

Mind Moon Circle

Journal of the Sydney Zen Centre

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“Sorrow tarries for the night but joy comes in the morning.”

Psalm 30, verse 5 in the Bible

Sorrow, hope, joy, equanimity.

Spring 2021

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‘Sorrow Tarries for the Night but Joy comes in the Morning’

Helen Sanderson

This is a line from Psalm 30, verse 5 in the Bible, by the Hebrew King David written in gratitude after a serious illness, so it seems right for these times, in this the second year dominated by Covid in Australia. There has been a long night of suffering, sorrow and hardship for many. Just last week a neighbour's father, doubly vaccinated but admittedly old, caught the delta variant in the aged care home where he was living and died. My neighbour, his daughter is in mourning and in isolation as she spent his final day with him in hospital. And other deaths occur. A friend went out into the street where she lived because she could see people gathering near her car. One of them said, "An animal's been hurt." My friend looked down and said, "That's my big boy". Her beautiful grey and white cat had been killed, hit by a car. Today I talked to a neighbour who is working for NSW Health caring for people remotely in western Sydney who are isolating at home with covid. The work is intense and vital, but some people don't make it. As the statement goes at the end of each day in session, "Life and death is a grave matter, all things pass quickly away"

What of sorrow? Most people of a certain age have some acquaintance with it. Early in 2015 my husband died after a long innings with cancer. Several people asked me how I would manage after he died. "I can't think about that now," I said. I was too busy caring for my still-breathing husband. Afterwards though, after the funeral, the friends and family went home, and I was alone. It was then that sorrow arrived. It was not always present but often came, an unwelcome visitor. I would be out walking the dog around the streets when what I called the weather front arrived. "Weather's coming" I announced to myself when the rain/tears started. Driving was also a wet affair. Unfortunately, sunglasses don't have windscreen wipers. At the time I bargained with myself about how long this sorrow would last. I thought maybe one month for each year we had been together which came to 37 months, just over 3 years. That's too long I protested inwardly but it lasted that long and more. It has lessened over time till now it appears as a gentle missing rather than deepest mourning.

We humans tend to assume we have a monopoly on sorrow, but some animals appear to mourn, elephants for example and dogs. Once when I was up the coast there was a wild storm. The bay in front of my house became choppy and dangerous. There had been a family of ducks including ducklings in the water when the winds hit. Later when things became a little calmer, I saw a drake on a pole looking out over the bay calling, calling. That happened for several days in a row. I never saw that family of ducks again. And what of the drake? Some birds mate for life like some humans.

We hope that joy will come in the morning, that sorrow will not last. That we can reach some level of equanimity and life will continue and even improve. In her poem Wild Geese, Mary Oliver wrote,

"Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes."

Years ago, my mother and aunt were talking to each other. “Which do you think is more important?” one asked. “Faith, hope or love?” One said hope for without hope it is hard to keep on. The other said love. Love trumps all. When I consider these questions, they seem like koans, mysterious. I tend to be hopeful but can also feel despair about issues like climate. The thought of species extinction breaks my heart. But my despair lessens when I take action especially if love is the motivating force.

For me it is the small things that give hope and joy. And they can be everything. The opening of flowers, the song of magpies, angophora trees, beautiful music, art, sitting in meditation with our sangha friends and the goodness of people. These things make me feel grateful. Last week I had a Covid test in a drive through clinic. It was cold and wet. The staff had been out in the wind and rain for hours testing people, keeping us safe. And yesterday I was down by the bay in front of my place. another windy wet day. A couple, about my age, (not young) were fossicking around by the wharf. “What are you doing?” I asked, “looking for treasure?” They had some large bags they were filling with what looked like flotsam and jetsam. It turned out they were cleaning up the foreshore of the bay, finding broken bits of asbestos and other rubbish and taking it away. They had been doing this weekly for months. When I see signs of such love for the earth and humanity and such quiet goodness, I feel hopeful and from that comes the stirring of joy.

It is good to remember the words attributed to Yun-men, in case 6 of the Blue Cliff Record, “Every day is a good day.”

Sorrow tarries for the night, but joy comes in the morning.



Zoe Thurner, “Shed”, watercolour, 2021

A Time of Lament, Reckoning, Hope and Opportunity

Subhana Barzaghi

There is a unified chorus of lament for a city under 15 weeks of 'stay at home' lockdown rules with itchy promises of freedom just around the corner. Lockdown has thrust us into a house bound reality; a somewhat isolating, mundane, ground-hog day-to-day reality, a more isolated mode of being. One could be forgiven for being bored, fearful, angry or stressed. There have been such tectonic plate shifts from how our lives use to be. Great tracks of a once busy freeway are ghostly quiet. I have not worn three-quarters of my clothes in my wardrobe in the last 3 months. They hang there lifeless in my wardrobe and my much-loved boots have been traded for Ugg boots and slippers that cannot be seen on zoom calls. I miss chatting to my Nepalese barista who makes great coffee, the aroma blended with the latest updates of the plight of his family in Nepal. I miss the physical embodied presence of friends and dinner parties. My good dinner plates lay hidden away in the sideboard, the cutlery becoming more tarnished. Picnic tables are barred up with red tape as if it is a crime scene. Entertainment venues are hollowed out like giant empty seashells, the owners gone, moved house or died. The dirge of Covid has shut down and sucked out the social life of the city, like those black, ghostly scary Demeter creatures from Harry Potter that had the kiss of death. Then there is the signing in and out with QR codes at every shop. Who would have thought that QR codes would be the entry for a new way of life? Sadly, we don't really appreciate what we have had until it is gone.

What breaks my heart even more is seeing out of control fires raging through Greece, the devastating floods in Germany that Angela Merkel had no words for. In the latest IPCC report, the science irrefutably states that the frequency and intensity of natural disasters is escalating and is increasing Global warming. Melting of the permafrost in the arctic circle and methane seeping out of the tundra rocks has got the scientists really worried. The ice caps are melting causing sea levels to rise and smaller island nations in the Pacific are under threat. New Zealand glaciers are receding every year. One of the scariest books that I have read is, "The End of Ice" - Bearing witness and finding meaning in the path of climate disruption by Dahr Jamail. Our future is not for the faint hearted if we don't drastically change course.

The current crises have touched emotional waves of grief, despair, outrage, sadness and fear from having our lives up ended. In the spiral that reconnects, Joanna Macy outlines a healthy way to process our feelings by acknowledging and honouring our pain and grief for the world. Our practice helps us hold these painful feelings in the arms of compassion. Roshi Joan Halifax, points out that moral suffering is experienced in several different ways: moral distress, moral injury, moral outrage and moral apathy. Suffering calls us to attend, calls us to mend. The process of grieving is an authentic response to the reality of what is happening to our world. Tears are the heart of the Buddha opening up the way. Grief is the flip side of love. We grieve because we care deeply. By honouring our grief with a compassionate response it becomes a vehicle for a new vision of inter-connectedness.

The shore of consolations

Despite the restrictions, the consolations are many. I have discovered two Iranian women who are fabulous cooks and set up a catering service and make sweet delicacies to die for, only a brisk walk away. The beatitude of books on my bookcase

is another consolation. Nuggets of knowledge to keep me happy for the rest of my days and now at least I have time to read some of them. Thank goodness for the IT whizzes of the zoom world and mobile phones at our fingertips, that at least bring us virtually closer together. There is more time for home cooking another reclaimed joy. Yotam Ottolenghi's buckwheat pancakes with a savory mushroom medley topping makes my mouth water.

Every morning I sit and give thanks for this earth, the rivers and the air we breathe the land that supports an abundance of life. My office and meditation space is on the second floor with windows that look out at eye level to the treetops. I'm entranced by a grove of Sydney turpentine, scribbly gum and iron bark trees in the gully below. In my natural pond, a converted swimming pool, a family of water dragons suns themselves by day and frogs' croaks raucously at dusk. The natural world offers such beauty and solace. I cannot seem to get enough of it. Joy Harjo's poem invites us to remember.

*Remember the earth whose skin you are: red earth, black earth,
yellow earth, white earth brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too.
Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of this
universe. Remember you are all people, and all people are you.
Remember you are this universe, and this universe is you.*

The Lane Cove National park and great north walk is only a 10min walk from out my back gate, down the gully, through the mangroves to the river's muddy edge. I try to get outside every day, not just for some exercise but to gaze into the great expanse of blue. I want to be taken up by the horizon, to hear the birds and adore the twisted, tangled canopy of the angophora gums. Nature is a restorative refuge and a re-wilding of the heart and mind.

While most things have shifted, closed down or change in our urban environment those old walking trails that hug the riverbanks, layered with crustaceans have been there for thousands of years. Those trails hold imprints in the soft mud of footfalls from forgotten generations. Walking on Gadigal country warps time, it opens up a deep time perspective - tree-time, nature-time, slow swirling river-time, and ancestral time. The twelfth century Chinese Zen Master Hongzhi who advocated Silent Illumination practice, invited us to fully meet all beings as our ancestors and contemplate 10,000 years. This contemplation opens up one's mind to a deep time perspective.

The ungraspability and uncertainty of life has never been so prescient. The poetic verse in the Diamond Sutra offers us a contemplation of this transience.

*Life is like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;
Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.
This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world.*

The Diamond Sutra reminds us that the three times; past, present and future moments are ungraspable. Right in the midst of this fleeting world we can find refuge in the timeless dimension of who we are that falls in the space between past, present and future. The river of transience of all things is one of the 3 characteristics of the true nature of existence. All things are dependently arisen, seeing into the changing nature of all conditioned experience naturally leads to cultivating dispassion, the gradual fading away of attachments. This stay-at-home time is another opportunity to simplify, to reduce down our commodity driven cravings and attachments?

Could there be a silver lining to a world ravaged by Covid? A daring question when so many people are suffering; mental health issues escalating, genuine economic hardship, loss of jobs and fear of how they will pay the bills. It is hard to probe this question when sadly 4.3 million plus people worldwide have died from this mutating virus. The extroverts amongst us are kicking and screaming and mourning the loss of a way of life yet others welcome it. One of the silver linings is we have seen how interconnected we all are. What happens in one part of the city affects us all. Many aged care workers and factory workers who package food for the supermarkets live in southwest Sydney. Their health is interwoven with mine. Our lives depend on the influences and reality of an interconnected web of life. Zen practice is to break through our narrow way of seeing things, to open up the consciousness to understand our inter-dependent reality.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh conveyed the profound teachings of inter-being in such simple ways. He held up a flower and asked us to consider the rose and the garbage. “Without the vegetable wastes which turn to compost, which then provide the rich elements and nutrients for the rose bush we would not have the exquisite, colourful, perfumed rose. So we learn to accept and value the garbage equally with the rose. The rose is on her way to being compost and the compost is on her way to being a rose.”

Due to the advent of Covid the well trotted out argument that we needed decades to make the necessary changes to transition away from pollution driven fossil fuels now falls flat in the light of the rapid behavioural changes that Australia and the world has made to deal with the threat of Covid. So this argument is no longer valid. It cannot be used as an excuse to maintain business as usual.

Perhaps a generous and optimistic way of viewing our current state of affairs and the changes bearing down upon us could be a struggle between two modes of living. We have pushed the **producing-having-acquiring** way of life that we have been living, a commodity fixated mentality, epitomized in neo-liberalism’s endless capitalistic growth and economic rationalism compared with a **being-mode-of-life**. In an interview with Richard Powers author of the Pulitzer prize winning book “Overstory”, said he was inspired to write such a book by a religious experience with a giant sequoia tree. Trees become another protagonist in his riveting blockbuster story. Powers book is a deep-rooted “meditation on the tension between commodity-driven mode of life we’re in most of the time - the having mode of life and the being mode of life, in which we are part of larger communities that extend beyond this commodity driven life”. (In an interview by GQ’s magazine journalist Brett Martin)

As we embrace the restrictions Covid has given us we have adapted to more of a being way of life, at least temporarily. We could think of this ‘stay at home’ time as a

self-retreat, a re-set button, a time for mindful reflection. Meditation is an ancient pathway that drops us into a being-mode-of-life. It can be a time for re-prioritizing what is of true value, what gives meaning and what will sustain our human community and our precious earth going forward. The benefits of a more reflective mode of being can be found in Henry Thoreau's notebooks:

"Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each."

The world is grappling with a multiple crises, coronavirus and extreme weather events from climate change. Why are we heeding the medical and health advice of one and not the other? With both Covid and the climate crisis scientists are at the forefront. With Covid the scientific and medical Public Health advice is trusted and listened to. We mask up, social distance and stay at home. We will undergo change in personal behavior, adopt restrictions and sacrifice our freedoms for the protection of our families and our communities. For the most part, there is a shift from individualism to a social conscience and well-being of the whole community. With climate change, although scientists are leading the charge, up until now they have not been heeded. Australian Federal Government policy makers have not made it a top priority despite the dire warnings by experts. Fake news and algorithm fed social media silos took centre stage during the Trump rein, fed by a hungry media for sensationalism rather than rationalism. Perhaps now scientific voices from the latest IPCC report will be heeded? A new wave and precedent has been set. Members of Extinction Rebellion plastered 'Duty of Care,' over the walls of parliament house recently. What will it take for the Federal Politicians to listen? Thank goodness Matt Keen, NSW State Government minister for the Environment seems to be listening, and the Business Council of Australia pushing their corporate muscle to double our reduction target of carbon emissions by 2030. (SMH 9/10/2021)

A Time of Reckoning

The climate has changed; we have entered the long gestational time of consequences and reckoning. It is hard for folks to deal with an existential threat of a Climate Crisis when immediate survival needs off putting bread and butter on table is a priority. Richard Powers commented, "Our whole way of life is a set of brittle systems that could not survive the breakdown of the living systems they depend on. Look, at the end of SARS-1, in 2003, a great deal of effort and research was put into what had happened, and the conclusions were very specifically that the vector was bats whose habitat was being destroyed, so their behaviours changed. We have known for a really long time that we're not going to be able to go on having the party and not pay the price for it."

This invisible highly infectious virus, like all viruses one cannot exactly declare whether it is living or dead but operates betwixt and between worlds, yet it is most certainly a destructive active agent within our human biological system. One way we can look at this virus is that is a catalyst, a character, a vexed agent in the bigger story we are all living in right now. The destruction of the habitats from which animals, bats and wildlife have been driven is all part of a larger story of complex, inter-connected, biological systems. Our human story and lives depend upon healthy functioning natural systems of the earth and its biosphere.

Our anthropocentric worldview: that humans are at the pinnacle of creation and therefore feel entitled and believe they have the right to have dominion over all other creatures is being challenged. “Coronavirus is just a very rapid refutation of this idea that we live in a completely human-moderated, human-mastered, human-controlled world and that all the stories we tell are basically about ourselves. We haven’t even begun to see the ways in which that notion is going to fall apart in the years ahead.” (Interview with Richard Powers)

It is a time of reckoning, a wake-up call to take stock and responsibility. We have never lived at a more privileged time in history with respect to what we have reaped from the earth and its resources. While the Holocene was a time of a relatively stable climate that afforded significant crop yields, abundance and wealth yet our rich affluent way of life is also a result of; plundering, raping, cutting down old growth forests, over-fishing the oceans and gouging the earth. Tragically our way of life has cost the earth. Every one of us, no matter how great our privilege will be affected by the unfolding climate catastrophe in the Anthropocene. With privilege comes responsibility. Thich Hhat Hanh was asked, what should we do to save our planet. He said, you must hear the earth crying and then you will know how to respond.

Hope and Opportunity

Our choices from now will make a difference for decades to come. The latest IPCC report issued Code red for humanity. It is clearly saying it's time to heed a mighty call, to stand up and take stronger, determined, fiercer compassionate action. It is a call for positive rebellion. It is a call of the wild, the call of the birdsong that needs our help. It is a call for a vision of, ‘World as lover, world as Self.’ It is a call to care for this precious planet, a call of adaptation, regeneration and renewal. It is a call to re-imagine our world. It is a call to harness our stubborn optimism and active hope. Rebecca Solnit a conservationist and writer asks us to find the luminosity inside the dark night. It is an opportunity to find a life affirming hope in the face of difficulty and uncertainty.

Lawyer Mariel Nanasi, Executive Director and President of New Energy Economy, writes: “We are at a crossroads. We either face the very real possibility of a planet on hospice, driven by an energy system that is the epitome of capitalism on steroids with extreme exploitation and racism at its core. Or we grasp a profound opportunity to shift at the very basis of our economic system that we haven’t seen since the abolition of slavery. And it’s really up to us which way we go.” (Roshi Joan Hallifax blog)

Hopi Indian chief White Eagle commented on our global situation, “This moment of humanity that we are currently experiencing can be considered a door or a hole: the decision to fall into the hole or walk through the door belongs to you. Do not underestimate the spiritual dimension to this social crisis, they go hand-in-hand. Take the perspective of an eagle who sees everything from above with a wider view.” We can choose to walk through the door for a clean energy future, a net zero carbon economy, or stay stuck in a hole of ‘business as usual’. Even though we step through the door of not knowing how it will unfold each moment presents us with a window of opportunity to make a difference.

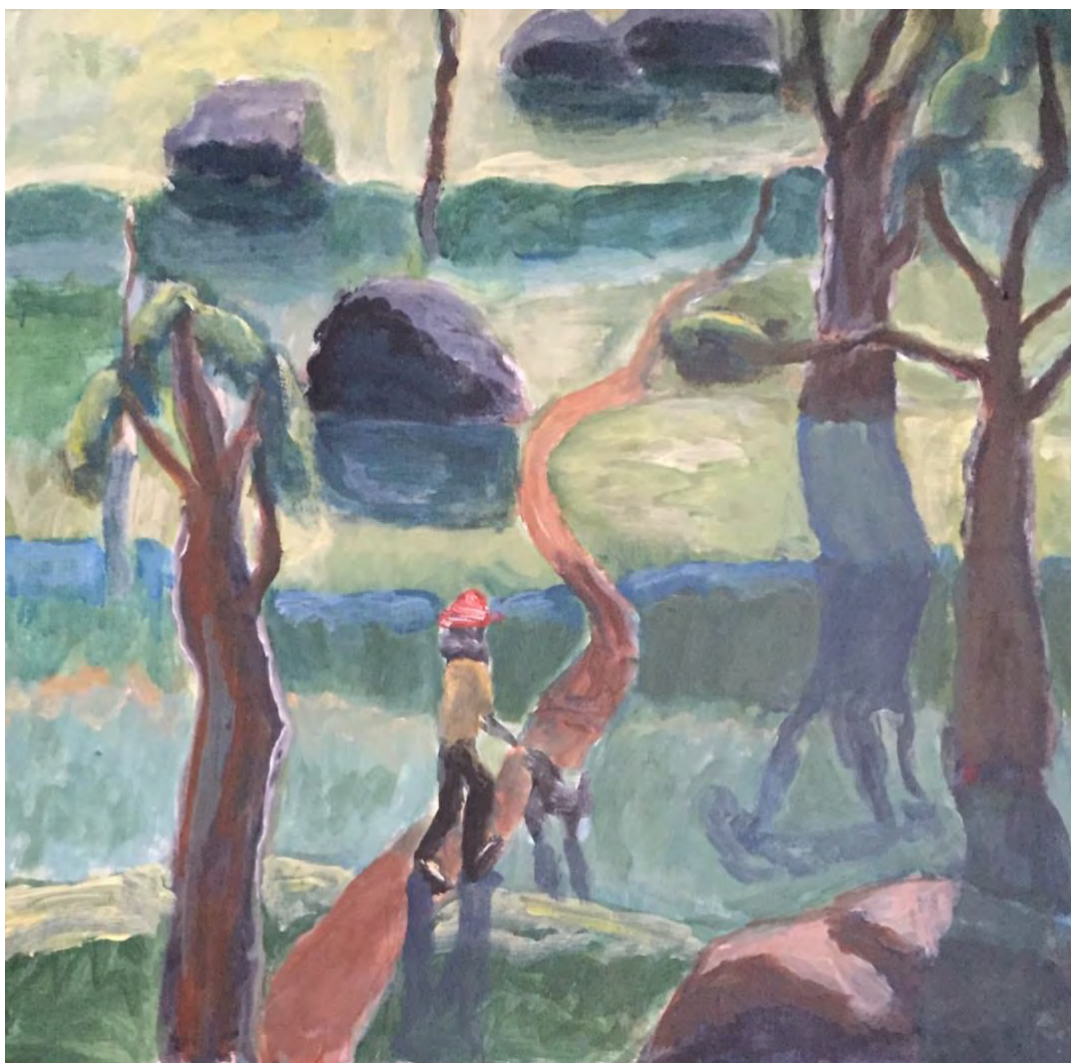
The longest winter of closures is soon coming to an end. Beyond excited: cafes book up, museums and galleries prepare to dust of the cobwebs and throw open their doors. Yet Covid is here to stay and so are the consequences of global warming, the question

is how shall we meet these challenges without creating further great rifts, division and polarisation in our community? Some of the fault lines that have opened chasms of polarized views are falling headlong into our pet silos on social media which foster groupthink. This often reinforces our confirmation bias and further justification for our views. When we become over identified with our views, we become defensive and rigid, and this only causes further division and antagonism in our community. We have to ask ourselves what kind of society do we really want to live in? One that is intolerant and polarized or tolerant and understanding. If we wish to live in the later, we need to keep the door of conversation open and practice wise speech and deep listening.

With mindfulness we see that the heart is the ground from which wise speech grows. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls this practice “deep listening” and Joan Halifax Roshi calls “listening from the heart.” Like any other mindfulness practice, listening is both a skill and a way of being in the world. In her book *The Zen of Listening*, Rebecca Sharif writes, “Listening is one of our greatest personal natural resources, yet it is by far one of our most undeveloped abilities.” The Australian Conservation Foundation recently offered a webinar on ways of listening and responding to people who have opposing views on; politics, vaccination or how to tackle action on climate change. A number one premise is; powerful conversations are all based on human connection rather than fixating on opposing views. This aligns with wise speech, which is an integral aspect of the 8-Fold Noble path. We connect by asking thoughtful questions, listening to understand, being authentic and sharing something of ourselves in these conversations. We build hope and confidence by giving people a sense of what is possible and what is required and showing that the things they care about fit into a positive shared vision for the future.

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Helen Sanderson, "Joy Comes in the Morning", Acrylic, 2021

Parachuted into a primary school for a creative writing workshop

A lesson in keeping your age at bay
all the tiny chairs tell me
and the many heads of the child animal
bent over tables
and amazing to say they're writing quietly
and I've slipped a toe into that river of young life,
all those green bones flowing
through the classroom walls
out into the playground sea
the possibility shining from thirty faces
as they turn again to me
whatever they reckon I am
a silver-haired pencil, one hand of a clock
it doesn't matter
I'm getting younger and younger
just standing here.

Harry Laing, *unsettled*, (Walleah Press)



Janet Selby, "Bush Track Points the Way", watercolour, 2021

‘The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them’

A Talk online by Will Moon 15 September 2021

At the end of each Wednesday, we chant the Great Vows. It is good to reflect on these vows and what they mean to us. Tonight, I just wanted to consider the first passage of the Great Vows, and what it means to us. ‘The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them’. What does this line really mean? And what does it mean for us and our vow? How can we possibly save the many numberless beings? These are interesting questions, and the answer is really discovered when we sit with the question, ‘what does this vow really mean for us’?

What does to ‘save’ really mean? Buddha described the human condition as suffering. We see the suffering of the world all around us. There is also the suffering of animals and ecosystems. So, we take action to help relieve the suffering and destruction.

I think an important point to make in relation to this vow, particularly for students just setting out on the path of zen, is that this vow should not be interpreted as meaning either that we will gain some sort of merit as a result of saving beings, as is the case with some other religions, and also that the vow should not be interpreted as ‘my way’ is somehow superior and I need to convert others. This would be a significant misinterpretation of the vow. We should view it in the Zen Buddhist context that through selfless action we task ourselves to ease the suffering of the world.

Action to save the many beings can take many forms. Saving ourselves is an important step. If we are confused and in turmoil it will be difficult to bring peace and appropriate measured action to any circumstances we encounter. We take action on our cushions to save ourselves from the world of delusion, thereby forgetting ourselves in this process, and support this with the precepts we take. We need to recognise that we are also one of the many beings to be saved. We suffer also from the baggage and delusions we carry into the world.

So, what about other beings? If we consider the interdependence of all beings, and how this is reflected in the Net of Indra, where each jewel reflects the other, to touch one jewel and it is reflected in all the other jewels. Each action we take is like ripples in a pond, the result of that action changes things forever. It is often imperceptible and not obvious in the global scheme of things. Sometimes it seems like our actions make little difference, but we trust in the interconnectedness of all things, knowing our actions take effect, whether we witness it or not. In this sense each action in accord with the buddha way saves the many beings.

There is also a sense of incompleteness about this vow. By taking this impossible vow we carry the intention to save as long as there is a need to save. Perhaps, to save can also be interpreted as to include. When we include we are not turning away. When we see an insect struggling on the kitchen floor, we pick it up and release it outside. When we witness the destruction of the environment, we turn up to the protest march, even though it is an inconvenience. We extend this intention into the rest of our lives.

There is also another aspect. We realise through our practice that from the beginning, all things by their essential nature are timeless and connected. This brings a level of

peace to our lives, even in our suffering. There is a case in the Book of Equanimity, case 36 where Master Ma was unwell. The temple attendant asked him, “Master Ma, how is your health these days?”. Ma answered, “Sun Faced Buddha, Moon Faced Buddha”. Even when he is ill, Ma shows his generosity offering something for the attendant to take up, and to realise his own truth. Now the day is bright and full of life, the sun faced buddha, now struggling with illness and unwell, the moon faced buddha. Both expressions of our timeless and eternal nature.

Through our touching of the heart mind, we realise that we are all brothers and sisters, insect, bird and human alike, and naturally when we see suffering, it is our own suffering, and it is our natural response to reach out and do what we can. In the eternal nature of all things there is also the fragility of life, of all life, when we witness suffering, we respond. As the heart sutra goes, there is no old age and death, and also no ending of old age and death. How can that be? This is where we take up our koan, or our shikantaza practice to resolve this truth for ourselves. There is so much more that could be said about the first line of the Great Vows. There is much more for the zen student to consider about this vow.



Spring Flowers, photograph by Glenys Jackson

Breathing

*In my long experience no one
has died on their cushion*

the teacher assures me
way back when I first
sample meditation

as if clambering on a skittish horse
nervous of its rearing, upending.

Is the cushion the horse
or my body the horse?

I'm twitching the reins
the reins of my breathing
and this horse is panting
nervy

and I remember
that first minute in the saddle
was endless
and too close to the notion of dying

for the horse to steady
and I dismounted

hence the question
hence the answer

*no one to my knowledge has ever
unwillingly died on their cushion.*

Even so, years on
and hours and hours
befriending both saddle and horse
gentling the reins

the question arises
is this what life is
just breathing?

Is this what distinguishes living
from that other solution
being unseated upended
ended

just breathing?

Nicola Bowery, *married to this ground* (Walleah Press)
*Nicola was a former long-time Diamond Sangha member and is now
practising in the Soto tradition*

Waking Up

Maggie Gluck

Good morning!

All that promise in the day stretching ahead. So much to see, learn, experience. Not that promise is always fulfilled, but the sense of it can be heady at 6 a.m. Good morning, birds! Your day-breaking songs are cause for rejoicing. Good morning, world! Possibly the most fundamental joy is the coming of the light itself. Little by little the sky takes colour, shapes emerge, warmth arrives, things reassert themselves. At least, it is a relief. Familiar forms are reliably present, giving an illusion anyway of solidity and permanence. At best, it is a revelation. The many blessings of existence are apparent. As my mother was dying, on a cold winter morning in a hospital room, she opened her eyes to the window. “The sun!” she exclaimed. There it was. That single great fact. Seen for the last time, as for the first time.

After she died, I found a clipping in her bedside table with this quote: *Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.* * She lived on her own, fiercely independent, as she travelled with sickness, old age and death. Clearly, she had passed many a challenging hour alone in her bed, confronted by the uncertainties of what lay ahead.

I suspect none of us are complete strangers to the long dark night that the psalmist evokes. Those hours when sorrow—not to say fear and despair—trouble the heart and seize the mind. Of course profound anguish is not confined to the nocturnal. The long dark night can be figurative. But at 3 am with the absence of visual perspective and thoughts a-jumble, enclosing darkness can be especially strong. One searches for a way to peace, for means to navigate the pain and grief that tarry with no end in sight.

Faith, one of the three essentials of Zen, is to the point. Suzuki Roshi had this to say: “*It’s okay to have that fear, as long as your faith stays a nose’s length ahead—then the more fear, the greater the faith.*” The word *confidence* from the Latin means literally “with faith.” “*Confidence*” said Aitken Roshi, picking up the ball “*in nothing whatsoever. Confidence that even the abyss is really all right.*” More than once the words of these old teachers have gotten me through the night. With the openness of faith as an antidote to limiting fear, one can find true rest in the darkness. Right there.

I personally am inclined to strategise a “way through” that can redeem suffering, helpful at the time. But the fact is that this experience, whatever it is—the koan in life—is lived for itself. And I have nothing to “do” with it. That means just walking straight ahead into the night. Just the deep sorrow. Just this human condition.

Classically, in the metaphor of Chan Buddhism, darkness is the realm of *sunyata*, the reality of absolute unity. There *is* no narrative to be discriminated and no discriminator. With realisation one becomes truly blind. Daylight in turn is the differentiated realm of the ten thousand things, the infinite uniqueness of Buddha Nature. With realisation one opens one’s eyes. Two sides of the same coin, and not two.

Perhaps sorrow and joy likewise are not two. One implies the other. Loss is inevitable, new birth is inevitable. With the resolution of an emotional or spiritual crisis—whether attending to it is a matter of one long night or many years, stumbling in the dark—comes some dawn of understanding. And for that, deep gratitude.

Good night!

Sayings and Doings of Little Heart

Sean Loughman

Case

Old man faces the wall. Someone is breathing in his ear. Slowly he turns his head. In the dark, little heart peers into his face and asks, “What are you doing?”

Verse

Practice interrupts practice. Life interrupts life.

One answer won't do, nor will two.

Dharma gates are countless, exacting teaches few.

Community of Imagination

Glenys Jackson



There has been an explosion of bugs and flowers, such as Wanda Wisteria, and Hosanna Hardenbergia that have lifted the lockdown spirits of zennies, shared with the SZC Women's group. These few are created and photographed by Glenys Jackson.

Wanda Wisteria - or more commonly known as Wandering Wanda butterfly. Wanda is naturally often mistaken for one of the abundant flowers/racemes of the wisteria plant. Thought to be extinct for many years, there has been a sighting of Wander in Japan recently where the Wisteria plant flourishes profusely. Wander spends her life wandering the countryside writing poetry, Basho her inspiration.

Haiku

Diana Levy

SORROW

summer's legacy
over on their sides
dead banksias

drowned or blown away
a sliver of pink tongue
dead flying fox

her salty footprints
disappearing
on the concrete path

Goodbye...
in the Disabled Zone
her soft cheek

in this burnt landscape
only one bird
chirps about roosting

my tears have dried -
bees take tiny drinks
from the wet sand

darkness comes slowly
the candle lights it
he was snuffed out
RIP Warren Crighton



Peter Thompson, "Sunset", oil crayons on paper, 2021

Rage and Cry, But Then Go Softly

Anonymous

Equanimity is a learned but conditional response to loss, suffering, and death, and it does not come easy.

Remaining tranquil when faced with impermanence in the 'abstract' is relatively easy, but there is a vast difference between, for example, pretending to be blind or sleeping on the street for a night to try and understand and empathise with others, but it's not real. You know you can open your eyes again, or sleep in your own bed the next night. You're safe. For the truly blind it's forever, and the homeless never know what will happen to them.

A very vast difference between knowing and accepting 'old age, sickness, and death' as an idea, and knowing that suffering and death have inescapably arrived. There is hard, very hard work to be done.

First stage: Denial

A few years ago, my GP informed me that some routine blood tests indicated I might have a rare form of blood cancer, Multiple Myeloma, but further tests would be needed to confirm. She wrote down the name on a slip of paper and, of course, when I got home, I searched Google. I was horrified by what I saw: cancer of the bone marrow, eating away at my bones, unspeakable pain and suffering, years of it. Treatment, but no cure. I was in shock. The test had to be wrong. There was a mistake.

Second stage: Anger

I was pissed off at my GP. She had not fully informed me that the tests might indicate an incurable cancer. I didn't want to know. My living in fear was her fault, and I was angry that she fucked everything up when I was feeling well and enjoying my life.

Third stage: Bargaining

I was able to skip this stage, I think. I once asked the Universe/God to grant me one last favour and that if granted, I would never, ever, bargain again, not ever. I got what I asked for, so no more bargaining. Besides, bargaining doesn't work. If it's going to rain, it will rain.

Fourth stage: Depression

Several months later, my Haematologist at Chris O'Brian Lifehouse informed me that a biopsy confirmed I had cancer in my blood marrow. Problem was there was no clear timeline for me... I could have months or years to live. Every case is different, just live with it, and wait and see.

The depression was prolonged; I couldn't shake it. It wasn't clinical so anti-depressants didn't help a bit. The depression and anxiety were

situational. Fuck. Who the hell wouldn't be depressed and overwhelmed by the dread of protracted suffering and pain, of feeling overwhelmed by fear? Give me a break.

Still, I hid the diagnosis from almost everyone and must have appeared to others as distant and disconnected. I avoided disclosure; I didn't want to be a bother...or be bothered. A private matter.

Fifth stage: Acceptance

Now this is the stage where I believe equanimity kicks in. In his poem, Dylan Thomas says to his dying father: "Do not go gently into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light." Why? What possible good does it do to not die gently, to not accept what must be so? Rage, yes, then let it be.

If we are forever wanting things not to be as they are, we can never truly find peace and joy because we are always waiting for something to be or not to be so we can be happy. If only this, if only that, then I'll be ok. But our meditation practice teaches us to fully accept the present without conditions, without looking away, to look towards our anguish and not push it away, to be able to truly say things are the way they are, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Acceptance allows us to see the true nature of things is perfect just as it is and everything is ok: we can't fail, we made mistakes, yes, but we never did anything wrong, and we don't have to crawl on our hands and knees and beg forgiveness; we don't even have to ask. The universe does not punish. We don't have to do anything to be saved or to earn special merit for heaven; it's already there before our very eyes and everyone is already there. It's not just ok; it's perfect. What could possibly be more perfect than our emerging from nothingness and then become aware of being, and being aware of being aware?

The past doesn't exist. It's just a collection of memories we use to construct a temporary raft on which to navigate the river of life. It's necessary and useful and fun at times, but not permanent. Why would anyone want to live with the same personal story for all eternity?

Nor does the future exist, and we know that only crazy people live in places that don't exist.

The only reality we can ever experience is the present, and feelings of anguish and distress will only intensify if denied.

Acceptance allows equanimity; it allows for great joy and happiness together with anguish and distress, and I wouldn't have it any other way. These have been some of the luckiest and happiest years of my life. A loving and supporting partner. Time to dwell on the amazing mystery of my being and just be with just letting it be.

The stages of grief and loss are not fixed. They circle back and jump around quite a bit. Just when you think you're finished with one, something will trigger anger or sorrow yet again and it must be allowed. But they soften over time, and soon, most of the time. And that's ok.

And in the end, we find that equanimity allows for anguish and distress, not their absence. If one needs to rage and cry, then rage and cry your eyes out, beat the floor with your fists if it helps; you won't lose fly-by points to heaven, we're already there.

And in the end, we learn that everyone has a battle inside that is often hidden from view, and that the pain of grief is not a curse or a failure; it's a blessing and a gift.

And in the end, as T S Elliot reminds us: "...all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well when the flames are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire, and the fire and the rose are one."



Janet Selby, "New moon with Venus", Ink and watercolour, 2021

SUNRISE -- EQUANIMOUS, Lockdown 2021

Sunrise equanimous,
Lockdown –
Between dark night
Morning light
The ocean
Uni-verse.

Ten swimmers,
Bobbing heads
Gather in
Blaze of gold
Cascading
Over ocean blue
Bodies crouch on
Rock cliffs,
Sea rippling --
Life!
Between sun
And shadow
Is this
Equanimity?
Holding
Deep darkness,
Flaring light –
Between –
Sea blue
Loving
NOW!
Lock
Down
Covid 2021

Caroline Josephs, September 2021



Caroline Josephs, "Equanimous Sunrise", Acrylic on canvas, 84cm x 76cm, 2021

Just Be Here

From a talk online by Will Moon

When we come to here to sit, we may ask, why are we here? Apart from all the ideas we have about it, the real reason we are here, is just to be here. To just be here, is to be absolutely complete. But what does it mean to just be here? Our minds are often racing with a million things going on, planning, scheming, likes and dislikes, and stories with all their complexity. But we are here to 'just be here'. Being here includes what is happening here. So to sit, just being here is to be aware of what is happening right here. We become aware that we are following a story, an imagined story. At that instant we recognise it and we leave it alone and sit with 'just this'. Just this breath, just this 'Mu', just this count. So, we are here to just breath, just 'Mu', just count.

Perhaps just breath, or just 'Mu' needs a bit more elaboration. Perhaps the word 'just' may diminish this interpretation a bit. When we say 'just', we mean fully engaged, so that there is nothing but this breath, this 'Mu', this count.

In the early part of our practice we often have some idea of an objective that we want to reach in the future, so we practice in order to reach that objective. But this is tricky because we never reach the future we imagine because we are always right here. The very idea of gaining something at some future point in time becomes our obstacle. Its ok to have the idea that I want to realise my self-nature, true nature, or buddha nature, but it is best if we understand that this very nature is already right here, nowhere else. This very place is the lotus land, this very body the buddha, as we recite in the Song of Zazen. It is not the place and the body that we image off in some place in the future. Sometimes, some of us may sit in zazen for a number of years before eventually we just sit for the sake of sitting. We reach a point where we just give up doing it in order to get something. The longer we practice, the longer we start to practice, to breath, to Mu, just for its own sake. We are here, just to be here, because we realise that everything is here, complete. We also feel that it is complete, and therefore there is no sense of a need to be elsewhere. We don't want to be anywhere except right here. We realise that this breath count, this one, this two or this Mu is totally complete, nothing lacking. It is this moment.

There are times during our practice when we have struggles going on in our life. Feelings arise, perhaps vulnerability, anger, anxiousness. As humans we bring this to our cushions as well, as we are not robots. Sometimes these feelings are very powerful and will need attention. We don't push things aside or throw them out. We practice with them, as the need determines. And so how do we practice with them. These feelings are also in the present moment, and so sometimes we need to just sit with the feeling, experiencing the physical and mental manifestation of the feeling. By doing this we are also just being present. That's it, that's the practice. But we don't pursue the associated stories. Strong feelings often generate thoughts and stories that then go on to increase the emotion, and more thoughts and this can be a vicious cycle as the emotion and thoughts increase in intensity. Sometimes we need to challenge our beliefs in the thoughts to break the cycle.

Some Questions About Love

Caroline Josephs

Is love an unfurling,
Like a sweet flower blooming?
Or is love just a deluge
A body needs to receive?
Or a yearning to fill us out?
Or is it complete like the nectar
Brought to us by the bees?

Is love just a listening
Through words for a feeling
Ofttimes to sense there
The lie twixt the two?
Or is love co-creating
A cradle for being?
Or is it the patience we show
When we wait for trust to renew?

Is it compassion,
A feeling for other?
A person a fish or a bird
The world in another?
Inside bone and feather
Or tell me is love just a verb
Just a word?

Is Love the flowing
Of the universe growing
That out of the silence
Presents in the now?
Or the sense of our worth
From the womb before birth?
Or is it protecting the homeless
Forgotten and the down?

Is love always holding
Can it oft allow going
Fulfilled in itself
Needing naught else to be
Is it simply the joy
In a girl or a boy?
Would it be just as precious
Were it to be felt by a tree?

Is true love a sharing
That comes out of caring?
Or is love just an image
That can never be real?
Can it learn to say 'no'
Respect different goals
A selfless embracing
Of another person's well-being?

Is love a question for asking
Or an answer everlasting?
Is love the essence
Of our humanity?
If it's not just the heart core
If it's all this and much more
Oh I ask you my friend
Is love the Great Mystery?
Yes, I ask you my friend
Is love the Great Mystery?

There is a crack in everything

Ellen Davison

‘There is a crack in everything through which the light gets in’
Thanks to Leonard Cohen for pointing this out.

You are the light, and you are the dawn chorus at Gorricks Run,
The chorus of the many beings waking to a new day.
You are the wave and the ocean from which it arises
You are the night sky and each star in that sky.
You are the thunderstorm and the great winds that follow
You are the cold night air and the warmth of the sun at noon.

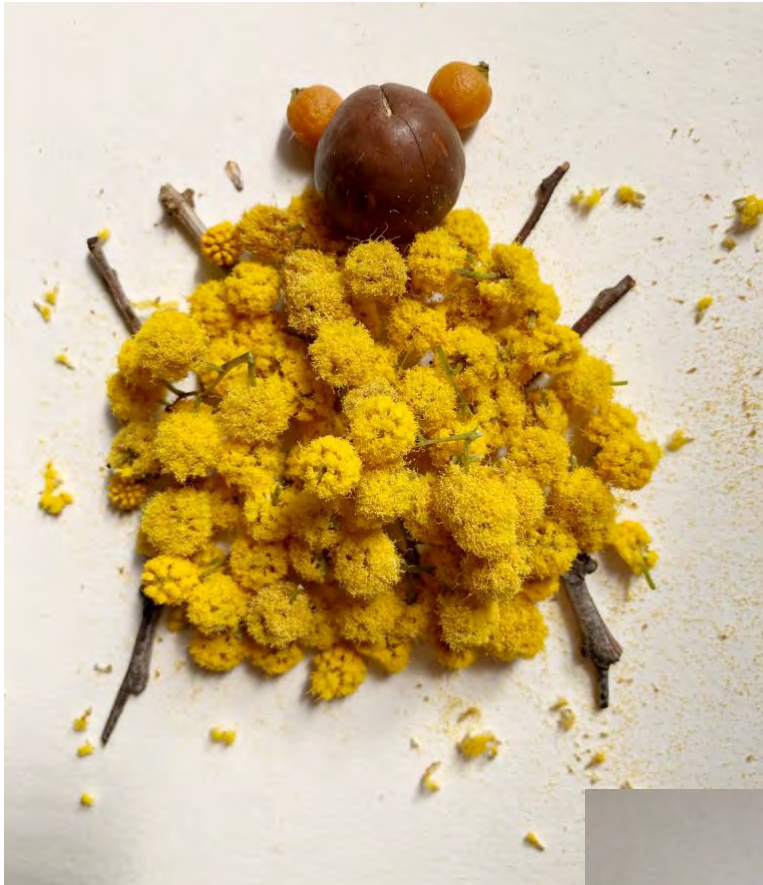
You are the crack in everything and you are the light that shines.

Community of Imagination (continued)

Glenys Jackson



Here is the delightful
Miss Daisy, she's just started
a storytelling get together
with her friends in the garden
- Clover, Buttercup,
Dandelion and Chickweed.
Springtime is usually quiet,
but stories start to flow more
readily as the weather warms.



Where's Wally Wattle- he's out campaigning for members for the Plant a Wattle Tree club:

one for your family
and one for your country.
Wally is so dedicated he's fashioned a Wattle flower cloak, so proud he wears it everywhere, never seen without it.
GO WALLY!

And his girlfriend Wilma.





My name is Hosanna, I'm a Spring blooming young Spanish dancer,
hoping to eventually become a professional.
Today an audition to join a troupe of dancers going on tour,
maybe- wish me luck!
(I'm wearing my new flouncy dress)

Glenys Jackson

A Selection of Poems

Sally Hopkins

(1987)

Hope can be a burden,
a razzamatazz to hide
what the heart truly knows.
No Hope, looked at squarely
has a kindly face
that puts all into perspective.
Each moment
shines like the sun
when the shadow of hope
has been rolled away.

(2006)

Death is the least of it,
though the papers
tell you otherwise.
So much harder to live.
“We’ll be safe when Israel is defeated”
“when Hezbollah is destroyed”
“when...”
“when my car has a lockup garage”
“when my body no longer aches”
“and my heart heals”

Dismiss nothing is the practice.
Hold everything as it is.
The screaming, madness, hatred-
don’t shut it out. Listen to all the tears.
Hold it all. Take the next step.

(2008)

By the edge of the grass
the edge of the stone
It wells up
It wells up
flowing freely everywhere.

Some states of mind
attract the solid “I”
the separate fearful me
forever threatened by
each wind.
But open the clenched hands,
open the bolted door-
and everything comes over

the thought –built fortress wall.
The “I” itself is the path long sought,
is leaf and cloud and wind,
each bud, each corpse,
each clear bird call,
each child. warm hand. blue sky.
Then whether tears or laughter,
death or birth, despair

by the edge of the grass
the edge of the stone
It wells up
It wells up
flowing freely everywhere.

(2010)

Dying is rarely a sudden Here/Gone-
there are bodily warnings, cliffs to descend,
sometimes years old mountaineering in dangerous country,
or a slow fade so slow
you wonder if there’s a mistake and you died years ago.
It requires courage that isn’t much valued
for it often looks like no known country,
not what the directions said.
You have to accept less, tipping to cloud and abyss;
known body not just strange
but unbelievable.

(2013)

Faced with failing heart and gut,
cancer in is prostate,
my brother says his life is good-
the bulbs, the daphne all in flower,
the spuds dug in, the crimson lories
nibbling acorns in the ground.
He too is blessed, as are we all,
to see another Spring.

(2013)

The news speaks of death, of threats of death,
beheadings. conflicts,
the feared, the hated, THEM,
while Bach’s Partita for his dead wife
is playing in my heart –
holding everything. Everything –
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia



Spring leaves, photograph by Glenys Jackson

(2013)

Uchiyama: We are always living out life that is
connected to everything in the universe.

This breath,
seventy sextillion silent stars
through the telescope:
traces of all that has ever lived
on the wind;
children crying in the street,
loud swearing and laughter,
crickets and cool rain
in the frangipani scented dark.
Who gives? Who receives?
Who is not grateful? who not awed?
How can a heart stay closed?

(2013)

LIFE-DEATH?

Have we not all tasted both?
Learned good times come and go
and nothing stays?
Demanding things be as I wish
can open bleakest doors
to lifeless life.
This body made from all
That's gone before,
this unique mix, THIS body, now,
for a time, an unknown time,
entering each unknown day.
Birds show us how things truly are---
a grub becomes a butterfly---
a seed falls on the living ground---
and oceans turn to rain.

LIFE/DEATH is true LIFE - Abundance! Joy!



Peter Thompson, "Joyful Beach Sunset", oil crayon on paper, 2021

Haiku

Diana Levy

JOY

thunder rolling
for the best act of spring -
bright red waratahs!

in a field
of sweet boronia
heavenly slow steps

how could I say no
the water cold like champagne
zinging of muscles

EQUANIMITY

a *Hardenbergia*
at the edge of the death leap
flowering

yoga by the river
my mind finally
stops complaining

easy rising
the small brown raptor
spirals up



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