

Born in 1955 I grew up in Adelaide, a small state capital, on the mid-south coast of Australia. Raised in a middle-class family with two sisters. I was educated at a Methodist all boys school, with some excellent teachers, and a lot of competition and bullying. I took turns being bullied and bullying all the while intensely uncomfortable with both. I liked most of these guys; why was this expected of us? Later in high school was the Vietnam war and the possibility I may be drafted. This stirred a wider social awareness. I had seen my older sister's friend return from war, clearly different and disturbed. My father reassured me that if I didn't want to go he would understand and support me, hiding me amongst friends in the country. One of a number of things I remember my father saying that somehow freed something inside me. I had permission to question, even the values and social norms of my upbringing. I began to question, but without direction, often only able to know what I was against.

I went on to university searching through classes in philosophy, psychology and politics. It was also a time of social change. As well as what was happening on campus, I was working in the first vegetarian restaurant, with openly gay folks, practicing yoga, living in a share house, the sexual revolution, musicians, artists, friends introducing me to science, and learning about our indigenous folks as keepers of deep traditions, and a few interesting drug experiences too. So much of this was a direct challenge to many stereotypes and prejudices I was realizing I harbored. I began to question conditioning and the self I thought I was and the one I thought I wanted to be. I think I was set on making a "good" self.

I was happier, and I was deeply confused. Some of my new friends gave me books on Asian religions. That led to a few interstate hitchhiking trips to meet and listen to talks with visiting teachers, mostly Hindu, and a voracious reading habit. I came across Japanese and Chinese Zen. I started experimenting with zazen.

Sometime later in Sydney there were several Buddhist groups and I started attending talks and meditation sessions. I had also started to study traditional Chinese medicine. I felt like I had found a path and the value of a path. I was also feeling more, questioning more, doubting more and prone to bouts of withdrawal and depression.

Soon after in Brisbane I began to develop a more formal, regular meditation and study program with an Australian monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The guided meditations on the graduated path, reading, and our conversations were helpful and provocative. At times when his elderly Tibetan teacher visited I would listen to his teachings, do retreats and the three of us would spend time together at night. He would challenge us to debate, to express what we were learning. I was often unable to respond, feeling stuck, a kind of stupidity about the obvious and ordinary things he was asking. I remember both the laughter of release and tears of frustration and doubt, especially when I was alone. I really didn't know. Sometimes I was scared to sit for fear of what I might find, and I drank instead. After he left town, amidst professional challenges, a relationship disappointment, and this meditation practice, I cracked. I struggled to make sense of it. I sought help but no answers satisfied. I could not continue to live with this doubt. I resolved that if there was a solution to this deep angst I will seek for it through Zen practice in Japan or China. I decided to go to live in a Zen monastery and face this dilemma. How naive I was. In my mid-twenties I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. But I was desperate. Looking back, perhaps I had some

confidence in sitting down, straightening my back and facing whatever. But that sounds courageous, and I didn't feel courageous. I asked a good friend who had studied karate in Japan if he could help me find a monastery. As it happened his teacher's father had trained at Kokutaiji, a Rinzaï Sodo, or training hall, in rural Toyama prefecture.

In 1982, I left a hot humid Brisbane summer travelling to a snowy winter in Toyama. I spoke little Japanese and my hosts not much more English. I insisted I wanted to go to the Sodo. Many times I was discouraged. Did I know it is freezing, there is no heating, the food is plain, the training hard, little sleep, no comfort and the monks are strict. I just kept saying, through a series of interviews, I want to go. I do not know where this resolve came from. I was eventually taken to Kokutaiji. The head monk again pressed me on what I wanted. I told him of my pain and doubt. I remember his calm, penetrating look. Soon my bags were unloaded, and not knowing where I was in Japan, or in my life, I started sitting and living with a small group of monks and resident lay folks. Fortunately, the wife of a friend had insisted I buy long underwear. They may have saved my life. Because I did not speak Japanese I had no formal one on one interaction with Roshi. We did have conversations through translators. He impressed me. Living simply, a talented artist, a ready smile, and even in the cold, somehow deeply at ease. I was learning that teaching is not just verbal. I was learning from his example, how he ate, walked, sat, and interacted with visitors. We drank tea with him in the morning. In silence with the doors open. White snow flakes on red camellia flowers at the veranda's edge.

The head monk took me under his wing and we often worked together. He taught me to sit, to breath, and to put myself into every activity. I had done many hours of manual labor, now I was learning practice in all daily activities. Not me working, just working. He seemed to know when I was wobbly, and would sit me down, tell me a story, or just encourage me. I started every evening of those long, cold, painful nights of sitting with the best of intentions, only to end up singing every song I knew, reliving every sexual encounter I had had, and a few imagined ones, fantasizing an enlightened life of joy and ease to pass the time. Quickly that became less engaging, and a curiosity for what was right here grew. On occasion doubt arouse: what was I doing, what is this weird practice? Sometimes waves of intense fear would arise. I would fight them, but they would wash over me and I would almost black out. In spite of the pervasive cold, I was soaked in sweat. Afraid to move, I had felt the training stick, and wanting to please, I sat still through it all. Somehow, in spite of myself, I was learning. Getting up early, chanting vigorously, working through the day, sitting every night, eating well but little, something was settling. I could concentrate more and attend to what I was doing. The cold became a companion to practice. My judgements of certain activities as mundane and just to be gotten through until the good stuff arrived, faded. Every moment was valuable. My depression had lifted, and I felt stable and at ease. All the stuff I had sat through, was just stuff. In spite of its occasional joyful, boring or frightening aspects, its hold was weakening.

The cook also befriended me. He would invite me and some of the others, unknown to the head monk or Roshi, to his room after sitting for a coffee and brandy. Amongst many things, I learnt to not take myself or training too seriously. Not to separate from relaxation either. I learnt that my companions whom I had watched sitting so still for so many hours, bareheaded in the cold, and who had lived this way for years, also felt pain. Their legs and

backs hurt. They knew doubt, had felt fear, loneliness, and struggled with the training. One of the monks had an arm amputated as part of treatment for cancer. He dressed himself and did his chores with an independent dignity. He was also willing to ask for help and he smiled a lot. I wondered what it must have been like to sit so many cold dark nights, really knowing the close proximity of death? They all embodied something I admired. At home in the muddy water, as the chant goes. They were not so caught in the things I was. They have remained friends. It was in Japan, for the first time, I saw the value of a meditative life. I saw that others also valued it. It was also the first time I felt seen and my aspiration acknowledged, and how important that is on our path.

I spent several months studying and later travelling in China, rising early, leaving my dorm to sit alone on the roof in the cold dawn. I was surprised this lasted, without effort. I just did it. It made a difference. It was changing me. And yet? After nine months I decided to return to the Sodo. I stayed a few months before deciding to return to Australia and to make my clinic and work with people my zendo, my training hall.

I returned to Brisbane and the first local Zen group was forming. I did several retreats with visiting US teachers, starting koans with both. I had all sorts of performance anxiety about presenting koans. Our group sat daily and did monthly weekend retreats. Teacher-less retreats develop a kind of independence and self-reliance. We also find many dead-end canyons to explore, sometimes not knowing we are in them, even for years.

My teacher was starting a new group in San Diego, California. In 1986, with my wife to be, we joined her. It was a time of upheaval in several Zen and Tibetan communities I had admired from Australia. How could teachers with transmission and widely acknowledged, behave like this? Was there something lacking in Zen training? I was deeply affected that people with long, apparently sincere practice, could behave so. Was I capable of great harm too?

We became long time members of a Zen community in San Diego. It was founded by people who had left a big center because of the problems, having spent years trying to fix them. It continues, a place run by volunteer lay folks with no residents. We endeavored to practice with our occasional conflicts and our many hours together. I still feel closer to many folks I have quietly sat and worked alongside than many I have talked to much more. It was deeply encouraging to watch so many lives develop and change, even that of our teacher.

I led many introductory sessions for visitors. In the early 90s I was leading a meditation group for intensive care staff at San Diego Children's Hospital, and teaching in a variety of settings. Zen teachings were becoming part of my Chinese medicine classroom teaching and clinical supervision. I fancied myself as a teacher, sometimes mistakenly wanting for others more than they wanted for themselves. I was perhaps too keen to share what I was learning. Largely a Soto center, my teacher had also trained in koans. Some of us continued them. I remember waking one morning in the midst of a serious health problem, having slept poorly, my head still on the pillow, looking out the large glass doors: just this, full and complete. Koans kept helping me see beyond my habitual mental habits.

At some point questions were arising that were holding my attention more than koans. Perhaps I was trying to find my own questions, or even acknowledge that I still had questions outside the koan curricula. I was reading Dogen at the time and started to notice things I had been taking for granted. When I sat facing the wall, I felt I was seeing it. I am the subject and the wall is the object. All the different kinds of thoughts coming and going, I was taking as objects being known by me the subject. I was then interacting with them, following them, or having preferences for some and aversions to others. And of course, I was working on my koan. Seeing this separation into subject and object, and returning to just sitting became my practice.

My teacher and I had a long close relationship. My only unresolvable difficulty with her was around the value and meaning of teacher transmission. It was to become a painful difficulty for many in the group.

Eventually we moved, taking a job in Seattle for a few years, and in 2004 moving back to Brisbane Australia. I started sitting with local groups, but didn't feel at home. For decades I had thought of being a teacher and running a center. I gave some public talks, started several groups, was leading monthly retreats and a few week-long ones each year. I also started training and doing retreats with a lay Theravada teacher from California. We had a small group of teachers in training, studying and doing long retreats together. I was learning a lot, especially about how to teach and group dynamics. We all became very close. On a retreat, to our surprise, we were all declared teachers. For a while I felt special. It went on to cause problems in several long-term relationships with other Dharma teacher colleagues. The teacher started in a direction that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable to me and others. I withdrew from the group and the teacher. I felt both deeply distressed and somehow free. Some of us have stayed close.

At this time, my marriage, in spite of a lot of effort on both sides, including our Zen training, was falling apart. Our son, had adjusted to his new country, finished high school and had left home. That was hard for me. I was struggling financially. Given the recent problems in the meditation group, I lost confidence in teachers and teaching, even in the Dharma. I quit teaching and sitting. I doubted the value of previous profound insights and experiences. I was ashamed that me, a teacher, could feel so low. Having some "insights" didn't seem to help. My desire for safety, for stability, for continuity, was difficult.

Alone, broke, and in hospital, life suddenly got simple. I remembered the feeling of sitting cross-legged with a straight back. Just sitting, not separate from what was going on. No timer, no bells, or any stuff. It felt like refuge. Not refuge from. More like refuge in. I also took a drawing class at that time and the very gentle teacher helped me listen inside and trust again. Therapy also helped.

The last few years I have been living alone quietly, continuing clinic work, drawing and practicing Chinese calligraphy. I no longer teach. Occasionally a few people come to my flat and we sit together. I don't want to run a group or belong to one. A few patients who have heard of my involvement with Zen have started sitting and insisted I speak with them about practice. They make longer appointments and we talk in clinic. I give no instructions. I listen and ask questions. Somehow, they find their way. One young man who was suicidal when he

first came in, now has a daily practice. He finds laying on his back on the cold bathroom floor, for 30-minute periods, conducive to concentration. He has developed a deep curiosity and is much more settled. His wife has been so impressed with the changes in him she now joins him on the bathroom floor. While I am deeply fond of the form of Zen, particularly the Japanese Rinzai form, it seems it can be used flexibly. The temptation to see the form as the way, and not what it is pointing to, is strong. My first teacher stopped wearing robes and having a Buddha statue on the altar for this reason.

In 2013 I took up koan training again with a local teacher and friend. Our relationship is more collegial and some koans have been enormously helpful. I find some comfort in these stories of others who have struggled and found their way. They help focus and energize my practice. They erode my stubbornly held self-centered focus. They shake the habitual doings of the mind, and reveal. They are experiential, requiring we know for ourselves the rich teachings of the Buddha dharma. Even while using language, they sidestep the limitations of language. They are a remarkable activity.

Early in 2015, I asked my old Zen monk friend and initial teacher if he would shave my head again as he did so many years ago. He lives alone in a small rural temple, keeping close to the daily schedule of the Sodo. He agreed and to my surprise my son and sisters wanted to join me for the occasion. Tokudo is the traditional home-leaving ceremony. For the first time I was able to share with my family the practice that has informed my life. They all tried zazen. My son, now 28, and I returned in 2018 so he could do his first retreat. Sitting, silently overlooking the garden between these influential men in my life. Now with a shaved head, and occasionally wearing koromo and rakusu, I stumble along.

I have only recently met Jeff Shore. His friendship has been invaluable. Not least his encouragement to keep going. On retreat in Kyoto his help finding and shaping a long time lingering, quiet doubt into a penetrating question has been of true value. I arrived with the question, I have had a career which has been interesting, taken me around the world, and introduced me to many fascinating people. It has also been difficult and challenging, from which I have also learnt. I have had a long-term relationship with all its ups and downs. I have raised a son, and it has been a highpoint of my life. I have studied and trained in Buddhism over decades. There have been real struggles, times of great peace, and life changing experiences. I have been a meditation teacher and clinical practitioner, having seen many people's lives change for the better. I am clearly ageing and my health is not so good. I think more about old age and death. Just the usual stuff. I asked Jeff, is this all there is?

Over a few days, we refined it to, what is lacking? The resolution of this, waking late on a hot summer's night, in pain, to the smell of smoke, and the sound of fire engines was profound. It still reverberates. It is easy to write, there is nothing lacking. Indeed, there is nothing that could lack anything. Words never catch these experiences. Mentioning these experiences can also seem to elevate them above every other daily activity. Not mentioning them can diminish the necessary and fundamental life-changing nature of them. It has also been important to let them go, which has not always been easy. And then, to keep practicing.

Greg, Australia, age 63