



First Encounter

Reflection and illustration by Jinesh Wilmot

My first encounter with Zen meditation occurred in a small poolside building tucked into the corner of a Perth backyard. I'd been feeling the need for some time to choose one particular meditation practice to throw myself into. Zen seemed the obvious choice for me as my previous teacher had often spoken of Zen and even said Zen is the way on more than one occasion. Also I'd long had an affinity with things Japanese. So when it turned out that a friend of my (then) spouse was a long time Zen practitioner and that there was a Zen group that sat regularly nearby, well, it was all just a phone call away.

On that first night there was I think about 5 or 6 people sitting zazen in that tiny poolside building, together with a Creepy Crawly and several piles of plastic cushions for the garden furniture. I don't remember very much about that first taste except that it was hot!, and the dokdokdok of the neighbours tennis game pushing its way through the thick and humid night air. One thing I do remember is coming out into the night after meditating for a couple of hours and being hit by the realisation that I was seeing the trees as they really were for the first time, not just seeing them with my eyes but with my skin as well.

Not long after, the Zen group moved to another venue; a 2 bedroom house somewhere in North Perth, overlooking a small park with a community of ducks. Here there was room for a zendo, a library/office and a tin shed, painted blue, in the backyard that became a dokusan room. There was also a room in which a resident/caretaker could live. My memories of this place are much more vivid, probably because I spent more time there.

My initial approach to Zen was undoubtedly informed by my Martial Arts experiences, and so the first evening I sat with my spine so straight and taut that I'm surprised my head didn't pop off! My meditation was full of such quiet excitement, here now, actually doing zazen. (It was also full of a lot of I). We would sit for 25 minutes at a time, with 10 minutes of kinhin in between. After about 20 minutes my legs would become numb, so my usual plan was to figure out when zazen was just about to end and then position my legs so that the feeling would come trickling back in time to stand and do kinhin.

Initially my practice consisted of counting my breaths, from one to ten, and then starting again. My

experience of this was pretty normal in that at first I rarely got beyond twooooo or threeee before realising that I was planning what I was going to make for dinner or what to say to the guy fixing my car. I continued with this practice for about 68 months, until my first retreat where I had the opportunity to meet a teacher and ask his guidance. The retreat was a 7 day Sesshin. Seven days of rising at 4am, followed by 1012 hours of zazen/kinhin, and meals eaten in the zendo with breakfast and lunch accompanied by chanting the meal sutras.

Although it was a 7 day retreat I found a couple of reasons (that seemed really good at the time) to only sign on for the first two days. Those two days turned out to be two days of hot, sweaty, painful hell! and even though I had previously done a 10 day Vipassana retreat, I found the Sesshin schedule pretty gruelling. Every part of my body alternately hurt or went numb. At mealtimes my knees felt like they were on fire! So much so that I remember thinking that they could just bring in the food raw and I'd cook it on my own little patella hot plate.

During the zazen periods (38C), the extremely tenacious W.A. flies seemed to find something of great interest in the corners of my eyes and often returned for a snack. Its amazing really what you can do with the muscles of your face! One memorable fly performed amazing acrobatic loops and twirls, accelerating to maximum speed before flying straight up my left nostril. Now theres a Zen experience! Strangely, despite the hardship (or perhaps because of it) I was absolutely hooked. And immensely grateful.

Now I can't even remember what my expectations were when I started Zen, but of course were advised to let those go as soon and as much as possible. I remember when I first read of Zen masters admonishing their students, telling them to practice for another 10 or 20 years , that I was shocked. How could I wait that long? Now as I sit and write this I can't help but reflect on how fortunate I was to have that first encounter, and to have this encounter. And perhaps to have another 10, 20 or 30 years of practice.

In gratitude, gassho

Jinesh Doku Wilmot

Transcribed and edited by Leesa Davis.