

Sexton Bourke (1949 - 2011)

Sexton was the eldest of four children and grew up mainly in Townsville. After a difficult period at boarding school in Charters Towers, he came back to Townsville and became school captain. He trained as an aircraft mechanic, moved south and gravitated to what was then called the counter-culture, on the outskirts of Brisbane and the hills behind Mullumbimby. In 1979 he moved again and helped start a community near Bellingen. He settled on that community, married, and carefully built a very solid house.

Sexton and his wife Pamela had two children. The second was diagnosed with autism and this changed the family dynamics. Sexton and Pamela put enormous effort into trying to help their youngest develop in a healthy way.

Sexton had been intrigued by a book he'd read on Buddhism when he was at school. When he had the chance to learn

more about meditation in the 1970s and go on retreats, he did so with enthusiasm. His first retreat was twenty days long.

He had a striking dedication to meditation practice. He sat for an hour a day, practically every day for over three decades. He wasn't able to sit formally when he was in hospital but those periods were the very rare exceptions.

Sexton practised for over twenty five years before starting to teach and when he did start, he had a very distinctive style. While many teachers talk about developing a body focus and using that as a way to relate to feelings and understand the conceptual world for what is, it's often not a practice they use themselves and because of this they don't give it lots of weight. Sexton persevered with this practice and eventually found a way for it to work for him long term. When he would talk about this way of practising, his appreciation and respect for it were easily felt.

He did have good guidance. He had many teachers but two who had quite an impact were Joko Beck, a Zen teacher who came to Australia a number of times in the 1980s and Subhana Barzaghi who was his primary teacher for the (Zen) koan curriculum. It took him ten years to work through the curriculum. A big part of the reason he started koan study was that he wanted a way to engage more with a teacher. At the time, that wasn't so easy in the Insight Meditation community, outside of retreats. He taught both Insight Meditation and more formally as a Zen teacher.

He was given roshi status in 2010. By that time he was driving into a studio in

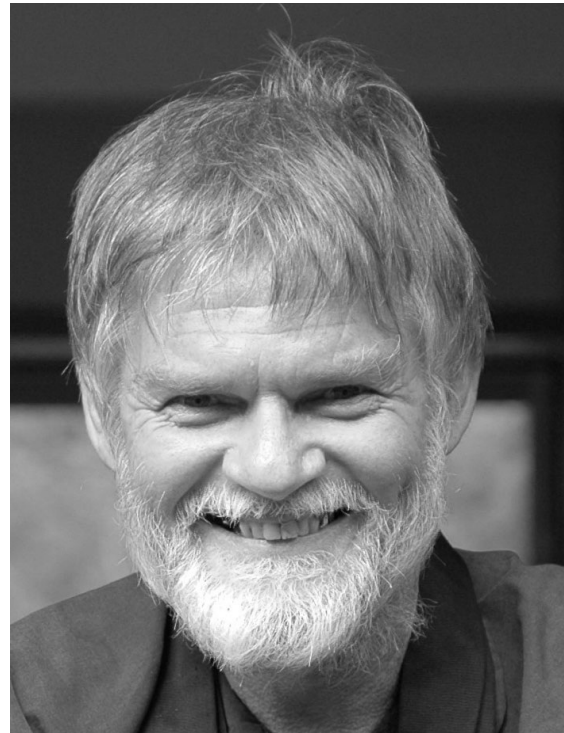
Bellingen seven mornings a week, even on Christmas Day, to sit from 6 to 7 am with whoever would come. He did this even when he only just had the energy for it. They would sit with the studio's big doors open, hot or cold, rain or shine. He had the view that if he could help people establish a regular daily practice, not just twenty minutes but something more substantial, it would really help change their lives for the better.

Sexton's approach to teaching was very grounded and practical. There was nothing flowery or heady because he just talked about what he'd experienced himself or understandings that he'd come to through practice. It always had a feel of authenticity.

Rather than read widely, he read deeply. He would read a short section from one of the Buddhist classics and just sit with it, letting it filter through. He did this as a practice, even if he didn't always understand at the time what the text was getting at. Eventually he understood. In his later years his views and commentary on koans gained much respect in the broader (Zen) Diamond Sangha teacher community, both in the US and here in Australia.

Sexton was generous. He took an active role in community groups, he'd pick up hitchhikers if there was room, he gave freely of his time with mechanics, electrics and welding, he gave financially to a wide range of people and causes and he was there for many people.

He was diagnosed with colon cancer with secondaries in 2004, after experiencing abdominal pains for some years. None of the doctors he had seen



over those years for the pains had picked up the cancer. He had operations, a remission and a variety of chemotherapy treatments. Pamela was not only there with him every step of the way (as well as bringing up their youngest) but was a vocal advocate when Sexton wasn't able to do that for himself. When the treatments stopped working he was still content and appreciating life. He was not one to complain.

Sexton was buried in a coffin made for him by one of his friends on the community he helped start. He is survived by Pamela and his children Katrina and Edward. He made a number of bells for meditation groups and retreat centres from wheel rims. When they ring it's a clear and resounding call to practice.

Victor von der Heyde