

Issue 94 –November 2003  
 Meetings (10.30am - 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday)  
 81 Greville Street , Chatswood  
 Next Meetings – 16 November 2003  
 21 December 2003

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This month’s edition includes the interviews with John Toler which I recorded on a visit to Japan last year. One of the lessons learned on that visit was that the Japanese way seems to be to provide only the minimum information required to answer a particular question and no information at all unless an appropriate question is asked. For example, we sat with John in his ancient and beautiful tea-room, of which he was obviously very proud, but about which he said very little. I only began to appreciate the significance of the tea tradition and that particular experience after reading The Book of Tea which John recommended after we returned to Australia and he was replying to a few of my ‘missing’ questions by email. Even an otherwise excellent ‘Tea Exhibition’ at the Kyoto Museum didn’t offer information on the philosophical and spiritual dimension of the Tea Ceremony but focused on the craftsmanship of the utensils from different periods.

I got to know John through a shared interest in the work of Douglas Harding and I have included an article he wrote for LookforYourself magazine in which he explains the connection between Headlessness and Zen.

Thanks to all contributors and, as there are a few letters this month, I recommend this sort of communication as a useful way of contributing for those who don’ t have the time or inclination to send in articles. The feedback happens to be complimentary in the case of this month’ s examples but critical comments are also most welcome.

**Sydney readers might be interested in the seminar described on page 13, especially so, as one of our readers is a speaker.**

**The Nowletter appears between 10 and 12 times every year and is a vehicle for news and views about awakening to what is really going on. Contributions from readers are considered the most valuable content so please think about letting me have your thoughts, experiences, discoveries and any responses to what you read here.**

**Subscriptions: Postal \$15 per annum, Email – Free**

*The following report is a transcription of informal interviews with John Toler recorded on tape during a visit to Japan in September/October 2002 whilst Margot and I were his guests at his Sei Sen An hermitage in Ouda. The one thing I haven't been able to capture is the humour of the exchanges. During the transcription process I've had John laughing in my headphones throughout what might come across to the reader as a rather serious exchange. So, please add your own laughter. The letter Q prefaces my questions and J, John's answer.*

**That which cannot be understood**

Q. I am interested in what brought someone from another culture here to Japan in the first place and, having arrived, what made you stay here.

J. Well, it was amazing to me you know, I didn't want to come to Japan. It was not long after the Second World War. I had just completed university where I majored in journalism. Then I was drafted and had to undergo the usual tests which resulted in my allocation to what they called military intelligence. It should be military stupidity!

I was sent first to Northern Japan, to a place called Sendai which was a very good experience, I loved it up there. The only thing wrong was that there wasn't a military intelligence group up there and when the military found out what they'd done they moved me back to Tokyo. Whilst I was in Sendai I met some Japanese students at the university there and we became very good friends. I'm still in touch with one of them who lives in one of the most expensive suburbs of Tokyo which perhaps makes it the most expensive suburb in the world. I was amazed when I arrived here, it wasn't at all what I'd expected and I just had the feeling that this is the place I need to stay awhile.

Q. Were you discharged from the army here in Japan or did you first return to the States.

J. No, I stayed in Japan. When I was discharged I was offered a job with the English language edition of a major Japanese newspaper, the Mainichi Daily News. And the silly thing is that Mainichi means 'daily'.

Q. How long were you doing that?

J. I was only with the Mainichi newspaper for one year when Densu advertising, the largest advertising agency in Japan, offered me a job as an advertising copywriter. So, I went to work for Densu and enjoyed it very much. It was great fun, for example, the Osaka Gas Company came to Densu at one time and they asked me to translate into English 'yappari gasu da' which very roughly translated comes out as 'After all is said and done it is gas'. I told them that their idea didn't translate into English, you just can't do it. But they implored me to try. I told them the only way to communicate their intention would be to say 'Gas is Best'.

Q. How did they accept that?

J. Oh they loved it.

Q. And how long did that go on for?

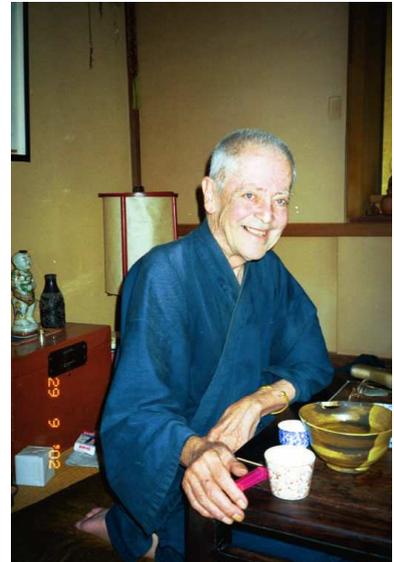
J. I was at Densu for almost ten years. I then joined Standard Advertising who wanted to hire me away from Densu and I negotiated with them for some time and finally they said they couldn't pay me any more than Densu but that they would pay the same amount for only three days work a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. So I went over to the smaller agency for two or three years. Since I was working for them only three days a week I had some free time and I decided I'd look around for somewhere to do Zen training in this spare time.

Q. Can I ask, at this point, what it was that made you decide to take Zen training. It was a big decision to make, so what was it that triggered that step, as opposed to taking a casual or academic interest in Zen; to actually get involved in it?

J. It was very simple for me because I'd always been interested in philosophy and in Japan I'd read a lot about it.

Q. So you were interested in philosophy and Zen met your interest and understanding to the point you were prepared to follow it through but what about what came before. What previous spiritual influences had there been in your life?

J. Of course, my parents were certainly Christian, Protestant Christian. My father wasn't serious about it at all. He wasn't a member of the church but my mother was quite serious about it. I was born into that sort of family. When I was a kid I played the violin and my sister played the piano so my sister and I were often asked to play at the church



and other functions in the town. My father was the mayor of the town. Some of the kids in the town didn't like me at all and used to throw rocks at me on my way home from school. I think it was because I was the mayor's son. One time my father gave me a horse. In those days you could have a horse-stall and keep a horse in town. Its name was Pickle.

Q. Pickle? No wonder you became a Zen monk. *(John had told us how important a part pickles play in a monk's diet)*

J. I thought this horse's personality was rather like a pickle. It was a birthday present. My father and mother had always ridden horses since they were kids. They were both brought up on ranches in Eastern Texas and expected me to be able to ride a horse although I'd never been near one in my life. The first time I rode Pickle my father put me up on the saddle with my sister, Janelle, back of me with her arms round my waist and let us go. So there we were going around the streets and I discovered, on the way, I didn't know how to stop it, turn it or anything. There was a man walking by the side of the road and I asked him "please can you stop a horse?" He came over, grabbed the reins, stopped the horse and led it home. After that my father took some time to teach me how to ride.

Q. Yes, learning by doing!

J. Yes, I enjoyed Pickle very much. Some of my school friends came over one day, before I'd learned to ride, and challenged me to ride Pickle. They treated me as if I was a cissy who couldn't do things so they challenged me to ride my own horse. I saddled-up and Pickle didn't like it because I hadn't fed him breakfast yet. I told them that he wouldn't like being ridden before his feed but they wouldn't take any of that. I led Pickle out and got on him and he threw me off. I wasn't surprised but I got up and got back on him. So we rode all the way around town and back into the stall.

Q. But you never felt inclined to become a priest. You became a Zen monk but did you ever think you might become a priest?

J. I had thought earlier on when I read Zen literature and after I took up Zen training, if I had read Catholic literature when I was a kid I might have decided to become a Catholic monk. I think that would have upset my family more than my becoming a Zen monk.

Q. That's a really interesting thing to say.

J. Being Baptists you know.....

Q. Oh, I see, now – yes I get it because I have Baptists in my line of descent. So, you did think along those lines but by that point the moment had passed?

J. No, I didn't really think about it but later on it occurred to me that if I had thought about it I might have done that instead.

Q. And that implies that there is something that both traditions share? Would you agree with that?

J. Of course I would. I think that the end-point of all religions is exactly the same. They put you in the same place.

Q. Coming back to your life here. You 'd taken the job with the smaller advertising agency for three days a week and at that point you decided to take on Zen training?

J. I looked around for training as a layman not as a monk and I found that the monastery at Daitokuji in Kyoto, which is one of the most famous in Japan, would accept me. I took an apartment near the monastery which also allowed me to commute to my advertising job in Osaka. In the Daitokuji line you must have at least three years of monastery training in order to head your own temple. I had four years and then I was offered the Shogonin temple here in Ouda where I remained for ten years before moving up here to this temple Sei Sen An which is just higher up the hill from Shogonin.

*(John has a collection of seals which are often beautifully carved pieces of jade or other semi-precious stone and into which the letters identifying the author of the document are engraved at the business end. We are familiar with the impressions they make because all or most scrolls we see carry this signature, usually in the form of a stamp in red ink. John's personal seal stamps out Murie - 'That which can not be understood' Ed.)*

Q. You trained at Daitokuji temple, Kyoto, what does Daitokuji mean?

J. Dai means great, Toku means virtue and Ji means temple. So, 'temple of great virtue'.

Q. So when did that temple, Daitokuji, appear?

J. It was built by one of the emperors in the twelfth century. It is a Daitokushi temple, kokushi means 'national' He was so called because Daito was advisor to the emperor. He became one of Japan's most famous Zen masters. Inside the compound there are many sub-temples and one of the sub-temples is a monastery and that is where I had my training.

Q. I think you said the teaching of Daitokuji fell within the Rinzai tradition? Would you elaborate on the background?

J. Well, the Rinzai tradition began in China and the Daitokuji had training in China and brought the teaching to Japan and the Emperor established the temple for him. It is said that the Daito was living under a bridge with beggars in Kyoto and the emperor heard about this reclusive, enlightened Zen master and personally set about finding him. It was rumoured that Daito was fond of melons so the emperor went among the beggars carrying melons and began to look for him. He noticed the eyes of one of the beggars light up on seeing the melons and thus identified Daito who was carried off and had fame thrust upon him.

Q. Was Daito the founder of the Rinzai tradition or a Master within the tradition?

J. He founded it in Japan. The tradition, of course, started in China, but it wasn't really Daito who started it over here but someone before him who didn't become famous at all.

Q. You mentioned another tradition within Zen, the Soto tradition. Could you outline the differences between the two schools.

J. The Rinzai sect puts more emphasis on the koans, e.g., does the dog have Buddha nature and the master answers "Mu" (*John expressed this, not as a gentle Moo but a harsh, rather, dog-like sound*) Mu, which means 'nothingness, a non-existent.' Which is one of the most famous koans. And you have to have a meeting with the Zen master in his formal room twice every day. Once in the morning at about six-o'clock and once in the evening around eight. We arose about 4am in the summertime and recited the sutras for about 45 minutes, then breakfast which consists of soft bread, rice and pickles. After breakfast you work in the garden and then go out on begging trips. You walk down the street in formal wear, straw hat and robe, arms folded with a bag hanging over your shoulder chanting Ho o o o.. Ho means the Dharma. The wives (housewives?) will come out of their houses and make a contribution. The monks divided into groups of three or four and this goes on until lunch when we returned to eat a meal consisting of rice and meat or fish and pickles again. In the afternoon we would work in the vegetable garden. Local people would make contributions of cow manure, etc. We were largely self-sufficient.

Q That is the life of a monk in training. How long did that go on for?

J. Three years is the minimum to qualify to head your own temple and I had four years myself. Then you must train for another three years to become a Zen priest. I was very lucky because Daiki Oshi was my Zen master. He happened to be very influential with many politically influential people, high in Japanese society going to him for advice. Luckily I seemed to get along with him very well.

Q. And does he act as a sort of sponsor?

J. Yes, for my Zen training. In Zen you must have a sponsor to send you to the monastery and who makes sure you've got all the proper clothes, etc.

Q. And then, at the end of the period you went back to him?

J. Yes, at the end of the four years he called me out, at that stage I wasn't a monk, I was still a layman. He had built a new temple out at Ouda into which he planned to retire. But, as he wasn't yet ready to retire he needed someone to run his temple in the meantime. He had heard of me from his Zen master, at that time I had completed my training and that is when I came here to the temple Shogan-I, which means Hermitage of the Origin of Pine Trees.

Q. And then what happened?

J. It was really interesting. It was much larger than here with many people coming to me. One was a professional photographer who'd also had a lot of Zen training in America. He was a very serious student and I was happy to accept him. I introduced him to some local photographers who were able to use his services. There was one thing which made him unpopular in this town (Ouda) – he was black. It didn't matter to me of course, but it did to some of the people here and these people came to me and said "Toler San, how long is this person going to be here?"

I told them he'd come to practise Zen for a year so he'd be here twelve months.

"But Toler San, to have someone living here for an entire year! For us to come for meditation from outside it's OK but to have someone like him for an entire year!"

I reminded them that I'd previously had another American student living in the temple for two and a half years and a Japanese student for three years. I asked them if they'd forgotten that.

“Yes, they said and we didn’t mind then did we?” I realized I’d have to do something and I asked my student to write out his personal history which was an impressive CV, some of his photographs are displayed in galleries in the USA, and I translated it into Japanese.

I took this to my Zen master at Daitokuji and explained the situation and received official permission to continue the arrangement. He said ‘that’s fine – teach him well’. Even so, the people couldn’t stand the fact that we had a black person here. So, about three or four of the biggest names in town went to my Zen master and said that Toler will accept just anybody off the street and we don’t like that. He should be more selective in who he accepts. In other words ‘no black people’.

So, my Zen master, Dai Komo, said Toler San is having a difficult time there with these people who don’t like what he’s doing so he intended to move me completely out of this town, to somewhere near Kyoto and in the meantime decided to put me here into Sei Sen An as a temporary arrangement until a new temple near Kyoto was complete. He sent my elder brother monk to take over Shogani where the trouble had arisen and I moved up the hill into this smaller temple. Ironically, the people whose complaints had led to my removal from Shogani didn’t find any improvement under the new order as my replacement had some strong views about who could and who could not use the temple. He said Shogani is not for the people of Ouda, it is for me and my disciples. That is, rich people from Osaka and Tokyo but nobody from Ouda. So they regretted their intolerance.....

Q. Couldn’t they have done to him what they did in the case of your removal ?

J. Well, they could have I suppose but the upshot worked quite well as far as I was concerned because the local people became more reliant on this temple and more well-disposed towards myself as an accessible abbot.

Q. Is that a very Japanese thing, the compensatory action resulting from an initial misjudgement?

J. Yes, I think that is true. Of course, they were also very good to me before the incident. There is a doctor in town and this doctor had met my student and he came out here one time after he left. He said he understood there were people in town that didn’t like the fact you had a black man here. He said that, if he’d known he would have held an exhibition of my student’s work at the Town Hall.

Q. So, that really brings us to the present with you up here in temple Sei Sen An overlooking, in winter when the trees are bare, your former temple of Shogani . When you were transferred up here you were a priest.

J. I would prefer to use the word monk.

Q. Right! But then did you not become an abbot at some stage.

J. Well yes, I am officially the abbot of Sei Sen An. When I became abbot here these people who did these things had a big party for me in an expensive restaurant.

Q. The hatchet truly buried then?

J. Yes, indeed!

Q. I think you said the temple’s name of Sei Sen An is to do with the unknowable?

J. Yes, it’s from a sutra, Buddhist sutra. The sutra that the monks recite most often and my English translation of it is:

*The only thing that you need to do during the twelve hours of the day is to turn towards the unknowable and keep it before you coming and going.*

Q. I’d like to ask you a bit more about Zen. We all have a vague idea of what Zen is about but it is nearly always very, very vague. It is almost as though this lack of precision and uncertainty is inherent in Zen itself. So could you a bit more precise about what Zen is?

J. Zen is a looking into yourself, to see what it is that you are and what you are not.

When my mother was in Japan which was some time after I’d been in Zen training as a layman for a while, she came over to find out what I was doing. I could see she was very upset . I’d taken an apartment for her and her cousin near to the Daitokuji temple where I was then living. I said to her ‘Mother, I think I need to talk to you about what I’m doing. Do you think we are sitting over there worshipping golden images or something?’

She replied ‘what do you worship?’ I said ‘nothing, we don’t worship anything at all.’

“Well, what do you?”

“We just look into ourselves to find out what we are and what we’re not.”

There was a young American staying in the apartment house and he'd asked to be present. I said 'Mother, in the bible it says there is a place that you can meet God, where is that place?' She couldn't answer me. 'But mother' I said 'any ten year old Sunday school student could answer that – where is it that you can meet God?' She still couldn't answer so I turned to the young man who replied 'in your heart'. So I said 'that's what we're doing mother, we are looking into our hearts – that's all!' So finally she sort of understood.

Q. I can understand her original question about worshipping because what came as a surprise to me on this visit was the Buddha's image as the focus of attention in the temples. Most people coming from outside would think 'Ah, that's the idol which is worshipped in this place.'

J. The goal is not to worship the Buddha but to become a Buddha yourself.

Q. So it's a reminder or sort of model?

J. Yes.

Q. The other day you recited to us your favourite sutra. Would you mind reciting again for the tape?

At this point John chanted the Sutra of Great Enlightenment in Japanese.

Q. When you were showing us the tearoom you pointed to a piece of calligraphy on the tearoom wall which had been painted by your teacher. To me it is an indecipherable symbol so can you tell me what it means.

J. It means 'I don't know'. (Roars with laughter)

Q. Marvellous! What a fascinating statement to put on display in such an important place.

J. Bodidharma is the name of the monk who brought Zen teaching from India to China. The Emperor of the time had a great interest on Buddhism but he didn't know about Zen. He called Bodidharma to the palace and questioned him. He said he'd built so many temples and sponsored so many worthwhile projects and asked how much spiritual merit had he gained thereby. Bodidharma said you haven't gained any merit at all. The Emperor then asked "who stands before me speaking?" to which Bodidharma replied 'I don't know', and walked away.

Q. I see, and that links in to your earlier comment to your mother into what I am and what I am not.

J. Yes.

Q. This might be the time to mention that although we come at this from different angles we share an interest in what Douglas Harding has to say about these matters. Could you give us the background on how you came across his work and the relevance of his work to Zen.

J. A young friend of mine who had Zen training under me, an American who came to me when he was nineteen years old. He was with me for about two and a half years and then returned to America to get a PhD before moving to Cambodia where I have been to see him. He sent me one of Douglas's books, On Having No Head. I read that book and thought "this is pure Zen". I went out and bought all Douglas's books I could possibly find. I then wrote him a fan letter and was very surprised when he replied to me. We then began a correspondence and the following year I was invited to London by the London Buddhist Society along with my top disciple. The leader of the Zen aspects of the London Buddhist Society, Irmgard Schlogel, was also trained at Daitokuji.

Q. What was the reason for the invitation?

J. I can't really say except that Irmgard especially wanted to introduce my disciple to her disciples and have a sort of interchange on our respective teachings, interpretations and so on. I was also asked to give some talks.

Q. One of the talks you gave was on your discovery of Douglas and his work?

J. No, not the first time, because at that time I hadn't meet Douglas but I'd been in correspondence with him. I'd written to say I'd be in London and he replied that I must come out to see him at Nacton. I took a day off and spent a day with Douglas and Catherine. I enjoyed it very much. The next year they invited me to the annual Headless gathering. That was where I gave the talk I think you are referring to. There was a young English philosopher from Cambridge who was at the gathering who at the end of the daily sessions would suggest we have a drink and we'd go off to a pub.

Q. The introduction to the article referred to you as the abbot of a Zen monastery. Shouldn't that be abbot of a Zen temple?

J. Yes, well actually it's supposed to be a hermitage. That is the meaning if Sei Sen An. *An* or *In* means hermitage and *Sen* means temple.

Q. What is kensho?

J. I would say kensho is a seeing into yourself. And if you see into yourself you understand the world better.

Q. I am mystified that the head monk didn't know what you were talking about. After all isn't that what the monastery is all about?

J. It often happens that a monk can have years and years of monastery experience and training and still not understand anything about Zen.

Q. Having read some of the well-known books I suppose I expected every Zen practitioner to be a Hui Neng or Huang Po whereas Zen seems to include the usual range of understanding? You say 'The kensho experience lasted several months and the administrative head of the monastery had asked the Roshi to give me koan interviews but he refused because I'd only been there six months at the time.'

J. Because, for one thing Daiki Oshi didn't want to accept any lay disciples and I was a layman. But he did at last and I was the first lay disciple and afterwards he accepted some others.

Q. What I'm trying to get at through these questions what it is the relationship between headlessness and Zen. Is it the same, is it similar or what? For example, you say headlessness has not been one of those highs which the kenshos certainly were but headlessness has certainly brought peace which passes understanding, etc., I'm trying to get at how you see the two?

J. I think they are exactly the same, there is no difference. When I first read Douglas that's what I thought and was very surprised.

Q. There seems to be, from how you describe your experiences, a difference in intensity if not in kind between kensho and headless 'seeing'?

J. I think that experience in meditation is of great assistance in understanding Douglas's teachings. Therefore, I understood immediately whereas a lot of other people who've read his books have had great difficulty understanding him. I think that if they'd had experiences in meditation they'd have understood him perhaps more quickly.

Q. Yes, that's very helpful it's as though accessibility to the obvious is facilitated by meditation.

Q. I'd like to throw at you an objection to headlessness, which has been thrown at me on occasions. It is 'Yes, headlessness might be quite useful or even important but it's a very low level of enlightenment or realization'.

J. I don't think that's true at all.

Q. The question implies that there is something greater or higher which headlessness does not touch.

J. I wonder what that could be?

Q. Yes, when I ask that question I invariably get an outline of a belief system based on something the objector has read about or the words of a teacher he or she admires. That is, a second hand perspective.

Q. Whilst I've been in Japan we've visited the Shrines and I've been reading about Shinto where I've discovered some similarities with Zen.

J. I've never practised Shinto but on reading about it I find many similarities. Of course, the Japanese – especially just before and during World War 2 used Shinto to shore up their militarism but that really didn't work very well.

*End of Interview*

### **Kenshos and Headlessness by John Toler**

On going over some back issues of *The Headless Way*, your article on Spontaneous Awakening last autumn reminded me that the first time I read it I had wanted to tell you about a couple of my experiences at Daitokuji. I had two experiences of kensho there, but, unfortunately or not, they were early on (1972 and 1973), before I'd even met the roshi (I was required to sit for a year before meeting him), and so they faded.

Anyway, the first was on my third day of sitting! Zazen began at sunset and ended, for laymen, at 9.00. Just before the last sitting (we sat for 30 minutes and rested for 5) ended, tears suddenly started streaming from my eyes, for no apparent reason. When the sitting ended I had to walk through a dark tunnel of trees before reaching the cobblestone street leading to the apartment where I was living. When I reached that street and looked up at the star-filled sky, I

began laughing, loudly and happily. It was entirely unexpected. I was filled with energy. I telephoned a good friend of mine to try to let him know what was happening to me, and he said, "You don' t need to talk to me. You need to talk to a roshi"

The only thing I could do was to sit in my chair and enjoy the wonderful sensation. I did not get sleepy at all, but thinking I should really get some sleep I drank some gin tonics (as alcohol usually puts me to sleep.) But after 5 or 6 of them I didn' t feel drunk and still didn' t want to sleep. This didn' t make sense to me, so I went to bed, but after a couple of hours dozing, awoke completely refreshed, needing really no sleep.

The next morning I went to the monastery to talk with the head monk (the administrative head, not the roshi), and tried to explain to him. I told him that I had discovered that I possessed something that everybody in the world possessed, and that it was the most important thing anyone could have. He asked, "And what is that?" I said, "It is just ' NOW` But he didn' t understand. This condition lasted for a couple of the happiest weeks I had ever experienced up to that time (If I had only had access to your books then!) During that time I hardly slept at all, and didn' t need to sleep, occupying my time writing. I even wrote a couple of poems to describe what was happening, but the head monk didn' t understand those either.

The timing of the second kensho was very fortunate, because my mother, whom I had told that I had taken up the practice of a philosophical method called "Zen", decided to come to Japan to see what this was all about. My second kensho, much bigger than the first one, occurred a week or so before she arrived, and so she found me completely at ease and obviously very happy. I could tell that she wasn' t happy, though, so on the third day of her visit (she had come with a cousin of hers who had done a lot of international travelling), I said, "Mother. I think we' ve got to have a talk".

Her cousin joined us, and there was a young man, Tim, whom they' d met on the airplane. who also wanted to join. I said, "Mother, I suppose that you must think we are sitting over there worshipping golden images or something." She asked, "Well, what DO you worship?" I answered, "Nothing at all. We don' t worship anything." I let that sink in for a moment, and then said. "Mother. In the Bible it says that there is a place where you can meet God. Where is that place?" And she couldn' t answer! I said, "But mother, any ten-year-old Sunday School pupil should be able to answer that! Where is it that you can meet God?" She still couldn' t answer. and turned to Tim. I said, "OK Tim, where is it?" He said. "In your heart?" I said "Of course! In your heart! That' s all we' re doing over there. Looking into our hearts to see what it is we are, and what it is we are not.'

Those were the exact words, I am sure, because it was an unforgettable experience. That kensho experience lasted several months. and I heard from a monk at Daitokuji that the administrative head of the monastery begged the roshi to give me sanzen (koan interviews). but he refused. because I' d only been there fo6 months at the time.

Afterward. having been accepted as a lay disciple (I was the first one that that roshi ever accepted - he had vowed to accept only monks) and doing koan work, I never had another kensho experience. Even after becoming a monk and training as such in the monastery!

Now, my experience with Headlessness has not been one of those "highs". which the kenshos certainly were, though Headlessness has certainly brought peace (that passeth understanding) a deeper appreciation of people, a much clearer understanding of Zen material, and more enjoyment of the magnificent view from my temple, and of "life" in general. And friends tell me these days that I laugh a lot more than I ever did before! How lucky could anyone get?

I have now shared "seeing" with a number of friends, and mostly successfully. Last week I had a 60-year-old man, whom I' ve known for some years, come to spend five days with me because he had a bad case of nerves, buzzing in the ears, etc., and he thought zazen would help. I was sceptical, but tried "seeing" with him, and it worked! When he arrived his face, especially around the eyes, was very puffy and he looked terrible, but by the time he left that had all cleared up and he was looking younger and much happier! I loaned him the book in Japanese that you so kindly gave me, and he was very grateful.

*John Toler*

### **Travellers Tales from Egypt**

Egypt is an open museum. Everyone says so. There is a township by the road into the Valley of the Kings in West Luxor where they know this. The Egyptian government wants the inhabitants to move to allow further excavation and has offered several incentives, to no avail. First they offered money, then money and a house: three years ago they turned off the water supply. We saw donkeys carrying paniers of water to the beleaguered but unmoved inhabitants who are convinced it is worth their while to stay put.

Our hotel near the Pyramids in Giza was an enormous complex of buildings and boasted the biggest swimming pool in the Middle East. It was big. I thought the water would be like pea-soup but my swim was refreshing. At dusk, a machine moved noisily around the perimeter of the resort, belching morose clouds and diesel fuel, to deter mosquitoes. We didn't see many mosquitoes. 'There is no malaria in Egypt,' said one of our guides. We saw two weddings in our brief stay at this Cairo resort: from neck to wrist to ankle, the brides were covered in white, in spite of the heat, and in contrast to brides in more temperate climates.

Cairo is the third largest city in the world, after Tokyo and Mexico City. The city is full of tall, unfinished square brick buildings, most with brick pillars on the flat roofs, to allow for the addition of extra floors, for example when a son or daughter marries. The storeys with windows are the ones which are occupied.

It's hard to believe that tourist numbers are down in Egypt; the Pyramids and surrounds were swarming with visitors from every country. We climbed inside Cheops Pyramid, the largest, to the central chamber. As we moved up the steep, narrow, low-roofed staircase, we brushed against many people who were struggling down. It was intensely hot and mildly claustrophobic. The chamber itself, about ten metres square, was dim and airless. I was invited to 'feel the oxygen' coming through a so-called vent, but felt nothing. A piece of sticky tape across a crack in the rock overhead was there 'for testing', which made me suddenly aware of the huge weight of rock over my head.

Pickpockets wander around the Pyramids and environs and the police chase them off. We saw one man being marched off after a scuffle. There are other ways of getting stung at this most famous tourist attraction: friendly Egyptians ('we are not Arabs,' our guide stressed) offer to take your photo with your camera and may refuse to return it if your tip is not satisfactory. There are few beggars in Egypt, if you discount the young children who plead and whine for pens, but Egyptian traders have hassling down to a fine art. They have obviously been told by tourists to cool it, and warned that the more they hassle, the less they'll sell because western tourists like to browse. Many stores carry the sign 'NO HASSLE STORE' which their owners point to triumphantly, as they then relentlessly hassle the possible potential buyer. One store had many signs to encourage the reluctant buyer, including one which read 'PAS DE HARCELEMENT'. Traders always ask where you are from so that they can hassle you in your own language: I was surprised at their multi-lingual ability.

Just off the main trading market in Aswan, we broke our self-imposed rule and walked into the shop of Hassan, a Nubian. Hassan allowed us the luxury of wandering around his shop, selecting various small things we wanted to buy. He introduced us to his pet pigeon, which occupied a section of the bottom shelf on one wall of the shop, and told us his story. He was an artist and a shopkeeper and returned to his home on the west bank every night at midnight, on his donkey. It took him about an hour. He lived with his sister and crippled brother. When the tourists were massacred at the Temple of Hatshepsut in 1997, Hassan had been a guide there and was sitting outside the temple with a Japanese woman while her husband went inside to take photographs. ('I like Japanese,' Hassan confided. 'They are small and they don't eat much, not like Americans.') When they heard gunshots, Hassan told the woman they must be making a movie. 'Where are the cameras?' she wanted to know.

Hassan went inside the temple, saw many bodies there and questioned a black clad terrorist, whom he mistook for police. When the terrorist bashed him on the forehead with his rifle butt, Hassan ran outside, picked up the small Japanese woman and ran with her under his arm, sustaining bullet wounds to the shoulder and neck. He showed us the scars. When they counted the bodies, it emerged that 63 tourists, including the Japanese man, and 9 Egyptians had been shot.

Hassan was interviewed by many journalists and VIPs, who wanted an objective account of the massacre, and he was able to tell them that the terrorists had arrived by taxi, like the tourists, and had not come from across the mountains behind the temple as previously thought. He told us the President had given him his small shop as a reward for his co-operation. The story goes that the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut has only been open to visitors since last year because it has taken them this long to get the blood off the floor. I hope that's an urban myth. Security is tight and obvious all over Egypt. Every stony ridge has its camel and security officer, armed with a machine gun. 'Tell your friends Egypt is safe and Egyptians are friendly,' the guides urged us.

The people are certainly friendly. As Alan walked onto the railway platform at Aswan, he was accosted by a smiling Egyptian businessman who introduced himself and asked Alan to pronounce a list of about forty English words. 'I know what they mean,' he said, 'but I can't pronounce them.' It transpired that he was going for a job, and after the pronunciation lesson, he and Alan had a long friendly discussion and exchanged addresses.

We bought some of Hassan's stock ("your best price please Hassan") and he spent some moments while his need for money warred with his sense of generosity, but he kissed me warmly on both cheeks and we think he was happy with his profit margin. I noticed when I unpacked at home that his pet pigeon had left its mark on one of the ornaments.

Painted papyrus and Egyptian cotton t-shirts were purchased at much more ruthlessly commercial outlets, hampered by our usual lack of bargaining skills. You could get gold jewelry from the gold souk, spices from the spice souk and fine Egyptian perfumes and body oils from the perfume factory. The Egyptians say French perfume was invented for practical reasons, to counter the smell of unwashed bodies, whereas Egyptian perfumes were developed for totally aesthetic reasons.

We flew from Aswan in a smallish plane to Abu Simbel; took overnight trains from Cairo to Aswan and return; travelled by bus from Cairo to Alexandria; sailed in a felucca, took water taxis, and sailed down the Nile in a steamboat for 3 nights. The steamboat reminded me of the SS Strathmore when I sailed to England all those years ago: it had a small plunge pool, a table tennis table and an exercise machine on the top deck, the lounge was panelled in dark wood and smelled strongly of stale cigarette smoke, and the cabin attendants spent a lot of time transforming our towels into crocodiles, lotus flowers, etc. One member of our group saw an Egyptian in traditional gelabaiya on board and asked him if he worked on the boat. "I am the captain," he replied.

One night, after being chased around the bazaar by the driver of a horse and carriage who wanted to make sure we used his vehicle to return to the steamboat, we went to a club for a drink and 'shisha'. The shisha was a big hooka with a large glass base containing water, and which tasted faintly of apple as we smoked it. It was too cheap to hold anything more than fairly rough tobacco. A member of the group immediately picked the shisha up by the neck so that the glass base fell to the ground and smashed. There were no recriminations from the staff and we didn't have to pay for a replacement.

Sand and lack of moisture have preserved the wonders of Egypt for thousands of years. Rameses II ensured his hieroglyphs survived removal by later kings by incising them deeply in the rock. Rameses II was some guy, he even had his own water-toilet. In the Valley of the Kings the best tombs were closed to the public: "maybe we would open one if your president came to visit," explained our guide. The ones we saw revealed miraculous colour. Where the decoration and inscriptions were incomplete, it was possible to see the artist's red outlines, corrected and adjusted in black, by the supervisor. A slightly surreal effect of so much, so old, being accessible to the tourist, was the amount of "recent" graffiti. Visitors 200 years ago have carved names and dates on temple pillars. At the Temple of Horus at Edfu, the so-called "healing" temple, there were games like noughts and crosses carved into the pathway, but in this case the carvings were done by locals to while away time until the doctor could see them. Nothing changes.

At this temple we saw carvings of medical instruments, even birthing stools. Our guide pointed out that medical practice has come full circle since ancient Egyptian times, as growing numbers of German doctors now favour the birthing stool method of childbirth. The guides, of course, were very proud of Egypt and its heritage and on more than one occasion told us that Egypt had the best beaches in the world. We Australians smiled knowingly.

Alexandria reflects more European influence than any other Egyptian city. We drove there by bus from Cairo and noticed the pigeon towers, used for breeding pigeons to eat by the many well-to-do households which lined the route. Our guide said he had tried to slit a pigeon's throat once, felt sick at what he was doing, and sewed the pigeon up again. It lived. Incidentally, the colour for the fashion-conscious Alexandrian woman for the coming winter season is brown.

We debriefed for 2 or 3 nights on the return trip at Dubai, a city which literally reflects oil money in its many-faceted modern hotels and new apartment buildings. We heard a story later, from a member of the group who had visited one of the most famous of these hotels, where it costs several thousand American dollars a night to stay. They decided to have lunch there, and after paying a lot of money just to cross the threshold, climbed aboard the machine which was to take them down to the underwater restaurant. Thereafter all was chaos and frightening turbulence as the passengers were thrown about. They eventually emerged, badly shaken, but apparently able to eat their free lunch, (worth US\$500), courtesy of the management.

*Margot Mann*

### **The Absurd Paradox from Gary Hipworth**

If I have given anyone the impression that there is a way out of the human condition to some kind of permanently blissful state leading perhaps to peace on earth or inner peace for the individual then I do profoundly apologise for misleading you.

Humans are half animal and half symbolic entity and it is possible to live in one or other of these two absolutely incompatible worlds by repressing one side or the other. Mostly we live in the symbolic realm with a name, a past and a hoped for future. I have discovered that it is also possible to live as an animal for moments at a time. I deluded myself that this was a better way to live because there are moments of pure bliss. But the whole truth is much more terrifying and real. The brutal and stark reality is that the human being is a physical entity that will die and a symbolic entity that can imagine its way into immortality. It is both things at the one time! These two worlds cannot be reconciled - ever!

However, there is only one certainty and that is that death is inevitable and still haunts our every waking moment even if it is repressed from our conscious mind. There really is no way out of this impossible situation.

I suspect that every single person who claims to have a way out of this dilemma is unconsciously repressing the other side. Otherwise we really would go insane. We desperately need our illusions. So we develop a personality to protect us from the terrifying reality that is the true paradox of being human. We then all collude (unconsciously in the main) to keep this big character lie going.

So the world or the person cannot 'be saved' by the guru or the traditional world leader because the followers of both types of leaders are still hoping for someone (a transferred father figure) to protect them and make them feel secure, or 'enlightened' or 'spiritual' or 'united with oneness' or whatever. No one can change the truth of physical reality! Wait! What about another illusion? Lets call it consciousness, or pure awareness. Every animal has awareness - nothing special.

To be an authentic human being is an oxymoron. If a person was to try to be authentic then s/he would soon be without any human relationships, any work. Why? To be authentic means that one would be living as half animal and half symbol with death only a moment away - and being honest about this way of living to everyone you have a relationship with. It is like being on a terrifying/ ecstatic emotional rollercoaster. One's unpredictable behaviour and moods would be too much for the 'normal' person or organisation to cope with. This way of living is a fast road to insanity/ sanity. (take your pick - it depends what side of the reality fence you think you are on)

Of course we are all insane if you consider the games and lies we play in order to keep the personality/ hero lie going - The Hitlers of this world are a pointer to what leaders and followers are all about. You can also add the Bushes and the Blairs and the Howards because these leaders have also killed innocent people in the name of pushing their own reputations and their own unique place in history. You and I have meekly allowed these leaders to kill in our name. What can we do now? We continue to meekly submit because we are guilty by association. We still pay our taxes and salute the flag. We are still Australians. Sure we might have marched against the war but if you said anything against 'our soldiers' then you were labeled a traitor. Terrorists are simply human beings with an extreme dose of symbol man.

So I am on that road to sanity/ insanity. Half animal/ half symbol - call me an anibol! At least I feel that it is a genuine road - albeit perhaps an alone one. I would like to think that I remain open to new learning. Just don't try telling me that I am not my body (shit happens) or I was never born and so I cannot die (another form of denial). This sort of nonsense insults the little intelligence that we do have. Perhaps I am still trying to be someone - an individual who is gutsy enough to challenge all the established authorities - whatever their ilk. See how impossible the human condition is? I understand why I am doing what I am doing and yet I still need to do it!

I know that the tone of this article is very unpleasant. Well, there is a dark side to life and to every human being. I have been very well trained at keeping this under control. By control, read 'personality', self-image, character, social penalties. I did this because I feared the consequences of letting my anger and aggression show - maybe I would have no friends or lovers or human relationships? I was also sure that I was a peaceful human being - unlike my father. This sense of certainty is no more. I do know that if I had allowed this anger to be repressed for much longer then some poor unlucky soul might have got killed just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time - and this is really terrifying to acknowledge. But it is the truth.

Why inflict my seemingly black perspective on anyone else? Society and I are a joint product. If there is a one zillionth chance of some kind of resolution of the life/ death dilemma then it can only come from a similar joint engagement. I am not hopeful. We avoid pain (or imagined pain) better than any other animal. This is massive agony and ecstasy

beyond belief. And all without drugs! I should add that I am also a product of something absolutely incomprehensible to the human mind. If I am able to take a leap of faith in the incomprehensible mystery of existence and beyond without turning it into another illusion called religion or spirituality I might just avoid the loony bin.

*Gary Hipworth*

## Letters

Dear Alan, Thanks for hooking me up to Capacitie, and please keep me on your list. I've been very busy with work, and only had a little time to browse the back issues of the magazine - but the small amount I've read I've tremendously enjoyed - the pointing to the marvellous What-Is, free of cultural accretions and conceptual baggage. For me the "Gospel", the Good News of my life is that in simple hereness is all the sacredness I used to yearn for. On the other hand, I do enjoy the Christian references of Capacitie. I came to nondualism via Advaita and other Eastern approaches, and only in the last few years have discovered this experiential Truth in Western Christianity - in reading works like the sermons of Eckhart, the Book of Privie Counselling and other jewels of the Via Negativa. Probably, being brought up a Catholic and resonating with Jesus' reputed statements in the Gospels (including Thomas), there's a deep personal significance to my western "discoveries". regards,

*Shane Keher.*

Hi Alan and Margot, You know J W-L's hypothesis about a "hyperactive survival mechanism" being the root of the problem of occlusion of our true nature?

There was a programme a while ago on the BBC about a phenomenon called "Supervolcanoes". The gist of it is that there may have been a "bottleneck" in our evolution roundabout 75,000 years ago when a "Supervolcano" called Toba erupted in what is now Sumatra. This caused a massive dieback amongst all life on the planet, but some researchers think that it affected proto-humans especially drastically, such that there may have been only a VERY FEW THOUSAND homonids (out of a population of millions all over the world) who survived (probably in Africa) after that apocalypse.

I think it's quite plausible that the only ones to survive may have been those few members of the homonid population at that time who happened to be extremely survival-oriented, in which case we may have inherited their extreme survival orientation. IOW, our minds may be the minds of very, very tough, paranoid survivors, and that mechanism runs even when it isn't necessary.

Which would explain a lot! Here's the URL re. the programme: -

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/1999/supervolcanoes.shtml>

Transcript of the programme:-

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/1999/supervolcanoes\\_script.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/1999/supervolcanoes_script.shtml)

And here's a URL from an academic (an economics prof.) who's incorporated a version of the theory into an interesting and comprehensive little theory of human origins:-

<http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/HL0101/S00026.htm>

Capacitie's a great website, btw - and I love the Nowletter. Keep up the good work folks! (But when's J W -L's book coming out, when are we going to hear more from him, how is he, and a thousand other questions!?!? :-)

*Peter George Stewart*

## The pweor of the hmuan mnid

Aoccdnrig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are tpyed, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit oedrer. The rset can be a total mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lterer by istlelf, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh?

*A note from Michael Adamson*



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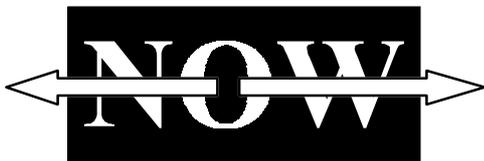
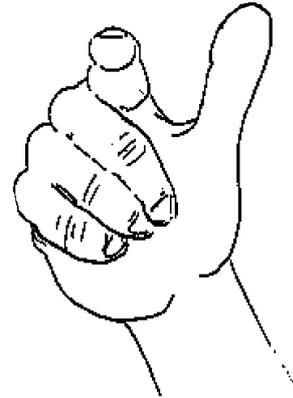
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Dialogue	Fourth Sunday	New venue - To be advised	Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379
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