

## **Great Doubt: The Koan of Religion**

*Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7.14, King James Version of the Holy Bible)*

### **Background:**

My struggles with religion had their origin at least several generations prior to my birth. All of my great-grandparents or grandparents had belonged to various Protestant Christian denominations, including the Presbyterians and the Salvation Army. In the early to mid 1900's, for one reason or another, they became dissatisfied with their religion, and found "The Truth". This true way was unique in that it did not have church buildings, but rather had fellowship meetings in the home, as referred to in the New Testament. Preachers, who were celibate, homeless and without their own money, went out two by two to preach the gospel as described in Matthew 10. There were also annual church conventions that lasted several days with communal sleeping and dining. Every effort was made to adhere to the bible. Those who converted testified about the great joy of finally finding the true way Jesus had started.

Fellowship involved three meetings per week, each lasting an hour – two on Sunday and one on Wednesday night. Each meeting included singing hymns, prayer and testimonies. There was a hymn that started with the line "Nothing matters but salvation", and to that end, our spiritual life was regarded as more important than anything else. In my experience, there was a strong emphasis on external appearance and conduct. For me, it felt like a religion of "law". In some cases, it was difficult to reconcile the scriptural basis for these unwritten group norms and "rules". We were encouraged to avoid "worldly" pursuits, which might detract from our relationship with Christ. Therefore, in my adolescence, there was no television, radio, popular music, movies, inappropriate books and magazines, alcohol, watching sport, playing team sport, dancing or attendance at school parties and discos. Friendships and marriage within the faith were encouraged. Biblical prohibitions around sex prior to or outside marriage were upheld. My adherence with group norms, traditions and "rules" came out of obligation and fear, rather than from a place of love.

Nonetheless, a closely-knit religious community of this kind supports living a wholesome life. There is a predictable rhythm, and Sunday is a day of rest. Children generally live in stable families. Fellowship meetings include everyone from new babies to the frail and elderly, providing social connection across the lifespan. Events such as gatherings to sing hymns, picnics in parks and beaches, game nights and birthday parties promoted a sense of community.

We were made very aware that **few** find this strait gait and walk this narrow way. One needed to die to self and live a Christ-like life. Heaven was the reward for this, and for those who did not heed God's message, hell and eternal damnation would be the result.

### **Fear of Death and Great Doubt:**

From 4 or 5, I became deeply distressed about death. The idea of dying and going to hell was horrifying. No discussion about how Jesus loved me seemed to prevent crying myself to sleep at times. What if my parents died? Life seemed SO wrong. When I was 9, my pet dog Sooky was killed. This resulted in a long period of intense sadness, and a childish hope that God might be able to bring Sooky back to life again. Despite visiting my dog's grave, and praying for this, my prayers were never answered.

At the age of 8, I started listening to the gospel carefully. My mother taught me how to say a simple prayer each night. Alas, on the rare occasion that praying occurred to me, I didn't seem to be able to concentrate. At the relatively young age of 11, I "professed", which was a public declaration within the church of my desire to serve God. Our preachers met with me to discuss the importance

of reading my bible and daily prayer. "Professing" meant that I became a fully participating member in our weekly meetings, praying and giving my testimony. Temporarily, I was filled with great joy and relief. Unfortunately, despite a sincere effort to pray, somehow, I just could not do it. My mind was full of "distracting thoughts". Within a week or so, it seemed futile and so I gave up. Was I lazy? Was I unwilling? Did the devil rule my life? What was the problem? The degree of guilt and shame I felt about this was intense. It never occurred to me that I should tell anyone about this struggle, and no one ever enquired.

By the time I was 12 or 13, despite external compliance, there were many doubts and questions. Why had I been so lucky to be born into a family who served God, and be one of the chosen few? How come my school friends were not so lucky? What about Asians and Aboriginals who never heard the gospel? Did they ALL go to hell? What I learnt from asking questions is that it was NOT OK to ask questions. A simple unquestioning faith was important and indulging in doubt put my eternal salvation at risk.

Despite every effort to put my doubt and questions aside, they intensified. To try to find answers without asking adults, I started to read everything about various religions in our family's World Book Encyclopedia. How could the religion I belonged to – God's only true way – mean all these other religious people were wrong?

At the age of 14, I took the step of baptism. In symbolically sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, and being willing to die to self, I hoped some of my doubt and fear might resolve. Once baptized, each Sunday we shared in the bread and wine, to be reminded of the sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation, and our need to die to self. Yet still, I was not relieved of doubt nor existential fear, and I remained unable to pray.

By the time I was 15, I had decided that when I went to university, I was going to apostatize. However, at the age of 16, I fell in love with my now husband of 32 years. For a while, my objections settled, and there was a brief period of religious peace. There were a number of difficulties throughout my adolescence that raised many questions about the meaning of life, death and why bad things happen to good people. My mother required several major operations. My parents experienced severe financial difficulties. Despite all of this, I enjoyed school, distracted myself with study and obtained the highest possible tertiary entrance score.

After marrying at 18, and enduring a miserable year as a student nurse, I desperately wanted to study medicine. My new husband had grown up on a 4000-acre wheat and sheep farm and was not keen on big city life. Further, a married woman going to university to study medicine was distinctly unusual. In the rural area where I grew up, most women in my church finished school at 15, and were expected to marry and have children, or become preachers. Those who attended university sometimes lost their faith, and so it was regarded as a risk to one's salvation. While I was aware of these concerns, I decided that I would prove that I could serve God AND become a woman doctor.

Despite this intention, tertiary education prompted more doubts and questions than I had ever known before. My husband and I continued to live in the way we were brought up, and we made lifelong friends in our religious community. There was ongoing intense guilt about not being able to pray and not having simple faith. Each year we would attend our convention. This would fill me with spiritual zeal and a renewed vow that this year, I really MUST try to pray every day. Within a few days, my zeal would evaporate and yet another effort at prayer had failed.

In my first year at university, I was required to study evolution. This was extremely challenging, as some preachers said that the "Big Bang" theory was an idea proposed by humans who were

deceived by the devil. The idea that humans had evolved from apes was also regarded as wrong. However, evolution seemed perfectly possible, and was clearly demonstrated through antibiotic resistance. The sequence of evolution roughly fitted the sequence in the Book of Genesis and thus with some mental gymnastics, I sufficiently resolved the dissonance between evolutionary theory and creationism. However, I felt increasingly uneasy that some of our preachers had such strong opinions about things they had not studied and did not understand.

Perhaps it was inevitable that I would discover the religion section of the university library. Does God exist? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What is the point of it all? Unfortunately, no end of reading settled my doubt, questions or confusion. The other source of doubt for me was prompted by my university friends, who all belonged to mainstream protestant religions. These friends were loving, kind and sensible and spoke of a meaningful prayer life. How could they all be wrong, and all be destined for hell?

Following graduation as a doctor, questions about death resurfaced. I found caring for dying patients rewarding and was delighted to be assigned a three-month term in palliative care. There was a profound curiosity about what people believed. The question about “one true way” gnawed at me. Were all my patients destined for eternal hellfire and damnation? Some of my patients were so peaceful in the face of death. Many found so much comfort from their faith. To have thoughts that they were all going to hell was beyond horrifying, and so I tried to avoid thinking about it. The most confronting issue was the Buddhist nuns. Our service relied on them to provide a home outreach service. Buddhism had been criticized by my church as idolatry, and yet my experience was that these nuns exuded the fruits of the spirit of Christ (Galatians 5). This was another struggle of severe cognitive dissonance.

About this time, a number of friends and family members “lost their faith”. This was SO grief filled for me, as I did not want eternal damnation for those I loved. What made this even more confusing was that I often entertained thoughts of doing exactly the same thing.

### ***Loss of Faith***

My 20s and early 30s were filled with study, long working hours, arduous on call, demanding specialist examinations, the birth of three children, working motherhood, and a PhD. The pain of doubt, fear and confusion was avoided through the distractions of workaholic and the demands of young children. During these years, any thoughts about prayer were quickly banished.

In my mid 20's the revolution of the internet arrived providing a new place to search for religious answers. In this process, I discovered a number of websites about the history and traditions of our group, from the perspective of those who had chosen to leave. This challenged my understanding that Jesus had founded the way I had been born into, and that the ***form and details*** of my religious practice were ***unchanged*** for nearly 2000 years. Given my years of doubt, this disturbing information led to a period of intense grief.

By the time I was 30, I was a church going atheist. Years of science, clinical medicine, and watching people die had led me to the view that there was no God. At one point, I told my husband that I did not believe in God and did not believe our religion was true. However, for family and social reasons, an ongoing superficial external observance seemed the easiest option. This choice to pretend to be something I was not and purposely engage in religious hypocrisy created the conditions for extreme anger, bitterness and resentment. During these years, my reading focussed on the merits of atheism, the nonsense of religion in general, and the dangers of fundamentalist religion in particular.

My life during this period was consumed with secular materialism. Ambitious achievement was spurred on with self-help books and leadership courses. We were happily married, had three gorgeous children, a beautiful house and wonderful family holidays. We continued to engage in our religious community. On the outside, everything looked good. But on the inside, I was increasingly distressed. I could not sleep and felt constantly stressed. I decided that achieving the goal of a full professorship would fix my sense of emptiness. That would be the thing I needed to feel OK, and to be happy and content. I set about working even harder, and at the age of 42, with three primary school aged children, that goal was achieved. Unsurprisingly, prizes, teaching awards and academic promotion did not fix gnawing dis-ease.

### ***Finding a path:***

In my mid 40's, due to complex work-related events, I needed professional care for insomnia and stress related illness. Through a series of serendipitous events, I found a health care professional who provided exactly what was needed. The skilfulness with which I was asked searching questions was unsettling. As a doctor and a university teacher, I was curious about what it was in this encounter that was so helpful. Over several months, I had been encouraged to pay attention and cultivate mindfulness. One morning, in tears after another work difficulty, I was asked the most important question of my life. Do you ever pray? It was a painful question that touched a life of guilt, shame and religious angst. And it was such an unanticipated question to be asked in a health care setting. Gently probing follow up questions resulted in a discussion about my long-standing difficulties with prayer, partly due to religious confusion, but mostly due to "distracting thoughts" and lack of capacity to concentrate. This was followed with questions about whether I had ever tried meditation. Despite having read about meditation and thinking it might be valuable, I explained that I could not meditate. Sincere efforts to count breaths at 1 AM to try to help with sleep had resulted in overwhelming anxiety. The experience of meditation and prayer felt the same – I was a failure.

The depth of compassion and understanding extended to me on that day was of a kind I had never experienced. A very odd homework experiment was prescribed. Each day for the next week, I was to find a comfortable chair, turn on a timer for 5 minutes, sit still, and observe my experience and thoughts. Filled with curiosity, I went home and started my homework. It was a remarkable experiment. Within a couple of minutes, I suddenly felt a tiny sense of ease. It was confronting to notice the profusion of thoughts. However, thoughts seemed to settle by being still and paying attention to them. Thus, my meditation practice started on 21 February 2015, and quickly escalated to at least 30 minutes morning and night. Strangely enough, despite a lifetime of struggle with prayer and meditation, I have had no difficulty in turning up to practice every single day since then.

Meditation provided a space for me to learn to concentrate, learn to be mindful, learn how to be still in the face of itches and pain, and learn how to feel my feelings. Despite the joy and ease, I was unsettled by the fact that meditation is regarded as a Buddhist practice, against everything I had been taught. One day, sitting with this question, the words from the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5) arose. "If I asked you to do some great thing, you would do it." These words appeared from the depths, and weirdly, felt like what people describe as God's still small voice. Naaman is a very proud and important man who has leprosy. In his quest for healing, he is sent to talk to the prophet Elisha. Elisha instructs Naaman to go and bathe in the River Jordan seven times. Naaman objects angrily, because he does not think the River Jordan is an appropriate place to find healing. He is asked this question: "*My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?*" On that day, I was convinced, without a shadow of doubt, that this unclean "Buddhist" practice was my path of healing. THIS was what MUST be done, regardless of how heretical it looked to my husband, friends, family and religious community.

My health care professional had experience in teaching meditation to doctors for stress management, and there was something in me that KNEW this would be helpful. Over a couple of years, and at my request, meditation was the focus of much of our discussion. Meditation teaching turned out to be a critical element of my health care, and I was extremely curious about what made it so helpful. In time, I became aware that the wisdom, compassion and skilful teaching I was the recipient of had been refined through a lifetime of zen practice.

The depth of my existential angst, religious confusion and doubt became painfully obvious. With an increasing capacity to pay attention, it became clear that these issues were associated with chest pain, palpitations, startle and hypervigilance. They lay at the heart of my generalized anxiety and struggle to sleep more than 2 or 3 hours per night. The health consequences of this had been ignored for many years and required extensive therapeutic support. Alas, as meditation and mindfulness eroded my ignorance, it became increasingly clear that I HAD to do something about religious trauma. In 2016, with chest pain and nausea at any mention of hell or the devil, my doctor asked that I cease exposure to religious triggers and religious environments. While a huge relief, this was associated with gnawing guilt and doubt.

Several months into my meditation practice, there was a startling realization that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, or within. For a few days, the degree of peace experienced was striking. There was a newfound appreciation of the beauty all around. This felt like a very special insight. Strangely, when I discussed this with my teacher, the only response was encouragement for ongoing daily practice. In discussions about fear of hell, it was clear that the hell I needed to concern myself with was the one I was living in this very moment.

The first couple of years of daily meditation was a very difficult period of unravelling and required the support of several doctors and therapists. Throughout that period, I read everything I could about Buddhism in general and Zen Buddhism in particular. The basics of Buddhism seemed logical and sensible. The four noble truths. Dependent arising. Mindfulness. The eight-fold path. Anatta, or "no-self". Alas, no-self did not make sense. Was I not real? Did I not exist? What was this no-self?

Despite my atheism, I had plenty of questions about God, and my health care professional patiently listened to all of this. Where is God? Who is God? Can God intervene in human affairs? I was SO grateful to finally find someone who I could trust enough to honestly share my doubt, questions and angst. One day, I read that if we have Great Doubt, Great Faith and Great Determination, we cannot help but resolve our suffering and dis-ease. It was clear that the process of meditation was something I could have faith in, because it was so obviously changing my life. Faith that arose out of my own lived experience made sense. It was such a relief to discover that I could find faith without a frontal lobotomy. My children commented on the change they noticed. Somehow, I had also stumbled across determination, through a daily practice, and a supportive teacher. And more delightfully, here was a religious practice that did not deny the importance of my experience of lifelong doubt but labelled it "Great". Given my religious background, my teacher made me aware of the Christian contemplative literature, which I read voraciously. Over many years, within this therapeutic relationship, I have been provided with guidance, compassion and wisdom. The depth of gratitude for this is inexpressible.

At the end of 2016, sitting by a pool in Bali, reading Shohaku Okamura's Realizing Genjokoan, I came across something that just about made me choke on my cocktail:  
*"Therefore, if there are fish that would swim or birds that would fly only after investigating the entire ocean or sky, they would find neither path nor place. When we make this very place our own, our*

*practice becomes the actualization of reality.... This path, this place, is neither big nor small, neither self nor others."*

This so perfectly described my experience. Here I was, wanting to know the answer to my questions about "the one true way", but only when I had fully explored everything, and never quite settling into my own path or practice. For years, I had read endlessly. My husband joked that I should write a second PhD about comparative theology. My teacher had noticed my insatiable reading habit. Since my endless reading had clearly not so far solved my religious dilemma, my teacher suggested that I needed to stop reading, turn towards my own angst and struggle and KNOW for myself. This suggestion seemed very unappealing.

At this point, I was so drawn to the path of Zen that I started to sit with a local Zen group. In early 2017, I sat my first Zazenkai. Alas, the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves reminded me of convention, triggered all my religious questions, and resulted in sitting for two days with tears running down my face, trying not to sniffle. At that Zazenkai, I met a Zen teacher from a different tradition. We discussed my desire to sit for longer periods of time, and he invited me to join the last two days of his next Sesshin. This Zen teacher was caring and compassionate. The focus was on koans, and following my curious enquiries, I was instructed on practicing with the Koan Mu. For the next couple days, I wandered around – Muuuu. What is it? It makes no sense. Muuu? On the second night of wrestling with this, I suddenly woke up. Mu. Oh. I am Mu. Everything is Mu. At that moment, I clearly understood what God meant when he said to Moses "I AM that I AM." (Exodus 3.14). The joy was overwhelming, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from phoning my Zen Teacher at 2 AM in the morning. We chatted the next day to confirm my realization about Mu. And on that day in April 2017, my "atheism" evaporated. And what a relief that was. Week by week, I worked through the preliminary koans, the Mumonkan, and much of the Blue Cliff Record. Koan practice was delightful. However, I soon realized that every single Koan had a parallel in the bible, and that the point of serious religious practice, be it Buddhist or Christian, was about our relationship with the very source of all things, and the need for death to the delusion of self.

Over the next couple of years, I did a number of Zazenkai and Sesshins with my Zen teacher. The sense of safety I felt with that group was important. The retreats were carefully designed to encourage beginners to learn to sit for longer periods of time. Koan practice was the central focus. Nonetheless, my religious angst did not shift. My daily practice had been consistent for several years now. My anxiety and insomnia had largely resolved through new working arrangements and several years of excellent health care. And yet, in every retreat I ever sat, despite consistently working through the koan curriculum, what kept on coming up was this painful, endless, intolerable religious agony. How could I get free of it?

### ***The Real Koan: Religious Doubt***

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Phillipians 2.12)*

In 2018, my teacher visited the hermitage of Jeff Shore, and returned looking especially peaceful and joyful. Always insatiably curious, I found the "Being Without Self" website, and was drawn to Jeff's translation of Boshan's "Great Doubt". With an electronic copy downloaded, I read it that night.

Jeff's introduction struck a chord:

*"Great Doubt is an intense wonder, a powerful curiosity that opens us up. It does not stand in opposition to trust in the Way. In fact, great doubt can arise only from great trust...- Great trust is the conviction, based on experience, that there is a way; great doubt provides the fuel to go all the way."*

In 2019, still struggling with doubt, I revisited Jeff's website, read through the transcripts and watched some of the YouTube talks. There was something that touched my heart, and so I sent a message to the website to express my gratitude. Within a couple days, Jeff wrote to thank me for

my feedback. This resulted in ongoing email correspondence, and I ended up telling Jeff about my spiritual journey so far. He suggested I read his book "Great Doubt", so I read it again. He suggested I read the works of Meister Eckhart and Christian Contemplative Bernadette Roberts, to see my practice from a Christian perspective. This seemed generous for a Rinzai Zen Buddhist.

In re-reading our initial correspondence, it is clear that Jeff was trying to probe to find and help me clarify the real koan at the bottom of my heart. Regarding the koan of religious agony he wrote: *Please don't waste the rest of your life dragging this stuff around like a ball and chain, dredging it up time and again – for what?*

*What are YOU getting out of it? What if you stop obsessing about it, endlessly replaying the reel? Let go of it! You can. You must. For yourself. For others.*

And:

*Instead of endlessly replaying the same old tunes in your head, cut through to the heart of the matter.*

*That is what a real koan is for. That is getting to the heart of the real religious agony you speak of. Now what is your koan? – the one that you are, the one that is you!*

*Any other "koan work" you're doing, one koan after another, is likely escaping from the real religious agony.*

*You can see this, can't you?*

Well, this did hit the nail on the head. Jeff generously offered to Skype. He listened carefully and made astute observations. He suggested I stop using a timer, get right to the heart of the trouble, stop avoiding it or suppressing it, and take a look at how the whole religious saga was being kept alive.

This resulted in me sitting for much longer periods of time. For a while, I thought the dis-ease had disappeared. However, there were various triggers where it all came flooding back again. Throughout the year, I stayed in email contact with Jeff. For a couple of months, he did not answer my emails, which might have been an electronic version of a bell being rung and being told to get out of his "email one on one room" immediately☺???

At some point, this religious angst became exquisitely painful again, and Jeff responded with some increasingly pointed observations and instructions. At times I wondered why I was voluntarily subjecting myself to what seemed fairly harsh medicine. When I mentioned this to my meditation teacher, I was met with a smile and reassurance that I was in safe hands. I redoubled my efforts to sit morning and night with it as it was. In my emails to Jeff, I described the religious dilemma with comments such as these:

*The questions bubble up again... Is it reasonable to participate in family religious observance, to be sociable?*

*Does participating in fundamentalist religion cause harm and suffering? Or could it be compassionate?*

*Outside of the tradition I grew up with, how to care for my children from a spiritual perspective?*

And:

*Everyone else in my family seems to be fine with it, what is wrong with me?*

*If I just went back, and just did the social part of my family's religion (as I did for almost 40 years), could I make peace with it, and avoid the pain?*

Jeff quite sternly pointed out that I was running away even while sitting, going in endless mental circles, and escaping from real practice. He suggested some vows to repeat daily, which I found extremely helpful:

*I vow, here, now, and for the rest of my life to devote myself to practice.*

*This includes living a wholesome life, being mindful moment to moment,*

*doing daily zazen, and retreats when possible.  
I will do my best to support the sangha-community.  
I take responsibility for my actions in body, speech, and mind  
and for my own health and wellbeing.  
I recognize there may be times when I lose heart;  
Thus, I vow to continue this practice in all earnestness, no matter what.*

In early October 2019, I had flown to another city for a conference. Ensnared in a luxurious hotel alone, I was drawn to sit for most of the night with this awful gnawing doubt, confusion and pain. In the early hours of the morning, I had a little sleep, and then woke to sit again. As the sun rose, I had this sense that I could just put this agony down. It just seemed like I was free to take the whole saga to the "Altar of Sacrifice", lay it down, have it burnt to ashes, and be capable of never picking it up again. The freedom I felt was astounding. Feeling tired but happy, I walked outside into the crisp air, found some very good coffee and a crispy almond croissant, and emailed Jeff about this latest turn of events. In the face of such delight, Jeff seemed to think there was more work to do!

This was followed with reminders that *"you must develop and sustain samadhi to clearly experience what is prior to mind arising."* This struck a nerve. Despite years of daily meditation practice, samadhi was an alien concept. A few months into my meditation practice, I had been instructed about counting breaths, but had always struggled with it. For a couple of years, my practice had revolved around koans. My very busy mind seemed to be able to settle and concentrate on koans. And then, for months, I had been trying to do my best to get to the very heart of the religious trouble. Now the trouble was gone, what was this samadhi? When I asked about this, Jeff asked me what exactly I had been doing all this time. And sternly told me that I needed to drop the plastic, poisonous play-zen once and for all.

This email had me in tears. The enormous effort. Putting down the whole religious drama. And here I was now getting into trouble for a useless zen practice. I wrote back to Jeff, and told him: *I give up. Whatever real zen is, or whatever it is not, I can't do it. In fact, I don't even know the first thing about it. Despite having exhausted myself trying, it is beyond me.* He asked me, *"If you've fully exhausted yourself, how could it still be beyond you?"* This question was like being hit with a stick. How could it still be beyond me after the sincerest of efforts?

A few days later, I was walking to work, grappling with this question. How could it still be beyond me? It was a beautiful spring morning, and as I was walking, a Jacaranda flower fell. As I stepped on it, there was a gentle crunch. Suddenly, I looked up, and realized that **it is not beyond me**. It is just exactly this. Nothing lacking. A carpet of fallen Jacaranda flowers underfoot. Stunned, I stood in the sunshine, unable to move, surrounded by the ordinary exquisiteness of everything. Every remaining step to work that morning was filled with the most inexpressible joy.

### ***Now you are ready to start zen practice!!!***

This especially delightful moment on the way was met with Jeff's declaration that I was now ready to **start** practice! There were instructions about deepening samadhi, and through it all, to examine what remains and what is lacking.

The issue of samadhi remained a difficult challenge. This was like having to revisit my entire life of "prayer failure". Jeff was leading a retreat in early 2020 which I attended, and my difficulty with cultivating samadhi had not escaped his beady eyes. This lifelong struggle with prayer/meditation is what remained!

On the first night, Jeff demonstrated how to breathe properly, and instructed me to do that. No koans. Just a focus on breathing, posture and disciplined practice. I was certain I could not do this. I had never been able to do it, so why did anyone think I would be able to do it now. In fact, I probably would never be able to do it. Jeff is extremely determined and brooks no argument, so I was stuck there fighting with myself. The only way I could focus on breathing was through a hell filled effort of self-will. On the third day, Jeff reminded me that at many points on my journey, I had touched joy. I had seen the living truth, through a glass, darkly. That there should be nothing more joyful than sitting and practicing with breathing. Something about that comment resonated. And somehow, all the striving self-will come to an end. It was an experience, not of self, but of grace. To come to a full and complete stop.

In the retreat centre, there was a reproduction of Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. This was a story that I had heard preached about many times. But on this day, I suddenly knew the experience of the Prodigal Son in my very own life. The experience of coming to an end of myself, coming to a full and complete stop, and knowing I had returned to my Father's house. It was also the beginning of the end of a lifetime of struggle with prayer. The irony that this occurred in a Catholic Convent with a Buddhist teacher was not lost on me.

### ***What remains?***

When there is no self, Christ remains.

Nonetheless, human beings are complex. We struggle with emotions, habits, patterns and reactions. The process of "being without self" is a daily commitment. In Christian terms, we must take up our cross and follow Christ on a daily basis.

Throughout the New Testament, the tension between grace and works is explored. In Zen, this is explained through the symbolism of constantly polishing the mirror, versus the reality that there is no mirror to polish. Our practice must be constant, and I am deeply grateful to have found a path where that is possible.

A few weeks after the retreat, the coronavirus pandemic engulfed the world. This was particularly confronting as a doctor. Despite all that had gone before, and despite a sense that every last trace of fear around death had been put down, here it was again. Jeff kindly reminded me to stop running away from it and just BE it. The coronavirus koan was very much a wonderful teacher, and the anxiety and existential angst resolved. It was an important reminder that we must know that there is no mirror to polish, and we MUST continue to polish the mirror. There was a deepening appreciation that through zen practice, Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 15.55 finally made sense: *Oh death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*

Jeff has been very helpful in assisting me to explore many of the Christian koans that have been grappled with over the centuries – the relationship between ONE God and ALL (the trinity), communion, and the prayer of Christ that is a moment by moment practice: *"Not my will, but thine be done."* My appreciation of the death and resurrection of Christ has utterly changed. When we first corresponded, Jeff urged me to see what is good and true in my religious upbringing. That has happened, and I am stunned by the beauty of Christianity.

Zen is a marvellous path for those who are called to walk it. In embracing Great Doubt, Zen does not deny intellect and neither does it indulge it. It not only allows but embraces the liberation of free enquiry and the power of curiosity and wonder. What I have discovered is a freedom to speak to my patients and colleagues about their religious experience, regardless of whether they are Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or nothing. Several times a week at 5.30 AM, some spiritual friends join me to

sit. Some of my closest friends from my religious community feel drawn to sit silent retreats. A number of colleagues have taken up contemplative practice within their own faith communities. A few people from my religious community have shared their own religious doubt, and there is a newfound capacity to listen and care. There has been a liberty to question religious hypocrisy. It has been possible to honestly share lifelong struggle with prayer and the value of zen practice with a couple interested members of my religious community. And there is a very profound appreciation for “Rinzai Zen” compassion – compassion that is so tough, that it is willing to do whatever is needed to help another stand on their own two feet.

This ends almost where it began:

*Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7.14, King James Version of the Holy Bible)*

It is quite curious that the practices of stillness and silence have finally helped me to deeply appreciate the reality of one true way. The Living Truth. To find life, we must be willing to let go of every single thing we hold dear. Through repentance and the forgiveness available in Christ, we are born into a new life of joy, peace, kindness, love, patience, humility and contentment. We come to know the reality of being free to serve, from the very source of love itself (1 Corinthians 13).

The ONLY way to find life is to find this strait and narrow way. However, this way is NOT about any particular religious institution, practice or group. It is just not that sort of thing. It is a way that arises through the inner work of grace within our hearts, which completely undoes the delusion of self. The love of God and salvation available through Christ has always been, and IS accessible to every human heart, regardless of geography, religion, language or culture. Thus, some of the most clear-headed Christians I know happen to be labelled Buddhist. The strait and narrow way gives us confidence, allows us to live out of the very source, and provides a deep and stable faith. To find the living truth, we must die to self, or be without self. And in my experience, the path can be found by fully embracing the only koan that matters – the Great Doubt in our very own hearts and minds.

The Book of Job describes the grief, loss and injustice that lead to Job grappling with Great Doubt. At the outset, Job had a very immature understanding of God. At the closing of the book, after the fire of harsh experience, Job describes a profound knowing of the very Source of all things:

*“I know that you can do anything and no one can stop you.*

*You asked “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?”*

*It is I – and I was talking about things I knew nothing of, **things far too wonderful for me.***

*You said, “Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you **MUST** answer them.”*

***I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.***

***I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.”***

Had it not been for a lifelong struggle with fear of death, prayer, meditation and the koan of religious agony, it would not be possible to enter into and know what Job is describing here. It does appear that it IS possible to be grateful for ALL. Formal koan practice was invaluable to me. However, the koan at the bottom of our very own hearts is the one that really matters. For me, Great Doubt and the Koan of Religion has given rise to the most profound peace and freedom. AND, the Koan of Religion is a gift that keeps on giving, popping up in different ways, at different times, leaving no choice about what MUST be done.