

OzZen Journal Spring 2021



Writing • Poetry • Art • Events • Dharma

The OzZen Journal is published quarterly (spring, summer, autumn and winter editions) by the members and friends of OzZen. The OzZen Sangha is based on the mid-north coast of NSW, Australia. For more information about OzZen please visit the website: ordinarymind.com.au

We acknowledge the Gumbaynggirr owners of the land where we meet, and pay our respect to elders of the past, present and future.

Cover photograph: Spring flowering Tea-tree (Phil Pisanu)

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Editors Note

The Spring 2021 issue of the OzZen Journal has Ecodharma as a special theme. Ecodharma is where Buddhism meets ecology, having originated in the USA in the 1970s as a response to the emerging ecological crisis.

At the time of writing, spring has arrived on the north coast of NSW and we just emerged from a few weeks of COVID lock-down. Whether you believe in the efficacy of vaccination or not, COVID, specifically the highly contagious Delta variant, appears to still be with us. A commonly held theory is that COVID originated in one of our mammalian cousins, bats. The transfer of a virus between animals and humans is not unheard of but some scientists speculate that COVID and other SARs virus transfers are increasing due to human disturbance of natural ecosystems, coupled with concentrated farming of animals, and a diet that seems to involve eating almost anything that is digestible.

The interaction between humans and natural environments is often described as being out of balance, under the assumption that nature without a whole lot of humans was more balanced than it is now. Humans have a relatively short history on the earth but we have proven to be substantial agents of change. Humans have caused multiple major disturbances to and reduced the resilience of the environments and ecosystems we (and many other lifeforms) use for food, shelter and the myriad of goods earth provides. As part of this disruption, human actions have created opportunities for the transfer of novel viruses between closely related species.

COVID-19 is making a mess of many lives, livelihoods and communities but it is not the most substantial disturbance we have generated. The state of the planet is a topic in the OzZen sangha that, like COVID, will not go away. In Australia, despite unrelenting efforts by some of our politicians to promote climate change denialism and the political and policy prevarication that has resulted from this, it appears that climate change/warming is still with us. This is an important topic of the Spring 2021 issue which provides examples of how Buddhism and other faiths are responding to the climate crisis.

While it will ultimately require collective actions to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change on the natural world and human societies, we all play a small but important part. Considering my role as participant and consumer led me to a basic question: What am I willing to give up? I don't have a clear answer for this right now. We are all faced with choices about and livelihoods and how we live everyday.

Many thanks to all who contributed to the Spring 2021 issue—Andrew Tootell, Kate Radha Kosh, Pingala Walsh, Catherine Herriman, Peter Joshu Thompson and Angie Lopes.

Happy reading.

Phil Pisanu, 14 October 2021

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Letter from the Teacher

By Andrew Tootell

Dear Friend,

You can't imagine the freedom to be your true self. It's an absence, and you can't pick up an absence. You can only slowly just get to be that way. The longer we practice, the more we have a clue about how to slowly become free. Freedom is the name of the game. Freedom to be nothing. It doesn't mean that you vanish or that you don't enjoy a good meal. It's not some spooky thing. It's an ordinary wonder.

Joko Beck, from her book, “Ordinary Wonder: Zen Life & Practice”.

Over the course of this year, I have become more conscious of speaking of Zen Buddhism as a *religious* practice. I think the catalyst for this has been my ongoing facilitation of the precepts study group and the preparation for our Jukai Ceremony (literally *receiving the precepts*) sometime next year. The Jukai ceremony can be described as an Initiation Ceremony into the Universal Way, where the Zen student consciously identifies with the Zen Way, taking refuge in the three treasures: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. However, when I describe Zen as a religious practice, it is religious in the sense of being founded in a sense of wonder, rather than belief or creed. There is no authoritative scripture in Buddhism. There is no “word of God” only the words of human beings.

I think the evolution of religion has always been founded on a profound experiential opening into the unity of existence, bringing with it a profound sense of peace, joy and love – accompanied by a sense of the inherent perfection of being just this moment, nothing lacking, nothing missing. All our practices (including ritual practice) are in the service of this profound unity experience. Even placing our hands together in gassho (palms, fingers and thumbs touching each other) is an expression of this *not two*. Our Zen practice has evolved from this deep sense of wonder in the oneness of life that is the birthright of all human beings.

From this deep sense of wonder and the realisation of the unity of the diversity of all life forms, arises the aspiration to do good and to cease from doing harm. The ethical dimension of our practice. Zazen, dharma talks and rituals are all expressions of this original enlightenment. This wonder is Life becoming aware of Life – the awareness of awareness. Zen can be described as a religion of Life, or a reverence for all life. Unlike monotheistic religions, Zen Buddhism is a nontheistic religion. We do not “worship” a transcendental God. However, we do bow down in reverence and awe at the wonder of Life: the vastness of the blue sky and the milky way at night; the still presence of the mountains and the life force of the great rivers and oceans; the luminosity of the autumn moon. We also aspire to relate to *all* sentient beings: rocks, plants and animals, with wonder and respect at the incredible diversity of life forms.

In receiving the precepts, some students are happy to identify as Buddhists, others prefer to think of themselves as students of the way. Participating in the ceremony is a formal ritual of entrance onto the Zen path and its perfectly fine to say, “I am entering the Buddha’s way, or simply entering the Universal Way, but I don’t consider myself a Buddhist”. In other words, its very important to bring your own personalised understanding and meaning into these practices, while, at the same time, honouring this very rich and ancient legacy, that is our job to preserve, maintain and reinvent for each new successive generation.

Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change

One Earth Sangha first developed and published *The Time to Act is Now, A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* in 2009. It was co-authored by David Loy, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi and John Stanley. The declaration was later updated in 2015 in preparation for the COP21 climate negotiations where it was presented to negotiators in a ceremony of all faith-based petitions.

The revised statement served as an endorsement of the original *Declaration* and was signed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Secretary General of the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), President of the Buddhist Association of the USA, President of the UBF (l'Union Bouddhiste de France) and Her Royal Highness Princess Ashi Kesang Wangmo Wangchuk of Bhutan as well as Buddhist leaders in Bangladesh, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

The statement highlighted the ongoing extinction of different species on the earth and the key role of modern economics and technology in driving unsustainable living. The authors note that from a Buddhist perspective, a sane and sustainable economy would be governed by the principle of sufficiency: the key to happiness is contentment rather than an ever-increasing abundance of goods. The compulsion to consume more and more is an expression of craving, the very thing the Buddha pinpointed as the root cause of suffering.

The Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change. On November 28th, 2015 in Paris, this statement was presented to UN climate negotiators with other faith statements around the world.

See: <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/>

Coffs Harbour Botanic Gardens

By Kate Radha Koch

At a time when the beaches of the North Coast region were being torn up by miners for rutile and beautiful natural heathlands around Red Rock were being bulldozed for cattle farming, a concerned group of naturalists, botanists and geologists became the voice for conservation of the land and beaches.

A group called 'Ulitarra Society' was formed and after a canoe trip down Coffs Creek in 1973, they recognised the importance of preserving the trees in Wilsons Park. They submitted to council a "Plan for the management of Natural areas of Coffs Creek" and the plan was adopted by council in 1974.

Now one of the major botanic gardens on coastal New South Wales, it covers about 20 hectares of Crown land and is surrounded on three sides by Coffs Creek. Prior to this time the area had been a night soil and waste deposit. Plans were drawn up Friends of the Garden was formed in 1981 with working bees, clearing truckloads of rubbish from the site, preparing paths and walkways. Hence we have what is now a wonderful 'Gem of Coffs Harbour' with displays of Australian Natives, exotic plants and many endangered native species of trees. It has a wonderful diversity of plant life and is supported by many local volunteers who give their time to the production of the gardens.

I myself am a keen naturalist photographer who volunteers for the gardens and produce weekly photos for the face book page and other social media.

I regularly also produce short videos with original music by Alan Lem. Link to Colours of Spring:

<https://youtu.be/pXxcyQSm7ro>

Link to Early Morning Light: <https://youtu.be/LID-Uv5Z2M>

The floral emblem of the Coffs Harbour Botanic Gardens is a type of Geebung, a small coastal tree called *Persoonia stradbokensis* (photo: Phil Pisanu).



Buddha in the Backyard

By Peter Thompson

Whether we call it " Buddha In The Backyard "or "Transition Towns " does not really matter as long as we make the essential, survival- based transition to a new sustainable way of living. Sure, it is certain that technology can help us make that transition with solar panels, storage batteries electric cars, pumped hydro, wind turbines etc. etc. But we ourselves, each and every one of us, must see the need and make the decision to transition in our own daily lives. Climate Change, through burning fossil fuels and huge carbon emissions, is now one of two major threats to our survival. The other of course is that we are on the brink of running out of precious resources that have up until now kept this greedy and rapacious Capitalist society going. This was made very clear in the Club of Rome Report called "The Limits To Growth " which was commissioned in the early 1970's. So for these two most pressing reasons we need to urgently transition to a new sustainable way of living.

Four major areas of needed transition are:

1. Food Production: a need for food growing to move to local community gardens and backyard gardens
2. Energy: a full transition to renewable energy ASAP
3. Transport: a transition to electric and pedal power transport
4. Waste: a full transition to recycling and other sustainable waste management systems.

Some vital components of these areas can be achieved by individual and community action (e.g. pedal power, backyard and communal food gardens, composting and recycling) and some by Local, State and Federal Government action (e.g. new cycle pathways, electric vehicle recharging stations, major subsidies and grants for wind and solar farm projects, feed -in tariffs for individual households , communities and small business).

As Buddhist practitioners we understand that all life is sacred-both sentient and non-sentient and that we need to treat the ten thousand things and beings with meditative respect. We need to become aware how we consume valuable resources, use and abuse our environment and it's products ignorantly and greedily. Greed is a product of ignorance and a sense of lack and we need to look into this current reality and dissolve these dangerous habits at their root through awareness. The practice and action of looking into and investigating our habits is indeed an integral part of our spiritual practice as Buddhists. Our inner practice of dissolving ignorance and therefore greed fits perfectly with our sustainable outward practices of sustainable living in the areas of Food, Energy, Transport and Sustainable Waste management. Let us start in any way we can to move into this Transition immediately with great awareness and mindfulness.

As Buddhists we have the advantage of a practice-based community traditionally called The Sangha. This enables us to work and share together in many ways with like-minded friends.

For The Earth, Peter Joshu Thompson.



*The promise of spring
held back by yesterday's grief,
A small crevice in life's bud*

*Early blossom blooms,
Her feathered twitter heralds
In a blue, leaved sky*



*Rich and flavoured home
House to birthing and abundance,
Soil of nurtured peace*



images and words by Pingala Walsh

16 Core Dharma Principles Important To Address Climate Change and How Dharma Practitioners Can Engage

By The Dharma Teachers International Collaborative on Climate Change.

The following dharma principles directly apply to the issue of climate disruption:

1. *Reverence for life*: From this point forward climate disruption is the overriding context for all life on earth, including humans. What we humans do will determine what life survives and thrives and in what form and locations.

2. *Happiness stems from helping others*: Our greatest personal happiness comes when we give of ourselves and help others. For example, many people instinctually help our neighbours after a natural disaster, which indicates that altruism and the desire to help others is built into our genes. We must grow and apply this to the marginalized among us that are at least initially hit hardest by climate disruption. This is the very opposite of the greed and self-centeredness that dominates today.

3. *We suffer when we cling*: The very nature of happiness is dependent on our capacity to give up our attachments and help others. This same principle must now be elevated and applied to public policies of all types.

4. *The ethical imperative*: All beings matter. We should act in ways that are beneficial for both self and others, acting out of a commitment to altruism and compassion for others.

5. *Interconnection and interdependence*: We must dissolve objectification of other people and nature and overcome the belief in a separate self that leads us to through a sense of kinship. Even as we let go of the delusion of an individual self that is separate from other people, we must let go of the delusion that humanity is separate from the rest of the biosphere. Our interdependence with the earth means that we cannot pursue our own well-being at the cost of its well-being. When the earth's ecosystems become sick, so do our bodies and our societies.

6. *Renunciation, simplicity*: To resolve climate disruption we must be willing to renounce attachments to things to contribute to the problem and live more simply.

7. *The relationship between the First and Second Noble Truth and capacity to learn to work with difficult states*: Understanding the suffering we have created symbolized by climate disruption and how it came about and that we can learn not to identify with it and instead work through distressing states such as fear, despair, etc.

8. *Opening to suffering as a vehicle for awakening*: The suffering caused by climate disruption provides an unprecedented opportunity for humans to learn from our individual and collective mistakes and manifest a great awakening. It is a special opportunity like never before. We can find ways to be happy—we can “tend and befriend” rather than fight (among ourselves), flee, or freeze. We can acknowledge that this is the way things are now, open to the suffering rather than becoming attached, and think and act in new ways.

9. The interconnectedness of inner and outer, the individual and the collective (or institutional):

Climate disruption provides an unprecedented opportunity to understand the roots of the problem—which relate to the ways our minds work and how those patterns become embedded in collective and collective/ institutional practices and policies. This awareness can open the door to new ways of thinking and responding that will eventually produce different institutional practices and policies.

10. Connection to diversity and justice issues: The dharma principles and narratives must also apply to issues of diversity and social inclusion and justice. The beliefs in separateness etc that has produced the climate crisis also leads to social inequity and exclusion. People of color and other marginalized groups must be included.

11. Buddhism as a social change agent: The principles of Buddhism help us engage with life, not remove ourselves from it. The Buddha was actively engaged with his social and cultural contexts and for Buddhism to have relevance today it must help people understand how to engage in today's political and social contexts.

12. Adhitthana or determination: We are called to develop resolve, determination, and heroic effort now. We must have the courage to realize that we are being called to engage in this issue and that living the dharma will see us through the hard times.

13. Remembering this precious human birth is an opportunity: We must always remember that it is a rare and precious thing to be born as a human and we have been given a rare opportunity to act as stewards because humans are not only the source of destruction—we are also the source of great goodness.

14. Love is the greatest motivator: Our deepest and most powerful action comes out of love: of this earth, of each other. The more people can connect with and feel love for the Earth, the greater the likelihood that their hearts will be moved to help prevent harm. Children should therefore be a top priority. Need to help people realize what they love about life and what will be lost as climate disruption increases.

15. The Sangha—and other forms of social support are essential: The reality of climate disruption is a profound shock to many people and the only way to minimize or prevent fight, flight, freeze responses is to be supported by and work with others so people will not feel alone, can overcome despair, and develop solutions together. We need to go through this journey together, sharing our difficult reactions and positive experiences in groups and communities.

16. The Bodhisattva: The figure of the Bodhisattva, which is a unifying image of someone who is dedicated to cultivating the inner depths and to helping others, is an inspiring figure for our times.

Sunday

By Catherine Herriman

State of grace

Through the dip a darkish, moving mass
then pectorals surface from green white blue
ever so slowly
and curvy.

The fisher says a 150-strong pod was here last week,
just out there.

We take a parallel somewhat clunkier path
meandering one side and another
of the fractal mica lit high water line.

Polyphony

Eyes closed.
They whoosh in
dissemble across space,
triangulating shrill chatter amps up
rising to a fever-pitched shrill squawk crescendo
petering out to tonic.

This done, they move on.

Anthropomorphist temptation noted.

Wind

Gusty, still, light, warming
Rustling Ficus and swishing Cardamom
On-off waves of ear-sharp angle grinding,
Basketball bounce, once, twice,
backboard ricochet to fence with full metal slam.
Another gust.
Still closed eyes,
just listening.

Introduction to Members of the OzZen Committee

At a recent OzZen Committee meeting we decided it would be a good idea to introduce ourselves to those of you who don't know us. This is part 1 of a 2 part series where committee members say something about themselves and their roles in OzZen.

In the last edition I mentioned my role in the committee as a general member and the journal editor. I have been living in Coffs for about 7 years and practising with the Ordinary Mind/OzZen group for around 4 years. I am taking a break (potentially permanent) from working as an ecologist and land manager in NSW, South Australia and Queensland for many years previously.

I am interested in the interface between Buddhism and ecology (Ecodharma) and I am keen to learn more about Aboriginal languages and improve my knowledge of landscapes where I live, in Gumbaynggirr country, and beyond.

Please contact me if you are interested in contributing to the OzZen Journal in any way.

Phil

I have been living in Bagiigamba/Fernmount near Bellingen for the last 20 years, making my living as a High School language teacher. English, Japanese and for the last 10 years or so Gumbaynggirr and Wiradjuri. Now semi-retired but programming for Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Language Centre. I'm obviously interested in the cultures as well as the languages as I recognize the close link.

Basic singer, guitar and shakuhachi player. I started sitting zazen 45 years ago while living in Kyoto, Japan. I (truthfully) make up the numbers on the committee.

Larry

My name is Jill Connellan and I am the nominated Treasurer of OzZen. Initially the job involved responsibility for the Dana box and paying for the use of the hall we used in Sawtell for Sunday zazen sessions. OzZen will soon upgrade to electronic banking both for expense payments and incoming monies including Dana and membership fees.

I came to Zen several years ago on the recommendation of a close friend. Over the years I have done a lot of meditation mostly as retreats, starting with Goenka in Blackheath and Nepal, Christopher Tittmus whenever he came to Oz, and even a Zen one that I absconded from! I was an avid follower of Stephen Levine and Krishnamurti for years.

I really like Andrew's psychological minded Zen practice and the Ordinary Mind lineage, which has kind of been a breath of fresh air in my pursuit of understanding life. I love how there's no right and wrong way to meditate. And that Covid hasn't stopped us from meeting, and that more people can join the group via zoom!

Jill C

I started with our OzZen group (or the 'Mid North Coast Ordinary Mind Zen' group as it was then known), approximately six years ago. I was originally drawn by the calming effects of meditation but soon grew to appreciate the broader context of Zen and Buddhism itself. I hope to continue learning new and more effective ways of integrating OzZen teachings into my every day life.

I joined the first OzZen Committee in 2020 as Secretary and in 2021, took on the role of Committee Chair. As the title implies, my main duty is to chair committee meetings. I can also potentially represent our group externally if the need arises.

I aim to help steer our group in a direction which aligns with both the stated goals of OzZen and the general attitudes of our members. I'm really glad for the opportunity to serve in this albeit minor way.

Jill Kelly-Williams

Research Report

Zen guided meditation: Sangha members share their experiences

By Andrew Tootell, Rhys Price-Robertson and Jed Blore

Summary

Throughout most of 2021, OzZen sangha members had the opportunity to participate in an online weekly morning meditation. These meditations alternated between silent sittings and guided meditations. After a few months, the guided meditations were followed by a participant witnessing process, where those present could briefly reflect or give feedback on the guided meditation. The current article outlines the results of an online questionnaire that was completed by 12 sangha members who regularly attended Tuesday morning meditations. ***Overall, sangha members found the silent meditations, guided meditations, and participant witnessing process to be beneficial to their Zen practice,*** although there seemed to be a slight preference for silent meditation over guided meditations. Participants provided a number of suggestions for ways in which the guided meditations and participant witnessing process could be improved. There appears to be enough support to continue with guided meditations and the participant witnessing process, and hopefully this research can contribute to continued improvement of these activities.

Background

OzZen's founding teacher, Andrew Tootell, had been experimenting with guided meditations for a number of years, but this gained impetus as the pandemic spread to Australia in 2020. Andrew began offering both guided and silent meditations on a more regular basis in the new OzZen Zoom zendō, where our sangha gathered on a regular basis to keep our connection alive following the lock-down implemented by government to protect our community from COVID-19. It was during these uncertain and anxious times that Andrew discovered the potential power of sitting together on Zoom to maintain social bonding. While sitting together with sangha in the Zoom room, he became very conscious of how we miss out on the actual felt presence of sitting together in a physical room. Of how, if we were all sitting in the same room together, we would be more conscious of each other's physical presence. We would be able to see each other and even be aware of people breathing. Sitting together in a room amplifies that sense of *physical* proximity and closeness. Even before the COVID-19 lockdowns, it was not always possible for people interested in Zen to sit with a Zen group, for geographical or other reasons. After all, we practice Zen not just for ourselves, but for all beings. Andrew felt that adding his voice for some of the meditation period may enhance the actual on-screen experience of sitting together – of sharing this unique moment together, even though participants were in different geographical locations, including interstate and sometime international locations.

At the beginning of 2021, Andrew approached OzZen members Dr Rhys Price-Robertson and Dr Jed Blore, who both lived in a different state, to discuss participating in this project. Both Rhys and Jed stood out as excellent potential partners for this project; they both had backgrounds in research as well as being practising psychotherapists with a familiarity with guided meditation. Andrew invited Rhys and Jed to join him in offering guided meditations to the OzZen Sangha every second Tuesday morning, alternating with a silent meditation, and to his delight they both accepted this invitation. Finally, prior to conducting the research, they decided to include what they called a “participant witnessing process” to the end of the guided meditation. This would give participants an opportunity to actively participate directly in the group process, as well as to explore how this participation enriched the overall experience of the guided mediation for everyone.

Introducing guided meditations fits with the project of Modern Buddhism, aiming to make Buddhist practice relevant to people living in this time and place. Andrew thought that guided meditations could be a useful complement to the Zen tradition, relevant to people practising today. In Zen we call seated meditation *zazen*. “Za” means seat, and “zen” means meditation. Zazen is traditionally practiced in silence; therefore, guided meditation has not been a part of Zen practice. There are few recognised Zen teachers who deliver guided meditations on a regular basis, unlike their Buddhist colleagues in the Tibetan lineages and the Insight (Vipassana) Meditation tradition. Andrew thought this needed correcting. He could see no reason why the practice known as guided meditation could not be legitimately incorporated into modern Zen practice as a significant contribution to maintaining Zen Buddhism as a vibrant and alive tradition well into the 21st century. He regarded a well-crafted guided meditation as a unique fusion of performance art, meditative thinking, dharma talk, poetry, experiential inquiry, and silent meditation. Poetry was often the preferred form of expressing the awakened way by many a Zen master; there are many famous Zen “enlightenment poems”. In many ways, guided meditations can be seen as a modern continuation of this ancient tradition, in a form accessible for today’s culture.

Therefore, we were interested in exploring if our interest in expanding the scope of guided meditations into the Zen Buddhist tradition would be something that participants found helpful. In order to do this, we thought about the best way of accessing participants for some feedback on their experience of the guided meditations, and how their experience of the guided meditations may have compared to their experience of the traditional silent practice of zazen. We wanted to know if guided meditations would be seen by the Sangha as a practice that they would like to embrace, along with traditional sitting practice. In the end, we thought a simple questionnaire, delivered via email, that incorporated a few questions that were quantifiable and a few questions which were qualitative was the best way to go.

Methodology

In July 2021, all OzZen sangha members who had participated in at least one Tuesday morning guided meditation were invited via email to take part in this research, which involved completing a brief online questionnaire. A total of 12 sangha members participated. Although the exact numbers of participants at each meditation session were not recorded, it appears that the participants in this study represent the majority of those who regularly attended Tuesday morning meditations.

This study used a mixed methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Sangha members were asked to rate their experiences of guided meditations, silent meditations, and the participant witnessing process on scales ranging from 0 (the lowest level of value or benefit) to 100 (the highest level of value or benefit). Members were also asked to compare their experience of silent and guided meditations using a scale in which a value of 50 represented an equal ranking between silent (0) and guided (100) meditations. After rating each activity, members were asked to share something of their experience of this activity in an open text box. This qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Results

Experiences of guided meditations

When asked to rate their experience of the guided meditations on a scale from 0 (“Never contributed to expanding and deepening your practice”) to 100 (“Always contributed to expanding and deepening your practice”), sangha members ($n=12$) gave an average rating of 72.

An open-ended follow-up question (“Can you describe what your experience of guided meditation was like?”) provided a more nuanced picture of sangha members’ (n=10) experiences. While three members were unequivocally positive about the guided meditations, the remaining seven members all expressed some degree of qualification or ambivalence in their responses. For example, some members noted inconsistency in their enjoyment of the guided meditations:

Very diverse, from experiencing moments of profound connection and realisation, to barely listening at all! Even when attention-challenged, always nice to have the presence of a compassionate human voice.

Sometimes it was like listening to a great *teisho*, sometimes not.

Others expressed their preference for periods of silence between the words, which were more present in some guided meditations than others:

They always gave me something new to think about, or provided a different perspective on a given topic. I preferred it when they had some periods of silence in between the guidance.

Was helpful when crafted well and following a clear path. I enjoy the sessions giving a little background on the intention and for the session, and a minimum of commentary. I find too many aphoristic comments or abstractions can become platitudes and become ultimately distracting to sitting with oneself.

Experiences of silent meditations

When asked to rate their experience of the silent meditations on a scale from 0 (“Never contributed to expanding and deepening your practice”) to 100 (“Always contributed to expanding and deepening your practice”), sangha members (n=12) gave an average rating of 87. This suggests that members generally found the guided meditations very beneficial to their practice.

In an open-ended follow-up question, sangha members (n=10) all expressed their appreciation for the silent meditations, with four members noting the importance of connecting with their fellow sangha members:

Connected group space for sitting.

There was always a lovely feeling of togetherness and support.

It was good to be in community and to have that fellowship. It was different to being on my own meditating; more comfortable and effective.

Useful – a chance to sit zazen in a supportive atmosphere.

Ever changing. From chaotic overthinking to moments of sense awareness to boredom and occasionally a glimpse of presence!

Each one is new and so some were more agitated and unfocused, some clearer with some equanimity but always the process is a good step in the journey of just being and letting go of the baggage one picks up along the way.

Comparing guided and silent meditations

Sangha members were asked to rate whether they preferred silent meditations (0), found both equally valuable (50), or preferred guided meditations (100). Members ($n=12$) gave an average rating of 50, suggesting they found both silent and guided meditation equally valuable.

Experiences of the participant witnessing process

When asked to rate their experience of the participant witnessing process on a scale from 0 (“Never added value”) to 100 (“Always added value”), sangha members ($n=10$) gave an average rating of 71, suggesting they generally found that the witnessing process beneficial to their practice.

In an open-ended follow-up question, sangha members ($n=9$) revealed a range of experiences and opinions. For example, three members were unequivocally positive about the participant witnessing process:

I really enjoy the witnessing process. It's a nice way to end a meditation, makes me feel appreciative and connected with those around me.

Others enjoyed the witnessing process yet expressed some reservation or critique. For example, two members expressed frustration that participants in the process would “drift off on tangents” or go “off topic”. Similarly, two members shared that speaking in front of others made them feel nervous or self-conscious. Finally, three members were more critical of the witnessing process, generally because they did not fully understand its purpose or because they did not think it added much benefit to the guided meditations:

At first, I found the witnessing process confusing, partly because it seemed difficult to work out what it was for. In practice, it occasionally yielded interesting insights into how other people practice, perceive Zen/Buddhism etc.

Limitations of this research

This research is subject to limitations, suggesting that, as with Zen practice itself, all ideas and conclusions should be “held lightly”!

First, although invitations to participate in the research were extended to any sangha members who had attended at least one guided meditation, it seems likely—and, indeed, many of the quotes suggest—that most or all of the sangha members who participated in this research regularly attended guided meditations. Sangha members who, for example, did not feel drawn to attend the guided meditations, or who attended one and then decided it was not to their liking, were unlikely to have been included in the study. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be taken to represent the views of the entire OzZen sangha.

Second, the small sample size precludes detailed statistical analysis. For example, the guided meditations and participant witnessing process were given overall ratings of 72 and 71 out of 100, respectively. On the other hand, the silent meditation was given a rating of 87 out of 100, suggesting that sangha members may have found this more beneficial than the other activities. However, with a sample size of only 12 participants, no firm conclusions about these differences can be drawn.

What can we learn from this research?

It was encouraging that sangha members found the silent meditations, guided meditations, and participant witnessing process to be beneficial to their Zen practice, as that they were able to offer practical feedback on how to build on and improve these practices.

The research reaffirms how sitting together, even on Zoom, contributes to social bonding as a sangha. The sense of heightened “togetherness and support” was at least as present in the silent meditations as in the guided meditations. The research also confirms the wisdom of continuing to offer a range of practices for sangha members. For example, some Zen centres offer both koan practice and /or just-sitting. In the same way that some Zen students prefer just-sitting to koan work, some students will prefer silent meditation to guided meditation and vice versa.

The research clearly demonstrates the importance of continuing to offer silent meditations, and to perhaps increase the number of mornings these are available. There was also enough support to continue the practice of alternating guided and silent meditations on a weekly basis, or perhaps having the silent and guided meditation on different days.

The participant witnessing project received broad endorsement and enough support to keep continuing. But some changes could be made to it, such as making its purpose clearer and proving a degree of facilitation, so people are less likely to go “off tangent”, and so on. The witnessing process is certainly not essential, but adds a new element that was genuinely appreciated by most participants.

Overall, we were very pleased with the participation of Sangha members in this project, and we would like to thank them for their time and effort they put into completing the questionnaire. We believe the use of this kind of research fits well with the participatory ethos of OzZen, encouraging all Sangha member to have a sense that they are co-creating a culture of awakening that is culturally appropriate and accessible for this place and time.

Andrew Tootell

Rhys Price-Robertson

Jed Blore

Ecosattva Vows

From Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy (Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston)

Contribution from Andrew Tootell.

I vow to myself and each of you,

To commit myself daily to the healing of the world and the welfare of all beings.

To live on earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products and energy I consume.

To draw strength and guidance form the living Earth, the ancestors, the future generations and my brothers and sisters of all species.

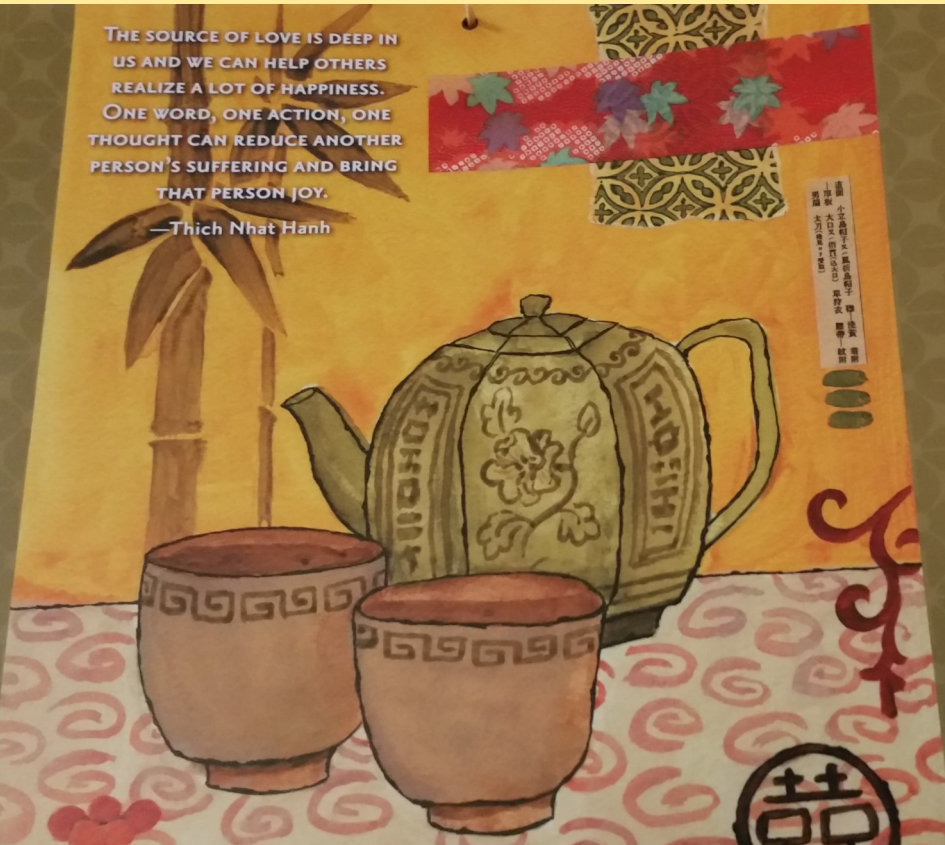
To support others in our work for the world and to ask for help when we need it.

To pursue a daily practice that clarifies mind, strengthens my heart and supports me in observing these vows.



THE SOURCE OF LOVE IS DEEP IN
US AND WE CAN HELP OTHERS
REALIZE A LOT OF HAPPINESS.
ONE WORD, ONE ACTION, ONE
THOUGHT CAN REDUCE ANOTHER
PERSON'S SUFFERING AND BRING
THAT PERSON JOY.

—Thich Nhat Hanh



Please email contributions for future issues of the OzZen Journal to:

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