# THE WOBBLY POT

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ISSUE THEME – WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

***Prostrating on Mounts Bay Road***

*THE WOBBLY POT* is the journal of the Zen Group of Western Australia.
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Cover: Photograph of Kevin Donohue ***Prostrating on Mounts Bay Road***

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BY ROSS BOLLETER ROSHI

Truly, the world is made of stories. In the light of this, plays, poems, novels and films convey the passions most powerfully, most especially the passions that bring us excess of joy even as they lay waste our lives. Sometimes it takes a catastrophe to startle us awake, to bring home to us that we are loved and that we need to love and to bless and forgive. The imminence of death sharpens these concerns. We meet King Lear and his youngest daughter Cordelia in the aftermath of their catastrophes in the last act of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. They are in captivity and almost certainly to be shortly executed. Here are Lear's words to Cordelia:

*No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:*
*We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:*
*When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,*
*And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,*
*And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh*
*At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues*
*Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,*
*Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;*
*And take upon's the mystery of things,*
*As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,*
*In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,*
*That ebb and flow by the moon*[1].

Lear doesn't accord with Cordelia's desire that they confront and combat their enemies. He's happy to find a home right there with her in prison, no less, and accept what is offered by fate. Enough is enough. No need to bring in reinforcements this time.

I love the breathless pace of his telling his love for his daughter, of his asking her forgiveness. Yes, time is against them, and the topple of his words reflects that. But first and foremost it reflects Lear's love for his daughter, now clarified by the tragic unfolding of events that has finally led to their capture –so that the words come importunately tumbling out of him.

He's an old man, but in the pace and pressure of his declaration he's like a boy recklessly telling his girl for the first time that he loves her. There's a joyful acceptance that they can express and indeed live out their love in what they sense will be the briefest time. Finally, prison and its rigours are no impediment to this; maybe they're the best vessel of all. For them, in this last tender interval, let's love, sing, bless, and forgive.

Death permeates this brief moment. Death is present at the fire. With the darkness closing in we feel how urgent it is that we make reparation and affirm our love for those who are close to us.

**The passion of love: forgiveness and blessing**

It's right that the old ask forgiveness of the young, for by the time we've struggled through the middle of our life we've likely caused much harm. Years before, Lear asked his daughter Cordelia to tell him how much she loved him (expecting that her declaration would surpass in fervour her elder sisters' protestations of love), so that he could give her a third of his kingdom:

> *What can you say?* he urged her.
> *Nothing, my lord,* she replied.
> Stung, he came back at her: *Nothing will come of nothing*[2].

But how wrong he was, for everything fountains from nothing, including her love for him which survives his rage and his casting her out. After the utter destruction and desolation brought on by his folly – his power and authority are stolen from him by his elder daughters and he goes mad – finally Cordelia and Lear are brought together in captivity.

Helen Luke in her insightful account of Lear's speech writes:

> If an old person doesn't feel his need to be forgiven by the young,
> he or she has not grown into age, but merely fallen into it,
> and his or her "blessing" would be worth nothing[3].

All Lear's misreading of his eldest daughters' counterfeit expressions of love, and his awful inability to recognize Cordelia's love for him – its expression was so unbearable that she had to be disinherited and exiled – are all behind him.

> '*When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness.*'

When an old person asks forgiveness of a young person it's hopefully not out of the selfish wish to relieve guilt feelings. Often guilt shuts the other out, blocking us from acknowledging the damage we have done and from feeling the pain of those we have hurt. The story about "how guilty I am" can be a cover, an alibi, which secretly hopes to get us off the hook of shame and the need to make reparation.

**The passion of love: blessing and release**

"I wish you everything you wish yourself," my father wrote to me when I went to Hawaii to begin my Zen training with Robert Aitken. The young need the blessing of the old, just as the old need the forgiveness of the young. Asking forgiveness is blessing: it's the heart's water, its release. That's how we free each other. That's how we enter each other into life, and on occasion into death.

After a lifetime of fighting with my mother, and after years of being alienated from her, I flew back from New Zealand post-haste to be with her as she lay dying:

> Where is all this rancour now? A few hours
> back from New Zealand I hold your right hand

trying to reach you. 'You've done well', I say.
"I love you. If you understand just squeeze
my hand." The squeeze comes back.
"You've had a massive stroke. If you understand
just squeeze my hand."
The squeeze comes back.
"If you want us to let you go just squeeze my hand…"
The squeeze comes back more strongly –

Lucid sutra of the squeeze; loving eloquence
of the right hand. It speaks where a whole lifetime
failed to raise its tongue.

Thus we release each other.

…*so we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies*

How do we pray? This goes beyond what we ask for, what we want. It's rather, how do we prepare our heart and mind for God? How do we open to his presence?

The rav once asked his son: "What do you pray with?"
The son understood the meaning of the question, namely
on what he based his prayer. He answered: "With the verse:
'Every stature shall prostrate itself before thee.' "
Then he asked his father, "And with what do you pray?"
He said: "With the floor, and the bench[4]."

And with eyes and hands, with blessing and forgiving, with serving each other and finding what is deepest in each other. Stoking the charcoal fire. And singing, too. There must be space and time for that.

Is your figure less than Greek?
Is your mouth a trifle weak
When you open it to speak
Are you smart?
Don't change a hair for me,
Not if you care for me.
Stay little Valentine, stay.
Each day is Valentine's Day[5].

An old love song expresses the heart of the Way. Each day is Good Friday as David Engelbrecht – a long time member of the Sydney Zen Centre, who died of AIDS – put it so movingly; but it is also Valentine's Day – shy, tender, silly, heartfelt...with the night closing in all around. It's time to sing our love, to tell you that I love you.

It's the province of the old to pass on the ancient stories, the wisdom that connects us to our deepest roots. My old piano teacher Alice Carrard learned from Leo Weiner, who learned from Liszt, who learned from Czerny, who learned from Beethoven ... an august dynasty indeed. Madame Carrard showed me Liszt's fancy ending for Chopin's Etude Op 25 no 2, which Leo Weiner footnoted in his edition of the Chopin Etudes. And I pass it on to my students in turn. And I'm beginning to pass on the family stories to my children, and to my grandchildren. It feels like it's time.

Robert Aitken says that koans are like the folk stories of Zen. To teach is to pass these stories on, to hand down a dazzling inheritance. To pass on the stories is one thing: to pass on their essence is another. Hakuin plays up the noble absurdity of passing on the Dharma:

> That idle old awl Cloud of Virtue-
> how many times has he come down
> from the peak of wonder;
> He helps other foolish sages
> hauling snow to fill a well[6].

No hanging about in paradise. You descend over and over again to convey what can never be conveyed – to drag your tongue in the mud. It's absurd. Rain falls. The well naturally fills of itself. The fresh water quenches the thirst and opens the heart and mind. It's all clear and above board. As soon as you ask what Shakyamuni realized when he looked up and saw the Morning star you join with that mob of old lags shouting, putting up a thumb, hitting each other. How joyously you join in the charade. And how gleefully you pass it on.

And you listen to poor rogues that talk of court news, and give them a good ear. Seated round the fire they get a good hearing. But even more importantly, you engage with those refugee politicians giving their news: "No sooner was he made leader than he was betrayed by his own backbenchers." "Well it's tough being at the top..." You take delight in who's winning and who's losing, who's in; who's out ... like those old Zen teachers – I'm thinking of Yamada Koun Roshi, who over a long breakfast on the lanai at Koko An, Aitken Roshi's temple in Honolulu, would listen for hours to students, nodding and encouraging them. Beginners were as welcome as the old timers. "Is that so?" "Is that so?" he'd respond, as he added ketchup to his porridge and ignored the fancy expensive Japanese treats that had been set out for him.

### The Passion of love: the mystery of things

*And take on us the mystery of things as if we were God's spies.*

Why this fire, this stove with water running down it? Why this cold blue sky that I can see between the bars: these eyes, this laughter: you and I, meeting, reconciling like this? Where are the despair and madness now? This present space and time, this tender interval, this open space of love makes even these present horrors seem like a dream. Even this prison in which we are confined doesn't confine us.

It's as if we were God's spies, ferreting out the hell holes – the terrifying places in the human heart – and reporting back on them. God's spies spying on God: two pairs of eyes in paradise: God playing hide and seek with himself.

Doushuai initiates us into this divine game in the first of his Three Barriers:

> People go to abandoned grassy places
> only to search for their true nature.
> At such a time, Honoured One,
> where is your true nature[7]?

Where is your true nature at such a time? It's utterly vital that you see into this. When you truly experience it, you find that the fact and the mystery are completely embodied, and utterly at home as each other.

We take on us the mystery of things when we allow the backlight of death to shine through the honest solidities of our long day here. What does my fight with this person, what does my wishing to hold onto this grudge, mean in the light of my death? Usually, not much. When we let go of clinging to outcomes – to coming out on top, to being seen in a good light – we make a pact with the deepest currents of our life. Then the tides of our pain and joy *are* the mystery.

Whose providence is this long beautiful evening? Whose providence is this year of failed enterprises? Whose providence is this great earth which rolls through space with its living and its dead, its marriages and burials? We take on the mystery of that. We live out, we die into the mystery of that.

Thus, we wear out the pacts and sects of great ones - all those political and spiritual movements that flourish and perish around us. As Shakespeare expressed it, *they ebb and flow by the moon.* Yet, we don't despise them. With their ambitions and their drive to temporal and spiritual power they are all welcome at the fire. After their scramble up the cliffs of hierarchy they must be cold and weary.

**References**


1. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act V, scene 3, lines 9-20
2. *King Lear*, Act 1, scene 1, lines 87-90 (adapted)
3. Helen Luke, *Old Age, Journey into Simplicity* (Parabola Books, New York, 1987), p.27
4. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (Schocken Books, New York, 1991), p.269
5. From the Rodgers & Hart song "My Funny Valentine," from the musical *Pal Joey*
6. Hakuin, "Secrets of the Five Ranks of Soto Zen" in Thomas Cleary (transl.), *Kensho: The Heart of Zen* (Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston, 1997), p. 76
7. See Doushuai's Three Barriers in "Koans after Kensho" Diamond Sangha unpublished manuscript.

# Stay right where you are!

BY MARI RHYDWEN ROSHI

An old worthy once said to a beginner who sought his advice about how to practise Zen: 'Do you hear the sound of the mountain stream?'

The novice answered, 'Yes I do.'
'Enter there,' replied the teacher.

Zazen is a way to let go of your self and just be where you are. But where are you? How do you know where you are? If you come to your senses you will know. I suspect none of us can hear a mountain stream right now, but a bird perhaps? The neighbour murmuring to someone? Even the humming of a refrigerator? Enter there. Where we are practising makes a difference. When we sit outside, in King's Park for example, we can't help noticing the bird calls or the hum of traffic on the freeway. Different places, different sounds or smells may evoke a different feeling response. A little bit of attraction or aversion tacked onto the sensory experience.

What do we mean by feeling anyway? In classical Buddhism, 'feeling' is the translation of Vedana and refers, essentially to the primary response to anything, attraction, aversion or indifference. This is the beginning of greed, hated and ignorance. Vedana is sometimes translated as emotion, but actually using the word feeling is helpful. Feelings are what we feel and it is via our bodily sensations that we sense our emotional reactions. We feel sensations of heat or cold, pressure, contact, tension, relaxation, pain, and so on and it is these bodily sensations that help alert us to our emotions. They alert others to them too. I remember my mother angrily washing up one day. Asked what was the matter she snapped back, 'Nothing's the matter!' while loudly slamming the pots and pans down on the draining board!

So, coming back to being where we are, it may be that the most salient aspect of where we are is its feeling tone. When we are feeling angry or upset about something 'where we are' is caught up, caught up in that emotion…it can even obliterate our awareness of the particular physical space we are in, so the first thing to do is to recognise the feeling in the most basic elemental terms, the like, dislike or indifference, and then track back to how it is manifesting in the body.

I've said this before, and I'll no doubt say it again: One of the most useful things one of my dharma friends told me, years ago now, is 'You are not guilty of your feelings.' You are not guilty of that kind of hungry feeling-sensation you get when you see something you really want, or the hard, clenched feeling-sensation you get when something or someone really annoys you. Our bodily responses to a stimulus are unconscious and completely beyond our control. However, we *are* responsible for our subsequent actions. This is why it is so helpful to notice our primary feelings, just in the crudest way, as quickly as possible—to recognise like, don't like or don't care either way.

When we do that, when we pay attention to the bodily source of our feelings, it is much easier not to get swept along by them.

So, how are you feeling? Right now. Relaxed and comfortable or tense somewhere? If so, where? Shoulders? Neck? Cheeks? Jaw? Toes perhaps? Tension can be very subtle. Notice that.

Sometimes it may be a sensation of heat or cold, do you remember that koan?

*A monk asked Dongshan, 'When cold and heat visit us, how should we avoid them?'*

*Dongshan said, 'Why not go where there is neither cold nor heat?'*

*The monk asked, 'Where is there neither cold nor heat?'*

*Dongshan said, 'When it is cold, kill yourself with cold. When it is hot, kill yourself with heat.'*

(Blue Cliff Record Case 43)

It came to mind just the other day when it had been very, very hot and I was a bit grumpy, so before going to bed I went to have a shower. I have those old-style taps, so have to adjust each tap manually and I just couldn't get it right. It was too hot then too cold then too hot and I got somewhat frustrated and muttered aloud, 'It's always either too hot or too cold,' at which point I just burst out laughing at myself. The heat and cold killed me dead!

Who we are, who we think we are, is very much a result of our conditioning, our habits. They may have been built without our noticing, or maybe through conscious effort, from childhood onwards. We are likely to have developed habits that worked when we were children, such as behaving in a certain way to stay safe (How many children learned to be compliant in order to not further antagonise an angry adult? Or to be a rebel to gain kudos among peers in adolescence?) Those tactics may have worked then, but do we still need them now or are they automatic, conditioned responses that have outlived their usefulness, maybe even become a liability?

Mind you, I don't want to encourage you to start analysing everything, trawling for habits of mind or body to endlessly think about. We are not here to psychologise. I just want to illustrate why, as adults, we may find that if we maintain awareness of our feelings, and pay attention to the bodily sensations that alert us to them, we are more able to let them go, or let them be, within the spaciousness of our awareness. In other words, if we want to let go of habits of mind we've developed over time, that are no longer useful, we first have to notice and be aware of them. We have to be present. We have to be embodied.

Some pain in the legs or back or shoulders, as result of sitting still in zazen, is a little different. It's actually good to learn to tolerate some mild discomfort as our bodies become used to sitting in zazen, though it is also fine to use a chair or even to lie down if pain becomes very intense or persistent. What we need to notice is the bodily tensions that are generally unconscious habitual responses. For example, certain clenching of the body accompanies a feeling of always being in a rush. When we are in a panic, doing the 'I'm running late and where on earth have I put my car keys/glasses/phone?' routine, it is interesting to bring ourselves into awareness of the inevitable tension that will be there somewhere. In the neck/throat perhaps, the shoulders, back, or maybe jaw, a kind of forward thrust of the body? It may be all of those. You know it is amazing how many of us have become habituated to rushing and yet, if you notice it, notice the tension in the body of trying to do things quickly and, instead, consciously relax, the task becomes much easier and yet no slower. Tense and hurried, we become our own hostile environment.

And the thing is, this awareness of our environment, including the environment of our own skin bag, allows us to be present even when we are not formally sitting in zazen. This practice that we do is practice in living well, living kindly, living compassionately, attentively, awakely (is that a word?). And we want to do that all the time. Not just when we are sitting, or at a zazenkai or sesshin. We don't get to that point if we think that we will sit in zazen and have a great whizzbang realization experience and live happily ever after. It's more like a relationship in that regard: even if it arises out of love, we still have to nurture it. And, you know, it doesn't mean we won't feel terrible at times. We should feel terrible at times. Our feelings are our senses giving us feedback and guiding us along the way. A lot of our problems are because we don't notice them or we ignore them or mislabel them and just react in the same old unskilful way.

It can be interesting and fruitful to start any meditation period by noticing where you are and that includes noticing any feelings you have already carried along with you. Be aware of your surroundings, but also be aware of any unchecked baggage you have brought along, which will likely manifest as tension somewhere: let it go. If you experience pain right from the start, you need to get into a different position, or get a chair or whatever. We need to start in a position in which we can relax.

Now I expect that most of you will already know most of this, and will be alert to tensions in your body when sitting in zazen. I'm just going through these reminders because, even if we have been sitting for years, there are times when we are so lost insome story or other that we forget and even if we go back to our breath, or to our koan, we are still carrying that feeling, that desire or irritation, as tension in our body. So practising where we are includes practising where we are emotionally, or feelingwise, in the body as well as our geographical location.

And here's the thing. We can do this even when we are not doing formal sitting meditation. We can do it when we are driving the car, or standing in a queue, going for a walk or lying under a tree. And again, sometimes we might be sitting under a tree, or visiting someone we like very much, or otherwise doing something that should be enjoyable, but isn't. Check the body, find the tension. It really helps to know where you are.

Obviously we want to be present, be here, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, not just when we are doing zazen. Zazen is when we practise and what we practice is being aware of our koan, or following our breath or whatever and we are aware via our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. We are aware of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch and thoughts.

Now at this point I want to go somewhere else completely, because what I've been describing can seem very plodding and earnest….as if our practise is an effortful paying attention, in the way we might pay attention to a child on a crowded beach, making sure you always know where she is, and sometimes paying attention can feel like that but at other times it is more like suddenly noticing that sea eagle overhead, the vivid glowing pinkness of its breast feathers coloured by the setting sun already below the horizon, but reflected by the bird above. The joy of it. It's like the joy of dreams of flying: the way you have to concentrate gently on nothing and then off you go, slowly but surely up to an altitude high enough to clear even the highest garden walls but low enough to still join in most conversations or perhaps that dream where, after the nasty woman just drives past when your car has broken down, you are rescued by a soft-faced donkey offering to carry you home.

Koans, of course, are perhaps the most perfect playground for us to realise and enjoy how uncontrollable it all is, how the universe so evades our desire to tie it down or figure it out.

Dreaming, dancing, playing with words or paint, doodling, strumming, running, diving, lying under trees, kissing, pretending to be a quoll: nothing in our lives is out of bounds. We just have to be there for it. Everything is an opportunity to wake up and realise our true nature. Some things seem to help more than others, seem to touch us, encourage us to be aware of what we know……and what we don't know. Now please, just raise your hand.

How did you do that? What is the connection between volition, wanting to do something, and action, raising your hand? How do you do it? What makes you do it? Most importantly: Who is doing this? Nothing we say can really satisfy us. We don't know how we do even the most apparently simple things or who is actually doing them, who is running the show. We often seem to believe that there is some 'me' that is in control, the CEO of the self, and yet when we dig deeper we find that our bodies can be moving with intent, driving the car for example, or ducking out of the way, without the 'me' we- think- we- are having any conscious control over it at all.

All we can do is be aware, awake and embodied. You can do this in zazen. Be there. Be embodied as you sit. Be embodied as you walk, lie down, eat, watch tv. Notice your body. Notice sensation, notice how you feel. Any time. Anywhere. As we chanted earlier, This very place is the Lotus Land. This very body, the Buddha. Please enjoy it!

I'm just going to finish by reading a poem. It is by Hafiz, the 14th century Persian Sufi poet. It speaks in a different idiom from Zen but the message is clear whether we talk of God, the Friend, the Buddha or our True Nature…..everything is included. Let's pay attention. Be there. Embodied and awake.

**Cast All Your Votes for Dancing**

I know the voice of depression
Still calls to you.

I know those habits that can ruin your life
Still send their invitations.

But you are with the Friend now
And look so much stronger.

You can stay that way
And even bloom!

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companions' beautiful laughter.

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From the sacred hands and glance of your Beloved
And, my dear,
From the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Learn to recognise the counterfeit coins
That may buy you just a moment of pleasure,
But then drag you for days
Like a broken man
Behind a farting camel.

You are with the Friend now.
Learn what actions of yours delight Him,
Learn what actions of yours delight Him,
What actions of yours bring freedom
And Love.

Whenever you say God's name, dear pilgrim,
My ears wish my head was missing
So they could finally kiss each other
And applaud all your nourishing wisdom!

O keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companions' beautiful
laughter

And from the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Now, sweet one,
Be wise.
Cast all your votes for Dancing!

HAFIZ

# Chris Barker authorised to teach in the Diamond Sangha

*On March the 7th 2022 at the conclusion of our Autumn Sesshin, I authorized Dr Christopher Barker to teach in our Diamond Sangha tradition.*
*Among much else, this is to convey the path of liberation in all its humanity, poetry and depth.*
*Chris's pioneering exploration of Hongzhi's Five Ranks, which follows, shows him well embarked on this fertile and inspiring enterprise.*

***Ross Bolleter Roshi***

*Chris Barker at online Autumn Sesshin*

*Chris Barker listens to Ross Bolleter Roshi's words*

# Hongzhi's Five Ranks

BY CHRIS BARKER

Over the summer, for our regular meetings, Ross Bolleter and I have been working, playing, reading, rejoicing and meticulously picking apart this wonderful new translation of Ross's and Peter Wong's of *Hongzhi's Five Ranks*. Here is their translation:

**contingent within essential:**
*Clear and green the river of stars seeps cold throughout the heavens.*
*In the middle of the night the wooden child knocks on the moon's door;*
*in secret, it shatters the jade maiden's slumber.*

**essential within contingent:**
*The sea of clouds appears uncertainly on the peak of the divine mountain.*
*The hair around the temples of one who has returned home is streaked white.*
*Cold, one is ashamed of viewing the image in the mirror.*

**arriving within essential:**
*In the long night, the fish Kun sheds its scaly armour.*
*With a broad back, it soars up to the sky with cloud feathers;*
*frolicking on the bird path, their species is difficult to surmise.*

**approaching from contingent:**
*A face-to-face encounter need not be a taboo;*
*morals and manners remain unscathed,*
*its true meaning mysterious.*

**arriving at concurrence:**
*The handle of the northern constellation is askew –*
*it's not yet daybreak.*
*The crane awakens from its dream, the dew is cold.*
*Flying out of the old tattered nest, a cloud pine topples.*

Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157), was born two generations after Furong Daokai, and as one of the most noted Song Chan masters, initiated the Book of Serenity koan collection and also articulated the Caodong meditation praxis of serene (or silent) illumination. He is a huge figure who revived the Caodong school, and prolific, producing a wide variety of case commentaries, sermons and exquisite, rich and resonant poetry.

Examining the historic background to these Ranks would mean to delve archeologically into how they sit in relation to the 'original' Five Ranks (attributed to Dongshan Liangjie). It would be a rewarding task to follow back the varied streams of the Ranks, examining their relation to the Caodong school, their place in the development of 'canonical' Chan texts in the Song dynasty, (in both monastic and literary circles), how they were subsequently taken up historically in Japan, then how they found themselves flowing into the West.

Indeed, there has already been some wonderful scholarship surrounding similar questions examining Hongzhi by Ross Bolleter in his 'The Songbook: Reflections on Dongshan's The Song of the Precious Mirror Samadhi & other Zen poems' shortly to be published by Wisdom Publications. Taigen Dan Leighton has some wonderful reflections on Hongzhi in his books 'Just this is it', as well as 'Cultivating the Empty Field'. There has also been some good recent scholarship by Christopher Byrne, Steven Heine, Morten Schlütter, among others, who go deep into these lines of inquiry.[1]

[1]Bolleter, Ross. Dongshan's Five Ranks – Keys to Enlightenment, Sommerville, Mass. Wisdom Publications. 2014

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Byrne, Christopher. "Neither Straight Nor Crooked: Poetry as Performative Dialectics in the Five Ranks Philosophy of Zen Buddhism." Philosophy east & west 70.3 (2020): 661–678. Web.

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But, given that it's Summer, the days are long and the room I'm in is warm, I'm going to skip all those fascinating scholarly questions and try to get away with merely pointing vaguely in their general direction, and then leave that particular party probably way too early.

I really want to just get into the poetry, and to touch just how this tiny little five stanza work rings out powerfully with a sympathetic tone that both chimes with Dongshan's ranks, and further enlivens them with new, and surprising overtones.

Although Hongzhi's poem might unfurl one stanza after another, it is like a fern, where the imprint of the last is in the first, and the first finds itself in the last. Like the 4th Century Chinese poet Lui Ji who observed that "when making an axe handle/the pattern is not far off", famously referenced by Gary Snyder in his own poem "Axe Handles". If there is a pattern, Hongzhi does not ever stray far from it. Just like Dongshan's Five Ranks, what Hongzhi presents is not a map of stages, but a series of perspectives of encounters with the Buddha Dharma.

Consider the cool water that both begins with:

*Clear and green the river of stars seeps cold throughout the heavens.*

And ends with:

*The dew is cold.*

The pattern is there at the beginning and the end. I remember one sesshin at Gorrick's Run led by John Tarrant, where he held up his teaching stick and with his hand made a number of cuts, saying "if you cut it here, it's gold, if you cut it here, it's gold, if you cut it here, it's gold". It made an impression on me. Dogen has a moon in a dewdrop, where the whole sky is reflected in a puddle even an inch wide. We each have our own uniqueness, and when cut, we're gold. Hongzhi, in the end, just says *the dew is cold.* There is nothing 'in' anything, just "oh! here it is again!" - just a warm, dewy morning, opening out once more after a night of stars.

**The First Stanza – river of stars**

Hongzhi's river of stars orients us to look up to that speech-stealing vastness of the night sky. Because of the gobsmacking distances involved, and the (near) constant speed of light, when we gaze at the stars, in every sense, without effort, we have already left our place and time, and immediately, without metaphor or allusion – we see the remains of a mysterious dance to which we owe our speech and breath. The twin threads that bind Hongzhi's poem – the contingent and the essential are like that - the first stars appear as ancient light, as sky flowers, *and yet* we still encounter them suffused throughout, under our hands, without exceptions.

Presented like this, we can see that the stars are with us constantly. It's like that when we hear "we are all Buddhas." Or "Brahma and God are immanent", or the like. Such sentiments are wonderful, and arguably comforting, but Zen has always been about something happening – something personal, unique, and tangible that makes a real difference in all lives. If not about real, personal, tectonic, or gentle shifts, Zen would only be a collection of cool aphorisms, or a fascinating medieval literary tradition. For sure, it *is* all that, but if we allow for the radical notion that the tradition opens us to exactly that realization the Buddha experienced and extolled, it becomes

deeply, and intimately personal. Despite changelessness, it *is* about change, about something happening, but for that, we must put ourselves right in its path. Hongzhi gestures on:

*In the middle of the night the wooden child knocks on the moon's door;*

This line has connections with Dongshan's line "Before the third watch, the old woman encounters the ancient mirror." This moment of putting oneself in the way is just like this knocking. It is ridiculous to imagine that the moon has a door, and even if it did, how could we ever reach it? I like to imagine this as the kind of impossible knocking perhaps done by Lewis Carroll's Alice, as she grew too big for the tiny room she was contained in - the knocking of elbows against walls, heels against dressers, or head against roof – all inevitable, all impossible, and all before breakfast![2] Hongzhi further says that this knocking activity *shatters the Jade maiden's slumber.* The story of the Jade Maiden in Chinese literature is fascinating, but here, I only need say that she was an immortal, and a daughter of the Jade Emperor. Whenever the image of an immortal appears in Zen, we are invariably being asked to square an impossible circle of deification, timelessness and dream with the school of hard knocks that is our lives.

The shattering of the slumber of the Jade Maiden made me think of the knocking-of-the-gavel activity of Yangshan as he ascended to the 'third seat' at Maitreya's place in case 25 of the Wumenguan. The action goes:

"Yangshan arose, struck the stand with the gavel, and said, "The truth of the Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations. Listen, listen."

I wonder if he could wake up a maiden with that racket?

Hongzhi's images for the first stanza do not describe something inert, far off, transcendent, or extraordinarily magical–and we shouldn't expect it to. In Case 66 of the Book of Serenity, commenting on Hongzhi's koan *Juifeng: head and tail*, Wansong quotes a simple instructive dialog between Shishuang and his community –

> "Beginners who have not yet got the great matter should first know the head, and the tail will come of itself." Shushan came forth and asked, "What is the head?" Shishuang said "You should know it exists".

It does exist! The scales *do* fall, the heart *does* ease, the stars *do* come closer than we could ever imagine! It is *indeed* as if something wooden has come alive, and with the fullest confidence can march right up to the moon and request a cuppa or alternatively get preachy with deities.

**The second stanza – a shock of white hair.**

The next stanza conforms to Dongshan's second rank – essential within contingent and is most beautiful. *The sea of clouds appears uncertainly on the peak of the divine mountain.* Mountains produce

[2]The wooden man image also appears in the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras to describe the actions of a bodhisattva who, like a wooden machine can perform functions, yet has no discrimination. Similarly, a Bodhisattva works to perfect wisdom, while never departing from that wisdom itself.

clouds. We can see them rolling off peaks, wave after wave of them, off into forever. Take a look at the satellite imagery of the Himalayas – green toward India, brown toward China. Clouds, mist, rain –these are the most subtle and evanescent imagery for an inclusive lightness. The stanza suggests also a hint of effort, a journey - *The hair around the temples of one who has returned home is streaked white.* The white of the cloud-peak is not a memory, and does not exist in a foreign place. It is not 'left behind' on our return, and that is what breaks the heart, again and again and again. Clear, cold, green. A spoon tap-tapping against the rim of the cup at a mate's place, the busy jostle of a peak hour tram, a lucky morning kookaburra – we carry that mountain without the slightest effort, and like every one of those who have journeyed that way, the mystery within distinctions remains – the mountains form the clouds, and the clouds immediately reciprocate.

The following line is quite mysterious: *Cold, one is ashamed of viewing the image in the mirror.* Why "ashamed"? Dan Leighton translates the line as such: *And (she) shyly faces the mirror-coldly reflecting her image,* which seems to me a bit more coy. When discussing this, Ross I said "the mirror shows the parts of me that I am ashamed of". Ross said "Also the Jacaranda tree!" I said, "The mirror is very kind" Ross said, "The mirror doesn't give a damn!" That it doesn't give a damn is to the point. So, who is the one in the mirror? Everyone who is raised by grace yet felled by time. When each and every reflection comes full and bursting with the time and season, good luck trying to explain away or diminish the existence of the twisted, broken, unresolved parts of ourselves. That's the heart of the Bodhisattva. Shame is the place where, as Hakuin says – thorns and needles can be pulled.

I remember, long ago, in the 90's where I had had what used to be called "a good sesshin". My bones had been unhooked, and I was a happy participant in infinity. Everything was blessed by a generous light, and time spun me through without any need for messing it about. Gratitude, and an air of benevolence was cast. I wandered around – quite comic really – and drifting through the parklands, I found myself in the heart of Adelaide, going up an escalator in the mall, looking to the left, and looking to the right. In the middle of all that poetry suddenly appeared a face of twisted pain, anger and struggle coming up toward me – like a vision of hell - sputtering rage, metal haired, beetroot-red, in a perpetual grimace. I was shocked right back on my heels – his face, dirty, angry, was reflected without fear or favour, *and* triggered immediately my own habits of fear and rejection, showing me how the grace that I was party to wasn't partial, pleasant or good – that *everything* was reflected. I walked back home to the Zendo, huddled in the back room and stood behind the second hand couch, watched the news, and there it was again – the fallout of war, crime, violence, inequity. Tears were falling out of my face primarily because I could no longer hold anything at arm's length. Isn't *ashamed* the appropriate word?

**The third stanza – cloud feathers.**

*In the long night, the fish Kun sheds its scaly armour.*

Kun here is taken from a story from the Zhuangzi, a Daoist classic from the Warring states period(476-221BC). Kun is impossibly sized fish who transforms to an equally huge, magical bird, Peng. It's a mysterious story, which examines the relative fit of a creature to its range and corresponding time, body and environment. The great fish turns to the great bird, each being wholly married to its place, sliding imperceptibly from one thing to another, perfectly met. Hongzhi takes up this image, suggesting that this transformation happens "in the long night". In Chapter 6 of of the Daodejing, there's some wonderful lines about this night, offering a tantalizing image of that darkness of transformation:

*The spirit of the valley never dies*
*This is called the mysterious female*
*The darkness that is the root of heaven and earth*
*Dimly visible, like smoke, it seems as if it were there,*
*Yet use will never drain it.*

Use will never drain it. Touching the bud ever so slightly, Spring arrives, nonetheless. In Hongzhi's ranks, this vast potential for transformation is "arriving within the essential". This is the "zero point" of the scale, where everything is raised up, *and* the place where everything collapses – that is: *right here.* In a trade of potent particularity amid a free exchange of potentials, a pavilion is raised when bowing to the altar, a hundred thousand years passes between words. Does one "arrive" there? Is it about zazen? Posture? Diet? A "state of mind"? When we try to say anything, it's stupid. Everything we can say is oblique and immediately lacking. There is a moon. Yet our words tell us everything we need to know. The leaf litter rustles with the potential of a snake. But *Cloud feathers* – isn't that beautiful? Everyone has cloud skin, but how about cloud feathers? There we are roiling in the blue – forever the essential, without effort. That is our samadhi of frolic and play. The bird path? It is just our path from the cushion, past the altar, to the car park – trackless, guideless, where each voice is the pivot, and each thing leaves no trace – and each thing soars immediately to heaven, perfectly in place.

**Approaching from Contingent:**

*A face-to-face encounter need not be a taboo;*
*morals and manners remain unscathed,*
*its true meaning mysterious.*

The contingent is *all this stuff*, all the stuff that matters. My favourite part of the Diamond Sangha Jukai ceremony is that moment where water is liberally scattered over the participants from a bowl, flung every which way by a snapped branch held in the hand by the Roshi. I remember attending one officiated by Ross, who, while dipping the leaf-clusters into a bowl again and again was spraying the flinching audience, calling all of the stuff that matters to witness "cushions, Grandmas, lobsters, walruses, flowers, clouds, sky, benches, eyes…". He could have said "passport checks, tax notices, work planning meetings, weddings, recipes". Hongzhi walks us right up to what is pretty much an open secret in Zen, and, for my money, it is the place of endless and open wonder, endless practice, and one that cuts to a freedom that can't be quelled. But it is very quiet, hard to discern background and foreground, vase or face. *A face-to-face encounter need not be taboo.*

Thanks to the wonderful translation efforts of Peter Wong, Hongzhi's telling of face-to-face comes from *fenghuawushang*風化無傷– literally "morals and manners remain unscathed", and is probably from the courtship traditions of Song China, where it was not seemly for unmarried men and women to meet together alone. Get togethers needed a chaperone – who provided an intermediary,partial, and appropriate view. When an observer was present, all is culturally above board. For unfortunate lovers, though, the presence of the observer sucks the sizzling potential out of the situation and directs traffic along familiar lines – "the weather in Xue is lovely this year", "Your timing was excellent", "Shall we ask for tea?". Hongzhi asks – what if the chaperone does not make it? Suddenly the lovers meet eye to eye, face to face. So what do they say to each other? "The weather in Xue is lovely this year", "Your timing was excellent", and "Shall we ask for tea"? Released from the gaze of the observer, *every* meeting cuts right through holy and profane, sacred, and secular. Just that meeting, no remainder, no need to call anything One, Empty, or Holy. It's just love at first sight, lemon or sugar.

**Arriving at Concurrence:**

*The handle of the northern constellation is askew –*
*it's not yet daybreak.*
*The crane awakens from its dream, the dew is cold.*
*Flying out of the old tattered nest, a cloud pine topples.*

I had a school friend, who, when gazing at the stars at night, she pointed out the Great Bear, or Ursa Major, "There! Just there near the chip-shop deep fryer". Take a look next time, and you'll regret I told you – all the previous romance of star gazing will get sucked out. The images that Hongzhi uses in his last stanza are all somewhat crooked – here we are, back in the darkness before the day has broken.
The Crane in the Song was an auspicious symbol that established a link between divinity and humanity. What dream was the crane having? Dreaming perhaps of steps and stages of the way? Nesting in the clouds? Of when the round will end?

I'm reminded of the famous, and beautiful image attributed to Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song – *Auspicious Cranes* (1112), which shows a flock of cranes emerging from the blue sky and settling on the rooftop of the Imperial Palace – an image of harmony and accord with the Taoist forces of nature (qi 氣), apocryphally recording a real event where this symbol of blessing of the court actually happened. The image was probably used as propaganda to remind the court of the Emperor's heavenly mandate, at a time when he was being criticized as ineffective against invaders from the North. Hongzhi's images strip us of all such uses, symbols and paraphernalia of attainment, waking us up in the dark in the middle of it all. The dew is cold. It's difficult to say anything about the last line, mysterious and beautiful as it is. We all have tattered nests; we all live among the cloud pines – no need to dodge when they all come down around our ears.

Emperor Huizong, Auspicious Cranes (detail), 1112, Northern Song dynasty, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 51 x 138.2 cm (Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang)

# Where are you now?

BY BRIGID LOWRY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY VANYA LOWRY

Where are you now, Anatapindaka, friend of the destitute, the homeless and the hungry? Where are you now, Ananda, liberator of the lost souls, the uncared-for dead? We need you more than ever. The shopping malls are haunted with hungry ghosts, buying unnecessary items to fill the emptiness. The psychiatric wards house some who could be healed with art and kindness, but are given massive drug cocktails and low-grade food instead. We live in strange times. The media peddles fear.

At the lake I watched a mother, pushing her two small children in a stroller. The older kid held a phone up for the smaller one, so they could watch a cartoon video on the screen.

"Don't drop it. It cost two grand." No warmth in the voice of the mother.
"Stop," I want to say.
"Talk to your children about the pelicans, the ducks. Show them the turtle lurking in the weedy water." Maybe she was tired, maybe she had played with them all morning and needed a break. Yet my heart was sad.
Where are you, oh wise ones, and where am I?
I'm ageing, nearer to death than ever before, living in a country that is not my homeland. I haven't seen my wider family for four years. I am aching for those in the Ukraine, in the floods, in Myanmar, in Eritrea, in Syria, Bangladesh and the Sudan, for all the suffering people in this world. Myself, I have food, water, clothing, medicine, a little money in the bank. My problems are first world problems, created by my own mind. I don't have a major health issue, or work in the cobalt mines in the Congo.

Sometimes I forget to be grateful. Instead, I worry about my nephew. I spill Milo all over my kitchen, forget what I was looking for in the fridge. I wear a cardigan, savouring the changing season. I eat a plum, shop for vegetables, read a book. I drive my car, mend my shoes, talk with my friend on the phone. I yearn for better days. I turn off the television when they tell of unprecedented temperatures in the Arctic, the rampant advance of the climate crisis. I find it hard to face the facts.
Sometimes it seems the world has more despair than one heart knows how to manage. I do not wish to drown in oceans of sorrow, but live instead in the ocean of joy.
I am here. It is now. I make a sacred vow to enjoy my grandchildren, my breakfast, my teapot, my life. Who knows which breath will be my last?

I thank you, Kuan Yin. In your honour, I was able to soften my heart and smile at the woman with the kids at the lake, and talk to the turtles on her behalf.

# Kaarta Gar-up- Sit on Country

BY MICHAEL WRIGHT

The 27th of November 2016, was our first Sit on Country at *Kaarta Gar-up* (Kings Park).

Members from the Zen Group of WA were invited to participate in the activity of a **Sit on Country** by myself, at the conclusion of my dojo talk at St Paul's on the topic of *Nyoongar Spirituality and Zen Buddhism*, and our resident Roshi, Ross Bolleter. I am a Nyoongar man, whose ancestral clan group is Yuat and whose ancestral *Boodja* (Nyoongar word meaning country) is an area known as the Victoria Plains, just north of Perth, Western Australia.

*Dr Michael Wright and Ross Bolleter Roshi*

I had been attending weekly zazen, zazenkais and sesshins for a brief period prior to the commencement of the Sit on Country. Ross had initially requested and I had agreed, to conduct the ritual of an *Acknowledgement to Country* prior to his Dharma talks for the group. Slowly, gently and in the fluid way of *Debakarn* (Nyoongar word meaning steady) the *Acknowledgement to Country* ritual became an integral part of the group. Through the activity of the *Acknowledgement to Country*, both the meaning and significance of why and how the *Boodja* is intricately connected to who and what we are became apparent.

Importantly, how connecting deeply to the *Boodja* can provide the necessary sustenance that we unconsciously crave for our human condition. What followed, and to deepen further the experience of the *Acknowledgement to Country* ritual, there was the natural progression to commence the Sit on Country at *Kaarta Gar-up* for interested group members. The literal meaning for *Kaarta Gar-up*; *Kaarta means hill, and Gar-up means place of the spider or crab. Kaarta Gar-up* was selected as the site for the sit on country, both for its position and significance; its position is spectacular overlooking the *Derbarl Yerrigan* (Swan River) with views to the east of *Moorda* (Darling Range) and of *Boorlo* (Perth City). The cultural significance of *Kaarta Gar-up* should be noted for it was a place to camp, hunt and hold ceremonies; a very special place for women as it was a birthing site. The local spring at the base of *Kaarta Gar-up*, near the Old Brewery was known as *mangjitj kep* (sweetened water) and is believed to have *quop werin* (spiritual and healing) properties.

The choice, location and cultural significance of *Kaarta Gar-up* for our Sit on Country became apparent almost immediately after we started our monthly gatherings. The most marked significance was the shift in energy experienced from the *Boodja*. We all felt the shift, for as we

progressed it became obvious that the *Boodja* was opening and deepening for us. Instructions given to the group before we commenced our sit was to reflect on and consciously make the connection to the *Boodja;* feeling the transfer of energy between us and the *Boodja.* The instructions also included how sitting on country was essentially a healing process. We humans, have caused so much damage to the *Boodja*; we need to heal and be healed by the *Boodja.*

Repetition, consistency and discipline are important for the work of healing the *Boodja.* We are now a steady and consistent group of between 5 and 10 members who regularly come and Sit on Country on the first Sunday of each month. We sit despite the weather; we sit in the sunshine and in the rain. We sit on the *Boodja* on cushions, on chairs and have close visitations by the Kulbardi's (magpies), Kaaraks (red tail cockatoos), Cling Clings (pink and grey galahs), Djidee djidee,(willy wagtails), Wardongs (crows) and Djang Djang's (wattle birds).

Noticeably there has been a profound change in us. More observant and more settled; less concerned about our appearance to others; the many tourists, families, walkers and joggers who often pass by, as we sit. Indeed, the longer we have sat, our appearance and presence has diminished. We have melded into the landscape; we have become one with the *Boodja* and its surrounds. The group has over time settled into the *Boodja* and the *Boodja* has settled into us. We have become one and the same; inseparable, and this was always the intention.

We continue deepening our relationship with the *Boodja.* We are discovering through unlearning and confidence in our ability to find new ways to connect and deepen relationships with the *Boodja* is growing. By sitting and being on country, we now have the capability of communicating with the *Boodja.* It has provided us the opportunity to deepen our connection to the *Boodja* as we experience the practice of reciprocity; of healing and of being healed.

The practice of Sit on Country by the group has allowed for a relationship to occur that is translating into an experience of a deep and abiding connection to the *Boodja.* Indeed, engaging in the Sit on Country has become an experience in time travel, for we as a group are transported back into deep time for the *Boodja* is very old and its stories are equally so. We all agree, that it is a very special privilege to sit as a group on the *Boodja;* we feel both blessed and healed.

My personal thanks to the group members who regularly sit on *Kaarta Gar-up* for our Sit on Country. It is, personally, very meaningful and a privilege. I believe, the *Boodja,* is also pleased with our efforts; we are being held by the *Boodja* when we sit and that is truly special.

# Sit on Country

BY HERMANN ISAAC

On Sit-on-Country- days my morning meditation is at Kaarta Gar-up.

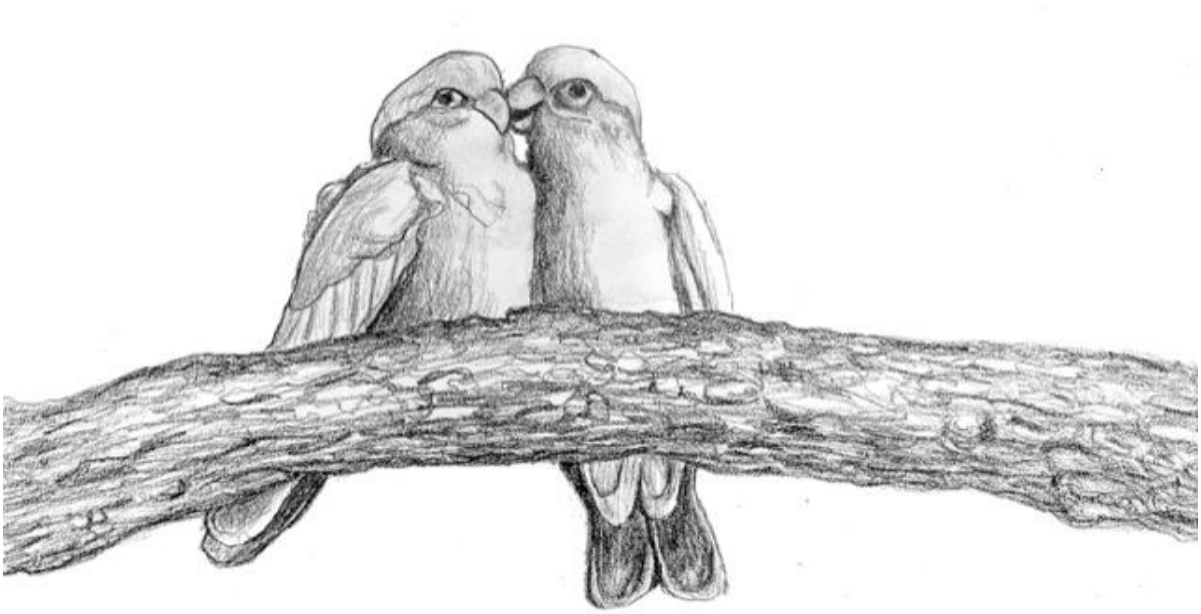
I join my friends from the Sangha and my friends in the trees and the soft grass that we are sitting and walking on. It has become a fixture in my organism. After more than 5 years of regular partaking, it is safe to say the practice has had an effect.

On arriving it feels like a familial place. Changes of the seasons become visible, and there are more than four. Sensations like ant bites, a March fly on the leg or the insistence of mozzies can occur at different times in the year. Sometimes the sun is on your back, sometimes the wind is blowing through you but we hardly ever got wet.

My gratitude goes to Michael Wright for opening the connection for us to the country of the Whadjuk people, whose land we respect and live on and care for.

My gratitude also goes to all the other participants, past and present, and their unwavering commitment, which creates a beautiful time and space to be in.

Cling Cling Father and Child Original Sketch by Hermann Isaac



# Sitting on Country

BY TRISH Mc AULIFFE

Sitting on Boodja with Sangha makes these monthly Sunday mornings special calendar events.

Michael Wright introduces with wise words from a deep past. He teaches us a few words of his language, strange but beautiful to our alien ears. Kings Park, (Kaata Gar-up) has been a place of significance for the Wadjuk Noongar people for over 40,000 years. What a privilege

for us to join with them, past and present, moment to moment.

As we sit and walk for the next hour, the soft sounds of the magpies (kulbardis) and the not so soft ravens (wardongs) with their arrk aaaark cries, and other winged friends, flit in and out of our gathering, seeming to welcome us, and also bring us home.

As we saunter up to the café afterwards, the quietude diminishes, and we join together for coffee and lively conversation. What's not to like?

# Barefeet

*Barefeet kinhin the carpet*
*of clipped evergreen lawn;*
*masking sandy tracks.*

*Time seeps through toes*
*to spread trunks and limbs,*
*of childbirth and corroborees.*

*Yarning turns heels from*
*special parades, monuments*
*and pricey gift shops.*

*Barefeet touch the ground*
*of Kaarta Gar-up's stories;*
*unearthed by pecking Kulbardis.*

*Time laments oppression,*
*its cries of injustice*
*ride the ancient wind.*

*Yarning's shade soothes*
*while Boodja reaches up*
*as us - in its Dreaming.*

KATHY SHIELS

# Quarantine

The king of infinite space has cabin fever.

JANE TAYLOR

# Where Am I Now?

BY RICHARD DAVIS

When I left Perth in mid-2016 for Alice Springs I had suffered several years of writing inertia. Prior to leaving I was employed as an anthropologist at the University of Western Australia where I was meant to write and publish articles and books, but I had stalled terribly with my writing. I had published the odd article here and there but really, I found it hard to marshal an idea and write coherently. In Alice Springs, I found myself in the midst of constant writing. I was managing a team of anthropologists at the Central Land Council (CLC) and every time they, and I, went out to an Aboriginal homeland or outstation to talk to people or witness an event, a report had to be written describing what had occurred, what decisions had been made and what the local, cultural rationale was for the decisions.

The CLC represents traditional Aboriginal owners throughout the southern half of the Northern Territory and anthropologists are employed to do the underlying research to identify the owners of a place or area. Sometimes the research for this takes months or years through a combination of archival research, interviews and talking to Aboriginal people. In the vaults of the CLC were thousands of such reports written by previous employee anthropologists over the last four decades, which has become an invaluable resource for Aboriginal people of the region. In the course of a day I would put in a request for several of these reports to the in-house librarian and later in the day they would arrive and I would start reading them.

Through my archival research I encountered writing from many years gone by. I had meetings with old pieces of paper typed on with manual typewriters from decades ago that contained family genealogies and accounts of startling Dreamings that crossed vast swathes of central Australian country.

Sometimes I travelled to meet other, older writings. Manuscripts from a hundred years ago housed in the South Australia Museum introduced themselves to me. They were hand-written in a form of German by missionaries that only 3 or 4 people in Australia knew and contained invaluable information relevant to a native title claim I was researching over the Simpson Desert.

A colleague of mine was able to translate them for me and in turn these words accompanied me as I spent several weeks in the Simpson Desert in the company of Arrernte and Wangkanguru people for that Country. In far west Queensland Aboriginal people pushed old government files into my hands that contained correspondence from long-ago Queensland Protectors to local rural bureaucrats of the early and middle of the 20th century. These letters and brief reports described a harsh regime of governance and control over their parents and grandparents, but their value was nevertheless immeasurable to these people as they were frequently all they had to account for the difficult lives of their ancestors. These hard, harsh words too often read in houses of desperation.

When returned from these trips I would go along to the wonderful weekly open mic poetry at Alice Springs Totem theatre and hear different words. Words thrown together in non-linear ways, so unlike the reports I was reading in my professional life. Words of love-wrought despair, words hollered across the seats, and words of comedic laughter.

Some words were best left unsaid - a public betrayal of confidence, sometimes a slur -, but once out in the world they could not be undone. They were alive, those dangerous words, and we who heard them struggled, each in their own way, with what had been said.

So there I was, surrounded by words and people constantly making more words and I had to get onboard the word-train and make some of my own. Gradually, I reacquainted myself with words, and in turn they leant themselves to me. First, I wrote my own reports, then came poems. And then academic articles and then creative writing. The reports gave me a rhythm, and a necessary predictability to writing. The poems lightened me and helped me join with Alice Springs, with its people, colours and soil. The academic articles (about Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu*) brought me notoriety, while the creative writing led me to see the world in ways I never thought possible. Sometime later this year a book will come out called 'Living with Monsters' with that piece in it. Be warned, it mixes a bit of horror with a dash of monsters from a far-flung mystical world in Torres Strait (where I have lived on and off over the years) in disconcerting ways – at least I hope it is so.

So, where am I? I am with words and they are with me. I had stepped aside from them for a while and did not know my way back to them. I think the healing heartland that is Alice Springs brought me back to them. I left Alice Springs in early 2020 and moved to Darwin, then to Cairns and now I live in Canberra and not once in that journey have I left words, or they me. It is a joy to live amongst them once again, they are where I am.

"These three images were taken in different parts of the Simpson Desert, which is a vast area that Eastern Arrernte, Lower Southern Arrernte and Wangkangurru peoples share ownership of. They were taken as part of a field research trip to allow members of the three groups to talk to each other on country and explain to me, the male anthropologist (other female anthropologists out of photo were working separately with women on the trip), the how and the why of their connections to their lands. It was a huge expedition carrying close to two dozen people, food, fuel, swags, chairs, tables, etc. Because it is so difficult and dangerous to get into and out of the desert, it is research trips like this that help landowners get back on Country to reaffirm their relationships with it. The two photos with myself and other men are taken at different parts of the desert as they shared songs and Dreamings for that Country. It marks a significant moment for them because some younger ones had never had the chance to visit some of the remoter parts of the Desert that we went to while others had not been on Country for several decades."

# Where are you now?

BY INGVAR ANDA

Writing this in Margaret River (*Wooditchup*) in the transition from Bunuru, the hottest season of the six-part Nyoongar seasonal calendar, to Djeran the cooler period when it becomes safe to carry out burning of *Boodja* (Country), to maintain the health of the land. Wooditchup means place of the Wooditch, being the magic man who created what colonisers called Margaret River which runs through the middle of Wardandi Boodja. The Wardandi people are one of 14 sub-groups whose *Boodja* make up the broader Nyoongar region that runs from roughly just south of Geraldton to just east of Esperance.

I came back to WA in late 2017 after living elsewhere for 20 years. My wife Bu and I both grew up in WA but headed east for professional reasons. We then both got into international aid work, starting in East Timor where we lived for several years. My son went to 3 different primary schools in three different countries. Once we became independent consultants, we realised we could live anywhere. We often came to Margaret River when back in WA on holiday and then one year we thought "lets live here". So we sold up in Canberra and moved to Margaret River.

This year has been a very hot Birak (Dec-Jan) and Bunuru (Feb-March) characterised by frequent bushfires. The Bureau of Meteorology has already declared the summer of 2021-22 (Dec-Feb) the hottest on record for Perth and most of southwest WA. Hot dry weather means increased fire risk. This summer there have been many catastrophic bushfires including here in Margaret River. In early December a fire burnt through 8000 hectares of Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, including a large part of the iconic Boranup forest with its majestic Karri trees (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*).


Not long after moving here around 4 years ago I joined one of the local bushfire brigades. Like much of rural Australia, volunteer bushfire brigades are the backbone of fire prevention and response. We had bought a small bush block so I had a vested interest in having better skills and knowledge around living in a fire prone area. I did my basic training and went to regular monthly training events when I could. I met a great bunch of people who made up the local brigade, old and young, but mostly on the old side. There are teachers and farmers, pharmacists and podiatrists, mechanics and FIFO[1] miners, artists and disability carers, and a lot of retired people. I seem to be the only international development assistance evaluation and design consultant in the brigade.

1 Fly In Fly Out

Not much happened for a while, then this summer all hell broke loose, starting with the Boranup fire. On the morning of the 8th of December, it was warming up and total fire bans were in place.

A fire started near Mammoth Cave and my fire brigade app started going off. I looked at it and said to Bu "well I suppose this is what all the training is for, I better go" I hit the green thumbs up icon, grabbed my fire gear, and headed to the station. When I got there, experienced firefighters were calmly and methodically getting the trucks ready, I was allocated to a truck and off we went. We fought that fire for several days, it burned through marri-banksia woodland, coastal heath, and tall karri forest. The second day was the worst, a hot northerly wind pushed the fire deep into the karri forest. At one point we had to pull back and head towards the coast where the bush was already burnt out (*always keep one foot in the black* as they kept repeating during training). As we headed away from the main fire front we got to an intersection, I looked to the left back towards Caves Rd and there was a wall of flame covering the road where just a couple of months before Bu and I were standing looking at pink fairy orchids growing near the side of the road. We turned right and headed to the burnt out coastal heath. We stayed there putting out spot fires until it was safe to head back to the visitor information centre we had been protecting. It was still there; the main fire front had gone around it. We spent the rest of the day mopping up small fires approaching the buildings.

During the summer of 2019/2020 almost the whole of the east coast of Australia burned, millions of hectares were incinerated, billions of lives perished. Anthropogenic climate change is amplifying fire conditions and catastrophic fires are becoming bigger and more frequent. As the concentration of $CO^2$ in the atmosphere increases, average temperatures rise, in large parts of southern Australia this is accompanied by reductions in average annual rainfall. Hotter, dryer, not good in forested areas.

Climate change is arguably one of the greatest fire risk amplifiers but what is less well known is the massive change in the overall fire management regime that has taken place in Australia since 1788. According to Bill Gammage, in his book *The Biggest Estate on Earth,* the entire continent of Australia was intimately managed by First Nations Peoples and catastrophic fire was avoided. Fire management was integrated into everyday life and spiritual frameworks. In his book, Gammage carefully documents how Australia was managed according to "templates" that maximised both the lands utility to Aboriginal people and its ecological sustainability:

> *Grass eaters seek shelter as well as feed, and feed-shelter associations ("templates") must be carefully placed so as not to disrupt each other, as this would make target animals unpredictable and the system pointless. Given how long eucalypts live, templates might take centuries to set up. Each needed several distinct fire regimes, continuously managed and integrated with neighbours, to maintain the necessary conditions for fire-stick farming.*

*This system could hardly have land boundaries. There could not be a place where it was practised, and next to it a place where it wasn't. Australia was inevitably a single estate, albeit with many managers.*

*Two factors blended to entrench this, one ecological, the other religious. Ecologically, once you lay out country variably to suit all other species, you are committed to complex and long-term land management. Aboriginal religious philosophy explained and enforced this, chiefly via totems. All things were responsible for others of its totem and their habitats.*

White settlers failed to see this complex management regime and Gammage asks:

*Why has it taken so long to see the obvious? Put simply, farming peoples see differently. Like our draught horses, we wear the blinkers agriculture imposes. Australia is not like the northern Europe from which most early settlers came. Burn Australia's perennials and they come back green; burn Europe's annuals and they die.*[4]

We cannot keep fire out of the Australian landscape, it needs fire to maintain ecological health. Too much fire and some species die out, too little and some species cannot reproduce. Fire managers need to be intimate with Country to do this. "We" (settlers) are starting to learn this and First Nations People are incredibly generous is wanting to teach us. They had their land taken by violent force, thousands were massacred, but still the desire to Care for Country takes precedence and hands are extended to show us the way.

I attended a cultural burning workshop near Margaret River last year. The Undalup Association represent the Traditional Custodians of ancient Wardandi and Pibulmun lands. The fire workshop took place in May, in *Djeran* (April/May). This is the best time to burn as the summer heat has gone but the winter rains have not fully begun. Fire is easier to manage, and less likely to get out of control, but it is also not so wet that it is difficult to burn. Fire is spread slowly by hand using dry flaming balga leaves (grass tree - *Xanthorrhoea preissii*) which gives time for creatures to get out of the way, including insects. The Undalup Associations wish is to see everyone (government agencies, NGOs, communities) working together to look after Country. According to their elders "if you look after Country, Country will look after you.

Country will look after you because it is not separate from you. This is the ancient Dharma of this ancient land, sung, danced and spoken here for thousands of years before Buddha had his realisation under the bodhi tree in the forests of the Gangetic basin. When Shakyamuni Buddha looked up and saw the Morning Star, he said: "Now I see that all beings are the Tathagata. It is

[2] https://theconversation.com/the-biggest-estate-on-earth-how-aborigines-made-australia-3787

just their delusions and attachments that prevent them from seeing it." As the Thai Monk Buddhadasa Bhikku put it:

*The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for animals, trees and soil.*[5]

If we can really look after Country, we can start to see this.

Here in southwest WA settlers have done a lot of damage to Boodja but there are some promising signs of change. Recently the WA government declared an end to all native forest logging when the current forest agreement expires (2024). Previous promises stipulated "old growth" forests, then used such restrictive definitions of "old growth" that few places outside national parks were safe. Hopefully this time it is more secure. Many people have worked for many years to get to this point, most recently "Nannas for Native Forests" (many of whom were campaigning for forest protection for decades). I remember being with a group of activists who tried to disrupt the Bunbury woodchip export terminal in 1993. We somewhat recklessly tried to block the ship from docking with our kayaks. The next morning, we scaled the fence and placed large protest banners on the top of the piles of woodchips. We were arrested but the charges were poorly thought out and did not hold up in court, they were dismissed thanks to the efforts of a savvy pro bono defence lawyer.


An earlier attempt to disrupt the woodchip terminal had taken a darker path. In 1976, two men armed with a sawn-off shotgun turned up at the Bunbury woodchip export facility and held up the night watchman. They laid 1000 sticks of gelignite and set three charges. They detonated the explosives and caused significant damage, despite only one charge going off. Both men were subsequently caught, charged, and jailed for several years. Flawed method, bad outcome all round. Thankfully not repeated.

Johnny Chester, one of the men involved in the bombing, became a bit of an eccentric homeless person when he got out of jail. He used to ride around the Perth suburbs on a horse with four dogs tagging behind, looking like a 19th century bushranger. I remember when I was the resident caretaker of the ZGWA Zendo in Highgate in the early nineties. One Sunday morning I was walking down James St in Northbridge heading for the train station. I saw Johnny Chester on his horse up ahead, riding through the Perth cultural precinct wearing his drizabone and Akubra hat, dogs in tow. A couple of police officers on foot patrol just stood there bewildered, clearly unsure what to do, and he just rode on past.

[3] Quoted in Robert Aitken, (1996) *Original Dwelling Place* p.141

This was around the time that Ross Bolleter Roshi began teaching at the ZGWA. I remember going to dokusan in what used to be the outside laundry shed at the back of the Highgate Zendo. (I found out some years later that that house used to belong to a friend's grandparents, a very Perth story, where there is rarely more than one or two degrees of separation).

Recently, in a special issue of the Wobbly Pot on Ross writes:

> *We bear witness to the intimate connection that each of us has – and that we all have – to the earth, which is our true face, our true and timeless nature. This intimacy of the natural world and ourselves means that we have responsibilities to the earth so that we treat it with respect and care: the care and respect we would, or should, accord to our own face and body. This means, at the very least, knowing our place and taking care of the environment so that future generations can inherit it for their sustenance, for their lives, as their lives.*[6]

In the same issue of Wobbly Pot, Michael Wright talks about *Boodja Wangakininy* (Country Talking) and the importance of learning from Aboriginal people and their connection to Country:

> *Aboriginal spirituality is critical to the survival of our species and to the planet, but time is pressing and there is still much to learn from Aboriginal culture. It can begin with a greater acceptance and awareness of the importance and relevance of Aboriginal spirituality. Sadly, modernity has created this split, and as such most people are seriously disconnected from the natural world; wandering aimlessly, not knowing and understanding why. Developing a deeper awareness of Aboriginal spirituality can help bridge this gap.*[7]

Michael's words remind me of Hakuin Zenji's "Song of Zazen":

*All beings by nature are Buddha*
*As ice by nature is water.*
*Apart from water there is no ice;*
*Apart from beings, no Buddha.*

*How sad that people ignore the near*
*And search for truth afar:*
*Like someone in the midst of water*
*Crying out in thirst;*

When I first came to Zen practice in Australia, I thought it was all about Old Japan and China, and maybe Hawaii, where Robert Aitken Roshi founded our tradition, the Diamond Sangha. But now I see it is right here in this timeless Country. We can find intimacy with Country by listening to *Boodja Wangakininy* (Country Talking) and starting to Care for Country, guided by the ancient wisdom of First Nations people. As Dogen says: *When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point.*

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4 From R. Bolleter, 'The Zen Way and the Environment' *The Wobbly Pot*, 2019 Issue 1.
5 From M. Wright, 'Boodja Wangkiny: Country Talking: Bearing Witness as the Pathway to Deepening the Work

# The Zen of Bush Weeding

BY BRENTYN J RAMM

Once a fortnight a group of us from the Cockburn Community Wildlife Corridor gather to hand weed a strip of bushland for two hours. Hand weeding bushland hardly seems like a romantic endeavour. It is hard work and the weeds can seem endless. Why do we do it?

In 2017, a long strip of Whadjuk Noongar country bushland was bulldozed by the Liberal WA State government to make way for the planned Roe 8 highway.[1] The Roe 8 project has since been put on hold (hopefully for good), and the bushland has slowly come back with the help of the regeneration efforts of volunteers. Hand weeding of invasive plant species, also known as 'The Bradley Method', is an effective method for helping the bush to regenerate itself with minimal interference.[2] As well as love of the bush, another reason we take up bags and breadknives for digging weeds is the general need to just do something in the face of multiple ecological crises. Taking action is in fact one of the most effective defences against hopelessness.[3] Here I would like to talk about some of the other possible psychological benefits of bush weeding and in particular its relation to Zen.

Whether or not one has a formal meditation practice, there is something quite meditative about hand weeding. In one common meditation practice you just follow your breath. Breath in. Breath out. Breath in. Breath out. Weeding is also a form of meditation. Dig, pull, place in bag. Dig, pull, place in bag. It is said that the essence of Zen is when eating, just eat. When working, just work. According to a Zen saying, before enlightenment you chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment you chop wood and carry water. There is something about embodied actions such as hand weeding that brings us of out our head. For a blessed period of time, thoughts and worries can recede to the background, or perhaps even slip away entirely. Being out there in the bush surrounded by life, worries seem less important, even trivial. Why is this?

Just being in the bush itself in fact has many benefits. In Japan it is popular to practice 'forest bathing' or shinrin-yoku.[4] This isn't hiking or exercising in the forest. It is the practice of just being aware of the sights, smells and sounds of nature. The psychological benefits of immersing in nature such as reduction in stress, depression and anxiety are well supported.[5] It is like coming home. Perhaps a lot of this is to do with the sheer beauty of nature. As an example, from bush weeding, in between digging up Gladioli, you look up at a Kangaroo Paw and it sometimes seems unreal. It shines with its own inner light.

Being immersed in the bush is a form of mindfulness, though it is also much more than this. It's also a letting go of the usual barriers between ourself and nature. In the Zen tradition, when asked 'what is your True Nature?' it is common for Zen masters to point to clouds, mountains, rivers and bamboo.[6] They are referring to your non-

separation from nature. Nature immersion is a radical openness to the world. In first-person experience, no eyes, nose or ears get in the way of the trees, smell of the soil, and sound of bird calls. They are you in that very moment. At least that would be the Zen explanation for why immersion in nature is so beneficial. It is a return to your original condition of wholeness. It is to see through the illusion of separation of self and world. We don't need spiritual language to describe why it can be so healing to just be in the bush. It can be useful though to give it a meaning that goes beyond the common-sense perspective. It also highlights that bush immersion shouldn't just be something we use as a de-stress pill to allow us to go back and be more effective workers and consumers, as was the case when forest bathing was developed in 1980's Japan. Rather ideally it can actually transform our purpose, values and very sense of self.

Of course, bush weeding isn't a walk in the park. It's hard getting up early on the weekend. You get tired, sweaty and dirty. There are flies and prickles. It can get quite hot. Forest bathing doesn't tend to have these drawbacks. But what forest bathing doesn't give you is a meaningful action which also gives back to nature. We are immersed in nature when forest bathing, but we do not participate in it.

Intellectually, we know how dependent we are on the environment (at least many of us do). Given the all-encompassing nature of the environmental crises we face, perhaps we also need to experience our non-separation from nature more directly. A common form of environmental activism involves yelling and holding placards in the streets. This is, of course, very important. But when engaging in such activities, 'nature' is an abstract concept. It can seem very far away. Burnout amongst activists is also a risk.[7] By contrast, bush weeding involves actual physical connection with the land, at the same time as recharging our wellbeing. By caring for the same area of bush over a long period of time an emotional connection also grows. Yes, there are benefits to bush weeding in terms of stress reduction, but in my view, this is just one of the possible benefits of engaging in this form of activism. This isn't how the word 'activism' is usually used, but surely this is what it is.

Sometimes when you see the weeds stretching off into the distance, it can seem futile. But you just keep going. Chop wood, carry water. When the two hours is over and we stop for a cup of tea, you see the bags full of weeds that we've collected together. Not just that, if only for a short time, you are doing something which is symbiotic with the plants, insects and animals of the bush. The weeds may seem endless, but then you look up and see a bee going from flower to flower. With no thought of the future, it just goes about its task. Likewise, often you are just pulling weeds. Of course, in the order of nature, we will never be anywhere near as important as bees. But we can play a small part out there in the bush for a couple of hours a fortnight.

[1] Roe 8: No pause for clearing work ahead of WA election as Environment Minister stands firm, Jan 11, 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-11/wa-election-roe-8-no-pause-for-work-albert-jacob-says/8176280

[2] Bringing Back the Bush, Dec, 1996, http://anpsa.org.au/APOL4/dec96-5.html

[3] How to Not Melt Down Over Our Warming Planet, Dec 2, 2021, https://www.wired.com/story/climate-change-anxiety-tips-maria-ojala/

[4] https://www.japan.travel/en/guide/forest-bathing/

[5] Li, Q., et al. 2016. Effects of Forest Bathing on Cardiovascular and Metabolic Parameters in Middle-Aged Males, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27493670/

[6] Suzuki, D. T. 2015. The Role of Nature in Zen Buddhism. In, The Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki, Vol 1. University of California Press.

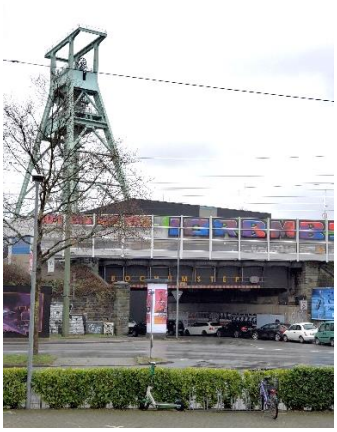
[7] Activist Burnout Running Through the Climate Activist Community, Aug, 27, 2019, https://greennews.ie/activist-burnout-climate-community/

# Where are you now?

BY ANTONIA GIEHL

I lie in bed with a warm brown cuddle banket, looking at a list of gratitude words and drawings on the white wallpaper next to my head. Getting up on a winter day feels like a huge task; the floor is cold and my socks are out of reach.

I am in a city with broken glass on the street, a kebab shop on every corner and a cold wind always in my face. I forgot my gloves again and I'm riding my bike along the busy road; going quickly under the graffiti-bridge to avoid being hit by pidgin poop - they live up there under the train tracks, huddled together for warmth.



I dream of sauna-spa-days and large amounts of cheesecake until the traffic light turns green. Then I enter the hall in the modern white building after I have shown all of my documents, but I immediately get in trouble for pulling down my mask, to eat an apple before class. The security person doesn't have an idea for how else to get the fruit into my mouth either. I'd have to go outside. Poor guy, it can´t be fun telling people not to eat in the warm and dry indoor space.

I can't help quickly checking my social media page. Up to yesterday the only News was the number of good people getting sick and number of bad people resisting the cure. Today it's all gone: They started a war next door. Fear and uncertainty about death by suffocation in front of a full hospital or the unknown effects of a new vaccine make way to fear and uncertainty about refugees and atomic bombs and gas prices. Either way, the promise of infinite cheesecake and sauna days or even apples and brown cuddle blankets are not taken for granted anymore.

Old men order large beers at 3pm, in the café down the road and talk about the good old days. My biggest worry is still the shame about watching "Germanies next Top-Model" with breakfast and the strangeness of getting a big desk only to find that it is cluttered with stuff all the time; so that I don't have any more space than I had on the small one. Meanwhile people are really dying, and my grandma has been diagnosed with cancer and I am just not sure if Aldi has the right brand of oat milk. Oat milk is basically just sugar anyway and if only I would drink more ginger tea, I might be lovable at last.

When I get home, I draw an apple and oat milk tree on my gratitude wall and consider the great luxury of having the choice between green or pink flip flops to go with my sauna robe. I call my friend and listen to her talk, and she says, "thank you". Together we decide that neither of us needs to eat large amounts of cheesecake tonight and wonder what would really be a contribution.

Even though it is futile, I tidy up my desk and boil the kettle for my red hot-water bottle. The corner of my room is growing a bit of mould. It's not pretty and neither am I. I don't really care because I get to eat soup in bed, watch another episode of an embarrassing TV show and draw on walls.

Before I fall asleep, I listen to the cat above, pushing marbles across the tile floor. It's strange because I am pretty sure there is no cat living in the apartment above. There are so many things that I don't understand. I just listen to my breath instead.

# Where are you?

BY KORAL WARD

It was the most beautiful picture she had ever made; the girl was certain of that.

Whether the teacher had asked for a vision of the children's possible future, or had given free-reign as to subject matter, she no longer remembered. Though memory would allow her to believe it was a future vision. The teacher handed out sheets of sugar paper, cheap, soft and thin. Hers was green, not her preferred colour, but it put her in mind of a garden. And so the girl began, made flowers, and placed a 'Lady in the Garden', on a path. The garden had a whimsical Japanese tone, with willowy trees, and the lady wore a long flowing gown. She may or may not have held a flower in her hand as she walked.

The girl took the picture home.

'Mum!'

'I'm too busy to look at that now, put it away and come and help me with the tea'.

'Dad!'

'Aye Love, very nice.' He said without looking.

*Original Etching by Koral Ward*

In a box, under her bed, the picture had its space.
The girl thought it so beautiful that she would keep it forever.
But later she saw that space was empty.

'Where are you?'
she cried
into the void of the empty bin.

'It's gone, long since.
Don't be so daft just make another one.'
'I can't - that was the only one, it was beautiful and I loved it, there can't be another!'

The mother had a long life. She had loved her garden.
'Where are you?'

The daughter set about a new picture: 'Woman in the Garden'.
There's symmetry within, flowers recur with variations.

She replaced the woman on the path.
The woman looks directly outward:
Where are you?

# Back to a new beginning?

BY PAUL DOUGHTY

After nearly 20 years with the ZGWA, I find myself back where I started with the group: making a long trek from the hills to the dojo on most weeks. When I first started sitting with the group in the early 2000s, I was in Kalamunda in the Perth hills, and we sat at Fremantle's Port Authority building, next to the big white tower of a building behind the sheds on the wharf, on Wednesdays from 7–9pm. I recall the entrance was a bit counterintuitive to find, and on my third attempt to check it out I finally saw the red lettering of our trusty welcome sign before sitting commenced. The dojo was austere and made an impression on me, and the regular post-sitting cup of tea in the library on zafus on the oriental carpets was a fine way to talk to a few people and ask questions of Ian Sweetman (the Sensei who became a Roshi in 2006) about Zen in an informal setting.

In those early days, Mary Heath was essential in welcoming me to the group and we often carpooled for zazenkais and sesshins on the weekends, as she and her husband Jim lived in nearby Darlington. In summer, I would sometimes head down for a swim at South Beach after work and before our Wednesday sitting, taking care not to wash the salt off me too well, so that I would itch a bit during the rounds, bringing me back to my practice. Ah, beginner's mind! Then there was always the big trek back up to the hills, getting home quite late.

Occasionally, I also sat with the Heaths and other friends in Darlington, sometimes at yoga studios, sometimes in lounges. Since the history of the Diamond Sangha is in Aitken Roshi's introductory book, descriptions of those early days resonated with my experiences with the ZGWA and the hills-folk. Zen can be pretty much a D.I.Y. activity in the vast West.

As at times happens with Zen people, aka "zennies", I took a break of sorts around the turn of the decade. The group had to leave the Port Authority building and sit at the Fremantle Prison, so it was around this time I took my little hiatus. I still sat semi-regularly so I was able to maintain a practice while out "in the wilderness". After some extended time overseas and bouncing around a few more hills' share houses, I felt it was time to consider returning to Fremantle and the Zen group.

After a lucky combination of coincidences, my wish was granted – a nice flat in East Fremantle fell into my lap; with a view and "mate's rates" to boot. Zen was just around the corner! But not quite. I was going to show my face around the new zendo at St Paul's "soon". After a while, I

ran into Paul Wilson and Paula Inayat-Hussein (key people in my earlier 2000s time with the ZGWA) and said "hey, I've moved back to Freo and will be attending the zendo soon!" So I think it was about six months later I ran into them in town again and I offered "I'm going to attend the zendo soon!" To which Paul replied: "you already said that last time!" Cornered, it was off to the weekly sit...

But now sitting on Thursdays (I still haven't recovered from it changing from Wednesdays). There were a few people that had left, such as Ian Sweetman Roshi and a German fellow named Martin who rode a motorbike. There were also all these new people such as Nick Arnold, Antonia Giehl, Lisa Callahan and Alistair Reid, and Ross Bolleter Roshi who I had only met once in the 2000s.

The plan kind of worked: I became a regular weekly zennie. Living just 10 minutes away from Beaconsfield there was no excuse not to take up the cushions each week, with the exception of gallery and movie openings which typically fall on Thursdays. Indeed, I became one of the reliable set-up and breakdown people. I even took up more service through joining the council for a 2-year stint and (eventually) accepting an invitation to be jiki.

But wait, I should rewind. In the early return to the ZGWA, I had the same old struggles – awkwardness with others, spacing out big-time on the cushion, inspirational dokusans followed by more "clinging to bushes and grasses" and so forth. Then a (in my mind) terrible summer sesshin in Applecross, even though I was only part-time. I was just about to throw the towel in again. But then – an informal workshop-style extended activity was being offered with yet another Roshi: a "Training Period" (as it was called then) in a suburban house with Mari Rhydwen Roshi. I remember reading Mari's rather long communiques from Indonesia before ever meeting her, and thinking – I don't mind at all that they're long, I can follow every sentence. And, oh my – looks like the way I write too! So I thought – why not one last try at this Zen thing. I remember on the first night speaking to Kathy Shiels – it was the first time we really spoke in depth. You see, I had traditionally been one of those attendees who lurked around the edges of the weekly sit: appearing just before the first round began, and then after doing some requisite packing away, turning heel and disappearing without talking to anyone beyond exchanging some pleasantries. In any case, the Training Period experience showed me a different side of the sangha and practice, and I've kept with it since. It also demonstrated to me how precariously many peoples' continued involvement with the group can hang by a thread. Sometimes the thread breaks, but sometimes happenstance incidents can bring you back to the sangha.

Then about two years ago, although content renting at my cosy East Fremantle abode, I began to think of my eventual retirement, just 10–12 years away. I looked at places in Fremantle for about six months – all super expensive or on busy roads or tiny or all of these things at once. After scoping out dozens of places at that time, I looked at just one hills place that seemed to push my buttons. And that was it. Back to the hills, back to the beginning; although perhaps not exactly.

Yes, back to being a part-time attendee at the dojo, but something had shifted and that's what this piece is more-or-less about. Soon after moving in, some ZGWA friends made the long trek to warm my new hills home with a sit, shared lunch and had meandering chats about Zen. It brought me back to the Darlington D.I.Y. sits in the 2000s, so I was happy to host this time. I continue to jiki, prioritise dates in my diary for sesshins and zazenkais (of course!) and meet up socially with sangha friends when we can.

However, it's strange in some ways, being physically so far away from the weekly sits after eight solid years of close involvement with the group. This has caused reflection on what, for me, is the ZGWA, the sangha, the practice?

There are some benefits of living far from the sangha's weekly sits, although most of these are in the category of "perspective". I have a newly found appreciation for those sangha members who don't live in Fremantle or nearby who nevertheless make the effort to be meaningfully engaged with the ZGWA. This can be in the form of membership or contributing to the Wobbly Pot or attending sesshins and zazenkais when things align and it's possible to attend.

Moreover, in some ways, the sangha opens up when living remotely. Weeks without sitting with the group are opportunities to engage with the non-card-carrying "sangha" members in all shapes and forms. I think of people who live in places where there are no established Zen groups, and have to just go it alone. Or rather, develop an appreciation of sangha members everywhere, even if they are not wearing black and showing up on the same day and time each week.

Regardless of our proximity to the dojo, practice beckons. Having lived near and far to the dojo, on hiatus or heavily involved with the ZGWA, I feel I've benefited somehow through these different experiences. All our paths in Zen are mightily crooked, but I suppose that's all a part of the great journey we undertake with our practice, no matter where we are.

## Where are you now?

*Where I am now is exactly where I am meant to be.*
*Cats, dog, broken hearts and rising moon -*
*Did I love well?*
*Well, I hope to love better next time.*

DESMOND LIM

*Tell me, what else should I have done?*
*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*
*Tell me, what is it you plan to do*
*With your one wild and precious life?*

MARY OLIVER