

Mind Moon Circle

Journal of the Sydney Zen Centre



Glass, stones, seeds and butterfly by Glenys Jackson

The Middle Path

SPRING 2020

The Middle Path

Spring 2020

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The next issue of *Mind Moon Circle* (Summer 2020/21) will be edited by Kerry and Brendon Stewart. It will be about “Flowering” - Stories, poems, pictures, memories and reflections on all things that come into bloom.

Please send all contributions in Word format to:

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Becoming Zen

Doshin Kusan
(Barry Farrin)

How did I find Zen?

When I started Zen Buddhism, I was looking to find peace in my life and to find a way out of my suffering. I had no idea of a philosophical system, or system of change, or a doctrine of how to live, or a moral code or how find an everyday practice guide. I was looking at Zen as a way of quieting my mind.

I had been exploring many modalities to help me work with the situation of a very unhappy marriage. I practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) and loved the meditation. I took up karate before this and I was consumed by it. This was about the time I met Subhana in 1976 and did my first class with her.

We moved to Queensland in 1988 and joined the Brisbane Zen Group. We did not have a resident teacher in Brisbane for about 4 years. We tried different people from the USA and from Australia. But we always sat with great commitment. I now think of these early days as Soldier Zen. Any noise or any movement was countered by a request from the leadership team to resist moving or making a noise. Coming from my stern karate world this was not hard for me.

Beginning True Zen

The Brisbane Zen Group was a good place to practice Soto Zen. I started doing a Soto style which Joko Beck was teaching at the time. I did not meet her, but Gregg Howard carried the teaching until he became officially the teacher in The Brisbane group. I began to do shikantaza meditation and silent Illumination. Later as I practiced with the Ordinary Mind School in Brisbane, I began to understand some of the liturgy and realised the overwhelming suffering in the world. One of the practical applications of zen is to work with people who are suffering, and I started to use mindfulness meditation with my psychotherapy clients and those who had a life-threatening illness. I enjoyed working with Roselyn Stone Roshi from Canada for a couple of years and loved her koan work. She was one of the teachers who came to Brisbane and she had a great sense of humour and I really appreciated her openness.

I read sparingly at this time as was the tradition in the Ordinary Mind School during Sesshin and Zazenkai. My practice became stronger and I enjoyed sitting. I did a lot of “Just Sitting” when I was on the Sunshine Coast when Subhana moved to Sydney. I got down to Sydney as often as I could to attend sesshin.

Living in an Australian Zen Monastery

During 1995 and 1996 I had to move to Brisbane for work and I was lucky enough to live in a Zen Korean monastery for 12 months. I started to think about ordination about this time. It seemed to me that it was a productive thing to do and I thought it would give me a deeper commitment. In 1996 I went to Hawaii to practice with Robert Aitken Roshi for his last *ango*¹ and *sesshin*. I discussed going further in Zen with Roshi and after my conversation I put the issue of ordination aside.

I have always understood zen from my inner knowing like an intuitive way of knowing. Reading about zen helped me understand some of the insights gained when I was sitting in *Shikantaza*. I developed an intuitive process of learning during my master's program as an un-written zen work. I was writing about zen in my assignments, but much of what I was writing came from my zen story and my way of narrating this story was not articulated in a zen way. I knew zen was impacting on my life.

I chose to exclude using zen as a philosophy in my psychotherapy work, but I found in learning conversations and other processes zen had a great impact on me. I was happy to call Zen Buddhism, a practice, a philosophy, and a religion in the early days. That all changed as I practiced *zazen*. Zen became a practice for me. I began to understand the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The Buddha's first teaching about The Four Noble Truths partly explained why I found my home in zen. Some zen students will always find the Buddha way difficult. But I found great calm and my fear of death seemed to drift away. Most of us have a degree of suffering in our life. This is the existential truth of our life. We will die and we will see many loved ones and friends die. The Buddha declared that there is a reason for suffering and there is a way out of suffering. This is a teaching that I felt I needed to explore more in my practice. This became a background echo in my mind as I thought about going further into zen. Ordination became a notion that reappeared often.

Mindfulness Practice

I found a place for mindfulness meditation and read widely about it. I was interested in Jon Kabat-Zinn and found that his mindfulness process was easy to teach other people. I was working in psychotherapy and then eventually palliative care and cancer care. I found a way of using mindfulness outside of Buddhism. I researched many of the papers on mindfulness and I then put together some observations of how effective mindfulness is in working with fear, grief, and loss.

¹An **ango** (安居), or *kessei* (結制), is a Japanese term for a three-month period of intense training for students of Zen Buddhism, lasting anywhere from 90 to 100 days. The practice during **ango** consists of meditation (*zazen*), study, and work (*samu* (作務)).

During this time while I was studying mindfulness for use in psychotherapy, I began to see how people could gain from practicing mindfulness meditation in controlling their anxiety suffering and pain. This connected me back into my own zen practice. I realised the ultimate benefit was finding my own true nature and understanding my place in the universe. My mind told me to come back to the world of ordinary people. I felt that was about ordination.



Patching the Robe by Liang Kai (1140-1210)

The Eightfold Path.

The way out of suffering is to follow The Noble Eightfold Path. Within the Eightfold Path we find ethical, spiritual and practice components. There is a component of having a deep understanding of personal suffering and this is called the “Right View or Understanding”. The deeper the understanding of individual suffering and universal suffering brings us to a broader commitment to Zen.

The Noble Eightfold Path lays down an ethical process to follow while we are in the early days of our practice. This may embody a period of reading and forming an intellectual understanding of the moral aspect. This period in my practice was philosophical and partly religious. The 16 Precepts form the other side of Zen Buddhist ethics. This ethical aspect of zen informs my understanding of what ordination means to me.

My passage through zen has always been a very intimate process. I continue to connect with the things that I have tried to hide from in the past. Zen is doing its real work now for me.

The question of ordaining which had always been an issue for me reappeared again and again in my mind. But through ignorance and misunderstanding I never pursued it diligently.

Finding Dogen and Silent Illumination

I found Dogen's teaching useful when I had no teacher close to me. I spent most of my time doing Shikantaza or what I later learned was silent illumination. I had always used just sitting but it was becoming my main practice. I was encouraged by the words of Dogen Zenji from the Genjo Koan,

"To study the Buddha Way (Zen) is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas.

To be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas is to free one's body and mind and those of others.

No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly."

Dogen's work after he returned from China helped me explore the practice of just sitting and silent illumination. Okumura's translation of Dogen's work in "Realizing Genjokoan" and "The Mountains and Waters Sutra", and Tanahashi's "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye" and "Moon in a Dewdrop" allowed me to see the beauty in Soto Zen.

Diamond Sangha and Soto Zen

I have worked with many students during their passage through the Mumonkan. I became aware of Guo Gu in 2016 and began to read his beautiful book "Passing Through the Gateless Barrier". My students read this book after each koan and it was rewarding for them. Guo Gu mentioned his teacher Master Sheng Yen and I read his work on silent Illumination which has continued to help rethink zen teaching for me. Bringing Soto and The Diamond Sangha together seemed like a new process.

Again, I thought of ordination and decided to make some plans to find someone in Australia who could help me ordain. It was not easy to find anyone who could do the ordination. I eventually found James Ford Roshi in the USA who had Soto ordination in the early 1970s and had studied in the Diamond Sangha koan curriculum many years before. James Ford Roshi came to the Sunshine Coast in March 2020 just before covid-19 and I was ordained with 40 of my friends, family, students and colleagues present.

I have explored my path through zen over 45 years and it all seems to have happened so quickly. When I look back at what I have written it seems I have given you only half of the reasons for my journey to ordination. Much of my thinking while writing this short article was so very private and difficult to articulate. What I have written may not answer some questions, but this is my journey. I thought there was nothing to be gained by ordaining in the past because I felt that I wanted to stay in my ordinary life. But this is my ordinary life. Many of my zen colleagues in SEQ and Northern NSW are already ordained and have encouraged and supported me in my decision. Many have expressed the idea: "If you think you should ordain you should do it".

Barriers

Sue Bidwell

Seeing the barriers I create
as I create them...
then perpetuate them.
Why do it?
then hold onto them?
If for protection,
protecting what?

I can let them go
can simply just let go
and be freely, intimately with
the sunlight on the spider's web
the soap on my hands
the muscles tiring in my back
the Koel calling, calling.

*"Your task is not to seek love, but merely to find all the
barriers within yourself that you have built against it".*

Rumi

The Clown

Caroline Josephs



I met a clown
As I was walking
(I thought to engage him
In some talking.)
His face was buried
In red-spot hanky ...
“Hullo Clown,” I say
Thinking he may want to play...
But Clown is sobbing
Oh dear! Oh dear!”
His voice is wailing
His red nose bobbing...

His red spot hanky
Is flailing ...
“Whatever is to become of me?”
He’s crying ...
But I am trying
To find out, (not prying) –
“Clown, tell me ...
What’s your name?”
I sit beside him on
bench frame
Place my hand
(gentle) on his sleeve ...



He blows his nose,
startled
by this reprieve
And looks long and hard
At me.
“My name?” he says
Locked in his story.
His sobs die down...
As though forgotten
his voice trails ...
Waking slow,
he answers
hoarse,
“My name is....

“Nails!”
“Whatever is
the matter,
Nails?” ask I,
Curious, always
to spy
The heart, the task,
Of mystery
at once...
“Lost my job in the
Circus!” cries Nails,
bursting into sobs and wails ...
“Oh dear! Oh dear!
“Never fear, never fear”,
says I,

Always sure of a path
to solve the mass
of life smarts!
“It’s not your fault!
You have been caught!
It’s the *Pandemic Push*
In city, and in bush!
We must try

To do something!”
Nails stops,
astonished
Looks at me,
His hand flops
from face....
“*We??*” he asks.
“*Of course!*” says I.

Caroline Josephs, Nov, 2020

Drop box link to MP4 video version of this work:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/vlwvkl0sc19nmuw/Clown%20Story%20CJosephs.mp4?dl=0>

Paintings by Caroline Josephs, acrylic on canvas, 95 x 95cms, 2020

The middle path

Brendon Stewart

*... enter the sea and notice how the water divides
with perfect courtesy, to let you in! (Mary Oliver)*

I have found there to be a surfeit of time in the middle of ‘the everyday’ as I ponder what it means to be socially isolated. My days are regular and repetitive, an endless week of Sundays.

I space these words with social distance in mind. News services or should I say social media platforms remind me often enough that for the year of 2020 at least ‘we are all in this together’; no politics, no ideology, no one left behind, everyone somehow in the middle.

I am grateful of course that we, my fellow citizens and I have managed to remain more or less sane and not indulge too much in disquiet with government public health policy. This as we sadly know has not been so elsewhere.

The horror that befell worshippers in the Notre Dame Cathedral of Nice comes forlornly to mind and alarmingly as polling has found, around a third of Americans believed violence could be justified in support of their political parties’ goals. Twenty-one percent apparently of those with strong political affiliations were “quite willing to endorse violence if the other party wins the presidency”. (The Conversation Media).

Holding lightly onto the humble directive that ‘the way’ is simple; refrain from picking and choosing is maybe just a little bit too humble. Partisan thought and activity prevail as indeed it most probably always has. Is the middle path just compromise?

*People are crazy and times are strange.
I'm locked in tight, I'm outa range
I used to care but things have changed (Bob Dylan)*

Buddhism offers an insightful way to understand and possibly end your suffering. Christianity with similar audacity offers one a way to save your soul.

Of late, the go-to Koan: ‘not knowing’ has taken on a new urgency, but in some ways too it lets dread seem legitimate. For many I think the not knowing is really about not being able to do whatever one expects. Flying to visit a loved one somewhere else in the world, eating out in restaurants, getting the flu with impunity.

*No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint
that something is missing from your life!* (Mary Oliver)

Not knowing as a practice device has philosophical and mindful value for sure, in much the same way that for Christians and Muslims the *via negativa* allows God to be knowably unknowable but it provides only poetics when it comes to how the mechanics of the universe work. Buddhism does outline some fundamental realities; all things are impermanent and materiality is interconnected and co-dependent but importantly, it's not a science; it isn't even like the much-lauded 'new' neuro-science. It didn't foretell evolution or describe gravity waves. In the same way Christianity, and for that matter Islamic texts give nothing away when it comes to how a spider weaves her web. These great religious texts are not scientific treaties on the order of things. And for centuries those who taught and proclaimed the word and the dharma made it clear that there was much to be left unknowable. Questions that began with 'why' usually would be put aside at best, or often enough turned against the questioner with the intent to silence the blasphemy. Not knowing can be shorthand for intolerance.

Over time, thank goodness, answers to 'why' questions have curbed disease, reduced infant mortality, settled social unrest and led on to further questions like; 'what now'?

I make no excuse for turning to sacred texts when I need to recover and nourish my spiritual levelheadedness; the paramitas and noble truths, the sermon on the mount and the wisdom of the Prophet in going to the problem rather than expecting it to come to him: all essential in the middle of one's life-time work.

In this year of 20/20 vision there has been a great organisation of knowing; scientists and health care workers; epidemiologist, some politicians and schoolteachers have helped to unlock the workings of a novel RNA cluster.

Wanting to know how this mischievous virus works is a way of mystery.

The sea can divide with courtesy as you enter and sometimes too it heaves you into turmoil. Sometimes we guess at the way, sometimes intuition pays off, sometime methodical research and inquiry is needed. A vaccine for C19 isn't going to wash up by not knowing.

The 20/20 vision that has so shaped this year of practice and care calls for clear and calm dharma eyes; tolerant eyes that focus on the many ways revealed.

Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches (extract) Mary Oliver
The Conversation Media Group. Monday 9 November, 2020

Things have Changed Bob Dylan 2000

What is beyond?

Joe Gaebel

Promoting the pluses
Preventing the minuses
What is beyond the ups and downs?

Beautiful relationships
Heartbreak at their loss
What is beyond joy and sorrow?

Animals that I love have passed
Eventually my parents, and so will I
What is beyond birth and death?

Grasping after what I like
Pushing away what I don't
What is beyond seeking pleasure and avoiding pain

Mandalas

Glenys Jackson



Remembrance of Flowers Past. Freesias and straw flower.

Mandala verses

Glenys Jackson

Outside in the garden
surrounded by green Clivia
petals fall - faded now, a
soft apricot hue.

I walk the streets in
early morning light.
The winds of spring
send sweet perfume.

Blazing colours - pink
and red azaleas.
New leaves burst into life.
Tightly curled buds cling
awaiting the heat of summer.

Home – a bag of treasures.
Soft pink camellia petals
bruised at the edges cover
the table. Ants run for
cover under eucalyptus
leaves. The mandala
emerges, slowly - a
meditation.

A week passes, petals wither,
leaves curl. In keeping with
tradition, time to sweep all
away. Scatter, bury in the
garden.

The circle complete.



Form is Emptiness...Calligraphy, poppy petals and buds.



Sunyata. Chinese ink enzo, rose petals, straw flower

The Sayings and Doings of Little Heart

Sean Loughman

Case 3

The Case

“Where are you, Little Heart?”

“Here.”

The Verse

Pointing to heaven and earth

With a single word,

Here, Shariputra,

She brings all beings

In to the one room.

a void

by Myvanwy Williamson
after Georges Perec

solitary body,
go softly towards this liquid ground,
allow your hollow form
to unify as
This –
holy and vast.

do not turn away, afraid,
submit to this sword
that cuts away from clinging.
fight fog and churning magma –
Burst through!

you must not avoid
what surrounds and flows
through all our bodies:
a Void that is always waiting.

Like the Georges Perec novel of the same name, '*a void*' is written without the letter 'e'. Perec was part of a group called Oulipo. Their goal was to use various constraints when producing creative work, such as the exclusion of certain letters. They believed that such constraints provided a framework within which creativity would flourish. I believe this principle also applies to our Zen practice.

One often hears in Zen circles that we do not practice in order to *achieve* awakening, but rather we practice in order to put ourselves in the way of it. I see the Middle Way as a framework for putting ourselves in the way. It is a framework that allows the boundless creativity of self-nature to flourish. This includes all the forms of Zen and the precepts, as well as all the constraints that other Buddhist traditions have. It is important to remember that the constraints themselves are not the Way. For example, no amount of bowing or abstaining

from intoxicants can, by themselves, give rise to awakening. They only create safety guards that can keep us from wandering around in the dark endlessly.

In monastic life one does not have much personal choice about the constraints one must adhere to. However, as a lay community we all must choose which constraints we implement in our own lives. This is something I have been contemplating for some time now. I find having a rigid framework in my life extremely beneficial for directing me towards practice. I am also lucky enough to be on the disability pension. Once I graduate university, I will not be looking for a job, and I will have the broad expanse of the rest of my life open to me.

My practice is the most important thing in my life, and in this broad expanse I want to direct myself towards practice as much as possible. I don't want to waste my time rummaging around in the mud for interesting diversions. A few weeks ago, I started looking for advice on how to create a framework for my life in this way. I found myself reading about monastic life, and my old longing to become a nun returned. This is no longer a viable option given both my marriage and my disabilities. I started to panic that I would never be able to create a framework that suited me and my needs. Then I had a dream.

In the dream I was a nun. I was wearing robes and meditating in a giant stone gazebo. It was circular with a huge stone dome. It was held up by pillars. The floor had giant hexagonal stone tiles. I was sitting on the middle hexagon which I fit on easily. There were trees around the outside of the gazebo. There was no one else and no furniture. I knew that this was where I lived and was all I owned.

I actually was meditating in the dream. I felt myself come back into my body. I'd that the vessel of monasticism was no other than the vessel of my own life. There are different challenges but the empty body in these vessels is the same. I was the same as a nun. Although they live different lives, once they are on the cushion it is all the same. The vow to save all beings is the root of practice. I woke up and my panic about my practice and the framework of my life was dissolved. I was solidly here in this body but without clinging or aversion to it. Just my body as all bodies. I am wearing my robes on the inside.

Whatever vessel I choose for my life, however I choose to embody the Middle Way, I know I must remember that in each moment I have already arrived.



Samuel Beckett

You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.

Greg Try

Zen existentialism, adversity, practical application of the middle way (1)

The heading I've used is a Samuel Beckett quote, which I chose because, well, this year for many people has been a strange one and also perhaps a year of hardship. For some as well it's been close to 'business as usual' but for others it's been a year spent close to home, around the house, perhaps doing those things that have been left undone for a long time.

I'm often interested in philosophers and thinkers who come to similar conclusions as the Buddha and Zen ancestors. One of those people was Iris Murdoch (1919 – 1999). Some of you may have come across a book called *Going Buddhist* by Peter Conradi. In this book the author, who is a friend and biographer of Iris Murdoch, has extended conversations with her about religion, philosophy and life.

Murdoch.... bequeathed a moral theory that was rooted in the idea of being attentive: holding "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality". This "just vision" required what she called "unselfing", a hugely challenging task but arguably exactly what's needed today to counter the rise of nationalism and tribal politics. (2)

Iris Murdoch was interested in religion and philosophy for most of her life. She was a self-pronounced "Christian-Buddhist". In his book *Going Buddhist*, the author starts off in 1982, over a few pints of beer in an Edinburgh pub with Iris Murdoch. She asks him 'Are you a religious person?' This starts Conradi off on his quest. At this point in his life, he's suffering from terrifying panic attacks, as he puts it: 'Fear and trembling were my specialist subjects.'

Through his friendship with Murdoch, he begins to explore Buddhism and slowly learns to deal with his anxieties.

In an article on Murdoch's ideas, the journalist asks Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, two academics who have researched Murdoch's contribution to philosophy – Can you explain her idea of unselfing?

RW: To unself, I simply turn my attention outward, away from myself and on to the world. If I do this successfully, I will see things as they really are, and not through the lens of my own selfish concerns.... Our view of the world is always clouded by our own desires and concerns – Murdoch often speaks of the “fat relentless ego”.

CMcC: She does think, however, that experience of nature has a special role to play in making in making manifest to us the quality of consciousness that unselfing involves. She gives a wonderful example of looking out the window while in an anxious state of mind – “brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige” – when she spots a hovering kestrel. At once everything changes, a bit like a Gestalt shift. The hurt vanity disappears – one is unselfed – and the full presence of the kestrel is revealed. (3)



This year has given the many the feeling of it's all too much. The virus keeps reappearing, the economy is in tatters and there is huge unemployment. I'm not quite at retirement age, so I have the feeling of being stuck in limbo, of waiting for things to 'open up again' but when will that be? Anxiety has reared its head again and living with uncertainty is again a reality.

Times like these require problem solving skills to surmount the obstacles we come up against every day. I used problem solving skills to achieve a couple of minor victories. Firstly, to finish and submit a skills assessment for an on-line TAFE course. I had to upload some scenarios I had filmed on my course. The files were too big, and I had to send them to One Drive on my phone. The IT person at TAFE was helpful in being able to move the files from my phone to my laptop. Then I had to convert the files to another format to be able to upload and submit. Technical hitches I find frustrating and sometimes bring on anxiety, though usually can be worked through.

So here I am Tuesday late morning at the living room table. The editor of this edition gave me a question “When your intentions don't materialise ,what is stopping you?” Well, there's procrastination, the deadline is weeks away, I can come back to it tomorrow, or equally insidious is distraction. I can look something up on my phone. Ah, the pernicious influence of Google: it's impossible to do one thing now, watch a movie or a football match. Who's that? I'll Google them, find out all about them? We can never have enough information and now with the help of Google, we can fill our minds with trivia – celebrities, food, bars, destinations, illnesses...whatever.

I've been unmoored from my secure place, my comforting routine, it didn't take much – just a pandemic that's going on and on...

*Renounce trivial pleasures
And you will encounter great happiness.
The wise will aspire to great happiness,
Renouncing trivial pleasures. (4)*

Maybe so, but in lockdown when there's nowhere to go. Trivial pleasures may have their place, time spent watching CNN and the 24-hour news cycle surrounding the American elections, which is a short reprieve from the boredom, uncertainty, despair no doubt felt by many. The economy is in tatters, so there are no jobs, if you were able to hold onto your job and work from home, then you're indeed fortunate. Life as we knew it has changed. Even the libraries are closed! The home has become a refuge prison. I have everything I need here; a fridge, a kettle, books, tv, laptop and wi-fi. When isolation drives me up the wall, I can at least go out the front door and head in a random direction and walk for an hour. I'm not under house arrest! And I in many respects I'm lucky.

During this period in the prison, there is nothing to occupy our time. We are just thrown into a cage and made to wear ridiculous loose-fitting clothes. It is even prohibited to play cards. In Corridor L, a few people were able to get hold of a permanent marker and draw a backgammon board onto a white plastic table. They began to play, using the lids from water bottles as counters. Almost instantly, a group of officers and plain-clothed guards entered Corridor L and crossed out the game. They wrote over it in bold letters, 'Games Prohibited'. It seemed that their only duty for the entire day: to shit all over the sanity of the prisoners, who were left just staring at each other in distress. Imagine a community of four hundred people, neglected in a boiling hot and filthy cage, still traumatised by the terrifying sound of waves ringing in their ears and the sight of a rotting boat fixed before their eyes. For how long can they simply talk to each other? How many times can they walk up and down the same hundred-metre distance? (5)

So I'm waiting and waiting to see how the chips fall. If I apply for a job with NSW government and get an interview, which is good. But then I wait for the outcome. The outcome is out of my hands no matter how well I prepared myself. No Antony Robbins positive thinking will do me any good here. I'm back living with not-knowing. Not knowing is most intimate. Not knowing is real and sane!

Zen Master Kosho Uchiyama said, "Violets are violets. Roses are roses. Budding, blossoming, fading, aging, becoming diseased – all are stages. As we go through these stages ourselves, let us bloom and grace the present moment of eternity" 6

1. Quote from Samuel Beckett – The Unnameable.
2. Why the World needs Iris Murdoch's philosophy of 'unselfing'. The Irish Times – May 16, 2019
3. Ibid.
4. Dhammapada, verse 290
5. No friend but the Mountain – Behrouz Boochani
6. Zen seeds – Shundo Aoyama

Neither going forwards, or going backwards, or standing still

Sally Hopkins

Neither going forwards, or going backwards, or standing still
Ajahn Chah

I often wake in the night. Well, I do go to bed ridiculously early! I can lie there, sometimes for hours and hours, floating in the dark, the world quiet. Thoughts can float in and out about the present or the future, or vivid moments from the past. Clouds coming and going. A sort of prone old age zazen. It is like floating in the ocean looking at the sky. There is great trust that ocean, or darkness, will bear me up if I just totally relax and let everything go. All is well. (I think of Julian of Norwich's "All things shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.")

Floating, I recently came to the quite shockingly vivid realisation that, like a newborn, this "I" is utterly dependent – dependent on other people, beings, earth, rain, air, sun - dependent for food, clothing, roof, sewerage, water, light, everything. I am not separate and cannot be separate. Everything bound together. It is a great cycle of giving and receiving. We are, as Aitken Roshi often said, all in this together.

Sometimes there is no floating. The mind gets busy, with how can I not be a burden on others? with the woes of the world, of friends and family, peoples all over the world, the creatures on land and sea and sky, the earth itself. So much suffering. Until 'Enough of wailing and gnashing of teeth. What good does my despair and anguish do for anyone or anything?' The suffering is real, but my imagining can become self-indulgent, sentimental. The only thing I have any real control over is my action. I then concentrate on the breath and in that open space things come back into perspective. Floating is again what happens.

As I write this some folk are sitting sesshin at Kodoji. I think of the sutras, the meal ceremony, the evening message. "*I beg to urge you everyone, life and death is a grave matter, all things pass quickly away. Each of you must be completely alert, never neglectful, never indulgent.*"

'Indulgent' was my mother's favourite word of criticism.

I don't think of the Middle Way as such. It has not been part of my practice. Floating seems to me nearest to what I understand by it.

Trusting that each moment will be sufficient. That somehow all the sorrows and delights, the sufferings and joys of everyone and everything can be held in this moment, this breath.

Often in that quietness the next step appears.

I now feel that for myself all is well whatever happens. Days are numbered when you are very old, but that seems of no concern. Everything changes, often from breath to breath, day to day. Every living thing eventually dies. This is life. Meanwhile, right now there is this moment, always coming, bringing the whole world. Right now, scarlet bottlebrush flower in all the neighbour's gardens, new leaves are bright green. The koel shouts its monotonous two-note call from the jacaranda. The radio brings awful news. People are afraid, lonely, kill each other, starve. The ocean fills with plastic, animals disappear. The earth itself seems to be dying. Fake news! Fake news! Greed, hatred and ignorance, alas, rise endlessly.

Endlessly, as I learn all too well in myself. Be alert, indeed! Floating in the moment upheld by everything, in the middle of Everywhere, may I be open-hearted to the world and always alert, never neglectful, never indulgent.



Morning birds

Philip Long

1000

10000 birds singing

In multiplex stream

Wave upon wave

Without beginning or end

Always NOW

One thousand sins

Ten thousand sins

Arriving departing

Darting

When did it ever arrive

500 lives entangled

500 lives expanded

What was their time

When did it ever end.



**The Middle Path, and the Genjo Koan:
Practical Applications of the Middle Path
in Everyday Life**

Philip Long

A constant companion to religion in whatever form it takes is the question of rationality. Some religionists argue that religious truths cannot be examined using logic and that we must “experience” religious truth rather than come to it by reasoning. Others say: “How can you argue *that*; it is a prescription for chaos and superstition?” I cannot hope to solve this problem in all its complexity in this short essay but I do say that the answer is not difficult to comprehend if we are asking about that word in its widest sense. I want to take a look at the philosophical/theological resolution of the issue in its most basic form. It is a matter of essentially practical relevance. This emphasis on practicality will keep the issue simple and relevant.

The first thing to notice in this debate is that those taking part in it assume that they know what religion and rationality mean and that those on the other side of the debate have the same understanding. This is far from the case. Part of this approach is the assumption that the two concepts are a dichotomy or dualism, that is, that they are essentially apart from each other. Similar absolute differences are claimed to exist in relation to a number of concepts – whole and part, experience and thinking, natural and supernatural, continuous and discontinuous, finite and infinite, and so on and so forth. Each concept has its opposite and is thus part of a duality.

There are two basic ways in which dualities are considered – dualistic and non-dualistic. In the dualistic approach the concept and its opposite (I shall call them “poles” of the duality) are considered as a dualism. This means that the two poles are seen as absolutely apart from one another and cannot exist together this separation involves the splitting off of one pole from the other, a denial of its truth, and a repression of that pole. If we take the

natural/supernatural duality this leads to naturalism on the one hand and supernaturalism on the other. In one, the nature world is all there is and, in the other, only the supernatural exists and the natural world is an illusion.

Buddhism is a non-dual philosophy and sees the two poles as complimenting rather than opposing one another. This also the case with other mystical traditions. Non-duality accepts that the relationship between the two poles is paradoxical and essentially mysterious at its base. It says that the duality is: “Not one, not two,” and that the two poles are not (absolutely) the same and not (absolutely) different, not continuous and not discontinuous. Thus, it is not so that all is One in a literal sense – it is One/man ¹

The mystery at the heart of duality is sometimes represented by the following drawing:



Who is this in the drawing? A girl from the Folies Bergère or an ugly old witch. We cannot resolve the difference between the two but neither can we claim that the two are wholly and absolutely apart. When we look at the drawing we can see either the girl or the witch but not both at once – not one, not two.

This is the philosophical aspect of the Buddha’s Middle Path which in the Noble Eightfold Path proposes a spiritual path that is neither wholly self-denying nor self-indulgent. What I want to talk about here is the way in which the enlightened aspect of our minds uses reason to deal with real life practical and psychological problems or put, simply, pain and pleasure.

¹ This is an odd form. It tries to get at the paradoxical and unfinished mystical nature of the duality inherent in language.

But the reason I speak of here is not exclusively traditional formal logic but one that takes into account both reason and experience and includes the subjective/objective experience of infinity or openness.

If we do not include this aspect of reality we will make errors in our reasoning for the obvious reason that we are ignoring an important aspect of our mind and the world. This leaves us with a lopsided or biased ground of our being and our thinking because we substitute a limited absolute for the unlimited absolute, part of the truth for the whole of the truth. We cannot rely on reason that is founded on a false absolute but we can rely on the Absolute which is another name for the paradox at the heart of all duality – not one, not two. How we guide ourselves through is a mystery, a mystery trying to understand a mystery.

But all of this is mere speculation; we can only guide ourselves through the mystery by doing it and by relying on our mystery mind. This is the golden way the pure light, the beginningless clarity, absolute freedom. It is not positive thinking in the ordinary sense of those words. But it is a superior way because it does not lead to a fight between positive thinking and negative thinking which can only lead to extra, even unbearable, suffering and compassion fatigue.

While lying in bed one morning experiencing an annoyingly persistent and non-specific form of anguish which I became more and more aware of as I woke, I entered into a samadhi, a relaxed and open mind at peace and then began, as I always do in these circumstances, to analyse (a better word might be examine) my thoughts and feelings. Years of practice meant that, while the first mind movement I noticed initially threatened a landslide of suffering, the second was a single breath meditation which followed on from a habit I have developed over years of meditation. This breath is a single drop of joy and bliss refined to have its ground in balance, in stillness, and it stops the mind from being automatically and powerfully overwhelmed by fear, shame, guilt, rage and so on and so forth. I then ask where on the spectrum am I at this moment - the spectrum that is a rainbow of pain and pleasure, negativity and positivity. Importantly I did not reach immediately for a positive mind or thought. This would only set up a battle between pain and pleasure and this usually doesn't work because of the many years the negative obsession has been working out in the gym.

My mind then adjusted to its wider perspective. Positive thinking had not yet entered the picture but my mind was no longer captured by the negative. I become rational. This rationality is built on the mystery at the heart of all meaning. Balance was restored and room was made available for more perspectives. Here is where the Buddhist notion of the Middle Way importantly brings to our mind the tendency we have to linger on the negative. It suggests the presence of the middle way between the dual opposites of pain and pleasure, attraction and repulsion as a practical, rational, workable way of keeping your balance of mind.

But “Middle Way” does not refer to a substantive state, a kind of mixture of say natural and supernatural, an amorphous blurry mass. Clarity and dynamism are what we find here. In

this realm supernatural is just supernatural, natural is just natural. However, the other side of the coin is that there are no absolute boundaries between the two². They are not one, not two. Like the drawing of the witch and the young woman the two realities are not obscured by each other and reveal themselves totally. Realities are not defined only by their difference from one another but also by their sameness. Reality is not:

- natural
- supernatural
- both natural and supernatural
- neither natural nor supernatural

Thus, it is:

- natural
- supernatural
- both natural and supernatural
- neither natural nor supernatural.

This analysis is the catuskoti (tetralemma) used by Nagarjuna. It is yet another formulation of the mystery at the heart of duality. These formulations like the word mystery or paradox are not to be taken too literally or they will turn into an attempt to enclose the mystery. Rest back in that mystery when suffering haunts you. It is your balance point for all spiritual enquiry and release.

² As Dogen puts it: *“It is not like the face reflected in a mirror or the moon reflected in water; when one side is illumined the other side is dark.”*



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