

Mind Moon Circle

Journal of the Sydney Zen Centre

WINTER 2021



Winter

Winter 2021

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Editor: Zoe Thurner

Thank you to all the contributors in this edition for your generosity and inspiration, Zoe

The next issue of Mind Moon Circle will be edited by Helen Sanderson on the theme
Equanimity.

*“Sorrow tarries for the night but joy comes in the morning.
Sorrow, joy, hope and equanimity.”*

Please send your contributions in Word format to: helen.sanderson@me.com

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June, July, August

Brendon Stewart

*And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look
Behind, from where we came
And go round and round and round, in the circle game.*

Joni Mitchell

It's winter now in the southern hemisphere.

Our winters are delightful. They never depress me as I remember winters gone in the UK. Autumn lingers here, long into the shortening days and roses seem to 'think' their flowers are everlasting. It seems only to be gardening convention that sets off the tasks of pruning, separating corms and cutting back. Spider's webs glisten and dance; they have been there all along through the summer months but now the sun comes across the garden at such an angle and the night time dew takes longer to fade and so they shimmer, slung between the branches of shrubs and on to the clothes line.

For Depth Psychologist winter is the most apposite metaphor to set and play out our imaginative soul theatre; the dark winter of our discontent as Shakespeare would have it. It's a bit troublesome here however because Sydney winters are never really dark or for that matter really cold. So how does winter frolic with our imagination in this great South Land?

In our garden there is a dance each day for a few weeks when the cumquat tree, heavily laden with ripening fruit is subject to invasion by sulphur crested cockatoos. The birds come in squadrons, powerful, bold and horrendously destructive. The fruit is ripped away leaf and stem either with their massive beaks or their nifty claws and then delicately each bird extracts the seeds, somehow holds them all and meticulously extracts the kernel. Our part in this amusing winter travesty is to launch a broom wielding counter attack aided with a chorus of shouts; *get lost you stupid cockatoos* and dog Joey barking and bouncing around at ground level. It continues day in day out to be a fruitful give-and-take. I sweep up great piles of leaves, fruit and seed-pods, the Cockatoos are well medicated with Vitamin C and Joey gets to be a guard dog.



Cockatoo delight, Cumquat japonica painting by Brendon Stewart

Riffing on Basho I pen:

When the winter cumquats go,
There's nothing to write about
But camellias.

Lets speak to the Camellia, that large group of evergreen shrubs that flower throughout winter. Mostly these are *Camellia japonica* and our garden has a great number, some date back maybe 100 years. As the days draw in, (a lovely wintery image isn't it – days drawing in; into what?) our old camellia takes on a scarlet pink guise, the tough, dark green leaves fall back and these big platter like flowers cover the tree from its tip to the ground. And then, astonishingly they fall one by one creating this joyful pink skirt that lies on the lawn for weeks. We don't have snow fall in a Sydney winter, we have camellia fall.



Winter blossoms; Camellia japonica painting by Brendon Stewart

My ancestral poetry and art celebrates the year by way of the four seasons, (Vivaldi, Poussin et al) picturing and telling how they each develop and mature and show off their variations in colour, flavour and mood. Of course many other peoples around the world think of these seasonal changes quite differently and name the variations, colour, flavour and moods accordingly. We could learn from that! Our indigenous brothers and sisters observe the position of the stars in the sky and follow water, plant and animal cycles as ways of identifying seasonal phenomena. Wikipedia names these six seasons, (I'll go with them just now): *Birak* (December - January), *Bunuru* (February - March), *Djeran* (April - May), *Makuru* (June - July), *Djilba* (August - September) and *Kambarang* (October - November).

This particular 2021 has certainly been a contrary winter. An Anthropocene bleakness of sorts pervades as we find ourselves captive on the carousel of pandemic and ecological time. Here we go on another round of lockdown, delayed roll out, contact tracing teams, mask madness; and across the northern hemisphere the Canadian arctic is on fire. The contrariness extends through the tangle of opinions shared willy-nilly. Once we have made our opinion known to others, to our selves we become doggedly reluctant to change course: vaccine hesitancy, vaccine denial, medical advice, returning citizens, climate and weather confusion, the economy, diversity, religious freedom of speech and political expediency all give Fox News and the 7.30 Report opportunity to share in the same reluctance to be open with uncertainty. Sometimes I think we confuse, or more often conflate our dogged reluctance with the superficially noble idea of remaining consistent.

Most opinions are settled on through nothing better than snap judgement or instincts. Our internal "press secretary" – a mental stay safe convinces us of our own infallibility. Most of us appear to be born with a "self-righteousness gene" – an inherent need to be right.

Conspiracy theories abound founded on self-righteous opinion. Even if we pride ourselves on being independently minded we can still fall prey to cognitive biases, an overconfidence in our own decision-making skills. Even highly intelligent people (he says with self-assurance) are susceptible to believing highly irrational ideas.

Maybe it's the independence of mind that tricks us up: a rational mind, a clear mind, knowing my own mind, minding my own business, keeping in mind; all good working ideas when it comes to believing in certainty. Getting back to normal, or still better finding a new normal.

This is were one might jump in with a Zen teaching using someone like Zen master Shunryu Suzuki who, when asked to sum up all Buddhist teaching on certainty offered this simple phrase: "Not always so."

That's cute. But more and more as I tumble along with my life I think everyone can see that we each participates in the constant cycles of life's change and renewal, seasons of grief and suffering, as well as seasons of joy, celebrating life's renewed marvels and beauty. Each of us can grasp at feelings and experiences and try to keep them close for a little time. And at the same time, deep down we know there is a season and time for every purpose under heaven.

Our Sydney winter this year has taken on a particularly exquisite quality forced upon us by the great turn of events world-wide. *The lockdown we were never going to have: not in the gold standard state* (words of sorts by Premier Gladys Berejiklian) coincides with the deep cold weeks of July and hibernation becomes normal. Lets celebrate hibernation as something far more soulful than lockdown. The virus (wild nature) again has proved itself the great leveller.

Reference: A verse from Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game", 1967

Winter

What to say?

What to do?

Brrrrr

Here's a jumper

Inner Glow

down by the creek
kindling gathered
some branches,
four fat logs;
paper scrunched
sticks on top

rasping match
fwoosh
flames jump up

hands outstretched
ruddy face
clear, bright stars

Sue Bidwell

A Winter Sesshin in Darwin

Jill Steverson

I have been lucky enough to be in Darwin, the beautiful land of the Larrakia people, for the last 2 months, June and July, thereby missing the Sydney winter and long lockdown. Of course, Territorians don't use the word Winter up here, just The Dry. I wondered what the definition was and if I could write about my recent 'winter' sesshin experience up here.

From Wikipedia:

Winter is the coldest season of the year (oh good, yes I can write something)

... in polar and temperate zones; it does not occur in most of the tropical zone.

(Oh maybe I can't write it?)

It occurs after autumn and before spring in each year

(perhaps irrelevant terms in Australia, where we can use the seasons of the Aboriginal people of the Country we are on. There are 7 seasons here, July being the season of the heavy dew, Dinidjanggama)

Winter is caused by the axis of the Earth in that hemisphere being oriented away from the Sun. (Darwin is still subject to the orientation of the earth, so I will write my piece!)

So... how lucky was I, arriving in Darwin and a sesshin scheduled in July, the cool, the dry, the winter, the Dinidjanggama. My first tropical sesshin. I received many stern warnings about how cold it was going to be in the mornings, told that even experienced hiker types get it wrong and freeze. The forecast showed a minimum of 16°C and top of 36°C, so I was a bit mystified but dutifully packed the equivalent of cold weather gear needed at Gorricks.

The venue was Ryala, a Christian centre and wildlife sanctuary 40 minutes south of Darwin, open for retreats from all religions provided they left any icons at home, thus the ceramic Quan Yin was left back at the Buddhist Temple. Nine fleshy Quan Yin's come as participants. The centre was irrigated by bore water, creating a green and lush haven for birds and wildlife in the middle of dry open woodlands. The accommodation was camping or dorms in the long steel container accommodation so common in the outback.

It was excellent to bring forth my beginners mind to practise with a new group, a new teacher at a new place and what a joy it turned out to be. We settled into the familiar forms of sesshin, serenaded by hundreds of noisy and vivacious tropical birds during the day. Bar shouldered doves, fig birds, spangled drongos and honeyeaters were a few of those sharing the Way. At dusk and during the night we sat at one with the mournful cries of the big eyed stone curlews and bizarre loud yelping warbles of the orange footed scrub fowl or Wurrkurrki, this name far surpassing the rather degrading scrub fowl name for this splendid strutting equivalent to the southern brush-turkey.

Northern brush tailed possums announced their importance after dusk by crashing down from sleeping holes onto the tin roof, racing back and forth to ensure they had woken any sleepy bodhisattva on their cushion. Bats squabbled constantly and geckos chirped warning of territorial boundaries. A frog hotel by the laundry was constructed of thick black plastic pipes stuck in a bucket of water. During the day it was all quiet with seemingly empty pipes but after dusk and during the 18°C nights the hotel became very busy with Green Tree Frogs coming out of their chosen pipe to survey the scene for insects or a mate and a tiny Roth frog lived in the overflow hole in one of the hand basins, peeping out at intervals.

Our teacher, Justine Mayer, has a small and strong sangha, the Darwin Zen Group. With all our Diamond Sangha teachers, she affirmed my faith in the transmission of the Dharma; reminding me that koans are 'dark to the mind and radiant to the heart'. Walking the Way with sincerity benefits all.

It was a vegan week. Ramakrishna, a fellow student and lunch cook, served up delicious bean and dhal dishes that meant I never thought of dairy for a week, quite an insight that it needed so little adjustment.

So the tropical days and nights passed with such peace and pleasure, only tested by afternoons developing a punishing 36C heat in the tin-roofed open Dojo, with the whirring clacking of ceiling fans trying to abate the relentless heat, bottles of water at each mat and trudging kinhin. By 4pm we were revived by walking out into the open woodlands, filled with magical tropical dry bushland: pandanus, palms and grasses and the occasional sandy coloured wallaby bouncing across the track. Gorrick's had my heart but new beauty woke me again.

As for 'winter' after a week of silence, the first topic of conversation during the post sesshin swim at Berry (hot) Springs was... It was SO cold on the first two mornings... Yes wasn't it SO cold!



*Twirling, sharp
Green whorls burst forth
Ouch!*

*In May, I led a silent mindful meditative walk for Bushwalking Club members,
to reflect on events of the previous year.*

The Teaching Wind

Diana Levy

Mt. Wilson
blew my hat into my face
where am I?
where next step?
a swamp on the right with sedges,
next step, next step,
my sweat cooling off
beneath the layers -
now comes rain that would be snow
clouds scud across a forever sky

and sudden sunshine.
A sunbeam illuminates
half a hand stencil in the shelter,
very old and broken away:
somebody placed their hand just so
stillness in the act of holding it there
while the mouth blows ochre,
stillness as we all look.
Wondering.

The teaching wind
with its strong sense of
where it's going - the east -
makes us sit
for our bushwalkers' morning tea
behind curvaceous shelter,
sandstone moulded by aeons of wind:
we face the mountain
look down upon the camping ground
meditate awhile -
facing east
where each new day rises.

Each moment new.
and when that moment was tragic
a bushwalker had fallen

and later died
when tears are shed for him
beside the gurgling creek
the teaching wind parts the clouds
sunshine drapes
the circle of listening bushwalkers -
and all is included,
past, present, future,
pleasant, difficult.

Then the teaching wind
slams us silent with a sleety hand
we trudge back up the hill
through burnt dead black,
a brief rainbow above the autumn-
toned
waving sea of sedge,
a pack cover is blown off
never to be seen again
and we, like the ochre-blowers,
seek shelter,
sit under the stencil
to eat our bushwalkers' lunch
in silence
look at the burnt trunks
of the camping ground again,
no fire
but steam rises from the pouring
thermos.

And then its pleasant again,
a cheese sandwich,
some chocolate to share,
a group of people who respect silence.
The teaching wind - no bad fortune,
no good fortune,
take the next step.



Photo: Diana Levy



Winter Street Helen Sanderson

A Season for Solitude

Helen Sanderson

It is winter here in pandemic city. Human migration now forbidden. Stay home. Isolate. Hunker down. Hunker in. Draw in on your self. Let yourself, whatever that is, be enough. Outside in the great ocean on the Eastern edge of this city, the annual migration of whales is taking place from Antarctica to the warmer waters of Queensland to rest and play and nurture their young. They travel along the coast oblivious to the distress of the human mammals in the great Sydney metropolis. Breeching and spouting, as they travel and call to each other.

And in some wetlands, swamps or mudflats, birds that have flown thousands of miles from northern Europe or Asia dig for worms; their digging beaks poking in the mud or sand.

But we in this city, must only make small journeys, a walk around the block with the dog, who stops to sniff each tree, without fail. We should avoid neighbourly chat like the most socially phobic being. But the dog wags at each dog it meets and sniffs at its hindquarters in a most intimate manner. We must be different. Virtue has a new definition. And it wears a mask.

A meditative kinhin in the garden is permitted, greeting each plant, bowing perhaps. Even in July, a rose flowers crimson on a wall in my garden still draws in bees, and geranium's flame. The spinach and peas are slow to progress waiting for lengthening days. It is past the shortest day, winter solstice. I hear a butcherbird and magpie warble in nearby trees. Come here I silently request looking for any company including winged, but they prefer their own kind.

Some trees are leafless, the persimmon elegant in its bare state, and the magnolia budding sparsely, a promise of spring. Their leaf fall has become earth.

Two years ago I was in the desert, camped out snug in a swag, which iced overnight, while stars blazed across the sky revealing Dark Emu to me as I lay, and a crescent moon.

And years before I was with my husband in Orkney, that island north of the most northerly point of Scotland. We visited an ancient burial mound containing the bones of the ancestors. For one hour at winter solstice, the sun shines on those bones, the astronomers and mathematicians of thousands of years ago.

The earth rotates on her axis and the days lengthen, edging towards spring. This winter in pandemic city is slow time, still time, time to stop like the sap in the wintering trees. Hibernation and resting time. A season for solitude while waiting for the rising of our sap, we wait to turn towards each other.



Winter Suburban Moon Janet Selby

Winter at Kodoji's Mirror Hall

Subhana Barzaghi

A wonderful yet challenging dharma practice emerges from gazing into a mirror. There are ancient Japanese Zen roots for this clear-eye seeing practice that were called Mirror Zen. While a confronting reflective practice, strong insights can arise from several contemplative exercises that I have developed while gazing into a mirror. The first task is to see what is actually present, to look through the eyes as if you were a scientist, to see the plain, ordinary, personal descriptive features of ones face without embellishment or derision. This is the practice of seeing things as they are. The second task is to see your reflection through the eyes of a poet, the third task is to see yourself through the eyes of a lover and the fourth task is to ask some profound and existential questions. Who am I really? Who's looking? What is your original face?

The mirror in the soft light of morning is where I frequently wonder who is this aging woman, especially after turning 65. I see wrinkles and sags that were not there before. I wince. How should I meet my reflection? I notice an urge that wants to peel away the image from the mirror and advert my gaze. Sadly, for most of us, when we look in the mirror in the morning our minds are full of judgement or aversion, 'I don't like this bit, I don't like that bit'. We see eyelids that sag and notice all the parts that we don't like about ourselves.

The first thing I notice in that perfunctory gaze is the layers of thin wrinkle lines down the cheeks and under my slightly puffy morning eyes and the neat smile lines around my soft fleshy lips. The artist in me could have easily drawn my portrait with lots of soft light pencil strokes. The delicate fine down along the side of the face reminds me of fluffy ducklings, although I am not that chick any more. The more I examine the image in the mirror, the stranger I seem. What creature is this? When I tilt my head, I look like my mother, but the auburn wavy streaked with grey hair is more from my father's side of the family. Mum was a stunning blonde haired beauty and the twins had blond curly locks. I always felt like the outsider. Yet, I find myself gazing into a genetic library; my hazel almond eyes must go a long way back through the generations. I see my ancestors encoded into those 42 individual facial muscles, imaging them laughing, moving, frowning and smiling back at me.

Seeing with the eyes of a scientist frees me from judgment. Just seeing the bare facts; light tan colour skin, oval shape face, my nose is vertical and my eyes are horizontal. It is a sobering observation, no fuss, no wincing, nothing special.

Age becomes a curious sometimes, frowning question. How old am I really? There is the linear time-centred biological age that becomes deterministic if one over identifies with such measurements. There is the emotional-centred age; how old I feel, which is a variable that doesn't always marry up to the image in the mirror or seems to depend on how well I slept last night. How I feel about my age sometimes depends on the social shadow that is cast in the kitchen theatre of life. Culturally older women become more invisible and undesirable. Have I faded from the visible, the youthful table of attraction to the invisible older undesirable heap? Unlike indigenous cultures we are not a society that esteems its elders, particularly with our ageist views. There is the social face of age, the hegemony of cultural beliefs of what a society portrays and tells us about how one should behave, the dress code at, 20, 40,

60 or 90. Fairy dresses, spotted tights and wings are only reserved for 4-year-olds, so I am told. What would happen if grandma wore a fairy gown, she has her reasons for those wings too! A rebellious voice in me says you are not going to clip my wings.

Sitting on my zafu, my heart-mind meets the jewelled net of Indra and opens: I am the age of the black pottery mug on my altar, the age of the angophora gum's seed pod bursting forth, the age of the coolness of the limestone tiles underfoot, the age of the soft morning light streaming inside. Indra's net also casts me out into a meadow of unspeakable grief for the burning of the Amazon, the 63 million refugees fleeing violence and the horrors of war, the billion species that died following the devastating bush fires of 2019. Each node on the web reflects the dark and the light, the trauma, the climate catastrophe and the joy of loving friendship. The timeless is expressed in this treasured, singular moment. All of this, the universe of falling flowers and new foals on wobble legs sit in the cradle of our original face, the ageless, timeless dimension of no age at all. I give a sigh of relief and a deep bow for the ancient mirror of practice that recognises, 'no age' at all. I bow to the liberating force of the Dharma.

As we walk the labyrinthine path between birth and death, we face many physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual challenges. Buddhist teachings focus on practices that liberate and heal the suffering and dissatisfaction woven into the fabric of our lives. These teachings are profound in the sense that they offer us a way to meet the challenges of sickness, old age and eventually death with calmness and serenity. Zen practice fosters deep acceptance and peace with life itself and promotes a wise compassionate response to our own departure.

I call up the poet and lover in me to take a different look at the image in the mirror. A middle-aged woman standing there naked and vulnerable. This familiar face has glanced over the same hand held pewter mirror for three decades now. There are so many daily different pictures of myself in the mirror, easily recognizable but which one is the true one? Derek Walcott in his poem, 'Love after Love', invites us to know the stranger that (is you yourself) 'that has loved you all your life', such a beautiful mighty task.

Mirror

I picked up an aged pewter,
pre-loved hand mirror
from the shelves of Vinnies,
it lies poised on the orange silk toile
draped over the dressing table.

I prefer to think that the mirror insists
I pick her up every day,
in the guise of our morning grooming ritual.
Of course it is easy to blame her.
"Look presentable, make sure your lipstick is not skewed,"
she whispers in her sociable well meaning voice.

I'm curious as to why I flinch
in front of the mirror

yet long to see my own reflection?
The dance of rejection and acceptance
flashes past the eyelids of morning.

I remember the whimsical child's game
of blowing the dandelion seeds,
with each guessing breath,
'he loves me, he loves me not'.
Ah! the held breath.... the agony of 'not'.

I practice looking at myself
through the eyes of a lover,
moist eyes.....soft smile
whole heartedly melting in a honey gaze.

I practice holding an equanimous gaze,
seen, unseen, who sees who, I wonder?
Seer and seen fall into sameness.

I am reminded of the Buddha's instructions to Bahiya,
In the seeing there is just the seeing,
then there is no you, 'with that' or 'in that',
you will be neither here nor beyond,
nor in between the two.
Just this is the end of suffering.

Subhana

Intimate relationships have come and gone, ex-lovers died, a soul mate found, loved and then departed leaving me broken hearted, wailing in grief and wondering. Just as the phoenix rises out of the ashes, I learned to 'stand in love' as Ervin Yalom the great psychiatrist advocated rather than 'fall in love'. If we fall in love we can fall out of love. I learned to love life's fierce grace, the hand that gives and the hand that takes away is not separate from my own nature. I have found the courage and integrity to keep my trembling heart open no matter what. Tears moisten my cheeks looking back on the journey of my own innocent, sometimes glassy eyed, yet well-meaning youthful folly that gradually grew out of the ashes into a wise strong heart, a woman with wings. That loving gaze softened the edges and I can now look at myself with a new tenderness.

And did you get what
You wanted from this life, even so?
I did. And what did you want?
To call myself beloved,
to feel myself beloved on the earth.

Ramon Carver

The art of sacred perception

Frederick Franck was an artist and Zen practitioner who designed creative drawing exercises to help students see clearly without all the filters and coloured glasses that affect the way we perceive the landscape and our world.

“We do a lot of looking: we look through lenses, telescopes, television tubes. Our looking is perfected every day – but we see less and less. Never has it been more urgent to speak of seeing...we are onlookers, spectators... “subjects” we are, that look at “objects.” Quickly we stick labels on all that is. Labels that stick once and for all. By these labels we recognise everything but no longer see anything”.

The Zen of Seeing – Frederick Franck

If we wish to experience life more intimately we need to train ourselves to see through or behind the appearance of things. We can cultivate an awareness of the stream of our own thinking which colours everything in the sensory domain. The true art of meditation is to see things as they are not how we would like them to be, or how we expect them to be or how we are socially conditioned to see each other.

Perception is apprehending and cognising the texture and tone of our environment. Perception is the label we give things for e.g. tree, book, desk, bell or flower. After a while we only see the label and not the actuality of the bell or tree. The problem begins when we add on to the label judgements about what we like or don't like. We see what we want to see, not what is actually before our eyes. We dress it up or dress it down and thus create our encrusted views. We gather associations and interpretations about the way someone looks, how they dress, the way they speak or walk. We so easily judge others by the appearance of things.

The visual sense door is one of our most powerful sense doors that help us navigate our way through the labyrinth of the world of form, we avoid bumping into the furniture of a life. Our eyes are such precious windows, our conditioning invents its own rose coloured or dark glass of perception, they bring a rainbow of colour to our interactions. Having my eyelids softly closed in meditation was incredibly beneficial in those early years as it naturally cut off the distractions of the visual field that drew me into the world. Eyes closed meditation allowed me to witness the movie of the mind within ones inner landscape and enter into deep blissful absorption states of mind. But when I opened my eyes, I was suddenly thrown back into the subject/object world, the dualistic world of the seer and the seen.

The visual sense door is particularly potent for me I think this is true for most artistically inclined folk. I think more in pictures than the crafted word. I am so easily seduced by the bright world of colour and form. I constantly fall in love with the aesthetics of things; and drool over a romantic French provincial bedroom with its layered linens, feel elegant in my fine silk blue blouse, or dreamily follow the dusty pink twisted branches of an angophora tree or etch the wavy line of treetops their bright new shiny leaves lapping at the endless space above. After many years practicing meditation with my eyes closed, I decided to try eye open meditation. My visual sense door needed some purification.

Sacred perception is the art of seeing clearing free of judgement. While we do have one-third open-eyed meditation in the Zen tradition, however the focus is usually on

the breath or silent illumination practice, whole body sitting or a Koan. The practice of sacred perception is to focus on ‘seeing’ itself. When we look at the world, the elements of colour, light shape and form is what actually hits the eye. Mid way into a retreat, through the purification of zazen people’s eyes get brighter and clearer. The orange of a carrot is so orange, the grass is vivid and shining in the dew soaked morning. As great master Chao Chou, asserts we can rest in the great way that is not difficult, it simply avoids picking and choosing.

The art of seeing clearly is an important practice for artists, writers and Zen practitioners. The fruits of meditation culminate in a wise vision, the ability to see things clearly as they are, to see into the suchness of things which is called the *Tathagatha*, an honorific title given to the Buddha, the one who is awake. The most generally adopted interpretation is, one who has thus (*tatha*) gone (*gata*) or one who has thus (*tatha*) arrived (*agata*).

Now what shall we call this new form of gazing-house
That has opened in our town where people sit
Quietly and pour out their glancing
Like light, like answering?

Rumi

Being Seen

For it is not just seeing that is important but the flip side of, ‘being seen’ that is so vital. To be seen and accepted for who you are is so primary for your well being. If you sift back through the awkward growing years, the moments that you were fully seen and accepted, probably is rare. It’s amazing how so many of us have such few memories of being truly seen by our parents, friends or partners. In fact, most of us would have recollections where we felt distinctly unseen, unaccepted or shamed and even ridiculed for being who we were as children and adults. The few experiences that we do remember are potent and unforgettable. How important it is to bring mindfulness to the healing power and presence of seeing your children at least in some moments beyond the expectations for them, beyond your fears and hopes of what you want for them. “These moments can be fleeting but if known and embraced, they are deep soul nourishment, an oxygen line of loving-kindness straight into the heart of the other.” (p.199 Jon Kabat-Zin).

Seeing and being seen complete a mysterious circuit of reciprocity, a reciprocity of presence that Thich Nhat Hahn calls, “interbeing”. That presence holds us and reassures us and lets us know that our inclination to be who we actually are and to show ourselves in our fullness is a healthy impulse. Our core sovereignty-of-being has been embraced.

When we see each other as we are and not stay stuck in how we desire our loved ones to be or not be, our vision becomes tranquil, soft and peaceful even healing. It’s like the veils before the eyes have been stripped away and our friend feels this instantly. It is felt, it is known, it touches the heart and it feels so good. When there is just seeing and being seen then an ‘I-thou’ relationship is held in the net of loving presence. The philosopher Martin Buber defined an ‘I-It’ relationship as a person who views the other as an object to fulfil his or her needs. On the other hand an ‘I-Thou’

relationship involves a person who acknowledges the “whole” in the other person and views his or her partnership as relational rather than experiential.

Ah, not to be cut off
Not through the slightest partition
Shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner – what is it?
If not intensified sky,
Hurled through with birds and deep
With the winds of homecoming.

R. M. Rilke

Shido's Mirror

Some of the fierce warrior women of Zen in particular Kakuzan Shido have inspired me and generations of female practitioners. Shido grew up in Kamakura in 1252-1306 in the Takugawa medieval period of Japan. She studied with her teacher Wu-hsueh at Engakuji Monastery and became the abbess of Tokeiji Temple. There are some amusing stories about Shido's bravery and fierce spirit that was true to her training and Samuari family background.

Sally Tisdale writes in “Women of the Way”, a celebration of enlightened women down the generations, that Shido carried a sword in her robes as women in Samurai families did and was a rather expert thief. At that time there was a great mirror, six feet in diameter installed in the Shinto shrine of Hachiman the ancient Shinto God - kami of war, divination and culture. During one of the battles between the clansmen when they were preoccupied with fighting one another, Shido fearlessly managed to sneak into Hachiman Shrine and steal the great mirror. She had it installed in Tokeiji in its new home the Mirror Hall.

Apparently she would meditate in front of the mirror in the Mirror Hall as a daily practice, in order to see into her own nature. Even though she had done years of zazen, had been given Inka, (acknowledgment of realisation) and had a depth of understanding and clarity to the very bottom, however in front of the mirror her mind kept flitting and moving away like a butterfly in the garden. She practiced zazen in front of the mirror by trying to keep her own eyes perfectly still. What did she see, perhaps everything ... nothing? She would have known how to hold herself still, upright and concentrated but apparently in front of the mirror it was difficult. Gradually she was able to see through the reflection, the face, the eyes, to see the empty fullness of life. The mirror mind was clear, clear as water, clear like the vast sky. No dust could alight. Shido wrote this poem to express her realisation. (*Women of the Way* pp. 223 & 224)

If the mind never rests on a single thing,
Nothing can be clouded.
No need to speak of polishing.

For many years the nuns at Tokeiji followed this practice and sat in meditation in front of mirrors at least once a day. The practice was called Tokeiji mirror Zen.

Eventually that great mirror disappeared during another clan battle but was replaced with another mirror and then another. Runkai who was Shido's successor at Tokeiji wrote her poem of wisdom.

Many the reflections
But the surface is clean.
It has always been free of clouds
This mirror.

Later generations of nuns would practice zazen in front of the mirror, concentrating on the question, "Where is a single feeling, a single thought, in the mirror image at which I gaze?" Each abbess of Tokeiji wrote a verse in response to the mirror practice. The fifth abbess, Princess Yodo composed the following verse:

Heart unclouded, heart clouded,
Standing or falling,
it is still the same body.

Zen practice is one of polishing the mirror mind of samadhi, a still, focused calm and clear mind. This mirror mind is the foundation for wisdom that reflects everything just as it is. True freedom comes when seer and seen (subject/ object world of duality) fall away into just seeing then only utter amazement remains.

I had often wondered why Shido's mind waivered in front of the mirror even though she had deep insight. A dear friend, psychologist, lecturer and wise zen teacher, Dr. Jeff Ward, gave a presentation on the origins of the self in a module of the Australian Association of Buddhist Counsellors and Psychotherapists' professional training course. Jeff showed a short 5-minute video of a one-week old baby mimicking its mother in an experiment. The mother was poking out her tongue three times. The baby watching her mother eventually found her tongue and managed to poke it out three times.

We are born with a whole set of mirror neurons that are fundamental for our development as a human being. The mirror neuron system is a group of specialized neurons in the brain that "mirrors" the actions and behaviour of others. The involvement of the mirror neuron system (MNS) is implicated in neurocognitive functions of social cognition, language, empathy and theory of mind. When parents attune to their infants they can learn the cues of connection and emotional expression. French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan asserts that it is because of these mirror neurons why the baby can mimic her mother. We are constantly being shaped by one another and reflecting each other in this intricate neural network of inter-connection.

Further experiments reveal that when you put an 18-month-old toddler in front of a mirror the toddler will recognise their reflection, 'yep that is me all right'. We don't have that recognition before that. We have a symbiotic oneness with mother or caregiver. It is an important step in our psychological development to recognise the image of ourselves as separate from other. A healthy sense of our self is central to our mental health and well-being. We need the first person perspective and agency over the functions of our body and mind. For healthy development we need a sense of continuity, a cohesive narrative, a sense of being embodied. Maurice Merleau-Ponty the French phenomenological philosopher understood the 'self' as embodied

subjectivity. He believed the physical body to be an important part of what makes up the subjective self. More importantly in that same experiment of the toddler at the mirror stage, past the initial moment of jubilation of recognition comes a sense of alienation of the self. This is considered to be our first feeling of alienation and separateness. Merleau-Ponty emphasised that alienation involved the splitting of the self and how we become captured by the image and reflection of ourselves.

The reason why I took this detour into the early childhood development of the sense of self and the fascination with mirror neurons is because it seems to indicate why Shido was unsettled initially looking into the mirror. Perhaps it has something to do with being caught by our image and how that is our earliest source of alienation and separateness. My belief is that her mirror practice was transforming something subtle and deep within her and integrating that first sense of alienation and separation.

The Mirror Hall of Kodoji

Having been inspired by Shido's mirror practice and the generations of women who practiced the art of clear seeing, I decided to do zazen taking my reflection as the object of attention. It was in a winter study retreat called, 'Painting the Sky', with Patrick Kearney in June 2010 at Kodo-ji - Temple of the Ancient Ground where Maggie and I took up this practice.

Winter at Kodoji has its bare beauty of a landscape without clothes. The clear starry night falls down around our camp in forgotten valley, sending us off to bed and tucking us in for the night. I had rustled up some nerve to sleep in a tent when the temperature plummeted to 5 degrees below in the icy paddock. Hot water bottles and thermals that hugged every inch of skin got me through the long dark nights. The day was first marked by the crackling sound of ice as I zipped open the tent to walk across the frozen grass to the dojo that crunched underfoot. A figure in the half-light bends down as if in prayer position to prepare the fire that we would later huddle around in veneration. The metal teakettle bubbled with fresh Genmaicha. The fragrance of fine green tea and roasted brown rice wafts out of the kitchen.

The mist like a graceful Tai chi master climbs the mountain and then breathes out down the cliff's sheer rocky face, the mountain now appearing, now disappearing under a blanket of white. I felt like I was living in a Chinese ink painting of a floating world, tip-toeing on top of a cloud. The mist rising up from the cold paddock to meet the first rays of warm light that streams over the eastern ridge melting every shinny wet thing it touches. The dawn bell ringing through the valley calling us to zazen. The cranked up wood fired heater pinging and hissing offering some cosy comfort. By day Maggie and I thawed out and we perched ourselves on the veranda with our backs to the warm sun softening, tight, stiff muscles. We faced the dojo's large sliding glass doors that ran along both the north facing and south side of the generous wide verandas. The glass doors acted like enormous mirrors and reflected back to me my silhouette. I looked into the dojo and could see through the meditation hall to the opposite glass doors out towards the tents dotted around the paddock, framed by the towering gums in the gully below.

A shadow was cast on the veranda by our statue like figures. There were at least three reflections of myself, one smaller image cast on the glass in front of me, one reflection projected into the centre of the dojo and one larger one reflected by the

glass doors on the other side of the building. It was a bit disconcerting at first, as I did not know which reflection to focus on. The reflections and my shadow appeared and disappeared like the mist dependent upon whether the sun went behind the clouds or not. There were multi-images of myself ... real, not real.

What is my original face is a koan that I returned to again and again. I wanted to come at it fresh and new, not rest upon some past revelatory experience. When I looked at the image that floated like a mirage on the floor of the dojo, my reflection was transparent, ethereal and fleeting. As I turned my attention to the one perched upright on the edge of the wooden verandah, this one who was curiously looking out through wide eyes, I wondered, who's feeling is this? Who's thought is this? My mind was like a mirror reflecting my immediate experience and thought was just another fleeting reflection, even the thought of "I", was just like the wagtail darting and dancing on top of the stone Buddha's head.

After a while, my mind became steady just like Shido's from practicing mirror Zen. There was no difference between the outside reflection and inside reflection. There was less separation between the landscape and myself. When I come home to my senses the subject – the seer, and the object seen unite in the moment of just seeing. In the art of clear seeing, there is no description, no label, no filter, no barrier, no judgement at all, just being here, there is only hanging out fully in the moment and a true intimacy with seeing and being. We are filled up and emptied out by this moment-to-moment theatre.

Everything became a reflection in the mirror mind. Who am I? What is my original face? Reflection, reflection! No reflection, no reflection! I continued this practice for 3 hours a day over that week resting in an equanimous, still, peaceful state that embraced movement and stillness, appearance and disappearance. An intuitive seeing is seeing directly into one's essential nature, it is the seeing that frees.

My winter robe became the cold ancient ground, the starry night my crown, the sandstone cliffs the backbone of immovability and the morning mist my ephemeral companion. My shivering, vulnerable body had been rugged up by the warmth of a winter's day, filled up with hot tea and nourished by the warm communal cup of friendship of two gals just sitting on the veranda together.

The verse of the rakusu, "I wear the robe of liberation the formless field of benefaction" has always comforted me. I sat happily on the veranda of life with a brimming smile. The practice is simple and sublime after all. To know ourselves at the deepest level, requires an intuitive seeing, one that is not orchestrated by the mind but by the heart that sees and recognises itself beneficent.

References:

According to Dandelion Folklore, it is said that if you can blow all the seeds off with one blow, then you are loved with a passionate love. If some seeds remain, then your lover has reservations about the relationship. If a lot of the seeds still remain on the globe, then you are not loved at all, or very little.

Bahiya Sutta - <https://www.accesstoinsight.org>

Dereck Walcott, poem, 'Love after Love'.

Jacques Lacan - The Blind Spot of the Sovereign Eye: On the Gaze. Psychoanalysis's Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan. "I will explicate the gaze (le regard) and the ways in which it exceeds or transcends what we know as vision, the objectifying or representational power of the eyes".

Jon Kabat-Zinn, (2013) Full Catastrophe Living, How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation. Revised edition, p.199 Random House.

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenological theory of inter-subjectivity.

[Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology_of_Perception.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenomenology_of_Perception)

This concept stands in contradiction to rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism asserts that reason and mental perception, rather than physical senses and experience, are the basis of knowledge and self.

Raymond Carver, "Late Fragment" in A New Path to the Waterfall.

Sally Tisdale (2006) "Women of the Way", Harper, San Francisco. Mirror Zen was a practice in the Edo period of Japan initiated by the Abbess Kakuzan Shido 1252 -1306. (p, 222-225)

The Sayings and Doings of Little Heart

Sean Loughman

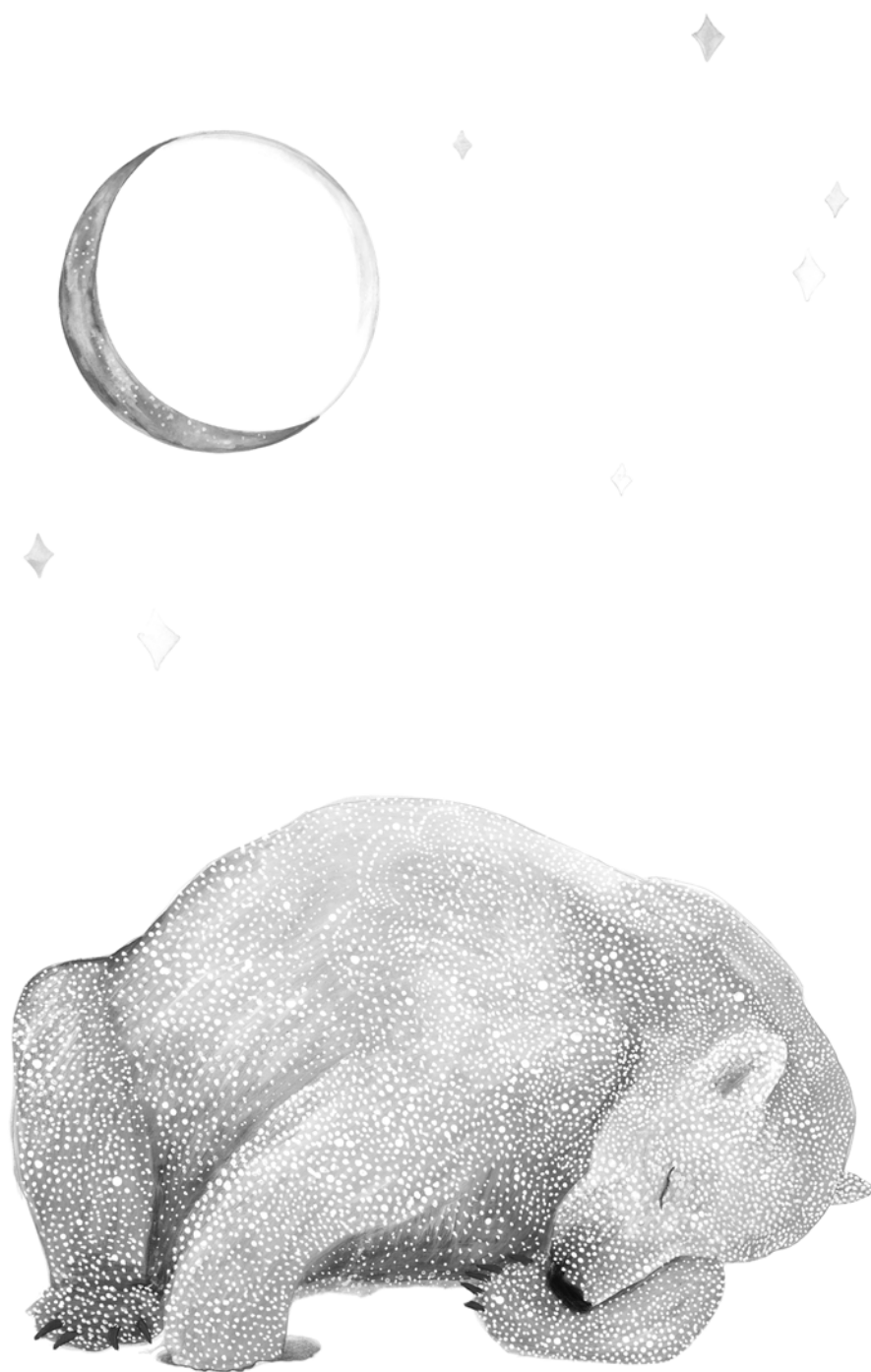
Case

Old Man sweeps the floor while Little Heart eats. “Thank you for sweeping the floor”, she says, oblivious to the falling crumbs.

Verse

*Old Man sweeps floors. Little Heart sweeps hearts.
When Little Heart sweeps everything away
With words of power, straight from the heart
What fills the heart and completes the void?*





Lay your paw on me.
Your warmth and calm ancientness
melt my icicles.

Rachel Stone

From the 45th Parallel North – a flurry of memory and verse

Maggie Gluek

Winter Joy

A morning in late January. It's dark of course. You'd love to snuggle back down under the covers but it's time to get up and get ready for school. Then, outside the window, there's a gleam and you run over to see. It has happened. Overnight, noiselessly. The magical transformation that buries forms, softens contours, paints the terrain uniformly white.

You and your family gather around the radio to hear the announcement of closures. Will your school be on the list? Yes! Driving is too dangerous. Drifts are many inches deep and most roads are still unploughed. A Snow Day is declared and you are freed from routines! You could stay in your pajamas. You could read a book. You could bake some brownies. But sooner or later, you must go and be *in* the new landscape. That's the imperative of this gift of a day, shockingly fresh and oh so bright.

First there's the snow suit to put on, cumbersome clothing that's not unlike what astronauts wear. And sox and boots and mittens and scarf. And a warm hat that holds your protuberant ears inside - you can't risk frostbite. Finally ready, you and your sister venture outdoors, your voices ringing in the newly quiet world. You walk tentatively at first, then plunge into a drift. Your boots sink deep down, as you hoist your legs up to take another step. You trudge like explorers. The two of you make winged angel moulds and weld snowballs. You slide down the hill on flying saucers, curved metal discs with handles, creating a track that gets icier and faster. It is so much fun. Then you accidentally brush your tongue against the saucer's surface where it freezes onto the metal. You have to pull your tongue away and rip its skin. Ouch! And now your fingers and toes are beginning to feel cold.

Hungry and weary, you tramp back inside, shedding all those layers. Happy.

Verse one

On the bare canvas of winter
color lives its recognition.
Never before apprehended:
the woodpecker's white,
the cardinal at full throat midday
in the blue spruce.

Winter driving,
on the radio
a nocturne, an adagio.
How can you play Mozart
without having seen snow fall?

Verse two

While we sleep, silent snow
Morning's first impressions:
A crow has walked to the cat's bowl.
Nothing hides now, without leaves.
The world is honest.
Tree bodies fingered and figured
in fine criss-cross
let the sky show.

In this season
no need to match a sombre mood
to luxuriant green,
no need to extend into what
one is not.

Maggie Gluek



Wintry Musk Oxen
Your snowy home is melting
I am so sorry

Rachel Stone

Winter Swimming – Body Oceanic

Caroline Josephs

Each day of the year,
I plunge my body
into the ocean ...

When the water
temperature drops --
14-16 degrees
in winter,
I sit by
the ocean pool,
legs dangle
in water,
'Not hot, not cold...
Just wet' --
the mantra...
I breathe deep
in to the belly

Sliding into salt water,
I am
swimming –
one movement...
Contracted,
tension,
cold hits.
Shock!
Body bitten
sudden change,
enveloping–
one-pointed
intensity --
At the threshold
breath
obliterates.
I swim, head out
for a lap...

After some strokes,
body
adjusts to
sudden cold...
tightening --
felt
as fear.
The body relaxing,
not resisting...

Being with cold,
singing cold.
Celebrating cold

Two pauses
between –
incoming,
outgoing,
breath –
each quite silent.
Thresholds --
dying, birthing.

Blowing out the self,
bubbles in my ears,
loud, vibrating,
ripples of sound in
water.
breathing in...
an oceanic
universe...

After a part lap
head
in sea-water.
face as ice mask –
distinct.

After more laps,
breathing swimming,
bubbles of out-breath
make friendly burble –
a steady rhythm.
Exuding from arms,
swathes
of tiny air pockets
ascend
to the surface,
ribbons of white
cells.

A few more laps –
I am dissolving
into a silkiness of sea
relieved of skin.
I am weightless.

Being water,
being breath, being...
tiny schools of
striped fish
turning their heads
into the oncoming
current,
being
slowly furling
sea-weed,
being blinking
pearlescent
bi-ped mollusc
shells
open to the sea,
being
lichen-covered
rocks, on floor of
natural ocean
rock pool,
being
flickering
fluid lines
of light
in prisms
of liquid...

Sometimes
turbulent
tumbling
great swells
roll in waves
over the side
of our ocean pool...
A few brave souls
flail and bob
in shifting
foam and currents,
waves running
up,
to slap
concrete
retaining walls
meet another,
in the backwash.

There's a swish as
froth, foam,
waves,
wash
over the pool
sea-wall,
descend in
white cloudbursts,
underwater.
Through my goggles
I am white-out.
Submerged,
gestating --
presence...
contained,
content.
Selfless.
Skinless,
No where.
No self.

Under a surface
cacophony
of conflicting currents –
Slipping through
a 'gateless gate' --
It is –

Quiet and untroubled
In the deep.

Seasons of Being

Sean Loughman

*Spring comes with flowers, autumn with the moon,
summer with breeze, winter with snow.
When idle concerns don't hang in your mind,
that is your best season.*

Verse of case 19, Wumenkuan, translated by R. Aitken.

Spring

Longya asked Cuiwei, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the west?"

"Pass me that chin rest," said Cuiwei. Longya passed Cuiwei the chin rest: Cuiwei hit him.

"I don't care if you hit me, but that does not show Bodhidharma's meaning," said Longya.

The first half of case 20 of the Blue Cliff Record occurs in Longya's youth before his enlightenment under Dongshan Liangjie. It is recorded that Longya studied under Cuiwei (and Deshan), before moving on to Dongshan. Thus we may interpret (at the risk of Cuiwei and Longya's staff!) Cuiwei's teaching as going right over Longya's head. In light of the second half of the koan (to follow), we are invited to take the view that though Longya's defiant retort is not entirely wrong, we should consider what it misses.

Summer

Case 21 of the Blue Cliff Record

A monk asked Zhimen, "How is it when the lotus flower has not yet emerged from the water?" Zhimen said, "A Lotus flower."

The monk said, "What about after it has emerged from the water?" Zhimen said, "Lotus leaves."¹

The Verse

*Lotus flower, lotus leaf, thus does he declare.
Above the water and down below, how do you compare?
North of the Jiang, south of the Jiang. Ask Old Teacher Wang.
One fox is done enquiring, one still wonders on.*

My translation

¹ *The Blue Cliff Record* by Thomas and J.C. Cleary.

As the last line of the verse suggests, it is natural and even vital to enquire into enlightenment and what it is like to emerge from muddy waters. And yet, we are also gently reminded that the division of enlightened and not is as confectioned as north of the river and south of the river.

The last line translated literally is “One fox has already enquired (i.e. has the answer), one fox is enquiring.” The dramatis personae of this koan are both cast as foxes, the one asking earnest but misguided questions, but also the one with the answers. Once a fox, always a fox.

It is easy to conclude then that we all have buddha-nature, there is no difference, we are all already enlightened, and so that is the end of the story (a common mistake throughout Zen history). But Zhimen does not say so. Springing from the same seed, lotus flower and lotus leaf are nonetheless different. Just as dragons and snakes intermingle, so too do lotus flowers and leaves intertwine. The metaphor here is quite different though. If you wish to understand what Zhimen is pointing at, look at a lotus pond before the flowers surface, when they are in bloom and after they have died. Strangely, Aitken and Yamada have mistranslated lotus leaf as lotus petals in the koan collection that the Diamond Sangha uses.

There are two Chinese characters for lotus, one of which has Buddhist associations. The koan plays with this linguistic variation, using the Buddhist laden character for “lotus leaves” but the plain character for “lotus flower”, further emphasising the difference.

Autumn

Longya asked Linji, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the west?”

“Pass me that zafu”, said Linji. Longya passed Linji the zafu. Linji hit him.

“I don’t care if you hit me, but that does not show Bodhidharma’s meaning,” said Longya.

The second half of case 20 of the Blue Cliff Record presumably plays out during Longya’s travels after his enlightenment, by now having established a reputation. It is known that he studied under Linji after Dongshan². Already, his encounter with Cuiwei is famous. Otherwise, how could Linji have responded with classic Zen wit?

Longya returns the joke and closes the loop. Even without Longya’s previous encounter casting a mountainous shadow over this meeting, each response in this dialogue is both a razor-sharp bear trap and a quick and confident step towards the other. Can you tease apart Longya’s responses to Cuiwei and Linji? If you can, I would like to know!

This is but one interpretation of this koan, but I think the most interesting. You can make something of the juxtaposition of Caodong and Linji lineages. However, at the time of this encounter, such delineations did not exist. Making something of it merely belittles Xuedou and this koan. North of the river, south of the river. I prefer to see Linji’s inclusion in this case simply as recognition of Longya’s status as Linji’s equal.

Case 19 of the Blue Cliff Record is an abbreviated version of the story of Juzhi’s finger, which also features in Wumenkuan. Like case 20, the extended version

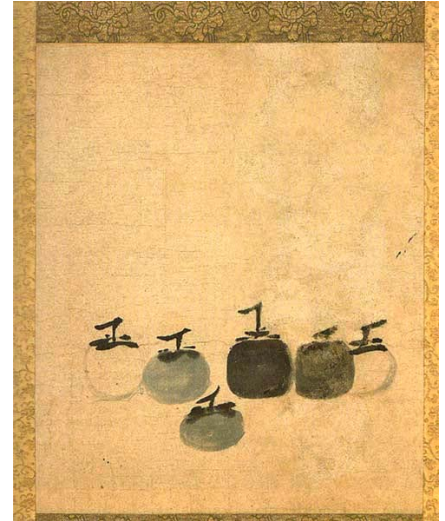
² “Zen’s Chinese Heritage”, Andy Ferguson, 2011.

involves identical responses by an enlightened and unenlightened figure. Here the actions are in reverse of Juzhi's finger: first an immature response, then fully ripened. Xuedou has clearly grouped these cases together to help us contemplate one of the great mysteries of Zen.

Winter

Persimmons have a special place in Zen, thanks to Muqi's painting of patient and dignified persimmons, at various stages of ripening, each with their own character and idiosyncracies³. Plucked from the tree in autumn, they are left to ripen off the tree to rid them of their astringency. There is another way to ripen and eat persimmons, and that is to skin them and hang them outside. You will see them hanging under the eaves of houses in autumn throughout the Japanese countryside. This ripening and preservation technique concentrates the flavours and allows you to enjoy them over the Japanese winter.

Some years ago, like a fool, I walked a section of the Shikoku pilgrimage in the dead of winter. One night I slept in a remote train station almost out of a Ghibli movie scene: a room on a platform beside just one set of tracks, absent overhead wires, planted amongst squares of rice fields fringed by low mountains. The next morning was transformed by snow. The only thing whose identity had not been extinguished was a lone, black persimmon tree that I had not noticed the previous evening. I knew it was a persimmon tree from the few blackened and withered persimmons refusing to fall from the leafless tree.



Six Persimmons, Muqi, 13th century

When you have a safe, warm home to return to, a wintry landscape is bracing and invigorating to step out into. But if you lose your way, the desolation of winter can be like a vast, endless desert. Every way you turn you face the prospect of death and so little of life.

I can speak of depression in which cold despair is a seemingly endless winter. But it is also true of emptiness. While depression is something we try to escape, emptiness is something we seek out. The samadhi of emptiness is blissful, where despair is painful. Taken too far though and emptiness also becomes a form of death and is just as numbing as despair. Without balance, emptiness is a dream state, yet so real, like depression.

This is well illustrated in the story of the old woman who supports a monk, steadfast in his meditation. To test the progress of the monk she instructs a beautiful young woman to passionately embrace the monk, who remains as unmoving as a stone statue. Some versions of this story say that the old woman was so enraged at her money being wasted on the monk that she turned up the heat even more and burned down the monk's hut! However, it could also have been a cool-headed act of tough love.

³ For a thorough deconstruction of this painting, see <https://davidtitterington.medium.com/zen-art-muqi-six-persimmons-308f6f944a2a>

Winter comes upon you or you seek it out, arriving at times suddenly, at times gradually; unawares or with full knowledge; sometimes when you have a degree of control over your life, sometimes none.

Persimmons and practitioners need the shelter and safety of home to mature. Home takes many forms, a smile, a word, a sangha. Without a home to orient and support, we are all lost.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter. As Wumen points out, there is another season. Leave your windows open to that season and your door open to the world and it will not just be persimmons that ripen.



Poppy Glenys Jackson



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