

February 2023 – Letter from Susan Murphy to the Melbourne Zen Group sangha, about the Dharma Transmission Ceremony for Kirk Fisher that will take place on Saturday 29 April in Melbourne.

Dear Sangha Members and Friends,

This Autumn, Sesshin has the special flavour of forming a prelude to a Dharma Transmission ceremony for Kirk Fisher.

Since many of you may be unaware of the full significance of this event, and how it may serve to confirm the maturity of the MZG sangha at this point in its long evolution, let me set out some background to this important moment:

Kirk has been humbly and generously walking the path of apprentice teacher in the Diamond Sangha in Melbourne now for six years, after being a long-time member of MZG and student of Zen for more than three decades. His Dharma eye is clear, his expression of the Way is warm, alive and vigorous, his energy is unflagging, and his commitment to both the sangha and the work of teaching is beyond doubt. I have supervised him closely across this time – intensively at first, but gradually watching him step out with increasing confidence in his own right, drawing new students to his teaching in the process.

The ceremony that confirms Dharma transmission is a recognition of Kirk's long and continuing walk with me through thousands of koans, which is a very intimate journey of coming into ever greater dharma clarity (that by nature will never stop opening), always testing it within and letting it be strengthened by the vicissitudes and joys of life. This, as well as close assessment of the character, compassion and ethos evident in Kirk's life and dealings, led to the moment in late 2016 in which I informed the sangha I was preparing to invite him to begin to teach in the wider Diamond Sangha as an apprentice teacher.

The dokusan relationship Kirk has maintained with me across more than two decades has now evolved into mutually rich dharma dialogue, and this evolution traces the nature of dharma transmission itself – a gradual coming to share and confirm (as Dogen's words say in the Jukai ceremony) *'one Dharma, one realization'*. But this does not imply any conformity of expression in the dharma. Our individual paths of life and death are different, which means that our way of expressing the great matter – in talks, teisho and dokusan engagement with students – will be as distinctive as we are.

There is a beautiful Zen expression of the mystery of emptiness and form evident in all beings: *'Though we are born on one stem, we do not die on it'*. All beings are 'born on the stem' of emptiness, but we all live and die in utterly particular and unrepeatable form. Zen teachers, too, *'are born on one stem...'* of realization of emptiness and the teachings of emptiness-wisdom – which in our tradition are passed down person to person, from warm hand to warm hand, in a line traceable back to Shakyamuni Buddha. This forms a part-historical, part-symbolic blood-line lineage that is

reflected in the document that is part of Kirk's work of preparation for Transmission. But, *'we do not die on it'*: meaning that every name on that blood-line document signifies a unique and distinctive voice of the 'one dharma, one realization', that sees into emptiness.

Like every sangha, MZG has its own, ever-evolving distinctive character, too. In early years, this strongly autonomous, sangha-led community elected to invite and try out many teachers from different places, and it is still the case that some members have affinity with teachers beyond the MZG fold. More than two decades ago, Subhana and I were formally invited to step into the role of the regular and continuing non-resident teachers for MZG - creating the present pattern of Autumn and Spring sesshins and zazenkai weekends.

Six years ago, when I invited Kirk to begin to teach, this was not imposed on the sangha. Instead, I initiated a careful process of consultative discussion, urging the sangha to find its own gradual process of forming a relationship with this fact, which it has duly done. It now seems timely to acknowledge the fact that Kirk has not only been assisting me for six years in sesshin and zazenkai events, but has manifestly also been offering regular teaching to the sangha, with a clearly recognisable degree of welcome for his strengthening teaching presence.

MZG remains a sangha-led sangha. The forthcoming Dharma Transmission ceremony plainly marks Kirk's readiness to step forward as fully authorised teacher in his own right - a moment worthy of real celebration, with the potential to strengthen and grow fresh post-Covid sangha energy and focus. But what evolves from here is its own story that is not yet written, and not dictated to the sangha by *any* of Melbourne's teachers.

Neither Subhana nor I plan to lessen our long and deep relationship with the MZG sangha, but Dharma transmission quite naturally begins to open the way for a careful and delicate process of 'sangha transmission' for Kirk, as the MZG teacher resident in Melbourne. It is a process and responsibility that rests in the hands of all members of MZG, and must take care of the many and somewhat varied perceptions of what this MZG sangha is, has been, and should be.

For this is the natural way in which *'Sangha relations (ceaselessly) become complete'* - discovering what they are day by month by year by decade.

Yours in the Dharma

Susan Murphy Roshi