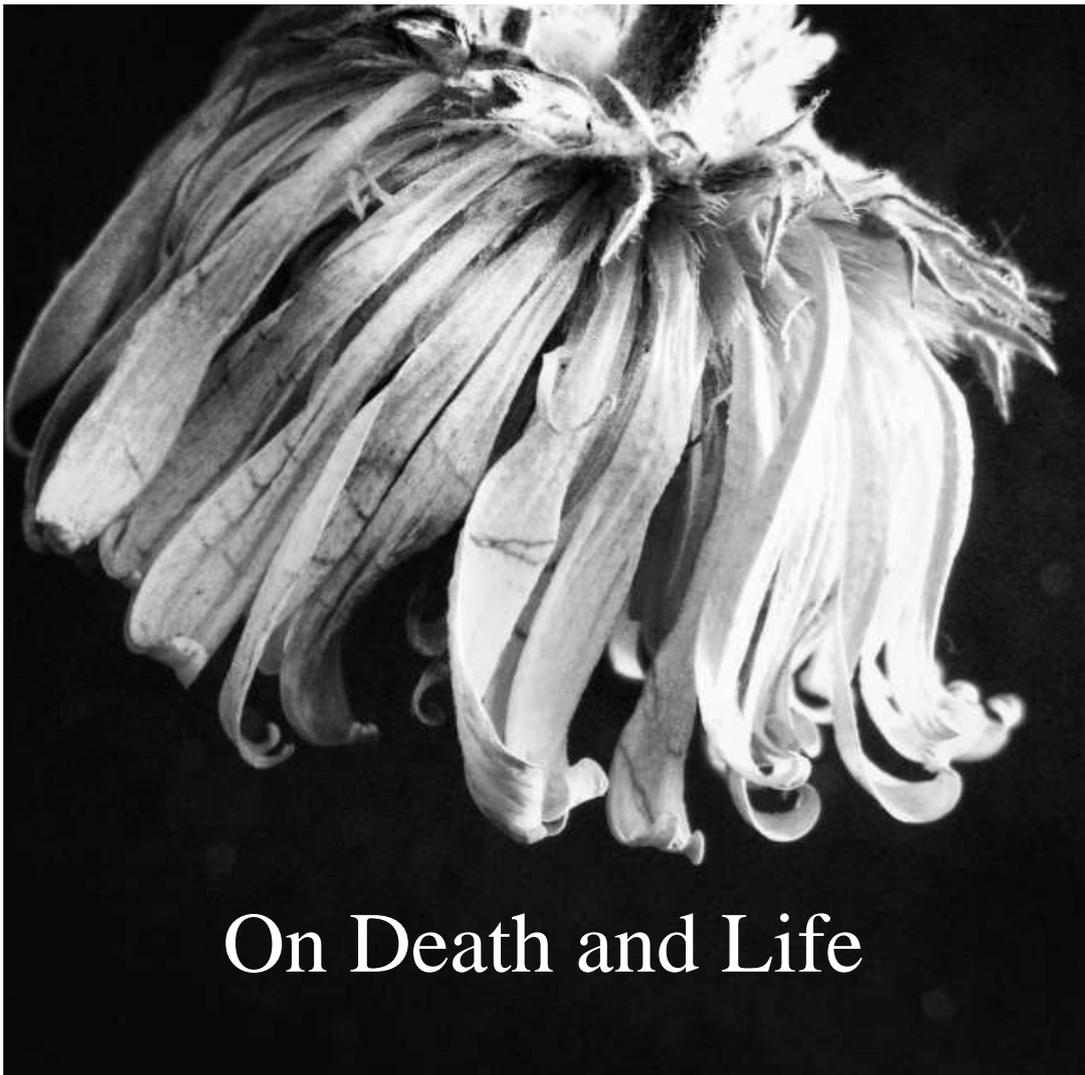


Mind Moon Circle

A journal of the Sydney Zen Centre



On Death and Life

Summer 2014

About the Issue: On Death and Life

by Max Baker

The skies were alight with flames in late October last year. They raged and roared and destroyed bushland, homes and lives. One dear Sangha member lost his house. And yet this periodic destruction is perfectly natural. These fires have always waged in our bushland and are part of its own process of renewal and rebirth. The shy life which then sprouts forth in the blackened void makes the destruction far less senseless. Death gives way to life. I hope my selection of Glenys Jackson's photo for the cover captures this shy life.

Are we not all arsonists to similar fires when we enter sesshin? Without self regard, we foolishly light an ember and toss it into the dry shrubbery of the small mind. During Rohatsu I sat in the most ferocious of blazes. I watched as the craving body and mind twisted, warped and spat, but each time I wanted to lunge forth and salvage something, I held myself back. After a while I just watched the process with both a deep sense freedom and sadness. In the end, when the smoke cleared and the earth was scorched and raw, I did not know what to do. However, I could see further in all directions than I had been able to for a long time. The beautifully subtle shy life started to return: a cool breeze on my face, minute textures, light and shadow, weird smells and distant once forgotten memories. My hands began to softly reach out; budding, sprouting...searching. I realised once again that death gives way to life on those cushions, in those cushions...and through those cushions.

Thank you all for your submissions. My how the tears flowed when I read them. I was overwhelmed by the depth and beauty of all the pieces submitted - be they poems, drawings, photos, essays, journals and even ethnographies. The submissions were as richly textured as life. Sadhu! Hopefully this issue will share the brilliance, talent and creativity that exists in our community. It may be that Zen practice allows people to connect a beautiful aspect of themselves, or it may be that 'creative types' are drawn to Zen practice. Either way it has been a joy to work with you all in the dharma. The issue starts with poetry from our dear departed friend Gordon Walters (even now I cry as I write this) who still burns in all our memories as a beautifully kind and brilliantly creative soul. His death affected us all deeply and so in life – in this very journal – we honour him.

Next Issue: Zen and Desire

The topic on our next issue will be 'desire'. How juicy! What is it that the body desires, the heart desires or the mind desires? All submissions are welcome however wild and sensuous. Please send submissions by 7th April, 2014 to:

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Mind Moon Circle

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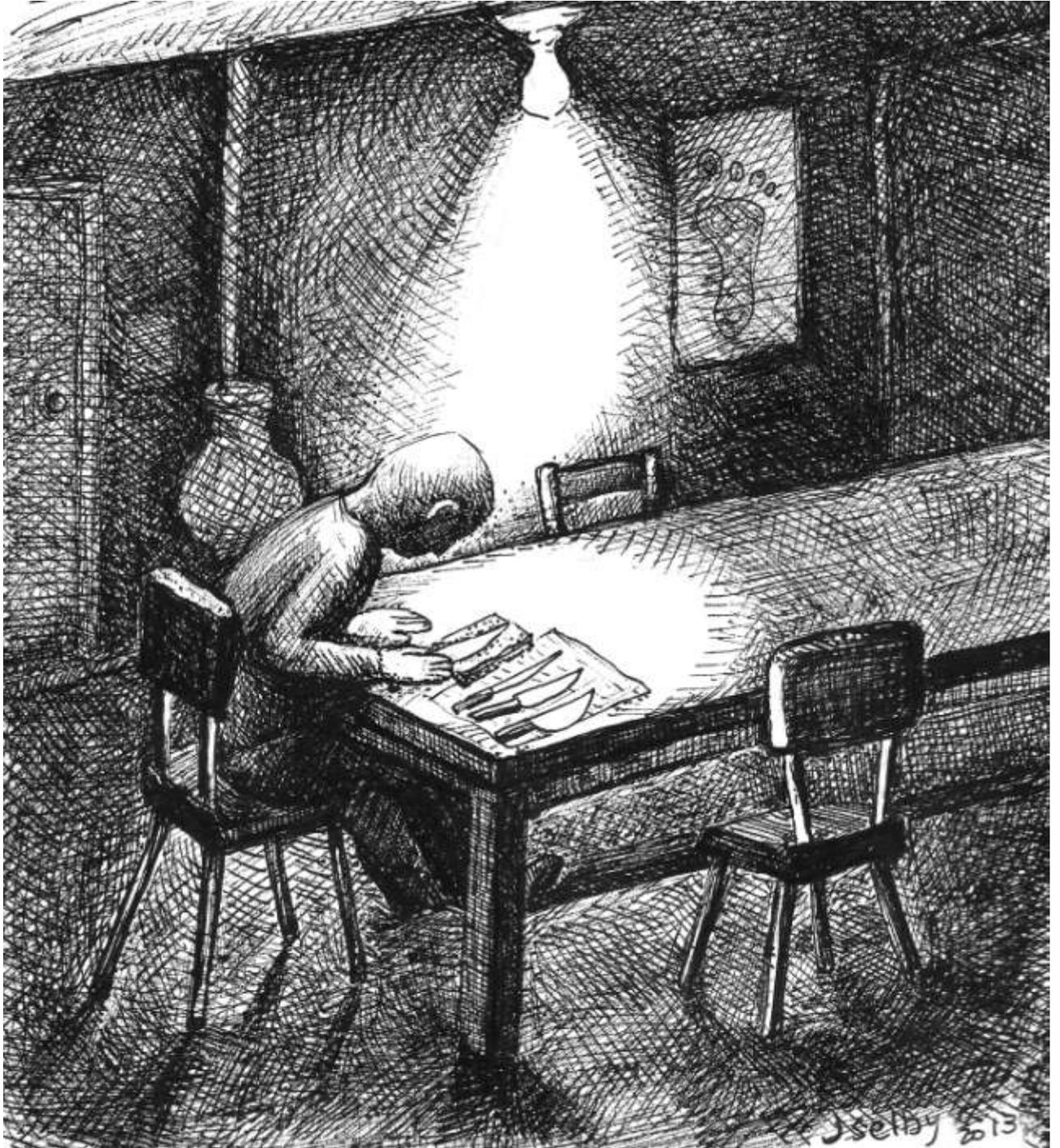
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Gordon Waters, Master Chopper - Drawing by Janet Selby



Poetry by Gordon Waters

Dear All

At the Memorial Ceremony, Anna Blunt Waters, Gordon's widow, read some of the poems he had written. You may know that Gordon was diagnosed with an invasive form of brain cancer ten years ago, joined our sangha, took Jukai on Christmas Eve last year, and died on February 5. The poems Gordon wrote were prescient and many attending the ceremony felt they would benefit the wider sangha. Anna also sent me a short prose piece, Mist, which she didn't read at the ceremony.

Gassho,

Gillian Coote

Journey

by Gordon Waters

Shadows pass in front of you and then change
For each second there is a different pattern

Like our lives.

This change is part of life
From something into something else

Constant metamorphosis.

This is what provides interest
This is what brings us closer to our destiny

Closer to the ultimate change.

This is not to be feared
This is to be accepted and embraced

For it is not then the end of the journey
Just the end of the journey that we know

Leaving Your Garden

by Gordon Waters

I used to leave the Calamondin or the
Abutilon Frazeri, knowing full well
photosynthesis would carry on and
I could enjoy the cornucopia of delights
on offer
elsewhere.

Some might call me cavalier.
I would have said I was just green.

Time was, the Brush Box had a whippy trunk, and
the shade from its branches
barely spit on the weathered fence.
The berries from the *Elaeocarpus reticulatus* (oh precious blueberry ash),
burst beneath footfall and made me itchy
to
Move.

Recently the *Grevillea* "Honey gem" you planted
just before we had the last rain
looked thin, pale, almost medically withered.
So I stayed.

Now I will see the plants from four hundred metres above the earth, then climb.
and I'm sure I'll spot that *Macrozamia* -
someone said every thousand years a frond grows.
We have
two.

It is criminal to tear myself away.
The plants: I can almost hear them weeping.
It's me isn't it?
I'm weeping.

I have to weep.
Within me is the sadness of the petals of the windflower
(Botanical name: *Anemone hupehensis*)
as they fall into the birdbath
And the frond of the cycad snapping through the soil;
bringing something
new.

There Was a Man Desirous

by Gordon Waters

There was a man desirous,
To fix his sullied view of the world,
And that of his neighbours: they shared the same oxygen,
The same aspect.

There was the too high tree and the pig face,
There was the bamboo burst thick on the sun;
Decrepit lattice, rotting tyre swans, a Hills Hoist askew.
There was a haunted, hollow, Holden.

The day of his fiftieth birthday he awoke under somber clouds,
Slurped his tea, embraced the machete,
Cuddled the angle grinder,
His body poised for duty and certain satisfaction.
This was to be a party like no other!

With truculent step he arrived affront his task, neither wife
Nor family to advance distraction
Arms raised above irritating objects of his attention,
The man did hear the universal presence

Of his neighbour, face covered in hair like fir,
Eyes as deep as precious gems
Who then did speak
Words etched in air:

"Is not this day fully within us?"

The words became part of the man,
So he hid the rusted tools beneath the rotted tank,
And found a new place inside the (spectacular) detritus of his life
Where,
Anxious action was replaced with
Calm acceptance.

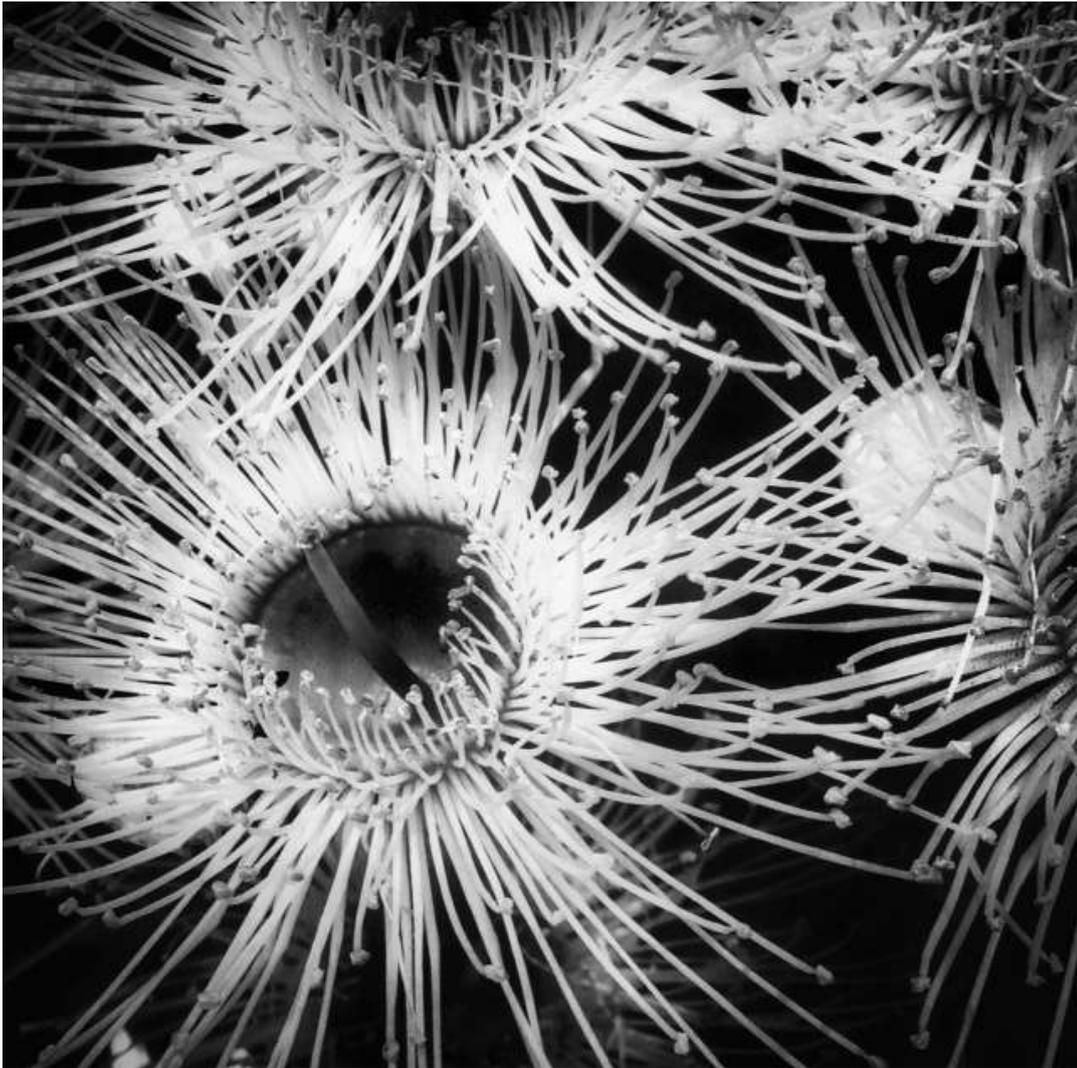


Photo by Glenys Jackson

.....mist.....

by Anna Waters

After the heavy rain there is always the silence of the water rising back up. in some places it is not possible to hear: places like roads and shops, and airports. this is because the rising is so quiet and calming that it requires complete attention, complete release within attention, and there that is impossible. the shelter of trees provide this, the rest of a garden provide this. as the water rises from under and on top of the ground in its complex kiss (structure much more than one hydrogen and two oxygen), the sun, always shining but seemingly hidden as if lost forever , will slowly evaporate small components, or each strand in the whole chain. dependant upon the strength, angle, and proximity of our fiery star a mist will blanket everything, so much so that trees cannot see trees, ferns cannot see cycads. the silence is lost, and everything is cleared by the definitive resonance of the sun's voice.

Clouds Passing

by Jillian Ball

Clouds passing
bathed in sunset gold.
Crickets chirping
from the back of their throats.
I see you
in the clouds.
Hear you
in the crickets.
Feel you
In my breath.

Life- Death?

by Sally Hopkins

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....
ocean turns rain ,
turns wilting grass bright green....
Life/Death- true LIFE- abundance! Joy!

The Burning Ghats of Varanasi

by Subhana Barzaghi Roshi

I have contemplated death periodically throughout my life. In 1986, Jacques Barzaghi and I had travelled to India and stayed in the ancient city of Varanasi, which is sprawled along the grand and mighty banks of the Ganges River in north India. We lodged at Tulsi Mandir at Assi Ghat which is a couple of kilometers from the central thronging main streets of Dashaswmedh Ghat. Assi Ghat is situated in the southern most part of the city at the confluence of the Ganga and Assi rivers.

Our visit to Tulsi Mandir was primarily to pay our respects and to assist an old friend of Jacques, Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra. Mishra was a seer, a scientist and much loved spiritual leader - the Mahant (High Priest) of the Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple the second largest Hindu temple in Varanasi. He was a former professor of Hydraulic Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology in Varanasi and was renowned for his life long practical crusade to clean up the pollution of the Ganges. Dr. Mishra juggled his roles as priest and environmental activist, and as a warrior for the river he founded the Sankat Mochan Foundation that launched the Swacha Ganga Campaign.

Mahantji was a deeply inspiring ethical, knowledgeable and passionate man who combined his respect and love for the river with his engineering expertise and spiritual authority to be an advocate for pollution control and new forms of sewage treatment that would protect the Ganges. One of Dr. Mishra's famous quotes highlighted his over-arching strategy, "Science and technology are one bank of the river, and religion, tradition and faith are the other bank of the river. Both the banks need to be firm, and only then can the river maintain the flow".

Due to Mahantji's renowned work and international acclaim he drew friends and supporters from around the globe who then signed up to assist Swacha Ganga Campaign. Supporting this campaign was in part the motivation for our visit, however Jacques became very ill and suddenly we were thrown into an intimate journey of life and death along the river.

Following Jacques' recovery from a near death experience with malaria and the nightmare of an India hospital we stayed another six weeks in Tulsi Mandir convalescing under Mahantji's benevolence and hospitality. Jacques had nearly died due to an initial misdiagnosis as the doctor assumed he had typhoid instead of malaria, this was then followed by medical mismanagement and an overdose in medication. This encounter with the scary fever face of death had been heralded in by a tiny mosquito that bred in plague proportions from the stagnant putrid pools and canals in the city.

During the period of Jacques' recovery we pursued a convalescing practice. The routine started with setting the alarm for 5am and heading down to the river in the pre-dawn light and clambering into a tiny boat. The rising sun peeled off her dark cloak to reveal her golden, rose-colored sari of dawn light, which she drapes over the plains of India. At that moment thousands of pilgrims and devotees descend down the ancient worn stone steps into the great river to bathe and perform their daily rituals and prayers. This ritual has been enacted since time memorial.

Our morning meditation practice began by journeying up stream from Assi Ghat to Jalasayin Ghat, which is one of the main 'burning ghats' or places of cremation. Jacques lay sprawled across the bow of the boat, plugged into his Walkman, listening to his favourite classical music. We chose

to park the boat outside the burning Ghats for the morning contemplation then the boatman would row us back to Assi Ghat, which was normally a two hour round trip before breakfast.

There are specific cremation Ghats, called 'Shamshan ghats' where bodies are cremated at the waterside, allowing the ashes to be washed away by the river. Hindu's believe that when a body is cremated the spirit is purified and released to the heavenly realms and is more likely to take up a more wholesome rebirth. Voices chanting down the narrow maze like alley-ways to the river, rose in chorus. 'Ram, Ram satcha Ram, satcha Ram hai', (translated as; God of Truth, to God we go) announces a trail of mourners carrying a dead body as they descend to the Burning Ghat. Smoke rises from the funeral pyre, a sickly, sweet smell of burning flesh permeates the blackened site. It is a pungent, unique smell that one does not easily forget that etches itself into the memory. Logs of timber are thrown onto the funeral pyre regularly; a hot fire is stoked to consume almost all the remains. There are a few exceptions to the final destination of the burning pyre; the bodies of young children, those with leprosy and the holy ones, the sadhus who are not burnt. Their bodies are wrapped in orange prayer shawls and thrown into the river! Unfortunately, the poorest castes often cannot afford enough wood to completely burn a body and hence charred remains litter the site or float in the river. Life and death intermingle in Maha Ganga. A moving spectacle of floating bodies are pecked out by the crows and become white, bloated, floating carcasses on their own singular final voyage to the sea.

Words from an old prayer and phoenix meditation reflect my morning meditation.

"I praise the moment I die, for the veils of illusion die with me. I see how hard we strive for truth, and once attained, how easily we forget it. I hold that fire as long as I can. My nose fills with the smell of seared flesh, the acrid smoke of death, so that years from now I might look on that scar and remember how it was to hold the light, how it was to die and come again radiant as light walking on sand". (1988 N. Ellis – Awakening Osiris)



Photo – The River Ganges

The River Ganges is referred to as; ‘Holy Mother Ganga’ believed to purify everyone who bathes in it. There was probably some truth to this belief centuries ago when the pristine, snow capped, glacial waters melted over calendula flowered slopes, but that belief now flies in the face of the putrid reality that the river has become. This ancient custom of the burning pyre and bodies floating amongst the morning devotees conducting their ablutions and ritual bathing caused health and environmental problems down stream. It was as if the morning bathers were completely blind to the state of their holy river, locked in their ancient perception. Up stream the grand forests have been denuded for these funeral rites and caused massive erosion along the river-bank. The recent introduction of the electric kiln has saved some of these environmental and health hazards.

The Sankat Mochan Foundation under Mahantji’s guidance was a catalytic agent, a watchdog and a scientific research Centre. He set up a research laboratory and its key goal was to instigate appropriate and effective technological solutions to sewage pollution of religious bathing areas, through community consultation processes. The Swatcha Ganga project had to find innovative ways to reach into the Indian psyche and try to transform these deep seated cultural attitudes and beliefs. The slogan, “Holy Mother Ganga is now sick, she needs your help”, helped to challenge their blind faith and shift their awareness to one of caring and protecting their beloved river. The campaign also fostered religious attitudinal changes supporting the use of electric kilns being the new funeral pyres that save valuable resources of wood, plus there are less bodily remains being dumped into the river.

Despite the blackened ash filled scene, the wailing circles, the pungent smell echoing ‘the God of truth’, I turned my gaze to look death squarely in the face every day for a month. This confronting, powerful practice helped me to release some of my fears about death. It’s not death itself but more our fears about death that lie at the heart of our suffering. This practice helped me face the reality that no one, rich, poor, holy or wise escapes the certainty of its fiery gates. I remember my dear friend Sexton Bourke Roshi saying, ‘no one really believes that they are doing to die’. Death and life are interwoven and inseparable, they are part of the wild braid of creation, there is no life without death. As Stanley Kunitz commented when he was ninety-eight, “Can you imagine having your great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers and mothers tottering around the household? No, death is absolutely essential and that’s the hard reality” (Kunitz, p,122). Sexton embraced life with cancer for seven years with extraordinary presence and wisely stated before he died, “we only fear death because we think there is someone to die”.

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1. Normandi Ellis, N., trans (1988) ‘Becoming the Phoenix’ in *Awakening Osiris: the Egyptian book of the dead*, Phanes Press, Michigan.
2. <http://www.sankatmochanfoundationonline.org/index.html>
3. Stanley Kunitz with Genine Lentine, (2007) ‘The Wild Braid’- A poet reflects on a Century in the Garden, W.W. Norton & Company Ltd. London.

Death's Weight

by Max Baker

Last night we held a memorial service for our friend Gordon Walters at the Zendo.

“With drooping heads and tremulous tails, they mashed their way through the thick mud, floundering and stumbling between whiles, as if they were falling to pieces at the larger joints.”

Dickens' description of the Dover Mail captured the effort and weight of our walking meditation. The mail always needs delivering. So too do we need to walk, and breathe and live, even in grief. In this way the mundane lives on. And is death not just another delivery that needs to be made? It is the daily toil of nature and we feel it as such; the heavy cold, the slop of mud in the heart and the falling to pieces at our larger joints: knees, hips and shoulders. After walking we sat and someone told me I too would die. With a drooping head I let it soak in. The mail does not wait and when it leaves someone else will lean against the same damp air of the Zendo, and stumble and mash through the same thick mud.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Life and Death are both a Cradle and Grave Affair

by Brendon Stewart

There is a delightfully touching scenario in the feel-good movie *About Time* where the young man Tim, who is narrating the story, asks to be momentarily excused from the gathering of his family as they prepare to attend the funeral of his father. The film's story is structured around the fanciful ability to travel back in time. Tim employs his mysterious skill and returns to his dad a few days before he dies. Here he is given, in an amusingly witty way his dad's last words on wisdom and the living of a good life. They exchange a kiss, reminisce and Tim leaves knowing that the real mystery is to live each day as if it's your last. Sufficient unto the day is the stuff thereof, Matthew's gospel reminds us and I'm sure the Buddha must have had something to say on this very topic.

There are apparently only some certain truths that hold universally, the laws of thermodynamics for sure, probably the predictability of the periodic table, evolutionary theory and that we humans are animals, we adapt and we will die. Nature is careless with creation, endlessly fertile but with no discernible ends. One cannot believe in nature or existence in the same way one might believe in some deity. The fact of death lures us into fictions. Death stories illuminate life stories because death is an organising principle. The thing is that the film's story causes tears yet again for me with that humanly difficult business of living and dying.

And so, at that hopefully splendid time when my mum and dad found themselves way beyond any take heed moment and I was conceived in the midst of their passion and sweat I can now say: wham bang thanks mum and dad for setting in train my funeral arrangements.

There is a wonderful beauty in transience. To be alive in this world, which is probably not divinely endowed is to have faith that there is nowhere else one could possibly be. The beauty is here when we take our lives, in this world fully to heart; being happy in this and with this world. The brilliance and beauty of the earth is the brilliance and beauty of the only conceivable paradise. One can only ever be truly happy with one's experience of living on this earth if one is convinced that there is nowhere else to be. And of course life on this planet will be sustained regardless of whatever foolishness we may precipitate. This isn't a pessimistic attitude, or at least it is only pessimistic in so far as this can be compared to illogical optimism; the belief in redemption or perfectibility or enlightenment or eternity.

This is how I try to put my practice with Zen to work. I try to make my life hospitable to the passing of time and the inevitability of death. In this way I sustain an image of this world as a place of interest and a place to love and perhaps a place I can find out more about. Optimism here is to be found in the way transience has to be acknowledged. Transience isn't a case for mourning; it involves making sense of our lives as bound by mortality and not seduced by transcendence. While it is true that we are more than capable of doing harm – what might we aspire too? I think it best to be sceptical about the perfectibility of humans. Indeed, we are creatures who suffer almost entirely because of our ideals.

There can be no perfectibility. Nature, unadorned isn't perfect, there are no perfect forms in nature, or perfect processes, or perfect outcomes. To be perfect is to assume the vanity of culture. Only through human cultural endeavour can we imagine the perfect. Nature has laws but no

intentions. No sense of responsibility to yours or my welfare. Nature is organised but not designed, it does not have what we might call a 'mind of its own', something akin to human intelligence. Nor does nature have a project for us, it cannot tell us what to do, only we can!

Living involves us in turbulence. Living is more like an experiment, a shifting methodology, with an unknown outcome. In this way the human experience of existence is radically unpredictable, puzzling even to itself. Our existence is circumstantial and the circumstances are always changing. Psychological observations of how our unconscious desires manifest suggests that we are minimally intelligible to ourselves, and often only in retrospect.

But human experience and the work we engage with, in order to make some sense of this turbulence, involves overcoming and in effect manipulating nature. This is the consequence of human conscious evolution. The emergence of human consciousness, that is being able to move back and forth with our imagination and miraculously, being able to conjure up in 'our imagination' desires and then demand satisfaction by way of completion, changed everything.

This work, this freedom to manipulate brings with it understanding, essentially about the world allowing us in many ways to enjoy our desiring. There is an invitation here to go on inventing the future and to maintain our commitment to a cultural project; sustaining and developing the Sydney Zen Centre for example. We invent our cultural process and in this there is much pleasure.

The pleasure of course comes wrapped in the wafer thin tissue of paradox.

Because the sublime essence of our awfully powerful projects is essentially that which is beyond making sense of: that which over awes us. The products of our massive intelligence, our capacity with language or with representation is provisional in the face of the sublime reality of transience. Nonetheless we each have experiences that overwhelm us and so in turn satisfy us, experiences we value because they are uniquely strange.

Stories about life and death are central to the mythology of our desires. Life and death are grave matters, we remind ourselves as we close each day at sesshin. The film *About Time* lets its protagonist swish back and forth getting his stumbling attempts at seduction more and more sophisticated and then, as I have said, having a moment longer with his dad. In the film, in this artifice we can ask or act out impossible questions; questions, as in the film's scenarios to do with happiness or maybe contentment. For happiness to be taken seriously, for it to be a special case in the matter of our satisfaction it must involve the pleasure of justice and the possibility of kindness.

The many beings are numberless
I vow to save them
Greed hatred and ignorance rise endlessly
I vow to abandon them
Dharma gates are countless
I vow to wake to them
The Buddha way is unsurpassed
I vow to embody it fully

Our great vows are what I aspire to. In words, and with the humble gesture of gassho they create meaning and value; very real human meaning. Their beauty emerges when I take my life in this world, fully to heart.

Haikus on Death

by Max Baker

Washing dishes

Looking out the window
Remembering how you made me-
wash dishes.

A woman starts crying
Everyone stops-
Breathing

During the funeral

I grip my chest
Is it a heart attack?
I wont say! I wont say!

Bro
-ken



Photo by Lee Nutter

Koans and Daily Life

by Will Moon

I recently had someone comment that he felt that “koans were abstract things that didn’t seem to have much relevance to life”. When I reflected on this comment I realised how it was totally at odds with my own experience, and how such comments can encourage misconceptions about koan practice. I had also heard comments along the lines that koans were of no help to a person when they were faced with the ‘real’ dilemmas, or challenges in life. Given that experience with koans can be so different to this, I wondered how this could be articulated to help clear some of these misconceptions. Though there are many better qualified to discuss the misconceptions around koan practice, I felt it might be useful to discuss how koans are relevant to my life and practice.

Early in our koan practice, the koan presents a barrier, though really, no barrier has ever existed. So it is called the gateless barrier, a barrier that we the practitioner have to come to terms with. Each koan that follows also presents a barrier. In another sense it highlights our lack of intimacy with the present. So it is a challenge, or an opportunity, to become intimate with the koan. In order to become intimate, ‘I’, the sense of a separate self, independent of everything, must drop away. This takes care of itself for the most part, if we are dedicated, trust the method, and have faith in our practice. Sometimes we need to have great patience, and sometimes ‘we must jump into the abyss yawning below’ (Aitken 1990:203).

Intimacy with our koan requires honesty and willingness to face aspects of ourselves, and then to take appropriate action according to what we open to. I have found that the practice of working with koans is not solely koan work, but a practice that is very linked and entwined with an awareness of the emotional landscape. It is inclusive of everything that we bring to the practice. In this way koan practice is not something abstract, nor is it disconnected from the real concerns of our lives. When I first came to zen as a young man, I sat with a samurai determination, pushing everything from my emotional life aside, thinking it unimportant, only to find the floodgates burst open and sweep me away in the flood. Then began the long process of acknowledging, accepting and including what surfaced in my practice. When I sit with koans today, it is often a good pointer to something that is not acknowledged in me if I find that I seem to be skimming along the surface of the koan, without becoming intimate. An example of this was a time when things seemed to be very transient in my life, when I left my job, moved house and moved to another state and started a new job. There was an underlying sense of insecurity and fear as a result of what could not be known about what was ahead. When I was able to acknowledge this and really feel the underlying fear, there was then a sense of wholeness, and from this there was a deepening of my koan and more intimacy with it.

When I’m off my cushions I find my practice shifts from one to the other of these two aspects of the practice for longer periods. Sometimes the conditions will suit just being with the koan, and other times the emotional life needs more attention. Driving down the endless corrugated roads of the north, I call up my koan, and there is the connection. We can call up our koan on the bus, or the train, in the rain, or the supermarket. Each time we call the question to our self, there is the opportunity to connect with the world, connect with the present. It’s hard to imagine a more effective and relevant practice. Recently when we were on our camping trip in the Kimberley there



Photo by Glenys Jackson

were often times when we had been traveling along dusty rough roads for long periods. We would be tired and need to setup camp in the heat and dust. Emotions would get stirred up. Sometimes I might feel that I was ‘right’, and I would defend this position. This was good material to work with, to be aware of, and to be honest with myself about what I was doing. On one occasion I became aware that this whole story created in the mind was completely empty, it had no reality, and with that it could be let go of with a smile. If only we could see this all of the time, to be free of our entanglement with our stories. But we can see it more often with dedicated attentive practice.

The koan and the awareness connect us to what we are. When we really experience the underlying feelings that we bring to our practice we find that they are of the same substance as Mu, and ChÜ Chih’s one finger. With this understanding comes as sense of liberation and joy. The koan, and our feelings are the same very substance of life. Nothing abstract about it!

When we call up our koan in daily life, when we breathe “Mu”, we create the opportunity for oneness, or as Dogen says, when we forget the self through our practice we are ‘confirmed by the ten thousand things’ (Aitken 1990:272). We are then more at peace with life, and more able to respond from this place of peace.

It seemed to take a while to understand that when we take them in whole heartedly, these old koans, from the old worthies, are intimately connected with life. There is good reason that they have stood the test of time.

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Aitken, Robert, trans. 1990. *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, Translated and with a commentary by Robert Aitken, Illustrated by Sengai. San Francisco: North Point Press.

Poetry and Haikus

by Diana Levy

“All things pass quickly away”
haiku for my father, Phillip William Levy

Back to the ocean
that you loved:
my only consolation

No rise and fall
of the chest -
grey and gone

Sequence for Chris Eade

Checkered slippers
beside her hospital bed
for big strong feet

Hospital carpark exit:
no need now
to be positive

Caged up
in the chemo ward
she's knitting furiously

Going down
the hospital hallway
her reflected footsteps

You're still and cooling now
but a slight smile
makes a joke of it

Through tears
the whole path
yellow with wattle

Cemetery:
neat rows
of the newly dead

Downstream
of their graves
the she-oaks sighing

*(near Megalong cemetery, where
Gundungurra people Fanny Lynch and her
son are buried)*

Cicada sings
a three-minute
life story

Jarraah: a series

Deep black puddle:
the red dog stirs up
clouds of brown mud

Strident barking
she paws a stick
hopefully

She dies
broken spine
under my hands

While Tara cries
he sits in the tree
eating chips

Her legacy:
toys, shoes, mats,
my zafu, chewed

Out of the tunnel
miles of blue hills
not grieving

Walking again
without the kelpie
so silent

This ignominious stick
with the tooth marks
of our long dead pup

How a grave subsides!
the bodies juices
seep away

*(Note: our RSPCA pup was hit by a car,
driven by an elderly neighbour)*

A Wreck of Muttonbirds* Spring to Summer

by Gillian Coote Roshi

1) September

Exhausted on their journey south
beset by storms,
they fall to sea
and float to shore.

2) October

Along the tide mark's dark wet sand -
smooth pebbles, shells -
and seagrass ribbons
wrapped around
the grey-cream birds,
the sea's plump gifts.

Tantalising, poised for flight,
their sand-jammed beaks held down.
Beached, washed up,
all gone to ground.

Nuggety nor-easter
ruffling their soft down,
their fascinator feathers
fanning floppy necks.

3) December

Up against the dunes,
some carcasses poke through
dry sand.

4) January

The Labrador supremely pleased,
absconding with his special stash of wing.
protruding like a louche cigar
between his lips.

5) February

The child has found a
perfect circle of white bone.
It's delicate and strong.
She brings it home.

**In Spring, thousands of muttonbirds fall into the sea along the coast of NSW, exhausted by their encounters with headwinds and severe storms, an event known as a 'wreck'.*

Does God Exist? – Reflections on the God Debate.

by Philip Long

The God Debate

In recent years a number of books have been published which decry religion as a dangerous and irrational delusion which leads by its very nature to evil consequences and which must be eliminated and replaced with rational, secularist atheism, if we are to have any chance of a just society and a peaceful world. I am speaking specifically of books by those authors who have come to be known collectively as neo-atheists or the New Atheists, principal among which are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, A. C. Grayling, Lawrence Krauss, Victor Stenger and Michael Shermer.¹

As I speak with friends and family members who are either professed atheists or simply doubtful about the truth and relevance of religion, I am struck by the enthusiasm and credibility offered to these authors' error ridden analyses by otherwise intelligent and balanced people. Dawkins' books in particular sell in their millions, perhaps partly because he writes so well (but not necessarily accurately) about science but also because he offers what his readers consider convincing arguments against religion.

A number of replies to the New Atheists have been coined by philosophers of religion, theologians and scientists of both theistic and atheistic persuasion. The debate has grown exponentially over the last five or six years and has come to be dubbed "the God Debate". Apart from Albert Lowe's *The Origin of Human Nature*, Stephen Batchelor's *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* and Sam Harris's own *The End of Faith*² very little has been heard in the debate from the Buddhist viewpoint, perhaps because most Buddhists consider themselves to be atheist anyway, perhaps because Buddhism does not seem to be in the New Atheists' direct line of fire. My viewpoint takes account of the three worldviews that have sustained my life to varying degrees over time – Christian, atheist and Zen Buddhist. Without attempting a systematic synthesis of these, I have drawn on all three in my response to the New Atheists, an ongoing project yet to reach publication. This article is born out of that response but in the space available I deal with only one aspect of the God Debate, the New Atheists' definitions of "God" and "religion". I examine these definitions in some detail as well as the commentary on them by others in the debate. On the way I examine some criticisms of my own from my own perspective.

What strikes me most about New Atheism is not only the narrow way in which it defines "God" and "religion" but also the fact that it comes to conclusions about the nature of religion which are so wide of the mark as to be absolutely opposite to my own and those of other moderate and radical religionists. They seem to have got hold of the wrong end of the stick completely

Let me say at the outset, however, that I do not regard the subject matter of the God Debate as being resolvable purely by the kind of rational discussion which has so far prevailed in that debate. No one will be persuaded to take up the religious life by rational argument alone, although he or she may be persuaded by such argument that to do so is not an unreasonable course to take. Anyone who has had the least insight into what I shall, for purposes of convenience only, call "God" will understand why this is so.³ This is a position also adopted also by a number of leading

theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas, and within the God Debate by theologians such as Alister McGrath.

A lot of what the New Atheists assert is so unarguable (superficially, at least) as to brook no opposition. Who could object to the claim that all our beliefs should be rational and not superstitious, that is, born out by the evidence available to us? Who could deny that there is no scientific evidence in what is available to our senses that God exists? Upon a little investigation, however, it turns out that such views are misleading. The real question here is whether religion in general is based on reason or superstition (and what is meant by those terms) and what is meant by “available to our senses”. These are wider issues that cannot be dealt with fully here but are reflected in the question of the definitions of “religion” and “God”. Even here, though, the New Atheists define these in such a way as to make the rejection of these ideas a matter of simple common sense.

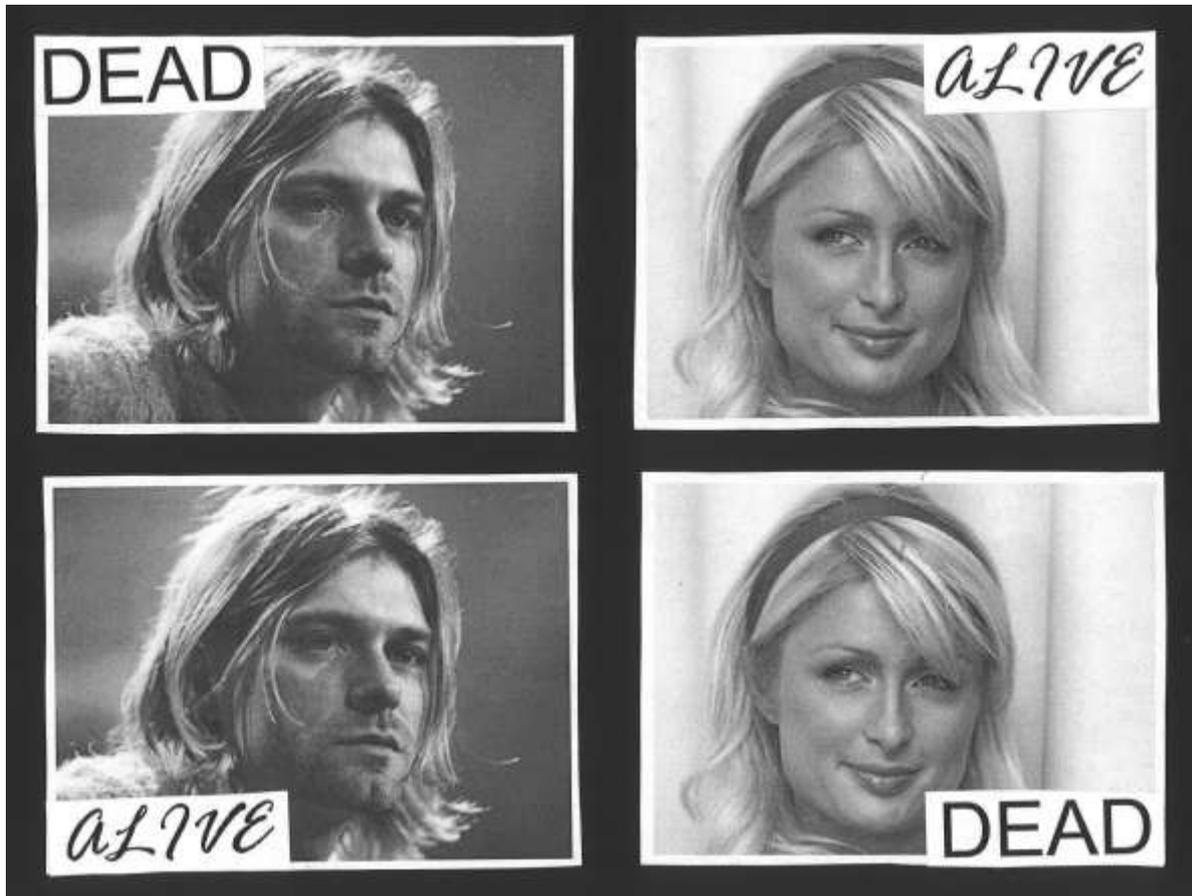
The God Hypothesis

The New Atheists define religion as a literal belief in a personal and supernatural creator God who rules the universe and concerns himself with caring for, or punishing, us human beings. Richard Dawkins actually coins the term “the God Hypothesis” which he says claims that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it including us”.⁴ In this way the New Atheists tend to confine themselves to Christianity, Islam and Judaism. In general, they ignore more sophisticated religious beliefs as either statistically insignificant or just excessively clever and impenetrable theological ranting about someone or something that clearly on all the (scientific) evidence does not exist. They are particularly opposed to any talk of mystery and regard religionists’ resort to such talk as the taking of a coward’s refuge when their (religionists’) rational arguments fail to convince. “How can you have a rational debate with someone who defines his or her beliefs in such a way that does not lend itself to rational criticism or debate?” Thus they try to force religionists into one of two clearly untenable positions – literal adherence to logically impossible propositions contradicted by the scientific evidence or a kind of mystical obscurantism which asserts literally nothing. They say little about Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism which they regard as not really religions. They do not mention Hinduism at all. What they would say about Zen practice and insight is not entirely clear.

The definition of religion by the New Atheists as (a literal or scientific) belief in a personal and supernatural creator God who rules the universe and concerns himself with caring for, or punishing, us human beings has been labelled a straw man strategy on the grounds that it reduces religious belief to its most extreme and unbelievable version so as the more easily to dismiss it. If God is a scientific reality, the New Atheists say, where is the evidence in nature (the only reality available to our senses) for such an entity? Any speculation about such an entity is thus purely subjective, unprovable and unexaminable. That is, it is untrue.

Like fundamentalist religionists the New Atheists insist that all religionists must believe in religious doctrine as literal propositional truth. As indicated above they object to anything less positive (such as mystery) as a method of avoiding rational debate. They do not accept that religious language is used metaphorically and as a guide to spiritual praxis. When faced with this point, Dawkins asks perplexedly: “A metaphor for what?”

The point is not entirely clear but it seems that they insist that truth can only be found by rational investigation on the model of the scientific paradigm, that is, on rational investigation of sense experience. In some versions, e.g. Dawkins', this is confined to actual scientific investigation. As an example of their appeal to reason, when asked on what he bases his moral views, Lawrence Krauss said: "Reason! Reason!"⁵ Now who could object to that? However, the simple reply to this claim is: "Whose reason?" and "How does that derivation actually work?"



Artwork by Max Baker

There is some support for New Atheism among non-fundamentalist religionists on the ground that it is arguing against a literal interpretation of religious doctrine which those religionists also refute. This approach is being over generous to the New Atheists in that such an argument from outside religious circles is not at all necessary. Religion already contains its own inbuilt warnings against literalism in the doctrine against idolatry. In addition, the New Atheists are not arguing against literal interpretation in favour of a metaphoric interpretation but rather assert that such literal interpretation is the only relevant one which then must be rejected as clearly absurd.

The New Atheists' literalist understanding of God and religion is so wide of the mark as to be laughable. No one with any spiritual maturity believes literally in such a God. It may be the hallmark of fundamentalists and fanatics that they so believe but not of the vast majority of moderate religionists. Such people understand religious doctrine to point to a different dimension of reality than that of science or common sense and therefore to be cast in terms not directly investigable by science. They understand God (and each of us) to be ultimately a mystery and that

even the metaphoric language of religion fails to capture God's nature. Our practice of Zen may go very deep indeed into the nature of reality but many Christians would be prepared to follow, even to the extent of giving up all their precious images of God, including the notion of God itself which is, after all, just another image. Even ordinary moderate religionists understand in their heart of hearts that God is mystery or unknowing. As indicated above, adhering to any other more specific image of God has been condemned throughout the history of Christianity as idolatry.

Natural and Supernatural

The new atheists reject the notion of supernatural and claim that everything that exists is part of the natural world, the only world that exists. They see God as a person or being for which there is not a shred of evidence in nature and decry religionists as holding to their beliefs "in the teeth of the evidence".

However, God as properly seen is not a being amongst other beings, only larger and more powerful. God is not *a* person or *an* entity or *a* being. Rather God is being itself, transcending, including and transforming all beings (including non-personal objects and forces). Beyond that, God is beyond the distinction between being and non-being, supernatural and natural, transcendent and immanent. While the New Atheists argue against any supernatural realm apart from or above or beyond the natural realm, it is clear that the concepts "natural" and "supernatural" derive their meaning from each other. One cannot exist without the other. If nothing is supernatural, then all is natural; if all is natural, nothing is natural, since there is no supernatural with which to compare it. In this case natural has lost all meaning. Reality just is!

One alternative is to accept that natural and supernatural are two aspects of the one reality which in itself is neither natural nor supernatural (exclusively) and yet somehow both. The supernatural aspect of reality is not apart from the natural but intimately and intricately bound up with it. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to the natural.

Transcendence

A related point is concerned with transcendence. To transcend is not to take up a position superior to but in the same logical category as that which is transcended (a being amongst other beings); nor does it involve the elimination of the transcended. Transcendence is not a process of one thing transcending another thing or other things. The nature of transcendence is such that there never were such things at all; from the beginning and before, transcendent and immanent exist in complete interpenetration and harmony. Samsara is Nirvana; form is emptiness. The *realisation* of transcendence, however, does involve *introducing* transcendence into our picture of the world. In this process the immanent or transcended is penetrated by the transcendent, is overturned, transformed and incorporated. The parts have been made whole, have been restored to their original wholeness.⁶

Mystery

This is a term easily misunderstood. It does not mean vague or obscure or unreachable. It is clarity, deep knowing, the thinking beyond thought. The New Atheists say that given enough time science will find a complete explanation of the natural world and nothing will be unknown; there

will be no gaps for “the God of the gaps” to occupy. They hear religion as saying that there is a realm of reality, the supernatural, which no-one can enter or know and about which there can be no rational debate. This is not so. The clarity and emptiness of God is such that in the experience of God everything we encounter is filled with God’s light and made plain. The known is the unknown and vice versa. Talk of God is not irrational. What is reasonable becomes more apparent in the light of God’s mystery, not less so. Further, this mystery is not a licence, as the New Atheists claim, for anything goes;⁷ all falsehoods are exposed and resolved in the wholeness of God’s being. God is the ground of all being and knowing. God *is* being; God *is* knowing.

Openness

Another way of looking at God is as an infinite openness which pervades each and every thing which then becomes itself infinitely open. *In the entire universe, just this one bird note.* This view is reflected in Hua Yen’s interpenetration of the relative and the absolute and of the relative and the relative and in Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion of “interbeing”. God is thus not just the whole of creation, all things therein just added up with one another; that is, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Our picture of creation is radically opened up and utterly transformed by this vision. And openness here is not just ontological but also epistemological. Knowing is ultimately one with being; the openness of being means the openness of knowing (to unknowing and to other knowing). This countervails the claim by the New Atheists that religious doctrines are closed, ideological and unquestionably absolute.

Compassion

If all things are radically open this naturally includes the Self. What is the result when we realise that the Self is radically open? We feel touched by the ten thousand things, by the Other. Responsiveness is not an optional choice; it has already happened and in complete equanimity our hearts reach out with unconditional compassion to this Other. This is the true ground of morality. The New Atheists want to limit this ground to isolated selves, albeit in dialogue with each other and culture. This is a small-minded view. They want to be in charge of their responses to the Other; to have complete power to decide whether or not to respond.

Other Gods

The New Atheists do acknowledge that there are other versions of God. Dawkins refers to an Einsteinian pantheism with what appears to be approval.

Further, in a Preface to the latest edition of his book *The God Delusion* answering his critics on the first edition, Dawkins says specifically that he is not talking about “such subtle, nuanced religion” as that of sophisticated theologians like Tillich or Bonhoeffer. If this kind of religion predominated, he says, the world would be a better place and he would have written a different book.⁸

Grayling appeals to “those spiritual yearnings, *that nostalgia for the absolute*, the profound base note of emotion that underlies the best and the deepest parts of ourselves”. However, he seems to downplay the possibility of an “absolute” when he goes on to say: “Humanism is the emphatic

answer to the request for an alternative [to religion] ... the most wonderful resources for good and flourishing lives lie in the intelligence, the experience, the wisdom and insight, of our fellows in the human story”.⁹ Apparently if an absolute exists it cannot be said to transcend individual humans, that is, to be transpersonal.

Whatever the true import of these passages are, both these authors, and it seems the rest of the New Atheists, are at pains to insist that only what is natural and discoverable within the scientific paradigm can be accepted as truth. In fact all the New Atheists show an appallingly inadequate and rather confused understanding of religion and of such basic religious concepts as “God”, “the Absolute”, “transcendence”, “supernatural” and “mystery”.

The Nature of the Debate

Of course, as indicated above, the God Debate includes a number of issues other than the definitions of “God” and “religion”. These include the nature of religious faith, the alleged conflict between faith and reason, the counter-allegation of absolutism made against the New Atheists themselves, the question of whether morality can be founded otherwise than on the dictates of a supernatural creator, the insistence that the subject be eliminated entirely in any search for truth, the claim against the New Atheists that they are proposing a utopia organised by reason as they define it, and claims by the New Atheists that

- religion is the “root of all evil”,
- religion can be explained in natural terms,
- all religious experience is hallucination,
- moderate religion is to be despised as much as fundamentalist religion since all religion is inherently fundamentalist,
- religion in requiring that we obey God infantilises followers and removes their autonomy,
- science and religion are in inevitable conflict, and
- religion has no respect for nature and this life.

These must be left for another day.

However, once the rather puerile notion of God attacked by the New Atheists is abandoned, the whole of the God Debate tends to evaporate. The other points against religion which they make are bound up with this notion of God and tend to depend on it logically for their force and effect. For example, if God’s nature is as I have suggested, we should not be surprised to find that science can find no evidence in the specific empirical realm it has carved out for itself, either for or against the existence of God. To find God we must extend the empirical field to include other areas of enquiry including our “subjective” experience of ourselves and the world.

The Future of the God Debate

As any school debater will know, the essence of any debate is defining your terms. When the central ideas in a debate have been adequately defined the substance of the debate tends to

dissolve. When I was a student at law school in the 1960's fellow students and I would gather for a game of Solo Whist. While we were playing we would discuss world issues with a mind to solving them, rather typical of brash young law students. The argument would get quite heated between competing views, each held with an absolute sense of rightness. But, as was to be expected in a group of lawyers, someone would eventually ask: "Well, what do you mean by X?" Some discussion would then take place about what X meant and correspondingly what the questioner-opponent meant by Y. As these terms were defined, re-defined and re-defined, the argument would begin to dissolve and would eventually disappear in a puff of smoke: "Well, if that's what you mean, of course I agree." I have never met an argument since which could not be resolved in the same way. If I say that by God I mean, *inter alia*, "infinite openness" and the neo-atheists say their diatribe against religion is fuelled by a sense that religionists are dogmatic, anti-rational and have closed minds, what indeed is the argument all about?

I think that the God Debate is resolvable but then I am an optimist (and an atheist, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Moslem and a Jew, to paraphrase the Mahatma). It seems to me that if the definition problem could be solved the whole debate would lose its impetus. Perhaps we could utilise the Zen notion of Emptiness as a ground for the debate and as a proto-resolution. Or some translation into lay terms, such as "infinite openness" or the "Ground of Unknowing". Perhaps we are on the edge of a new *Zeitgeist* where all debate takes place against this background in a spirit of respect and deep listening to the other. If so, the New Atheists are in grave danger of being left behind.

References

1. See, for example: Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Black Swan, 2006; Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Viking, 2006; Hitchens, Christopher. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Allen and Unwin, 2008; Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. Norton, 2004; Grayling, A. C. *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism*. Bloomsbury, 2013; Krauss, Lawrence M. *A Universe From Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*. Atria Paperback, 2013; Stenger, Victor J. *God The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. Prometheus Books, 2008; Stenger, Victor J. *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*. Prometheus Books, 2009; Shermer, Michael. *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God*. Holt Paperbacks; 2nd edition, 2003.
2. Albert Lowe. *The Origin of Human Nature: A Zen Buddhist Looks at Evolution*. Sussex Academic Press, 2008; Stephen Batchelor. *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*. Spiegel and Grau, 2010; Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. Norton, 2004.
3. By this I mean to include in the term such notions as the Absolute, the Transcendent, the Supernatural, the Numinous, Allah, Yahweh, Brahma, The Tao, Buddha Nature, essential nature, Thusness, (the cosmic) Buddha, Emptiness, Ultimate Reality, the Self, etc., etc., etc. It is my view that all religions point to the one infinite, eternal, ultimate, transcendent and "unknowable" reality. The fact that it has many names, or one name, or no name, is beside the point.
4. Dawkins, 2006, p. 52.
5. This exchange occurred on the ABC television programme Q&A broadcast on 29th May, 2013.
6. As the Heart Sutra says: "Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form. Form is *exactly* emptiness, emptiness is *exactly* form". No remainder, nothing omitted.
7. If one believes in God, they say, one may as well believe in fairies at the bottom of the garden.
8. Dawkins, 2006, p. 15.
9. Grayling, 2013, p. 8.

Just This Life

by Larry Agriesti

It all comes to just this
Countless creations have come and gone
Before this birth and those to follow
Yet it can only always be just now

And it all comes to just this life
Just this breath
First breath of life draws in
Last breath out at death
And in between a lifetime
Of coming and going

I die before I die and wonder
Where was I before and will be after
Doesn't matter
In the still awareness of now
There is no room for death

Just this now proves the point
That no one ever dies
That emptiness gathers all of us
In just this moment
When all of us come to this
To just this breath
Just now

There is Gladness in Remembrance - 3rd June 1914

by Janet Selby

I have in my possession a family heirloom. It is an Autograph book in which my grandmother collected annotations from friends and family before her life-changing emigration to Sydney, Australia from Oxford, England in December 1915.

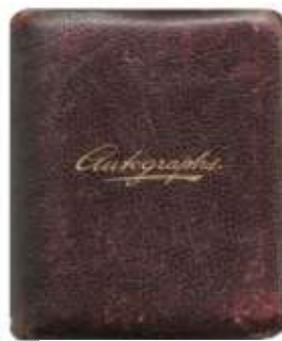
Its historic value cannot be underestimated, especially as the 100th Anniversary of the Great War looms in 2014.

Flossie Broughton was one of 12 siblings. Three of her brothers' deaths in France are noted. My grandfather, who she met in Oxford, left the home country and missed the European conflagration, safely residing in Marrickville with his new bride in 1916.

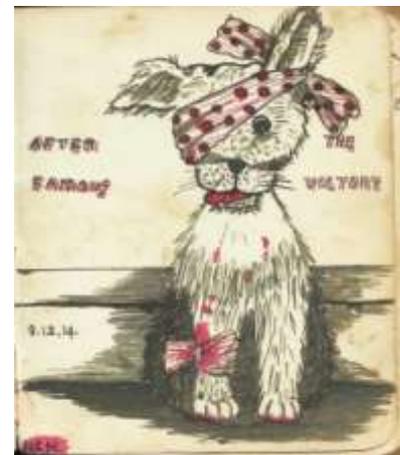
Here are a few images from the Autograph book. It seems there is a project waiting for me to delve in to this family history. The scant research we have done so far reveals that the Broughton family resided in Oxford for at least seven generations. The Great War disrupted many more families than I can ever imagine. I am just grateful (and indeed wouldn't be here) for the fact that my maternal grandparents left England at this time, and that Flossie had this record of snippets of her youth.

One intriguing quote is “*“May the skin of a gooseberry be large enough to cover all your enemies. F.F. 11.2.1915”*”.

And another: *“There is gladness in remembrance.”*



An Autograph
book from 1915



Paintings by
Flossie
Broughton's
younger
brother, Sid
aged 13 years,



Blue Pools of Love

by Maeve Dunnett

At your death you give to me
I give to you
Love, is all there is to give
All that is needed
A lifetime's longing given & received
Never before given or received
Always longed for but never shared
You always held your eyes shaded from the gaze of others
Now at the end clear & open
Beautiful blue pools open to give & receive
Holding your hand I stand open hearted
I swim in those blue pools
You are not afraid I can tell
Filling me with buoyancy I have never known
Trusting that I can
I am
Perhaps what I gave was an opening to give
Allowed what I received
Conditions allowed
A peaceful death full of love
No fear

At Ease Everywhere

by Maggie Gluek

Te-shan one day descended to the dining hall, bowls in hand. Hsueh-feng asked him, “Where are you going with your bowls in hand, Old Teacher? The bell has not rung, and the drum has not sounded.” Te-shan turned and went back to his room.

Hsueh-feng brought up this matter with Yen-t’ou. Yen-t’ou said, “Te-shan, great as he is, does not yet know the last word.” Hearing about this, Te-shan sent for Yen-t’ou and asked, “Don’t you approve of this old monk?” Yen-t’ou whispered his meaning. Te-shan said nothing further.

Next day when Te-shan took the high seat before his assembly, his presentation was very different from usual. Yen-t’ou came to the front of the hall, rubbing his hand and laughing loudly, saying, “How delightful! Our Old Boss has got hold of the last word. From now on, no one under heaven can outdo him.”ⁱ

Recently a friend in the US asked me what quality I would like to invite into my life and I found myself saying “space” or “spaciousness.” The intention has been knocking around since then. When addressing challenges, seeking how *not* to be cramped and cut off by self-imposed pressures, personal delusions you might say. How to maintain spaciousness of mind in any situation. So that however things are, they are included in a wide vision. And not limited or defined by ideas *about* this particular situation, and what it means.

Te-shan Carries his Bowls is a lengthy koan, in which a whole little drama is executed. It’s wordy you might say, for a case that is challenging around the matter of words. But I thought of it in the first instance because of the spaciousness of mind one sees in Teshan, this old teacher, respected head of the temple. He has been in his room, maybe doing zazen, maybe reading, resting, going about his business and seeing to his responsibilities. And then he thinks “Oh it’s lunch time,” picks up his bowls and heads for the dining hall. Is lunch late? Is he early? Does it matter? Then he is confronted by the brash young Hsueh Feng who says, possibly disparagingly, “Where are you going carrying your bowls, Old Teacher? There has been no signal for lunch?” Te shan doesn’t pull rank, defend his actions or explain himself. He has dropped the need to be right, to be anybody special. He simply turns and goes back to his room. A small but significant moment. A silent teaching, as Aitken Roshi says.ⁱⁱ

In the koan literature he appears at the end of his life as an embodiment of equanimity, someone who really dwells in that sublime abode, or Brahma Vihara. And silence is his preferred environment. There’s another koan, this one in the Shoyoroku that illustrates this.

Case 14: Attendant Huo Offers Tea

Huo, the attendant, asked Te-shan “Where have all the past Buddhas and patriarchs gone?”

Te-shan said, “What did you say?”

Huo said, “ I commanded an exceedingly fine race horse to spring forth, but only a lame tortoise appeared. “ Te-shan was silent.

Next day, when Te-shan came from his bath, Huo offered him tea. The teacher gave his shoulder a gentle pat.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Huo said, “The old boss has noticed for the first time.”

Teshan again was silent. ⁱⁱⁱ

Another young monk with a challenge, spoiling for something to happen. He doesn’t get what he expects, misses what’s given. And all those silences!

Teshan’s own notorious history is that he was a scholar of the Diamond Sutra. He pushed around a cart full of commentaries. We pick up the story as he is headed south to confront the Chan heresy and stops along the road at a tea stall for a cake. Specifically he asks for *tenjin*, a Buddhist term which means refreshment but whose etymology is “to punctuate the mind”.^{iv} The old woman proprietor asks about all those books he is lugging around. On learning they are texts on the Diamond Sutra, she makes him an offer...if he can answer her question, she’ll give him the cake for free. “*I hear the Diamond Sutra says ‘Past mind cannot be grasped, present mind cannot be grasped, future mind cannot be grasped.’ Which mind does your Reverence wish to refresh? When he can’t respond, he turns around, metaphorically, and seeks the name of teacher. He proceeds to meet Lungtan one fortunate night and realises what his books couldn’t tell him. After that, it is said, he burnt them all.*

A bit harsh perhaps. Words and concepts aren't the problem. Nor is silence to be reified over words. That's falling into dualism. Words may be unable finally to *describe* or explain the great mystery, but they are no less a spacious abode. Remember that line from the *Shodoka*: *It speaks in silence, in speech you hear its silence*. What complicates is what one wants to *do* with words and thought constructions--that is, hold on! One wants to recall them to mind, marshal them reassuringly to reestablish a sense of control. They would offer secure reference points by which to navigate. We need those too. *I'd like a cup of coffee, please. The wallaby ate the flowers you planted*. It's when they get in the way, most often as abstractions, that they become hindrances in the mind, blocking what is essentially an open system.

To illustrate, Case 34 of the WuMen Kuan: *Nan-ch'uan said: Mind is not Buddha, Wisdom is not the Tao*. Equations can suggest neat reference points. Grasping for the ungraspable? Mind is Buddha. Got it! Can store that one away now. Wisdom is the Tao. Ah, now I know. Maybe it was fresh the first time. Maybe it's evergreen. A previous case in the same collection declares *This very mind is Buddha*. But what's stashed away and solidified can become stale, a mere cipher to reiterate a construction. *Oh yah, Buddha*. Which is why "What is Buddha?" is a perennial question and a favorite in the koan literature. Women includes a verse:

The sky clears, the sun shines brightly;
rain falls, the earth gets wet.
He fully opens his heart and expounds the whole secret;
but I fear he is little appreciated.

When the heart-mind is open, unobstructed, where's the secret? Things are as they are. When all the windows are open, news of the universe can arrive. To once again quote the *Shodoka*: *Release your hold on earth, air, fire, water*. Release your hold. Let go of reference points. In this fundamental orientation of spaciousness you find intimacy right here.

Back to Teshan carrying his bowls and the young Hsueh Feng. Hsueh Feng reports what has happened to Yentou, implying *The old teacher is losing it*. Yentou plays along: *Teshan great as he is does not know the last word*. And hooks Hsueh Feng at the same time. Yentou then brings Teshan into the plot to advance Hsueh Feng, whispering his meaning. And finally after teisho declares, *"How delightful! Our Old Boss has got hold of the last word. From now on, no one under heaven can outdo him."*

Hsueh feng thinks he's *somebody* but now he'll be confounded and tangled by this talk. What *is* the last word? What *did* Yentou whisper to Teshan? What has the old Boss got hold of? How is it noone can top him? What is the secret? Doubts arise, and motivate inquiry, intense practice. That's the idea of the strategem. Koan questions function like that. But there's that edgy seduction of wanting to get hold of, to be in the know so that the self will be a superior self, so that I'll *finally* be "together." (I've got news for you.....)

What is the mind? The other day I did zazen at 7:30 am. Ah, the peacefulness, uninterrupted. The temptation to inflate a little, the good meditation. An hour later I sat again with a friend who joins us every Thursday. This time a three ring circus. Where was that mind at least perceived to be

still? Where's "together"? Forever falling apart of course. How can it ever be "stable" with everything constantly changing. Maybe "together" is not being tossed about by the winds of circumstance, finding security exactly in insecurity, in the fact of impermanence, in the mind ground of emptiness.

There's a literal vision of empty space in a new film--maybe you've seen it--called *Gravity*. It's a 90 minute space/sci-fi nail biting thriller in which two astronauts, one a top-level scientist, the other a nuts and bolts guy, are working for NASA on a space station above the earth (our planet wonderfully visible) doing maintenance and repairs. Debris from a Soviet satellite arrives without warning and destroys the space station and all the crew except these two who are flung widely out from the vehicle. The scientist gives us a study in existential terror. She hyperventilates. Apart from her teammate, there is no one and nothing around. No stable reference points at all. Familiar supports have failed them. Up and down have become meaningless.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Her offsider, on the other hand, is a Zen master in astronaut gear. He's just a guy. He chatters incessantly and potentially annoyingly about this that and the other, cracks jokes, gives practical advice from time to time about not using up oxygen and how they can get back to their vehicle, but all the while is calming and encouraging her with the ordinariness of his demeanor and

his words--no different to how he'd be talking in any other situation on earth. A bodhisattva mission. You sense someone who has surrendered entirely, forgotten himself, in that Zen sense of the phrase, and found himself, also in the Zen way. The night before I saw the film at I read this story to the participants in an Introduction to Buddhism class. A classic.

A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!^v

This then echoed by George Clooney, the astronaut, who in the midst of their perilous untethered journey, exclaims with heartfelt joy and appreciation at the glorious sunset. *Aww isn't that just beautiful? I never fail to find it amazing.* Something like that.

I think it's a film about death. How do you face it? If the self is forgotten, death becomes just another moment of refuge.

How can you be at ease everywhere like a calm spring wind? said Chao Chou.^{vi}

The spaciousness of everywhere can only be experienced when you enter the one fact of here and now. This is the practice of and gift of zazen samadhi. No referencing past, future or present for that matter. No hindrances in any direction.

One more gem from Chao Chou:

A monk asked "What about when there is no place to put up at 10000 miles?"

The master said, "Stay at a Ch'an temple." ^{vii}

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^{iv} Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 180.

^v Paul Reps, ed, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), p. 32.

^{vi} James Green, trans., *The Recorded Sayings of Master Joshu* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), p.36

^{vii} Green, p. 116

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Random Ruminations on Dying, Death and Living

by Sue Bidwell

It feels as if it's always been with me, this curiosity about death. Perhaps this is not different from anyone else...most children I believe are intrigued by death, by this fact that a grandparent or a guinea pig for example, has been part of their life but is then peremptorily removed from their world – gone forever.

As a child I badly wanted to see death at first hand, to know what happens at that actual point when life ceases; not the lead up to it, when the person or pet is still alive and kicking (this very expression conjured up images to me of a writhing body being subjected to some form of torture), but at that exact instant when the kicking and breathing stops. However my father shielded me from the rabbit-trapping and skinning and chook-beheading activities that provided food on our table, chicken of course being for special occasions only. Perhaps his experiences with death during the war made him want to protect me from these harsh realities, but as is the way with these things, it only served to whet my curiosity further.

I recall believing that if I couldn't see a person or an animal die, then just viewing a dead body could prove instructive in some way, but at that time it wasn't considered appropriate for children to even go to a funeral. When my girlfriend's Irish grandmother died, just around the corner from my place, I was green with envy as she'd been able to see the corpse lying in bed at home. I begged my mother to let me go and have a peep but, unsurprisingly, this was refused.

So at the advanced age of 17, when I was convinced that I must be the only person my age, if not the only person alive, who had yet to see a dead body, I began my nursing training and saw my first corpse within days. He was an elderly, frail man and apart from a slight slackening of the jaw, looked for all the world as he had done a short while before, so it was something of an anticlimax after so many years of anticipation. I was fortunate though at the time to have a very kind and perceptive nursing tutor who instilled in us very junior trainees the privilege of caring for a person as they near death and then the importance of tending their body with care and respect after death. And so it was that my lifelong curiosity in witnessing death suddenly and simply left me, and I became the nurse who was always asked to lay out the body whenever someone died on my shift. And that nursing tutor's wise words have remained with me while volunteering at a Sydney hospice and when I've been with friends during the end of their life.

So time, and the familiarity of being with people near death have tempered all those childhood and adolescent desires to find concrete answers to the mystery of life and death. I discovered that the extraordinariness (and the ordinariness) of life and of death is not to be found in our bodies or in a corpse and, more significantly, I learnt that there are no concrete answers to anything. I've found out that what I know in my head is necessary and useful, but it's what I 'know' in my bones that really matters. Don't ask what I mean by 'bones'. I have no answer. Thich Nhat Hanh's words are apposite, but I can't express exactly why;

'My actions are my only true belongings...My actions are the ground on which I stand'¹.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Is there a way to prepare for dying and death? Perhaps this is what motivated me from childhood, this idea that if I could see it and experience it, then I'd know what to do when my time comes. What's true for me is that the more familiar something is, the less my fear. Walking in Kings Cross at night I'm very aware of where I'm going and of my surroundings, but I don't feel afraid because I'm in recognisable territory. And the closer I get to death, through exposure to it and ably assisted by my own increasingly evident aging, the more at ease I am.

Does meditation bring me more intimately in touch with both living and dying? I don't remember specifically seeking this nearly 20 years ago when I began meditating, but I realise that my interest in death and dying is what brought me to Zen. A Zen practice isn't needed in order to see the aging of my body and be aware that I forget things! But my practice helps me experience the impermanence of every part of me, it helps me be open to whatever comes, to see it for what it is and to laugh at my desire for it to be otherwise. Every cell in my body is in a state of flux. The food I ate this morning is this very moment being transformed, is travelling through my body in its changed states and will leave my body before long in an entirely different state! And before it became my meal it was a seed being grown, watered, harvested, transported, packaged and sold, each individual step involving changes in one way or another. Everything is forever unfolding, forever emerging.

Another aspect of my meditation practice is the way I learn, and need to keep learning, to come back to the present, to an intimate connection with what is, with life. A heightened awareness is there in any truly intimate moment, and this is especially so when we're with someone dying. It's as if time has stood still and all the small issues have faded away and there's nothing other than that which is right there. Life itself suddenly has new meaning and relevance that eschews cynicism and world weariness, despite what the daily news presents us with.

David Steindl-Rast says that 'we fear death most when we feel we haven't really lived yet. We're afraid that death will come like a thief in the middle of the night before we've really had a chance to live. This fear is most real when we are not living in the moment. If we don't find ways to live in the now, then death is frightening because we've never really been present to our life. We missed it and all of a sudden it's over. The more fully we live, the easier it is to let go, to die'². Being present to life means grabbing it with open hands and an open heart and the openness to say 'I love you' or to show I care. How sad it must be when one is dying to be filled with regret that so much time was spent on unimportant matters and crippling emotions, and so little on those things that we all truly cherish.

My practice has also let me see that things go their own natural way without need for my control or interference, not to say I don't get caught up in both at times. My body and mind are likely to respond positively to being treated well, but ultimately both will age and stop working, regardless of how hard I might try to prevent it and regardless of how science and technology may advance. I can't command it to not get sick or not get old and if I cling to a belief that I'm able to control it, I'll only suffer more when I'm dying. 'Dharma sees the body as an impermanent phenomena like any other, one that will not only come to an end but is also constantly changing in unexpected ways. We have control over some conditions that affect the body but not others, and part of wisdom is to know that. We need to take care of our bodies, but in a profound way we don't really own them, except in a conventional and legal sense'³.

The realisation of non-self which comes (and goes!) arises when I let go. And dying is a process of letting go, whether it be a sudden death, or a gradual decline through sickness and old age, the latter often demanding a letting go of independence, including the prospect that at some stage I may need someone to feed me, turn me over in bed, wash me and wipe my bum. The physical aspects of zazen provide me with the experience over and over of letting go; letting go of any tightness of my muscles, gross muscles and more particularly tiny muscles around and somehow behind my eye sockets. Letting go of thoughts and emotions too, over and over – being aware that they're there, but letting them go. Letting go of my self-image, seeing my face as a skull, my flesh having been taken from my all my bones, exposing my skeleton, bringing an intimacy with death.

The truly overwhelming and most painful letting go experience I believe though will be the death of those I love most dearly, if any of them die before me. All I know is that I can't put myself there, I can only be myself here. I can only be present with whatever is and be open to whatever arises, be it joy or crushing grief and pain. There's nothing more to be done but open my heart and cherish life as it is in the awareness that love brings joy and sadness.

A dear dharma friend, now living as a nun in the Nederland, has said that she's been in the midst of much pain and surgery over recent months and then the realisation came to her that this

day by day pain is her very practice. In Aitken Roshi's words 'You are always in a certain condition, sometimes healthy, sometimes toxic, sometimes refreshed, sometimes stale, sometimes comfortable, sometimes uncomfortable. You are always indoors so to speak. Your condition is the context of your practice, the valley in which you follow the path. The path is your practice, not the valley'⁴. So if my condition is acute pain, then that's my path at that time and I need to be present to it, maintaining an awareness that it is what it is, knowing it will change. If my condition is joy, it's no different. Once again, my practice is in returning over and over to being present, regardless of whatever is coming forth.



No matter how much preparation I may undertake, I'm not assured of a comfortable or easy death, but as Shunryu Suzuki Roshi says " I don't know what it's going to be like when I die. Nobody knows what that's going to be like. But when I die, I'll still be a buddha. I may be a buddha in agony, or I may be a buddha in bliss, but I'll die knowing that this is how it is"⁵.

The contemplation of dying, the intimate awareness of death within me, brings a perspective to life which is liberating and shows the small, petty aggravations of life to be laughable in the light of the whole. When I surrender to the whole of life, I can grin at my grimness. And I can see how efforts to be brighter, better, more ANYTHING than I am and, especially, more ANYTHING than anyone else, are completely meaningless and crazy. In the wonderful words of Sufi poet Rumi,

*'Inside the Great Mystery that is, we don't really own anything.
What is this competition we feel then,
before we go, one at a time,
through the same gate?'*⁶

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In the Rain

by Jillian Ball

Tributes given,
words unspoken,
tears
and aching hearts.
Family, friends
and neighbours
heaving
from their depths.
Love omnipresent
weaves through
life
and death.
A pine box
with red dahlias.
A discarded body.
A dark limousine.
The sky opens,
rain falls.
The drought
has broken.
I feel your presence.
“We need rain,”
you said,
before you died.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Relinquishing

by Jillian Ball

The past year we have watched your fading spark.

Your body pinned
with unspellable, unpronounceable words.

Your once athletic muscles
now atrophied,

eyes sunken,

gait slowed

to a shuffle.

Love once obscured

now spilling over.

Objects bearing no meaning now.

Life lying instead

in each smile of your grandchildren

in each orchard you nourish

Dendrobium speciosum

Sarcochilus

Osmoglossum pulchellium.

*My father, along with many
other sentient beings died in
Victoria's heat wave last week. His
garden has come back to life as we
water each of his plants with love.*

This Dewdrop World¹

by Allan Marett

I'd like to take up a haiku by Issa. You may know it already.

this dewdrop world
is but a dewdrop world,
and yet, and yet

It is one of Issa's most famous poems, written following the death of his daughter Sato, just after her first birthday.

In Japanese, it is particularly lovely, so let me try to give you a taste of that, if I can. Like most traditional Japanese haiku, it comprises three lines, of five, seven and five syllables respectively.

tsuyunoyo wa (5)
tsuyunoyo nagara (7)
sarinagara² (5)

The first line, of five syllables, consists of the words, *tsuyunoyo wa*. *Tsuyunoyo* means 'the world of dew,' or as it is more poetically translated, 'the dewdrop world,' and the grammatical particle *wa* at the end of the line marks what comes before it as the main topic of the sentence, hence 'this dewdrop world.'

In the second, seven-syllable line, *tsuyunoyo* (the dewdrop world) is repeated and followed by *nagara*, which means, 'while' or 'although,' giving us 'while but a dewdrop world ...' So, together lines one and two are: 'this dewdrop world, while but a dewdrop world ...' And the hanging statement is completed in the third, five-syllable line, which consists of a single word, *sarinagara*, meaning, 'and yet.'

Issa's family was devoted to Pure Land (Jôdô Shinshû) Buddhism and Issa eventually ordained as a lay priest in this school of Buddhism, taking the name by which he is generally known, Issa, which means simply, 'one [cup of] tea'.³ In an interview, Nanao Sakaki, speaking in English, contrasted the farmer, Issa, with that other great haiku poet, the samurai, Bashô:

Issa's more peasant, good for peasant. Like middle class because he's landowner Only a very small patch, still he was landowner, so landowner means middle class. Bashô mostly intellectual background. Issa nothing, no education, he learned only from his life. So that is more closer to everybody.⁴

¹ This was first given as a dharma talk at the zazenkaï held at the Sydney Zen Centre on 19 January 2014.

² 露の世は 露の世ながら さりながら

³ Aitken 2011 *op.cit.*, 134.

⁴ Sakaki 1999, *op.cit.*, 63.



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Although his family was a moderately well off land-owning family (Sakaki's 'very small patch' perhaps overstates it a bit), Issa had a difficult life. His mother died when he was three, and after his father remarried and his grandmother died, he was so miserable that, at the age of 13, he left home and went to live in Edo (modern-day Tokyo). He married in 1791, and fathered three children, two of whom lived for only a month, and the third, his daughter Sato, died just after her first birthday. As I said earlier, the haiku we are focusing on today, was written on the occasion of the death of this little girl.

So what are we to make of, 'This dewdrop world is but a dewdrop world, and yet, and yet?' Aitken Roshi, somewhat surprisingly, makes a great deal of Issa's Pure Land beliefs about the dead going to the Pure Land after death. I'm not inclined to take that tack myself. Hakuin presents the Zen view of the Pure Land when he says in his Song of Zazen, 'Even those with proud attainments wipe away immeasurable crimes –where are all the dark paths then? The Pure Land itself is not far.' And later, 'Boundless and free is the sky of Samadhi, bright the full moon of wisdom, truly is anything lacking now, nirvana is here before our eyes, this very place is the Lotus Land, this very body the Buddha.'

What the poem says to me is: 'even though you may see clearly into the insubstantiality of things (the dewdrop nature of the world and the self), sadness and pain arise nonetheless.' On the face of it this might seem to contradict the promise held out in opening lines of the Heart Sutra, which, as perhaps the most fundamental and universally known of all texts throughout all schools of Buddhism in Japan, would have been just as well known to Issa as it is to us. This is my paraphrase

of the opening passage: “When the Bodhisattva of Compassion practices the Perfection of Wisdom (prajna paramita), she clearly sees that the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental constructions and consciousness) are all empty and without any abiding substance—like a dewdrop, you might say—and in this way she transcended all suffering.”

But we have to be careful here. It’s very attractive to imagine that realisation is a magic key that will miraculously free us entirely and forever from pain and sadness. If this becomes a fixed position, or a ‘view’⁵, or some sort of ideal to which we struggle to aspire, we will almost inevitably become disappointed and frustrated. The Zen tradition reminds us again and again that our lives, as they are actually lived, are complex and dynamic, and impossible to pin down. I ask you, ‘Would it be appropriate to not feel pain at the loss of a beloved daughter?’ All things are essentially empty, and that undoubtedly liberates us from suffering, but how do we apply this in our lives as we actually live them? Even realisation can be problematic if it becomes just an idea or a memory. So! You are entirely swept away by the song of the cicadas. Everything disappears. Just “chikachikachika zzzzzzz.” Great! Congratulations! —and I’m serious about my congratulation here—realisation is fundamental to the Buddhist Way. But what are you going to do with this realisation? How are you going to integrate it into you’re your life as it is actually lived? What about when you encounter pain or sadness?

One of my favourite Zen poems, which we encounter in the Denkoroku, or ‘Record of the Transmission of the Light,’ is Keizan’s poem appended to the end of Case 6.⁶

Though we find clear waters raging to the vast blue sky of autumn,
How can it compare with the hazy moon on a spring night?
Most people want to have it pure white,
But sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind.

For me, ‘most people want to have it pure white, but sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind’ resonates deeply with ‘this dewdrop world, is but a dewdrop world, and yet and yet.’

Another expression of “and yet, and yet” occurs in the Wumenguan, Case 38: Wuzu’s Buffalo Passes Through the Window.

Wuzu said, “It is like a buffalo that passes through a latticed window. Its head, horns, and four legs all pass through. Why can’t its tail pass through as well?”

To this, Wumen adds a verse:

Passing through, falling in a ditch; turning beyond, all is lost. This tiny little tail—what a wonderful thing it is!

Why is it wonderful, this tiny little tail, this, ‘and yet and yet?’ Because it is what makes us human. How, without our joys, our sorrows, our frustrations and our terrors, could we ever develop

⁵ I discuss the meaning of ‘view’ within Buddhist discourse later in this talk.

⁶ The *Denkoroku* is a collection of enlightenment stories compiled by Keizan Jokin (1268-1325). In the Diamond Sangha we take up the *Denkoroku* and this poem late in our koan study.

true character, imbued with compassion and wisdom? The way of the bodhisattva embraces everything, grapples with whatever arises, and eschews ideas of purity. Ideas about realisation freeing us entirely from pain and sadness, or of Buddhas passing across into the Unconstructed, into nirvana, for all eternity, may be attractive and inspiring ideas, but that is all they are. Ideas.

At this point, I want to move from reflection on poems, koans and sutras to some more personal experiences, because the little tail that doesn't pass through the latticed window is nothing if not personal and based in actual experience. You may sometimes be asked in dokusan to make your response to a koan point "more personal." When we say, "personal" here, we don't mean "please entangle us in your stories about yourself". Rather we want to see the koan alive and embodied by the one coming forth on your cushion.

When our good friend and dharma companion Gordon Waters was dying, I sometimes went across to his house in Five Dock to sit zazen with him in his studio. We would sit facing each other, just breathing, just sitting. It was a great privilege to be able to sit with Gordon like this. It brought me down to earth. After all Gordon was actually going to die, and soon. One by one, each of his sense gates—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and the thinking mind itself—were going to shut down. What would be left then? Emptiness and form may be one, as the Heart Sutra reminds us, but when form ceases to exist, when dharmas cease to arise, what then?

Subhana told me that when he was dying, Sexton Burke said, "the only reason that people fear death is because they believe that there is someone to die." Yes, true, if we fully realize that there is nobody here at all, that there truly is no self, then we need not fear death. But that requires considerable maturity and constant work. Gordon told me that he was not particularly concerned about death itself. Nor was he particularly concerned about the process of dying. He had complete faith in his palliative team. But, he told me, he could not bear the thought of leaving all those people who were dear to him—his wife Anna, his family, his friends, of whom there were an astonishing number, as we learned when we went to his funeral.

Patrick Kearney recently told me another story about Sexton, who said something very similar when he was dying. That it was not the dying that concerned him, but what would happen to his wife and children after he died. According to Patrick, when he said this to the senior Vipassana teacher, Christopher Titmus, Christopher replied, "but Sexton, surely you can see that that is just a view." And, according to Patrick, at that point, Sexton palpably relaxed as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Because I didn't really understand what 'view' meant in this context I questioned Patrick a little more about this and he replied:

...view (ditthi) [is] a cognitive understanding, in this [ie Sexton's] case of an affective state. You could say it entails the meaning of an affective state. So, for example, the body might be churned up and disturbed, and the mind needs to understand what this means. So it could read the sensations (body = first aggregate) and associated feeling tone (feeling = second aggregate), the pleasantness/unpleasantness, as "Oh my God! A disaster just happened! Or could have happened!" This interpretation is cognitive, and in the realm of meaning. And this is where we find view. But of

course, the same sensation/feeling tone could be interpreted as, "Wow! That was fun," and the experience would be read, interpreted - seen - very differently.

So much of meditation training actually consists in learning to read, interpret, one's experience according to the categories of dharma, and to place reality there rather than in the categories of self and other. But in both cases, it's just an interpretation.

Reading the exchange between Sexton and Christopher Titmus in the light of Patrick's comments, it seems that what Christopher was drawing Sexton's attention to was the fact that his anxieties were simply feelings that arose naturally as a result of conditions—from the fact that he was dying. No need to make a story about them. No need for them to become a locus for the generation of the self.

This is all pertinent to the 'and yet, and yet' of Issa's haiku. When you really pay attention to it, Issa's 'and yet' is so subtle. It only hints at feeling and it also seems to convey a deep acceptance. It doesn't even name the feeling (it was I who added the label, 'sadness'), and it certainly doesn't create any stories around it (it was I that gave you the story about it being composed on the death of his daughter). It really is wonderfully subtle poetry.

And now, at the risk of creating a story about myself, let me tell you about a recent and unexpected brush with death that I had myself. I was driving to a weekend walking retreat in the foothills of the Southern Alps of NZ with my friend and fellow Zen teacher, Arthur Wells. Arthur had picked me up from the airport and we were barreling along one of those long straight roads that you get on the Canterbury Plain. At one point we were behind a car approaching an intersection. The car in front pulled to the left, as if it was going to turn left at the intersection, and then suddenly swerved to the right in front of us. There was no time for evasive action. We collided with the car at high speed and our car took off diagonally across the intersection, straight towards a concrete power pole. I calmly thought, 'oh, so it's going to end here in NZ' (there was a sense of it almost being appropriate, self-evident even, that I should die in the country in which I was born).



Photo by Glenys Jackson

Somehow, however, Arthur maintained enough control for us to narrowly miss the power pole. We plunged through a ditch, demolished a fence and ploughed about 30-40 metres into a field. Thankfully, once we stopped, both our doors opened and we were able to get out.

The first thing that struck me was the total insubstantiality, the dewdrop quality you might say, of everything. The vivid unique green of the hills, the vibrant presence of the distant mountains, the caress of the cool late afternoon breeze. The thought arose: 'What if we were dead? How would we know?' And back came the answer: 'I can't say.'

Here's an old Chinese story from the Blue Cliff Record (Case 55):

Daowu and Jianyuan went to a house to express condolences. Jianyuan rapped on the coffin, and said, "Living or dead?"

Daowu said, "I won't say living and I won't say dead."

Jianyuan asked, "Why won't you say?"

Daowu said, "I won't say! I won't say!"

On the way home, Jianyuan said, "Your Reverence, please tell me right away. If you don't I will hit you."

Daowu said, "If you like, I'll allow you to hit me, but I'll never say." Jianyuan hit him.

Later, after Daowu had passed away, Jianyuan went to Shishuan and told him this story. Shuang said, "Alive, I won't say! Dead, I won't say!"

Jianyuan asked, "Why won't you say?"

Shuang said, "I won't say! I won't say! With these words, Jianyuan was enlightened.

But no sooner had I had this thought, "I can't say", when I was engulfed by a profound surge of grief. "Oh! The pain that would have been unleashed had Arthur and I died!" Images of my grieving loved ones flooded my mind.

A couple of weeks later, after I had got home, I had a terrible dream. I had been abandoned by everyone that I loved. This was another, late appearing manifestation of that surge of grief that I felt just after the accident. Suddenly I understand how Gordon must have felt. Although, when you die, you are the one leaving, you are also the one who is losing everything.

And the thing is, the arising of such feelings are unavoidable. To imagine the grief of our loved ones, to feel abandoned when we die, these are, like Issa's 'and yet' natural and appropriate. The important thing is how we regard them. How we deal with them. Can we avoid turning them into stories about ourselves? Can we feel pain and sadness, but not cling to them? If we can, then we will undoubtedly have taken an import step on the path of liberation. But then, what about the next step? And the next?

*Please Note: An audio version of this article is available for download or streaming on the Sydney Zen Centre website <http://szc.org.au/archive/category/podcast/> The talk is entitled: **Allan Marett – This Dewdrop World** and was published on 8th February 2014. This talk was given at the January 2014 Zazenkaï held at the Sydney Zen Centre in Annandale.*

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