at the world from the limited perspective of the ego - our life span, our failures, our relationships, our unfulfilled dreams, our disappointments. We may find ourselves depressed and in pain. There is no magical remedy for this; there is, however, the PRACTICE. We see our ego-driven response to the situation and we release our iron grip and allow ourselves to flow with the surging waters of the dark and the uncertain. To where? Not to the passive resignation of the sceptic or the self-reliance of the rationalist or the existentialist. This is fatal. Instead we simply cease to cling to resistance. As we float in this mindno-mind a friendly face appears and smiles at us. We notice the absolutely luxurious sensations of ice cream on the lips and tongue. We witness the deep azure blue of an autumn sky. A simple greeting directly touches us. Our minds and hearts are opened and our guides appear right there in the midst of, and presenting themselves as, the pain and the uncertainty themselves. Who are our guides? UNDERSTANDING and LOVE. Manjusri and Avalokiteshvara. How can understanding and love help us when the forces of darkness are so manifest and seemingly in control? Mahatma Ghandi said this:

*“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it--always.” \**

Oh, what lucky chance! The world is ruled by IMPERMANENCE. But how are we do derive comfort from this? If it changes sometimes for the better, it is also true that it sometimes changes for the worse. There it is again, the EGO. If it is the EGO that is allowed to decide what is better or worse then in the words of Private Frazer in the TV series Dad’s Army: “We’re DOOMED!”

Some years ago we had a visitor at Annandale, one Inoueh Roshi. He explained that when he was younger he one day came to the realisation that he was on the road to having a nervous breakdown. By lucky chance he was introduced to Zen and his life took a completely different turn. Often, so it was reported to me, he would say out of the blue to someone who was caught up in some favourite suffering: “Are you ready to die?” Are you, really?

REALLY?

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\* <https://www.beliefnet.com/quotes/inspiration/m/mahatma-gandhi/when-i-despair-i-remember-that-all-through-histor.aspx>



What is this? It is a change of perspective and a transformation of all that we know and experience. It is COURAGE. It is my GIFT to you. It is everyone's gift to everyone. In the words of Steven Sondheim's song No-one is Alone from Into the Woods:

*Hard to see the light now.  
Just don't let it go  
Things will come out right now.  
That's the best I know  
Someone is on your side  
No one is alone.*

## Bliss Bestowing Hands in 'The Market Place

If all of this seems a little internal, a little like an endless preparation for taking on the tough task of improving human society, it is only so because we cling to the EGO's version of time and progress, inside and outside and the self. The realised self is neither private nor public, neither inside nor outside.

In addition, having attended to our inner work we will be freed from self-obsession and our energies liberated for that impossible and sometimes disheartening task of making a difference. Our picture of the world will be more realistic and we will be more effective. We will acquire resilience and patience and avoid burn-out and helplessness. We will learn to embrace our suffering and that of the world and as the Heart Sutra says it will be transformed (as will we) and we will be able to work with it. Is this not enough for you? In the words of Hannah Green: I never promised you a rose garden.



# SPRING MOON, AUTUMN WATERS

Sean Loughman

*This is part two in a series on the capping verse to case six of Keizan Jokin's Denkōroku. Please see the Summer 2018 edition of MMC for part one.*

*Though clear waters range to the vast blue autumn sky,  
How can they compare with the hazy moon on a spring night!  
Most people want to have pure clarity,  
But sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind.*

Translation by Maezumi & Glassman<sup>1</sup>

*If we suppose that it has a connection with heaven, autumn water is pure,  
but what about the haziness of the moon on a night in spring?  
Most other people desire what is clear and white;  
they sweep and sweep, but their minds are not yet empty.*

Official Sōtō school translation<sup>2</sup>

The first line of Keizan's verse appears to borrow from a description of an enlightened person by Lingyou of Guishan (滄山靈祐, 771–853), co-founder of the Guiyang house, first of the Five Houses of Chan<sup>3</sup>.

*... by the practice of not giving rise to evil views or thoughts, the difficulties of the corrupted world  
become like the clear autumn waters, pure and unmoving, tranquil yet unimpeded.<sup>4</sup>*

Guishan's description is found in the oldest complete Zen Lamp record, *The Annals of the Ancestral Hall* (祖堂集, Zutan ji, 952)<sup>5,6</sup>. In writing his own Zen Lamp, Keizan obviously looked to earlier examples as a model and probably expected readers to be familiar with them too. He is also clearly swinging the dharma pendulum in the other direction, towards form.

Guishan founded Miyinsi (密印寺) on the eponymous Mount Gui (now written as Mount Wei), where his stupa remains, on the recommendation of his teacher, Baizhang Huaihai<sup>7</sup>. Guishan's posthumous name was Great Perfection, literally Great Complete/Circle (大圓禪師), partly due to his use of circles in his teaching. As one disciple explained, "the circle is a symbol of nirvana as the refuge"<sup>8</sup>. It also pays homage to his teacher.

The third line may also make reference to Guishan. His stupa is inscribed with 清淨<sup>9</sup>, "Clear Purity"<sup>4</sup>, of which 清白 is a synonym with more fitting tone and image. Although the translation by Maezumi and Glassman is my favourite, there is some "poetic licence". They translate 清白, made up of the characters "pure" and "white", as "clarity", which I initially interpreted as insight, but it actually means purity or perfection of character. The cultural association in Japan of white with purity is why politicians don white gloves when on the campaign trail and why bus, train and taxi drivers wear white gloves. Instead of understanding 清白 to mean realisation or insight, it refers to purification of character. Of course, each begets the other, but there is less ambiguity if we leave the word as it is.

The Guiyang house that Guishan co-founded was later absorbed in to the Linji school<sup>10</sup>. It is interesting that a Sōtō monk would allude to poetry by a monk not of his lineage. Is Keizan rejecting Guishan's teaching, paying his respects or is it all just one great pearl?

Water and moon are frequently paired images in Zen. However, I suspect Keizan draws inspiration from a poem in another Zen Lamp, *The Jiatai Record of the Universal Lamp*, 18th scroll (嘉泰普灯录卷第十八, 1204)<sup>11</sup>, written

by Leian, who I introduced in the first installment in this series. Dōgen apparently made reference to this record frequently<sup>12</sup>, so Keizan would also have been familiar with it, either first or second-hand.

千江有水千江月  
萬里無雲萬里天

*A thousand moons shine in the waters of a thousand rivers.  
Ten thousand homes under starry skies above,  
ten thousand homes in accord with the Dharma.*

(Literally, “ten thousand villages without a cloud, ten thousand villages under heaven.”)

My translation (with some help from Bing Crosby!)

For this reason and because *The Jiatai Record of the Universal Lamp* has greater relevance to Sōtō Zen (through the connections with Dōgen, The Blue Cliff Record and Xuedou<sup>13</sup>) than *The Annals of the Ancestral Hall*, it can be argued that Leian’s poem had greater influence over Keizan than Guishan’s. Adding further weight to the final line, Maekawa *godō* also told me that these poems are often written last line first, simply because it was easier to write this way.

Maekawa *godō* pointed out that the last line expresses the main message that Keizan makes throughout the *Denkōroku* and is a defining teaching of Sōtō Zen. Your mind is still not empty if you are seeking purity. You can only find the purity that you seek when you stop seeking. That the two translations diverge at this point (perhaps it is no coincidence that one is by Rinzai teachers and the other Sōtō) makes this interpretation all the more intriguing.

Another point of interest is 人家, which Keizan uses instead of Leian’s 里, which can mean “village”. Strictly speaking, both refer to lay people, but they can be understood to refer to people in general. It is understood that even if our minds are swept well enough to perceive the clear waters of nirvana, this emptiness is not enough. What is missing in our understanding?

Another word more faithfully translated in the Sōtō version is 未, meaning “not yet”. It is not a negation like “cannot”, as used by Maezumi and Glassman, but more ambivalent. It is used in words like 未使用, “not yet used”, which we would translate as “unused”, or 未完成, “not yet complete”, as “uncompleted”. These words have a transitional quality, hinting at the change inherent in all things that the English equivalent does not capture. It is full of potential and pregnancy. As I once read, “I am not a human being, but a human becoming”. This changes the overall sense of the poem significantly.

The translation officially endorsed by the Sōtō school is more faithful in meaning, but inevitably loses something of the original beauty. No translation that I have seen has managed to preserve the wordplay of the last character 空, which can refer to physical emptiness, the emptiness of nirvana, and sky, an image also used in the first line.

*In the third installment, I offer one interpretation of this poem.*



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“Manjushri was always regarded as the fount of compassion. One legend says that the Buddha miraculously created the bodhisattva as a means of enlightening China, where he was called Wenshu.

*The Imperial Capitals of China An Inside View of the Celestial Empire* Cotterell, Arthur 2007 Pimlico. p.240

# BEARING WITNESS TO THE HEART OF ISLAM

Alex Budlevskis

**T**he practice of bearing witness is a brave way of walking side by side with fear into the unknown, offering yourself up to the world, and bridging the gap between the seemingly inward and private nature of Zen practice, with outward social action. Bearing witness was developed by Bernie Glassman by trying to articulate how he had approached his professional career, in which over time he developed a small empire of social enterprises that addressed many things from homelessness, employment for the unemployable, affordable childcare, cafe/soup kitchens, and supporting AIDS sufferers. All of the ventures came from approaching things with the spirit of what he now calls bearing witness. Bernie stated that bearing witness is another upaya (skilful means), in addition to zazen and koan study. He frames bearing witness as the same as the mind of shikantaza, the opening that koan work aspires to, and of the non-dual state itself within everyday life.

A very common response to the pain and suffering one sees in the world is to be discouraged, either by not knowing what to do, or feeling as though one's faculties are not sufficient enough to get involved. This usually leads to a distraction or explaining away of the situation, preventing oneself to feel the suffering of the situation from a powerless standpoint, and carrying on with life focusing on other things. Bearing witness is a way of sidestepping this tendency and turning it into an opportunity for openness and growth, by willingly plunging into the midst of things. I was placed in this situation the moment I heard the news of the Christchurch massacre. I was in the middle of a haircut by my local barber who happens to be a muslim man from New Zealand. We collectively shared our shock, distress and anger at the action. Not long after, contributing to my distress was one of our own politicians trying to use the atrocity as an argument to curb immigration to Australia. Then there was the response from people in the muslim community commenting on the amount of race hate speech and discrimination they already experience on a regular basis - "I am sad but I'm not surprised", was Waleed Ali's words. I was deeply saddened, and I wanted to help somehow, but I had no idea how.

In bearing witness this is the best place to start. The first of the three tenets of bearing witness is to embody the mind of unknowing. Letting go of how do define the problem, any plans you think might work, that something needs fixing, or what the solutions should be. If you don't know what to do, or how to go about it, that is a perfect place to start. The thought came to mind - I'll go out to the nearest Mosque and pay my respects, and offer myself up in solidarity. I'll bring some flowers and that's as far as the plan goes. This was the beginning of vowing to bear witness.

I had no idea what I would do when I arrive, and before arriving all sorts of ideas sprung up. Maybe I would arrive and people would be hostile, that a non-Muslim is invading their sacred space at a vulnerable and sensitive time? Maybe there will be a lot of police and security present, and it might be a dangerous place to be? Maybe I'll be accepted and can help somehow, such as by lending a hand to clean the Mosque? Maybe I can just offer some words of mutual bereavement and express solidarity? An aspect of bearing witness is not only of places and people, but the mental-emotional responses that are brought up by the vow to bear witness. To bear witness fully, these responses are acknowledged and recognised, then let go of in the same way we do during zazen. The act of willingly continuing to bear witness allows these views to fall away into the not knowing mind, the same way we don't need to engage every thought that arises during zazen.

Bearing witness is the second of the tenets, and can only really start once we have let go of all of our ideas of knowing. If I don't let go of these first, or at least hold them lightly, then any witnessing is done through the prism of my own ideology to either challenge or confirm it. Once they are let go of there is just a bare and innocent attention of the situation at hand. My presence becomes the offering, and in that openness is the tenderness to really experience the situation with intimacy.

After arriving in Lakemba to bear witness I wandered down the street towards the mosque. Small kids whizzed past me on bikes wearing head scarfs, “bring brrrring” on their bells as they passed. Adults were calmly walking down the street as well, talking quietly or just walking in silence on their way to prayer. The street itself was very quiet with only the occasional car drifting down the street. I was waiting to cross a side street and a car stopped and generously waited for me to pass. I walked past a group of elderly gentleman sitting around a table drinking coffee in a front yard, they greeted me warmly as I passed by.

I arrived outside the mosque and it was very quiet. There was a vigil wall made out of the metal fence filled with cards, flowers, and posters. There was also a big Aboriginal flag draped over the fence, placed there by one of my wife’s co-workers the day after the massacre. The cards and posters wrote of words of grieving, interfaith solidarity, and love. There was only one person visible, a man wearing the traditional full-body clothes with the round cap on his head. He was inspecting the cards strung on the fence and tidying them so the writing could be visible to passersby. There were no police cars in sight, no visible security presence, just a great big quiet mosque and this one man.

The man spotted me and welcomed me, asking why I’m here.

I answered, “I’m here to pay my respects after what happened in Christchurch.”

“Ahhh yes! You’re most welcome! Please please! Put the flowers wherever you like.” was his reply.

He helped me find a place and we both carefully guided the bouquet into the twists and turns of the wire fence. He introduced himself as Jasim, an Iraqi refugee from the first gulf war. He invited me to come in to see the mosque which I gladly accepted. I had no preconceived idea of what I should do or say, so I just accepted his kind invitation and allowed things to unfold. Inside the mosque there was only a small handful of people spread out, quietly reading what must have been the Qur’an. None looked up to greet us, they were deep in contemplation. Jasim took me through a tour of the big prayer room explaining the process of prayer with great enthusiasm, also showing me the library, and then the Imam’s speech platform. Briefly the mood went more serious when he said “see this door here, if anything happens we go out this door, okay.” It was brief, but this was our escape plan should a copycat event take place and we need to flee to safety. His demeanor lightened quickly and we carried on.

Jasim took me a few doors down from the mosque to the same group of older men who greeted me as I walked past earlier. They made space for me, introduced themselves, and then offered me thick Lebanese coffee. This is their usual place to meet and chat while they wait to pray. Initially they thought I might be a new muslim, however they became even more surprised and curious when I said I was a Buddhist, and here to pay my respects for what happened in Christchurch. After some talk they became comfortable around me and went back to talking in Arabic to each other, with one of them occasionally asking me a question about Buddhist practice, or to ask where I’m from or about my family background. Offering oneself up is a part of bearing witness too, as our presence is a part the offering.

Next, Jasim asked “would you like to pray with us?”.

I said “sure, but I don’t know how.”

“Never mind, it’s easy, come come!” he replied.

He took me back into the mosque shortly before the next prayer session and began explaining the rituals. The authority in the mosque interrupted him and said I won’t be able to participate in the praying as I’m not muslim, however I’m welcome to sit in the chairs at the back of the mosque and watch while they pray. I found some chairs to sit on at the back of the room and made myself comfortable. It also happened to be the same place elders use who don’t want to kneel on the floor to pray, and all of my friends from coffee arrived and sat around me. They excitedly welcomed me to sit with them, and explained the whole prayer ritual to me as it was happening. It started with the beautiful singing of the call to prayer, then a praying ritual governed by singing instead of words. I just followed along with what I saw happening. If people stood, I stood, if they sat, I sat, if they put their head down, I did too. I didn’t want to seem defiant, and wanted to participate in good faith.

After the praying had finished everyone smiled to each other and thanked each other for their presence during the prayer, me included. A man then introduced himself and wanted to share an understanding of Islam with me. "Islam means peace", he said. "You can identify as a muslim, but if you are hurting, killing or doing harm, you are not practicing Islam." It reminded me of Thich Nhat Hahn's quote, "there is no way to peace, peace is the Way." You have to live it, not just talk about it, or identify as it. He continued, "according to our beliefs, everyone is a descendant of the first Adam and Eve. So what does that make us?". He looked at me with a smile waiting for me to realise. "Family!", I said. "Yes!", his smile grew. He happened to be the father of the current head Imam of NSW, and he encouraged me to meet his son sometime at a different mosque that caters to younger people. Another day I'll attend there and bear witness all over again, letting go of any ideas I have about this first visit, and let the next mosque visit be new all over again.

After we finished chatting a little after prayer, Jasim offered me to come out for dinner in Lakemba after prayer, but he suddenly realised it would be quite late after the 9pm prayer will have finished. He then hurriedly called some friends on the phone to see if they could come in especially to take me out to dinner nearby, but they too were going to attend the last prayer. Jasim then beamed with a new idea, "I know, we can get takeaway!!". We both jumped into his car and he whisked us to a nearby restaurant, Al Aseed, and bought me a takeaway mixed pack for dinner. He then gave me an unopened tissue box for my car, an English version of the Qur'an, a giant smile with a big genuine hug, and sent me on my way into the night.

What did I learn from it? One thing was that the healing was in both directions from both me and them. I was made to feel like part of the family, and was imparted with what felt like to me as the heart of Islam. I now feel like all muslim people are my brothers and sisters. I knew they were before this in an intellectual sense, but now I really feel it. Anytime I have the opportunity to smile or be friendly to a muslim person I make the effort. On their behalf, I can only imagine what it meant for them that someone wanted to come and learn their ways in the good faith of curiosity, as they shared words and prayers of Islam with great enthusiasm. They insisted that I come back sometime, so it was healing for them somehow too. I only reflected on this afterward, but during the prayer I participated in, we were all very vulnerable to a copycat attack. There was just one security guard outside the entry to the mosque for the length of the prayer, and he could have easily been overrun by enough people or force. I had offered myself up to be part of that same vulnerability they were experiencing throughout that prayer, and I felt my presence meant even more to them not being a muslim. The feeling that left me was that we were all brothers and sisters, and there was something more than identifying with a faith that was our strength we shared together that day. We all had something to offer in the supreme meal of life, and we each had our own language of being peace. What shone through however was not talk about peace, or ideas about it, but living peace itself.

Since this experience I have noticed more and more situations calling for bearing witness. We live in a fractured world with many collective pains. Climate change, homelessness, racism, the list is a long one. The hope offered from bearing witness is that we don't have to know where to start, or what to do, we just need to be willing to walk into the darkness of the unknown. Vow to oneself to bear witness, stay with it, and let it advance and confirm the self.

A verse in reflection:

*What started as a gift of flowers  
And deep condolences  
During a time of division,  
Led to open arms,  
Hospitality like no other,  
Deep prayer and shared unity.  
Islam means: "being peace."  
Leaving with a warm heart,  
The heart of Islam.*



# ON POLITICS, LOVE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Georgina Reid

I received an email last week regarding an essay I'd written recently. The writer told me how it had made her feel less alone. She felt reassured, she wrote, because my words made her realise she was not the only person in the world feeling the way she does. I am often surprised when people tell me this, because the emotions I express in my writing often feel deeply personal and particular to my experience. They're not, of course. I was reminded by her words that to be human is, essentially, to be alone. And that the pursuit of connection, of shared experience and shared feelings is what drives many, if not most, of our actions.

This reminder came two days after the Australian federal election, in which many, myself included, had hoped for change. We had hoped for a government who would take seriously the climate emergency. Our hopes were left hopelessly unfulfilled.

I spent the day after the election in a state of deep sadness. I was angry. I gardened furiously and I furiously gardened. I felt marginalised and isolated. I ranted and raved. I cried. I planted and pruned, somewhat more violently than usual, and was pissed off that a day in the garden wasn't enough to ease my heart. Usually it works. I turned to poetry as the sun went down, reading Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Let this Darkness be a Belltower over and over until, like the gloriously full moon on the night of the election, my rage began to wane.*

"And if the world has ceased to hear you," wrote Rilke in the last stanza of the poem, "say to the silent earth: I flow. / To the rushing water, speak: I am." We all want to be heard. We all want to feel less alone. The truths contained within Rilke's poem are universal. My heart started cracking again, on realising that the current political discourse in Australia preys on the very vulnerabilities that make

us human. Fostering disconnect, fanning the flames of the us-against-them bushfire with fear and cynicism. The relentless hunt for the 'other', for us to direct our pain and angst towards.

Otherness is essential for small-minded fear-mongering politics to work. Refugees, terrorists, environmentalists – it doesn't matter who this feared group might be, as long as it exists and its so-called threat can be ramped up with catchy one-liners. This goes both ways, left and right. For a few days after the election, the anger and indignation filling my social media feed – a bubble of left-leaning greenies if ever there were one – was everywhere. We thought, we hoped, we crossed our fingers for change. It didn't happen and now it's the 'others' fault. It's not. It's ours, shared.

We are a rich and complex species. All of us – regardless of where we live, how we vote, how we think – desire love, connection, freedom, shelter. We're scared, greedy, ignorant and angry. We're wonderful and terrible, light and dark. We are connected by our shared desires and pains, our shared experience of being here, on this planet, in this country, right now. How we got here is our joint responsibility. Where we go next is a choice to be made by all Australians, not just those in power.

Throughout my 20s and early 30s I'd often find myself entangled in emotionally charged discussions with my father at the dinner table, traversing the many political and social issues we disagreed upon. I used to get upset that he wouldn't change his mind when it was so obvious to me that he was wrong. I sometimes still do. As we've both mellowed, our arguments have often evolved into conversations rather than conflicts. Whilst we still see things differently, I think we've both realised that we share more than we don't. And what we share goes way beyond the political.

It's grounded in love. And so, we agree to disagree, and we attempt to listen. It's not easy, and sometimes it doesn't work, but when it does, we both learn something of other ways of seeing. We grow.

Love is a word rarely used in politics. It's not part of the language of control and division. And yet it's at the centre of the human dialogue. To love is to not be alone. As we sit with continued government inaction on the climate emergency, as we reel from the cynical divisiveness of the current political ecosystem, let us love. Let us rise above right and wrong. Let us sit with each other and listen. Let us share our stories, our hopes and our fears. Let us walk in each other's shoes. Whether we're inner-city environmentalists, or underemployed mine workers from rural Queensland, the truth is this: we share more than we're lead to believe. Let us not allow our leaders to suggest anything otherwise.

Let us find our common ground and start from there. Because we have an emergency on our hands. It is existential. To suggest that the climate emergency threatens the survival of the human species, and millions of others, is no alarmist dramatization, it's fact. The crisis is of a scale far, far removed from the usual political discourse of electricity prices and tax cuts. It's hard to fathom, hard to imagine, hard to see how it directly affects us (though this is changing, fast). Maybe it's for these reasons that many Australians, lest of all our government, are willing to stare into the truth of our situation.

"We are doing our bit, as we should as a global citizen, but I'm not going to do it in a way that puts our kids' economic future at risk", said our newly re-elected Prime Minister Scott Morrison a few weeks back. Do we, as a nation, really think that our kids will prioritise their 'economic future' over the opportunity – one in which we've long taken for granted – to

be free to love and grow in a stable and safe nation? I'd really like to sit down with Scott. I know we'd not see eye to eye on many issues, but I know too, we'd find common ground. It is from this shared soil that new visions and ideas are offered room to sprout. Fancy a cuppa, Scott?

As the climate emergency bears down, none of us know exactly what will happen, exactly where our actions are leading us and exactly what solutions might work best. But this is no reason for non-action. This is reason to find out. To learn more, to share more, to do more. Many, many people have committed their lives to staring into the truth of climate change; many more have long pondered the mystery of what it is to be human. Climate scientists, artists, ecologists, writers, biologists, poets. Let us listen to them. Let us learn and use what we've learned to change the discourse. We need to tell new stories that include, not exclude. Because this is not a binary argument about jobs or environment. This is no one-or-the-other, us-against-them matter. It's the fight of our lives, the fight for our lives. Let us not forget this.

And so, let us love.



# TRANSCENDENCE OR IMMANENCE? BALANCING HEAVEN AND EARTH

David Loy

**A**t the heart of Buddhist teachings is a crucial ambiguity that has become increasingly problematic as Buddhism has globalized. Today it's clear that this ambivalence needs to be resolved if the Buddhist tradition is to help us address most effectively the challenges that now confront us.

In early Buddhism the “end of suffering” is nirvana, literally “blown out” or “cooled off.” Yet it's not clear what that metaphor means, because the Buddha described nirvana mostly with negatives (the end of craving, ignorance, etc.) and other metaphors (the Shelter, Harbor, Refuge, etc.). His reticence leaves the important question whether nirvana refers to something that transcends this world -- some other dimension or reality -- or whether it describes an experience that is immanent in this world -- a state of being that could perhaps be understood more psychologically, as the end of greed, ill will and delusion in our lives right here and now.

Theravada Buddhism, which bases itself on what it believes to be the original teachings of the Buddha, understands nirvana as an Unconditioned realm that transcends samsara, this world of suffering, craving and ignorance. The ultimate goal is to escape the unsatisfactory world we now live in, by avoiding rebirth into samsara.

Whether or not the duality between this world and some otherworldly goal accurately reflects the original views of the historical Buddha, it is similar to what is found in most of the other spiritual traditions that developed around the same time, during the Axial Age (roughly 800-200 B.C.E.) that gave rise to Vedanta, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Judaism, as well as Pre-Socratic Greek philosophy and Platonism.

The Axial worldview was quite different from that of older empires such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, which believed that the gods related to humanity mainly through a king or emperor at the top of the social pyramid. The authority of such rulers was as much sacred as secular, because they were the only ones directly in touch with the divine realms. The Axial revolution brought about a new relationship between the transcendent and each individual. In fact, this relationship created the individual. Instead of connecting to the divine through a priest-king, now everyone has his or her own personal relationship with God, Brahman, or the Tao. In Buddhist terms, each of us has the possibility of awakening and attaining nirvana. This also implied a circle of empathy and compassion that incorporated everyone else who has a relationship with the sacred.

The most revolutionary aspect of this new relationship was a sacred demand that we transform ourselves. It was no longer enough to fulfill one's social function by supporting the ruler's sacrosanct role: now the transcendent expected each individual to take responsibility for his or her own life. In the Abrahamic traditions this was mainly an ethical requirement that we live according to God's commandments. To risk a further generalization, the emphasis in India was more on liberation from this world of maya, usually translated as illusion. To awaken is to realize the really Real, which is something other than its appearances.

“Give me a place to stand and I shall move the Earth,” Archimedes said. Culturally, that leverage has been provided by (our belief in) transcendence, which offered the reflective distance - the alternative perspective - necessary to evaluate and try to improve oneself. To paraphrase something Renan wrote, the transcendent is the way that the ideal has made its appearance in human history. The world

we live in today - including our concern for democracy, human rights and social justice - became possible because of that “other world.” Nevertheless, such cosmological dualism has also been problematic. It became a split within us, between the “higher” part (the soul, rationality) that yearns for escape from this vale of sorrow and the “lower” part that is of the earth (physical bodies and emotions). As the Buddha emphasized, this world is a place of suffering and death. Much of the attraction of the Axial religions, including Buddhism, is that they seem to offer an escape from mortality. Dread of death also explains our degradation of the material world, nature, animals, our bodies, sex and women (who remind us that we are conceived and born like other mammals). We don’t want to perish: We want to be immortal souls that can qualify for heaven! Or no-selves that might attain nirvana. All the Axial spiritual traditions were or became patriarchal: the hierarchy between higher and lower worlds became reproduced in the hierarchy of men over women.

The problem with those approaches today, of course, is that science has not discovered anything that supports such cosmological dualisms, which may have outlived their role.

Largely in reaction, a this-worldly alternative has become widespread in contemporary Buddhism: understanding the path as a program of psychological development to help us deal with personal problems, especially one’s “monkey mind” and afflictive emotions. The aim is to gain insight into how our minds work, in order to make our lives less stressful.

Although this is a beneficial development in many ways, what we might call the “psychologization” of Buddhism tends to de-emphasize its ethical precepts, community life and awakening itself, all of which are central aspects of Buddhism in its Asian context. This is especially true of the mindfulness

movement, which extracts one technique from a tradition that has so much more to offer, including a deeper transformative insight into one’s true nature.

Without denigrating such practices, we need to ask: Do psychological and mindfulness approaches help to develop an awakened society that pursues social and ecological justice? How do they address the challenge of growth-oriented corporations that are damaging the sustainability of life on Earth? Is Western Buddhism being commodified into a self-help and stress-reduction program that does not raise questions about consumerism and our dysfunctional economic system, but helps us adapt to them?

## Beyond Transcendence and Immanence

If transcendence encourages dis-identifying from our lives here, because focused on escaping this world, psychological appropriations of Buddhism (including the mindfulness movement) tend to accept this world as it is - to presuppose the prevalent, Western-derived worldview about who we are, what the world really is, and our role within it.

Do both miss the point? Buddhist awakening is a profoundly transformative realization that this world as we usually experience it, including the way that I usually experience myself, is neither real nor unreal, but a psychological/social/linguistic construction that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, which is what the spiritual path is about.

The most problematical aspect of this construct is the sense of myself as a being separate from the rest of the world. Because it has no substantiality or reality of its own, the sense of an “I” that feels separate from others is inherently insecure and anxious.

Awakening, from this perspective, is not an escape from this suffering world, nor a grudging acceptance of its existential and social realities, but letting-go of oneself (Dogen calls it “forgetting yourself”) and “falling into” the world, to realize one’s nonduality with it. Meditation enables this process, because we let-go of the mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, etc., that normally work together to sustain one’s sense of self.

As Nisargadatta put it:

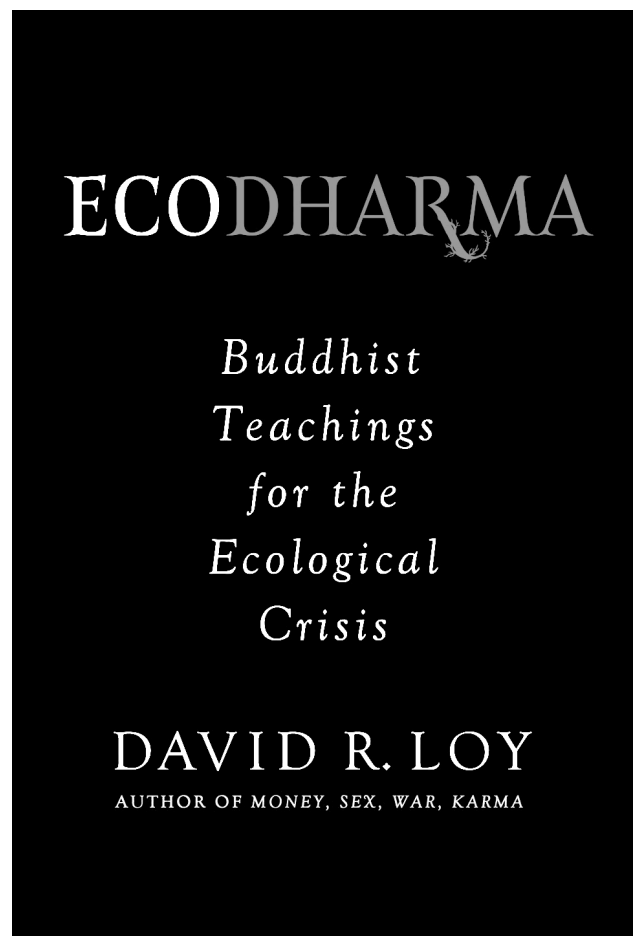
*“When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that’s wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that’s love. Between these two my life turns.”*

If there is no inside (my mind), the outside (external world) is not outside! Wisdom and compassion: the two wings of the dharma.

This way of understanding enlightenment has important implications. If awakening involves transcending this suffering world, we can ignore its problems. If the Buddhist path is psychological therapy, we can focus on our own problems. But both of those approaches reinforce the illusion - the basic problem - that I am separate from others, and therefore can be indifferent to what they are experiencing.

Then the bodhisattva path is simply a more developed stage of personal practice. One learns to live in a way that embodies what has been realized. There is no individual salvation from the ecological and social crises that confront us today. They are just as much spiritual crises, because they challenge us to wake up and realize that our own well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of others, or from the health of the whole Earth.

David Robert Loy is a professor, writer, and Zen teacher in the Sanbo Zen tradition.



(Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2019)

This landmark work is simultaneously a manifesto, a blueprint, a call to action, and a deep comfort for troubling times. David R. Loy masterfully lays out the principles and perspectives of Ecodharma—the Buddhist response to our ecological predicament, a new term for a new development of the Buddhist tradition.

This book emphasizes the three aspects of Ecodharma: practicing in the natural world, exploring the ecological implications of Buddhist teachings, and embodying that understanding in the eco-activism that is needed today.

Offering a compelling framework and practical spiritual resources, Loy outlines the Ecosattva Path, a path of liberation and salvation for all beings and the world itself.

I was an uni student when my beloved Sarajevo was besieged by heavy artillery and when shells started falling daily, tearing the place apart, its bones and flesh. At first I was in disbelief. After that I was in denial for a while. But very soon everything I was holding onto came falling down into an abyss of terror, fear, confusion and misery. During this time entire population of Bosnia and neighbouring regions was in an orgy of violence based on dichotomy of us and them. Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Muslims - all well armed bashing at each others. 14000 people died in Sarajevo alone during those years. 97000 in Bosnia.

During that time I died 97000 times - 66 times a day for 4 years. My body shrunk and my mind was leaking away down the hole where death played the game of hide and seek. It was total an assault on life. Sarajevo had no corridors to the rest of the world. In the span of two seasons food supplies dried out, power and water were cut off. My street which used to be lined with old chestnut trees was bare like a rooftop parking lot. During first winter of the siege all you could hear all day long was sound of chainsaws.

Fear was fuelling me with instinct of fighting back - Taking up the arms and going at the fringe of the city where I could do something. Shoot at the moving shadows of the other. Small part of me didn't agree and I stayed put. Not because downtown was safer and sheltered by tall buildings. Paramilitary groups were arresting citizens at random corners and taking them to labour day camps digging trenches while exposed to sniper fire and artillery.

Safety was nowhere to be found. It was during those times that seed of different thinking had landed into my mind. Thinking about how the big structures in which one is born and grows into, structures like one's nation, borders, institutions, religious identity, history, future, security etc. are nothing more than ideas kept alive by what we say to ourselves. "Security is an illusion" became my mantra. But even though I saw through the story clearly I was still paralysed by fear. And even though pale in comparison, remnants of that fear are still here, in the words I am writing right now.

Last six years of practice has transformed some of that fear. And my practice continues to transform it. I have been looking deep down in the depth of my being. Deeper I look less I find. At the same time, deeper I look more I find. There is an ambiguity. This is liberating. It is liberating because the fear is still there but now I can see my fears and I can hold them. Every time they find their way to my body I can recognise them clearly. I can hold them with understanding and compassion. I can transform them.

We chant every week:

“Form is emptiness

Emptiness is form”

Then we go on to make sure it's clear:

“Form is exactly emptiness

Emptiness exactly form”

“Everything is like this”.

I remember when I first heard the above passage from the Heart Sutra I immediately felt taken by it. At the time I didn't understand why such a seemingly ambiguous statement would command such truthfulness about it.

Roshi held the stick up in the air and said:

“If you tell me this is a stick I will give you 30 blows.

If you tell me this is not a stick I will give you 30 blows.

Tell me what is it”

Our tradition is woven with examples like this. Ambiguous statements potent with creativity. With creativity our practice brings realisation of ultimate reality beyond opposites. Notions like Inside-Outside, Centre-Periphery, Observer-Observed, Alive-Dead, Present-Absent, Here-There, Samsara-Nirvana, Suffering-Liberation constitute two-sidedness: an ambiguity. Zazen is an act of creativity bringing about transformation where upon we embody the two sides right here right now by taking the Middle Path.

With practice we realise the impermanence as a foundation of our experience. And ultimately we need to reconcile the impermanence with the life of our loved ones and with our own life. This is the true test. This requires unprecedented leap of faith which can only be achieved with true creativity of compassion.

And right here right now at this exact moment we need to embody the practice without slightest tremor of hesitation. It seems that our world is splitting in the middle, it's being pulled apart. Ignorance breathes greed and hatred. If there is even one hair of ignorance on our body, it obscures the clear light of Buddha-Dharma.

This pulling apart of the world, the destruction of biosphere is nothing else but expression of our inner darkness. Inability to see and embody the omnipresent light of Buddha-Dharma. “Each one of us Buddha, it’s only that light of truth is being obscured by ignorance”.

All neo-liberal super capitalists with greedy extraction economy machines and bottomless bottom line and all the ultra right wing trigger happy supremacists with weapons of mass destructions are not excluded from all beings. Nothing is outside of Dharma. Outside of Dharma is an illusion.

In the Great Vows we chant:

*The many beings are numberless* (Being can not be defined by number or by concept - it is encountered continuously)

*I vow to save them* (the way to hold the numberless beings is by opening one’s heartmind and keeping it open - growing it bigger and wider in all directions so there is room for everyone including mountains, rivers and stars)

*Greed, hatred and ignorance rise endlessly* (three poisons rise from the beginning-less past and they continue to rise with no end)

*I vow to abandon them* (there shouldn’t be any desire not to see them, there shouldn’t be any aversion when seen and we shouldn’t ignore it. To abandon something that is everywhere is not to close our eyes but to open our eyes and see it without end, see it everywhere, look at it endlessly and shine the torch of wisdom over it continuously without end.)

*Dharma gates are countless* (stop counting the grains of salt in the oceans.)

*I vow to wake to them* (to wake up to each one in the countless vastness is to wake up to this very moment which is the truth of Dharma. Becoming this moment, becoming the truth of Dharma. Becoming becoming becoming moment by moment by moment - the way to do this is to be in the present)

*The Buddha way is unsurpassed* (When the light of Buddha-Dharma shines without obstructions there is no elsewhere. With practice we have arrived on the path. This is it - this is the middle. It can’t be surpassed.)

*I vow to embody it fully* (scientifically investigated human body has 37,200.000.000.000 cells - give or take. Light each one of them with the light of Buddha-Dharma and there will be no place for darkness to dwell. I vow to bring this light into the biosphere.

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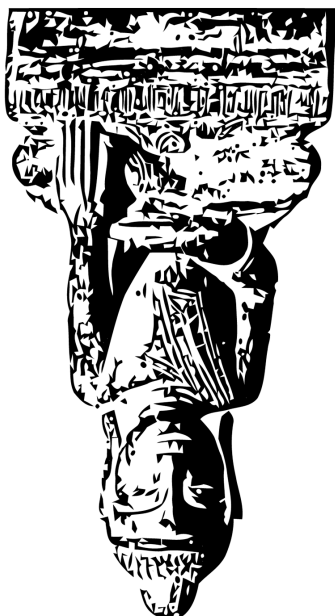
*Heaven or hell, love or hate*  
*No matter where I turn I meet myself*  
*Holding life precious is*  
*Just living with all intensity*  
*Holding life precious.*

*Kosho Uchiyama Roshi*  
*(1912-1998)*

*Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice.*

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