

# Mind Moon Circle

*Journal of the Sydney Zen Centre*



**Relationship**

**SUMMER 2026**

## Relationship Summer 2026

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This issue was edited by Helen Sanderson and Zoe Thurner.

We wish to thank the sangha for their generous contributions and reflections.

The Autumn edition of MMC will be edited by Ameli Tanchitsa.

The theme is:

*"Dharma in the Age of Accelerating Metacrisis.*

*How can practice help us meet the unique challenges of our time?"*

Please send your contributions to Ameli at: [ameli.tanchitsa@gmail.com](mailto:ameli.tanchitsa@gmail.com)

One of the things that we come to realise in Zen, or in any deep spiritual practice is that everything is in relationship. Nothing exists in isolation, independent of anything else. With this comes joy. When we realise that we are not apart from things, there is a sense of relief. From the grandest of things such as the sun, where all of life depends upon it, to the smallest things at a quantum level, everything is in relationship, everything joined. Quantum entanglement is a good example of this where two or more particles are linked regardless of the distance between them. So, one side of the universe to the other, they are linked.

One of the tragedies of the human condition is that our minds are so entangled with dualism that we are unable to experience our relationship to everything. This is evident in our suffering and our wars and exploitation of everything; nature, animals and each other.

In Case 1 of the *Wumen-kuan*, in *Wu-Men's* comments, he says that when you are truly intimate with *mu*, “you will walk hand in hand with all the ancestral teachers in the successive generations of our lineage, the hair of your eyebrows entangles with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears”<sup>1</sup>. We are always doing this anyway, however real intimacy with ‘*mu*’ awakens us to this fact. In this intimacy of true relationship, there is no coming or going, no past or future, it is all within now, this moment. All that has ever been is contained within this moment, hence we see with the same eyes, hear with the same ears. In that true intimacy, in that relationship, who is it that rises in the morning and puts on clothes and goes to work?

With our understanding and experience of the relationship of all things, it is our natural inclination to respond to the suffering in the world. We are not apart. And so, we recite, ‘though the many beings are numberless, I vow to save them.’ Each act is in relation to all things. Like the net of *Indra*, everything reflected in everything else.

Being flesh bodies that have needs, that feel pain, that love, and suffer, and make mistakes, we do a dance with the intimacy we awaken to, and the human landscape of emotion and activity. This landscape of course is not separate from this intimacy. Our awakened intimacy informs our emotional responses to our day-to-day experience. When strong emotions feel like they overwhelm us, to sit and simply experience the feelings, the tension, the resistance, free from following the storyline or the beliefs, a deep spaciousness begins to be felt in our experience, and the sense of isolation and separation begin to lose their hold. We are no longer so entangled in our emotion thought. This dance is our life’s work. Even the most enlightened beings are flesh bodies that have needs, that feel pain, that love, and suffer. To have a path such as *Zen*, makes that journey, that dance, so much more worth living.

With sincere practice, one day we may be able to appreciate *Yun Men's* *Every Day is a Good Day*. In this case from the *Blue Cliff Record*, *Yun Men* said, “I do not ask about before the 15<sup>th</sup> day, try to say something about after the 15<sup>th</sup> day.” *Yun Men* himself answered for everyone, “Every day is a good day”<sup>2</sup>. *Yun Men's* reference to the 15<sup>th</sup> here is about awakening. What about after we awaken?

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<sup>1</sup> R. Aitken. *The Gateless Barrier. The Wu-Men Kuan*. North Point Press. 1990, pp 7-9

<sup>2</sup> Cleary, T., and J.C. Cleary. *The Blue Cliff Record*. Shambala. 2005, pp. 37

We must be careful not to interpret this in our usual way of thinking about good and bad. Yun Men is really talking about something deeper than this, where we realise and experience that we are in relationship to everything, and in that, there is nothing missing, each moment is full and complete. What we may think of as a not so good day, it too is full and complete, nothing lacking. It is always there if we really look. We notice the resistance, drop the resistance, and learn to simply be. It can be a surprise to notice, in our days of struggle, in the situation that we so want to be different, there is also gold there too.

Our close relationships with partners, family and friends provide fertile ground for our practice. Sometimes in workplaces this also the case where we spend a large amount of our time and have a particular idea of who we are and what we contribute. These are the relationships where we have allowed ourselves to be more open and trusting with those close to us, so we are more vulnerable. In moments when we or our partners feel tired and prickly, some words seemingly loaded or interpreted as hurtful can really hit a sensitive spot. Often when we are tired or more sensitive than normal our default mode may be to react. The longer we practice, the quicker we can notice and catch our reaction before things become heated, and perhaps the less identified we become with our thoughts. The less often we have to be right. Not always being right can be a relief. A teenage daughter refuses to follow our requests, oh well we can just accept, we don't and can't control the world, and the resistance drops away. We become more accepting.



*'Cranes guard Jizo, Temple 20, Shikoku Pilgrimage, 2017', painting by Janet Selby*

## **The Sound of Water**

**Colin Hopkins**

In retreat from the busyness of the world,  
The demands of parents with their constant needs,  
but especially from myself, or at least those public  
selves, son, carer, listener, and those other selves  
who want to avoid involvement, avoid responsibility,  
seek a quiet life.

Weary of these selves, I stroll through the trees until,  
following the bed of the valley I come to a tangle  
of ferns, vines and shrubs, impenetrable. I seek the  
margins below the steep slopes and loose scree  
where it is easy to lose your balance.

Somewhere down in that green of ferns there is a  
gleam of black water, then, round a bend, the path  
of the wild creatures, and a mossy rock pool.  
Its waters clear, steadily it spills from the brim  
and having passed whatever obstruction forced  
its emergence, sinks into the sands and disappears.

I sit beside the pool and listen, only the purl of the  
water, an undersong, ambient murmur, is there.  
Perhaps there is a solution, an answer, here.

So too, my life an inexorable flow impels,  
Now this, now that.

## **Diary Entry, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1996**

**Sally Hopkins**

I talk with Aitken Roshi of my difficulties. I am caring  
for my in-laws and it is hard to keep clear and not distracted.  
He looks at me, "They must be very old". Such a gentle  
warm expression on his tired face. I say, "You must be very  
weary after the travelling." He says, "Let me help you up"  
and his frail arms help me to get up.  
Did he hear? Did I intrude the personal into the impersonal?  
Was he showing me how it is done?  
But the quality of his voice and action remain.



*Glanmore Clogheran, Ireland, photo by Kerry Stewart*

## **Ulysses Comes Home**

**Lunita Bloom\***

**“Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiphane. *Basta!* I will see if I can see. See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end.”**

- **James Joyce, *Ulysses***

When I was a teenager on holiday with my family, my father took me on a rollercoaster called The Corkscrew at an amusement park. It travelled along a single track from one end to the other, making several loop-the-loops along the way. The end of the track was also its zenith, where it stopped and paused for a few seconds before repeating the process in reverse. By the time we reached those few brief moments of respite, I was petrified. Screaming, with my eyes tightly shut, I scrunched myself down in the seat as far as I possibly could. But Dad was having none of that. “Open your eyes to your life, Lunita!” he shouted into my ear, tugging at my arm. Then once more, for good measure: “Open your eyes to your LIFE!” I look back now and smile. Dad, you were my first Roshi.

Many years later, I again found myself travelling at a great height, feeling intense fear. But this time it was much more serious. I was on a plane, travelling home to Australia after receiving a call to say the palliative care team were preparing for Dad’s final hours. Over the years I’d read stories about people in the final stages of life who have willed themselves to hang on until a loved one arrives to say goodbye. This, I was certain, would be the case for me. Dad and I had been close and he was a stubborn, strong-willed man. He would wait.

But as I came out of arrivals at Sydney Airport on that chilly winter morning, the sudden change in script was written all over my dear sister’s face. I was too late. When I recall that moment, I am reminded of Pema Chödrön’s description of the moment her world collapsed:

**“I remember the sky and how huge it was. I remember the sound of the river and the steam rising up from my tea. There was no time, no thought, there was nothing – just the light and a profound limitless stillness.”**

- Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*

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Dad died where he had lived for most of his adult life, on Bidjigal land in the Dharug nation. Home ground of the great Bidjigal leader Pemulwuy, who led the resistance against the British in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

After emigrating from Ireland in the late 1960s, Dad came to love the land deeply. But as dementia took hold in his final years, he would sometimes ask the hospital nurses to borrow a few dollars so he could buy a bus ticket and return home to Ireland. Just like his beloved James Joyce, the famous Irish author, when Dad died it was the city of Dublin that was written in his heart.

**“For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”**

- James Joyce

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When I arrived at my parents' home from the airport, I found my family had already finalised most of the funeral and cremation arrangements. When the mortician finished his work a day or two later, Dad's body was taken to the funeral home. We were offered the chance to view his body, but no-one wanted to go. My family members, who had seen him in his final hours, had already said their goodbyes. Without hesitation, I said yes. It was the last thing I could do for my Dad.

As I drove to the funeral home, I remembered a story he used to tell me. On the day I was born, I was immediately taken away by the medical staff, as was common back then. A short time later Dad, waiting at the window of the newborns' ward where all the new fathers gathered, saw me lying in a crib away from the others. Entry to the ward was strictly off-limits to fathers, but Dad couldn't bear to see me alone. He snuck in past the Matron and gathered me up in his arms, bedding and all.

As Dad had held me first, it was only right for me to hold him last. Looking deeply into his face, I saw the dementia that had tormented him in life was finally gone. He was at ease, resting in deep samadhi. I made sure everything had been done as he would have wanted before I sealed his coffin. Then I stood quietly and played the *adagio* section of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622*. Dad always said that listening to Mozart was as close as you could get to experiencing heaven on earth. For the many things dementia stole from my funny, generous, erudite and occasionally quixotic father, I am deeply grateful that his ability to recognise music remained with him until the end.

At Rohatsu sesshin in December, Maggie Gluek roshi gave a beautiful teisho which was based on the story of the Seven Wise Women in the Charnel Grounds from *The Hidden Lamp*. As the story unfolds, the sisters arrive at the charnel grounds where one points to a corpse and says: “There is a dead body. Where has the person gone?”

Standing before Dad's coffin that day, I asked that same question. I'm still asking it now. Where did you go, Dad? Where are you? On one hand, I feel he is always present. On the other, here I am, waiting for the day when I won't have to wait another day to see him again. I find myself presenting him with artworks, photos, snippets of poetry and song lyrics in English, Irish, Spanish and Portuguese. I pin them to my noticeboard at work or stick them on my fridge at home. As if I could somehow return the wealth of knowledge in art, literature, poetry and music that he so generously gave me.

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By now it should come as no surprise to learn that Dad's favourite book was James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses*. No doubt some *Mind Moon Circle* readers will be far more familiar with it than I am. *Ulysses* is the Latin version of the name *Odysseus*, the hero of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. The novel chronicles the experiences of three Dubliners over the course of a single day, 16 June 1904. It draws parallels between characters Leopold Bloom and Odysseus, Molly Bloom and Penelope, and Stephen Dedalus and Telemachus.

As I was growing up, Dad used to tell me wistfully that his dream was to return to Dublin on his own, to walk the streets free and unencumbered. I like to think that he was able to live this dream, at least in part, through the footsteps of Leopold Bloom.

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I've been deeply fortunate to travel far and wide throughout my life, but grief has presented me with a different journey. At first it was a physical one – I crossed rivers, sobbed my way through forests, and climbed to the top of mountains. After Dad died I went to Ireland and wandered in a daze around the streets of Dublin. I went to a pub there, famous for its singalongs, to sing some of the old songs he had loved. But when the time came, I couldn't find my voice to sing them.

It's only in the last year or so that I feel I am actively working with grief. I am learning to accept the thorns buried inextricably in my heart. And not just accept them, but even to feel grateful for them. For the alternative is to remain mute and frozen. Throughout this process, and in finally being able to pick up my pen and write, I've been deeply thankful for Gillian Coote roshi's 2016 teisho examining the koan 'Step from the Top of the Pole' (*Mumonkuan #46/Book of Serenity #79*). For me, her curious, gentle invitation to deeply consider how we might step from the dizzying heights of the 100-foot pole has been invaluable.

To return to the question of the Seven Sisters: where has the person gone? The answer is I honestly don't know where Dad has gone. But what I do know for sure is that he was a man who consistently said yes to life, a stance which helped to create and shape mine in the most profound way.

At the end of *Ulysses*, there's a famous soliloquy by Molly Bloom in which she utters the word "yes" repeatedly. In doing so, she constantly and emphatically says *yes* to life – in all its sacred beauty, complexity and profanity. And so it is Molly's last utterance, the final phrase of the novel, which forms the most fitting tribute I can offer my father.

**"Yes, I said I will, Yes."**

- James Joyce, *Ulysses*

I love you and I miss you, Dad. *Hasta la raíz*.

\*Author – Lunita Bloom (*nom de plume*)

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1.5.1992. *Caroline Joseph*



*'Snapseed I' painting by Glenys Jackson*

## Was Albert Camus a Zen Master?

Heidi Merrington

I have just read Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, first published in 1947. While Camus' beautiful writing would be enough of a reason to read it, I was mesmerised by his capacity to appreciate the human experience of suffering. There were many occasions when I found Zen in his writing. Towards the end of the story, he describes how a community reacts to the end of a devastating outbreak of bubonic plague:

*The whole town rushed outside when the time of suffering had ended and the time of forgetting had not yet begun... that day they expended the stock of life that they had piled up during those months when they had put their souls on the back burner; this was the day of their survival. The next day life proper would resume, with all its reticence and restrictions (Camus, 2009, p.228)*

Camus speaks to the way separation or dissatisfaction with relationships with partners, family, community, with the environment, is like 'exile' that brings paralysis lasting days, weeks, months. And when it passes, when we have in our hands what we have been grasping for, we are grateful, full of joy and relief. But ever so briefly.

In the exile of disconnection, the future with a person may be gone and the present can be almost unbearable. The past can be respite but only until it leads you back to the present. My meditation practice seems fledgling at best at times like this. But when I sit, there are moments of humble peace when I reconnect with the constancy and calm of just being. I start to let go of me, you, us, where, when. Even though I am only at the start of my Zen path, I can know these things lie at the heart of suffering.

*And what does it mean this plague? It's life, that's all. (Camus 2009, p.236)*

Camus, A. (2009). *The Plague*. Translation by Robin Bass (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), The Penguin Group Australia.

## **Saving All Living Beings – One Phone Call at a Time** William Verity

The date is around 1980 and I am aged about 13 on the cusp of adolescence and changes that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

It is late at night and I am in my childhood home, trapped by the quiet country life of English lanes, woods and suffocating family dinners.

The house is starting to feel like prison.

I like to lie in my bed listening to the radio as I go to sleep.

My favourite station is LBC, an FM station broadcast from London, 50 miles and a world away.

Every Monday night, from 10 to midnight, I listened to a show that will open the door to my perception – *Sexual, Marital and Relationship Problems with Psychologist Philip Hodson*.

It's a talkback show where anyone can ring up with anything – literally anything – that is causing them emotional pain.

And they do.

“My girlfriend of two years has just left me and I'm distraught.”

“My husband of 50 years died last year and now I'm in family home alone and lonely. I just can't stop crying.”

“I think I'm gay.”

“They're getting at me through the plugs in the house. I try turning them on and off but the voices never stop. They're telling me to kill myself.”

The dark carnival of the human spirit is broadcast into my late-night bedroom, assailing me with a principal that I already know too well but which will take more than a lifetime to take in – that all life is suffering.

I called Lifeline once.

It was a few weeks after the separation when I drove away from the family home in exile.

I had moved into my rental property on my own, my worldly possessions in the back of a ute, carrying my queen mattress like a coolie on my back, bent double.

On the Sunday morning, feeling as alone as I ever have, I called Lifeline.

I felt like I was a small person stuck at the bottom of a deep well, the sunlit sky visible only as a small disc of blue as I looked up the shaft.

The man I talked to was reaching down to me in the deep hole while he was free on the open surface of the earth far above.

He was able to remind that there was a place where life was not dark, and that I would see that place again if I had a little patience.

“Do you think life is worth living?” I asked.

He laughed.

“Of course it is. Of course it is.”

My grandmother was my inspiration, as she was in so many things.

She worked as a Samaritan phone and face-to-face counsellor and used to break client confidentiality with abandon.

“He came in well dressed, in a city suit and tie, and then told me how he could only orgasm if he was wrapped in a rubber incontinence mat.”

“She thought she was the Queen of Sheba – if only the world recognised her truth.”

So when I found myself at university, the only formal club I joined was the counselling service. It was my proudest achievement that I was later chosen to co-lead the organisation.

I learned through picking up the phone to students in distress to the point of suicide, that there was nothing more satisfying to me than to reach out a hand and walk alongside someone who felt lost and alone.

These were my people. This was my way of turning the darkness that has always inhabited my soul into something else. Healing for myself and a purpose for life.

The crisis support has become my life's vocation, my dharma candle which – once lit – casts a flickering light that will not be extinguished.

I took it up again in the mid 1990s when I arrived in Australia, joining Lifeline within months and feeling fellowship with a sangha who shared my curiosity about humanity and an urge to engage deeply with that.

I am still doing it now. Children gone, family over, I have returned to Lifeline and help mentor new recruits and try to do a weekly shift on the phones.

The walls of the office in the city are lined with glass phone booths with volunteers like Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*, standing on the cliff, catching people as they fall. Saving the world, one call at a time.

Like any organisation founded on passionate purpose, Lifeline attracts the best people – or perhaps better put, it brings out the best in the people who take up the challenge.

It's a volunteer organisation so there's no money to corrupt relationships, and the currency is in gratitude, support, unconditional positive regard.

"However the call has gone – well or badly, there's one thing that makes you successful every time," one of my supervisors said.

"You showed up. You took the call and had a go. That's enough."

It's a deeply democratic place. There are no barriers to calling Lifeline except access to a phone. It free and welcoming to everyone regardless of wealth, status, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, criminality, age or any of the other markers that we make to segment and fragment the whole.

Even after all these years, the heart beats a little faster when the phone rings – who could this be about to enter my life?

What a privilege to be invited into the most honest, most vulnerable places in a stranger's life where the anonymity ensures that there is no point holding back, where there are no conditions and no judgement.

To be free of judgement? Consider that.

I am often the first witness to a life, hearing pain or revelation that shame has kept buried sometimes even to the voice who is now revealing the unspoken.

There was a time last year when I saved two lives in a week. Where the soul-to-soul connection that we created was enough for the pills to go in the bin, or to step back from the platform's edge.

Other times it can be teenagers arguing with parents and looking for validation and the guidance of an adult.

Or an alcoholic man living in a caravan deep in the Queensland bush with only his dogs for company and a mind full of regret.

Or a woman whose childhood abuse has gifted her a life of resilient loneliness, where for decades it's about surviving one week or one day at a time.

Mental illness and loneliness are the two largest factors underlying many calls. If life is hard for all of us, how much harder is it for those in long-term conflict with their own errant and conflicted minds.

These people are my heroes. They are my other sangha.

They – and by that, I mean *we* - battle against what can seem like impossible odds and somehow never lose touch with the lifeforce that flows through us and forces us onwards into uncertainty, whether we like it or not.

This work is kinhin for the soul. It is an expression of Indra's Net. The relationship that we have with all living things, with the 10,000 things. I vow to save them.

There's a sense that we're all in this together and that there is no Zen unless it is engaged Zen.

Whatever that may mean for each of us.

May we all find our connection.

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Lifeline is always looking for crisis supporters. If you want to know more, feel free to contact me at [jwgverity@gmail.com](mailto:jwgverity@gmail.com) or go to [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)



*'Solace', photo by Helen Sanderson*

## Zen Love

Linda O'Connor

I'm so grateful for Zen. It has enhanced all the relationships in my life but the most important one has been with myself.

Sitting open me to the realisation of emptiness. My habitual thoughts were just that - thoughts. I was able to practise not attachment to them.

This realisation had a wonderful consequence. As I accepted myself more, or should I say my 'no self' more, I could open more to others, knowing that they are not others but myself.

Awareness created more awareness, on and off the cushion. Coming home to my breath was the antidote to habitual reaction.

The more I practised, the more I am able to be here, now, for myself and others I experience the world with more intimacy and love.

My heart is full and my eyes well with tears on the contemplation of this.

The kookaburras are laughing.  
Aha!! She has arrived.

## Backburn

Diana Levy

That fire burning out of control  
in the East  
consuming democracy  
singeing institutions  
killing Renee Good and Alex Pretti,

can we put in a containment line  
backburn all the way to Washington DC,  
a cultural burn, a knowing careful  
dolloping of flames under  
a treaty here, an AUKUS deal there,  
so that which always was  
and that which we have built  
remains green

and can we hold a hose  
for the One Nation ember attacks  
that come from the woman  
whose hair is on fire?

## Subhana's Wild Wet Guest House

Subhana Barzaghi

We live in a relational matrix of stardust, whale song and kookaburras' laughter that heralds the dawn. All beings and creatures great and small, wild and tame form an inter-connected web. Birth and death are the warp and weft of the fabric of life. Life is essentially relational, it is dependent upon and embedded in family constellations, friendship networks clans and flocks. We have interesting names for family groupings – a gaggle of geese, a swarm of bees, a bloat of hippos, the funniest being a rhumba of rattlesnakes or a smack of jellyfish. Some species like eagles, storks and albatrosses pair off and mate for life. Most flock together for protection, safety and survival. Wolves hunt together with more eyes on the prey. Birds fly in V-formations using slipstreams for energy conservation. Safety comes in a 'bait ball' where fish swarm into a tightly packed ball to protect from a frenzied shark attack. A multitude of amazing creatures that creep, crawl, climb, wing their way and slither over this earth are under threat and fast disappearing with the 6<sup>th</sup> Mass extinction event.

My natural pond is home for a cluster of dragon flies, a family of water-dragons, a school of gambusia fish, an army of frogs and a watering hole for squawking bird life. It's brought the wildlife and nature close to my back doorstep. There is an inter-relationship between the life of the pond with its frequent visitors and my inner emotional landscape. On a more companionable sublime level, the pond is a mirror for inter-being. Our relationship with the microcosm of our neighbourhood, the nature reserve also has implications for the way we treat the macro level – our precious environment. Encounters with wildness, the untamed creatures that live amongst us, can re-wild our heart.

It's not your typical suburban backyard. Twelve years ago, I transformed my chlorine and salt swimming pool into a natural pond, an eco-friendly wild wet land. Sick of pouring chemicals into the pool, cleaning it regularly and fixing the creepy crawler sent me on a mission for an alternative solution. The final straw came when the catalytic salt-converter broke down and I was up for a big expense to replace the pool equipment. I researched all kinds of ways to transform swimming pools into a natural pond, many too expensive. With a do-it-yourself handyman attitude and some muscly help from my son we built a number of layered step-like platforms in the pool out of concrete Besser bricks. Different varieties of aqua plants require different levels of immersion. I covered the bricks with thick green shade cloth, shovelled dirt on to the top layer, then a splattering of yellow river peddles and planted a quarter of the pool with various reeds, water lilies and plants. To create a natural eco-system, a pool needs about a quarter of plant coverage. My son, Akira, re-routed the plumbing, so that the pump just circulates water around the pond, cascading down a sandstone fountain to aerate the water. Keeping the water moving, reduces algae and slime, it oxygenates the water keeping it fresh.

My pond attracted a menagerie of wildlife guests who moved in all of their own accord. There are long-term residents and seasonal guests too. A family group of Eastern water dragons are long-term residents; they have made a home for themselves in the pond but have been around in the backyard for over 20 years. Water dragons belong to an ancient lineage of lizards with their genus connected to Gondwana land, their close relatives existing in Australia for at least 20 million years. Their spiny crest and angular head give them a distinctive, "prehistoric" look, contributing to their reputation as ancient creatures. My ancient urban guests love eating blueberries, a rather expensive breakfast delight that we both share. They come running when I post blueberries over my back balcony which roll along the path. The large male water dragon, I call Prince Frederick of Ryde is the boss of the pool,

he has more than two wives, so is busy keeping the girls in line. They hibernate from Autumn through the winter months and emerge 3 months later in early Spring scrawny and hungry. The males are very territorial especially during breeding season and aggressively defend their patch. (No new story there) They use elaborate displays like head-bobbing, push-ups, and arm-waving, often escalating to physical fights for dominance, and will even fight to the death.

A pair of wood ducks announces themselves with a plonk and splash, they are frequent seasonal guests. They preen their green underwing feathers on their favourite spot, a thumbnail postage stamp of an island in the centre of the pond. It is surrounded by reeds, which I am sure makes them feel safe from domestic cats and dogs. Normally quite shy and a bit wary of humans yet I was overjoyed when I spied them sunning their feathers on my back veranda tiles.

A cheeky, sulphur-crested cockatoo who sometimes brings her mate, perches on the veranda railing and waits expectantly. In some parts they are climate refugees but are adaptable to urban centres. They enjoy nuts and seeds and are so chilled and unafraid, I can feed them out of my hand. Ms Cheeky Cockatoo charmingly cocks her head from side-to-side, eyeing me, cajoling me to give her more. She gets five nuts every few days. I feel like a bird dietician. I don't want to over feed them but with her charm, I'm sure she also gets fed elsewhere.

Each evening, especially through the warmer months, as I drift off to sleep, I am serenaded by a chorus of frogs. On rainy nights the frog band concert is loud. I'm glad that the neighbours don't complain. One evening I recorded their bonking chorus on the Frog ID App, a citizen science initiative by the Australian Museum that helps monitor frog populations by identifying them via their calls. The App identified 5 different types of species of frogs all with their distinct calls - common eastern froglet, striped marsh frog, peron's tree frog, eastern dwarf tree frog. My favourite is the eastern banjo frog because its loud 'plonk' or 'bonk' call, sounds like a banjo. While the pond offers a tiny haven, frogs are experiencing a severe global crisis with over 40% of species threatened with extinction due to habitat loss, disease, and the long hot arm of climate change. Amphibians are the most threatened class of vertebrates on earth and are considered "indicator species," meaning their decline is a warning sign of wider environmental degradation.

A rare seasonal summer guest is the speckled female eastern koel, a migratory cuckoo species that seems to have a honing instinct, remembering exactly when the red berries hanging from the fronds of the tall Bangalow palms are ripe. It is a rather elegantly shy bird with speckled tail feathers that blend in with the brown fronds becoming almost indistinguishable. It migrates annually over long distances from Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, even the Philippines to eastern Australia to breed. I often hear the koel before I see it, as they tend to be shy and disappear into the canopy sitting quietly for hours, foraging on berries.

It's so easy to fall in love with most of my wild guests, but some guests are just downright annoying. Ms Naughty Possum scurries across the roof after the sun goes down every evening around 9pm. She descends down the palm tree and walks along the back veranda railing. She has a penchant for the exotic and loves eating my beloved roses. I have to admit she has dam good taste. I am sentimental about my roses. I planted two in remembrance of my dear mum, who adored roses. Roses appeared in every backyard of the numerous houses we lived in throughout my childhood. I tried a variety of things to deter Ms Naughty. I found a natural spray made from a cocktail of repellent herbs and chillies called 'Poss-Off',

thinking it would do the trick. Only in Australia would you find a product call Poss-Off! It certainly expresses the way I feel. Alas! that too failed. A friend told me she feeds her possums with bits of carrot and apple. Brilliant I thought, befriend the enemy. I'll try that. The deal was that its ok for my pesky fury fiend to eat bits of fruit and carrot as long as you don't eat my roses. But possum was not aware of the fine print in the agreement and devoured both. I then built a metal cage around my rose bush, it's ugly but seems to be the best option so far.

One evening, I caught the possum red handed and found myself yelling at it. I won't repeat what I said, something I am not really proud of. Several years of frustration was unleashed. I'm sure you get the picture. It looked at me with those cute wide eyes, so shocked. It was a Mexican stand-off. She then scampered down the downpipe her furry tail disappearing over the edge. I thought I should be more compassionate, after all possums are protected species.

A bit crestfallen, frustrated with my reaction, I remembered stories about Ryokan, a poet, eccentric hermit and Zen master. He lived in a tiny hut in the forest at the foot of a mountain with only a few belongings. He was endlessly patient and kind even to fleas that took up residence in his robes. Gently, he would take them out, place them on the veranda for a bit of sun so they could keep warm. Then pick them up and put them back in his robe.<sup>1</sup> The extent of his compassion and kindness, I do not have, but the story softened me. I feel kindlier towards Ms Naughty Possum. Possum is just being possum, that is her nature.

I reflected that Ms Possum stood in for my relationship with the difficult guest. We all have a nemesis, an enemy, a challenging relationship, either at home or work or in the wider community, more notably in the political arena. We blame and project all manner of negative judgments and viewpoints onto them but rarely take responsibility for our own angry fuel that perpetuates division and alienation. How we create the self/ other dichotomy is our responsibility. Who is that other? How do we perpetuate 'selfing' and 'othering'? A deep and essential koan needing to be resolved if we are to create harmonious relationships with one another and our earth household?

Zen master Jui-yen in Case 12 in the Gateless Barrier, challenges our self/other, them/us paradigm. Through a call and response practice he leads us through that dichotomy to a true refuge, boundless and free. The priest Jui-yen called, "Master!" to himself every day and answered himself, "Yes! Then he would say, "Be aware!" and reply, "Yes!" "Don't be deceived by others! No, no!"<sup>2</sup>

One day when Ryokan was down at the village a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal. Ryokan returned and caught him. "You may have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "And you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. As Ryokan sat naked watching the moon he wrote a Haiku, "The thief left it behind: the moon at my window."

Ryokan's entire philosophy was one of universal compassion and kindness to all beings even fleas. Instead of feeling angry with the thief, he felt compassion. The practice of the boundless heart makes ourselves a guest house, welcoming all the many beings. Compassion needs to be extended in ever widening circles even to the 'thief,' or so called 'enemy'. Ryokan embodied a deep, non-judgmental acceptance and love for all life, great and small, seeing them as expressions of the same Buddha-nature. Our essential nature, like

the glorious moon is always here within us, closer to us than our breath, it cannot be stolen. The true treasure of the awakened heart-mind is intimacy and inseparability with all life. Zen master Hongzhi invites us to contemplate, “All beings are our ancestors”. How might that change our relationship to one another?

A monk came to Zen master Zhaozhou asking, “When difficult times come to visit us, how should we meet them?” A master of sublime one-word responses, Zhaozhou said, “Welcome.” That welcome is vast and wide; it is the depth and breadth of our world. It takes fearless presence with a heart flung open. To genuinely say welcome is to not only accept our feelings but have a mindful grounded presence knowing you are already at home, right where you stand.

When we welcome a guest coming to our house, we take the role of host. Yet, who is the host, who is the guest? The guest in Zen, stands in for all phenomena and living things throughout the cosmos. The host being the empty-one essential world, our original dwelling place that effortlessly embraces all guests. The practice of emptying out the clutter in the mind makes room for more joy and a full guest menagerie. Zen master Rinzai, a fierce advocate for ‘Followers of the Way’, points out, “Wherever you are, play the host, then any place you stand will be a true one.”<sup>3</sup> Each and every being right here and now are our difficult and loving guests, generously prising open the door to our heart. This wide embrace includes the water dragons, the banjo frogs, the possum and the rose.

The art of zazen is to become a guest house, to hold a space in our heart for all those suffering in war torn places, conflict, environmental disasters. Responding with the hands and arms of Kuan Yin, we awaken the heart of compassion. Jalaluddin Rumi generously invites us to make of ourselves a welcoming host in his poem, ‘*The Guest House*’.

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary  
awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes, because  
each has been sent as a guide from beyond.<sup>4</sup>*

References:

<sup>1</sup> Sky Above, Great Wind: The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryokan (2012) by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Random House. USA.

<sup>2</sup> Case 12 Gateless Barrier, (1990) translated by Robert Aitken, North Point Press, San Francisco. p.81.

<sup>3</sup> The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi, (1993) translated by Burton Watson, Shambala Pub, Boston, p.41.

<sup>4</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi – poem ‘The Guest House’, translated by Coleman Barks, in Essential Rumi, Mind, Body and Spirit. Harper Collins Pub.

## A year or so ago

Brendon Stewart

A year or so ago Kerry and I fell through a rip in the drapery of our normal day and landed on the Isle of Skye just a wee distance off the coast of Scotland. It's easy enough in Scotland to stay in touch with fairies. I have entertained fairies previously. When our children were young and sharing a bed with them in the morning fairies would and still do leave a trail of sunlight glitter across the wall and ceiling. But in Scotland provision has been made for the fairy people to make their way unhindered into homes and villages, there to make mischief and bring a living mystery into the everyday; in so many different ways *the mystery* is loved.

We were in Scotland to track down some antique relatives of Kerry and there they were all laid to rest in Alexander Smith's tomb sometime in 1847, in the grounds of a Church of Scotland Kirk, in the village of Forfar.



Scotland is also the natal home of Dolly the Dorset ewe sheep, the first mammal to be cloned from an adult somatic cell.

So here we are visiting the old country, vaguely marshalling a trail of memory and ancestor.com suggestions that might reclaim some old DNA journey. Scottish folk lore says that if a self is somehow lost or stolen it can be replaced with a changeling. Plenty of people were lost or stolen away with the land clearances in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, others also found themselves far away in Botany Bay without so much as a good bye. What if you lose your phone today with all those stored up tweets and ticks and toks and facebook memes and an endless gallery of photos, is that another self, lost or stolen; can our phones steal ourselves from our self? What sort of changeling might be offered if the phone is found?

All the while the *summer woods are full of cuckoos singing. The sun breaks through floating clouds, clear is the universe.* Meanwhile back in Scotland we wonder has time away from these hills and glens changed us in a fundamental way, what relationship can still be conjured out of distance and time? Our journey is gentle and sweet and curated by the generous hand of good fortune. Searching for comfort and safety and holding on to memory wouldn't be so easy for a young mum coming out of Palestine today, it would be hard to find an inn with a stable and manger.

Often, we seem to live through time confused and caught in a stream of consciousness that's not our own. Think of all the relationships that had to happen over the last 4 to 5 million years that have come to a temporary moment in time that is you. How many meetings and get-together's and mishaps and false starts, famines and wars of disturbance and transportations, lost phone numbers and mistaken identities, disagreement with parents and whatever... ending up here now in this bodily form, the miracle of me, and you of course.

We only ever exist in relationships; my Zen practice is one of the many connected relationships that have come into being as I stream along in a consciousness that is just happening. *This is the truth at one moment, that is the truth at another instant.* And every encounter along the way, every outcome is unique, every relationship mustered up has no equivalent, sometimes we forget this and carry on as if there is a common ancestor's dinner table.

During Covid there was among many, a fear that the vaccine might be a way of injecting us all with small barcoded molecules, a sort of check-out strategy; was it to be self-checking?? Well whatever, I sometimes think these barcoded special agents might have been a good idea we could have kept track of ourselves; keeping up a good relationship with ourselves and with the universe. *The universe is a great cathedral of satori, each and everything in the universe is nothing else but I-Myself;* and also to remember here Dolly the Dorset ewe Sheep. Will there ever be another ewe, Dolly?

It is a wonderful Michael Leunig quote Helen sent through "Come and sit down beside me, I said to myself, and although it doesn't make sense, I held my own hand as a small sign of trust, and together we sat on the fence."

*On the fence*



It's easy to be neglectful and indifferent to the many relationships that hold our lives in place, we can never escape the relationships but we can be enhanced by their complex beauty or made despondent, it's a day by day matter and fairies at play. Our Buddhist practice is fundamentally about good relationships; the endlessly intriguing effort to live by way of the Eight-fold path; an ever-present invitation to live with:

- Right Actions
- Right speech
- Right livelihood
- Right mindfulness
- Right effort
- Right concentration
- Right view
- Right intention

Notes:

*Thank you Maggie Gluek for the notes on Tosotsu's three Barriers*



*'Why I wake Early' painting by Elizabeth Austin*

Named after a poem by Mary Oliver, this painting is an observation of a quiet and private moment and reflects my love of a summer dawn. Such moments often go under-noticed yet this is what life is made of: the getting up and the making of tea, the glance back at a loved one in the silence. It speaks to our relationship with our beds and bedrooms, how restful and relieving they are for our tired bones and busy, outward-facing minds. These private soothing places offer a homecoming.

## Only Connect

Gillian Coote

The drone and whine of incoming jets heading for Mascot begins around 6am and doesn't let up... all those cramped cicadas up there longing to be released... *coming and going, never astray*... up in the sky, down in the bed. A coach yells encouragement to rowing fours and eights in semi-darkness - 1, 2, 3, 4 - move, boys! Kookaburras cackle up the light, willy wagtails chitter, Tilly shakes herself and her name tag tinkles.

Time to get up and time to stay awake, for this next moment and then the one after that, like practising walking a tightrope wire, an earthbound Phillippe Petit, perhaps even more of a challenge when every day offers repeatable events like every other day - the same cup of tea at the same time, the same rituals of zazen, the same journey to the puppy park for Tilly's walk. You could do it all in your sleep, robotic, disconnected. Aha! 'The same' is a dharma gate. There is no 'same'.

Yesterday, in the creek running alongside the puppy park, there are schools of baby mullet, sacred ibis hunt in the mangroves, five schoolboys run together across the vast field. Today, magpies search for food in the grass, ducks in the creek and, ravens call their friends across the valley. Step by step. There's Rudi. "How are you today?" "Oh, I am very sad, today it is six months since my Axel died." Axel was Rudi's beloved dog. Tears run down Rudi's cheeks. We walk together in silence.

Our path is the path of connection; it's personal and intimate and can't be examined from a distance, as if it were someone else's, one step removed. Kensho and satori **are** intimacy. Connection, you could say, is our religion - or better still, interconnection - though these days many bridle at the word 'religion', perhaps because for years, 'religion' has meant '*the human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience*'<sup>1</sup>, which counts out Buddhism, though examining the etymology is instructive. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary traces the word back to L. *religio* meaning "taboo, restraint." *Religio* comes from *re* and *ligere*. *re* a prefix meaning "return," and *ligere*, "to bind" - in other words, 'return to bondage', not too far from 'yoga' (Skt.) a word which means '*union, being yoked, bound, connected, the Hindu system.... designed to affect the reunion of the devotee's soul with the universal spirit.*'<sup>2</sup>

But regardless of whether we identify our Zen practice as religious or not, the open-ended invitation, both on and off the cushion, is to notice and experience the disconnect and come back to the matter at hand. 'Every incident in your life and mine, and in all lives, is the interplay of all beings, and this interplay is not only in the objective world, nor is it only in the subjective world. The song of the kookaburra is myself; the sun is my heart, the atmosphere my breath. When you are intimate with any being, you live through what that being lives through, a release from preoccupation with yourself, sometimes joyous, sometimes heartrending. Either way, is Buddha's own release from self, the heart of his teaching and practice.'<sup>3</sup>

So, three cheers for the disconnect! It's our whetstone, our opportunity to be fully present. Jump in!

### **Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain**

The birds have vanished down the sky.  
Now the last cloud drains away.  
We sit together, the mountain and me,  
Until only the mountain remains.

- Li Bai (8th century), transl. Sam Hamill

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> Concise Oxford Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> The Morning Star, Robert Aitken, pub. Shoemaker Hoard, 2003



*'The Mountain', painting by Glenys Jackson*

## Bees and other flying things

Helen Sanderson

Our honeybees and even our native bees have been suffering lately. The European honeybees, in particular, were disastrously affected by the varroa mite which caused many of the hives in NSW to be destroyed; before that they suffered in the 2019 bushfire. Last year I looked anxiously for bees in my garden which has been a haven for many flying things including mosquitoes. But wait, even the pesky mosquito is a pollinator as well as a blood sucker and a biter. Then as summer came on there appeared some blue banded bees and some black stingless bees and even several teddy bear bees. But nary a honeybee. Then came one or two in the nasturtiums, and then a few more. Where did they come from? Were there still some hives operating, maybe illegally and below the radar or did they come from wild bees in tree hollows? I suppose they did their dance to tell their compatriots where the flowers were.

About a month ago my Ivory Curl tree, otherwise known as *Buckinghamia celsissima*, decided to flower. It was literally covered in blossoms but none of them opened. I thought the very hot days we'd had might have killed the flowers dead on the tree. But then came the rain. A fantastic downpour and soon after that the blossoms opened and with them their scent wafting through my front door. It wafted around the tree which was suddenly full of bees flying around and crawling through the blossoms. Bees, both European and native, beetles, patterned green and black, various butterflies, everything flying around the tree, gathering nectar and pollinating. The tree has been there for twenty years or more but I have never seen such a profusion of flowers and insects, a veritable cornucopia.

As far as I know the European honeybee is a social insect with a complex system of communication. They tell each other where to fly for the goodies. Their relationships are socially ordered. Beekeepers sometimes tell stories of their relationships with their bees, and how their bees will not sting them, as opposed to those they do not know. Who knows? Maybe bees do discern those with good or bad intent towards them. Once, some years back, I had an infestation of European wasps, undesirable visitors. I was having a pest inspection at the time and my pest man, (he himself was not a pest, though he dealt with them), anyway, this pest man sprayed these wasps. Maybe it was a feeling of guilt for doing this but afterwards when I went to that particular patch in my garden the bees seemed angry and buzzed at me to go away. So maybe they do have a relationship with humans. After all, when Queen Elizabeth the Second died her beekeeper went from hive to hive to let the bees know.

As long as we humans do not create havoc with insecticides, climate disruption and disease, bees will pollinate and make honey. We might be able to live without the honey, though it has medicinal qualities as well as being delicious, but without pollination our lives are doomed. We just need to plant flowering things for the honeybee and the native bee, of which there are hundreds of types, then nature will do its work. For me the scents and colours of flowering plants equal life in all its abundance and variety and to me that life is love. Life emanating from the relationship between plants and insects. Perhaps love circulates with the creation of life. This is my theory: When we cooperate with plants and bees in this life project, we tap into love, like the bees as they sip nectar and carry pollen from flower to flower.

We live in relationship with plants and pollinating insects and in a sense we are all an interdependent family.



“Green Wren”, watercolour by Jillian Ball

## Always changing

Jill Steverson

I was wandering the land at Kodoji, Gorricks Run in early February this year. Beloved and magic to me, as to many in the sangha, I feel more connected as every year passes. Each time I am there I track around the perimeter of land that encircles the buildings to look at the condition of the bush, check out new plants and weeds, and especially as most people know, I’m on the lookout with an eagle eye for the dreaded invasive moth vine.

I was loving the walk as usual, seeing the various different areas and plants, when I realised how totally dynamic the land is and how my relationship is also moving with it. It’s always changing.

Parts I *think* I know are different. Areas of weed change, plants flourish or recede, areas of resilience change, wombat diggings alter, clearings get larger and smaller, bank edges are eroded and get steeper, other places get gentler inclines, plants are covered by branches, trees fall. Parts I used to struggle to check and had to climb down to the southern dry creek bed, are suddenly now fully visible from the top of the paddock.

I remember one year the paddock was a sea of plantain, the seed heads waving in the breeze, then suddenly as quickly as they arrived, they disappeared. Today a new plant has arisen in abundance in the hard dry edges. I investigate it in alarm and check when I am at home with internet with the wonderful app, *iNaturalist*. This indicated the native Small-flower Evening Primrose, *Oenothera indecora*, which is expected to grow nearby. I suddenly feel much more kindly towards this tough, non-descript plant with a massive tap root.

The land under the fast growing acacias, post burn off, is now bare with many mystery diggings. Possibly lyrebirds, who are plentiful, may be finding the invertebrates who feed on the acacia nodules in the soil.

Plants have their own relationships. Weedy disturbed areas are attractive to other weeds, and resilient areas are more stable with their plant communities hanging together, in familiar neighbourhoods with familiar neighbours. Some weeds get cheeky with their relationships, mimicking their neighbouring native plants and suddenly getting thinner leaves or a change in habit to blend in – just like I change my clothes for different groups of people and conditions.

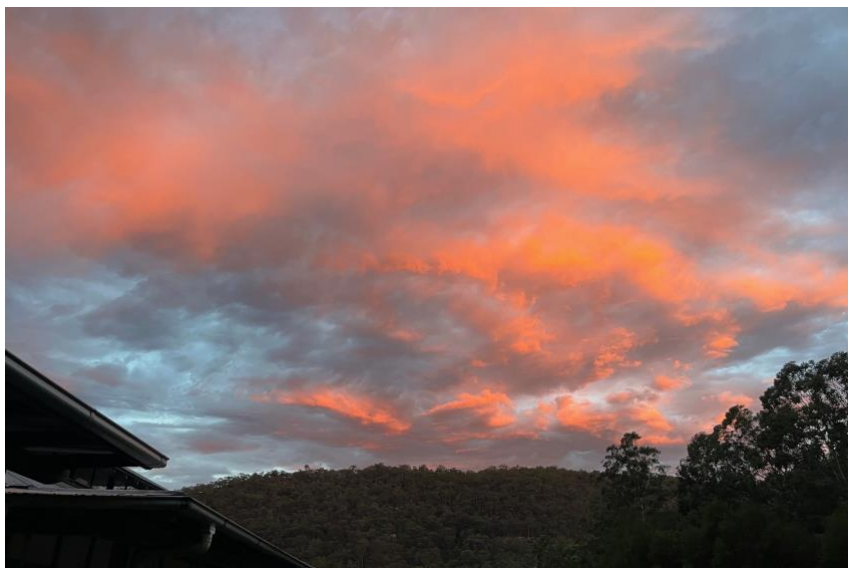
As I get to know the land more as the years go by, my relationship to it feels more intimate, more confident and enduring. There are those wonderful moments on sesshin when the trees and cliffs come forth and show me there is no separation.

But now I wish I knew more. I love the different plant communities in each area but it's just twenty years. I think of the indigenous people and their embedded knowledge of country over millennia and their current teachings for all Australians to care for country. Humbling.

Somehow this relationship seems easier than other relationships, for example my relationship to myself, my partner or other people. The land teaches me, surprises me, and shows me so clearly without the layers of judgement and extras. Bold fresh, exciting, interesting, fascinating, ungraspable in its dynamic. Perhaps the freshness comes from the infrequent visits, and the familiarity of other relationships closes my mind?

I'd like to practice seeing all my relationships, self and other just as freshly as I see the bush this damp morning. Like walking around the paddock in the bush with joy at the adventure. Just as I am now, this damp morning awake to new weedy bits, growing bits, embedded bits, new surprises, impermanent and thrilling. Like the amazement I feel at the bush growing and passing away, the stars coming with the night and then disappearing with the clouds and the white throated nightjar singing before dawn.

How lucky we are to have this special place to renew our practice.



*Sunset at Gorriks, photo by Jill Steverson*

# Rippling Ripple

Caroline Josephs

Each moment a  
Ripple in time,  
Bearing all  
With it.

Rippling waves  
Sunlight on sea,  
Reminding  
Of a universe  
Of flickering,  
Mesmerising,  
Inter-being,

Body,  
    Mind,  
        Spirit,  
Suffused...  
With liquid  
Wind, sunlight  
From cool, cold--  
Invigorating

Breath,  
    Wind,  
        Ripples –  
We are but  
A ripple in time...

Fourteen billion  
Years

Time and cosmos  
Beginning  
Our universe.

Sea absorbs  
Become Sea,  
Its shimmering serenity,  
Its tumbling waves...  
Washing, splashing,  
Cosmic dynamic,  
Surprise!  
Epiphany!  
Frolicking fecundity.

Look! The moon!  
Absorbing moon...  
Becoming moon!  
Stars resplendent,  
Liquidity sheafs  
Of sparks...  
Light up  
Our sky...  
All emptiness.

Cherish  
wisdom...  
Of each ancient  
Native peoples!

All...our kin,

Human beings—  
Relating, all  
Becoming  
Earth!  
  
Awe-inspiring...playful  
Enchantment!  
Mystery, Laughter...  
Sing and dance  
Joy, Celebrate  
The Universe...  
The Milky Way...  
From the cosmic  
Egg of primeval  
Fireball,  
To explosion of light...  
Emerges reality  
To present reality....  
Our closest  
Relative –the Planet.

## Is Emptiness Beneficent? A View from Zen and Headlessness

Brentyn Ramm

In a recent Dharma discussion, we had a very illuminating conversation on emptiness and loving kindness. How is emptiness related to loving kindness? As a first pass, we might say that emptiness in Zen isn't an abstract metaphysical proposition, but a direct experience of our innermost selfless nature. So, emptiness is referring to the emptiness of self. To experience emptiness of self is to see that you are non-separate from all beings, which naturally engenders loving kindness.

A participant in the discussion told us how she found the Kesa (Robe) Gatha particularly helpful in the practice of compassion. This is the sutra which is chanted when putting on one's rakusu or kesa:

*Vast is the robe of liberation.  
A formless field of benefaction.  
I wear the Tathagata teaching,  
Saving all sentient beings.*

I had not heard this gatha before and I felt that pointed to a profound link between emptiness and loving kindness. The notion of emptiness can seem merely negative if not outright nihilistic. This sutra on the contrary suggests that compassion is somehow intrinsic to the very realisation of emptiness itself. Is emptiness actually beneficent, and if so, how?

I had been thinking a lot about this question, particularly as it relates to the Zen-like experience of 'headlessness' taught by Douglas Harding (1907-2011). The headless experience is simply the recognition that you cannot see your own head in your first-person experience. I usually assume that I meet people face-to-face. But I never see my face, only others' faces. In direct experience, visually speaking my head is just not there. In fact, when I drop what I think I know and simply look, I find nothing whatsoever in the place I'm looking from. No features and no boundaries. There is nothing to keep others out.

I was particularly struck by how closely the Kesa (Robe) fits the experience of *headlessness*, with regard to the formless field of one's true nature. Zen describes this as the direct experience of your Original Face. Rather than merely thinking about the connection, I invite you to do a couple of simple experiments.

Zen and *headlessness* both point to self-realisation occurring in the most ordinary of circumstances. You don't get much more ordinary than putting on clothes, whether they be one's meditation robes or everyday clothes. How then can we experience the vastness of the robe of liberation directly? I suggest that a Zen aphorism, from Huang-Po, regarding putting on your hat provides just such a pointer. Huang-Po, a ninth-century Chan master known for his uncompromising teachings, observed that even though his travelling hat is small 'the entire cosmos is readily covered underneath'. This was an extraordinary claim. I suggest that it only makes sense if we test it out for ourselves in direct experience:

### Putting on Your Hat Experiment

Take a hat with a wide brim and hold it in your hands. Notice that it is a small, coloured object in the world. It can only cover a head-sized area. Try covering your hand and one of your knees to show this. Now to see how much the hat covers for the first-person, you are going to put it

on. Slowly bring it back and upwards and see what happens. Notice that your hat seems to grow larger and larger and begins to blur. Watch as the back edge of your hat disappears into the void that you are looking from. Finally place it on your 'head' and notice what happens. I find that all of the hat has vanished except for a wide brown brim bordering the top of my visual field. How large is the brim? Is it head-width or is it world-wide? I find that this brim covers everything I can see from horizon to horizon. Have you put your hat on a head or the world itself?

In affinity with both Huang-Po and Douglas Harding, the Christian mystic, poet and country priest, Thomas Traherne (b. circa 1636) also expressed the joy of union with the world using a clothing metaphor:

*You never enjoy the world aright,  
till the Sea itself floweth in your veins,  
till you are clothed with the heavens,  
and crowned with the stars.*

Indeed, when I look straight ahead my body disappears, it is as if I have put on a cloak of invisibility from folklore tales, and more recently the Harry Potter series. As such there is nothing to come between me and the sky. The sky, my thoughts and bodily sensations are one vast field. Unlike the emperor's new clothes which were merely invisible, my true (first-person) garments are many coloured and chameleon, perfectly reflecting my environment. All forest walks are indeed forest bathing, and all city walks are to be clothed with the city.

One could also say that seeing this is liberation in the sense that here you are free not just from boundaries and form, but self, craving and judgement—these are not 'states' to attain, but simply describe your intrinsic spacious nature.

Circling back to the beneficence of the void, an important question from our Dharma discussion: why is the void not just a formless field of indifference? This is a powerful objection. It also won't do to merely follow doctrine in this regard. To test this in direct experience please try the following experiment. You can do this in pairs with another person or even just notice the experience of engaging with others in everyday circumstances.

### **Face-to-no-face Experiment**

What is it like to relate to another? We are told that we meet face-to-face and so are separate. But is this the lived experience? When you are with another take notice of the direct experience. Do you currently see two faces or just one? Notice the shape and colours of the face. Are there any shapes and colours where you are looking from? Are you currently face-to-face in your visual experience or is it rather face-to-no-face? Has your face ever got in the way of the face of others? Or do you disappear in favour of the other? Do your eyes get in the way of their face or your ears in the way of their voice? Or is the other's presence your complete absence? Finally, does it seem to be merely 'nothing' where you are looking from or is it an awake capacity for the other's face?

An indifferent void would entail that it is insensitive. However, I suggest that far from being insensitive, this emptiness can be described as a vibrant spacious awareness. Is that true for you? This featureless spaciousness takes on others without judgement (whether 'I' like it or not). Of course, my thoughts and sense of self also arise in the same spaciousness. We could say that this is the basis for true or unconditional compassion. This is not because the emptiness itself has any positive feelings intrinsic to it, but because it perfectly hosts others

just as they are, warts and all. My true nature is radical hospitality to the suffering and joys of the world. This is the basis of its beneficence.

This being said, you may find with this practice that a sense of tenderness for others does spontaneously arise. So, I would say that the void isn't intentionally beneficent, but practicing noticing that you are radically open to others provides the grounds for beneficence. An indifferent void suggests detachment from the world and others. But far from detached, this void is pure receptivity to the world and others—not to mention my thoughts, feelings and intentions.

Finally, this space rather than being cold and neutral holds suffering, value and care. As receptive and non-resistant, with no ego defences, we could call its relation to the world one of kindness. Not in the affective sense of kindness, but in a structural sense of welcoming without discrimination.

Can practicing this increase sensitivity to the plight of people, animals and the planet and help to unblock ethical responsiveness to them? It seems so in my experience. But don't take my word for it. This is a hypothesis for testing out your everyday life.



*'Snapseed II' painting by Glenys Jackson*



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