

THE WOBBLY POT

Quarterly Journal of the Zen Group of Western Australia.

WINTER Edition 2013



*Monks these days study hard in order to turn a fine phrase and win fame as talented poets. At Crazy Clouds hut there is no such talent, but he serves up the taste of truth as he boils rice in a wobbly old pot.
– Ikkyu*

The Wobbly Pot

This journal provides a medium for members and friends of the Zen Group of Western Australia to express their views. The opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect Council's views, or those of other Sangha members. To contribute to the next edition please contact Phillip McNamara at mcnamara9@optusnet.com.au

Membership to the Zen Group of Western Australia is encouraged. Membership supports the activities of the group; including publicity, this journal and hall rental. Members get discount to our Sesshin and Zazenkaï's as well as access to books in our library.

Zen Group of Western Australia (ZGWA)

ZGWA started in 1983 with a small group of people sitting in a private home in Mt. Claremont, Perth. It is affiliated with the Diamond Sangha tradition of Zen Buddhism, which was founded in Hawaii in 1959 by Robert Aitken Rōshi.

The Diamond Sangha tradition follows the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, practiced and passed on from Shakyamuni Buddha in India, through China and Japan, from Japan to Hawaii, and now to Australia. Diamond Sangha communities integrate this ancient tradition into their lives in contemporary cultures throughout the world. Drawing on the great Japanese schools, our sangha offers a rich and authentic environment for the study of Zen Buddhism.

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Finding a home

- Kathy Shiels

With this being the 30th year of the Zen Group of WA we have plenty of memories of sitting together in various locations over the years. In the group's early days we sat in members' homes until there was enough support and energy to establish an independent Zendo (place for sitting). At different times the group has had its Zendo in rented houses in Highgate, Rivervale and Claremont. Following the Zendo houses the group moved to a floor in Fremantle's Port building for nine years. However, when the Port Authority needed its space again in 2007, the group moved to the Fremantle prison for a brief period before establishing our impromptu dojo in St Paul's church hall, in Beaconsfield.

Many of us recall the good times when the group 'had its own place'; the dojo was permanently set up for sitting and the library was accessible at all times. As well as weekly activities the group held regular zazenkais and at times sesshins in its Zendo. There were also more social activities such as shared meals, soirées and busy bees in the house and garden.

As cold winter nights are now with us again, a long-time member recently made overtures to the group's council to consider finding a home-Zendo again. Council members had a positive response and are presently considering the practicalities including location, local government zoning bylaws and costs. In the group's previous Zendos, which were in rented houses, some of the costs were met by having resident caretaker(s). Such an arrangement could be welcomed once more.

However, at its recent meeting, the council agreed that the most important first step in researching the possibility of establishing a Zendo is to invite everyone to consider the matter. Would you support the idea of finding and helping to establish a future Zendo? Perhaps you have some good ideas or know of a suitable location or place worth investigating. Please speak to any of the council members (Paul Wilson, Mary Heath, Phil McNamara or Kathy Shiels) about your response to the idea.

Our Great Seven Day Sesshin

Our Sesshin at Balingup from September 27 to October 4 is the first seven-day Sesshin for the ZGWA for a number of years. Ian Sweetman Roshi is unfortunately unavailable to teach this Sesshin, and I have asked Mari Rhydwen to co-teach it with me.

Mari Rhydwen was a member of the ZGWA during the 1990's and early 2000's, and was Tanto – the leader in charge of practice in the dojo during Sesshin – in a number of Sesshins. I gave Mari permission to teach in 2007. She has co-taught with Susan Murphy in Sydney, with Arthur Wells, Glenn Wallis, Mary Jaksch and myself in Arthur Wells' Transmission Sesshin last year in Christchurch, and latterly with Arthur in Auckland this month.

Mari is an inspiring teacher, who presents the Way keenly and vividly. She brings a clear eye and a rich life experience to her teaching of the Zen Way.

Sesshin means to settle the mind, to touch the mind, to convey the mind. It is good to experience the vastness of the mind that is in all things, and to confirm our intimacy with it. The path to such experience is vitally provided by Sesshin – in particular the seven-day form of Sesshin, which is the classical form of deep practice that has emerged from Zen traditions.

Sitting a seven-day Sesshin not only deepens and transforms our personal practice, but nourishes our practice as a community. Needless to say, these benefits are profitably intertwined, and are timely for the development of practice, both personal, and for our community. In these regards, it's hard to beat Spring Sesshin among the rocks, flowers and birdsong at the Origins Centre, Balingup.

Ross Bolleter

Monday office morning - the important things

- Mary Heath 17.06.13

What's important is sitting in front of the computer, on a hard chair.
Hearing the air con and the fluro lights.

What's important is contemplating lunch - a bit early yet.
It's important that I have nothing urgent, because if I did there would be no spare awareness to go around this room, or notice the shadows under my keyboard.

It's important that I feel a bit bored. That I notice the gap between urgent, busy, worried and the pause of nothing special to do.

Because if I did not feel at a loose end I might not realise that my boots are a bit tight.

What's going on?

- Kathy Shiels

It's good to ask "What's going on?" Ross Bolleter Rōshi reminded me, in reply to my comment "I'm being quite cranky these days".

Ah yes, I remembered the question and renewed my resolve—next time I'll do it. I'll ask myself what's going on, and what I am feeling, just as I begin to rev up and thrash around in the quicksand of irritation.

Well, it seems I am slowly creeping up to those moments but at times they sprint by before I know it and I'm stuck in that quicksand, not quite sure of how I got there. It's good to be reminded and reminded, to return and return. Marvin Gaye so popularly sang out the question in the 70s and Ross has posed it on a number of occasions this autumn: *what's going on?*

In the last of his recent talks on 'Shikantaza', Ross spoke on *Poetry and Shikantaza*. It was a magical evening of chilly zazen and glowing poetry. Ross shared several poets' intimate reflections of what was going on for them when they took to words.

The quiet, salty air of our port city dojo swelled with sea images as he read Elizabeth Bishop's *Fish Analysis*. We sat with Elizabeth in her little boat, gazing with her at the old fish she had just caught. I was so taken by the poem that I found it online, and here's an extract:

*...I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
--if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weapon like,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.*

As we all let the old fish go, the dojo became impossibly quieter and softer. Only the resident frogs, in the garden near the dojo door, kept up their refrain. It felt quite rural until a siren sounded in the distance, a bus lurched past along Hampton Road and a helicopter came hovering above like a noisy dragonfly.

When the last round of zazen ended and lights were switched on for chanting, bows and announcements, all the places were full. Fifteen seems to be our constant number these days so our impromptu dojo gets packed away really quickly!

During the tea circle, which followed packing away, what's going on in the Sangha presented itself in encouraging images. As most of us sipped tea while getting to know newcomers, some were speculating about future discussion night topics. We'd recently had a marvelous viewing of the group's bodhisattva prints by artist Mayumi Oda, led by Mary Heath, and Mark Edwards had led a lively discussion on Zen and Work.

A few people then left the circle and signed up for the next Saturday afternoon/evening Zazenkai and our seven day spring Sesshin. Others were browsing through back copies of the Wobbly Pot, borrowing books or arranging rides home.

Before leaving, conversations extended to Sangha goings on beyond the dojo. Plants from home gardens were exchanged; there were updates on the progress of the group's 'new' web site. Council members were confirming whose house would host the next monthly meeting and noting that the group's 30th year anniversary celebration on the 8th of December would need to be on the agenda.

It was a great night and as Ross donned his signature fedora to bid farewell, I realised it was getting late and that I'd better remember to ask *what's going on* the next day, when getting up in the dark at 5:45am may be a little irritating!

early morning under the blankets

- [Paula Inayat-Hussain](#)

It was last winter.
I remember the same sky, the same cold.
Funeral director offers sympathy
Like bath water grown tepid.
Good zen talk on Thursday night.
Zen teacher holds out hope like a bone.
"Twenty-one years in the making!" he says.

Looking for pen and paper in the dark, find an eraser instead:
"Great Civilization Article Co. " it says in English and Chinese.
They could be right.
I don't know what anything is for either.
Morning walk with friend:
"How was your holiday?"
"Great. It was great!
We ate our way from east to west and up to the Thai border,
Then declined an offer to go south."
But joy, bound up with string,
Cannot be summoned.
Love abides, I know,
But this subterranean, unshareable life ...
Back to one breath
Back to one breath
Back to the very first breath.

Zen Practice

| - Paula Inayat-Hussain

We lose our money,
Become beggars in our lives.
Yet I am, you are,
The last prophet.
Following thin trails of evidence
We come
And with singular responsibility
Dig out the cave from the Mountain.

Right questions can assist our practice

- Phillip McNamara

Questioning is perhaps the basis of our human life and true mind. I'm not talking about cluttering your mind anxiety questioning, brooding complaining questioning, or worry-infused drama-filled excess worrying questioning. Rather I am talking about deepening your world and point of view questioning, emptying and loosening questioning. This type of questioning, or the juncture of such questioning, can redirect our whole being toward greater clarity and understanding of life. How do we make use of such a trait; one that can be a particularly powerful stimulus for opening life up?

Many Zen stories open by telling us that a student asked their Zen master a particular question, or the master asked their student a

particular question. It appears from these stories that a Zen question can be used to trigger off a Zen awakening, or used to test if the listener has attained one. Some famous Zen questions have been recorded in Zen stories known in Chinese as 'gong-ans', or in Japanese as 'koans'. I am sure that many people professing to be practicing Zen – even if they haven't been given a koan as their central practice by a Roshi – have read a book quoting some of these recorded koan questions, as well as some of the commentaries which attempt to open them up. I certainly read about them many years before I sought out a group where I could find out more about meditation.

In high school and just after graduating, my best friend and I use to meet and wander around a nearby lake discussing the koans in Paul Reps' book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. It was an enjoyable circumambulating of the lake in which we often got so focused on the koan, our responses and silences that we became quite unaware of the time or the picnickers'. When we did become aware of the time or our surrounds again we'd laugh and wonder if being partly on autopilot whilst deeply ruminating on questions was healthy for us. That led us to ask other questions such as- what is time or what is memory?

It was thought-provoking, introspective and yet an intimate social way of easing some of our adolescent existential angst. We gained some insights that, at the time, we thought useful. And our questioning minds meant that we started to read and search for what others might have thought or said about life. We shared notes as we developed an interest in art, literature, psychology, comparative philosophy, religion... and took those interests into our University degrees. Along the way we also began to find that many others who were interested in questioning what life is, had also stumbled upon Zen. Yet hardly any had taken up a serious practice. They had been intrigued by Zen, found some insight, and then gone off to explore levels of consciousness, chemistry, epistemology, the ironies and subjectivities of mind, or the many finer layers and labyrinths of Cartesian dualism.

Sensing-thinking-feeling-responding: self-awareness seemed problematic; an endless loop of self-monitoring contradictions. How to find a way through all this? As guide rails I've had my own academic repetitive questions that led to several dissertations, but amongst or between those I still had the undercurrent of Paul Reps book and what I regarded as larger and puzzling questions about the nature of mind that couldn't be answered merely by academic pursuits. Having dipped my toe in the Zen lake, twenty years later I eventually found my way back to asking what was this Zen practice of zazen?

Like many others I came to zazen with many 'why', 'what', 'how' and 'when' questions. I guess I had already considered answers to these questions but had left them unconscious. But once I committed to tasting what this Zen was all about - and gave myself a year of regular attendance at the Zendo - my questions came back into focus.

I regularly struggled with getting in the car and driving the fifty minutes to the Zendo. Some times I felt too hungry or too tired or too busy to bother, but I did. At other times it often seemed too hot, too cold, too late, too early, too expensive, too intrusive on the many other things I 'had to do'... but I'd made a commitment to myself to give it a good go and so managed a fairly regular attendance and, for some reason, when ever I felt too lazy, my family would say: 'Isn't it Zen, why aren't you going?'. Their question I couldn't or didn't want to really answer and so I'd go. It was probably because their question echoed many of mine that it gave me focus.

For many years I stumbled through my practice on the competing energies of - When will I find time to do this? Why should I do this? What is the exact outcome of this practice? How do I proceed?

Many questions. Many answers. I persevered as enquiring and doubting mind juggled about. Then I just accepted that this energy of questioning was actually my practice and settled into that. It was okay to have doubts. It was okay to practice something I couldn't quite articulate. I decided that perhaps for everyone - if you take up your practice and continue with it you will struggle again and again through such questions. That's fine. Why, what, how and when questions can be guiding questions; orientating, resourcing, assistance, goal, timeline, expectation questions.

I entered zen asking such questions and sat with them. An overly busy mind perhaps. Amongst my confusion, but after listening to teishos and watching the Roshi's manner, I decided to trust the Roshi and went to dokusan - to meet with the teacher. He helped me to at times be gentler on myself... and at other times be more exacting of myself. From that process - of meeting with a Roshi - I have learnt that perhaps the most important reflection is which questions are you attempting to answer? If you are engaged with your practice - which questions will help you stay focused? Which questions are about the quality of your practice? Which questions are about your struggle and where to turn?

I have found that questions can be an important tool for practice. But questions can also be an excuse not to practice. They may raise complications or provide over simplified solutions and alternative temptations. They can become distractions that serve as a basis for poor practice ...and eventual dissolution of it.

Face your questions and use them to focus. I was horrified to find that some of mine indicated that parts of me didn't really want change, did not want to be disciplined, wanted to be fearful, wanted to be over exuberant, wanted to be zealous, wanted to escape my responsibilities and certain aspects of the world. By sitting through these I discovered why Zen is often called the Middle-Way, and am grateful for that.

Questioning is important. However questions can be an avoidance tool. Questions can bring insight. However questioning can also bring about a dangerous detour or seductive short cut that steps you away from your true self.

In deep questioning big doubt and great faith can often combine to produce the energy that results in some sort of realization. As an expression 'Big doubt, Great faith' challenges us to be aware that questions are no guarantee that we are engaged with the Zen path; we may just be playing with little doubt and ego based frustrations.

This is why dokusan, with a recognised teacher, eventually becomes essential to authentic practice. You are truly blessed when your commitment, discipline and understanding can be checked by a teacher. That is the place of important dialogue and response. Intimate and true to deep self. That is when the sustaining or distracting, revising or capturing nature of your questions can be fully utilized. A good teacher will help maintain the continuum and equilibrium of your journey through your questioning. Having traveled the way they know specific indicators of you place or state on the journey.

In short questions or enquiry on the right questions can assist your practice. Questions can also raise issues and challenges for you to grapple with and resolve if you are to bring your Buddha nature to life. To assist this process a teacher and dokusan should be considered. Zen stories tell us that some masters can become grandmotherly for us within this bringing to life. Eventually one might discover that as Zen students we should not deceive ourselves at all, and that we can do this by establishing a whole-hearted faith in the Buddha Dharma and an aspiration to always turn the wheel of the Four Great Vows:

Shu jo mu hen sei gan do

The many beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

bon no mu jin sei gan dan

grief distress no exhausting pledge vow conclude

Greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly; I vow to abandon them.

ho mon mu ryo sei gan gaku

dharma gates no measure pledge vow learn

Dharma gates are countless; I vow to wake to them.

Butsu do mu jo sei gan jo

Buddha way no top pledge vow become

Buddha's way is unsurpassed; I vow to embody it fully.

As Robert Aitkin wrote: *The four Great Vows express aspirations relating to the Three Treasures of Buddhism: to redeem the sangha, to stop debasing the Three Treasures, to perceive the dharma clearly, and to attain buddhahood. As such, the Vows are a recasting in the Mahayana of the Ti-sarana-gamana, the ceremony of taking refuge in the Three Treasures, that is found in all Buddhist traditions.*¹

Indeed. Eventually one might take up these vows and wrap one's questioning mind into taking the precepts. This then becomes a life long practice; saving the many beings which also includes yourself.

EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY

¹ Robert Aitken - The Bodhisattva Vows, from the archives of Tricycle Magazine, at <http://integral-options.blogspot.com.au/2010/01/robert-aitken-bodhisattva-vows.html> accessed 4-7-2013. He writes:

THE GREAT VOWS, known as the Bodhisattva Vows, probably originated in China around the sixth century and may have been derived from an earlier Sanskrit gatha (song). At the turn of the eighth century we find Chinese Zen master Hui-neng teaching their implications. Today they are recited at the end of services in most Mahayana centers.

Composed with seven Chinese graphs per line, the Great Vows are poetically arranged in parallels, rhymes, and repetitions. The contemporary English translations of the Great Vows rely heavily on D.T. Suzuki's version, first published in 1935. He used the title "The Four Great Vows," an abbreviation of the title used by Hui-neng: "The Four Broad Great Vows." The graph for "broad" implies "for broad dissemination." Nakagawa Soen Roshi (1908-83) in turn established the title "Great Vows for All" for his own translation in 1957, and two years later, at the Diamond Sangha-then a fledgling community in Honolulu-we used this title in our first sutra book. Today, as we continue to refine our translation, it is almost the only part of the wording of the Vows that has stayed the same.

- Brigid Lowry

Recently, on a wild night, amidst rain and lightning, fourteen black-clad Zen students sat together in a creaky old hall, contemplating the idea that *Every day is a good day*. It's a comforting thought, and some of us had no problem with it. The words are cheerful and encouraging, and often feel true. If we can greet whatever is happening in our lives with grace and equanimity, welcoming all that arises, then surely every moment is a good moment, every day is a good day? Roshi Ross Bolleter challenges us, urges us not to be so hasty. What about if you accidentally ran over a child, killing it? How would that be a good day? What is the truth of the matter here? He urges us to dig deeply into this koan, or unsolvable question.

Next morning, during zazen, I remember John Tarrant once saying that when something is uncertain, we want to hurry it towards Yes or No. We prefer easy solutions, and are not keen to allow the uneasiness of Not Knowing. But some things can't be hurried, and perhaps some mysteries will never be solved.

Present moment, wonderful moment. Thich Nhat Hanh invites us in. Here it is, this moment, this cool morning, this mug of green tea with rose petals, this purple fake leopard skin coat I found in a kid's dress-up box. It's the only moment I have. It's up to me to feel it, taste it, know it, love it, then let it go. Robert Aitken Roshi urged students to stop "seeking better accommodation". If we are always in search of a better moment than the one we find ourselves in, we can never be fully in our life. How often do we find ourselves hurrying in search of a moment less busy, less anxious, less angry, as if there really were a heaven, a place somewhere not far ahead where the good stuff happens.

However, endlessly seeking to create only pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones becomes very wearying. Nor does it work. The three noble truths have stood the test of time, because they can't be denied. There is unsatisfactoriness. We all have to live with what Ezra Bayda calls "the anxious quiver of being alive." Shit, as they say, happens. Someone we love is diagnosed with a large aggressive brain tumour. Factories collapse, crushing underpaid, unprotected workers. Crazy people shoot innocent people. Greedy companies sell poisonous products. Beauty fades, and for two weeks f***ing Telstra refuses to fix my telephone, despite my daily begging and whining to the hapless call centre folk in the Philippines.

So, here we are, in our unsatisfactory wonderful wobbly lives, dealing with the push and shove, the bright and the shadowy, the arising and the passing away.

Is every day a good day? I can't answer this fully yet but do know that every moment offers an opportunity to explore the matter. In my world, some days are better than others. On tricky days, I can mumble and grumble, or I can seek out the good bits and sav our them. Gratitude seems a wiser choice than taking the dark path of ignorance into crankiness, anxiety and despair.

I am ageing, inching closer and closer to death. My thighs are flabby, my love life is zero, it's my beloved niece who has the brain tumour. My television regularly informs me of heart-breaking violence on the streets of London, Boston, Syria, Armadale. Yet I am lucky to have a teacher, a hall, a zabuton, a sangha, a teapot, lemongrass tea, lightning, wild stormy nights, quiet mornings. The cancer diagnosis has rallied our family in the most tender of ways, and Amber is an amazing beacon of courage, acceptance, hope and equanimity. I will continue to pray for biggish miracles. Meanwhile, smaller ones do happen. Whoo hoo! My telephone is working! Somewhat to his alarm, I almost kissed the man who came to fix it. Big gassho to you, Steve from Telstra.

The Practice of a Lifetime

- Mari Rhydwen

Wumenkuan Case 19 Nanquan: 'Ordinary Mind is the Tao.'

Zhaozhou asked Nanquan, 'What is the Tao?'

Nanquan said, 'Ordinary mind is the Tao.'

Zhaozhou asked, 'Should I try to direct myself toward it?'
Nanquan said, 'If you try to direct yourself you betray your own practise.'

Zhaozhou asked, 'How can I know the Tao if I don't direct myself?'

Nanquan said, 'The Tao is not subject to knowing or not knowing. knowing is delusion, not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Tao, you will find it vast and boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of affirmation and negation?' With these words Zhaozhou had sudden realization.

Wu-men's comment

Questioned by Zhaozhou, Nanquan lost no time in showing the smashed tile and the melted ice, where no explanation is possible. Though Zhaozhou had realization, he could confirm it only after another thirty years of practice.

Wumen's verse

*Spring comes with flowers, autumn with the moon,
summer with breeze, winter with snow.
When idle concerns don't hang in your mind,
that is your best season.*

Please sit comfortably. I was inspired to talk about this particular koan by a conversation with someone I'd known for a very long time who has given up the practice of zen for a more exotic form of practice on the grounds that zen is 'too ordinary.' We can tell it's ordinary, here, on a Thursday evening, a group of people in New Zealand singing ancient Aboriginal songs translated into English. Just the kind of ordinary activity we expect. So, in response to 'Zen is too ordinary' here we go.

Here we have Zhaozhou (known as Joshu in Japan) Zhaozhou of the dog fame and, because of that and because that is the first story in the Wumenkuan, it's a name that we are all familiar with. So he was someone I knew about very early on in my practice and I always liked him because he took a long time to mature in his practice and he made me feel I had plenty of time. Now I'm not quite so sure I do. There was something very reassuring about that sense of slow maturing. He lived in the late Tang dynasty and here, in this story, Zhaozhou is a young man, of around twenty years old. And he's studying with Nanquan and in fact he was to study with Nanquan for forty years, which puts everything into a bit of perspective around

here. Forty years studying with one teacher and Nanquan at that time was around fifty. And that's Nanquan of cat fame (Zhaozhou dog fame, Nanquan cat fame) and this was around the year 800 AD. Just to put it into a historical context, thanks to Google, 800 AD Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the West by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day. A few years later, algebra was invented. A few years later the Vikings sailed up the River Thames and later that century Alfred had a great victory over the Danes in southern England so in terms of Anglo-Celtic history and world history, that's the time Nanquan and Zhaozhou were living.

Coming back to Nanquan, I'm sure you all know the story of the cat, of Nanquan holding up the cat, 'If you can say anything, I will spare the cat!' There is silence and, the cat is spliced in two! Poor cat! Zhaozhou wasn't there at the time but when he came back he took off one of his straw sandals and placed it on his head which apparently was a sign of mourning and Nanquan said, 'If you'd been there, the cat would have been saved.'

So, this first question that the young Zhaozhou asks Nanquan here is, 'What is the Tao?'

The Chinese used Tao, which literally translates as Way, it means that in the sense of the way of doing things, so it's metaphorically the right path as well as meaning a way, a path, a road and this word was used by the Chinese for Indian metaphysical terms for which there was no Chinese equivalent such as Bodhi and Prajna. So this question is really, 'What is the way?' or 'What is Zen?' or 'What is it?'

The sense of a way in Chinese is interesting. The sense of a way changes as it moves from country to country, continent to continent, the idea of a way is very practical and literally grounded, a taste of the earthy pragmatism of Chinese zen and there's a sense that even if you can't articulate it and see it, the way is somehow there if you can just find it. That path is available. I have odd memories of a teisho years and years ago where some the teacher, perhaps it was Yamada Roshi, talked about butchers cutting up a carcass and how if they follow the way, it cuts easily which seems like an odd example to talk about in this context but is a story told by Zhuangzi, a 4th century Taoist, a man of the way, of the Tao. And this is something about we know don't we, when we're doing something and it's just going so easily that it seems that the path has been there all along and this is what the way is, it's not something to fight with, to overcome or master, it's something we go with.

The answer, 'Ordinary mind is the Tao'. Well initially this seems incredibly reassuring. If it's ordinary mind I can do it. But then the doubts start to creep in. Ordinary mind? Surely not my ordinary mind? Buddha's ordinary mind, or that guy over there who seems so calm and deep. But not my mind. Not the mind that worries about income tax and fixing myself, and mostly everybody else as well and sorting out the problems at work and bad hair days or the fact that I'm just not good enough, one way or another and, getting really deep and dirty, sometimes getting really annoyed about something in the middle of zazen and creating imaginary dialogues in which, surprise-surprise, I have the perfect retort to my perceived adversary. Surely not **that** mind? Is that ordinary mind?

See the thoughts are already defining it aren't they? But thoughts are not the mind. My thoughts are not who I am, our thoughts are not who we are. And yet we make that mistake again and again and again of hanging onto this embroidered story which somehow becomes a self. So that's one idea of ordinary mind that somehow tempts us, but blocks us. Or there might be a reluctance to embrace ordinary mind. Zen is supposed to be interesting, not ordinary. Sometimes we may think it should be interesting and not ordinary. I fairly recently reread Shunryu Suzuki's book 'Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind' which I had read very early on in the eighties when it was first published and I was curious about how it would measure up, many years or so after I first read it and here is what I read:

'Zen is not some kind of excitement but concentration on our usual everyday routine.' There was a whole section about not being excited, not even about zen, and that zen is not about rushing off to the mountains or to the forests or to Japan, or wherever you happen to plan go to practice and it continued - 'This is the sudden way because when your practice is calm and ordinary, everyday life itself is enlightenment.' I was quite fascinated because that part about excitement was definitely not in the book when I read it, excitedly and full of plans, all those years ago.

But you know ordinary mind is nothing to do with being dull and boring and mediocre and for that matter it's not to do with not being dull and boring and mediocre. Ordinary mind free of judgements and opinions about everything, nothing added, nothing made out of the thoughts that arise and pass when you yourself get out of the way.

Zhaozhou asked, 'Should I try to direct myself towards it?'

Ordinary mind, do we need to strive for it? Well of course we can't really or it becomes another pose, 'I'm working at being ordinary.' And yet there is something to be said for it. I've recently done some Impro, improvised theatre, playing games on stage which are all totally improvised and there are no scripts. You have to work together with other people according to the rules. One of the rules is to be completely ordinary and not to try to be clever and come up with smart ideas or hilarious gags because when you do that it doesn't support other people. Another of the rules is that you support other people because you are never a one man show. In improvisation we are never on our own and it doesn't work if you don't give, as well as accept, offers. There are all kinds of offers, for example just saying something (like) 'Why don't you take off your sunhat?' would be an offer, and this is the nature of improvisation—not knowing what you or anyone else is going to do or say next. But, whatever happens, it will be funny, or touching or unexpected, because that's the nature of improvisation. You never know what is going to happen next and the rules apply to life in exactly the same way. So the ground rules for improvisation work pretty well for life as practice: be ordinary, pay attention, listen, respond naturally to what arises, accept wholeheartedly whatever happens and act from there, give generously and make offers to other people (especially if they seem a bit stuck) by taking action so they can move on. Ordinary mind is the way here but all life is improvisation this is what we do in our practice.

Many of you will know Susan Murphy who is a dear friend of mine and of many of you I know and in her latest book, 'Minding the Earth, Mending the World' she says 'Mind empty of supposition has an exact fit with reality and the nature of the universe.' This mind free of opinions, just like (sings) 'Fat Charlie the Archangel sloped into the room. I have no opinions about this, and I have no opinions about that.' Which really rather explains why he was an archangel now I come to think of it.

If you try to direct yourself you betray your own practice. Well we all know this really don't we? This clinging to not-clinging. Not clinging to clinging. It's a betrayal. We betray ourselves. And we know when we do that and all the little rationalisations that appear. It makes me think of Patrick Kearney who told a lovely anecdote at a retreat I went to recently. Patrick is an old zen colleague of mine who is now teacher in the Theravadan tradition and he described how we kid ourselves and in the middle of zazen he'd have a thought and he'd say to himself, 'Well I'll just finish this thought, because it's really, really

interesting and then I'll go back to my breath.' We don't need anyone watching over us, we know when we're doing that, don't we?

But Zhaozhou keeps persisting. 'How can I know the Tao when I don't direct myself?' Really not letting go is he? And you can really feel for him, it's a question all of us must have asked. Everyone seems to ask it at some time, even Dogen, the 13th century Soto Japanese priest whose drive to find this out led him to China at a time when going to China was an extremely dangerous journey, by sea. You were taking your life in your hands to go to China in those days by boat to answer his question:

'Both exoteric and esoteric teachings explain that a person in essence has true dharma nature and is originally a body of "Buddha nature." If so, why do all buddhas in the past, present and future arouse the wish for and seek enlightenment?

You know, this is a problem that comes up for every person seeking the way. But at the same time, throughout the history of our practice, there's this coming back to the ordinary. Linji told his monks, 'Virtuous monks, just be ordinary and simple. Don't strive, just be ordinary'. So you see this question arises again and again. If we already have it, are it, do it, why do we have to try? And the answer again and again is Don't try to do anything. Just be ordinary. And this is one of those glorious paradoxes. Aitken Roshi used to say there are no paradoxes in nature, only in the human mind or, to put it another way, this question, this apparent contradiction, only exists for us. Reality is quite comfortable with itself as it is. But this is not much consolation when you are really wanting to realise the Tao. It's so frustrating: how can you generate the effort to try to know it, at the same time that knowing that trying to grasp it is forever moving it out of reach? And you know this. We all know this. And we know too that it doesn't make sense. And that it does.

Nanquan said as much to Zhaozhou, 'The Tao is not subject to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion, not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Tao, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of right and wrong?' Hakuin criticised Nanquan for being grandmotherly here. As a grandmother I have a horrible feeling that this is secret men's code for 'talks too much' but it also seems to mean that he was being very helpful. Hakuin perhaps would have given him a whack which was more his style.

Nanquan said, 'The Tao is not subject to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion, not knowing is blankness.' Knowing doesn't work in this realm. Just when we think we have the answer, we know nothing. Zhaozhou knows this, but where to go from here? This way is blocked. That way is blocked. The mind road, cut off. What do you do then?

'If you truly reach the genuine Tao you will find it vast and boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of right and wrong?' Well Nanquan probably is being verbose here but, as with many good koan stories it ends with Zhaozhou having sudden realisation. But make no mistake, this is just the start of a long, long practice of ordinary mind. You know I used to have very much an 'Are we there yet?' mind a 'Have I got it now and can I stop yet?' mind. And teachers kept saying, 'This is just the beginning' and it was so discouraging because it felt like when you climb a mountain and (you're all New Zealanders so you all know about climbing mountains, I've seen all those boots and hiking shoes out there) and you go up and you think you are there and you and there's another slope and you think, 'Oh well, okay' and then you get up that bit and, 'Oh no, there's another bit and it's even much bigger than the first bit' and I thought practice was going to be like that, I really did. 'What did I let myself in for? It's just going to get harder and harder and harder and I'm never going to reach the top!' But it isn't like that at all. Fortunately the long practice of ordinary mind is just beautifully ordinary. There's something oddly reassuring about Zhaozhou and the sense of the time he took to mature just by doing this practice. This was the start of his practice, ordinary mind is the way, and years and years of ordinary mind is the way before he actually started to teach, because he didn't start to teach until he was eighty. And he continued until he was a hundred and twenty. And this is the way, walking the way. Zhaozhou, there goes the leisurely one, walking the Tao, beyond philosophy eating supper, taking a stroll, doing some zazen preparing for teisho.

Spring comes with flowers, autumn with the moon

summer with breeze, winter with snow.

When idle concerns don't hang in your mind

that is your best season.

When I was reading this koan again in preparation for tonight I hadn't read the poem for a long time and the wonderful vivid freshness of it—of Spring comes with flowers, autumn with the moon. Completely new, like you've never heard it before. Yes, spring is like that and then it's summer, then autumn. Sometimes we create seasons too, not like spring into summer but we have those long stagnant winters like in fairy stories, the ones that go on and on, but those too move on from the stagnation and the long cold winters. This poem in fact then reminds me of another poem and this poem is by Xiwan Zhingwan (1597-165) who was a Ming abbess in the Linji line. I think because Zen developed from Chan in Japan we forget that people were still practising in China for a long time after it came to Japan and so this abbess, her lifelong koan was *'Where is the place I can settle myself and establish my life?'* And she wrote a poem which was practice instructions for this koan.

Understand the ordinary mind and realise one who is naturally complete

Ask urgently who you were before your father and mother were born

When you see through the method that underlies them all

The mountain blossoms and flowing streams will rejoice with you.

You know, it is a long practice, this ordinary practice, a lifetime practice letting go of stories and habits of self so familiar we don't even notice they are there. They have become the furniture of our minds. But then we let go, just become ordinary, and there's the candlelight, the branch of white blossoms, and the sound of distant traffic.

Thank you for your attention.

About Mari Rhydwen:-

After growing up in Wales and studying in England, Mari went to Japan where she practised as a student with Yamada Roshi and first met Robert Aitken Roshi, the founder of the Diamond Sangha. When she moved to Australia the following year she began sitting with others in

the Sydney Zen Centre which had recently invited Aitken Roshi to become their teacher. When she moved to Perth with her two daughters in 1992, she became a student of Ross Bolleter and practised with the ZGWA for many years, often taking the role of tanto at sesshin, before setting off from Fremantle on a small sailing yacht across the Indian Ocean. She now lives in Sydney, close to her grandchildren, and has continued to work as a linguist, supporting Aboriginal languages. Since being invited to teach in 2005, she has been particularly involved in exploring how to combine zen practice with the demands of work and other aspects of contemporary lay life.

Maturity in Zen

- Ross Bolleter

How we deal with suffering is one gauge of maturity in the Way. When we realize intimacy, when we awaken to the world as our own nature, we recognize that there is no place where we are safe from the pain of the world.

The suffering of the world is not just our business; at the deepest level, it is also our matter. As the years of training mount, we find that there is less of a pull to seek our own comfort and to close our attention off from the pain of others. If we flee from that pain, or try to inoculate ourselves against it, we won't be high and dry at all, but will suffer needlessly because of our evasion. Standing fast, we may be able to help, even if it is only with our mere presence.

When we move to ease the pain of another, we let go of our own self-concern as we engage with them. The development of compassion, and its close relative, moral imagination: that ability to put our self in another's place and to empathize with them, rest in the kind of wisdom and insight that our journey on the Way can provide.

For me, the development of a sense of humour is another gauge of maturing practice. We are all error-prone, and our wrong-footedness and its resulting shame and embarrassment seem to intensify, if anything, as we deepen in the Way. Over time we learn that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously, and be able to tolerate and laugh at our own foolishness. This is an antidote to the spiritual pride that can easily grow with perceived attainments on the path.

With the development of a perspective on our place in things, comes, hopefully, a gift for not sweating the small. So much angst is typically expended on slights and insults—assumed, or actual. In this regard, it can be helpful to ask, “What does this mean in the light of my death?” Usually, not much.

With maturity in the Way, we get a clearer perspective on what is important. Shido Bunan’s famous line, “Those who seek the Dharma in the depths are those who leave it behind in the shallows,” is rich in implications, but surely points to the fact that if we are overwhelmingly focused on awakening to emptiness, we may miss the richness of our lives that lies so close at hand in love and work. The quest for enlightenment may mean that we put these on hold. The long journey after awakening surely includes restoring those values in our lives, and becoming increasingly available to others.

Lastly, as a gauge of maturity on the Way, I would include grace under pressure: that ability to deal lightly and freely with what is difficult. My father, while not a Zen practitioner in the formal sense, exemplifies this most aptly for me. When he was in his eighties he was knocked down by a delivery van. In hospital they put him in “treatment,” prior to admitting him as a patient. I broke regulations to be with him. Although no one could find time to get him a bottle to piss in, four staff members came round with their clipboards during the three hours he waited there, to ask him his age. He generously gave each of them a fresh response —“twenty-one,” “ninety-eight,” “forty-seven,” and finally, “two-hundred!” I would say (modestly) that his tongue had no bone in it. Always playful, he found the freedom and the grace to play, even in his pain and distress.

(An extract from Ross Bolleter’s book, *The Five Ranks of Dongshan: Keys to Enlightenment*, to be published by Wisdom Publications, Massachusetts, in 2014.)

ZEN GROUP OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA MEMBERSHIP/PLEDGE FORM FOR 2012/2013

The fee structure for the Zen Group of Western Australia for 2012/2013 is as follows.

Full Member - Town - \$160 Family -	\$200	Health Care Card/Pension/Student - \$90	Out of
	\$230	Friend (suggested) -	\$90
Pledge (suggested)- \$500	(\$42 per month, in addition to membership)		

If you would like to join but cannot meet the fees please contact the ZGWA Treasurer, Paul Wilson. The money raised through membership and pledges goes towards maintaining the Zendo and paying the teacher. Members have the opportunity to be nominated for council positions and to vote at general meetings. As a member you also have a right to a reserved place and discount for sesshins, ZGWA magazine subscription, receipt of mail outs, and use of the library.

We have a group of **members** who pledge monthly, over and above membership. These pledges are vital to maintain the zendo and our teacher, and keep the doors open for everyone. If you can afford it please consider. Pledges can be made throughout the year, or in a lump sum. But this is different from a donation. Pledges are a scheduled payment, and the Treasurer is notified in advance of your commitment.

Regular payments can be made by cheque or by arrangement with the ZGWA Treasurer.

The membership fee should have been paid by **1st July 2012**. However you can join at any time. If you wish to continue your membership or to join us as a member please do so now. To become a member or friend of ZGWA, and to register your pledge, please complete the form below and either give it to the Treasurer or a Council member at the Zendo or send it with your payment to:

The Treasurer, Zen Group of WA, PO Box 442, Fremantle 6959

If you have a query regarding membership please contact the Treasurer by:

Email: zgwa_contacts@yahoo.com.au

Or call: 0413826119

I wish to be a member of the Zen Group of Western Australia for the **20012/2013** financial year.

Please tick:

Full Member - \$200 Health Care Card/Pension/Student - \$90 Out of Town - \$160
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If you also wish to pledge a regular amount to ZGWA please indicate below.

Monthly pledge of \$..... Other (please specify)

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Please fill in your up-to-date contact details below.

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-

Phone: _____ E-Mail: _____

Signature(s): _____

Date:

THANK YOU