

NEW CH'AN FORUM

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No. 24 Summer 2001

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Price: £2. 50

EXPERIENCE AND TIME

This issue is devoted to personal experience. Chan is everywhere and anytime. It only needs the mindfulness of the right perspective to bring up the vision, the lessening of self-absorption and the opening to vastness.

However much we talk philosophy or worry about social ills everything in the end boils down to experience in time now, time remembered or time hoped for. How do we practitioners handle our own experiencing? In this lies the skill of Chan.

We devote this issue to surveying different ways in which our friends in the Dharma cope with varying aspects of their lives - in learning, teaching, in day to day events, on retreats with others and in solitary contemplation alone in the hills.

Learning from one another through understanding each other's paths is a helpful way to reflect on our own endeavours.

The context of experience is time - so we begin by a reflection on time itself. We follow with an account of two teachers' experiences of training and the problems of providing teachings essential for deeper practice. How do practitioners experience Chan? The rest of the issue will tell you. Each report is like a refreshing glass, taste them one by one. Not too many all at once!

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INTRODUCTION

THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

John Crook

We live within our personal ecologies of meaning construing our relations with the "outer" world on the dimensions of space and time. Yet, in everyday experiencing, place and time often seem separate modes of being rather than inseparably related. Standing in front of a fine landscape painting we witness a timeless space. The landscape is static, frozen in time, it is all space. Contrariwise, if we gaze from a window witnessing the movement of the traffic in a London street everything is change and change is time. Yet reflection tells us there is just one continuing "arrow of time" pushing us relentlessly to our personal deaths and, in whatever way we experience space, time never ceases.

There are many ways of classifying time and therefore experience. Some of them are as it were embedded within one another as in a Russian doll. The most basic time is the natural one of days and seasons, which depend on, and indeed measure, the rotation of the earth and its annual tilting set within the time of our solar system, our galaxy, and the universe.

Universal time

Physicists tell us there is no sense in talking about whatever "existed" before the "Big Bang"; neither time or space existed then for matter had not yet begun. As if from a point the results of the explosion have flown outwards like the ever-expanding circumference of a sphere. Time is the changing, expanding surface of universal matter while space arises as the consequence of the movement of matter in time. And, apart from wobbles in the surface, (which may have broken free as bubbles of space-time out of contact with the original universe and thereby creating other worlds, the number and existence of which we can only guess), that is all there is. Space is not only co-emergent with time but as time went on matter coalesced to form places.

Planet Earth was such a place, a globe that revolves and wobbles in regular rhythm in the light of the sun to generate days and seasons. As human life emerged people found themselves making their livelihood within this pattern of time and having their consciousness shaped by it. Master Sheng Yen speaks of such time as being of "the eternal".¹ The agricultural round, emerging from a world of seasonal hunting, and becoming the prime mode of temporal existence for many millennia, still obtains in many parts of the earth and, in the alternation of green leaf and frost, underlies and shapes our consciousness and our imagination.

Economic time

The emergence of exchange, the buying and selling of products surplus to subsistence, began the development of places where commerce could best occur and the establishment of geographical linkages for transportation of goods. Agricultural areas became focused on commercial loci where exchange occurred and the system of routes connecting them.

With the appearance of industrialisation the pace and nature of commerce changed radically. The relation between time and money became more critical and that between distance and time also. Within the "eternal" time of the seasons became superimposed the rigorous times of the work day, the hourly schedule, the annual holiday, time spent in getting to the office and back again for "time off", the precise regulation of meal times, pub

times and sleep times and the leisure time of the rich with the emergence of leisure activity with its own separate timing, casual time.

The feel and atmosphere of place became dependent on human activity rather than on some natural quality of wind and water, rock and air. The relatively unchanging rhythm of time in a work place became experientially reified more or less as an entity, a period, an "event", more like a quality of space in fact than the movement of time.

Frozen time

When we visit a place of character, a cathedral perhaps, or spend a holiday on an island or in an attractive city, the time we spent there appears to us afterwards as a singularity, an intact timeless memory, an apparent fixity, a constellation. Place may appear to stop time - even though of course we know it has done nothing of the sort. We remember a period of unitary character, being a student at Cambridge for an example, almost as a thing, we forget the impermanence of persons and events, the flux and the fragility of the moment.

Periods of still time and the places in which they occur can become very important for us because they suspend for a while the awareness of our mortality. Seasonal festivals, long holidays, certain experiences like an afternoon in an art gallery freeze the arrow of time and give us a fleeting sense of security, a momentary immortality. Because we can all share such times and places, a culture builds up around them so that they become embellished with the trappings of the sacred. In large measure they are what the sacred is. Memories are often like this.

Turbulent time

The sacred place gives us the sense of something enduring. Identity itself comprises location and locality. Yet embedded in history are the processes of change. At certain times these come together to produce great shifts in our lives and in the form, appearance and importance of locations, places and institutions. Since we are identified with these forms such change, reminding us of impermanence, is threatening, frightening maybe and can generate stress, anxiety and depression. We may feel our world to be falling apart and us with it.

The same experience emerges during those periods of transition generated by our personal progress in life. The periods spent at school, in university, as a trainee, as a professional with his office or laboratory, all have their particular qualities and mode of being to which we become attached. During such periods our experiences become a constellation of patterns which in later retrospect appear as having one quality, the character of an "age" as it were. As we necessarily move from one life period to another the transitions generate uncertainty, again our illusion of fixed identity is challenged.

Such changes may be forced upon us by marriage, childbirth, divorce and separation, redundancy, bereavement, retirement, ageing, ill health. At such times the relative stability of a "time of life" is broken and our identification with that period has to be opened up to something new and other.

Catastrophic time

Sometimes the turbulence takes the form of great economic and social crises, wars, famines and natural disasters. Time then freezes in a period of discomfort, deprivation, disaster or distress. There may be experiences of horror that shatter the personality so that the personal identifications of previous years are broken down. At such times only those who have inner resources upon which they can draw are likely to be able to survive psychologically in a positive manner. The victims of terrorism, of torture, of political imprisonment, have to

face such issues and need the help and consideration of others - not their prejudice and racist concern.

Fantasy time

In imagination and dream we create places and events that reflect and reconstruct our wishes and uncertainties often in highly symbolic form. The understanding of symbols is vital for the comprehension of our lives since our experience of the symbolic often conditions our responses to changes of a more immediate nature. The time we spend in fantasy has a particular significance for us.



Some sacred places become more real for us in imagination than as experiential realities. Places such as Jerusalem, Mecca, or ancient Canterbury become places of pilgrimage where the timeless presence of the past can be evoked and the arrow of time seemingly annulled. Some places beyond our capacity for travel exist in this way almost solely in imagination, Timbuktu, Lhasa, imaginary spiritual abodes of the gods or the godly with whom a salvation from time can be imagined.²

Symbols also express our values and these may be derived from collective ideologies of great persuasive power. A failure to receive loving care of an appropriate kind in childhood may cause an individual to seek out comfort not in physical and psychological intimacy with another but in some other safer "transitional object", a teddy bear or a pet for example, so called because in a beneficial sequence the transition leads back into adult intimacy. Where the personality is damaged the transitional object may take the form of a belief system which justifies the mode of restricted being which the person has adopted. Ideological symbols become "places" of refuge from the inner processes of the abused self. Such an individual spends great lengths of time in the service of such ideologies sometimes causing major cultural disaster and personal distress to others. Personal time has here been captured by the symbolic in an attempt to stabilise a distress that is repressed and not understood. Time becomes illusion.

Time spent in the symbolic may however also carry intimations that are not yet conscious. Archetypal symbols represent the root features of personal life acquired in childhood, experiences of parenting, personal heroes, strange old persons, the otherness of nature, sun time and rain time, dream time. The working through of such symbolic experiences can lead to a recovery of the repressed and the emergence of an adult mind ready to live a more open life in a space and time less characterised by fantasy.

Psychology and Time

The contrasting ways of experiencing time form a sort of evolutionary series. With the development of commerce there has been an increasing fragmentation of the 'eternal time' spent by agriculturists in relation to nature. We live in worlds of temporal dualities; work-play, travel-office. Such dualities together with others such as profit-loss, pleasure-pain, we-them are experienced in a characteristic frame of mind in which whatever happens is related to the individual's egoistic concerns.

Margaret Donaldson has classified the modes of human experiencing. In the first, the focus of experience is the ongoing present-continuum, attention to the moment is predominant. In the second, the focus is on relating the present to the immediate past or future while, in the third, the findings of the second are related to a context of structured memories that allows planned intention in relation to knowledge. In contemporary life most of us spend virtually all of our time preoccupied within the second and third modes of mental activity³. This is inevitably a highly evaluative process providing us with the basis for making choices between multiple alternatives most of which refer back immediately to self in relation to others.

Inevitably this process gives rise to considerations of approval or disapproval by others, of others by oneself and oneself by self and such thought entails a constant low level stress punctuated by times of crisis or demand. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has shown experimentally how concern generated by the relationship between the difficulty of a task in relation to expectation of personal performance may give rise to a sense of alienation. Where a task is easy boredom and mistakes may follow. When a task is too difficult anxiety may arise in the expectation of failure. Where task difficulty is matched by confidence in an expectation of success the experience of work tends to be one of optimum enjoyment or "flow" however difficult the actual task may be objectively⁴. Clearly such relationships depend greatly on the attitude brought to the life situation by the subject, especially when the tasks in question are essentially to do with social relations and with self. Modern life involves most individuals in a constant anxious and often largely unconscious enmeshment with self-concern.

Meditation can break this insistent self-concern by anchoring ourselves in the actuality of the present moment. In the simplicity of "being now" release can be obtained and here lie the seeds of "enlightenment". Few realise that such another mode of life exists in which recurrent contact with the ongoing present by an undivided mind can reveal an inner peace even in active living. Such a mode of being is not attained however without training.

Unfortunately today the conflict between a failing humanism and forms of superstitious spirituality increasingly divorced from either a scientific understanding of the Cosmos or meditational realisation creates a paralysis in creative thinking against which a few struggle often in vain. The task of Buddhism is to meet this challenge and open up the world to a recovery of the human heart.

1 Crook, J.H. 1991 *Catching a Feather on a Fan. A Zen retreat with Master Sheng Yen*. Element. p60-61

2 Bishop. P 1989 *The Myth of Shangri-La. Tibet, travel writing and the Western creation of sacred landscape*. Athlone. London.

3 Donaldson, M.1993.*Human Minds: an exploration*. Penguin. London

4 Csikszentmihalyi, M.1975. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco. Also Csikszentmihalyi, M and

I.S.Csikszentmihalyi. (Eds) 1988. *Optimal experience: psychological studies of flow in consciousness*. University press. Cambridge.

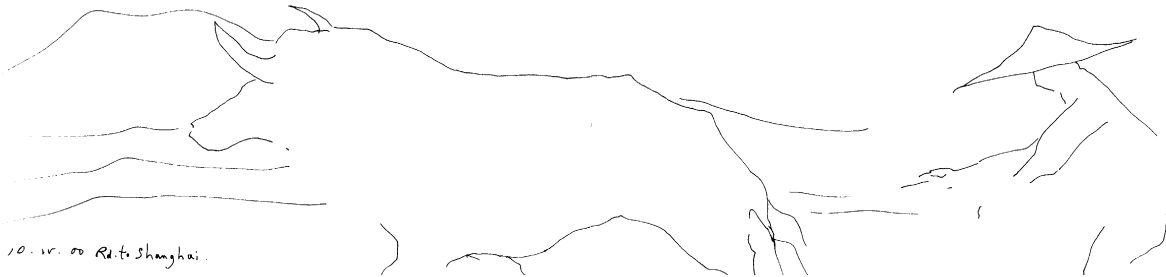
TIME LEARNING, TIME TEACHING

In this section we look at fundamental experiences in learning how to uncover the essentials of a personal attitude that become the basis of teaching and at how teaching may be directed to the most essential difficulties of practitioners. Shi fu describes the prime components of his training and John Crook follows with a discussion of the tribulations of a Western teacher.

CHALLENGING THE EGO; THE BASICS OF TEACHER TRAINING

Master Sheng yen¹

After I came from the mainland to Taiwan I left the army and lived in a temple in Taiwan and edited the magazine Humanity. I was in training of course and attended retreats. The great doubt persisted. I was constantly wondering what Enlightenment or Buddhahood was. There were so many contradictions in the teachings that I could make no sense of them. The deeper I looked, the worse it became.



When I was twenty-eight I had a profound experience of dropping the mind. It happened like this. I had been practising a lot and had had some small experiences yet all these questions kept running through my head. I went on retreat in a monastery in southern Taiwan where a famous monk, Ling Yuan, was visiting. One night he and I were sharing the same sleeping platform. Seeing that he was meditating I sat with him. These questions were going round and round in a circle, one leading to another. They were all about the nature of vexations, life and death. After some hours, an hour after midnight, these questions became intolerable. I asked my master whether I could ask him a question. He said yes. But when I started there was this sudden flow of questions. Like water they all poured out of my mouth. It went on and on for two to three hours. I really felt I needed answers from this monk who seemed free and easy in himself. All he did was to listen. He said nothing or simply asked, "Anymore?". It was very strange. I had started with one question and suddenly there was this endless flow. It was the "great ball of doubt". After one hour the Master suddenly sighed, lifted his hand and struck the bed hard. "Put it down," he said. Suddenly my mind seemed to snap. I was pouring with sweat and felt a great weight being suddenly lifted from me. There was nothing there. It seemed that there was no problem anywhere in the world. Everything had gone. We simply sat on not saying a word. I was extremely happy. The next day the whole world was fresh as if I were seeing it for the first time.

In the practice of meditation -- you have to let go into purposeless practice. If there is purpose the discriminating mind is active and the ego is present. You just work hard on your method. No - it is not waiting. It is not even not-waiting. It is essential to bring

positive causal conditions together so that one can practise under the guidance of someone who has sufficient insight to be a guide. Not any teacher will do.

When I had at last left the army I found a certain Master Tung Ch'u who I sensed to be an extraordinary individual. He neither lectured nor gave instructions on practice. Yet, seeking neither fame nor followers, he was widely respected. He was an heir to both the Lin chi and the Ts'ao tung lineages. His way of speaking was startling and could effect people deeply. My stay with him was rough indeed. He treated me much as Marpa the great Tibetan had treated Milarepa. He would tell me to move into one room, and then into another- and then back again at once. He told me to seal off a door in a wall and open another. Although we used a gas stove, I had to fetch logs from high up in the hills so that he could brew tea over them. I never got the wood the right size; it was always too large or too small. Similarly when I sat he would say, "You cannot become a Buddha by sitting. Mirrors are not made by polishing bricks." I was then ordered to do prostrations. After several days he would say, "This is nothing but a dog eating shit. Go and read the sutras." So I would read for a couple of weeks. And he would say, "The patriarchs thought the Sutras only good for cleaning sores. Go and write an essay." When I had done it, he would tear it up saying, "These are only stolen ideas. Using your original wisdom say something!" Whatever I did was wrong even when I had done exactly what he had told me to do. Furthermore, because we were supposed to meditate at night, he wouldn't let me keep a blanket for sleeping.

This harsh teaching was actually very compassionate. Without him I would not have realised much. The message was that one had to become self reliant in the practice. So after two years I decided to go into solitary retreat in the mountains. I told him I had vowed to practise hard so as to not fail the Dharma. "You are wrong," he said. "What is this Dharma? What is Buddhism? The important thing is not to fail yourself!"

¹Excerpt from "Catching a Feather on a fan" pp114-116.

TRAINING TO LEARN, LEARNING TO TRAIN

EXPERIENCE IN CHAN TEACHING

John Crook

Most of us have read the story of how the great yogin Milarepa trained in Dharma practice in the household of his teacher Marpa. It is one of the classics of Tibetan religious literature and extremely important as a guide for those concerned with questions of how to advance on the Dharma path.

As a boy Milarepa had to endure extreme pain in family life as an uncle deprived his mother of welfare following the death of his father. In revenge Milarepa learnt black magic and achieved the downfall of his uncle's household. Ashamed of his behaviour he sought teachings from Marpa.

Marpa had gone to India, survived the diseases of the Plains and returned with the profound teachings given him by Naropa. These were to become the foundation of the Kargyudpa lineages in Tibet. When Milarepa arrived at his house Marpa greeting him mockingly, "Oh Great Magician, what do you expect to do here?" 'Great Magician' became the nickname with which he taunted Milarepa, while setting him impossible tasks to do, only to tell him to undo them or do something more useful. It seemed to Milarepa that it was impossible for him to please his teacher and he was on the point of leaving. Only the kindness and wisdom of Marpa's wife kept him back. Marpa was an irascible man, his methods were rough in the extreme but he had a clear purpose. He knew that unless Milarepa could overcome his personal pride and self concern he could never inherit the Dharma and receive meaningful empowerments. Magic and pride go together, the Dharma requires absolute humility. In training a magician there could be no half-measures. In the end he succeeded and his pupil became one of the most renowned figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, the inspiration of generations down to today.

Shi fu's account of his training under Master Tung Chu (see above) reveals the same method only this time in the context of Chan. As we have just read, in spite of the severity of this training, Shi fu acknowledges it was critical to the acquisition of a selfless mind that is essential for advanced training. If fellows of our lineage in Europe wish to advance beyond a mere middle class "hobbyism" they too must understand the import of such training. This is especially vital when we are conditioned, almost unconsciously, to forms of self indulgence that are inevitably concomitants of the consumer society and its world view and within which we aspire to practice.

Some personal stories

To my great good fortune I have experienced a number of encounters which impressed upon me the great need for self-confrontation in the manner so heroically endured by Milarepa and by Shi fu in his turn. I cannot claim to have made the best use of these teaching experiences but I believe that together with other forms of confrontational training at school and in the army something has rubbed off on me. I have come to consider it essential to hand on an understanding of these methods to those who train with me because not to have done so has led to a weak and relatively ineffective training in Dharma in the fellowship. Some recent pettily emotional events in the British Sangha and a tendency to argumentative disputing in the Polish Sangha have demonstrated this most clearly. We need to correct and understand this - at least those who are serious about training must do so.

One day I went to see the Austrian nun Miyokoni, formerly Irmgard Schloegl, who, at that time taught in the Buddhist Society in London. I knew she was of the Japanese Rinzaï

tradition and would give me outspoken comment. I told her about the Western Zen Retreats which I had then recently started to run in Wales. I waffled on at length, telling her about various aspects of these retreats and my role in them but she made no comment. She simply looked at me as I went on talking - perhaps with increasing anxiety. Finally, I stopped and asked her "What is your response to what I have told you?" She said, "I have no response!" - and that was the end of our meeting. I was devastated, not by what she had said, but by the way in which, in one move, she had exposed to me my underlying need for her approval. She was warning me that I had to find my own approval for myself.

In another solicited interview I discussed my practice with her and my attempts at Zen teaching. She remarked, "You are like a person who sits at his desk writing innumerable articles and letters with great enthusiasm while ignoring the accumulating pile of unwashed underwear in the corner of his room." O dear, that hurt. I still recognise the truth of that remark today. Although I cannot say I loved Miyokoni for her comments, I remain immensely grateful to her for what she taught me about myself and about the training of others. I once had the opportunity to thank her and reminded her of these stories. "My goodness, did I really say that?" she had replied, smiling. A great teacher.

In training with Shi fu I have also had my petty ego pricked on several occasions and have had to learn how to handle such an event positively so as to learn from it. One day on retreat in New York my task was to clean the bathrooms. I had just finished polishing one bath and toilet when Shi fu looked in. He scowled and fiercely pronounced it "Filthy - do it again!" and marched off. I re-examined my work and could see no blemish in it. I felt angry and hurt and began swearing away in my mind, furious with my teacher who only half an hour before had been so kind and welcoming in interview. But then I remembered both Milarepa and Shi fu's own account of his training. I could not tell whether Shi fu was actually playing me a teacher's trick, was genuinely of the opinion that my work was defective or whether he was just in a bad mood. Whatever it was, I resolved to take no notice. Whatever he throws at me will not make the slightest difference to my practice - I decided.

There were to be several occasions when Shifu put this resolution to the test - sometimes by his deliberately grim failure to acknowledge my presence when I had just arrived for retreat, sometimes by his ticking me off in interview, and sometimes in fierce letters in response to some naive but innocent comment in one of mine to him. Always I returned to my resolve, realising these were ego confrontations which I simply had to set aside as of no importance, relying in humility on my own feel for what I was about - mistaken as it might possibly be - and upon my trust in Shi fu's underlying wisdom.

On one occasion I had felt it necessary to ask him in a letter whether he so disapproved of me that he did not want me to continue teaching Chan. In that case, I had added, I would continue on my own! Shi fu responded with a warm appreciation. Once I had incautiously mentioned the word "God" in a letter. I received a rollicking reply. I wrote back explaining that for me the word God was "empty". I got a reply warning me to make clear what I meant. Some months later, in my first interview on retreat after this correspondence, I was met by a smiling Shi fu, "Is it alright about God now?" he asked.

Training of this kind is training in the development of what I call the "Zen attitude". This starts with courage to be oneself and to submit to the ego testing of difficult experiences, of hardships on retreat, on pilgrimage and in relating without resentment, irritation or rejection to a demanding yet insightful master. It continues into learning to develop this containment of subtle egoism in everyday life. This is a very different set of demands from merely learning how to sit. It is deep training in reflexive mindfulness. Problem - how to teach it?

Problems in teaching Westerners

Several Eastern teachers have remarked to me on the difference between teaching Asian people and Westerners. Shi fu has said that Western would-be practitioners, most of whom have had a good education, have little difficulty in grasping the intellectual ideas underlying Dharma practice. In addition, initial enthusiasm may lead them to quite quick realisations and to an apparent deepening of practice. Often however this is not maintained, practitioners failing to sustain practice through inevitable habituation and boredom. In worst cases, psychological insight is not matched by ethical advance. When such an individual becomes a teacher serious scandals have occurred. More usually, however, individuals begin prospecting elsewhere for spiritual experiences, whether within Buddhism or outside it - in Sufism for example, or various forms of "do-it-yourself" pseudo-Christian mysticism.

Such behaviour is natural in persons conditioned to the values of contemporary "consumer" society. There is a broad market place of "spiritual" ideas and practices ranging from the more religiously inclined psychotherapies through the emotional group experiences offered in many "new age" practices. Anyone acquainted with the spiritual shenanigans available in Glastonbury or Totnes will recognise the peculiar mix of wisdom and foolishness that is on offer. It follows that when one approach does not deliver the goods quickly there is another to try out round the corner on another shelf. This absence of consistency at the behest of self-indulgence is a deep enemy of serious practice.

Our Western society is also rooted in a marked "individualism" that characterises the Western, especially the Anglo-Saxon, self¹. The strengths of individualism lie in the maintaining of independent judgement, in a self-confidence that allows effective personal action and in a social responsibility that underlies functional democracy. Sadly however such individualism may also lead to merely petty egoism and self-indulgence and a challenging of authority by mere amateurs with little understanding of a matter in hand. Every Joe Bloggs can have an opinion on the economy as if he were Chancellor of the Exchequer - a tendency encouraged by the gutter press. Opinionated persons with inflated egos fail to recognise their own mediocrity and can wreak havoc if they have any power, money or influence - which is often sadly the case.

These two aspects of contemporary culture mean that within Buddhist practice a Western individual may consistently overrate his/her insight and progress and reject or misunderstand a teacher as soon as they are corrected in any matter whether theoretical or practical. Unfortunately such an attitude towards teachers means that any challenge provided by a teacher is often unrecognised or perceived as some sort of an affront. And there is always another self-promoting teacher of poor quality waiting to attract cheap followers of this sort. Teachers are in the market place too, their overstretched smiles decorating the pages of their advertisements.

Challenging the subtle ego

In Tibetan Buddhism indulgence in such petty egoism is considered a major enemy, a thief of Dharma understanding. Anyone learning Dharma can soon recognise the effects of gross egoism, pompous self-importance or aggressive assertion demeaning others and will do their best to eliminate such behaviour. Subtle egoism is however commonly unconscious and only realised through mindful and reflexive self-examination. This is the egoism of small scale, self concern, none the less insidious as an enemy to practice.

Examples include such things on retreat as worrying whether or not one has eaten enough porridge, rushing to get a preferred seat at table, arguing in favour of a late start, thinking about going walking rather than sitting, fussing about the sniffs of a neighbour with a cold,

failing to cope with snoring companions in a dormitory or worrying pedantically about hygiene, warmth, or any aspect that disturbs one's sense of personal comfort. It is not that some such matters may not need attention, it is the obsessive concern that disturbs practice that becomes the enemy. The underlying attitude is that one should not be disturbed from perfect sitting through minor inconveniences - failing to see that coping with such matters is the essence of training.

The assumptions of consumers is that everything should be directed towards their personal comfort, all inconveniences should be eliminated. The purchaser buys comforting experiences that shield him or her from the basic facts of life and death. In paying for defensive avoidance the consumer sustains a world of illusions. A teacher who confronts such an attitude is liable to be rejected, ignored or becomes a butt for argument and rationalised criticism.

Subtle egoism avoids the basic insights of Buddhism. A practitioner with subtle ego intact is merely comforting herself with nice experiences that give an illusion of spirituality. At most such a Chan practitioner may learn something about calming the mind but can never progress to insight whatever intellectual knowledge they may possess. The wayward heart remains unchallenged and devoid of clarity. These are mere "hobbyists" to use Simon Child's expressive term.

We see the world through our own psychological mechanisms, it is not the same world as that of frogs, cats or horses, they have their own worlds too. Depending on the focus of experience, this 'virtual' experience may be interpreted as an expression of agents (selves) in interaction or as motion within an interpenetratively active field of causes and effects interpretable at many levels. While Buddhism stresses the latter viewpoint it does not argue that one perspective is more true than another. Both are aspects of the experiences we draw from virtuality. The essence of insight lies in an understanding of the relation between varying modalities. We learn to handle different ways of seeing our modes of being, seeing things "in the round" as Huayen philosophers express it. Tibetan Buddhist practitioners of Mahamudra, for example, speak of the 'co-emergence' of particularity and emptiness as aspects of experience. That which is perceived depends on how one looks.

What then does it matter if one has had a sleepless night? What does it matter if one has ingested a few grams less of porridge than would be felt as optimal? If Shi fu is irritable - why let that disturb me? He is in his own space, I am in mine. Even if I disagree with a decision by a teacher do I need to pursue an argument, to ring up others for support, to set up a social disturbance which others may never have considered. Do I need to play the petty politics of Dharma gossip? Since my thoughts define my 'self' arbitrarily as a result of personal karma may I not reframe my own reflexive understanding in other ways? When the "view" is corrected one can perceive the relativity and inconsequence of so much that we do in defending our petty ego and its fears of affront, discomfort and the possibility of being wrong.

It follows that a Buddhist teacher must help his or her practitioners to confront the insidious undermining of insight through the operations of the subtle ego. The teacher needs to confront this negative process at every turn. That is what Milarepa had to face in accepting Marpa as his teacher. It is what Shi fu endured in the house of Master Tung chu. A Western teacher has a problem, however, for he or she belongs to the same consumer culture as his followers and can suffer from spiritual undermining in the same way. If he or she stands out against this and confronts practitioners in whatever manner, some of them will resist, basically on the grounds of their precious sense of what is comfortable. Such resistance can

easily become destructive and personally insulting. There is the danger that such confrontation may be perceived not as it is but as an abuse of power.

The question arises as to what authority a Western teacher of Dharma may possess? Eastern teachers tend to be idealised as remote and mystical figures of perfection who know the answer to life and death. A mere Western teacher, whatever his transmission or empowerment, is viewed more sceptically - especially in Anglo-Saxon society. Unfortunately abuses of power by some Western teachers have created a not unreasonable basis for such scepticism. We have to distinguish the false from the true and this is part of the training a good teacher must provide.

The nature of a teacher's authority needs careful definition. It is not the authority of a boss. Our own constitution has carefully eliminated that possibility for the WCF teacher. Nor can a teacher tell a practitioner what he or she should or should not do. A Western teacher is primarily a facilitator. He/she facilitates that which the practitioner needs to develop. When the practitioner is clear as to what that may be, the relationship is not problematic, but, when a practitioner is confused, opinionated or resistant, the teacher has to proceed with great skill - often determining what may be a minimal move towards Dharma understanding. The role is not unlike that of a physician who seeks to facilitate the health of a patient but cannot dictate whether he takes the medicine. The Buddha was known as the "Great Doctor" with good reason.

Yet the teacher is authoritative in his or her understanding. He or she will have trained, sometimes for years and with great persistence against difficulties, with one or more Dharma masters in lineages of revered transmission. His or her experience will transcend that of beginners and of most old hands in practice to a very considerable extent - although this does not mean that a teacher's learning from practitioners is not also always present or that his judgement is perfect. It follows that when a teacher offers a challenge a practitioner needs to consider his or her position with mindfulness and not with some immediately prejudiced reaction. The authority of a teacher's experience demands respect.

Teachers of course come in various shapes and sizes. Some may be kindly and gentle by nature. Some may be quite aggressive and forthright. Some may be plain bad tempered like Marpa. Some may quite idiosyncratic in a variety of ways. The practitioner needs to seek the wisdom inherent in a teacher and not to be put off or concerned with their psychological traits as characters in the world. Of course if no one can see any wisdom in a teacher then it is time to look elsewhere!

There are two main ways in which a teacher confronts and challenges a practitioner. The first is through the programme of an orthodox retreat. Everyone knows that retreats are demanding and many people would like to see them made easier. This would however eliminate one of their main purposes - to challenge the attitude of the practitioner in a test of their zen pretensions. So we get up early, we spend many hours in practice, silence and retreat discipline are maintained. The subtle ego is confronted again and again and observed in interview. If you have not experienced this sufficiently at the Maenllwyd, go try Throssel Hole! This is not the only way of running retreats but certainly an important one that cannot be missed from any well-planned programme. Shi fu once told me, "In running a retreat be tough on the group but kind to individuals". I have experienced his own conduct in running retreats in this light many times.

One thing is essential in a teacher. He or she must be incorrigibly themselves. It is pleasant to fulfil others expectations, to please people so that they smile at you and love you. Yet this way dependency lies. Being oneself inevitably confronts others sooner or later. Shi fu's often dismissive stance towards practitioners when they are arriving on retreat is one

example. Whether it is deliberate or not I have not determined but it is often quite a shock causing one to recollect one's attitude. Sometimes a teacher may have to make rapid decisions about whether to run a retreat or not, whether to accept an individual trainee or not, whether to offer criticism or not or utter a sharp correction or command. In this the teacher must act from his or her heart. The task of the practitioner in training is to respond mindfully and not to react from the dictates of subtle egoism. Many Westerners fail in this, start posturing in ways that reveal their inadequate training and shock the teacher into an awareness of the inadequacies of his methods. His skill in means is then tested to the full.

Of course a teacher is not always right. Marpa could have been kinder to poor Milarepa. He was a bad tempered man and chose to be true to his nature. Shi fu sometimes seems distant and uninvolved. I believe at such times he is simply being himself - perhaps needing some space in which to be. I like to please others but am learning to be blunter and more direct in my stance within teaching. I believe this is essential - if I may seem bad tempered or irritable, unusually sharp tongued maybe, it is because I am bad tempered and irritable-right there and then. Yet that is not all of what I am. Maybe it is worth your while to hang in there. Equally, maybe not. It's up to you.

In conversation with Roshi Reb Anderson, I once asked him about teaching. He said. "If you say one thing you can be sure it will be wrong. If you say the other, again you can be sure you are wrong. Whatever you say will probably be wrong. Why say anything? Well - you just do so in trust." And I was reminded of my favourite definition of zen - "One big mistake after another!"

Conclusion

The experience of being a transmitted teacher is not easy. Although there is often affection and friendship, being oneself incorrigibly, sticking to a 'zen attitude', challenging the stupidities and confusions of others, does not necessarily earn one praise, more usually blame or criticism. Yet the target is the subtle ego both in oneself and in practitioners. Without such confrontation there can be no true insight for that depends on the setting aside of self. I do not believe there is any essential gender difference in this matter. I am sure women's concerns cover a different range than do men's and that retreats for women and men separately are sometimes well worth while. In matters of fundamental egoism there is however little difference and women who attend our Chan retreats do quite as well as men. In whatever way it may be appropriate both genders have to confront their essential self concern and to explore in what way that may be most clearly achieved. Gender relations in the Western world are often tortured and problematic and exploration of these issues within the Dharma is appropriate. Where selfishness is concerned we all have to come to terms with our innate intolerance of others. What else is the Dharma about?

Since I received transmission I have come increasingly to see where the difficulties in teaching really lie. They lie neither in showing people how to meditate, in giving Dharma talks, nor in arranging retreats or pilgrimages from which people gain a certain benefit. They lie much more deeply in the dynamics of self, my own and that of others. I have experienced all of the difficulties mentioned above and some others not treated here and I have done my best to understand them and to respond within the range of my own potential. I propose to continue in this way for only in confrontation is "ignorance" exposed. Whether this can become the heritage of the Western Chan Fellowship I cannot say - and no doubt there will be more to discuss anon.

May 10th 2001

¹See: Neisser, U and D.A. Jopling. 1997. The conceptual self in context. Cambridge University Press.

SOLITARY TIME

Useful as retreats in a group may be, eventually it is wise to sit in solitude. Here no one else can possibly be responsible for feelings, thoughts and experiences. One is on one's own and weird things may start emerging from the woodwork. Not everyone is ready for this but when you do attempt it you may find the practise is supremely worthwhile

GREY STONE¹ **Solitude at the Maenllwyd** **Ken Jones**

*Father Time on the weathervane
WSW
scything over green fields*

Y Maen Llwyd -- The Grey Standing Stone. Gives its name to a small farmhouse folded into the Radnorshire hills. Around a muddy yard are sheep pens and a barn, now a meditation hall surmounted by a weathervane. All silent and empty for my seven day solitary in the lean-to. "KLONDYKE" is embossed in cast iron on the stove.

*Lightness of spruce
little dried blocks
iron belly*

There is room enough for shrine, cushion, camp bed, desk, and easy chair. The other occupant is a winter fly, who sleeps upside down above the stove. Each morning, two hours before dawn, she and I and the pot belly all come to life together.

*The wind whistles
the stove grumbles back
between them
I sit*

Out for a pee under a starlit sky. One face of the cheesy moon is already lit up by the sun rising, I suppose, somewhere over England. Owls return to their roosts in the dingle. Back on my cushion, vast space.

Later, I sit at the little desk...

*Morning star
hiss of the pressure lamp
the sutras black on white*

Turning off the lamp, staring out of the window.

*Restless buzzing --
dawn filters slowly
through ragged clouds*

The bliss of morning coffee is not mentioned in the sutras. Nor marmalade on toast. I brush my teeth, and get into Dogen's *Life and Death*.

Along the track another of my kind greets me. "Nice day, it is!" The care-worn face of a farmer, heaving a dead ewe into the trailer. Later, in fading light, I wander up onto the hill. Shoulders hunched, searching as usual for something too shy to show itself. Hands tighten on the rust of an iron gate.

*Warmed by the setting sun
my skinny shadow
stretching across a field*

Down in the valley the searchlight of an occasional car, swinging round a bend. And then... against the evening sky, there it is.

*Again that thorn tree
rooted to the spot
standing and staring*

Again the old fool is reminded. Doffs his cap, and bows to the tree. For only when the self retires do the ten thousand things advance and enlighten.

The Maen Llwyd is an electricity free zone, apart from my torch. It picks out this and that as a flood of light can never do. Once, a fly:-

*Down on paper --
drawn to the torchlight heart
transparent speckled wings*

And later a hatchet:-

*Old axe
the sway
in its haft*

Here are two centuries of heat and light. There is the generous soft light of the Victorian lamp, the ultimate in paraffin technology and elegance. And the battered "VALOR" heater, recalling the draughty bed sits of my youth. The oldest exhibit stands with a box of Co-op matches beside my bed.

*Made for thick fingers
pewter candleholder
its brass snuffer*

Down in the valley lies Pant-y-Dwr -- the Watery Hollow of some ninety souls, with the lowest temperatures in Wales, and its most central pub, the Mid Wales Inn. A ghostly moon, veiled in mist, floats above the nine sodium lights. I throw more logs into the stove, pump up the flaring Tilley lamp, and heat a can of baked beans.

*Closing curtains
opening curtains
this long life
of nights and days*

Later, I light a single candle before the pale green figure of Kwan Yin, goddess of compassion, austere and erect. A slender stick of pine incense perfumes the air. Three times the sounding bowl ripples the silence, and the first watch of the night begins. An hour passes, and I stretch my legs across the passage in the cold shadows of the meditation hall. On the other side of the yard the weather-beaten planks of the old barn are silver bright.

*Slow pacing meditation
reassuringly
a floor board creaks*

Returning, I wrap my black robe about me and ease my body into the last sit of the day. The short chant has a depth and richness that takes me unaware. Kuan Yin stares back, with that elusive smile of hers.

*In the murmuring stove
soft cry of owls
incense
burnt out.*

¹ This text is a *haibun*, a blend of haiku and haiku-like prose. This is a Japanese literary form which goes back to Basho's 17th century "Narrow Road to the Deep North". Several poets are now seeking to develop the haibun as a distinctive Western literary genre. "The Grey Stone" is to be published by Iron Press, together with other Welsh-interest haiku and haibun by Ken. For further information on the haibun project please phone him on 01970 880603 or email kennora@onetel.net.uk



TEN THOUSAND THINGS

A Solitary Retreat Diary. January 2001

Hilary Richards

Thursday. As I arrive the farmyard is deserted; no dogs, no people but I spot a Landrover on the hill. Driving up the track I meet the farmer who has been feeding the sheep. "Have a nice holiday!" he says. Yes - I think to myself, this is going to be a holiday. Simon also told me to enjoy. What is there to be worried about?

It's not raining! Maenllwyd is perfect. There is a soft smell of incense and all is in its place. I don't take long to unpack and sort out, and by three o'clock I am ready to start my retreat. What to do?

I say the service and chant. I have been taking singing lessons. It's lovely to be on my own. It all flows. I decide to mark time by burning incense sticks and use five before bedtime.

*All alone
Not lonely
Sitting
A Robin joins me for my tea.*

Friday. I wake at seven. Lots of dreams overnight about my childhood and my children- What's going on?

*Soft rain gently falling
I go in
Don't want to get wet.*

I do some exercises and then meditate. I actually want to. After breakfast the jobs take longer than I think and I start sitting again at eleven. Vast silent space appears - where am I - a presence on a cushion but almost transparent.

*Make your mind like a mirror
Be open not closed
Don't let the mind move!*

I walk up the hill. Amazing! The ten thousand things are all here and I am them. I sit on a stone. The sheep stand watching. Cool air through my hair. What else is there? Coming down the hill, I marvel at the beauty and simplicity of it all. Shi fu says, "It's easy!" So it is - sometimes.

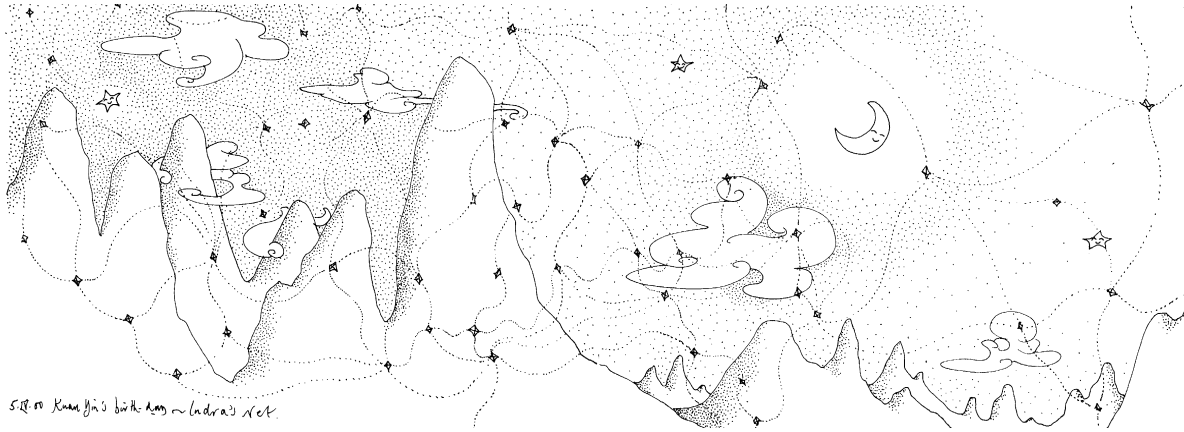
A cup of tea reading NCF 15. Silent illumination. No time to finish before the light goes. I sit again while words from the article spring up at me:

*The essential point of the Buddhas
The central pivot of each and every patriarch.*

The mind sometimes rests at one point. What a privilege.

Saturday. I rise before dawn, have a cup of tea and sit. I am managing on my own and getting the hang of all this now. After breakfast the jobs are done swiftly. A cup of coffee and I sit. It's so open, so transparent, so vast, so silent. No me, no pain, no wants, just everything in acute awareness. This is indeed silent illumination, not just a glimpse but a flow. There is this silence and the mind is still, but there is also this aware presence, a luminosity illuminating. Is the water still right to the bottom? No - lots of fishes but less mud about.

I go for a long walk up and over the hill. It is cold and windy and I make footprints in mud and snow. The sheep run ahead of me. There is a thrill about this aloneness of a windy mountainside yet I am pleased to be back in again for tea. I complete the reading of "Silent Illumination".



"The field is boundless and without limit". Shi fu spoke of the concepts of silent illumination in this building five years ago. I am now beginning to realise some understanding. I can sit. There is a slight shift in attitude and then - amazing - boundless and without limit. What am I doing? I am cultivating the empty field. Waiting with and not for. I enjoy it!

Sunday I go home today but try not to finish too soon. Up at six-thirty to sit with the dawn. A spectacular sunrise.

*Sun rising, golden glimmering
Steam on the window
A cup of tea.*

I clear up, pack the car, jobs done, retreat nearly over. A cup of coffee and one last sit. Mindful of Shi fu's words, faith, humility and gratitude, I am indeed fortunate. I say the closing words and depart.

EVERYDAY TIME

There are many ways to practice in everyday life. Here we take a look at three ways in which practitioners have recently been spending their time.

SILENT RUMINATION

Nick Salt

We stood at the door of Maenllwyd on a damp November afternoon and watched the little convoy of cars winding its way up the muddy track from the village. This was the Radnorshire Planning Committee on its way to carry out a site inspection at the Maenllwyd in the middle of a Chan retreat, and we were ready for them.

When John had bought the disused barn at Maenllwyd he had been wrongly advised by an estate agent that planning permission would not be required to convert it into a part of the retreat centre. We went ahead with the design and building work, and gradually the new Chan hall came into existence. But it was not until it was all finished, and the first retreat was taking place that a malicious, anonymous telephone call was made to the local Council, and a planning officer turned up to find out what was going on.

After months of visits, letters and telephone calls, John was asked to make a formal retrospective application for planning permission. Following yet more months of discussions, drawings and documents (including an eight page letter of complaints, none of them valid, to the Council from the anonymous caller - who was well known to us all), the Planning Committee decided to defer their decision pending a site inspection. The chosen date happened to be in the middle of a retreat, which pleased the planning officer because "the Committee will be able to see what goes on up there". So there we were, waiting for the Members to arrive, and honing our answers.

They stood in the yard and listened patiently to John's careful introduction to Maenllwyd, in which he skilfully skirted around the words Buddhism, meditation and silence (so as to not frighten the horses, he said). We then all filed over to inspect the Chan Hall, where the retreatants were sitting in perfect silence, but fully aware of what was happening. The Members seemed to be impressed by what they saw, and tiptoed around with interest and reverence. "Please tell me", I was asked in a low whisper "why are some people facing the wall?" (He later admitted to me that he thought they may have done something wrong!)

Out in the backfield we gathered to discuss the building in more detail. We explained how it was built, and were going into the principles of the unusual composting toilets when a smile of recognition spread across the face of one of the older Members. "There is nothing new about all that", he said, "Tis just the same as the old 'ty bach' we had down the bottom of the garden when I was a lad." This realisation opened up a flood of fond memories from other Members about their own childhood privies. "We used to tear up old copies of the Radnorshire Express into squares and hang them on a piece of string behind the door." "Ours never smelled bad, and it was the only place you could get a bit of peace." "I remember our ty bach being blown over in a storm." The ice had been broken, and the tension began to lift.

Back at the house Tim had laid on tea and cake, and when the Committee were happily settled down John stood up and asked if anyone had anything else they wanted to ask. We braced ourselves for practical questions about vehicular access, parking, bed numbers,

environmental impact and effluent disposal etc., and waited. After a thoughtful silence a cautious hand went up, followed by a tentative question. "Excuse me Doctor, but please could you tell me if your religion has a god?" It was one of the few times that I have ever seen John Crook struggling for an answer, but he soon recovered his poise and aided by Tim, who seemed less surprised, managed to put together a brief introduction to Buddhism. After that other hands shot up, and the questions came thick and fast... "Why do people come here?" "How often do you meditate?" "Is meditation the same as prayer?" "Why do you have to sit on the floor?" "Are there many Buddhists in Wales?" "Do Buddhists recognise Christ?"... etc. John answered with care and tact, and the kitchen filled with genuine interest, goodwill and extra cups of tea. At one point a disgruntled Member tried to get the Committee back onto the official agenda, but was politely ignored by his colleagues, who had got their teeth into something much more interesting, and were determined to make the most of it.



The visit was over, and the convoy bumped back down the track to the village. I followed at a respectful distance, and on reaching the road junction found an impromptu meeting breaking up and the Members driving off in their cars. The local Member, a retired farmer now living in a bungalow down in the town, came over for a chat. "We were just saying that it was one of the best site inspections we have ever had", he said. "Who would have thought that such interesting things were going on in the hills of Radnorshire?" We carried on talking for a while about the changing patterns of hill farming and rural life, and I sensed a genuine sympathy for what he had just discovered was actually happening up at the Maenllwyd (as opposed to the rumours!). "And, by the way, the Members asked me to thank the Doctor for the very nice tea and cake".

The official planning approval arrived two weeks later, confirming the change of use of the Maenllwyd barn from "agricultural" to "a training facility". A simple oak barn constructed long ago for ruminants had outlived its original purpose, and had been transformed into a space where others could ruminate in silence beneath the ancient timbers. Buildings have spirits (discuss!), and we had helped to guide this one on into its next life through the bardo of redundancy, change of ownership, design drawings, specifications, official approvals, demolitions and building works. But we also know that all phenomena are in constant flux, and that even a Chan Hall can't escape impermanence.

OUCH!

David Shaw

Nothing concentrates the mind like the prospect of execution.

In February 1999, ignoring the evidence of approaching illness I went on a short retreat at Maenllwyd. Soon afterwards however the symptoms led to a visit to a Chest Physician who having excluded tuberculosis left some rather ominous possibilities. It was like getting into a very hot bath...something, which could be only done in stages. It took a day or two to get round to looking on the Internet at the first layer of nasties in the form of some kind of lung cancer, and even longer to get round to the most virulent form. For this last option there were no useful treatments and decline to death was within in 3 -11 months. On the following Saturday, the Physician broke the news that the diagnosis from a CT scan was that of this most aggressive type of cancer. This confirmed all the misgivings, and all I could do was to blurt out that I did not want any heroic treatments.

This was an interesting reaction based partly on cowardice and fear of surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy, whose effects sounded painful, debilitating and prolonged. Which form of suffering should one choose - illness or treatment?

My preference at that time was quality rather than quantity of life and not to spend months or longer defending a deteriorating body. The optimum choice was for complete cure or for something which would kill me off with as little trouble as possible to myself or anyone else. A Chest Surgeon confirmed the likelihood of some form of cancer, with the most aggressive one top of the list.

The directness and honesty of the doctors and surgeons was helpful. They shared what was in their minds and answered any questions in an open way. Their free communication created trust in me and helped acceptance of what they thought was happening. Paradoxically I was wanting time to come to accept unpalatable facts but at the same time was appreciating instant frank responses from the medics.

One lesson that emerged from the experience was the working of my mind. At the best of times, except for the gift of that part of me that is professionally honed, my mind and body are not ideally co-ordinated. A bit of an easily spooked and maladroit colt (despite the chronological age), this mind was experiencing the prospect of dying in the near future, and went from skittishness to stampede... As someone approaching the statutory three score years and ten, part of me said, yes that is enough, its a good innings... what more do you want? But another part screamed for survival... and went from one fear to another and back again.

One of my personal demons is choking. This is a repeated experience following an attack of polio aged 25 which produced a partial paralysis of the throat For little reason the vocal cords snap shut. I struggle for breath and no matter how many times it happens, the demand for breath and the attendant panic are uncontrollable. To have a diagnosis of something which might lead to choking and/or breathlessness, was guaranteed to summon up some monsters.

To this fear was added the fear of dying, of death, of loss of control and independence, of being smelly/incontinent/rotting, of pain, and of a whole range of emotions and anticipated experiences.

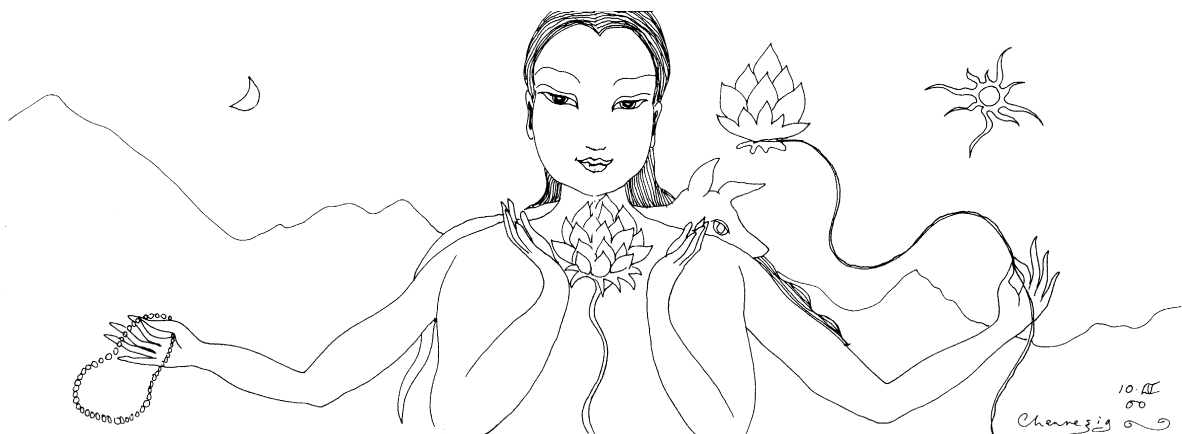
Then I began to notice something happening. We were open with each other and as part of this I looked at and shared the mental arisings with my partner as and when they happened.

Something would arise. Say fear or other distress, and at another time 'that is just how it would be and that was OK'. Storms and calms just came and went.

It became clear that the direction of any of the mental excursions... fear, panic, acceptance, anger, terror, optimism, whatever... was unpredictable... but it even got to the point when I would share a mental state ['positive' or 'negative'] with my partner and just say... well in an hour or two it will be different.

Seeing the mental dramas as such gave space and some ease... neither optimism nor pessimism nor any other mental state could be taken too seriously... and the fears and hopes just arose and went... as stated above, - not an experience to be sought perhaps... but something evoking gratitude for the insight it provided.

There was another lesson, which was renewed awareness of just how much kindness there is in the world. There is the unhappiness we see around us all the time and the horrors brought to us by the media daily, and in contrast I experienced kindness in abundance. As a poorly co-ordinated person physically and with an even more chaotic mind, I have always been in awe of my partner's ability to organise and at the same time be mindful of the needs of people around her however distracting and disturbing is the situation she is in. It is something that could never be taken for granted because it was and is a constant source of wonder. And even at a time like this these gifts continued to flow as waves beneath everything else which happened.



And kindness came in also from our adult offspring, from other members of the family, and then again from any friends and acquaintances who happened to be in contact with us at that time, and outward again from people perhaps unknown to us. Kindness survives in the Health Service too, despite the bad press it receives, and all sorts of individuals were warm, courteous and kind without exception. Being the object of good wishes, prayers, healing circles etc felt as if someone had taken a video of dropping a boulder in a still lake and had played the result backwards - the ripples came from the distance and converged on an epicentre - and that was surprisingly sustaining. It was a very humbling experience.

People said how brave I was being. This statement was totally incomprehensible to me, but it accessed the memory of the same puzzlement when I said exactly the same thing to a close colleague in terminal illness. What is bravery? Perhaps they meant that they would shy from the prospect of death/dying/loss of control/surgery/etc and they assumed that I was not doing this. This was not true. I recoiled from these things but as stated above, what

went on in my mind was a variable and changing feast- now this, now that... the film kept changing from one plot to another without voluntary control. Also, with the prospect of a virtually untreatable disease, 'bravery' became sort of irrelevant...there was no choice - nothing to be decided - its was just all happening without the possibility of saying yea or nay.

Another lesson of this experience was living with uncertainty. There is part me which wants things to be unchanging, but, if that is not to be, would much rather know even if the news is unfavourable. This is not the same as the black and white preferences for a kill or cure diagnosis - its more to do with the discomfort of living in a completely open ended situation.

A week after the diagnostic procedures we were back at home and waiting to hear of the results of the biopsy. There was no shadow of doubt in my mind that I had a highly malignant growth in my left lung. Any equanimity went by the board in favour of getting into a fortress from which the bad news could be heard. As we approached the time of meeting the Surgeon, the castle walls got thicker and thicker. It came as a complete surprise to me that no cancerous cells were found. The likely diagnosis was that of a lung abscess. Such was my inner rigidity that it was hours before I could take it in and begin to unwind and celebrate.

Just over 6 months after the bronchoscopy, the process of recovery seems to have ground to a halt. At least as far as energy, exercise and tolerance are concerned, things do not seem to be improving perceptibly... and the shadow in the lung is about the same size. Or is it the shadow in my mind? heigh-ho... here we go again.

So again there is some uncertainty... it does not feel good to be so tired... but this time the uncertainty is not such a problem... today is enough... and this is the experience of today.

Postscript: Two years on and there is still no diagnosis despite a further lung episode and a level of exhaustion, which is overwhelmingly debilitating and quite unpleasant. What now? And where is my mind now? The drama continues.

Someone once said that external and internal difficulties do not go away until they have taught us all that that they can.

DISTRIBUTING THE JOURNAL

DROPPING IN ON MAENLLWYD DURING A RETREAT (JANUARY 16TH 2001)

Marian Partington

Our kitchen table is about 15 miles away from Maenllwyd. At last it is free from stamps, labels, subscription reminders and freshly printed WCF matter. Doing this mailing work is like sitting. Thoughts and images arise and fall. I watch them as my hand movements become more automatic. A pair of roguish Tibetan monks in the Golden Temple in Patan, Nepal come to mind. They sat at dawn muttering mantras, counting with rice, sliding grains from one pile to another. One of them began to count the paper money that was offered by passing devotees, the other elbowed him back into order.

Moving envelopes from one pile to another I do sometimes sing mantras. Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha. Sometimes I notice a name, or a place on an envelope sticker. I am impressed by the labels that deliver the contents to Hong Kong, Japan, India, U.S.A. Is Iceland zone one? I enjoy the simple repetitive nature of the action, the intention and the attention, and the feeling that I am indeed "getting more involved with John's organisation", as a monk on Shih Fu's retreat advised me to do. I reflect upon the time, commitment and energy that have culminated in NCF23 and its sibling newsletter and retreat programmes. The lineage, the interdependence of this very moment. Is that Eastenders again or another football match that I hear in the background? Will my sons help me this time? Later I am cheered to hear, "Another mail out Mum? Shall I stick some labels on?" Time for another meal, move the boxes onto the stairs for now.

I wasn't surprised that John happened to be in Nick's office when I went in to get a blank cheque for the stamps, the day before the Ch'an retreat. (Let the universe do it). He kindly invited me to "come and sit" when I asked if I could bring his NCF delivery up to Maenllwyd, "we're a bit short of women". I decided that Tuesday would be the day. Yes it would be fine to come in time for the morning service, 6.40.a.m. The retreat would be in its fifth day.

The evening before, I went out to my Tai Chi class in the village hall at Llwyn y gog (cuckoos' grove). I was beginning to get a sore throat. I returned home to the aftermath of an unresolved battle between my partner and his stepson, my son. My son presents me with a tirade, which he has written on the back of his bank statement entitled, "People shouldn't abuse positions of power". He points to a magnetic sticker on the fridge, which anchors a newspaper cutting from today's Guardian: "Those to whom evil is done do evil in return (W.H. Auden)". My partner says that he hasn't eaten supper because he felt sick and he hasn't cleared up either. He is hiding behind a newspaper on our bed. My sore throat feels worse and I want to go to bed early because I want to get up at 5.a.m. My heart sinks.

Both people I love fighting again. I read my son's accusations. I tell him that they are a bit exaggerated, I am taking him seriously, but I am too tired to do more this evening. I also say that he will have to get himself off in the morning because I am leaving very early. My partner is looking reproachful and doleful but I say that I need a torch for the morning and had better sleep in my daughter's room (she's away at university). I just haven't got the energy to get caught up in it. They become like deer with locked antlers and I am not the person to resolve their conflict. It is very painful for everyone when it happens. It can split me in two, like my son has felt when I left his father. Time to sleep. I have a restless night. It feels like the first night of a retreat. How to be free of suffering and help others to move there too?

I wake with a sore throat but no hesitation about getting on my way to Maenllwyd. It is dark when I park the car in the lay-by on the Rhayader road. I follow my cold nose up the mountain. I carry the words in the boxes stacked on the flat of my skull, balanced by a gloved hand. The ground is frozen and my footsteps startle a few sheep near the hedge, who startle a bird in the cluster of pine trees. I am a medieval woman delivering a sack of grain for milling, an African woman carrying a jug of water, a Nepalese woman with planks for a new house up there on the mountain. My destination is marked by two squares of flickering candlelight, hovering and shimmering like luminous flags in blackness, above me. I feel in my element. My heart is opening.



I enter the cottage and deliver the boxes to John's room. I descend the stairs to find Kindness in the Kitchen. He smiles and says, "Are you here for breakfast?" He then offers me his cushion for the sitting before the Morning Service. I slip into the Ch'an hall behind the last retreatant. The heaviness of the previous evening had long dropped away into the frosty night on my way up the mountain to this refuge at Grey Rock. Simply by walking mindfully up a mountain in the dark, balancing some dharma on my head.

The silence at the Maenllwyd has ripened over five days. It is warm, spacious, empty, full of a mixture of suffering and compassion. I bring whatever is within me into that precious place, which pulses with the three jewels. My pain is dissolved. Our grain is being milled. We drink the water. We are building a new house which has Kindness in the Kitchen. We sing the words of the Morning Service. The vows ring true. Some of us wear woolly hats. We are mountain people. We cross the yard for breakfast. Our breath wafts and clouds, a cluster of white, silent balloons.

Ken asks me, "Have you got a place?" I say, "I don't know". Kindness in the Kitchen says, "Yes I've laid one for you." We eat porridge for breakfast. I am smiling inside. I feel perfectly at home in this community of silent souls. I feel grateful, I want to offer my life in some way.

Work period. "Dust and polish in the library. Use your ingenuity for tools." John mutters that it looks as if a bomb has hit the place as I peer in the dawn light unable to see the dust on the surfaces. Yes, it looks like our house does when I go away for too long. I neaten the piles of papers, dust, shake the rugs into the cold air. They ripple and crack and the dust disperses into the dawn air. I took great pleasure in restoring the presence of the jade Kuan Yin from behind some dusty birthday cards and lighting a candle by her so that she glowed

in the dawn light. Yes, light a candle and some incense beneath the painting of Shih Fu. Empty the fruit peelings, fill the jug with juice. Sorting, purifying, polishing my mind.

Ken says, "Nothing like a woman's touch." I could feel patronised but nothing is arising. But I do feel as if I have been rearranging male territory. Treading around other people's baggage. (What difference does it make if they are jumbled piles or neatened piles? Is the urge to tidy mostly a female characteristic? The line between order and chaos is fine and subjective. I often choose to leave cobwebs hanging at home, especially when they are beaded with dead bluebottles). Later, when John is teasingly provocative ("I sometimes wonder if there any women left who want to be nice little girls!") I laugh to myself. What is this 'messy'? Maybe I have stumbled across a feminist koan. After the work session Rebecca leaves and I take her place. Still only three women. Monks and nuns. Are monasteries messier than nunneries?

The dharma talk was so appropriate to my personal needs (how could it not be?). John spoke of partial view and the whole View. About the Wheel of Samsara goaded on by the pig, the cockerel and the snake in the centre. The greed, the hatred, the ignorance sustaining the six states. Also the eight states that we must avoid becoming attached to (fame, love, wealth, joy, poverty, sadness, being unnoticed, and?). The different kinds of love (friendship, spiritual and sexual). As a parent and a partner I must work hard to free myself from my prejudices, delusions and attachments. As a parent and a partner I must be honest about my mistakes and live knowing that every moment is an opportunity for change, to work towards good, to polish and purify ourselves until we shine. Crossing the yard for lunch we wear woolly hats because the sun doesn't break through the icy mist.

After lunch I polish a brass candlestick, whittle and fit a candle, leaving it on the tidied, dusted desk for the evening. I walk down the mountain in the afternoon. The sun is clearing patches of mist and melting frosty hillsides. I return home and write, "Those to whom love is done, do love in return" and stick it on the fridge. My son comes in and we make pizzas for my partner and our younger son and two of his friends. The kitchen is full of kindness again. The NCF23 is finally delivered. Now I can sit down and read it! I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.

TIME ON RETREAT

Retreat reports are an integral aspect of our journal and one much approved of by Shi fu. We print them mostly anonymously and are most grateful to our practitioners for sharing themselves so generously with us. In reading these reports we learn much about the experiences of others on retreat and they often provide pointers for our own understanding.

Poem: A Welsh Hillside in Spring

Nigel Jeffcoat

*Returning again
the gift of stillness
opens around me.
A warm mantle
of silence
enfolds me.*

*All that I am
is here in this hall
I walk back in here
letting go.
All the hall holds
I carry within me
Allowing its teachings
to grow.*

*How hard it can be
not to hunger after grand epiphanies!
Who would have thought
it could be so hard
to sit still?*

*To sit still and not to worry
To sit still and not to desire
To sit still and not to think
To sit still and not beat oneself up
To sit still and not feel superior or special
To sit still and not to regret the past
To sit still and not to dread the future
To sit still and let everything be exactly as it is-*

(Which is the hardest and simplest of all and is all that is required of us anywhere - ever.)

*In these winter afternoons sitting still
descends from the softly glowing skies
like a benediction*

*After the cold sharpness of a walk above the valley
there is tea
Three earthy earthenware pots, steam rising
from their spouts.*

*A plate of freshly baked cakes
big squares of chocolate brownies
gooey, crisp on top
or moist gingerbread, spicy and warm.*

*The fire crackles, spits in the old grate
scarlet sparks
scurry up the chimney.*

*Still figures sit,
hands clasped around mugs
munching delicious cake.
Silence.*

*Outside the bell, gently chiming now.
Pulling on wellingtons to cross the muddy yard,
entering the hall.*

*In the Zendo the wood stove creaks and murmurs in its corner
Warm, still silence fills the space.
Settling on our cushions,
wrapping blankets around our legs
becoming quiet
we wait.*

OMMMMMM

*Take a deep breath
really deep, deep down inside
a breath bigger than you've ever taken before.*

Begin

chant

sing

*Let the chant sing you
Let the breath stream out of you
Let the sound come from the deepest place within you.*

Feel yourself foursquare on the ground and imagine the sound coming from the molten heart of the earth, up through your guts and into your lungs and out into the world mingling with all the other voices filling the hall and the world.

It goes on

unrolling, unfolding, arising, falling, dying away, reverberating, ending, beginning, ending again, arising from emptiness and falling into emptiness, it goes on, it goes on it goes on

A blast

*Harsh, trumpeted.
Lips hard against a conch
forcing a sound
so earthy
old
physical
across the chanting
seeming to speak
of birth, copulation, death.
unexpected
brutal
human.*

The chanting ends when it ends, when it will or will not, it dies away, it diminishes, it whispers away into the walls. Whispers. Away.

*After this to sit is easy
After this everything is as it is
effortlessly
radiant*

*and the is that is
is the silence
around
within
the rise and fall of the breath
going on
going on
on*

*The suchness of silence and the suchness of still sitting
are the same
as the suchness of chanting and the suchness of trumpeting
such am I.*

Amazing grace

Amazing things are happening to me at the moment. I am beginning to realise there is no hurry to get things done, I can be me and enjoy it, no ego is needed, there is nothing to prove.

I understand myself a lot more. Listening is something I now realise I was never in the habit of doing.

The retreat was very special in that it helped me to understand and connect with my pain and emotions (which was difficult for me at the time but looking back has done me a lot of good with regards to relationships with people). I was left with the need to do some deep soul searching within my self in order to find out more about me.

The intensity of the hurt I was feeling was scary to come to terms with, but now it feels as if a big weight has been lifted off my shoulders and I can begin to appreciate myself and be happy about the things I like and dislike.

I feel I am able to act to things instead of re-acting, listen instead of hearing, but I know there are a few more walls for me to work on concerning self-esteem and self-love. Connecting with people on a deeper level is very important. For me knowing and understanding their pain/ hurts and disappointments in life diverts me from myself and makes me feel part of mankind.

Developing a need to spend time in my own company was something I was not in the habit of doing but I now realise that it is so important to assess where I am at this moment in my life.

Connecting with myself and giving myself time to re-charge are very important habits for me now, in order for me to divert that positive energy to others.

The Wind Is A Friend

Retreat Report 11-18 January 2001. Ch'an Retreat.

How on earth to write this? How to give a sense of the significance without attaching too much importance to it? Begin with preparation. One's best fountain pen and block of paper. Wait till the mind is still but alert, casting eyes, hawk-like across the inner landscape, waiting for the moment of movement. What is it? Exactly what is it? Precision.

A first Ch'an retreat at Maenllwyd at a time of potential extremes of wintry weather. The car was stuffed to the gills with survival supplies; rubber boots for if it was wet; walking boots too, in case....in case what? Walking boots because I always take them: a first indicator of habitual programming. Vests, long johns, cuddly mohair socks, two hats. Two? Perhaps that was in case I started putting a "head on my head" while I was there. A hideous, but warm and comforting, big woolly jumper, which identifies one as a person of a certain age who has been to folk festivals. Scarf, gloves, echinacea tablets to keep up the energy levels and ear plugs to keep down the night-time noise. Ironic really, as I was the one snoring most nights. Twice I woke myself up shouting in the midst of strange dreams. I'm sorry for the folks who had to share with me. Lots of "things" to give a semblance of physical comfort and to create "my space" in the Ch'an hall.

I picked up a fellow retreatant at Shrewsbury. Waiting for the arrival of the train, I saw a chap laden down with rucksack and two sleeping bags who got up to go for the Llandrindrod Wells train. That was the station for the Maenllwyd. Was he going there? He looked equipped for it. He looked calm and serene. He could be a Buddhist. Should I offer him a lift? The fabrications one makes are endless. How one seeks for compatriots.

My last decision was about getting food for a week. It was made when we stopped at a jolly veggie cafe complete with yellowing scented geraniums in the window. They were abandoning parts of themselves in the form of dead leaves in the interests of future growth. A model of ego-less development, but not one that I have managed to take on-board. I was in Wales, so I ate baked potato with cheesy leeks. I followed with Italian bread and butter pudding, made with Panettone to give it that continental twist. I didn't need it but I knew that sweets were off the menu for a week and part of me felt like one condemned. "Any last requests?"

By this point I noticed that my anxiety levels were high. Excitement, fear, dread, hope: all of these were ricocheting around my head like a bouncing super-ball. Crystals of adrenaline were pricking the insides of my arms and legs. How would it be? How would I be? Stop faffing about and just get on with it. We set off and got lost. How symbolic. Irritation added a layer to the anxiety. I turned the car around from the darkening valley and retraced my tracks. Now we were headed into the light of the evening. The hills were lit with a heart-breakingly golden pink glow of sunset. My heart too changed direction. Enraptured by the sight that I forgot to feel guilty about my temper.

Coming through the yard at the bottom of the lane, the dogs didn't bark. Up the track "being mindful of the ruts" and there, as you bend to the right, the first sight of Blue Mountain Ch'an Temple. A quick confab about this being the last opportunity to turn around and forget it, but my chest was already opening up, my throat wanted to shriek with joy and I was suffused with a desire to run up the lane shouting "Brilliant!" like the bloke on the "Fast Show". I compromised on an inordinately wide grin and pushed down on the accelerator. Control always has been one of my issues.

I hadn't seen John to speak to for years. How do you say hello to transmitted Ch'an master on his home ground when it is dawning on you how much you owe to him? In this case he gives me a hug. The retreat was going to be OK. Anxiety and fear subsided.

A few hours of "gubbins" followed; the putting of stuff in places, bags on beds, cushions in Ch'an hall, food in the kitchen. Gradually, the civilised "me" went up the chimney with the flames and smoke from the logs. I was disappearing into the ancient stones of the walls, sinking into the foundations, blurring and blending with this place.

Tea arrived and biscuits. I walked past, picked up a biscuit and dropped it onto the stone floor. Propriety was gone. I picked it up, brushed it against my fleece and ate it. The muck and I would merge before long anyway, so a practical manifestation of the principle seemed entirely apposite. The chat about why we had come brought me back to a more usual frame of mind as I made some snap judgements gazing at my fellows for the week. When will I learn this simple lesson? God knows what they thought of me. But we were all in this together.

The opening ceremony made me want to weep. I saw it more as a formal opening of the heart rather than an opening of the retreat. "Our contract together we well understand..." A monastery of the spirit for a week, a whole week. What a luxurious opportunity. AWAKE!

And I was, awake that is, for part of that first night. I slept in three layers and a hat and was still cold. The damp, freezing air spiked my lungs with every inbreath. Breathing inside the sleeping bag was less cold but more humid and somehow putrid. The sensations of cold reminded me of where I was. A strangely pleasant discomfort. I waited for "morning boards" and put on yet more layers.

Exercises in the yard in the visible presence of bright stars. Living close to a city I don't get to see that many stars and I was, as always, fascinated. My body moved to the instructions given silently: the yearly stages of acceptance. No decisions to make, beyond tahini or peanut butter on my bread. Everything laid on. Simple luxury.

In the Ch'an hall, the big wooden fish was having a pattern beaten out on its head. I felt the sound rather than hearing it. The big heng, even when struck gently, sent out its message in waves of sound: ee-ow-oo--eeow-oo, as though riding a series of crests journeying on: to where? Inviting, instructing, directing. Somehow I hear the heng with another part of my mind that is not much to do with the aural sense. Sitting was not uncomfortable but was "noisy" and busy and not exactly settled. More like an enclosure of agitated chimpanzees in a zoo. Despite this, a comforting rhythm arose; darkness pierced through with lamplight; shuffling on one's bottom to find the "easy spot"; hands coming together in gassho; head moving down in a bow; the body moving in accordance with the traditions of the ancients; moving around the hall feeling the fibres of one's socks pushing against the skin of the feet; the periodic groan of the pine forest as a floor board speaks back.

The first day's chanting was not so musical. John struggled bravely through with the rest of us a beat and a half behind him in time and in a discordant harmony out of keeping with a unison chant. But it was all part of that coming together process; finding a voice and realising a unity. We had come from so many different places; geographically, socially, chronologically, emotionally, but here we all were in the ice and frost of the farmyard of compassion, each at our blind signpost.

Breakfast was jolly enough. Who would sit where? Could the crockery in my cup be a little more quiet during the washing up process? I felt a little clumsy or gawky. Back to adolescence? Time does funny things at Maenllwyd. A chance to re-visit karma perhaps.

The day moved on through its cycle, work, rest, sit, eat, walk, watch. The talk gave me two words to hold and use; "now" and "new".

Slowly, slowly, my mind gave over control to my body and a different part of me directed the pace. The days merged, dovetailing different aspects of existence. My body awoke and tapped into its own folk memory. I nestled into the body of the land as the house nestles into the hillside. The icy slopes became a lover whose familiar frame nurtures and gives succour. The stream laughed and joked and shouted "Be alive!" and she and I lay down together a few times, when I was shocked into realising both my vitality and mortality. Always afterwards, the chi would be racing around pouring from every orifice and tinkling away, chortling down the valley.



The immensity of life came from the vast expanses of intergalactic light coursing across the sky, streams of stars some nights, calling out to the tiniest particles of plankton and the individual cells of the pine trees on the hillside. Here were the "10,000 things". And I was of no importance in that grand scheme. Yet I too was amongst the 10,000. I was of no less importance than that rock or that wag-tail. I "was" and that was enough. There was no more. A single star shone through a frame of branches against the night's black space. Star, tree, hill, eye, space, time, no difference, no dimension, no forwards, no backwards, no then. Only now. Love is an overworked word to describe this.

Prostrations were a good release of gratitude and repentance and "AH OH OM" a beautiful way of opening up emotional blockages. But the burning of the names at the fire puja and the sweet singing of the Tara mantra was a highlight and gave symbolic closure to some past karmic issues for me. That was a precious gift. Weeping into the prostrations. Reconciliation. It is over. Without a name I am light, free and airy, but not insubstantial.

So what is it that makes Blue Mountain Ch'an Temple so special? For it is uniquely blessed. It is partly geographic, tucked into the hillside at the end of a blind valley; good feng-shui as John said. It is partly architectural; the buildings "fit" into the landscape neatly and appropriately but with a quirky individuality. Have you noticed how the gable end of the Ch'an hall "looks" out down the valley with those triangular windows seeming to be gazing out as though "ts'an-ing" with intense concentration? It is the simplicity of the facilities. That which one needs is present; shelter, water, some heat, but there is nothing extraneous, no unnecessary light, nothing to lull one into crippling social mores. It is the way things are done; strict with the group, gentle with the individual and according to ancient custom proven by time but so subtly modified to be appropriate to the cultural setting.

The place has good heart. It has its own tradition, come down from John and moving on through others like Simon. I once asked the Abbess of San Fransisco Zen Centre why the place felt so welcoming and she told me that it was the legacy of Shunryu Suzuki. His ways and presence had imbued the place and I suppose the people were conduits for that. The same is true for the Maenllwyd. Except that we still have John with us and can see the process in action.

The other reason that Maenllwyd is special is the teaching. John has a way of making the Dharma accessible to modern lay life without diminishing it or losing sight of the hugeness or specificity of it. There is room to grow at the Maenllwyd. There is a gentleness of holding that goes on here that I find difficult to express. It goes beyond unconditional regard. It is involuntary compassion. For the first time for me, here was a glimpse of compassion without cost-counting. No giver, no receiver, just a flow of movement. If I think about it, I lose touch with it. It seems only visible from the air, when looked at with "the eye of a soaring eagle". I have had some years in a wilderness where I sought the Dharma elsewhere. What I have realised is that what was going on for me at that time WAS the dharma, if I had but known it.

There were some exquisite moments in meditation. One was a time when I had been feeling a bit low and self-deprecating. Meditation moved into a flat, calm land. Still, but not void. My body opened up from the sternum out and turned itself inside out. I can find no other words to describe this. It was extremely visceral and yet completely unconcerning. My insides were on the outside. "I" was both inside and outside watching this with detached interest. This "form" lacked dimension. There was nothing to stand on as there was nothing to stand. Everything and nothing together. Nothing mattered, while everything "was" in that placeless place. "Doc, doc, ting", and back; back into time and space. Returned by a bell.

Another boundary blurring experience involved a solitary, singing bird. The bird was singing away outside the hall and seemed to enter, via the singing into my heart. Bird, song and heart became one.

*A black feathered bodhisattva sings in an icy landscape.
She and the song enter my cracked, frozen heart
And the decay of dis-ease is eaten away.
Look! It beats and pumps with pink vigour!*

One morning the "thought for the day" was:

"The world is asleep. Can you hear it? That's all I have to say."

When I heard this, it made me weep. I cannot think about it now without weeping. The world is asleep and suffering. If I listen to it, I hear the pain and feel overwhelmed. I am swamped by the 10,000 things. Yet, if there can be stillness and silence, listening can happen through the ear of heart and the natural flow is not impeded. There will still be pain and sleep, but these can be shared by open, wide awake compassion.

At the Maenllwyd the shadows obscuring "suchness" are very thin. It is a place to slow down and watch. If one sits still and looks closely, the wind blows and moves the veil aside momentarily. The wind is a friend.

"Where Will And Power Are One" ¹

When I first began to practise Zen, I fondly believed I had stumbled on a marvellously direct, almost foolproof road to the truth. Having had an apocalyptic LSD experience, when all I had to do to see that the universe and I were one, was to breathe in and open my eyes, I imagined Zen was essentially simple - Just relax into the abyss!

Perhaps because this is essentially the case, and because most great Zen masters talk out of the absolute, there is a popular belief that all you have to do to practise Buddhism is to watch the ever-changing parade of thoughts and feelings in one's mind.

Even so, we start off already turned to the outside and therefore split in ourselves. It is for this reason that it states in the Ox-Herding pictures, that, even if the herdsman wants to throw off his passions and opinions and find the Buddha, he cannot. That meeting is only possible when the passions and opinions are seen into, right down to their very ground, so that everything is revealed as the Buddha. The third patriarch said that the sickness of the mind is to set up what it likes against what it dislikes. Unless we see what we are clinging onto, and what we are denying, and gradually come to face the split in ourselves, liberation is impossible.

My teacher emphasised that the head did not know the way home; it was in courageously facing the waves of feeling and relaxing into them, that the waves themselves could take you back to the source. I remember sitting my first sesshin; I felt that I could not breathe and that I was breaking into a ghastly cold sweat; I got up and went to my teacher and said 'I'm going to faint'. She snapped, 'If you faint, you just faint, go and sit down!' I sat down again, and felt myself collapsing into a puddle of fear and that any will-power I had ever automatically associated with being able to do something was disappearing likewise. Gradually as I died into the puddle of fear, I felt love filling me - something I had never known before. Hard as this was, it was paradigmatic. Sitting still, fear came up which I had previously disowned and held down with self-will and pride. Lived completely, fear dissolved into its own nature. In relinquishing 'my' grip, it had felt like dying, but this made room for the Joy of Being.

Although such experiences initially gave me the confidence to let go, I eventually came across a wall in myself I seemed to be unable to penetrate. This drove me into psychotherapy. I was lucky, the last monastery I lived in turned out to be near a community started by a trance medium who had given a number of profound lectures on the images and the vicious circles in which the mind gets lost. Together with a psychiatrist she married, they evolved a way to see, focus and dissolve the barriers to relaxing into the clear light of the void. Within this perspective, the ego has to be strong enough to let go of itself. What does this mean?

As a child, we glimpse the Joy of an undivided life-force. Confusing this with our will, we strive to get pleasure for ourselves, and wall off the pain and frustration we encounter. In linking pleasure to an idea of ourselves and to Life, we split off pain and death and the other. (Which is why admitting a mistake, or giving up a point of view brings up the fear of death). So we lose our sense of the whole. We try to replace this by relying on our parents' voices, as we hear them in our minds, telling us how to react. This layer of ourselves strives to prove that we are good, and does its best to deny our pain and anger. Whilst we feel that we have to live up to our pretences, it is crazy-making. We are imprisoned by the stories our mind insists on, unable to acknowledge or let down into the truth of what we are

¹Dante's password through the gates of Hell

actually thinking and feeling. Only as we come to see, identify, and understand the Job that our inner tyrant attempted to do, are we no longer identified with it.

Acknowledging our pretences, and seeing how we have learnt to manipulate others, and ourselves, exposes us to the energy of the drives in our hearts that drove us to hold on and resist in the first place. In Buddhism, these energies are called the three fires of greed, anger and delusion. In psychotherapy, we understand these fires as largely the desperate attempt of the child in us to manipulate and control the outside, and refuse anything else in ourselves which might threaten this strategy.

It is hard to cope with this hitherto unconscious, omnipotent and egotistic child. When we are children, we take everything personally: if our father leaves home we may think that it was our fault. We may form an image that men will always abandon us. Of course, we are then likely to withhold ourselves from intimacy, and subtly provoke the other person into doing the very thing we fear. Unless we can begin to feel how we ourselves say No to the fulfilment we long for on another level, we will feel victimised by Life.

We first have to see that we hold on tight, and how we do it, before we can dare to take our foot off the brake. The child in us, who came to repeat certain hard won conclusions about who we had to be, to survive, cannot give up his grip, until he is infused with the light and warmth of awareness, and begins to sense something more glittering than what he is holding onto. It is as if we are lost in a soliloquy, where we are blindly insisting on our demands, and thereby either aggrandising an illusion of ourselves, or seeing ourselves as a victim.

This struggle is so confusing and contradictory that it is generally pushed below the threshold of awareness. A large part of psychotherapy is precisely about bringing these conflicts into awareness so that there is a chance to work through the issues involved.

Dogen says, "When the opposites arise, the Buddha Mind is lost." Consequently, unless we come to see how we have split ourselves, we cannot enter 'the Middle way'. Can we give it up? A medical students' joke runs that neurotics build castles in the air, psychotics live in them, and the psychiatrist collects the rent. The Buddha says something very similar when after his enlightenment he said, "For many births I sought in vain, the Builder of this House of Pain, now Builder, thee I plainly see. No more shall you build a house for me."

Living in one's own shoes, the castle dissolves. When we begin to practise, it takes a long time to see and Journey through all these layers of reaction.

Acknowledging and bearing how we have turned away from the truth of our own heart, begins to bring us the strength to let go. Acknowledging and observing the feelings and thoughts of the Judge inside of us enables us to step back into the place of the observer. Acknowledging, bearing and observing the feelings of the Judged part of ourselves allows us to stand in the strength behind the feelings. As we begin to acknowledge and surf the waves of our heart, rather than tighten up against them, or allow ourselves to be driven by them, so we begin to trust our identity with the whole ocean. At this point it is no longer so threatening, to allow a wave to arise and pass back into the unnameable.

The ego (as a provisional sense of our whole self, a willingness to acknowledge and take responsibility for all the waves of thought and feeling) is essential in this process as an integrator, who fights to see our misconceptions, our irrational and destructive feelings, and to reach out to bring the light of the-Buddha into all of our dark corners. Unless the ego progressively takes responsibility for all of our thoughts and feelings, it is not strong enough to abandon self-will and trust in the Buddha.

Beyond A Name

My previous sesshins often consisted of three or four days of pain and struggle to reach half a day or one day of serenity, with glimpses of transcendence. I have been on eight Rinzaï Zen five-day sesshins over the years. I was better prepared for this retreat than for any previous ones. In the weeks leading up to it I had been regularly meditating and reading the dharma. I had not been working full-time, so I had not got a build-up of stress. This time I hit pay dirt after only two days of struggle and was flying for the rest of the week. Lucky me.

It must have helped me that the felt atmosphere in the Maenllwyd was warmer (not the weather, though!), more flexible, and more down-to-earth than in the strict and even a bit authoritarian Rinzaï I had been used to before. I felt that I was being given the freedom to make informed choices about how to access the dharma, and how to interpret my experiences. This strengthened my trust in my own sense of the inner world. One can get too dependent on one's teachers and on doctrine.

Master Rinzaï himself actually makes the same point: "You take the words of these ordinary Zen teachers for the real Way, supposing that...as an ordinary person you dare not attempt to assess these old timers. You are blind if you take this view all your life, contrary to the evidence of your own two eyes." (Linji, translated by Thomas Cleary.)

John's teaching of Silent Illumination was a revelation to me. I found a great spaciousness welling up in me, alive with a sort of calmly seething life-force; it was an emptiness that was full, full of something buoyant and aware. I observed it carefully and tried to define it but John told me to stop running commentaries and just abide in it. I did that.

After a day in my Silent Illumination the world changed. When I had first I had arrived at the Maenllwyd and glanced around I thought, "Yes, I can see it's a bit of a beauty spot with rolling hills and sheep and so on, but it's Welsh, and not as dramatic as the Lake District... and it's bloody cold," and I went inside hoping for a fire. But now the veil of my suspicious judgement had been removed from the world, and I was laughing in delight at the frost, marvelling at the icicles hanging on grass-stems over the stream (Master Basho was right! "Nothing is as beautiful as ice,"), lost in admiration of the bare tree silhouettes, ravished by the afternoon's weak sunlight. I was falling in love with the place.

We did prostrations and I apologised again and again to the people in my life for not loving uncritically, unsuspectingly, for not being a strong centre of love for them, a fountain of nourishment for those around me. Tense, critical and mean, that's how both my partners and I had been too often.

John lectured on the illusory nature of the self and tied it in brilliantly with other Buddhist ideas so that one aspect of the dharma threw light on all its other features. I also felt it in the meditations. The spacious life-force I experienced was no doubt exactly the same as the life animating all other sentient beings, and the same that I would have experienced as a new-born baby with no idea of who I was supposed to be. I took it to be the basic 'reality' of me, and saw my public personality and private vanities as a trivial side-show.

For the first time in my ten years as a Buddhist, the baffling teaching about how the self does not exist and must be overcome appeared simple and self-evident to me.

With immaculate timing, John arranged a beautiful Tibetan name-burning ceremony and I consigned my 'self' to the fire. It was no great wrench. I felt perfectly light-hearted.

John read out quotations from Master Hongzhi, and I was struck by his wonderful phrase in discussing the Silent Illumination meditations: "Romp and play in the centre..." When I added that advice to John's advice to "abide" in the centre, a whole new dimension of delight was liberated, a bliss that was funny, and held out the hope that I could become an opening onto a fountain of nourishment for others.

It is now ten days since I returned from the retreat. I have managed to nurse my Silent Illumination samadhi along, preserving it carefully so that I have access to it whenever I sit. I also feel it when I read the dharma and when I watch the sun on the sea, the clouds darkening the West and the mist rolling in from the Channel. I don't feel any sense of lack or dependency. I'm no longer anxious about the meaning of the dharma. I read the great Chan masters of the Tang and Sung dynasties and I feel I can see exactly what they mean. I can judge their wilder, combative pronouncements from my own experience.

I'm mildly dubious now, because it all seems so easy and there is a long Zen literary tradition of gloating over the years of pained struggle required. Yet perhaps all my previous, painful work has been the basis of the liberation I now feel. I had been moving forward, I suppose. Over these years I have freed myself from various dependencies. I don't drink or smoke any more. I'm no longer a workaholic, and I don't cling out of fear to needy relationships. Anyway, I'm grateful.

Growing Up

SEVEN DAY CH'AN RETREAT 11-18 JANUARY 2001

This retreat was significantly different from my first two visits to the Maenllwyd; and it was certainly very different from my previous Ch'an retreat with Master Sheng-yen at Gaia House in July 2000, where I had found myself crippled by old emotional baggage - baggage which had been evoked by some parallels between the setting and structure of the retreat, and some very early boarding school experiences. Since the summer, however, I had continued with my personal practice of zazen: I have found it increasingly important in my life, and have not been discouraged from my overall commitment to, and delight in, Ch'an by the experience of the summer.

Arriving in Wales - experiencing the bumpy ride up the track to the house, with its pauses for the opening and closing of several gates - felt like an inner homecoming. The externals of life, the everyday demands of my personal and professional life, dropped away very quickly; and soon there was warmly established an inevitable and expansive sense of being centred, in the right place - once again. I also knew now (as a result of what I had learned on previous retreats) that whatever was to unfold during the coming week, whether difficult or joyful, would be an aspect of the truth: both my personal, karmic truth, and the much wider truth of the Dharma. I had a sense of confidence in what I was doing, and expressed this confidence during the introductory meeting once everyone had arrived; I said that I had not found the Maenllwyd - it had found me.

An icy, uncharacteristic, east wind blew throughout the first night of the retreat, which made sleep difficult in the upper floor of the Ch'an hall, where I was billeted for the first time. However, the weather gradually changed and calmed during the first full day of the retreat, and thereafter the week was dry, but still very cold: there were frequent heavy frosts and thick mists, and sometimes these would only lift briefly for an hour or two during the afternoon.

If there was a certain constancy in the mood of the midwinter weather, then the same felt true of my practice as the week unfolded. As we began to sit, I would become aware of my habitual psychological and emotional reactions to difficulties in meditation, which in the past had unbalanced me and led to a miserable sense of paralysis: but this time I was able more readily to notice all this stuff, and to realise that I had a choice about how I could react to it. I could allow it to overwhelm me, or I could simply be aware of it, acknowledge it, and patiently return to my method. Overall I felt I succeeded in this mindful aspect of practice during the retreat, and as a result I never slid down into the grip of my familiar demons.



I gradually became aware of my personal daily rhythm, the ebb and flow of energies, and John had alluded to this in a talk. As always, I found the opening moments of the early morning sit very moving: the quality of the silence created by the fading beats of the drum, followed by a feeling of engagement and commitment arising from the repetition of the opening words. I experienced two or three very expansive, still meditations at this time of day - a luminous brightness would gradually establish itself, my heart would fill, and my breathing slowed and deepened. I sat for an hour easily and lightly on a couple of mornings.

The sits before lunch generally had a less spacious quality, but still seemed to achieve a certain steady level of lucidity; wandering thoughts were present, but riot clamouring for attention, and physical aches and pains sometimes intruded; but these too did not dominate my attention.

The long afternoon period following lunch was my least good period, and I was relieved when we broke the sequence with a period of direct contemplation outside. This sometimes led to a more focussed sit after we returned to the hall.

My energy would rise decisively again for the mantra, which I have relished since my first visit. Allowing the mantra to "take charge" is an invigorating process, and the silence created as it gradually dies away is extraordinarily intense and rich; the transition to meditation is effortless and deeply satisfying. The sense of a unified, communal meditation is very strong, enhanced as it is by the sounds of breathing gradually returning to their normal pattern. I felt that I could sit in this rich stillness and inner spaciousness almost indefinitely: all striving and intentionality seemed to have been washed away by the mantra.

The last sits of the day usually retained some of the flavour of the previous period, and I would retire upstairs to sleep within the atmosphere we had all generated in the hall during the day, feeling peaceful and a part of the retreat process.

I was allowed a view of the retreat process from a different perspective during this week. On my arrival I saw that my name was down as timekeeper for the Tuesday, and I at once experienced a little flurry of panic at being asked to take on this responsibility: however, this soon faded, and I resolved to do the job as mindfully as possible. When the day came, I was delighted to notice how much I relished the role, and how good it felt to be playing my part in taking care of everyone from my place at the end of the hall. It was very moving to see the two rows of straight figures working so stilly and determinedly at their practice, and I look forward to doing the job again on my next retreat: it felt like a further step on the path of my engagement with Ch'an - for we practice for the sake of others as well as ourselves.

As we stood in little groups in the yard on the last morning of the retreat, warming up our cars beneath the thickly frosted branches of the trees, I remarked to one or two people that I felt I had an some sense "grown up" on this retreat: a stage of maturity and conviction about the path on which I had found myself embarking nearly two years ago appeared to have been reached. The sense of rightness, of fitness and confidence about being where I was could not have been stronger. I drove home in a single arc, focussed and mindful - "just driving".

During the retreat I made prostrations every day in gratitude for what has been unfolding and growing since I started to come to Wales. Gratitude and confidence are my main feelings as I complete this report.

Seven Years Later!

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT DEC 2000

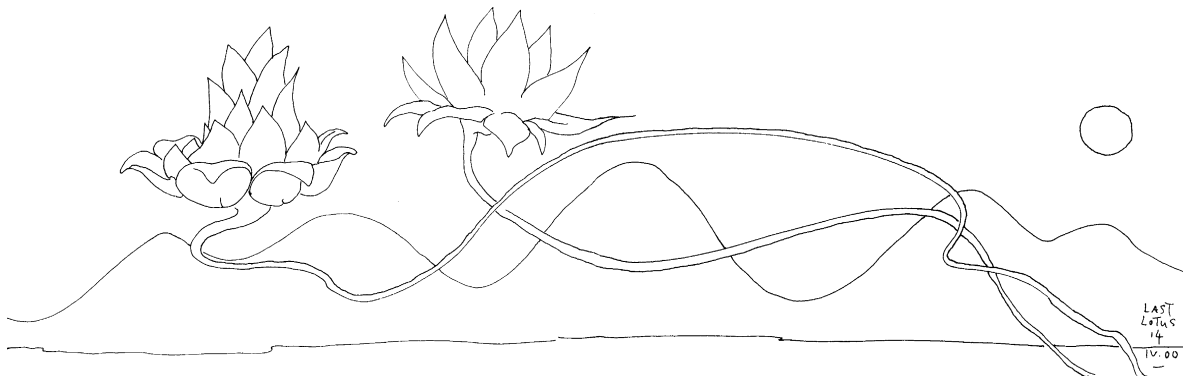
It was the first time in seven years that I had been back to Maenllwyd. I had not seen the new Ch'an hall and was very impressed with the conversion. Sleeping arrangements had improved vastly though the slightly hillbilly, unkempt hay barn look had sadly disappeared.

As to the retreat. Sitting was not bad at all. Slightly more formal than in the old upstairs room. But plenty of zafu's. Not much wall gazing. Settling down not bad at all. Legs cramped at first. Kneeling with three cushions much better. Koan dropped in. Mind in various states. Drifting, chuntering, still and quiet. What is love? Ah well that would be telling... And the communication exercises? Somehow less intense than being crammed in like sardines, the group dynamic slightly more laid back but just as revealing, less explosive.

Many personal insights into the ground of one's being. Telling reflections about the past interweaving with the present. Visualisation of Tibetan paintings which appear naturally, Yab Yum, compassion and wisdom. The interconnectedness of it all. Love that appears in strange unexpected places, triggered off by small connections. The overflowing of one's being into a state of knowing acceptance. Acceptance with wisdom, the laws of impermanence, the compassion arising, love that knows no boundaries, a feeling of space and emptiness within which everything wells up. The good, the bad and the ugly... beauty that comes from small stories or anecdotes heard long ago, chance meetings, small fractions of life that meet for a moment, voices and expressions, the deep intense feelings of sadness that eat your heart out, the small shifts of perception, the letting be, the letting through, each

insight deeper than the last, small recurrences that echo again and again the immeasurable depth like swimming in an ocean of awareness.

The fulfilling of one's life in small unexpected areas, childhood memories that spring back into life, memories that have somehow shaped our lives in unexpected ways, a glance at the Buddha, the gold gilt, the expression, the hands folded, or not as the case may be, the teaching pose, images of Bodhgaya, leaves under the bodhi tree, the endless kaleidoscope of images flowering, resonances that flow from one to another, the internal shiftings the siftings of the mind coming from the very core, the inner truths that are often obscured. The quiet spaces, the empty flow of outer and inner where the divisions melt, and there is no movement apart from an almost imperceptible breath and even that has its own small stream within the body of the room that does not move except with the wind, and through the windows the arms of trees flail amidst the echo of sheep who stalk the green, wet flanks of sodden hillsides that funnel the water ever more precipitously towards the small bridge that is almost swallowed up in the flood's insistence.



And the mind takes this all in, as the weather worsens. Rain is only rain and wind, wind. We pause and wait for it to stop but it never does except for a brief moment when the full moon rises up and the clouds race.

No words can possibly express the intense feeling of sadness that I felt from time to time at the ending of a very dear and wonderful relationship. And yet no words could also possibly express the intense feeling of love and completeness and compassion which also welled up when I thought about various events and landscapes and voices that had intermingled with my own small, personal childhood history in West Devon on the edge of Dartmoor- visions that lasted for half an hour. And all this somehow triggered by an association with Oxford and a meeting with Michael Aris, a card on the offering table that showed a picture of himself and Suu in 1973 in Burma perfectly at ease and in love with each other. So sad that he should die without them being together for so many years... Love, separation death. Impermanence. Impermanence.

Brief encounter

A Shorter Ch'an Retreat, Maenllwyd, 5-9 October 2000

I was one of 11 participants on the second "Shorter Ch'an Retreat", a new retreat format recently introduced by the Western Ch'an Fellowship and led by Simon Child and Hilary Richards.

Prior to the formal opening of the retreat in the Ch'an Hall there were the usual brief self-introductions in the main building over cups of tea. One person seemed to think that a retreat of only 3 full days was going to be an easy option. However, I suspect that once the schedule got underway, we all found it pretty tough-going. This schedule incorporates twelve 30-minute periods of meditation per day, plus a further 2 hours or so of sitting in the Ch'an Hall for the morning and evening services and then the talk before the final two periods of zazen. In fact, Simon told us on the closing morning that in some ways a shorter retreat had all the difficulties of the first half of a full-length 6-day Ch'an retreat, but none of the relative easiness of the second half, when retreatants have adapted to the rigours of the routine and can to some extent "coast" along.

I had been on one previous WCF retreat, a "Western Zen Retreat" in April, and by the end of the first full day of this Ch'an retreat I felt that the method of just sitting and trying to maintain a continuous simple awareness of sitting there (as a sitting, breathing, often thinking being) was a lot more difficult than the method, practised at the Western Zen Retreat, of pursuing a specific question such as "Who am I?" with an increasingly urgent, total-being desire-to-know. There seemed less to hold onto moment by moment. And yet, as I reflect now, post-retreat, all one needs to do moment by moment is to be aware of what is presenting itself at that moment: the weight of the body, the sensations of breathing, the sensations of the muscles, the play of thoughts. Boredom.

But that leads me to a BIG difficulty I experienced as the present moment became painfully boring! I'd never felt this so intensely before. Just this body sitting there, a wall in front of it, and that breath all the time, increasingly annoying! One breath, then another, then another. One more. One more. Then another one. Then another. This repeated experience of the breath became intensely irritating. My entire experience began to feel like deprivation, an existential straitjacket.

Reflecting on this now, I think I made a mistake in just staying blindly with this boredom of the present moment. It would have been more efficient to have deliberately analysed why I felt thus, and then to have gone back to experiencing it.

Analysis

So here is my post-retreat analysis: it seems to me that my boredom was also a longing for more diverse experience. But why do I find more "diverse" experience desirable? It would still be me, experiencing something. Perhaps it is because the colourful and fast-changing complexity of so-called normal experience diverts me from myself to so-called "external" things, so that the difficulties of confronting myself do not get a chance to manifest themselves. Just as a well-made film diverts me from my own life. I think this is a fruitful line of questioning. I will try to return to it, perhaps during my next retreat, when that awful boredom, verging on the sense of being horribly imprisoned with myself, will probably arise again.

Once again during this retreat I had to confront the problem of intense pain in my knees and legs. At one point, I found myself thinking, "This Zen way is too hard for me, too painful, too boring. I'm going to give it up." This is a problem that I will have to deal with in the

future. From what I have heard, we all have to face it. However, I have a new guide to dealing with it -- some words from a talk that Master Sheng-Yen gave on a retreat in Croatia in 1997.

It was thanks to Simon that I came across these helpful words. In my interview with Simon, he identified my method of meditation as so-called Silent Illumination and subsequently gave me a copy of a transcript of a talk by Master Sheng-Yen about this method. Some of Sheng-Yen's words were among the clearest descriptions of how to sit in zazen that I have ever come across, and also gave advice on dealing with pain. I find the following passage so clear and so useful that I will quote it here:

"In this approach [the more tense approach of Just Sitting] maintain a very good posture. Keep the body motionless. Do not move at all, despite pain, itching, numbness, or soreness. Such discomfort should be viewed as a favorable condition for practice. These sensations make the experience of sitting very apparent and clear. Now maintain the sense of knowing the motionless body to be aware of the body's weight and maintain a clear-cut awareness of the presence of the whole body.

A step beyond this you may experience a joyful feeling. This comes about by reorienting the way in which you deal with pain. Experiencing pain, especially extreme pain in the knees, legs, back, and even the abdomen, may greatly reduce or eliminate wandering thoughts. The pain tells you that the body is right there. Do not fix or localise your attention on the pain, nor should you simply try to endure it. Rather, relax and allow the body to have pain and *place the sensation in the context of the whole body* [my italics]. This may be difficult to do, but it is the best way to deal with pain."

End-of-Retreat First-Person Reports

I thought that the end-of-retreat "debriefing" session, during which each participant, sitting in the Ch'an Hall, spoke briefly about how she or he had found the retreat, was an excellent practice and a useful addition to the established Western Ch'an Fellowship pre-retreat self-introduction by the participants, during which each person speaks briefly about why they have come and what they hope to gain from the retreat.

For me, this debriefing session was a lesson in humility. As people spoke, I realised that I had out of stupid habit described each person to myself and ignorantly and automatically evolved an image of each person that was now shown up as false. The old "don't judge a book by its cover" situation. For example, the person sitting next me in the Ch'an Hall had always appeared to me to be extremely focused. And yet she reported that she had had to struggle with drowsiness for much of the time. I will try harder to relate to people objectively and to avoid the subjective, emotional judgements that cloud my perceptions of others.

Useful Advice and Suggestions for Practice

Simon gave us very useful practical advice in a couple of his talks. He mentioned techniques for overcoming drowsiness. One such technique is the extremely common-sense one (despite which it had never occurred to me before) of removing a layer of clothing to cool the body and so remain alert. As Simon said (and as the first clear, breathtakingly starry night in Wales proved), when you are cold in bed it is hard to sleep! Another useful anti-drowsiness tip is to look straight ahead at the wall rather than downwards at the floor. And keep those eyes open!

Simon also introduced the practice of prostrations. Again, this is a practice that I had never thought of undertaking. I would previously have dismissed it as part of the "religious trappings" of Zen. Simon pointed out that we could do it in various ways. We could start

off by "seeding" the practice with a particular emotion/thought such as repentance, and then either let the process flow and other feelings arise spontaneously, or deliberately work on particular feelings other than "repentance". Well, I'm not big on all this feeling stuff, but nonetheless I found that this prostration practice did elicit emotions. In my case, the nifty little movements of the hands (the sequence of palms flat on floor, making fists, turning fists upwards, opening them, holding the hands open upwards on the floor, then reversing and making fists, turning them downwards, and finally opening up the hands facing the floor!) turned out to be a particularly rich source of spontaneous thoughts and feelings.

Anyone turned off by all this religious stuff? Luckily, my attitude at a Zen retreat is to try everything (except the porridge) with as open a mind as possible. For example, reciting sutras in Chinese or English is not something I am drawn to, but I'm happy to do it. I suppose we all have some favourites among them, or some favourite lines, and reading or chanting these feels good.

(NB. I was helped by the fact that my work involves reading Japanese. As a result, having the Chinese characters on the page along with the English was a source of extra meaning that I found invaluable.)

Food, Food, Glorious Food!

The food was excellent. Luckily, meal times are short, otherwise I would eat more than I need simply because the tastes and food combinations created by the cook are so good. Several times, while eating Pete's good meals, I felt what a luxurious retreat this must be, compared with Japanese Zen retreats of the "three-pickled-radishes-a-day" variety!

The Usefulness of Discomfort?

I am allergic to dust, and I suspect there's a lot of dust at the Maenllywd! So I frequently experienced a running nose, tickling in the nasal passages, and sneezing, and the need to blow my nose. Fellow sufferers will empathise. These experiences can be extremely annoying and discomforting, especially when distractions are not available or appropriate. However, these experiences also provide an excellent opportunity to practice awareness of the present, and I was occasionally able to stop interfering in the experience of a sudden nasal irritation, and to maintain a simple awareness of it as it developed and then subsided over several minutes. In practical terms, this turned out to be a better resolution of the experience than my habitual approach of nose blowing and sniffing, which can actually prolong the irritation. Perhaps this is an example of Zen mindfulness being of immediate practical value.

Whole Body Awareness

I underestimated the power and effectiveness of this retreat. The Western Zen Retreat I had been on in April was longer and used the technique of questioning, and produced a more marked effect. However, as Simon hinted a couple of times, this Shorter Ch'an Retreat turned out to be more effective in producing stillness than I had expected. I noticed this especially once the retreat had ended. In our first motorway cafe stop, walking through the cafe area was a remarkable experience. I felt so grounded, and so deliberate in a relaxed way. Simon's constant urging us to feel the ground pressing against our feet had worked! I was now doing it, and I realised that it was not essentially a matter of feeling the ground, but rather of letting the entire body relax and respond to gravity, and of allowing myself to really experience the body.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that Simon had seemed, during the retreat, to make a particular point of getting us to "feel the ground pressing against our feet". I reacted against this suggestion at first, because, as I told him in our interview, I prefer practising a general rather than a concentrated awareness. As far as I remember, Simon later mentioned in one

of his Ch'an Hall talks that in Silent Illumination, one began by practising what John Crook calls "total body awareness". What this may be is perhaps clarified in the following passage from the above-mentioned transcript of the talk by Master Sheng-Yen:

"The first stage of Silent Illumination practice is Just Sitting. Anyone can use this method. It may sound easy, but it's not. A good posture is essential. After all, you're "just sitting". This means maintaining a correct posture with the mind aware of the body sitting right on the cushion. What is the mind aware of? The body and its sensations - the totality of all bodily experiences. Of course, you may not feel some parts of the body, but, your only concern is just sitting and experiencing yourself as a whole just sitting there in the moment. Sensations and experiences of the body will naturally be partial, but they are a part of one unified whole."

Reading this, I felt that my practice, imperfect though it was, was on the right track.

Those Old Friends: Desire and Aversion

Later, during the first day or two back at home, I noticed how some of my ordinary actions were now done without a haze of emotional/physical distaste. For example, my partner uncharacteristically poured a pot of Japanese green tea leaves down the sink. The leaves blocked the plug-hole, and of course I put my hand down to retrieve them and put them in the bin. I would do this normally, but I know that I would normally feel a background sense of distaste. Now I was simply doing it, without the haze of emotional response, and for some reason I experienced this little difference of perspective as a significant and delicious liberation.

I realised as a result of this retreat, during which we were sometimes urged to keep our eyes downwards and not look around, that much of the time in my non-retreat life I am looking around. Why? I think it is out of a deep-rooted habit of mindless, blind longing or desire. Desire for something other than the present moment, which is perceived as insufficient or unsatisfactory. It is as if my usual mind is constantly seeking something that it blindly feels will assuage this longing. This became very clear to me on the day the retreat ended.

Getting Things Into (and Out of!) Proportion

As for "far out" experiences, I did have one, briefly. Zen teaches that such experiences are just experiences along the way, and I suppose that they seem wonderful partly because they are new. Anyway, this little experience was on the final day and I was sitting drinking that first cup of tea (fellow retreatants will know what I mean!). Suddenly, I realised that the sounds from the kitchen were happening with a peculiar freedom and that the people moving around the room existed for me with that same peculiar freedom. I could hear the sounds and see the people, yet there was somehow an absence of emotional "noise" in these experiences. The sounds and the moving people were happening somehow "freely", and I realised that all experience could be like this. I find it very hard to find suitable words to describe this way of experiencing.

From a young age I have felt that Zen is not a matter of any particular experience, but rather a perspective on any and all experiences, and that this is the freedom and beauty of it. From a young age, too, I have been convinced, in the words of the Heart Sutra, that it is "real and not false". I hope to return to Maenllwyd for further tea and sitting.

VOYAGING

We are all voyagers on the seas of time. We conclude with a poem about voyaging written rather a long time ago on the way to a first visit to Japan.

PASSING THE PESCADORES

A VOYAGE TO JAPAN. MV HERMOD. 1954

John Crook

*Uncoiling waves hover a moment
caught between sunglance and foam.
Catch the incandescent moment in a loop of light
and hold it to yourself alone,
Catch the spangled spray in the finger tips at the mind's end
And lie spread-eagled on a second's dome.*

*Passing the Pescadores a flying fish leapt and flew,
a drifting tern tripped a wing on a wavelet
and turned again towards her barren home.
The dreaming Pescadores!
Sunwink on spray and lighthouse blink,
a flying fish leapt and flew before the prow's dividing wave.*

*The first sea-mists of Japan, the smoke haze of our ship
swirl together above the small light at the mast head.
This much the ship has always known
but that far off coastal light
and I on this damp deck
usually see the one without the other.*

*Between the word and the realisation there's a space where none may go.
Even authors in their blind conceiving
know not the meaning of the seeds they sow.
Maybe the universal music master cannot understand the pain
that rings from his own bell's chime
and durst not seek an answer in a world he cannot know.*

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We welcome your contributions, whether articles, poetry, artwork, retreat reports, letters, or whatever else. However we do not promise that we shall publish your contribution, or in which issue it will appear if we do so. Owing to the workload involved, our policy is that we do not acknowledge materials received. Where possible submissions by email to **editor@w-c-f.org.uk** are preferred for articles, poems, etc, since this obviates the need for retyping or scanning. For artwork email submissions are also useful, but in addition non-returnable copies or originals by post may be helpful since then if required we can rescan them ourselves at higher resolution than may be appropriate for email attachments. Thank you.

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Subscriptions: WCF Fellows receive NCF as a benefit of Fellowship. Others may subscribe at a price of £7. 50 per three issues (we aim for three issues per year) by writing with payment enclosed (cheques payable to Western Ch'an Fellowship) to Tim Blanc, 29 Gwilliam Street, Windmill Hill, Bristol, BS3 4LT. **Back Issues**, if in stock, are available at £4 per issue, otherwise please refer to the website where most back issues are available online.

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New Ch'an Forum is published and distributed by the **Western Ch'an Fellowship**,
Registered charity number 1068637,

Correspondence address 24 Woodgate Ave, Bury, Lancs, BL9 7RU.

Printed on recycled paper.