

Wandering Path Zen

Phil Pisanu, Coffs Harbour, October 2019

“Asleep out on the edge of a dream

Shapes take form and disappear into the infinite abyss of the mind

Did you touch it?

Was it real?

Did it even happen?

AWAKE

Some place there’s a memory stain

An echo to start from

A reminder of something you can’t quite put your finger on

Something you’ve chased since you first drew breath

Something you can’t explain

Still wandering out on the edge of a dream

Out on the edge of a dream”

Andrew Kidman – Surfer, shaper and filmmaker, North Coast NSW (extract from film: ‘On the Edge of a Dream’ by Andrew Kidman and Eric Ericsson 2019)

My ‘Zen’ journey has 3 entangled threads – the idea of Zen, my interest in the natural world, and my lifelong pastime of surfing.....Mind, body and spirit.

All good journeys have a beginning, a middle and end...

To borrow from Hollywood I will start with an ending –

Peach and plum blossoms under snow and frost are not what I love.

In green pines and emerald bamboo, so much cloudy mist.

Even though not yet stained with chicken skin and crane hair,

For some decades I have abandoned fame and gain....

Dōgen’s Chinese Poem (18) - Snowy Night in Spring (translation by Shokaku Okimaru, Dōgen Institute, Tricycle Magazine Winter 2014 – Interview)

I have my share of ‘chicken skin and crane hair’ the signal that the end is beginning to form around this story of the wandering path.

I am a late arrival to ‘Zen’ practice (in a formal sense). This has led me to ask an important question: Can an old fat practice the way?

More of this later...

But what of beginnings?

Picture a small child, a blond boy with brown skin standing in the long grass on a summer's day...breeze filled with butterflies.

This is a trace, a memory I have of being completely connected in the moment – without care, simply joyful

If you watch a small child long enough at play you will probably see evidence of this connectedness.

The middle bit:

Picture an adolescent, a long- haired (it was the 70s), brown skinned youth....paddling a surfboard into the golden glow of sun rising over the sea.

This mind trace still resonates as a kind of magic feeling, removed from the day-to-day life of parents, school and trying to impress girls!! (and my mates)

So where does Zen come into this?

Nothing profound....I really have popular culture of the early 70s to thank for this. And there is a surfing connection...*Tracks Magazine*.

I had to look this up...it was a long time ago...the first issue of Tracks magazine was published in October 1970 (I was 8 years old). I reckon the first time I was old enough to buy an issue was in 1974, the year when a huge cyclone swell smashed into beaches all the way along the east coast as far south as Cronulla (where I was learning to surf).

Tracks from this era is now referred to as a counter-culture publication. I had no idea what this meant – but for a kid in the suburbs of Sydney, Tracks had surfing, hippies, nudity and drug references...and a dash of yoga and Zen (or when I think about, mostly TM or Transcendental Meditation).

This is when I was exposed to **Gerry Lopez**...the Hawaiian surfer known as Mr Pipeline. Gerry was so cool under pressure, so stylish and so fearless that the surf media of the day referred to him as the Zen Master of surfing.

(the 'Banzai Pipeline' is a famous surf break on the North Shore of Hawaii known for big waves breaking over an extremely shallow lava reef)

I had no idea what Zen actually was but I sure wanted to be more like Gerry.... so the idea (the seed if you like) of Zen was sown in my consciousness.

Fast forward a bit...

I have always had a deep sense that we are connected to nature and an interest in how the natural world works.

This would eventually lead me to a profession based on ecology and to questions about the place of humans in the world. I have found science to be a satisfying and useful way to explore many aspects of these interrelationships, but science does not explain all things.

Nature can exist without humans but humans cannot exist without nature. Yet much human behaviour is self-serving and destructive. (Something I have become increasingly concerned about over time)

A feeling of something missing and not well explained led me to start a long path of Buddhist and, in particular, Zen research.

This is truly a wandering journey so I will speak briefly about some influential points along the way (not necessarily in chronological order).

Hōgen Yamahata – A Japanese Zen Teacher who taught students from a Zendo in Byron Bay. I attended a 5 day Sesshin in Broken Head in 1998.

This was when I was spending a lot of time in the region doing my PhD research into the population dynamics of wild Macadamia trees. I would sometimes attend early morning Zazen and then spend the day in the rainforest. It sounds like more fun than it actually was! (Spend any time in the rainforest and you become part of the food chain)

In retrospect the effort to sit zazen for a prolonged period and the practical advice Hōgen imparted had a strong influence on me, although I would not take up a regular Zazen practice for another 20 years.

The writings of many authors influenced me:

A book that resonated strongly was *The Light Inside the Dark* by John Tarrant, a Tasmanian, living and still teaching in the US in the Rinzai Zen Tradition. John seems to have created his share of controversy in the world of Zen but his down to earth teaching with many classical western philosophical references and a tendency towards the poetic resonated with me.

I will give you an example:

“The interior life is a place of the wild – uncivilised and unpredictable, giving us fevers, symptoms and moments of impossible beauty.”

John Tarrant – 1998.

But probably the most influential modern Zen teacher for me has been our dharma Grandmother - **Charlotte Joko Beck**.

I have read *Nothing Special*, *Living Zen* and *Everyday Zen* at least twice from cover to cover and more recently we looked closely at *Everyday Zen* as part of our studies with Andrew.

In *Nothing Special Living Zen* – The Eye of the Hurricane:

Joko poses a question - What if you found yourself flying a plane in a hurricane? Joko taught that most of us would try to preserve our life and the plane but her lesson points towards something else.

Life is enormously powerful and a bit out of control but we so often live constricted lives where we do everything to protect ourselves, not living joyfully in the moment (whatever it is).

This certainly challenged my day to day view of the world. Joko often refers to creating a bigger container for your life in her teachings.

In *Everyday Zen*, Joko provided a piece of advice which I took literally for a while. In the Chapter "Opening Pandora's Box" she discussed the quality of (and commitment to) a Zen practice. She made a comment:

"Practice is not easy. It will transform our life. But if we have a naïve idea that this transformation can take place without a price being paid, we fool ourselves. Don't practice unless you feel there's nothing else you can do. Instead, step up your surfing or your physics or your music. If that satisfies you, do it. Don't practice unless you feel you must. It takes enormous courage to have a real practice. You have to face everything about yourself hidden in that box, including some unpleasant things you don't even want to know about."

At the time I first read this I was not ready for a committed and mature Zazen practice, although I don't think I really wanted to admit it to myself.

I would embark on another part of my life where surfing in the wild Southern Ocean became a major part of my existence. Yet Joko's teachings stayed with me and in some way the surfing itself changed.

So where does this leave us in the story?

I will end with a quote and a (made up) Zen saying:

The quote from **Drew Champion, The Surfers Journal 28.2 – Lucky Eyes**

"Quite simply, we look at the past with the eyes and minds we have now. Even if we were there, really, we can hardly remember."

Zen saying:

"When surfing in the vast blue ocean, waves not good or bad, simply flow towards the sandy shore."

Thank you for listening.