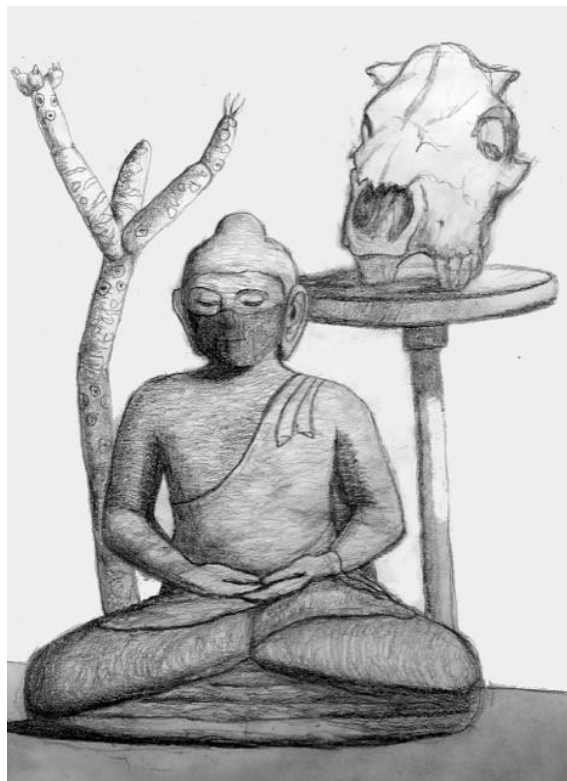


# THE WOBBLY POT

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# The Passions and the Zen Way:

## *A Dharma talk on Sense of Wonder*

BY ROSS BOLLETER ROSHI

A talk given at St Paul's dojo, June 2021

My earliest memory is of being alone and crawling over my father's work bench. I remember pushing over a jar of cold three-inch iron nails and hearing the crash as they hit the shed floor. The coldness of the iron and the ensuing crash still reverberate. There's little of childhood that I remember, but this solitary event still evokes my sense of wonder.

I had the good fortune to have been able to learn music from musicians in the city of Perth, thus enabling me to live a double life between the yellow sand suburb where I lived and the ancient Bon Marché Buildings where I learned piano accordion from Harry Bluck.

The dizzying disparity between these ways of life – dipsomaniac trombonists versus my teetotal parents – surely evoked my sense of wonder:

I climbed the crippled spine  
of the stair, dragged my accordion  
up to the roof-line, where, jack-knifed  
in some rusting valley, wolfing  
my pie and vanilla slice I played  
for the angels, for the dead virtuosi,  
for the town-hall clock staring back  
over acres of shining iron – chiming  
the time, doing its hoodwink of eternity,  
while the roof-nails popped as  
Bon Marché Buildings eased its back  
baking in midsummer heat.



I remember looking into the eyes of my children when they were born and thinking “You know all the secrets of the universe.” Then there was the joy of seeing them discover those secrets with such wonder – not to speak of my own wonder at their discoveries.

### **Sense of wonder and Descartes’ The Passions of the Soul**

Wonder may seem like an unlikely candidate for a passion. We conventionally associate the passions with the dramas of romantic love or the catastrophes of revenge. Against all this, wonder seems slender, an odd fit.

We have the philosopher, mathematician and scientist René Descartes (1596-1650) to thank for the inclusion of wonder among the passions. In his final philosophical treatise, *The Passions of the Soul* (*Les Passions de l'âme*), completed in 1649 and dedicated to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes contributes to a long tradition of philosophical inquiry into the nature of the passions. For Descartes the six fundamental passions, from which all the others stem, or at least can be constituted, are: wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness.

Descartes writes of wonder:

Wonder: When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel—i.e. very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it should be—this brings it about that we wonder and are astonished at it. All this can happen before we know whether the object is beneficial to us, so I regard wonder as the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, because if the object before us has nothing surprising about it, it doesn't stir us in any way and we consider it without passion<sup>1</sup>.

For Descartes, wonder has no opposite – or at least it has no opposite that can be conceived as a passion. He regarded wonder as the first of all the passions. It is interesting to reflect on the role that wonder plays in the field of the passions. It is easy enough to discern in love and desire, harder in hatred and sorrow: though wondering “Why me?” – that unending plaint – can surely figure in both hatred and sorrow.

### **The evanescence of wonder**

Our sense of wonder may be a little like happiness – fleeting and happenstance. Yet, just as we can say that the tenor of someone's life is happy, or even that they are a happy person, we can also live our lives in the spirit of wonder. The following lines by Mirza Ghalib (1797-1869) convey the spirit of wonder beautifully:

If you want to know the miracle, how wind can polish a mirror,  
Look, the shining glass grows green in spring.

It's the heart's unfolding that creates the desire to see –  
In every colour and circumstance, may your heart be open for what comes.

“Glass” is easy to misread as “grass.” However, “glass” evokes the mirror of our true and timeless nature which right here and now is spring in its blossoming: yellow wattle, orange and white banksia, the heart drop red of backyard hibiscus.

As I write this, a New Holland honeyeater flies straight out of the hibiscus at the glass of my study window, beating its wings in a blur of braking – just in time!

Intimacy breeds wonder.

### **Open to wonder**

In the spirit of wonder it's good to not close on uncertainty, good not to jam our discourse with our opinions as if they were immutable truth. “I wonder about that” or “That's got me wondering”

– even apart from their virtues as circuit breakers in an argument – are the lingo of the Way and not less than the Way itself.

When we truly listen we listen ourselves away. This means we don't rehearse our reply while others are speaking their truth. We leave space. The feeling – what the other person is really about – so often emerges at the end of what they are saying, or in the pause afterwards. It's important to respect this. However we often charge over them and blurt out whatever it is that we have been storing up. This prevents us from responding with curiosity from silence, or from wonder that evokes wonder.

We can't engineer a sense of wonder. We can't demand that it appear. Yet, in the spirit of not-knowing we can maintain the kind of openness which can engender wonder.

Spring opens the flowers with a single puff.

### **Descartes as “modern”**

At the outset of *Passions of the Soul* Descartes goes so far as to assert that he will write on this topic "as if no one had written on these matters before." In this spirit he never issued any overarching prohibition against the passions as fatal human defects that must be avoided at all costs. He recognized the passions as an inherent aspect of our humanity. Certainly, they were not to be taken as evidence of faults or sins – as with the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth, within the Christian teachings.

For Descartes the passions weren't there to be transcended, or to be eliminated; rather he felt that they should be harnessed in order for us to learn which of them are good or bad for the body, and therefore for the individual. In this regard his approach to the passions feels exploratory, and quite contemporary in spirit.

### **Intellectual passion: passion for exploration and discovery**

For George Bernard Shaw there were passions far more exciting than the physical ones..."intellectual passion, mathematical passion, passion for discovery and exploration: the mightiest of all passions." We get a clear sense of the passion for discovery and exploration in the young Werner Heisenberg's account of his leap into the dark regarding how to understand the bizarre behaviour of electrons leaping from orbit to orbit. Heisenberg's leap into the dark turned out to be his discovery of quantum mechanics: a breakthrough that transformed physics – and indeed our very conception of the world. Here are Heisenberg's own words concerning that momentous night of discovery:

*When the first terms seemed to come right, I became excited, making one mathematical error after another. As a consequence, it was around three o'clock in the morning when the result of my calculations lay before me. It was correct in all terms.*

*Suddenly I no longer had any doubts about the consistency of the new 'quantum mechanics' that my calculations described.*

*At first I was deeply alarmed: I had the feeling that I had gone beyond the surface of things and was beginning to see a strangely beautiful interior, and felt dizzy at the thought that now I had to investigate this wealth of mathematical structures that Nature had so generously spread out before me<sup>2</sup>.*

I love the fact that the lead up to his discovery was a rash of errors – so typical of the creative process, not to speak of our lives. We feel his awe and wonder – and alarm! – at what had been revealed to him, and what was now required of him.

### **Sense of wonder and the Way**

Sense of wonder sustains us in our practice and we readily associate it with Bodhicitta – the love of the Way that gets us embarked onto the path of awakening and inspires us to keep going. Poetry is often a spur and inspiration for Bodhicitta, and in this regard Hongzhi Zhengjue's *Inscription on Silent Illumination* is exemplary. Here are the opening stanzas of Hongzhi's magnificent poem which celebrates the profound practice of Silent Illumination. In the commentary that follows I will focus primarily on the imagery of wonder:

In silence and forgetful of words,  
It vividly manifests.  
When seen clearly, it is vast;  
when embodied, lively.

Lively, it alone illuminates;  
in the midst of illumination, wonder –  
an unclouded moon, a river of stars,  
snow draped pines on clouded peaks.

Dark yet ever brighter;  
hidden yet still more distinct –  
a crane dreaming, cold mists;  
within the waters an autumn sky.

The vast kalpas are utterly empty;  
Successive events are exactly the same.  
When wonder remains in the place of silence,  
merit is forgotten within illumination.

What kind of wonder is this?  
Bright and alert, it pierces the gloom.  
The way of silent illumination  
is the root of cleaving and subtle emergence<sup>3</sup>.

For Hongzhi *silence* is one partner in the interplay of opposites<sup>4</sup>, the other being *illumination*. “Silence” evokes the boundless darkness of our original nature, while “illumination” evokes events, beings and objects in all their bright uniqueness: the breeze that moves the branches of the purple-flowered jacaranda, the red of the bottlebrush against the bright blue of the vast blue West Australian sky.

Silence and illumination are mutually dependent and broadly represent wisdom and compassion. One of Buddhism’s most inspiring images is: *wisdom and compassion are like the wings of a bird: you need both to fly*.

Through our devoted practice we experience *silence* – the vastness and timelessness of our original nature. And for Hongzhi, when we embody silence we become lively – which is a relief if we had feared that embodying the illimitable dark might make us glum.

Actually, Hongzhi may be suggesting that when we become lively we’re up for whatever arises without being submerged by our own issues. This can surely mean equanimity and good grace as we play the hand we’ve been dealt. Liveliness isn’t forced cheer though. Rather, the old saying *Compassion in another’s trouble, courage in one’s own*, comes to mind.

When seen clearly, it is vast;  
when embodied, lively.

Lively, it alone illuminates;  
in the midst of illumination, wonder –

Silence – the darkness of our original nature – illuminates only when it is embodied: when it has arms to embrace, legs to saunter, and a tongue to articulate desire and distaste. By its nature, embodied silence is lively – talking a torrent, weeping a river, listening herself away.

“It” is not other than the vastness of our original nature: the darkness forgetful of words. Without darkness there is neither illumination nor liveliness arising from embodiment, and finally no wonder nestled in illumination. “Alone” is important here for it points to the necessity of realizing our original nature: the silence that is forgetful of words.

Now, silence is not other than illumination, and in the midst of illumination there is wonder: given heart opening expression as “an unclouded moon, a river of stars, snow draped pines on clouded peaks.”

What is that wonder for you?



The vast kalpas are utterly empty;  
Successive events are exactly the same.  
When wonder remains in the place of silence,  
merit is forgotten within illumination.  
What is “wonder remaining in the place of silence?”  
Last light on my backyard, doves cooing

Why in the whole vast universe is there just this?

Clinging to realization stales our practice, and our life, so I don’t think that “wonder remaining in the place of silence” means that we should linger in a state of raptness and amazement in the face of our realization. Rather, true wonder draws us into greater depth and encourages us to widen the aperture of whatever we think we might have realized.

What is “merit being forgotten within illumination?” “Merit” means awakening and also the sense of achievement that awakening may bring. When you wonder within silence you are not other than the unfolding matter of *just this right now*: taste of coffee in the mouth, early morning cold, the caged bird next door singing on one note only. Like this you aren’t attached to achievement or accomplishment at all. Rather, you unselfconsciously embody *silence* – the dark that’s forgetful of words – in your least activity: cleaning your teeth, getting dressed, heading up the wet path to the car, then driving to the train station. In terms of your life there is not the least gap between silence and illumination, and you live that “not the least gap” to the hilt.

What kind of wonder is this?  
Bright and alert, it pierces the gloom.

*What kind of wonder is this?* That question is the very wonder itself.

Wonder with no opposite, wonder that’s forgetful of words and meaning. And yet, in the same breath, this wonder pierces the gloom. What of “piercing the gloom”? In an earlier stanza Hongzhi wrote:

Dark yet ever brighter;  
hidden yet still more distinct.

These images reflect Dongshan’s “Fully illuminated at midnight, it is hidden at daybreak” from his poem Song of the Precious Mirror Samadhi, written centuries before Hongzhi’s Inscription. “Dark” is evocative of silence: “bright” of illumination. “Wonder,” encompassing both dark and bright, pierces the gloom, understood here as the darkness of our original nature. The bright alertness of wonder piercing the gloom may also convey the sense that awakening disperses our

despondency – and there’s truth to that, although even profound enlightenment can’t produce unending cheer.

Finally, the wonder that pierces the gloom is not other than the liveliness of life among all beings: helping and being helped, the give and take, and joy and sadness of our brief tenure here. Above all, it is our compassionate activity that alleviates suffering and liberates others and ourselves.

All this is far beyond the naïve wonder of the monk in the following story.

### Admonitions

A monk asked Baizhang, "What is a matter of special wonder?"

Baizhang answered, "Sitting, alone on Daiyu Peak." (Daiyu Peak is the mountain on which Baizhang’s monastery stood.) The monk prostrated himself, and Baizhang immediately hit him<sup>5</sup>.

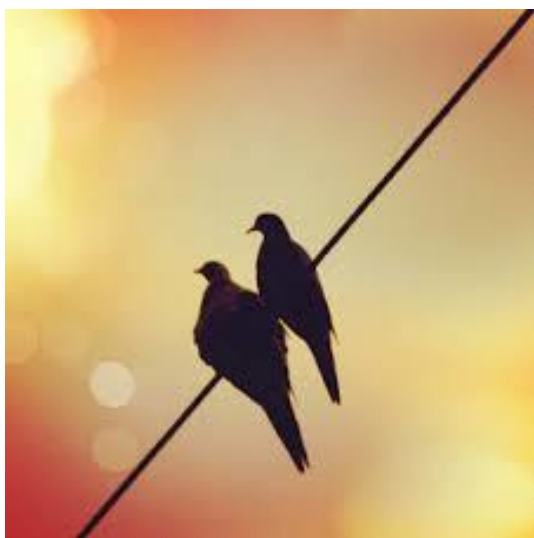
The monk is consumed by his curiosity – What is it like to awaken to my true and timeless nature? His teacher responds: "Sitting, alone on Daiyu Peak." The monk is awed by his teacher’s response, which hints at being all alone in the universe – and bows in reverence – *abbb* ...

Baizhang immediately hit him.

Baizhang’s blow is compassionate – Don’t get stuck in any kind of wonder, special or not! What do you seek other than this? – *pow!*

Regarding admonitions: As a teenager I remember sitting on one of the crumbling third-floor window ledges of Bon Marché Buildings and pelting folk with grapes as they passed the laneway’s mouth below. The accordion tuner and repairer, Tony Steffanoni, who shared the third floor with my accordion teacher Harry Bluck, scolded me: “How would you feel to be hit on your new felt fedora by a grape coming out of nowhere? When I was your age, I was fighting the Austrian forces in the Italian Alps.”

I still remember the sting of his words – as well as my admiration for him, amounting to wonder.



### References

1. René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (Internet copy copyright © Jonathan Bennett, 2017), paragraph 53, p.17
2. Carlo Rovelli, *Helgoland* (Allen Lane part of Penguin Random House, UK), p.13
3. This translation of Hongzhi Zhengjue’s *Inscription on Silent Illumination* is by Peter Wong and Ross Bolleter.
4. See Guo Gu, *Silent Illumination* (Shambhala Publications, Boulder, Colorado, 2021), pp. 7-11 “The Poetics of Silent Illumination” which inspired the imagery of the interplay and interdependence of opposites in this Dharma talk.
5. *Blue Cliff Record*, Case 26.

# Ziyong's Great Earth

BY MARI RHYDWEN ROSHI

A Teisho given in 2015

## THE CASE:

*A monk asked Master Ziyong Chengru, "Thirty blows—are they the actions of a man or an enlightened being?" Ziyong replied, "Just as long as the fellow isn't beaten to death." The monk said, "When you speak, the congregation assembles like clouds. In the end, who is the 'great hero' among women?" Ziyong said, "Each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet." The monk gave a shout. Ziyong said, "What is the point of recklessly shouting like that?" The monk then bowed respectfully and Ziyong said, "The Dharma does not rise up alone—it can't emerge without reliance on the world. If I take up the challenge of speaking I must surely borrow the light and the dark, the form and the emptiness of the mountains and hills and the great earth, the call of the magpies and the cries of the crows. The water flows and the flowers blossom, brilliantly preaching without ceasing. In this way there is no restraint."*

Ziyong Chengru (1675-1672) lived near Beijing and was of the Linji lineage. This was during the reinvention of Chan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was connected to the disruptions of the Ming-Qing transition when, in the words of Beata Grant (*Eminent Nuns* 2009): 'leaving home to enter the religious life became an acceptable, and even honourable, option for educated men and women of the gentry class.'

These nuns were treated as honorary males, according to Grant, and referred to as disciples, rather than masters by their male colleagues and disciples.

Ziyong was the last woman whose discourse record collection was preserved in the Jianxing canon. She was the only child of elderly parents, was never inclined to marry, and left home determined to attain enlightenment, eat a vegetarian diet and embroider Buddhist images.

She wrote a poem called *Bingzi* (1691) *Writing to My Feelings*.

*How many glorious seasons have passed!  
Forty and nine years of springtime.  
Although in this world I have no companion,  
If I ask my mind, I find it is my own intimate!  
The smell of incense disperses the early dawn;  
The closed shutters keep away the dusty world.*



*From today, having woken from a foolish dream,  
I am the “Just-as-It-Is Idler” Person of the Way.*

She travelled to Mt Wutai, a place of pilgrimage 150 miles southwest of Beijing, not far south of the Great Wall which marked the boundary between the civilised world of China proper and the vacant expanse now known as Mongolia. On her way there she met tigers and wolves, thieves and bandits. ‘But I was not frightened of fire or swords, natural disasters or people out to harm me. I regarded everything with complete calm and tranquillity.’ Reading this I was prompted to wonder: Why did she need to sit?

She was apparently granted a vision of Manjusri...known to reward some pilgrims in this way, and wrote a poem about it.

*Peaks and cliffs in folds of green known for their freshness:  
Mist and rain so obscure and deep, I lost my way upwards.  
Treading upon the dark blue hills, a red sun appeared,  
And the Dharma King burst forth out of the void.*

*A monk asked Master Ziyong Chengru, “Thirty blows—are they the actions of a man or an enlightened being?”  
Ziyong replied, “Just as long as the fellow isn’t beaten to death.*

Now this koan is actually something that happened in Jiangsu, after she had left her monastery in Beijing and gone south on an extended pilgrimage, intending to return to Beijing. In fact she never returned because she was offered a new convent at a place she visited later in her pilgrimage, the rather grandly named Jade Empyrean Chan Cloister, ‘in the scenic Wu Mountains, bordering on the southern edge of the famous West Lake outside Hangzhou.’

So here she is, a visiting zen Master who has just given a talk and a monk asks her a question.

She responds appropriately and the monk follows up with another question. Actually this is not in the koan version of the story in ‘The Hidden Lamp’, but in the original version (lines written between brackets) which I was lucky to find in a book ‘Eminent Nuns, Women Chan masters of 17<sup>th</sup> century China’ by Beata Grant:

*(The monk then said: “The Great Way is not divided into male and female; why is there any need for me to ask you [these questions]? Ziyong replied, “The nun was originally a woman.”)*

Why is it not in the koan? Well, your guess is as good as mine but I suspect in this instance that space might have been part of it. Notice that this monk is already well-aware that there is essentially no distinction between male and female and yet he also asks why he then has to ask about the matter. ‘Why is it still an issue (for me)?’

As mentioned previously, these nuns were treated as honorary males. In those days, to be treated with due respect, highly esteemed women had to be regarded as honorary men and this is not so different even today. When I went to Japan in the 1970s, Western women were often treated as honorary men. I don't know if it is still the same now, that was almost 40 years ago, but it meant that, for example, when I was invited to a meal at someone's house, I could be served along with the host, as well as my husband and other male guests, while the women of the family stayed out the back. It was, I hasten to add, horribly awkward for me and yet I think it was more comfortable for them than upending their own cultural practices and anyway, I think I did not conform to the expected ways of female behaviour, so I don't think they had any problem treating this ungraceful, opinionated person as a man rather than as a very poor example of womanhood.

She responds very clearly and straightforwardly, 'the nun was originally a woman'. We are all of us conceptualised as either men or women, tall or short, straight or gay, musical or not-very, as human, as tiger or as a chocolate biscuit.....The Great Way is not divided like this and yet it manifests in its myriad forms.

The nun was originally a woman. What is she now?

*The monk said, "When you speak, the congregation assembles like clouds. In the end, who is the 'great hero' among women?"*

Compare this with *Miaozong's Disappointment*, another case in the Hidden Lamp.

*Master Jiang Yuan said, "As a well-brought up lady from a wealthy family, how can you be prepared for the business of a 'great hero'?"*

*Miaozong replied, "Does the Buddhadharma distinguish between male and female forms?"*

*Yuan questioned her further. He said, "What is the Buddha? This mind is the Buddha. What about you?"*

*Miaozong replied, "I've heard of you for a long time. I'm disappointed to find that you still say that kind of thing."*

This exchange is of course a bit different; she is being questioned by a senior teacher, and expresses her disappointment.

But Ziyong did not express disappointment about being asked about her sex by one of the monks in the assembly, and answered directly and simply, *"Each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet."*

This questioning of her gender evidently arose more than once. There are other stories about her that shows that she was not always a meek, self-deprecating lamb but sometimes more a fierce tiger:

Another time a wandering monk entered her room. "The wolf has entered the lion's den", she said. "It is Manjusri who is here," the monk replied. 'Just in time for you to wash the feet of this mountain monk!' retorted Ziyong Chengru. The dialogue continues with her 'delivering a blow that left him speechless' and chasing him away.

Most interesting though is another encounter:

A first-degree graduate came from the south and entered the hall. He and the Master looked at each other, and then the scholar said: “After having travelled all day to come and visit the ‘Ship of Compassion’ who would have guessed that this ‘Ship of Compassion’ would turn out to be nothing but an old crone!”

The Master emitted an earthshaking roar, then asked: “What is this place? Tell me is it male? Or is it female?” When the scholar could not reply, she said to him: “Come closer and I will tell you.” When the scholar was in front of her, she grabbed him and said, “From the day you left Spirit Mountain, there is no place to be sought: from this day on, mother and son have met again.” The scholar said, ‘I trust you completely,’ and, prostrating himself, took refuge and requested the tonsure.

What do you make of this ‘mother and son have met again’? I have never heard of the intimacy between teacher and student being expressed this way, usually it’s more about entangling eyebrows, but expressed this way, telling him straight out that there is not a bit of difference separating them. Wow!

*The monk gave a shout. Ziyong said, “What is the point of recklessly shouting like that?” The monk then bowed respectfully and Ziyong said, “The Dharma does not rise up alone—it can’t emerge without reliance on the (‘world’, in the other translation) (environment and it is neither distant nor is it far. I’ve come from a distance of three thousand li (that’s about 1,500 kms) to the mountain of my ancestors, and have humbly accepted the request of the abbot, [who is] the senior monk and my Dharma uncle, to ascend this platform and speak of the principles of the lineage. I am ashamed only that my wisdom, insight, and knowledge are shallow.) If I dare to take up this challenge of speaking I must surely borrow the light and the dark, the form and the emptiness of the mountains and hills and the great earth, the call of the magpies and the cries of the crows. The water flows and the flowers blossom, brilliantly preaching without ceasing. In this way there is no restraint (and there may even be some fresh and refreshing phrases.”)*

Again we see the extended response here. The monk gives a shout after Ziyong says “Each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet.” But she wants more than a reckless shout...which may well be a ‘may as well give it a go’ shout and he bows, acknowledging her response before Ziyong launches into this speech that is much longer than in the koan version. “The Dharma does not rise up alone—it can’t emerge without reliance on the (environment and it is neither distant nor is it far. I’ve come from a distance of three thousand *li* to the mountain of my ancestors, and have humbly accepted the request of the abbot, [who is] the senior monk and my Dharma uncle, to ascend this platform and speak of the principles of the lineage. I am ashamed only that my wisdom, insight, and knowledge are shallow.)

Here the bracketed words that are deleted in the koan version do not add anything to the koan point, but just give some information about how far she has travelled and some context about her relationship to the abbot before she says: *I am ashamed only that my wisdom, insight, and knowledge*

*are shallow*. I can understand why this has been deleted, it makes no sense alone, without the preceding information about where she has come from, but it is also self-deprecating in a way that is particularly inappropriate and likely to lead to confusion in an Australian (and American possibly) context.

In Indonesia, as far as I can understand people generally, and the Javanese in particular, are exceptionally polite, especially if they are educated and high class. We often discuss this and I have told them about my experience in Australia, as a person asli dari Inggris raya. One aspect of English politeness is a tendency for people who consider themselves to be ‘well brought up’ to be very polite, particularly to people in subordinate positions and to be a little self-deprecating and modest in manner. When I arrived in Australia, I used to be self-deprecating about myself, including my driving ability, mainly because I was rather proud of it (I can still impress people with my parallel parking in very tight spaces!) but my brother-in-law refused to let me borrow his car. I eventually found out that this was because he had taken me at my word when I joked about my driving ways and could not be coaxed into a change of mind!

Now, in a status-conscious culture where this is the norm, I find it easy to understand that when a Javanese (or Japanese or English) man is being very polite to me, it may well be because he is of high status, not because he thinks I am. I think that, in this case, it is very likely that women from Australia and America, places where people regard themselves as egalitarian, the self-deprecating line, *(I am ashamed only that my wisdom, insight, and knowledge are shallow)* could be interpreted as evidence of unhealthy low self-esteem, whereas I think it could just as likely to be the healthy self-confident politeness of a born gentlewoman, a woman at ease mixing with the nobility in Beijing, a form of humility that, in some people, can even border on arrogance. Here it is genuine humility, that is born of neither self-doubt nor of arrogance and I’d like to read you a passage about humility and low-self-esteem from the late Sheng Yen. (Shattering the Great Doubt)

Many people think humility is a feeling of inferiority or low self-esteem. They think that being humble means one is worthless. This is not a correct understanding. On the contrary, from a genuine feeling of humility, self-confidence can be established. This self-confidence comes from the recognition of what one truly is. Thus, being humble, one can be more diligent in correcting and in improving themselves. Furthermore, a sense of inferiority can lead to a flightiness and instability, whereas humility grounds oneself in a true perspective—one recognizes and understands their mistakes and shortcomings; their character becomes more stable, down-to-earth, with an air of solidity. In Chinese terms, you could say that one’s chi flows subtly downward as opposed to an insecure person, whose chi is floating and unsettled. Either way, it adds nothing to the koan point to leave this section in, and may lead to misunderstanding, but it is good to understand that modesty is not always a sign of self-abnegation.

*If I (dare to) not in the koan,; again it doesn’t make sense without the whole context) take up this challenge of speaking I must surely borrow the light and the dark, the form and the emptiness of the mountains and hills and the great earth, the call of the magpies and the cries of the crows. The water flows and the flowers blossom, brilliantly preaching without ceasing. In this way there is no restraint (and there may even be some fresh and refreshing phrases.)*

And here we come to the real heart of this koan. So transparently expressed and, indeed, when do we ever speak as what the black writer Mudrooroo used to define as a monad, "The ego existing in splendid isolation and from this divine monad [comes] the great work.' We are always and forever borrowing....if we can be said to borrow from what, right from the beginning, is no other than ourselves.

And it is this awareness of interbeing, to use that wonderful coining of Thich Nhat Hanh's, that shines out of Ziyong through the many poems she wrote about her pilgrimages.

*I still think about carrying my travel bundle, in those days gone by,  
Travelling the hills, frolicking in the waters, coming out in cloud country.  
Eyes open and eyebrows raised in astonishment, everything is Samadhi,  
And in this great earth, there is nowhere that is not a Wisdom Hall*

### Original story:

*A monk asked Master Ziyong Chengru, "Thirty blows—are they the actions of a man or an enlightened being?" Ziyong replied, "Just as long as the fellow isn't beaten to death." (The monk then said: "The Great Way is not divided into male and female; why is there any need for me to ask you [these questions]?" Ziyong replied, "The nun was originally a woman.") The monk said, "When you speak, the congregation assembles like clouds. In the end, who is the 'great hero' among women?" Ziyong said, "Each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet." The monk gave a shout. Ziyong said, "What is the point of recklessly shouting like that?" The monk then bowed respectfully and Ziyong said, "The Dharma does not rise up alone—it can't emerge without reliance on the (environment and it is neither distant nor is it far. I've come from a distance of three thousand li (about 1500 kilometres) to the mountain of my ancestors, and have humbly accepted the request of the abbot, [who is] the senior monk and my Dharma uncle, to ascend this platform and speak of the principles of the lineage. I am ashamed only that my wisdom, insight, and knowledge are shallow.) If I dare to take up this challenge of speaking I must surely borrow the light and the dark, the form and the emptiness of the mountains and hills and the great earth, the call of the magpies and the cries of the crows. The water flows and the flowers blossom, brilliantly preaching without ceasing. In this way there is no restraint (and there may even be some fresh and refreshing phrases.)"*





# Frog Dharma

BY PAUL DOUGHTY

A talk given at St Paul's dojo, November 2019

A recording of this talk, including all the frog calls, can be heard at:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-987980431/frog-dharma-a-talk-by-paul-doughty-7th-of-november-2019>

## Does the frog have Buddha nature?

What it is about frogs that opens us up to the mysteries of nature? Frogs are one of those animals that we know are out there, but that are encountered rarely enough to remain mysterious to us. But frogs are as popular as ever these days, some reasons being: their large eyes - they are nocturnal animals, and so have large eyes to see at night; their current conservation plight - frogs are under threat from a variety of human-caused reasons, so we may take a vested interest in their survival; or maybe it's their non-threatening dispositions - they don't bite or scratch like the reptiles I also study. Another unique thing about frogs is the hop. You'll be looking at a frog when suddenly it will do a small but explosive hop, which is both startling and comical at the same time. Maybe it will jump into the pond with a splash - 'ker-plop!'

As the state's reptile and frog biologist, I hear lots of stories from people about encounters with these animals. And just as everyone has a 'snake story', most people have a 'frog story' as well. For example, one that appeared in the laundry or toilet, or that you dug up or uncovered while working in the garden and so on.



Kimberley Spadefoot Photo: J&N Chiew

But tonight I will be focussing on one aspect of frog biology and how it can open us up to nature: that is, the *calls* frogs make. So I'll be talking about frog calls, but also about other aspects of sound and hearing more generally. And by 'nature' I mean both the natural world 'out there', and in a more Buddhist vein, our own self-nature.



Moaning Frog Photo: J&N Chiew

Unlike the reptiles that I work on a lot, frogs are truly a musical animal. And as a general 'music person', I've been obsessed with music from an early age, and I can honestly say my interest has never waned. So when I was lucky enough to fall into a career as a reptile biologist, I was eventually lured to the calls of frogs in the 90s when I began to study them at UWA. And especially the breeding biology of the Quacking Frog, a shallow-water winter breeder that sounds just like a duck.

The calls of frogs are extremely varied from species to species, and here in the south-west we have an especially wide range of frog call sounds. Part of this stems from only having about 2 ½ species of ‘tree frogs’ – which tend to be in the higher registers and feature clicks and beeps.

One is the Slender Tree Frog. This species is very common in Perth as they’re climbers, so they can find backyard ponds and hang out in the vegetation. The other common local species is the Motorbike Frog, which sounds like a motorbike changing gears, and is also another climber and commonly encountered in the south-west. Along with the Quacking Frog, you can hear them all at Balingup from the dojo in the distance at night, something the Yaza crew would be especially familiar with.

The other two dozen or so species are what are known as ‘ground frogs’ – a group that’s been in Australia for tens of millions of years, that doesn’t climb but is down on the ground amongst the mud and leaves and grass, and they like to burrow deep into the soil.

One of the common ground frogs around Perth is the Moaning Frog. ‘Moaners’ breed in areas that flood seasonally, and dig their burrows after the first autumn rains in April and May before the winter rains begin to saturate the ground creating ponds and creeks. I usually know it’s frog season in Perth when my phone begins to ring about complaints of this species. Young males will often dig burrows in gardens that people water over summer to keep the plants going, often right under someone’s bedroom window. So by the time people call me they are partially going mad through the noise this species makes and through lack of sleep. Fortunately, they are easily moved on and I give advice on how to do this.

### **Some frog biology facts**

Since this presentation is about frogs, you’re going to have to learn a few things about frogs. First of all, within a species, only the

males call. And within these calls, there are two main parts to the calls. The first part can be roughly translated as ‘hey baby’. This part is for the females the males are trying to attract, and all calls have this element. The second, optional, part can be roughly translated as ‘bugger off’ – this bit’s for the other rival males that are competing for the same females in the chorus.

Another thing to know is that calls are unique to that species, although some can sound similar, especially the more basic, simple, grunting-like calls.

The hearing of females is finely tuned to the sound of their own species. This is because if a female makes a mistake and mates with a male from a different species, she’ll waste her entire investment into her clutch of eggs, so for this reason females have very good hearing. Not only that, but females listen intensely to the quality of the male, whether it’s some size components in the resonance of his voice, the complexity of his call or perhaps some melodious elements lost on human ears as we can’t hear them.

In WA, there are about 30 species in the south-west and 40 in the Kimberley region, with Kununurra being the ‘frog capital’ of WA with the most diversity. In the arid zone there’s a lesser number of more widely distributed species, with a few regional oddballs in the Pilbara region.

Globally there are currently over 7100 species. A few years ago, the number of reptile species exceeded 10,000 and overtook birds as the most diverse terrestrial vertebrate group. But the bird people didn’t like this, and so raised some subspecies and populations up to full species, making birds the most diverse group again. But because almost all bird taxonomy was worked out over a 100 years ago, reptiles have continued to climb and birds have been overtaken again. But frogs are on an even higher rate of increase in species descriptions, and so when it’s all said and done, frogs may well be the most diverse group through new discoveries, including the use of calls and genetic

techniques.

Speaking of birds, these animals certainly get a lot of air time in zen discussions, and birds are of course an essential acoustic component of sitting in the morning, and Ross and Michael Wright even have bird totems. But like a lot of other life-long reptile and amphibian people, I've been a 'hands on' person when it comes to engaging with the natural world, especially the objects of my curiosity: lizards, snakes and frogs. So as a boy I would catch these animals in the woods and hills around my house, but would not really notice the birds. We are all the product of our particular unique sensory perceptions, and birds to me have just been these noisy flappy things in the corners of my awareness. Sure, some of it is professional jealousy, as 'birdos' are the dominant animal-watching group amongst the public. And what's more about mammals is that we all know a handful of doe-eyed species which Hoover up most of the available conservation funds. So I guess I like the weirder, hard-to-see vertebrate animals out there.

### **Frog discoveries**

But getting back to frogs, they are a great animal to work with, as - like birds - they cry out their species name. So my colleagues and I have discovered many species by their calls, especially in the Kimberley.

In the Dr Suess story, *Horton Hears a Who*, an elephant hears the faint cry of some voices from a dust speck, and these voices are from a world of tiny people that only Horton can hear with his large ears. The story involves Horton carrying around this dust speck on a dandelion to protect the small world, but some mischievous non-believing jungle creatures, such as kangaroos and monkeys, try to take the dandelion away from him and destroy it. Eventually the Who's from Whoville make just enough sound so that the animals of the jungle are aware of them and then look after them according to Horton's motto: 'A person's a person, no matter how

small'. As a frog biologist, I can relate to Horton a bit. When I'm out in the field, I'm continually straining my ears to hear the sounds of frogs - as if there's a Whoville out there waiting to be heard.

What's it like to discover a new species by sound? Well, this may sound strange, but in my experience discovering new species is most similar to finding out your house or car has been burgled. So when you've been robbed, you'll say 'oh that's funny - the door's open' and 'maybe the wind or the cat knocked these things all over the floor'. Then the penny drops - aah, I've been trying to force my old reality into a new reality I have not anticipated. So - discovering a new species is kind of a surreal experience for this reason.

### **Frog dharma**

Having a job as a biologist where I get to do field work as part of my normal activities has been an unforeseen, wonderful thing in my life. If I ended up as a geneticist, for instance, I would still be thinking about animals, environments and evolution. But the key thing is - I would not *have* to get out in the bush to go look for and get in touch with my subject animals.

When you're out and about in the bush, there's a wonderful release from the stresses of modern life. Some of you may recall the story from one of Mari Rhydwen's teishos of the rowboat in the mist. It goes something like this: you're out in your boat in the morning in a dense fog. All of a sudden, out of the mist comes another boat that crashes into your boat. Your reaction is to be angry at the other skipper for being so careless. But - there's nobody in the other boat. It's empty, and so your anger disappears, as you can't hang your negative feelings on another fellow human - it's just an inanimate object with no good or bad human intentions behind it at all.

And so it is in nature - you're walking along a trail, when you suddenly stub your toe, roll your ankle a bit on a rock, or your thigh gets

stabbed by a sharp stick or a spinifex clump you've run into. Maybe you're puffed because you've underestimated how long your walk will take, a common mistake. Nobody to be angry at. It's just nature as it is, and any anger is just all you, with no other people to blame. To put it differently, we have a chance to escape our own self-projected likes and dislikes that we put onto the world, and see them for what they are. Sounds a bit like sitting zazen, doesn't it?

A point I'm trying to make here is that when we're in nature, it returns us to our ancestral world, to where our bodies and minds have come from. Civilisation is nice and all - it's comfortable, easy, entertaining. But society can also untether us from the ancestral context of the way we interact with our social and physical environment. It surely must affect the quality of the self-chatter that goes on in peoples' heads.

So - how do the sounds of frogs bring us back to nature, to our true selves? In other words: what is frog dharma? Experiencing unusual sounds in nature, such as with hearing frog calls, presents an opportunity to truly hear the sounds as they are. Frog sounds have a surprising, counter-intuitive feel to them. They occur well within the range of the human voice, which gives them a kind of fresh and familiar sound, making for an invigorating listening experience. Frog sounds are also rarely encountered during the year, given our busy concrete-jungle-based daily existences. It's true, you can unite with sounds such as the traffic, ravens, people moving in the dojo, but hearing new unusual sounds presents new opportunities.

Take for example the Wotjulum Frog species that occurs in the Kimberley, with its incredibly complex call. The males get themselves into these kind of intense trance-like calling sessions where they are highly attuned to each other. Interestingly, females are twice the length of males, and many times more massive. They are a true party frog, as the choruses don't really fire up until after midnight, and then they'll call until dawn -

long after all the other species have turned in for the night.

Nature can certainly produce things that humans delight in that are not 'designed' for our enjoyment. Rainbows didn't have to exist, but they do, firing up our photoreceptors and vision centres in our brains.

One of my favourite local frogs is the Hooting Frog, with its deep 'who...who...who...' call. It is a large-bodied and slow-moving species that's endemic to the Darling Range. And as you listen, you may be inclined to hear this species proposing a koan.

But not all frog sounds are pleasant necessarily. When I was in Albany a few months ago for Science Week, I was giving a talk at the high school, and a student asked me: what's your *least* favourite frog call? I said 'good question!' as I had an answer: the Little Red Tree Frog aka the 'dunny frog', as this is where people usually encounter this species in the outback. But I call it the 'seagull frog' owing to its harsh and grating call, like when several seagulls land around you at the beach with your chips.

### **The sound of a dove versus a critical voice**

Regarding these two calls - one pleasant and one harsh - they present a parallel case to a kind of conundrum posed by Charlotte Joko Beck. Many of us here at the ZGWA are familiar with Joko's books and teachings. Indeed, in addition to reading Robert Aitken's books, her books also introduced me to what zen is all about over 20 years ago.

Near the end of her book *Nothing Special*, there's a chapter called *The sound of a dove – and a critical voice*. In this chapter, she recalls a student from the other side of the U.S. ringing her up, to relay to Joko how wonderful she felt when she heard the sound of a dove in the morning. Joko with her somewhat characteristic 'killjoy' approach



came back with: 'That's wonderful! But suppose that instead of hearing the dove, you hear a critical voice finding fault with you. What's the difference between the sound of the dove and the sound of a critical voice?'

I've always been stuck on the horns of this dilemma, as it gets to the heart of where I often am in my own practice. Joko brings the same kind of flavour to it as her 'don't be angry!' statement or koan, even, as Ross describes it. In this case, she herself is the agent that may cause one to anger, but she's kind of getting in your face about something, telling you what to do. Similarly, in the dove vs. critical voice one, it is none other than Joko that is the narrator with the critical voice.

In this chapter, there's some dialogue with students, wherein this conundrum is delved into a bit. To get to the point, the main difference between the two sounds is our opinions we attach to them. That is, we like one and not the other. Joko says: 'In just hearing, there is no opinion. When the sound hits our eardrums, there is no opinion; there is just hearing. All day long, sensory information comes in. But from the human point of view, only some of it is acceptable. ... Certainly we don't want to listen. Over years of sitting, however, that unwillingness slowly changes. Sitting is not about being blissful or happy. It's about finally seeing that there is no real difference between listening to a dove and listening to a critical voice; the 'difference' is only in our mind. This struggle is what practice is about.' It's an interesting, and to me - initially a counter-intuitive, argument. And one that I keep coming back to in my own practice, especially with sounds and hearing.

So - getting back to frogs - what does this have to do with frogs?? Frog sounds are unusual to our ears. And there's a range of different kinds of calls: not all are pleasant, and not all are harsh. So with frog calls we have an opportunity to just hear them as they are, as we're not bringing that many opinions into our hearing.

## Music and non-music.

The calls I've been playing for you fall under a kind of category called 'field recordings'. These field recordings are made outside of the studio and out in nature or on city streets. One example of the use of field recordings in music is the sounds of birds and waves that Riley Lee adds to some of his shakuhachi recordings. In other cases, it's just the straight up sounds as in some nature-only recordings, such as many of those that you've heard tonight.

With recordings of frogs and birds and waterfalls and the like - they're completely natural, and I'm going to say 'un-self-conscious' sounds. Just sounds, without any intentionality behind it. This is usually quite different from music, where the writer is trying to communicate something, a feeling or a lyrical message, in a piece of music.

A kind of example of this is pets. Dogs and cats are completely unselfconscious when you film them - they don't understand what picture-taking is so they 'act naturally' and don't reply to 'cheese' (you also can't explain anything to them that you're about to go away on holiday and that you'll be back, or going to the vet either).

The musical piece *Magic Window* is an entirely 'silent' piece of music. It is from an electronic band called *Boards of Canada*, which are actually two brothers from Scotland, each with a different surname. They've only had three albums out in about 20 years, and are a bit reclusive, and this piece is from their album *Geogaddi* from 2002. It's in the spirit of John Cage's *4'33"* from the 1950s, but a bit shorter at only 2 minutes. John Cage was an avant garde 20th century composer and a zen practitioner. With *4'33"*, there's a piano and a piano player and some physical instructions for what he or she does. The point of *Magic Window*, which is just a shorter version of John Cage's piece, is to open the listener up to the sounds of what's really happening in

the room that you're sitting in. So the 'music' is the ambient sounds all around you. So - that's the trick with these kinds of pieces. When you're hearing the sounds, is the performance on? Or is it a non-performance, a semantic trick of sorts. Or is this just like zazen? - a device to get you to really experience what's happening around you, without your thoughts constantly blocking your hearing, feeling and other sensations?

Getting back to the nature of field recordings and the *Magic Window* track, one can ask at any time: is this the track or isn't it? Is the tape recorder on or off? And what's more - what am I hearing (or not hearing) right here now within this 'recording' of our lives that's happening every moment? I think that's an open question, and one worth listening carefully for the answer out there.



*Motorbike Frog* Photo: J&N Chiew

So - is the recorder on or off? Does it matter? Are you attending to your life as it is while sitting zazen? What about at the shops, in traffic or talking to your boss? What's the difference? The bigger question seems to be: are you attending to life as it's happening?



*Just Sitting* Photo: Desmond Lim

# NATURE IN DOGEN'S PHILOSOPHY AND TEACHING

BY LIZZIE FINN

A talk given at St Paul's dojo, April 2021

With Thanks to Ross Bolleter Roshi for his teaching with Dogen

*Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water.*

This fascicle taken from Eihei Dogen's *Genjo Koan* is a magnificent example of the way he writes with nature not only to express and teach his own experience of the Way, but to express the teachings inherent in nature. He saw nature as teacher of the Buddha Dharma and expressed this in his poetry and writings.

The moon, stars, mountains, rivers, ocean and peach blossoms are among the natural phenomena that abound in his literature, and there was no separation for him from these natural phenomena. One academic reviewer talks about Dogen's 'living insight', and for me the term captures this 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen Master's extraordinary skilfulness in weaving his practice insights into his writing through live experience in nature, and the very aliveness of nature itself as teacher.

Dogen wrote prolifically and his thinking and writing were instrumental in the founding of the Soto Zen sect. The references to nature in his literature were also influenced culturally, where images of nature, including the moon, the stars, mountains, rivers and the ocean, recurred in Japanese literature at that time.

Zen Buddhist practice is founded on live experience. Beyond the sutras and koan practice and other written teachings, the

most important learning takes place sitting on a cushion, and sitting and sitting.....and extended sitting, often in wild natural places. We have all experienced intimacy with nature through many hours of practice – especially here in St Paul's where the sound of the cicadas in the summer ricochet's right through, and at home or on sesshin in the country, we become intimate with birdcall, the rain and the wind, the sun, stars and the moon. It is this growing intimacy through Zen practice that has fed my increasing love with nature. You will have gathered from the environmental activities I engage in that I have developed a deep respect for nature, and a sense of how utterly alive and essential it is. I have realized that everything, every insect, tree, bush, reptile, animal has a high level of intelligence within its own domain – except perhaps human intelligence in that we appear to be on a path to self-destruction unless we can radically change our way of living.

So.....studying Dogen has been rewarding for me. He can be viewed as a radical in the Buddhist world in that he overturned the traditional view of separation between sentient and insentient beings in his teaching. His writings posed a revolution to the traditional Buddhist theory that Buddha Nature was only possessed by *sentient* beings.





Dogen, however, sees Buddha Nature as all existence, everything from a particle of sand, to a mountain, to rivers, and to trees, animals and humans. He believed that all existence – where all existence subsumes the labels sentient and insentient beings - was vibrant with Buddha Nature, that extraordinary intelligence vast and unknown that we cannot envisage or describe. I dream that if Dogen was alive today and here in WA, he would be joining environmental action sits and landcare events, or planting trees, rescuing animals and clearing rivers. He would surely have been dismayed by the way that humans are destroying the natural world, destroying themselves. However, in his life time he was not an activist or ecologist, his overriding concern was transmission of the Dharma.

I am going to look briefly at Dogen's earlier life history, and how this is likely to have influenced his inclusion of nature in his writings. Then I will look in brief at some of his poetry and writings, before focusing more extensively on a particular fascicle in the *Genjo Koan*, where nature in the form of the ocean, provides, for me, a salutary lesson about the cardinal Zen teaching emphasis on 'not knowing' and thereby not discriminating or judging.

Dogen was born in Japan in 1200 near Kyoto. He faced many challenges in his early life including the refusal of the clan into which he was born to accept him as legitimate. His father died when he was 2 years old and his mother died when he was 7. He was initiated into training in Japan as a Tendai Mahayana Buddhist monk at the age of 13 and was ordained when he was 17. He considered Japanese Buddhism at that time to be corrupt and influenced by secular power struggles, and at the age of 23 he left for China with his teacher Busuju Myozen to study Cha'n Buddhism, an important precursor to Japanese Zen Buddhism. Their

voyage to China by sea was prompted by a wish to discover genuine Buddha dharma. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century to sail to China involved a dangerous and long journey out at sea. Dogen's voyage to China with his teacher took him out into boundless ocean for many days and was a salient experience for him, one which he wove into his teachings including *Genjo Koan*, as you will hear a little later.

He returned to Japan aged 27 and at the age of 44, after being abbot of a small temple in Kyoto, established his mountain monastery *Eiheiji*. Throughout his life, he engaged in prolific writing influenced by what he had learnt in China.

Some years after returning to Japan, he lived and taught in his monastic retreat Eiheiji which was near mountains and waters. Yet his 'Mountains and Waters Sutra' was written three years before he moved to live in the midst of mountains . Dogen loved the mountains, however his relationship to them was not a naïve veneration or exaltation of nature. He considered this a defiled view of nature that was enslaving. As I described earlier, he did not see insentient beings in the traditional way as being excluded from Buddha Nature. Dogen said that so-called insentient beings such as trees, rivers, mountains and streams, expressed dharma, not in human languages but through their own expressions. Dogen believed that non-sentient beings may not communicate in the same way as sentient beings, but they possess the ability to give voice to the Buddha Way. He rejected any sense of a hierarchy of beings. He saw Buddha Nature as a temporal flow of reality from which nothing was excluded. It is significant that this teaching is supported today by research in the natural sciences which has discovered the fine intelligence of a nature, completely alive and sentient: for instance trees communicate with each other through fungal networks.



These networks can share resources, both with related trees but also with trees of different species in the same tree community. Trees also use fungal networks to warn their neighbours about impending attacks from pests.

So...returning to the 'Mountains and Waters Sutra', the very first line of it *Mountains and waters right now are the actualization of the ancient Buddha way* expresses Dogen's firm statement that mountains and waters, right now, right in this present moment, are Buddha Nature itself. He is also saying that they are sutras in themselves, expressing teachings about the Buddha Way... that mountains and rivers are right now expressing the way everything really is. In fact everything right now, here tonight is the actualization of the Buddha Way.

As well as his longer treatises, Dogen wrote many *waka* (*w-a-k-a*) which are a traditional short form of Japanese poetry resembling haiku. In this poem Japanese Cicadas teach impermanence:



*Deep in a mountain,  
Both on the peak and in the valley,  
Raising large voices,  
Higurashi cicadas are chirping,  
"This day is already coming to  
end."*

Higurashi is a kind of cicada spread all over Japan. It chirps in the evening and in the early morning. The Japanese word "Higurashi" means "the day closer" Cicada is representative of a short life. It stays underground for some years as a nymph, but when it matures and emerges in the air, it lives one week or less. It sings wholeheartedly while it can, without wasting time, just as the cicadas sing in summer around our St Paul's dojo teaching us, perhaps, to live mindfully and attentively each day without wasting

time. I wonder what the cicada song suggests to you?

*Water birds  
going and coming  
their traces disappear  
but they never  
forget their path.*

There is nothing to hold onto here, impermanence as the water birds come and go leaving no trace, arising and falling each moment....and yet they never forget their home, their path, the Way.

And Dogen's experience of no-separation is vividly expressed by the rain in this waka which may remind you of many times listening to the rain pouring, pounding down on the roof in the dojo here or in the country on sesshin

*As I listened  
I became  
The sound of rain  
On the eaves*

You will notice in these three poems that Dogen entirely captures a moment in time taken from his life experience. He cannot be understood aside from his apparent sense of wonder as he practised in the world of nature amongst mountain and rivers.

I am going to turn now to focus on Dogen's inclusion of nature in the *Genjo Koan*. I am looking *specifically* at Fascicle 9 where he writes about the ocean as teacher. *Genjo Koan* was written in Japan some 7 years after Dogen returned from China. *Genjo Koan* means the koan of our life, that is to say the koan of this present arising moment. Every moment that presents is Genjo Koan. *Gen* means to appear, to show up, to be in the present moment. *Jo* means to become, to complete, to accomplish. Genjo as a verb means 'to manifest or actualize', where something that was potential becomes actual in this present moment of time. As a noun

Genjo means the reality presently happening. *Ko* means public and *An* means record. So we have a 'public record or document'.

I'll read the Fascicle first and then offer an interpretation, and I emphasize the word interpretation, of what Dogen sought to convey in each part of it:

*When dharma does not fill your whole body and mind, you think it is already sufficient. When dharma fills your body and mind, you understand that something is missing.*

*For example, when you sail out in a boat to the middle of an ocean where no land is in sight, and view the four directions, the ocean looks circular, and does not look any other way. But the ocean is neither round nor square; its features are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It only looks circular as far as you can see at that time. All things are like this.*

*Though there are many features in the dusty world and the world beyond conditions, you see and understand only what your eye of practice can reach. In order to learn the nature of the myriad things, you must know that although they may look round or square, the other features of oceans and mountains are infinite in variety; whole worlds are there. It is so not only around you, but also directly beneath your feet, or in a drop of water.*

Shohaku Okamura, a Japanese Soto Zen priest, now in his 70s, has written extensively about Dogen's teachings including *Genjo Koan*. He believes the analogy of the ocean in this fascicle was influenced by Dogen's experience when he sailed to China in 1223 with his teacher to discover genuine Buddha Dharma, as I mentioned earlier. On this voyage he spent many days on a boat with nothing in sight except the horizon of the ocean and the vast sky. When we sail inland we see many things like villages, people and trees on the coast. However once we sail out into the vast ocean we only see the ocean and

the horizon looks like a circle touching the sky. Dogen aligns this experience out in the boundless ocean with viewing one-ness or unity as realization:

*When dharma does not fill your whole body and mind, you think it is already sufficient.*

Dogen is saying when dharma does not fully penetrate your body and mind, you may think seeing unity or oneness is enlightenment. *When dharma fills your body and mind, you understand that something is missing.* Then when dharma fills your body and mind, you see how incomplete your practice is, how subtle and complex it is, and that true realization goes far beyond seeing the unity of things. We realize then that we must inquire endlessly into reality, into the nature of all things, on a journey through vast and infinite territory.

*For example, when you sail out in a boat to the middle of an ocean where no land is in sight, and view the four directions, the ocean looks circular, and does not look any other way. But the ocean is neither round nor square; its features are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It only looks circular as far as you can see at that time. All things are like this.*

The ocean is not circular as we perceive it. It is infinitely varied in its depths and shallows, the shapes of submerged land beneath its waters, its irregular coastlines, as Dogen writes, *its features are infinite in variety*. The one-ness of the circular horizon is thus a construct created in our mind. What we see is limited, we can never see the entirety of reality as it truly is. This teaching is fundamental to the emphasis on 'not knowing' in Zen Buddhist dharma. As finite and limited human beings we are capable of creating a mental image of what we think is total reality, but this is only a construct or mental representation of the world we create in our minds. When we see that our views of

oneness, or our discriminating views are mental constructs, and realize how deluded we are, we move to the wisdom of seeing the actual reality of our life.

When Dogen wrote *It is like a palace. It is like a jewel* he is referring to the writings of Asvabhava an Indian Buddhist teacher who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century. Asvabhava taught that ‘the fish sees water as a palace, and the celestial being sees water as a jewel, humans see water as water’ How we see water depends on our conditioning and our karmic conditions.

*It only looks circular as far as you can see at that time. All things are like this.*

Dogen is questioning the fixed independent existence or self-nature of anything. There is no objective true reality of water.

*Though there are many features in the dusty world and the world beyond conditions, you see and understand only what your eye of practice can reach. In order to learn the nature of the myriad things, you must know that although they may look round or square, the other features of oceans and mountains are infinite in variety; whole worlds are there. It is so not only around you, but also directly beneath your feet, or in a drop of water.*

The dusty world refers to the secular world and the world beyond refers to the world of dharma, and they correspond to relative and ultimate or absolute truth. Dogen says we must see reality from both points of view. Neither is superior. We should not try to escape the dusty world nor try to reside in absolute reality. Our Bodhisattva practice takes place within the world of desire, of comparisons with others, of picking and choosing and of eating and sleeping and sweeping the paths. In our daily lives we find ourselves in many different situations and we interpret each situation and experience according to our individual karmic

conditions. Dogen urges us to see reality with fresh eyes, just as it is right now, without grasping fixed ideas or colouring what is happening now with previous experience. I hope to remember this the next time someone is critical or abrupt with me and to think ‘just these words’, rather than feel offended and decide this person is rude!

*You see and understand only what your eye of practice can reach.*

Dogen’s teaching here is really helpful for practice and life. I remember my early days as a somewhat rebellious Zen student, when I had all sorts of views in the sangha about other people, how they had behaved, how they are behaving and how they should behave in the future, and I often focused on the faults of others. So Dogen’s teaching and the teaching of the ocean, tells me that I don’t know about the motives or values underpinning other people’s behaviour. As my practice continues I find myself, when not expressing my opinion or judging at every turn, more at ease. Dogen and the ocean show us that so much is going on beyond our immediate view. As I continue, I realize I am changing in spite of my ‘self’, embracing ‘not knowing’ more often than I used to. I am more aware now that when my mind is ruminating about something dastardly that someone has done, that is ‘just my head’, just my non-stop rattle of thoughts rising and falling, I don’t have to listen to them, I don’t know why someone is behaving the way they are everyone has their own perspective and conditioning. We all hold the best truths we’ve been able to come up with based on our particular experiences and perspectives. Dogen’s teaching is ultimately about humility – we can never know anything completely in the relative world, ‘We can only *see and understand what your eye of practice can reach.*

So...Dogen ... mysterious, profound, obscure....a brilliant teacher and yet humble

in realizing that mountains, rivers and the ocean and many other natural phenomena are not separate, are very much alive as Buddha Nature, and offer teaching of the dharma moment by moment. I have some sense of this as I am fortunate to sit on my zabutan in front of sliding glass doors with the whole garden and its inhabitants, and the wind, rain, and sun accompanying me. Dogen's revolutionary approach to nature is one that sits very comfortably with me, and more than that, his teaching with and through nature is helping me to absorb the dharma.

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### **Comment: Responses to Living with COVID**

Dogen immerses me in nature in his teaching and that's one of the reasons why I love studying his writings. In the early days of COVID in WA, I relished the first lockdown. I had a keen sense of nature being freed at

last from the non-stop tyranny of human daily life. Suddenly there was utter peace and the birds seemed to be rejoicing, singing right out, clear and undisturbed by the noise of cars and trucks or the smell of fuel emissions. And on the news, hearing that the Wien river flowing right through the city of Vienna had cleaned up enough for dolphins to have a swim there. All those planes grounded at airports, a wonderful sight which meant that migrating birds could fly in formation without worrying about being caught and mangled in jet plane engines. And for me the sheer relief and joy of walking in almost complete peace and stillness, so rare in this 24/7 electronic world. I imagine Dogen taking peaceful walks around his monastery at Eihei-ji in a pristine environment bounded by mountains and waters. At that time in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, peace would have enabled the teachings inherent in nature to awaken him.



Eihei-ji Monastery Grounds

# Lockdown Lessons

## or

# The Three Marks of Existence

BY MARI RHYDWEN ROSHI

A talk given during Everyday Zen, May 2021

It's been ages since I've seen any of you in person—since the 2020 January sesshin, which is the only teaching I've done in person since I retired in October 2019, imagining I'd then be free to spend more time on my teaching in WA!

Anyway, this last 18 months has been a very strange time for all of us across the world, but it has been different for each of us. So today, I'd like us all to consider how it has been for us and what it has meant for our practice, for our lives. I'm going to start by talking about my experience and then open things up for discussion.

I've been in lockdown for seven weeks now and it shows no sign of ending any time soon. Living alone, I talk to my cat Kevin even more than usual, as do many of my friends since he often tends to insert himself into my phone conversation. Lockdown has also given me a lot of time to think about solitude and the role of other people in our lives, (as well as our role in the lives of others)—which is another way of saying the place of solitude and of community in our practice. I know that most of you haven't been in lockdown for any length of time recently, but I hope it has some relevance for everyone, because it's not really about lockdown but something broader. I know that some of our Sangha have already been affected by border closures that have prevented meetings with family and friends, access to work in other states or countries and so on, and I think all of you have experienced at least some periods of lockdown. I suspect many of you will have had some experience of feeling disappointed, deprived of something, or generally ill-at-ease in one way or another during this last 18 months.

So, what have I been deprived of? Ironically, being in lockdown has prevented me from being able to go to do a solo sesshin for 7 days in a tiny kuti in the rainforest on the mid-North Coast. I felt very disappointed about that. I had been looking forward to being somewhere remote and even a little bit scary being some distance from any other habitation. (You may think, 'Well, so just do the retreat at home then, you're in lockdown anyway so its solo already, just sit there.' (I shall return to this point.) I also missed out on some excursions and holidays with friends and family that had been planned for months. By mid-July it was even becoming apparent that my plan to come to WA for sesshin was under threat.

I'm used to living alone and to dealing with challenging situations—in Jakarta, on a boat, in remote Aboriginal communities. Yet it was in lockdown I became profoundly aware of how much we take our interactions with other people for granted, even when we are unchallenged in other ways. I'm



not talking necessarily about planned meetings with family and friends either but just the incidental everyday interactions we have with work mates, neighbours, shop assistants, car mechanics and others, without having to try. I missed that.

I know that in Zen we are raised on the story of Bodhidharma sitting facing a cave wall for 9 years ...but he was an exception.... and that's why we hear about him. Most of the zen adepts we encounter in our tradition spent most of their time in monasteries or on pilgrimage (which generally meant going from monastery to monastery) and the bulk of our koans involve people interacting with other people. Admittedly, sometimes they are administering blows, or receiving them, but it is still interaction. Inter-action. We inter-are and we inter-act, not just with other people of course but with other beings and things. Yet, we are not the separate selves, interacting with other separate selves, we tend to think we are.

Realising this is our practice. Responding to this is our practice. During this lockdown, I became more aware of this than usual. We all fall into patterns of habitual behaviour that help us to maintain a kind of equilibrium in our lives that can lull us into feeling that we have got it sorted. But being in a new situation over which we have little control can remind us that we haven't. We have never got it, our selves, sorted. Because there is no fixed separate self. Lockdown can help teach us more about this.

**Lockdown lesson #1.** Lockdown is pretty good at teaching us this first lesson. It's teaching me. It's teaching Mr Morrison. It's teaching an awful lot of others too, in fact, it's even teaching the Covid virus itself. In Buddhism this is the first of the three marks of existence and goes by the name of *anicca*, impermanence. Nothing stays the same.

We know, don't we, that everything is impermanent? Yet we behave as if it isn't and we take for granted that we will be able to go to work (or whatever we usually do) on Monday and arrange to meet up with our friends or family members next weekend and go on holiday later on, maybe in the New Year?

But we can no longer take what we thought of as 'normal life' for granted. We know now that everything is provisional. Some, possibly most people, are waiting for everything to go back to normal but, particularly for those people in the Northern Hemisphere, in Greece, Turkey, Canada and the USA who are experiencing unprecedented and devastating heat and fires or in Germany and China, extreme floods, what we think is normal is starting to reveal itself as an illusion. A global pandemic, the catastrophic effects of record-breaking temperatures and coming up against the natural limitations on a growth economy on a finite planet: this is how it is, this is *anicca*.

**Lockdown lesson #2** is another of the three marks of existence *dukkha*, otherwise known as suffering or stress. Much of the current stress and suffering is related to the subject of the previous lockdown lesson, impermanence, and this is what we would expect. *Anicca* inevitably leads to *dukkha*.

Some of the current suffering is caused by sickness or death as a result of contracting Covid, but for the vast majority of people it is the way that *everything* has changed due to the pandemic that is the cause of suffering or stress. Not only is there stress about the consequences of getting Covid but about job losses, loss of income, loss of freedom to travel, about being separated from loved ones interstate or overseas, or to even just meet freely with friends and go to the footy. (Probably you can still go to the footy in WA, but even *you* couldn't go to the Olympics!)

**Now, lockdown lesson #3** should be *anatta*, or no-self, but while the truth of life's inevitable marks of suffering and impermanence almost universally become evident in lockdown, or during this pandemic, whether in lockdown or not, *anatta* is a less obvious lesson. Of course, it may well become clear to everyone that we are all indeed mortal when faced by an existential crisis in the form of a potentially deadly pandemic, but this is not what I am talking about. No, I am talking about the self that we habitually *think* is who we are—you know the one—the self we imagine manages the contents of this skin bag—the one that prefers tea to coffee and showers to baths, the one who feels offended when described as 'pretty ordinary,' rather pleased when complimented on a 'skillful response in a difficult situation,' and resigned when confronting the face in the mirror each morning. That self.

That self, a patchwork quilt of memories and plans and conditioned reactions that seems to be 'me' is not who we really are. We are both bigger than that, and much tinier. The true self is as real as it gets but, even in lockdown, while it is clearly apparent, we still may not realise it.

This brings me back to something I mentioned earlier, about being unable to do my solo retreat in the rainforest— so why not just do it at home? There are a couple of reasons. One is that I wanted to do a *rainforest* retreat, far from everything. I can't do that in the middle of a city. Secondly, I found I wanted to *be* in lockdown. I don't mean I *wanted* to be in lockdown, rather that I wanted to be present in lockdown, pay attention to it, experience it fully. I didn't quite understand that to begin with, I just know I was irritated when someone suggested I could still do a solo retreat just not in the rainforest. I was tired. I was sad. I was confused. I didn't *want* to do a formal solo retreat, I just wanted to let go of everything, including my plans and expectations, and just see what happened.

I noticed my moods, followed my inclinations, didn't try to fix anything and wasn't trying to get anywhere or achieve anything. I ignored all the proffered advice about maintaining a routine, which is a form of normalising life in accord with the regimented, clock-ruled way of being that suits life in late capitalism where time is money and efficiency is everything. I didn't even know what day it was much of the time. At the beginning, this felt like self-indulgence, so strong is the dictatorial inner voice that says I should get up and be dressed before a time when anyone might knock on the door and catch me in my pj's, or tells me it's wrong to read books at 2.00am.

It was (and still is) an experiment in finding out what happens when we can't go out and do the things we normally do: not look after the grandchildren, not visit our friend who is rapidly sinking into dementia in a group home, not organise a contemplative rebellion, not meet with a recently bereaved friend or help other friends pack up and move house, not even prepare for the Spring sesshin as it became unlikely I would be able to attend.

So, what to do when you can't do any of the things you would normally do?

*Cryptonaturalist* captured the spirit in a poem:

*Feeling you matter isn't discovering an  
island of secret worth out in the vast seas of space and time.  
It's turning towards the grassy meadow  
inside your ribs, building a cabin  
there, and coaxing warmth and light  
into the hearth.*

*You will love your portion of space and time.  
You are a part of that graceful  
vastness.  
But only you are in a position to map  
out those hidden woods within  
yourself.  
That interior place is worthy of being  
known, loved and sanctified.*

This poem just appeared one day when I was Twitter-scrolling aimlessly, and, wittingly or not, points to that true self that we can all realise when we allow ourselves to realise that who we are is not fixed and is not limited by our thoughts about it but is spacious and freely given each moment.

While in lockdown, as well as books about climate change, about domestic violence and a novel about New York Showgirls, I'd been reading *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, translations of some of Thich Nhat Hanh's early journals that he kept in the 1960s, before he was exiled from Vietnam, and describing the time when he was developing his vision of Engaged Buddhism. (The film, 'Walk with Me' was the Tricycle film recently and included extracts from that book read by Benedict Cumberbatch and it had made me curious to read it.)

In the book, Thich Nhat Hanh writes about his own experiences, his thoughts and feelings at that time, before he became world-famous. He writes about Princeton, where he studied, but wrote poignantly that, while it was beautiful, it didn't have the beauty of Phong Boi, his forest temple:

*Fog never encircles the mountains....nor do gibbons' cries echo there. Princeton is not untamed, like Phong Boi.'*

In some sections he describes his life, both in Vietnam and the USA (where he was studying), and he refers to his times of darkness and grief at a time when, of course, Vietnam was riven by the ongoing conflict, but the grief was not about that, but rather followed an experience of stormy awakening. At one point he writes:

*The faint beams of light that appear after the desolation of the storm made me feel even more alone and abandoned. I felt the unbearable pain of a woman who is about to give birth to a child she already knows will be sentenced to death. She is consumed by despair, inconsolable and humiliated.*

A few pages later, Christmas Eve in New York, just before midnight:

*Christmas is almost here. I am awake in this sacred hour writing in my journal. My thoughts flow and it feels wonderful to pour them onto paper. I've written about the spiritual experiences that revealed to me how to look and listen with full attention. Such moments may only come once in a lifetime. They appear as ambassadors of truth, messengers from reality. If we're not mindful they may pass unnoticed.'*

Later he wrote of an earlier night of November 2<sup>nd</sup> as one he would never forget:

*It was a moonless, cloudless night, and the sky was filled with stars, bright as a child's eyes. In fact, that was the sky in my mind. The actual night was rainy and windy. The windows in my room were shut tight and I was unable to sleep. I had been reading Bonhoeffer's account of his final days, and I was awakened to the starry sky that dwells in each of us. I felt a surge of joy, accompanied by the faith that I could endure even greater suffering than I had thought possible. Bonhoeffer was the drop that made my cup overflow, the last link in a long chain, the breeze that nudged the ripened fruit to fall. After experiencing such a night, I will never complain about life again. My heart was overflowing with love. Courage and strength swelled in me and I saw my heart and mind as flowers. All feelings, passions and sufferings revealed themselves as wonders, yet I remained grounded in my body. Some people might call such an experience "religious" but what I felt was totally and utterly human. I knew in that moment that there was no enlightenment outside of my own mind and the cells of my body. Life is miraculous, even in its suffering. Without suffering, life would not be possible. There is nothing permanent, and there is no separate self. Neither is there impermanence or no-self. When we see life deeply, there is no death.*

So here we have it, the three lockdown lessons: impermanence, suffering and no-self and, at the same time, and this is the important bit, *Neither is there impermanence or no-self. When we see life deeply, there is no death.*



I loved reading these journals, the everyday events (including meetings with the wild forest tigers that roamed near his forest temple or cooking dinner each night for his American flatmate) juxtaposed with his accounts of his thoughts and feelings, his despair, his doubts, and his experience and true realization of the three lockdown lessons. This was not Thich Nhat Hanh a revered Zen Buddhist icon, but a man living his life fully, including everything. Practising.

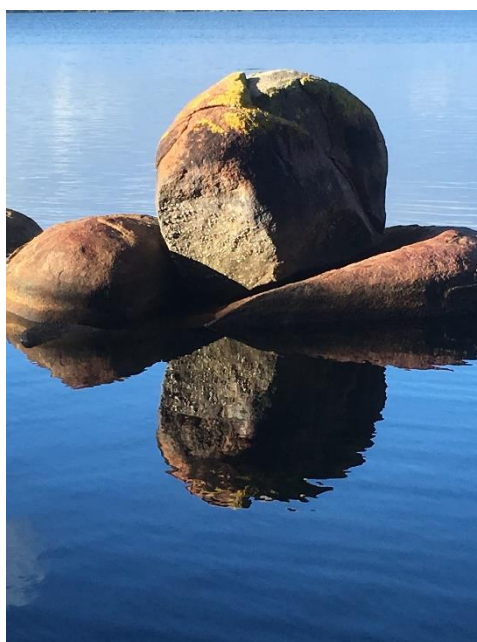
What he describes is not some mysterious elevated being who has transcended suffering but someone deeply engaging with his everyday life as a scholar, activist and monk. He lives his understanding of the true self manifesting as an ordinary human being.

Stumbling accidentally on this book during lockdown was incredibly helpful. It confirmed that what I was doing in lockdown, while I was not doing a formal retreat, was not **not** practice! (Do you know that ad for Audible books, it comes on SBS, where Celeste Barber is in bed with a book and a cup of tea and her partner says, 'It doesn't smell like tea' and she replies, 'Well it's not **not** tea, it's **hard** tea.') It was **hard** practice!

There are many ways of exploring how to challenge this sense of a fixed permanent self and become part of a flow of interacting thoughts and feelings and forms. The angst of the early stages of what looked as if it would be a far longer lockdown that what we were being told, gave way to a kind of lightness as all expectations were abandoned and it was just this: this alarming experience of lockdown brain as I tried not to let the person on the other end of the phone (who happened to be Ross Bolleter) know that I hadn't realized it was actually Tuesday and not Monday, or the unexpected dawn encounter with a neighbour, both of us embarrassingly attired in our nightwear, at the clothes line, grabbing our washing off the line before it got totally soaked!

There is more I could say here but I'd like you to do the talking now. As I mentioned before, not being able to meet with you in person for so long is difficult and some of you are also unable to meet with others in the sangha except online.

So I'd like to hear from you—something that captures what's been going on in your life recently and that points, perhaps, to some to aspect of the three marks of existence, to impermanence or suffering or no-self.....



# Just This in The Time of Covid

BY BRIGID LOWRY

*Without resistance in all directions,  
Content with whatever you get,  
Enduring troubles without dismay  
Wander along like a rhinoceros.  
  
Khaggavisana Sutta.*

I remember the conversation my son and I had when we first heard mutterings about some virus in a wet market in China.

*Nothing will come of it.  
Probably be like Sars or Ebola, won't affect us.*

Well, we were wrong about that one.

Soon there was no denying that we were in something unavoidably real, something bigger than one could have imagined. Nearly two years later, the situation intensifies and continues.

We are deep in it. Some of us are in lockdown, and some of us are not. Some of us believe in vaccination and some of us do not. Some of us will get ill and some of us will not.

In Western Australia one can almost pretend it is business as usual. Except it isn't. We are face to face with a humanitarian crisis, undoubtedly linked to climate change. No one really knows what will happen next but any idealism about the world going back to normal, or even an easy new normal, can be discarded.

Our world has changed, forever. It was always changing, but in less dramatic times we were able to avoid seeing that. Nothing can be relied upon, which was also always true but in easier times was possible to ignore. Now we see, very clearly, the evanescent, unsatisfactory nature of existence. Now we are eyeball to eyeball with our less welcome feelings: fear, loneliness,

vulnerability, survivor guilt, anxiety, trepidation.

For myself, sometimes I feel strong, resilient, strangely calm in the midst. Other times I grapple with a blend of numbness and disbelief as things continue to change and morph in various new directions. Lockdown, travel, vaccinations, so many things to take in and process, quickly superseded by the next information overload.

Hope is a new size now. My tasks are smaller. Can I get through this day with a sense of ease and calm? How can I serve? Maybe call a friend in lockdown, send a cartoon to my sister in New Zealand, smile at a stranger in the park. Maybe turn off all my devices and sit another round of zazen.

Gratitude is everything. I feel such appreciation when watching the sunset, walking without a mask, or listening to a dharma talk online in the evening. There's huge pleasure in the simple act of being able to visit my granddaughters, watching them flourish. A seven-year-old girl loves riding a bicycle; a toddler is very fond of story books and fetta cheese. Their lives are rich and full, despite Covid.

What is our practice, right now, right here? This is our opportunity to surrender to the way things actually are. This is our chance to bow down to the fact that we are not in control of very much at all. We are being called to stop complaining about first world problems, to cultivate awareness, kindness, compassion, self-care and equanimity. We have the good fortune to endure troubles

without dismay,  
wandering along  
like a rhinoceros.



# EVERYDAY ZEN

BY GARETH OWEN

The feeling of gratitude I enjoy when sitting with the Zen Group of WA is testament to the quality of teaching from both Ross Bolleter Roshi and Mari Rhydwen Roshi. Offered the opportunity to participate in the 2021 Every Day Zen (EDZ) event, to be led by Mari Roshi, I seized it with an open heart and mind.

Advice received prior to the event, sent by an eminent member of the group, was to keep the camera at about face height or people would be looking up your nose. Armed with that information I entered into the zoom event ready and willing.

Being in the comfort of one's own home and participating with the Zen group is a unique way to sit. The feeling of encouragement from

each and every person is very real and intimate. The breakout rooms forced me out of my comfort zone but in return I sensed the togetherness.

Thank you to Kevin and Andrea for the extra mornings' zazen, hosted from their house. it was a marvellous way to start the day. All of the EDZ went really well and I write this with a deep gassho to the leaders for investing so much of their time and energy into the organizing.

Yet, technology will have its say. While observing the breath, amongst other things, I realized that Dokusan was in progress and my turn was very near. And this is when a possible precedent was made. Somehow, I landed in the Dokusan room unannounced in the company of Mari Rhydwen Roshi and an esteemed member of the group.

Although I was only in the room all of 3 seconds, I had time to observe the setting. The esteemed member was performing with gay aplomb while guarded approval was being given by an ever-watchful Roshi, who somewhat surprised, said "Gareth's here!" and I was zoomed from the room landing back in my own living room wondering what had just happened!

I really look forward to such events in the future, surrounded by an amazing group of individuals and guided by our very special and learned teachers.



# Coming Home: At Home

By KORAL WARD

At first it seemed like a substitute and perhaps a poor one; a change dictated by the particular times. The idea of on-line sitting in silence seems a little perverse when the technology is designed to bring people together for communication. When I told my brother (via WhatsApp) I could feel him raise his cynically amused Yorkshire eyebrows. But Zen has much to do about, and with, contradiction and paradox.

There was perhaps some uncertainty amongst the Sangha about the Zoom Sesshin (ZS) and Zazenkai (ZZ), a feeling that they may not fulfil what we have come to expect. A Zazenkai usually brings people together sitting in company with Sangha, in ZZ the physical presence becomes a virtual presence. In the dojo, excepting leaders, we face the wall and avoid the gaze of and glancing at other sitters. In ZZ we face the device and one another on the screen. Each window holds a fellow Sangha member. In one of her talks Mari makes us laugh about faces at rest in meditation, and that there is a popular term called ‘resting bitch face’, where features relax into unselfconscious attitudes. Now we can see each members’ resting bitch face, and in a moment of self-consciousness can be thankful for small screens without too high resolution.

A benefit of the online environment is that Sangha members who are far away and cannot usually get to Sesshin or Zazenkai, (or the Thursday evening sitting), and whom we miss, are included. When Mari Roshi breaks from the usual form of Zazenkai, and introduces discussion break-out groups, (usually only seen in the Zen Intensives) there is the opportunity for direct connection with other Sangha members. The sharing of thoughts on contemporary topics lead to a more intimate understanding of one another which was moving and important in deepening relations. And at the end of the day of ZZ we also got the

chance to say hello informally and catch up briefly. Being together with those we cannot be with in person is a wonderful benefit for all, strengthening the Sangha.

Usually, when we meet in the dojo we maintain noble silence. Online, our microphones are set to mute so that household noises, neighbours, talkative and demanding cats do not distract others or set up complex sound loops. Within our muted spaces these aspects of daily life, not discernable to others, offer distraction and thereby present another focus for practice, for concentration.

When the Ino chants within her muted space, sitters follow the sutra book on the screen, how odd to hear my voice alone, and to see other mouths moving but silent. Do you chant louder? Harmonise more? Do you chant with less effort, relax a little? Within these muted spaces we do not know what goes on for others. Who could have known that the Ino, in that first ZZ, was fighting off her cat who was attacking the striker. Above, all was calm; below, a struggle!

Dokusan proved a complex job for the leaders (except for the Ino who gets off lightly in this respect!). Ringing people in and out of the dokusan breakout room was simplified at the last ZZ, we each rang a ‘bell’ ourselves to signify our leaving for and coming back from dokusan. A glass and a spoon were recommended and worked quite adequately, everyday informal objects standing-in for the formal Kansho bell. In this way, over the course of two or three Zazenkai, rituals have been transposed and transformed. Sangha members have taken on a job usually done by a leader, so we participate more in the rituals.

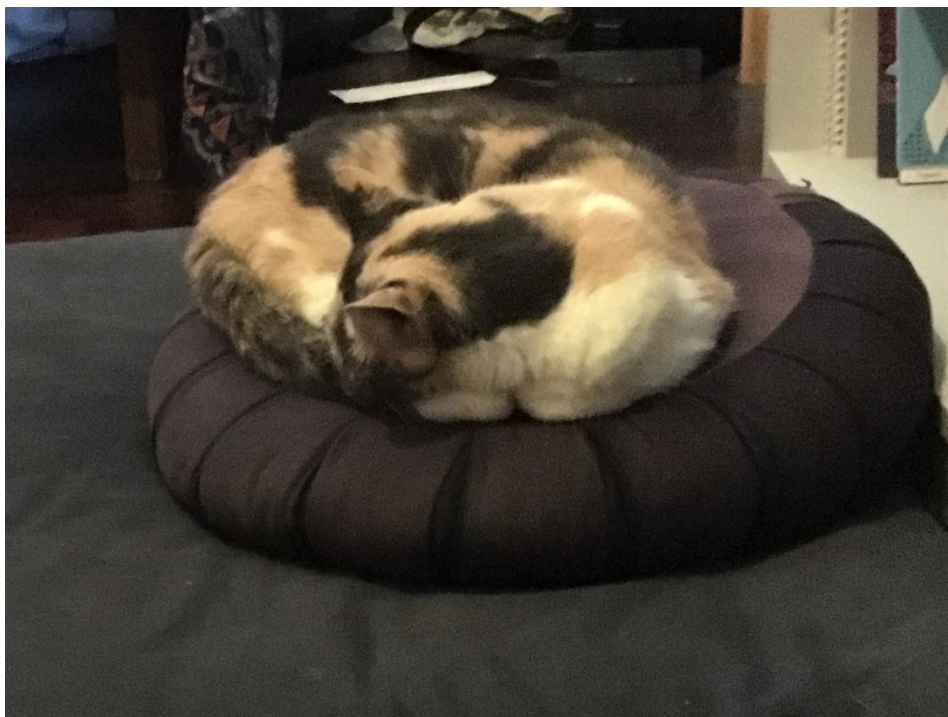
At kinhin, we walk about our homes, and concentration is harder than when walking in a line around the dojo, following the feet of the



one in front of you. The washing-up beckons but we can safely walk past and ignore it. Or we can allow the doing of things: rinse a cup, incorporating small domestic tasks into our *kinhin* and bringing the practice even closer to everyday life, to home. We sleep in our own beds, make our own lunch. Here is a taste of what maintaining practice in the domestic environment on a daily basis can feel like. Bringing formal practice home casts a new aura into our rooms, not just a place where we live, but a place of practice. The experience of 'home' is enhanced after ZZ is over. My room is my dojo. My home is a more peaceful refuge. I am coming home, at home.

From *Zazenkai* in the dojo to ZZ is a change in its nature, it is becoming a new form rather than

an attempt to make the familiar form fit new conditions. There is a shift between the formal and informal. Although there may be some losses, there are many gains, and there are aspects that add to the nature of it. We see a little something of one another's homes, there is a closeness we may not have expected. We come to know Kevin - Mari Roshi's cat who loudly vocalises his needs. The Sangha widens to include our familiars, our significant beings who are already adept at 'just this', join us in our practice. At the end of the ZZ day, we share the amusement – cats are lifted up and their paws made to wave at other Sangha cats – at last we meet Ross Roshi's Possum! The Ino's cat Gollie however, having satisfied her curiosity and need for play is fast asleep on her own cushion.



# Developing a Delight Radar

KATHY SHIELS

Adapted from a talk given on the first night of Everyday Zen, May 2021

An inspiring birthday gift this year was a book called *The Book of Delights* (2019) by Ross Gay, a Black American writer who, as written in the blurb of the back, *is funny, poetic and philosophical in the way he writes of life closely observed*. In the preface, Ross Gay describes how one day in July, he was feeling delighted and felt compelled to share that delight. He decided it may be nice, even useful, to write about delights. There and then he set himself three rules: to begin and end on his birthday, to write a delight every day for a year and to write brief drafts by hand. It became a discipline; a practice and the book is the result of his year. He writes of that year:

*I felt my life was more full of delights. Not without sorrow or fear or pain or loss. But more full of delight. I also learned that my delight grows – much like love and joy – when I share it.*

He emphasises that the discipline or practice of writing of even fleeting delights brings on a kind of *delight radar* or develops a *delight muscle* in that the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study. Here's a snippet from his first entry *My birthday kinda*:

*...A cup of coffee from a well-shaped cup. A fly, its wings hauling all the light in the room or the peanut butter salty enough. Or the light blue bike the man pushed through the lobby. Or the topknot of the barista...*

Sometimes Ross Gay riffs and meanders around a delight and the insight it offers creating quite an essay, but more often they are brief and referred to as essayettes. Here's an example entitled *Hickories*:

*My friend Michael and I met today to put together the order for the nut grove the city has the Community Orchard to plant and oversea. Hazelnuts, pecans, buartnuts (a mix of heartnut and butternut) and hickories. "How long until the hickories start making their fruit?" I asked Michael. He said, "Oh, they'll be in full production in about 200 to 250 years."*

Noting delights doesn't take long. It's great fun and most uplifting. During Everyday Zen, we are encouraged to exercise our delight muscles and note our experiences. We can write as little or as much as suits us; without stopping to judge or edit. It's a brief and freeing experience. Enjoy!

On the last day of Everyday Zen, we had the opportunity to share whatever delights we had recorded and it was heart-warming to hear from every participant. Their *Delights* are shared below as encouragement to develop and enjoy your *delight muscle*; in the midst of our troubled times

## ***Lizard***

*Sitting at EDZ, with the dokusan list on a piece of paper in front of me.*

*I look down and see a small lizard creep across the page.*

*It parks itself at the top of the list and lays there motionless, for a while.*

*Then scurries off, presumably to go to dokusan.*

*Strangely, it doesn't return.*

*I wonder where that lizard is now.*

KEVIN DONOHUE

# Covid Jab #1

NICK ARNOLD

Claremont vaccination centre.

People guiding us through the queues, people showing us where to sit, where to go next, people checking us in, people asking if we've travelled out of WA in the last seven days? On their feet all day. Are they volunteers? How much thanks do they get? But they're calm, friendly, patient. And all of us lining up for our jabs, quiet, subdued voices, and grateful to be there, no fuss. All under a great big shed.

Looking up at the ceiling, regular panels, big box lights: it reminds me of a Bunnings warehouse. It reminds me of the ceiling and lights of the old Tai chi and Kung-Fu academy of O'Connor, the old training grounds. In that shed, the front and back walls were lined all along with full height mirrors, facing each other across the practise floor, from one end to the other. Mirrors to practise into, watching our form as we moved up and back, drilling, repeating, trying to learn the right forms, trying to make the right forms, trying to embody them

On the floor amongst the empty waiting chairs I spot two \$50 notes unattended. I pick them up and give them to an attendant. He hides them and calls out "Excuse me - anyone lost some money?" A woman in a row in front of us immediately touches her back pocket, and is out of her seat, "Yes, me! And I know how much is there!"

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Today I was going to bring along the Nintendo Switch, the Apple iPad, a book to read, a writing pad and pen, and also...

"How are you with needles?" "Don't like em much. I won't watch. That's why I've got this squishy ball to distract me, I'll just look at it instead." "As long as you know what works for you, that's good. Just let me know if you're worried about fainting."

No, well, should be fine, but if you were taking blood that'd be a different story – but she doesn't need to know all that right now. The little green and black juggling ball, full of soft pellets, seams crossing, curving under my kneading fingers, turning it slowly in my right hand to get different angles.

And: Done? Already over?

"What are your plans for the rest of the weekend?" "Just rest." "That's a good plan, and book your second shot once you're out there, and grab a juice box."

She must have seen so many faces through the day, and how many other days, but still she is gentle, compassionate, kind. She smiles and helps me relax. I swear she makes a little gassho to me as I leave, like a reflex action she couldn't refuse. Does every single one coming here today feel so lucky, so well cared for, so listened to and held? I think they do, I think they all do.

Out in a new set of chairs for our self-managed 15min rest "just in case", drinking our free juice boxes. I got an apple juice, Jess an orange. Everyone is even quieter than before, we're all in shock, we've been looked after so well - exactly how was it, that we got so lucky?

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Getting up to go after our 15 minutes, it's started raining. There's a cluster of people just outside the doors, opting to wait under cover to see if it'll pass. It doesn't look heavy, and the car isn't far, and we just want to get home now...

“It’s just a bit of rain”, as people say. It’s what Jess says. I think anyone growing up in England has a deep claim to those kinds of words. The land where in my imagination it’s always raining or pouring or sleeting or hailing or snowing, probably coming in side-ways, at gale force, probably for the 25<sup>th</sup> day in a row, probably with a max temp of 2 degrees.

But I figure by now I’m at least a little British too, just by association. And that means now I have some power over the rain too. I can walk through rain, even enjoy it briefly, look up into it and feel it on my face, knowing there’s the promise of dry and warm in close proximity. Just a little bit of spitting; spots on jacket, jeans, hair slightly dampened; nothing to fuss over, Nicholas.

And besides: we’ve just been vaccinated!

So out into the gentle rain – powerful, unafraid, and grateful – we strode.

## **Locked Down**

Nobody comes along here, outside the legal radius  
The town is deathly quiet  
Bent beyond its duty.

Endlessly crooked, this single track  
Pulls dry creeks and puddles along  
Behind the faithfully wed.

One spring magpie snaps and switches back  
In a clatter of feet and claw  
White feathers blurring black.

Is there blood? A graze? A telling mark?  
I have absolutely nothing to show  
Of my troubles.

The Sheoak's needles have jointed fingers  
That hold wind back just enough  
To turn it into song.

CHRIS BARKER

Golden sun warms my cheek,  
the end of a long dark winter.  
Complete stillness  
and blue blue sky.

LIZZIE FINN



## Gypsy Goddess

In the little gallery just across from my apartment, a young woman is having her first exhibition opening. She goes by the name of Gypsy Goddess, and the exhibition is called 'Goddess Rising'. She makes head dresses inspired by a contemporary mix of mythologies.

I am skeptical.

But I look out (from my EDZ retreat) and see many young people arriving. Then she, Margarita the Gypsy Goddess arrives, one of her creations on her head. Greeting her guests she accepts praises and admirations, she shines, she is beautiful. I give way, recognizing her moment, delight takes hold of me.

KORAL WARD

*Stillness, morning light  
eyes open, bird chatter and cars  
the world has woken.*

*Like a painting - fresh  
serene river dances with sun  
swimmer glides with ease.*

*Morning air still cool,  
two rowers glide through the calm  
leaving no trace behind.*



*Pan of roasting seeds,  
Pip, pip, pop bright green,  
olive to brown. Perfection!*

*Three frogs together sunning by a pond  
delighted I step toward them, to see  
plop, plop, plop.*

*Moment caught mid air  
legs stretched one, two, three  
suspended now in my memory.*

*Up with the dawn  
sunrise shines bright through grey clouds  
a tree dazzles.*

ANDREA DONOHUE

## Geese

Hundreds,  
maybe thousands in the city skies above us, the  
whole visible sky filled with geese  
returning in constantly branching V formations  
from Africa for their summer quarters here.  
The vibrating wing beats of the returning geese  
continue in my heart beat.  
Lockdown for one year,  
borders between countries suddenly shut again  
in the despaired attempt to stop viruses.  
The geese migrate above all borders, without  
social distancing, controlled by their innate  
magnetic sense.  
Relief – the geese as symbol of the survived  
winter,  
a winter more grey, longer more alone, more  
isolated than all the preceding winters.  
The geese return the summer and hopefully the  
freedom.  
And then  
A small two-year-old voice from the cargo bike  
seat,  
full of wonder enfolding the world:  
“Wow”.

LARA AVERHOFF



## Snail

You have a  
tiger-striped house  
bat wings  
leopard-patterned lizard-scales and  
telescope eyes on your giraffe neck.  
The whole universe sparkles in your glitter after  
the thunderstorm night.  
You slide through the grass like water and  
primordial soup,  
Unaffected by antigen tests and vaccination  
records,  
leaving a trace of what you are.

## The Drop

*Going for a walk past the netball courts after EDZ.  
I see a player walking towards us.  
She accidentally lets go of her keys and quickly catches  
them.  
I say to her good catch as we pass by, and she returns a  
big warm smile.*

KEVIN DONOHUE

## In the Park

*Watching a small boy mark the footy his father kicks  
to him. Just going for it!  
Whether he catches it, it bounces off his chest or  
knocks him over, who cares?  
With inexhaustible enthusiasm he is ready for the  
next one.*

## Today

The single red flower  
on my altar,  
against the lush green pot  
plant on the window.

I have so many purple things,  
I really like purple;  
mouse, yoga pants,  
journal, drink bottle...



A few light clouds  
saying you can rest  
a bit today.

ANTONIA GIEHL

*Sitting in my armchair,  
before morning EDZ begins.  
Clouds covering the sun.*

*Suddenly sun shining so brightly,  
lighting me up, warming me up.  
Bright. Warm. Fierce. Wonderful.*

*Then behind the clouds again.*

LISA CALLAHAN

*The bus was parked. A trusty 114. Barely looking, I climbed up and tagged on, reassured by the little green light and its beep. Having a question, I paused at the driver's seat and studied how it had become a Covid cage; all grill and perspex.*

*After fossicking behind paperwork, the driver's head appeared and there she sat. Lightly made up with just a hint of lipstick, she couldn't have been more than twenty five years old. Sitting upright in command of a hefty concertinaed city bus, she confidently smiled and nodded her head for me to speak.*

*If it hadn't been for the cage and restrictions, I would have hugged her for seizing the wheel and driving herself, along with all of us, so delightfully out of stereotypes.*

KATHY SHIELS

When you're lying on your side  
trying to go to sleep for a while,  
then you turn over to the other side –  
that feeling.

After waking up and entering the  
kitchen,  
staring at the sinuous curves of the  
steam  
wand of the coffee machine  
before turning it on.

PAUL DOUGHTY

