

NEW CHAN FORUM

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Teacher

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Living Dharma

As those sad days of Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen's funeral at Dharma Drum Mountain fade into the past we are all getting our practice and Dharma thoughts together again, remembering vividly his impact on our lives, his teachings and our debt to him as our Shifu. And we are not wasting time; whether it is in Taiwan, in Pine Bush or at the Maenllwyd, the orchestra resumes its play. In this issue, there are two things to note. Firstly, the range of activities and contrasting focus of our practice-investigations and, secondly, the fact that our journal has reached its fortieth issue – no mean feat of continuity and resourceful application. I want to thank everyone who has maintained our work through the years with contributions, thoughts, theories, poems and argument, editing and computing. Our journal is not here to praise our masters or our practice but rather to examine and criticise where necessary and to keep the investigative Dharma that is Chan alive. In this, we follow our Shifu whose originality and persistence in bringing Chinese Zen to the West has been so important both for us as practitioners and to Buddhism as it spreads its global wings.

Please continue supporting our endeavours and we await your thoughts and contributions.

To celebrate our 40th birthday we present a number of accounts of on going Dharma initiatives covering several contrasting issues that concern us. Read and Enjoy!

Chuan-deng Jing-di

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Master Yen Wai of Hong Kong

When I arrived in Hong Kong (1953) on my National Service during the Korean War, I soon set about trying to meet Chinese people. I wanted to follow up my reading of Buddhism carried out during the several weeks' voyage on the troop ship from Southampton. Through contacts with the HK university I met Professor Ma Meng who introduced me to a Mr Yen Shi liang, a Buddhist merchant with an embroidery shop in downtown Victoria Island. Mr Yen had come back to Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland following the communist take – over. He had been a close disciple of the great Chinese master Hsu-yen – indeed a first generation descendant of this great teacher. It was not till years later that I realised how significant that was.

Yen Shi liang was an inspiring teacher and, following my first visits to monasteries on Lan Tao Island, I soon began a serious engagement with Zen. In my book “Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon” I describe my meetings with this fine teacher and our conversations together. I was 23 at the time, a young Radar officer, later RHQ Troop Commander at Stanley Fort.

Recently Jackson Peterson, an American Zen teacher, who had come across these writings and wanted to know more, contacted me. After correspondence, he has been kind enough to write of his own experiences with our mutual teacher who, by the time Jackson was in Hong Kong, had become a monk and Chan master under the name Yen Wai Fa Shih. Here is Jackson's account of the legacy that is our joint inheritance. John Crook

Jackson writes:

I began my practice of Dharma in the Soto Zen tradition for over 3 years in 1966 under Matsuoka Roshi, when I was sixteen. I then spent time at the Bush St. Zendo in San Francisco with Suzuki Roshi in 1968 and received dokusan from him and Katagiri Roshi (sensei at that time).

I also studied with many other teachers during that time. The most significant was my Chan master, Yen Wai Shih who was living in Shatin, Hong Kong. In 1978 I pursued him in attempting to penetrate the definitive meaning of “wu”, which he taught from the “sudden approach” school following his teacher Hsu Yun. I travelled twice to Hong Kong to study with him. I also did a short Chan retreat while under his instruction. When I left, he gave me his original incense stick, his ‘kyasaku’. He also gave me his copy of the Platform Sutra, and asked me to teach Chan to an acquaintance of his in the U.S.

The Way of Wu

From Victoria Island I took a ferry to the New Territories and found my way to Shatin, the location of Yen Wai Shih's temple and monastery complex. Yen Wai was an 84 year old Master of Zen Buddhism, the head of three separate temples in southern China. He greeted me in the village and we walked up into the lush foothills of Shatin. We saw several older villagers in a lower temple room busily chanting randomly and lighting incense sticks in great abundance.... the fragrance was intoxicating. Thinking this was a Zen Temple, where monks usually just sit quietly in meditation, I didn't understand what all this other stuff going on was all about. Hoping not to offend my teacher or confess my ignorance prematurely, I yet took the risk to ask him what those people were doing. In response he said "God only knows....." and we both had a good laugh! The image this venerable 84 year old Zen Master offered in his simple yet functional Zen monk's robe was in startling contrast to his off-handed comment about his own disciples.... it was completely disarming --- our first point of human contact --- heart to heart.

We continued walking upwards, the steps continuing to ascend to higher and higher temple grounds and buildings. We finally came to a house where Yen Wai resided. I was introduced to his granddaughter and family. I was amazed at the sense of reverence they had for this elderly patriarch of the family. You could tell they knew he was more than just a nice and

kindly grandfather and knew intuitively his value to all those who be fortunate enough to have contact with him. And now it was my turn to try to understand what they already knew.

We talked about many things concerning the Dharma and how one could come to understand the true meaning of Enlightenment. I told him that above all other things, I wanted to understand and experience my Buddha-Nature first hand. I shared with him many of my intellectual thoughts about the true meaning of practice and the enlightened state of mind. He was quite amazing in his command of the English language. He spoke with a deep bass tone and flawless British accent. Actually, in his earlier years, he had studied and fallen in love with the writings of Shakespeare. He insisted Shakespeare was an enlightened being. More amazing was the fact that when I asked him about points of the Zen teachings, he would often quote phrases from Shakespeare to make himself clear! For me, this whole scene took place in an almost, no, not almost but actual, surreal space somewhere between ancient China and Medieval England.--- truly unsettling!



We continued walking the grounds and eventually arrived at the monastery of his disciples, men and women in different sections. Most of the Buddhist nuns were already well beyond middle age. They were nothing less than wonderful in expressing their very warm greetings to us both --- but they had something very special to offer us --- a stew of freshly picked and stir-fried giant shiitake-like black mushrooms. To this day, I can't think of a single meal I have ever enjoyed more --- so simple, yet so delicate in the array of subtle flavors. --- as though I was eating the essence of the entire mist enshrouded forest from which these mushrooms were gathered. I knew also, from observing the demeanor of these elderly women, that each mushroom was savored at the picking as being a precious offering of the forest itself, an

offering yielding nutrition and 'chi' to restore the vitality of these self-less servants of the Way.

We finally arrived at our destination, a residence that housed some of the senior monks and guests. We went upstairs to Yen Wai's study, where we were greeted with tea and biscuits. The tea was a bit strong for my tastes, but certainly set the sober mood.

Now was my chance to ask more of my burning questions... the ones that I was leading up to yet approaching obliquely so as not to expose my shallow knowledge all at once. Perhaps I had a fear that if I appeared as too much of a novice he might reserve the best of his enlightening morsels of wisdom for a later time, when I would have ripened more. Ripening more, for me, was just twisting longer in torment on the vine of my own unenlightenment --- a state I already knew all too well. Well, hell.... that was why I took all the trouble getting this far wasn't it? Let's not fall now, I thought, clearly aware that I was free-climbing without any ropes or safety equipment on the face of a totally unpredictable mountain that could be my final salvation if scaled adroitly or be my demise, if not in actuality then at least in spirit. Who else could I visit and interview about the ultimate meaning of the Buddha's teaching? My short list of candidates was dwindling --- after all I was interested in the shortest path to enlightenment, the teachings of the "Sudden School of Enlightenment" of the 6th Patriarch. These teachings were renowned as being the source of instruction that brought the greatest flowering of Chan/Zen Masters of all time! If not Yen Wai Shih, an actual master of this lineage, then who?

At any event, we sat drinking tea discussing the true meaning of Wu, the Clear Void of Awareness, the true nature of one's own Perfect Buddha Mind. Wu has a particular meaning in Chinese; it's a way of asking about one's innate Buddha Nature or our original unborn and perfect Awareness. From his precise and direct explanations I thought I finally grasped the true essence of the teaching. Proud of my realization I asked him this question: "So, master, I understand... the purpose of practice is to just "simplify" ones thinking completely.... isn't that it?" I waited, expecting his nod of approval and confirmation of my understanding. Instantly, like a Master Samurai drawing his katana and striking a singular killing blow, lurched toward me with the authority of a granite mountain and said "**You have already made "It" hopelessly complex!!!!**" My mind went completely BLANK, EMPTY....WU There it was....HA!!! We looked at each other, his eyes locked on mine... no movement and suddenly as though Mt. Fuji was erupting, we both exploded in laughter... I couldn't stop laughing.... I stood up and danced around in hysterical laughing.... I said "I see... I see.... yes, to simplify is hopelessly complex.....ha, ha, ha...." laughing for a good five minutes at least! He smiled broadly, his eyes filled with mirth as we both recognized that his skillful and thoroughly spontaneous blow cut through to the marrow and divided the space of my mind into Wu!

That's how I came to know the Way, as taught by the "Sudden Enlightenment School of the 6th Patriarch of Chan (Zen)", the illustrious and profoundly compassionate Huineng (born in the 600's A.D.)

A Day in the Life of Bruce in Sogenji

Bruce Stevenson

Last year Bruce Stevenson took himself off to Japan for a period of practice in a Zen monastery. This was not Bruce's first such expedition but it is the first he has written about for us. Let us continue this issue then with a further account of experiences in the distant East. Bruce tells Sogenji is, as far as he knows, the only monastery in Japan full of Westerners - well this includes a Taiwanese nun and an Indian monk etc, etc.

The day begins ---

3.35am --- the alarm goes off in the tiny room I have in the guest quarters up the hill. Pull clothes on and stumble down rocky path in the dark; stand to one side of the Hondo, waiting for the head monk to arrive with a posse of monks at his back. Get my stool (thank God I don't have to kneel on the ground like almost all the others). Crow honks in the dark, maybe a bull frog is booming.. The Roshi arrives --- looking as always very solid and dignified, and steps into the wooden square let down into the tatami in the centre. He bows to the Buddha. We start off chanting the lotus sutra. I can never keep up. Several pages in I find myself staring at my little book full of almost identical sino-Japanese phrases, and searching and feeling inadequate. The chanting of a number of different sutras, the heart sutra, the dahishin dharani etc., etc., goes on for nearly an hour. Sometimes the Roshi seems almost like a mad dog, barking out the chants, his head jerking with energy.

Then, at breakneck speed, we file out of the Hondo, down a long passage with moss gardens on one side, and halberds still resting in racks on the wall, round a corner on polished wood walkways and into an annex off the kitchen, for three more breakneck-speed chants. We finish. And the Roshi regards us all gravely. He bows and we say Ohayo Gozaimasu (formal Japanese for 'good morning') to him. It feels a bit like being his personal retainer in a medieval setting --- and that he is our boss---Then off again, this time to the Zendo. I sit in the Gaitan, a corridor that runs to one side of the main Zendo where not all the rules have to be observed, which means I sit on a raised bench like everyone else, but I can have my feet on the floor. We enter the Zendo chanting Hakuin's song of Zazen.

After the fourth strike on the clackers, suddenly everyone (but me and maybe one other --- we don't have sanzen privileges) jumps to the floor and starts tearing towards the exit, running and jostling like a football crowd, off to see the Roshi for sanzen (interview). One hour and a half later, after three breaks, it is time for breakfast. More chanting. We eat whilst sitting on long benches alongside a table in the kitchen, the Roshi at the far end. Bowls of rice and fried vegetables get passed along the table.

There is a demanding etiquette, about passing the bowls and bowing if you don't want any food from them. After breakfast there is a little free time and then we get to grab a straw broom and a 'gomi'- a plastic dustpan for picking up leaves, and a bamboo rake. We start off raking up leaves, and combing the gravel into precise furrows at the entrance to the monastery.

I like to sweep the leaves near the lake, they are scarlet. The lake is beautiful and full of koi fish. Sometimes a heron is sitting on a rock in the middle, with his mate in a tree nearby.

Guan-san, the head monk, who is Swedish and has been here some 23 years gives a big yell when he judges it is time to finish. I lug a bag of leaves on combed paths up a rocky staircase and past a beautiful glade of tall green bamboos to the edge of an ancient cemetery to dump the rubbish.

Now it is time to go back to the guest house for more cleaning. I sweep the main room, whipping myself mentally for not being more on target or more willing but I am tired by now, and want to get to my room and lie down for thirty minutes or so and bury myself in a book.

At around 9a.m. it is time to start work again, maybe sweeping leaves in the tiered cemeteries which contain beautiful, strange pillars marking tombs of noblemen from three centuries ago. I might get to natter with Eric, a retired American lawyer who comes here regularly, or Darius, a sweet Polish surgeon here for three months. Guan-san comes up and gives me instructions I can hardly understand, his English is very peculiar, and although he is maybe very intelligent there is something possibly autistic about him. Can I just let him be, and not worry about what this means for practice here?

Three or four times a month, we go on 'Takupatsu'. It is a challenge to find and put on layers of monks robes, rice straw sandals around the feet, which only leave 6mm. of straw between my feet and the road, a 'rakusu', and a giant belt. We all line up in front of the Hondo, hats in our hands, and bow. The Roshi, even though he is 67, walks at a fantastic pace and I have to half-run, dreading that my sandals may fall off or my robe fall down.

We queue up at the bus stop and stand upright on the bus glimpsing schoolgirls, people fanning themselves, schoolboys with yellow baseball caps. We walk or is it march through the mall, yelling "Ho" (Dharma) at the top of our lungs, bowing in front of each shop, opening our rakusu to receive a few yen, then chanting a short thing that I cant remember --- I have to haul a piece of plastic out of my bag where it is printed. I feel like a fake monk, faced with the sincerity of those who make offerings. One time we are chanting to help the victims of the floods in China, another time to help the victims of the floods in Myanmar, someone (thank God not me) has to hold a banner with Chinese characters on it proclaiming what we are doing.

If it is not sesshin time (and it is nearly always sesshin time, there are kosesshins with only 4 hours of straight sitting at night, and then there are the Osesshins with some 12 hours of sitting during the day, plus yaza¹ at night), then we get a break in the morning. At times, these tea breaks can become mini orgies. Someone may have donated chocolate rabbits for the Sangha - and we scoff several each, plus swig bottles of donated coffee.

During Takupatsu also, if we are lucky, there is a supporter waiting for us somewhere to offer us bottles of orangeade, and maybe bean paste cakes coated in rice flour.

Time for lunch at 1p.m., more chanting, then rice, and noodles, vegetables and sometimes surprisingly to me yoghurt and fruit - even a cake if it is someone's birthday.

Then finally, unless it is Osesshin, there is time for rest. Maybe we have from 1.45 off till say dinner at 4.30. This is technically medicine, so consists of leavings from lunch.

Evening sitting from say 6.00 to 8.30, followed by tea being served in the Zendo, and a little cake. Then back to the kitchen for evening chanting - the Roshi looking solemn as he says "O-Yasumi-nasai", and we say it back to him.

Out of the 25 or so residents at any one time only a few are here long term, Guan-san, Jiao fussy nun, blind nun, Shin-so, young monk: Jion, ex-pro sportsman monk, French monk, angry US woman.

There are two senior nuns here both Swedish, one of whom has been here about 20 years and has been given permission to teach, another who has maybe been here 15 years and also given permission to teach. The first is, Jiao, with whom I went to stay in Sweden, where she is setting up a monastery and we spent nearly two days talking; largely about how so many people have gone through Sogenji and some have just got worse, the more they have stayed there. Jiao herself seems great. She is solid and unpretentious and really listens. The other nun feels brittle, and is always carping and insisting you do something some other way. After

¹ 'yaza' is supposedly voluntary but actually compulsory meditation after the end of the day in Osesshin - where we go sit outside at night - under the eaves of the Hondo or wherever.

about the fourth time of this, I managed to stand up to her in a really clear way. It reminded me of wanting to hug Kristina (my teacher in Almaas's school) years ago and Kristina drawing a line in the air between us and saying 'This is what its all about' Afterwards I felt aligned (with the will?). I was weeding at the time, which my mind certainly thinks it hates, but actually I felt completely relaxed supported by space. The weeding just seemed to happen all by itself. It was like I had been made up of ice cubes and suddenly the ice cubes were aligned with each other and able to melt, rather than in submission and opposition to the world.

Another time, Zhou, a Canadian-Israeli visitor who had been living in very Spartan conditions in a Soto monastery in the mountains in Japan, was talking with Jion. We were supposed to be cleaning the drains from the kitchen which I certainly found irksome, and as they nattered on, I became increasingly cross. In my mind I became angry with them and was wondering what is practice? Somehow I fell out of the bottom of my nest of thoughts and was just the witness. I could observe the thoughts I had been wrapped up in but was no longer identified with them. I felt at one and gently compassionate to everything. Oddly this felt quite Theravadin, exactly what Ajahn Sumedho all those years ago used to point to, just watch the changing conditions.

Another time the head monk, Guan-san thought I'd taken his tools when we were up ladders cleaning fallen leaves from gutters and he whispered to me something about how bad this was and how he could be violent. Again the scales fell from my eyes, and though shocked it was exactly as if I had fallen into the hara out of my habitual trance of fitting in and agreeing with others.

Another time, during Osesshin I found myself really imagining the death of my mother and experiencing the loss that this would be, seeing (again) how I swallow down her desperate anxiety and that I am like my father and therefore must imprison myself and then, to my astonishment, falling inside and coming to as a beam of pure love. .

Later given a one-off sanzen to report this to Roshi.

Jiao told me that all sentient beings are inside each one of us – maybe this is why so many difficult incidents with others became grist for the mill of practice - as I forgive the other who was actually in me.

Near the end, Jiao (who had been there the whole month), told me there was space on the sesshin in Latvia - and if I went I would get sanzen privileges.

In Latvia in a very beautiful rickety Zendo on the edge of a huge lake with nothing but forest between us and the Byelorussian frontier. Expected Roshi in sanzen to be like my experience of Japan the last time: a remote wall on which I could find no toe hold.

Actually he was very engaging. He talked about Beginner's Mind, and suddenly I felt right there with him and at that moment a cat appeared in front of me and I grabbed its tail: felt like some free action. He said to me at one point that normally at my age there was no possibility of becoming a Zen teacher but for me there was and that I'd been born to see the reality (Shobogenzo) beyond body and mind. I can still see him twinkling at me.

Shifu's Legacy

Let us now return to the West by way of Pine Bush, New York, where, as Buffe Laffey tells us, Shifu's legacy is bearing fruit and recovery from his loss is underway. We are delighted to hear of this. Eds

Buffe Laffey

This has been a noteworthy year at Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Since we lost our Shifu in February, one might expect an atmosphere of desolation and loss. Instead, we are enjoying one of the most vibrant periods in the history of the place. More than one person has remarked on it. It is as if, having left the body, Shifu's Dharma spirit is manifesting itself in the heirs and students he left behind. Even the greenery up at Shawangunk was spectacularly lush, and the weather especially sweet, this year. But that of course may only be the vagaries of global warming.

I overheard a conversation between a visitor to DDRC and a long-time Dharma Drum practitioner. The visitor was commenting on the air of stability and equanimity she observed at the center, which she found surprising in view of our recent loss. The old-timer responded, "Well, you know, our Shifu didn't raise no fools!" This is true. He prepared us very well for his passing. Although we all love him dearly and wished never to lose him, he grounded us in the understanding that the heart and wellspring of our community is the Dharma itself, which he embodied so perfectly.

With Shifu's passing, each of his Dharma Heirs has had to reflect on their responsibility to carry his legacy forward. Judging from what we've heard at the retreats this year, the Dharma Heirs are equal to the challenge. One suspects that, in reflecting on their new responsibility, they have re-examined for themselves the fundamental principles. The Dharma Talks this year have been exceptionally clear and precise in presenting the core of the teachings. More than one participant has commented that these talks are good enough to publish as books.

The retreat center itself seems to be ripening into its full potential. From the time it was purchased a little over a decade ago, the retreats were always well-attended, with often more than a hundred people filling the Chan Hall. However, only a small percentage of those attendees were Westerners, and this was a source of concern for Shifu. He had come to America, after all, to bring the Dharma to Westerners, and he had many conversations with his senior students about how the percentage of western attendance might be increased.

In 2005, for the first time, Shifu's health condition would not allow him to fly to New York to lead the winter retreat, as he had done every year since the center had been purchased. When this announcement was made, nearly half the people who had registered for the retreat cancelled. There followed a sort of dwindling time for the center. Although major retreats continued to be offered with very qualified leaders, the numbers in attendance were nothing like they had been. With Shifu confined to Taiwan, there was no permanent monastic presence at the center. At times the entire place was deserted except for the caretaker. It could seem quite desolate. One wondered whether the place would continue after Shifu was gone.

One needn't have worried, however. Even before Shifu's passing the center had begun to regain its vitality. A new set of monastics were sent from Taiwan to take up year-round residence, supported by a full-time staff. This constant presence has nurtured the Thursday Night Sitting Group and Sunday Service into a healthy community of regular local practitioners, some of whom have gone on to attend retreats. New types of retreats have been developed to supplement the traditional intensive retreats. Jimmy Yu (Guogu) designed the Beginner's Mind retreat for people with no meditation experience. John Crook and Simon Child introduced the Western Zen retreats, designed for the individualistic and over-analytical western mind. There are "Introductory" retreats of varying lengths, providing basic instruction and preparing practitioners for the more advanced intensive retreats.

On the recent Koan Retreat, John Crook had this to say:

'Here at Pine Bush you are extraordinarily fortunate, because actually, there are at least four kinds of retreats going on here which you can select from. There are of course the fundamental retreats, presumably virtually the same as Shifu taught them. Then you could work also with Chi Chern Fashi, whose emphasis is very, very much upon calming the mind; very, very calm until you reach a kind of clear one-pointed state and only then do you allow the hua-t'ou to drop in, if I've understood his approach correctly. Then you have Guo Ru Fashi who is picking up a quite ancient way, rather a "rough" way, of doing retreats. Rather like old Matsu actually used to do. This is a pretty rough retreat and obviously only for those for whom that is suitable. It may not be for everybody. I'm not sure how far Westerners will take to it, but there it is. It's certainly an entirely valid approach. Then of course you have the retreat, which Simon and I from the Western Chan Fellowship, offer here in its two forms, the Western Zen Retreat and this one which you're on now [the Koan Retreat]. So you are very fortunate in Pine Bush. I don't think there are many places that offer such a variety of intensive retreats. Looking at the programs of a number of other centers, what Simon and I have noticed was that there are one or two other obviously very good intensive retreats offered, but most of the programs had bits and pieces of yoga and other elements added so that they were more of a workshop than a retreat.. Good stuff but not really intensive Dharma at all.'

In addition to the teachers already named, retreats are also being led by Guo Xing Fashi, Zarko Andricevic, and Gilbert Gutierrez. Some of these teachers are leading both Huatou and Silent Illumination retreats. Each offers his own unique set of personal experiences and manner of teaching. So there is a wide range of "flavours" for practitioners to sample and discover which one resonates for them.

The different styles of retreat allow for a coherent progression from beginner to advanced practice. We're seeing people come for the Beginner's Mind retreat, and return for the Western Zen retreat, and then go on to attend the intensive retreats. The variety of styles can enrich the training of long-time practitioners as well. In my personal experience, after years of training in the traditional style retreats, I derived great benefit from the Western Zen and Koan retreats. The Western-style communication exercises and personal koan investigation led to insights that resolved long-standing personal issues. This cleared my mind of a tremendous amount of clutter, which in turn allowed me to benefit more fully from the traditional style retreats.

Another comment from John Crook: "Of course our great loss in the last few months has been the loss of our Shifu. This has been a great tragedy for us. But tragedy is not quite the right word, because it also has to be an inspiration. All of us, whether we are beginners or whether we are advanced practitioners, need to take up where Shifu left off and press forward with the extraordinarily clear perception and understanding of the Dharma which Shifu gave us. [...] We have our work to do, and we have to press forward."

Retreat attendance is steadily increasing. There are many newcomers, the majority of them Westerners, who have been attracted by Shifu's TV program or ads in the major Buddhist magazines or by our website. Many of these people have never met Shifu, but are energized by their retreat experience and come back for more. I see them all as they arrive for their retreats. I watch them settle as the days pass. They move ever more gently and their faces begin to shine. I hear their Sharing Talks at the end of the retreats. Each one goes away changed for the better. The Dharma is flourishing here. What Shifu set in motion is healthy and strong, and continues to grow.

Ten Zen Questions¹

Susan Blackmore

Back in the UK this short extract introduces you to Sue Blackmore's new book in which she puzzles her way into certain serious Zen questions. You must read it to decide whether she has solved them or not but her discussion is characteristically lively and interesting; furthermore it is based in retreats at Maenllwyd. We place it here for your interest and information. Eds.

The idea for "Ten Zen Questions" came to me one day when the scientific mystery of consciousness seemed particularly insoluble and I thought "I wish I could just sit still and think it all out". Then I realised that I should by now have the skill to do so. I first learned to meditate with John nearly thirty years ago, went on my first retreat at Maenllwyd in 1982, and have been practising ever since.

So the idea popped into my mind to use my Zen training in a completely unorthodox way. I would make writing a book the excuse to work hard at asking my favourite questions – Am I conscious now? What was I conscious of a moment ago? Who is asking the question? and so on. I did several solitary retreats of about a week each, some at Maenllwyd and some in my own garden shed at home. The book is a compilation of these, along with four chapters based on formal retreats led by John.

Here is an excerpt from one of those, John's first koan retreat in January 2002. On the first day he gave us a list of koans and hua-tous and asked us to choose one. I had no trouble, "There is no time, what is memory" simply leapt off the page and I was hooked.

There is no time. What is memory?

The first morning, when we'd all assembled under the bright stars of a frosty morning in the yard and dutifully copied John's assorted jumps and stretches, he gave us some steadying words for the day: "Patience, Application, Persistence".

I start work. The instruction sheet says that Western minds will first tackle the koan intellectually, but that this thinking will naturally wear itself out, so not to worry. Good. I don't have to prevent myself from thinking. What I have is simple: - here a statement; there a question. I don't need to rush. I have a whole week ahead. I decide to take the statement and sit with it in two different ways. First I'll agree with it, and then later I'll disagree with it.

I sit. I look. I look very hard. I sit and look at the carpet on the floor in front of me. But I haven't had enough sleep. That's the one thing I hate about these organised retreats. I start to hallucinate. The pattern of colours and squiggles on the carpet turns into big crabs that get up and crawl about over each other and make me blink and get cross. But I cannot see any time. OK then. The koan is right. There is no time. But if there is no time, what is memory?

I am out in the yard again, for slow walking meditation, looking down at the ground as I pace up and down. The frost has gone, and the mud and sheep droppings squelch under my feet. Of course there's time. The clouds are pouring up straight into the sky from behind the hills, moving fast. You can't have movement without time. The koan is wrong. There is time.

Hours of sitting pass. The crabs crawl and I blink to keep myself awake.

¹ *Ten Zen Questions* is published by Oneworld, Oxford. 181 pp, £ 12.99 ISBN 978-1-85168-642-1

Find out more at <http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk/Books/Tenzen/index.htm> where you can read further extracts or join in the Ten Zen blogs.

Hang on a minute. How can I tell the clouds have moved, or hear that noise as a cough, or see that John is walking? Because from one moment to the next I can *remember* what came before. Without memory they would be meaningless sights and sounds. And what is memory? Ha. This is a clever koan indeed. If I agree with it, then I become perplexed about memory – if I disagree with it I have to find out what time is. I begin to feel a curious respect for these seven simple words.

It's evening and we all sit in deep silence around a flickering log fire, the smell of the smoke hanging heavy in the slowly warming house. The flames are moving all the time. So is there time in these flames? Is there a now? I could grasp a moment with a camera but there is no camera, only my eyes, and what they see keeps changing. I can't grasp a moment from which to say that what has gone before is past and what is to come next is future.



I watch the tongues of red curling around the dried bark of a long-dead tree and try to imagine things from the flames' point of view. Without memory they cannot have a past, a now, and a present. I get the creepiest feeling that the whole of the universe is like this. Flames, and pieces of wood, and rocks and fireplaces, and matches, and hills – none of them has time. I sit and listen to the crackling.

An ant is crawling from the pile of wood on the floor. Is there time for an ant? The ant is different from stones and hills and I wonder whether this is what it means to be a sentient being, but I don't know. There is so much to investigate. A week seems nothing. But it's late. I wash, clean my teeth, and slip into my sleeping bag, still holding my koan steadily in mind.

This is how far I got with my koan the first day.

The morning boards are sounding and I'm instantly awake. The words are right here. "There is no time. What is memory?"

This koan is like a magic converter that flips everything in its path into mindfulness; and it does so without a jerk. I might meander off into thoughts like, "I remember when I was here last summer when the...", but before I can get lost in reminiscence up come the words, "What

is memory?" So instead of being cross with myself and coming back to the present with a jolt, the memory of last summer becomes food for the koan. Almost every arising thought is like this, so I am still working on the koan. Or perhaps the koan is working on me.

This morning, in the yard, where we all stood shivering or gazing dumbstruck at the beauty of night in the mountains, John gave his advice for the day: "Perfect practice" (ha!), "Persistence" (again), and "Let the koan do it". It seems that it is.

It is the third day and we are each to have a formal interview in the library. We have been told to enter quietly, bow to a particular statue, sit down on the cushion facing John, and then, without him asking, explain how far we have got with our koan.

I have heard so many Zen stories of encounters between teachers and monks. They are always dramatic or insightful, and either teacher or pupil does something unexpected. At the end the monk is either chastised and told to keep practising, or instantly becomes enlightened. Of course, I want to become enlightened – to be hit with a stick and everything falls away and then stop it. I want John to approve of me, to think I'm clever, that I'm getting on really well with my koan. I know all this from many retreats. It's just self-centred stuff that gets in the way. I know. I concentrate hard, waiting for my turn. There's a tap on my shoulder. I get up, bow, and walk mindfully to the library.

I push the curtain aside, find the right statue and bow to it, sit on the empty cushion, pause, and then bang twice on the floor.

"What separates these two bangs?" I ask, as John sits perfectly still. "Time of course. So the koan is wrong. There is time. But we only see the time when we remember one bang from the other. From here, you can begin to doubt all past things, and all future things too, because they are all built on memory. So, all that's left is "now". You can't doubt that - can you? But what is now? I am looking to see. That's how far I have got with my koan." I feel pleased with myself. I said it clearly and well.

John is impassive. "Fine", he says.

"Aren't you going to help me?" I ask..

He smiles and says "Continue."

I walk back to my place in the hall.

If I can't catch a "now" perhaps I can find what's happening now; one might say "the *contents* of now". I realise that this is the same concept as "the contents of consciousness" so familiar in neuroscience. Yes, this is my consciousness; it's my "now". I shall look into that.

I stare at the carpet crabs, and the unstable streaks of the wooden floor. I open my ears to the cracking of logs in the stove, to the shuffling of other people's uncomfortable knees, and the clearing of their throats. I feel a slight pain in my calves but the more I look the less substantial the feelings seem. The longer I watch, the less like sounds and sights and feelings they are. Yet, these are all the contents of "now". What is this? What is this?

I am surprised to realise that this is the very same question that drives my life; that motivates my research, and has done for decades: "what is consciousness?". This is all I want to do: to sit, quiet and steady, and ask this question. Surely I must be able to see if I look hard enough, mustn't I? I must keep looking, all the time, meditating or not meditating.

This is a magic koan. It gobbles up everything in its path. Even repeating the words "There is no time" requires memory. It is a self-gobbling koan. I am looking to see what is left after everything is gobbled up.

It's work period now, and I am to care for the twin-vault, urine-separating, composting toilets. I love them. I like the principle of dealing with waste without water, and the skilful job of

tending them properly. I like working on my own in mindful silence, and getting the bathrooms sparkly clean. But the people drive me mad. They come and want to use the toilets during work time (why aren't they doing their own jobs?), or even to speak to me (don't they know what silence means?). But I persevere. I don't look at people on retreats – not at all. I look at feet. It is a long habit inspired by Master Sheng-yen who told us, many years ago, not to make eye contact or any facial expression, just to bow in acknowledgement and gratitude to others. So, I let the others be ghosts in shoes, and I mop the floor. Is this now?

Whether I try looking for the “now”, or ask what is *in* the “now”, I stumble into a kind of blindness or fog. It's as though out of the corner of my eye I'm convinced that something's there, but when I look straight at it I cannot see. Things somehow evaporate into insubstantiality whenever I am looking at them.

In one way, this is encouraging. I remember Sheng-yen once telling us that we had to become blind and deaf, and I had no idea what he meant. Indeed, I hated the idea because I desperately wanted to see more clearly – not less. But if he advocates blindness, then maybe I'm getting somewhere.

But it's horrible. I hate it! I keep staring into the blindness harder and harder. I don't know how to proceed. Keep looking – can't see. Keep looking – it runs away. Keep listening – can't hear. Look. Look. Pay attention!

I remember that the koan is meant to be doing it, not me, and I relax a little. This helps. It even seems that *I am* the koan as I walk through the refectory and sit at my place at table. I am the koan as food is silently eaten. I am the koan as legs walk back across the yard. In some way that I don't understand this seems to open up a little chink. The wretched carpet glows spaciously.

Something has changed. This is interesting (I allow myself a little academic speculation). Normally it seems as though I am conscious of some sounds or sights, and can switch my attention so that different ones come into consciousness. It's as though there's a me watching the things in a space called “my conscious mind”. I know this doesn't correspond to anything inside the brain, and it implies an impossible inner space where a ghost in the machine observes its stream of private experiences. Yet, it has always seemed that way.

Now it doesn't. It seems as though everything I attend to has always been happening. There's no jump when my attention shifts. Everything is just as it is, even as it changes. I reflect that maybe experiences simply don't exist in time. There are brain processes going on but there is no me who experiences them, and no time at which they become conscious. How slow I am, but now I see that directly.

Thank goodness for the afternoon walks. The hill behind the house is steep and I'm breathing hard by the time I reach the edge of the moor with its heath, and sheep, and far views of the Welsh mountains. I plod along narrow sheep tracks, through the rough stalks of heather, walking steadily, staying mindful, asking my question as I go. The heather and rocks pass through me as I walk. I don't know who is walking, and I don't know who's moving, them or me.

Then I'm laughing and laughing and laughing. There are no “contents of consciousness”! Of course. It's so obvious. Experiences are scraps; they're not grounded; they are not *in* anything; they're not centred anywhere, either in time or space. The world we think we see or hear - is always a memory. And what is memory? Ha ha!

I am grateful to this amazing koan; to this transforming, self-gobbling meme, to these circumstances here in mid-Wales, to my parents, and to this little sturdy, willing body for which I suddenly feel much affection. My downfall is yet to come.

Coming Home

Mahamudra Retreat 2005 - Session One

John Crook

When we were introducing ourselves last night, several of you remarked on how valuable you found it just coming to the Maenllwyd and how much you valued the place.

Let us begin then by asking why that might be so. I have a good story that helps us here. Some years ago there was a practitioner, Jane Turner, whom some of you might remember, who used to be a regular retreatant at the Maenllwyd, driving herself here from north of Glasgow. One year she got the dates wrong and arrived here after her long journey in the wrong week! She told me about it afterwards. In those days the track, was largely undriveable so she had walked up the track only to find the place deserted; there was nobody here! The Maenllwyd was completely silent; not a soul! Locked up! Yet she told me that she was so radiantly happy just being here that when she went back down the hill and got in her car and drove back to Glasgow, it was almost as good as if she had done a retreat!

Jane, perhaps, was a slightly extreme case, but a lot of people make remarks along such lines, I myself sometimes arrive here and discover myself smiling; and, as is my wont, I sometimes ask myself, "What on earth are you smiling about?" I have often gone into that because I have found that if I just sat and allowed the smile, as it were, to seep into my bones, then I began to experience a move beyond smiling, into something really very blissful. And of course on such occasions, it isn't necessary to know why; Something is happening, which is bringing about a feeling of bliss. And indeed that bliss ... that joy ... at thinking about Maenllwyd or being here is, in many ways, a very important component of Dharma. Many people experience bliss in the course of meditation, but in this case it simply arises out of the smile at being here, or maybe even just thinking about the place.

So what is going on here? Well, Shifu gave me a clue to this many years ago when I was talking with him about the fact that sometimes in meditation blissful feelings arise. I had been experiencing bliss on retreat in New York with Shifu; and I went to him and I said, "What is all this bliss about?" So he said, "Well, bliss arises out of gratitude". "How come?" I said. "Well, what it means is that, without really knowing it, in meditation there has been a moment of stillness ... silence. You've got yourself out of the way. And because you did that, you feel gratitude; and gratitude produces bliss."

I have contemplated those remarks of Shifu's ever since and tested them out. And I find it to be true. When one experiences those moments of bliss in meditation, it emerges from a process of which one is not fully aware. One has dropped the cares of everyday life for a little while, and the fact that they have gone gives one a freedom and a clarity. And spontaneously, out of that freedom and clarity comes a feeling of thankfulness, gratitude; and that expresses itself in bliss.

I think something like the same thing happens when some of us arrive at the Maenllwyd ... or perhaps when one even thinks about the Maenllwyd, or maybe one does a visualisation which might involve the place. And it is not, of course, only Maenllwyd. Those of us who travel around and visit various monasteries or power places for meditation sometimes find the same thing happening there too. In fact it has to do with the fact that what we have been doing here is creating a little monastery. Maybe not exactly a monastery as a place, but rather a monastery of the mind, in that when we come here we practice a certain "dropping of attributes"; we let go. Maybe we're not always sure about that, and maybe some of us find it very difficult, but essentially the key thing that happens here is the letting go of care. When you arrive here you let go of something; you let go of the troubles of life. And you find yourself arriving and you find yourself smiling, and you say things like "coming to the

Maenllwyd is like coming home". Many people say that. Home, of course, is a place where there is no care because one is 'at home'.

This is a very interesting discovery to reflect upon, because we may ask what is going on when one "drops care"? What's happening? One could say "Well, it's just that I'm away from the kids for a bit", or "I've left the office and don't have to worry any more about the bloody finances", or "Thank God I'm away from him or her for the weekend" a bit of rest from the relationship. Any of these things might be, as it were, the stimulus, but that's a fairly shallow response. Because, of course, in problems of relationship, in problems of work, in problems of looking after the children, it is actually one's own performance that one is most worrying about and monitoring. "Am I a good enough Daddy?" "Am I a good enough friend?" "Oh, dear, I wasn't very nice on the phone last night." "Oh, I'm always stressed when I go to work; I'm no good at my job." Many of these things which we attribute to outside calamities, pressures, strains and stresses, are really actually internal strains and stresses. It is self concern.



So I put it to you that one of the things that happens when we arrive here, when we find ourselves "coming home", is that we drop self concern. And in dropping self concern, what does one find? Well, if you drop your self, then you allow a great space to appear; a great space for just appreciating precisely what's in front of your nose, namely: the yard; the clouds glowing in dawn light; a kite flying over; the sound of chanting. All of those things can then make a immediate and direct impression because 'You' are not in the way. You're not worrying about, for an example, "Am I meditating well today?", because you've dropped self concern. There is then no worry about whether you're meditating well or not! You're just

sitting there. And if you're truly Just Sitting ... to use that Japanese expression ... if you are truly just sitting and not being there as a 'me', then everything is present to you, for you, of you ... in a kind of special freedom. It's what is called "emptiness" in the Buddhist jargon, the psychological experience that is thus named.

Unfortunately, 'emptiness' is also a technical term in the Buddhist philosophical vocabulary and this may be confusing. Whenever one wants to try to understand what emptiness is, one has to say "What am I or what is it 'empty' of? What is it that's 'gone empty'? And, if you've dropped self concern, that's marvellous: you're empty of self concern. And that's well on the way to enlightenment! We are smiling on arriving at the Maenllwyd because we have actually, unbeknown to ourselves, dropped care. And particularly, for a little while, dropped self concern.

So there's a very useful lesson in this; because, of course, dropping self concern is precisely what the Buddha was talking about in his first two Noble Truths. That's really quite a discovery. If one has found, as it were, an indirect way into understanding the Noble Truths, that's really very useful indeed. So how come? Well, let's just remember the pattern of the Buddha's fundamental thought here. The Buddha, as you know, was concerned about suffering, and suffering, of course, is self concern ... or in a very large measure, self concern. So suffering and self concern go together. So at the moment when self concern is dropped there is no longer suffering ... or, at least, a big alleviation of suffering. And Buddha called that a dropping of "ignorance": we are ignorant of the fact of self concern and the reasons for it. The Buddha worked out why. Self concern is usually concerned with time. It is usually about something I did in the past, or the fear of something in the future. Self concern is time bound. And time, of course, is the measure of impermanence.

The Buddha realized that absolutely the root for understanding suffering is to understand impermanence; because it is the fact that things are impermanent which causes us distress. Something beautiful happens, a lovely holiday on a Greek beach, and then it's gone and Winter comes. Spring comes, but then it goes again. The joyful love affair is over and one is left by one's self. One gets older and one realizes that, as somebody said last night, the idea that one is going to go on for ever (which one takes for granted when one is young) begins to fade, and one realizes that Time is shortening. It's all impermanence and, of course, what we do with impermanence, through our ignorance, is to grab onto things that we like and try to hold onto them and make them permanent, because then we can be "safe" and 'happy'. The reason why that is so ignorant is that we fail to face up to the fact of impermanence: things cannot be made permanent; nothing is permanent. The universe itself is not permanent; it's endlessly moving and God knows where it's going to ... and probably He doesn't either!

In our stupidity we try to make the things that we like permanent and to annihilate or get rid of the things that we don't like sometimes, even the people that we don't like. And this is ignorance, and the root of suffering. The Buddha called it *anicca*, But then the Buddha said, "Well, what is it that is so worried about impermanence?" Well, of course, it's Me. I'm worried about Me because I am impermanent; I am going to die one day. I'm going to get old; God knows what's going to happen. As somebody said yesterday, arriving on the retreat, "God knows what's going to happen here!" Quite Right! Goodness knows what's going to happen here!

It's scary, very scary; impermanence is scary ... if one is holding onto permanence. Of course, if one isn't holding onto permanence, it's not scary, obviously. The two go together. But time flies, troubles come, troubles go. Nothing to hold on to ...if one tries to hold on, it's like trying to grasp the wind. You can't do it. The Buddha's truth however, was to say "Well, who are you anyway? What are you? What is it you're holding on to?" Well, the Buddha realized that he was holding on to Siddhartha; I have to realize that I am holding on to John; you have to realize that you're holding on to Rebecca, or whoever it might be; Eddie. That's what we're

holding on to. This thing which appears to be here; John, which appears to be here, is what I am holding on to because it is that which is changing, it is that which is fading, going away ... it won't be here much longer! So scary. But then, "What is this John?", asked the Buddha. This is where he made a very important discovery. Because when he examined himself through yogic meditation he was able to see very clearly that, actually, what was going on, what was called "John", was a process; not a thing, a process. And it could be divided up into five different aspects. Very simple; very simple psychology; but a very, very good model. It still works. It still works better than a good many modern models.

First of all, there is Sensation. Obviously, you feel something, a sensation; something happens. You sit on a drawing pin Ooooh!: a sensation.

But then there's Perception. Perception is "Oh, what's this? Have I sat on a scorpion? ... Oh, no. No, it's just a drawing pin; that's not so bad." That's perception. You perceive what the sensation is.

And then there's Cognition, which is working out why there happens to be a drawing pin on your chair: "Did someone put it there? Who could have done that? Somebody hates me, and put a drawing pin on my chair so I'd sit on it ... or is it just that I dropped one out of the box yesterday?" Or if it actually is a scorpion, "Oh, my God: scorpions! Better put down some DDT or something. Let's be nasty to scorpions for a change." That's cognition: working it out.

And then there are the so-called *samskaras*: we have to use the Pali word because it's rather difficult to find an English word for it. The *samskaras* are, as it were, the habit formations from all one's previous thinking, so you think now "What about scorpions? Yes, I remember about scorpions; well, they are supposed to occur in the South of France, so what is one of them doing here in England? It must have escaped from the zoo. But I haven't been near a zoo, so how can there be a scorpion here?" And so you start working out, by referring to the past, by referring to karma, why the present situation might be as it is. And of course it is these *samskaras* which become what you might call the "habit formations", because they determine what you worry about next. Thus karma is built up out of these *samskaras*, these past habits. So a mind, this John, is actually a complicated functioning of Sensation, Perception, Cognition, and habits of the past, which as it were make one decide what is good and what is bad. And all of it has a certain form: and that form ... bodily form ... bodily presence, that is what we call "John". But John is just a name; there is no John, there's just this process; the process of Sensation, Perception, Cognition and habits, going round and round and round. Quite temporary; moving through time, but no fixed entity, no John. John is just the name. So if John is just a name, where is John? Is John the perception? Well, no, that's not enough. Is it cognition alone? No, not enough. Is it the history? Is it the past? No, that's not John. So where is John? There is no John as a thing! It's just a name for the process. The Buddha called that *anatta*, No Self.

So. We have Impermanence; no self. Very radical; a very scary teaching. Because, of course, what we want is John, this thing, to be loved by everybody all the time (at least John likes that, to be loved by everybody all the time); John wants to be permanently young, permanently beautiful, permanently clever ... whereas, in fact, he is becoming increasingly idiotic, falling apart and getting dotty, and generally becoming absurd. That is the truth about John, it is the zen truth, total absurdity; one big dottiness after another! But that's not how we want things to be: that's because we get attached. So, ignorance is made up out of this attachment to something, which is a flowing, ever moving, process. There is no Thing to be attached to; there are just names. Language fools us: technically it is called "reification"; the making of things out of concepts. Just as another example, take the word Spring. We speak of Spring as a thing; but actually, of course, it is just a period in time, in which all sorts of other things are happening: we know there is Spring because the flowers flower. But we can't actually see Spring; Spring is just a word which refers to the period of time within which

flowers flower. There is no Thing called Spring which you can grasp hold of. That's another example of reification. And me, John; you, Betty; whoever it might be, are just like that.

So, the Buddha's thought is very subtle here. But the problem is the illusion that there is a thing to which we can be attached, which we must be protective of. Now, in common sense terms, of course, conventionally, we do look after ourselves; that makes sense. But we don't have to be obsessively attached to the ego in the way in which we usually are; that's where self-concern comes in. Self-concern is actually illusory. Now this message of the Buddha is not so easily taken on board, because we are so easily convinced of the normality of John being John. This is why, in order to really understand the Buddha's message, we have to investigate the mind, to explore and find out whether these things are true or whether it is just the Buddha's fantasy. That's why we meditate. Meditation as it were is always the testing of a hypothesis. The hypothesis is "Where am I? I exist. Am I here?"



Am I here? Well, let's investigate it. And of course, what you find in meditation, as you calm the mind, as you practice, is that gradually the attachment to things begins to fade. You begin to find a kind of openness emerging. Something which is much more difficult to characterise; you can't find words for it. Language begins to fail because you're actually going beyond language. You're going into that which language tries to express but never entirely succeeds. Because it's just language; it's not the thing in itself. So we work at that and in our meditation we begin to test the Four Noble Truths for ourselves. In Buddhism, it is said you should never accept things on trust. There is faith in Buddhism, yes; but it's a faith in the method of exploration. It is not a faith in a thing; it is not an attachment. Faith is often an attachment to a concept. This is more like faith in an investigation, *an unending investigation, because there is no end to it. The universe goes on; we go on ... for as long as we're here. Then we disappear. But what an exciting adventure!

And the moment of smiling as you arrive at the Maenllwyd is a hint that there might be something in this. Because if it's true that you're smiling and enjoying being here because

you've dropped your self, even for a moment, and just allowed the space of the place to impact upon you directly, you've actually tested the hypothesis. For when you drop attachment to self, the universe is there in all its wonderful turning, in all its manifestation as a place: Maenllwyd in December. "Christmas is coming and the goose is getting fat" whether you're a vegetarian or not, the goose is still getting fat!

So we have then in this very simple beginning; this simple recognition of happiness at arriving home at a place we call Maenllwyd; the being open to the monastery and all that the monastery is for, we discover that we drop something. We can either investigate what it is that we have dropped or we can just enjoy the fact that we've dropped something, and let it take care of itself. That's fine also, although it may not allow one an understanding of what one is actually experiencing. So the letting go is an absolutely key thing in Buddhist practice. The Buddha himself discovered his insight through letting go, through the process of letting go. He didn't discover what eventually he knew by adding, as they say in zen, adding a head on a head, more ideas on top of more ideas, more philosophies on top of more philosophies. Intellectual construction isn't it at all. You drop the intellectual constructions and there It is the thing in itself; the Thing In Itself, which can never be quite caught by language, or fixed in philosophy. The experience of Being.

The experience of being is the experience of flowing. Being, in fact, is always becoming. It is never stationary; there is never a halt; there is never permanence. The challenge of Buddhism, the challenge of the words of the Buddha, is whether one can actually allow one's self to enter the flow of being, the flow of time, without trying to grab on to things which keep one safe. That's the challenge. And that's why an entry into Buddhism can be quite painful.

* There are people who come in interviews and meditation and say, "A strange thing happened today: I seemed to be about to fall into nothing". So I say, "Yes?" And they say, "... very scary". So I say, "Why?" "Well, I might not exist". And I say, "Yes, you might not exist."

It requires a certain nerve to say, "Okay, I'll fall into that nothing". So that, in your meditation, you let go of your attachment to your little self, just let go of it, and then you find the extraordinary freedom of the flowing of time without attachment. But it is not easy to do. One has to have a certain nerve to jump off the high diving board; as I know, having jumped off the top of high diving boards. I've done it, but I must say it was quite difficult! And I'm not talking about diving; I'm talking about just jumping into the water: "Ooooooh! All the way down there!" Big splash! Yes, big splash, but rather nice.

So maybe out of this comes a key message for this retreat; in fact, for all retreats. Jump!

Epiphany

Ken Jones

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

T.S. Eliot - *The Rock*

The open door of the shabby little Hotel de la Gare. The municipal street washer has just clattered over the cobbles, freshening the air before the sun gets up. On their way to work, the locals drop in for a *petit noir* or a shot of something stronger. Hands are briefly shaken all round. Even the solitary *touriste anglais*, dunking his croissant in his bowl of coffee. No one says much. A new and unrepeatable day is on its way.

Morning brightness
sipping
coffee's bitter edge

Listlessly I flip the bible paper pages of the *Guide Bleue*. Things to see and do. Something significant might be missed. You never know.

Among the natives of the town were Pierre Magnol (1638-1715), who conceived the idea of plant classification; and A J Balard (1802-1876) who discovered bromine in 1826.

The cathedral dates mainly from the 13C (transepts). Some good 14C glass is preserved, together with murals of 1347 in some chapels. The 14C cloister contains some sculptural fragments.

Enough! Enough! I thrust guide book and street plan firmly back into my travelling bag and close the zip. Now a mere *flâneur*, I stroll round the town gallery again; always the same favourites. Chewing their cud, in their heavy gilt frame, Albert Cuyp's sunlit cows. After the coach tours have departed, I sneak into the cathedral.

In the cage of stone and glass
the long echo
of a dropped camera

Come the evening, off to a favourite brasserie for a *biere blonde* and badinage with the barmaid. En route, there is a certain ancient door, this time unlocked.

Chapel of the Black Penitents
a lonely Christ
hangs in his silence

In the dim light I find a stone seat and sit with him in the cold.

Next day to the one town on the railway that gets scarcely a mention in the guide. As soon as I get off a gritty metallic tang catches my throat. And there's no tourist office. Only the huge, ugly church of an industrial Christianity. The interior shelters a dozen or more migrant families.

Beneath the stony gaze of saints
homeless
on a mosaic floor

Outside, among pollarded plane-trees, a travelling fair is in full swing.

A merry-go-round
of painted horses
up-and-down we go

Hope For The Future

John Crook

During my last visit to Dharma Drum Retreat Centre in Pine Bush, New York, I was introduced to Dena Miriam the head of the Global Peace Initiative of Women based in Manhattan. We discussed the world crisis and I promised her a copy of my new book, World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism, as soon as it appeared. In due course I sent a copy to her and received an invitation to attend the Conference of the GPIW in Copenhagen timed to coincide with the global Climate Change conference there in December and at which leaders of the world's religions were being asked to prepare an advisory document for presentation to the statesmen and politicians. Very sadly my back condition prevented me from taking up this invitation – a great disappointment, but I decided to send a brief statement of my views, which could be circulated among the representatives of religions gathered there. This is what I had to say.

Message to Honoured Venerable Teachers and Participants in the Global Peace Initiative of Women Conference in Copenhagen, December 2009.

Thursday, October 22, 2009

It occurs to me that a brief statement of personal views concerning this meeting and the planetary condition may be helpful and be a small contribution to discussions. I send it therefore with good wishes to all fellow participants.

As the late Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen's first Western Dharma heir, I have read through his various contributions as co-chairman of international meetings of religious leaders. He always sought to find an interfaith perspective that brought representatives of contrasting faiths together. I have oriented my thinking about this meeting from this viewpoint. I feel that if religious leaders are to influence the approach of political leaders to climate change and our global ecological dilemma, it will be essential to formulate a common viewpoint to which all at this meeting can agree. Any partiality towards one religion rather than another must inevitably contradict an essential interfaith perspective seeking to represent a global opinion.

It follows that world religious leaders need to adopt a somewhat contrite attitude of humility because it is strife between various religious fundamentalisms that underlies so much of today's warfare and regional killing that in turn prevent progress on global ecological problems. Generally, religions have done remarkably little to address this situation adequately. It is essential that comparisons between religious theologies and metaphysical interpretations of the origin and nature of the cosmos in which we dwell be set-aside in our discussions. Even the most advanced scientific comprehension of the universe can do no more than stress the mystery and wonder of it all. By contrast, however, the world religions have much in common when it comes to exploring the ethical basis of human life. Here we have the real possibility of outlining a global interfaith position that can provide politicians with guidance.

One of the tragedies of modern life is that the important perspectives arising from the European "enlightenment" of the nineteenth century have become distorted through the emergence of economic greed. The principles of democratic government, free elections, open debate in the media, the implementation of human rights, gender equality and the rights of women and the creation of international fora such as the United Nations are all basic to human happiness and political development. Unfortunately, economic theory, controls of finance and the political will sustaining such important principles have all failed. Instead, we have had economic collapse largely through corruption and greed, developed states becoming richer often at the expense of developing nations, the destruction of local industries and vernacular cultures and the over-exploitation of valuable landscapes essential to climatic

stability. Indeed, the entire economic process seems little more than a “greed machine” favouring the wealthy – individually and collectively. Economic theories with known benefit to all nations have too often been ignored. Even developing nations, such as China and India, use the same defective financial tools. The ruination and pollution of rivers and natural environments in China and the great gap between rich and poor in India testify to this. The widespread denial of gender rights is chronic. All this can only be due to a failure to seek out policies that are good both for humanity and the planet and an absence of any adequate spiritual understanding of what the “good” may comprise.

Philosophically, one may argue that Cartesian theory in both science and in some Christian theology is responsible for much of this decay through creating dualisms between humanity and divinity, one religion and another, observer and observed, economics and ecology, right and wrong in contradiction to the currently emerging scientific focus on a holism revealing the complex interactions of all causes and conditions in world affairs that may only be understood through systemic analyses. Such dualisms have a very long history mainly in the West and in the Middle East.

The work of Lovelock and others in developing the Gaia hypothesis reveals the way in which our planet functions through the co-dependence of numerous systemic processes that include socio-cultural effects on climate. There is no doubt whatsoever that without strong political action our climate system is breaking down in a way that will bring chaos to our current world civilisation. This civilisation, brilliant though it is in scientific achievements, none the less lacks any socially adequate ethical structure to combat the corruption and decay now so evident. Traditionally it has been the responsibility of religions to provide the values and ethics that ensure well-being. For the world religions to overcome their differences and combine in bringing about an international and interfaith system of values is critical to our current situation. Are they up to it?

The world religions are each deeply concerned with the “Sacred” but espouse contrasting positions regarding its nature. From an interfaith perspective, the prime character of humanity’s sense of the sacred must focus on the home that provides the basis for well-being. Such a home needs to be safe, protected from destructiveness, supportive of life, family and economic welfare, including insurance for the future but not essentially or specifically a place for wealth creation. The home may also include places of worship following whatever the local religion may be. The home necessarily depends on the local environment and eventually on the whole of the planetary system of which it is both part and contributor. It is this planetary system that is overwhelmingly threatened by the current “greed machine” and its supporting politics. The planet itself is the basis of the sacred but this is widely ignored through exploitation and greed. Without planetary care humanity’s survival and certainly the integrity of current world civilisation is severely threatened. There is no current evidence that humanity could establish a home elsewhere. It is overwhelmingly the duty of the world religious leaders to insist on the protection of humanity’s sacred home, its beauty through which our cultures are meaningful and to promote the selfless love that underlies both.

It is a remarkable fact that although theologies of various kinds are commonly in dispute, and defensive belief the basis for aggressive conflict, the world religions share preceptual systems of values, ethics and vows that show very close agreement. There is common emphasis on values that reject war, aggression and killing, espouse principles of financial honesty, truthfulness in debate and speech, compassion and assistance for the poor and the sick, gender equality and the rights of women, love in sexual relations rather than lust, and clarity of mind free from distortion by alcohol and other drugs. Christian compassion, Buddhist wisdom, Islamic care for those in poverty are all well known. The Taoist view that the ‘mandate of heaven’ will be withdrawn from an Emperor if his governance does not support the poor and unfortunate is especially instructive. We can see today how the ‘mandate of heaven’ is being

withdrawn from world politicians because of their failure to control greed, pollution, ecological exploitation and strife. Given this common ethical inheritance, present day World leaders should be able to formulate a set of interfaith principles providing a preceptual philosophy that politicians may be persuaded to follow if they are to develop a worldview that moderates the rapidly approaching tragedy.

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that rising sea levels can flood vast areas of low lying land (Bengal for example and many small islands) as well as some modern cities: that water shortage can bring starvation and deadly thirst to thousands; that intense heat can create deserts and uninhabitable waste lands and that all this is predictable by careful research. The result would be overwhelmingly large migrations of people invading lands that are more fortunate, causing war and killing maybe on a vast scale. Social and political chaos would be inevitable and the probable appearance of tyranny led, as usual, by desperate if perhaps sometimes well-intentioned tyrants.

Specific recommendations are a matter for discussion but we can point to some essential needs.

1. The gross greed of bankers and vast transnational corporations needs an immediate legal curb. The short-termism and institutional selfishness needs to be firmly addressed. Perhaps 80% of all current executives' bonuses should be taxed and used to fund climate related projects.
2. Negotiation to yield global agreements concerning climate warming that are workable and a system of consistent monitoring for the next century or more.
3. Compensation from rich developed nations to developing nations called upon to slow or shift their emphasis on development in response to climate warming.
4. Political reform in the direction of democracies of truth rather than spin, together with balanced representation of gender in world affairs with especial attention to the welfare and contributions of women.
5. The development of UN supported treaties limiting land disputes through skilled negotiation and the adoption of reconciliation where huge crimes are in process.
6. Reform of economic theory to prevent the destruction of local cultures and agriculture brought about by market driven policies lacking any human concerns.

In conclusion, this meeting calls upon religious leaders to create a preceptual system aimed at restoring care for our sacred planet. The ethics for this can be based in the precepts of major religions restated to suit the contemporary world on a global scale. Within that context, special focus may be directed at the six prime targets suggested. The details of such a statement for onward transmission to world politicians will constitute the work of all assembled at this conference in Copenhagen. Compassion, tolerance and diligent persistence will be required.

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

Abide in the Unborn

Koan Retreat at the Maenllwyd. October 2009

Two experiences come to mind from the retreat:

One morning as I walked outside the Chan hall, I observed 15 to 20 birds darting in and out of trees in unison as they flew up the hill. I felt a sudden jolt, like someone had thrust a knife into my heart. “Huh!” I gasped. But, it was not pain that I felt, it was pure, intense joy. I’m not exactly sure what happened but, in a way, I became those birds. I didn’t see through their eyes or enter their bodies, but at that moment, our hearts united.



One afternoon, I walked half way up the hill behind the house and sat down amongst the grass and ferns. It was such a peaceful and still afternoon. As I looked across at the sunlight filtering through the trees, the beams of light illuminated hundreds or thousands of flying insects of one kind or another. As I looked down at the ground around me, I became aware that this 1 cubic metre of space was teeming with life. The problems of the human world did not seem so important. My heart felt warm and full of hope. I took comfort in the thought that

no matter what happens in this world, even if we humans destroy ourselves and our habitat, nature would find a way, life would go on.

I'd been working with the Hua-tou:

'It's not the Buddha, it's not the self, it's not the mind, it's not a thought, it's nothing at all; what is it?'

This Hua-tou was a continuation of the practice I had adopted since the Korean Zen retreat I attended the previous month where I practiced with the Hua-tou: 'What is this?'

However, I found this longer Hua-tou such a useful tool, it was so liberating. It enabled me to let go of all accumulated knowledge, all views, and all grasping after understanding so that I could drop into bare awareness. This state could be maintained by the silent enquiry 'What is it?'

So, what is it?

You could say that 'it' is bare awareness or bright clarity. You could call 'it' love. 'It' is a place where one can rest from past conditioning. 'It' is emancipation. 'It' is a source of constant nourishment. 'It' is this present moment free of labels or discrimination, free of knowledge and understanding, free of any contrived activity. 'It' is the unborn Buddha mind. But, 'it' is nothing special, 'it' is quite ordinary as every being already has 'it', 'it' is not something that needs to be attained. Yet, although ordinary, 'it' is wondrous. 'It' is that which is most immediate, most original. 'It' is the primary, the source, the essence of being. 'It' is 'this'.

These words and phrases may point to 'it', but none of them really capture 'it' as 'it' is beyond all words and labels as 'it' is not a thing. All these words and phrases really just smear 'it' with muck.

This was a really lovely retreat for me. I feel I have come full circle. I awoke initially to the principle 3-4 years ago whilst reading *The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma*. As I read a paragraph from that book, my mind was purged of all thought and I sat in bare awareness and through this experience I came to see the illusory nature of thoughts and suffering. I then became attached to the teachings and read book after book, piling up knowledge. After a couple of years, I started doing retreats, experiencing new states of mind (one mind experiences, deep experiences of unity, and profound samadhi states). These retreats really helped to develop faith, compassion and Bodhichitta, but I also acquired a terrible sickness of seeking as desire and fell into confusion, a grasping to put it all together so I could understand. A couple more retreats addressed this seeking and finally during the Western Zen retreat in June I woke up to the preciousness of this present moment. But, delusion soon returned and I found myself on the Korean retreat trying hard to raise great doubt, intensely asking 'What is this?', whilst wanting 'that' (enlightenment). During this retreat I sort of felt that 'this' was 'that', but never quite clarified it. But, the seeds that were planted during the Korean retreat began to germinate during this retreat. John's wonderful talks added more water and I believe flowers are starting to open or at least, buds may be forming. I feel I have had a good introduction to Chan and now I can really start to investigate more thoroughly.

I continue to use this Hua-tou as well as simply asking 'What is this?' throughout the day as a continual wake up call. A phrase from Zen Master Bankei now seems important to me: Learn to abide in the unborn for 30 days, and from there on, even if you don't want to, whether you like it or not, you'll just naturally have to abide in the unborn. This is my next step, to find a way of doing a reasonably long, solitary retreat.

Offering to Gurus and Yogis

Mahamudra Retreat, The Maenllwyd, November 2009

Maenllwyd!

Sutras kept well in the kitchen

Dakinis fly effortlessly overhead

*Even sheep and dogs from distant temples come
to chew mantras in peace*

In the hut we retrieve solid ground

but after closing ceremony

a dog circles in the dark

*What moves that mouse to sing so beautifully
each and every day?*

The Buddhas Do Not Understand!

Koan Retreat, Pinebush. New York 2009

A monk said to the Master "The Buddhas of past present and future don't understand. Cats and oxen do. Why don't the Buddhas understand?"

Master Nanquan replied, "Before they entered the Deer Park they knew it."

The monk said, "How is it that cats and oxen do know it?"

"How could you doubt that they do?" responded Nanquan.

When I read the list of koans in this Koan retreat, I was intrigued by this koan. What the monk said makes no sense. I thought to myself, "how is it possible that cats and oxen understand something the Buddhas don't?" Yet I knew this thought reflected a certain prejudice in my way of thinking and I was eager to explore it.

Before I started with this koan, however, I had to deal with an internal conflict. I was trying to decide whether I should investigate this koan or the huatou concerning how to practice on the open path. I had a pretty clear idea of why I thought I should use that huatou as I felt I ought to be thinking more about how I would like to live my life from now on. I requested an interview with John, who advised me to work on Cats and Dogs koan. He told me that I would find out how to practice on the open path after investigating this koan. I was glad to receive the encouragement from John because something inside me told me that I was hiding from something by not choosing this koan. I was relieved as soon as the decision was made. The process also taught me something about myself: I often rationalize an alternative choice when I want to avoid doing something I know I should do. This is an avoidance tactic I use to myself and it is useful to learn to detect it.

I followed John's instructions in using the koan. The first day was spent memorizing the koan. I did feel intrigued by the koan, especially the first two lines. They did not make any sense and my mind would "lock up" in the face of the paradox. These experiences cleared wandering thoughts out of my mind and very soon I felt very calm. I would bring up some lines in the koan and the mind would enter a seemingly very serene state that did not have much doubt sensation. It was very pleasant, sort of like silent illumination, but it was also suspicious. John instructed us to play with the koan, ask questions, let the mind give rise to answers while knowing that the koan cannot be answered. I requested a brief interview with Simon to check with him on whether I was on the right track. He asked me if there was investigation. I realized that I was not so much doing silent illumination as resting, or as Master Sheng-yen said, "soaking a stone in cold water." While I knew this conceptually, it was easy to become complacent and satisfied with sitting on the cushion with a decently calm mind. Simon's comment, together with John's lectures, reminded me that the purpose of attending retreats is to look deeply into the mind to gain a clear understanding of its habits, its tendencies, its conditionings. Only by so doing will I be able to understand the deep-seated internal conflicts that exist. I left the interview room with a clearer sense of how I should approach the practice—it is not about keeping the mind free of wandering thoughts *per se*; it is about knowing clearly what arises in the mind at all time.

Taking John's instructions to heart, I investigated the koan. First, I tried to find out why this koan intrigued me. "Why am I so shocked that the cats and oxen understand something that the Buddhas don't? How is it possible? The buddhas are clearly superior to the cats and oxens, aren't they?" I thought to myself. It did not take long to see how my conditioning had a profound influence on my worldview. Through Dharma study, I know the teaching that all sentient beings are equal. From my own professional training, I understand the notion that status differences are socially constructed and not based on true differences in the individuals' innate nature. Yet, I was raised in a society where some are considered more worthy than others. Not only that, I was socialized to want to be the superior one. Thus I fear to be the

inferior one. Throughout my schooling years, I strived to be among the top students and feared to be seen associated with students who were considered hopeless or losers. The same mentality stayed with me in my professional life. It became clear to me that these ideas of whom I should avoid or associate with in order to maintain my social status are all created in my mind. There is little objective reality to it. The insecurity I feel in my social life based on these fabricated ideas is indeed a house of cards. It's all air! Furthermore, my emotional responses to such insecurity seem also laughable—avoiding some perfectly fine people, looking down upon some people for no rational reason whatsoever, discriminating against activities merely because they are associated with my prejudiced mind's socially undesirable groups.

I am still feeling the effect of this revelation. One thing that used to really bother me was when I moved between areas of very different social classes while in my hometown. In the past, because of this deep-seated emotional aversion to the conditions associated with being poor, uneducated, and non-western, I would subconsciously feel sorry for myself for having to be in that environment part of the time because that was where my parents lived. After all, I had worked hard since my childhood to get out of that kind of life—to get away from a world of manual labour, non-English-speaking, uneducated, noisy, dirty, unsophisticated, on and on. That was why I worked so hard in school! I learned that I did not want to end up in the same place where I grew up. I still remember the deep sadness I felt for a girl who was a bit older than me, also the daughter of a hardware store owner, who stayed and worked in the store when she grew up. The same time as I felt sad for her, an intense fear also arose in me, thus motivating me to move forward in school to make sure I don't end up like her. This deep fear of ending up where I originated helped motivate me in school and professionally. But it also instilled a deep prejudice against the impoverished and those who are less fortunate than I. I realized that fear is inseparable from the aversion from that which represents what I feared. As a result, even though I knew it was wrong, deep down I despised everything associated with the impoverished and uneducated.

This has caused me a great deal of pain. My place of origin, my parents and the people around my hometown are a part of me, even though it is a part of what I try to escape. Inevitably, an internal conflict has been brewing. Obviously, I cannot erase my past, nor can I disown my parents and everyone else, not that I ever consciously tried or wanted to do so. But whenever I despise something or somebody for some very minor thing for such an entirely irrational reason, it gnawed at me and I did not know what to do. This revelation is a very important one.

This time in my hometown, I can see that my attitude to the people and things I used to despise is all due to this fear. Seeing the fear is like taking away a veil that distorted everything I see in the world. Now I see people of humble background and can look at them as other fellow human beings, neither pitying nor fearing them. My parents' humble abode also bothers me less. I can truly see it as a place to live. It is noisy, not fancy, but it is a safe and decent place to live. The uncontrollable feeling of wanting to escape from this place no longer arises. I can stay put, do my work and only go out when it's time to do so. It used to hurt me immensely to feeling this urge to escape from my parents' house, a place where I grew up, of which I have great fondness. This time, I am much more at peace with everything.

It has been incredible to discover how profoundly this deep-seated fear has influenced my feeling about so many things and thus affected my relationships with many people. These are things that bothered me over the years. I am very grateful for the opportunity to see the root cause so clearly. So far, the retreat has been extremely productive. Yet I knew I was not pushing the koan far enough. I kept asking. I took Simon's advice to investigate why I had trouble in getting past the first two sentences. "Before they entered the Deer Park, they knew it." What did they know? Why did entering the Deer Park stop them from knowing it?

My intellectual answer is that teaching caused the Buddhas to use words and concepts. But this conceptually correct answer is not what I am looking for. What is it? I got increasingly frustrated. In the evening of the fourth day, I've had enough. "What am I doing here asking this absurd question?" And then the questions would not stop arising. "What is the purpose of all this?" "What is the point?" "What is the point of life?" "Why am I born if I have to die?" "What is the point?" For the first time I truly understood what Shifu meant by "doubt sensation." It is not just being curious about something interesting. Rather, it is a question that is so important that before it can be answered, life makes no sense. The questions that arose are precisely such questions. Without knowing the purpose of this life, how do I know how to approach the next moment?

During my next interview with Simon, I told him about what happened. It was extremely emotional. I could not stop weeping. I had clearly touched on something deep in the core of my being. I also discovered why I have been having the "problem" I articulated earlier on—motivation at work. I complained about not being able to get motivated to do what I need to do at work. It has been bothering me a great deal. According to Shifu's teaching, a Chan practitioner ought to be diligent in fulfilling one's responsibilities. But I have found it increasingly difficult to do so. I cared less and less. Apparently, deep down, I could not see the point of it all. My thought patterns went like this: why bother publishing another paper if all it means is to get me promoted, then what? Why bother keeping the house clean, it gets dirty in just a few days. What's the point? Why bother keeping friendship going when we eventually all die anyway? This pessimistic, hopeless viewpoint is clearly not in accordance with what Shifu taught. Something is off in my practice. But I hadn't been able to identify what, and this has been immensely frustrating. Now I know why I have this thought pattern and the resulting motivation problem. I do not know the purpose of my existence. Having read existentialist philosophy, of course I knew I could come up with meanings for things I do in my life. In fact, that has been my "survival strategy." Yet, deep down, I knew too well that the meaning of my life has been carefully fabricated by my clever mind, and I was no longer willing to be fooled by it. Yet this is causing a problem: if I no longer believe in the meaning of life I created, how else do I find meaning? How do I keep up my motivation in life when a meaning cannot be attached to life? The whole issue is like a puzzle that I need to solve, and finding the solution is of utmost importance, on which the rest of my life depends.

What is it that the cats and oxen understand that keeps them going? I couldn't help but recall images of animals of all species enduring extremely cold weather through long winters or long drought and having the will to keep on going until favourable conditions return. Those stories of nature never failed to move me, but I did not know why. Now I do. I admired these animals' strong will to survive, to hold on to life, regardless of the severity of adversity. They simply would not give up! "Why can't I be like them?" I thought to myself. The whole picture has been turned upside down. The cats and oxen do know something that we don't. What is it?

Simon told me that it was clear that I had found my life koan—what is the purpose of this life? I could not drop the question and felt that my life depended on it. This is indeed how Shifu described doubt sensation. Simon encouraged me to continue to investigate this question. I did. I spent the next two days asking what the point of life is. I started with the present moment. I looked deeply into each moment, trying to find the purpose of each moment. Concentrating on each moment, my mind calmed down further. I found that there is no inherent meaning or purpose in each moment, and I was able to accept that. Then I moved on to my relationships, my strongest attachments in life. As I went over memories of my interactions with my brothers and sister and my parents, people very dear to my heart, I could feel the attachment manifesting in the form of a reluctance to accept the fact that they, too, are empty of inherent meaning. It is a lot easier to accept that the sounds of wind and birds are empty of inherent meaning, but when it comes to relationship, it is tough to do so. Then, I

looked at my relationship with my husband. I could sense my mind refusing to contemplate the notion that our relationship is empty of any ultimate and inherent purpose, that my husband and I are together because of our emotional attachment to each other, which can vanish when causes and conditions change. It was painful to force myself to face this fact. Then, rather than despairing at the fact that there is not even any point in the part of my life I hold most dear to my heart, I realized why it is so important. As I was reminded of all the things he did that made me happy, it dawned on me that his being in my life makes life less unbearable. I said to myself, "he made this life less unbearable, isn't it sufficient? What more do I need?" I started sobbing, out of deep gratitude for him and for the fact that he is in my life. This experience struck a very deep chord in my being. It is difficult to explain, but my heart was filled with gratitude from that moment on. Yes, there may not be any point in life *per se*, I am still grateful for what is in it right now.

When I went for my final interview with John, I reported what happened to him. I told him I have been investigating what the point of life is. He asked if I found it and I told him that I could not find any. I told him of my fear of losing my loved ones to death, and this feeling has become more intense since Shifu's passing. John told me that I was obviously having some bereavement issues. He reminded me of impermanence, which I clearly have yet to truly accept at the deep emotional level. Indeed, that is the root cause of my question: why bother if all ends in death anyway? What's the point? Of course, I was deeply bothered by the nihilistic tendency of this thought pattern. I knew it is not in accordance with Chan practice, but after years of suppressing these views and feelings, I have decided to let them out in the open in this retreat. John told me that when the Buddhas entered the Deer Park teaching about emptiness, what they lost was the faith in existence that cats and oxen have. Instead of asking the nihilistic question of "what's the point of all this," I need to open my heart to existence. Existence itself will carry us along. Then I asked, "how about my problem of getting motivated?" John said, "Do you need to be motivated?" It was an interesting question. I am so used to thinking about this issue in the conventional way, in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that are all manufactured products of the mind based on social constructions. But I asked myself, do I need to be motivated to brush my teeth, or eat my meals? These are merely things that need to be done, and I was reminded of Shifu's teachings that the purpose of life is to diligently do things that need to be done to benefit others which will in turn benefit ourselves. It does not mean that I will become a failure or "loser" at work, but my perspective on work can be adjusted. Before, I knew that my "motivations" were based on the need for recognition and social status rather than the need to contribute to my profession. My attitude was too cynical concerning the notion of "contributing to my profession" and the deep-seated reason was that I did not believe life is worth all the trouble. Indeed, my attitude has been unconsciously dominated by the phrase "why bother?" Yet, if I can adjust my views, I can see that while constantly changing, the academic field is built on everyone's effort, one small chunk at a time. If everyone is nihilistic like me, we will still be living in the Dark Ages. Hence, I should do my best to contribute to my field's understanding but do so without competing or comparing with others' achievements. It's merely something that needs to be done, regardless of what others are doing. I feel a sense of hope in my situation. It is not that all the problems are gone,, rather I feel I have acquired a more healthy perspective to handle them.

It has been four weeks since the retreat ended. I feel I am applying what I have learned in the retreat in my daily life. I think back to how I felt in a similar situation in the past, and see less anxiety, less grasping, less craving, more contentment, more gratitude and more love. These retreats never fail to amaze me and my faith in the practice only gets stronger after every intensive Koan retreat. My deep gratitude to John and Simon, the teachers, and other participants who inspire me so much.



*Falling Leaves and
Floating Clouds....
Infinite Spaces Within
So then...
Just a Reflection*

Jess Barneveld: 5 Day Chan Retreat October 2009

Food and Silence

Introductory Chan Retreat, Hourne Farm, October 2009.

I had been trying to meditate on my own for about three months before coming on this my first ever retreat. For me it was both exciting and frightening to be trying this out. I am truly grateful for the experience, which I think will be the start of slow but significant change in my life.

What I found was a safe, warm and compassionate structure created by Jake Lyne (leader), David Brown (guestmaster) and Miche Lewin (cook). While there were some early leavers, the ripples of this were absorbed and respectfully acknowledged by this team rather than becoming a source of concern for the entire group.

My Experience There

The food is to live for!

Initially I felt profound irritation and hostility at the silence. It took time for me to realise that I was struggling with having my tools of attachment to others stripped away from me. The assurances, smile and eye contact were all gone out the window. I had understood the silent retreat to mean silent rather than unattached.

The meditation was difficult for me at the time. I learned that my mind is a very active and demanding part of me that is best quieted at times. During an outside meditation on birdsong, I came to see these thoughts as somewhat like birdsong, they are there because it is their nature to be there and that is to be respected but just like birdsong I can choose to focus in or tune out of the tune.

I am still coming to grips with the realization of how much time I spent outside of myself beforehand. I am currently in recovery from addiction and one of the things I am becoming aware of is the process of self-abandonment that happens in the pathway of addiction. What I saw at the retreat is that this self-abandonment happened for me in my early life, long before my addictive patterns were written in. It therefore filled me with delight to be able to place myself within my own skin and to remain there and get back there when I found myself having wandered off again.

My ways of not being internally present are varied and persistent, I need to work with them.

What Have I Come Away With?

I have left the retreat with a deep sense of compassion, which is what I had been struggling to find in my recovery before the retreat. Being in early recovery has been somewhat like looking at the stark white light of the reality of how I have lived my life. It has been difficult to come to terms and find forgiveness or a sense of wholeness with my past.

I have come away with the sense that those things done were/are part of my nature and as such to be accepted and loved though not necessarily repeated; that these things happen and can be seen within the idea of a pattern that has been badly learned or has outlived its purpose. Not in itself necessarily anything other than just itself, somewhat like my thoughts that in some way can be let go. They need assessment and then can be let go, indeed to honour the very essence of being in today, they must be let go.

What am I Doing Differently Now?

The quality of the time I spend in meditation is a world apart on a before and after picture. It's difficult to put this into words and the best way I can describe it would be to say it's more flowing. I see today that there are new retreat dates on the website for next year and so I will be booking one shortly.

To finish I would like to say a final thank you to each one of you for so skilfully weaving your will and purpose around me and our whole group to make the retreat such a wonderful experience. I truly appreciate it. I had a great and wonderful nurturing and nourishing time. I will never forget what I learnt with the soft green moss.

Iris Tute - In Memoriam

John Crook, Sunday November 22, 2009

I heard of Iris' death today with great sadness. Even though I knew Iris had suffered long and with great courage, I feel her passing to be a very personal loss and know her many friends will be feeling the same way.

I deeply regret not being with you here today; especially because I know she would have liked me to be here. I send these words as a small contribution as we remember her life together.

Iris was a deep thinking human being of unusual spiritual attainment who, through her manner of life, her career and personal expression, has given much to those who knew her. Indeed, she continued to do so throughout her long and trying illness.



I knew Iris in a number of contrasting settings: on retreats at the Maenllwyd, during our Indian pilgrimages; with George and the rest of our group at Christmas dinner in a splendid Maharaja's palace not far from the inspiring caves at Ellora; at meetings of the Bristol Chan Group and in personal encounters both in Zen interviews and more casually in her beautiful house and garden.

I did not encounter Iris in the context of her work as a therapist but I know she was not only very competent but also inspiring, able, as she was, to draw on spiritual as well as on psychological knowledge of the weaknesses to which we are all heirs. She was not afraid to experiment – exploring for example the ways of introducing children to meditation in successful, pioneering short workshops.

Travelling with Iris in India could be both amusing and instructive. She was a stickler for cleanliness at all times, be it sheets on hotel beds or the washing arrangements – the state of most India toilets attracting her extreme ire. This, of course was rather like looking for a vegetarian restaurant in France. On arrival at many, often highly recommended, hotels, I would soon hear her calling the manager to her room and upbraiding him in no hesitant tones, while various lackeys ran around washing and flushing with brush and disinfectant with

unwonted vigour. I always hoped that future guests would benefit from her heartfelt instructions. None the less, she loved India and the fresh insights it always afforded.

Iris was one of the early participants in our Chan retreats at the Maenllwyd. She soon revealed a deep understanding of what was happening there. I participated with her in communication exercises during which her insights were often profound. On one occasion, I noted a clear white aura around her head as she spoke. I make no interpretation of this, but I was aware of the connection between its appearance to me and what she was saying at the time. Iris understood Chan Buddhist meditation very well yet her insight was such that she was by no means constrained to one approach. As a practising Quaker, she showed me how the spiritual roots of the good life are not limited to particular viewpoints but can appear in many circumstances and through many disciplines. Several times, she brought small groups of Quakers to our Chan retreats during which our common understanding was clearly evident.

We have often had Quakers coming to experience the silence we cultivate in the hills of Wales. Iris's diligent practice soon led her to a very direct understanding of the Zen practice of Silent Illumination. Hers was not so much a matter of verbal or intellectual understanding as the finding of herself in a state of joy and bliss leading into that silent emptiness from which deep compassion springs. Although we rarely discussed such experiences analytically, it was clear that her vision often took her beyond the boundaries of her personal narrative and the discrimination of time into that elusive presence of the present moment that transcends the objectivity of suffering. She felt this not only as a Zen understanding but one that opened the secrets of Christian texts such as the 'Cloud of Unknowing' to her in a totally clear way. When she became ill and had to endure the painful consequences of medication, she did not lose this capacity for direct contact with what one may call the divine but rather her experiences became the root of patience and resolution. During our last meetings over this period, she was able to share her insights with me with such simplicity and humility that I feel humbled as I recall those occasions. I know that Iris inspired others similarly. Iris, I have no doubt, was a 'realised person' as we say in Zen. Many of us feel an appropriate humility, I believe, when we recall the depth of her spiritual being. I do not use such words lightly.

As we gather together here on this occasion, of course we feel deep grief, yet also we should also use our gathering as a celebration for a life well led and exemplary, one for which we should be thankful as we send her on her way.

Let us say to her, "Iris – thank you for being among us".

(Optional addition if some one is available to lead the chant and if it feels appropriate:

In remembrance for Iris, let us chant together the Mantra of Compassion of the Bodhisattva Tara – *Om tare tutare ture soha* – one hundred times.)

Remembering Iris

I was privileged to be with Iris on two occasions during her final days, when she had gone over to palliative care and was, with cheerful equanimity, waiting to move on... A long dedicated Follower of the Way, Iris had admirably completed the Work, and recently had had two out-of-body experiences -- a preliminary reconnaissance perhaps? I was hugely impressed and not a little envious!

Iris was pleased with the Guan Yin dedication which I offered her, and especially its concluding words: "May I die a good and peaceful death, and may the triumph of my death benefit all beings, living and dead." At last I know what this means. As I kissed her at the end of our long friendship, we both experienced a strong sense of being together in timeless time. Fare thee well, Iris, love.

*Black reef ahead
but in the rigging
the song of the wind*

Ken Jones

About three hours after Iris' death I picked up the message left by Analise (Iris' good friend). I sat down, wept and meditated, did some chanting for her then I went to visit her and her family. It was pouring with rain and very windy.

When I arrived, a nurse and Iris' sister were bathing Iris and putting on new clothes for her. It was around 5pm when I could finally go to her room and see her. I said, 'Iris, nice to see you, I know you can still hear me. You had a very good life. You look peaceful now, I am very happy for you. Don't worry about anything, you can go freely now. Please let me know what I can do for you.' After talking to her, I sat by her side for some time, her family joined me from time to time. I continued to sit with her for a number of hours. I was occupied on Sunday, and could not go to visit her and her family but they were in my mind.

I went again on Monday. Sister Analise and Vicar David who led the service for Iris came too. We, 6 of us, 3 family members and 3 spiritual family members, sat together with her for a while and then they asked me to do some chanting for her. I did The Heart Sutra and Gate Gate Mantra 108 times. It was raining very hard when we started but after the chanting the sun came out! It was exactly 48 hours after her passing away and it felt like Iris was saying good bye to us. In the afternoon we had a meeting about the funeral service, and then she was put into the coffin and brought down from her room to the front room ground floor. I worked and talked with Iris's family and we had a very nice meal together cooked by Iris's sister. She and George were holding Iris' hand, when she was passing away.

Although Iris is not here anymore, I know my friendship with Iris will continue and I can continue my care for her through caring for her family. I experienced life and death as well and joy and sorrow. Through interaction with Iris and her family I was brought to the deepest place of my heart and saw human nature and love. I also faced feelings of fear of the death and I learnt deep Love between parents, children and friends. I also realized Life is so precious and cherish-able, we can't afford to waste it.

Jin Ho

Some of my strongest memories of Iris are from 1998, when we both went on John Crook's inspiring trip to Ladakh and Spitti. She was a good travelling companion, fully engaged with what we were all experiencing, usually calm and quietly organised. Her tiny shared tent was definitely the neatest. It was her sixtieth birthday the day we set off from Hemis Gompa over

some of the highest mountain passes in the world, and at breakfast time a man on a motorbike bumped up the rough track from faraway Leh bearing a birthday cake in a box, tied with blue ribbon. A light sponge & cream cake, encased in brittle white icing with intricate vivid pink and green decorations spelling out 'Happy Birthday Iris'. I took a photograph of her sitting in the bright Himalayan sunlight, her hands held up in delight, several white kata scarves around her neck, a birthday card signed by us all in her lap, and that magnificent cake, about to be cut up and shared out for breakfast. It was very sticky and sweet.

Nick Salt

Iris was a very special and wise person. I came to know her through the Bristol Chan group particularly through meeting with her for supper before the group began and also co-running day workshops which aimed to introduce children to meditation. I always respected the great care with which Iris approached these situations. We were always *very* well prepared for the workshops (mainly because of her!) and we always had to finish our supper *well* before the evening meditation group began, and well before anyone arrived so that she could prepare herself in meditation. This careful preparation saw her through right to the end of her days. She was not only prepared for death but fearless, despite the fact that her body was extremely challenging.

I had the honour to visit her right up to a few days before she died. On one of these occasions she wanted very much to help with a challenging situation that I was facing, despite that fact that she was dying; 'Look deeply at your anxiety' she said, 'What is it *really* about?' This was characteristic of Iris, always wanting to help, share her insights. She was indeed a very generous person.

One of the last times I saw her she was in her bedroom with a Buddha altar and prayer beads in her hands. She was using them to chant when she felt in pain. I am so grateful for having known her, and will never forget the precious way in which she has guided me.

Alysun Jones

Iris and I 'share a constellation' (her observation) on our Quaker/Chan path. We met at Shifu's retreat in 1995 at Maenllwyd where we shared in the cleaning of the refectory and first laughed together, when the 'mouse shit' by Shifu's plate turned out to be pumpernickel crumbs! With impeccable attention and typical generosity she accompanied me as a member of my 'support group' during my year as a grant holder for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust' (from '97-'98), simply listening, once a month, to the unravelling of traumatic loss with skilful, unspoken compassion. During our recent bedside farewell we experienced a wordless knowing that this deep connection is indeed, 'beyond birth and death'. It felt just right to be at Glasshampton monastery (SSF) when she died. This is where we met to practice regularly, a place of silence and prayer, a place she loved. The Franciscan Brothers prayed for her to 'rest in peace'. At her funeral wake I learnt that the 'wonderful blue flower' (see photo, taken at Bristol Cathedral on July 20th where we listened to an address by Archbishop Rowan Williams and he hugged her 'goodbye') was an agapanthus. This name comes from the Greek 'agape' (spiritual love/fellowship) 'anthus' (flower). Iris offered this quality to so many. She never faltered in her quest. Her life and death fulfilled her dharma name, 'result of the middle way'. In gratitude, with tears, letting go.

Marian Partington

World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism

End Games: Collapse or Renewal of Civilisation

WCF has purchased a stock of Dr John Crook's major new book and is able to offer it at a discounted price.

Review by Jake Lyne

This is a book that will have an immediate appeal to Buddhists, since it provides a sophisticated, readable overview of the history of ideas within Buddhism and shows clearly the significance of a 'buddhistic' insight to meeting 21st Century challenges.

However, the scope of the book goes beyond Buddhism and will interest a much wider audience. John Crook's scientific background is in evolutionary psychology. During his career he became especially interested in the scientific study of human behaviour in the context of environment, which necessarily leads to an attempt to understand the influence of language, thought, culture and human experience. Human behaviour is an issue of central importance in our world with its burgeoning population, the threat of global warming; and with the potential for human conflict, supported as it is by extremely dangerous weapons, to be a serious threat to survival.

In contrasting western philosophical dualism with a buddhistic perspective, John Crook shows how our world is shaped by our world view and how a shift in world view is a necessary precursor to a more healthy way of living on this vast though finite planet. Most people have only a tiny and short-term influence in life, but ideas are powerful and can live on, e.g. witness the power of the theory of evolution in shaping the way we understand the world. This book contains fundamental ideas that were developed around two thousand years ago, but more or less failed to penetrate the 'western' world. They are now being introduced through many sources, but few authors are able to present them so clearly or with such relevance as in this publication.

People who have been on meditation retreats with John Crook will already have a sense of the message in this book, though it is unlikely that anyone will have been fully aware of the range of his thought, and perhaps even he wasn't until he began to write this! Our challenge is to widen the readership of this important book in the hope that the ideas it conveys are disseminated so that they may be of long term benefit.

Koans of Layman John

Stories and Poems by John Crook

These stories from a modern Chan Master tell us of enlightening interactions with teachers. The poems offer us spontaneous verses expressing a Zen spirit touching on the many emotions that paint the colours of human experience.

Buy Books from WCF

World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism:

WCF price: £11 inc p&p within UK

Koans of Layman John:

WCF price £5 inc p&p within UK

To Order:

Send your delivery name and address with your payment cheque or postal order made payable to "Western Chan Fellowship", to:

Jeremy Woodward, 46 Wood Park, Ivybridge, Devon, PL21 0PP (Email: jemwoodward@aol.com, Tel: 01752 893165).

More details at:

<http://tinyurl.com/wcfbooks>

Western Chan Fellowship Retreat Programme 2010

The retreats below are scheduled in 2010.

The Autumn programme is not yet finalised and we expect to add some more retreats, particularly in the Autumn, so keep an eye on the website for any updates and to read full booking details: <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/retreats.html>

16th January to 21st January: Western Zen Retreat

1st April to 6th April: Western Zen Retreat

8th May to 13th May: Chan Retreat in Sussex

26th June to 1st July: Everyday Chan - Buddhism Everyday

24th July to 31st July: Silent Illumination

21st August to 26th August: Western Zen Retreat

2nd September to 5th September: Core Sutras - the Roots of the Dharma

10th October to 15th October: Chan Retreat in Sussex

4th December to 11th December: Silent Illumination

Other Retreats

In addition, though outside the WCF programme, it may be of interest that John Crook and Simon Child will be leading the following retreats:

6th February to 13th February: Koan Retreat, Gaia House, Devon

20th March to 27th March: Silent Illumination, Warsaw, Poland

22nd May to 29th May: Koan Retreat, New York, USA

Western Chan Fellowship Malas

These are available to purchase. They have been made for us in Myanmar from rosewood and jade and are designed to be used with John Crook's Aspirational Prayer - more details here:

<http://swindonchan.org/index.php?pageID=24>

They are £7 'as is' with nylon cord and a big green tassel. A restringing service is available -

<http://swindonchan.org/images/malaKnots.jpg>

Contact membership@westernchanfellowship.org

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