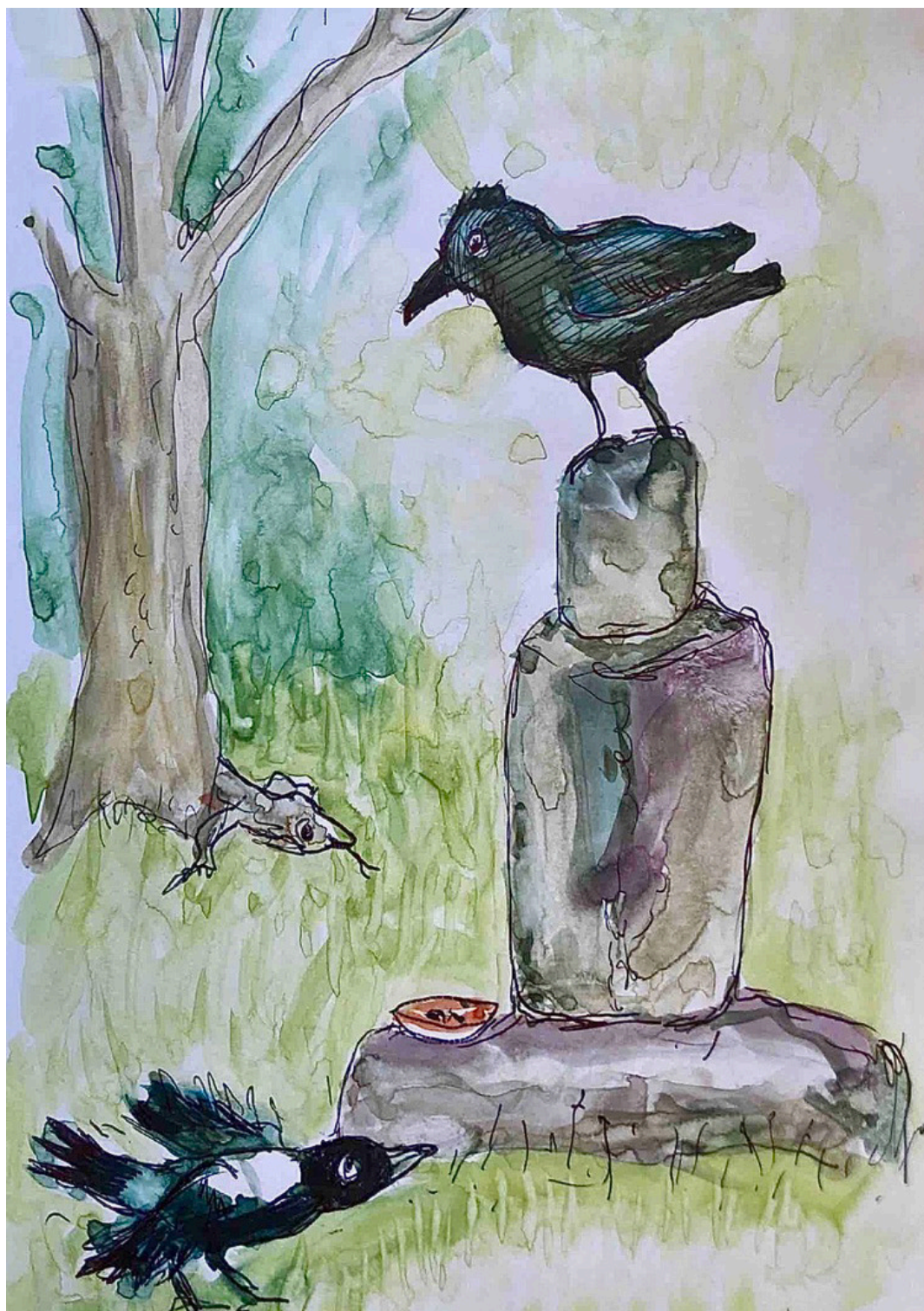


MIND MOON CIRCLE



Journal of the Sydney Zen Centre | Spring 2023



Editor's note

William Verity

Welcome to the Spring edition of *Mind Moon Circle*.

As I write this, Rohatsu Sesshin has just finished so I feel full of gratitude for the power of the sangha. Although I enjoy many wonderful friendships, there are none with whom I can share my Zen experiences as fully as my dharma brothers and sisters. They are strange friendships, because it's possible to feel intimate with people about whom I know next to nothing about their lives, their histories or their other relationships.

The most extreme version of this must be the connections made at sesshin, where I can feel closer to someone I've sat with in silence for five days than some people I have known all my life. And not a word was spoken.

So friendship does not need to be about time, or words spoken, so much as a shared understanding.

That understanding has something to do with emptiness (or was that form?) and the dawning realisation expressed so well by that great Zen roshi, John Lennon: 'I am you and you are me and we are all together.'

Thanks so much to those who generously sent in pieces. Gassho.

If you haven't yet, consider expressing yourself to your sangha friends in the next edition, which will have the theme of Zen and Awe.

Send your pieces to the editors, Jill Ball (jillianball@bigpond.com) and Janet Selby (janetselby@bigpond.com).

Finally, a massive thanks to my co-editor Jerath Head, who has done most of the hard work on this edition, designing it and getting it print ready. Thank you, thank you.



William



Jerath

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Take time to love

Jillian Ball

At dawn, I often wind my way to the coast through Waverley's iconic cemetery. Weaving a path around Norfolk pines, wildflowers, and gravestones frequented by wrens, crows, and the magnificent Nankeen kestrels and black-shouldered kites.

The shimmer of light on the ocean is matched by the wonder of life, love, friendship, and loss that this special place exudes.

There is one grave where I always linger to pay my respects. The family of my longest treasured friends rest here.

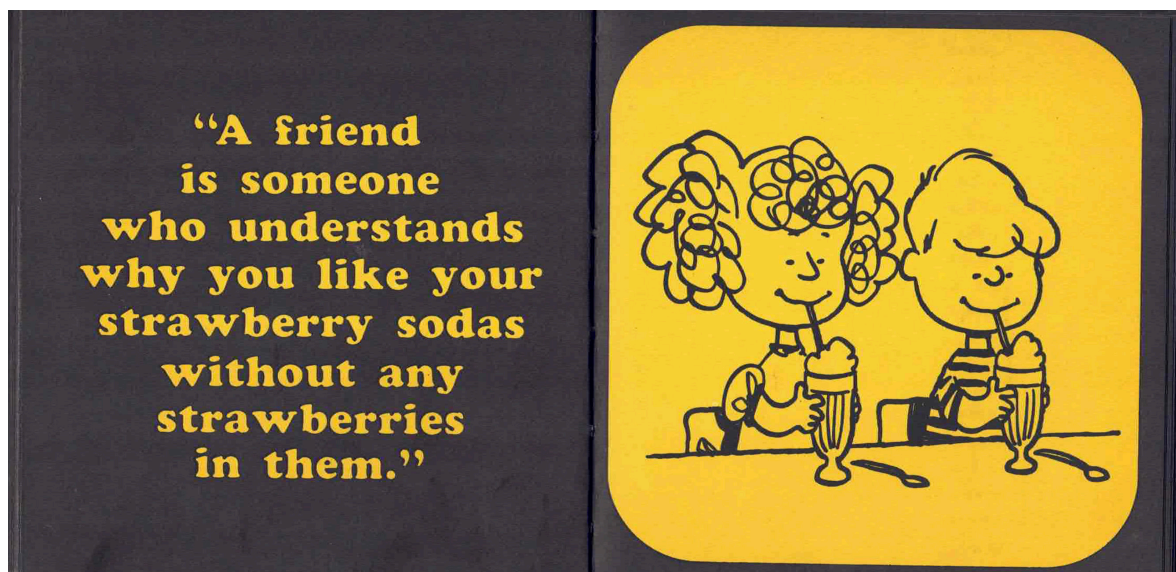
'Take time to be friendly', reads the headstone, 'it is the road to happiness'. Here rests the body of a beautiful gentle son, who passed in his young adult years. We gathered thirty years ago to share our grief

and seek comfort and strength through love and friendship.

Now, we gather again around a simple, wooden cross and place our flowers on the recently turned sandy soil. Tears fall with the spring rain, and we are again comforted by the full embodiment of warm hugs and human connection.

'Take time to love and be loved,' the new headstone reads.

Stories, invigorating conversations, laughter, and comradeship bind us while we negotiate the ups, downs, and roundabouts of life. ○



Reference: Hamlyn, Paul (1967) *I Need all the Friends I Can Get*, Drury House: London



Best friends: Isobel (3) and Matty (2), Malabar Beach (2021)
Photograph by Jillian Ball

The woven basket of spiritual friendship

Subhana Barzaghi

There was considerable heartache and grief in my personal life in 2013. I was in the midst of the tearing ache of separation from a long-term loved partner plus a dear friend had died and another was very ill. This coincided with my son embarking on his much saved-for overseas journey, which I was delighted about but also felt pangs of loss.

These major events landed on my doorstep simultaneously. Every morning for a month, tears overflowed on my zafu. I did not know myself. I had become a wailing woman kneeling on the floor of grief. I would wake up with the sinking feeling of dread remembering the loving rug of relationship had been pulled out from under me.

The blended family basket that we had so carefully woven together was now unravelling. Sadness walked me through the days like a zombie. I forget where my keys were or what day it was. I found myself sighing frequently trying to ride the emotional waves pounding in my chest. I embraced ‘not knowing’—one breath at a time, one step at a time, one day at a time.

While it is one thing to know everything is

impermanent and transient, it is another to experience the familial ground beneath one’s feet shifting.

Sitting was a refuge, a compelling lifesaving raft where I could embrace and radically accept the unravelling of my relational life as I had known it. Over and over, life requires us to let go into this moment. Sometimes wild unruly guests come crashing through the door clearing us out for some new delight. As I was walking across the bedroom floor, full of sorrow one day, I dropped into a place beneath the turbulent emotions and touched a profound stillness, a silent, vast, spacious awareness capable of limitless love.

It was as if I had fallen through the floor of grief and emerged out the other side into love. We grieve because we have loved. We don’t grieve what we don’t really care about. This silent boundless love did not exclude anything, it embraced the pain and loss like waves on the surface of the ocean, yet the depth was undisturbed and boundless.

In painful times, I have relied on the wise and compassionate teachings of liberation

as a compass for my heart and a rudder for my mind in how to keep aligning with my personal true north. To be honest, I don't know how people manage without a spiritual practice and path to point the way. Over the years it has been the kindness of dear friends that has carried me through times of vulnerability, pain, and sorrow. A phone call, a card, some flowers and above all a listening ear makes the world of difference. I wrote this letter of thanks to dear friends for their kindness:

There are good days and terribly painful days, alternating between plunges into grief and loss and days that are lighter in nature. 'There is an ocean of solemn clouds an ocean of bright clouds'. What is carrying me right now is my practice of opening into the broadest sense of the inter-weaving of the nature of a lived-loved-life. I am prepared to show up, meet, and be present to THIS. What carries me in this painful time is the compassion, good intentions, warmth, and kindness from dear friends, their care and connection, integrity, receptivity, the actual nature of the woven fabric of a life, with its many facets and faces. It's not a fairytale, it's not always pretty, it is sometimes down-right painful, it does not exclude the fabric of suffering, the challenges, the broken trust, the grief and loss. Pain has been a somewhat unwelcome but curious portal, which keeps expanding into the ocean of essential nature. This lived-loved-life is simple and yet extraordinary in its unadorned way.

In this moment I know I am ok. This moment-to-moment unfolding carries me along, the body of breath, the caring and goodwill that others have for me and I of them, the momentum of my own good-hearted nature. I let go into not-knowing: a receptive yielding into all that lives. When my mind is clear, I am carried by the ocean of fullness, the bird song, the water dragons diving into the pool, the bats feasting on insects above the angophora gums, the bright sunny day, all held in this vast spaciousness that finds its home in this humble, trembling, vulnerable being. I sit with Zen masters Yun-Men's koan, 'Every day is a good day', no matter how it unfolds I try to embody THIS. Sometimes I sigh and sob, sometimes I abide in deep peace. Either way all are blessed, all are blessed. I bow down and thank my dear friends for carrying me.

We are also held in the arms of a community of spiritual friendships, what the Buddha called *kalyana-mitra*. Taking Refuge in the Sangha historically meant to take refuge in the monastic Sangha. However now it has a broader meaning of taking refuge in the wise, compassionate community of like-minded fellow practitioners of the Buddha way.

I have a couple of metaphors for Sangha relationships. One is the nourishing well: a refuge in this troubled world. I often recall a poignant conversation between Ananda his dedicated disciple and the Buddha. Ananda announced that spiritual friendship was half of the spiritual life.

The Buddha kindly corrected him and said, ‘No, Ananda, spiritual friendship is the whole of the spiritual life’. The Buddha skilfully corrected Ananda’s idea that the sangha and the dharma were separate. He explained that, ‘When a monk has good admirable friendships, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie it is to be expected that s/he will naturally develop and cultivate the noble eightfold path of; right speech, right action, right livelihood, right resolve, right mindfulness, right concentration and wise view’. Through association with the wise, one will hear teachings that are conducive to the opening of the heart and mind, ethical behavior, and concentration, and on discernment and the knowledge and vision of true release. Spiritual friendship is not only integral to the dharma path it is the embodiment of the path.

The Buddha laid out the conditions for noble amiability. Acts of kindness engender feelings of endearment, respect, leading to a sense of harmonious fellowship and a state of unity in the community.

1. *Metta-kayakamma*, **friendly**

action: each show friendliness and goodwill to their colleagues and fellow community members by willingly helping them in their duties in a courteous and respectful manner, both in their presence and in their absence.

2. *Metta-vacikamma*, **friendly**

speech: they each inform the others what is of benefit; they teach or advise them with a heart of goodwill; they say only polite and respectful

words to them, both in their presence and in their absence and refrain from negative gossip.

3. *Metta-manokamma*, **friendly**

thoughts: they establish their minds in goodwill, thinking of ways to be of service to each other; looking at each other in a good light, having a pleasant and congenial attitude toward each other.

4. *Sadharana-bhogi*, **sharing of merit**

and gains: They will share, support and rejoice in each other’s strengths, achievements, joys and happiness.

5. *Sila-samannata*, **moral harmony:**

they maintain virtuous conduct, abide by community rules and regulations, and do not conduct themselves in ways that are objectionable or damaging to the community.

6. *Ditti-samannata*, **harmony of**

views: they respect and honour each other’s views; they have reached consensus or agreed upon the main principles; they adhere to the same ideals, principles of virtue or ultimate aims.

David Viafora, (Chân Thiện Sơn) is a zen practitioner and author of *Conscious Communities: The Transformative Power of Sangha*. Along with beloved friends he built an intentional mindfulness Centre and community at Greatwoods Zen in North Carolina.

‘The practice of sangha-building may be considered one long story of spiritual

friendship. Strong communities depend on the personal relationships between its members, like a patchwork quilt that is woven together of various threads and seams. By strengthening each individual friendship, we strengthen the entire fabric. For anyone who wants to build a happy and thriving sangha, the key is growing beloved friendships.’

Our Sangha has created a multi-layered quilt of spiritual friendship spanning fifty years now with thousands of acts of kindness. Fresh flowers adorn the altar, weekly cleaning of the dojo, sitting on the Board, editing Mind Moon Circle Journal, designing the newsletter and flyers, offering to be a sesshin organiser, being part of the women’s group, managing SZC web site, contributing to samu at Kodo-ji. We have sat sesshin together under the sandstone cliffs through sweltering heat, torrential rain, mist, and cold for decades. We have organised funerals, grieved, and honoured treasured Sangha members. We have made art and music together that uplifts the spirit. Each offering strengthening the entire fabric. The heart glue of a healthy Sangha is gratitude and appreciation for companions of the way. The Buddha said, ‘Cherish these wise friends devotedly as does a mother her own child.’

This vulnerable human life is not only afloat in the ocean of emptiness but afloat in the ocean of relationships, personal and universal, irrevocably, and playfully intersecting one another. We’re living at a time when the fabric of relationships is being stretched and torn and trusting each other is an increasingly radical act.

Having been a founding member of ‘Bodhi Farm’ and lived on a spiritual community for twenty-five years, set up Kuan Yin Meditation Centre in Lismore and Blue Gum Sangha in Sydney, and been part of the early formation of the SZC, I have been passionate about understanding and nurturing the conditions for true Sangha relations. Another metaphor I have for Sangha is that it is like a sack of dirty potatoes. If you have a sack full of dirty potatoes and you shake it up, and shake it up, over and over, the potatoes dirty and gritty bits rub up against one another. Eventually, you open it up and tip them out and viola...what have you got? Clean potatoes! It is in the frolic, grit, and fray of communal living where we rubbed up against each other’s personalities, projections, defensiveness, misunderstandings, irritability, righteous anger, and differing viewpoints. That’s a cocktail for our inner work.

Sangha can be a compassionate fierce mirror that invites us to clear and clean away our own gritty bits. But we must be willing to see into and own our own reactivity, soften our defensiveness, pull back our projections of rivalry, let go comparing mind, release the judgements of oneself and others. It takes deep inner and outer listening to work towards harmony and practice amiability. Sangha is then a wonderful crucible for transformation.

I lived in the forested hills of the Northern Rivers on community for twenty-five years. Several times a year, for more than twelve years, four dear dharma friends—Gai and I from ‘Bodhi Farm’ along with Carol and Ellen—met on ‘Dharmananda’,

our neighbouring community. The joy of friendship brought us together to share our stories of communal life over a good cuppa and a nourishing meal. This evolved into an 'accountability group' giving each other honest constructive feedback, holding each other to account, to actualize our fullest potential, to embody our dreams and visions.

John O'Donohue writes beautifully in *Anam Cara*, which means 'soul friend', of how true friendship can also challenge us: 'Your noble friend will not accept pretension but firmly confront you with your blindness'.

No one can see their life totally. We all have a blind side, therefore you must depend on the one you love who is wise to see for you, where you cannot see for yourself. Your kalyana-mitra complements your vision, in a kind a crucial way...for they are willing to negotiate awkward and uneven territories of contradiction and woundedness. The honesty and clarity of true friendship also brings out the real contour of your spirit. It is beautiful to have such a presence in your life' (p. 48–49).

The Buddha considered that having admirable friends a prerequisite for the development of the wings of awakening. The Buddha, Dharma, Sangha is an interwoven basket, a triple refuge that upholds the compassionate teachings of liberation. A *kalyana-mitra* is not just any pal you hang out with. A virtuous friend is someone who uplifts your path to a higher level of ethical and spiritual well-being. As Ram Dass liked to say, 'We are all walking each other home'. Friendship and community have agency for awakening. By simply practising

together we create a powerful container for a culture of awakening.

Joan Sutherland Roshi called enlightenment 'a conspiracy amongst friends'.

When we hold an intention to wake up, it unleashes a powerful force, to recognise our mirror of interbeing in the world. Sitting on our zafus together in silent communion forges a deep intimacy with the Way.

John O'Donohue spoke eloquently about the intimate space between two people: 'One of the tasks of true friendship is to listen compassionately and creatively to the hidden silences. The depth and substance of a noble friendship mirrors itself in the quality and shelter of the silence between two people.' (p. 145).

The mystery of who we are is not revealed in words but lies in the silence between the words or in the depth of what cannot be describe or named. In our daily life, there is such an immense rush and busyness to express ourselves or to post on Facebook, with such promptness. When we sit and befriend the inner silence we can drop below the superficial chatter of the mind, below the images, roles, the persona and stories we have about ourselves and others. Spaciousness, serenity, and silence allow us to visit the hearth of our own inner sanctum and recognise our essential timeless nature.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh was fond of saying 'the next Maitreya Buddha (future Buddha) is the Sangha'. It will not be a

single great charismatic guru or one highly realised soul but the collective wisdom of Sangha. Building strong sustainable resilient communities will help us navigate the challenges of societal upheaval from the climate crisis. We are all in this together.

The Bodhisattva path is to keep opening our heart even wider to the Maha Sangha of mountains, rivers, stones, and clouds and all beings. Not only do the verdant plants, ancient forests, animals, wild rivers, and rice fields nourish our body and community we realise that we are not separate from natural world.;

We awaken to our great body. As the world becomes increasingly more egregiously polarized, perhaps the more challenging task set before us is to promote respect, reconciliation and learn to live in harmony with one another in community. To vow to save the beings is an ongoing practice of not separating ourselves into a them-versus-us, me-against-you paradigm. This is not just an idealistic notion but based on a deep understanding and insight into our interconnected nature of all existence and non-existence. The woven basket of spiritual friendship walks us home to rest in the great house of belonging. 🌀

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Proofs of a new book

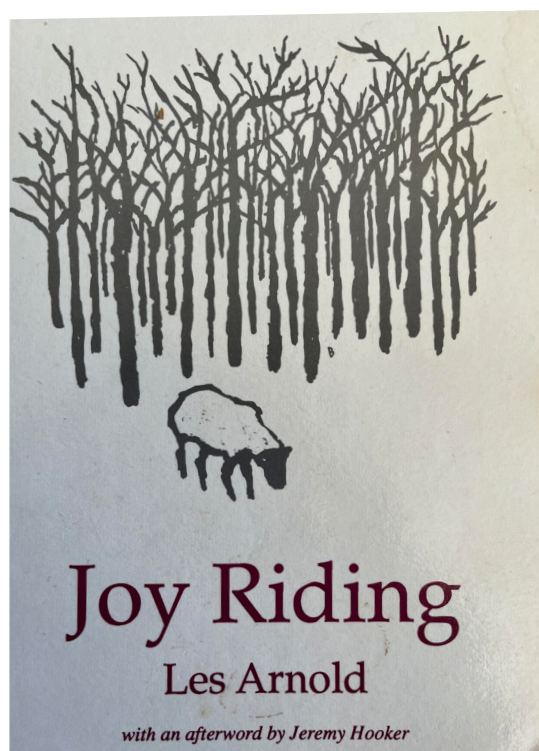
Les Arnold, with a reflection by William Verity

*The 'Proofs' arrived in the morning mail.
They cheered me up no end. They proved
I had been alive then and kicking at the
traces. Sandy reads them as a diary of
our time together. Jake who should know
better is suddenly struck with an idea
I may be better known after I'm dead. Meg
doesn't read poetry. At least not mine.*

*When I start to ring the changes I'm lost
in admiration for the person who wrote
these poems. Like health it seems another
country inhabited by friends and family
who must have known me even when I wasn't
myself. I comb this landscape hoping to
correct mistakes, plug gaps, be sincere
even to a comma's worth or a period.*

*When I'm finished it will be all over.
That part of me anyway. I'm glad to be
done with it although the poems include
some I'd written for my mom and dad now
dead. Waiting now only for the moment,
between the sealing of proofs and mailman's
hand, when the familiar beats down like
illness & there are no more words in sight.*

◇ ◇ ◇



‘Proofs’ was the last poem that Les Arnold ever wrote, found on his computer shortly after he died like a bolt from the night sky after a brief bout of pneumonia turned fatal.

He was 49.

The first I heard of it was a phone call a day or two later from his widow, Sandra, to tell me that he was dead and would I write his obituary and have it published in the local paper.

I gave him the obituary that I would have like for myself:

‘Les Arnold, poet, father, teacher, farmer, sportsman, adventurer, traveller, has died at his home in Bradford-on-Avon.’

It was my privilege to be able to play some part in his send-off, a part that he would have appreciated as my fellow writer, and to be able to honour the fact that he had once lived. And that I had known him, however briefly.

◇ ◇ ◇

We only met twice, in what were the final weeks of his life, although neither of us had any inkling of that at the time. I was looking to swap my car—a rusting, eccentric open top white Triumph Herald built in 1966 and therefore one year older than me—for a modern, sleek, fast motorbike, a black BMW K75 and one of the finest bikes I ever owned. The car was my first and was an individual that expressed its age by regular breakdowns (easily fixed) and a driver’s door whose latch was so worn that it would fly open on sharp lefthand turns unless you

held it shut as you turned. I loved that car, but I loved motorcycles more.

I was working for an old-fashioned, weekly country broadsheet newspaper at the time, *The Wiltshire Times*. It was really the last place that you would look to buy a second-hand motorcycle. But, as is sometimes the way, the universe provides the opportunity when the student is ready. It was the only motorbike advertised in *The Wiltshire Times* classifieds that week, and possibly that month. It was the model I was after and at a price that I could afford.

I drove into the front yard of his smallholding and there it was, propped up on its centre stand in the farm shed next to the machinery that you need when you have a few acres and a flock of Cotswold sheep. Les came out to welcome me. He was a fit man who still played grade hockey and had a full head of dark hair that had not yet started to go grey.

His friend and colleague, Jeremy Hooker, would later write of the spirit of the man, and his inspiration as a teacher. ‘There will be many people who know themselves to be in Les’ debt, lifelong,’ he wrote. ‘With his energy and zest for life, he fulfilled himself in everything he did, and gave joy to others.

‘As a poet Les was extremely modest. He simply refused to play the part. His poems do and will speak for themselves, however, and they will speak of and for him. Each act is an attention to which he brings his whole being.’

Jeremy tells a story about a speech Les gave to his colleagues as he was leaving after a stint of many years in Canada, to return to

a job in the UK. To the assembled room, he said that many of them were teachers who were lazy and had lost their spark. There was a small handful, however, who were exceptional pedagogues with a sharp creativity and ability to connect with students. It speaks of Les' ability to connect, that each of his colleagues counted themselves as one of the shining exceptions. He told the truth yet none were offended.

He used this superpower on me as we stood around the bike and I metaphorically kicked the tyres, know that this bike and only been waiting for this moment to arrive. 'What are you doing with the car?' he asked.

'I'll be getting rid of it,' I replied. 'I can't afford to run both.'

'My daughter would love to drive a car like that. Would you consider selling it to me?'

So we retired to the kitchen where Les brewed a cup of tea and we set about the awkward task of negotiating our prices. 'I'm terrible at this kind of thing,' he confessed.

Turned out, I was better. 'Why don't I give you the highest price for your bike that you could reasonably expect, and you give me the highest price that I could hope for my car?' And so the deal was quickly done over a cup of tea and the conversation turned to broader matters.

He was a teacher, the head of the English department at a college in nearby Bath, where he specialised in creative writing. I was a newspaper journalist just finishing a three-year apprenticeship and about to become fully qualified and looking for the next opportunity.

'I always wanted to be a journalist, but it never quite worked out that way,' he said.

'And I always thought that I would teach, and maybe I still will,' I replied.

Then he said something—or perhaps he did something—that sealed our friendship after just fifteen minutes of acquaintance. He stopped, looked me in the eye, and said: 'I think we're the same.' And in that moment, I knew that we were the same. That there was a sense that I had met one of my people. A rare moment of deep connection and understanding. In that moment, we dived into that intimate space often reserved for lovers. In that moment, he became my guide and my teacher as well as my friend. His teaching came later in the words of his poetry but the most powerful teaching came beyond words, beyond explanation.

He fetched three slim volumes and gave them to me. 'You may not like them. Don't worry about that,' he said.

The teaching has continued in the decades after Les died and is talking to me now, even as I write this. Les was not a meditator, as far as I know, and yet his poems are shot through with Zen wisdom. The koan that guides my path this week is the exhortation to 'save a ghost'. My sense is that Les had a way of inhabiting his original face that created a connection that showed me the way.

'The many beings are numberless. I vow to save them.'

◇ ◇ ◇

We met once more, a few days later, when we swapped vehicles. My Triumph parked in his barn and I rode off on the motorbike. I can't remember the details of that second meeting so well, though we would have talked and swapped ideas.

A week or two later, Les got a cold that turned into pneumonia. His condition deteriorated so fast that by 5 November, Guy Fawkes Day, he didn't have the strength to join his family in the garden for their fireworks, but had to watch instead from an upstairs window.

I knew very little about his life. I met his wife once and only briefly. I never met his children or his many friends. So perhaps our relationship should be described as 'acquaintance' rather than 'friendship', except that in that brief time of our acquaintance, I felt a connection that I have been lucky to celebrate with perhaps half a dozen people in my life.

His poetry helped, but it was an aid to his teaching and not perhaps the teaching itself. The finger pointing at the moon.

The poem that was found on his computer after his death was an uncanny premonition:

*When I'm finished it will be all over.
That part of me anyway.*

*Waiting now only for the moment,
between the sealing of proofs and mailman's
hand, when the familiar beats down like
illness & there are no more words in sight. ☹*

Friends, friendship, and 'spiritual sangha'

Caroline Josephs

I asked a dear friend (we dance together, at any opportunity)
to 'dance' with me, as 'friend', in words...
She responded, as we met face to face
with an intense... YES!

What is a friend?

I asked some dearest friends what it meant to them.

One wrote:

Trust, reliable, open sharing, looking after, caring, equal, making an effort, giving small gestures of understanding. There—even if there is a gap of time...

Another responded...

Evokes warmth, kindness, understanding.

I always think my friends understand me, far better than my family.

And another:

Some thoughts on friendship...

Being with treasured friends is like coming home, the comfort, the simple joy, the groundedness, the safety.

Coming home within myself, with company that fits in all the spaces.

The comfort, the freedom & reassurance of mutual love & acceptance.

The simple joy of warmth and love as the background glow.

The groundedness of liking myself in how I am with those important people in those loving ways.

Safety and stimulation all at once.

And another:

You are dear to me. Our friendship has spanned decades.

It is a nourishing red thread that weaves through the trials and tribulations, sorrows and joys, grievances and celebrations of our lives. There is always a heart song that it touches, despite our ageing bodies and minds. I know we rejoice in each other's creative talents, and pursuits.

We forgive and understand one another's foibles. This allows an ongoing, enduring love, and acceptance of one another.

We lick our fingers, as we share pieces of the same pie. So many delicious potlucks.

We keep showing up for each other through thick and thin.

A friend is someone who holds out their hand—to witness, care, and know, parts of our journey—particularly when times are tough. I cannot imagine how I would have managed without the loving support of dear friends through relationship breakups, and emotional distress, at times in my life.

It seems to me that the four Immeasurables of the boundless heart—love, compassion, joy, equanimity—with the addition of play, humour, music, honest feedback, all manifest, and find their home in the joyful field of friendship. Hallelujah!

Then I asked a few more dear friends what 'our friendship' meant to them:

First one responded:

*I treasure your presence, warmth, and playfulness,
passionate conversations, and always being there.*

Another wrote:

Dearest C,

You know I love you and our friendship! It is intimate.

She added:

I am reminded of this quote, from George Eliot:

'Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.'

All of these wondrous Beings are part of my 'spiritual sangha',
sharing lives, listening to each other's sorrows and joys...

Loving... 

Friendship

Brendon Stewart

Neighbours or Friends, the Ramsay

Street mob or cool New York? I can't say I have ever seen an episode of *Neighbours* and only occasionally, when my kids kind of insisted, did I sit down and watch *Friends*.

The certain regularity of time and place each day made these two soaps loved; loved in a real, heart-felt way while the friends and neighbours themselves were trusted and beloved. For many, *Friends* and *Neighbours* were the television equivalent of the soundtrack to their lives. And then, just as I sat down to write came the sad news that Matthew Perry, Chandler, a friend from *Friends* died. So even though I hardly knew who was being mourned over these last few days, Chandler and the unfamiliar life he'd led as Matthew was there on my screen.

These drama/comedies and others, too, show how great is the need for a friend and kindly neighbours. Feeling at home in yourself and with others. The friendships of life.

Good Sangha friendships are essential on the path of our practice. It's easy, not necessarily lazy, however, to practice without connecting to other people and so not notice the important perspective that direct human relationships create in learning about Buddhist teachings and practice. Of the three great treasures, Sangha and our community relations is the most complicated and unsettling. We each react to other people; other people are always the conundrum.

Some portray the Buddhist path, *sila*, as a practice of generosity. Generosity promotes a healthy relationship between people. Probably the single most helpful way to create friendships is to be generous. Being authentic with your acceptance, warmth, interest, and care for others. Become a good listener, and when asked, be willing to reveal yourself to others. Creating healthy relationships with others is of concern in all aspects of our everyday; strive to have all relationships be helpful and supportive.

Just as it's impossible to see our own face it can be even more difficult to see 'ourselves', to see ourselves as others see us.

Oh would some power give us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait would leave
us,
And even devotion!

— Robbie Burns

Good friends can help here, our face is there in the face of friends, in the world, in the moment before us. A friendly face from the world can check our foolish notions, help us understand and laugh at our vanity and blunders more clearly.

The world of good friends can hold lightly all manner of conceit. Living by the precepts is the practice of developing caring, compassionate relationships with others rather than harmful ones, generous ones rather than greedy ones, honest ones rather than dishonest ones. And so now at this time it might be a moment to pause and think about our friendships as a people, as a society.

Noel Pearson, in his 2022 Boyer Lecture, described Aboriginal Australians as ‘a much-unloved people’. Friendless in large part outside their own mob. The devastating result of the referendum on the Voice to Parliament seems to confirm this.

But, says Professor Freya Matthews from La Trobe University, in an ABC Religion and Ethics opinion blog:

‘There is plenty of evidence of good will towards our First Nations people. Long gone are the days of the Great Australian Silence towards Aboriginal history and culture.

‘Our national arts, literature, and music are now suffused with Aboriginal influences, bursting with Aboriginal notes and themes, richly populated with Aboriginal voices.

‘Decolonisation is a lens through which all our cultural and academic discourses, across the spectrum, are being unpicked and reviewed.

‘Preoccupation with exposing our colonial history is pervasive. On our public broadcaster, there is a daily stream of Aboriginal-referenced content and commentary. A new appreciation for the richness and sophistication of the traditional

Aboriginal Weltanschauung (“worldview”) is running ever deeper in our collective consciousness.’

This good will feels generous to me.

The new appreciation spoken of has grown hand in hand. Sure, it’s not the cry of despair one often hears. Many millions of us here in this Great Southern Land are friends to each other. Matthews outlines the love she has for the people here, in particular indigenous peoples. I love you she says, because ‘you delivered to us perhaps the most beautiful political bid in all of history, the Uluru Statement from the Heart—a document into which all the distinctive elements of this Heart of yours were pressed, like petals of your spirit. You upheld the sanctity of Law, and with it your inalienable sovereignty, yet from the torment of your powerlessness under conditions of colonisation, you appealed to the colonial government to return to you power over your own destiny.’

Many millions of us heeded and rejoiced in that invitation.

Our national friendships have happened gradually as we have got to know more about each other. Getting to know ourselves as friends and neighbours has taken shape despite the constraints or possibly the gifts of long and hardened cultural patterns. Noel Pearson describes us as ‘this glorious multicultural community’ that has emerged, unlike anywhere else—and it has come into being, I would contend, by happenstance.

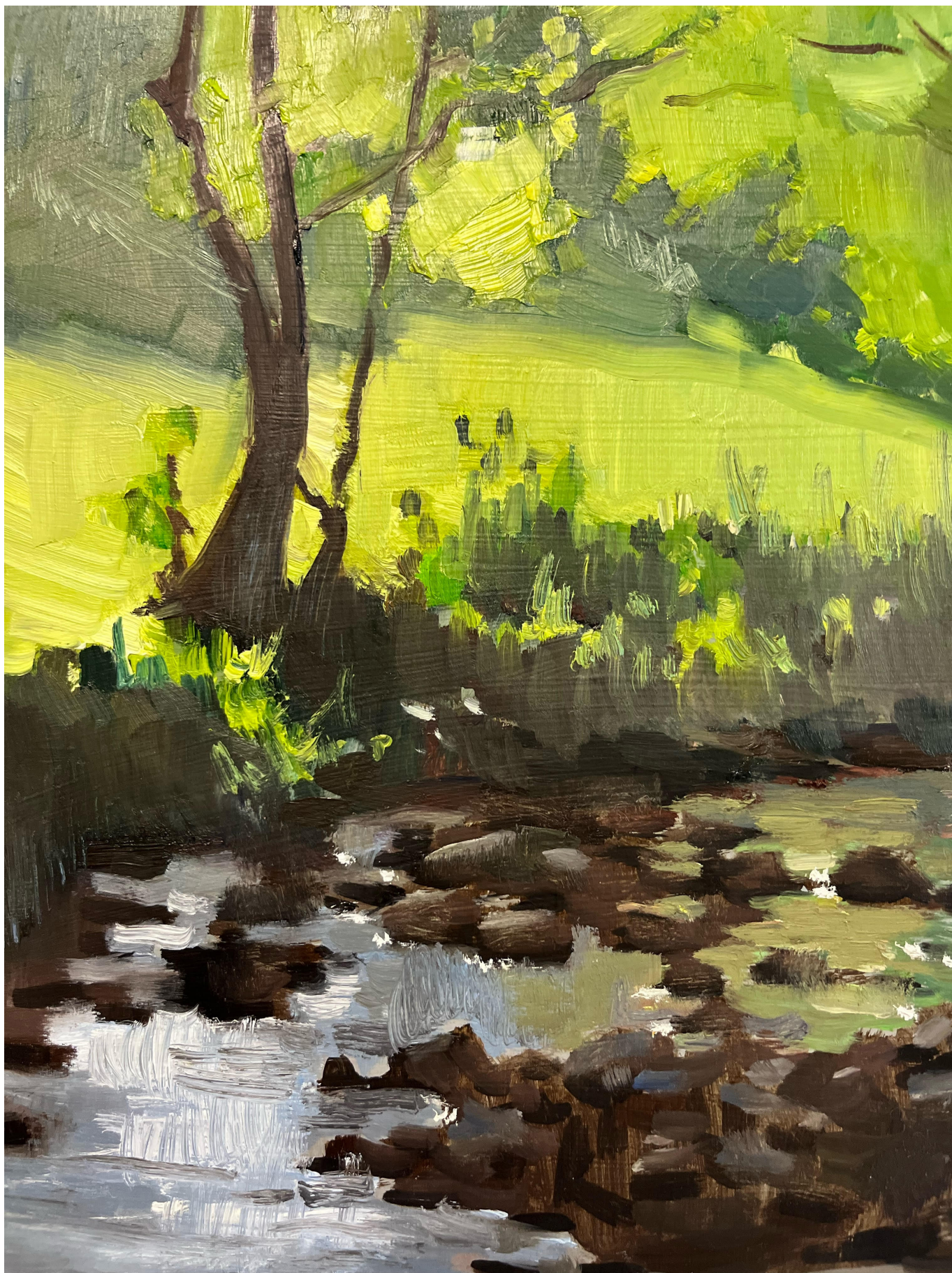
The Ten Buddhist Precepts which we share together speak to friendship, they emphasise sangha relations. Dogen’s words remind

us that each precept is a mysterious and subtle proposition. Taking great care when it comes to the sanctity of all living beings; not being violent, deceitful or abusive, avoiding a veneer of affection, not stingy, not gossiping or taking advantage and so hopefully the friendships from within our Sangha show that we don't just practice for ourselves. Our practice is for our friends and neighbours too. 🕐

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Elizabeth Austin, *Stream* 2023

Lest we forget: Three days of hope, determination, and dignity

Gillian Coote

After a majority of Australians

rejected the Indigenous Voice referendum held on 14 October 2023, Aboriginal Yes23 co-chair Rachel Perkins called for a week of silence ‘to grieve this outcome and reflect on its meaning and significance’.

It continues to be a sobering and difficult result. Who are we, really? When will we fully acknowledge the First Australians’ continuing trauma, beginning with the arrival of the First Fleet, listen to their voices, and together work towards a healthier future?

It’s heartening to recall that fifteen years ago the first Welcome to Country ceremony was held to open the 42nd Parliament of Australia, and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose lives had been blighted by past government policies of forced child removals and assimilation. It was the beginning of something new.

◇ ◇ ◇

12 February 2008

My car radio stopped working reliably years ago, so a friend persuaded me to buy a small

clip-on radio and now I often travel with it. You hook it onto your t-shirt, and use one of the ear-pieces, so when you get to where you’re going you can just lock the doors and walk away from the car without the music or story being interrupted.

Well today the music was overpowering, an Indigenous man singing the opening of the 42nd Parliament of Australia, accompanied by clapsticks, the first time this has ever happened. My blood ran the other way as his song took me over and walked with me out of a bakingly hot day into the cold, smelly air of my father’s last home.

As usual, he was in the recreation room, slumped in a chair along the wall, and a nurse’s aide was scooping jelly into his mouth. I took his new trackie dacks down to his room. The nurse had told me to buy extra extra large, so his long legs would be covered.

Since Pa went into the nursing home I’ve been looking after his little dog, Sasha. But the last time I brought her in and put her on his lap, he didn’t light up and pet her like he used to. She was just a lump and he pushed her off onto the linoleum. And because my own dog isn’t too happy about having Sasha

round, I put an ad in the local rag, offering her free to a good home.

The song finished with rapturous applause from inside Parliament House. I'm sure it wasn't only my heart that softened, my tears that fell. Ngambri Elder Matilda House read her welcome speech. She spoke of the time when the first Parliament in Canberra opened, and an Aboriginal elder turned up in his suit, but with bare feet, and was told to go away by a policeman.

My father would have been fourteen then, a big strapping boy, but it's too late to ask him if he remembers that day, because his mind has stopped working, like nearly everything else. Now, eighty-one years later, this new prime minister has the grace to invite this Welcome to Country and promises to make it the norm from now on. The leader of the Opposition even agrees.

I sit with my father for a while, stroking his forehead, speaking to him about the rain, the garden, the new parliament. He is impassive.

Later, when I get home, I turn on the television. The new prime minister is at the podium thanking Matilda House for her Welcome to Country. His face is soft. There are cutaways to the Indigenous men, women, and children sitting in the house for this occasion, the little ones' faces blank, their parents brave and strong, finally acknowledged, finally respected. Again, there is great applause and some whistling.

It is the beginning of something new for all of us.

◇ ◇ ◇

13 February 2008

Next morning, the alarm goes off at five minutes to six and it's grey again.

Friends are going into Martin Place to watch Rudd's historic apology on the big screens there. I'm going into the bush to remove Tradescantia and fleabane that has escaped from the back gardens on the edge of this remnant bushland valley.

Doing this work is a way of giving back to country, caring for country, supporting the micro-organisms, insects, birds, and reptiles of this country. Because once the Trad and fleabane and whatever are gone, the indigenous vegetation comes back.

The seeds have been biding their time, waiting for some light and breathing space. I pull on work clothes, fill up the thermos, put on my boots, eat breakfast and get on the road by 7 with my earpiece in so I can listen to this event.

I'm on site and working by 7.30 am. It seems to be getting darker, a huge cloud overhead. Tentative raindrops, and I scramble up the rock ledge and put on my plastic poncho but now it's bucketing down and within five minutes, my pants are sopping wet. The supervisor decides to call it a day. We worked for thirty-five minutes, my bag's half full and my face is covered with mud.

Driving home I can hardly see for the rain and great sheets of water whoosh over my car from floods on the road. I'm relieved to be home safely. Hooray! Now I can watch the apology on television after a hot shower to warm up.

It's the best television I've ever seen. Two hours speed by. My heart swells, tears fall. Rudd is humble and honest. Truth emerges from the dust of obfuscation and ill will. People in the gallery weep. People on the lawns outside are cheering. This is about open heartedness, about compassion, about empathy and it's so extraordinarily powerful because it's so long overdue. Even the Opposition leader is sorry, though his detour into wars and sacrifices is odd. But he reveals that his own father was taken away, so he understands the basic human need to know who you are, to know your family. To be loved.



14 February 2008

On the third day, it's grey again, no work.

I can eat breakfast and read the paper, full to bursting with yesterday's watershed events. There's even a colour supplement. The few dissenting voices don't spoil it. The phone rings, somebody about my father's dog. 'I'm in a wheelchair,' he tells me. 'I've already got a dog but I think he needs a companion.' I arrange to meet him, with Sasha, later today.

A lone pelican sails along outside on the river. In alchemy, the pelican symbolises resurrection. Which is what these three days have been, a rising up from a dead, moribund decade to hope, determination, and dignity. ○



Elizabeth Austin, *Haze* 2023

Last visit and thoughts on friendship

Helen Sanderson

‘Yes, I’ll come, Tuesday 10am.’ I typed the text. ‘Won’t stay long, don’t want to tire him.’

Running up the road to the hospital, corona check, ok, sticker on my jacket, my deep-blue jacket with my mother’s pearl brooch on it. Then up in the lift to the 9th floor. West ward, transplant ward. Walking through the ward past the different patients to room 15.

I wait at the door. Nurses taking blood, then a physio taking Dave for a walk, then the OT. My window of time with Dave is narrowing to a slit. I have another appointment after this. Dave is excited. He is going home the next day.

The hospital is getting Dave ready. Dave is happy, optimistic, in control. ‘Bring me some of those nice biscuits next time you come’.

‘This is the best room in the hospital’ Dave enthuses. I look through the window to trees and sports grounds of Sydney University. It is a fine view.

Dave’s hair has grown long and dark and thick but Dave is yellow, startlingly so. My heart squeezes. I sense Dave is perilously ill.

I have been contemplating this question. It seems like a koan. Who is my friend? Who is my enemy? Is it my little dog I take walking each morning? Woman’s best friend. Is it the trees and flowers that give me pleasure on these walks, the jacarandas blooming purple, the silky oaks in all their golden splendour, the bougainvillea climbing red over trees? Is it my sangha companions, friends along the way?

I explain I have another appointment. I planned to see him in a couple of days, with the biscuits. ‘See you soon.’ I wanted to kiss him, to hold him, but instead patted him lightly on the shoulder. Touch is not really allowed in these Covid times.

He did make it home on Wednesday. But Thursday, an SMS: ‘Dave back to hospital. midnight. Running a temperature. Not expected to live. In intensive care, intubated.’

By Friday, Jay, his wife, told me I could go and sit with Dave in ICU. My reply, ‘Sorry I can’t—Covid.’

Several days later: 'Withdrawing support. Hard but at peace.' The next day, another text: 'Dave died today. No pain.'

A photo of the board with his name on it: 'David Haywood. He fought hard.'

Me? mute. No words adequate. Still, I sent a text: 'Sending love.' Nothing adequate.



It is several years, maybe two, since my good friend Dave died. He was my piano teacher and enriched my life. As well as the great pleasure I had in playing Bach, we talked plants, gardens, art, animals, and family. I heard about his passions—gardens, teaching, and art—and also his health struggles. Covid put an end to face-to-face visits, so we would have a word over the phone.

Our relationship was platonic and full of affection. In those last days, I was one of the few people considered close enough to visit. Since then, until recently I couldn't play the piano. I was too sad. Even today, writing this, tears arrive.

But I have started playing again. My thinking has changed from 'I'm too sad to play' to 'aren't I lucky to have known such a person, such a friend, and isn't my life bathed in love'.

I have known friends over many years. A few are childhood friends or people I knew in my youth. They know my history. One good friend I first met when I was a girl of seven in Sunday School. That's more than sixty years.

Another close friend I met at the age of seventeen. I remember talking to her all

night. We caught up just yesterday: each of us had had a biopsy and we wanted to check that the other was ok. We were.

I met other close, long-term friends through the trials and tribulations of teaching in NSW schools and TAFE. These friends have known me through the milestones of my life. They know my history and were with me for major life events like my wedding and the death of my mother and husband. Some of my friends were my husband's good friends and have become mine.

Friendships do change. They are often circumstantial. If they are work friends, what you have in common can disappear when you move. Or some friends are close for a while then a cooling off can occur and the friendship fizzles. Relationships like everything come and go. Some friendships become acquaintances and vice versa.

When I was a child we sang that childhood hymn in Sunday school: 'What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.' So is my friend Jesus or God or the Buddha?

The question 'Who is my enemy?' can be left for another time. It is more nourishing to think of friendship, of people or creatures you love, especially in the wake of a nation and world that seems filled with fractiousness and in need of love. And inklings of friendship can occur any time, like the fine people I met in the skin cancer hospital, or the lovely man who fitted me with new shoes at my local shopping centre who told me about his First Nations DNA and his thoughts on the Voice, or the couple I spotted in the local park doing guerrilla planting of trees where some had died. ○

Practice is round

Bob Rosenbaum

Qigong means ‘qi practice.’ It’s a general term that applies to any exercise, mental or physical, which cultivates a healthy flow of vital energy. Translating *qi* as ‘vital energy’ is a bit misleading, though, since it seems to imply there is a ‘thing’ called ‘vital energy’ which we can somehow manipulate. We have the same problem in Buddhism when we reify emptiness, mistaking it for some essential state. Emptiness is dynamic. So is *qi*. Both arise by flowing and appear through myriad forms.

We could say zazen is a form of qigong, where doing not-doing meets thinking not-thinking. We could say qigong is a form of zazen, expressing stillness in motion. Although zazen and qigong are not one, they are not different. Although they are not different, they are not the same.

There are hundreds of forms of qigong, perhaps even more forms of qigong than there are forms of meditation. *Dayan* (Wild Goose) qigong is one of the most ancient. It differs from the many standing gongs that repeat a single movement along with instructions for specific breathing. In contrast, *Dayan Qigong*’s sixty-four movements flow from each other and into each other while letting the breath come naturally. As a Taoist practice, *Dayan qigong* harmonizes our natural selves with our natural world. If I had to summarise

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my late teacher Master Hui Liu’s teaching it would be two words: *just natural*.

Sitting quietly, doing nothing is also just natural. So is being yourself. So is all being. We human beings, though, have a tendency to complicate our lives. We have the illusion we can somehow set ourselves apart from this natural flow. This leads to blockages, imbalance, and strained grasping for excessive control. We lose contact with ease and joy.

In the stress of our daily lives, our bodies and minds often go out of tune. Hands and feet lose touch with each other; body and mind feel estranged from each other. Even taking a step can become a battle against gravity and inertia, falling and catching ourselves. Even zazen can become rigid or stagnant, scattered, or skewed.

The sixty-four movements of Dayan qigong help bring us back around to the earth upholding us and the sky enfolding us; here is the place we meet ourselves where we are. The first twenty movements open up blockages in the acupuncture channels, the next twenty tonify and strengthen the qi, then the last third of the form consolidates the flows and settles them.

About two-thirds of the way through there is a movement where we gather the qi into a ball and massage the ball. The hand on top makes circular movements counterclockwise in concert with the bottom hand making circles clockwise, strengthening and concentrating the qi.

Meanwhile, the waist rotates to move the upper body in a semi-circle from left to right. Then the movement reverses; going in the opposite direction counterbalances and stabilizes the flowing qi. Doing the movement 'just so' involves considerable coordination, concentration, and equilibrium.

One of the reasons I like teaching qigong is that people often feel the beneficial effects from the very first, even when they can only approximate the movements. When we train to become qigong teachers, though, we have an immediate experience of how 'a hairsbreadth's deviation fails to accord with the proper attunement'.

We learn how small adjustments have big effects for deepening the responses of our body-and-mind. We immerse ourselves in the fine details of each movement, practising to become precise in our expressions of it.

In one such teacher training class my friend John was painstakingly practising 'massage the ball', repeating it again and again for almost an hour. Our teacher Shimu (Master Hui Liu) came by to observe him. After John showed her the movement, she coached him: 'Make circles, *circles*.' John had been trying hard to perfect the movement and felt somewhat frustrated. He said: 'I thought I was making circles.' Shimu smiled sweetly, and said: 'Yes, making circles, very nice circles. Just not *round*.'

This is a good description of our Zen practice, and our lives in general. We approach our problems and our desires like a dog circling round and round to lay down and settle into a comfortable position. There's always a bump or two underneath we need to deal with, and whatever position we take we can only stay in for so long. We all have our sharp edges. Like river stones tossed about in the water's flow, as we're jostled in the stream of life-and-death, bumping up against each other and coming up against ourselves, our angular egos get dinged and dented.

Like stones in the river, over time, the current polishes and smooths us. If we are set in our ways, stuck in the mud, we aren't free to collide with all the dharmas. The *Tao Te Ching* reminds us: the Way is empty, meaning *free*: it rounds our edges, loosens our tangles.

This isn't always comfortable. We live in a society obsessed with smoothing our way as quickly as possible. We lose touch with the earth when we pour asphalt on our highways, and our equanimity gets bumped when we hit potholes and curse. We're

accustomed to linear thinking: aim straight for what you want to accomplish and get there as fast as you can! Paradoxically, this pursuit of progress makes us more jagged and jittery.

The notion of circling round, feeling our way, coming back to where we began, is looked down on as counterproductive. It may seem pointless. The acupuncture needle of zazen, though, penetrates by virtue of being pointless. Qigong helps us appreciate how each time we come round again, we discover deeper dimensions to our practice.

When we want our practice to result in some *thing*, our straining to be productive immerses us in the line of creation and destruction, with all the attendant sufferings of birth and death. When we circle back upon ourselves, we make very nice circles but they usually are not round. They usually have some catch in them, some elongation or constriction.

Our efforts at circles are not round, but *our practice is round*. Our sitting cushions are round. So are our minds and hearts. We think our journeys to the Zendo are back and forth, lines of come and go. In reality, we are always turning and returning.

The stories we tell ourselves pretend to have starting and ending points, but eventually we realize the same issues of love and loss arise and fall again and again. In Dayan Qigong, the last movement comes back to the first: in our end is our beginning. Our practice is endless and beginningless, like a circle.

Many years ago, when teaching a beginning qigong class, we were grappling with the

movement ‘massage the ball’. The students were feeling awkward and clumsy. Hoping to encourage them, I said: ‘This movement is very difficult. It takes quite a while to learn it. I’ve been doing it for about fifteen years, and I figure it will be another five or ten years before I really get it.’

Master Hui Liu happened to be passing through the class when I said this. She stopped, and corrected me. In a very encouraging, sweet tone of voice she reassured me: ‘Oh no, Bob, not five or ten years more. Whole life, Bob. Whole life.’

Some people, faced with lifetime practice, feel daunted. I find it inspiring. It means life is never boring. Each time we form a circle, the little uneven bumps help me discover a new way of finding smoothness. Physical smoothness is a gate to equanimity. Neither smoothness nor equanimity have some fixed, unchanging essence. Each is an expression complete each moment. We realise equanimity step by step, a balance of effort and ease, yin and yang, reaching out from an ungraspable centre.

In movement twenty-two of Dayan Qigong, ‘waving hands like clouds’, we draw a semi-circle around ourselves waist high with one hand, then complete the circle with the other hand. This delineates the field of *qi*, the buddha-field of our practice. We find ourselves at the centre of this empty field and as we step forward, the centre moves along with us.

The centre moves along with us, and when the close of the Dayan Qigong form brings us back to the opening, the centre at the end is both different and the same as the centre at the beginning. Pretty much every time

I do qigong I feel better at the end of the session than at the beginning.

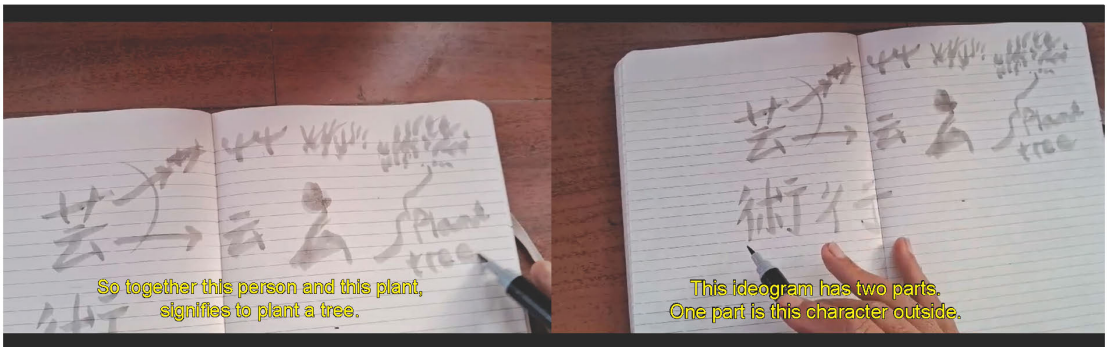
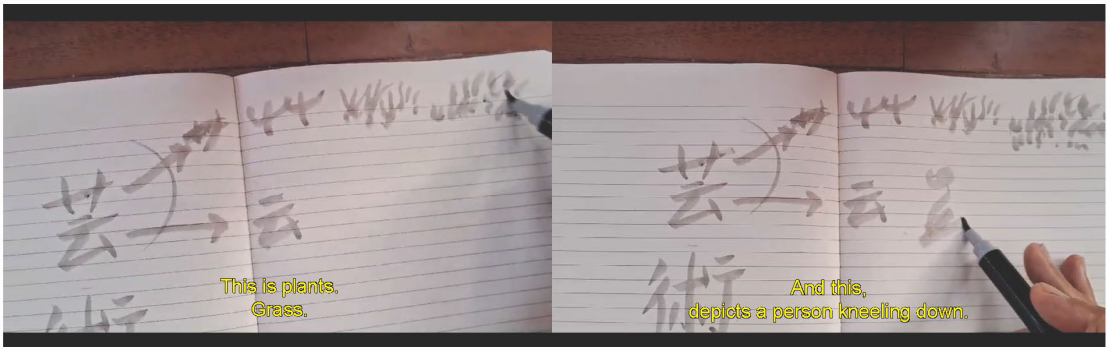
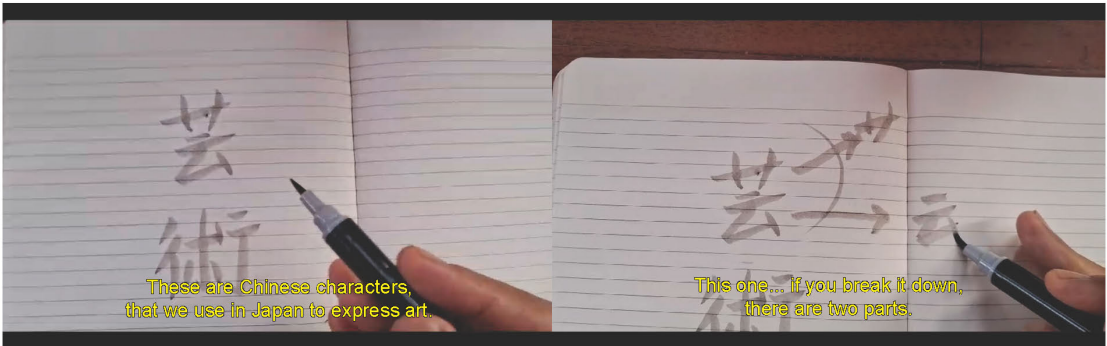
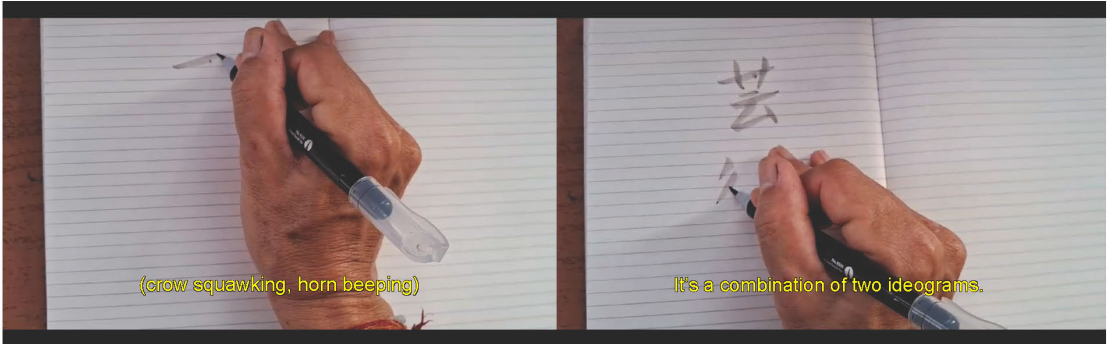
I came to qigong at a time in my life when I felt stymied in my Zen practice. In retrospect, I realize I was so attached to 'no gaining idea' it had become a blockage, another gaining idea. It was a relief to acknowledge that I wanted to feel better, and to have qigong provide practical tools to return me to the ease of just natural. Shimu, herself a devout, practising Buddhist, used to tease me: 'Oh, you Buddhists, always thinking about suffering, old age, sickness, death. We Taoists say: "Live a long life! Be happy!"'

Have you ever felt stuck in your Zen practice? It's part of the practice. Being stuck and flowing freely complete each other; gaining and no-gaining are two sides of the same coin. When we allow effort and ease to meet, they circle around and find each other as effortless effort. In Zen, delusion and enlightenment circles around to stumble into realisation. In qigong, yin and yang circle round, interpenetrate, and balance us so that we walk with ease.

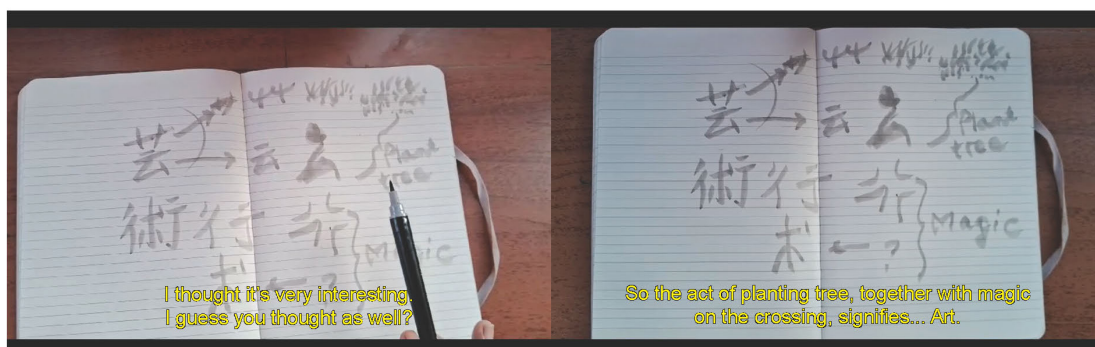
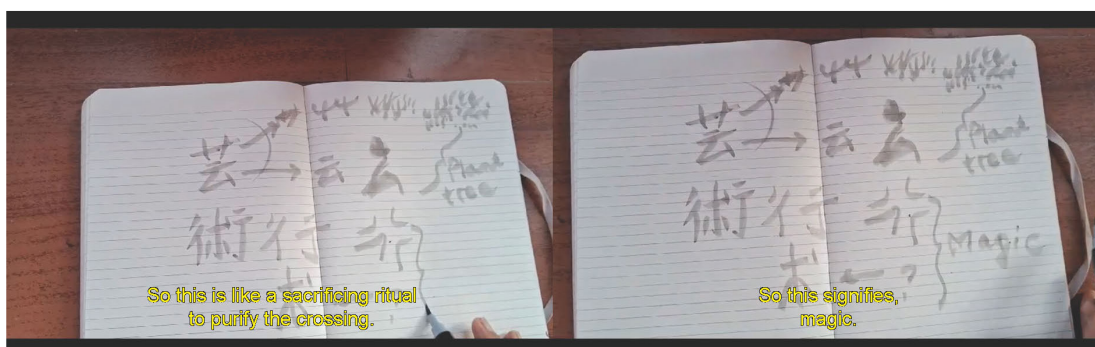
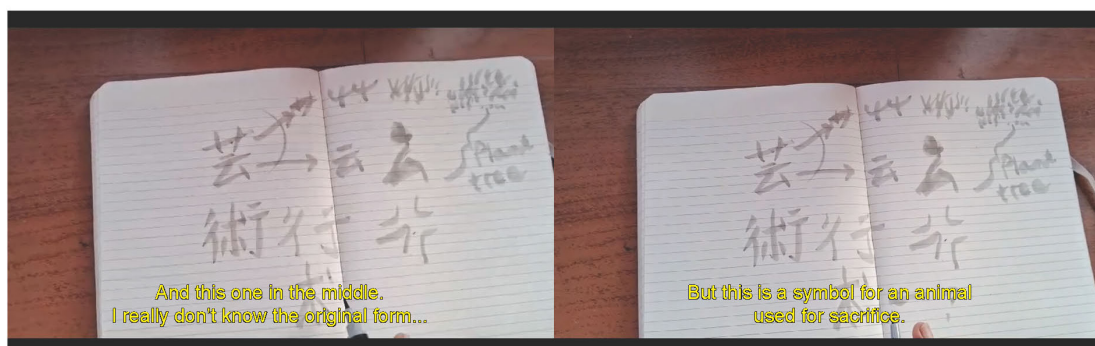
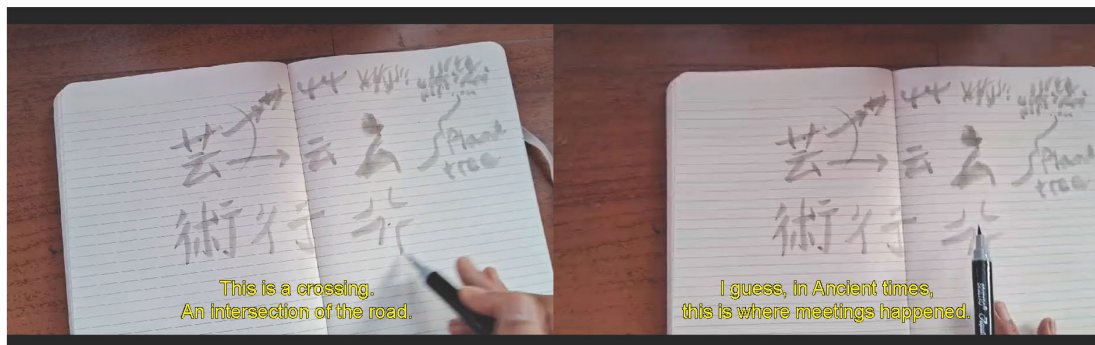
In both Zen and qigong, we keep making circles which are imperfect. That's what makes them real. In the process, we touch and are touched by roundness.

I love zazen: when I settle down to sitting motionless, the stillness reveals how I'm always going somewhere. I love qigong: the flowing movements reveal how I'm never going anywhere. Every when and everywhere they meet, we find ourselves where we are. ☯

Reiko explains art



Lisa Myeong-Joo



Where did you go?

Will Moon

In the Kimberley we are in the midst of the dry season, and the build-up to the wet is starting. It is September and the temperatures have started to climb. Most days it has been about 35-36 in the middle of the day, but it has been a dry heat so it is ok. The humidity is now slowly starting to increase and by the end of September it will be around 40 degrees some days and the heat will start to feel oppressive. Right now, it is still pleasant enough.

Each day I go to work and sit in my little air-conditioned office in the library. In the morning I sometimes wander down to the museum for a chat with our volunteers and help to sort through the issues with the museum. In my lunch break I have a habit of doing the short walk of just over a block to the edge of town where I can look over the marsh. I walk out of the library and am instantly bathing in the warm to hot sunshine.

Naturally, in the midday heat I drop into a slow, mindful almost dreamy walk down the streets. The tourists are dropping off now, so the streets are quieter during the day. Once I get to the edge of town, I cross the path and walk across the brown dead and dormant grass clumps, with dead leaves crunching underfoot. I head for the patches of shade beneath the jigal trees, and take a seat under one of the lovely jigals. Frier birds and babblers chatter and flit about in

the branches above. I love their songs and antics as they busy themselves in the canopy above me while I eat my lunch.

Sitting here, my eye wanders across the marsh, which is a huge baking tidal mudflat, to a distant mirage. The mangrove trees which line the distant creek seem to dance about behind the mirage. Kites circle around in the thermals above. I love to do this each day; it refreshes my mind before I return to the office.

Last February, we began our journey to the Kimberley after delays due to floods in the north caused by cyclone Ellie, which destroyed the bridges and damaged the main road access. It is interesting to contemplate the twists and turns we take in our life. An internet search back in late 2022 revealed a job advertised in the Kimberley. Ten years ago, we had fantasized about working in the Kimberley one day, after having an amazing journey through the area. An application, an interview, and a job offer. It all seemed so random. There was a sort of half-hearted application for the job, never really taking it too seriously, or discussing it much, but when the phone call came that offered the job, there was strangely absolutely no doubt that we should accept. Both Sue and I felt this way. We were fortunate to have choice, many people don't. Lily was less enthusiastic however we encouraged her that it would be an

incredible experience. And so, we are here.

It is mysterious how our life unfolds. In our lives, we step into the unknown, both consciously and unconsciously. In our case we really had no idea how it all might unfold yet we take that next step into each moment, following out instincts and best judgement. Really, none of us know what the next step will bring. Even when life seems to be following a very predictable and seemingly secure pattern, we can be sure that it will change, and change in ways that we perhaps never anticipated.

There is a koan, Case 36 of the *Blue Cliff Record* that goes like this:

One day, Ch'ang Sha went for a walk in the mountains. When he returned to the gate, the head monk asked, 'Your reverence, where have you been wandering?' Ch'ang Sha said, 'I came home from strolling about in the hills.' The head monk said, 'Where did you go?' Ch'ang Sha said, 'First I went following the scented grasses; then I came back following the falling flowers.' The head monk said, 'That is the spring mood itself.' Ch'ang Sha said, 'It's better than the autumn dew falling on the lotus flowers.'

Hsueh Tou commented, 'I am grateful for that answer.'

The head monk asks, 'Where have you been, Master?' Ch'ang Sha says, 'I came home from strolling about in the hills.' And then the head monk asks, 'Where did you go?' Ch'ang Sha gives a beautiful response to the head monk" 'First I went following the scented grass; then I came back

following the falling flowers.'

This is like the words of a wonderful poet, with these words, we can smell the scented grasses, feel that we are the falling flowers. Without a sense of separation, the experience is brought to life for us in these words. The head monk acknowledges this, saying: 'That is the spring mood itself'. Exactly—it is none other than this. Ch'ang Sha brings it alive for us. We have a lovely sense of the freedom in Ch'ang Sha's words, the acceptance of each moment as it arises, strolling about in the hills, completely free and at ease. Following the scented grasses, open to each moment, moment to moment.

The monk's question is a significant question for all of us. Where are you going, or perhaps it could be, how do you approach each moment? First, I followed the scented grasses. This is like, now I open to this moment, and the next moment, and so on, and I respond to each moment as it arises. There is a sense of the great mystery of life as it unfolds, moment to moment. How many of us could say we respond to each moment as it arises? This response is not only to act when appropriate, but to open to each moment. To remain open to each moment.

While we may plan and strategise, or try to control our life, we really do not know what the next moment will bring. As our world is becoming more tense with war and global unrest, and the environmental crisis that now unfolding before us, we begin to sense that our assumptions of stable and secure future are not holding up like they once did. Many of our ancestors and followers of the way back in time also lived in sometimes

very dangerous and uncertain times. We can't help but have assumptions about our future, however that is all that they are. Life is such a precarious thing, yet we somehow assume that it will just go on.

Ch'ang Sha is saying, I open to this moment, moment to moment. Now I am the sweet smell of the scented grasses, and now I am a flower falling from the tree. Open and accepting of this precarious life. It is not resignation to whatever comes up. Right now, there are so much need for action, so much urgency for action if we are going to avert massive ecological and human loss. Following the scented grasses is to be open and to also act when appropriate. It is also acceptance of what is. It is to love life. Amid our acceptance and openness to our vulnerability and uncertainty, to the vulnerability of life, we are able to love.



My work in the Kimberley has been to manage the Shire's library and heritage services. I didn't really have much idea about managing libraries, however after many hours in libraries doing archaeological research, I figured that it couldn't be too difficult. What I discovered is that it is such a joy to serve people. One aspect of the job which I could never have predicted is the interaction with the local Aboriginal people, for which I am so grateful. However, it presents in the most unexpected ways.

Some of the local people are like any other library user. In the town there are also people that live on the fringes, that live in poverty, without the opportunities and

choice the rest of us take for granted. The causes are complex and each individual has a unique and complex story to tell. What sometimes goes with poverty, lack of opportunity, and perhaps an ingrained sense of hopelessness is the abuse of alcohol. It is not unusual to have intoxicated people come into the library each week. We are in the middle of town, and near the park. People drink in the park and then come into the library.

This has been part of my practice of following the scented grasses, the openness of moment to moment, responding as needed. I don't really see drunk people come into the library. I see beautiful people that are suffering, every one of them is unique. I don't really know what each moment will bring or what to do next. Sometimes I just leave them to settle down and maybe just talk calmly with them. Sometimes I have to ask them to leave. Today a lady who comes in from time to time, and is normally very quiet came in, and she was crying and wanted to be taken to the sober up shelter, so we rang and arranged for the people at the shelter to come and pick her up.

In the meantime, another lady came in who was an acquaintance of this woman and they started to have a heated argument. So we had to try to settle things down a bit. Eventually the bus arrived and picked up the first lady. The second lady started to talk to me about her life, how she went to school in Derby, how she now lives in Broome but feels sad when she visits Derby, how she loves the place, love fishing here.

I learned that she came from the Imitji

and Barnett area and we talked about the beautiful gorges and country up there. I told her that we were up at Mt Barnett on the weekend and about a smoking ceremony that they were having at the community because there had been a tragedy in the community that week. When we were there, we never asked what the tragedy was. It seemed insensitive. The lady said, 'Yes that was my nephew, he hung himself.' I said that I was so sorry to hear that. By being open to the moment, I was able to share her sadness.

One thing I have learned since being here is that, when we see suffering, there is always a tendency to want to find a solution to fix it, however, sometimes to just be there, to be open and listen and not flee is what the moment calls for. It doesn't need some grand design to fix things. Sometimes the moment also calls for a word of advice. One day I suggested to a chap that it is not good for this health to drink hand cleaner as his kidneys will fail and he will end up on dialysis after he admitted to me that he drank it. The moment called for honesty. He listened in his intoxicated state. Maybe, just maybe those words might be remembered.

I'm reminded of a story about Hakuin Zenji and I've extracted a copy that I found on the web that seems close to how I remember reading it in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. This story exemplifies the openness and response to the unfolding present.

Hakuin was greatly respected and had many disciples. At one time in his life, he lived in a village hermitage, close to a food shop run by a couple and their beautiful, young daughter. One

day the parents discovered that their daughter was pregnant. Angry and distraught, they demanded to know the name of the father. At first, the girl would not confess but after much harassment, she named Hakuin. The furious parents confronted Hakuin, berating him in front of all of his students. He simply replied, 'Is that so?'

When the baby was born, the family gave it to Hakuin. By this time, he had lost his reputation and his disciples. But Hakuin was not disturbed. He took delight in caring for the infant child; he was able to obtain milk and other essentials from the villagers. A year later, the young mother of the child was troubled by great remorse. She confessed the truth to her parents – the real father was not Hakuin but rather a young man who worked at the local fish market. The mortified parents went to Hakuin, apologizing, asking his forgiveness for the wrong they did him. They asked Hakuin to return the baby. Although he loved the child as his own, Hakuin was willing to give him up without complaint. All he said was: 'Is that so?'

This is a quite incredible example of opening and responding to each moment as it arises. Hakuin could see little point in arguing with the furious parents. He could see what the baby needed, love and care. He responded in the most selfless way.

When we are not open to each moment we are occupied in our thoughts, in the

busyness of our minds. This is the imagined world. It doesn't exist anywhere but in our thoughts. We can't respond without much deliberation, and our responses often miss the mark. Some thoughts are important, but mostly our minds are filled with chatter. In this busy thought mind, we are absorbed in a dream. In Case 40 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, 'Nansen's Flower Plant', Nan Ch'uan speaks of this dream.

While conversing with Nan Ch'uan, the high official Lu Hsuan said, 'The priest Chao said, "Heaven and earth and I are of the same root. All things and I are one." That's extraordinarily wonderful!'

Nan Ch'uan pointed to a flower plant in the front garden, and called to the official, saying, 'People of the present day see this one flower plant as though they were in a dream.'

In this koan, Lu says to Nan Ch'uan how wonderful he finds the idea that 'Heaven and earth and I are of the same root. All things and I are one.' This very idea is a dream, so Nan Chuan points to the flower plant and says, 'People of the present day see this one flower plant as though they were in a dream.' Nan Ch'uan is trying to awaken Lu Hsuan to the fact, rather than the concept.

How do we see and know that 'Heaven and earth and I are of the same root. All things and I are one', rather than it just being a lovely idea? There are all sorts of ideas about what heaven is. Here we may think of it as the ultimate flawless purity all things. When we experience that this ultimate flawless purity, earth and I are of

the same thing, we know what this phrase is getting at. In some religions this is called the experience of God. In Buddhism we refer to it as the Dharma. However, these words betray the experience. It is just building concepts upon concepts.

In a sense we probably all come to Zen practice because we are like high official Lu. Perhaps even to sesshin. We have read a lot, or listened to lots of podcasts about Zen, and it all sounds so interesting. But our work now is to go beyond the appealing ideas, and to really experience this truth for ourselves.

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What is the dream? We could consider anything that is not the experience and awareness of this moment as the dream.

When we think of people, events, things, all kinds of things that are not 'here', they are the product of our minds. They are not accurate representations of our life, which is right here, but images and concepts. Every idea we generate has some element of bias, influenced by our conditioning, our past experiences, our expectations, and our imagination. Whether it is ideas or memories of the past, or ideas and the anticipation of the future. If we think of someone we know well, that is not them. That is not the person in this moment. It is an idea. We all know this.

Ideas about ourselves can often be out of step with what we experience right now. When the experience doesn't measure up to our idea, we can feel depressed or disappointed. We should be like this idea, or like that idea. Ideas of our life are like this too.

It is like we develop this idea that we are travelling along a linear path, travelling along a highway, with our birth and our past at one end of the road, and our future and then death at the other end. We are at some stage on the increments along the linear path of the highway that we mark as years, like marks on a ruler. But it's all an idea, a very convincing idea.

Your future is an idea, an idea that probably has very little to do with how your life will unfold, moment to moment. And yet we must have the idea of a future and past, we must plan for the idea of the future, which is really planning based on the assumption of the continuity of each moment as it unfolds in a particular way. Our concept of the future is essential, and similarly we draw upon our memories and lessons from the past for how we act now and in the unfolding of each moment.

The problem for most of us is that the imagined world is so convincing that we spend most of our time in this dream, and very little, if any time being present. We love our imagined world, and for most people, they don't actually know that there is anything but this. The dream has become their world. The problem is that the dream and the unfolding of each moment often don't align, and so we suffer, and bring suffering to those around us as our ideas and expectations fail.

The instruction to practise being present does not mean that we need to obtain some sort of perfect continuous state where we are always present and never confused and never deluded. We are unlikely to ever reach some sort of perfect state like this, and such

a state fails to value the human condition with its imperfections, its failings, successes, confusion, clarity and all of the things that make our lives rich and human. Our intention to be present, and our resolve to understand is enough. Sometimes we will be clear, and sometimes foggy, awake or sleepy. All that matters is our intention and our resolve.

There is a koan that describes us running along the edge of a sword. At any moment we can fall off either side of the sword. And this is what we do, over and over, we fall off the edge of the sword. Perhaps a tight rope is a better description. Our practice is like stepping onto the tightrope. At first, we can barely keep our balance for more than a few seconds at a time before we fall off. That balance for us, is being present. We step onto the rope again and again. Gradually we can stay there for a short while. Eventually we have enough balance to take our first step along the tightrope, then we wobble and fall off, caught by the net. Eventually, after a lot of dedicated practice we can walk to the end of the tightrope and back. But we only have to lose focus for a moment, and we fall off the rope, and we surely will and do lose our balance and fall off the rope. This is our humanness.

We can't help but be swept along at times by our imagination, by the dream. It is always imperfect. One moment we are present, and we delight in this, and then the next moment we are off on a chain of ideas and thought, then we become aware of it, and we are present once again.

After a while we just start to love the process for what it is. Stepping onto the rope, taking

Random sesshin thoughts

Sean Loughman

Ding!

Sit? Stand? Bow? Gassho? Wrong again. Eh.

◇ ◇ ◇

Am I the only one that needs to fart?

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Excuse me, yoga mats are by nature non-dual, but I think that one is mine.

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LUUUUUUUUNNNNNNNNNNNNCCCCHHHH!!!!

◇ ◇ ◇

The Great Way avoids picking and choosing, but do you want peanut butter, tahini, honey or jam on your bread?

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Rain! What an amazing weather phenomenon.

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I'm getting better at this! Actually, I'm pretty good. Oh, wait...

◇ ◇ ◇

Oh, good. I'm not the only one who needs to fart.

◇ ◇ ◇

'There is no judgment,' I lie to myself.

◇ ◇ ◇

If it is not difficult and not easy, what is it?

◇ ◇ ◇

A pair of butterflies bow and curtsy.

Spring is finally here. ○



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