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[www.zgwa.org.au](http://www.zgwa.org.au)

[wobblypot@zgwa.org.au](mailto:wobblypot@zgwa.org.au)

Editor: Gerard Mazza

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The Wobbly Pot is a forum in which ZGWA Sangha members can share Dharma and creativity.

All Sangha members are invited to contribute essays, articles, poetry, fiction, photography or visual art.

Email submissions to [wobblypot@zgwa.org.au](mailto:wobblypot@zgwa.org.au).

The next edition will be released in October 2017. Submissions are due by the 30th of September, 2017. The theme will be ‘The Whole Earth is Medicine’.

Thank you to all of those who have contributed to this current issue.

# Bodhidharma's Great Emptiness

A Teisho delivered during the ZGWA's Spring Sesshin, 2014

BY MARI RHDWEN ROSHI

## **Case I of the Hekeiganroku (Blue Cliff Record): 'Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness'**

*The Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the first principle of the holy teaching?"*

*Dharma said, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy."*

*The Emperor said, "Who is this person confronting me?"*

*Dharma said, "I do not know."*

*The Emperor could not reach an accord.*

*Bodhidharma then crossed the river, and went on to Wei. The Emperor later took up this matter with Master Chih.*

*Chih said, "Does your majesty know that person yet?"*

*The Emperor said, "I don't know him."*

*Chih said, "That was the Bodhisattva Kannon conveying the mind-seal of the Buddha."*

*The Emperor felt regretful, and at once sought to have a messenger dispatched to urge him to return.*

*Chih said, "There is no use sending a messenger. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he would not return."*

In recent years, I have spoken via Skype to my brother David in the UK. He and I are the only remaining members of my birth family. He often asks me questions about our family, and I answer him and he says: "How do you know that? No one ever told me!"

As I tell him, I know because of being in bed in the early morning with mum at 'cup of tea time' when I was little, and hearing the same stories, begging for the same stories, again and again. Uncle Tom who was jilted by the Indian princess and married his grumpy cousin instead, for example!

As Arundhati Roy says, the great stories are "the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably."

When considering today's teisho, I thought back to the early days of my practice and the delight in hearing

the same stories, again and again: the familiarity of them, and the same feeling of never tiring of them. Indeed, traditionally, Zhao-zhou's dog is reiterated, and a teisho on it is given, at the start of every sesshin. Some teachers have abandoned this, I know, (and I know why!) but it points to an important part of our tradition, learning by heart. Learning by heart... not the rote learning so denounced by educators, (though how good is it not to have to think about what seven nines are?) but learning *by heart*. Intimately, word for word, it becomes who we are.

(Talking of heart, there's a nice line in Bob O'Hearn's *Shodoka*: "Just keep walking, if anyone asks directions, point to the heart, yours and mine are not two. Looking elsewhere it's completely missed.")

So, this koan, this story, is one that very many of us here today are very familiar with, and yet it is one that we can hear again and again. And for anyone who hasn't heard it before, it is one of the founding Zen stories, Zen myths.

Myths? Well this is a part of the story of Bodhidharma, but there are very few facts known about him, except that he was a Brahman from South India and took Buddhist Yogacara teachings to China. Much of what we now know about him was written much later, but, as the first teacher of Zen in China, the man who brought meditation (dhyana) from India to China where it became Chan, then Zen in Japan, he is an important figure.

You can find Bodhidharma dolls (Daruma dolls... like Kelly dolls, you can knock them over and they right themselves) in Japan, but now they are a kind of good luck charm. You buy from a temple, and wish for what you want, and return it to be burned at the end of the year at the temple; exactly the kind of thing that might have had Bodhidharma turning in his grave!

And talk of graves leads to another myth (that combines two conflicting myths, one that he died in China, and one that he returned to India) that has Bodhidharma dying in China, but being found walking back to India with only one sandal, whereupon his supposed grave in China was dug up and found to be empty except for one sandal.

Despite the lack of information about him, or reliable historical records, today's story is a very powerful narrative of what characterises Zen Buddhism. Note 'Buddhism': not Zen as floating in a kind of 'anything goes' space, but Zen as a Buddhist teaching with its own flavour.

So, Bodhidharma: one of the first teachers in our lineage, the very first 'Zen' teacher if you like. And in Zen we remember our teachers. We know they are not separate from us.

I recently read a teisho by Aitken Roshi, which he presented at the 2010 Founders' Day ceremony on June 13, 2010, at Palolo Zen Center. It was actually Roshi's last teisho.

And what is so noticeable is that in this teisho he speaks so much about remembering people. He tells stories of people who he knew and worked with and who influenced him: Flora Courtois, Maetzumi Roshi and Joanna Macy. So this telling the stories of people, and retelling them, over and over, it's what we do. It is how we embody our practice.

And he told one about Joanna Macy who was driving her motorcycle in Sri Lanka, and said she was the Huayan sutra incarnate when she found that she was not driving the bike. ('The Huayan' is the Chinese name for the very long Flower Ornament sutra. It is a sutra about the interdependency of all phenomena, or dharmas.)

So, *she* was not driving the bike, or, as she told it:

*"...certainly not the only one [driving it]. The road was driving it, and so were the people and buses and carts, and the crazily leaning palms. Consciousness was everywhere, no longer contained in my skull, no longer divided up into separate heads and walled in behind separate pairs of eyes."*

This made such perfect sense to me. It's so evident and recognisable where I live in Indonesia, watching the swarms of *sepeda motor*, not colliding with each other or anything else, moving as one in and out of the trucks, like schools of small fishes dividing and going around bigger fishes and rocks and coral, then reforming, but with no leader. And crossing the road as a pedestrian in the middle of all this is like walking the Way, indeed is walking the Way, as you set off with relaxed courage at a steady pace and just go straight, between the cars and motorbikes and trucks and buses that flow around you, and *you* are not in control, *it* (all) is and if you *think* about it, and waver or hesitate, you are likely to cause a pile up!

And actually, it is always like this. We just don't usually notice.

Anyway, returning to Bodhidharma's story now:

***The Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the first principle of the holy teaching?"***

***Dharma said, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy."***

The Emperor of the southern Chinese kingdom of Liang was presumably expecting a different answer. In fact, if we have not heard this story before, we probably expect a different answer (though if we know anything of

Zen, even by reputation, maybe not).

Actually, earlier in the conversation, but not included in this particular version of the koan (koans are often abbreviated), before asking this question about the first principle, the Emperor had actually asked Bodhidharma about how much merit he had earned. So, we can fairly confidently assume that Emperor Wu, who had devoted a lot of money to building Buddhist temples and who, on occasion, became a monk himself only to find himself forced to return to secular, or imperial life again fairly rapidly each time, was expecting to have some assurance that he was on the right track by giving so generously and building lots of temples and studying the scriptures. (In Indonesia, many Chinese people are Buddhists and they really are very curious about what my kind of Buddhism is about, because for them Buddhism does not involve any meditation. It is about going to the temple and praying and/or giving money to pay for their wrong doings to ensure that they do not have bad karma. And they see Buddha, Amitabha, as a god, who must be prayed to, to ask for success in this world and good rebirth. Karma and rebirth. These are the main issues. So this concern with merit is a long and ongoing tradition.)

Bodhidharma's reply to the question about merit was "None whatsoever!"

The Emperor then went on to ask about what genuine merit was, to which Bodhidharma replied that it was, "pure wisdom of sublime perfection, experiencing one's 'solitary emptiness', and seeking nothing in the world."

But, returning to this telling of the story:

***"What is the first principle of the holy teaching?"***

***"Vast emptiness. Nothing holy."***

Here, Bodhidharma is telling it straight, the first principle of the teaching that he brought to China was not about earning merit through good deeds or generosity, though this is not to disparage the value of generosity. And this is very important. We hear this story and can sometimes be misled into thinking that practising generosity/dana is of no significance. Yet in his own teachings about ways to enter the path, the two entries and four practices attributed to Bodhidharma, the fourth practice is to practice the six paramitas, and generosity is the first one of these and the one he discusses in detail: "The essence of dharma is without possessiveness. Thus one can give up life and wealth, and practice generosity."

But there is a subtle difference, or actually maybe not so subtle a difference, indeed a gaping chasm, between giving generously in order to get something, and giving generously in a way that takes everything away, especially miserliness. And here we touch on the crux of practice. Then, in mythologico-historical ancient China, as well as now, for us here today, how do we actually do this practice?

We know *why* we do it. We have been told often enough, and in so many ways, it removes 'all anguish and

despair'. But *how* do we do it?

We do it by 'cutting of the mind road'. By 'non-thinking'. These are some of the terms used in our tradition. But how do we do that, and how do we do that and still function off the cushion as well as on it, and still, you know, give the right fare to the bus driver?

Thoughts arise; they come and go. But at times it can seem as if there is an awful lot more come than go. How do we let go of thoughts, particularly the opinions that multiply alarmingly? By not fussing about them. By not clinging to them, trapping them in the cage of our minds and allowing them to take over and become who we think we are.

This might be the point to tell you about Bodhidharma's student, and eventual successor, Huike. According to legend, Huike waited outside Bodhidharma's cave in the snow and was only allowed in when he cut off his arm to show his resolve.

Then Bodhidharma asked him what he wanted, and Huike said that he was looking for the Dharma. Bodhidharma said he had nothing to teach him, but Huike said that his mind was not at ease. He had been an army general and killed many people, apparently. So, Bodhidharma said:

"Bring me your mind and I will pacify it."

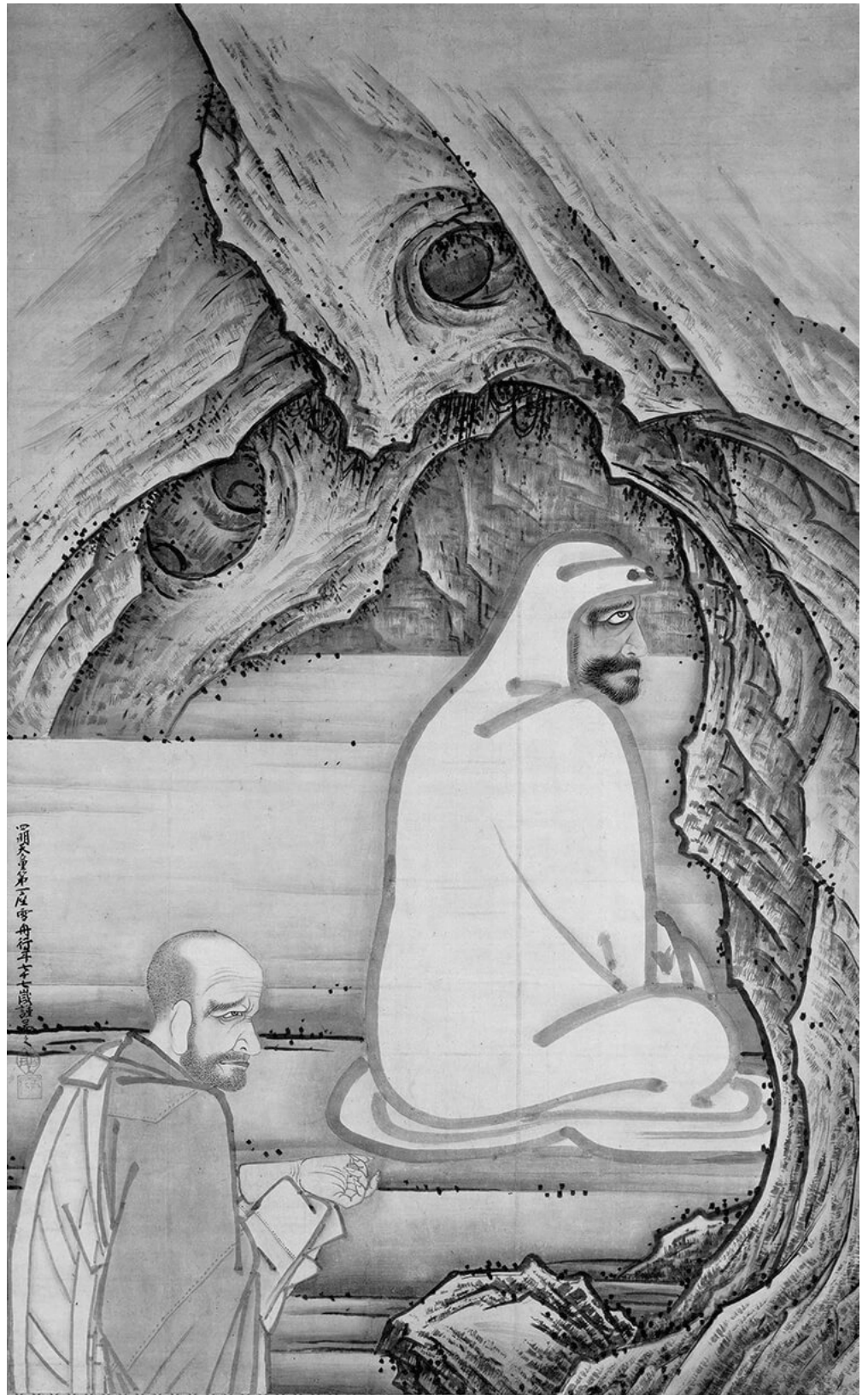
Huike replied, "I cannot find my mind."

"Then I have already pacified it."

Emptiness, or spaciousness, might be another way of terming it, this cutting off the mind road, pacifying the mind. This spaciousness is inexhaustible. Minds can seem very small when filled up with some urgent problem, which can actually be fairly insubstantial in the scheme of things, like where to buy petrol because the gauge is

on empty, or life-changing, like whether to leave your marriage or to choose surgery and/or chemotherapy. But when we become aware of the thoughts and allow in awareness of the breath, a tightness somewhere in the body, the cooling breeze, then where is the boundary we hold so close? Is there anything that cannot be accommodated?

The candlelight, the glowing wooden floor... and the stars. We can't see them right now, but they are there, too. And nothing is impossible: the story of the herd of



unicorns with twizzled pink and golden horns is there, perhaps, and, oh yes, somewhere, my urgent, self-referential problem is there, too. But, somehow, it no longer completely fills the space I thought was me.

Do you understand?

***The Emperor said, “Who is this person confronting me?”***

Well the Emperor was not entirely sure about this answer from the scruffy foreign monk with big round eyes and apparently fierce expression who had not only said that the first principle was vast emptiness, but that it was nothing holy. And the Emperor had studied Buddhism extensively; he knew the scriptures. After all, this apparently contradicted Bodhidharma’s own Chan teaching, contradicted the teaching of the paramitas. He had taken it all away, including holiness. So, in modern parlance, “Who are you to be talking to me like this?” Perhaps he was expecting some credentials, you know, “I’m the abbot of blah, blah monastery”... Some kind of dharma credentials to justify speaking like this.

And indeed Bodhidharma then gave away all his secrets, exposed himself completely.

***Dharma said, “I do not know.”***

Don’t know mind. A truly open mind.

And I mean a really open mind, not the kind of open mind that declares, ‘I’m very open-minded’... and you wait for the implicit but... nor the kind of open mind that is code for anything-goes, self-centred hedonism.

But rather, a mind that is not wrapped around a sense of a fixed self, keeping it safe and intact, not ensuring that it looks right for the part and says the right things and voices wise-sounding opinions and sounds suitably ‘Zen.’ (Though in this case, Bodhidharma displayed a suitable lack of concern for sartorial elegance and unintentionally set the benchmark for sounding Zen!)

No, a mind that is free of the fetters of ignorance, aware of the greed and hatred (greed and hatred are the extremes, shorthand for all the habitual judgements of nice, not nice, interesting, boring, and the holding on and pushing away) that we habitually apply to everything in relation to ME. To the me who I then think I am.

Awareness of these vexations (a charming, old-fashioned, but useful word that conveys both the unpleasantness and the triviality of most of them) is wisdom and, freed from them, without the added salt and pepper of ‘want’ or ‘don’t want’, words are said to be flavourless. These flavourless words, that we encounter in the stories of ancestors of the way, are words spoken when there is no barrier erected, no false self to protect. It is a lifetime practice.

I don’t mean that as a deterrent. Fortunately, this is a lifetime practice. And in both senses. First, it never ends. You don’t find that one day you can relax and let all the opinions flood back in unchallenged. But if you have

tasted the liberation of freedom from them, you wouldn’t want to. Even if you did, they probably wouldn’t pass unnoticed in quite the same way anyway. Try it!

It is also a practice that is not confined to the cushion, and is absolutely something you can do right in the middle of the most secular, contemporary, lay-life scenarios. For example, in the middle of a difficult email exchange stop and ask, ‘What am I hanging onto or pushing away here?’ Just notice, notice the vexation, and you will find the Way.

***The Emperor could not reach an accord.***

***Bodhidharma then crossed the river, and went on to Wei. The Emperor later took up this matter with Master Chih.***

***Chih said, “Does your majesty know that person yet?”***

So, the Emperor really didn’t understand Bodhidharma’s words, and Bodhidharma went on his way, off to the north to sit in a cave for nine years. According to another version of the story, the Emperor actually asked Bodhidharma to leave (i.e. could not reach an accord), letting him get away lightly from having spoken to him with such apparent ignorance and what may well have seemed like disrespect.

However, after he’d gone, Master Chih, who evidently was a Buddhist advisor to the Emperor, finding the Emperor still didn’t have a clue, told him straight:

***“That was the Bodhisattva Kannon conveying the mind-seal of the Buddha.”***

That was the embodiment of compassion, giving you the true teachings of the Buddha. (And you missed it!) Not that he said that, he wouldn’t have needed to. The Emperor straight away wanted to call him back, but of course, it was too late. And how we feel for the Emperor! How often do we realise, just too late, that we have missed it? Whatever it was: The chance we had to respond with gratitude to a generous offer, to offer help, to not say something hurtful or unhelpful...

And Bodhidharma went on to practice and teach in China, becoming the trail-blazer of the path we follow today. Not by setting up great monasteries and seeking imperial patronage, but by practising and teaching among ‘peaks and caves’. It continues in quiet backwaters, sprawling suburbs, shiny, rich cities and hazy megalopolises, here in spring in Western Australia.

So: Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?

That, of course, is the question posed in another koan, in more than one other koan. But why wait? Right now, we must realise this for ourselves!

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*Opposite: Dazu Huike offering his arm to Bodhidharma. Ink painting by Sesshū Tōyō (1420-1506)*

# Issan Dorsey: *You get what you deserve whether you deserve it or not*

A Teisho

BY ROSS BOLLETER ROSHI

Issan Dorsey was born Tommy Dorsey Jr. in 1933 in Santa Barbara, California. He was raised in a Catholic family, the youngest of ten siblings. As a boy he aspired to become an entertainer and studied dance and piano. While in junior college he became dissatisfied with his life, so he joined the U.S. Navy. During the Korean War, Dorsey and a male lover were expelled from the Navy, giving him the opportunity to spend several years in and out of employment, finally settling into a job as a waiter in a bar in North Beach, and becoming a performer there. As a drag queen, Tommy Dee – “who looks like the girl next door” – worked the bars, dealt drugs, did cabaret, and worked as a male prostitute. Tommy underwent a transformation in the late 1960s when he began sitting with Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) at San Francisco Zen Center. Walking down Haight Street one day he stooped to pick up a sweet wrapper.

*“I bent down and picked it up and right as I did, I said to myself ‘Does this mean I am responsible for everything I see? I told myself it didn’t, but actually I knew that it did.’”*

Tommy was eventually ordained by Richard Baker, Suzuki’s successor, and given the Dharma name Issan. Dharma became Issan’s life and the Sangha his long-sought family. This was evident in the crisis that engulfed Zen Center when its Abbot, Suzuki’s heir, Richard Baker was found to be having an extra-marital affair with the wife of one of the Sangha’s benefactors, and was forced to resign. Issan stayed loyal to Baker throughout. When he was questioned about this, he simply said, “But he’s my teacher.”

In his final years Dorsey served a gay community blighted by AIDS. In 1987 he created Maitri Hospice within the Zen Center on Hartford Street, primarily caring for gay men who were dying of AIDS. There’s a humorous, even mythic, story from this period of his life:

*One bright afternoon, Issan was walking down Hartford St towards 18th with Steve Allen and Jerry Berg. They were headed to the hamburger place that used to be right next to Moby Dick’s, close to the corner. Steve was a Zen priest, a close friend of Issan, his dharma heir, and the first Executive Director of Maitri. Jerry Berg was an early supporter of the hospice, a successful lawyer and prom-*

*inent leader in the gay community. As they walked, Steve and Jerry were talking about possible legal structures for the hospice while Issan lagged behind. He noticed a bottle lying on the sidewalk and bent to pick it up. Yes, any rumours that he was an incarnation of Mr (or Miss) Clean are well founded. But when he noticed that the bottle was rather beautiful and might be worth keeping, he took out the rag that he kept neatly folded in his monk’s hand-bag, and began to polish it. Suddenly, a Genie appeared! It had to be a Buddhist Genie, a Bodhidharma look-a-like, with a shaved head, droopy ears and a bright robe. The Genie looked at Issan and Issan looked back, a staring match of wonderment. Steve and Jerry turned around to see what Issan was holding Issan up and stopped dead in their tracks.*

*The Genie spoke the time-honoured script of genies: “Because you have freed me after many lifetimes of being cramped-up in that god damned bottle, you, yeah, I guess all three of you, get one wish. It’s just one so you’d better make it good.”*

*Steve didn’t hesitate: he knew his Buddhism and asked to be released from his karma and enter Buddhahood, or nirvana, or the Pure Land, right there and then. Just as he was about to raise his palms in gassho, the traditional gesture of respect—poof, he was gone.*

*Jerry thought to himself, that was powerful magic. I’m going for it. “I’m not getting any younger so how about a great life in a heaven modelled after Palm Springs—but without the humidity—endless pool parties, rafts of handsome men, an eternal nosh that never made you fat?”*

*As he smiled and waved goodbye—poof, he disappeared too.*

*The Geni turned to Issan who was left standing alone—it might have been wonderment on his face, maybe just puzzlement. The Genie said, “OK, honey,*



*it's your turn, what does your little heart desire? Issan didn't hesitate, "Get those two numb-nut girls back here. We have a hospice to run."*

Issan contracted HIV himself, suffering a long, painful illness before his death in 1990. He was 57 years old.

***"You get what you deserve whether you deserve it or not"***

It's great to have a koan so focused on karma. Issan understood karmic consequence because he lived life at levels of intensity and risk that few of us could, or might even indeed wish to. Issan's koan gives the nod to karma in its rawest most retributive sense – "You get what you deserve ..." You do someone a bad turn, and you get your come-uppance. Or you do someone a good turn, and consequently feel that you deserve acknowledgement. This is all about "getting what you deserve." But what about "whether you deserve it or not." What is it to get what you don't deserve? We chiefly regard Karma as a retributive force, because we are caught up in the dramas of our small self. However, personal retribution and reward are only a tiny part of the karmic drama.

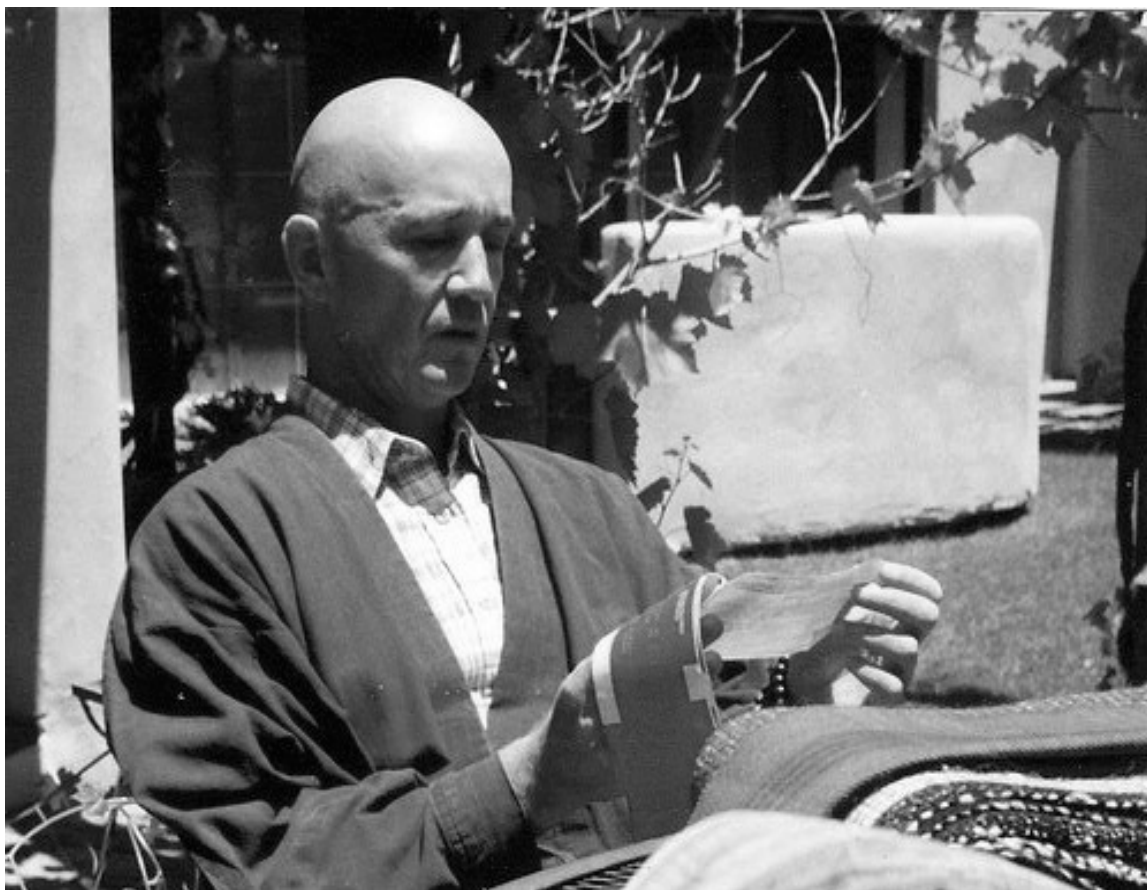
The overwhelming karmic fact of life is that we are born at all, and that we are born into this universe that is some 13.8 billion years old, on this strange and beautiful planet, which we humans are so busy despoiling. How strange, how miraculous. Our karma is also

intensely bound up in whether we are born male or female. Our gender determines a lot about who we are, though it's not immutable, as trans-sexuality shows. Our genetic inheritance is important too, and on a vaster scale – going all the way back to the single-celled amoeba – our and the country in which we are raised have karmic outcomes for us. As it surely was for Bob Dylan, who expressed it: "The country I come from is called the Midwest." We inhabit the reality of our inherited situation, especially our biological inheritance, whether we like it or not, whether we deserve it or not.

We don't have to deserve our life, it's freely given. Our life unfolds beyond being deserved, or not being deserved. Our heart beats, our blood circulates, whether we deserve it or not; we are born regardless of our deserving, we grow up and mature regardless, we get our heart broken regardless, and we die regardless of whether we deserve it or not.

All these larger karmic forces play out beyond simple retributive karma, which is the part we are mostly interested in. We take the big karmic picture for granted, but it's good to bring it into focus. Although it is true that our past actions often generate present consequences, and we can ruefully acknowledge that we got what we deserved, I doubt that this sliver of retributive karma is in any way absolute. It is certainly easy to imagine it otherwise, and I suspect it often is. To take retributive karma as absolute is to take an awful lot on trust.

We conventionally regard karma as cause and



*Issan Dorsey.*

effect unfolding in a linear way: this leads to that, which leads to this ... but we can also understand karma as mysterious affinity, especially as it finds its expression through love, friendships, family, and Sangha relations. Essentially an inexplicable clustering, mysterious affinity eludes ordinary cause and effect, and mechanistic karmic accounts of reality. Synchronicity is one branch of the tree of mysterious affinity.

### ***The accord of karmic and essential***

Yet finally the karmic (however we conceive it) and the essential – which is to say the realm of the timelessly empty – are no other than one another. They waltz themselves into union, and out again – all the while being inseparable. Here's a story – really a koan – involving Issan that bears witness to this:

*Issan had contracted AIDS and was very weak and close to death. A friend of his was carrying him to the toilet. Looking down at Issan and seeing how pitifully emaciated he looked, his friend burst into tears, and said, "I'll miss you Issan." Issan replied, "I'll miss you too – where are you going?"*

### ***Leaning on karma; leaning on the essential***

When we pit the karmic against the essential it is like riding a horse and falling off on one side or the other. The karmic extreme side: "Well, I can't help my up-

bringing. My parents' marriage was so awful, what hope is there for mine?" I remember a Danish man called Bjorn who lived opposite me for many years, and built a formidable brick house over the old wooden house that had formerly been rented by alternative folk who played guitar, and smoked a lot of dope on their front veranda. Whatever Bjorn was telling me about his life, he always added resignedly, "You get that." "My son refuses to do his homework – you get that." Bjorn had worked as a radio operator for the US military in Greenland. He told me: "I would have radio contact with pilots flying at night. Then radio contact would cease, and you knew that their plane had flown into the side of a mountain in the darkness. You get that." Such numb fatalism is a good gauge of someone falling off at the karmic extremity.

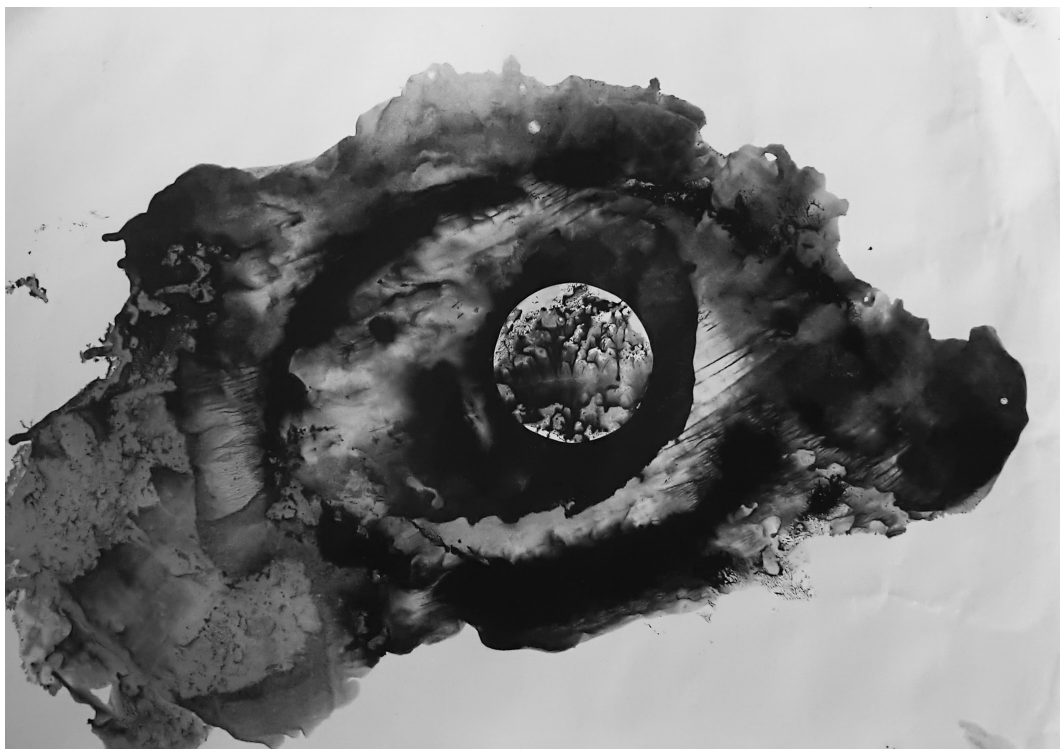
Back to the horse: When you fall off on the essential side, it's like: "Well, no need to worry any of those issues, it's all one, buddy." This is pernicious oneness. Good to avoid falling into that, too. Our only task, under constant threat of falling off left or right, is to stay in the saddle, and the saddle turns out to be remarkably large.

You get what you deserve. You get what you get. You are what you get. You get what you are. You get that?

What is it to get what you deserve, whether you deserve it or not?

**"You get what you deserve ..." is from Ross Bolleter's book, *The crow flies backwards: Western koans with commentaries*, to be published by Wisdom Publications, Boston, in 2018.**

**Copyright Ross Bolleter, May 1, 2017**



*Monoprint by Herman Isaac.*

# The Record of Dongshan, fascicle 30

A Teisho delivered during the ZGWA's Summer Sesshin, 2017

BY GLENN WALLIS ROSHI

*When Shenshan had picked up a needle to mend clothes, the Master said, "What are you doing?"*

*"Mending answered Shenshan.*

*"In what way do you mend?" asked the Master.*

*"One stitch is like the next." said Shenshan.*

*"We've been travelling together for twenty years and you can still say such a thing! How can there be such craftiness?" said the Master*

*"How then does you're the venerable monk mend?" asked Shenshan.*

*"Just as though the entire earth were spewing flame." Replied the Master.*

Just as though the entire earth were spewing flame! A little daunting isn't it?

Tonight's koan is taken from the Record of Dongshan, a collection of 119 portrayals of dialogue and behavior between teacher and student of the Way. For the first few fascicles Dongshan was the student, and later he was the teacher.

Dongshan lived in 9th century China and together with his disciple, his premiere disciple Caoshan are seen as the origin of the Caodong, or Soto, school of Zen. During Sesshin we chant the historical line of the Soto and Caodong ancestry in our first round of sutra dedications each morning and include Dongshan Liangjie out of recognition of his place in our lineage.

Caoshan Benji is remembered for his immense contribution and collaboration with Dongshan in the Five Ranks and the promulgation of that work. However the Caodong line however didn't come down through Caoshan but through Dongshan's other senior disciple, Yunju Daoying. Yunju's was the only line from a total of 25 Dharma Heirs that continued through the centuries and reaches us here in this hall today.

So I want to look for a moment at what a koan is.

A koan is a direct invitation to mystery. The mystery of the juxtaposition of here you are, but who are you! Well, who are you? Really! Who are you? Beyond your story your labels your ideas, your identifications, who is that sits on your mat?

It is clear that we do. And yet when we try and find

that one we seem to be able to only touch the things we seem to know about that one. This is part of the mystery that we come as, that we inherit.

Formally a koan is a point of inquiry that the Zen student wields to batter down or ease open their own delusions. Sometimes it can feel like battering at a door or a brick wall, only to find a gentle easing open rather than a shattering. Sometimes it's a shattering. There is no fixed way here, just as there is no fixed way to you. We are organic. There is no fixed way. You are you.

So a koan is a tool to work with our delusion.

In the usual sense, delusion is 'false thinking' or 'false confidence' or at least it is in colloquial New Zealand language. "He's absolutely deluded if he thinks he'll make that shot."

In Zen, delusion is particular. Delusion is the mistaken apprehension that 'I' am in here and 'not I' is out there beyond this border of skin. And that's our genuine impression; it's not an intellectual proposition. If I sit here and close my eyes, my kotsu sitting on the floor in front, I'm not aware of the shape and size of the kotsu, it's independent. While we are utterly the body, arising sensation events.

Even though this is normal, it's the way we are as people; it's also how we feel about ourselves. We feel like we are here.

There are a few very unfortunate instances where this is not the case but generally as people we have the feeling that we are here.

And we do need a border. If we are to uphold ourselves as discrete, distinct and specific, we need to be able to delineate and mark out a border to ourselves.

This isn't haphazard, this is functional, it has purpose; we are social creatures. This didn't just happen by accident I'm sure. We do have a border and a region that we have sovereignty over.

And that sense of sovereignty is over the aspects that we come as, that we are solely privy to. Aspects that nobody else has access to as this specific individual, you. You are the only one who feels your little finger sensation. You're the only one who is aware of your thoughts. You may not be the only one who weathers the heat but you are the only one who feels it as your body. As we all do.

No one else feels the ache in your hands, the ache in your back, even as their hands ache or back hurts. We are sovereign in this territory.

Because this is sovereign territory, we identify with it as me. Naturally. What else are we going to do with it? We're not going to think, 'Oh I think this might be ..(not your name).. here.' No. It's clearly you, because it's no one else. We say its me because it's clearly no one else. Not because it is you, but because it is clearly no one else.

But this is delusion. It is not that way, it just seems so. Delusion or delude comes from Latin meaning 'to play false'. Like to act falsely. To make a play of being false, to act falsely. So to treat all that seems to be inside of the skin covering as you is a false act. But a useful one. We are social creatures, we need it to be this way. But it's a false act. Its partial, it's misleading.

A koan is a tool we use to personally resolve this misleading impression.

Imagine if you could come into a Zen group and sit down and the teacher could snap the fingers and the misleading impression was gone and you're enlightened on the spot. It is immediately clear that there is no one here and no need for anyone to be here and everything trucks along as if nothing had changed. How on earth would you deal with that?

Practice is not just to realize ourselves, it is to hold what we come to realize. This is really, really important.

So a koan is a tool we have to resolve this misleading impression we have of who we are, what we are, as this one here. It doesn't resolve as some special way of thinking about ourselves and things, it really doesn't. It doesn't matter how careful and developed our analysis is, thinking won't free us. It's not personal, it's just the wrong ground to work for resolving our sense of separateness.

And it doesn't matter even if you have the 'right answer' to the koan. That still won't cut it. In a sense a koan has no right answers, maybe even only wrong answers. At least it seems like that when we hear, "Not like that!" Dingggg-a-liinnngggg dingggg dingggg dinggggg.... And out we go, again.

But a koan has a point of resolution, and that resolution can be expressed. People mistakenly think that a koan is to be answered, like finding the answer to a clue; but the koan is there only for its resolution, which is your resolution. A koan works toward resolution; the resolution of you. And when the koan is resolved we can express that resolution to some degree for ourselves, which is the work of the dokusan room.

This is not an easy process, but that does not mean that it requires us to be hard in response. The difficulty of the koan is not something to harden ourselves against, but rather it leads to a softness, a permeability. However it does however require one thing, and one thing only, and this is absolutely unerring. It requires you and things to be exactly as you are as they are. Exactly. This is the gate of the Way. We don't go about trying to make ourselves better in some contrived way so we can practice properly, we just know what to do (when we practice) and do it.

Every koan that is worthwhile stops us in our tracks. Completely stopped, utterly stuck! This mile high impenetrable barrier, being stopped, is the treasure and virtue of koan practice. This is where we do work. We don't do the work that blossoms in realization by passing koans, we do the work by being stuck. It doesn't feel like it but it is that Way. We are stopped because there is a fundamental barrier or impediment in ourselves. Actually not in ourselves, it is ourselves, our impression of who we are. There is a definite impediment and working with a koan is the work of resolving that impediment, resolving that barrier.

However it's not like we know what we are resolving, we don't. We can't see it, we can't apprehend it, we can't really think about it, at least not usefully. We just know that we're stuck and we're trying and we just don't get it. It's difficult. It really does require perseverance.

What we resolve in terms of a barrier is a sense of inherent separation or another element that we hold as being necessary to being ourselves. This is not the realm of psychoanalysis or trying to figure something out. This is very, very organic.

We can't really get rid of these elements and attributes we hold to be necessary to be ourselves; we really can't. And we don't need to. It's not about clearing out all the little edges and assumptions so you somehow cease to exist, not at all.

We can't get rid of these things we hold to as me mainly because they're imagined. There really is nothing to get rid of except our recreating what we hold ourselves to be. If we get rid of anything, we get rid of, or cease to have, the need to keep recreating ourselves. And in this way we become no one to be, which curiously leaves us most genuinely and freely being ourselves.

There is no one else to be here but you. And that doesn't change, even if as you do. One thing we learn through zazen, through koan work, is how not to pick up these elements that we identify as me.

This applies to no longer playing the same story of how that person doesn't like me, because of an argument three years ago, that always gets played each time that person is in our presence, as well as simply not redoing conversations we had or rehearsing ones we haven't had or expect to have.

We become content with not having to play with the stories, the impressions; we become ok with not continuing to glorify them, with having to do something with them, and by inference, with our me.

We don't need to fix that part of ourselves in some way. But if we discontinue the aggrandizing of self by no longer picking it up to play with, whatever it is, then what's left?

The difficulty is that all this work is done in the dark. All we know when we're sitting is our zazen, that we haven't passed our koan, and that it's difficult, and

that I'm just not getting anywhere with it. That's how the perception is for us. But if we're applying ourselves to the practice, things are happening in the subterranean strata, underground. And they do happen.

Fruits of practice are real. When people absolutely fall in love with breath practice it's beautiful. Their life changes. They have a resource to calm themselves when things are difficult, and often find a real peace that they never thought possible through the very functional work of breath practice. And it works because we are organic. We're biological. It's functional.

But still the work of our zazen happens predominantly in the dark. That is how the work proceeds. So how do we proceed? How do we go on with our lives and with our practice? This is what Dongshan is pressing Shenshan for when he asks, "In what way do you mend?"

How are you with what arises as sore back, what comes as lunch, with the cooling evening the sound of voice, the ache of knees? How are you with that?

Shenshan responds honestly and without artifice or craftiness when he says, "One stitch is like the next." He's mending, maybe mending a travelling bag or mending robes, stitching, one stitch like the next. It's good for sewing to be regular. It is stronger when regular and doesn't distract the eye. It looks right. The regularity is in harmony with the circumstance.

We keep our zazen regular. The regularity of each

breath being the only breath. There is the regularity of raising the inquiry of koan fresh and live, time and time again. There is a regularity that we don't vary the practice we meditate with. When there is regularity then there is deepening. If we're always jumping about, really all we do is empower our own self centricity. If its time to change, talk with the teacher in dokusan and work it out there.

In our case, Shenshan's response is also honest. He's not seeking to make himself look more adept or sophisticated than he is. He's very straightforward.

Zen is about trust. For instance, trust in what is current, allowing what is current – allow, allow, allow. This is trust. For example, how do we allow this room, this space? We truly allow it by not requiring ourselves to be. We allow the room. Just the room. This room is real. We're sitting here. Even though most of the time the eyes are down towards the floor were in a room. It's spatial, it has dimension. The space in this room is as live as you are.

As much as Zen is about trust, trusting what is, allowing it to be as it is, it is also about honesty. Honesty with ourselves and honesty with the world. When we are not honest we are playing falsely, we are perpetuating delusion.

If your honest response to Mari's question last night, "Who are you?" is "I don't know." Then that 'I don't know' is so much more valuable than some con-



*Altar at Summer Sesshin, 2017. Photograph by Dotsi Burnazova.*

jured insight, or contrived certitude. The Way is straight ahead.

Honesty is the Way and it is how the Way flourishes among us. This is not the apparent honesty of declaring our view, it's the honesty of not holding to the conceit of separateness. The conceit of me in here, and everything not me out there.

When we hold on to our self in here and everything else out there, all this talk starts to sound so special, 'the whole earth spewing flame!'

*A monk said, "Everywhere [people] just speak with their mouths. How do you instruct people?"*

*The master kicked over the censer with his foot and pointed to it.*

*The monk said, "That is it, isn't it!" –meaning your foot poking out kicking over the incense holder, there is the great matter right there, that's the very expression of Buddha Nature itself, right there!*

*Zhazhou responded, "You got a good look at my foot."*

*-The Record of Joshu, Jame Green,  
# 271 p. 93*

No conceit, no view, the foot is at the end of the leg. But good to notice that Zhazhou doesn't dissuade the monks view either.

Dongshan seems dissatisfied with Shenshan's expression of how it is for him. In fact Dongshan scolds Shenshan, "We've been travelling for twenty years together and still you can say such a thing! How can there be such craftiness?"

Pointing to delusion can be hard. Sometimes we do get a rather challenging sideways poke in dokusan. It may seem pretty uncomfortable at the time, but it can open the Way for us, or not. It's not really up to us as the agency here.

Shenshan continued, "How then does the venerable monk mend?" he asks. Sometimes it's highly worthwhile batting a challenge back and see what happens. "What would you do?" "How would you say it?" It's creativity after all. Dongshan responds, "Just as if the whole earth were spewing flame!"

Wow, that must really be something! Maybe in the pitch dark of night he could still see his sewing with all

that flame about. It conjures up massively heroic images of what it must be like. A part of us responds to these stories with, "Oh, so that's how it will be. And by inference, 'that's so much better than and a world away from sitting through a talk, from this back pain, from having to shift about a little, from life's dissatisfactions, from our own dissatisfaction. It'd be much better surely!'

But what if Dongshan's 'as though the whole earth were spewing flame' what if this is absolutely no different at all to Shenshan's 'one stitch is like the next'? What if they're one and the same? What if this (clap) is the entire earth spewing flame. What if the fact of lifting a glass or a spoon to your lips at supper time is the fact of the entire earth spewing flame? And that's just the way it is.

Regardless of the content each moment is here as you.

There is no good or bad in such a thing, there is no bigger or smaller in such a thing.

How big are you? Listen! Listen!

There you are. If it's not apparent it doesn't mean that it's not apparent. It can be that in such a moment we are so taken up enough with 'the current' that there is no one left to say, "Oh!"

Working in practice is not about vigorously hunting each moment; that adds a sort of blocking effort. It can be softer than this.

Every moment perennially rising for you, as you, but that is saying too much. Actually every moment claims you and you disappear into that claiming. And we don't notice. In the disappearing we've lost the resources to notice.

Koan work shifts us a little, so we no longer have to say, 'It shouldn't be like this. It should be something different.' It just takes a glance to see, we are empty beyond our borders even whilst we are ourselves. This is what this is. This is where you are. It cannot be passed on, it's too late for that, it is already so. This is the mystery, so we practice relinquishing to the current moment. Being claimed, disappearing into that claim, losing ourselves, remembering ourselves, practicing. As if there were someone to disappear.

Why is it when you look, you only find story, preference, a wall, flowers, air conditioning, a warm evening. Why is that? I wonder.

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# ***SITTING ON COUNTRY***

For Michael Wright

BY BRIGID LOWRY

Sunday. 9.15am. Kings Park.  
Bewilderment. No sign of the others.  
Wrong place? Wrong time?  
Looking again,  
I see them, already sitting,  
beneath creamy gum blossoms.  
Join in. Feet on wet grass. Flies.  
My anxiety. Someone nearby, yelling.  
Busy mind, wandering elsewhere.  
Perhaps I will buy a small suitcase  
make an omelette for lunch.

Opening my eyes, I feast on green, on blue,  
the leaf patterns, the river, my life.  
Beautiful beyond measure.  
This is it. Nothing more. Nothing less.  
Us mob, under this tree.



*Michael Wright in Kings Park. Photograph by Herman Isaac.*

# *HAIKU*

BY JOHN TURNER

in coastal scrub  
tree martins dipping low -  
dunes in flower

shrieking wildly  
sixty black cockatoos  
as I chant

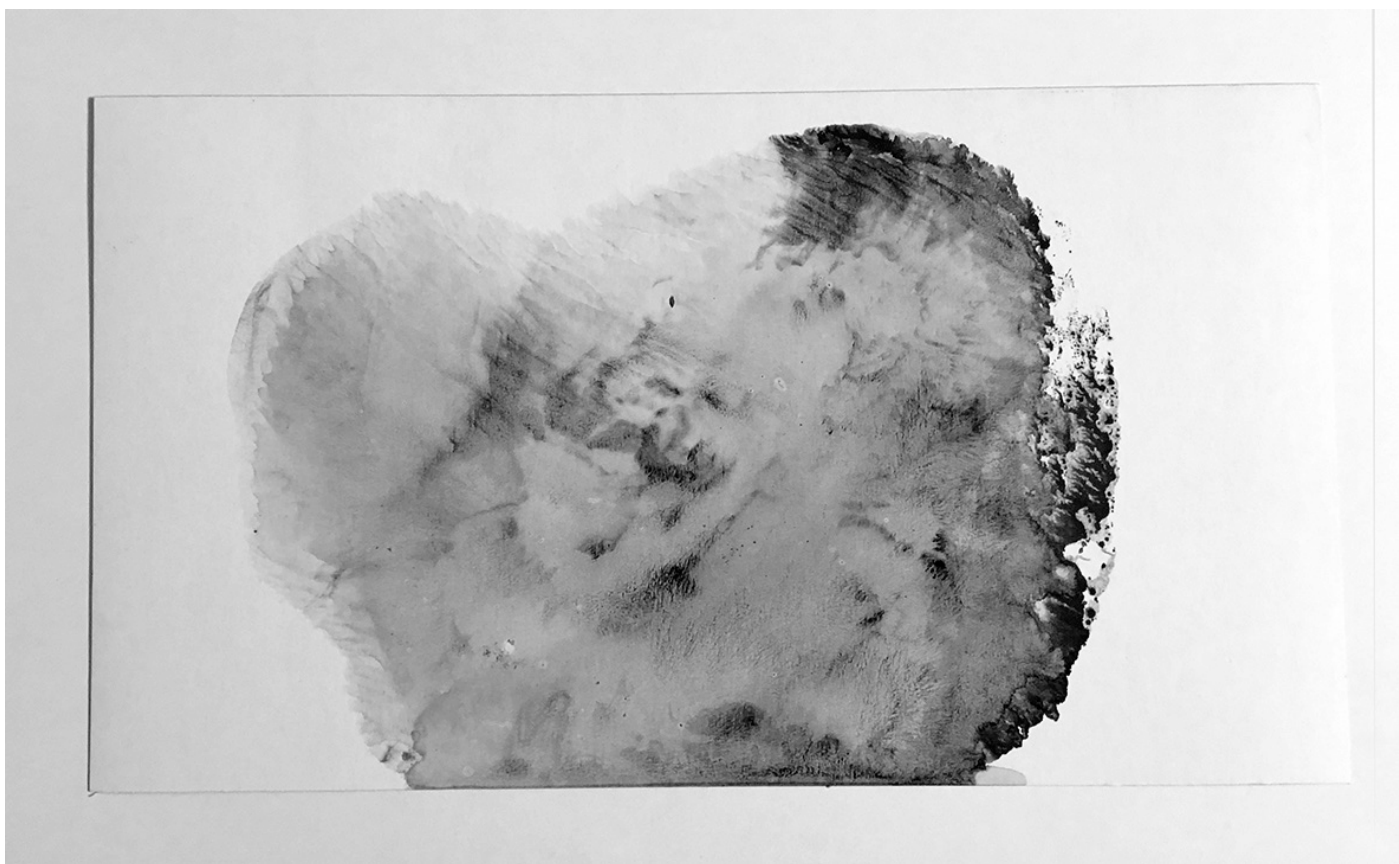
travelling India  
writing freestyle poems -  
haiku seed is popping

with a wiggle  
of sexy mime - we all rock  
the pelvic cradle

just a pair  
of red-capped parrots -  
a woylie wonders

a brown gashawk  
searches further woodland -  
old horse pasture





*Monoprint by Herman Isaac.*

# Art and Zen

A talk given at St Paul's Dojo

BY HERMAN ISAAC

Born in Aschaffenburg, Germany, in 1956, I grew up in a nuclear family with three younger sisters.

My parents had both studied pharmacy and Dad worked in research for a large company where he received Fine Art Calendars for Christmas every year.

The reproductions of works by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Kirchner, Malewitsch, Picasso and Magritte became my source of inspiration. When the year had run out I turned the calendars into collages.

I painted my first oil on canvas at thirteen and went to a High School with a bent on music and art, where I was taught the printmaking techniques of etching and aquatint, which I still do to this day. At the same time the work of John Cage entered my life.

After school came fifteen months of National Service, one year of studying art education, then an apprenticeship as a lithographer in the printing industry.

On the side I painted small murals on people's houses (landscapes or animals), co-founded an artist's group, and helped organise art exhibition and music events.

Germany had a tense atmosphere at the time. There was terrorism by the Baader-Meinhof-group, violent clashes during protest rallies, anti-nuclear demonstrations and a sense that the world is a bigger place.

My girlfriend and I agreed to go to Australia and a sponsorship by a Perth printer enabled us to settle here in 1981 and have three boys.

Our relationship broke up after seven years and I was left in a depressed state. Little did I know about the changes that were about to follow. A friend suggested a meditation retreat and it turned out to be Vipassana with Goenka. It was my introduction to Buddhist practice and it felt like I had found my home. My depression had fallen away, regrets had vanished, I had forgiven everyone and myself.

We had shared custody and I started to study painting and printmaking at Claremont School of Art and had the kids on the weekend. I kept my practice going and learned from different art teachers, most Western, some Eastern, mainly in drawing.

There was an emphasis on observation, of not just the physical appearance but also the spirit of the observed. It was pointed out to us how there is a different approach in Chinese and Japanese art, with spaces of emptiness and equality in nature. We find an equivalent in the Western realm in the work of JWT Turner.

In his essay 'Zen Buddhism And Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern And Western Arts', Fredric Lieberman writes:

*Art in the West has developed a complex linguistic symbolism through which the artist manipulates his material to communicate something to his audience. Art as communication is basic to Western aesthetics, as is the relationship of form and content.*

*A landscape painting in the Western tradition is not merely an aesthetically pleasing reproduction; the artist uses his techniques of balance, perspective, and color, to express a personal reaction to the landscape--his painting is a frozen human mood. The aesthetic object is used as a link between the audience and the artist's feelings. And the artist's technique is used to create an illusion of the forms of reality.*

When I discovered the Zen Group of WA, my sources of inspiration were rejuvenated. Poetry became a new friend on top of the Sangha. I started reading Zen literature while embarking on Zen practice. It filtered into my art practice and I began looking more consciously at Japanese and Chinese art.

According to Lieberman:

*The Zen artist tries to suggest by the simplest possible means the inherent nature of the aesthetic object. Anything may be painted, or expressed in poetry, and any sounds may become music. The job of the artist is to suggest the essence, the eternal qualities of the object, which is in itself a work of natural art before the artist arrives on the scene. In order to achieve this, the artist must fully understand the inner nature of the aesthetic object, its Buddha nature. This is the hard part. Technique, though important, is useless without it; and the actual execution of the art work may be startlingly spontaneous, once the artist has comprehended the essence of his subject.*

Gazing at the flowers  
of the morning glory  
I eat my breakfast. --Basho



*During Japan's long periods of self-imposed isolation, art forms developed in ways that were specifically Japanese, and many of these art forms were strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism.*

*All Japanese art forms, such as chado (tea ceremony), ikebana (flower arrangement), shodo (calligraphy) and even martial arts were greatly influenced by Zen. These art forms were transformed into a spiritual discipline focused on calmness, simplicity, and self-growth.*

*When practiced with Zen principles in mind, art can be a peaceful journey and a way of self-cultivation leading to calmness, serenity, and concentration.*

Every Monday evening I am part of a group of artists who meet at Kidogo Gallery, Bathers Beach, to draw a model. It is called Life Drawing and can be very much like Zazen. When everyone is in their positions and the model is in a pose she will hold for two hours. Silence begins, with the sound of breaking waves and the knock-

ing and scratching on the drawing boards.

The focus is entirely on the observed and every time you look up again you see more.

Breathing is the partner of accuracy.

When the model resumes her pose after a short stretch-break, the slight change in the tilt of her head signals a different moment.

Lieberman writes:

*Zen has a unique aesthetic, which includes a great appreciation for moderation, asymmetry, imperfection, rusticity, and naturalness.*

*This Zen aesthetic concept is called Wabi-sabi, and it sees beauty in things that are imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. In art, Wabi-sabi is manifested in modest, humble, unpretentious and earthy artworks.*

*Wabi-Sabi is genuine, humble, and is deeply associated with love for nature.*

Adapting this concept to my western hybridity has taken

me to a technique that suits my true nature: monoprinting.

The main attraction of monoprints is randomness and unpredictability, achieved by a desired accident with a good portion of chance.

After applying some black printing ink to a glass plate and splattering turps amongst it, a large

piece of cardboard is placed over the ink, and by pressing down on it the ink is being transferred onto the cardboard. The resulting image is a surprise; the play between the black, white and grey can evoke three-dimensionality. Some of the textures are like microscopically observed cell structures or draw you into a landscape.

The process of producing an etching and aquatint and hand-colouring a few prints is quite complex. One has to be very focused on it to avoid accidents, even though minor accidents are very welcome. Zen practice is helpful in accepting them more readily and the training in self-discipline provides the power to bring a piece to completion.

This applies very much to the realist style of my portrait painting. To tease out the spirit of the person portrayed, concentration on the hara enables a deeper observation than superficial likeness.

Master Dogen, addressing his assembly said:

*My late master, old Buddha said,  
“The original face has no birth and no death, Spring is in the plum blossoms and enters into a painting.” When you paint Spring, do not paint willows, plums, peaches, or apricots, but just paint Spring. To paint willows, plums, peaches or apricots is to paint willows, plums, peaches, or apricots – it is not yet painting Spring. It is not that Spring cannot be painted, but aside from my late master, old Buddha, there is no one in India or China who has painted Spring. He alone was the sharp, pointed brush who painted Spring. This Spring is Spring in the painting because it enters into a painting. He does not use any other power, but lets plum blossoms activate Spring. He lets Spring enter into a painting and into a tree – this is his skillful means. Because my late master, old Buddha, clarified the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, he correctly transmitted it to the Buddhas and ancestors who assembled in the ten directions of past, future and present. In this way, he thoroughly*



*mastered the eyeball and opened up the plum blossoms.*

Employed as a disability support worker for sixteen years now, I have had the opportunity of helping people with a disability achieve their goals.

A major part of this has been artistic expression, and a prerequisite has been and is continuing to be cultivating my Beginner's Mind. Thankfully it is reinforced constantly by the fact that some of the people I am working with are non-verbal or very hard to understand.

All too often my thoughts get in the way of really understanding what is trying to be communicated and to prevent assumption I have to let go of my thoughts and continue to tease out the message of this human being, that part of the universe to this part of the universe.

When I am helping someone produce an artwork I have to cater my way of support to the person's ability, and my input into the work can vary from minimal to substantial.

However, I am always aware that it is not mine and on completion I invite bystanders to comment on the work. In that environment feedback is always positive and commends the maker for their achievement.

In a life full of limitations art turns out to be a field where personal expression, passion and freedom are possible.

I have helped a blind person paint and exhibit pictures. She chose to do a painting, she chose the colours. My task was to load the brush. She held the paintbrush in her mouth, since she couldn't move her hands. I guided the canvas so she could reach it.

Another person with reduced hand/eye coordination I assist by holding her wrist and guiding her brush to paint a flowering cherry tree perched on volcanic rocks in front of a sunset in Hawaii. Our source is a picture from the internet that I helped her to find and print out.

At the moment she works on a dot painting using a large dowel, based on my suggestion.

As a team us support workers cooperate and communicate, so that we can take over helping an artist with special needs evolve their individual piece.

It can be a clay bowl where we roll up little balls to be pushed into the mold.

Or cutting tiles for a mosaic of footballer Adam Goodes, that the person wants to send over to the Swans in Sydney; and assisting with grouting a mannequin torso covered in coloured tiles that the artist calls his girlfriend.

In conclusion I would like to point out that my main support is Zazen at the beginning of the working day and following the Path, the Eight Fold Path which I like to share with you in an abbreviated form.

## ***The Eight Fold Path***

### **1. The Right View**

seeing things as they really are  
Not as I want them to be

### **2. The Right Thought/Intention**

awareness of purpose or role in life  
A life of labor. Feeding the animals in the morning.  
Preparing for a talk.  
Helping where I can.

### **3. The Right Speech**

speak truth, avoid slander and gossip  
In the pressure cooker I might use strong language under my breath and  
even then it pops up in thoughts upsetting the balance.

### **4. The Right Action**

staying in harmony with fellow beings  
behaving peacefully and following the precepts  
The mobile vet euthanised my chook. Empathy for all.

### **5. The Right Livelihood**

no exploitation of other beings  
no trade in weapons or intoxicants  
The caring work is very supportive of the practice.  
One has to be very aware  
in every respect, and even though there is nothing to attain, after helping another being  
in any way one feels somewhat rewarded.

### **6. The Right Effort**

gain control over your thoughts and  
replace unpleasant ones with positive ones  
With recent changes in regards to the NDIS that affect us at work it pays to stay  
in the present and accept the change and let go of expectations.

### **7. The Right Mindfulness**

see things as they are without being led astray  
by greed, avarice, anger and ignorance  
To do someone's seatbelt up and not blame the person who got them out of bed.

### **8. The Right Concentration**

Zazen  
It gives me confidence  
I'm not special

---

*Illustrations: Monoprints by Herman Isaac.*

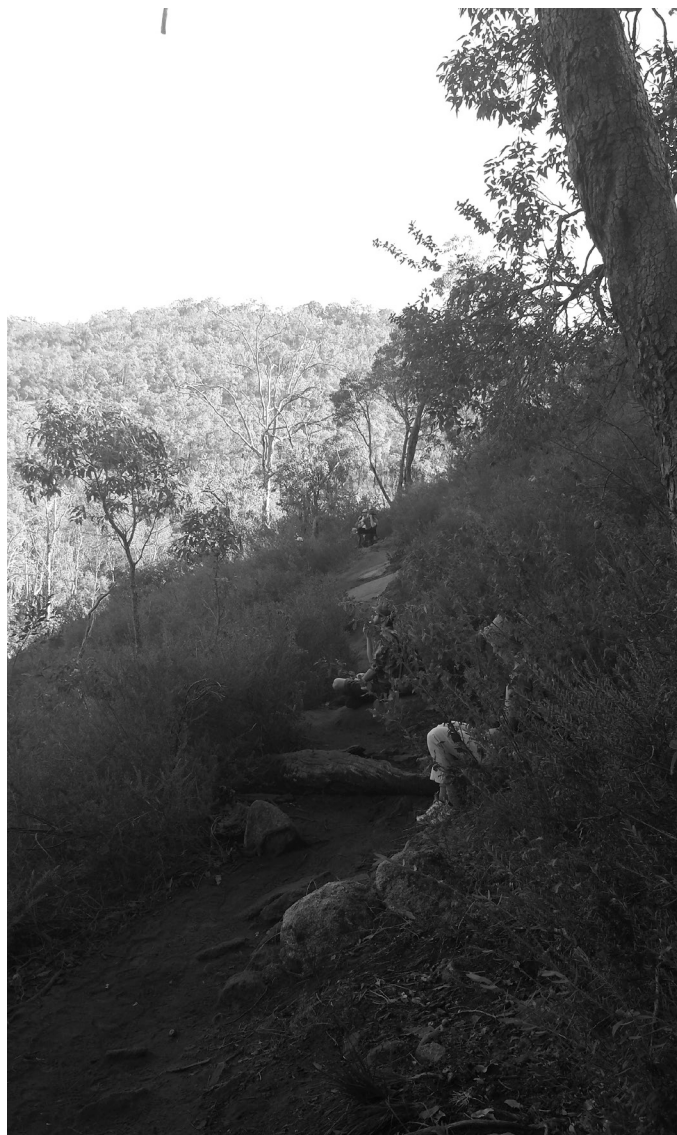
# Bushwalking

## Zazenkai

Kitty's Gorge, Serpentine

29 April, 2017

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL WILSON





Autumn deepens  
My neighbour -  
What does he do?

- BASHO (1644-1694)  
translated by Robert Aitken

