

NEW CHAN FORUM

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Rethinking

The state of Britain certainly needs rethinking. The feral teenagers armed with guns and knives, some freely murdering those who object, the vulgarity of binge drinking, the vomit in our streets, the riotous prisons, the lack of respect for race, sex or age on trains and buses – these things are not common elsewhere – although other continental countries have their own problems. We need to rethink and force a rethink among the unthinking. But how? Depressive pontificating, moaning or gnashing of teeth gets us nowhere. It is sit down cogitation that is needed with both mind and heart. We can only begin in our known places. This edition of NCF includes some rethinks and some further thinks. As we continue to develop with an expanding network of small groups we will necessarily gain a larger footprint. We need to consider what print that is to be. In their own way each of our contributors has a message to offer whether as lecture, talk, pilgrimage, meditation, poetry or humour.

Chuan-Deng Jing-di

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Rethinking Self

John Crook

The Marianne Fry Lecture, 2007 ¹

*This annual seminar of the Friends of the British Gestalt Journal commemorates the life of a well loved psychotherapist. John was honoured to be invited to give this lecture before a national audience of around a hundred therapists in Bristol in the summer of 2007. The event took all day, included lunch and ended around tea time. The talk was followed by a long question and answer discussion session. John took the opportunity to review some of the main ideas in his forthcoming book, **World crisis and Buddhist Humanism: End Games - Collapse or Renewal of Civilisation (New Age Books Delhi)**, which should appear in May this year. This article therefore allows our readers a preview of some of John's ideas and hopefully encourages a purchase of the book! Eds*

The scene is set beside my father's deathbed. It was the time of the oil crisis in 1972. Dad was reading his newspaper; he'd had a serious heart attack and he was to die the following morning. That evening he was very lucid. He was reading about the world crisis of that time, and I was sitting with him. He put down his paper and he said to me, "John, you know, I always used to think I would like to come back in the future and see how everything is going on. But you know now I really don't think I want to come back; things look just too bleak." I was always sad about these last thoughts of my father, and I resisted them over many years. Yet, I have to confess that in the last three years I have come to have a lot of empathy with what he was saying. I am not at all sure I would want to come back in 20 or 30 years' time. And that's within the lifetime of my grandchildren. It's within the lifetime of the grandchildren of all of us.

The Problem of Decadence

It now seems certain that in the next 30 years or so the planetary world as we know it ecologically today will change dramatically. We can already see the changes happening. Furthermore, without being alarmist, we also have to say that scientists do not know what the thresholds involved in these changes are. There could be trigger points that may bring about far more rapid and catastrophic changes than we are thinking of at the moment. It is just very uncertain indeed. Let us hope things will proceed smoothly; let us hope that we manage to get on top of it, but there are no promises.

Why did my father feel that way? My Dad was an Edwardian who had come through the First and Second World Wars, who had seen the victory of democracy over Nazism and Fascism, who had also seen the fall of the Iron Curtain and the change in politics towards what appeared at first to be a much more optimistic scenario. This was a direction of change that would have fulfilled his humanist-Christian values. He had been an engineer and was proud of all the progressive advancements in the world. He'd seen all of those things but the changes that were then occurring were disappointing and seemed chaotic. I think he felt that the world had entered a period of marked decadence. Today I would agree. I put it to you that we are living in a decadent world. And I'm also going to suggest to you that the reason for that decadence is us, you and I in our time, I mean the current Western cultural attitude to this world of ours.

What is decadence? Well the Oxford English Reference Dictionary defines 'decadence' as "moral or cultural deterioration especially after a peak or culmination of achievement". The

¹ Presentation of this article here by agreement with Friends of British Gestalt Journal. Many thanks to Dr Malcolm Parlett who initiated this invitation.

juxtaposition of these opposed ideas – moral or cultural deterioration after achievement – is a very sad one to reflect upon. We have to realise that, as Prime Minister Macmillan said long ago, we in the West have never had it so good. The scientific advances, the inventions, the extraordinary speed of communication, email and all that is really staggeringly significant and has brought about an ease and comfort in life that no previous generations ever had. Not only that, up until relatively recently the victories in the Second World War and the fall of the Iron Curtain did indeed suggest that we might be moving towards a more stable historical situation on the planet with a greater importance of the rule of law, the United Nations, a World Community, and the development of something approaching democracy over at least very large areas of the world. Yet, then what happened? Well I needn't rehearse for you the history of the last 15 years, but I do want to refer you to another definition – the definition of the adjective 'decadent'. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary refers to the adjective 'decadent' as "self-indulgent". Now, as we've seen, the title of this talk is 'Rethinking Self' and if our world is failing on account of a decadent self-indulgence, then it is attention to the 'self' itself that we will need to pay attention.



I don't want to spend too much time talking about the well-known problems of our time, the faulty politics, bad decisions, poor economics: Kosovo; Iraq; the state of the Middle East; Islamic religious fanaticism due largely to deprivation and poverty distorting Islam into the terrorism of resentment. This is matched by equally perverse and self-concerning policies of the Christian Right in the United States – the Neo-Cons. The collision of Islamic fanaticism and the Neo-Cons, if it continues, (and thank goodness it looks as though it isn't) could produce the ending of our cultural world, both in bangs and in whimpers. Fortunately, the victories of the democrats in the recent elections in the United States show the American people are at last waking up to the mistakes of their leadership: understandable mistakes because driven by the terrible disasters in New York of '9/11'.

Yet these dangerous political and terrorist issues are of relatively minor concern when compared with the problems of global warming and the concurrent political resistance to adequate action in changing our economic practices in relation to ecology. Again, sad to say, it has been in the United States that the major resistance has been seen – political resistance to doing anything about the planetary ecology. Furthermore, the lack of leadership by the United States is allowing or encouraging China to produce incredible amounts of pollution as it fills the US demand for cheap goods. This pollution does not stay in China but drifts around in the world's wind systems.

All this is the background to something else, which is perhaps the saddest point directly and immediately facing us in Britain. I refer here to the extraordinary social alienation of large sections of our young people – the lethal teenage gangs, the Ladism and the lunatic binge

drinking. In Bristol, only a few weeks ago, I went to see a film and came out to the street at about 8 o'clock in the evening to find it full of drunk and half-clad young people. It was from any perspective socially disgusting. Then again, not much better was the behaviour of our football supporters in Barcelona a few months ago. The Spanish people were putting up politely with a good deal of shouting, violence and excessive bravado. Beyond these symptoms of decay, we have all the well-known effects of family breakdown. It seems that British teenagers of certain origins bearing knives and guns are becoming lethal, roaming dogs in the body politic.

I could go on like this but to do so would be merely depressing. We all know these things. So I want to make the one major point which makes our world decadent, truly decadent. We have been almost unthinkingly engaged in the spoliation and destruction of this planetary ecosystem upon which our civilisation depends. The way in which we are behaving economically and socially is bringing about climate changes that may be extraordinarily destructive over time. What is so extraordinary is that when we know we are faced with severe damage to our own planet, to our own cultures, to our own cities, we're doing so remarkably little about it. Two days ago we had headlines about the Queen getting cross during an interview. Such triviality is typical of the media. There is very little adequate focus on the truly serious situation that we are in.

We might ask - haven't things always been difficult? For my Dad things were pretty ominous in 1939. Yet, in 1939 it was not the state of the planet that was at stake. This is what makes the word 'decadence' truly potent in our time. It is unbelievably decadent, in my book, not to take this planetary issue enormously seriously as the most important issue of our current existence and one that will affect our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren enormously. Washington fiddles while Rome burns.

World-Views

These pressures, these gloomy pictures, do have personal effects on all of us. I myself find that listening to the 10 o'clock news bulletin is commonly a highly depressing experience; it's often grim. I want now to refer to the essay written by a young woman student in the University of Bath which Peter Reason, Professor of Management Studies in Bath, quoted in his inaugural lecture about two years ago. She had said: "As I approach the end of my studies I can't help feeling that freedom is a fallacy, and that somehow I've been walking a predetermined path to mortgage repayments and commuting nightmares. Further, I'm not alone. Despite a whole array of graduate opportunities, there is a growing mood of claustrophobia and a sense of powerlessness. For all the relative luxuries of the Western world we are still unsatisfied, there is an unmistakable sense of longing, a deep craving for some kind of release or escape." In quoting this essay and going on to discuss it, Peter Reason argued that what this young woman was trying to escape from was the Western world-view itself, that is the unthinking collusion in a certain image of our world that almost all of us entertain.

What is a world-view? We have to spend some time thinking about this. A world-view is that complex set of integrated social images and understandings that, as it were, passes as the norm of one's time. A world image of a period of time drives the history of that period. You could say that the world-view of the Victorian era had to do with imperialism, to do with white supremacy, to do with the cocky arrogance of the West, to do with Christian dominance. Yet, it is also to do with the rights of man, European enlightenment, free play, democracy, and the ending of the slave trade. Such a complex made up the prevailing world-view of the majority of educated people in the Victorian era.

What is the set of components that determines the world-view of most of us today? Well, I think very few of us ever actually sit down and ask what is my world view, or what is our

world view, or what is the British world view, or what is the European world view, or what is the Western world view. Of course, there's a good reason for that – it's very complicated.

I want to list three features of our current world-view to put to you as being characteristic of our time and which are operating for the most part unconsciously in that we don't reflect upon them and are not educated to reflect upon them – Capitalism, Individualism and Dualism.



Capitalism

First of all, there is the overriding power of capitalism in its consumerist form. We have to realise that this economic system is amazingly dynamic based upon the system of business institutions that requires investment to yield products which in turn produce dividends for the investors. In order to make that cycle work, there has to be novelty, exploitation of ever more resources, and growth creating value addition beyond the cost of labour. The system naturally sustains the division between the relatively poor producers and the often tremendously rich investors. Needless to say, some of these industrial activities involve arms sales utilised in regional violence and the potential for atomic war. Nowadays so powerful is consumerist capitalism that many of the really big trans-national corporations are much bigger than national states.

If one asks who is responsible for the activity of a trans-national corporation it would be very difficult to put a finger on anyone because these are machines – machines driven by a very effective economic process. One could say that the people who are responsible are the investors, that is you and I. Yet we rarely know exactly where our funds are invested. They are invested by brokers. Only a few of us have actually conducted an ethical investigation as to what these investments are actually supporting. One of the effects of the system has been the enormous expansion in the search for raw materials into all parts of the globe involving the destabilisation of tribal peoples, the creation of enormous dams sometimes requiring the removal of whole populations, and the breakdown of the culture and language of many small peoples.²

This extraordinary system, we must realise, is historically completely new, a novelty. Before the industrial revolution the great empires of, say, the Sultans of Turkey, the Moguls of India or the Emperors of China, were all based on agricultural riches. Of course, there were trade routes, of course, there were banks, of course there was exchange – these systems were also

² Boyden, S. 1987. *Western Civilization in Biological Perspective*. Oxford..

dynamic. Yet, the limitations of agriculture and the seasonality of production meant that such empires could never gain more than a certain amount of power. Such economic systems couldn't become endlessly progressive in the manner of post-industrial economies. Britain with its dynamic world-view of industrialisation created something entirely new when compared with any of the agriculturally based empires. It is this very European novelty, adopted by all the powers of this world that is now destroying the natural systems that it exploits.³



Individualism

What is this consumerist capitalism riding upon? I put it to you it's driven largely by another feature of our Western world-view - our extreme sense of individualism. This is the second feature I wish to stress. We value our individuality enormously, perhaps excessively. One of the crudest indications of this is the way in which every time a British or an American soldier gets killed in either Afghanistan or Iraq, flags go up, ceremonies are performed, corpses are brought home covered in national flags, relatives are informed, great sadness is publicly expressed and, because of a few hundred American dead, new policies are presented in Congress. But what about the hundreds of Iraqi civilians run over by American convoys rushing at high speed to supply their fortresses and so terribly fearful of roadside bombs as to drive recklessly through crowds of civilians smashing any cars in their way? I was reading a whole set of such accounts in yesterday's Guardian, interviews with American soldiers now back in the States currently recording the grotesque brutality in the way in which Iraqi civilians have been treated.

These are signs of our preoccupation with ourselves as individuals and our failure to generalise this preoccupation to others with whom we fail to identify. At a subtle level, there is an extraordinary self-confidence about the individual in the West. Our education encourages us to focus on becoming the brightest boy in the school or the most beautiful girl in the class. Some very interesting psychological testing has shown how this focus on the individual creates a very selfish attitude towards purchasing, buying, being – all focused on me, me, me. Furthermore, psychological enquiries reveal a very different situation in Japan or in China where research directly comparable to that done in America has been carried out. Briefly, the average Japanese or Chinese is not particularly concerned with 'me'. What they're concerned with is relating to the community within which they belong. First and

³ Stiglitz, J. 2002. *Globalization and its discontents*. Penguin

foremost is the family – a strong communal sense of the family. And that extends outwards to the company within which individuals work. If individualism can be said to be the hallmark of part of our Western world-view, so communalism is actually the hallmark of much of Asian world-views.⁴

Of course, this means the Western media are very strongly focused on things that happen to individuals – the cult of celebrities, discussions about the differences between the last Prime Minister and the present one. The focus is far more on individuals than it is on policies and viewpoints. Our general assumption of the importance of the individual is one of the reasons for the success of Western capitalism. Individuals run it and earn cash fortunes never dreamt of before

Dualism

The third of the characteristics that seem to define our Western world-view at the present time is what I would call metaphysical dualism, and there are two forms of this. One is philosophical and one is religious. The philosophical form of metaphysical dualism comes from Descartes and the whole Cartesian way of viewing science. The object to be studied is completely distinct from the person or the process doing the studying. The two are kept apart. Mind and matter – the thinker and the studied – are kept rigorously separate in classical science. This, of course, promotes a kind of almost schizoid activity within science. What such a scientist actually does is not necessarily effected by what he or she values.

As you know, I'm a scientist and I have a great many scientific friends whom I respect enormously and who hold more or less this so-called reductionist attitude. But what are their values? Some people denigrate science as being somehow valueless and not contributing to our world. This is not true. The orthodox scientists of my acquaintance think very carefully about the world. But what do they feel about themselves in the world of their understanding? The scientific enquiry reveals a universe in which there is no ultimate 'point', just an extraordinary complicated mystery. There is no personal security offered in the investigations of science to bring comfort in the face of universal death. After all, however exciting and intriguing may be the wonders of the Big Bang or the recent discovery of some galaxy so far out it's light was created so many millions of years ago that one can't even imagine it – at least I can't – and which reveals something about what happened within the first few seconds of origin of our universe, what does that mean to an individual with a mere three score years and ten of transient existence?

Most of my scientific friends are, I would say, stoics. Really, they think very much in the way of a Roman Stoic. Many would say this is the way it is, this is the way the world is, we adjust our lives to fit it. We investigate what the truth is. The truth is something we have to live with and discover. Values and idealism here tend to become highly utilitarian, because the values that such people hold are about making utilitarian differences in the world, improving the water supply, flying better aircraft, speeding up communications. Scientists are dedicated to utilitarian results that make our lives more comfortable, more 'happy' in a material sense. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that what we lack are 'hyper-goods'.⁵ By hyper-goods he means values that have, as it were, a fundamental relevance in some sense, not merely things being done for some utilitarian effect but things being done because it is right and proper to do them, driven by some universal perspective. Such values are not so common among my scientific friends. A mere utilitarianism in values has percolated very widely throughout our culture. We can call this a philosophical dualism. Action for utility.

⁴ See: Neisser U and D. A. Jopling. Eds. 1997. *The Conceptual self in Context*. Cambridge.

⁵ Taylor, C. 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard.

The religious dualism is more potentially dangerous. What is religious dualism? Well, it's the form of belief that has been traditional for many centuries in monotheistic cultures. The thinker reifies some abstract idea and promotes it into the key position in a discourse. For example, when we don't understand the universe, we may well say it must be due to 'God'. We reify the idea of a causal God and project him into the universe and go on to believe it. This is dualism in that the entity placed up in the heavens is a production, a projection of our reasoned inferences. It is not something up there to which we can be intimately related except in illusion. It is simply a metaphysical imputation. This mode of thinking is known to philosophers as logocentric discourse: a discourse which pivots around one key theme and everything else hangs on it.⁶ So for example, in Christianity or Islam, everything hangs on the concept of God.

I must have been a really unpleasant student. When I was at university, I was troubled about this word 'God', so I used to go along to theological lectures. I used to sit deliberately in the front row and of course the speaker, being a theologian, would very soon use the word 'God'. I would put up my little 19-year-old hand and I would say "Excuse me, you have just used the word 'God', could you please give me a definition of God because without a definition I don't see how the lecture can proceed". Bastard! I never ever got an answer, which just goes to show that if you have a logocentric discourse you cannot query the logos in the middle of the discourse otherwise the entire thing falls apart.

The tragedy of these logocentric religious discourses, however, is that there is more than one of them. So we have Islam versus Christianity, where we have two versions of 'God' that share a lot of common history but whose rules and regulations have come down in a rather different way in the two cases. Then, because neither of them can be questioned within the belief, one side is always the infidel to the other – hence Crusades, hence Jihads.

Jihads and Crusades are fundamentally rooted in a particular kind of dualistic position and such attitudes in the modern world need to be very seriously interrogated. Yet, if you listen to the radio, if you listen to what's going on in the world, you will find a general assumption that this kind of dualistic religious thinking is fine, nothing wrong with it, perfectly OK. Yet, the troubles between them fester. We have to discover a philosophical position allowing tolerance between the two of them. It is very difficult to find tolerance between two ultimately absolutist dispositions. It requires a third perspective, a third philosophy that might compensate for and integrate the schism between the two. This will not be easily achieved and is not yet achieved.

I've chosen these three features – capitalism, individualism, and dualism – as three cardinal points within the Western world-view. Now we need to understand a little more clearly what world-views are and how they may have changed through time, because none of these world-views, none of these elements in our world-views which I've been talking about, are in any way sacrosanct throughout history.

The History of World-Views

There is a wonderful Russian philosopher called Mikhail Bakhtin who is not very well known in this country. He is mainly a writer on the structure of novels and the way in which the novel and similar literature is related to the world-views of the times in which they are written. As part of his project, he has considered the historical sequence of world-views. He argues for three main periods, chronotopes he calls them.⁷ The first period is Shamanism – the ancient matrix as he says it. Shamanism is extraordinarily interesting. It's a pattern of

⁶ See further: Belsey, C. 2002. *Poststructuralism. A very short introduction*. Oxford.

⁷ Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. University of Texas. Austin

varying beliefs in the cyclicity of nature. It creates relationships with ‘gods’, which are actually forces of nature – forces of nature which determine the annual cycle. Its practices bring about adjustment to forces of nature through visualisation and often the use of psychedelics to create a close association between the Shamanic yogin or ‘priest’, the natural powers and the manner in which village people relate to those natural powers. Some of the Shamanistic systems are extraordinarily well adapted to the ecologies in which they exist, as in the Amazonian forest or in the Siberian tundra – quite extraordinary examples of intuitively skilled metaphysical adaptation to ecology.



The shamanic phase in the history of world-views gave place to viewpoints that we can call progressive dualism. Once overproduction of some commodities was achieved through agriculture, markets were established through the flow of goods. You had banks, you had businesses. Life was less concerned with cyclicity of the seasons, but rather with the acquisition of money and power, hierarchy, of leadership or kingship. This was a linear vision instead of a cyclic one. You got a division between authority and those who were dominated. It was in this context that the logocentric discourses emerged. You also got the emergence of high priests, bishops, popes, authorities, dogmas, coercion within religion. Here emerged a kind of authoritarianism including such things as the assumption of infallibility and the inquisition, and so on; a system of power in which the state and the religion became highly intermingled.

In the third phase, Bakhtin argues very interestingly for a period characterised by reflection, a reflective world-view. In a reflective world-view the mind of the thinker becomes aware of the nature of what it has thought, the limitation of that thought. The thinker begins to accept responsibility for what he has thought. For example, a thinker might discuss God. God? God is in his heaven. Maybe yes, but that’s just my idea. Actually - I don’t know. Mmm. That’s reflective thinking. It doesn’t necessarily mean that the thought was wrong, it just means that it was a thought and no more than a thought, a concept reified into a truth, a ‘reification’. It was the great philosopher, Kant, who really began to uncover this whole issue in Europe exploring how far we can ever understand ultimate reality when ultimate reality is always necessarily a production of our own minds. This viewpoint became a key element in so-called post-modern thinking, and therefore it’s relatively common today. Yet, here’s a surprise! As

we shall soon see, it also appeared at least 2500 years ago, in the iron age of India, with the thought of the Buddha.⁸ We shall investigate the implication of this shortly.

So, our current Western world-view is a strange one in which we have a conflict between religious dualism and the scientific understanding of the world creating for many a deeply schizoid tension between the values of scientific exploration, the utilitarianism of economy, and the quest for something spiritual in the absence of any 'hypergoods'. There's an enormously confused interest in the spiritual in 'New Age' movements of various kinds. Most of these are easily perceived to be projections of individual minds despairing of something more relevant to life and death within a world of utilitarian values.

West and East

This Western world-view is deeply divisive yet few realise that it's not the only one on offer. If you read learned texts about the history of world culture you quite often find they begin with Ancient Greece and proceed to the present time without a mention of the tremendous philosophical importance of India and China. Their cultures and philosophies are quite often bypassed and simply ignored. This is indeed amazing today when the literature of great Indian thinkers and great Chinese thinkers in translation is well available through superb scholarship, particularly in North America. No-one really has an excuse for assuming that world culture began with the Ancient Greeks. A lot of very important things did indeed begin with the Ancient Greeks but that's not the whole story.

The key thing about these Asian world-views is that they are not dualist. They are holistic. Let's take an example – Confucianism. Chinese Confucianism, which is touched also by Daoism, assumed an intimate relationship between the Emperor and the natural world. The Emperor held the 'mandate of heaven'. Heaven was the natural world. Heaven was the universe. When something went wrong in the rule of an Emperor it was said that he had 'lost the mandate of heaven'. This means that in Confucianism there was a connection between political power and the natural world. They are not separated by thinking that allows the natural world to be forgotten while the political world is retained. No, the political world and the natural world interact with one another. This is an important holism. And we find much of this also in philosophical Hinduism, in Daoism, and especially developed philosophically and experientially in Buddhism.

If we are looking for an alternative to our western perspectives or for a way to modifying them then I put to you that Buddhism is the most useful of these Asian visions because Buddhism is essentially a never-ending enquiry. As my friend, the philosopher Steven Bachelor, puts it, 'Zen is enquiry'. That's what it is – it is enquiry. We shall see in a moment it is a special sort of enquiry, but it is enquiry. It's not an answer: it's an enquiry.

The essential point to realise in approaching Buddhism is that it is not just a rationalised philosophy or belief system. It is based in a never-ending enquiry rooted in the methodological practice of mental yoga. It resembles science in being a subjective empiricism.⁹ That is to say, an experimental investigation of the nature and practices of mind rather than an objective empiricism concerned with nature as perceived and measured by a mind. Unlike psychological science, however, its prime focus is not actually mind itself, but rather suffering. One could say, rather pompously, that Buddhism is a phenomenological soteriology. Sorry about that - but it's rather a good definition. What does it mean? What does it mean? Phenomenological means a psychologically based experiential investigation of

⁸ See discussion : Crook, J. H. 2007. Shamans, Yogins and Indigenous psychologies. In: Dunbar, R. I. M. & L. Barrett. (Eds) Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology. Oxford.

⁹ See : Crook, J. H. 1980. The Evolution of Human Consciousness. Oxford.

suffering, and soteriology is the study of its function in producing 'salvation', a resolution of suffering.

So we have here a system of active enquiry, a philosophical inquisition which is aimed at understanding the suffering of the mind with the purpose of finding something which is termed 'enlightenment', the relief from that suffering. The most important thing is that it is rooted in mental yoga as a prime method. The yogic enquiry is the essence of Buddhism. What is the yogic enquiry? Well, to put it very simply, meditation is a yogic enquiry. Why? Because when you sit in meditation you are looking into the mind and you are saying what is this? What is this experience now? Where is it? What is it? How is it? It is endlessly going in to the nature of mind. That's what I call subjective empiricism. It's just as significant for us as the objective enquiry in psychology that is essentially the description of mind, and the analysis of people's behaviour. That's objective. It's fine. Nothing wrong with it but it is incomplete. The key point here is that the essence of Buddhism is subjective enquiry. Buddhism parallels Science in this very fact of enquiring. Of course, these two modes of enquiry are related and we must go on discuss their relationship.



The Perspectives of Buddhism in Relation to Science

One cannot simply assert that Buddhism is like science; one has to demonstrate it. The first thing to say is that there is no dogma in Buddhism. The Buddha himself said quite clearly that here's an argument, here's a viewpoint – if you like it, fine, come along and we'll participate in investigating it. If you don't like it, fine, find something else. This has remained true throughout the history of Buddhism; there is no coercion within Buddhism. This resembles Science in that the scientist can put forward a theory, an idea, and no-one has to believe it. It's put there to be evaluated. Of course, that releases enormous discussion between those in favour and those against but there is no coercion to believe and no personal problem if you don't follow it. In Buddhism there is no sin, but there is the making of mistakes. This shift in vocabulary marks a whole difference. No sin, but yes, one can make mistakes and one pays for them through karmic retribution.

What is the prime hypothesis of the Buddha? It's called the 'Law of Co-dependent Arising' or 'inter-dependent origination'.¹⁰ This argues that the universe has no single origin; it has always been a flux of causes and effects. The cause A comes up, has an effect B. B has an effect C. C has an effect D. B and C may also affect something out to one side – a parallel discourse going along. So there is a network of causes and effects always going on and on and on. This is what is meant by 'inter-dependent origination' because A, B, C, and D are all inter-dependently related with one another. The process can also come back in a circle so that

¹⁰ See :Loy, D. 1998. *Nonduality; a study in comparative philosophy*. Humanity Books. New York. Also : Macy, J. 1991. *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*. The Dharma of Natural systems. SUNY.

the original A is also caused by the sets of circumstances within which it arises. Buddhism is a philosophy of contingency. Causes arise and produce effects dependent upon conditions. This is an extremely simple statement, but it is enormously far-reaching. It means among other things that nothing can come out of nothing. There are always causes and effects and conditions. Equally well nothing can ever come solely out of itself for the same reason. And so on. There are therefore whole sets of logocentric, metaphysical theories which simply collapse in the face of the law of inter-dependent origination. Many of the great Buddhist philosophers spent a lot of time enjoying themselves destroying metaphysical theories through subjecting them to the arguments of inter-dependent origination.

This theory, this viewpoint, this 'law', is itself a hypothesis – it's a way of seeing. The fascinating thing about it is that it has some extraordinary parallels within Science. Now I'm not a physicist, so I'm on dangerous ground here, but there is support for this general view from quantum mechanics.

The Buddhist story itself underwent evolution. The simple law of the Buddha became very much enlarged in a wonderful philosophy developed in China called Hua-yen, which is based on the Indian Garland or Avatamsaka Sutra. It contains an extraordinary metaphor, a picture of the Law of Co-dependent Arising. Imagine a huge sky, hanging in it is a net known as the Net of Indra – Indra simply being the King of the Gods. This network consists of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of diamonds, multifaceted diamonds all hanging in space. They are all mutually reflecting one another. Everything is reflected in everything else. The Empress Wu of China couldn't quite understand this metaphor and asked a leading teacher to demonstrate it for her. So he said - well it's like this. He fixed up a room with many mirrors – I think an octagon of mirrors. And in the middle, he put a lamp. Then he brought Her Majesty into the room and said, "This is the demonstration of the Net of Indra", because the lamp in the middle was now reflected millions of times in the octagon of the mirrors in the room.¹¹

When these ideas first began to come to the West, people thought that's just amazing but how on earth does it relate to what we're talking about in Science? Yet then along came quantum mechanics, and the extraordinary thing about quantum mechanics is that the inter-relations between the quanta, the 'particles' or 'waves' of energy, which operate as the most fundamentally known constituents of matter, perform in a way that makes that metaphor very valid indeed. I'm not qualified to go into quantum physics but my reading of the matter and checking it out with physicist friends shows that the way in which quanta relate together is in a mutual interaction of great complexity that could very well be expressed through the ancient metaphor of Indra's net.

So, right at the foundation of Buddhist thinking we have an extraordinary parallel with some of the most advanced thinking in contemporary Science. Furthermore, if everything is dependent on everything else, one would expect that in evolution the emergence of novelty would have been dependent upon conditions. Indeed, the evolution of humanity has depended on certain conditions in the past out of which the causal processes of genetic selection produced our species.

A lot of evolutionary theory has been quite simplistic, that is up until about 10 years ago. The way in which evolutionary theorists – and I have been one of them – used to think about evolution was to think of the environment and the organism as a dualism. The organism adapts to the environment. It does this by producing broods of offspring in every generation of which the individuals vary. Some of them are more suited to the environment than others. The ones that are most suited reproduce and spread and the population becomes adapted to the environment. In this view, there is always a fixed environment and a dynamic process of

¹¹ See: Chang, Garma C. 1972. *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality. The Philosophy of Hwa yen Buddhism.* George Allen and Unwin. London.

reproduction which is endlessly adapting to the environment. Two things therefore – life and environment; a dualism.

Recent evolutionary theories have shown that this approach is far too simple. Why? There is a viewpoint being developed by a former colleague of mine, John Odling-Smee at Oxford, who talks in terms of 'Niche Construction'.¹² Niche is a term describing the way in which a species lives in its environment. For example, take the bird the Great Tit. It's quite a large Tit, a member of the Paridae family. It lives in trees but will also explore food on the ground, bird tables and so on. That's its 'niche'. The Coal Tit, a smaller darker coloured Tit prefers conifer woods. They are a prime feature of its niche. So the question is how do species evolve in their different niches?

John Odling-Smee has argued that species play major roles in creating their own niches. How does this argument work? Well, a very simple illustration of this comes from one of my own first PhD students – Steven Gartlan – who very sadly died recently. Steve was out in Africa studying a forest monkey and he noticed that along the forest fringe the monkeys used to bring their fruit out of the forest, go 100 yards or so outside and climb up on a termite mound and eat the fruit there. What happened? They dropped the seed. The seed germinated and the forest expanded. So the monkeys were actually producing the extension of the forest which was their own habitat. There's a feedback here. The monkeys were helping create the habitat within which they were eventually to live. It's not simply a dualism of habitat and selection, the monkeys were participating in creating their own habitat.

This idea goes further. If you introduced some burrowing animal into a small island, what would happen? Well, first of all you had a nice neat and tidy virginal island with sand dunes and hills and a few trees. You introduce these animals. What do they do? They start creating burrows. Before you know where you are, they've spread widely and the whole environment is full of burrows. Now the appearance of burrows in a habitat where there have been no burrows before will produce a lot of ecological changes. The humidity of the soil is altered. The topography of the soil changes. The presence of nesting sites changes. The whole habitat begins to change as a result of the activities of the animals. So that after 10 years or so, when you come back to see what has happened, you find an entirely different habitat on that island as generated by the behaviour of the animals. The animals in relating to their habitat as first encountered have created their own domain.¹³ Those currently living had evolved not only in relation to the original matrix but to the changed environment created by their immediate ancestors. And the process goes on.

Now, in the case of humanity, we have extensively modified our environment to increase our use of it but increasingly we have failed to adapt to the constraints of our planetary system sustainably. Indeed, our behaviour has become adaptively dysfunctional to the extent that we are altering the climate of the planet in a manner that disturbs the entire ecosystem. By failing to curb our greedy aggrandisement, our limited capacity for reason appears to have turned into a malfunction so far as adaptive biology is concerned. We may be heading for the evolutionary denouement of extinction - a common fate for species that fail to support their sustainability in relation to resources.

¹² Odling-Smee, F. J; Laland, K. N. & Feldman, M. W. 2003. Niche construction: the neglected process in Evolution. Princeton.

¹³ For a psychological version of the above approach in application to humanity see: Crook, J. H. 1995. Psychological processes in cultural and genetic co-evolution. In : Jones, E and V. Reynolds. (Eds) Survival and Religion. Biological evolution and Cultural change. Wiley. New York.

Such a viewpoint is obviously a holistic position, not a dualist one.¹⁴ What we evolutionists now have to consider is the way in which the activities of organisms themselves modify the habitat to create a changing world, the niche of the species. This example shows how something like the Law of Co-dependent Arising can be a relevant if simple expression describing a modern problem, the evolution of species in relation to their habitat.

The Buddha put forward a very simple yet elegant model of the mind. It is also based on the Law of Co-dependent Arising. He argued that there are five main features of the mind in constant interaction with one another. The first is sensation. If I pinch Malcolm, he'll feel a sensation. Secondly, there is perception. Perception is when Malcolm realises that it is John who has pinched him. Thirdly there is cognition. Malcolm is now calculating fast and comes to the conclusion that it's a joke and not an assault (hopefully he comes to that conclusion!). And fourthly there is the conditioned historical background to his cognition. If he was a particularly aggressive person, he might come to the opposite conclusion and bash me one. So you have sensation, perception, cognition, and what's known as *Sanskara* in Sanskrit, namely the pre-determining conditioning factors which affect cognition. Lastly there is consciousness. You have a whole system here in which these psychological aspects are interrelating, co-determining features of mind. Although this is a relatively simple model, it's not so different from those we use today.

But where is the self? No self appears in this system. Self, Buddha argued, is an imputation within cognition that arises from the activities of the five features. So I'm sorry, Buddha thinks you're just an imputation derived from your sensation, your cognition, your perception, and your predispositions and your consciousness – all that produces the impression that there's somebody sitting there. Sorry, says the Buddha, you're just not there in the way you think you are.

Now when a person holds onto this false impression that he or she exists as some sort of a 'thing', s/he will go on to examine what happened to him or her in the past and what might happen in the future and begins to create a narrative. This narrative emerges as the basis for the constitution of a self image, an identity. Amazingly therefore in the Buddhism of 2500 years ago we find this very sophisticated idea of the self as narrative which, I think you will agree, is not far different from a lot of ideas which we hold today in modern psychotherapy and in modern psychology.

Indeed, after 2500 years, it seems we really haven't got very much further on. These parallels show that these fundamental ideas in Buddhism are compatible with scientific enquiry and parallel much modern phenomenological research. As we have already discussed, Buddhism is fundamentally concerned with subjective rather than objective enquiry. The Buddhist Law of Co-dependent Arising came from the Buddha's direct observation of his own mind. His Brahminical teachers had told him that if he looked deeply into his mind he would eventually discover Brahman and that would be the solution to everything. But the Buddha was a deeply sceptical thinker. When he did this meditation - and he was a superb meditator - he found that whatever was going on there was caused by something which had happened previously. There was always some kind of process or condition which shaped what the mind was doing, even to the extent that when the mind began to disappear, seemingly to become Brahman, that was simply because the removal of certain attributes of mind had left an empty space. This was not something absolute and final, rather it was part of the process of meditation. So the Law of Co-dependent Arising was born. Absolute Brahman was just another imputation.

¹⁴ A further notable and very important example of biological holism is the global perspective of James Lovelock. See Lovelock, J. 1989. *The Ages of Gaia. A biography of our living earth.* Oxford.

I hope I've managed to persuade you that there is sufficient overlap between the empiricism of Buddhism and the empiricism of Science and, indeed, the empiricism that underlies the enquiry of psychotherapy, to justify an interest in the Buddhist viewpoint. What I want to do now is to suggest in a broad way that the manner in which our world-view needs to move is towards a holism that could repair the schizoid quality of our present split between economics and ecology, between self and other, between 'God' and person. What we need to do to replace that schizoid world-view is to regenerate some kind of a holism.¹⁵

Obviously, this cannot be the ancient Shamanism. Too much complex superstition is involved. Yet Buddhism, although ancient, is actually an exercise in the reflexivity of Bakhtin's third stage in world-view history, often supposed to be a modern development. Essentially the Universe is a mystery for us. We project images and ideas upon it, logocentric visions as powerful and often mutually rejecting alternatives. Yet in relation to mystery, there can only be rational inference and inquiry as a product of our own minds. Reflexive understanding knows this and does not promote either dogma or coercion.



There are real problems for education here. One can appreciate the danger of illusions that may be fostered by 'faith' schools for example. Yet, in school, inquisitive teenagers may be easily excited by the universal mysteries of world, mind and self. An educational approach presenting them as open inquiry permitting debate right from the beginning, would set the young thinking, wondering, get them going. Instead of having to believe this or that about Allah, God or whatever utilitarian project was to hand – however ethically sound such beliefs may be - the fundamental metaphysical assumptions of the dominant 'world' religions need to be exposed as out of date – actually by two thousand years! It may then be possible to create a world of values in a world that is honestly mysterious.^{16, 17}

Postscript after the Event

What would be the result of uncontrolled decadence? We have the fall of the Roman Empire as an example. But this time, after the extinction of the Lion, Tiger, Elephant and Rabbit, the logging of almost all forests and the exhaustion of petroleum it may be the turn of Humanity itself. Destroying the means of interdependent life, exhaustion of energy supplies, loss of land

¹⁵ There have of course been Western holistic philosophies starting with Heraclitus. In recent centuries Jan Smuts and A. N Whitehead have put forward suggestions. A most recent advocate is Thomas Berry : see Berry, T. 2006. Evening thoughts: reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community. Sierra Club. San Francisco. They have contrasted markedly with the main stream Cartesian approach to Science.

¹⁶ My book in press, World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism (see introduction to this article), ends by focussing on the significance of buddhistic (not necessarily Buddhist) education as a global orientation.

¹⁷ For a contrasting approach to these issues, see: Hinde, R. A. 1999. Why Gods persist. A scientific approach to religion. Routledge. London and New York.

to the sea and greenery to new deserts, the vast population disturbances will generate wars of survival and chaos. With no psychological discrimination left we will hardly be in a state to fly finally to another planet circling another star. We will die out here.

May be this is natural evolution. Life itself will not pass away. A new surge of evolution will follow just as it has after five previous global extinctions. Once more the planet will be beautiful, filled with myriad life forms of complexity, rarity and beauty- only we will not be here to see it. Gaia will have heaved a great sigh of relief. Humanity will be gone. But not the Buddha Mind, the spirit of life itself. Emptiness will find new forms facing new vicissitudes. In imagination, in visualisation, the heart of things is not lost. Yet, with wisdom, we do not have to tread this path. Will there be wisdom? Will there be compassion for remaining life? Who can say? Those of us who are sufficiently aware need to make our voices heard.

Silent Illumination

Talk 2 May 2005

Simon Child

Simon has been leading retreats in Silent Illumination for some years closely following the teachings of Master Sheng-yen. In this article, he not only provides very effective practical teaching for use on retreats but these same instructions are also valuable when you are sitting at home. Meditation brings about 'self at ease' and, when the mind has reached this state, not only does a fresh self acceptance follow but one's world view shifts to a greater tolerance and understanding of others. In such a state problems get resolved. Read, learn, practice and inwardly digest! Eds.

Silent Illumination is essentially very simple. It can be summarized in three sentences:

Look and see.

Look what is there.

And don't add to what is there.

'Look and see': Illumination.

'Don't add anything': Silence.

But it doesn't seem so easy! Why? Because there's something in the way. You! You're in the way of your own seeing. You're disturbing your own mind.

When I say 'you', we could use that difficult word 'karma'. People have different understandings of the word. Simply, it is your own personal history that's getting in the way, reliving itself in your memories and thoughts and projecting itself into thoughts of the future. What has happened to you in the past is getting in the way now of your direct seeing. Ruminations, reminiscences, recriminations, fantasies, hopes, fears. All these obscurations come from you, generated from your personal history.

How can you get 'you' out of the way? First of all, you need to understand that you are in the way. This is where the process of looking and seeing is very important. It applies at all levels. When we speak of Silent Illumination in a pure sense we are speaking of looking into a still, peaceful mind. Then we can see 'The Nature.' But even if your mind is not still, we can nevertheless apply that same process of looking and seeing. The Chinese word is 'Tsan', investigate. It is not investigate in the analytical sense. It is not conceptual.

You need to investigate as in 'looking', 'seeing', 'appreciating', 'knowing'. You can think of this more as the activity of an artist, poet or musician in the act of creativity. They may have a sense their creation is not quite right and they want to do more with it, but they are not quite sure what. If we set aside the basic errors of craftsmanship, what they actually do is mull it over, just sit with it, open to whatever might come, what needs doing to change it. This is the meaning of this sort of 'investigate'. It's not checking the chemistry of the paint!

It's the same with your mind. Be open to your own mind in the same way you might be to an artwork you are creating. Just be there with it, let it arise and see what's there. We use the mnemonic 'let through, let be, let go'. When you are sitting in meditation and your mind is not still and silent, the way to proceed is not to try to cut it off. The way is to investigate, to let that mind arise. To let that thought or feeling arise, to let it through, not suppression. Let it through into awareness. And as it comes through, let it be there. Silent Illumination is not suppression. It's being with 'what is' and seeing 'what is'. Let it through, let it be, and - in its

own time - let it go. It's not about holding on, it's about 'this is how it is'. And this is what's next.

This process of non-suppression helps with the clarification of the mind. If you are suppressing to try to achieve a kind of stillness then by definition you are not fully illuminating. But if you let whatever arises flow through you, then Illumination is occurring. And, if you do not engage with what is arising, silence can accompany that. You let it arise but without engaging with it. You don't react to it, you just let it flow and know what it is that is flowing. Such 'going with the flow' is the Silence. And knowing what is flowing is Illumination.

Of course we don't always find it easy to flow. Things touch our tender points, our resistances. And we hold back and resist. As you find yourself getting caught in these ways, the method of the sheep pens can be useful. As these thoughts or feelings arise you may notice that some are repetitive. One way to get a grip on this is to give thoughts or feelings a name or category and put them in the appropriate sheep pen. 'Greedy sheep'. 'Angry sheep'. 'Sad sheep'. 'That's that relationship problem'. 'That's that work issue'. 'That's that family issue'.

You may find that most of your thoughts can be put in just three or four categories or sheep pens. As they come up, notice them, notice the category to which they belong and put them aside. Say 'yes, that one's come up again, I'll put it into that sheep pen.' You're not denying it, you're putting it aside for attention later. If your thoughts are flowing freely and you're not getting locked into them then there is no need to do this. Very often though we are locked in; we find ourselves going down the same track again and again and that is when this technique is useful.

I'm saying 'let through, let be, let go' if the thoughts are flowing freely; but I'm also saying 'interrupt the flow' if the thoughts are repetitive and locking you in. Divert them into a sheep pen. As you become more familiar and clear with what's 'flowing' or being 'penned up' there comes a point when you start to get a sense of ownership of what's going on inside yourself. You acknowledge 'this is part of me'. This is how I am. This what is going through me. And with that may come a sense of regret. You think, 'yes that sheep pen is getting very full on that particular topic, I cannot deny it anymore. I have a role in that. I have responsibility.'

As repentance arises, karma can be discharged. If one honestly repents for something the issue discharges itself. Maybe not completely, maybe there will be ramifications that remain to be explored at another time. The value of gathering these things together is to be able to clarify them and take them on board and discharge them through repentance. It's necessary to be willing to own your own material and discharge it through repentance.

You might argue that it comes through yourself but was imposed on you by someone else. That may be true but the way you handle it now is your responsibility. It may have been put there by another, but how you live it is down to you. So, if it is difficult to be 'Silent' and 'Illuminating' then investigate the difficulty. Find out what is blocking the flow. Identify it and examine it. Sometimes just identifying it is sufficient. That may clarify something for you. And sometimes it may need further investigation. Maybe it needs active repentance. Be open to whatever comes.

There are other ways of handling difficulties in meditation in addition to the sheep pen method. When your mind seems quite scattered, then you can try changing your focus a bit. Maybe you're not ready for Silent Illumination and taking time over one or more sitting periods to count the breath may be advisable. Or use a mantra. Use a method with a narrower focus that helps to contain the mind. If you try to do Silent Illumination when your mind is too scattered you may just scatter it further. So, don't be afraid to return to a method that

concentrates the mind more effectively, then later try again opening it up and see where you are.

Sometimes if you are scattered it's because you're trying too hard and you are too tense. Check your posture: are you over-tense and in need of relaxing a bit? Conversely, if you are getting drowsy, maybe you need to tense-up a bit. Use your posture to arouse yourself. Usually we spend much of our time in meditation either drowsy or tense and little time in between. So get to know how to handle tenseness and drowsiness so you can adjust to the 'in-between'. If you are drowsy, stiffen your position a bit, lift your eyes to wake yourself up. Take off a blanket or a sweater, it's hard to be drowsy if you are a bit cold. If you are scattered, try relaxing even if you slump somewhat. Let your eyes go lower or even closed. So adjust yourself according to need. If you have not been sleeping well at night then maybe you're drowsy because of genuine tiredness. If this is persistent sitting after sitting then maybe you should take a rest. But don't do that too often as drowsiness may be a resistance to the things I've been talking about.

Let's return to the method of Silent Illumination. The particular method of Silent Illumination is to place focus of awareness on the whole body. Other methods tend to focus on one part of the body, for instance the breath. That's an easier way to get an initial grip because it's a narrower focus. But with focus on the whole body, it is experience of the whole of you. And ultimately it is the whole of your experience because it includes the environment, perceptions, sounds, sensations. This is why it's a very valuable practice even though it's a bit more difficult to get a grip on initially. Anchor your attention in the body. If you find you have lost attention to your body then simply bring it back. You will lose it of course. Just bring attention back when you notice you have lost it. The body awareness we are talking about needs to be both total and even. It's not a collection of parts: Not 'I can attend to my knee now, and here is my back' etc. etc. It's a single activity of being you, of knowing what is arising in any part of you. Sensation and mind and breathing and whatever. If something is happening then you know it. And if something is not happening then you are ready for when something does happen. It's that sort of continuous attention on yourself.

One specific example of losing attention is getting lost in admiring the landscape. It shows you've cultivated a certain amount of stillness but it's a loss of Silent Illumination. By putting your attention 'out there' you have lost the body. So at those times it's good to notice that you have lost the body and bring the body back into awareness with the landscape. So the landscape is not something 'other' out there, it flows from here. You are part of the landscape, bring yourself into the landscape. There's no need to deny the landscape but do be part of it, feet on the ground.

Silent Illumination is really not a method, it's a principle. And there are various ways that one can fall into it. The formal method is this awareness of body. But if you find other ways working for you that is fine. Do check them out – body awareness should be there even if you're using landscape as your method. If it's not there then it is not Silent Illumination. On one retreat with Master Sheng-yen in New York he noted that fourteen people in interview had recounted fourteen different ways to do Silent Illumination. So Master Sheng-yen said to the group 'That's OK but maybe you want to try the proper way sometime'! There's something special about making sure you are solidly present there in your body. So check that out.

A Holy Laugh

Sasha sends us these jokes with laughing belly wishes.

Kids in Church...

3-year-old Reese: "Our Father, Who does art in heaven, Harold is His name. Amen."

A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am."

After the christening of his baby brother in church, Jason sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That preacher said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I wanted to stay with you guys."

One particular four-year-old prayed, "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

A Sunday school teacher asked her children as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping."

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin 5, and Ryan 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.' Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"

A father was at the beach with his children when the four-year-old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore where a seagull lay dead in the sand. "Daddy, what happened to him?" the son asked. "He died and went to Heaven," the Dad replied. The boy thought a moment and then said, "Did God throw him back down?"

A Pilgrim's Report

Eddy Street

My friend Mark had promised himself that when he was 50 he would try to follow the Buddha's footsteps on the Ganges plain and he asked me if I would accompany him on this pilgrimage. It is not something that I would have decided to do spontaneously as I do not see myself as a traveller and certainly not as somebody who needs to tick off 'Buddhist' experiences. But I was very happy to accompany him and construct an appropriate pilgrims' attitude to the journey. Time and practical constraints meant that we would visit five sites associated with the Buddha. Vaishali, Nalanda, Rajgir (Vulture Peak), Bodh Gaya and Sarnath.

We contracted with each other that we would have a particular pattern to our day and a discipline to ensure our focus. Making free use of our Maenllwyd liturgy I constructed an opening and closing ceremony, a morning and evening service and a service of thanksgiving for each of the locations linked to a sutra appropriate to that specific location. With these short rituals we had a meditation period each morning and each evening and we ensured that we also had a sit at each of the locations we visited.



*Many paths lead from the foot of the mountain, but at the peak we all gaze at the single bright moon.
- Layman Street ascending Vulture Peak*

We also agreed some basic rules; we would have no 'work talk' (as Mark and I have always been engaged in the same professional activity and we can readily talk about psychotherapy for hours); there was to be no TV in the hotel rooms; we would not have an alcoholic drink until we had finished visiting all the five sites; we would only read Dharma books; and we would have quiet/silent reflective times during the day. Similar to the opening remarks that follow every day's early-morning exercise period at Maenllwyd retreats I also identified a theme for each day which we attempted to hold in our minds throughout the day and which

formed our first topic for discussion at the dinner table. Although this seemed to be a rather formalistic way of dealing with travel in a foreign country it proved to be an excellent framework for us to make our pilgrimage. The structure certainly worked and as the pilgrimage progressed I recognised my mind going through a similar process as it does on retreat.



Vaishali - column and stupa

Each place we visited had its own quality. At Vaishali we were the only visitors; it was quiet and serene and here we read that the Ratana Sutta as it was here the Buddha gave his last sermon. Nalanda presented as being solid and substantial, we could almost see the busyness of all the monks that lived there at some time. In our practices we read out words from the Kevatta Sutta which the Buddha had spoken when he visited this place.



Shrine on Vulture Peak

Vulture Peak was open and universal and it was with sheer joy that we read out the words of the Heart Sutra deliberately choosing the Tibetan version as this begins “Thus have I heard: once the Blessed One was dwelling in the royal domain of the Vulture Peak Mountain, together with a great gathering of monks and Bodhisattvas.” All the other pilgrims and tourists at this site were visiting the stupa built by a Japanese tradition on top of the mountain and so we were the only aspiring Bodhisattvas who were actually on Vulture Peak itself. Bodh Gaya was full of rainbow coloured activity as all types of monks and nuns from many

countries and traditions practised in different ways. Here we felt a part of the universal community of Buddhists reciting the Metta Sutta and meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Reciting our 'aspirational prayer' in this location was very humbling and heart opening. At the place where Buddha gave his first sermon, Sarnath we were surprised at the absence of many pilgrims; it had the quality of being a place of the world and a place that is appropriately used by those on the path and by those not so. Here we read the Dharmachakra sutta and reflected on the turning of the Dharma wheel.



Buddha at Bodhgaya

Throughout our travels particular events established themselves as firm memories. The monk who recited for us the Ratana Sutta in Pali at the stupa in Vaishali in which it is claimed some relics of the Buddha are placed. The sound of 300+ Bhutani practitioners reciting a puja at Bodh Gaya with their full range of bells and instruments. The Japanese hotel near Vulture Peak with its own zendo about two storeys high and open to the sky where we were the only visitors and therefore the only users of the zendo. And of course the teeming humanity, poverty, and chaos that is India. For me the memory is also of clear meditations at each place and at Vaishali and Vulture Peak, a particular sense of what it may have been like during Buddha's time.

As our journey unfolded and we arrived at Bodh Gaya I experienced a flow of gratitude arising from deep within me. I came to a realisation that all presentations of the Dharma are initially not inspired by wisdom but simply by compassion. As I sat within the mystery of it all I cried with love for the suffering there is in this world.

When the time came I was ready to return home ceasing to be a traveller but continuing as a pilgrim in this universe.

Two Crows

Jane Spray

Two crows diverged above Aston wood.
Silhouette kiss, across a violet sky.
The first crow flew as far as he could,
beyond all imaginings of where and why.

With a jackdaw's 'chak'!, the second crow
fell into someone else's dream.
One, poised moment's horizon glow
slips down a black hole, sooty seam

near as the next brain cell, near as skin.
Two birds diverge. The one flies on;
the other flutters, still trapped within,
till new sky fissures open, and she's gone!

Returning home, Frost's poem of the ways¹
distracts in darkness, and I take the turn
that leads to Ledbury, and so to Dymock strays.
So many roads, with chimneys cold, or on the burn,

so many paths, with no choice but to choose.
We take our chance, no going back to this.
Not seeing freedom, beyond 'win' or 'lose',
not knowing which 'the road less travelled' is.

¹ Robert Frost's poem, 'The road not taken', (-under discussion, on the car radio, when I took the turn towards Dymock, in the dark). Frost was one of the Dymock poets, for a while.

Chan Practice in Precious Wood

Eric Johns

Eric has always been a great wanderer, perhaps an expression of his partially Romany origins and a contrary childhood. Wandering has taken him, his horse and wagon, to Cornwall where he found his teacher and on to Hong Kong and Japan. His life as a monk was well lived and adventurous enabling him to overcome the worst of his life temptations. Back in the UK he has established Precious Wood a delightful little temple and wooded space for contemplation of the Dharma. Here he can develop the Soto 'lineage' passed on to him from Bill Picard, itself indirectly descended from Throssel Hole. We wish his Sangha well. JHC

The Retreat

The retreat idea came early in 2005 when deciding to extend the Empty Cloud meditation hut which I had built in Precious Wood, about 15 years before; I had already held many solitary short retreats there, as well as a few 10 day brown rice fasts. (NCF No 33)

When the extension was nearly finished it seemed that a 30 day retreat would be a good way to celebrate. Firstly it was going to be a solitary retreat but things quickly changed. My girlfriend got a new job with proper holidays and wanted to sit in instead of just supporting me. Then a friend said that he would like to come in and sit with us to, so we decided to open it up and invite the regular meditation group to come every day as well, from 3 to 6pm. At first it was to be 4 weeks long but extra sponsorship half way through meant that we could run it for six weeks.

Shortly before the retreat I was put on very strong drugs for my hepatitis c, unfortunately they had very bad side effects and I had to come off them after one month, I became much worse when off them than on them, they had a bad effect on me and I had not eaten well for weeks. I had sat on many retreats, some quite long, but this was the first one that I had organised myself, I was also the cook.

Week 1

It started on Boxing Day 2006

We got up early every morning, lit the wood burning stove, then carefully putting on ceremonial robes, there was chanting (in the Chinese "Dharma Drum" Style), three refuges, 4 great vows and Buddha's name. Next there was a prostration session for the time one incense stick took to burn, and then sitting began. Meals and routine were usually on time, we kept the monastic custom of no garlic and onions strictly and ate mainly organic, vegan food with local spring water and cooked on a wood stove, chanting and offering food to the Buddha statue, our ideal, the ideal state of mind that we have vowed to become, before eating. At the end of the week Sam wrote these poems, they describe the scene well.

Period pains and sideways rain,

The compost toilets full of shit

No-one's been to empty it

There's no dry wood or kindling cut

And Maureen's car's stuck in the mud

How do I enter Nirvana

And step off the wheel of Samsara

Prayer flags dance in the breeze

Spray rains across the sky

Pheasant flaps in his tree

As night falls

The first owl calls

"Who am I?"

Week 2

Near the end Sam was back at work and various messages started coming along. I asked her to stop telling me about them.

Week 3

It never stopped raining even by Welsh standards! As Sam had gone back to work I was alone except for friends that came to sit in the afternoons from 3-6pm. Experiencing longer Hua Tou, (mind before thought) states more easily as my mind was starting to settle down a bit. I did more prostration sessions and entered nice states at times but knew them to be only temporary and passing stages and not get stuck with them.

Then Sam bought a message to say Bill Pickard, my first meditation teacher had died as we had expected. He was 92 and had a long, slow death but died peacefully in Zazen with one of his other students. We held a memorial ceremony for him in “empty cloud hut” on Sun 14th at 7pm. His family had sent me his robes and transmission certificates, as he had asked them to, and I used some of them during the ceremony.

It just happened that John Crook, who also had known Bill and his wife had arranged to come and give a talk on that very evening, and when he arrived mid afternoon in his new but dented car (it had unfortunately just slipped off the Maenllwyd track on his way to us!) he was lucky enough to have time to examine Bill’s collection of Buddhist history and tradition that we had on the table, including a rare glance at the three silk transmission certificates. John was also in good time for supper at 5.30pm, and then the 9 invited guests arrived for the evening and after the evening chanting we said good bye to Bill with a bow. Next John, sitting in the “moon window” gave us his talk, and lastly, after some simple hints from me, we sat in meditation. Pure selfless Zen was what I tried to hint at, as Bill had shown me 25 years earlier.

Flashback

In 1975 when I was 20 I stepped off the Horse drawn narrow boat that I was working on as a horse boy, to go out drinking as usual and walked into an occult shop. This was in Northampton and there I saw Charles Luk’s book “The Secrets of Chinese Meditation” It contained a photo of Ven Master Hsu Yun (Chan Master Empty Cloud) which startled me, and at £1.25 it was quite a bargain for what was going to be the journey of a life time.

After reading the book I found that I liked sitting in meditation and when I was 27 I went to Bill Pickard’s house. One of Charles Luk’s books, the translation of the “Vimlakirti Nirdesa Sutra” had been dedicated to Bill. He lived in Cornwall, and I stopped near Banbury for the winter in a horse drawn “bow top” gypsy caravan. It had taken me 3 months to walk and work down there in Feb. to May 1981, from Banbury, starting out with a Romany called Alex Draper, who was born in a bow top wagon on the side of the road near Thame. Soon after he transmitted the three refuges and five Buddhist precepts to me in a most amazing way, having given me my first Koan “What is it that you are looking for?” the moment that I met him. I think he made it up on the spot to suit the occasion, us standing on his door step. About 3 months later an experience after one of his retreats changed me again. A few weeks later, totally inspired, I went to a monastery in Hong Kong, there I met my Chinese teacher Ven Master Sing Yat, my Shifu, and after about 18 months became a fully ordained a monk in the Chinese tradition (NCF No 18).

I worked at the practice too hard and got a bit burnt out by it. I would fast often and not lie down to sleep then sometimes do other sorts of hard practices. Bill Pickard had told me how Grand Master Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud) had burnt his finger off, and I was shocked at a Buddhist monk doing this at first, but now I saw that some of the other monks and nuns had done the same sort of thing and had oil cloth candle burns on their heads and arms as well, which I sometimes watched them do. When I asked Shifu about it he said if you can do this

without pain it proves there is no self, I decided that I would like to try as well and asked Shifu to help me. One day after the morning chanting he said it was my turn next. He wrapped tourniquets around my wrist and elbow, wrapped string tightly around my finger and placed my hand in a bowl of medicinal clay (that one of the nun's had prepared along with healing black ointment) with, my third finger sticking up out of the clay. He then wrapped oil soaked cotton wool around and lit it with a burning incense stick. Many monks & nuns and some lay supporters had come to watch and chant a Bodhisattva's or a Buddha's name, I chose Shakyamuni Buddha. We all chanted for a while whilst the end burnt off my finger. Unfortunately it became infected a few weeks later as the bone was all exposed in the heat. My Master lost face when Doctor Kwok sent me to the Royal Hong Kong hospital to get the protruding end of my finger bone sawn off and have it sewn up. That night sitting on my plank bed the pain was unimaginably intense. Shifu had to pay £150 to the Hospital as I was dependant on him financially. Then it took over 3 months to heal, and I had a reminder for the rest of my life never to drink the dreaded booze again. Indeed, this had been the main reason I did it. 15 years later I went back to visit him and gave him the money back.

As a new monk I liked some of the chanting, I had been a choir boy so robes were normal to me. I became the chant leader at meal times, and at the Hsu Yun memorial hall Chan retreats I had the privilege to lead the meal chants and sit next to some of Master Hsu Yun's personal disciples. One of them spoke fluent English; he had been to university with Charles Luk, and he was also John Crook's first Chan teacher, the Ven Yen Why.

At Precious Wood Chan Monastery we were holding a 3 month summer retreat, it was a very hot, humid day and the mosquitoes were biting us. One of the monks Ven Hin Sing a retired Chinese sailor fell asleep during each sitting, he would keel right over every time the bell rang. One time he fell asleep right across my lap so I gave him a hard slap on the back and woke him up for the rest of the sitting, then, after the running (between the sittings in China we ran or fast walked around the Chan hall) I sat in the space where he had been sitting. There were no fixed seating places on this retreat, but suddenly and furiously he lashed out at my face and a few lay people pulled him off, blood dripped of my chin. I just sat. The others told me the loss of face to him would be terrible, he was a nice monk and kind to me, but embarrassed by his failure to sit well, he reacted with rage. Others in the hall sometimes had really strange effects from sitting, like bouncing about violently or doing beautiful movements and making very strange noises. Shifu simply said that it was just natural healing, and would get worked through in its own time.

One day the phone rung for me, a nun called down in Cantonese and I ran up the steps to answer. Shifu was just coming down and without saying a word gave me his best teaching, he simply gestured with his hand protruding from the long sleeve of his robe, but the look in his eyes demanded "What is this thing rushing up here?" He asked so urgently but yet gently.

Not long after a Japanese Monk came to Precious Wood Monastery and invited me to his Zen temple near Mount Fuji. I went there, it was very different from the Chinese style, there was a lot of booze about, the very thing I had gone into practice to get out of! I started learning simple Japanese conversation easily after the slightly more tricky Cantonese that I had loved learning in Hong Kong. Then I was invited to his friend's Temple nearer Tokyo in Saitama Ken. The retreats were a tough sort of Soto style, from 3am until midnight, but at least there was a nice comfortable bed there in Mushoshino-Ji to snatch the 3 hours sleep. The programme was compulsory for one week in each month if you wanted to stay there.

I never gave up smoking though during my time as a Monk. The craving from my alcoholism changed its manifestation deprived of the booze. I went to AA meetings in Hong Kong and Japan as that was how I had stopped drinking a few years earlier in England, and I worked hard on the 12 step programme while in Asia.

Next I became a beggar monk, as I had no money and was wandering around Japan, That's how the idea to buy a practice centre in England came about. This was an exiting and challenging period of my training lasting 6 months. Kyoto has some good temples to beg at, and a very peaceful one was Roan Ji with the rock garden and then Todai Ji at Nara in the deer park. I spent weeks there sitting on the ground in all weathers with some determined and hungry mosquitoes, a sign in Japanese and a plastic begging bowl. During the golden week holiday one day I could hardly carry the coins to the bank there were so many and heavy! Occasionally people were suspicious and challenged me quite seriously. Some Japanese and Americans treated me like a very special person. It was quite bad for my ego. Drunks were often a problem, especially on Sundays when they visited the temples. When I was sitting in Zazen on the temple steps begging, one dear man tried to pour sake down my throat until his friend pulled him off. Then half an hour later he came back even drunker from the temple restaurant and apologised giving me a 1000 yen note (about £50). He then tried to offer me a drink again before staggering off towards the station in Kyoto with his friend. Also a very interesting place to beg was the magic bridge in Osaka city centre. There was a sort of spot in the middle where you could stand near the police box. It was surprising how many different people handed over their cash so respectfully, I usually said nothing. You could get very hot in the sun there in summer and it was a relief to get back on the air conditioned train after a few hours standing there.

After returning to lay life in the UK I still liked to attend the Chinese Temples quite often and enjoyed the chanting. I still kept up my friendship with Bill, he was like a kind uncle to me (NCF No 18), and we spoke Romany together as we were both linguistic. One day around 1995 he asked me to go to John Crook's Maenllwyd retreat centre in Wales. I did not want to go, thinking that they were only a stuffy old bunch of intellectuals, but Bill insisted, saying that they could learn from me. In fact it was I who learnt a great deal from all of them with their great many skills. At first, Bill was dubious about me starting a Chan group but, after the training and encouragement that I got from John Crook and his team, I found Bill was happy too. I was now aged 50. I delighted in teasing and testing John and trying to trip him up all the time - encouraged after being told by some of the other fellows that no one had ever challenged him like that before! He reminded me of my late father who, with his manic depression had given me a hard time, and I'm afraid that I rather took it out on John. (Sure did! JHC)

Week 4

I cut and split logs as it had rained a lot and most had been burnt. It was wonderful to be practicing outside again with better weather now with the birds singing all their songs. Sam said the Doctor had called. I had called him as I had been feeling ill again especially in the mornings. It was really windy and a few pine trees had blown down, next winter's firewood.

Fri 19 Jan, had to leave the retreat for 3hrs. I was ill again, went to the GP's to give some blood tests, went home for 2hrs to pay the bills and check my affairs were in order, everything was fine.

A newspaper cutting had come of Bill's photo in an obituary from a Cornish newspaper. After returning the ten miles to the woods, I carefully put it on the offering table and resumed sitting. The Huo Tou state had grown bright and clear as week 4 was nearly over. I was holding it for longer periods easily. Although my health was very poor my spirit was bright and clear, my intention to practice was as new and fresh as when I had seen Master Hsu Yun's photo all those years previously in Northampton. As for people who have been addicted like me there is no going back to drinking as that may mean insanity or death so we must carry on especially after and when we make mistakes, and in my case bad ones at times. I practice with my life and mind on the line because for people like me there is no choice.

Sitting during this week I felt as though at times my breathing was through Bill's nostrils and I was hearing Zen through his ears. I realised how lucky I had been to have taken that bow top wagon and mare 'Spot' down to Cornwall to visit him all those years ago.

I am still walking the same path but now there is no end in sight and the need to go anywhere has slipped away. The ideal signified by the Buddha Rupa sitting on my offering table reminding us constantly about the ideal state of mind. It is not one we can "get" for we already have it, simply we need to tune out of our mess to find it right here and now.

On Sunday it suddenly got cold again, found some nice elm logs at the back of the log shed and split them. The smell was intensely strong.

Suddenly my health was much better, and I started lots of prostrations again and did more chanting and Tai Chi, the Chi started to flow again. Found enough energy to catch up on a few jobs. I had been alone for a few days and some more small trees blew down. On Wed. I had to leave the retreat for seven hours to go and see the hepatologist. All tests were clear. They blamed my recent 'flu jab and told me to come back in six months and say hello.

Week 5

The pipe contractors were back at work, big time two fields away, from 8am with flood lighting. Even so I have enjoyed sitting and working for long periods with an undisturbed mind.

Saturday day, the contractors were busy as usual but they were starting to move further away from the woods. The weather was beautiful and all the sliding paper panels in the meditation hut were finished. I started to feel like my old self again.

Week 6

Finished a section of foot path around the woodland boundary and pond and up to the gate. I did some logs. It was very mild weather for February. Health was nice and the sitting was calm for a while, then unexpectedly all the symptoms of my alcoholism started to pop up one by one. However I did not go to the pub or off-licence or try to hide from my insecure emotions. They told me things like I was just wasting my time getting up early donning fancy dress robes trying to practice Chan, not worthy of Bill's trust. Most painfully I felt my girlfriend was about to get fed up with me & go off with some one else (fortunately it was not true, she is still around). I was obliged to sit watching my samsaric mind and its turmoil, for a few days & nights. I noted all this mess but was not caught out and carried on focusing on the still, clear aspect.

The sitting had a nice new fresh quality, don't mind if I chant, work or do prostrations now they seem all the same. It seemed that I had oozed out some mental crap, in this.

Friday came with the full moon, a hard frost and the birds in full song at dawn and dusk. Sunday morning work period, we finished the footpath and now can walk all the way around Precious Wood after 17 years here.

Monday night badgers came, right up to my door.

Tuesday the last day, Sam came after work; I had made a banana cake.

The Koan "I am not it, but it is all of me" is now very obvious. My demons were still there but as they had not been fed so much, had become weaker for a while.

Closing ceremony. We did it in Empty Cloud hut, beneath the stars, with a photo of Bill, and ate the banana cake. The next morning as I packed to leave, it seemed that the retreat had gone very quickly and it did not seem long enough, my mind had only really started to settle down after 1 month.

Mametz Wood

John Crook

In October 2007 my son and I took the Honda and drove to France staying in Arras in the valley of the Somme. We were looking for my Uncle Ernest's grave. He had been an artillery officer and died of wounds during the Ancre offensive near the end of the great battles on the Somme in 1917. I did not know any family member who had been there since the 20s. We found him, visiting him in his gentle resting place twice, and told him the news. The Somme on these bright October days was beautiful yet the memories in the cemeteries and monuments that scatter the war-riven landscape are both deeply troubling and strangely inspiring. One of the greatest fights had been in Mametz Wood where the disciplined Welch Regiment on its second attempt overcame ferocious resistance in a bramble filled wood with low visibility everywhere - a dreadful hand to hand business. Several notable accounts of this action have been written. In honour of these brave men and in memory of them I wrote the following.

Mametz Wood –

Human entrails hang in the branches-
Arms, legs and heads stuck in trees-
The dying lost among shell holes
Hidden by clutching brambles:
That dead German, still helmeted,
Green face streaked by black-blood snot
Propped against a trunk.
Odour of death everywhere.

Mametz Wood -

Peaceful now
Gentle below tall, same aged trees
Dark shadows here are now our own.
Brambles still impede the path
Where maybe boar are hidden.
Shades of deer float through the trees
Platoons of ghosts in distant foliage.
They rear pheasants here today
For shooting.

Mametz Wood -

A flash of colour upon an oak tree's trunk
Welch flag painted there
Not long ago
Red Dragon high
Where shells once fell
And guns and blood stained bayonets
Did their work
To fill a hundred cemeteries.

This tranquil landscape of the Somme
Shines in the Indian summer sun
A mellow fruitfulness
Gentle cattle,
Ploughed fields,
Rolling down land and wooded rivers
Still green on this October morn.
The Sunday chasseurs stalk the ground
Their dogs at heel.
The memories do not fade
Tears still falling
Year on year

Monday, October 29, 2007

Let Me Be

Ken Jones

Every creature covers the ground it stands on, no more and no less. It never falls short of its completeness -- Zen Master Dogen.

Its green face
scarred with scree
an ancient hill

The place where I encountered her haunts me no less than the meeting itself.

An hour long struggle through dense thickets, waterlogged underfoot, and infested by all the ticks and midges of a hot Highland summer. Beyond, I enter a primeval woodland lying between loch and crag.

A graceful spout from some higher lake comes swishing down through the trees, the great boulders and waist-high ferns. I follow the tracks which the deer have ploughed through the black, peaty soil. And from time to time I pause, to let in the stillness. In this wilderness and solitude, an animal neither young nor old, brave nor fearful, strong nor weary.

And then, I see her. She is climbing the crag ahead up a steep deer track, agile and sure-footed. Fawn shirt and matching slacks, brown shoulder length hair, and – decidedly odd – not even a day sac. To catch her up I climb the bare rock over to the left -- a granite boiler plate¹, sticking to my boots, clinging to my fingers.

We break out onto the same grand view. Big, empty country, teeming with red deer – the hinds flowing through the landscape, and the occasional antlers on the skyline. Amid a scatter of silver lochans, bleached granite outcrops rise above heather, tussock and bog. The ruling summit, an elegant rocky cone, lies some two or three miles distant. Country which challenges even the walker with map-and-compass – of which she appears to have neither.

She turns to me a strong, intelligent face -- or what's left of it. Half of it is cruelly disfigured as if by the claws of some beast. In a soft and even voice: "Let me be." I know I nodded; I hope I smiled. She turns again, and, in awe, I watch her loping away light-footed across a boulder field, deeper into the interior.

Day's end
the face of the mountain
flames and fades

¹ Boiler plate: Climbers' jargon for a large, inclined rock

Using the Buddhadharma to Help Ease Addictions

Anon

The author is a therapeutic psychologist familiar both with the condition and the provision of treatment.

How appropriate the Buddha's message is to people like us today, who have developed addictive personalities. The Four Noble Truths explain our dilemma quite clearly and then even better the fourth truth gives us a map out of the "Burning House". With its eight right paths to follow from intention to meditation, the Buddha's ideas can be understood as a diagnosis and prescription. People like us practice as though our lives are on the line, for we cannot go back after reaching a "Cut off point" or "Rock Bottom", or we descend into a sort of deep hell state, for if we pick up a drink and put it to our lips we might as well put a loaded gun to our head, in fact it could be a quicker and easier death!

Usually we have choice in our lives, in fact many choices all through our life, but when we pick up a drink or use an addictive drug most choices are soon deigned to us. For the addiction has taken the driving seat and we have no control anymore, we may never be able to stop again or worse.

However if instead we choose a "Higher Power" for our guide and inspiration, and use it as a base, we replace the self destructive way of creating an endlessly revolving samsaric life for ourselves with a power greater than our usual conception of self.

The most wonderful thing of all is when we discover that this Higher Power is within, and it's ours and that we all share it equally without any distinction at all, and it's always accessible to us if we choose it. We all have a Buddha nature, and if we access this part of ourselves we can find something, a new way of being that does not need booze or drugs to escape from, unlike the round of difficult and uncomfortable emotions and attachments of "samsara"

If you are not addictive you may not grasp what I am trying to say easily, but if you are, will easily start to identify with the language we use and also the way that we go about managing our condition.

When we cease to use the fuel of our addiction there must be something healthy to fill the void emptiness we will now find ourselves in. The Dharma can provide us with the tools we need to handle difficult situations & emotions and fill us anew with the joy of living, a life more detached from the dialogue in our heads.

To stop following our suicidal urges will be a hard path, but we have no choice but to accept it, and if we are fortunate enough to develop wholesome states of mind we find that they can easily become addictive as well, but here the "lotus" begins to bloom as we transform destructive patterns for happier and more constructive ones. The Buddha's practice of "Metta" was the one that I personally used at first so I could start to like myself again as I started to try and achieve "Sobriety". Usually when helping addicts I have to teach them to love themselves again in a way that only they can do for themselves with a little encouragement if necessary.

The danger for addictive personalities is to take the method or ideas as "it" thus becoming a religious zealot. If we can realise that these are only tools, we can keep them in their appropriate place and know what we cannot know with our minds. After all what is there to know when mind is dropped?

Chan meditation is not an intellectual affair, only the understanding of it is. That is useful for teaching others but still not "it". The Chan masters break down attachments in their students in many ways depending on what they are stuck on.

Taking Booze and Drugs are usually only avoidance techniques to get away from difficult emotions, but when we practice deeply we are often overwhelmed by them. But we can watch them come and go and even grip us, from a more detached attitude and then see them for what they really are.

The problem with using or boozing is that when we stop, the illness continues to mature and deepen quietly in us, it's rather like holding a cork under water, and is often just waiting to pop up again and again in a new time, a new place and a different manifestation.

Using the Twelve Step Programme

The programme begins by admitting that we are powerless over our craving/addiction, the Buddha called this "Tanha" a craving that can never be satisfied. Then coming to realise that the ego is not able to control this intense craving, only by letting go of our perception of our self can we experience a state that is greater. Next it suggests that we give ourselves over completely to this better way of experiencing life, and who we think that we are. Next we make a fearless assessment of our self, and then admit it unreservedly to our self and to another person. This means our entire inventory, done face to face with them, leaving nothing unsaid, or we can't purify our mind very well. From this we start to surrender all we held dear, all that was the cause of our suffering and strife. Namely our habitual reactions and desires with the urgent and constant need to escape from the mind that experiences this self made, self perpetuating samsara. Next we have to try and put right some of the damage we have done to others, in a careful and sensitive way.

Then partially and temporarily cleared from a life time of samsaric habits, we are, if we have been thorough and cleaned up very well, ready to start meditation. This is quite a frightening stage to many alcoholics. However as stated before we must now move forward into a spiritual head space or we may backslide and head for a new disaster, which is likely to be worst than the last, as addictive illnesses like alcoholism get worse and are continuing to lay dormant and fester and mutate inside us. If we are thorough we will achieve a breakthrough sooner than average. I have seen it many times to varying degrees and interpreted by the person in many different ways depending on their religious or cultural background.

Then lastly having had a spiritual awakening as a result of this programme and some good meditation we can carry this message to help others to the "other shore" that we have seen, but probably not landed on as yet. For we only see "it" when the self slips away and with it all ideas of programmes and progress right and wrong etc. For here we can take nothing; even the idea of awakening has long gone. Then, much more work is needed in order to get a big awakening.

The Pales

Marian Partington

Earlier this year Nick Salt and Marian Partington, after many years of partnership, decided to get married. We joined our Quaker friends at the wonderfully remote and scenically situated Meeting House, The Pales, in Mid Wales, a place of stone, silence, air and hills. It was a beautiful occasion, which we all appreciated, Quakers and Chan practitioners together. Good wishes Nick and Marian. Eds.

Quaker Bridesmaids

the blue of your shirt
nestles its linen lines, soft
with words unspoken

links my flowered sleeve
meadow of orange, pink, green,
touching the blue sky

witnesses gather
above beneath the thatched eaves
guarding the silence

thank you for coming
we will face you, barely, soon,
when the time is ripe.

by the pond we wait
allowing love to fill us
brimming with lilies

urgent, bold and true
our nieces* bursting with weeks
couldn't wait to give

their card, wishes pressed
by cut fruit dipped in thick paint
a fresh new border

hills are green with gold
'not just an apple, Jazzy,
a Cox's apple'.

now it's time to go
our bridesmaids came, innocent,
shape all that we bring

Savannah, Jasmine
thread us into one place
your cloth of prayer

a candle is lit
bringing those who could not come
we bow to silence.

* great nieces!

© Marian Partington 4th September 2007

Retreat Reports

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

What the Retreat is About

Retreat Report: Koan Retreat, Maenllwyd 2007

During his pilgrimage, Joshu came to visit Linchi. When he arrived he was washing his feet. Joshu asked, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' Linchi replied, 'Just now I happen to be washing my feet'. Joshu moved closer as if expecting to hear more. Linchi looked up and said 'Do I have to throw out a second ladle of dirty water?' Joshu departed.

Joshu and Linchi were both great masters so what is going on here?

When I looked through the Koans none of them seemed particularly obscure. On previous Koan retreats this has not been my experience, but during the first two days of this retreat my mind had been clear and spacious. On the mountain above the Maenllwyd, whenever I stopped walking my mind fell silent and the long distant views and hills under moving clouds came together in spacious serenity, punctuated by occasional winter bird song. Only the merest tension was observable in my abdomen, a sign of something being held back - but what? Later this tension disappeared and then there was still spaciousness, but I was warmly a part of it.

In one of his early talks John seemed to be playing to the audience, trying to get a reaction going I thought, but I would have none of it. Even when some of the comments seemed to be aimed at puncturing my own particular ego in the context of that wonderful Chan Buddhist recruitment story for the unwary to do with Hui Neng's rapid progress to the Patriarchate, I would not give, would not comply. And yet I was affected. Upset can only occur to the extent that one wants something and such wanting must be dropped. I wrestled with imagined dependency, but then in interview John suggested I check out whether it really was dependency. I felt liberated, because suddenly in my heart I knew it was not.

After a couple of days the koan resolved itself, and I felt light and happy. I had suddenly noticed my own ego my Bodhidharma saviour complex, hiding behind Joshu. Once the cat was out of the bag it scampered away. At the beginning of the path, many years ago I was affected by the underlying psychological wish to be held in the arms of the cosmic Buddha, to be accepted. A long time ago that wish dropped and is not an obstacle now. More recently the archetype of being the cosmic Buddha, which is a subtle backdrop to the Bodhisattva ideal, has had to be abandoned. On this retreat it fell away pretty early on so progress is being made. What these tendencies have in common is putting "me" at the centre of the universe, which is surely a difficult place to be!

So what to do now? I combined two phrases from within the koan to work with 'What is the meaning of just now?' as a method. Standing under the great pine in the morning sun, watching the wispy mist floating across the frosty field under a blue sky, in this unnameable beauty tears flowed and flowed, tears of relief at rediscovering my own heart, my own good heartedness. Returning to the cushion, where I could not be observed, the tears continued to flow.

After this at all times of day and night empty spaciousness came and went frequently with different tones and moods depending on what? My mind? Whether it was dark or light, the

atmosphere of the place? Sometimes radiant, sometimes soft and deep, sometimes silent, sometimes still and sometimes a sense of love, but at one time even love seemed too coarse and it gently lifted to a light radiance in which the stone wall at the end of the Maenllwyd ceased to be a wall at all, as it merged with the farmyard, before being reclaimed again as a wall by my mind. This was a taste of the world that must have become so ordinary to Zen Master Dogen, for whom the boundaries of language failed to contain his experience.

In interview it was clear there was more work to do - what is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the west? John seemed to throw down the gauntlet - what would I bring if I were Bodhidharma? Playing to my ego, but why not? As I was leaving, before I was out of earshot, I heard John summing up the interview up in a single word to Nigel. I came to the conclusion that paying attention to that was a distraction, and now a week or so later I believe that John's conclusion says more about our relationship, than about me as an individual.

After much work, on walking across the hills it was quite clear that Bodhidharma, who would sit nine years facing a wall after coming from the west, brought only himself. This then crystallised into a question, Where am I coming from? This I really wrestled with. That which I wanted was very clear to me and finally I realised I could not stop wanting it on my own. I needed help in order to get free of it, and for the first time ever I did prostrations of prayer to the Buddha to help me, not that I believe there is anyone there other than the symbolic act of prayer itself.

Finally a complete resolution of the koan emerged with the seemingly trite insight that I am coming from HERE. There followed a very significant interview. Many years ago I realised quite clearly that John the Teacher is in the same boat as the rest of us. I have never forgotten this and of course it applies to all the teachers in all times, however remarkable as individuals they may have been. But on the other hand this insight needs to mature. In this interview I was able to be just here not moving from my place, quite free with no need of any 'side'. John was over there in his place and I didn't need anything from him, didn't need to impress him and didn't need to hold back.

In the evening a spontaneous feeling of gratitude arose without needing to be prompted in any way; what good fortune to have found this place. Not needing anything from John I thought was the best condition in which to learn from him and to help him in the task of passing on a legacy to future generations.

On the last morning in meditation, I had a clear sense of the 'lancet of zen' in meditation. My method continued to be "Where am I coming from?" which resolved into here and now; where or when else? Any thought that was to do with the past, or future, any dreaming etc. was carefully dissected away before returning to the wellspring of the moment: it felt delightful.

Some years ago in retreat Master Sheng-yen said that a person of Chan when facing a problem does not duck it, they stand up to be counted. This is what I have been doing ever since, especially in a number of very difficult situations at work. Refusing to be bullied or cowed I have stood up for what I believe to be right, going through whatever reactions of fear and discomfort I have had to deal with. The results have been good, but in the midst of these situations I had forgotten exactly where I was coming from. On this retreat it was a relief to discover that I have been coming from a good heart, not of course perfect and some mistakes have been made, but these are minor and repentance is always possible. Now I am about to leave work, having come to a time of 'completion'. From now on my work will be to spread the Dharma as expressed in Chan Buddhism, in whatever way I am able. I wish to do this wholeheartedly, without making my contribution conditional and preparing for this is what this retreat was all about.

Journey to Soul Mountain

Koan retreat, February 2007, Pine Bush, DDRC, New York

Since the early 1970's I have participated in many Chan retreats of traditional Chinese monastic style. I have always derived great benefit from them. In the past few years I have also attended retreats designed by the Western Chan Fellowship. To my delight, these western-style retreats have enabled me to make great leaps in self-knowledge, and progress in understanding my practice. I continue to value the traditional retreats for the discipline and foundation they lend to my practice. But the western-style retreats have become my mainstay.

Last spring I participated in the Koan Retreat. I had attended Chinese-style Hua-t'ou retreats in the past, and felt I understood the basics of bearing down on "What is Wu?" and generating the Great Doubt sensation. I expected this western Koan retreat to be more of the same, with some communication exercises thrown in. So I was taken by surprise when my hua-t'ou manifested itself in a visual, almost mythical fashion, throughout the course of the retreat and afterwards.

The teacher read us a list of koans and hua-t'ous from which we were to select our "life koan". I was attracted to several of them, but when he read "Soul Mountain lies beyond the source of the You River" I was suddenly choked with tears. Still, I didn't want to choose that one to work on. It seemed, I don't know, sort of trite. Like a Chan greeting card. However, in the next hour or so, as I read through the list over and over again, each time without fail "Soul Mountain" choked me up with tears. Nothing for it, this must be my current life koan.



We were told to take some time and determine which koan to work on. I went and sat on a stone above the lake, facing Shawangunk Ridge, our mountain. I repeated the hua-t'ou over and over to myself and felt I had figured it out already. It seemed crystal clear. Soul Mountain is obviously the place you want to be - Heaven, Nirvana, ego-free enlightenment. There is a black music show in America called "Soul Train" - When it comes on you see a cartoon locomotive boogieing down to a funky electric bass line, while the announcer croons "SOOOOoouuuuuulllllll Traaaaiiin!!!" in a cool deep Afro voice. My first idea of Soul Mountain was something like that, everyone hip and aware and grooving to Motown sounds. Who wouldn't want to be there? No, it wasn't "Soul Mountain" that choked me with tears; it was the "You River" part. I wasn't on Soul Mountain because I was being washed downstream in the torrent of "Me".

At the time of this retreat I had just completed a series of profound life changes: My own near-death and recovery, the loss of my husband to drug-addiction, the deaths of several loved ones. My job of fifteen years was outsourced to India, and I sold my beloved house where I had lived for thirty years. My years of Chan practice enabled me to weather these changes

with equanimity. I was not unhappy with any of my choices. I was excited about my future. However, these changes had forced me to confront the realities (actually, the delusions) of my life. The loss of so many things at the same time, not least husband, home, and job, revealed to me how my self-esteem had been based on these empty things. I was suddenly uncertain of my self esteem. My self-disillusionment extended into every aspect of my being, from my “status” as a long-time Chan practitioner, to my choice of dog, to my miscalculations in packing for my move. Where I had always been confident and sure of myself, I was now horrified at the delusory nature of my own self-image.

[Actually, this is not a bad place to be. Having been stripped of so many delusions, and being forced to examine them so closely, I may stand a better chance of not building new ones back up again.] At the time of the Koan retreat I felt like a hermit crab that has come out of its shell but not yet found a new one. I felt vulnerable, insecure, and paranoid. I was ashamed of feeling this way and that made it all the worse. I knew from my Chan training that these feelings were impermanent and empty and that I should be able to let them go. But I was trying to “let go” of them by examining them minutely. In leaving my past behind, I was revisiting every part of it. I thought I was saying goodbye but really I was trying desperately to weave together a comfortable new self-image. Out of place in my own skin, I was battered in the rapids of the You River. No wonder it made me cry.

I sat above the lake. Clean late-winter wind blew down from Shawangunk. I settled into a meditative state, repeating the hua-t’ou gently in my mind: Soul Mountain lies beyond the You River. (So I’ve got to get out of the river to get to Soul Mountain.) It lies beyond the source of the river... (Oh no! I’ve got to swim all the way back up the river to the beginning! Well, if that’s what it takes, then that’s what I’ll do.) I bent my determination to stilling my mind. I sat for a long while and entered a bliss state, got myself all spacey and ended up coming back late to the Chan Hall.

We had a communication exercise and I could barely speak, I was feeling so stoned from bliss. When it was my turn to speak, an image of Soul Mountain popped into my mind and I babbled the description: It was pure and austere, conical like Mt. Fuji. I seemed to be some distance away and viewing it from the air, behind it empty blue sky and a far green horizon. Below me was a green plain empty except for the thin blue ribbon of the You River. You River flowed away from the mountain, and its source was not on the mountain. You River had nothing to do with the mountain. The mountain was where I wanted to be; I wanted to get to the top of Soul Mountain then leap off, not to fall, but to soar and lose myself in the clear void... (So much for trite Chan greeting cards. Eh?) Luckily the bell rang, ending the communication exercise, and I could say no more.

Next morning I felt clear and grounded, no more bliss. I settled in to the steady work of meditation. Unfortunately, my daily practice had not been all that strong in the weeks prior to the retreat. So for the first couple of days, I kept losing my focus. I kept settling into silent illumination and forgetting to work on the hua-t’ou. When I would remember, and try to recite it in my mind, I found it difficult to recall all the words. I persevered. At one point, after sitting for a while in simple awareness of the breath and the body, I suddenly recalled the hua-t’ou. Simultaneously, a new image presented itself to my heart’s eye: I was closer to the mountain and the river, and Soul Mountain had eyes; gentle, wise and loving eyes like a stupa in Nepal! From now on, each time I “saw” Soul Mountain, it was gazing into me with those Buddha eyes.

With diligent practice I built up my energy and concentration, until I was able to hold the hua-t’ou most of the time. I entered a recitation phase of the method, repeating the hua-t’ou like a mantra while striving not to let the repetition become mechanical. I examined each word, finding different nuances. After perhaps a day and half of this, the hua-t’ou had internalized. I didn’t have to make an effort to call it up; it just stayed with me all the time. So I entered into

what I call the “asking” phase. I would say the hua-t’ou silently, and then listen and watch in my mind for an answer.

Now all of these “phases” I’m referring to are instructions I recall from earlier Chan retreats, which I may not have remembered or been applying correctly. When I had gotten to what I call the “asking” phase I had an interview with John Crook. I think he told me that I didn’t need to “ask” or “listen” for an answer, and didn’t need to keep the hua-t’ou in my mind constantly. I asked, “What should I be doing when I’m not saying the hua-t’ou?” and John replied (with a twinkle), “If you’re very clever, you’ll do nothing!”

This was absolutely the best instruction I’d gotten in a long time.



For the rest of the retreat I settled into sometimes deep levels of absorption. I would say the hua-t’ou from time to time to keep it alive, and the rest of the time I investigated what it might mean to be simply aware, doing nothing. At intervals, “visions” of Soul Mountain and the You River would present themselves in my imagination. I was not actively designing these; they seemed to rise spontaneously from my subconscious. I wish I had the skills to draw them. They followed a progression that would make a lovely comic book or animated film.

At first I was in the river struggling my way upstream. Not swimming; the river was mostly too shallow for that. I sloshed and crawled my way over slippery boulders. Ahead of me, above the trees which lined the deep river gorge, I could see just the summit of Soul Mountain, far away, Buddha eyes serenely observing me.

Later I was out of the river, more sensibly walking along the bank. The path was steep and stony; Soul Mountain visible ahead but still mostly obscured.

A few more times this image of walking arose. Each time the path was less steep, the river more of a stream, still noisy over stones that diminished in size. Ever ahead of me Soul Mountain gazed down with Buddha eyes. With each new “vision” it grew slowly closer and loomed taller over the river gorge.

One lunchtime, near the end of the retreat, we left the Chan Hall to discover a surprise visit from Spring. Snow had covered the ground when the retreat began (and a blizzard came the day it ended) but on this day suddenly the temperature was near 70°. We walked en masse to the Dining Hall and people slowed, examining the daffodils poking from receding snow. I saw the teachers stop and lounge on the steps of the Main House, seemingly intoxicated by the sweetness of the air.

I kept walking, and suddenly Soul Mountain was there in front me, looming over the trees beyond the Dining Hall. It was sweeping towards me. Its Buddha eyes were huge. It was transparent, like a ghost mountain. It swept over and contained us like a vast spirit tepee, and I was struck with a realization that made my knees buckle: Soul Mountain doesn’t lie beyond

anywhere at all - IT'S NEVER NOT BEEN RIGHT HERE!!!! How could I ever have forgotten this? I wanted to collapse weeping on the ground.

Ego was still with me; I wanted to roll on the ground but not in front of the teachers and the walking retreatants. I made it as far as the Dining Hall and collapsed on the back porch. My weeping probably sounded like profound grief. But there is no name for the emotion I was feeling. Certainly not grief and not even joy. I was overcome with disbelief that I could have EVER forgotten the eternal presence of Soul Mountain. Profoundly grateful to have remembered; it was impossible not to weep.

I sat on the porch for a long while gazing out towards Shawangunk Ridge. The trees were still bare and I could see each one clearly distinct and individual. High above a plane flew silently, punctuating the vastness and depth of the sky. All of existence was a unified sphere. I sat in the center. Nothing existed beyond what I could see (and it seemed I could see full 360°). It was perfection. I needed nothing, wanted only to sit there inside of Soul Mountain.

After some time my stomach spoke and I went inside and gave it some soup. After lunch my work was to make fresh hummus for the evening meal. I worked with a shining sense of well-being and equanimity that stayed with me for quite some time. There were no words in my head, and no visions. Only the sun coming through the kitchen window, the lemons and chick peas, the sound of my fellow retreatants working around me. After the retreat someone said to me "I hope you kept the recipe for that hummus, because that was absolutely the best fresh hummus I've ever tasted." I thought to myself, that's the same recipe I've always used. It's just that that hummus was made on Soul Mountain.

The day the retreat ended another "vision" presented itself. I had reached the source of the You River, a clear cold spring emerging from the ground not far from the foot of Soul Mountain. I was sitting in it, water up to my waist, and I could feel it bubbling up through my t'an-tien and flowing away downstream, the Buddha eyes looking over my shoulders.

A few days after the retreat I had one last "vision". I was still sitting in the source, the water was still bubbling, but it was not as clear, beginning to cloud up with particles of silt. I hoped it would not end up muddied; I don't believe it has. As I complete the writing of this account almost a year has passed since that retreat. I can't say that I stayed on Soul Mountain, but I do remember that it is always here. I did not return to the anxiety and insecurity I felt a year ago. Indeed, this past year I have felt better than ever before in my life. I am not dwelling in examination of the past. I keep my life simplified and focused on health and practice. I have deepened my practice and continue to investigate the cleverness of doing nothing at all.

Notices

Forthcoming Retreats

July 5 th – 10 th	Western Zen Retreat
September 6 th – 13 th	Silent Illumination
October 3 rd – 8 th	Five Day Chan Retreat
October 18 th – 25 th	Koan Retreat
November 15 th – 22 nd	Mahamudra Retreat
December 6 th – 11 th	Western Zen Retreat

Details and booking form at www.westernchanfellowship.org/retreats.html

Important Notice to Members Regarding Future AGM Arrangements

As mentioned at the AGM on 2nd March 2008, in future years we wish to lessen the expense and workload of mailing AGM papers, by switching over to email notification.

- For those of you for whom we already hold an email address, please be sure to advise the membership secretary of any changes in email address.
- For those of you for whom we don't hold an email address, please advise the membership secretary, membership@westernchanfellowship.org of your email address.

Data Protection Act IMPORTANT Please Read

We keep the NCF mailing list and the WCF membership list on a computer database for administration and mailing purposes. If you do not wish your details to be kept on a computer database then please write to the Membership Secretary. There are sometimes circumstances where it may be helpful to use this database in other ways, and we would like your permission to do so. We would of course do so sensitively. The circumstances that we have in mind are to contact individuals in a geographical area e.g. (i) to attempt to form the nucleus of a new local meditation group or (ii) to respond to enquirers who wish to discuss Chan or WZR or meditation with a contact in their locality. If you would not wish your details to be released in such circumstances then please write to the Membership Secretary and your wishes will be respected.

Submissions to New Chan Forum - Editorial Policy

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

The articles in this journal have been submitted by various authors and the views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Western Chan Fellowship.

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