

THE **WOBBLY POT**



JOURNAL OF THE ZEN GROUP OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

2018, ISSUE 1. AUTUMN/WINTER

The Wobbly Pot

is the journal of the Zen Group of Western Australia.

The Wobbly Pot offers sangha-members an opportunity to share Dharma and creativity.

Thank you to all contributors.

The Wobbly Pot is now published biannually. The next edition will be published in October 2018. All Sangha members, near or far, are invited to submit articles, essays, poetry, fiction, visual art, reviews or other contributions. Submissions are due by 30 September 2018. Email submissions to wobblypot@zgwa.org.au.

Contents:

| | |
|---|----|
| ‘Buddha’s Enlightenment and Care for the Earth’, by Ross Bolleter Roshi | 6 |
| ‘Nyoongar Spirituality and Zen’, by Michael Wright | 9 |
| ‘Touching the Earth’, an interview with Ross Bolleter and Michael Wright, by Kathy Shiels | 14 |
| ‘I vow with all beings to recall my original purpose’, by Phillip McNamara | 22 |
| ‘Vocabulary’, by Brigid Lowry | 32 |
| A poem by Sally Wilson | 33 |
| ‘April evening three haiku’, by Gerard Mazza | 33 |
| ‘The Wonder of the Way of Hongzhi Zhengjue’, by Kathy Shiels | 34 |
| Buddhists for the Environment | 42 |

Editor: Gerard Mazza

Front cover illustration: Brigid Lowry

Photographs on pp. 4-19 were taken at Matilda Bay by Gerard Mazza.

The copyright of all content belongs to its author.

Special thanks to Alistair Reid and Brigid Lowry for their work in preparing the interview for publication.

Buddha's Enlightenment and Care for the Earth

Adapted from a Dharma talk given for Buddha's Enlightenment on December 8, 2016.

BY ROSS BOLLETER ROSHI

Once upon a time – or two and a half thousand years ago – Prince Siddhatta was born into the noble family of the Shakya clan, at Kapilavastu. It was foretold that he would either be a great ruler or a great spiritual teacher. His father unequivocally decided for the former, so Prince Siddhatta was raised in luxury and schooled in the arts of love, war and statesmanship. The genie that could grant an infinity of wishes was there at his command. However, hedonism, like asceticism, can be a tough path. Excess finally becomes boring, and power in time brings onerous responsibilities as well as an irresistible temptation to cling to it. Accordingly, the prince became troubled by questions concerning the purpose and meaning of life. Is the purpose of our existence solely the enjoyment of pleasure, the achievement of wealth and status and the exercise of power? Or is there something deeper than these that can, for example, address the problem of suffering?

Prince Siddhatta managed to escape from the palace where he was walled in by his father to protect him from the raw realities of the troubled world. We all do a good job of protecting ourselves from a lot of reality too – until we can't. On his surreptitious visits to the world outside, Prince Siddhatta encountered an old person, a sick person and a corpse, so it's no surprise that his enquiry began to crystallize around questions such as: "Why do we suffer?" and "Is there liberation from suffering?" Finally, on one of his escapades he encountered a monk, and realised that there was a path that would support his inquiry: a path that he felt he had no choice but to embark on.

At the age of 29, Shakyamuni – as we more customarily know Prince Siddhatta – left his wife Yasodhara and his son Rahula. With his wife and his parents weeping, he cut off his hair and beard, put on the saffron robes of a mendicant, and undertook the

homeless life of a renunciant. The story goes that he left the palace on the very day that Yasodhara gave birth to their only child, the unfortunately named Rahula, whose name means "fetters."¹

We could say – and it often has been said – that Shakyamuni lost the opportunity to find the Way in the midst of the responsibilities of marriage and bringing up a family. As lay people we practice the Way in the midst of our everyday lives – which may include marriage and children – but the path that we walk depends on Shakyamuni's discovery of it. In terms of his quest, he did what he had to do, and we are the beneficiaries.

The quest

Shakyamuni started with a study of the philosophies and meditation systems of his day, and he mastered them so completely that he came to be regarded as the prince of philosophers and meditators. However, his experience of profound samadhi states and his insight into subtle philosophical systems didn't satisfactorily address his fundamental concerns.

Next, Shakyamuni spent six years practicing austerities with a band of ascetics. In an attempt to transcend the body and its needs, he learned to subsist on a few grains of rice a day, with the result that he almost died. Out of his near catastrophe comes the Buddha's teaching of the Middle Way, which in its most fundamental sense encourages us to avoid the extremes of indulgence on one hand, and self-mortification on the other. Shakyamuni had experienced both – the former as a prince, the latter as an ascetic monk – and he discovered that both extremes were ultimately dead ends.

Shakyamuni realised that if he was going to continue his quest, he would first have to regain his strength, and so he resumed taking nutritious food. The story

goes that a girl from a nearby village whose name was Sujata, discovering him at the point of death, gave him milk and rice to revive him, and continued doing this until his strength returned. Thus restored, Shakyamuni seated himself beneath the Bodhi Tree in the meditation posture and vowed not to rise from meditation until he had attained perfect enlightenment. He meditated resolutely for forty-nine days and nights and it is said that his koan during this great sesshin of sesshins was: *Why do we suffer?* At the end of the forty-ninth night, at dawn, Shakyamuni looked up and saw the Morning Star, and exclaimed, "I and all beings have at this moment attained the Way."

In that moment of awakening, what did Shakyamuni realise? What was it that had him sweepingly exclaim that he and all beings – including you and me – in that instant had "attained the Way"?

For several weeks, the newly awakened Buddha remained in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree enjoying the bliss of awakening. After a time the question arose: should he share what he had realised with others, or instead should he remain in the forest enjoying the bliss of liberation alone? He opted to come out of the forest, to come down from the mountain, and to spend the next more than forty years walking the dusty back roads of India – "for the sake of those with only a little dust in their eyes" – in fact, teaching all comers according to their capacities. And here we are tonight.

The Buddha's awakening is the source of the great stream of our Way, and provides us with the deepest encouragement to awaken and confirm who we truly are, always have been, and indeed always will be – and to walk the Way into our lives.

What do we learn from the Buddha's story? Certainly stickability, determination, and devotion to practice. It's important to keep right on – regardless. Zen is the regardless Way! Getting enlightened may seem like a solo business, a hero's journey, but Shakyamuni also needed the support of others, including his early teachers, the ascetics, then Sujata, and finally that intrepid Morning Star. The universe is always kicking in. We may sit alone, but we're not alone. Not remotely. Everything gathers as you facing the dojo wall, struggling to come back to your koan – and how.

We each awaken in our own way, yet with realisation we recognize the Buddha's awakening *as* our own. The experience of awakening is actually universal, pre-dating Shakyamuni and outlasting Zen in the West, and all the rest.

Yet we rightly express our gratitude to the Buddha for his courage, his determination to awaken regardless of the odds... and finally for his decision not to let his awakening remain a private ecstasy on some remote hill out of Magadha.

"There is no person without a world"

– Anne Carson

When Shakyamuni was meditating under the Bodhi tree, the story goes that demonic forces tried to unseat him because their king, Mara, claimed that very place beneath the tree. As the demons proclaimed their leader's powers, Mara demanded that Shakyamuni produce a witness to confirm his spiritual awakening. The Buddha simply touched the earth with his right hand.² Some accounts have the earth literally speaking on behalf of the Buddha, saying – or even roaring – "I am your witness." However, there are more subtle ways the earth bears witness on our behalf. Listen. Listen.

The Buddha's gesture of touching the earth and calling it to bear witness manifests our intimacy with the earth. When we realise that indissoluble connection, in the same breath we comprehend that we have responsibilities to the earth, and to each other.

Cool burn

If we are going to survive and ensure the survival of other species, human communities, and indeed the



earth itself, we must bear witness to the earth by maintaining it, and by caring for it. The most exemplary form of this care that I know is the Aboriginal practice of fire-stick farming and land management, a practice that goes back for time immemorial. Bill Gammage in his classic book *The Biggest Estate on Earth* writes that Aboriginal people (including the Nyoongar people of the south west of Western Australia) created an extraordinarily complex system of land management using fire and the life cycles of native plants to ensure plentiful wildlife and plant foods throughout the year. Their practice of fire-stick farming is about how to burn well; it's about how to use fire discretely, and how to prevent the gigantic and destructive bush fires that will likely multiply as we advance further into global warming.

On this theme, I recently heard a radio program about a “cool burn” in and around Orange in southern New South Wales, Australia.³ The cool burn was being done by Aboriginal people to prevent massively destructive bushfires. I was especially moved by the mention of the fact that cool burning is *slow burning* and that slow burning gives animals and insects time to escape, to get out of the way. Also that in a cool burn, you burn in a mosaic pattern, and hence you don't burn everything. For example, you don't burn out the home range, say ten hectares, of a bird. Otherwise the bird has nothing to eat. The fires are cool enough for families to walk through. Moisture at ground level protects invertebrates. Flames don't go up into the canopy, which means the fire doesn't spread out of control. By burning the undergrowth you reduce the chance of having the huge and disastrous bushfires that we know today. Cool burns also involve the whole Aboriginal community, including children, who peel the bark from the trees to stop the flames reaching the canopy.

Engagement is key in cool burning. In effecting it you are caring for country. One of the old Aboriginal men on the ABC program said, “You look after country, country look after you.” It was also said that by looking after country, you are also caring for your community.

Sitting on Country

We are sleep walking in Nyoongar country: country that is and has always been of immense and fundamental spiritual significance to Nyoongar people, country that has been their home for more than 40 000 years. Intimacy with country is fundamental to Nyoongar spirituality, and surely, we have so much to learn from Nyoongar people about how to live and practice the Way in this place. For all of these reasons, sitting on country in Kings Park (Kaarta Gar-up) under the guidance of Nyoongar man Michael Wright is vital for our

group, because it makes real the spiritual affinities between Nyoongar and Zen Buddhist culture, enabling us to experience under Michael's guidance our intimate relation to the earth – river eyes, crow ears – so that with each step we take, the earth pushes back, affirming our deepest nature.

When we sit on country we also bear witness to the immense suffering of the Nyoongar people arising from the European invasion with its dispossession, massacres, and fatal diseases, and we hope that through our sitting on country we may open a path to healing.

I am deeply grateful to Michael Wright for all that he has taught me about the culture and spirituality of the Nyoongar people through his talks and through our dialogues over the years. I am the richer for his guidance.

When we bear witness to the sufferings of the world we are also learning to come to terms with our fear of others, and theirs of us. Courage is not the absence of fear; courage involves that we include our fear. That makes for crossing boundaries – real and imagined. And for reaching out and taking loving action.

It is good to know the story of the Buddha's enlightenment; it is also important to live it, and we do this through bearing witness to the joys and sufferings of the world, and through taking loving action to resolve suffering, as the Buddha did when he came down that hill out of Magadha to teach a Way that includes and inspires us all.

When the Buddha looked up and saw the Morning Star, he said: “Tonight I and all beings have attained the Way.”

What did he realise?

Notes

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1999, *Two Lectures on Buddhism*, Buddhist Publication Society, pdf, accessed 17 April 2018, <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh433_Bodhi_Buddha-and-His-Dhamma--Two-Lectures.pdf>, p. 10.
2. Stanley, J & Loy, D 2011, *Why the Buddha Touched the Earth*, Huffington Post, accessed 17 April 2018, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-stanley/buddhism-and-climate-change_b_925651.html>.
3. ‘Burn’ 2016, *Earshot*, ABC Radio National, 4 August, accessed 17 April 2018, <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/burn/7669262>>.

Nyoongar Spirituality and Zen Buddhism

A talk given on November 3, 2016.

BY MICHAEL WRIGHT

Kia, wanju, wanju nidja Wadjuk Nyoongar boodja.
Hi, welcome here on Wadjuk Nyoongar country.

Gyun miyal koort, wirin djoorapin dinang.

My eyes heart and spirit are happy to see you here.

Ngulluck goorling nyin-iny dwonk kaditj kadidiny Nyoongar wirin Nyoongar boodja karla boodja.

We gather here together to sit and listen and learn about Nyoongar spirituality on Nyoongar boodja, our boodja.

I would like to start with a very old story that goes back 60 000 years. Seventy kilometres north of Mildura is Lake Mungo, a place of major significance, both for scientists and for Aboriginal people. As an Aboriginal man I made a pilgrimage to Lake Mungo last year. Fiona, I and others visited Lake Mungo with a local Aboriginal man, who is a traditional owner for that country. His knowledge of this area was vast, not just about the Aboriginal story, but also the story told by the palaeontologists who claim that they discovered the remains of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady. Interestingly, Aboriginal people tell a different version of the story to the scientists, for they say it was the country who decided when to reveal their secrets. It was just coincidental that the scientists were there at the same time.

What is it that is significant about the Lake Mungo site? Two things. Firstly, when Mungo Man remains were uncovered it showed that he had been given a ritual burial, and secondly, it was determined by carbon dating that the burial occurred sometime between 42 000 and 45 000 years ago. This information both perplexed and amazed the scientists. The significance



of this discovery was a first for palaeontology, both in Australia and the world. The uniqueness of this discovery is unprecedented, as there is no other recorded evidence of a ritual burial on the planet going so far back in time. These findings showed that in Australia, 45 000 years ago, there was an intelligence present among Aboriginal Australians.

Living within and without

Lake Mungo, 60 000 years ago, was very different to what it is today. There was lots of water; Lake Mungo

was part of the Willandra Lake system that stretched north from Broken Hill to the south coast of Victoria. So large was this lake system, it is estimated that some of the lakes held up to five times the amount of water currently in Sydney Harbour.

What are the key teachings from the Lake Mungo experience that can provide insight and ways forward for us living in the 21st century? Firstly, 45 000 years ago Aboriginal people lived in and around these lake systems, and evidence since has shown that they lived simply: hunting and fishing closely on and with the land. Reaching back in time 60 000 years, Aboriginal people were living and practicing their culture, and there is evidence that they had very intricate and complex cultural practices for birth and death. Those same cultural practices are still upheld today, and allow for close and intimate relationships with kin and country.

Separation, both within and without, is a major cause of both anxiety and distress. Separation from the natural world has become increasingly a source of distress that is not well understood, unfortunately.

For Aboriginal people, a disconnection to *boodja* (country) can be problematic. We are energy, and a major source of our energy comes from our *koort* (heart) *boodja*. In Nyoongar language a pregnant woman is '*boodjarri*,' which means she is 'carrying the country'. Both the spirit and child forming in the mother's womb are intricately connected to their country, to their *boodja*, and both are protected and nurtured by the *boodja*. Nyoongar people identify with their country. Their *mirin* (spirit) is located within their country.

Other Indigenous groups respond similarly. The Hmong, for example, who live in the mountains of Cambodia, have a ritual of burying the placenta of newborns in the ground near the place of their birth. Why? It is because they believe that when a person dies their spirit will travel back to where their placenta was buried in the earth; a reconnection to both the source, being the placenta and the earth.

Understanding intuitively the ancient ways, which apply to everyone, is the obvious way forward. All of us are part of ancient cultures, and if we understand their teachings we know the importance of staying with the energy of the *boodja*, the country; to stray and not recognise the importance of this energy is both folly and dangerous.

The Nyoongar Elder Noel Nannup tells of the importance of living with and understanding the importance of relationships with country. He speaks about having an intimate understanding of your 'totem'. A totem is usually an animal that defines a person's role, responsibility and their relationships, both with their totem and with others. Noel says by living

and breathing your totem and by knowing and integrating all aspects of your totem, so you begin to know yourself.

Australia is an ancient land, and unlike other places on the planet, it has not been subject to huge geographical upheavals. The people lived undisturbed, in harmony with their traditional country, for thousands of years. The first recorded evidence of a European to land in Australia was here in Western Australia. Dirk Hartog landed on the west coast of WA in 1616, just 400 years ago.

Fast forward nearly 350 years. In Western Australia, somewhere east of Fitzroy Crossing in the Western Desert, lived Jimmy Pike, a Walmajarri man who came out the desert for the first time in 1960 as a seventeen-year-old. He, his family and other clan members lived a traditional lifestyle in a place seen by white people as inhospitable. For them as desert people, it was home. The desert was not an inhospitable place for Jimmy and his family for they knew it intimately: dancing and singing to country, looking after country and living in harmony and respect. According to his partner, Pat Lowe, a non-Aboriginal woman who travelled with him on his country, he knew intimately the waterholes, where to find food and the places to avoid. They lived with the rhythm of the country, not in competition but in harmony.

Australia is a very diverse country, and before the arrivals of Europeans and the impact of colonisation



there were 300 languages and over 500 dialects spoken. The diversity and sophistication of Aboriginal life is still mostly unrecognised and unacknowledged in mainstream societies. In central Australia, the Anangu (*Pitjantjatjara*), like most other language groups, have a very complex and layered system for understanding both their environment and the means and conditions to interact with their environment. In Central Australia, the means for understanding this complex interactive dynamic is called the *Tjukurpa*, and it provides the framework for the correct cultural interpretation that allows for the ongoing harmony between people and country. It is often mistakenly called 'the Dreaming' by non-Aboriginal people, who because of their cultural blindness and hubris cannot grasp that the country is a living entity, and that the stories told by the Anangu are not stories from the past, but are both the current and future reality.

When you are ready the country makes itself visible. A story told to me by a non-Aboriginal man who was a frequent visitor to Aboriginal people living in a remote area in Central Australia clearly illustrates this point. He told me that on one occasion, while driving with the Elders between sites, he saw in his peripheral vision the landscape changing and becoming alive: rocks changing into half-human, half-animal forms, just as he had heard from the stories told by the Elders. Understandably, he was somewhat shocked, immediately stopped the car, and looked back at the Elders in the back seat through the rear vision mirror. He was taken aback when he saw them smiling knowingly at him. He told me that the experience was transformational; his worldview changed completely.

This country is alive, for it breathes and moves, and if you can find that connection it will reveal itself to you. My co-worker had this experience on Nyoongar *boodja*. It was at New Norcia, and we were standing on the bank of the Moore River. As you do, we were paying respect to the river, throwing sand across the surface of the water, and reciting '*Kia Wagyl koorbaduck gyun djeng kool kool noonuk.*' At this point, another colleague and I saw the Wagyl rise out of the water and sweep over our friend. She was aware of what was happening, and stood there completely at ease, welcoming the experience.

This is an example of an understanding from within, of knowing where you are, feeling and experiencing the *boodja*, not as something inert, but something that is pulsing and alive. Understanding from within allows us to take refuge in the same way the Buddha took refuge, for he touched the earth to ground himself. When we take refuge we should also touch the earth. We need to be grounded in the earth, in this *boodja*. Nyoongar *boodja*.

Nyoongar Spirituality

It is unfortunate that less than a generation ago Australian children were told that Aboriginal people were illiterate and uncivilised, and that the arrival of Europeans in 1788 was fortunate, for it saved us from extinction. Ray Norris, the Chief Research Scientist at CSIRO, disputes this proposition, for he says that when the Europeans came here their simplistic notions of the Aboriginal people were both arrogant and foolish.

He cites Bill Gammage, who writes about how Aboriginal people carefully managed the country to maximise its potential. Gammage explains that when Europeans arrived, their lack of understanding of how to look after country resulted in land being destroyed by intensive agriculture. He further states that Aboriginal people had sophisticated number systems. They navigated using the stars and a wealth of oral stories, that included stories on how eclipses work, and they used this knowledge to travel across country for trade and in order to access seasonal foods.

Norris concludes by saying that Australians:

must overcome the intellectual inertia that keeps us in that old paradigm [that Aboriginal culture is primitive], stopping us from recognising the enormous contribution that Aboriginal culture can make to our understanding of the world, and to our attempts to manage it.

Indigenous spirituality is critical to the survival of our species and to the planet. There is much to learn from Aboriginal culture. It can begin with a greater acceptance and awareness of Aboriginal spirituality. Nyoongar spirituality can deepen an understanding of our profound connection to place and show us that we need to treat all things, animals, plants and landforms, with deep respect. Modernity has created a split, and so most people are seriously disconnected from the natural world: wandering aimlessly, not knowing or understanding why.

Christianity, a monotheistic religion based on exclusive rights over the animals and plants of the earth, came with the tall ships. The verse Genesis 1:26 attests:

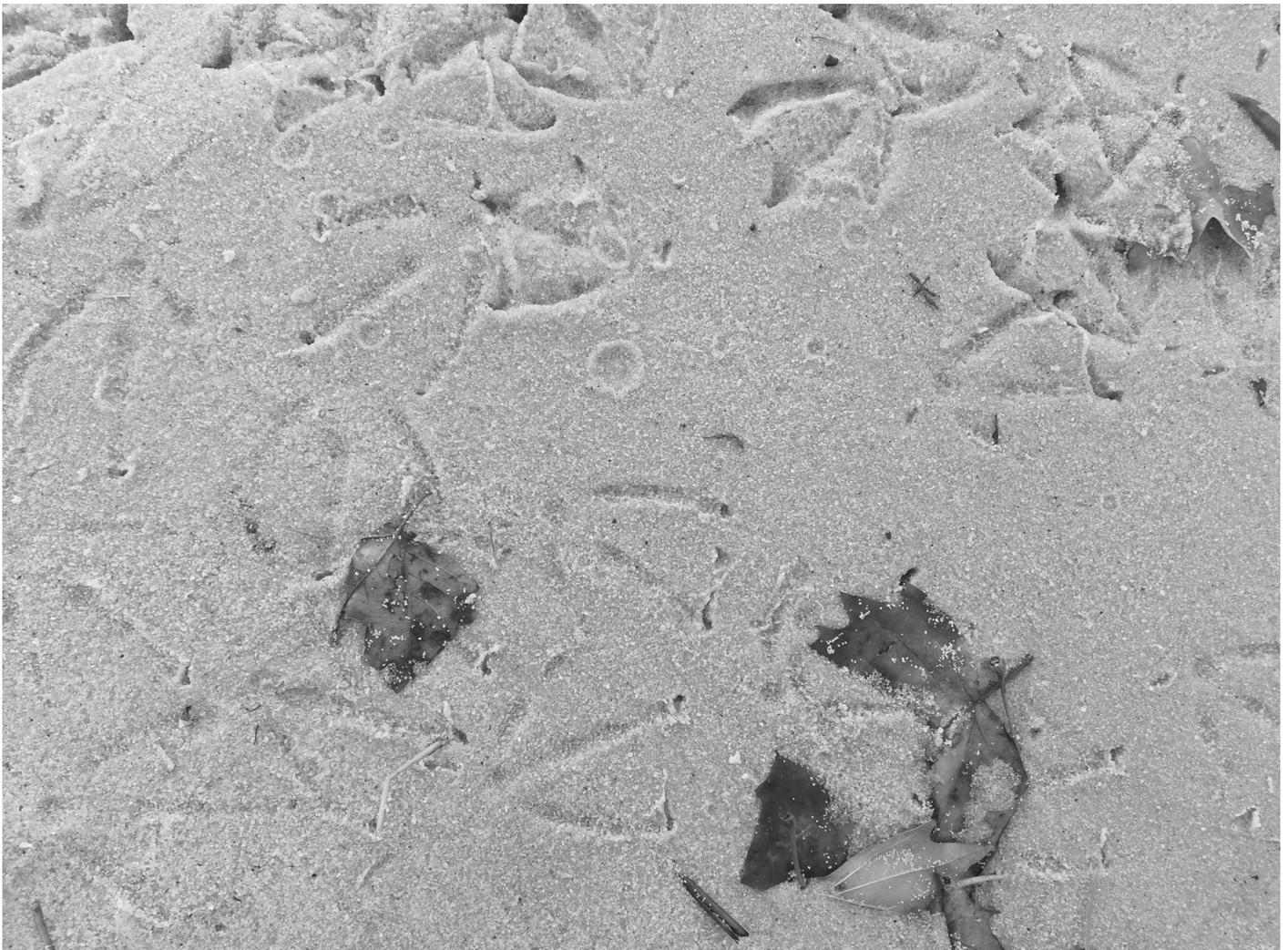
Then God said, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

With the blessing and authority of the church early Christians came to impose their religion and to denounce and ridicule the spirituality of Aboriginal people. Their Christian religion was, according to them, superior, and as such could not co-exist alongside Nyoongar spirituality.

Those who have come to save souls, and to convert to their religion and worldview have done irreparable harm. Children have been taken away, removed from families on the basis that they did not have Christian values. Children were taken away with the intention to raise them as Christians. My friend, a Jesuit priest, told me of visiting Balgo mission as a young novice in the 1970s and witnessing very young Aboriginal children being taken from their families, placed in dormitories and raised by priests and nuns until they were seventeen years old. The parents lived literally metres away from these dormitories but had no contact with their children for their entire lives. He was appalled, and the practice was soon stopped. Christianity seems like nonsense when you hear stories such as these.

I struggle with Christianity. I struggle with any belief system that seeks to subdue, either by force or coercion. My own family had strong ties to the Catholic religion. Through the influences of the monks and nuns at New Norcia mission, my mother was totally in awe of their religion, both in her life and its influence over wider society. She told us, my brothers and I, stories of Nyoongar people who were converts to Catholicism. If they encountered spirits when travelling across country they would respond by holding up crosses denouncing these spirits and praying to Jesus. Similarly, I have heard of other Aboriginal Christians who, when camping on their country, encounter spirits of the land and pray to Jesus for their protection. They are oblivious to the idea that perhaps the spirits of the country are not a threat but are welcoming them back to their *koort, wirin boodja*.

In contrast to these stories stands an experience I once had on a trip to a remote area in Central Australia, where I had been on a number of previous occasions. On this occasion we had been there for a week with the local Elders, travelling, visiting sites, and sing-



ing and dancing to country. When we were leaving, the guide, a non-Aboriginal man, told us that the Elders wanted to say a prayer for our trip. I was surprised, for this had never happened before. The Elders recited the Lord's Prayer. I was taken aback. Here we were on country, having had a week of strong connection to country through song and dance, and during that week I had felt the strong energy of the land. I went away very bemused and confused.

It took me some time, perhaps a year, before I could reconcile that experience. What I realised is that this group of Elders had not rejected their Aboriginal culture and spirituality, but rather had just re-integrated the Christian story into their own. The story of Jesus was now part of their desert story, their story of country. It was an epiphany.

Nyoongar spirituality and Buddhism

Buddhism and Nyoongar spirituality are, I believe, very compatible, and importantly, can co-exist. To illustrate their compatibility, I will recount two examples. Firstly, the story of Padmasambhava the Lotus-Born, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who was an eighth-century Indian Siddhi master.

Padmasambhava went to Tibet at the invitation of the Tibetan King Trisong Detsen to help in the construction of the first Buddhist monastery, Samye, in southern Tibet. The King had asked Padmasambhava to come to Tibet on the advice of another Indian Siddhi who was helping in the construction of the monastery, but was unable to complete the building because of the spirits in the land. He advised the king that the only person who could complete the building of the monastery was Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava came and engaged with the spirits. Rather than using force to subdue or conquer, he acknowledged the spirits and engaged with them in relationships. In time, the spirits helped in the construction of the monastery.

If Padmasambhava had come to Australia in the eighth century he would have not tried to conquer or subdue by force the spirits of this land. He would have acknowledged and engaged with them in relationships. He would have found a way to co-exist alongside the spirits of this land.

The other example of how Buddhism can co-exist and heal is the work of American Zen Buddhist Roshi Bernie Glassman, who is a co-founder of the Zen

Peacemaker Order. Key teachings of the Zen Peacemaker Order are three tenets for bearing witness:

- 1) Not knowing: letting go of fixed ideas of ourselves and the universe.
- 2) Bearing witness: seeing what comes up.
- 3) Loving actions or compassionate action.

According to Glassman:

When we bear witness, when we become the situation, whether it is homelessness, poverty, illness, violence, death — the right action arises by itself. We don't have to worry about what to do. We don't have to figure out solutions ahead of time. Peacemaking is the functioning of bearing witness. Once we listen with our entire body and mind, loving action arises.

Loving action is right action. It's as simple as giving a hand to someone who stumbles or picking up a child who has fallen on the floor. We take such direct, natural actions every day of our lives without considering them special. And they're not special. Each is simply the best possible response to that situation in that moment.

These two examples show that Buddhism can be a force for good if it does not emulate or replicate past practices. If those who practice Buddhism can remain non-judgemental and move gently across the landscape, and focus on similarities rather than differences, we can live in harmony with each other. Finally, I believe Buddhism can co-exist alongside Nyoongar spirituality, as the stories of Padmasambhava and Bernie Glassman attest, and it can heal and build relationships with Aboriginal people and the spirits of the land.

Nyoongar *boodja* is very old and ancient. It was here before humans arrived and it will be here after the last human has left. Lessons from the past have shown that humans are not superior to the rest of nature, so we need to be in relationships both with the land, and with the spirits of this land.

Ngalak kaditj kadidjiny dwongke nyinyiny dinang—iny mijal.

We sit and listen with our ears and we look and see with our eyes.

Debakan, debakan, debakan.

Steady, steady, steady.

Touching the Earth

An interview with Ross Bolleter Roshi and Dr. Michael Wright, by
Kathy Shiels.

Kathy: Here we are, beside the Swan River, at Matilda Bay, in Perth. Ross Bolleter Roshi is the senior teacher of the Zen Group of WA. He received transmission from Robert Aitken Roshi in 1997 and has Dharma heirs in Australia and New Zealand. Ross is a well-known musician, composer, author and poet. He has two grown children and two granddaughters.

Dr Michael Wright is a Yuat Nyoongar man from the Moora and New Norcia area of Western Australia, north of Perth. He holds a fellowship position at Curtin University, in the Division of Health Sciences.

Michael's experience, understanding and expertise are highly regarded and recognised in the Aboriginal community, with government and non-government agencies and policy makers. Michael, a Sangha member of the Zen Group of WA, brings his Nyoongar spirituality to us within the activities of the group and the practice of Zen.

Before we begin our interview, I would like to invite Michael to welcome us to Country.

Michael: *Ngulluk goorliny kaaditj Nyoongar Wadjuk moort keyen kaadak nidja Nyoongar boodja.*

We acknowledge the Nyoongar Wadjuk people as the original custodians of this country.

Kathy: Thank you.

Ross: Thank you, Michael.

Kathy: Today's interview has arisen from both of you recently giving talks in the dojo of the Zen Group of WA. Ross, you gave a wonderful talk entitled *Buddha's Enlightenment: Murmuring Warmth*, to celebrate Bodhi Day, and Michael, you gave a talk entitled *Nyoongar Spirituality and Zen Buddhism*. There is a great deal to explore in the connections between your talks. But firstly, I'd like to ask, Michael, as a Nyoongar man, when did you first become aware of Zen Buddhism?

Michael: My approach to spirituality and my own path has changed over the years and has been based much around exploring, touching, seeing, feeling. It is

also an intellectual exploration of that, with whatever it is I am looking at. I see Zen, or anything for that matter, as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. I try to remain open and be aware of many influences rather than locking myself into one particular thing. For me, the huge attraction of Zen is meditation. My practice of meditation has unlocked a whole lot, and has revealed so many things to me, but the basis is the actual practice of sitting. I like to think that if I pursue zazen I'll be less focused on myself and more focused on what's around me and outside of me. I'll be more aware of that, rather than on the self-centred attitude and the self-centredness that has been a very big part of my life, I think, over many years. If I can, in my final moment in my life, come to a point where I am less self-centred, that would be lovely.

Kathy: Ross, when did you first become aware of the Nyoongar people?

Ross: When I was at Jolimont Primary school. I would have been about seven or eight. I used to walk around in the bush a lot and sometimes would take a circuitous way home from school past the Nyoongar camp, which was just off Peel Street. Many Nyoongar children, I think from that camp, came to Jolimont Primary. But I also understand that they were actually not mentioned in the rolls, so when people went back to check, there was no record of these children. However, they were coming to school, for some of the year at least. What I remember with huge amusement was Nyoongar children bringing dugites to school, from out of the bush, and holding them behind the neck and then chasing white kids around the oval. And that's stuck in my memory! I am one of the kids who was terrified, you know! That was my first real contact with that world. I had a sense of wonder at seeing the camps. Often there was no one there at the time. Just a sense, I guess, of the mystery, and of living very close to a culture which I didn't understand at all.

Kathy: I'd like now to turn to the talks that you gave. Ross, you referred to Shakyamuni Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi Tree. Here, we're sitting under some wonderful Peppermints and Gums and Morton Bay Figs. You said that his awakening under the tree is the foundation myth of the Zen tradition, and that the



Buddha's gesture of touching the earth and calling it to bear witness shows the connection that each of us has to our true and timeless nature. Would you like to comment a little more on the gesture of touching the earth?

Ross: The actual foundation myth is different in different traditions. In Zen it goes: Shakyamuni looked up, and on seeing the Morning Star, said, "Now I see that all beings are the Tathagata." There's so much scholarship that has been wasted on what "Tathagata" means, but as far as I'm concerned, it means "the one that does not come and go". "Now I see that all beings are the one who does not come and go."

This one! [*Ross beats his hand against his chest in demonstration.*]

This! It is just their delusions and attachments that prevent them from acknowledging it. The Buddha points to the nature of all life, not just humanity, and its deep intimacy with each of us. The whole universe does the same: it comes and goes, as each of us – even as it doesn't come and go at all! This experience is not new; it points to something which is timelessly the case.

The story goes that the followers of Mara, the evil one, on behalf of their boss, questioned the Buddha's right to be sitting under the Bodhi Tree. So, the Buddha was asked to call on an authority to bear witness to this, and he called on the earth to bear witness. Some stories have the earth crying out literally, "I bear witness to you!"

Actually, it is a lot more subtle, I think, in Zen. When the Buddha called on the earth to bear witness to his right to sit under the Bodhi tree, he touched the earth. That very gesture itself is enough. It indicates that bearing witness is also, in a way, his own enlightenment. "What is your own true nature, at this time?" This connects deeply with the theme of our interview today.

Kathy: Michael, you spoke of your culture reaching back 60 000 years, with practices that are still present with us today, which provide for "a close and intimate relationship with kin and country." You said in your talk that the Buddha touched the earth to ground himself, so when we take refuge we should also touch the earth, and that we need to be grounded in the earth in this *boodja*. Nyoongar country. Can you say a little bit more about *boodja* and this Nyoongar country?

Michael: I'd like to acknowledge what Ross just said. That was a beautiful way of describing that moment of the Buddha in his enlightenment.

I think that in all the ancient traditions land was important, but in modernity, there's been a gulf that has occurred. Perhaps from the Middle Ages, and then the beginnings of industrialization, we've moved away from this intimacy with the land which was so essential to all lives before that. It was a huge disruption, not just culturally, but intellectually, and in every manner of our very being as we know it. I believe the ancients didn't have that view. I mean... Christ went into the wilderness, to find enlightenment. He went for forty days into the wilderness and he spoke and he lived. John the Baptist is another one, who lived with the animals.

So, the ancients knew that, but now we've lost it. There is a lot of division going on, in the religious space, and also in the secular space. I think what modernity offers is that anything that's not 'that' is 'other', and 'other' represents something else, and it's often the darker side of what we don't want to be.

When the first Christians came to this country, they saw this place not as inviting, and not as a place to embrace and to become a part of, but something to overcome. It represented to them... well, they didn't use the word evil, but they were here to change it, to shape it, to make it something other than what it was. Australia was such a frightening place for non-Indigenous people when they first came, you know. Acres and acres of trees. At the time, England was devoid of trees; Europe was devoid of trees. At one point, around the sixteenth century, the Dutch were renowned as ship builders. They took whole trees and shaped them into one hull. They had the skills and the intellect to do that, and virtually stripped the whole of the country of trees. To Europeans, Australia was such a scary, frightening place! All the early painters painted the bush as something frightening, and somewhere not to go into, you know.

The bush was seen as something unknown. "It will take you, your spirit will be taken, your soul will be taken!" What saddens me most is that we live in a country where we can't live with the bush; we can't tolerate the sounds of the bush.

[As if on cue, a crow starts cawing in the background and gets louder.]

Ah, the sound of the crow with its call: *War-dang*. Ross's totem you know. That's the sound of the bush.

It's raucous, and it can sometimes grate. But to me, the sound of the bush reminds me of the story of the Buddha touching the earth. It speaks to me of the old traditions; this fantastic and special relationship with country.

The early people knew the story of the country; they knew that from the country springs everything. When I talk about the ancients in our culture, in Australia, the ancients aren't that long ago – 200 years, 250 years, you know. We're not going back thousands and thousands of years. This is very close to our lived history. I mean, I'm only two or three generations from that knowledge. So, it is still very fresh, in my gene pool at least. *Boodja* is such an important part of everything, for our knowing, for our hearing, for our connectiveness, for our very being. And bearing witness, to acknowledge the *boodja*, is so important. The earth bears witness to this in a very subtle way, or maybe not always subtle. The earth cried out and said, "I bear witness." So, that's a long circular kind of answer, but I think that the Nyoongar voice is the conscience of this place. If the Nyoongar voice was silenced entirely, then we would lose all of this....

[Michael touches the earth.]

Being part of the earth is so utterly important, and the wider Australian community can't even come close to that realisation.

Kathy: I notice that both of you refer to separation, and you're touching on this now. I'd like to quote from your paper, Michael, in which you said, "Separation from the natural world has become increasingly a source of distress that is not well understood, unfortunately."

Michael: I remember reading an essay by Carmen Lawrence, where she spoke of there being non-Aboriginal people living here among us who now have shifted their experience dramatically. Tim Winton is one. When you read his writing about the water, and how he interacts with water, it is just amazing. And there was the English artist, Ian Fairweather, who lived in the bush on the east coast. He is another one. When I see his paintings, I think, "My God." His relationship with the bush is just phenomenal; it is amazing; it just gives me goose bumps. So, there are these people, often artists, often great meditators even, who are responding. The earth is so patient; the *boodja* is so patient. You have to sit with it.

I mean, we're now in the age of the iPhone, iPad, instant everything, as you know. Being with country

takes time. Ian Fairweather would sit for hours, even days, just sitting in one spot in the bush, watching the shadows, the light, how the bush changed, and he captured that, and you can see not just what he's painted in the foreground, but what's hinted at behind. He draws you into the painting. Some amazing painters do that.

So, yes, we have disconnected, I think. Carmen Lawrence tells of driving up to the northern suburbs on the Mitchell Freeway every day, driving past this piece of bush for however long. One day she drove past, she hadn't been past for a little while, and the developers had been in and logged every single tree; there wasn't anything left standing. She stopped the car and got out of the car and cried. It had such an impact on her. She literally dropped to the ground and wept. To me that connection is profound. I imagine it is hard to have that, and I despair sometimes. Well, I do and I don't. Ross's experience of walking the circular route home, that's something that is becoming increasingly rarer in these times... It's not happening enough. I had similar experiences living on the Swan River and seeing people living on the river, as a child, but our children don't have those experiences. We're obsessed with sanitising every bloody thing.

Kathy: Ross, continuing this thread, Michael referred to Carmen Lawrence, Tim Winton, Ian Fairweather - people who are seemingly not separate. In your talk, you mentioned that in terms of Mahayana, we suffer



because we are ignorant of the nature of reality, and the dualistic notion that I am 'here' and you are 'there'. This is so much in accord with what Michael has been saying. Would you like to say a little more?

Ross: Yasutani Roshi said, "The fundamental delusion of humanity is *I am in here and you are out there.*" I would expand that to, "The fundamental delusion of humanity is I am in here and the world is out there." The reverse is true. The reverse is fundamentally true. The matter of practicing Zen is learning to realise this, and to live it. And that dictates respect. It dictates tenderness. Sometimes people take Zen experience as a form of self-aggrandizement, but this is completely wrong. With realisation, you are more tender, you are more open, you are more respectful... and you are more patient, to take up Michael's themes.

Everything is so rushed these days. It occurs to me from time to time that the world is not exhausted by our explanations of it. The scientific approach is important but if that's the end of it, there's an awful lot left out. Take the voice of the crow. We understand how sound works, but that's the least of it. I am not belittling scientific explanations, but they don't exhaust that matter. At the end of scientific explanations concerning its nature, the world in its why and wherefore – the very fact of it – remains mysterious.

Our nature is, you know, as voice of crow, as voice of Country. This is why your point, Michael, has touched me really deeply. You said, "Nyoongar language is the voice of Country." This expresses the essential matter beautifully. Because even our own voice is the voice of Country. This is the point here.

[Children speak in the background.]

The voices of children are the voice of Country.

I'd also like to touch on nature, because it's such an important theme in our discussion today. In terms of the history of Christianity, nature was also seen as fallen. That attitude of "dominion over palm and pine", crow and swan, everything that creeps and crawls on the earth, you know, has very deep roots in that attitude as well.

Zen comes out of Chinese and Japanese cultural traditions, where nature is so powerful and significant, and Zen is shaped by that. I think Nyoongar spirituality and Zen spirituality are deeply linked. Between nature and country there are deep affinities.

Michael: Certainly. Just to pick up something you said

then, I think about Japan, with all its tornadoes, earthquakes and all manner of natural disasters...

The whole martial arts thing is not about overcoming your opponent, it's actually about just allowing your opponent to exhaust themselves. I think that of this place here. There is such a different world view in regard to that. I don't want to misrepresent here, but I often think that in the European tradition, the English tradition, it's about dominion over, it's about conquering, do you understand, rather than living in harmony with.

For Aboriginal people, and in indigenous cultures generally, there was a harmony. It wasn't about overcoming but a sharing with, and understanding the power of... Not living in its shadow, but finding ways to harness, if you like. To come together with, to live alongside of, to be, understanding that there is this power there that goes beyond anything I understand. And understanding that that's fine.

There are a lot of Aboriginal stories about that: about the land being powerful, very powerful. So, the point here is to know, to pay respect to, to acknowledge, and to live in harmony with and alongside of. To know that the *boodja* will always provide, but not as something you can control. That agenda about control, it seems to me, is folly. We're seeing it. And when it doesn't go the way we want it to go in, we get angry. Which is again folly.

It's similar with modern medicine. We're in this pursuit, we're going to discover everything that will harm us, anything that's gonna kill us, we're going to discover and conquer it... and we invest so much in that.

Ross: Sure! Don't you think that's grounded in fear of death and dying? I mean, it's great to have medicines that alleviate suffering, but I think the frantic pursuit of that is driven by deeper things, such as the quite rational fears of death and dying.

Michael: Yeah, without a doubt, underneath there is this rational fear. But, there is also a note of irrationality in all of this as well.

Ross: I agree. Yes, absolutely.

Michael: I think we've rationalised the irrational at some point too...which is another story.

Kathy: So speaking of stories Michael, another story! I can't resist this opportunity to ask for you to comment on some things you said in your talk, and about this

thing that is sometimes called 'The Dreaming'. You said that the country is a "living entity", and that "stories of Aboriginal people are not stories from the past, but are both current and future." I'm very interested, because I think a lot of people without an awareness of Aboriginal culture have this misconception of "The Dreaming". I was very intrigued by your comments in your paper, and I'd love to hear more.

Michael: Yeah. I don't want to go down the anthropological line here, because there are many anthropologists, fine anthropologists it turns out, who have written on this topic of what they interpret The Dreaming to be. It's a bit like trying to explain Emptiness, I would have thought. You know, what is Emptiness? The big question.

Ross: My feet are sandy.

[All laugh.]

Michael: Kathy, knowing who you are and that you have a background in Buddhism yourself, and knowing that there is this huge mystery anyway, there are unknowns, so we play with that! You know, there are no absolutes in any of this. I think The Dreaming has those qualities to it.

There is a question, and we each have to search until we discover what the answer may be. I love the Buddhist explanation, because I think it overlays beautifully with The Dreaming. All of what we see around us, is it real, Ross? In the absolute sense and the relative sense? Do you know what I mean?

[All three clap and laugh.]

Kathy: I'd like to go back, Ross, to your comment, about the Nyoongar language being the voice of Country. Earlier the crow swooped down, loudly, with, "caw..."

Michael: "War-dang!"

Kathy: Michael, could you give us some Nyoongar words that illustrate what you mean by 'the voice of Country'?

Michael: Oh, okay sure, would love to. So, the Nyoongar name that's given to Country is *boodja*, right? So, when a woman is pregnant, she is *boodjari*.

Kathy: Ahh. *Boodjari*?

Michael: *Boodjari*. She is carrying Country. There weren't words for 'please' and 'thank you'... Not that we weren't grateful. But they were redundant words. An important word was *koort* and, in my understanding, *koort* is heart, and it is also the name for your wife. Interestingly, a slight variation is *moort*, which is family, your kin. *Moort* is also your blood. *War-dang* is the sound the crow makes when you hear him, and *koolbaridi* is the magpie, when it makes that "khro, khro" *koolbaridi* sound. *Kayark* is the red-tailed cockatoo. *Ngoolyanak* is the white-tailed cockatoo. The words are often-times related to the sounds the animals would make. And maybe it's something else, like the physical description of an animal. The name for the race-horse goanna is *kardar*, and the blue-tongue lizard is a *yoorna*. The kangaroo is *yongka*.

Kathy: *Yongka! Yongka! Boing!*

[*Laughter.*]

Michael: If you had a coat that would be a *booka*, but it also means covering, so if you wore shoes it's *djena booka*; *djena* being your foot. Your hat is *kaat booka*; *kaat* being your head. It's a very practical language. There is also a lot of gesture and non-verbal language.

Kathy: Thank you. I'd like to take our interview a little further regarding the notion of time. We were talking about 'Dream Time', and the mysterious nature of time. So to begin, Ross, I'd like to ask about your comment: "...in the moment of the Buddha's awakening, that experience is universal, predating Shakyamuni, outlasting us all, Zen in the West and the rest." So... predating Shakyamuni, outlasting us all?

Ross: It's... twenty past twelve.

[*Kathy laughs.*]

Kathy: I'm not disappointed.

[*Ross and Kathy laugh.*]

Ross: Yeah, the midday is warm. Completely fulfilling to be sitting here, looking out on the river.

Kathy: Thank you, but I am going to stay with it!

Ross: Sure, as you should!

Kathy: I'd like to explore your experience, so fetchingly described as 'Murmuring Warmth'. I'll just remind you, Michael. Ross put in his talk that he was trying to

find his way home after one of his musical gigs, and stumbled from one dark uneven path to another, knowing he was lost. When he realised he was among Nyoongar people talking in low voices, he spoke of how he sensed "A murmuring warmth spreading far back in all directions." He said, "I couldn't see anyone, but felt safe and reassured." So, I ask you both, had the ancient country and its people come forth to Ross at that time? He couldn't see anyone, but he could hear it reaching far back in all directions.

Michael: I think that we walk through life in many ways. I am struck when someone walks with some degree of confidence in the world. When someone has a fearlessness in what they do and how they do it. Someone who has confidence and says, "This is fine. The world is okay, there is nothing to fear." Then, when one is that, then one can hear all others. When one is consumed with their own fear, they can't hear nothing.

Ross: How true. Regarding fear, it's not only that one can't hear, but one can't see either.

Michael: No, you can't see anything.

Ross: That flickery gaze... When we're highly anxious, nothing stands still to be seen. I suppose it's just ordinary panic. Nothing is taken in; in a way reality evaporates for us. I think it does at those times. I was just expanding on what you were saying. I think that it points to the fact that we lose contact. I think that's how I would say it.

Michael: The question for me here is, how do we walk confidently without that fear, so that we can hear? Because then everything will reveal itself. There are so many influences now, whether it be the media, whether it be a whole host of things, some things more so for some, and not for others. But the more that we close in and become more and more afraid and less able to move with confidence, with fearlessness - I don't mean stupid bravery - that to me is a teaching in itself. What a gift. Mystery is important. I mean, why do I draw the next breath? It's this curiosity of what is or not. If I had the answer to everything, well, what's the point?

Ross: Yeah, you bet. It's like to live in a cage...and to die in a cage.

Michael: If openness and acceptance and a readiness to hear, to see, to feel, become increasingly present, it suggests to me that there's just this thin gossamer that separates us from anything...

Kathy: It's interesting that you both spoke very encouragingly of the writings of Bill Gammage in his classic book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, and that you both singled out the Zen Peacemaker Order founded by Bernie Glassman as presenting ways of healing. I invite you both to comment on how their insights, their tenets, may apply here to Zen Buddhism as it co-exists alongside Nyoongar spirituality.

Michael: Oh, what a great question. That's a fantastic question, Kathy. Over to you, sir!

Ross: I want to say something preliminary to, well, answering may be too ambitious a word here, but I did want to say something with regard to the delusion of 'I'm in here and the world is out there'.

When we say 'world', I think we not only include nature, but also include the industrial and post-industrial world, and the suffering of countless sentient beings. A lot of Zen stories that come from the tradition are set in nature. You know, there's a monastery, they have a few cows around the monastery, there's a village nearby, and there's a lot of trees, so the stories reflect that. I think the huge challenge of our time is including modernity, with its divided and dualistic consciousness, with its greed, with its rapaciousness, with its cutting up the world into little bits for exploitation and all of the suffering that ensues – as also *who we are*.

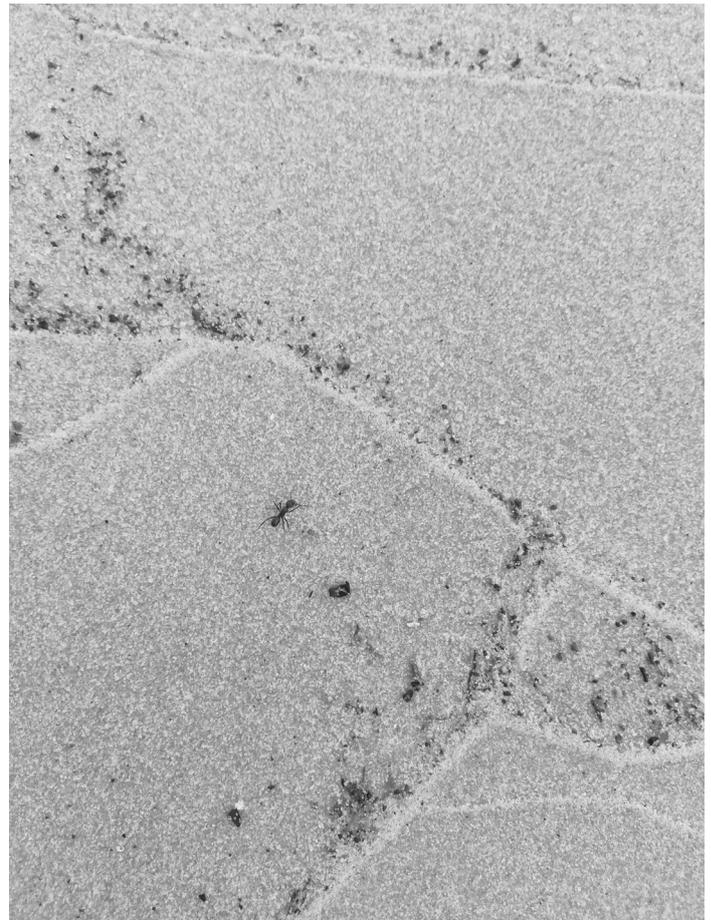
So, to come back to your question, Kathy, there are myriad possible responses, but for me, just bearing witness is so important. We turn up to bear witness, we turn up to simply be here with it. Sitting on Country is just like this. In the talk I described it as "geared towards healing." I think that's what we hope in our heart, to simply be there with what is, which is not only the present moment of river and children's voices. All the time that has ever been leads to this. Healing may come from that, and one would hope that it does, or that it's a tiny first step. But I think it's wrong to presume that by simply taking action it accomplishes something of itself. Zazen teaches patience. It's not an escape from the responsibility of action. But it's the ability to simply wait on situations... to not be trying to force the issue constantly, but to open to what is. This has huge power and it touches other people in ways that we can't even begin to fathom. I think when we do this, we notice it in our lives, and sometimes we don't even notice it, and it's alright. But bearing witness, yes. I am deeply grateful to you, Michael, for providing this opportunity for us to sit on country. I think it is a wonderful thing.

Michael: Yes. It's once a month and we've had a good

response, as we all can attest. David Mazza has been working up in Mulan, which is a desert community. He sat with us a couple of times, and he said, "You've got to keep doing this, it's fantastic. I'd like everybody to do it... Everyone in Australia!" Well, that's a big ask, David...

[All laugh.]

But I love the intention behind it.



As for Bernie Glassman, he impressed me with his work, Bodhisattva work really, which is at the core of the Mahayana. A teaching aiming to end the suffering in the world and to be a part of something that would end suffering. I love that in the Vajrayana, in the Tibetan tradition, they talk about working with compassion, and that when doing this work, one needs to have both wisdom and compassion, because compassion in and of itself is not enough. You have to have the wisdom to understand what true compassion is. And similarly, wisdom without compassion is not the Bodhicitta or Bodhisattva work at all. I like the way that Bernie Glassman has approached that, taking it front-on. His work is full of all of that. But central to all his work is meditation. All of it is around meditation.

Indeed, a lot of traditions do this. The Catholics have a beautiful tradition of helping, you know, a lot of them are out there fighting the good fight. They're meant to use prayer as a way to guide them through that. It's not for me to say, but let's say prayer is equivalent to meditation. I think having that as the core part of that work allows for some of the emotion to settle. Emotion can distract from what the real work is about. Through meditation one gets clearer insight in how to hold. How to just hold steady.

The sitting's important. Where do I sit? Well, you know, we often think we have to find this quiet place, and, you know, no distractions at all. But sometimes you have to sit amongst it all to know... to fully understand what it is.

Kathy: Yes.

Michael: So that's the Bernie Glassman work too, sitting on the streets, sitting in the places that we don't associate with monasteries, or whatever, and to me that's truly the work we do. That's the work we do with country, I think, and it goes to that question you asked earlier about disconnect. Maybe there's some overreach on my part here, but maybe not. I think that by experienced meditators who are part of our Zen Sangha sitting on country, that the healing is two ways. We heal, and country heals us. We get a better understanding about what country is. Not through words, but through the experience of sitting, because all of this is experiential. I can only take you to the place; I can't give you the experience of the place. That's your experience. It's the same with Bernie Glassman. He can talk about it, he can write lovely books, but it's the experience of doing it that is where you become that. So, more and more I hope people realise this is not an alien place.

Place is not alien, in fact, it's where we should be. This is what living is about, not being separated from this, being part of this. Because separation is the thing that we are afraid of most, whether it be death - which is a separation from life - whether it's losing your home, anything that's separating us from living. Separation is where all of our latent and ingrained fears lie. However, we don't want to go there, we never confront them. We keep them over there and we don't want to talk about it. But if we are here, and on the earth, then we don't need to think about them. Here we are, no longer separated. That's the experience. Everyone's experience will be different.

And to me this an extension of the zendo, but it is a zendo. It's one and the same to me. It's not different.

That's the shrine! *[Michael gestures around.]* That's the shrine! That's the shrine!

Kathy: This is the shrine.

[All laugh. Ross claps hands.]

Well! What a wonderfully rich encounter. I am so grateful. Ross and Michael, your most serendipitous meeting has brought such a change to our Sangha and may we sit together on Country often, and for as long as we can.

Ross: I want to thank you, Kathy, for conducting the interview. It's beautifully planned...

Michael: It's lovely.

Kathy: Michael, it's encouraging and heartening to know you, and to become a friend. You are part of what well-known Aboriginal television broadcaster, Stan Grant, referred to in his recent *Quarterly Essay*: "The quiet revolution" of Aboriginal people, "taking their place at the forefront of Australian society." So, thank you both very much for giving this time.

Michael: Wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Ross: Thank you, Michael. Just great!

Michael: Likewise. And thank you Kathy.

Ross: Yes. Wonderful!

This is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place in January 2017.

Kathy Shiels is an educator and writer who currently serves as the ZGWA's tanto. She sat her first Sesshin with the ZGWA in 1987, received Jukai from Robert Aitken Roshi in 1995 and has been a student of Ross Bolleter Roshi's since the 1990s.

The interview was transcribed by Alistair Reid, and edited by Brigid Lowry and Gerard Mazza.

I vow with all beings to recall my original purpose

Adapted from a talk given on March 1, 2018.

BY PHILLIP MCNAMARA

Hakuin Zenji, in his *Song of Zazen*, tells us that “All beings by nature are Buddha”.¹ *The Great Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra* tells us that we are “Not stained, not pure; without loss, without gain” (FU KU FU JO-FU ZO- FU GEN), and essentially empty.² These chants and others, as well as koans, tell us that our True Nature, our life, is that of a Buddha. We might conclude from this that we should be peaceful and happy in our practice... but then dissatisfaction shows up, discontent comes forth and we may begin to wonder about the truths of Buddhism. We find our faith is uncertain, hesitate in our practice, fall further into doubt and vacillation, and a path that once seemed straight and clear becomes more muddy and winding than we ever anticipated.

This finding of our feet and our mind mired in mud is quite normal. Indeed, as well-known psychologist and spiritual teacher Ram Dass has said, it is because most of us are attracted to varied experiences, gratified by sense connections and seduced by pleasures that, despite our good intention to not stray from our spiritual path, we do, and thereby find that “what had been a vertical path turns horizontal”.³

Dass also advises that “Few of us are ready to see completely through ego’s illusion and thereby achieve instant liberation. So we use methods.”⁴ These methods help us to let go of our kicking and screaming quicksand-like mind and habits. In Buddhism they include the Four Noble truths and the Eightfold Path. In Zen they include zazen, bowing, chants and vows. Together they create conditions which may allow the

grace of a kensho or enlightenment experience. But whether you have kensho or not, the methods - their intentions and the life you lead of inspiration and dedication within them - are the realm of freedom from conditions. This is also the realm where we are completely one with the whole universe, and so this realm has the form of *both* emptiness and your very life as it is.

What does the actualization of such a realm look like? It looks like our own body and mind. It includes mountains, sky, clouds, birds, insects, rocks, traffic lights, shopping lists, niggling guilt and unicorns. We can find in meditation that all this arises in our mind. And we find with continued practice that we can let it arise, notice it, let it pass, continue our practice. But to find this out for ourselves we need diligence, otherwise we slide back into the poor habits of mind Dass warns about.

Grounding ourselves in disciplined daily practice we might eventually find ourselves coming closer to a still point of harmony, a well spring of energy, or to glimpsing how emptiness is the fundamental condition underlying all differentiation. Within that harmony, energy and mystery we continue sitting with reverence and awe of our own uniqueness and of existence itself. It is humbling to recognise that our depths are the depths of the universe, our actions are the actions of the universe, and that our laughter or tears fill the entire universe. As do those of our neighbours. As do those of our enemies. There is no room for feeling special or superior here. So how should we express and proceed with this reverence, this awe, with

tion stage. Although technically in this moment each of us is already enlightened, most of us, as already noted, step over this into our explaining, planning and strategizing mind. To slow this ebb and flow down enough to conceive it as something we can let go off – as opposed to something we are continually being swept along by – it is useful to perceive it as forming, growing and changing in stages. Therefore most religions talk about the stages in one’s spiritual journey.⁹ If we consider awakening the goal of Zen practice, then the sequence would look something like: alignment, commitment, concordance and immanence or embodiment.¹⁰ Alignment - to commitment - to concordance is a process or continuation and deepening of purification until it becomes embodied compassion. Indeed, as Soen Roshi said at the end of a sesshin to those there, including Peter Matthiessen, “Sesshin is nothing else but purification.”¹¹

In Zen Sesshin services *Purification* is book-ended by our chant of *Great Vows for All*. This chant comprises of the four vows of the Bodhisattva, and is recited in most Mahayana centre’s at the close of ceremonies.¹² On the path to enlightenment *Great Vows* is our vow to practice. Together each of the four vows show us the key elements to our Way.

The opening vow of *Great Vows* is “*The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them*”. The three vows which then follow are the ways to go about this. To vow to save all beings means to be one with all beings. This isn’t saving through the arrogance of individual power. Rather, it is the attitude of seeing our imperfections and limitations, yet continuing to work at something infinite.

The second vow – “*Greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly, I vow to abandon them*” - takes up continued purification as the way to fulfill what is described in the next two vows: to awaken to the countless Dharma gates and to embody fully the Buddha’s way. The second vow can at first be quite a shock, as it bundles our imperfections together to seem like a never-ending and forever-looming wave that might drown us. But then, just as we acknowledged them and are about to get caught in their momentum, we chant that we repent and abandon them. Shohaku Okumura, author of *Living By Vow*, says, “this awakening to our imperfection is repentance”, and that “Vow and repentance are

two kinds of energy that enable us to continue our practice.”¹³

The opening of *Great Vows*, which is a vow to save numberless beings, is at face value an impossible task. Yet in doing so it tests our understanding of Dharma and practice, and raises promising questions. How do you express that saving? Sit with that and keep chanting. That is part of polishing your wisdom and compassion. In the chapter titled ‘Inherent Completion’ in his *Taking the Path of Zen*, Robert Aitken writes: “Nobody fulfills these *Great Vows for All*, but we vow to fulfill them as best we can. They are our path.”¹⁴

Taking this path and fulfilling this vow *is* the consequent purpose of the purification process; endless polishing. Ram Dass describes it as the journey of integrating meditation into our experiences; a path along which our “long-latent impurities must be skimmed off.”¹⁵

Buddhist’s speak of these impurities as *ignorance*, but the terms used by other religions in regard to this felt dichotomy can also yield some perspective on the condition. Taoism regards it as disequilibrium, Hinduism (Vedanta) take the perspective of *illusion*, Judeo-Christians regard it the state of our *fall*, Islam describes it from the viewpoint of *rebellion*. Whatever you term it, all religious practices say that our separation needs to be recognised and the resulting suffering (and fear) transmuted through actions of purification. Again most (if not all) religions are party built on the premise that if you really commit yourself to a course of purification and consequent practice or action, it brings something new into being.

What it brings into being is mercy, grace, love, union. These are evidence of your practice of purification and your realisation of the Great Vows. But this birthing takes cultivation and practice. For example, Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his short essay *Purification of the Mind* (1998), writes:

An ancient maxim found in the Dhammapada sums up the practice of the Buddha's teaching in three simple guidelines to training: to abstain from all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind. These three principles form a graded sequence of steps progressing from the outward and preparatory to the inward and essential. Each step leads naturally into the one that follows it,

and the culmination of the three in purification of mind makes it plain that the heart of Buddhist practice is to be found here.

... in the Buddha's teaching the criterion of genuine enlightenment lies precisely in purity of mind. The purpose of all insight and enlightened understanding is to liberate the mind from the defilements, and Nibbana itself, the goal of the teaching, is defined quite clearly as freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion.¹⁶

Hence these three are listed in both chants; where one first confesses them and then where one vows to continue to abandon them.

The first step on the path of purification is always the confession whereby we recognise suffering and transgressions. Indeed the very first step on the spiritual path (as indicated by Purification being our opening chant), is to reach the recognition that karma exists and must be dealt with. This in turn allows redemption, forgiveness, atonement. How does just chanting our *Purification* bring such healing about? I found that just by chanting it and not running away (by not leaving before that round in our weekly sits and by committing to Zazenkais and Sesshins), I started on recognizing the place of acceptance and the process of purification in a spiritual practice.

Nonetheless its very concepts initially made me squirm. Perhaps many other modern secular (and even spiritual) people would also balk at the notion of evil and the need to purify one's mind from greed, hatred and delusional ignorance. This is because we now often respond to such words as being subjective, or too tied to outdated moralism and childhood encounters with ideas of sin and anxiety about being somehow "bad". However, spiritual refinement, and the redress this then brings to delusional and harmful attitudes, requires introspection on our karma and how it rolls along or is selfishly protected and maintained.

When I first started Zen practice I initially strayed from taking the chants too seriously and stayed within surface consciousness. That is, I regularly found my mind running a commentary beneath my chanting; an attempt by the small-self to deny the dignity and possibility of acceptance and healing being offered. My discomfort with the chants paralleled how long it took for me to settle into a less distracted and sustained pe-

riod of zazen. Tedious commentary accompanied that too, but alongside the chants it went something like:

"Good grief. Here we go, I came to mediate not to confess. Where's the peace in this? Well, yes, I've experienced greed, perhaps hatred, certainly ignorance, but is it all really "created by me"? And although I can acknowledge that consequences arise through my "conduct, speech and thought" are any of them really all that "evil"? What! Why get me even more anxious by suggesting that my karma keeps moving in different fermenting directions?"

Then it was: "Well, when you put it like that, of course my karma's tangled and seemingly beginningless... but heck where's the scent of a pathway from suffering to love here?"

Nonetheless I continued - week in week out - to grind my way through chanting ...and eventually found that I was beginning to look forward to it. For within my meandering thoughts, my never-ending secular quest for new experiences and my expression of personal freedoms, I began to respond, via the mirror of these chants and zazen experiences, to see that our freedoms are somewhat shallow and that daily consumer orientated life is often fraught with more conflict than contentment.

From beneath such feelings introspection nudges us and grows, and we develop an interest in personal change or self-control. Driven by this interest we may find or re-visit religious teachings such as the Three Pure and Ten Grave Precepts. We may also start to consider what confessing these tangled experiences and feelings might *actually* mean. We may even begin to find we like the purification chant: "Well, a bit of emotional honesty and authenticity, not through judgment but with compassion, might help me suffer and struggle less." Concurrently thoughts about what engaged Buddhism or Zen may look like surface.

Historically (two thousand years ago and more) the Buddha made it quite clear that ethics are inseparable from what we do, and say, and think, and so this very life is the opportunity to observe, review and modify our mind and mental states. Hence this very life is precious.¹⁷

For Zen, this realm of the sentient human being is precious, because it is here that Buddha-mind – noth-

ing more than ordinary mind purged of its attachment to small self – manifests itself for the many beings.

What is the small self? As it grows, the small ego decides it wants to be the centre of the universe. We set goals and plans to become successful. Implicit in this becoming are the notions of reward and punishment. If we see our lives as something we control, we may begin to see our success as what our talents and hard work merit. If we develop a sense of privilege, we might conceptualise our plans and desires as something we have the right to possess. If we are of a religious nature, we might partly conceptualize our successes and draw backs as serving something that is “meant to be”, which is operating through the consequences of either “merit” and “sin” or “karma”: operational on a scale too big for our ordinary comprehension. We may also find that though there are laws and ethical guidelines in human society, not everyone plays by the rules. We start to notice that the game appears to be noticed as some *thing* special. With such greed as its impetus, it begins to grow into a tyrant. Thereby our small-self can also, particularly in a modernised Western society and economy based on spinning the wheel of desire and consumption, quickly learn that rules are made to be bent, if not broken, and down into muddy waters we sink.

In small self-mode we cling to ideas of success and reassure ourselves – perhaps up to our last breath - that possibilities of gain are still there. From all this grows “heaven” and “hell” and all the conditional realms in between. Dass, in his book *Journey of Awakening*, warns us that sooner or later we must break such old habit patterns and see that true meditative practice purifies and alters our mind, heart, and body so that these things (which take us away from spiritual experience) lose their power over us.¹⁸

However, the Buddha made it quite clear that ethics are inseparable from what we do, and say, and think, and so this very life is the opportunity to observe, review and modify our mind and mental states. Hence, this very life is precious. Thereby the Buddhist precepts are seen as training principles for our ongoing personal development and responsibility to the world; expressions of our Buddha nature.

For Zen this realm of the sentient human being is precious because it is here that Buddha-mind – nothing more than ordinary mind purged of its attachment to small self – manifests itself for the many beings. Hence also in Zen, with our *Great Vow* to save the many beings, we are saving ourselves from such states and realms; it is indeed *Great Vows For All*.

So, chanting “*The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them*” brings to awareness the model of integrity which, in its quiet commitment to serving the world through abandoning, awakening and embodying, releases or reorientates “*All the evil karma ever created by me since of old/ On account of my beginningless greed, hatred, and ignorance*”. The two chants work together. They show the process of confessing and returning to (or remaining in) deep human relationship with the wondering energy and creation of life. Thus, the matters of character raised by the chant of purification around our seemingly “*beginningless greed, hatred, and ignorance*” – which perhaps made us unsure of how to proceed beyond the confessing of it “openly and fully” – is presented with a vow which indicates we can train or discipline ourselves through; into embodiment and practice via zazen.

Thus, everybody is endowed with Buddha Nature, but its fulfilment is a matter of unceasing practice. Indeed, we may see that the path is to attain immanence,

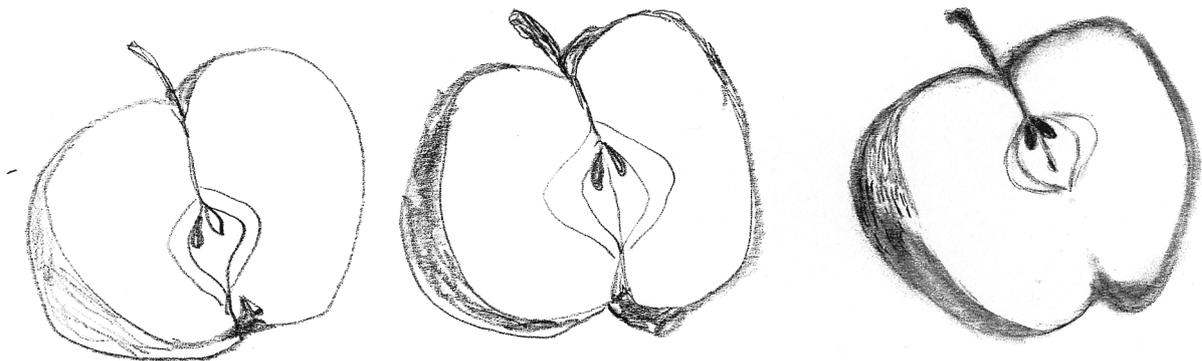


Illustration by Brigid Lowry.

but this is often a gradual embodiment. The difficulty lies in directly working in Buddha Nature - keeping up unattached or “empty” awareness moment after moment through life – without being dragged back by our small-self into associational thoughts.¹⁹

Our karmic flaws brought into interactions with others often grate. The discipline of *zazen*, bows, vows, the teacher’s *teishos* and *dokusan*, toss us about. We get polished and transformed and perhaps take joy in the redemptive capacity and wisdom in our way. Meanwhile, our Buddha-mind or true nature, like the moon, remains whole and serene, whilst the initial optimism of the small self’s chase for empowerment and difference may start to seem fleeting and unreliable. We may start to ask, “How am I living my life?” If we don’t turn away from the question towards narcissism or paranoia, a niggling sorrow may provide a crack, where, seeing that the small self can only ever be the centre of its own greed, we start to investigate our conditional nature with greater focus and care. Thereby we develop a practice during which we may get polished so much that we show some of the colours of compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and humility and start to see difference as oneness and oneness as difference. The challenge is to keep seeing into this whilst still making a living and paying the bills, whilst still getting dressed in ill-fitting clothes or caught in the morning rush hour, whilst still walking the dog and worrying about climate change. *Zazen* and chanting assist you to stay steady.

If we stay on such a journey – from small self to Buddha nature - we start to see that everything is conditional and most live lives caught more in their passions and imaginings than anything else. In realising this we may shudder at the hatred and ignorance or suffering that believing otherwise has produced. We begin to wonder about what is wholesome and unwholesome, what beneficial or harmful. We may also begin to find - in our own and others’ lives - a current of underlying sorrow and suffering enough to disarm us. Eventually this grief and sorrow begets compassion for what we impose and project on each other and the many beings. Wisdom has taken seed. Release and healing has begun. In response we may look more seriously at what the heart of Zen looks like when engaged with the world. With questions around what the manifestation of practice might look like we may also

move beyond just meditating to become interested in investigating the Precepts; perhaps taking them up in *zazen* or by undertaking *Jukai*.²⁰

When we take a journey, extra maps and guidelines are useful, and this is another territory to explore. In brief, the Precepts are useful guidelines for embodying *Purification* and *Great Vows For All*, as they sprung from the Buddha’s questioning of how his disciples way of life accorded with the Dharma. The Buddha asked pertinent questions about their actions of body, speech and mind. That is, he asked questions about *how* they were practising, and thus the Precepts were formulated. A similar lay commitment to ethical observance and training principles – an application of mindfulness – is something we might eventually also adapt or formally take on once we see that the precepts provide a beneficial framework and commitment for our own practice.²¹

Meanwhile, our work on helping our small-self understand and respond to our Buddha Nature continues, as does our practice of purification. The Buddhist path is again quite explicit in stating that the work of purification must be undertaken in the same place where the defilements arise: in the mind itself. Hence, the main method the Dharma offers for purifying the mind is *zazen* or meditation.²²

Indeed, the Buddhist path has its inherent completion and fundamental full presentation in our *zazen* meditation and in each return to our breath. This path of purification through *zazen* is also the path of our *Great Vows for All*. Hence, we realise “that the essential world of perfection is this very world of gain and loss, birth and death, cause and effect.” Aitken states: “When Dogen Zenji said, ‘*Zazen* is itself enlightenment,’ he was speaking from this fundamental standpoint”.²⁴

Purification and *The Great Vows* are of course not the only chants that Zen students take to heart. A core chant for Zen students is the classical condensation of the six-hundred-volume *Prajna Paramita* literature, translated into Chinese by Hsuan-tang in the seventh century and which can be called the basic Mahayana sutra and summary of essential Zen understanding, is the *Maka Hannya Haramita Shin Gyo* or *The Great Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra (The Heart Sutra)*, cited at the start of this essay.²⁵ This chant points to the purpose of our

practicing. Its insights are also the transformation that occurs through purification and the qualities that allow the Bodhisattva *Great Vows For All* to be proclaimed.

Robert Aitken, in his *Miniatures of A Zen Master* (2008), writes that the fundamental message of the *Heart Sutra* and the *Vimalakirti Sutra* “is *Shunyata*, the essential emptiness of everything”, and states that “unless you think and conduct yourself from this position, you are not yet squared away.”²⁶ However, when we take up Zen practice, not many of us are “yet squared away”. Indeed, when we start out we are mostly, as Aitken also suggests in *Taking the Path of Zen*, “preoccupied with personal problems, the attitudes of others towards ourselves, and by personal ambition for religious experience and leadership. But as our training continues, our motivation may deepen, and we can put aside such personal concerns and exert ourselves with our sisters and brothers.”²⁷

In such deepening we find that purification is also the art of dying to old habits of mind. Thereby meditation itself is a purification which undoes the small ego and the juicy content of its positionalities. To put aside our personal concerns we must let go of our ego’s obsessions and resentments, its justifications and compensations, its associations and superstitions, its proclamations and games. But found here, beyond ego substitutes and clinging, is the reality of unconditional love. Nonetheless, the journey of purification towards the unconditional is looked upon by the ego as the territory of loss and defeat. Be warned. Yes, the spiritual journey is a place of sacrifice and surrender, but only of narcissism and ego’s surreptitious and stubborn feeding of itself and its delusions.

Yet drop clinging, and the ego’s addictions and survival are found to be largely based on the secret pleasures of negativity. Buddhism labels these ‘suffering’ or ‘karma’. Buddhism also says that all things are transient and essentially without ego.²⁸ Once recognised and identified as such, one’s karma can be owned without shame or guilt, its operation in daily life recognised and released. It is conditional and empty and not really personal at all.

But even though the ego and its karma are not “me”, it nevertheless belongs to me. The chant of purification helps us confess and understand this. Thereby the ongoing practice of purification progresses into

the certainty and necessity of *Great Vows For All*. Here we turn from the ego’s positionalities towards compassion or love. Thus when we chant “*Dharma gates are countless*”, what we are recognizing is that the choice of love is available in every instant. The key is our willingness to see it, as stated in “*I vow to wake to them.*” The final vow, “*Buddha’s way is unsurpassed, I vow to embody it fully*”, is both an invitation and a recognition that the spiritual awareness of our true nature is what illuminates the way of love’s immanence. When finally chosen, the reward and practice of letting go of our small ego is the awareness and use of the love contained in our *Great Vows For All*. But to arrive there we must cultivate a mind that steps beyond ego to the Whole. Steve Hagen tells us that “Cultivating such a mind is sometimes called the practice of egolessness.”²⁹

This doesn’t happen automatically. Indeed, we might resist it, but regular *zazen* and directed effort can take us in its direction. How do we know we are cultivating such a mind?

Finding out is a matter of discipline and refinement, of making mistakes and continuing on because you know that with experience you will become better and better.³⁰ This is also applying Yamada Koun Rōshi’s dictum: “The purpose of Zen is the perfection of character.”³¹

Ultimately, within this perfecting, there is nothing to fear. Though the undoing of past ideas, beliefs and delusions can seem challenging, it is really just staying steady enough for impermanence itself to appear and break open. Within that unfolding is our true nature. What is that? Another Zen chant, similar to Hakuin Zenji’s “*All beings by nature are Buddha*”, is the introductory line to the Diamond Sangha’s *First Sutra Dedication*, which states “*Buddha Nature pervades the whole universe, existing right here now.*” That is our true nature. IT IS THIS VERY MOMENT.

Why then begin our chants with purification? Confession to ourselves of whatever has held us back or down gives us courage to move on. It cuts directly through our attachments around sin or self-alienation, wielding Manjushri’s sword, to say we are open and fully ourselves right NOW. Furthermore the kalpas of evolution, the workings of beginningless time, and the contributions of many beings who have helped birth us at this very moment thereby bless us and our ability,

right here, to help them purify along with us. By acknowledging this twisting, turning, fathomless path, we take responsibility to abandon any further intentionality of evil, and to move forward from here to our *Great Vows*. Within the chant of purification, our comprehending of karma and its causes encourages us to have courage.

Similarly, because the chant of Purification encourages us to put down the “old” past and to stay with *what is*, “openly and fully”, it also reminds us that when we sit, we do not try to become calm or peaceful, or to quiet the mind, but are practicing staying with and amid whatever feelings arise.³² As we do so, we are reminded that Buddha nature and enlightenment aren’t far away states or events somewhere in the future, nor a special state. Expecting something different to what we get, we might not see the treasure of what is immediate and ordinary.

In this regard, purification is putting down all our expectations and all our desire for things to be a certain way, and to just returning to our breath and everyday experiences as each comes forth. Hence, as the traditional Diamond Sangha Sesshin cautions state, we may find that whilst sitting on the mat we laugh or weep, but should not be concerned; we are going deeper. Indeed during this perfecting we may find that though, as Ross Bolleter Roshi in his Dharma talk “Envy and the Way” says, we touch some deep underlying sorrow, through such sitting we also:

*...encourage a release. We can weep for a while, then breathe a little deeper. In time we get less self-preoccupied and the moon rises and reflects in the great dark lake of our ancient sorrows. The passions roll through like the seasons; Great moods of the soul.*³³

In this regard it can be said that chanting is one of the methods that helps stabilize the essential practice of sitting. They help our understanding and support the quest for deep knowledge and essential values which are part of the spiritual journey.

The words of chants and vows thus often support and deepen, or at least help us make sense of what occurs in meditation. What is particularly pertinent about the two chants under discussion is that they emphasize that some of our awareness should be on how the “old”, “beginningless”, “numberless”, “endless” and

“countless” nature of our karma and embodied actions are blessed. These words may initially make the consequences of our life seem overwhelming, and our intentions and nature seemingly unknowable and mysterious. But don’t be lured away from the simplicity and profundity of these words. What happens when we confess this beyond knowing, “*openly and fully*”, is that we break open. We completely empty. Whatever we “*previously created*”, however far back and entangling, is purified, set free, eradicated. We then “*wake*” to the greater Sangha of this very life and embody fully our responsibility.

What is this responsibility? The Buddha advised in the Dhammapada that “experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind.” Thus our responsibility starts with us understanding that we are responsible for our own experience of mind. That is, we control what we do with our feelings and thoughts around life’s events. Thereby, our practice and our own mindfulness can, at some point, create a wider positive effect.³⁴ In the Dhammapada it is also said: “*Renounce all evil;/ practice all good;/ keep your mind pure;/ thus all the Buddhas taught.*”³⁵ This renouncing starts with purification. Keeping it “pure” is the practice of continued purification. Practicing “all good” is practicing zazen and the Bodhisattva vows. Hence, as alluded to earlier, the purpose of zazen is our enlightenment as well. Nonetheless, as our chants suggest, it is an endless task of polishing. However, do not be disheartened by this journey. As Robert Aitken says in his commentary on Hui-neng’s koan, “Not the Wind; Not the Flag”:

*Polishing compassion goes hand in hand with polishing wisdom. “What is the application of my understanding? How can I conduct myself to actualize the harmony of all beings and to encourage fulfillment of their marvelous uniqueness?” Such questions must have preoccupied Hui-neng during his fifteen years in the forest.*³⁶

Thus, even Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, spent years wandering (with a party of hunters) in the forest, polishing his already profound realisation and broad compassion, before emerging to teach.

The overall purpose of doing chants such as *Purification* and *Great Vows For All* is that they provide both a motive and process of change. Then all of this, as a

regular practice, is setting the conditions for zazen to do its true work and take you home. It is where our intentions become the life we lead within and embody, and where the realm of freedom from conditions becomes established. This is finding the true response from this very body to what arises and becomes the world. This is part of the matter of being truly serious about practice, and it is the answer to Robert Aitken's questions in this paragraph from *Miniatures of A Zen Master* where Roshi writes:

*In his Song of Zazen, Hakuin Zenji wrote, "This very place is the Lotus Land, / this very body the Buddha." We recite this passage without a second thought, yet there is nothing more radical and presumptions in the myriad expressions of the Dharma. How can I say that the social morass around me is Heaven itself? How can I say that this very shithead is enlightened?*³⁷

Aitken admirably signposted how we can say this in his book *The Dragon Never Sleeps: Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice*, where he vows that "*Whenever my vows seem meaningless / I vow with all beings / to recall my original purpose, / boot up, and get with it again.*"³⁸ Aitken is suggesting that our chants and vows are akin to the Buddhist sacraments. That is, they help us grasp the point of our Buddha nature directly.

Indeed, with the confession of purification we acknowledge our sin or karma and find the forgiveness and the capacity to serve and honour every part of life through our Great Vows. So, take up the responsibility of saving the many beings, including yourself. Take up the responsibility of being Buddha. That is what is going on when moment after moment we find ourselves fully embedded in this very life. And that is, moment by moment, also our liberation.

Notes

1. Hakuin, Zenji. Song of Zazen; first line as translated by Norman Waddell. See: http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Translations/Song_of_Zazen.htm retrieved Feb. 4th, 2018.
2. Maka Hannya Haramita Shin Gyo (The Heart Sutra). The Zen Buddhist chants quoted have been translated from Japanese and rendered into thoughtful English by the Diamond Sangha members, Honolulu, Hawaii, headed by Robert Aitken Roshi (the basic work done in the 1970s and the 1980s). These chants are used with gratitude by members of several affiliated Zen centres and communities, including California Dia-

- mond Sangha, Santa Rosa and Berkeley, USA (headed by John Tarrant Roshi); Sydney Zen Centre, Australia, and the Zen Group of Western Australia, Perth, Australia (headed by Ross Bolleter and Mari Rhydwen; the Sangha with whom I practice). See: <http://www.essentia.com/book/spiritual/buddaprayers.htm#>
3. Dass, Ram. Journey of Awakening A Meditator's Guidebook, Bantam Books, revised edition New York, 1990, p. 149.
4. Ibid. p. 143.
5. Okumura, Shohaku. Living By Vow A Practical Introduction To Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012, p. 30.
6. Kwong, Jakusho, No Beginning, No End The Intimate Heart of Zen, Shambhala, Boston, 2010, p.134.
7. Diamond Sangha Chant Book, prev cit. The original translation said "body, mouth and thoughts". In 1991 "mouth" was replaced with "speech".
8. Aitken, Robert. Encouraging Words Zen Buddhist Teachings for Western Students, Pantheon Books, New York and San Francisco 1993 p. 170.
9. For example the Sufis have four main stages of spiritual development, these being purification of the self, cleansing of the heart, emptying of thoughts and the illumination of the spirit in divine love. See <http://muslimcanada.org/sufi/tazkiya.htm> accessed February 25th, 2018.
10. This is a description from my own experiences and reading of Zen, giving a horizontal sequencing to what exists or nests as a vertical combined learning/enlightenment in this very heart-mind. Zen sees that reversing what I quote from Dass – that the horizontal can be the vertical within any moment – is just awakening to it. However the usual ego approach is alignment or testing out and tasting of practice, then after glimpsing something worthwhile deciding on a commitment to regular practice, and then developing concordance with Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. One can oscillate between these states over many years. Although immanence or living/seeing Buddha Nature may occur, one also sees that there is never a condition (this is perhaps our human karma) where there is nothing more to learn. Hence these stages are also a spiral or ever deepening loop. The 10 Ox-Herding pictures are a traditional depiction of the stages of enlightenment. Texts on these are readily available (for example John Daido Looi's Riding the Ox Home Stages on the Path of Enlightenment, Shambhala, Boston and London, 2002, where he also advises: "*The movement from realisation to actualization applies at every stage in training after the original breakthrough*" p. 40).
11. Matthiessen, Peter. Nine-Headed Dragon River Zen Journals, Flamingo ed., London, 1987. "The Sesshin ended with a purification service and a talk on the ten Buddhist precepts", p. 34.
12. Aitken, Robert. prev. cit. p. 172.
13. Okumura, Shohaku. Prev. cit. p. 34. He cites Uchiyama Roshi that zazen has two aspects – that of vow, the other of repentance.
14. Aitken, Robert. Taking the Path of Zen, North Point Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York, 1982, p. 62.
15. Dass, Ram. prev cit. p.172.
16. Bodhi, Bikkhu. Purification of the Mind (1998) https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_04.html accessed Jan. 3rd 2018.

17. Dogen's *Kyōjukaimon* (Commentary on the Precepts) states: The Great Precepts of all the Buddhas have been maintained and protected by all the Buddhas. Buddhas hand them down to Buddhas, and Ancestral Teachers hand them down to Ancestral Teachers. Acceptance and observance of the Precepts transcends past, present, and future, and the perfect accord between the realisation of teacher and disciple, and continues through all ages. Our great teacher Shakyamuni Buddha imparted them to Mahakashyapa, and Mahakashyapa transmitted them to Ananda. Already the Precepts have passed through many generations in direct succession, reaching down to the present head of this temple. Now, receiving the Great Precepts, I vow to requite my deep obligation to the Buddhas and Ancestral teachers. I pledge to establish these Precepts as essential teachings for human beings and all other beings so that eventually all will inherit the wisdom of the Buddha. (translated by the Diamond Sangha headed by Robert Aitken).
18. Dass, Ram. prev cit. p.157.
19. Positive Samadhi (oneness) is possible and not too difficult to experience, the problem is continuing it or establishing the condition of mind called shōnen sōzoku (maintaining genuine nen-thoughts in continuous succession). For the training and explanation of nen-thoughts and the nen-impulse see: Sekida, Katsuki. *Zen Training Methods and Philosophy*. Shambhala, Boston and London, 2005.
20. See Anderson, Reb. *Being Upright Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, Rodmel Press, Berkeley, California, 2001.
21. Dogen's *Kyōjukaimon* (Commentary on the Precepts) states: The Great Precepts of all the Buddhas have been maintained and protected by all the Buddhas. Buddhas hand them down to Buddhas, and Ancestral Teachers hand them down to Ancestral Teachers. Acceptance and observance of the Precepts transcends past, present, and future, and the perfect accord between the realisation of teacher and disciple, and continues through all ages. Our great teacher Shakyamuni Buddha imparted them to Mahakashyapa, and Mahakashyapa transmitted them to Ananda. Already the Precepts have passed through many generations in direct succession, reaching down to the present head of this temple. Now, receiving the Great Precepts, I vow to requite my deep obligation to the Buddhas and Ancestral teachers. I pledge to establish these Precepts as essential teachings for human beings and all other beings so that eventually all will inherit the wisdom of the Buddha. (translated by the Diamond Sangha headed by Robert Aitken).
22. Bikkhu, previous cit, also states this central role of meditation in purification. It can be noted here that in this essay my intent is to nudge Zen students to consider purification as an inherent part of the meditation process. It is merely an introduction and therefore I don't go into detail about Visuddhi or the 7 stages of purification which form the structure of Upatisa's *Vimutti-Magga (The Path to Freedom)* and Buddhaghosa's monumental work, *Visuddhi-Magga (The Path of Purification)*, based on the former work. The goal of Purification is not morality or of mind or of view ect., as such, but of finding truth and thereby total deliverance and extinction.
23. Aitken prev. cit. p. 63.
24. Ibid.
25. A recommended read on this chant and its place in Zen can be found in Shohaku Okumura's, prev. cit., see *Chapter 6. Sound of Emptiness: The Heart Sutra* pp. 131-205.
26. Aitken, Robert. *Miniatures of A Zen Master*, Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2008. p. 32.
27. Aitken, Robert. *Taking the Path of Zen*, prev cit. p. 62.
28. Okawa, Ryuho. *The Challenge of the Mind A Practical Approach to the Essential Buddhist Teaching of Karma*, Time Warner Books, Great Britain, 2004, p. 76.
29. Hagen, Steve. *Buddhism Is Not What You Think, Finding Freedom Beyond Beliefs*, HarperOne, New York, 2004, p. 168.
30. Aitken, Robert. Prev cit. p. 10.
31. Aitken, Robert. *Encouraging Words Zen Buddhist Teachings for Western Students* prev. cit. p. 74.
32. Magid, Barry. *Ordinary Mind Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychotherapy*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2002. Magid describes this as developing the skills of *affect regulation* and becoming a bigger container. See pp. 102- 104.
33. Bolleter, Ross. "Envy and the Way" (first published in *Bright Water* summer 1997) retrieved from <http://bolleterzen.com/articles/envy-and-the-way/> December 15th, 2017.
34. For an account of journey's into how zazen's transformation can be taken into our everyday work see Padmasuri, *Transforming Work An Experiment in Right Livelihood*, Windhorse Publications Birmingham, 2003. The fuller verse from the Dhammapada is quoted p.122; where it is also suggested that we can create our own precepts to resist temptations. Robert Aitken uses vows in a similar (and playful) way in his *The Dragon Never Sleeps Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice*, Parallax Press, Berkeley California, 1992.
35. Aitken, Robert. *The Dragon Never Sleeps Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice*, Parallax Press, Berkeley California 1992. p.xvi (translation from the Pali by Irving Babbitt).
36. Aitken, Robert. *The Gateless Barrier The Wu-Men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, North Point Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York, 1991, Case 29 pp. 185-186.
37. Aitken, Robert. *Miniatures of A Zen Master* prev cit. p. 102.
38. Aitken, Robert. *The Dragon Never Sleeps Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice*, prev cit. p. 29.

VOCABULARY

Japan - never been there

Temple - old worship place

Sound – ear bell dance

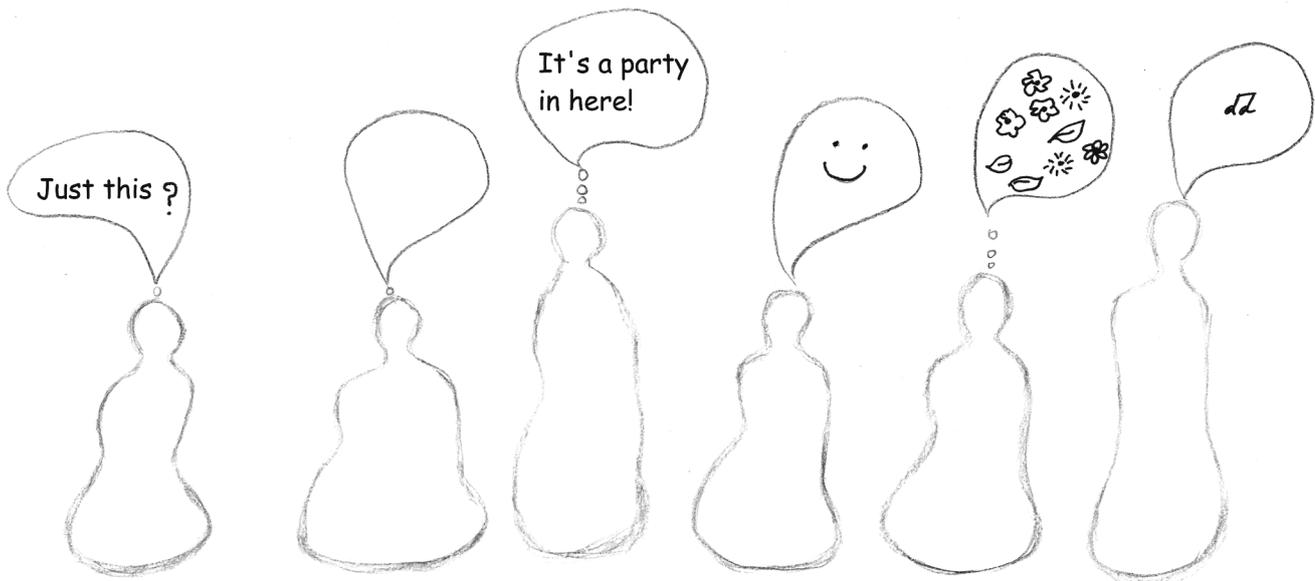
Water - cool silence clear pond

Nun - not this lifetime maybe last maybe next

Granddaughter - best joy always childhood I never had

Zen – ocean voice sit solid as mountain gentle as rain

BY BRIGID LOWRY



THURSDAY : 8.05 PM

Cartoon by Brigid Lowry



Summer Sesshin flowers. Photograph by Paul Wilson.

The seedlings, newly sprouted
are bathed in moonlight
for the first time ever.

BY SALLY WILSON

APRIL EVENING THREE HAIKU

disused doorway:
brown leaves and plastic
in a pile

long branch droops:
little wiggle
with the wind

Cold night air,
walking past
my ex-girlfriend's ex-house

BY GERARD MAZZA

The Wonder of the Way of Hongzhi Zhengjue

Adapted from a talk given on November 2, 2017.

BY KATHY SHIELS

Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge with gratitude the *Whadjuk* people of the *Nyoongar* tribe on whose *boodja* (country) we sit.

I'd also thank our teacher, Ross Bolleter, for his generous Dharma which includes inviting me to give this talk. While I never feel quite ready, preparing to give a talk encourages my practice as it brings more focused study. Thank you, Ross. Thank you also for the quote with which you launched my interest in Hongzhi Zhengjue some years back:

*When by the side of the ancient ferry
the breeze and the moonlight are cool and pure,
the dark vessel turns into the glowing world.*¹

The immensely encouraging quote, as cited in Chang Chung-Yuan's *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*, resonated deeply. Around the same time, Ross introduced Hongzhi Zhengjue, sometimes known as Tiantong Hongzhi, to our Sangha with the wonderful poem: *Guidepost of Silent Illumination*.² The poem is on page 10 of our Sutra books and recited during Sesshins.

When I first read the poem, I wondered about it; I wondered where it came from and what it meant. I was struck by its beauty, but had no idea that it was the expression of an ancient Chan Caodong practice: *Mozhao*: *Mo*: 'silent' (or 'still'), *Zhao*: 'illumination' (or 'clarity'); an enactment of enlightenment that can be traced back to Shakyamuni Buddha. Nor did I understand that it's the praxis of the *Caodong* School of Shitou and Dongshan, as articulated by Hongzhi eight

hundred and eighty years ago, during his thirty years as abbot of Tiantong monastery, in Southern China.

Three generations after Hongzhi, the monastery's abbot was Rujing, who transmitted the Caodong teachings to Dōgen: a young monk visiting from Japan. Rujing referred to the practice as *Zhigan dazuo*. Hence, we have Dōgen's Japanese transliteration: *Shikantaza* (Just sitting).³ We now know Shikantaza as the heart of the Japanese *Sōtō* School, while Silent Illumination is still the principle practice today at Tiantong Monastery, in China.

These days, there are Zen centres throughout the world that teach Silent Illumination, Shikantaza or both, and the teachings acknowledge the rich koan commentaries of Hongzhi and Dōgen. I wonder about the interface and enjoy exploring related texts and podcasts. In particular, the teachings in English of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen and his Dharma heir Guo Gu, of Dharma Drum Mountain Lineage, welcomed me into the teachings of Hongzhi. Sheng Yen wrote many books during his thirty-two years of pioneering Silent Illumination in the west and one of the most popular is *The Method of No-Method*.⁴ It was published in 2008, one year before he died. However, it's the small in size, but huge in impact book, entitled *Cultivating the Empty Field*, written by Taigen Dan Leighton and published in 2000, that provides the basis for much of this talk.⁵ It's the first translation into English of Volume 6 and parts of Volume 8 of: *The Extensive Record of Chan Master Hongzhi*.

Over the past few years, Hongzhi's ancient yet immediate presence has curiously enlivened my practice

and I'd like to share what that means. When formally sitting, there can be more trust and ease of focus which can refresh everyday life with spaciousness. At times 'the shadowy ghost within the machine' (as Ross calls it) can be enticed into the light of not knowing and its fingers unclench from around my heart; releasing appropriate responses.

Of course, throughout the helter skelter of these busy days in our troubled world, with tutoring duties, lots of Sangha, family and friends' concerns, tensions constantly arise. But the practice of noticing bodily tension and releasing it with kindness is at times more accessible. And when it's not so accessible I forgive myself and others for not understanding.

The other day, a rather uptight guy at the Apple store told me it was "close to closing time!"

He reluctantly began trying to sort the recalcitrant storage issue on my iPhone. I managed to simply smile and breathe. Surprisingly, while he was scrolling, swip-

ing and tapping, he told me a lengthy story of his new puppy; including how it wakes the household each morning at 2.00 am. We laughed and relaxed as he told his story, and mysteriously the storage issue resolved in the five minutes left before closing time. I was grateful for more than the storage.

I'm grateful also for the devotional element in Hongzhi's writing. It includes a deep appreciation of and reverence for nature, along with profound respect for the lineage of teachers. This resonance warms my practice, and is especially with me when the local flock of corellas call and wheel above our suburban roof tops, or I'm greeted by a green cricket perched on a leaf in my small backyard, or I put on my Rakasu, with the Dharma name given to me by Robert Aitken Rōshi: Sō En – Ancestral Garden. The ancestral garden we meander through as a Sangha is vast, and we're continuously practising in the shade of its twining vines. Tracking their roots and branches can be fun and enlivening.

Tonight, the tracking has led to Hongzhi, and I've called the talk *The Wonder of the Way: Hongzhi Zhengjue*, because the Way of Hongzhi is full of **wonder**, literally. I emphasise the word here and in the lines which you'll recall from our Sutra book:

*Spiritually solitary and shining, inner illumination restores **wonder**.*

Dew in the moonlight, a river of stars, snow-covered pines, clouds enveloping the peak.

In darkness it is most bright, while hidden all the more manifest.

The crane dreams in the wintery mists. The autumn waters flow far in the distance...

*When **wonder** exists in serenity, all achievement is forgotten in illumination.*

*What is this **wonder**? Alertly seeing through confusion*

*Is the way of silent illumination and the origin of subtle radiance.*⁶

Truly, we all wonder. We wonder about life, about our ageing body, about death, about our loved ones, about our practice and about taking care of our busy lives.



Hongzhi Zhenjue.

But the wonder in Hongzhi's poem is far beyond our preoccupations with (as Mari Rhydwen calls it) the 'me who isn't there.' It's the vast wonder of the boundless empty field we are and cannot cultivate. Hongzhi tells us that we cannot cultivate it because it's always here – never can be gained; never can be lost.

And throughout his writings he is clear that clarifying and expressing that wonder takes practice – continuous practice.

Hongzhi wrote:

*The field of boundless emptiness is what exists from the very beginning. You must purify, cure, grind down or brush away (my favourite) all the tendencies you have fabricated into apparent habits [note *apparent* – don't believe any of them]. Then you can reside in the clear circle of brightness.* ⁷

And for Hongzhi the point of residing in the clear circle of brightness, as he poetically expresses, is to "... graciously share yourself with the hundred grass tips in the busy market place." ⁸

Encouraged by these lines, I became curious about

the life story of Hongzhi Zhengjue, who I learnt is considered the most influential Chinese Caodong teacher in the century before Dōgen. Taigen Dan Leighton tells us that he was born one hundred and nine years before Dōgen, in 1091, in north-east China. He was a very intelligent child, who by seven years of age had memorised several thousand Chinese characters. His father was a lay student of Desun of Linji Chan, and Hongzhi so impressed his father's teacher that he predicted that the child would become a vessel of the Dharma.

At the age of 11, Hongzhi became a monk, and at eighteen he went to study with Kumu Faqeng, whose name meant 'Dead Tree'. He was given this name because his style of practice echoed that of Shishuang Qingzhu, who centuries before had been abbot of the Dead Tree Congregation; which sat for hours as still as blocks of dry wood. In turn, Kumu's monks were known as the Dead Tree Assembly, and Hongzhi's practice blossomed in the dead tree style.

In his twenties, Hongzhi travelled between monasteries, studying with various teachers, and at the age of twenty-eight received the seal of transmission from his



Ino's place at Summer Sesshin. Photograph by Paul Wilson.

teacher Danxia. He then travelled to study with Yuanwu Keqin, famed for his koan collection known as *The Blue Cliff Record*. Later in life, Hongzhi compiled his own collection of old koans, which forms the basis for the popular *Book of Serenity*.⁹

When he was thirty-eight, Hongzhi was invited to teach at Tiantong monastery. He stayed at Tiantong for thirty years, only leaving it the day before he died when he went down the mountain to thank his lay students and patrons. On his return to the monastery he wrote his death poem:

Illusory dreams, phantom flowers

Sixty –seven years.

A white bird vanishes in the mist,

*Autumn waters merge with sky.*¹⁰

He died in a formal meditation posture. (As you do!)

During his time as abbot, he restored the monastery, which flourished with well over a thousand monks. When the seasons were unkind, he was known to supply food to lay people and neighbouring monasteries, including that of Dahui, who first used the name *Mozhao*, translated as Silent Illumination, to contrast Hongzhi's teaching approach with his own. Chan Master Guo Gu tells us that Hongzhi quite liked the name and adopted it. Most significantly for us, Hongzhi liked a lot of words. He was a true wordsmith who became a prolific and poetic writer; perhaps the most eloquent in the history of Chan.

His writing included poems, informal talks, discourses, old teaching stories and practice instructions. From within Hongzhi's text of *Practice Instructions* Taigen Dan Leighton has identified suitable headings, some of which are:

The Bright Boundless Field

Face Everything, Let Go, and Attain Stability

With Total Trust Roam and Play in Samadhi

Breezing Through the World

Investigating Wonder

*Graciously Share Yourself*¹¹

Three generations after Hongzhi died, Rujing was abbot at Tiantong, and welcomed the eager young Dōgen to the practice instructions within Hongzhi's texts. I'd like to share some of them with you now:

*People of the Way journey through the world responding to conditions, carefree and without restraint. Like clouds finally raining, like moonlight following the current, like orchids growing in shade, like spring arising in everything, they act without mind, they respond with certainty.*¹²

And:

*In wonder return to the journey, avail yourself of the path and walk ahead. In light there is darkness; where it operates no traces remain. With the hundred grass tips in the busy market place graciously share yourself. Wide open and accessible, walking along, casually mount the sounds and straddle the colours while you transcend listening and surpass watching.*¹³

*Stepping back with open hands (giving up everything) thoroughly comprehends life and death. Immediately you can sparkle and respond to the world.*¹⁴

In the mountainous environs of Tiantong monastery he also wrote:

With coming and going, a person in the mountains

Understands that blue mountains are his body

The mountains are the body, but the body is not the self

*So where can one find any senses or their objects?*¹⁵

And

*...The valley is empty, but echoes. From the beginning unbound by seeing or hearing, the genuine self romps and plays in Samadhi without obstruction.*¹⁶

At Tiantong, Dōgen was greatly influenced by Hongzhi's lingering presence in the walls and in his writing. When back in Japan, Dōgen referred to Hongzhi as an *Ancient Buddha*, quoting him more than any other Chan master in his own writing: at least forty - five times in his *Extensive Record*, compared to Rujing ten times.¹⁷ Dōgen also frequently added commentary on Hongzhi's expression of the Dharma.

On the *bête noire* of making judgements or evaluations of our practice Hongzhi wrote, "Creating a pond, the moon will come." Years later Dogen responded: "Creating a pond, do not wait for the moon. When you have built a pond, naturally the moon will come."¹⁸

Their exchange is timelessly immediate for us as Zen students, and we may wonder about the subtle shift in emphasis.

So, what is Silent illumination on the cushion? I'm deeply grateful that Chan Master Sheng Yen travelled to the United States in the late 1970s and brought the practice to us in the west. From his books, articles and recordings, as well as those of his Dharma heir Guo Gu, and in turn his Dharma heirs in the west, we learn that Mozhao or Silent Illumination is not a meditation method, but a state or way of being that is simultaneously still, alert and clear.

It's a state that has links to the *Samatha-Vipassana* ('calm - insight') of the Theravadan School. However, traditionally in that school calm and insight were taught as sequential practices rather than simultaneous. It's thought that Silent Illumination has perhaps even closer links to the *Mahamudra* practice of the Tibetan School.

According to Guo Gu, an upright but completely relaxed body is the foundation. He teaches that it's essential to begin sitting with the heart-mind lightly scanning and relaxing every part of the body. On a podcast guiding Silent Illumination practice, he uses the word *relax* no less than twenty seven times.¹⁹ He refers students to their face, the space between eyebrows, the eyes, cheeks, perhaps a gentle smile, the jaw, neck, shoulders, forearms, elbows and on down to the toes making a special point of being aware of the buttocks and the presence of bodily weight. He em-

phasises that the hands need to be supported by the lap (or even a towel) in order to fully relax the shoulders.

Some years ago, when I was having shoulder pain during Zazen, I eventually discovered that it always left once I fully released any tension in my hands and thumbs. Referential pain is curious. Truly relaxing can be illusive, as crusty habits of body and mind persist, so beginning our sitting with the intention to soften and release any tension as we lightly scan the body can work wonders.

Once tension has been released, the practice is to maintain awareness of the totality of the body; an amorphous lump rather than its specific parts. Totally at ease, breathing in and out with focused energy, Silent Illumination has us remain continuously present to the bodily form; a mountain grounded and stable on the cushion, stool or chair. This total body awareness extends to our surroundings: sounds, candlelight or the breeze. Emotions and thoughts rise and pass through the vast landscape until they have no foothold.

This is 'just sitting'. Sheng Yen called it the first taste of Silent Illumination. However, both Sheng Yen and Guo Gu encourage us to continue practising in this way to fully taste the fruits of the empty field of Hongzhi. When we lose awareness of the total body sitting, we've wandered off even perhaps into a deeply concentrated place. The Chan teachers say it's staying with total bodily awareness; upholding the balance of stillness and clarity that drops off body and mind leaving us to romp and play in the empty field.

In the words of Hongzhi:

*Just resting is like the great ocean accepting hundreds of streams, all absorbed into one flavour. Freely going ahead is like the great surging tides riding on the wind, all coming onto this shore together. How could they not reach into the genuine source?*²⁰

The words 'total bodily awareness' resonated deeply when I first heard them because they express what seemed to occur naturally when I sat, but for years I was stuck in checking myself and trying to do something else. Staying with total bodily awareness, brings trust. Completely relaxing my body while remaining



Flower offering at Summer Sesshin. Photograph by Paul Wilson.

upright brings alert ease. Practice feels more alive and open. Responses to daily situations, Dharma texts, and teachers' questions arise from nowhere when 'I am not in the way.

Relaxing the mountain body while sitting with alert focused awareness of its totality can resolve us. Earlier this year when visiting Hongzhi's Tiantong monastery in southern China, I took the opportunity to ask the present abbot, Chung Xin, a question through our guide and translator, Eric Lu. I asked, "What is the essence of Silent Illumination?"

The abbot became quite animated and spoke at length. Eric translated his words to say that Chung Xin teaches his monks Silent Illumination and says that while the essence is simultaneous stillness and clarity, everyone is different - and the same. Some people have more stillness before clarity, and others have more clarity before stillness, but it's the balance that is the Way - and practice brings balance.

While at Tiantong, our small group was given permission to briefly visit the meditation hall while the

monks were having tea nearby. I'm still musing over the contrast between that meditation hall and the Zendo's I saw in Japan. Rather than the tatami mats and uniform black zafus facing the wall in Japan, at Tiantong I saw quite thick blue mats, cushions of varying sizes and fleecy blue knee rugs for the monks who sit facing in. It reminded me of day two of our Sesshins in the cold of Balingup's spring when we sit facing in, for a reading or encouragement talk. By day two, everyone is settled into Sesshin and practising deeply, invariably with an assortment of cushions and fleecy knee rugs. My musing goes along the lines of: when it comes to uniform black we're generally Japanese Zen, but when it comes to our cushions and rugs we're certainly Chinese Chan.

Now that musing brings me back to Hongzhi and Dōgen, and wondering about the elusive or perhaps illusory interface between Silent Illumination and Shikantaza.

Regarding inherent Buddha nature Hongzhi said to his monks, "For a luminous jewel without flaw, if you carve a pattern its virtue is lost." A century later,

Dōgen’s response was “For a luminous jewel without flaw, if polished its glow increases.”²¹

Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura have a note in their translation of Dōgen’s *Extensive Record* which relates to these lines. It says that for both Hongzhi and Dōgen practice and enlightenment are one, but for Hongzhi, the emphasis is on enlightenment and practice as its natural function, like a pearl rolling on its own. For Dōgen, the emphasis is on practice, which expresses and actually deepens enlightenment.²²

There is a shift in emphasis, and I wonder about how it occupies our cushions. Meanwhile, there are also many instances when the temple bell in Hongzhi’s writing resounds bells in Dōgen’s writing. For example, when Hongzhi told the abbot Xiangshan of an experience of awakening the abbot asked:

‘Where does your enlightenment come from?’

Hongzhi drew a circle in the air with his hand and threw it behind him [a gesture used by Dōgen many years later.]

The abbot asked Hongzhi:

You are a man who produces muddiness. What is your capacity?

Hongzhi said:

Mistake

The abbot responded:

Don’t see people as others.

And Hongzhi answered:

*Yes, yes.*²³

Almost a century later, Dōgen echoed Hongzhi when he called his own life “One continuous mistake”.²⁴

As I said earlier, tracking the roots and branches of our ancestors can be fun and enlivening, but agreeing to give this talk this evening may very well have been a mistake. I thank you for your patience and kind attention – listening to all the misunderstandings I have up to now! I welcome your illuminating comments and/or questions.

Notes

1. Hongzhi Zhengjue, translated by Chang Chung-Yuan, cited in *ORIGINAL TEACHINGS OF CH’AN BUDDHISM*, Pantheon Books, USA 1969 Pg. 56
2. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000 Pg. 67
3. Tanahashi, Kazuaki Ed. *Moon in a Dewdrop: writings of Zen Master Dogen*, North Point Press, USA, 1985 Pg. 6
4. Chan Master Sheng Yen *The Method of No-Method: The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination*, Shambala Publications Inc. USA 2008
5. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg.67
6. Ibid Pg. 67
7. Ibid Pg. 24
8. Ibid Pg. 16
9. Cleary, Thomas Translator, *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues* Shambala , USA 1998
10. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg. 7
11. Ibid Pg. 30 – 55
12. Ibid Pg. 26
13. Ibid Pg. 55
14. Ibid Pg. 35
15. Hongzhi Zhengjue cited by Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura in *Dōgen’s Extensive Record : A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, Wisdom Publications, USA 2010 Pg. 552
16. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg. 37
17. Hongzhi Zhengjue cited by Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura in *Dōgen’s Extensive Record : A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, Wisdom Publications, USA 2010 Pg. 59
18. Ibid Pg. 206
19. Guo Gu, <https://tallahasseechan.org/teachings/meditation/>
20. Ibid Pg. 206
21. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg. 46
22. Hongzhi Zhengjue cited by Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura in *Dōgen’s Extensive Record : A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, Wisdom Publications, USA 2010 Pg. 163
23. Ibid Pg. 163
24. Hongzhi Zhengjue translated by Taigen Dan Leighton cited in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg. 4
25. Eihei Dōgen cited by Taigen Dan Leighton in *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen master Hongzhi*, Tuttle Publishing, Hong Kong 2000, Pg. 4



Summer Sesshin participants.



Summer Sesshin altar. Photograph by Gerard Mazza.

Buddhists for the Environment

Humans! I, Mountain, am speaking. You cannot ignore me! I have been with you since your very beginnings and long before. For millennia your ancestors venerated my holy places, found wisdom in my heights. I gave you shelter and far vision. Now, in return, you ravage me. You dig and gouge for the jewel in the stone, for the ore in my veins. Stripping my forests, you take away my capacity to hold water and release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? Can't you see? In destroying me you destroy yourselves. For Gaia's sake, wake up!

- Excerpt taken from *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of all Beings* (p. 87), by John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naes

If you are concerned about what is happening to our planet, you might be interested in joining with Buddhists for the Environment (BFE) to express this concern through right action.

Our vision statement and mission statement underlie any actions we take, and are on the page opposite.

We meet on the first Saturday of the month from 9.30-11.00AM at the Buddhist Society of WA's Dhammaloka Centre, 18-20 Nanson Way, Nollamara.

All are welcome.

See Trish or Lizzie for any further information.

Buddhists For the Environment WA

Vision Statement

Western Australian Buddhists, in their deep concern for the health and sustainability of Earth's natural environment, recognise through Dharma practice their connectedness with the whole of nature. They are willing to take energetic and compassionate action both collectively and individually, in accordance with Buddhist ethics, to minimise harm to nature whenever and however it is threatened by adverse human actions. They will be a voice for thought, speech and action, which promotes the flourishing of all sentient beings and the web of life on this Earth.

Mission Statement

The Mission of BFEWA is to work in accordance with the Dharma towards the following aims:

1. Raise awareness of environmental issues among Western Australian Buddhists
2. Inform and educate WA Buddhists and Dharma practitioners about the Buddha's teachings that relate to care, concern and action for the benefit of the natural environment.
3. Encourage and facilitate WA Buddhists and Dharma practitioners to take collective and individual actions within their capacity to minimise harm and maximise care of the environment at all levels from local through to Global communities.
4. BFEWA will take peaceful action for the benefit of the natural environment where appropriate and agreed on by consensus.
5. Practising and sharing Buddhist values of wisdom, contentment, kindness, compassion, virtue and peace BFE will:
 - be a voice for Buddhist values and ethics relating to environment in the general community
 - participate with inter-faith environment networks and/or the wider environment movement in undertaking actions in accordance with aims 3 and 4.
6. Support each other in the group's caring efforts for the Earth in other spaces outside of this organisation.

