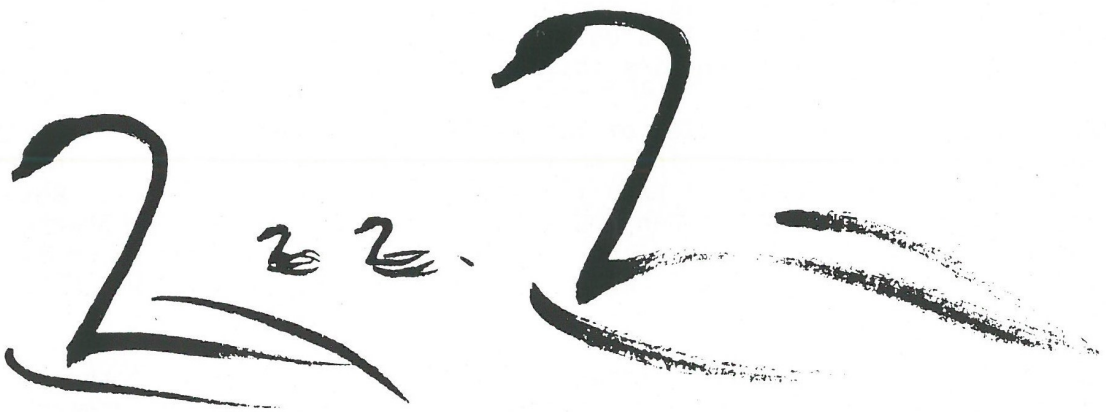
THE WOBBLY POT

2017 VOL. 3: NOV—FEB



the whole earth is medicine

THE WOBBLY POT

IS THE JOURNAL OF THE ZEN GROUP OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

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

Thank you to all contributors.

The next edition of *The Wobbly Pot* will be released in March, 2018. Submissions are due on the 28th of February. Email submissions to wobblypot@zgwa.org.au.

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Editor: Gerard Mazza

Front cover illustration: Kathy Shiels. Originally published in the Zen Group of Western Australia's Winter 1991 journal.

This, and other illustrations by Kathy Shiels in this issue, are taken from ZGWA publications from the 80s and 90s.

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

- Ikkyū (1394-1481)

RAVEN'S COMPASSION

A Dialogue from Robert Aitken's *Zen Master Raven*

A TEISHO BY ROSS BOLLETER ROSHI

Mole spoke up after a long silence one evening and asked, "What's compassion?"

Raven said, "That's an inside story."

Mole asked, "Inside what?"

Raven said, "Stars on your fur."

In his book *Zen Master Raven,* Robert Aitken presents his insights gleaned from a lifetime of study, practice, and the teaching of the Way through the beaks and muzzles of the creatures of the forest. Conveying the wisdom of a lifetime in this manner, Robert Aitken creates a kind of discourse record: but one with a difference.

Aitken Roshi, as we affectionately knew him, would never have written his own record; for him that would have been hubris. However, he conveyed his teaching (the quintessential responses he had made, or wished he had made, to students' questions over decades of teaching) in a collection of dialogues between the creatures of the forest and their teacher, Zen Master Raven. This was his quirky, ingenious, and modest way of presenting a record of sixty years of teaching.

Nelson Foster suggests that we read Robert Aitken's *Zen Master Raven* simultaneously as "a serious record of his six decades practicing and eventually teaching Zen" and as "a lark, a merry improvisation by an old man living in retirement, entertaining himself and fully intending to entertain others as he set forth the path of liberation."

Although the dialogues in *Zen Master Raven* have a familiar and homey feel, Aitken Roshi's presentation of the

Illustration by Kathy Shiels

Dharma in the exchanges between Zen Master Raven—that wise old bird—and the other creatures in his assembly is subtle—"corner of the mouth" in style— and gives nothing away.

Aitken Roshi wrote that koans are the folk stories of Zen, and on at least one occasion he referred to *Zen Master Raven* as a book of koans. Taking him at his word, I

have chosen one of the dialogues—in this instance, between Zen Master Raven and Mole—to see what it might yield as a koan.

What Is Compassion?

Mole is one of the students in Zen Master Raven's sangha. He's thoughtful, compassionate, respectful, and very concerned about the suffering of others. Several of his questions arise from a long silence – befitting of a mole – as in the present instance when he asks Raven: "What is compassion?"

Mole may have hoped that Raven would give him an explanation of compassion along the lines of "suffering with others with a strong urge to help them." Even to say "compassion" softens mind and body. But saying "compassion" doesn't make us compassionate, any more than feeling the warm glow of a compassionate impulse need result in compassionate action.

In the not-quite-post-Romantic West we place a high value on feeling and sincerity; which is to say, if you are going to act compassionately, you've got to mean it, you've got to feel it. But compassion is mostly doing what needs to be done: helping your neighbor to start their car or kneeling to tie a child's shoelace with or without the accompanying warm glow.

Compassion, however conceived, releases us from our self-preoccupation and is hopefully helpful to those we attend. Mole may have been seeking such an account of compassion from Raven to inspire him into helping the creatures of the forest to better their lives.

Who benefits from your compassion?

An Inside Story

Raven's reply to Mole's question regarding the nature of compassion comes as a shock, for it has its source in a deeper place: the origin of compassion and compassionate activity itself: "That's an inside story."

An inside story is one known only to those close in; an inside story is an intimate matter: in fact, as Raven is expressing it, the innermost matter. When we experience who we truly are, that experience is utterly intimate and personal, yet in the same breath it is completely open to all: the wind moves the branches of the cape lilac, the pink hibiscus blossoms shake as the wrens and New Holland honeyeaters get busy at nectar. With "That's an inside story" Raven points to the vastness of who we truly are and presents it in the same breath.

Mole responds: "Inside what?"

Such an innocent question, such a great question. Unknowingly, Mole presents the innermost matter. Imagine sitting out under the night sky with its spattered stars and a cool breeze blowing. In just that place, I ask you: "What is the inside of *this*?"

Raven replied: "Stars on your fur."

He deeply acknowledges Mole's, "Inside what?" and presents the immensity of our true and timeless nature right there. What does this have to do with compassion? Raven's very words are an intimate act of compassion; they are intimacy in all its dark radiance. Truly the stars are closer than our breathing, and the night moves on little feet—or big feet, depending.

Mari Rhydwen's "Thank You"

Words themselves may constitute the vastness of our true and timeless nature, in which instance they are no longer solely words. Even a single word can do this, as Mari Rhydwen's interjection in the following story, shows:

> Mari Rhydwen, Glenn Wallis, Arthur Wells, and I were giving an evening of short talks for students in Glenn Wallis's dojo in Dunedin after teaching sesshin there. I gave one on gratitude, which was warmed by the fact that I had mislaid my wallet several times that day—and found it again. Each time I had it back in my hand I'd mumble, "Thank you, Universe." I continued, "I'm sure there must be a better way to express that." Mari chimed in, "Thank you."

"Thank you" encloses the universe. Glenn Wallis expressed the same matter with: "My words are not what I am say-

ing."

Coda

> Mole came to Raven privately and said, "We haven't talked about death very much. I'm not concerned about where I will go, but watching so many family members die, I'm wondering what happens at the point of death?"
>
> Raven sat silently for a while, then said, "I give away my belongings."

Back in 2010 I was engaged in an email dialogue with Aitken Roshi. Our exchange concerned the concluding lines of Dongshan's poem, "The Song of the Precious Mirror Samadhi":

> Conceal your practice, function in secret,
> seem for all the world like a fool or an idiot—
> if you could only continue, it would be called
> the host within the host.

I had sent to him a copy of the translation of the poem Peter Wong and myself had written. Roshi said that he liked our translation and sent back his own, which he said he also liked. However, the last line about the host within the host was missing in his translation. I asked him—it was irresistible—"So what is the host within the host, Roshi?" "I'll get back to you on that," he emailed back.

Shortly after, I heard that he had died.

His "I'll get back to you on that" was a perfect reply—Raven incarnate—even without his obliterating follow-up.

Where is Roshi now?

*

"Raven's Compassion" is an extract from Ross Bolleter's book *The Crow Flies Backwards and Other New Zen Koans* to be published by Wisdom Publications in July 2018.

THE WHOLE EARTH IS MEDICINE

A Dharma Talk given at St Paul's, Beaconsfield, 18 May 2017

BY MARI RHYDWEN ROSHI

'The whole earth is medicine', is a line from Case 87 of the Blue Cliff Record:

> "Yunmen said to the assembly, 'Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is the self?"

I'm not about to give a teisho on the case right now, but just wanted to tell you where the sentence, '*The whole earth is medicine'*, comes from. But I do just want to ask you, briefly, to note your initial response to Yunmen's whole utterance:

> "Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is the self?"

How does it make you feel? What thoughts arise?

I chose this theme, The Whole Earth is Medicine, for the 2017 Training Period (or perhaps it would be better termed a Zen intensive, since it is so far from the regular form of a traditional Training Period ,which in a monastery would involve three months of seclusion) for a couple of reasons. The first is that I wanted to focus attention on the earth, the world, the universe, or however it is translated in different texts, but which is basically referring to everything we don't normally define as 'me'. It is the greater self, if you like, that we all are, as waves are the great ocean. Secondly, it has always seemed such a comforting line: everything, the whole earth, is medicine. At a time when we have such fears for the well-being of the earth, for those creatures that live here, including ourselves, we need to know this, we need to truly know that the whole earth is medicine.

I'm not going to say any more about Yunmen's point here. As a koan it does of course gesture to the fundamental truth at the heart of our practice and this is something for you to explore yourselves. Indeed, this is our life's work and if you do not yet know that for yourself, you have a wondrous and joyful realization in store!

So, this evening, I just want to talk a little about some of the issues arising for many of us because, whatever else is going on for us personally right now, what is happening now in the world raises the question of how, as Zen practitioners who vow to save the many beings, we address the suffering that is happening as a consequence of human activity by people like us: people who, for the most part, are not trying to cause harm or destroy the environment, but who are nonetheless implicated in the current global crisis, while feeling helpless to alter its trajectory. Not only that, but in our practice we learn to accept whatever arises, without judging, without picking and choosing, without indulging in anger and without imagining we can shape reality for our comfort.

Does this mean we just grin and bear it, whatever happens? Or es-cape into a peaceful state of Samadhi? I don't think so! So, what *do* we do?

What I'd encourage you to do is to consider this koan, *'Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is the self?'* and let it compost slowly. I'm not suggesting you think about it, or 'work' on it or indeed that you DO anything. One of the wonderful things about nature is that it mostly knows what to do without our interference. Things compost and ferment, breakdown and reform, in ways that are helpful. Often this is how practice works, too. Our job is to pull up the weeds (all those unnecessary thoughts and opinions that arise during zazen and interfere with the process) and set them aside. If you leave them alone, allowing nature to do its work, you might be surprised at the result. But you can't cheat. You really have to leave them alone.

Looking back there has been concern about the effects of human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels and the attendant consequences, such as our ability to fish and farm on industrial scale, as well as increasing CO2 levels, for many decades. More recently some scientists began to get really alarmed that we may have already passed the point of no return where much life on earth, including humanity, is threatened with extinction.

In my diaries from 2008 I wrote a letter to my 3-month-old grandson after reading an article describing 'compelling evidence that we are at the brink of annihilating ourselves'. I wrote:

"Dear little Bird, this morning I read Robert Manne in *The Monthly* about what is happening

Illustration by Kathy Shiels

> with global warming and I fear for you. You will wonder why I didn't do something."

I went on to talk about the things I do and that his mum and dad do too, offering what comfort I could, more for myself than for him, of course. After all, I always knew I would never send it!

Since then though, I've encountered many scientists and, as others have reported too, scientists being a conservative bunch tend to err on the side of caution and not predict worst-case scenarios. Yet, I've found that in private they worry a lot. Sometimes they tell me their fears.

Talking of which, I just want to quote from the *Meaning of Liff* by Douglas Adams. This is a book which takes English place names and uses them as new words for things we have no words for. He writes:

> "So, the vaguely uncomfortable feeling you got from sitting on a seat which is warm from somebody else's bottom, is just as real a feeling as the one you get when a rogue giant elephant charges out of the bush at you, but hithero only the latter actually had a word for it. Now they both have words. The first one is 'shoeburyness' and the second, of course, is 'fear'."

Fear! Fear about Trump. Fear about global warming. Trump is, I suppose, the modern, urban world's equivalent of a rogue elephant and many people felt real fear when he was elected. One person I know, who experienced the tanks rolling into Tienanmen Square firsthand and knows that terrible, unimaginable things like that really happen to people, was deeply shaken and made very afraid by Trump's election.

The other big fear for many of us is climate change, though not for everyone. When I first moved to Nambucca, the news on TV was about the record high temperatures in the area - 47 and higher - and my landlady commented to me on how awful this was. I said something about how we could expect more of those temperatures with global warming and she looked at me with surprise asking, 'Do you believe in global warming?' I was a guest and had steered clear of the usual controversial topics, religion, politics, but given what she's just said, my response just popped out. Indeed, I was so surprised that I responded quite candidly, 'I don't *believe* in global warming, it's just a fact!'

My hosts were good people. Kind. Helpful. Hard-working and cluey about how to make a good-enough living in Australia. People whose political views are probably a bit different from mine, but we share common ground too. So my landlady responded that scientists didn't all agree about global warming, and I refrained from asking her whether, if 97% (or even 30% for that matter) of aeronautical engineers expressed concern about the safety of plane she was about to board, she'd fly. I know that arguing is unhelpful.

Why do people not believe in climate change? Fear mostly. Many of us avoid going to the doctor if we fear something is really wrong. And, as a psychotherapist friend of mine has observed in her clients, there is a really distrust of science by people who don't understand how it works. In science, things are only true until they are disproved, which means that as our understanding increased, theories change. This is particularly evident in the case of complex issues like dietary advice. Once it was fat that was the problem and then carbs, then sugar and then our gut bacteria were seen to play a role. No wonder people are confused and think that scientists just keep changing their minds. As more evidence comes to light, understanding changes. Maybe most of the world's scientists are wrong about climate change but, right now, it's looking like they are not.

Perhaps some of you have doubts. I know that at times I had doubts myself and checked out some very convincing looking websites, only to discover through more research that they were sophisticated 'think tank' websites funded by the fossil fuel industry. Anyway, my point here is not to debate climate change so much as to point out that it is not helpful to denigrate or dismiss or argue with people who don't believe in climate change or who voted for Trump or One Nation or Brexit or whatever. We need rather to understand them. Who are the people who vote to ban immigration? People who are frightened or suffering, feeling that no one has their backs, mostly. I'm not suggesting that fear is what you see on the surface. In fact

what we see may well be the aggression that shields the fearful from realizing their own fear. Which brings me back to our responses as Buddhists/Zen practitioners, because many people have been talking about this.

In the past, at times of political unrest in China, for example, Buddhist monks have often retreated to the mountains until things calmed down again. Buddhists have not had a reputation for being social activists, which may reflect cultural differences between cultures where Buddhism originated and has traditionally predominated, and the West where Christianity has been more prominent, as much as religious ones. Robert Aitken Roshi, the founder of our Diamond Sangha tradition, was one of many western Buddhists who took a stand on political issues and was a founding member of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. He refused to pay the proportion of his taxes that went to the military. (Civil disobedience of a kind that some politicians here now want to label as criminal!) Political activism was not the focus for many Buddhists and, in Buddhist heartlands, not much has changed.

This is a conundrum that is facing us all. Practicing Buddhism won't in itself fix climate change any more than it will fix a broken marriage or a failing body. Social action can be helpful or counter-productive, just as some medical interventions can be helpful or not. We have to make choices. We have to be skillful. We have to know when to act and how to act. And you know, sometimes the skillful action is not to protest but to sing and play the piano, or wash the floor, make sure everyone in the office gets their pay this week, give your loved ones a treat because you can see how sad they look, or take the dog for a walk.

We can't fix the world, and talking endlessly about everything that is wrong with it (I know! I know!) often leads us down a path of misery, and then we have to deal with that too. We can only take action in our reality right now and of course there is nothing wrong with keeping ourselves informed. Actually, as participants in a democratic society, we have some obligations in that regard. However, even if we can't see any way to fix the whole world we can usually take care of something, even if it's just making sure we get enough sleep and sit regularly so that we are practiced in paying attention. Then, when the time is right and we are called upon to act skillfully, we will know what we must do. I can't emphasize enough the role that doggedly attending to our practice, sitting zazen, makes. We just need to do it, not analyse it!

I have strayed away from another issue I wanted to ensure I included here, which is about our relationship to nature. I think it is only fairly recently that we passed the point where now most people in the world live in cities. The koan, 'the whole earth is medicine' points to the therapeutic qualities of the *whole* earth, and yet we tend to think of some aspects of earthness as more therapeutic than others: walking on deserted beaches, bathing under waterfalls, sitting in cool forests. There is a long tradition of monastics and mystics and poets, immersing themselves in the wildness of nature.

In his book *Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane writes about the way that wildness has often been viewed as a dangerous force throughout much of human history, but goes on to tell us that, "parallel to this hatred of the wild has run an alternative history: one that tells of wildness as an energy both exemplary and exquisite."

He continues, writing of the Chinese tradition of *Shan-shui*, (rivers and mountains). According to Macfarlane, the *Shan-shui* "sought to articulate the wondrous processes of the world, its continuous coming-into-being. To this quality the *shan-shui* artists gave the name *zi-ran*, which might be translated as 'self-ablazeness', 'self-thusness' or 'wildness.'"

The *Shan-shui* predate even the *peregrini*, who had similar objectives. The word *peregrini* is from Latin *peregrinus* for which we get the word 'pilgrim'. These are Christian monks and mystics from around 500-100 AD who travelled (in the UK) to the wildest places they could find to set up hermitages, mostly in the coastal regions, islands, even Iceland and Greenland, often making dangerous voyages in wild seas.

Nonetheless, when tempted to retreat to the hills or the desert, I like Gary Snyder's instruction: 'If you want to study nature, start right where you are.' He is a poet and Zen man famous for his experience of the wild, being the 'Thoreau of the beat generation' who inspired Japhy Ryder in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. It is quite a good antidote to those city-dweller excuses for not engaging with the natural world and is quoted in the glorious film, 'The Wild Parrots

of Telegraph Hill'. This is a film about someone who lived in San Francisco and who got to know the escaped South American parrots that had formed a flock there. (Real naturalists studied native north American flora and fauna, not these interlopers, these illegal immigrants from south of the border…)

I remember watching that film some years ago, at a time when I was very envious of friends who lived in places where there were visiting wombats, when I lived in the inner city. It helped me change how I looked at it. I saw what was there, rather that thought about what wasn't.

Of course, there is something about being away from the built environment that is soothing for many of us, and may even be mind-blowing, which is why we have gardens and protect wild areas as national parks, and have sesshin in Balingup.

I recently encountered a wonderful book by James Rebanks who grew up in the Lake District, perhaps England's most famous National Park area. He is a sheep farmer in some of the most rugged country in England, where people still farm the common high land. (Really still the Commons, land to which local people have traditional rights, as they did over much of the countryside before the enclosures when private ownership of land, but the powerful and wealthy, became commonplace.) He left school young, school being of little interest to boys destined to be sheep farmers as their fathers and father's fathers back over 600 years had been before them and who, by all accounts, made their teacher's lives hell.

However, after leaving school early he was later accepted at Oxford, without having done any school exams, where he did brilliantly, before returning to his farming life. Fortunately he did then write about his life, the basis of his book, *The Shepherd's Life*.

In part the book describes a way of life: sheep farming in the rugged common land of the Lake District where his family has lived and farmed for 600 years. This area became the earliest National Park in the world as the result of a suggestion in 1810 by Wordsworth. To Rebanks, it was home. He gradually learned more about 'the Lake District' as it was perceived by people escaping from the ravages of industrialization.

Later, he would really get it for himself. During his time at university he did work-experience as a sub-editor at a magazine in London. He suffered it for the money for the whole summer and finally understood why people needed to escape to places like the Lake District.

Over the past couple of years I've been reading several books about nature and wildness in the UK. It is the country that, as I discovered when I went back to visit my dying brother, is truly familiar to me in way only the things you've known from childhood are. And, as James Rebanks shows, the wild is only the wild if you are not intimate with it. If you are, it is not the wild, it is home.

There was a book written in 1923 called *The Gentle Art of Tramping* by Stephen Graham. He died in 1975 and had walked across America once, Russia twice and the UK many times. He is described as one of the greatest walkers of his age, finding the wild places wherever he went.

I want to end with a quotation from him:

> "As you sit on the hillside, or lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet-legged by a mountain stream, the great door, that does not look like a door, opens."

Which door would that be? Sounds remarkable familiar…

Buddha nature is not something we try to acquire. It is our natural, wild condition. It is what we unlearn as we train ourselves in the art of tying ourselves up in the straitjacket of maintaining a permanent sense of self, an identity. And, as Kafka so eloquently put it, 'Identity is a cage in search of a bird.' Buddha-nature is not a straitjacket or a cage. It is unconditioned mind. At the same time, we cannot express it without the language of this and that, of differentiation. It is the mind that knows intimately that the whole earth is medicine and wants us all to recognize this too, inviting us in with the challenging question, 'What is the self?'

MOST WELCOME PARTICIPANTS

BY KATHY SHIELS

"The sand dunes are fenced off and there's a shark net in the water!"

I hear disappointment and note that, for some, the muted colours and sleek furnishings in the beachfront townhouse feel a bit cold and swish for our Training Period's home. However, as we set up the dojo in the large room at the top of the wooden (Marri timber no less) staircase and open the glass doors to the balcony, the *Fremantle Doctor* of a sea breeze sweeps over the Indian Ocean to reassure us. Ah, the taste of salt!

I'm delighted when Mari asks if anyone, apart from her, is staying in the house. I say I'd like to stay the Sunday night after our first weekend Zazenkai. With that settled and the dojo in place, the lure of ocean views from the balcony has me rolling up the legs of my blacks and heading past Peppermint trees, bottle-brush shrubs and neatly trimmed grass for the beach.

Well-trodden into troughs and mounds, the track to the beach is no more than a metre wide. Everything stills as I step onto it. Low dunes either side rest as sentinels of the track's timeless hold on the steps of so many. I walk on; my feet at so many ages and stages eager to tread the earth of Port Coogee. But the evening is rolling in, so it's a short walk. I pause, watching the ocean's amber fingers fringed with silver lazily roll up the sand then slowly ease back. It's good to be back 'home' on a beach just a little way north of the dunes where I grew up.

During the Zazenkai's long Kinhins we string out then pause like black cormorants along the shore. In the lunch breaks, I walk, skip and play between untidy clumps of seaweed and the rolling waves. Surging, slapping and rolling of waves soundtracks the dojo.

All too soon, it's Sunday evening, the first zazenkai is over and I'm in the front room with its crisp linen and 'city taupe' doona. There's a hi-tech blind to keep in privacy and keep out the bright glare of the street lamp opposite. I'm tired and ready for bed, so place my bag of somewhat shabby things in a corner of the room, which complains loudly of its preference for elegant suitcases and thick towelling robes. The flouro street light fiercely spotlights the pillows, so after eventually figuring out the impossibly simple mechanism to lower the blind, I fall asleep.

I sleep deeply, but at some point in the little hours, find myself wide awake in a state of confinement. I feel sealed off and stale knowing that I'm just across the road from the beach that we listened to, gazed at and walked on all weekend. I leap out of bed and rather desperately reach in the darkness for the hi-tech pulley to raise the blind. In the bright light I see the windows' levers and turn them further and further until both are fully open. Cold salty air rushes in, wrapping itself around my shoulders like the hug of an old friend. I sit on a pillow in the middle of the bed with my back to the street light. The doona pulled around me from head to knees warms the salty air. The roll, lift and slap of each wave rides in through the windows, and I smile.

The room fills with water. I'm in still depths with fish of different sizes, shapes and colours accepting me with customary nonchalance. Stripes, spots, gills and large eyes come companionably close as fish glide towards and around me. Now I'm water and I'm fish. Water as fish and fish as water; flow in the deep quiet.

A distant ache in my knee knocks for attention. Smiling again I stretch the faithful knee, throw the doona off my shoulders and climb from the bed to lower the blind just enough to stay some of the street light. Through the wide open windows the water washes back across the

Illustration by Kathy Shiels

road and I return to sleep.

After sitting and breakfast the next morning, I return to the beach and stroll near the edge of the shore with the sun on my back. Autumn paints the sand pale and the sky a whisper blue. The adventurous ocean rests demurely in shallow jade and silver.

Two sandpipers strut and scurry on thin orange legs near me. With heads bent over long beaks they ignore me and dart from side to side in tandem. Lifting my head from watching them, I see a middle-aged man (who could be eighty) up to his knees in the water. He pulls on a yellow bathing cap, splashes the arms of his wetsuit and plunges in to make even strokes along the shark net.

"Laps, he's doing laps!" I tell the sandpipers, who don't seem to hear.

My unhurried steps catch a small flash of vivid pink. I unearth a plastic drink bottle lid. Picking it up, I spy a broken white spoon. Soon I'm walking slowly with head bent noticing residue fragments of family days and friends' picnics on the beach. A remnant of a plastic bag is a 'lucky' find and I use it to carry my little hoard of what's been left from those days.

Further up the beach a woman with the light golden skin of a year-round swimmer is coming towards me. We say hello, comment on the lovely morning and the number of forlorn pieces I've collected in my little bag. As we go on our ways, I notice she's carrying a broken plastic knife and is steadily scanning the sand for tiny blue jellyfish whose thin long tails look just like plastic.

"I'm just making sure these won't breed and add to the numbers of stingers here" She says piercing the side of a tiny jelly fish.

I nod weakly; not at all understanding.

Walking on, I soon have my bag and both hands full, so I turn to retrace my steps, hoping I've found the last of the left fragments of plastic. As I come closer to the 'jellyfish piercer' I see she's carrying the remains of what had been a red beach bucket. She smiles when we are in speaking distance and shows me the 'left at the beach' collection she has with her. Her jagged jelly fish knife has been tossed into her collection. I breathe more easily, feel more warmly towards her and say thanks when she indicates to drop my clumsy load into her bucket. We stand soaking up the sunshine and our bond of collecting the debris together.

"Are there many fish here at Port Coogee?" I ask, still feeling the closeness of their presence hours earlier.

"Oh yes, she says brightly. My husband and I swim most days and we snorkel all around inside that shark net. Some of the fish hang around here all the time and we know them well. We have names for quite a lot of them. They come right up to us and turn their heads eyeballing us as we swim along. There are herring, whiting, taylors and of course the mullet. They're my favourite - the mullet, because they're so friendly."

She talks on and on, animatedly describing stripes, spots, gills and large eyes while using her hands to show lengths and sizes. I stand entranced by her broad daylight intimacy with the local fish. Yes, the fish I now know well from when they crossed the road to swim the front room in the little hours of the morning. I'm grateful to them as the most welcome participants who scaled the walls of our Training Period, to testify that the whole earth is medicine.

Training Period participants.

LIVING WITH MEDICINE

Reflections on our Training Period

BY PHILLIP McNAMARA

Experience One: The Medicine of Committing to Taking Medicine

The Whole Earth is Medicine was my second Training Period. This time around, in the middle of a school term, towards the start of winter when rain and darkness make driving tiresome, and with a friend visiting from New Zealand, I thought I might give it a miss. Yes, I'd also then miss some intensive practice and the treasured opportunity to do Dokusan with Mari, but heck, the demands of a busy life were wearing me down, and I'd catch up with Mari at the Sesshin anyway. Well most likely would. If I went to that.

The more I thought about the niggling reasons not to go to the Training Period, the more I felt lethargic about actually going. I started asking myself: What was I running around searching for in Zen practice anyway? The indetermination and choice that lay at the heart of reality begun to niggle at my notions of self-agency; perhaps there were too many other possibilities of things to do during that period. Taking a cue from the title - if samsara was medicine - then staying at home was equally as valid.

To go or not to go became quite an internal debate and a rather disruptive pondering during my morning zazen. This intrusion, hesitation and then prevarication intrigued me. I joked to myself that it was possibly the voice of Mara whining to me rather than my own, but either way there was some squirming here that I needed to watch rather than act on.

The watching meant that I was wary of saying that I wanted to pull out. I know from practice that free will and choice can become slippery self-indulgences, and that dignity often lies in seeing what conditions are arising to present a particular impulse, so I waited.

Hanging in the space of indecision I began to sway towards pulling out. Yet I couldn't quite bring myself to take my name off the list; hesitating each time I went to do so.

I clearly didn't know what I wanted to do, or why I actually wanted to go, however as the start date loomed I did decide that if I pulled out I didn't want to voice my own excuses for that choice; knowing any excuse would be me doing just that, making excuses, when - going by the title of the training period – excuses were both medicine and also the sickness of this very mind giving voice. It's one of the binds of pivoting around the mirror of emptiness. You sometimes look at yourself looking startled because, the fact that the mind is emptiness means you're also the one who actually has to make the moves (no excuses).

In moments of squirming around excuses I like to defer to others. I am then able to blame them for the choice; it wasn't really what I chose or wanted, I took their advice as a command. Hence I asked my wife, my boss, my children, my aging parents and my visiting friend for a list of urgent or important tasks, jobs, events, parties or catch up they wanted me to attend to over the dates of the Training Period.

They could all tell, possibly by my pleading voice or perhaps because they know me well, that something was up, so they asked, "Have you got something else on?" So, having been directly asked, I told them each about the Training Period and they, in return, all said, "But you get so much benefit from Zen, you need to go." Even my New Zealand friend said, "No, before I booked my flights I didn't ask what else you had on. I can't expect to just lob on your doorstep and you drop things that are important to

Training Period altar. Photograph by Paul Wilson.

you. I've got other things to do and people to see. You can tell me all about it when we do catch up. I'd enjoy some further discussions about meditation and Zen."

At the last moment I paid my money to go. Yet even on the first Friday evening, as I drove to the rented house, I felt like turning around and going home a number of times (the Thursday talk by Mari at the dojo, with others not attending the Training Period also there, didn't quite seem like I'd fully committed).

I perhaps make my eventual choice of attending seem inevitable, with my reluctance comical and my commitment just needing some prodding. However, in the months leading up to it, I went through mounting angst and trepidation. By the time it arrived I was feeling dreadful: deep in the valley of darkness. Indeed, I had been finding it very hard to get up, go to work, live my life, go to Zen. The cheerio and some hugs from Sangha when I did go were true beams of light during all this, which broke through my cloud during the Training Period.

Before that occurred I had a last day Sisyphus-like struggle to push through. The first Friday of the Training Period was another dramatic day at work. I left at about 5:30 to drive up and, by that time on a Friday, I'd usually be cooking dinner at home and unwinding. I was tired and just wanted to go home, but it was more than that. It also felt like a tsunami of negative feelings about my practice and the futility of it all had descended, and I said to myself (as another excuse) that I didn't really want to contaminate the tone of the Training Period or affect the focus of the sangha members sitting near me or looking at me. As I drove, the impulse to run away was ever present, and I had to keep vigilant focus on just steering in the right direction.

It is now a fact that I didn't give into the almost overwhelming urge to do a U-turn, nor to the impulse to keep driving interstate, nor to the final, last kilometre thought to suddenly detour and pop in unexpectedly on one of several friends who lived nearby, but I was worried for a while that my hands might decide for themselves to turn away. Somehow I just gritted my teeth, got there, parked and went in. I guess I did this as I knew, from having similar feelings that had, at various times over the years, almost pulled me away from wanting to do regular zazen, that I just had to get there and, even if screaming internally, just do it. Commitment was now what it was about. Anyway, I knew that even amidst whirlwind lives or reactive experiences there remains green grass and blue sky. Why was I feeling this state? I didn't know, but I did know that the feelings of dread would pass; hopefully sooner rather than later.

I don't know if people noticed my state when I

arrived or organised myself. It wasn't pertinent really, as I was there and so were they; with the leaders doing last minute things.

I also didn't know how Mari was going to start off the Training Period at the house. But, given the above, I felt some hesitation to untangling my melange of feelings when Mari started discussion by asking each of us to say why we had decided to attend the Training Period. She said "each" of us so there was no passing. It felt like the first time you go to Dokusan and get the question as to why you have come to practice; for me a big existential moment.

By the time I spoke the month of inward struggle and mounting lethargy had pulled up into a mound of 'don't know why I am here' attitude, with a lot of lingering doubt as to whether I'd make it through that evening, let alone the whole period, as humus. Actually I just wanted to cry or scream or run, so I jumped in to say something before too many had spoken.

The few who had already spoken seemed to have much more noble or positive reasons than I had thought of, so as I opened my mouth I merely explained that I was there because no-one, including myself, could give me an excuse as to why I shouldn't be there, and in fact a number of people in my life had said that I should be there.

I said it in a humorous, lilting, teacher-voice, but felt like weeping. Some people smiled so I bowed, then bowed and listened to the next person who spoke. As I listened to the other participants speak, my own mind lessened its chatter of protest about being there. The Training Period had started. I could rest in it and stop being churlish. Thankfully, I quickly settled into the now of it all; perhaps because of the familiar form.

When we moved into pairs I was present and let my day, week, and doubts flow away. What was that couple of months of nonsense all about? Gone, gone, completely gone.

Acknowledgment of every moment as the giving and receiving of medicine had begun.

Experience Two: Kinhin and left shoes as medicine

I think everybody who attended the Training Period liked the outside kinhin.

Whether it was around the balcony with wind, bird song and waves as our atoms, or going along the path and the beach, it was precious medicine. There is nothing like kinhin within the elements to make one aware that there is no outside or inside, there is just you.

I also had the medicine of ill-fitting shoes as medicine.

We had all been asked to bring shoes to wear on the beach. So before we gathered for our first kinhin walk there, we took a quick moment to put on the shoes that we had brought for that purpose.

Putting on my shoes took a bit of an effort and I held up the line. People waiting in the kinhin line would have heard my laughter as I tried to squeeze one of them on. This was because I'd got up in the dark and, not wanting to disturb others in the house, had gathered my clothing and items without turning on the light. I was pretty chuffed that I'd grabbed some diving boots, purpose built for sand and water, however somehow I had grabbed two left shoes rather than a pair.

I eventually hobbled over looking like I was going to keep veering right and somehow made my way giggling to the shore with the sangha.

On the journey to the beach I'd been somewhat quietened by the smell of the dune vegetation, which had instantly transported me back to childhood experiences of camping amongst the sand dunes on Garden Island (which was visible from the balcony of the house), however once we were on to the soft sand, seeing the boot prints I left behind got me giggling to myself again.

I knew from many walks along the beach that others would be immersed in the rhythm of the waves or the ripples in the sand, but my immediate experience was more like one of Cinderella's step sisters contemplating cutting off a big toe; mine was getting a blister. Thoughts of fairy tales made me briefly think of Jungian medicine before I focused down on gentle placement of my wayward

imprints. I didn't want two left shoe indentations to puzzle those behind me, so I began to step into the footprints of the person in front of me and settled into my breaths and gait. I was taken away with more thoughts of how a path is nothing but impressions made by feet in shifting sands, then thoughts of which foot marks were I to follow, before I just dropped it all and took in the sounds.

When we each reported back to the group I felt that we each selected something to add to what those before had said. None of us could say it all, however I was pleased that aspects of what I had experienced were mentioned by each of the others.

Experience Three: The dirt as medicine

During this Training Period we were given some exercises of intimacy. We all indicated we were concerned about the state of the environment and our impact or role in its continued functioning. One activity was particularly effective at helping us see our relationship to the earth more clearly. The exercise was to find a square metre patch of earth (with greenery in it) to watch for half an hour.

I found it quite amusing that I could look for about five minutes before it blurred and I wanted to look either up, or at the nearby square metre, or scan about, or wander to a different perhaps more interesting patch of earth. Once my mind knew it was there for the long haul it settled into observing and naming and being amazed at things that suddenly popped out from the background to be noticed. I then noticed how everything, every overlay of myriad things slotted together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Yet each part begged for my notice; as my acknowledgment blessed it with an individual form and function. Next came little narratives around the bits of debris, types of plants or the lives of insects crawling through the space. There were lots of ideas, concepts and scripts also creeping in there. Eventually the bondage of those loosened and that square metre and I sat together as One body. There were countless things there, each living out its life of beauty and decay. But everything was held within a pattern that was natural and complete within itself and within the composition of this oneness. I think we returned having glimpsed that everything is sacred and whole yet continuously coming and going. There was no hiding from the Sangha of inter-being; we are all in this together. How then do you live your life?

Experience Four: Your life as Medicine – what is you legacy?

An interesting discussion for me was one about what we felt we gave the world or rather, what our legacy would be. My group all mentioned similar things. Most of it was around healing our immediate environment (including family karma) and using our awareness (from meditation and what it gave us in maturity; for want of a better word) to bring compassion to the world.

There was a brief discussion, when the two groups came together prior to chanting Great Vows For All, about what each group had reflected on. Some of the threads of that were for me cut a bit short by the ending of the evening.

Part of the discussion was how people had first, in a Catholic or karmic sense, answered the question pictorially by imagining a balancing scale of pros and cons. I think pictorially and so took the image through a number of permutations and associations as we sat there. It is an image of justice and judgement, guilt and sin and also of balance, equilibrium and ideas of progress.

The first association I had was with the rocking back and forth of a see-saw, the second was of the idea of judgement day and the scale as a summing up of my life. In that context how would my actions and qualities be judged? By whom? Because the world is medicine my life is expressed in the shape or form of that scale, and that is an evolving pattern that is, within its own capacities and journey, beautiful. I made the comment that these qualities were perhaps not for weighing and measuring, but just lived. I demonstrated this by tilting over and saying, "It doesn't really matter how lopsided the scale looks to others, it is the result of a worthwhile life responding to what arises as best it can." To give a related image I added, "Just like an old gnarled plum branch."

This was, in body and action, reference to a koan verse that Ross Bolleter has used in several Teishos over the years. The image of him hanging his hands in the air –

intimately showing that ancient gnarled tree barely hanging onto life but still blossoming - blossoms as my life and the fragrance of my heart. I don't know what others thought as I held out my hands, but my hands were joining theirs. In that moment we were all holding up the sky, blossoms, fragrant incense, Avalokiteshvara, holding the world of medicine as this very life. Precious beyond knowing.

Ross has used the verse several times, but one that is relevant here is when he discusses Dongshan pointing out that the savagery of this life is all only for our benefit. Ross quotes the verse within a story about his student Irina Harford; a story which makes my squirming about practice seem boorish. Ross writes:

> "In her late seventies, Irina Harford, even when she was gravely ill with cancer, still climbed the wooden steps to the Zendo to dokusan. When she was very close to death, she asked me if she could take up another koan. I gave her the verse:
>
> *True intimacy transcends friendship and alienation;*
> *On the great plum tree fully blossomed*
> *the southern branch owns the whole Spring*
> *as also does the Northern branch.*
>
> Irina was not expected to live a fortnight. Because I was about to fly to New Zealand, and I thought that she would die before I returned, I came to the hospital to say goodbye to her. As I brought my hands together to indicate dokusan, she sat up with great effort, and silently held up her withered arms. That blossoming – only for you: only as you, and as us all."

In the Book of Serenity a verse that touches the same ground says:

> "beyond the window, the old plum branch
> once again is drenched with white -
> birth and death mingled on a single bough."

Whether in winter or summer it is drenched, all quite beyond measuring yet growing gnarled and beautiful for us to see.

A comment made in response to my plum branch was "And I'm always out there pruning". I laughed heartily to that comment as this is exactly what we all do. It was precisely why we were at the Training Period finding out about medicine and a very apt eye towards the hanging limbs. My laughter was also because my immediate association was to the story of Bodhidharma.

Pruning is akin to the poem:

> "Our body is the Bodhi-tree,
> And our mind a mirror bright.
> Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
> And let no dust alight."
>
> (- *Platform Sutra of Hui Neng)*

By then it was time for the evening to end, so Mari asked for Great Vows to be chanted. That was a fitting summation, signalling as it does why gnarled branches are ok (as is pruning):

> "There is no Bodhi-tree,
> Nor stand of a mirror bright.
> Since all is Void,
> Where can the dust alight?"
>
> (- *Platform Sutra of Hui Neng)*

Conclusion: Medicine

How then do we live our life?

Our freedom lies in the attitude we take into our awareness. This awareness precedes and holds our actions, and this is our medicine. It is openness where the world and you are not two. Another way of saying this is form is precisely emptiness, emptiness precisely form… and thereby we, as Zen students, empty our hold on likes and dislikes to give out compassion (medicine) to the many beings (including ourselves) who continuously meet in their oneness, "mingled on a single bough".

THE WHOLE EARTH IS MEDICINE

BY BRIGID LOWRY

Too tired, too busy to attend. Yet something was calling to me. Pink roses curled a welcome outside the house. Kinhin in the sun, walking with my friends, silently, in deep companionship, a flock of black seabirds. Mari's questions, opening us to sharing our fears, sharing our joys. Laughing about Phil's rat story. Getting to know each other better, getting to know ourselves in the depths. Falling asleep in the afternoon. Waking up to bell, breath, moment. Fat fleshy leaves on the balcony plant. The thrill of the ocean, its wild song. The divinity of soups. Irina on the altar downstairs, her hands in anjali, farewelling this life. Driving back and forth a lot. Feeling not quite on to it. Feeling totally into it. A flourish of orchids on the dokusan altar. Faces softening as the days go by, or was it my eyes that softened? Not so hard, it turned out, to cease struggling against myself. Resting in the still place within, always available. Tidying the house together, sharing the load. Going home in the dusk with bread and apples and a happy heart.

Photograph by Paul Wilson.

HAIKU

BY JOHN TURNER

ringtails and lorikeets
eat flame tree flower ends

a water dragon ~
adjacent to the sunny stream
one soup ladle

gardening
with canvas leather gloves ~
a monkey puzzle tree

rain water ~ together with
a plethora of protons

a pussy willow tree
with the gentle touch ~
no catkins

a caspian tern
over the harbour bridges ~
a seal upriver

CLOUDS OF BLOSSOMS

A talk given at St Paul's, Beaconsfield, 5 October 2017

BY GERARD MAZZA, WITH PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

The title of this talks come from a haiku by the great master of the form, Matsuo Bashō, who lived in Japan from 1644 to 1694. The poem goes:

> Clouds of blossoms –
> that temple bell, is it Ueno?
> Asakusa?

That translation is by Robert Hass, as are all the translations of haiku in this talk.

Haiku, particularly Bashō's, capture fleeting moments that arise and then pass away in this world of dew. Here, the poet presents us with the cherry blossoms, the sound of the bell, and then his question to himself. That's all.

Traditional Japanese haiku are usually linked to a season by *kigo*, or seasonal phrases. The inclusion of a certain *kigo* determines the season of the haiku. 'The moon' suggests autumn, 'broiled parsley' suggests winter, 'mosquitos' suggest summer, 'serenity' suggests spring. Manuals have been published that list almost 5000 different

kigo, which all carry their own powerful connotations. When the 20th century haiku poet Kuroda Momoko was asked about *kigo*, she said:

> "These words do not belong to the author of the poem … They belong to us [the Japanese people]. …Seasonal words are our national treasures. They are like jewels, polished and made more precious by time. When we pick up one of these jewels and use it in a haiku, it is rich with history. … They capture the essence of Japanese life."

Haiku are about the seasons, which means they are about nature, and about change.

In Bashō's haiku: "Clouds of blossoms -/that temple bell, is it Ueno?/ Asakusa?", the *kigo* is 'blossoms', which of course suggests spring.

In April this year, I travelled to Japan, and visited Tokyo and Kyoto. It was spring time, and I too saw clouds of blossoms. The old grounds of one of the temples mentioned in that poem of Bashō's have now been transformed into Ueno Park, one of Tokyo's largest public spaces. Over 1000 cherry blossom trees line the paths of the park, and it is one of the most popular spots for blossom viewing. During the two weeks of cherry blossom season, each evening thousands of people visit Ueno Park for *hanami*, or 'blossom viewing picnics'. The tradition of *hanami* can be traced back to the eighth century, and is perhaps even older. In Ueno Park, I sat and ate under the blossom trees, alongside families, office workers and students. People laughed, sang, took photographs and shared food. Above them, pink and white petals came down from the trees, drifting slowly to the ground. Almost as soon as they appear, the blossoms begin to fall.

According to Robert Hass, with the introduction of Buddhism into Japanese thought, "The cherry blossoms, associated anciently with the orchard, the fertility cycle, and the priapic spring, became, in their beauty and briefness, poignant emblems of the transience of the world."

Spring is a magical time in Japan, as it is here in Western Australia. On Sunday, I, with many of you, sat on Nyoongar country with Michael Wright in King's Park. It was a beautiful day. Sometimes the breeze blew cool, sometimes the sun shone with a warmth that felt like a mother's love. The wattle was intensely yellow, and tiny, tiny blue flowers grew wildly. As we sat, around us people laughed, sang, peeled off their jumpers and ran about.

This year I have felt fortunate to learn a little from Michael about the six Nyoongar seasons. The start of October marks the end of *Djilba*, the season of conception, and the beginning of *Kambarang*, the season of birth. I wonder if it would be possible to develop a collection of south-western Australian *kigo* based on the six Nyoongar seasons, and use them to write haiku about this part of the world. Traditionally, haiku anthologies are arranged seasonally. Imagine an anthology with a chapter for each of the six Nyoongar seasons.

Tonight, I would like to talk to you about Japan, about poetry, and about Zen.

There is a great literary tradition in Zen. According to Robert Aitken, "The Way is grounded in genuine experience and poetry." Many of the most revered Ancestors in our Zen tradition were also gifted poets, as is our own teacher, Ross Bolleter.

Poetry is a great inspiration for my Zen practice. I'm inspired by Chinese, Japanese and American Zen poetry; the haiku of Bashō and others; and the gathas of Robert Aitken. I'm also inspired to practice by the work of poets completely outside of the Zen tradition.

William Wordsworth, who lived from 1770 to 1850, is one such poet. I would like to read you one of his sonnets, which to me suggests the Buddha-nature of all beings:

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
> Is sinking down in its tranquility;
> The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
> Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
> Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
> If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
> Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
> God being with thee when we know it not.

In some ways, Bashō and Wordsworth could not be any more different to one another. The former is renowned for condensing moments of human perception into powerful, 17-syllable verses, while the latter is best known for his 8000-line epic 'The Prelude', which outlines a complex philosophical system. And yet, the two have their similarities. Both poets wrote primarily about nature, and with an awareness of themselves as part of nature. Both also rejected in their work the heightened poetic diction that dominated poetry during their time, in favour of a more down-to-earth language, derived from ordinary speech.

Another poet that inspires my practice is the Australian poet, Judith Wright, who lived from 1915 to 2000. Both the Zen student and the poet must observe closely, and Wright's poetry is powerfully attentive. Here is her poem, 'Lichen, Moss, Fungus':

> Autumn and early winter
> wet this clay soil with rains.
> Slow primitive plantforms
> push up their curious flowers.
>
> Lichens, mosses and fungi –
> these flourish on this rock ridge,
> a delicate crushable tundra:
> bracket, star, cup, parasol,
> gilled, pored, spored, membraned,
> white, chestnut, violet, red.
>
> I stoke the fire with wood
> laced with mycelia, tread
> a crust of moss and lichen.
> Over the wet decay
> of log and fallen branch
> there spreads an embroidery, ancient
> source of forests.

In her later years, Wright was influenced by the Japanese haiku masters, whose work she described in her poem 'Brevity' as "Enclosed by silence/as is the thrush's call." In the poem I've just read this influence is obvious in the way the poem is linked to the seasons, and in the directness of her observation. She combines these qualities with her own inclination to catalogue precisely in botanical terms.

I would like to now tell you about some of the places I visited in Japan, and read a few poems I scribbled in my travel journal.

In Tokyo, I sat zazen in two Zen temples. The first was a small, slightly rundown Rinzai temple in the Shibuya area. The temple held zazen for lay people between 6 and 7 am each morning. The first time I tried to go there, I couldn't find the entrance. The next morning I was lead in by a French ex-pat, who sat there every day. We were joined by fifteen or so others, mainly businessmen on their way to work. We sat two rounds of zazen, very much like we did here tonight, although we did not sit on zafus. Instead, we were given two small mats, one of which we folded in half. Afterwards, I and a few others stayed for tea in the kitchen with the Roshi, who was very shy. He must have been a keen calligrapher, as there were brushes laying all around the temple.

The second temple I sat at was a large, opulent Soto temple, in a business district of the city. Huge gold statues of the Four Heavenly Kings stood at the entrance. There I met a monk who spoke good English, and was very generous with his time. He took me into the temple, where we had tea.

He told me about his training as a monk, which was at times difficult and rigorous. He asked me many questions about the way we practice here. He seemed intrigued by Western lay practice, and the fact we would sit Sesshin on our holidays. He also spoke a lot about the importance of posture: of sitting upright, without effort. He said that it took him ten years of sitting before he could find comfort and ease. Remembering this has given me solace a number of times, as I've struggled with pain during zazen.

After our tea, he lead me into the meditation hall of the monastery, which was incredibly grand. In the hall, zafus sat on tatami mats on a raised platform. Traditionally, training monks would have sat, ate and slept on these tatami mats. Each mat had a small drawer, where a monk would stow all their belongings.

There were many complicated rituals for entering the meditation hall, and for raising yourself up to sit on the platform. Anyone who has been to Japan would know that, because of the way the currency works, you always end up with heaps of coins in your pockets. As I climbed onto the

platform, money spilled out of my trousers. Later, I wrote a haiku about it:

Climbing on a zafu -
Clinking coins fall
From the layman's pockets.

After sitting, as I was leaving the monastery, the monk told me, "it is not enough to be taught, we must also teach others."

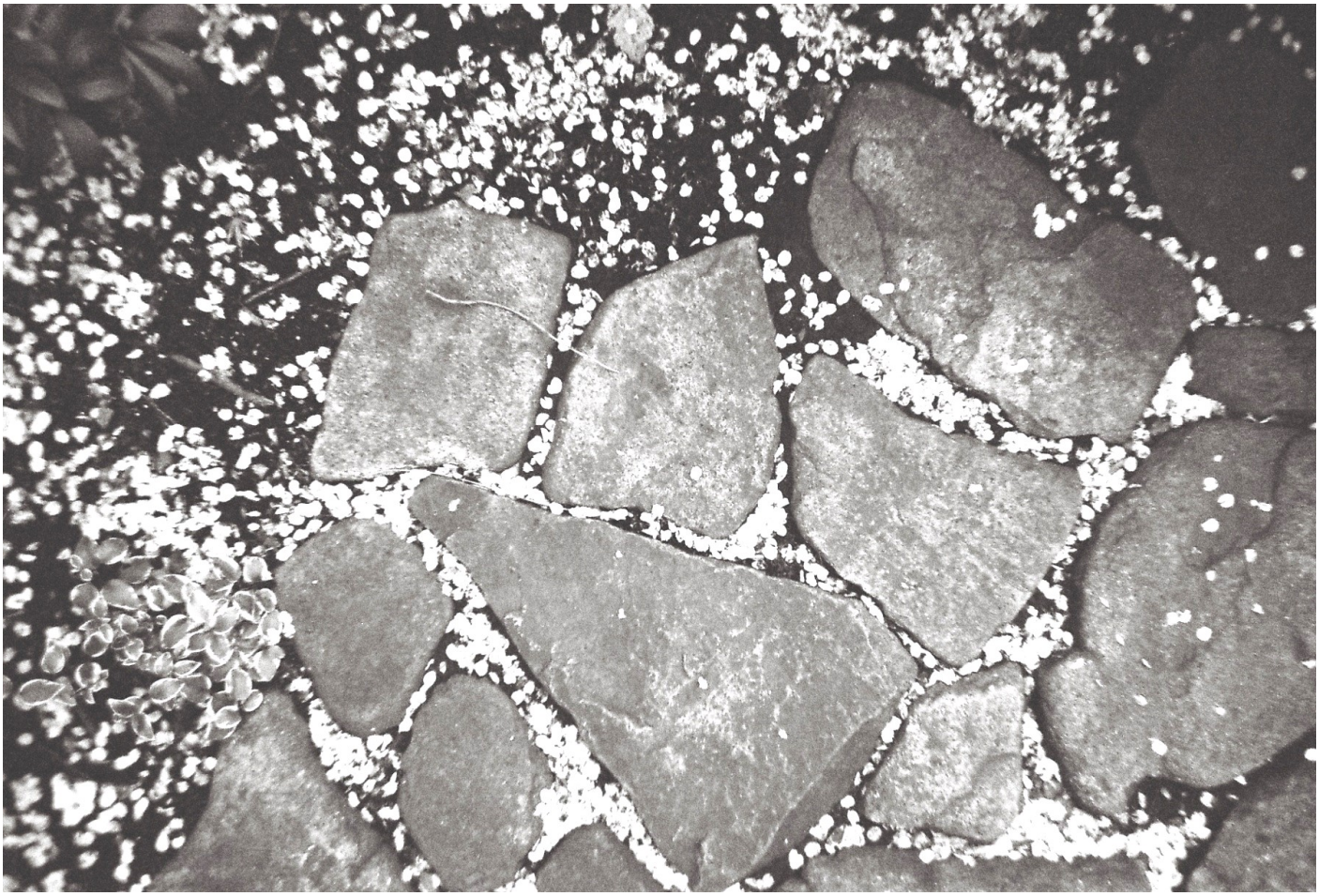
That evening, I checked into a capsule hotel. On the floor of the hotel that I stayed on, 150 men slept in small cubicles, stacked on top of each other. Each capsule had a television, with several channels of pornography to choose from. Through the night, a chorus of snores could be heard. Most of the men were businessmen who'd been out drinking and missed the last train home. In the lobby the next morning, they bought business shirts and toothbrushes.

When I lay in the capsule, my feet touched one end, and my head the other. It struck me that the capsule was about the same size as the tatami mats at the temple. This is where I would lay, and practice.

While I was travelling, I read Bashō's travel-writing, which combines prose and haiku. As I sat on the bullet train, or shinkansen, between Tokyo and Kyoto, I read his classic 'The Narrow Road to the Deep North'. In Bashō's time, travel was tough; he was always exposed to the elements, at constant risk of physical danger, and fearful of being attacked by bandits. He wore the black robe of a priest to protect himself from being robbed. At the time, it was very unusual to travel for pleasure. As I read about Bashō's journeys, I sat in an air-conditioned train, moving at 300 km/h, eating a bento box I'd bought at the station.

Here is one of Bashō's haiku from the road:

Weathered bones
on my mind,
a wind-pierced body.



Here is a short poem I wrote on the bullet train:

Out the window of the Shinkansen
Things move so very fast:
Did I just imagine
The green house on the hill?

In 'The Narrow Road to the Deep North' Bashō expressed a desire to die on the road, as he eventually did.

The city of Kyoto is surrounded by hills, throughout which are scattered hundreds of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. I took a bus part way up one of these hills to visit a small temple called Konpuku-Ji. The temple was originally established during the Heian Period (between 794 and 1185) by the Tendai Buddhist sect. At some point it was ruined, and sat unused for many centuries, but was rebuilt as a Zen temple by a Rinzai priest named Tesshu during the 17th century.

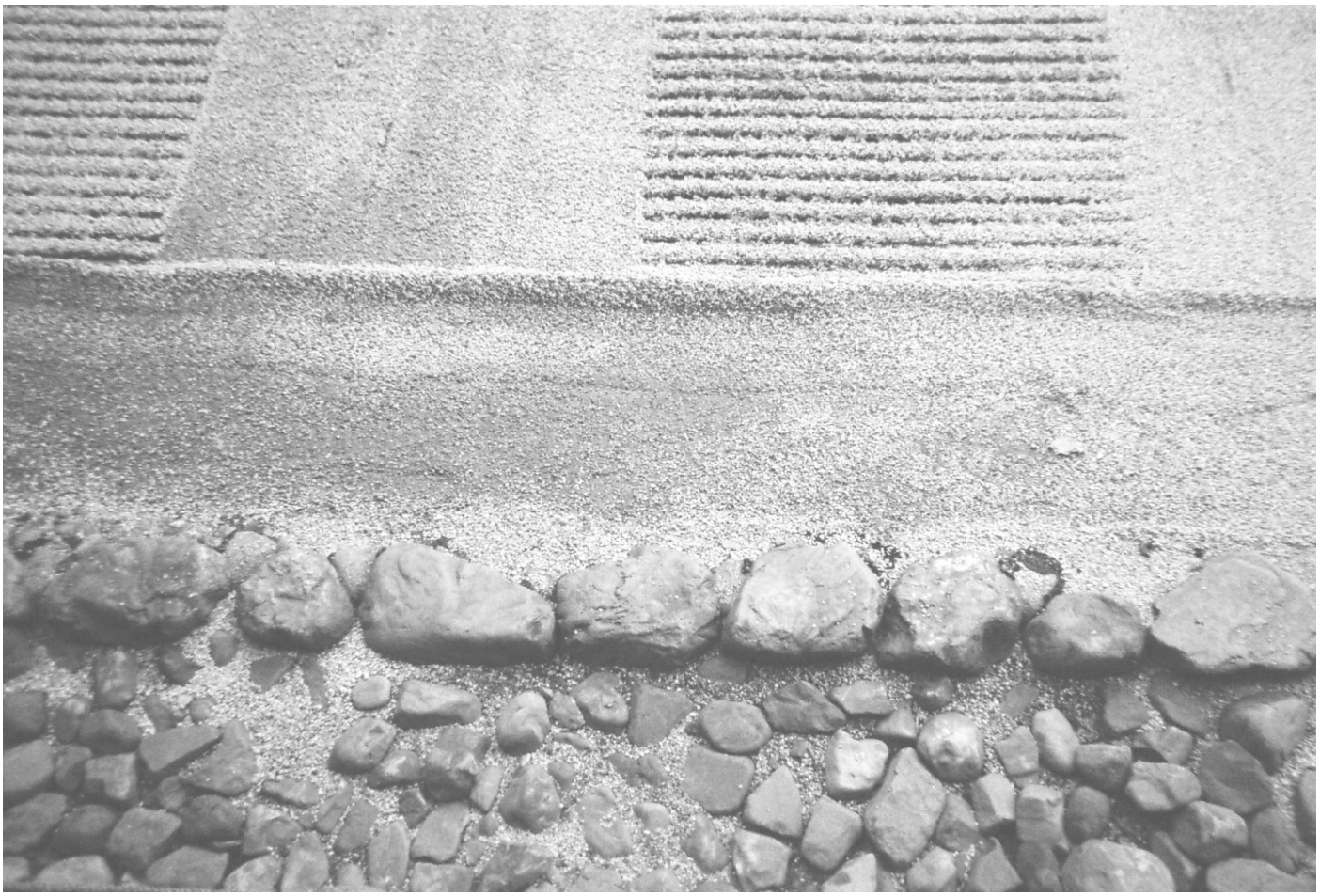
Bashō was friends with Tesshu, and when visiting Kyoto would sometimes stay in a small wooden hut behind the temple, which Tesshu named Bashō-an. In this hut, Bassho is said to have written his poem:

Even in Kyoto –
Hearing the cuckoo's cry –
I long for Kyoto.

Yosa Buson was a painter and haiku poet who lived from 1716 to 1783. A hundred years after Bashō had stayed at Konpuku-Ji, Buson visited the temple to pay tribute to the master-poet. He was dismayed to find the hut in a state of disrepair, and so set about rebuilding it with some of his followers. In the restored hut, they would have parties and compose renga, which are collaborative poems of linked verse, as well as haiku.

The restored Bashō-An still stands today. It is rustic, with small windows and a grass-thatched roof. Nearby stands Buson's grave. Around the temple and hut is a garden of clipped azaleas and Chinese bellflowers. As the hill slopes upwards, the formal garden slowly gives way to the wilds of the forest, without clear delineation.

People come to Konpuki-Ji from all over Japan,



and all over the world, to pay tribute to Bashō and Buson. The work of both masters is read widely in many languages. In some ways, the appeal of the haiku to a non-Japanese audience can seem strange. So much is lost in translation. Robert Hass, who has translated hundreds of haiku, describes them as 'untranslatable'. Metre and sound must be sacrificed. Allusions, puns and the rich associations of the *kigo* are all lost on the foreign reader. It is a rule that Japanese haiku must use a *kireji*, or 'cutting word', to mark emphasis, transition or juxtaposition. There is no English equivalent of these words, so for us the effect is lost. In their choice of Japanese or Chinese written characters, the haiku poet will often make subtle suggestions or double-meanings, which are also inaccessible when the poems are read in another language.

Despite these difficulties of translation, the haiku of Bashō and the other Japanese masters still retain great power when read in English. As a high-school English teacher, I have seen how the directness and concision of the haiku has the power to captivate even the most jaded of teenagers, who groan merely at the mention of the word 'poetry'.

There is a fantastic book on the history of renga and haiku called 'One Hundred Frogs', by Hiroaki Sato. At the end of the book, Sato collects 100 different translations of Bashō's most famous poem. I would like to read a handful of them to you, to give an idea of the difficulty, subjectivity and joy that must be involved in translating these poems:

Robert Aitken:
The old pond;
A frog jumps in, -
The sound of the water.

Kenneth Yasuda:
Ancient pond unstirred
Into which a frog has plunged,
A splash was heard.

D.T Suzuki:
The old pond, ah!
A frog jumps in:
The water's sound.

Allen Ginsberg:
The old pond
A frog jumped in,
Kerplunk!

R.H Blyth:
The old pond.
A frog jumps in –
Plop!

Peter Beilenson
OLD DARK SLEEPY POOL…
QUICK UNEXPECTED
FROG
GOES PLOP! WATERSPLASH!

James Kirkup:
pond
frog
plop!

Robert Anthony Fagan:
hey
the frog's fallen
in the pond
splash

So many ponds! So many frogs! Ribbit. Ribbit. Ribbit. Spshh! Spshh! Spssh!

As well as giving a translation of the poem, Robert Aitken offers a verse of his own in response:

The old pond has no walls;
A frog just jumps in;
Do you say there is an echo?

At Konpuku-ji, there hangs a portrait of Bashō, painted by Buson. Buson has inscribed the portrait with the words:

Neither speak ill of others,
Nor well of yourself.
The moment you open
Your mouth to speak,
The autumn wind stirs
And chills your lips.

In these words I hear the spirit of the Grave Precepts of Zen Buddhism.

Buson, as well as being a gifted painter, was a talented haiku poet. Of Buson's poems, Robert Hass says "There is a sense in them … of the world endlessly coming into being, as if it were brush strokes on white paper." Buson was a great poet of the bell, and therefore can be an inspiration to Zen students, who must sound bells in the dokusan line, or in the roles of jikkijitsu or jisha.

One of his bell haiku goes:

Coolness –
the sound of the bell
As it leaves the bell.

This is a summer haiku, because of the use of the *kigo* 'coolness'.

In another of his bell poems, we see how Buson was willing to allow, record and celebrate all moments, not just the ideal ones:

The sound of a bell
struck off centre
vanishes in haze.

The *kigo* 'haze' gives this poem a spring mood.

On another day, I caught the train from Kyoto down to a small city called Uji. Uji is most famous as one of the main settings in the 11th century novel *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, which is often described as the world's first novel.

Uji is also home to Kosho-Ji Temple, the first temple established by Dogen Zenji. Dogen was the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism, a philosopher and a great poet. Kosho-Ji was originally built in Kyoto in 1233, then was moved to nearby Uji in 1648.

To reach Kosho-ji, you must walk down a long path from the bank of the Uji River. As I went down it I looked up to see a monk, high up on a ladder, tending to the maple trees by the side of the path.

When I reached the temple, I was given a brochure by a monk at the entrance. It gave a history of the temple, then said:

> "In the present difficult situation of Japanese Buddhism, this temple endeavours to continue to be true to the essence of Dogen's interpretation of Zen Buddhism, and to exist as a Buddhist temple rather than a tourist showplace."

Zen is in decline in Japan, and few young people choose to become Zen monastics, leaving many temples empty. They are preserved as tourist destinations, and as sites of cultural heritage.

I was warmly welcomed to walk around the temple. After visiting many temples that felt like museums, it was good to be in a place with an atmosphere of serious practice. At one point, I heard the sound of clappers coming from down a hallway. I had to resist the urge to run and join the kinhin line.

After looking around I chatted to a monk, who told me there were 26 practitioners currently living at Kosho-ji. He was very happy to hear that in Australia zazen is being practiced, and Dogen's words are being studied.

On the train on the way back to Kyoto, I wrote a short poem in my journal:

Between the river and the mountain
The monk trims the tree.
Clappers sound;
Flowers bloom.

During the recent Spring Sesshin, Ross Bolleter recited a poem that Dogen quotes in his essay 'The Perfection of Great Wisdom'. The poem is by Dogen's teacher, Tiantong Rujing, and goes:

> The whole body is like a mouth hanging in empty space.
> Not questioning the winds from east, west, south, or north,

Equally all of them, speaking of prajñā:
Ding-dong-a-ling ding-dong.

During Sesshin, this poem helped me to find a comfortable zazen posture. It was a great inspiration to me, and seems to have been an inspiration to Dogen as well.

On my final day in Japan, I took the suburban train to the town of Kyotonabe. From the station, I walked half an hour up a hill to Shuonan, also known as Ikkyu-Ji. This is the temple where the Zen teacher Ikkyu-Sojun spent the latter half of his life, and is now buried. Ikkyu lived from 1394 to 1481, and is a beloved figure in Japanese culture. He is known for his compassion, anti-institutionalism, poetic skill and love of pleasure. In the 70s and 80s, a very popular children's cartoon television show was made about him.

Ikkyu-Ji was a very beautiful temple, with particularly elegant rock gardens. Mountains of rock and moss sat in oceans of sand. Real mountain scenery made a spectacular backdrop. Outside the *hojo*, or abbot's quarters, five small zafus were set out on the balcony, looking onto a garden. There I sat next to a Japanese schoolboy in his uniform, and we both did zazen. Behind us, in the *hojo*, was a life-sized statue of Ikkyu, which supposedly has real hairs from the master's moustache and head attached to it.

Ikkyu's joyous spirit is captured in his poetry:

Every day, priests minutely examine the Dharma
And endlessly chant complicated sutras.
Before doing that, though, they should learn
How to read the love letters sent by the wind and rain, the snow and moon.

Part of the reason Ikkyu is so beloved is because of his naughtiness. He is famous for his love of saké and of sex. He also enjoyed other sensual pleasures, as shown in his poem, 'A Meal of Fresh Octopus':

Lots of arms, just like Kannon the Goddess;
Sacrificed for me, garnised with citron, I revere it so!
The taste of the sea, just divine!
Sorry, Buddha, this is another precept I cannot keep.

Bashō also wrote a beautiful poem about octopuses, which goes:

The jars of octopus –
Brief dreams
Under the summer moon.

Bashō wrote in his travel sketch 'The Record of a Travel-Worn Satchel' that "all who have achieved real excellence in any art, possess one thing in common, that is, a mind to obey nature, to be one with nature, throughout the four seasons of the year." This is the essence of haiku.

Since the end of the Second World War, haiku have been read and written all over the world, and the form is well established in English poetry. The English haiku has its own conventions, but retains the same power to shine the light of attention on moments in time, and to show the mind as one with nature. Take, for example, this haiku by Philip Whalen, the American Beat poet and Zen monk, who lived from 1923 to 2002:

Early Spring

The dog writes on the window
with his nose

Or this one, by the Western Australian poet, John Turner:

bees in the basil –
she carries vegetables
in a fold of her dress

Haiku has always been associated with Zen in Japan, as it is here in the West. We can use the form of haiku to convey the spirit of our Zen practice. I always love receiving submissions of haiku from Sangha members for publication in our journal, *The Wobbly Pot*.

Poetry and Zen: Two disciplines, two practices. Two paths I am taking my first steps down, and hope to follow for all of my days.

There is one last thing I would like to do in this talk, and that is to offer thanks:

Thank you Bashō, for your honesty and clear vi-

sion.

Thank you Robert Hass, for your many voices, your craft and your joy.

Thank you Michael Wright, for helping us to properly know the place we live in.

Thank you Robert Aitken, for your endless inspiration.

Thank you William Wordsworth, for your spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, for your sharing of emotions recollected in tranquility.

Thank you Judith Wright, for loving this land.

Thank you to all those I met in my travels.

Thank you Tesshu, for giving Bashō somewhere to sleep.

Thank you Buson, for your poems that toll as clear as bells.

Thank you Kuroda Momoko and Hiroaki Sato, for sharing your knowledge.

Thank you Kenneth Asuda, D.T Suzuki, Allen Ginsberg, R.H Blyth, Peter Beilenson, James Kirkup, and Robert Anthony Fagan, for chronicling the catapulting of the frog.

Thank you cherry blossoms. Thank you wind and rain. Thank you snow and moon. Thank you golden wattle. Thank you lichen, moss and fungus. Thank you octopuses.

Thank you Dogen, for your shining use of poetry in making clear the Way.

Thank you Tiantong Rujing, for your vivid metaphor.

Thank you Ikkyu, for serving up the taste of truth.

Thank you Philip Whalen, for the freedom and humour in your poetry.

Thank you John Turner, for observing the changes, and for posting me hand-written haiku for the *Wobbly Pot*.

Thank you to all those who I love, and all those who love me.

Thank you to the Sangha, to every single one of you, for sitting here, with me.

Thank you Darcy Thompson, for years ago breaking in to an old shed with me and setting it up as a place to study, write and meditate, and then later on coming to the Zen Group of WA with me for the first time.

Thank you Charlotte Guest, for long discussions on poetry, and for helping me with this talk.

Thank you David Mazza, for exploring this path with me.

Thank you Dotsi and Wendy for helping me to sew my rakusu.

Thank you Mari Rhydwen, and thank you Ross Bolleter: for being our teachers, for sharing the Dharma, for showing us the Way.

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HAIKU

BY ANDREA DONOHUE

Hey little birdie
The mountain sits in silence
Morning mist rising

Yellow wattle green
Wind shakes the leaves glimpse of red
Dark green smoky green

The ant pilgrimage
Day after day after day
Sunset in the west

Water falls on cups
Above staring eyes meet mine
Strong smell clean up now

Misty morning at Origins Centre, Balingup. Photograph by Dotsi Burnazova.

TAKING CARE OF THINGS

BY BRIGID LOWRY AKA YO SEI (OCEAN VOICE)

It is good to take care of things: teeth, gardens, friendships, our health, the planet. It is wise to slow down enough to notice what needs doing and then do it, with attention and love. In this way we connect with objects, with others, with ourselves. Broken bicycles, messy fridges, cluttered wardrobes, grotty corners: all will benefit from our tender care.

I took Jukai in 1993. Recently I noticed that my rakusu was looking a little shabby. It's been kept in a brocade pouch and ironed occasionally but after all these years the white cloth on the back- where my name is written - was brown and grubby. I asked a few sangha members about washing a rakusu. No-one knew much. On-line there was a wonderful photo of a row of rakusu drying on a clothes line in Minnesota but nothing current about cleaning rakusu. There was a recipe from ancient times that I can't seem to find again which involved strange items like elm ash and your guru's toenail clippings, so I decided against.

I worried that if I washed my rakusu, even gently by hand, the ink would run, so I took it to a drycleaner for advice. The kind man told me that if my ink was the running sort, it would also run when the garment was dry-cleaned, as dry cleaning is actually a damp process. It also involves chemicals, which did not seem the ideal way to treat a rakusu. However, he gave me a little trick of the trade, which was to moisten a cotton bud and dab the writing on my rakusu gently, to see if the ink would run or not.

I did, and it didn't. Thus encouraged, I gently cleaned my rakusu with a damp soapy washcloth, and it looks much cleaner, though not perfect. This is good enough for me, because if I have learned anything in all my years of training, it is to forget about perfect. Or that imperfect is actually perfect. Or something.

In my research I also learned that if your rakusu needs mending, do it as soon as possible. It is truly part of practice, the samu of the world, to take care of things.

For those new to Zen, you may wonder why people put their rakusu on their head before donning it. This is our tradition, and as we do we silently say a recollection. There are various versions, but this is Robert Aitken Roshi's translation.

VERSE OF THE RAKUSU
I wear the robe of liberation,
the formless field of benefaction,
the teachings of the Tathagata,
saving all the many beings.

Spring Sesshin photos by Paul Wilson.

Spring Sesshin photos by Paul Wilson.

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