

# NEW CH'AN FORUM

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## CONTEXTS

Often we find ourselves pondering the seriousness of this world crisis. News bulletins flash from one event to another. Dimly we are aware of patterns. In a Dharma perspective these events are the consequences of inattention, mindless self-indulgence, personally, collectively, politically, economically. We fail to see them coming because we fail to see the contexts of stupidity and ignorance within which we live.

A little insight into context would tell us why so many Arabs hate America. A little reflection would show us why arming those given to hate will cause disaster. Attempts at understanding will show how the economically neglected may in their poverty turn to violence. And today the means for terrible revenge are readily to hand. Take over two airliners and commit suicide. No amount of missile defence could have stopped that. Where's the awareness of context here?

What can Buddhists do? At least we can encourage reflection. Understand cause leading to consequence under the influence of conditions. The conditioning of the world through co-dependent arising is all about us as the Buddha pointed out.

This issue is therefore devoted to CONTEXT in several areas of our concern where more mindful reflection could make a difference. We are not talking of sitting - this concerns everyday Zen. Do you practice that?

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## **REFLECTION IN THE CHAN HALL**

**Chuan Deng Jing Di**

I have received several articles and poems about the current crisis and reams of world improving e-mails. I wondered whether to publish some of these heart felt statements in this journal. Thank you all for them - but events have moved so fast. The writing is so quickly out of date, the feelings of today not clearly related to those of tomorrow; horror; fear; relief; hope; worry; succeed one another bulletin after bulletin. At this moment it seems that there is some hope for Afghanistan and its people after all and the possibility of retributive justice may indeed arise. Not that we will ever see the Buddhas of Bamyan again.

It seemed more important here to look at more restricted contexts wherein our reflections might make more direct a difference. Our issue this time takes up themes where our thought and our actions can have some effect - in "cultures of enquiry" (p13). The Dalai Lama's wish for us to practice, Shi fu's careful description of the Precepts and their meaning, a deeply felt encounter with Prison life, concerns about Schooling, some personal experiences and a book review revealing dangers in some western thought about the Dharma - all these take up themes that are the contexts of our lives. In considering these themes the Dharma becomes active and maybe we can see opportunities here for its actualisation.

The notion of context is important. The Buddha's Law of Co-dependent Arising argues that causes lead to consequences under the influence of conditions - that is context. The understanding of context thus becomes very important for us. If we can adjust context the outcomes of past Karma may be very different. Context is always present but in our concern with events we sometimes fail to notice its importance.

At the level of mindfulness let us note that practice is the context for precept just as precept is the context for practice; that the sickness in society is the context of prison just as criminality is often a context of society; that schooling is the context of emotional growth just as emotional growth can effect schooling; that the Guestmaster conditions a retreat just as the rules of retreat are the context for him; that food is the context of meditation and meditation the context for cooking - which is why a Chan cook is so important; and, finally, that the adequacy of thought and philosophy determine Buddhist understanding just as insightful Buddhist practice conditions philosophy. So it goes. Practice at these levels has wide implications.

Please think about these.

*1 December 2001*

## **A Daily Practice from the Dalai Lama**

The Dalai Lama has asked that the following practice be shared with as many people as possible. A group recently spent five days visiting with the Dalai Lama focusing upon what they believe are the five most important questions to be considered as we move into the millennium.

1. How do we address the widening gap between rich and poor?
2. How do we protect the earth?
3. How do we educate our children?
4. How do we help Tibet and other oppressed countries and peoples of the world?
5. How do we bring about spirituality (deep caring for one another) through all disciplines of life?

The Dalai Lama said all five questions fall under the last one. If we have true compassion in our hearts, our children will be educated wisely, we will care for the earth, those who "have not" will be cared for. The group asked the Dalai Lama, "Do you think love on the planet is increasing or staying the same? His response: "My experience leads me to believe that love IS increasing." He shared a simple practice that will increase love and compassion in the world. He asked everyone in the group to share it with as many people as they can.

### **The practice:**

Spend 5 minutes at the beginning of each day remembering we all want the same things (to be happy and to be loved) and we are all connected to one another.

Spend 5 minutes breathing in cherishing yourself, and breathing out cherishing others. If you think about people you have difficulty cherishing, extend your cherishing to them anyway.

During the day extend that attitude to everyone you meet. Practice cherishing the "simplest" person (clerks, attendants, etc.) as well as the "important" people in your life, cherish the people you love and the people you dislike.

Continue this practice no matter what happens or what anyone does to you.

These thoughts are very simple, inspiring and helpful. The practice of cherishing can be taken very deep if done wordlessly; allowing yourself to feel the love and appreciation that already exists in your heart.

Will you commit to creating Peace in yourself and thereby "On Earth" by spending 10 minutes a day with this simple meditation? Peace on Earth, Good will To All. It's not a season. It's a daily practice.

Please pass this on to as many people as you can.

See [www.silcom.com/~snospx/events.htm](http://www.silcom.com/~snospx/events.htm) and [www.silcom.com/~snospx/dailypractice.htm](http://www.silcom.com/~snospx/dailypractice.htm)

## The Buddhist Precepts

Master Sheng-Yen

**Excerpt from *Hoofprint of the Ox*, a book based on lectures by Master Sheng-yen and translated, compiled, arranged, and edited by Dan Stevenson. Lightly edited for NCF.**

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, "The precepts are the foundation of supreme enlightenment." Thus, one could say that the basic spirit of Buddhism is to be found in the system of precepts or moral restraints that describe the life of the Buddhist renunciant and in the great importance that followers of the Buddha's teaching attach to their observance. For anyone who becomes a disciple of the Buddha, whether it be a lay person or one who has formally left the household life as a renunciant, the first great act by which one enters the gate of Buddhism is to receive the precepts. Without this, a person is not really sanctioned by the Buddhist tradition, even though one may consider oneself to be a believer and practitioner of Buddhism. A person who has not received the precepts is just an ordinary individual who hangs outside the gate.

Because of differences in Buddhist practitioners themselves, different types and degrees of precept have been distinguished. The most basic division is that between the householder (male, *upasaka*; female, *upasika*) and the officially ordained renunciant (the Buddhist monk, *bhiksu*; or nun, *bhiksuni*). For the householder or lay practitioner there are altogether four levels of precept that may be received: (1) the three refuges, (2) the five precepts, (3) the eight precepts of the *uposatha*, or bimonthly fast-day observance, and (4) the precepts of a bodhisattva.

For the individual who chooses to renounce the household life and embark on the career of a Buddhist monk or nun, there are four types of precept: First come the ten basic precepts of the novice renunciant (novice monk, *sramanera*; novice nun, *sramanerika*). These are received at the formal ceremony for first renouncing the household life (*pravrajya*) and observed over a subsequent period of probation. Second are the precepts of the *siksamana*, an interim probationary status for the female novice. Third and fourth are the precepts of a *bhiksu*, or male renunciant, and *bhiksuni*, or female renunciant. These are taken during the ceremony for full monastic ordination known as *upasampada*. Finally, there are the bodhisattva precepts.

For all Buddhists, receiving the three refuges is the first and most elemental act on the Buddhist path. In the presence of a duly ordained monk or nun, one pledges to take refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha; the Dharma, or Buddhist teaching; and the Sangha, or Buddhist assembly. Some people think that the three refuges are simply a profession of faith and should not be considered precepts. In fact, the three refuges also are precepts. One of the characteristics of a Buddhist precept is that it carries a sense of prohibition or restraint. Restraint is indeed an attribute of the refuges. When one takes refuge in the Buddha, one vows for the rest of one's life not to seek or resort to depraved or demonic spiritual ideals. The Buddha is one's ideal of perfection. In taking refuge in the Dharma, one vows for the rest of one's life to avoid wayward paths and false teachings. The Dharma is the true path. In taking refuge in the Sangha, one vows for the rest of one's life not to rely on followers of wayward or false paths. As such, taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha entails a very basic sense of restraint - commitment to proper spiritual ideals and attitudes, as defined by Buddhist tradition.

The five precepts comprise the vow to (1) refrain from taking life, (2) refrain from theft, (3) refrain from lying, (4) refrain from harmful or socially unacceptable sexual involvements, and (5) refrain from intoxicants. The first four of these items - taking life, theft, lying, and unacceptable or harmful sexual activity - are considered to be grave errors in Buddhist tradition. The fifth - indulging in intoxicants is considered an evil only insofar as it beclouds the mind and readily contributes to the other four offences. Thus, it is less serious. By committing the four cardinal evils of killing, theft, lying, and engaging in unacceptable sexual activity, one engenders much evil karma, mental and spiritual faculties are greatly impaired, and suffering is intense, making it very difficult to generate the karmic causes and conditions necessary to return to higher realms, much less receive the Buddhist teachings. The five precepts forestall the possibility of this sort of painful retribution and help to ensure a stable existence in the human world, where faculties are keen and it is relatively easy to make spiritual progress.

From a purely humanistic standpoint, the five precepts also describe the basic requirements for a healthy human society.

The harmonious fabric of society is undermined if killing, theft, deceit, complete sexual license, and intoxication are condoned. Suspicion and violence would reign, and human relations would fragment into utter self-isolation. The actions prohibited by the five precepts are simply unacceptable if people are to live in peace and harmony. Accordance with these precepts represents the minimum criterion for being considered a decent human being.

Figuratively speaking, we can say that there are many paths that we may take in this world, spiritual and otherwise. If you act like an animal or ghost, you become an animal or ghost. Act like a human and you become a human. Act like a Buddha and you become a Buddha. If you want to become a Buddha, you must walk the path of a Buddha. The five precepts are the gate to the path of Buddhahood and the moral bedrock on which all genuine spiritual progress rests. Hence, together with the three refuges, they are the foundation for both the lay and monastic life.

The eight precepts expand on the five basic lay precepts by incorporating additional restraints that pertain to monastic life - namely, renunciation of cosmetics and personal adornments, avoidance of song, dance, and other forms of public entertainment and refraining from taking food after the noon hour. Actually, they comprise nine of the ten novitiate precepts taken by the sramanera and sramanerika during the ceremony for renouncing the household life (*pravrajya*). However, whereas novice monks and nuns become renunciants by profession and observe these precepts continually, laypersons take them only at specifically appointed times.

According to the Buddhist ritual calendar, there are six days in every lunar month, known as the days of the uposatha fast that require special religious observances. They are the two days of the dark moon, the two days of the full moon, and the two days of the half moon. In addition to observing the eight precepts, laypersons on these days will often visit temples, attend lectures or meditations, take part in rites of worship and offering, read or recite scripture, and engage in other forms of meritorious activity. Because they so closely anticipate the monastic life, the eight precepts are literally called the "eight precepts that shut the gate" (*pa kuan chieh*), meaning that through these observances, one temporarily shuts the door on samsara and the household life and moves toward the liberative path of the renunciant. The uposatha observance itself is commonly referred to in China as the "days of purificatory fasting" (*chai-jih*), primarily because laypersons at this time keep the restraints and the post-noon fast ordinarily observed by the monastic

Sangha. The eight precepts are also known as "the eight precepts of the purificatory fast that close [the gate of samsara]."

The five precepts close the gate to the sufferings of the lower destinies and open the way to the upper realms, and the precepts of the renunciant define the path for achieving nirvana and deliverance from the cycle of birth and death. In similar fashion, the bodhisattva precepts set the parameters for the bodhisattva path-the path to the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood itself. Within recent generations in China, the bodhisattva precepts have been uniformly based on the system of 10 major and 48 minor precepts found in the *Fan-wang Ching* or *Brahmajala Sutra*. Because the precepts of this scripture are primarily directed toward helping other beings achieve salvation, it is thought that their observance does not require any special distinction in religious status. Therefore, they have traditionally been open equally to laypersons and renunciants. Lately in Taiwan, however, renunciants and laypersons are divided when bodhisattva precept ordination is given. Only those individuals leaving home as renunciants receive the precepts of the *Brahmajala Sutra* while laypersons receive the only the 6 major and 28 minor precepts of the *Upasaka Precept Sutra* (*Yu-p'o she chieh ching*). In actuality, this program needs further discussion, for the *Upasaka Precept Sutra* states quite clearly that the 6 major and 28 minor precepts are the foundation of the bodhisattva precepts and are not necessarily equivalent to the bodhisattva precepts themselves.

It is said that, in principle, the bodhisattva precepts do not distinguish between householder or renunciant. They are equal when it comes to the bodhisattva path. But even though Buddhist teachings may speak of equality or sameness, it is sameness with respect to essential nature, not sameness in terms of phenomenal features. It does not automatically obliterate all distinction between old and young, honourable and lowly, before and after. The Buddha says that all people can become Buddhas, because every person fundamentally possesses the enlightened nature of a Buddha. But without having actualised this intrinsic Buddhahood - without fully knowing that they are Buddhas - sentient beings are still sentient beings. They are not yet Buddhas. Thus, with regard to the Buddhist precepts there are distinctions in level and stage that must be observed, such as the three refuges, five precepts, ten precepts, and so on.

The three refuges are the foundation. The bodhisattva precepts and the renunciatory precepts of the *bhiksu* and *bhiksuni* are what we call the "complete or full precepts" (*chuchieh*). A person who receives the three refuges cannot thereby automatically be said to fulfil the moral demands of the bodhisattva and *bhiksu* precepts. What is more, there is no *bhiksu* or bodhisattva who will not have first received the three refuges. Thus, one can see that the three refuges are merely a preliminary expedient that leads one to the gate of Buddhist practice. The bodhisattva and renunciatory precepts describe the conditions for actually entering the gate.

All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future are said to attain Buddhahood as a human being among human beings. When they do so, they all display the demeanour of a *bhiksu* or renunciant. Hence, any person who decides to take the three refuges should strive to go on to receive the five precepts. Likewise, a person who has received the five precepts should go a step further and seek the bodhisattva precepts. Having received the bodhisattva precepts, if a person is able to make the resolution to leave home as a renunciant, the merit will be incalculable, But if one is incapable of completely severing worldly entanglements and leaving the household, one should still keep the eight observances of the uposatha fast in order to open a road out of the prison of cyclic birth and death. One must, above all, never think that the work of the Buddhist path is completed by a simple profession of faith in the Buddha or refuge in the Three jewels.



When one receives the refuges and precepts, it is very important that one undergo the proper ceremony for transmission of the precepts. This may take two forms. Ordinarily, one begins by fostering a serious and thorough determination to commit oneself fully to the precepts. Then one formally recites the vows and receives confirmation of the precepts in the presence of a preceptor and witnesses from the monastic Sangha. If the necessary monastic preceptors and witnesses are not available, one may prostrate and repent before an image of a Buddha or great bodhisattva, until one experiences an auspicious sign. Such signs may include visions of radiant light and flowers, or the vision of a Buddha or bodhisattva appearing and granting one the precepts. When this occurs, it is a sign that one is confirmed in the precepts.

However, receiving the precepts is just the beginning. After obtaining them, one must go on to study and embody them. Among the four great vows recited daily by Ch'an Buddhists in China, there is a line that can be rendered as, "Dharma-gates beyond reckoning I vow to study." What are "Dharma-gates," and what does their study entail? "Dharma-gates" are approaches or accesses to the Dharma or Buddha's teaching. To study the Dharma-gates is to study whatever the Buddhas have studied, practice whatever the Buddhas have practiced, and eventually realize whatever the Buddhas have realized. The Buddhist precept codes themselves constitute a broad and vast Dharma-gate that teaches people how to learn what the Buddhas learn, practice what the Buddhas practice, and realize what the Buddhas realize.

Most people familiar with Buddhism will have heard that the main function of the precepts lies in their preventing wrong and putting a stop to evil. They may also be aware that the precepts bear a resemblance to the legal codes that establish norms and juridical procedures for secular societies. Precepts are prohibitional, prohibiting Buddhist followers from engaging in evil, much as law codes do.

They also provide formal steps for dealing with offences. People may also have heard that the Buddhist precepts are limited in number, ranging from three, at the very least, to the three hundred-odd vows of the *bhiksuni*. Being limited and essentially prohibitional, how could the precepts ever be an access or "gate" to the Dharma at large?

The fact is that while the Buddhist precepts certainly do prohibit doing specific evils, they equally prohibit apathy or resistance to doing good. Thus, observing the precepts carries two senses. On the one hand, there is "observance that entails abstinence or restraint." These are the precepts that are fulfilled by refraining from doing what must not be done. If one engages in an action that is prohibited by law, then it is an infraction of the precepts. On the other hand, there is also "observance that entails action or engagement." These are precepts that specify actions that should be done. If one does not do what is required, it is also considered an infraction of the precepts.

Generally speaking, most people only know of the negative or prohibitive aspect of the Buddhist precepts—that aspect that is designed to put a stop to evil. They are not aware that there is yet a positive side to the precepts, a side that requires one to "undertake to cultivate all that is good." If one looks at the precepts in terms of their relationship to the totality of Buddhist virtues, one will realize that such apparently proscriptive systems as the five precepts contain within them the most profoundly positive spiritual and ethical ideals. One of the oldest and most venerable statements of the Buddhist path says:



*To refrain from engaging in any evil,  
To undertake to cultivate all that is good,  
And to pursue the purification of one's own mind.  
This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.*

from the *Dhammapada*

The five precepts are the most simple among the Buddhist precepts. At the same time they are referred to as the "root or foundational precepts" (*ken-pen chieh*), because they are also the foundation of all the other Buddhist precepts. The eight *uposatha* precepts, the ten novitiate precepts, the precepts of the full *bhiksu* and *bhiksuni*, and the precepts of the bodhisattva are all simply an expansion of the five basic precepts. All of them recognize the five precepts as basic to the Buddhist path and look upon their infraction as cardinal sins. Thus, of all the precepts, the five precepts are the most important. If one does not study the five precepts and bring oneself fully into accord with their ethical implications, all the precepts will elude one's grasp. If one is pure in one's observance of the spirit of the five precepts, all the other precepts can be kept quite easily.

At first glance, observance of the five precepts will seem a quite common and simple matter. Only after researching and reflecting on their contents thoroughly will one realize that they are not as trivial a matter as one might think. The great master Hung-i, one of the most illustrious monks of the modern era, was especially renowned for his study and observance of the Buddhist vinaya, or moral codes. Not only did he feel that he was not *bhiksu* material, but he considered himself unequal to the demands of a novice monk and even lacking in observance of the five precepts of a layman! Just think! If such a sternly observant monk as Hung-i would not dare to consider himself pure in the five precepts, who among us could ever do so?

You should realize that master Hung-i's motives for assessing himself in this did definitely not come from the guilt of having actually broken the precepts. It came from his appreciation of just how difficult it is to fulfil the true spirit of the precepts once one understands their total import.

Any person who wishes to receive the precepts should keep this point in mind and not allow himself to become too proud, thinking that he or she is already a pure follower of the Buddha. After receiving the precepts one must study the precepts thoroughly; otherwise one will never appreciate their sublime nature. Even then, the real purpose of receiving and studying the precepts is to embody them. If one receives but doesn't study the precepts, one is arrogant and stupid. If one studies but doesn't strive to embody them, it is like talking about a meal or counting jewels that are not one's own. One is then even more stupid and arrogant. There is no benefit whatsoever.

Why do we need precepts? There is a common saying that, "though the sword is sharp, it does not behead the blameless." In theory, the laws of nations are of no use to a citizenry that by nature is harmonious and restrained. But, for the security and benefit of those who are by nature law-abiding, it is still necessary that there be laws, for there is no guarantee that society and its members will be free of individuals who would violate others. Laws act as a warning not to overstep certain bounds. They set down norms of proper behaviour for society at large, and they provide the means for taking action against those who would harm society, thereby protecting it.

The Buddhist tradition has precepts for much the same reason. During the first few years after the Buddha attained enlightenment and began to teach, there really were no precepts

to speak of. The disciples who came to him during this early period all left home as renunciants with the best of intentions. Their karmic capacities were very high, such that two or three lines of explanation from the Buddha were sufficient to cause them, then and there, to become enlightened and realize sagehood. Since the majority of the Buddha's followers were already quite pure, the early Sangha had no use for explicit regulations to keep them in line.

But during the fifth year into the Buddha's preaching career, there occurred an incident in which a *bhiksu* gave in to sexual relations at the urging of his former wife and another woman. Allegedly, it is from this event that the first precept codes came into existence. As the Sangha grew, precepts and rules for monastic procedure were expanded bit by bit, all in an effort to protect the purity and solemn respectability of the Sangha, as well as to ensure that monks and nuns would not lose the essential spirit of the renunciatory life.

If the monastic and lay Sangha, as a whole, will keep the precepts, the Buddhist tradition and humankind at large will surely flourish. But if the Sangha has no precepts to serve as a blueprint to unify and guide it, not only will the condition of the Buddhist teachings decline, the tradition itself may well vanish like smoke. For this reason, the Buddha on his deathbed made a point of stressing for the generations of disciples to come that they should take the precepts themselves as their teacher or master. Just like a great nation, even if its original founder dies, so long as the constitution is preserved intact and everyone continues to observe it, a new leader can be selected time and time again, and the political integrity of the country will not be shaken. So long as Buddhists keep the vinaya precepts intact, the Buddhist Sangha, both collectively and individually, will be able to endure as long as the world itself does. Thus, one of the most important roles of the precepts is to preserve the Buddhist tradition from age to age.

The state of the Sangha aside, however, in their ultimate sense the real contribution of the precepts lies in their power to sever the karmic causes and conditions that keep one bound to the cycle of birth and death. It is said in the sutras, "If you want to know the past, it is what you are experiencing here in this present life. If you want to know the future, it is what you are doing right now in this present life." If we do not create causes for continued birth and death, we will leave no trace, even if we remain in the midst of birth and death and give no conscious thought to seeking release. Therefore, the creation of the vinaya precepts was not a case of the Buddha giving forth some sort of absolutely binding commandment to his disciples. In reality, it was just a path for the spiritual liberation of his disciples and a counteragent to the possible corruption of the Sangha at large.

In summation we can say that the vinaya precepts perform two main functions: First of all, the precepts provide a foundation for Buddhist practice by closing the door to the unwholesome paths that will lead to painful karmic retribution and by fostering the purity of mind and deed that will lead to liberation. Secondly, they ensure order and high standards of purity within the Buddhist community, thereby enabling it to flourish and function as an inspirational model for society at large.

The relevance that the precepts have for maintaining collective order and discipline within a religious community is easy to understand. But for many people, the connection between the precepts and meditation may be more difficult to understand. "The aim of meditation," they may think, "is to enlighten and liberate us, to make us spontaneous and free. Precepts are restrictive and confining. Isn't this going in the opposite direction?"

Indeed, one can say that enlightenment does represent spontaneity and untrammelled freedom - a world where things are perfect just as they are. What is more, Buddhist

tradition teaches that we already have this enlightenment within us and all around us. There is nothing we need add or remove from either ourselves or the world. But there is a vast difference between knowing this in theory and living it in truth. It is easy to talk about being spontaneous and free, but most of us don't have a clue to what spontaneity and freedom really are. Precisely because we are so complex and out of control, we need discipline to restrain and simplify our lives to the point where we can uproot the habits of greed, hatred, and delusion that inhibit true freedom. The five precepts free us from anxiety and provide the stability and emotional space for meditative practice by helping to straighten out our lives and create positive relationships with the people around us. Properly nourished, this sense of spaciousness and ease develops directly into meditative clarity and calm. For the Buddhist monk or nun, the experience is even more profound, since all attachments are severed. As it says in the *Samannaphala Sutta*, "Endowed with this body of moral restraints, so worthy of esteem, one experiences within oneself a sense of ease without alloy."

Another important function that the precepts serve is to safeguard the meditator. Without precepts, one's practice will be like a leaky bucket. Every day the purifying waters of meditation are poured in, until one begins to feel strong and full of vigour. Unless one is firmly grounded in the precepts, this vigour may spill out in all sorts of destructive ways, bringing harm to oneself as well as others. If lust increases, anger increases, and foolishness increases, it is simply not Buddhism that one is practicing.

## **Something has Hit Home**

**Marian Partington**

My friend Chloe and I arrived at HMP Grendon and Springhill prison in early April this year. The front tyres of the car bumped over disinfectant saturated lumps at the top of the drive. We were directed to halt, exit and paw the squelchy pads with our shoes, before the back tyres got their lethal drench.<sup>1</sup> Did they have sheep here?

The prison officer uniforms began too. They seemed quite friendly when we asked where to park. The prison wall made us crane our necks upwards. It was crested with the inevitable coiled barbed wire, spikes of no man's land. Which was the way in? We took a wrong turn again, finding ourselves walking towards poly-tunnels and compost heaps. Maybe we were avoiding something, delaying the moment when we too would be locked in. But only for a day. Visitors day.

We returned to the paved route that curved around the edge of the wall. There they were: the fortress gates with the pedestrian door, the door within a door, with the barred grill. Over the sill, keys clicked and jangled, medieval style. Door locked, blotting out the green hedges. I glanced up at the system of wires encased in pipes. School buildings. Institutions. We were asked for our identifications. Driving licence or passport. No mobile phones or cameras. No escape. No communication with the outside world. We were treated with professional suspicion, 'to make the event a safe and secure one for us all'. I moved away from our small group towards the notice board:

"Her Majesty's prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and provide constructive regimes to enable them to live law abiding lives in custody and after release".

The next portal was before us (a metal detector), the frisking ('prison service rub down search'), and the sniffing (wide, indifferent black lab, waiting for me to walk by half way along a short corridor, a nonchalant sniff, "the passive drug detection dog"). Into the canteen, being ticked off the list and told who was 'looking after us for the day'. Chloe and I were on different wings. 'Tom' approached me. He asked me if I would like a coffee. He seemed distracted, shy. A few moments later he returned with a polystyrene beaker full. We all milled around. Chloe and I found ourselves with a JP from Winchester. I observed Tom greeting someone else from our group (there were six altogether). I began to taste the anxiety in his mouth. He told me later that a Visitors' day is part of the therapy. It was part of mine too; I was soon to realise.

The conference hall felt 'professional' with its various presentation techniques (lap-top to large screen) on stage, curved purple seating below. We were asked to 'spread out and mix together'. Tom sat on one side and a tall, broad man in his early 30's wearing a white nylon shirt on the other. Their badges marked them out as residents. Also a restless, pacing tension as if something was trapped inside. I sat in the middle strangely at ease and uncurious (it struck me later) about the crimes. Or was it denial? Where was Chloe?

"Do you know what the theme is today?" the man in the white shirt asked, leaning towards me (affectionately?). "No, I didn't realise that you had themes." "It's victims. And when we were looking through the list of visitors we were told that one of them is the sister of a West victim." "That' me." I disclosed in a matter of fact way. His response was immediate and authentic. He showed curiosity and concern, which was shushed by the beginning of the

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to precautions against the spread of Foot and Mouth disease in cattle and sheep.

presentations. He offered me a peppermint and whispered that he was 'on soon', and implored me to give him 'some eye contact. I'm dead scared'. I felt strangely maternal, nodding with encouragement. Soon he was up there. He began to speak, tearfully, discarding his written speech that he must have sweated over. " My name is 'Fred' and I'm serving 8 years for armed robbery. I entered the bank and held up a customer at gunpoint. I held her from behind in a neck hold and put the gun to her head." Silence. I suck the peppermint and catch his eye. "There isn't a day goes by when I don't think about her. There isn't a day goes by when I don't think about 'Anne'. I wonder how her life is now. I wonder if she had to give up her job because of my crime. I wish I could know. I wish I could tell her how bad I feel about what I did. I wish she could know that." He breaks off and says that's enough. Then he's sitting next to me. I pat his shoulder. His forearms and his huge hands agitate. So this is an 'armed robber'. Why don't I feel threatened by him, now that I know the violence of his crime? Our first contact was direct and empathic, no room for prejudice. I hope we can keep it that way. It would be easy to slip into fear or fantasy.

The Governor of Grendon, Tim Newell, spoke about the 'culture of enquiry' that underpins the Grendon approach. (Tim looks and speaks like a biblical prophet with his broad grey beard and his calm, confident voice!). This phrase stuck in my mind. A community of seekers, that we were part of for a day. I felt privileged. We divided into our 'wings' and left the hall, walking past football pitches, raised flowerbeds until our small group entered D wing.

First the smell of school dinners and the sound of loud rap music coming from the kitchens. I learnt that part of the therapeutic regime is to do their own cooking and cleaning. We would all be eating together later. I didn't see any prison staff around. We were shown into a room with a circle of chairs. Again we were offered a coffee. A few tablespoons of instant coffee granules sagged in the corner of a polythene bag, next to scattered tea bags and some dried milk. The stainless steel jug of hot water was getting cooler, and no one seemed to be serving, so we began to help ourselves. The tension was increasing. We sat in the circle. Six prisoners and six visitors. No one else. This was 'any questions' time. The prisoners were on line. So were we. Tom was the facilitator in our group. He suggested that we went around the circle saying why we were there.

He began. His name, his age, the time he was serving, his crime. "Rape", he was in his early 30's is what I remember. I have never been raped although a friend once accused me of raping him, 'in a friendly way' (what did that mean?). The line between consent and coercion applies to all crime, but its expression in the criminal justice system in Britain seems clumsy and insensitive to the needs of victims, perpetrators and their communities. Retribution takes precedence over rehabilitation. We all suffer because of that.

I was the first visitor to speak.

"My name is Marian and I'm here because my sister, Lucy, was a victim of violent crime. She was abducted, gagged, raped, tortured and killed by the Wests. We didn't know what had happened to her for 21 years. Her body was dismembered, she was decapitated and buried in the cellar of 25 Cromwell street. I'm here because I want to bring something positive out of the senseless cruelty of Lucy's death. I need to understand how and why that happened and how to help prevent that from happening to anyone else. I have been searching for some sort of truth and understanding about this crime.

Like all of you in Grendon, I have ended up having to search inside me, investigating my own cycle of violence and abuse. I have found debilitating grief, fear, shame and murderous rage. I would like to be able to understand what kind of circumstances lead to the acting out of the criminal impulses that we all have within us.

Lucy was gagged when she died. That is one of the most difficult aspects of her death for me. She couldn't speak her truth. She became faceless; flesh and bones. Hidden for 21 years. I don't believe in labelling, writing off and locking away. The conspiracy of silence and denial. We need to find and share our truth as human beings, not remain separate and opposed as perpetrators and victims.

I don't believe that punishment is the way to reduce recidivism. How can a regime that is based on fear and aggression hope to achieve anything but a continuing rage and terror? I'm here because I know that you have chosen to look for a way of understanding the context of your criminal actions, and the effect that they have had upon the lives of your victims, in the hope that you won't make the same huge mistakes again. I would like to listen to you."

Where did all that come from? You'll end up pacing up and down Oxford Street with a billboard strapped to your chest. I go quiet. Rather a long silence - then, next.



"My name is 'Rob'. I am serving 12 years for murder. I'd like to say that 'Bill' from A wing made me feel very angry this morning when he talked about himself as victim." (Yes, he'd spoken with emotional detail about his victim years, "on the day I was born my father was done for bigamy and three days later my mother left me on a door step. I went in and out of children's' homes all my childhood. I was severely sexually abused by staff. Eventually I became a perpetrator". It had felt authentic enough to me. But part of the therapy is to continually challenge each other and learn to express anger in words rather than physical violence). 'You can't con a con'? Rob continued, "None of us here on this wing would ever use that as an excuse for our actions in the way that he did. (I don't agree that he did). Yes, we know that we have all been victims in our childhood, but we would tear open the ass of anyone who used that as an excuse for his crime on this wing. I feel fucking angry about that." Vigorous nods of agreement.

I find myself musing about the possibility that it must be more acceptable to identify with the part of oneself that has become a perpetrator (as a man) than truly own one's victim part. Also easier for women to identify with their victim rather than their perpetrator. I have certainly found and tried to face both within myself. The cycle of violence that we all perpetuate in extreme or subtle ways. Our society is full of structures that promote and condone humiliation. Soul murder abounds, even if capital punishment has been erased. Shame and the need for justice are at the root of all violence.

I have come to see how the predominant penal system separates, locks away and humiliates. Perpetrators are removed from the victims and the context of their crime. Their punishment removes them further from the possibility of understanding their actions. The prison environment enforces the cycle of violence and abuse, within and without. There is no place for trust and understanding. They return to their communities driven further within their defences, a lonely place that fuels rage, shame and a feeling of dismemberment. How can they ever join any thing up, become more whole? Society has hacked them into further disintegration. They have become further decomposed.

Meanwhile, victims are left with the trauma, the uncertainty, and the insecurity. They can remain frozen and separate. They cannot express their pain to the perpetrator. They are often avoided and misunderstood by their community. The community has lost two members. Has become less integrated. One is locked away until s/he returns. The other is locked away with no prospect of healing because there is no context for reconciliation. The polarisation is hardened by the tabloid media's vengeful ignorance.

My mind has digressed. It is good at escaping from the present moment into a polemic monologue, which keeps my ego intact and separate. Back to this circle and the 'culture of enquiry'... A Buddhist prison minister (now that interests me), a rapist ('I haven't done just one crime'), another armed robber, a probation officer, a woman who had set up a victim support service, a student of criminology, a dear older woman who is 'always popping in and out, these young men need someone to listen to them' and finally an arsonist who spoke of his experience of extensive sexual abuse as a child in various homes.

The suffering of these men remains mostly unspoken but it seeps into the air, as if they have been flayed to the bone, aching to understand. The common soil amongst this group could be described as ruined childhood. Is it possible to heal from such social, economic and emotional deprivation, which we have created as a society? The fact that they are still alive seems miraculous to me in that moment. Or wanting to be alive.

How would we continue? Tom took the lead. He turns to look me in the eye. "What you said has really affected me. Until I heard you speaking like that, I think I had just been playing at 'victim empathy'. Something has hit home.' A moment of contact and impact that leaves us both exposed and vulnerable. For me it goes something like this. In my gut (rather than my head where I had already worked it out) I am struck by the realisation that by sharing something of my experience of Lucy's death with men who have committed violent crimes it helps them to experience 'victim empathy', which may help them not to re-offend and to integrate their own victim pathology.

Is that the positive outcome that I could help to bring out of Lucy's terrible death? Is this really happening? Another 'still point of the turning world', Lucy. I wasn't expecting this. Questions came from other visitors, gentle, searching. The tone was loving, encouraging. Shame was disclosed without fear of humiliation. An openness, a shared suffering. I asked if listening to my story would be something that would have to be carefully timed so that it came at the right moment in their therapy. The answer: "There is never a right time. But it has been important to hear it".

Later Tom told me that he hadn't wanted to eat his lunch and chat to the visitors. He had gone to be alone in his room to stay with the feelings that had arisen during our session. Pacing, questing. Who am I? Who are we? As we queued for lunch I was approached by another member of our group. "What you said really did something to me." He was thin and younger than my oldest sons. "How did your life end up here?" He spoke intensely, urgently and honestly. We sit opposite each other with our plates of fish, chips and lurid mushy peas. Transport caf style. Wedges of chocolate cake, already choking in their

imminent dryness. I listened to him and tried to eat. Suddenly aware that I had been cooked for and invited to share a meal with 'dangerous criminals'. All I could see were children trapped in adult bodies. Brutalised, betrayed children needing a safe space to find understanding and inner strength, to find a way of taming their rage and terror. Chloe discovered the same during her shared lunch.



'Nod' told me about his father's violent discipline. He said he loves his Dad, because when he got into violent drug related crime in his mid teens until his early twenties (when he was caught) his Dad had acknowledged recently that it must have been something to do with the way he had brought him up. "But I told him last time they visited that I couldn't use that as an excuse. When I get out of here I'll do any ordinary job, like sweeping up in a supermarket. I just want a proper job. But you need to know that there are some people out there who would never want to change. The bloke I was doing robberies with. He couldn't go back to being straight. Never." I couldn't manage the chocolate cake.

During the afternoon session, back in the conference hall, I was invited to join the panel on the stage. I appealed to our common humanity. What do I mean by that? As I reflect, unexpectedly I flash back to a time when I was 20 in 1968, when my friend and I were hitching back from Spain. Our glamorous racing car drivers had driven us off the road into a forest near Le Mans. We were trapped in the back seats as the car drew to a halt. My friend kept screaming, "They're going to kill us, Marian", as one of them pinned her down wrenching at his flies. The other was poised to pounce and I found myself staring into his eyes, appealing in French, to our shared humanity. He was taken aback. He pulled his friend away and they told us to get out of the car. They left us there. Then we saw the headlights returning. My friend started to scream again. We thought about hiding in the bushes, but it was too late. They pulled up. They said that they wanted to apologise and take us back to the road. I persuaded my friend to trust them. All the time speaking in French to them. Thanking them for their change of heart. They waited with us until we got another lift, from a woman.

Rosemary West was fifteen years old when she was abducted from a bus stop and raped. She was nineteen years old when Lucy (21 years old) was gagged into anonymity, raped, tortured and killed, or left to die. Lucy may have trusted a couple with a younger woman. She may have been forced into the car. It was certainly a huge part of my survivor's guilt



that she was so against hitching and I that did it all the time. The 'it should have been me' syndrome that most siblings and friends suffer for a while. Le Mans wasn't the only narrow escape.

Rosemary West is one of the few of the 38,000 prisoners in Britain who will probably 'never see the light of day again' (be released). 'Take her away', ordered the judge in grave theatrical tones. I have thought a lot about justice in relation to murder. I don't think that there is any human sentence that can appease or repair the hugely devastating loss of a loved one to murder. There seem to be four main routes (with numerous side roads) for the family survivors.

Firstly, denial (i.e. - take her away, locked up for ever, this person does not exist and had nothing to do with Lucy at all, The End). This is usually the preferred option and has many subtle twists and turns. We will probably never know the truth. I have chosen to accept that, after much investigation. Denial is an important part of survival, but as a conclusive position it attempts to bypass, trivialise and negate or delay the pain of the healing process. To fix it, make it more comfortable to live with. Denial can lead to lethal, oppressive regimes. I have tried that one and sometimes wish that it would work for me, but it leaves me in a frozen silence which is driven by a wish to deny pain and carries a perverse power which can haunt, oppress and sometimes destroy vitality.

I worked out (in my head), during a Buddhist retreat in 1995, that forgiveness offers the most creative, positive way forward. But how to do it? I made a vow to try. I could understand that it would involve giving up all hope of a better past and would be the kind of fullstop that would offer a new relationship with the present moment, with myself and with my environment. My initial motive for beginning this journey towards compassion was for the sake of my children. I have realised, in terrible depth, the reality of the cycle of violence and abuse: we pass on our unresolved pain to the next generation. I have been trying to explore my feelings and integrate the dreadful reality of Lucy's death in a way that does not pass on my struggle with anger, bitterness and grief as well as the aftermath of a difficult trial and media coverage. I needed to know how I could use my life to stop this cycle of violence/abuse and revenge, without denying the devastating effect that it has had upon us all.

But my immediate experience after this vow to forgive was murderous rage. The emotion rushed up from my navel, dashing its heat and power against the inside of my skull, swilling, scouring, and eroding like a river in flood. It had no logic, no reason. Its energy was terrifying in its involuntary seizure. I pulled my hair, banged my head on the bed, screamed, rushed outside and stamped and clawed at the earth. I had no words, just a roar that tore the membranes of my throat. My desire to forgive was premature, pretentious and impossible. But in that moment, when the rage seized me with a physical power that obliterated thoughts I was connected to all humans who have killed. I could never lightly dismiss murderers again. I saw a long journey ahead. The hope of forgiveness became more urgent.

Maybe denial lurks behind the hedge of the third route: suicide. This pain is too much I simply cannot go on living with it. It is never going to go away. There is no hope of change. My life is meaningless and has no value. It is too dark in here. I just don't want to go on breathing. I have touched on that place too. I was on another Buddhist silent seven day retreat. It was day four and I was about to have my interview with the Chinese Ch'an master. All I could feel was an apathetic depression that meant that I didn't want to go on breathing, too much effort. The grief about Lucy started to surface again. And I thought Oh No, I thought I had finished with all this. This self I have had enough, this snivelling,

grieving mess. The pain was surfacing again. I will ask him if I have become too attached to this. Will it ever go away?

But when the moment came in my only interview with the Ch'an master (with 5 other people) all that came out was a tearful blurting that I was struggling with an impasse (the wall of denial?) and that I was also feeling that I didn't want to go on breathing. John Crook (my Buddhist teacher) added the information that my sister had been murdered. Neither Master Sheng-Yen nor his dear Abbot looked at me. They spoke rapidly in Chinese and then the Abbot gave me an interpretation.



He said that Lucy's death and my present grief was for the benefit of all living beings and that our suffering was relieving the suffering of others. It was not something that I had become attached to, it was real and it was important to stay with it when it arose within me. At that moment I realised that my whole life had led to this point, this privileged moment with 'a monk' (as he humbly describes himself) who has devoted nearly the whole of his life (from the age of 12 years to 70 years) to the Buddhist pursuit of wisdom and compassion in order to be able to help others move that way too. Somehow it felt natural and affirming of what I have been trying to do, but with a slightly different angle that may offer a clearer practice.

As usual I didn't quite understand, but asked him for a method. How do I do that in practice? Did he mean that I should pray (a good method for transforming ones own pain into the desire for the well being of others in my experience), or practise tonglen (a Tibetan Buddhist technique for advanced practitioners which involves breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out compassion). But he said No. *Just know that your suffering is relieving the suffering of others.* I am still puzzling about this. Does it mean that by staying true to my own suffering, not trying to bypass it (by denial), allow it to destroy me (suicide), dump it on others (murder) I will eventually find the place of peace that allows me to express my life in a way that is genuinely free of all negative impulses, when I experience the reality of non duality and the universal nature of being alive (spontaneous forgiveness)? I have tasted that place and am deeply committed to that direction.

It was 1997 and I was on day four of a Ch'an retreat. Grief had crept up unexpectedly, as it usually does. I have become familiar with this emotion during the past seven years. I began to feel a sense of panic. Where to put this feeling in the context of a Ch'an retreat? The

expression of grief can become involuntary and can develop into wailing and sometimes barking when my body needs to exorcise the horror of Lucy's death. Yet I was committed to the medium of stillness and silence, with nineteen other people who had made very little noise so far.

I decided to stay with the discipline of sitting and let it happen. The tears and mucous began to pour out of my eyes and nose. Where did all that liquid come from? How many bowls would it fill? I allowed my face to become wet and for the tears and snot to coat my face and drip off my jaw. Then my whole body began to tremble and I could feel heat circulating and being released as my body quivered with life. It felt like a purifying fire coming up within, balancing the wetness on my face. I felt as if I was being purged by fire and water.

The phrase "The Vale of Tears" came to mind. At first I was alone, feeling a crippling isolation. What was this feeling about? It was something to do with acknowledging the enormity of suffering that humanity is capable of creating against itself, the realm of human atrocity, the realm of Hell. But as I waded in the lake of tears, bemoaning my isolation, I became aware that it was full of others who knew this pain. Victims and families of victims of the Holocaust, people who knew the reality of human demolition caused by centuries of war; Bosnia, Hiroshima, Vietnam. There were millions of people there, they were all groaning, wailing and weeping. The lake was becoming deeper. The salt water was etching more pain into our wounds. My breath exhaled with more sound. I was sighing and sobbing. I needed to allow it to be expressed. I had gone beyond feeling self-conscious and different about it. I felt proud of my grief. It felt pure and necessary as it was happening, as it needed to happen. I was not alone.

At that moment of being able to embrace the pain and release it into a wider context, I became very still. I recognised the "still point of the turning world" that my sister and I used to muse about, from T.S.Eliot's "The Four Quartets". All I could do, all I wanted to do was to stay completely still, where I was. There was nothing else to do. I sat with no pain and the "massive stillness" for three sessions.

I have chosen to work towards reclaiming the sacredness of my life, in honour of the sacredness of Lucy's life and ultimately the potential sacredness of Rosemary West's life. I would like her to be released within herself, to be able to unravel her lies and find some sort of truth. I know this is unrealistic. I hear the occasional rumours about her via the media. 'I may as well be dead', 'working towards an appeal'. She has always denied any involvement in Lucy's death. But it seems meaningless for her to be simply locked away and written off without any hope of change. Is that the 'punishment' that our society desires? So nobody has learnt anything. We have all missed an opportunity to move away from cruelty towards compassion. It seems there is little room for anything beyond revenge and fear in our popular culture. The possibility of rehabilitation is too threatening.

But, back on my cushion in 2000, after my interview with the Ch'an master, the grief flooded back again, and my desire to breathe returned. "Just know that your suffering is relieving the suffering of others". I thought of Rosemary West and tried to say to her, in my head, I am feeling a terrible pain, but I hope that it might help you in some way. And then the most profound realisation of the depth and extent of the suffering that she has created for herself filled me with a heart felt response of really hoping that this method works for her as well as for me. I could feel her terrible isolation, in a society that hates her, and how irrevocably her family is wrecked and fragmented. She is in the realm of hell. While I was experiencing this compassion (empathy with suffering), my isolated pain was transformed into a feeling of spacious ease that connected me with all forms of life. Yes, in that moment

forgiveness was spontaneous. Through Lucy's death Rosemary West has become part of my life, and I have worked hard to find a place for her which allows me to go on living without hatred and bitterness. I have tried to face the effect of violence on my ability to go on living in a way that does not create further destruction. I feel closer to that place. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the fact that I would never have tried to explore these depths if dear Lucy had not died in such a terrible way. I feel joy and a deep gratitude to all those who have supported me on this journey.



Back together, in the hall at Grendon the culture of enquiry continued. I could feel frustrated remorse which had no where to go, no structures in place for its appropriate expression. A cultural block on the potential healing process. Again, I experienced emotionally what I have recently formulated intellectually. Something about the needs of victims and perpetrators being ultimately the same. We need safe spaces to dare to feel the pain and horror, be vulnerable, help each other to face the truth about ourselves as human beings. We need to share that with utter honesty. To be able to face each other and listen to each other's questions and answers is the most profound, irreversible justice available. This is bringing the fantasies and the prejudices into a real situation. The remorse (which is always the result of a deeply painful, reluctant journey of facing the reality of the destructive effect of one's actions on oneself and others) and the accompanying shrivelling shame need to be witnessed and heard. Maybe not always by the people whose lives have been deeply scarred by their actions, but at least by people who believe in restoring human relationships rather than driving them further apart.

The victim can benefit and possibly be released in some way by witnessing the authenticity of the perpetrator's shame and need for forgiveness. The reconstruction and rehabilitation of the victim's family involves the question why? The trial decides upon whether the perpetrator is sad, bad or mad. Details about the person's emotional and social context are not admissible evidence. It is possible to see the perpetrator at the trial, hear the facts built up by the statements from witnesses, pathologists and the questioning of the defence and the prosecution. But there are many questions that a victim's family are left with after a trial. For many there is a need to know all the details.

This truth is beyond the sad, bad or mad of the court process. This truth is beyond the decisions about the sentence, the punishment, the locking away. To experience this truth it

ultimately involves coming face to face with the perpetrator. The imaginations move into reality. It involves risk and preparation. It is a deep need that our present system does not cater for. For some victims, this need, if unfulfilled, increases their stress and leaves them unable to move forward with their lives in a positive way. This can lead to vengeful, violent deviant behaviour which carries the cycle into the next generation. The men in Grendon have understood this. It is why they are there. So have I.

Sometimes there can be true healing. By wishing the perpetrator to be rehabilitated/ to be well allows the victim to come closer to the reality of the suffering of the perpetrator. This naturally involves compassion. If this can be felt and communicated it is a form of forgiveness that is healing for both 'sides'. It is a realisation of the interconnectedness of the lives, a bridging of the chasm created by the violence, widened by imprisonment. It is a way of facing our own potential for violence and beginning to understand the meaning of "there but for the grace of God go I". It is the most irreversible healing /form of justice that humans are capable of creating. The outcome can be a realisation by both 'sides' that more violence (revenge, punishment) must be stopped at all costs. The pay off is the deep liberation of both parties.

So how can we re-structure our society so that our communities are safe, creative nurturing environments that foster genuine compassion and eradicate fear, suspicion, shame, cruelty (all the emotions that lead to murder, rape, child abuse and are present within each of us to some degree or other)? Somehow we all need to find the truth about ourselves and our shared, interdependent place in our society. We all need to be respected and valued as individuals. We need to develop the culture of enquiry that allows people to dare to find and speak their truth, to challenge each other, to learn to trust and love. The response to the child killers by the community in Trondheim, Norway, reflects this attitude.

Research at Grendon has shown that therapy involvement over 18 months helps men reduce offending by 20% to 25%. For lifers it is more dramatic with recall rates reduced from 24% for the control group to 8% - 7 years at risk after discharge - a remarkable improvement. The usual re-offending rate is 80%. Lord Woolf has already highlighted the brutality of our adult and young offender prisons, by refusing to risk the undoing of the successful rehabilitation of James Bulger's killers. Until our tabloid press can be rehabilitated, the vigilante attitudes that they incite will continue to contribute to the seemingly inexorable violence in our culture. It is terrifying that a 'secure unit' is a safer place than 'outside' where all but 66,000 of us live.

I think of the poet Rumi:

*'there is a place beyond  
rightness or wrongness.  
I'll meet you there.'*

Something is hitting home.

## Time to Go Back to School

**Bruce Stevenson**

*Bruce argues that until the education system sees troublesome pupils holistically, rather than simply as troublemakers to assess and control, inclusion policies are doomed to failure<sup>1</sup>*

I used to teach a 14 year-old boy one-to-one. He had a long criminal record and used to swagger down the corridor towards me, enjoying the fear he instilled in all the other kids. One day he exploded: "Bruce, man! You don't know how angry I am with the previous teacher!" Spontaneously, I asked him if he was afraid of his anger. He replied immediately: "Yes." I suspect this was the first time he had ever admitted to being afraid. I could see him melt out of his imitation of power and fall back inside the body of a vulnerable 14 year-old boy, separated from his father who was living abroad.

Many of the pupils I see are helplessly acting out conflicts from the past that gravely hinder their ability to engage with education. In some cases, their attempts to escape feelings they find intolerable have led to serious consequences, such as imprisonment or being sent away to a residential school.

Many have not been remotely adequately assessed. For example, the statement of special educational needs for one of my pupils – I shall call him Robert – says attempts should be made to reduce his anxiety and to encourage him to work independently at structured tasks. These are laudable aims, but they fail completely to address the severity of the developmental tasks that he faces.

Yet the entire school system is founded upon taking such developmental achievements for granted. Inevitably, it fails to diagnose adequately and fails to offer the support pupils need. The young people I teach have often had such difficult experiences that they are unable to see themselves as a whole: they cannot hold together their need to connect and their anger at the same time. The picture they have of themselves is fragile: if anyone questions them too deeply, they feel persecuted.

Robert, for example, is split between two images: on the one hand, everything should be perfect and he should get exactly what he needs when he needs it, and on the other, he fears that he is bad and hopeless and will never get anything he needs. Unable to trust, he veers between depression and violence, especially when he feels that he is being threatened by rejection.

In my experience, educational psychologists understand the cognitive factors that play a part in learning, but not the crucial emotional and psychological development on which learning is based. Similarly, child and adolescent psychiatrists, who have no obligatory training in psychotherapy, often medicalise the dilemmas pupils face by labelling them with a specific condition or disorder. Such diagnoses may have value as part of an overall assessment, but clinicians trained to see children from the outside tend to grasp only external factors. So often, they fail to connect to the child himself, who experiences himself as being on the inside.

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Pupils like Robert have learnt to react in a way that is a desperate attempt to gain support – in his case, by refusing to co-operate with any authority and feeling he has to provide it all himself. Inside, such pupils are crying out for support and recognition and respect. Outwardly, more often than not, they are objectified and quantified.

So, what can be done to help pupils like Robert? For a start, different professionals must be prepared to work together to build a picture of the whole child. Such pupils need a safe adult who can see through their reactions to their underlying feelings, without humiliating them. If they feel seen and supported and understand that adults can contain them and respect them – then they can begin to get on with life.

Above all, the educational psychology service needs to review its current practise, which is frequently limited to the application of standardised tests as a part of a very long and bureaucratic process that fails to diagnose the child properly and, tragically, fails to identify the support they actually need.

## WHERE ARE YOU?

### A 'funny for the week ' offered by Jo Horwood from Australia

*Jo keeps me entertained by sending out jokes and touching stories to his friends on a weekly basis. One of the joys of e-mail is this reminder of Aussie humour on a regular basis! A touch of sunshine from down under. JHC*

The boss of a big company needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the main computers. He dialled the employee's home phone number and was greeted with a child's whispered,

"Hello?"

Feeling put out at the inconvenience of having to talk to a youngster, the boss asked,

"Is your Daddy home?"

"Yes," whispered the small voice.

"May I talk with him?" the man asked.

To the surprise of the boss, the small voice whispered, "No."

Wanting to talk with an adult, the boss asked,

"Is your Mommy there?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"May I talk with her?"

Again the small voice whispered, "No."

Knowing that it was not likely that a young child would be left home alone, the boss decided he would just leave a message with the person who should be there watching over the child.

"Is there anyone else there in your house?" the boss asked the child.

"Yes," whispered the child, "a policeman."

Wondering what a cop would be doing at his employee's home, the Boss asked,

"May I speak with the policeman?"

"No, he's busy," whispered the child.

"Busy doing what?" asked the boss.

"Talking to Daddy and Mommy and the fireman," came the whispered answer.

Growing concerned and even worried as he heard what sounded like a helicopter through the earpiece on the phone, the boss asked,

"What is that noise?"

"A hello-copper," answered the whispering voice.

"What is going on there?" asked the boss, now very alarmed.

In an awed hushed voice the child answered,

"The search team just landed the hello-copper."

Alarmed, concerned and more than just a little frustrated the boss asked,

"What are they searching for?"

Still whispering, the young voice replied, along with a muffled giggle:

"Me."



## **Our First Retreat for Children**

**Iris Tute**

Alysun Jones and I have both had experience in teaching meditation but a whole day with children was a new venture for both of us. (Oct 8th 2001).

We wanted the day to be an enjoyable experience for the children and to provide them with some meditation tools they could use. We were somewhat ambitious by offering it to a rather wide age range from 10-16 years old. In the event we had six boys aged 10, two boys aged 12 and 13 and a 13-year-old girl. A 16-year-old girl cancelled on the morning of the event.

The main aim was to provide a meditation experience for children within a framework of safety and acceptance. Exercises for concentration in the form of games according to the age groups present formed the core activity with short times for meditation and teaching in the form of stories. We based much of our work on the very helpful book by David Fontana and Ingrid Slack: "Teaching meditation to Children" (Element).

We had prepared a programme of games and exercises for a sunny day using the garden and for a rainy day - which was what we had. Being cooped up in a small area, the children none the less did very well. One game was in the garden and everyone got wet but no one minded. We had a sharing lunch when talking was allowed. The seating order was carefully considered as well as the way everything was laid out for the children.

Meditation was much easier for some of them, mainly those who already had some training, but newcomers also experienced it as very positive. For some it all went too quickly. At the end we gave the children a chance to either draw or meditate. The majority chose to meditate. One boy wanted to find a quiet space at home where he could practise regularly and one child wanted to join our regular (adult) evening group for meditation.

Our impression was that everyone enjoyed the day - and so did we. There is a need to provide opportunities of this nature for children that are not dominated by any specific belief system.

On March 17th 2002 we are planning to hold a meditation day for teenagers (11-16 years).

Contact: *Alysun Jones* (01934 842017) or *Iris Tute* (0117 9624631).

## Pearl Diving

By Ron Henshall

### Introduction

*In the fog  
It's probably most useful  
If one's guide  
Is only a step or two  
In front*

Some years ago, I began to write down aphorisms that encapsulated various insights that I had had whilst engaged on the path towards enlightenment. Later I collected them together in a booklet called "Pearls Amongst The Guano". I had chosen this form for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the insights were not easily conveyed via words, either written or spoken. By their very nature, insights present understanding in a more holographic way as against the linear approach of conceptual reasoning and discourse. Aphorisms, metaphor and allegory offer a way of representing the gist of the insights in a more symbolic and non-linear way.

When an insight arises, it often brings with it a sudden release of energy or tension that is often experienced as a Ah!! That's it! In some similar way, I hoped that seeing into the aphorism or allegorical poem would provide the reader the opportunity also to experience this joyful release of tension and at the same time gain the understanding of the insight- a bit like getting the joke.

Subsequently I came to see that this form in some ways maintained a barrier between those who "know" and those who don't "know". While at first I saw this device as a way to protect the esoteric or secret knowledge that I believed I had re-discovered, I now see that it also served to further deepen the sense of an 'I' that got it and a "them" that didn't. Mistake!

Couching insights in allegory, metaphor and poems is nothing new. It has been one of the tried and trusted methods of teaching in Buddhism as well as in most of the world's great faiths for centuries. It was also a favourite method of the founder of the Christian religion. Zen Buddhism has also used images from direct perception as a way of indicating the gateway of bare awareness, as in the Japanese Zen Haiku poems.

However, more and more I am feeling that there is a need to present wholesome guidance for fellow enquirers in down to earth, direct, everyday twentieth century language. At the same time I also see the arrogance and futility of ever hoping to resolve any deep-seated blocks to clear-seeing by a few pages of words. Even more so when it is known that these very words can themselves form the blocks to the wisdom we seek to uncover.

Yet I myself have been inspired by the written word and I am deeply grateful to all the teachers over the ages who bothered to scribble down a few sentences, which, like drops of homeopathic remedy, were so attenuated as not to be too poisonous.

The form of scribble chosen here is that of a story. If you are one who prefers esotericism, please forgive this party pooper. I call myself Ron because that's what my parents call this 'it'. Yet who is it that writes, and who the reader? Let me know how it goes.

## **Ron's Story**

### **The Pearl Necklace**

Ron had always been a seeker. He could remember being a very small boy coming home alone from confession late one Saturday, feeling absolutely refreshed, with a bright, shining and clean soul. As bubbling joy overwhelmed him, he tripped and grazed his knee. In that moment, bliss and clarity were no more. In their place was pain and suffering which soon became transformed into an angry little fist, thrust towards the overcast sky and the word *Bastard!* echoing through the encircling darkness and directed to an uncaring God who somehow could let his little, dedicated follower be hurt for no apparent reason.

At twenty, Ron found himself in a professional rock band playing sax and flute for a living. They were somewhere in the south of England, playing their own brand of progressive rock to a receptive, university audience. Ron was at the front of the stage, totally involved in a glorious improvisation on flute; spontaneously weaving rhythms and melodic phrases in and through the dynamic patterns, beautifully laid down by the drummer, guitarist and bassist. All of a sudden, in an instant, there was no longer any Ron or any band or any audience. There was just IT musicing. There was no separation between players, listeners or music. Even the walls of the hall were sparkling IT. All was one and one was all. There was just the marvel of creation, beautifully and blissfully happening.

This instant was outside of any concepts of time, and so had no duration that could be calculated. However, in what has later appeared to be an absolutely perfect but cruel joke, IT decided to stop playing the flute, so that IT could more fully take it all in (!!). Yes, you've guessed it, the whole magic evaporated as quickly as it had arrived, and Ron was left startled, holding his flute by his side, facing the open-mouthed gazes of a thousand or so undergraduates and in front of the still driving band with the voice of Dave, his drummer shouting from behind "Ronnie, what are you doing? For f--ks sake play!"

Things eventually began to settle down and normal service somewhat resumed, but the hold that the normal perception of reality used to have had been dealt a fatal blow.

The quest to re-establish the blissful reality continued apace, but this experience and other similar ones that he had had, were kept mostly secret, save to a very few trusted loved ones. Trying to gain a framework through which to make sense of these monumental experiences Ron checked out the world's major religions. He eventually found that the Zen Buddhist literature contained passages and quotations that seemed to allude to similar states, and also offered an apparent path to prepare the seeker for these experiences, as well as offering a framework through which to make sense of them. Ron read avidly.

Eventually, some 20 years or so later, He came across a book by John Crook which was a report of a 7-day Ch'an retreat with Master Sheng-Yen, held in the Welsh mountainside. Ron contacted John through the publisher and eventually booked himself onto one of John's Western Zen Retreats.

In the meantime, he had been reading a book about Ramana Maharshi. Ron had done some Transcendental Meditation many years previously but without much effect other than a general relaxation of the mind, and a tendency to doze off into reverie. In this book, however, the master said the question "Who am I?" was the only question worth asking.

Armed with his book knowledge about Zen koan meditation and with an enthusiasm fuelled by the promise of the forthcoming retreat with John Crook, Ron began to hold the question "Who am I?" He meditated on this and repeated it to himself during any gaps in the day's intellectual activity. Two or three weeks later, in the mid-morning, he was walking Cheri,

the family pet Cocker Spaniel dog, along a tree-lined path. Without any warning or apparent cue, there was no Ron present, just IT. Very natural, very ordinary, very quiet.

The closest that can be got to indicating how it was experienced (although there was no sense of an experiencer there) is probably by presenting here the few lines Ron wrote to celebrate it:

*This morning a leaf fell from a cloudless sky*

This episode lasted for about 30 minutes before normality gradually and seamlessly resumed.

He finally got to the retreat with John Crook. With hindsight, Ron realised that these earlier events had subsequently increased his sense of separation by making him feel unique. It became evident to him, at least so he thought, that others on the retreat had not experienced some of the states that he had. However, Ron threw himself completely into the meditations and the interactions. The question given to Ron and every other first time retreatant was "Who am I?"

Even though he had recently had a realization apparently precipitated by the same question, Ron hadn't yet made the connection between the two events, question and insight. He struggled with leg and back pain, frustration and fatigue, but tried to hold the question at all times in the way that John had urged all of them to do. After the third day at about 2 am, it was as if a light came on in his head and what felt like some kind of physical rotation took place within his mind, a kind of 180 degree turn with some seeing faculty. That is it! Ron knew without any doubt that Who am I? is a misleading question, the answer is closer to the question What am I? Awareness!

Ron slid out of his sleeping bag, got up from his bed space, dressed and climbed down the loft ladders of the barn in which they slept. Stepping out into the cool clear night in the Welsh hills, his heart leaped for joy; he had found that for which he had sought for eons, the SECRET! At that moment the moon appeared from behind a small cloud. It was a familiar friend. Ron smiled and the moon smiled - they were not two. He thought about waking John up, as the Zen master would traditionally need to validate this type of insight. However, he knew John was tired and needed his sleep so Ron enjoyed being the night air then went back to bed. Still, there did remain the shadow of the "me" that had found IT and no doubt John would have highlighted that!

Of course, normal operations gradually resumed and ideas of a separate self gradually took hold once again.

He later composed a poem to celebrate this event:

*It's a dark night.  
The trees stretch their  
Limbs in the breeze.  
The air is cool  
And the nostrils flare.  
Suddenly,  
The clouds part  
And there stands the moon,  
Bright and serene.*

There were several such openings on 7-day Ch'an retreats. One such occurred again with John Crook in Wales. Here though, the practice was Silent Illumination. This is basically

sitting with whatever arises and seeing into it. Here, intellectual processes lose their fascination and the mind becomes bright and shining. On this retreat, each morning at 4.00 a.m. just after exercises in the yard, John would offer a thought for the day along with a short teaching.

This particular morning Ron was still feeling a bit dozy from the nights five hours of attempting to sleep through some cacophonous snoring. He did not recall what John said until the words "Everyday mind" suddenly emerged. Phhhh! All limitations and ideas of a separate identity vanished. There was only THIS. When the community moved into the Chan hall and sat on their cushions, there was just this bright, illimitable awareness. The wall in front of his cushion appeared totally transparent and the surrounding hillsides were sparkling with an incandescent light.

Yet again ideas of a separate self soon arose and once again gradually began to monopolise the way awareness is mediated and experienced.

One sunny, summer Saturday morning, Ron decided to go into Manchester to find a stimulating book. He rarely read anything other than books by, or about ancient Chinese Chan masters. He had long since discovered that other literary input had a disturbing effect upon his emotional balance, making him a bit tetchy. Anyway, Waterstones on Deansgate could usually be relied upon to have a reasonable selection of such books.

After parking his car on the multi-story car park behind Debenhams, Ron set off walking down Market Street towards Deansgate. He usually hated the jostling and noise of the crowds in Manchester which often left him feeling as if he had done three rounds with Muhammed Ali. However something about this occasion was very different from others.

As he was walking down past the Arndale Centre, Ron became aware of a warm, cosy feeling; a deep sense of well-being. Looking at the faces on each of the passers by he began to realise that he knew them all. Like suddenly bumping into an old friend, there was that leap of joy in the heart, a twinkle in the eye and warm smile on the face. This wasn't just with one or two of the shoppers, but every single one of the hundreds milling around this busy street, coming in and out of the shops.

It wasn't long before Ron realised that many of the people who made eye contact with him, appeared to show signs of recognition and hesitated in their tracks. Some moved toward him as if in greeting only to pause, looking confused and embarrassed, seemingly unable to place his face. Not wishing to cause any unnecessary embarrassment, Ron began to lower his gaze and half close his eyes, as though looking out from under a hood.

The glow lasted for a long time after this episode before gradually fading, but the meeting of seemingly old friends still occurs periodically. On one of the following retreats in Wales, Ron noticed a small porcelain statue of Bodhidharma in John's private quarters, which were being used for dokusan or one-to-one interviews. This statue immediately brought to mind the feel of the whole Market Street episode. Eventually after much scouring of china shops and other likely outlets, Ron managed to acquire his own Bodhidharma statue. The statue now hides behind the banister post at the top of Ron's stairs, unobtrusively watching all who pass by.

There have been many insights both on and off retreats. Each insight somehow dissolves these cognitive structures that support a belief in a self as a separate entity. Perhaps the most radical insight is that the SECRET is now out. Having a secret creates a schism between those who "know" and those who don't. The true secret is: there is no schism or separation. Even though self arises and brings with it others and other, still it is only an apparent arising in awareness. Each arising offers an opportunity or as Tony Parsons puts it,

an invitation. The invitation is to be in present awareness, just as it is. Even with it's apparent discomfort or joy.

All paths suggest "someone" being somewhere and going somewhere. This is the beauty of the dream we call life. No preparation is needed to be in present awareness. Sure, the pull of thoughts and feelings of separation may appear strong, but their only strength is in proportion to the belief in their existence. The present moment AS IT IS even including feelings and thoughts born of ideas of separation, called Suchness or Thusness in the Zen Buddhist tradition, is the gateless gate to emptiness or no-self - Nirvana.

## **Reflection**

*There is a secret,  
A secret which few have known.  
It has been the most highly  
Guarded secret since time began.  
In fact, so well kept has been  
This secret  
I don't know what it is!*

Well, the secret is out, only there can never be an "I" that knows this. As soon as we have a known then we have a knower and a knowing and that can't be "It". So I can never know this secret.

'Whosoever would lose his life for his sake shall find it.' Lose the idea of separation, of an individual life and find the truth. This truth is closer to you than your breath. Present awareness is available to all and is the basic ground of all being. It is so close it can be overlooked, but the joke is, even the overlooking is it!

All the great religions have the secret or at least thought they did. Only, having a secret for a few brings up the them and us dichotomy and thereby duality is propagated. Pure, present awareness is the ground of being. It can be ignored but is never spoilt. Like the sky, when birds fly past, no trace is left. It always is. It can't be boxed. All conceptualising is not it, but still takes place within it.

These words only point to the secret, they can never be IT. Are you right now looking at the finger or are you looking at the moon to which the finger points?

You don't need any special technique, or skill. You don't need to earn it or deserve it through good works. It is your divine right.

Are you like the fish swimming in the great ocean that is endlessly searching for water?

*Eureka!  
Every time I say  
I've found it!  
I lose it.*

A chicken will never lay an elephant

## **Seasons**

*Snowstorm of my mind  
flakes hitting, melting, dripping  
earth dark and hard, mist  
vision blurring.*

*Spring awakening  
clear air, translucent sky  
profusion of life and love  
sea and sky.*

*All is one - growing  
gone with the wind.*

*Iris Tute 18.1.96.*

## **The Guest Master is a Fool**

**Mahamudra retreat. November 2001**

**Jake Lyne**

We left home in a flurry of wet snow and headed for the Maenllwyd, arriving in the afternoon just before dark. It was snowing as we drove into Pant-y-Dwr. I was excited and wanted to get started: not just start the retreat, I sensed that this was a beginning that I had been preparing for over 20 years of attending retreats. This would be my first retreat as Guest Master. I wanted to do this because of a growing desire to contribute to the Dharma in some capacity other than as a “Dharma consumer”.

The first job was to welcome the retreatants (guests from the point of view of the Guest Master) and settle them in. Over the first two days there were plenty of routine requests; an extra blanket, a different sleeping bag, a chair instead of a cushion, and questions about jobs, until the routine of the retreat was established. There were bells for food, going to the dining room, to the Ch'an Hall, starting meditation, interrupting it, ending it, Han to wake up, clappers to start and end work, Han to go to sleep. Forgotten bells, so that the timetable slipped and the cook got cross, because the food was cold; an early clapper, so that everyone lost 15 minutes precious rest (an early clapper cannot be undone). This should all be done mindfully, but the signals seemed to be required one after another at a rush in the strangely slow time that makes a retreat.

The Guest Master supervises the work periods – the main problem was that there were too few jobs, but we solved that in part by painting a weatherboard shiny, dark blue. This should have been the pride of the painters, but I took pride in it myself – an instructive lesson.

The Guest Master gets an important perk – sleeping in the Library! Farts and snores are out of earshot; peace, quiet, a small stove to create warmth on a freezing night and a view of the stars. Getting up early to light the candles and lamps and meeting the Master before the guests got up, was a delight. Hit the Han; far too many times on the first two days, but later the right amount to send a signal and bring people out into the cold, dark morning.

By good fortune I could meditate: my mind was clear when not sleepy and the teachings on Mahamudra were directly applicable. Many times on retreats the Master has spoken of a sense of spaciousness arising; it had not occurred to me before that this arising occurs because the meditator withdraws and leaves the space alone; when it is apt to come alive.

The greatest privilege was to be able to sit in as an observer of interviews. The participants were generous and kind, bowing and smiling, helping me feel less like an intruder. The interviews were so interesting; I had many observations that I discussed with John, and I was impressed by his astute insights into character.

But the novice Guest Master is likely to be prey to paranoia. Projections are important in retreats – the strongest are laid at the door of the Master – Wise Old Man, Daddy, Military Captain, Enlightened Master etc. My paranoias were to do with disapproval from others, competitiveness with other men and fear of loss of control over the silence (the Guest Master is responsible for reminding the guests not to talk). These could be very disturbing, especially as the retreat progressed and defences came down. But towards the end I walked with a lighter tread, when it occurred to me that, just as the Master claims to be a fool in the opening liturgy of the retreat, so too is the Guest Master.



I had one interview with the Master. I spoke of my wish to learn more and become a Buddhist teacher – “no reason why you shouldn’t” – to conduct interviews on retreats – “come again as Guest Master to a Ch’an and a Western Zen retreat” – find a way to ensure that my commitment to Ch’an and to my family would be compatible – “I will help in any way I can”. Part way through the interview a red kite glided below the library and then round the side and up above so that all of its splendid markings were visible in the sunlight with a rainbow in the background. We interrupted the interview excited by the sight. Later there were six kites circling above the valley.

Often I wanted to be alone – this was possible on walks and for a few moments here and there – my mind came to a stop at these times; if it was disturbed there was always a personal reason. For example, acceptance that a phase of my life is over; understood in silence, gazing across the wide valley.

Near the end of the Retreat there was a Mondo – a question and answer session. One question prompted the seventy-year old Master to talk about the purpose of comforting ideas in the world of religions, including going to heaven and rebirth: he turned to the young questioner and said “After all we all need comforts – we all die”; his personal concern, made universal through kindness, evoked a feeling of love for him that I have not felt before.

The retreat was soon over, and after enjoyable conversations over lunch, we wound our way through mid-Wales to the motorways, and returned home no longer separated by the retreat rules, leaving the Guest Master behind to assume some other form at the next retreat.

Next day at work it was a beautiful day. For once after a retreat, I felt completely at home in my world of patients, meetings and computers. I began to ponder the question of how a strange wild place in Wales, with its elderly Master who lives in two worlds between the ancient East and modern West could have relevance, beyond the obvious value of temporarily being more at peace with oneself and others. What does it mean for our society? What is the positive meaning of the myth of the Dharma ending age? What would it mean to get rid of all the ancient and monastic distortions of Buddhism? What would it mean to be a teacher of Buddhism? How can the modern demons of commercialism, media obsession, meaningless materialism, and individualism be tamed? Surely not head on – an alternative life-style will only ever be that. In the myth, Padma Sambhava took the demons of Tibet and tamed them by incorporating them into Buddhist Tantra – how do we transform our immensely powerful demons so that we can reclaim the human spirit and beyond in every day life?

## **Exploits of a Chan Cook**

**Chan Retreat October 2001**

**Fiona Nuttall**

I had trained with Pete, one of the established Maenllwyd cooks, in March. I had been ready to cook a short, five-day retreat in June but it had been cancelled due to foot and mouth disease. Suddenly, it all seemed a long time ago. Could I remember any of it, come to that? What utensils were up there and what had Pete taken along himself? Did I need a big stockpot or not? How much cheese did one allow per person? All at once, the enormity of it all struck home. They might not eat. We might not eat.

Dharma friends laughed and said "Tell them it's a fasting day. Tell them it's good to break down attachment to eating. It's supposed to be a light diet anyway. It's the early stages of renunciation; you will be being kind to people in the long term." And so on. But I had contracted to provide three meals a day and afternoon cake for 14 people, myself included. It had to be done.

Shopping went on at a frantic pace for two days. Wholefoods, dairy, fruit and veg, sundries, personal supplies, first aid requisites, paper bags, toilet rolls, paper towels, other fresh stuff; all of these filled the house and the car. Then there were the "extras". These were the additional in case stuff did not work and substitutes needed to be applied. I could just about see out of the car windows. Anxiety was at an all time high. Lots of "what ifs".

The drive took longer than expected, probably because of having to corner more carefully than usual. Mindfulness practice was imposing itself on my scattered mind. Anxiety was replaced by contentment as I pulled onto the little road to Tylwch and the valley began to unfold before my wheels. Those hills are just beautiful and the late afternoon light was superb. A few red kites stretched their wings near the refuse tip and flew over. Perhaps they knew how much food was in the car! No assistance with the gates, so the entry to the Maenllwyd hill was slow but measured and finally the farmyard appeared.

Hilary and Simon were welcoming as always. I decided on a cup of tea before unloading. A first timer was wandering around the yard, so introductions were made. Getting to know you, getting to know me. Who am I when I am the cook? This became an interesting question over the days. The practice was practical and began with a chain of folk shifting stuff from car to kitchen. The theory is that creation of order follows out of chaos. Master Sheng-Yen tells us to put thoughts like sheep into pens. Cooks put veggies into blue plastic boxes and stack them in an orderly fashion. But it's the first day and not everything will fit where one would like it to go. Vexation arises. It's early on. You do what you can do. Mind and kitchen are both chaotic. There is probably a way of calming the kitchen, but this was my first time and I do not know that yet. I remembered a note that I had made for myself on my training retreat. "Just keep going back to the method." Doesn't matter if it is meditation or cooking. It's all the same. Do what needs to be done at the time. Just do it. Follow the recipe. Follow the breath. Don't add on.

I sat with a cup of tea and passed around a plate of biscuits. People were already quietening down. The fire glowed and threw light onto the ancient stone walls. The nooks and crannies sighed into the warm air and the Green Man in the corner smiled at us. We told our stories to each other. Some were old hands and might be expecting culinary standards akin to those of the earlier cooks. Others were "newies" and had no idea what to expect. I told my tale of novelty and asked for forbearance with the cooking. The Rayburn and I had yet to bond intimately.

The opening ceremony was strangely moving. We were creating a monastery of the spirit and I really was a stonemason in that construction this time. My efforts would help to keep things moving. I felt a warmth towards these people and a strong desire that they should be able to do what they needed to do. We would do this together.

A first night in the cook's sleeping quarters in the Buddha room. I awoke in the early hours, unable to breathe in the pitch black. Convinced that I was about to die, I sat bolt upright and flayed around with my arms, calling out-to whom? So. Not ready to die yet! Coughing and snorting, I realised that the problem was my sinuses. At last, an in-breath. The internal blackness faded to a shade of grey and faint moonlight illuminated the room. The Rayburn called to me, reminding me that it would need feeding just like everyone else, except that I was also responsible for clearing out its innards too.

Morning clappers and I was doing that very thing for the first time. Kettles on gas, humming away, teapots clinking, tea bags rustling, furnacite for the stove rumbustuously rattling and clunking in the metal scuttle. A silent retreat means hearing all these things really clearly and smelling the oil of bergamot in the Earl Grey and the Calor gas and the paraffin and sniffing for differences that indicate change.

Porridge: the eternal indicator of mental state. Mindfulness of porridge. Degrees of stirring and heat and water absorption. All this while cutting bread, lighting candelabra, placing milk, distributing marmalade and tahini and warming the boiler for tea. Not too thick or thin. Warmed through but not scorched.

Morning service over, people arrive expectantly. Not ready, not ready. They sit patiently. Yak bells ring. Ready now. First meal. First offering to Tara. First cut of the first loaf and a spoon of the first porridge. I go out and give thanks. Om Tare tutare ture soha. She has her head inclined quizzically and a smile plays around her mouth. I know that I cannot do this alone. I need all the help I can get from deities that I don't even know exist.

Meal over, I introduce myself to the kitchen assistants. I set down some ground-rules and then realise that I sound too stern. I tell them that I may seem fierce but that it is just a way of keeping things ordered. I also tell them that they have an excellent job for mindfulness practice. It is too. The kitchen is a place to watch impermanence minute by minute. Also to see transformation taking place. The repetitiousness of onion peeling or washing up the same pans over and over again. The significance of small changes-no, not finely chopped this time: sliced. Stoke fire, carry water. This really happens.

First porridge gives way to first soup and first cake. Flapjack is the first disaster as it comes away in pieces on being removed from the tin. Blast. What to do? Shove it all back in and re-bake it. It works! Pieces unevenly sized, but that gives people the opportunity to pick large or small. Anyway it is tasty and the newbies look amazed that treats like this exist. Cake is followed by chanting, which is about as good as it gets for me. Tea, cake and singing, all in the same half-hour. Bliss. Meditation steady.

First evening meal causes some anxiety. Tagliatelle for 14 not a good idea in the size of pot we have. Sauce OK though. Still having discerning mind. Not good. Relieved at getting through the day. Not in the moment. Meditation scattered. Too concerned. Stoke stove and sleep.

The days begin to repeat. A settling occurs. I remember to light the candle in the kitchen, salute the flowers and offer incense before I start to cook anything. It seems to work. Either it creates a mindfulness in my work or the kitchen gods are satisfied, or both. The bread rises, the soup has flavour and the cake stays in one piece. What more can a cook ask?

One day, the stove would not heat up properly. I riddled and raddled and bunged in more coke and didn't run the water and still it would not burn. I went over to Simon and Hilary to ask whether either of them knew any Tibetan invocation to the wind gods for a bit of wind to get the fire going. Truly, I was at Maenllwyd! I searched my memory for Taoist practices, but could find none. We were lucky to have cake that day. Eventually the fire burned up and by evening had reached the highest temperature that it was to reach all week. Perhaps some dragon, be it Welsh or Chinese or Tibetan heard my cries and blew some breath down the flue. Perhaps the incense appeased the kitchen gods. But something beyond me assisted that day.

There were real disasters. Chocolate brownies that had to be composted before they saw the light of day. Pumpkin fritters that could not get the required temperature off the gas rings and were abandoned even before they hit a pan, but every day food was served three times. I was amazed that in the midst of all this, there was also space for retreat stuff to go on. I followed the same process that I always follow on retreat, even though I was not in the Ch'an hall with the others. There was weeping and there was joy and there were small realisations. There was noticing and looking and hearing and more smelling than usual. There was the ineffable beauty of the turning leaves that changed daily before our eyes. There was the Milky Way reflected in the poppy seeds in the lemon cake. There was the moon. The mist in the valley, perfect autumnal drift. The screeching owl by the stream at 6.30. The kiwi fruit nibbled by discerning mice, "At one with the food we eat". Blessings heaped up upon each other. Throwing out the hungry ghost soup each mealtime or finding the Tara offering being eaten away by mice or slugs. All of these added to the experience. All of these were the experience.

All the time the retreat participants sat strongly. A great sense of solidity pervaded the hall. They sat, worked, walked and chanted. And ate. And in eating they were doing something for me. They gave me the chance to give. This became very precious as the week went on. I felt very privileged to be a part of the process.

The other strange bit of the week was one night when everyone was in bed and I was stoking the stove and Simon was getting lamps ready for the morning. He had given a talk that night about Xu Yun. He was laughing about being a few Dharma generations down from Xu Yun. And I laughed too. But I went to bed soon after and realised that I had been standing in the kitchen talking to one of the Patriarchs. That made me sit up and take notice.

So what was it like being a Zen cook? It was fantastic on lots of levels. It was a private retreat. It was an offering. It was a sharing. It was fun. It was hard work. It was a time to meet dragons and ride with them. It was an opportunity to watch the ego rise and fall like bread dough. It was a time to bond with the Rayburn; she and I are good mates now. Inside and outside become strangely mixed when you are the cook. We are all the same because we are eating the same food. And that extends outwards to the other critters that share it with us; mice, slugs, birds. Then there is the Dharma food that we all share. Cooks always try to get to the talks. Nourishment happens on many levels. The kitchen helpers fed me with their enthusiasm and their unwillingness to depart a work period before everything was complete. 4 pounds of carrots in Jullienne strips? No problem. 15 pounds of potatoes to peel? Just put them there. It is an experience that I am still digesting. I am grateful for having had it.



## DUMBING DOWN THE DHARMA?

### A Book Review

Ken Jones

**The New Buddhism: A Rough Guide to a New Way of Life by David Brazier. Robinson (London), 2001. £7.99. ISBN 1-84119-332-1.**

This is a challenging and original book, written in a clear, racy style. And it is selling well. The author is spiritual teacher to the Order of Amida Buddha, a religious community dedicated to socially engaged Buddhism. To the best of my knowledge he is wholeheartedly practising what he preaches. There is, however, a major flaw at the heart of this book which concerns the whole project of a socially engaged Buddhism for that is in effect a synonym for the "New Buddhism" of the title.

Brazier promises both a critique and a programme. The book aims to inject some critical spirit into the contemporary scene "in order that Buddhism [may] not die of complacency and rot in the harbour"(p27). The book will "contribute to re-establishing the importance of debate within Buddhism. The Buddha was willing to be sharp if he thought a shout might wake people up."(p12).

Near the end of his critical vision Brazier concedes that the Buddhist heritage is "a good one on the whole" (p259). Nonetheless he subjects it to a root-and-branch critique. He is particularly concerned with the perennial tendency of original spiritual insight to become solidified and corrupted into a religious metaphysic for a socially quietistic and institutionally embedded conservatism nurturing a private, cloistral pursuit of mystical experience. At worst such religion can become an accessory to war and social injustice, as in the case of Japanese Imperial Way Zen (to which Brazier gives considerable attention). Similarly Brazier warns of the danger of "white Buddhism" degenerating into a narrow, sectarian, small-minded and irrelevant pursuit of personal euphoria with a "watering-down of Buddhist ethics in the pursuit of popularity and the consequent weakening of renunciation and service to the community" (p26).

Brazier invokes the support of Japanese Critical Buddhism. This school criticises many forms of orthodoxy which are said to "assert that underlying manifest reality as we encounter it is a reality in which many things are far from well, there exists a more fundamental, unifying metaphysical substratum that is more real than the ordinary world" (p139). The concepts of emptiness, non-duality and Buddha nature are specifically targeted here, largely it seems mistakenly.

What are being attacked rightly here are false reifications, the conceptual solidifications of such insights, for these are then severed from their *paradoxical* identity with the world of form, of this and that, good and evil. As a consequence of reification it becomes possible to justify anything because, after all, the bad things are only superficial and unreal (p149) and only the underlying metaphysical substratum is considered real. If all have the Buddha nature anyway, and the world is an insubstantial and fleeting phenomenon, then "people can sit on their meditation cushions emptying their minds while the world starves".

Well said so far, -- but Brazier's Critical Buddhist conclusion from all this then turns disastrous because the Dharma is not a teaching based on such solidifications at all. Such concepts, correctly understood, are very far from being "unnecessary mystification and a mere hindrance" as Brazier asserts.

In a response to a first draft of this review Brazier argued that the paradox at the heart of things for the early Ch'an masters was the paradox of living under the patronage of an absolute despot while trying to square what they were doing with Buddhist principles of truth and compassion. "[They] had to present the teaching in such an incomprehensible way [so] that anybody (and certain people in particular) could drive a coach and horses (or a war chariot) through it whenever they wanted to."

Brazier thus reduces Form-and-Emptiness to no more than political opportunism and the stories of the Masters to rubbish. "The New Buddhism requires a better theoretical base. We would be better to return to the philosophy of Buddha that did assert the necessity of choices, that asserted the importance of those choices being ethical" (p176). Brazier would evidently have us believe that the Chan masters of China lacked an appreciation of ethics. Thus he throws the baby out with the bath water and denies the very heart of Dharma.



As astute critics of Critical Buddhism have noted, it is pointless denouncing attachment to emptiness if all you can put in its place is attachment to form<sup>1</sup>. The way forward is not to deny emptiness, non duality and Buddha nature, but to realise both experientially and in thought that 'form is only emptiness, emptiness no other than form'; non duality is duality; Buddha nature is itself karmic nature.

To live out that seeming paradox is the central theme of Nagarjuna, Dogen and the other great sages of the Mahayana. And we find it also in those pregnant Aryan silences of the Buddha and those mystifying paradoxes in the Udana and other early suttas which the Critical Buddhists together with Brazier appear to have missed. Long before Critical Buddhism did so, the Zen masters were warning of the dangers of making an Absolute out of non-duality. Thus Seng Tsan: "Reject phenomena and you turn your back on the very substance of things. Chase after the Void, and everything is lost". But his counter warning: "Pursue the light and you will lose the source" particularly comes to mind in reading this book.

I do not find in this book that lightness of spirit, that playfulness and irony that comes from living out the paradox at the heart of things. Like Anton Chekhov, I fear for people who are

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Stone *Some reflections on Critical Buddhism*, 162, 171 *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26/1-2, 159-188

too determined to do good in the world, and like Oscar Wilde I find the world in too serious a mess to be taken too seriously if we really want to do something useful for it.

The book examines no fewer than eight different traditions of enlightenment and finds all of them wanting. "All the different forms of enlightenment on offer in the Buddhist supermarkets" are essentially selfish in concept (p199). Here again we find that paradox at the heart of all spirituality, for individual salvation is indeed a contradiction unless it be at the same time compassionate liberation into the service of all beings. Yet we do have to start with the personal. As Dogen reminds us "To study the Way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be enlightened by all things; to be enlightened by all things is to remove the barrier between self and others."

Brazier undoubtedly believes in the importance, even the centrality, of some kind of profound insightfulness. He refers approvingly to Master Sheng-Yen and the Dalai Lama, in their emphasis on liberation from personal suffering in order to be able to do what matters to create the nirvana of society (pp97-98). He has many sensible things to say about the teacher-disciple relationship and "going forth", in which the need for "spiritual awakening" is emphasised. He has no doubts about "mysticism" as the deeper experiences of the spirit that arise through the discipline of religious meditation, as presumably practised in his own Order. Moreover "a hallmark of Buddhism is the bringing together of two dimensions of religious life, the socially engaged and the direct seeing into the heart of reality. Tearing these two apart does profound damage to the human spirit" (p201). However, it remains unclear what Brazier sees in the heart of reality, having rejected the "needless mystifications" of emptiness and non-duality.

The Critical Buddhists themselves are more consistent. Thus, for Shiro Matsumoto Buddhist enlightenment is nothing more than "thinking correctly about the teaching of dependent arising"; transcendent mystical experience and non-conceptual insight are rejected, and prajna translated as intellect. This sounds very like the "modernist, progressive humanism dressed up in a little Buddhist terminology" which Brazier decries as the possible fate of engaged Buddhism! (p198). There is superficiality of view here.

These concepts of impermanence, no self, emptiness and the wisdom of enlightenment are not dry philosophical concepts. They are vital pointers to how we actually experience our lives and how we do a bit of good in the world or make a mess of it. Any well-established meditator will experience a reality which has a fleeting, shifting flimsiness about it, and which embraces the self who observes it. This is the insubstantiality and impermanence the "emptiness"-- which Buddha identified as 'the signs of being'. He urged us to uncover them for ourselves. Does Brazier include this in the mind training to which he refers?

In meditative insight we also discover how the self attempts falsely to feel more secure by solidifying reality into this and that, black and white, self and other. Of course, in a relative sense these distinctions do exist and are important. But in another sense they are empty of substance and can be dangerously self-deluding. Hence the Heart Sutra (presumably rejected by Brazier's Amida Community) proclaims that form is emptiness and emptiness form. Indeed calmly observing a mature personal relationship or a social conflict situation amply reveals paradox, complexity and elusiveness.

The above insights are the root of Buddhadharma. Matured and taken to heart they make for ways of helping and of social activism which are more perceptive and less self-deceiving than if our ethical endeavours were uninformed by them. This is how, as Buddhists, we strive to "work selflessly for the benefit of the many". This is how we free ourselves from "clinging to self-importance". David Brazier seems to be reducing this Dharma to just another righteous moral code - a set of those good intentions which in



history and personal life have so often paved the road to hell. Not even Brazier's Pure Land Republic of Sukhavati would escape that fate!

What goes on in the heartlands of Buddhism is very relevant to the success of the engaged Buddhist project. In a long tradition of reformers David Brazier calls as witness only his own reading of Indian foundational Buddhism. This lively book seems to restore the idea of the Buddha as a radical critic of society with a vision of a new social order transcending racial and economic divisions (back cover). In fact such a view is a secularising Buddhist modernism which is already half a century old and remains as questionable as when it was first used to provide a rationale for a socially engaged Buddhism.



David Brazier has a laudable and well-conceived vision of a global Dhammic Republic of Sukhavati. He is aware that a pluralistic civil society of responsible communities will degenerate, if certain virtues are not upheld. However it is unclear how they can be upheld if the 'wisdom-gone-beyond' has been discarded for such remains the root of the Buddhist view.

The strength of this book lies particularly in its sense of urgency and renunciatory zeal. There is no time here for hobby Buddhism. "Most of the population of a modern Western country can be controlled through the debt system. Instead of slavery we have mortgages, the renunciant has no or only minimal involvement in this system and so has nothing to lose. This makes them dangerous" (p226). This is the virya (energy) emphasis in engaged Buddhism, rather reminiscent of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, except that Brazier's followers are thankfully more unruly than Sangharakshita's. Energy needs to be balanced, however, by contemplation, reflection, and patience. To combine the two is not easy.

Notwithstanding these important reservations, the launching of this book upon the UK Buddhist scene is not without merit. There are indeed many people who have learnt some discipline, who have practised mind training for many years, who have acquired wisdom and much compassion, but because they have not set themselves free, in a straightforward practical sense, little comes of it. They are like a fully equipped ship that is provisioned and cargoed and has a fine crew that sits in the harbour until it rots because nobody thought to pull up the anchor. (p25). Yet I fear that the author has thrown out so much of the ballast as "troublesome mystification" as to render his ship attractive yet insufficiently seaworthy and deep-keeled for its ambitious voyage.

In sum the book offers a misleading and superficial fast-food Dharma. I must however let Brazier have the last word. Hard pressed, David Brazier claimed that "I do not dispense with emptiness, but it is a question of what it means. Emptiness. Ah! Well, empty of what? Empty of self, yes, that 's what we aim for, isn't it in a less selfish world. Emptiness as a term for the fact that everything is dependent in its arising and passing away. Yes, that is how it is. Emptiness as something eternal, transcendental etc is a redundant concept, I think."

## **Maenllwyd**

*So this is home:  
This quiet decorum,  
Clean spaciousness.*

*Wind and light lie back  
Calm together,  
Backs of hands resting on  
Contemplative hills.*

*And a strange decency  
Blesses still heads.*

*Ecstasy is at odds  
With stone's ordinariness.  
Love is just  
Noticing.  
Truth seems enough,  
Or clarity.*

*No bliss needed.*

*Pat Simmons*

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