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© 2011 WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP LARGE COVER CALLIGRAPHY: 'PRAJNA' BY MASTER SHENG-YEN

THE PASSING OF A CHAN MASTER

JOHN HURRELL CROOK (1930–2011)

John has been the Editor of The New Chan Forum since its inception in 1991, producing roughly two copies every year. He prepared this edition a few weeks before his death. He took great care over every edition, composing an overall theme for each and choosing from among the best submitted articles, retreat reports and poetry. He wrote topical editorials, and contributed a good number of thoughtful, high quality articles himself.

His death has come as a shock to us all, especially since he was in very good spirits, and appeared to be well right up to his death. He died suddenly and alone in his study at Winterhead Farm, a fitting way and place to die for a Chan Master and brilliant scholar who loved solitude. He was also a Tibetan Buddhist, having been given an empowerment to teach Mahamudra and the Chenrezig Sadhana. Because he died alone, John's body was able to rest peacefully for a period after his death, a circumstance that is considered extremely favourable according to Tibetan tradition.

Our next Memorial edition will be a tribute to John and a celebration of his fruitful and quite unique life, and the journal will continue thereafter under new editorship, but for now let us enjoy John's final words in this 44th edition of the New Chan Forum.

JAKE LYNE, WCF CHAIR

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION BY THE LATE JOHN CROOK
THE LONG WALK

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The articles that fell together haphazardly here and came together in a natural composition seem to emphasise complexity; the irredeemable complexity of the human mind, the self, our world and the Universe. We struggle towards some kind of clarity through the dense fog of history, our contradictory ideas, our worried philosophising and our refusal to accept the simplicity of this moment. We like to achieve, to gain celebrity of any kind, to be clever and please ourselves by what we are doing. Our western minds seek explanation, certainty and respect through self-importances of which we are rarely aware. Reluctantly, we admit our blank stupidities, blaming others, the times, politicians, and our parents. Why are we too often such sad, conflicted, over-complicated persons?

These articles take us along many paths and struggle in various ways with these themes. Our two retreat reports reveal two very different situations. We can learn from both of them. It is so difficult for us not to be one-sided, stuck on one bank of a duality. Accepting the unacceptable often seems impossible yet that was the message of the Buddha and the Sutras. Yes – the world and we ourselves are complex yet, when we turn down our overactive left hemispherical concerns, we find a Universe immediately before us in the landscapes we see, the faces we know, the eggs boiling in the saucepan so brilliantly. Yet, thought returns to puzzle us and indeed is often necessary.

The place so difficult to reach is the third place – knowing that both sides, intellectual enquiry and spacious direct awareness, make up the whole, we need to pause there seeing both as one – not only the multiplicity in the simplicity but also the simplicity in the complex patterning of our lives: Just Now – no other time. The birds in the spring time trees sing at sunrise.

JOHN CROOK

THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS

Žarko Andričević

Teacher, Dharmaloka – the Chan Buddhist Community, Croatia

Our incapability to live in harmony with others, the environment and ourselves is a consequence of deep ignorance of our nature and the nature of existence in general. All human suffering, misery and discontent, be it personal or collective, arises out of a fundamental ignorance that is called *avidya* in Buddhism. *Avidya* is not common ignorance or what we commonly think of as ignorance. Every person, learned and unlearned alike, may be a victim of such ignorance.

Human maladjustment with the nature of existence has varied throughout the history of mankind and has had consequences that were usually short-lived and local. The harm that one person could have afflicted by actions to oneself or to community or the environment was quite limited. However, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the incredible development of science and technology has made the consequences of human actions long lasting and global. Today, the World is smaller than ever, while the impact of mankind on the planet has increased to a rate unprecedented in history. Now we are witnessing the global ecological crisis that threatens our survival, the survival of other forms of life on Earth, and nature as we know it.

The global ecological crisis is what comes back to us as our own collective karma. To face the crisis means to face the self. We have to become fully aware that the situation demands much more than superficial changes only. We have reached the point where the sustainability is possible only if we are ready to undergo a radical and genuine transformation of our worldview and behaviour. To be profound and efficient, that transformation has to be reflected in all aspect of our lives – be it personal, social, economical, political or religious. It is good to remember that this crisis contains both danger and opportunity. It is true that we have brought ourselves to the edge of abyss, but this position gives us an opportunity to use the awakened awareness, to start afresh with a life based on the ethics of the common good and cooperativeness instead of pursuing selfish interests and competitiveness.

The process of industrialization, the use of fossil fuels, an ever-expanding consumption of goods, human population overgrowth, pollution of soil and groundwater, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, melting of ice, a rise in sea levels, the shortage of drinking water and food, the extinction of animal and plant species that ultimately threatens the survival of human race – all this constitutes the cause and its consequences that has been undeniably established and largely understood by uncorrupt and wise members of the scientific community. The alarming phenomena of today are only among many symptoms of uncaring human actions such as economic exploitation, wars, religious and ethnic hatred, to mention only a few.

To struggle against these phenomena on the individual and local level, as they appear, means to deal with the symptoms, and not with the causes. However positive and necessary such actions may be, unfortunately they have never yet been universal, efficient or permanent.

The crucial question is where the true causes of the crises lie, what is their nature and how to eliminate them? If we stop for a moment and look closely and deeply into the current crisis, we will inevitably see ourselves. The deeper we look, the deeper we will get onto our own self. What is it in us, human beings, that is responsible for the situation that we got ourselves into? What are the traits in us that lead to the causes of the crisis? Are these the worldviews and attitudes that we hold or are these emotions that govern our behaviour? What is it in us that makes us so destructive to ourselves and to our surroundings? This is actually a question about who we are in the first place. If we were utterly honest and open in our inquiry, without inclination to any theory, we would arrive at a conclusion that we do not know the answer to that question. And, if we reach that point, we will realize that most of our problems stem exactly from our conviction that we know everything about every thing in the world. We all have our identities, ethnicities, religions, names, personalities, our special life stories, our virtues and faults, our professions, talents, hobbies. We have a multitude of roles. We put huge efforts into maintaining the belief that our own identity is solid and to sustain the self-image that we want to present to ourselves and to others. But who are we, really?

The very awareness of that question may help us to find the way out of the clouds of mental constructions and ground us in the here and now, in the reality of the present moment. We may then discover that in our self-preoccupation we find very little place for others, for nature, for the reality in which we live. A peculiar paradox of egocentrism is that the more we want for ourselves, the poorer and the more unsafe we feel. The feeling of alienation, separateness and confrontation with the world is what we call illusion of separate existence. Because of it, we view ourselves and the world through a prism of our own narrow interests that are constant source of conflicts at all levels. Guided by an illusion of duality of the self and the world, we have used modern technology to create the crisis in which we find ourselves today.

The belief in the illusion of duality makes us unaware of our own nature and of the nature of life in general. We behave as if we were going to live forever, we hold on to things as if they were eternal and as if we can truly own them. The world exists for us as subordinated to the human race and other beings are seen as living to serve us. This anthropocentric and egocentric perspective is narrow, shallow, harsh, painful and dangerous, and misses a wider context and the subtle nature of the phenomena as they are. We are not aware of impermanence and the fragility of life. We are not aware of the opportunity that we have been given by life.

We are not aware that the suitability of our planet for life is not absolute, but rather it depends on a fragile balance of a series of causes and conditions that are fluctuating and inconstant. The mankind living on this planet may be compared to a bull in a china shop, clumsy and uncaring, moreover too overbearing, arrogant and aggressive to look at its own face and ask – who am I, really?

We are not aware of all this because our awareness is captive to our own egocentrism. When we are full of ourselves, there is little place left for anything else. Being full of oneself means wanting to own

everything else, wanting to become master of everything else. That is the source of our troubles, the condition that makes our nature full of conflict and our experience painful.

It is of critical importance to free ourselves from such false views on separate existence, from arrogant views on the superiority of humans over other forms of life and nature itself. Only if liberated from egocentrism can we really become aware of ourselves, of others and nature as intertwined phenomena, deeply interrelated and interdependent. It is like a cup of tea, when it is full there is simply no space for some fresh tea. Likewise, with us, if we want the world to unfold in its entirety and in its full splendour, as it really is, we have to escape the egocentric perspective.

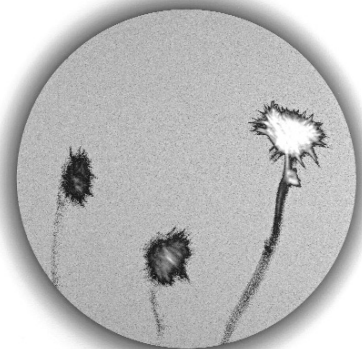
In our deluded condition, we think that the skin is a boundary between the self and the outside world. Everything that happens in our body we see as internal, and all that happens outside we see as external. This is a narrow understanding of one's self in opposition to the world. The expanded self draws within itself things from the outer world that are considered to belong to it or with which it identifies. However, no matter how the boundaries are shifted, the self stays separated from the whole, opposed to and conflicting with the rest that it has not incorporated. If we free our minds of self-concepts and if we start to observe ourselves carefully from one moment to the next, the myth we think we are will begin to dissolve. We may see that the body with which we identify, internal and separate from the outside world, is actually sustained thanks to the environment through air, water, food, warmth, light, gravitation, other beings, people. Without air we would not be able to live more than a few minutes, nor without other elements that we consist of. Our body is made up of the same elements that make our planet, and the universe.

From that perspective, our body is not ours at all. It is an inseparable part of nature that surrounds us, it belongs to nature and to nature we "return it" upon death. If we succeed in liberating our mind from an egocentric perspective and the rigid categories that enslave it, we will discover a completely new dimension of our being that is bound to change our understanding of the self, the body, others and the environment. The realization of oneness with the world leads to profound internal transformation. If all people perceived and treated the environment as if it were their own body, we would not have the crisis that we have today.

All sentient beings share not only the experience of having a body, but also the nature of their corporeity. Usually we are oblivious of that deep connectedness. We are deceived by our superficial, shallow and scattered ordinary mind that sees only differences – in species, shapes, sex, and colour. If we look even deeper, deep inside our being, we will discover that in addition to corporeity we also share in the experience of life. The common denominator of human experience and the experience of all sentient beings is suffering. Birth, illness, old age and death connect us deeply, these are experiences to which we all are subject and that we all share. Dhammapada says: "You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?" How far have we got from that truth, the insight that what we have in common connects us more deeply and strongly than the differences, of any kind, divide us.

Going still deeper, we will observe that we do not only share the same experience, but we also share its very nature. We share the same nature of mind and its potential of realizing that nature. So when we, observing our mind, recognize how relative all views, perspectives and beliefs that we hold true and absolute actually are, and that these views present merely just another description of reality, only then will we be able to say that we know that not a single thing remains to divide us and make us stand apart. This realization holds the answer to the question – who are we really?

Mankind today is perhaps confronted with the greatest challenge in history. The challenge is so great because we have to open ourselves to a new and substantially different way of living in the world and dealing with that world. If we fail to agree on the fundamental principles of the new way of being that comes from the deep sense of Oneness of people, animals and environment, we will miss the great opportunity that lies in the crisis. The crisis is but a mirror. It seems that the future of life on Earth depends on whether we are ready to look deeply enough to be able to recognize our true face and change the way we live accordingly. We may not get another chance like this, ever again.



THOUGHTS ON JAPAN

John Crook

The world was deeply shocked by the terrible catastrophe in Japan. We send our condolences to all who have lost loved ones and are still suffering there at this time. When I think of a 30 foot wave striking the Somerset coast, I see the land lost to the sea all the way from Weston super Mare to the Dorset hills, lapping up the valleys below Winterhead Hill and leaving Glastonbury Tor as a lonely island surrounded by total devastation. It is almost unimaginable but that is what the Japanese are facing. The nuclear disaster is a lesson for us all. The demonstration of human blindness in placing reactors in such dangerous places arises from the extraordinary carelessness with which humanity has approached nature for over a century. Let us learn from nature not ignore it. The planet has spoken in a decisive way that we ignore at our peril. We should all consider this and express our dismay at and resistance to our carelessness.

Om mane padme hum

JHC.



THE HEART SUTRA & THE DIAMOND SUTRA

Jake Lyne

In April 1997, the Western Chan Fellowship held a retreat in Scotland on Holy Island off Arran. St Molaise was a Christian hermit there in the 7th Century. During the retreat, we celebrated his feast day and held a ceremony in St Molaise's cave hermitage in the Saint's honour. This article is based on a talk that was given on the retreat.

*Like a lamp, a cataract,
a star in space, an illusion, a dew drop,
a bubble, a dream, a cloud,
a flash of lightning;
view all created things like this.*

DIAMOND SUTRA

The Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra are members of the *Prajnaparamita* group of sutras that were written down sometime between 100 BCE and 400 CE. The Heart Sutra comprises 25 and the Diamond Sutra 300 lines of Sanskrit. Other sutras in the *Prajnaparamita* group include a 125,000-line sutra and even a sutra of about one million lines, though legend has it that the latter was hidden in the oceans by the *Nagas* (Sea Serpents) and has not yet been released to humanity.

Prajna means wisdom of emptiness and *paramita* means perfection. So, *Prajnaparamita* is the perfection of the wisdom of emptiness, which might be taken to mean the perfection of the natural wisdom that manifests when the human heart/mind is no longer constrained by confusion and attachment. Perfection of wisdom is not something that can be practiced or learned, it has to be realised. The wisdom of emptiness is possible, because nature is not confined to the logic of dualism, though this is not to deny the value of logic. Dualism in this context means emphasising the separation between me and you, or it and you, or them and us. Because wisdom is not confined to this logic, it is possible to bring to bear what might be called counter-logic or encounter-logic, an approach that is often used in the paradoxical teachings and methods of Buddhism.

The Heart Sutra is elegant in its structure and is recited daily by Buddhists across the world. The Diamond Sutra is less well structured. There have been numerous commentaries on the Diamond Sutra and many attempts to make sense of the repetition within it, one theory being that it comprises two versions of the Sutra, back to back. The Heart Sutra is the sutra of going beyond: its mantra '*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha*' is translated as 'Going, going, going beyond, going altogether beyond, wisdom all hail!'

The sutra describes the experience of the Bodhisattva (wisdom being) Avalokiteshvara, whose mission is to help all beings to be liberated. Within the Heart Sutra's mantra, '*Parasamgate*' is usually translated as 'altogether beyond', but can also be translated as 'all together beyond', i.e. all sentient beings being liberated together. However, the central theme of the Heart Sutra is personal emancipation; it is in the Diamond Sutra that universal emancipation is more fully explored and therefore considering these sutras together is valuable.

If the Heart Sutra is the sutra of 'going', the Diamond Sutra is the sutra of returning, the direction taken by the Buddha after his enlightenment when he returned to the world in order to help all beings. In the Diamond Sutra or *Vajracchedika Sutra*, where *vajra* is the diamond that cuts through, the Buddha teaches his followers how to be Bodhisattvas.

THE HEART SUTRA – THE PATH OF EMANCIPATION

Let us examine the Heart Sutra in more detail. The Sutra sets out the true nature of a human being, essentially affirming the message of the first turning of the Dharma Wheel (the earliest teachings of the Buddha), that liberation or emancipation is possible. However, it removes dependence on all categories, including the categories of *samsara* (bondage) and *nirvana* (release), by introducing the *Prajnaparamita* teachings, which are a feature of the second turning of the Dharma Wheel. From the perspective of *Prajnaparamita* there is no such thing as emancipation. Only from the perspective of one who is trapped in the world of human categories and attachments is there a place of bondage and a place of freedom, but this perspective, whilst useful for teaching purposes, can be transcended.

In the sutra, Shariputra receives a teaching from Avalokitesvara that is approved by the Buddha. Shariputra and Avalokitesvara start from the understanding that self is dependent on parts, known as *dharma*s, and therefore it is not self-existent in its own right. The parts that the self depends on are listed in the Heart Sutra. These are the five *skandhas* that comprise the body or form, and the four mental components of mind; feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. The sutra also lists other categories that are pertinent to the potentialities of sentient beings; the sense realms, the Four Noble Truths, the chain of causation that underpins the wheel of life and death and its reversal, the distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana*, wisdom, and the attainment of enlightenment.

The Heart Sutra lists Buddhist analytical concepts but, although these concepts are useful for teaching 'right view', the sutra negates them all because realisation goes beyond the narrow boundaries of conceptual categorisation. It is through this negation that the Heart Sutra becomes a corrective to, but not a dismissal of, the early teachings of the Buddha. The negation comes about through Avalokitesvara's experience in which he sees that all five *skandhas*, and indeed all *dharma*s, are empty. He does not use his analytical mind to see this, he simply sees it as a result of coursing in the deep *Prajnaparamita*, and, in seeing it, he sees the emptiness that underlies all forms and constructions. However, in case Shariputra would be tempted to fall into error, Avalokiteshvara adds that whilst form is emptiness, emptiness is also

form, and that emptiness manifests exactly as form with nothing left over; this is a corrective to the possibilities of nihilism or escapism. The same formula applies to the other *dharmas*. The Heart Sutra might be termed a sutra of enlightenment; it states that enlightenment is an insight into one's true nature, one that is normally obscured by false understanding or ignorance. Remove ignorance and enlightenment is discovered to be the natural order of things and therefore it cannot be "attained".

When I began practicing Zen in the 1980s, the attainment of wisdom and enlightenment as described in the Heart Sutra was emphasised much more than Buddhist ethics and the expression of compassion. This was partly due to the influence of authors such as D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts who, in their writings on Zen, emphasised kensho and spontaneity in everyday life. These authors inspired many Westerners to investigate Zen. Western education, especially at that time, offered a vision of life that was divided on political lines between capitalist and socialist values, but underpinning both was a materialistic, philosophical outlook that was ultimately nihilistic. Zen as written about by Suzuki, Watts and others seemed to offer an alternative in principle but, to open yet sceptical minds, until tested in experience this was essentially just another viewpoint. Even if wonderful experiences occurred in meditation, still the logic of a materialistic world view went unchallenged. But a materialistic vision is at heart painful, because deep down it makes life appear to be meaningless, however kindly or dramatically lived. This pain drove many deeper into Zen. Going beyond materialism is a matter of the heart and of insight. It is a matter of the heart because the pain of oneself and of others must be faced, and a matter of insight because something paradoxical needs to be seen through. Both are needed in order to leap free of the chains of a limiting world view.

As described above, Zen was a solution to a personal problem of alienation that had its root in a culturally determined world view, which itself was founded on a mistaken understanding of the nature of self. Just as the Buddha solved the universal problem of suffering in his quest, so Westerners could find a pathway out of the alienation resulting from an incomplete, and yet seemingly unchallengeable, understanding of life. The solution has universal implications and can only be unearthed through facing suffering and through the heart being touched. However, essentially it was a personal quest.

It was some time before I started to appreciate more fully that, as a Mahayana Path, Zen goes much deeper. My early practice and perhaps that of many of my contemporaries was tilted towards the painful need for a breakthrough, but if Zen practice stays at that level it becomes questionable as to whether such breakthroughs are of much lasting value. On the other hand, to deny the value of insight and only emphasise an instrumental approach to Buddhism that focuses exclusively on ethics, mindfulness and social engagement, is also an error, that denies or ignores the Buddha's enlightenment, and ultimately may not have much power. It is the combination of insight in the context of a growing wish to make a contribution that defines the Mahayana Path that is to be lived out in the spirit of a bodhisattva.

THE DIAMOND SUTRA – THE PATH OF THE BODHISATTVA

Just as in the Heart Sutra the wisdom of emptiness (*Prajnaparamita*) shines like a light to illuminate the teachings of the first turning of the Dharma Wheel, so in the Diamond Sutra the same light illuminates the Mahayana teachings, the central theme of which is universal, not just personal, emancipation. Together with the *Prajnaparamita* teachings, the Mahayana teachings constitute the second turning of the Dharma Wheel.

The Diamond Sutra relates a dialogue between the Buddha and Subhuti, one of his senior disciples. In the opening exchange, Subhuti asks the Buddha the following question,

It is rare, Bhagavan, most rare, how the Tathagata, the fully enlightened one, blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings and how the fully enlightened one entrusts fearless Bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts. How should a person set forth on the bodhisattva path, how should they stand, how should they walk and how should they control their thoughts?

In his answers, the Buddha applies the wisdom of emptiness to all the aspects of the bodhisattva path. Two themes that are given high priority in the Sutra are liberating others and the perfection of giving.

The Buddha replies,

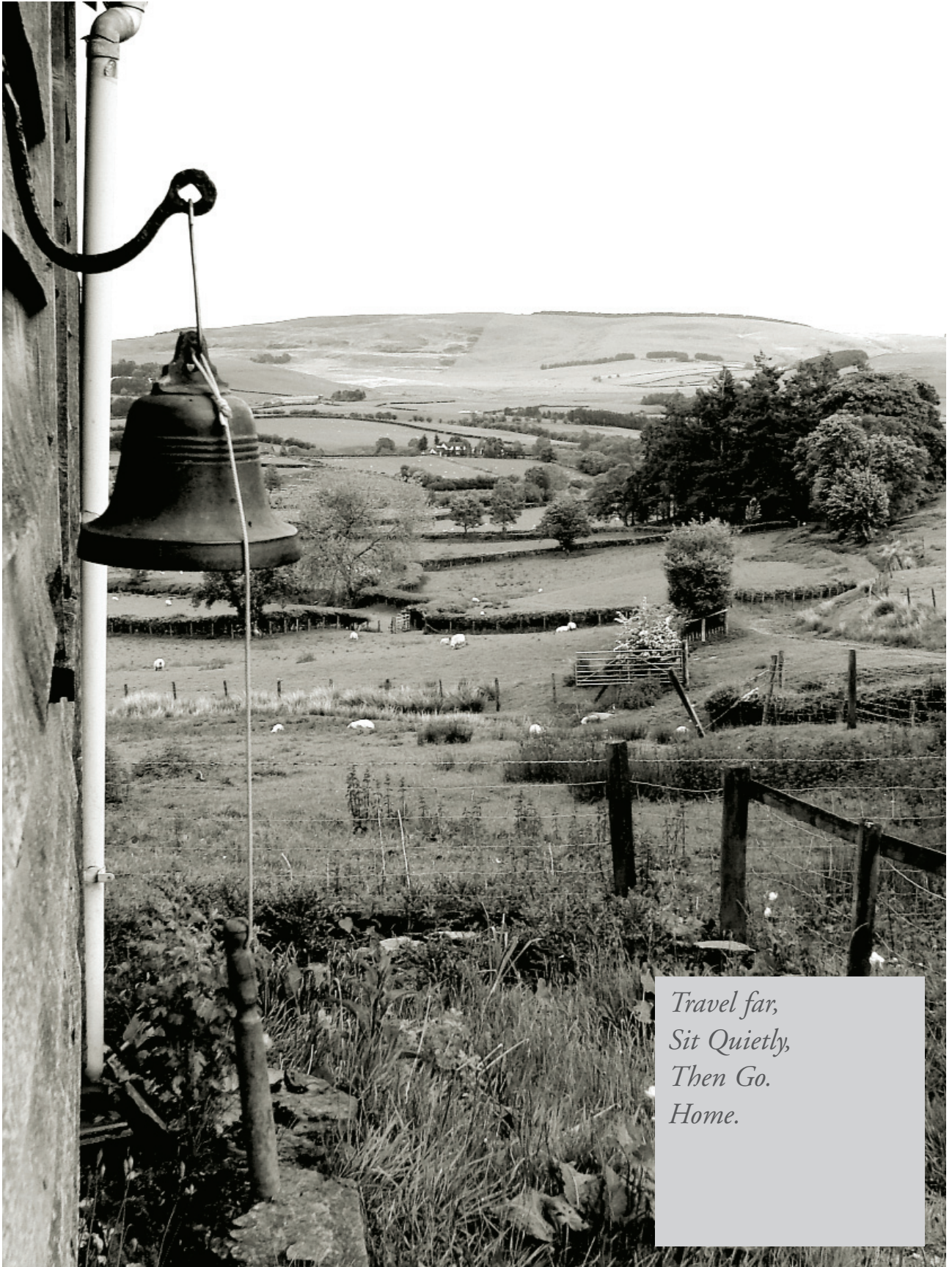
Subhuti those who would now set forth on the bodhisattva path should give rise to this thought: however many beings there are, in whatever realms they might exist, in the realm of complete Nirvana I should liberate them all...

That's some project, little wonder that the Dalai Lama once, when speaking about practice, said there is no rush! But why would we want to liberate anyone and why take such a vow? Well we might ask the opposite, why would we not want to liberate anyone? When we meet someone who is in trouble why would we not want to help them? Unless something else intervenes, our spontaneous reaction is to help, but our feeling of goodwill and the desire to help comes and goes, it is unreliable, so we take a vow. The purpose of a vow is to compensate for the unreliability of feeling. But – why the apparently impossible vow to liberate all sentient beings? At an ordinary level it's so that our vow is unbounded, so that we don't set limits to what we decide to do, yet at the same time, we are only able to work within our capacity; the vow is not an admonition to stretch ourselves so thin that we become ineffective.

The Buddha goes on to say,

...and though I thus liberate countless beings, not a single being is liberated, and why not Subhuti? A bodhisattva who creates a perception of a being cannot be called a bodhisattva, and why not, no-one can be called a bodhisattva who creates a perception of the self, who creates a perception of a being, a life or a soul.

Here the Buddha shines the light of *prajna* on this great thought of liberating all sentient beings. *Prajna* is an antidote to egotism. In discussing the Heart Sutra we have already touched on the problem of ego involvement in seeking self-enlightenment, and the need for the illuminating light of *prajna* in order to transcend the ego. In the Diamond Sutra the issue is ego involvement in the bodhisattva's wish to save others.



*Travel far,
Sit Quietly,
Then Go.
Home.*

PHOTO AND POEM: ANON

The wisdom of emptiness is an antidote to the trap of becoming a 'rescuer'. A rescuer is someone who blurs responsibility by taking responsibility for another person in some inappropriately zealous way, and this often involves competing with other 'rescuers' to be the special helper in the lives of others. When such rescuing is scaled up to being a mission to save everyone it becomes a Saviour complex. People with a Saviour complex are often profoundly resented, they may also harbour a grudge about the ingratitude of others, and since they are inevitably disappointed in their mission, they can become paralysed by guilt, or caught up in delusions of control.

To effect this seemingly impossible vow, wisdom or *prajna* is required. Some years ago I was in Kolkata, a city in which there is a huge gap between rich and poor, with many people living in abject poverty. To avoid the problems involved in giving to people begging on the street, we made a donation to a charity with a good reputation in Kolkata. But one situation arose that I felt I could not walk away from. A woman begging on a busy street corner was holding in her arms a baby that was extremely poorly. The baby was limp and almost lifeless. I wanted to give the woman money on the spot. However, my medically qualified companion had a completely opposite reaction; she insisted that the woman go with her to a hospital nearby so that the baby could be treated, but the woman refused. My companion told the woman that her baby urgently needed to be in hospital and offered to pay, but the woman paid no attention. This was a racket; the baby was either drugged or extremely ill and was being used to elicit sympathy. Whatever was going on, the woman was not free to be mainly concerned for the baby. Kindness without wisdom is at best misguided and at worst harmful. Mother Theresa, whose moving and impressive tomb we visited in Kolkata, had a practical policy for dealing with situations like this: when you go among the poor, go with food not money.

The Buddha said there is no self, no being, no life and no soul. That also implies that there is no self who is giving rise to the thought of liberating all beings. In everyday life, we ordinarily feel that we are a self, but in practicing according to the Diamond Sutra, we repeatedly set the self to one side, knowing that there is no self to help and no being to be helped, no life to be saved, no soul to be rescued and therefore no function for a saviour.

The meaning of what it is to be a bodhisattva changed over time. In early Buddhism, a bodhisattva was a great human being, who after countless lives was close to Buddhahood. According to the early Buddhist cosmological system, most of us are aeons away from this, so the bodhisattva ideal is unreachable for most of us. Bodhisattvas were special, exceptional people, not ordinary people like you and me.

As Mahayana Buddhism became more widespread, a transformation occurred leading to a second way of understanding the bodhisattva ideal that opened the bodhisattva path to almost anyone (anyone that is who has not killed a Buddha in this lifetime). From the Mahayana perspective, anyone could be a bodhisattva so long as they took refuge in the Buddha, and took the bodhisattva vows and did their best to live by them.

In addition to vowing to live by certain ethical standards, the bodhisattva makes a vow to liberate sentient beings and to attain supreme Buddhahood. They make progress towards this by various means, one of which is to accumulate merit, since merit increases their potential for liberating others and attaining enlightenment. In ancient China, the most powerful way to accumulate merit was to give to the monastic Sangha, a mutually reinforcing system that might be said to have allowed the Sangha to become wealthy in practice, whilst the lay people became wealthy in spirit by reducing their own wealth in practice!

The Dana *paramita*, or perfection of giving, is the first of the six *paramitas*, or the six perfections, that bodhisattvas practice. The others are morality, patience, energy, concentration and wisdom. Generosity is the foundation for all of the other *paramitas*, and the sixth *paramita*, *Prajnaparamita* (perfection of wisdom), informs them all. The greater a person's generosity, judged not by how much a person gives but what it costs them to give, the greater are their chances of a favourable rebirth.

Ego is founded on the fires of greed, hatred and ignorance. In the Diamond Sutra, three types of generosity are outlined that are intended to be antidotes to these fires: the antidote to greed is material generosity, food, medicine and so on; the antidote to hatred is kindness, protection, and listening; and the antidote to delusion is spiritual guidance and instruction. Applying the wisdom of emptiness to the *paramita* of generosity results in giving without attachment.

Moreover Subhuti, when bodhisattvas give a gift they should not be attached to a thing, when they give a gift they should not be attached to anything at all, they should not be attached to a sight, nor should they be attached to a sound a smell a taste a touch or a *dharmā* when they give a gift. But Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object. And why, Subhuti, the body of merit of those Bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure. Thus, Subhuti, those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object.

The Diamond Sutra was without doubt instrumental in motivating people to donate immense wealth, to Buddhist Monasteries especially, at various periods in Chinese history. Perhaps the Sutra served as an antidote to a possible problem in the position taken by Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, in his meeting with the Emperor Wu.

The Emperor said "I have donated so much, I've created so many monasteries I've helped so many Buddhists, and I've given so much to the Dharma, what merit have I gained?" And Bodhidharma replied "No merit your Majesty".

A good Zen answer, but not one likely to promote the giving of wealth to monasteries!

A third way to understand the bodhisattva ideal is to consider that the great bodhisattvas are not in any sense real, but that they represent archetypes. Archetypes are human ideals or dispositions that are present innately in all human beings. So for example, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara represents the archetype of compassion or kindly action and the Bodhisattva Manjushri represents the archetype of wisdom. This understanding makes the Mahayana path much more accessible, since everyone has the capacity to be compassionate and wise at least some of the time, and we can develop or realise these capacities. This way

of understanding allows us to internalise the meaning of the Mahayana path, and does away with the need to think in terms of the accumulation of merit in exchange for some future spiritual benefit or higher rebirth.

'LOGIC' IN THE DIAMOND SUTRA

Buddhism teaches the Middle Way, or the third place between being and not being, but from a logical point of view there is no third place. The law of the excluded middle states that everything must either be or not be, it is not possible for something to be and not be, or neither be nor not be. However, this middle way perspective is central to the encounter-logic of Madhyamaka reasoning, the function of which is to challenge the idea that entities with permanent and independent self-nature can be found.

The Diamond Sutra also uses the encounter-logic of the middle way, but it goes one step further by contradicting an even more fundamental law of logic, the law of identity. The law of identity states that an object is the same as itself, so a fish is a fish but is not a fisherman. In the Sutra, this logic is repeatedly flouted, for example the Buddha says that sentient beings are not sentient beings, which is a fundamental enough denial of the law of identity, but then even more radically he goes on to say that *therefore* they are sentient beings. Repeatedly statements appear in the form "A is not A, therefore it is A", including statements that take away reliance on the Diamond Sutra teachings themselves. Other examples are *prajna* (*Prajna* is not *Prajna*, therefore it is *Prajna*), the Dharma, enlightenment, transformation, merit and of course the same would apply to the concept of 'the wisdom of emptiness' introduced earlier. So far as I am aware no explanation for the use of this unusual formula survives antiquity, though some Buddhist philosophers have attempted to explain it in modern times.¹

The formula was also adopted by Zen Master Dogen, always with an imaginative twist. For example, quoting an old master, Dogen wrote:

'Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.' The meaning of these words is not that mountains are mountains, but that mountains are mountains.

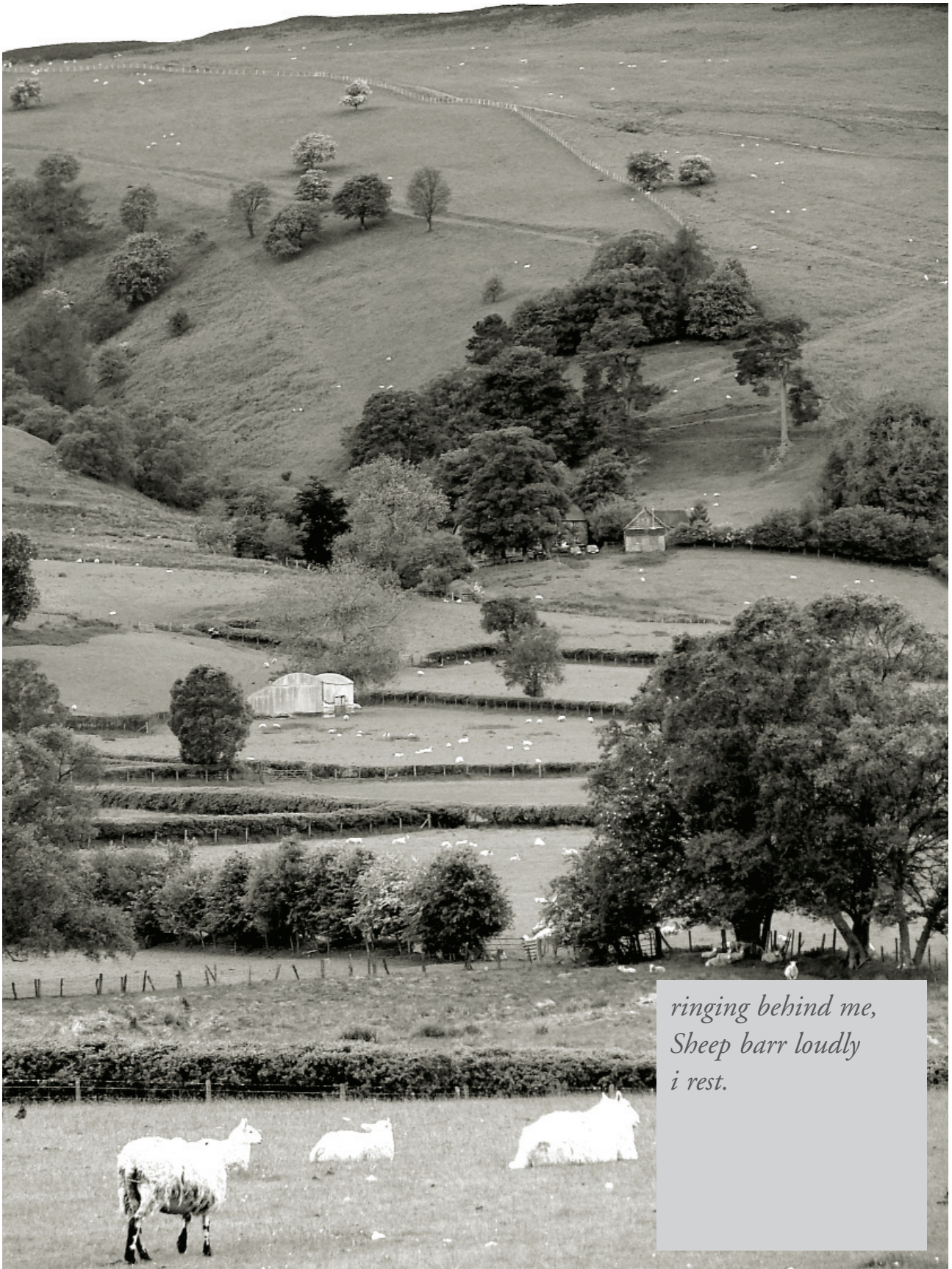
This defies ordinary logic and indicates the need for a different kind of investigation into what is intended by this formula. The first point to consider is whether the translations of the Diamond Sutra from Sanskrit into other languages are correct. Paul Harrison² argues that they are not quite correct. When the Diamond Sutra was first translated into Chinese, the translator Kumarajiva made one of two possible choices about how to translate a particular term and all subsequent translators (except for Tibetans) have repeated the choice, resulting in the non-logical formula A is not A, therefore it is A. He argues that an equally valid choice would have been better and would not have resulted in this formula.

However, I believe that one can get to an understanding that is very similar to Harrison's (judging from preview material), using the formula A is not A, therefore it is A, and since Harrison's translation is not published I shall try to do this.

Think of a friend (I shall use 'Chris' for convenience) whom you know very well. Very likely, your mental image of that person is a composite of your memories and mental images of them, coloured by your impressions, prejudices, preferences, opinions, and perhaps your wishes for them to change in some way, or to stay the way they are (e.g. not grow old and die). In other words, your thought of them is a representation that is partially tailored to your self-concern and this representation is what you refer to when you think of 'Chris'. Another person would have a different (perhaps very different) impression of 'Chris'. Now try to think of 'Chris' at the same time as attempting to set aside as much as you can your own attitude towards them, try to get to a more direct impression that has less of you involved in it and that allows them to be as they are. At this point, we are considering the possibility that 'Chris is not Chris', in other words a direct, fresh appreciation of them is not the same as the habitual impression we form of our friend. The Diamond Sutra goes on to say, 'therefore he/she is Chris'. I take this to mean that the act of removing our habitual impression of 'Chris' is what is necessary, in order to reveal a more direct appreciation of 'Chris'. This is not to suggest that there is an objectively real 'Chris', but rather that open or intimate communication with 'Chris' depends on removing something that is in the way. Open communication is possible when we accept that self and other are always changing and shifting, rather than falling into the habit of seeing people as fixed unchanging 'selves'.

What about Dogen's mountains? The message might be that our perceptions of the world are limited by language. Once we give something a name, we are likely to stop noticing its true ever-changing nature. Mountains, which flow at a geological pace, seem the most unchanging of all things, but this is an illusion. Mountains may hold their general form during human time, but they change with the seasons and the weather. When viewed from afar they are beautiful, but when we are on a mountain in a storm, beauty goes and the mountain can become frightening or dangerous. As we trek through mountains, so they are moving all the time. The word 'mountains' is a symbol that cannot in any way capture the vastness of mountains. When we are no longer dominated by such symbols, then mountains are mountains! But this can only be seen if our attachment to words drops away (*therefore* they are mountains). One can go more and more deeply into mountains, it is not possible to exhaust them, unless we reduce them to the status of a word and stop noticing.

The sutra seems to be saying that the way we see A is bounded by our concepts of A, but this is not really what A is. When we truly see A for what it is, it is *because* we have let go of our concepts, or preconceptions about it. This is a rather precise way of speaking about *Sunyata*, voidness, emptiness, direct experience unmediated by concepts and opinions. The law of identity is not really contradicted; it is just that we have a habit of taking the false for the real. However, whilst this might seem to resolve an apparent logical dilemma, we should not overlook the power of the word *therefore*. What is being pointed to is a moment of fresh understanding, a kind of sudden eureka moment that involves seeing something in a different way from usual.



*ringing behind me,
Sheep barr loudly
i rest.*

It is easy to experiment with examples where the costs of releasing a fixed idea are little in relation to the resulting reward. Investigating examples that are more challenging can indicate just how difficult it really is to realise the truth of what the Diamond Sutra is pointing to. For example, in a relationship dominated by fear, competition, cruelty or hatred, the idea that A is not A (e.g. this evil person or country is not fundamentally evil) can seem trite at best and may be very difficult to realise in practice. Consider how difficult it was for people in South Africa to heal the wounds of hatred during the truth and reconciliation process. Likewise, returning to the *paramita* of generosity, it is not difficult to be generous when the cost to us is low, but what if the opportunity for generosity involves considerable expense of time, money or energy? How does the formula “A gift is not a gift, therefore it is gift” work then?

These are examples where attachment is strong, because the costs are high and yet on the journey of truly understanding what the Diamond Sutra points to, these kinds of chasms have to be crossed. Such examples point to why practice is so difficult, but also to why we are often impressed on encountering someone who is sincerely engaged on this journey.

THE ESSENTIAL MESSAGE OF THE DIAMOND SUTRA

Huineng, when a young man before he became the sixth Patriarch, heard one line of the Diamond Sutra: “fearless Bodhisattvas should give birth to a mind that is not attached to anything” and on hearing this he was awakened. The person who was reciting the Sutra had learned it by heart in the monastery of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren. Huineng set his affairs in order and went to the monastery to meet Hongren with the aim of becoming a novice monk. Hongren asked Huineng why he had come. Huineng replied, “I have come, because I want to be a Buddha.”

A Buddha is wise and compassionate, but wisdom and compassion are big, potentially self-important words. Was Huineng’s aspiration based on self-importance? The Chinese characters translated as ‘a true person of no rank’ are code words for Buddha. We are all a long way from Buddhahood, but these words give us a clue as to the nature of Huineng’s fearless aspiration. When a person is being themselves without any artifice or self-centred agenda, they have no consciousness of being wise, compassionate, or heroic; unselfconsciously, they act according to the circumstances they encounter.

The Diamond Sutra addresses this in typically enigmatic fashion:

Subhuti asks, “Bhagavan, what is the name of this dharma teaching.....?” The Buddha replies, “The name of this dharma teaching, Subhuti, is the perfection of wisdom... What the Tathagata says is perfection of wisdom...is no perfection of wisdom. Thus it is called the Perfection of Wisdom.”

CONCLUSION

The Heart Sutra sets out a vision of liberation, of emancipation, the path of going. The Diamond Sutra sets out the unbounded vision of the Mahayana, the path of returning. To both visions the sutras apply the wisdom of emptiness. The sutras cut through the illusions that can be generated when we bring our egos into contact with the Buddha’s teachings. When we meditate, we go back to basics and we apply the

wisdom of emptiness in our practice. We try not to get caught in thinking, or trying to work things out logically, knowing that we have had a lifetime of that approach and knowing the limitations of reasoning. Instead, we sit on the cushion and meditate and eventually we find pain, the pain in our lives and the pain in our bodies: we face that pain and do our best to release it. In the silence of meditation, we acknowledge mistakes that we have made, and in a spirit of contrition we let them go. We become aware of the processes of privileging and punishing ourselves and we let those go too. Meditation practice creates a space for *prajna* to arise and as we see from these two great sutras, *prajna* is fundamental to the path of the Bodhisattva, which is the path of compassionate action.

According to the translator Red Pine, the whole message of the Diamond Sutra is summed up by a single gatha that the Buddha recites in the Sutra:

*Who looks for me in form
who seeks me in voice
indulges in wasted effort
such people see me not*

So we need not look for the Buddha in some other time or place.

This teaching is not dissimilar to another teaching from the Christian tradition. As a young man, St. Molaise spent some years living as a hermit in his cave on this beautiful island, but eventually went on a pilgrimage to Rome to further his studies and visit shrines. An ancient Christian verse pertaining to such a mission is as follows:

*To go to Rome much labour
little profit
the King you go to seek there
unless you bring him with you
you find him not*

NOTES

1. Shigenori Nagatomo *Asian Philosophy, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2000* The Logic of the Diamond Sutra: A is not A, therefore it is A.
2. <http://humanexperience.stanford.edu/diamondsutra>

ODE TO 'IT'

Jane Spray

*October days of sunshine, nights of frost,
The chestnut leaves fan golden by the gate
With early mists, when all below is lost
Save field-tree tops. To us, the sun seems late,
Or is it just we rise and have a pee
And venture out in still dark air
To taste the day and feel the ground a while,
Before damp sheep begin to stir?
All standing, waves of movement, like the sea,
Then fingers curling round a mug of tea;
Sun under blanket, widening smile.*

*Be with the hua tou, a long sword that leans
Against the wonder of a wide, wide sky.
If tired of wrestling with just what it means
To you, be with a steady, wondering why,
That asks, 'What is it?' This. And 'this' is ...what?
The Buddha, long ago, held up a flower
That stemmed all questions, natural style.
Still the retreatant, sitting by the hour,
Steps to the bell and gives 'it' what it's got;
A paradox, 'whatever is, is not...'
Hakuin answers, with a stern-hid smile.*

*Horse chestnut leaves fall gold-brown by the gate
Creaks open to a field, we run and run,
Without a thought of love, a thought of hate,
October nights are frosty after sun.
The evening comes, yet all is light around
Moon's 'beauty-truth', on the white grass, a sigh.
Though there's no actual grief in leaves
A-leaving, 'yet, you will weep, and know why'.
When lighting lamps, keep both feet on the ground -
All's in the timing...glow...and roaring sound.
For Quan Yin's smile, a bit more Brasso, please.*

Includes quotes from Hsu Yun, Seng Ts'an, Keats, and Gerald Manley Hopkins. Also, John Crook is paraphrased in the last line.

CHAN & WRITING THE WORLD

Peter Reason

I clamber over the stile, and climb toward the Callow Drove, which runs along the ridge above me. The path follows a farm track across a field. Sheep are grazing on grass still frosted where the winter sun doesn't reach it. A heavy tractor has left deep grooves, hatched with the marks of coarse tyre treads, in the frozen mud. Leaving the field, the path becomes more rugged as it climbs steeply through neglected, copped woodland, rough rocks slipping underfoot. Breathing the frosty air deeply, about half way up I pause for breath and look around.

There is a movement – brown – to my left. I turn to see a hawk flying in the woods. Bigger than a kestrel, smaller than a buzzard, brown backed, agile: a sparrow hawk effortlessly navigating the narrow gaps between the trees, flying quite slowly. I imagine she is hunting. She makes a tight circle toward me and then is away, back down the hill in a wide arc over the path.

Part of me flies off with her and then returns. I continue my walk up the hill.

This walk is part of a five-day retreat at Winterhead Hill Farm in the Mendips, the house of my friend and Buddhist teacher John Crook. I am exploring how meditation practice in the Chan tradition¹ might show me a way toward a practice of participation. What does it feel like to meet the world not as a collection of objects but as a community of spontaneous, mysterious subjects?² But I am not at all sure what it means to experience myself and the world in this way: as part of, rather than apart from, the more than human world.

The sociologist Max Weber famously wrote that modern culture had resulted in the 'disenchantment of the world'. So we might see a world of subjects 'enchanted', in the sense that Freya Mathews uses the word: the world and its subjectivity awakens, in a literal sense, to our song.³ This is characteristic of fairy stories, in which the hero or heroine steps out of their everyday life into a world encountered as living beings, holding the possibility of transformation and transfiguration. Things are no longer as they appear; this thing here, that thing there.

The Buddha taught that life is characterized by suffering caused by attachment to a transitory world, and in particular attachment to an illusory sense of a permanent self. It seems to me that this illusion of separateness and permanence is one way we stop ourselves participating in enchantment. I set up this retreat to explore how meditation practice over an intensive period might help to loosen my bonds of attachment to 'Peter' as a separate entity and, through this, offer access to a participatory and enchanted experience of the world. I want to see if I can 'write the world' as a participant, rather than as an observer.

All these words are unsatisfactory, maybe delusional: hence the importance of practice and why I have arranged this retreat.

Once I am settled into Winterhead on my first day, sitting at the table in his kitchen over a cup of tea, John and I talk through how I will spend my time. We agree the simple routine I am following: I sit in meditation for two 30 minute sessions, with a brief stretch in between, four times each day: before breakfast, late morning, late afternoon, and in the evening before bedtime. Between these sessions, I take walks around the garden and further afield in the Mendips, walks in which I attempt to maintain a meditative quality of attention. John agrees to talk with me about my experiences from time to time through the retreat. I make occasional audio and written notes. The rest of my time is spent doing little jobs for John around the house, preparing and clearing up my meals, and sleeping.

The brief encounter with the sparrow hawk takes place on the second day of my retreat. My practice to this point has focussed on becoming fully present — leaving behind all the activities of my everyday life and calming my mind, the starting point of most meditation practices.⁴ Like most people, I am always busy with thinking and feeling, reflecting and planning about my business in the world. However worthy this may be in its own right — and I am enormously committed to the projects in my life — the Buddha dharma tells us that this busy mind is also devoted to establishing and maintaining our self-image and the illusion of our separateness. So much thought divides us from direct experiencing of the world.

I don't find it easy to slip into my practice. It is a struggle to establish the alert yet relaxed posture — even using a meditation stool my knees and angles feel bent out of shape. As I focus on my breath, noticing the inhale and the exhale and the pause in between, my mind wanders around, running off into distractions — what is the best recipe for the leek and potato soup I will make for lunch? How cold will it be for the walk outside? What is the best way to mend the chair John has asked me to attend to?

Meditation teachers tell us that distraction and wandering thoughts are ever present; and, as emotional barriers are lowered, the practitioner may also need to confront buried distress and the unfinished business of earlier life. I talk to John about my wandering mind, and he laughs kindly, reminding me again how common this is. The skill, which is gradually learned and re-learned, is to gently bring attention back to the breath and over time discover an experience of quiet being. This process of calming the mind is common to many meditation practices and is traditionally called *samatha*.

By the afternoon of the second day, I am able to establish quite long periods of quiet mind, and take these qualities on my walk up to the Drove—where I meet the sparrow hawk. Would I have even seen the hawk, so quiet and brown against the fawns and greys of the woodland, if my mind had not been quiet? Would the hawk have even come so close to a busy mind? How would I know and does it matter? It is a gift, spellbinding, to see a wild bird just doing her own thing for her own purposes.

The point of Chan practice is not just to calm the mind but also to radically confront the illusion of a self separate from the world. Once a degree of calm is established, the Chan method is to focus on the whole body and become open to its wider context. This is 'silent illumination' through which, with time and practice, one can develop into a relaxed 'one pointed' experience, 'present in the presence of the

present' as John puts it: I am simply here, at ease with myself and with my surroundings, noticing the world around as it arises. From this place of 'self at ease' the quality of mind begins to change, and experiences of spaciousness, of timelessness, of bliss may spontaneously arise.

On the third day the weather is bright, and I try meditating outside, looking over the fields toward a small wooded area. It is not easy to sit comfortably, but nevertheless sitting is calming and quiet. It rains a little, not really enough even to wet me, I just hear very gentle pattering on the leaves. And then the sun slips out from behind a cloud, and all of a sudden I am wonderfully warm. That is the right word 'wonderfully': it feels like a charm or a gift of brightness. Looking over the field, I can see little drops of water from the rain hanging on blades of grass, glistening in the sunshine. And with the warmth of the sun comes a feeling of movement in the air. It was as if I am directly experiencing the power of the sun to drive the cycles of Gaia—why do I write 'as if'? I *am* at that moment directly feeling it in my own warming up.

Then the clouds come over the sun again and everything cools down quite suddenly.

Looking up at the clouds shading us, I realize that as they shade the Earth they reflect the sun, part of the albedo⁵ effect that keeps the earth cool. I realize how we usually see only part of the total arc of the climate system. We maybe cross with the cloud on this winter's day because it obscures the sun, but don't see it is also part of a larger cycle that is keeping Gaia cool so it remains inhabitable for animals like us. It is so easy to grumble about the wind or the rain, rather than seeing it as part of a cycle of weather.

In this meditation, my awareness is drawn to the cycle of the wider Gaian system in which I am embedded. I am for a moment less bothered by getting wet than in wondering about the coming and going of the sunshine. What does it take to see oneself as part of the wider cycle? I suspect that quietening the mind allows some clarity: I become less attached to immediate concerns and purposes, which narrow vision, narrow understanding, narrow what we can experience. I become just a little more able to experience the wider system of which I am a part. But am I experiencing it or thinking about it?

As my retreat continues, I grow to appreciate the contrast between sitting in the Buddha room and walks outside in the January cold. The Buddha room is small and bright, with windows on three sides. John has filled it with the iconography of Chan and Tibetan Buddhism: there is an altar with a small statue of the Buddha, and another of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of loving kindness; on the walls are silk drawings from Buddhist mythology; in the corner sits an almost lifesize Buddha, brightly painted and bedecked with a Tibetan ceremonial scarf; in the opposite corner a large Tibetan drum.

At the start of each session, I light a candle and an incense stick on the altar and bow in respect to the Buddha and the teachings—that's about as much ceremony as my Nonconformist background will easily accept. But the incense and the images are reminders of why I am here, each time I enter the room they draw me more profoundly into meditative practice.

The following day my experiences deepened. I had been sitting quietly using silent illumination and whole body awareness. In time my mind became quite still: I was just watching the movement of breath and body with a few thoughts trickling through the back of my mind but none staying attached. Following Chan practice, I opened my attention to my wider context. Immediately I did so, without any volition, intention, or expectation, I found myself in unbelievably extended space: one wide sweep of awareness took in the universe as a whole. In place of my everyday experience of perceiving from the centre of my embodied self, I was an indescribably minute being in the vast, vast reaches of a space that was in some senses alive. I was a speck within this whole, experiencing my tiny-ness. Yet I was clearly within and part of it all, part of this whole that was comprehending itself in some way, looking back on itself. It is as if the universe itself, rather than I, was doing the meditating. It left me feeling giddy.

This is an inadequate description. Necessarily so, maybe.

My sceptical self wonders about the authenticity of this account. Is it not odd, I say to myself, that you have created the kind of experience of being part of the whole that you are seeking to articulate? Is this not just fulfilling your expectations? And yet, and yet, I reply cautiously, while I can describe what happened in terms of my ideas, the experience itself took me completely by surprise: I had no idea that at that moment I would be catapulted into a space that was itself meditating. (And of course, this conversation between my sub personalities indicates that I am a long way from letting go of the illusion of myself!).

The following day the experience of spaciousness arose again while walking. I stepped over the stile that leads from John's garden into the field, and walked through the gap in the straggling hedge down toward the main track. The field dips down into a hollow where there is a trough for cows to drink at. Nothing special, just a field in Somerset. Beyond the track, which is part of the West Mendip Way, the land rises again. I can see across to the path through the woods where I met the sparrow hawk.

As I walked down into the hollow, I was again overtaken by this sense of spaciousness. I felt that I was no longer a point of consciousness making my way through the world, but that I was in some sense extended into the space. It was as if 'I' was no longer centred within my skull or my body: I was reaching out to engage myself with a vastness around me as that vastness was reaching to envelope me. The word 'vastness' is a good one, it suggests a space that is undefined and unlimited.

I walked on, climbed another stile and crossed the track, part of the West Mendip Way. I had to pick my way over the deep ruts full of crazed and opaque ice and through mud churned up by tractor wheels, some places squidgy, other places, where the sun hadn't struck on it, frozen solid. I followed the footpath up the steep climb toward the ridge.

As I walked on the spaciousness stayed with me, but now I could play with it in my awareness. I could choose to pay close attention to my immediate surroundings—my feet on the rough track, the trees around me—or I could attend to my participation in this wider space. One moment 'I' am directing my awareness, the next I am part of a whole.

As I play with this strange experience of being both immediately here and in a vast spaciousness I get some insight into the koan that has caught my attention. A koan, part of Chan and Zen Buddhist practice, is a paradoxical puzzle, a story or a dialogue that cannot be resolved by the rational mind. Traditionally, koans are stories of encounters between students and masters; but they also arise from everyday life. The paradoxical nature of a koan means investigation of their meaning can liberate the mind and shock it into awareness of its constructed nature. This particular koan had been playing around in the back of my mind for a few weeks.

A group of men, committed environmentalists, are gathered around a campfire. One companion asks, 'Why do we go into wilderness?' and another responds, 'Wilderness treats me like a human being.'⁶

What a strange thought, that wilderness could treat me like a human being! And am I in wilderness, walking up this muddy churned-up track with barbed wire fences and rusty farm implements lying around? Yes, for this experience of vastness places me in wilderness of the wild Universe as well as the more immediate wildness of the sparrow hawk's wood. And this is exactly what it is to be a human being: to be a centre of awareness and at the same time utterly insignificant, but a speck. I am both my separate self and part of the whole witnessing the whole. Again, I get that slightly giddy sense of being both tiny and part of it all, of being on Gaia, being *in* Gaia. Almost *being* Gaia.

I carry on up the hill, reach the Callow Drove, turn along it, and walk for nearly two hours. The drove runs straight along the ridge between two lines of stone walls that separate it from the farmed fields. The walls are mostly tumbled down, windblown hawthorn and oak growing amongst the scattered stone. At the end of the ridge, the path descends sharply through open woodland. I watch the tiny birds flocking in the trees, wondering how they manage to survive in this long cold winter. There are lots of crows milling around, the occasional croak call of ravens flying past, the mewing of buzzards high above. I keep an eye out for the sparrow hawk I saw earlier in the week although I know she won't perform to order! At the bottom, the path rejoins the West Mendip Way, and I turn right to make a circular walk.

Coming back along the West Mendip Way, once again, while walking, I focus on my breath and on whole body awareness. After three days of meditation, this practice feels quite accessible. And again I suddenly I feel myself in that curious way inhabiting space more thoroughly. I can feel the mud squidging under my feet, the sweat coming through my long johns, the physical weariness from the walk. But I also feel my awareness has unusual reach so that when I hear the buzzard call it isn't calling from outside me, because the buzzard and I inhabit the same space.

Two walkers are coming down the hill toward me, maps in hand, picking their way along the rutted track, their boots and gaiters splashed with mud. I feel embarrassed to be standing here as if in another world, at the same time dictating notes into my audio recorder. I am about to flip back into being a socialized person again when a blackbird flies past in the same curious open space as me...

The walkers come closer, and we exchange formal greetings.

‘Lovely day for a walk, so long as it stays dry.’
 ‘It gets very muddy further down the track, though.’

Later that evening I discuss these experiences with John. He confirms that they reflect what he calls ‘self at ease’ and points out again that this is a quality of mind available given time, persistence, support and skilled direction. But, as he points out to me again, however much the self may be ‘at ease’ and however beneficial the experience may be, the self is still present. Beyond ‘self at ease’ is a more profound experience where the sense of the self drops away completely and the world is experienced directly. Buddhists call this, ‘seeing the nature.’

Buddha nature then is the ‘world’ seen by the subject in one flowing relationship in the state called ‘true nature’. The sensory mind participates directly in the world process but without dualistic identification as something apart.⁷

We talk about how this enlightenment experience of dropping the self cannot be deliberately developed or consciously willed. It requires a quiet mind, yet it comes ‘from its own side’ as John puts it, so that ‘without any self-involvement, wishing or desire... the continuing presence of “me” is disrupted.’ This may be triggered maybe by some startling event, or maybe called by the communicative presence of the world. One can create the conditions, the ‘self at ease’, in which this insight may arise, but the insight itself is spontaneous. I think it is evident from my narratives above that I have experience of ‘self at ease’ and I have touched experiences of vastness and bliss. But I have no experiences of dropping the self and of seeing the nature.

However, these meditation experiences have important lessons for ‘writing the world.’ First of all, they point to a difference between knowing through probing and manipulation; and knowing through openness and encounter. As Freya Mathews points out, Western science conceives a world of things without subjectivity, as pure objects. There can thus be no moral or spiritual objection to us laying bare the inner workings of such objects through scientific research; indeed such laying bare is seen as a self-evident good. But if we accept the panpsychic premise that matter is in some sense infused with subjectivity, that the world is not a collection of objects but a community of subjects, the nature of inquiry must change. Intrusive investigation is a violation of subjectivity, for ‘A subject is entitled to preserve the secrets of its own nature’.⁸

Knowing through encounter must rest on a readiness to let go of fixed views of self and other. Just as one does not truly meet another person if one is primarily concerned with preserving one’s self image and inner dialogue, or with the categories into which you wish to slot them, so it is with the more than human world. I need to be willing to cultivate a quiet mind and openness, to greet the world as sentient other. And then I need to wait for whatever will arise. I cannot make the meeting happen. It comes ‘from its own side’, to borrow John’s term.

We will know we have been open to the extent that we are taken by surprise. I suggest that the authenticity of encounter can be judged from its unexpected qualities. Just as when I genuinely meet my closest friend I do not know how the encounter will unfold, so with the more that human world.

All this seems to be to point to some principles for a practice of participation and for 'writing the world', which I should follow on my journey.

I draw on meditation disciplines to quieten my mind

I lay myself open to the world

Each day I write what I have experienced

I ask, what is the world and its beings saying to me?

How is it saying these things?

What is my response?

NOTES

1. Chan is the Chinese ancestor of Zen Buddhism. It emphasizes an experiential understanding of the world through meditation practice rather than teachings or scriptures.
2. Berry, T. (1999). *The Great Work: Our way into the future*. New York: Bell Tower.
3. Mathews, F. (2003). *For Love of Matter: A contemporary panpsychism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
4. This account draws strongly on Crook, J. H. (2010). Meaning, Purpose and Insight in Western Chan: Practice after Shifu. *New Chan Forum*, 42, 1-18.
5. *Albedo* refers to the reflective quality of the planet that reflects solar energy. Clouds and ice have high albedo, oceans and evergreen forests low albedo. See Harding, S. P. (2009). *Animate Earth*. Foxhole, Dartington: Green Books, p. 77.
6. Cheney, J. (2005). Truth, Knowledge, and the Wild World. *Ethics and the Environment*, 10(2), 101-135.
7. Crook, J. H. (2010). Meaning, Purpose and Insight in Western Chan: Practice after Shifu. *New Chan Forum*, 42 (summer 2010), 1-18. P.12
8. Mathews, F. (2003). *For Love of Matter: A contemporary panpsychism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. P. 76



*Sit awhile.
And rest.
Clear mind.
I see.*

SPRING & FALL
TO A YOUNG CHILD

G. M. Hopkins

*Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove, unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter child, the name,
Sorrows springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.*

DAVID FONTANA – A MEMOIR

John Crook

I must have met David Fontana at a psychological conference where several of us decided to form a small discussion group to have a look at the then growing interest in Meditation and Zen. We worked closely together to set up an international conference on “Psychology: East and West” in Cardiff and David and I edited and contributed to the book that followed “Space in Mind” (Element Press, 1990). It was a joy to work with David and we had many attitudes and questions, if not answers that had much in common.

David always saw the best in people. Indeed, he was sometimes accused of being flattering but I don't think so. He always spoke from the heart and optimistically about others. Of course, this made him a joy to be with on a whole range of occasions.

We went together to two conferences on ‘Consciousness’ in Athens organised by the Brahmakumaris and both spoke there. Afterwards, we went on extended expeditions through fascinating regions of Greece. We flew in mid winter, buffeted by alarming winds in a small aircraft, to the volcanic island of Santorini. There were no tourists and we had the wonderful island almost to our selves. Another time, we drove a hired car around the Peloponnesus including a complete circulation of the extraordinary and remote Mani peninsular dining simply in remote tavernas closed for the winter but opened for us with that characteristic friendliness to foreigners that Greeks often show, especially perhaps because, having married a Greek with a mother from the Mani, my Greek was up to the job. This led us into the many fascinating encounters that can happen best outside the tourist season. We strolled around the old centre of Athens musing on ancient times and pretending to chat with Socrates.

During these journeys, David was working on the difficult Zen koan “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” He was having a hard time and evening after evening we returned to our puzzlement. In Delphi, appropriately, I tried to persuade him that he might do better if he answered, “Who am I?” first, but he persisted. He never found Zen easy being essentially a thinker and a writer – at which he excelled in his many well-prepared books.

We also enjoyed many further weekend meetings of our little discussion group at my retreat house in mid Wales talking and walking in the hills. At this time, David had much in common with the rest of our group – an enquiring mind open to all the strange phenomena and experiences that religious and non-religious spirituality can provide. Together we investigated several sources of healing experiences. As time went on, David moved more into a direct investigation of the occult, which intrigued him greatly. He found a factory in Cardiff where poltergeists threw things about and went there in the night to examine what had been reported to him. He told me of the experiences that persuaded him there was indeed something happening. Yet, David was wary of letting others in on this investigation. It was if he suspected a subjective component that the presence of others would subvert. He refused to allow Sue Blackmore, a

well known sceptical thinker but a good psychologist, to accompany him saying that if she were there nothing would happen. Although I expressed an interest, I never got the invitation!

This led on to further investigations of which I heard little until the publication of his valued book “Is there an Afterlife? A comprehensive overview of the evidence” (O Books. 2005). It is indeed probably the best review of this subject available. Here he explores the afterlife both through personal enquiry and through an extensive search through the literature. The accounts are fascinating and his own participation intriguing but he is honest in saying at the last that, although he was personally convinced, he realised that others may not be so persuaded. As usual in such an enquiry, the evidence does not quite make the grade, extraordinary though it is and brilliantly reported.

David turned to Christianity and died in the faith. He was cremated following a simple service in the Cardiff parish church that he attended regularly in the last years of his life. I mourn the loss of a dear friend on life’s strange journey and a stimulating, deeply thoughtful companion.

SELF ASCENDING

Paul Atherton

Searching for the way

Gate on gate until

A fenced enclosure of the self

Spiky membrane of a mutating cell.

This single Centre with two nuclei

One old and dark, a sort of hell

One new and lit, yet secretive.

Old dark labyrinth of the nightmare mind

Tomb of hanging beams and creeping things

Hidden ghouls and swinging bells

Dull black axes over torture fires

Eyeless skulls and human bones

Devil's teeth in human flesh,

Source of pain and all our wickedness.

In this dark, gestating womb, a spirit heard.

Through the knitting-web this tugging thread

Draws half-dead souls from sleeping slabs

Along blind walls through doors ajar

Into darkness' source

Pin-pricked above with glints of light.

Now the spirit weaves and shakes

Pouring life into lifeless gapes.

These half-lives trap the spirit's path

And by St. Vitus' dance are led along.

Punch drunk, worn and cold

They come cowed and bowed to the hall

And like spittle spat upon the floor

Once more, lie drained and helpless

Wanting more.

At last, dim dark is turning grainy as

Lamp and candle play Baptist to the sun.

Rays split and colours grow,

Ice thaws and hearts pump-pump

Eyes flicker and noses twitch

And in growing golden glow

Eyes blink and hail their rising sun.

Glassy eyes may deform the light

But where there's shrinking sin

Grace flies in, so tears now crystal prisms

To bright light, scattered and multiplied.

By subtraction division ends

Thus, one plus one makes more than two

As in cleaving one or two, Three ascends.

RETREAT REPORTS

Retreat reports are an integral aspect of our journal and one much approved 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 after and they often provide pointers for our own understanding. Eds

CLARITY AND CONFUSION

I'm not quite sure why it has taken me until now to write this report, nor why I have decided this moment to do it. Maybe it will become clear as I write it.

The retreat was a Silent Illumination retreat at Maenllwyd with John Crook and Fiona Nuttall in July 2010. Today is 5th November 2010. Maybe the lapse of time is portentous? I can see this as I write it.

The weather was totally beautiful for the week. That must be important to me since I am writing about it. Warm, balmy, sunshine from Saturday to Wednesday, light soft drizzle then sun again on Thursday, persistent mizzle on Friday. In fact, at Maenllwyd, I almost feel that a visit there wouldn't be complete without some wet from the sky, it is part of the whole that is the beauty of the place.

I have to add that I spent 6 weeks before hand preparing to wear ear-plugs. That made all the difference, as sleep is what makes retreats possible for me. I also invested in a box of Paramol which, whilst inadvertently starting a dependency I have since had to break, got me through feeling almost in perfect health.

So, yes – health plays an important role in my life. It's hard to say whether this is old karma giving me an opportunity for me to transmute it into a letting go of body and self, or an attachment that supports the continuation of self. Hard to say or know about anything really – but I'll keep going.

At this point in writing this report, I am plagued by many strong feelings. Why am I writing it? In part, having just finished reading the *New Chan Forum*, I have been triggered into doing so. I was both bothered and inspired by the degree of wisdom in the waking up experiences I had been reading. Does my ego feel challenged in its quest to get to the top of the mountain all-alone? Competition was both encouraged by my upbringing and discouraged by my parenting? Ambivalence is thus the hallmark of the experience of Me: noticed by John who appeared quite concerned by the degree of split I demonstrated on this retreat.

After the bothered feeling, which was mild and lasted maybe for an hour after reading the magazine, feelings of inspiration and gratitude arose and my botheredness subsided in fresh gratitude for everyone involved in the dharma experience. Then – relief. I sense, with an enormous outward sigh of letting go, that I am part of the whole caboodle that is the movement from ignorance to enlightenment – to going beyond all of it. Maybe reading the NCF magazine removed a blockage to writing this report.

The retreat seemed at the time to be uneventful. I had asked myself for an uneventful one, the last two had been so unbelievably full of action. (I asked myself to go gently, no big stuff please). Does this mean that no big stuff happened or that I hid it from myself, so that I could process it over time?

Other points of significance on this retreat: it was a new format with John delivering teachings on emptiness that were a new experience for him, I believe. It was wonderful to hear this Dharma being revealed, there was a mixture of confusion, spell-bound attention and a great heightening of energy in the room on the day he broached the new ground. The talk ran over from 45 minutes to an hour and ten and I was in agony as my bladder urgently pushed to release itself. In the end, I had to rush off and by the time I got back the talk had ended. I felt I'd broken a spell but the spell had not disappeared - instead it was lapping into the warm, sunlit air as we spilled ourselves out from the Chan Hall, a hum of unspoken conversation hanging between us full of undefined yet very potent possibilities. The whole life process was zinging so much within ourselves and outside of ourselves in the world - it was tangible, a touching of the beyond-life-and-death. Its enormous reality was revealed, and we experienced it each according to our ability.

I suppose that I should be talking about the "mummy's curse", since from a practice point of view it was the big breakthrough of this retreat. It's interesting how I am walking around it. It's almost as though, although it was the practice breakthrough, it wasn't any more or less significant than anything else and yet that would be to underestimate its impact. Are all things really this equal?

John helped me to discover that "mummy's curse" was the moment a voice pipes up full of criticism, anxiety, imperious warnings, angry exhortations quite shattering the state of one-mind as soon as it emerges. I realised that it was my mother. As we discussed this and I continued to sit and observe it, it became apparent that mummy's voice extends beyond my living mother - with whom I have had the grace and good fortune to build an adult-adult relationship. It includes all my conditioning. John expressed his concern at the profound split within me. He confirmed that the unbroken clarity of experience of the world was correct and to be extended through practice. We guessed that my internal "mummy" was freaked out by this and fighting it, probably because 'she' was rendered utterly redundant by it. We dubbed this dissenting voice the 'mummy's curse'.

The bated breath practice did work wonders to quell the voice. I said to John that, now I had confirmation that the clear unbroken awareness meant things were going along the correct path, I would adopt the bated breath practice every moment of consciousness. He looked doubtful but sort of nodded.

Things settle down after that, with the voice chattering away sort of somewhere below the left elbow almost like a small child persistently and absently chattering away. Strange also that it is changing as I write about it from mummy to child. Interestingly, when consciousness broke into the experience of no-mind on the previous retreat, it was located in the same place. Hmm. Curious.

The end of the retreat arrived and we started to talk as the day opened up and we prepared to leave. I went to speak briefly to John and was struck by the change in him. I had seen it at the previous retreat at Gaia House, my first meeting with him; seeing it a second time, I wondered what it meant. He seemed sad in a resigned sort of way. It was as though for a week, the world and all its dreadfulness, its pain and pointless cruelty had been held at bay, maybe even reversed for a while as we way-fared together into the fullness and emptiness of it all; but that it was seeping back into his consciousness, unbidden and unwanted. I was bubbling away in front of him and, as he watched me, nodding slightly, I felt suddenly as though he didn't believe that it would last, that once I was 'out there' I would forget to breathe, watch the self, practice and continue to evolve. Was he being a mirror to me? Was I being a mirror to him?

It felt as though something was piercing my heart but it didn't hurt, didn't bleed, didn't even affect me right then other than to make me wonder and want to hug him forever. I wanted to continue to talk but I felt as though I was paining him and so went away, unsure of what was happening but not wanting to be causing anybody any harm. I knew perfectly well that he could have been suffering from indigestion or back pain from sitting for more prolonged periods than normal. My problem was that as soon as I had noticed and started to process what was coming in to me through my senses about another, my ego was involved and I didn't want to take any chances.

Picking up life again on return seemed straightforward, particularly compared to the previous retreat. However, my body had been quite gutted by the regime and as the days became weeks, the impact made itself known. I simply couldn't return to life quite as it had been before I went on the retreat. Some of my chronic fatigue symptoms returned and worsened. I continued to work but shut down any social activities, stayed in evenings and weekends, read, meditated in a chair or on my back, reflected.

So, this is life then? Is this all I can do? Is this the sum of my contribution? Am I alone in my pride and guilt at wanting to be a Bodhisattva, liberate innumerable sentient beings and feeling simultaneously that this cannot help but make me superior in some way as my merits and attributes increase, whilst feeling an utter failure at the task? Superior and alone. The two worst feelings I have to combat – pride and ego at their best. My personal obstacles are so familiar that I can locate and stroke them in the dark without even having to think about it, like a favourite pet. Perhaps our ignorance is our favourite pet since we will do everything within our power to feed it and keep it from dying.

After a while, I picked up Master Shen Yen's *Complete Enlightenment* again and the notes I'd made on the Avatamsaka Sutra before I gave it away at around chapter 30. I found that all that business about saving beings for an eternity without wearying (it kept exhorting me), was depressing because I felt that, with this body, not being weary was something I was not likely to experience in this lifetime. Having this book in the house made me feel obliged to keep studying it and confronting my inadequacy to meet the Bodhisattva challenge. It was not helping me, so I opted as I always do in

times of spiritual danger, to repeat the vows to protect intention and follow the breath to protect clarity of mind. Compassion and wisdom. The twin pillars. Keep faith and keep moving.

I had been trying to bate the breath at work and at home but my attention kept slipping. The clarity of the sky however is never lost, however many clouds may gather and grumble sometimes into full-blown storms. The clear sky is always there, the crucible in which it all happens. I decided that watching my ego play itself out in this clarity would have to do. Let go completely –

How far

Can I let go

And still function?

The question that immediately follows this is always, “How far should I let go?”

What does mummy have to say about all this? Mummy says, “What sort of a monstrous ego do you have to even presume you could be anywhere near this point? It’s irrelevant to you! You’re ego is so large, its root so deep, you’re not going to have to worry about this for a few hundred thousand lifetimes yet.”

Sometimes, I feel as though I’m my own Shutter Island. Is Mummy right? Does she keep me from developing an even bigger ego? Or is she proof that I am in fact in danger of relinquishing ego (even Mummy herself) and she’s trying to build my ego up by making me believe I am not able to be a Bodhisattva and follow the path to the end which is no end but a total dissolving of self?

So, I keep repeating the vows, keeping the mind clear, and watching. This is all I can do. Reading the NCF made me feel for a moment wonderfully free. I am a drop in the ocean. This ocean has been filling and emptying with drops for years, forever, unwearingly; drops falling in, drops evaporating out. This ocean of Bodhi is so vast it doesn’t increase or decrease in size. I am a part of this. I am safe. I don’t have to worry. That part’s over – if I can let it be.

To know, to see the illusory nature of everything doesn’t help, doesn’t change anything. To experience nirvana, doesn’t help, doesn’t change anything. To pierce the veil, to rip every last illusion away doesn’t help, doesn’t change anything. What needs to be helped? What needs to be changed? The bottom line is – what is it we are trying to end? Who is it that needs to end it?

Even confronting head-on the utterly shocking answer to this question doesn’t help, doesn’t change anything. Karma must still play itself out. This we cannot avoid. This is what Mummy holds on to. I’m guessing that after all the reading and reflection my path is not the fast one. It is the slow, painful, ‘walking without shoes up a very stony road’ one. Again, the Avatamsaka sutra comforts us with the notion that the long, slow, painful road is the more beneficial for the Bodhi ocean in the long run.

It strikes me as so sad that I need so much reassurance. I wish it weren't so, I wish I could run blithely up that road without pain, saving innumerable sentient beings with no fear, no wearying of body. My mind is never weary – my God – how come I've never mentioned that until now? My body is weary. But I never weary of studying, reading, sharing, contemplating the single most important truth. I cannot get enough of it. When Mind is cleared so that it is like the sky, it contemplates its nature with the naked, unblinking, unswerving devotion of a lover. My whole life is devoted to it.

Is my weary body in fact my best friend, my ally? I am celibate. I do not drink alcohol or caffeine. I do not smoke. I can only socialise once, maybe twice a week. I eat a plant-based diet. I don't have a television. I hardly use the internet. I do a full-time job that I can manage easily with little stress. All due to my body. And all I see is that I cannot sit on the cushion and rush around spreading the dharma and saving people and so have failed. Instead, I sit or lie for hours in silence, watching, contemplating, marvelling at – what? With unswerving determination, I deconstruct self-referencing thoughts, feelings, emotions that get in the way of and obstruct my view of – what? I don't know. I can't explain what I'm doing, why I do it. I can't even tell what it is I am looking at. Just... Am I involved? I've no idea. This drifting through infinite space. It just happens. More than that I cannot say.

I feel bitterly inadequate in my ability to save others. I cannot regularly attend a teacher or a Chan group, nor am I destined to teach. Why does this irk me? Because Mummy is there, at my elbow, driving me on, reminding me of my failure to fulfil my aspirations. "Is it any wonder?" I say to myself, "You pick what has to be THE most difficult challenge in the world and then think you can achieve it!" Always I look for what more, what else could be done.

When am I happiest? Sitting in front of the fire or in the sun, at rest or reading a sutra. How can that possibly be enough all by itself? Mummy wants to know. I have no answer. I hope that this rambling has some value. It seems to lack that certain something that the other reports have. They are full of such incredible wisdom and worth. This seems to be a muddled musing of no real substance or conclusion 'signifying nothing'. Rambling aimlessly on as I feel life does. I suppose it is a reflection of how I experience life. For what it's worth, here it is, warts and all, wishing well to anyone who should read it.

Namaste...

DAILY MENU – A COOK’S RETREAT

SUNDAY

Courgette, coconut and Lemon soup.

Bread rolls

Citrus and poppy seed cake.

Mushroom and Lovage stew

Creamy polenta

Green allotment salad.

The beginning of a *Hua-Tou* retreat, my first retreat of the year and I feel I really need it. Somehow, I’ve lost focus and cannot see beyond grey clouds. There is a nice group of people, balanced; John and Jake as teachers, which is quite a treat.

I came a day earlier to get the place into a nice flow. The pantry is now a fully functional room with lovely shelves and work surfaces, white pristine walls. I brought cabbage flowers for the altar and freesias for the slugs. The kitchen sizzles and the sleepy Rayburn toasts a tray of sesame seeds, slowly, at a snooze pace. The first stages of what is to become a bitey, courgette soup sweats away by the window where the cooker now stands. A misty start to a beautiful autumn morning, the valley clouded over by what looks like a creamy bowl of differently coloured ice-creams, that pastel subtlety of pistachio, raspberry, peach, hazelnut, sunlight filtering through it, the landscape’s deliciousness...

I took a tray to the Tara statue and as I kneeled before her, a beautiful butterfly landed on my arm and tangled its legs on my woolly sweater. The ‘gifts’ start to get noticed.

How to achieve perfection on this training? As in the vow of the recited grace, of each second bite of every meal, a shaping of focus and hard work, mindfulness, awareness combined with heart and creative spirit. If I can manage it here, why do I struggle everywhere else? Same resources, same potential, same person...what a quandary.

Serene moment

The stream flows down

With water I will never see

Yet, I hear it and it is present.

The sun kisses my skin and makes

My eyes flicker.

The coffee holds a whole sycamore tree in its reflection.

Jake collected some mushrooms and they were death caps, very poisonous. Luckily, I did not put them in the stew!

Tara, oh Tara, oh Tara...

Fried Tofu with Tamari

When we talk about soya derived foods there is a truth that on their own they are pretty useless. However, put together, the chemistry between them combusts into a full-blown love affair. Use ordinary tofu, not silken, with the meaty sponginess, and slice it thinly into square slabs, but thick enough for it not to fall apart, about 1 cm thick. Shallow fry it on a hot pan in olive oil until the tofu is golden and crispy on both sides. Add the tamari so it soaks into the slices. Turn off the flame and put a lid on and let the remaining heat caramelise the tamari and evaporate, for about three or four minutes. You end up with crispy, salty, healthy and delicious strips of tofu. Eat it on its own, with a salad or in a butty.

Acorns, oak leaves and lethal mushroom

Mandala on the steps, for Tara.

A brisk walk to the woodland area down the path.

Sheep chats.

Two red kites.

Delighted to find some lovage leaves for the stew, new and young and full of flavour, another gift.

The moon and Venus

A trace of a plane to somewhere west of the border

Imagine the stories,

The people waiting, the ones left behind.

What is this?

We fly to remote places and we fly into space beyond the space that belongs to this planet. We are confined by an atmosphere while the universe expands constantly to unimaginable dimensions and realms, and that is part of who we are too, and yet we are cramped to being an individual, called x or y. Confined to a gender, an age, a role, restricted to a country, a nationality, an identity, a status. Limited to our role in society by the haves and have nots of the Saturday Guardian magazine. We are narrowed into finding a truth that suits us and then sticking to it, flying a flag with its insignia, defend it till death. How claustrophobic!

I am constricted by not liking the town where I live, the society I find hard to identify with, by short days and long cold nights, dark winters and unnoticeable summers, yet I am surrounded by beauty, abundance and generosity, by lush greens and ancient buildings.

The discipline of writing, is it based on a new notebook and a nice pen?

MONDAY MENU

Celeriac and parsnip soup from Evan's farm.

Banana cake with golden sultanas and sunflower seeds.

Buckwheat, rye grain and black rice bake.

Notes for the cook

Wet hands crinkle paper with dampness.

Fat resurfaces in soup for the annoyance of the Tenzo on a diet

Never give the gomasio grinding to an uptight participant.

Trim or slice or shape the vegetables that you want in a certain way.

This pen flows beautifully, like the seasons.

The *Hua-Tou* – *What is this?* Normally comes back to me, to the self, and I am struggling with feelings of self-loathing. *What is this?* Takes me to me, to the lump that I am, to the lazy, grotesque person that I sometimes hide, for no one to see, the slob, the moaning blob, the flat, the clogged up me, the spotty, hairy, smelly me. The mundane, reluctant, arrogant me, the mean me, the small-hearted, too self absorbed to care for others me, a loathsome me. At the moment, I am possessed by feelings of self loathing, self disbelief.

But *what is this?* Because the way that I see and perceive myself is not the real me, or just a part of me, where is it coming from? Where is this? Where am I? Where am I behind the curtain of ugly? What happens when you undress the narcissist scallywag...where am I then? Can I too be the daffodil?

The kitchen has a wonderful flow. The pantry has been transformed into a fully functional room, ideal for afternoon light and spaciousness. The Rayburn however leaks fumes and I have not been able to warm it up enough to bake. The fire pit might be glowing yet the oven temperature is not even above 150 degrees... The kettles are doing their job beautifully.

Am I nice?

Am I nice?

Am I nice?

Are there mice?

Are there mice?

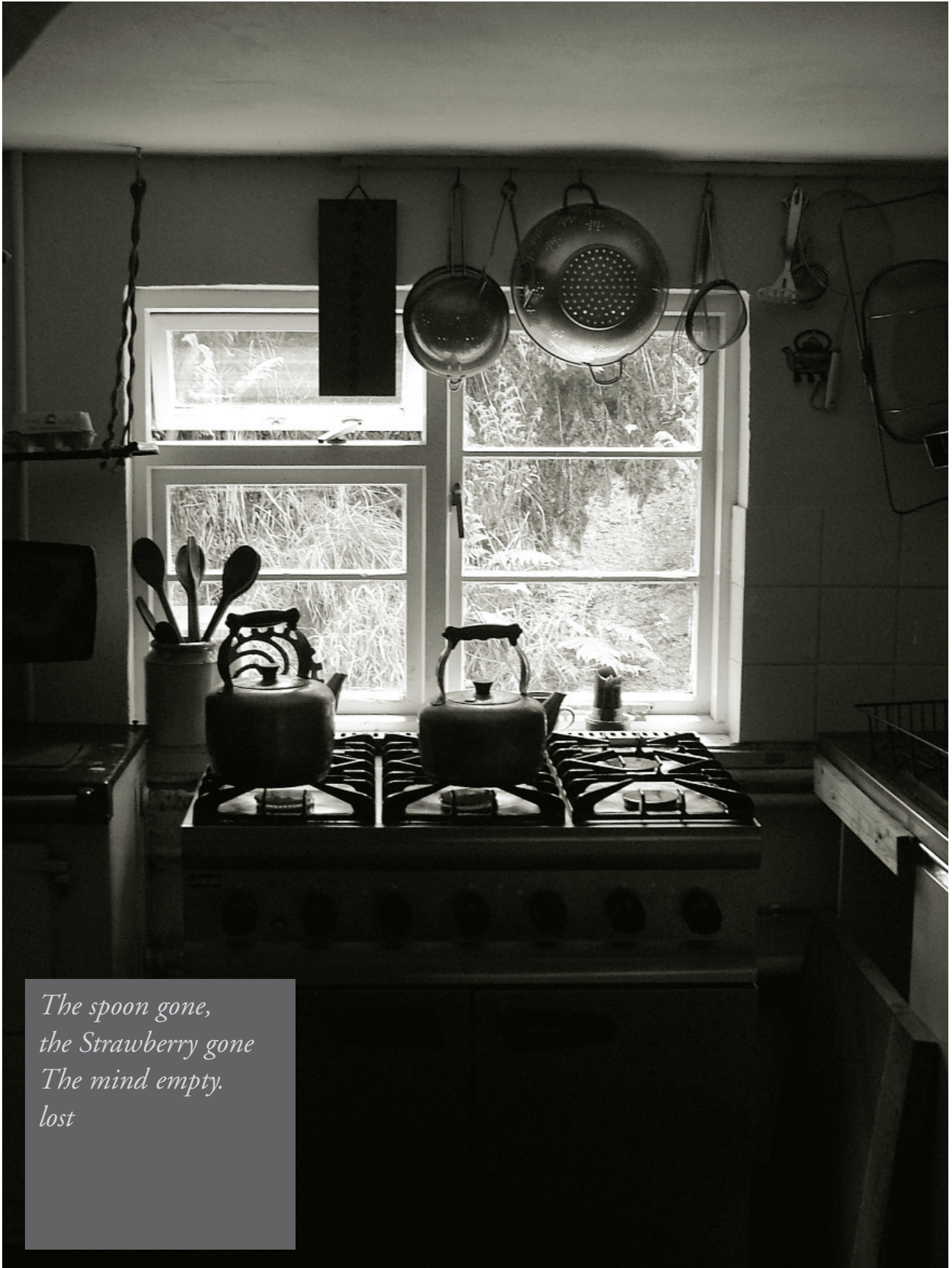
Are there mice?

Knobs, nibbles, nutmeg, noise

Books, blocks, balsamics

Jams, spreads, seeds,

Compost, fragrance, steam...



*The spoon gone,
the Strawberry gone
The mind empty.
lost*

Took a beautiful walk up the hill this afternoon, collecting leaves and conkers, admiring the view, caressing those old gentile trees that guard us on the ledge. The breathtaking landscape and its diversity; Sally's Puja by the stream filled me with sadness and the reality of impermanence. I reclaim language in all this silence. Now off to meditate...

TUESDAY

Harira!

Butternut squash curry with spiced rice and purple aloo (purple potatoes).

The Harira was wonderful. I put little cubes of preserved lemons, with all their salty sharpness and it added a punch that was subtle yet noticeable at a certain stage.

However some people !...Tahini in a perfectly seasoned soup?

Before even tasting it? Despair...

Cooking the chick peas from scratch makes such a difference compared to the sweet and slimy tinned ones. I will never forget the flavour and texture of the chick pea I tasted in that market in Asilah. An old man selling plain boiled chick peas in paper cones. He gave me one to taste. Heaven - simplicity and wholeness at its best. The universe.

So *what is it?* Are you still a slob, are you still a lump?

Spiritual cooking allows the flaws to come up.

Purple spuds look amazing. I tried to make a little bit of ghee by separating melted butter but failed terribly so I mixed a little bit of butter and oil, added cumin, coriander and cardamom seeds. Remove from heat. Stir in the potatoes, which were part boiled. Cooked them but don't allow them to get brown or over cook, when you are confident that they are thoroughly cooked remove from heat. Add tomatoes, cucumber, dried mint, lemon zest, juice of lemon, coriander.

I am sitting this afternoon after tea, sun streaming thorough the window, chanting my gut away, the mountain looks wonderful, the different coloured trees, and valleys like a picture postcard, green and lush. Evan had a lot of vegetables this time and so far they are fantastic. Russian kale, parsnips, suede, potatoes...

I have been making lots of small mandala offerings with things I find on my walks, so far managing a walk a day...breathtaking. I made a beautiful one with the death caps, leaves and acorns...Tenzo practice involves more than just cooking and as soon as you start wording experiences people's eyes dilate and the judgement begins. I even feel like that with the teachers.

I have seen a fairy every day, yes, fairies...insects, flying insects that I have never seen before but at the point of seeing them I have gone beyond the fact that they are an insect, undressed them of signifier, and at that moment one can perceive this otherness, this intelligence, the magic! And they were so

beautiful and aware and so utterly perfect. Tara always gives me those wow moments, when I go to retrieve or to offer the tray, I get touched by nature and life in ways that are overwhelming, touching, awakening ... Today at lunchtime it was insects, the broken winged fairy, the tiny spider, two ladybirds whose colour I have never seen before standing on Tara's head, no slugs this time, it is too cold but the metaphors and the connection I feel with these bugs takes my breath away, expands my heart and makes my knees wobble.

It feels wonderful, this flow of words. I haven't felt like it for ages and I realise now that it is the computer that crashes my creative narrative, the flow of the hand... I want to write stories when John is telling us to drop them.

"What is this?"

I made curry tonight, the usual butternut squash from scratch. Fresh fruit chutney with pineapple and cantaloupe melons, coconut chips and lots of green chillies; lots of green chillies, sugar, salt and fresh coriander.

WEDNESDAY

Such a beautiful day, I am sitting by Tara on the steps and the sun is warm. The stream flows merrily down the hill, chilling the milk bottles. The purple potato side relish from last night turned into an alternative and much more colourful Spanish omelette with a bit of an Indian flare. Fascinating colours and good texture. Miso soup today, diva speaking, not the best I have ever made, but let them have gomasio...

I have four people in the kitchen team and they are all great practitioners and full of generosity and awareness. John just came down for his third coffee of the day and is sitting on the bench next to D, enjoying the sunshine; a pleasure to watch, a truly dashing brace of men.

I left some onions cooking with cumin seeds and salt. I am planning to make lentil cottage pie. I am so pleased with cooking things grown down the valley: parsnips, carrots, celeriac, butternut squash and potatoes, all from Evan's farm. It is quite difficult to cook for small numbers. I am a big mama who loves big pots.

At lunchtime the day could not have been more beautiful, warm sunshine, clouds on the horizon, and as I opened the refectory door to ring the bell, a red kite flew quite low, over the sycamores and across the Chan hall's roof and started circling around the hut. Gift.

The lentil cottage pie was beautiful (the stock had the left over miso which work wonders with flavours) and the earthy sweet topping contrasted in quite a Zen way; earth and moisture, yeastiness and the perfection of a puy lentil.

What is this?

Why do I keep coming back here to cook, to the Maenllwyd, to break my back, to get knackered, to peel my layers, to stir the big pot of emotions. This is it, the cooking, I am it. No different to a beetroot or a grain of sea salt. Everything goes into the wok, it sizzles and sweats and sips each otherness. It all becomes one.

John has been instructing in the middle of a silence during mealtimes. Hold your question! Where is your mind? Hold your method! This evening he said –Where else can you get a meal like this? We all smiled.

People are sitting by the fire and there is a beautiful full moon. Nights are cold but days are full of autumnal glory. It is Thursday and the week has almost gone by...it is that time in the early afternoon when everyone has gone back to the Chan Hall and I am left in the kitchen with loads to prepare for the evening but the sun is shining so I grab a cup of mint tea and sit on the bench. A blue tit sings, spring like, leaping from branch to branch of the holly tree, just by the lovage plant. To my left is Tara, getting less and less green but harbouring a remarkable collection of insects, so beautiful and perfect. The sunlight makes the green almost incandescent, and the crimson leaves on the cherry tree beyond the stream shimmer...

John talked about coming to retreat and for what? – that feeling of coming home, not because this place is our home, but because retreats in the Maenllwyd help us to come home to ourselves, to finding our heart. I was thinking or perhaps meditating about this: why do I keep coming here? Is it to cook and work long hours and fill my lungs with soot, and damage my back? Is it because I like it? Yes, with some sense of madness and masochism one could say I do. I come here because here I find the meaning of being, not having time to think about anything makes me abandon myself and melt into the rhythm of the kitchen and the schedule. I am one with time and one with the elements, fire, water, rayburn, lamps, kettles, bounty of ingredients, teapots, spices, pots, pans and spoons...I just move around them and with them and the cooking just happens. The vegetables tell me what they are going to become, soups arise from a few bowls of chopped vegetables and seasoning, the alchemy of a cake with pears and almonds, how wonderful. An hour before it was just scattered dry ingredients in bags...Magic. We look for meaning, we look for hints on “how to be” on this “life” of ours, and sadly we miss the magic which is always around us, in us. The Aliveness of Life.

Being away from our “life” is so liberating, and perceiving that we also can carry magic, in our hands, in our presence, in our heart. The magic of love. Be kind and people will be kind, smile and they eventually will smile back. Give give give and your heart will grow and grow until its bursts out of its cavity. Your heart will not only be in you, but will be you, outside of you, it will be the landscape, it will be the moon.

Tantric cooking, sadly I didn't find any of the Thai orchids I tend to bring for the slugs, and I also think the slugs are sleeping off the feast they had in July.

Interview afternoon. Finding one's heart in the magic. John spoke of the Maenllwyd spirits and ghosts, the ones I have felt on the way to the compost heap. I like it that I can share that with him. Not that I need affirmation.

Had a wonderful walk up the hill, all the way up, fantastic colours and breathtaking views. An eye to eye encounter with a sheep, have you ever noticed how strange their eyes are?

Lovely supper tonight...Ottoman feast without the aubergines, which I forgot to buy. What makes people experience a sense of lack more profoundly than others? I made spicy apple chutney and bottled it up in individual jars that look quite pretty. I will try and sell them at the end for Dana for the bursary fund.

What is this?

Life. The beauty of life pulsating, the perfection of a single brown lentil on the palm of one's hand, the complexity of one's biochemistry, the water that I hear going down the stream which fills me, yet I will never see it, but is there, in the moment, in me, and then gone. Moss growing on a bench, alive and thriving and the sun hitting the green grass incandescent and being a witness is not enough, yet I immerse myself in its lushness, I gleam, it fills my heart, a beautiful chunk of moss. Turning rice into ambrosia...

Evening chanting...A sky filled with stars.

FRIDAY, LAST FULL DAY.

Apple cake with cranberries, cinnamon, pecans and rose petals...lovely and wholesome and completely invented, so no recipe, never again one like it. At John's request I made cauliflower curry with spiced rice, cucumber raita and chapattis, also orange wedges sprinkled with cinnamon.

What is it to challenge oneself beyond the challenge that has ceased to challenge? What is going beyond the challenge?

What is it?

Brownies by the fire...

I see fairies, but what do the fairies see?

The kitchen is slowly emptying, things are going back to boxes, to bags, and it is such a sad feeling yet I am ready to go home. Beautiful evening chant. The opening of hell's gate. The hungry ghosts. Very moving.

There is something new yet archaic about biting a russet apple. New because I don't think I ever tasted

that particular one before, the seasons in it, all that it has stored, symbolising the end of the summer sunshine, preserving it as a gift for us to taste later. New also because I never tasted a russet before I came to a retreat, thinking it was a round pear, I picked one, took a bite and the inside of my cheeks imploded as I tasted the crisp sweet tartness of this understated and almost forgotten fruit. Archaic because of the way it has prevailed throughout centuries, holding all its history in its flesh, skin texture and flavour.

What is it?

Beautiful Flowers

Conkers floating like lotus

Altar glory.

Mahamudra

Flowers on vases, buds sprouting through the sycamore tree. The ground ready to burst as it slowly warms up with the season.

Loaves, silence, over six jars of peanut butter, bells, bowls, pink peppercorns and forks, fast, farts, snores, valleys and birdsong, the owl which I still haven't seen but I hear and it haunts me.

White rice brown rice and mice who like to eat green scourers.

A shrew and tears.

RETREATS & EVENTS

WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP RETREATS 2011 & 2012

The retreats below are scheduled in 2011 and 2012. Keep an eye on the website for any updates and to read full booking details including how you may now book and pay online using debit or credit card: <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/retreats.html>

2011 WCF RETREATS



3RD DECEMBER – 8TH DECEMBER

Western Zen Retreat

LEADER: JAKE LYNE | VENUE: MAENLLWYD, WALES

2012 WCF RETREATS



7TH JANUARY – 14TH JANUARY

Silent Illumination Retreat

LEADER: HILARY RICHARDS | VENUE: MAENLLWYD, WALES



19TH FEBRUARY – 24TH FEBRUARY

Western Zen Retreat

LEADER: EDDY STREET | VENUE: MAENLLWYD, WALES

ADDITIONAL CHAN RETREATS

- *Simon Child will lead a 10-day Silent Illumination Retreat in New York on 25th November – 4th December 2011, see www.dharmadrumretreat.org*
- *Simon Child will lead a 7-day Koan Retreat at Gaia House on 4th – 11th February 2012 see www.gaiahouse.co.uk*
- *Simon Child will lead a 7-day Silent Illumination Retreat in Poland on 2nd–9th March 2012*

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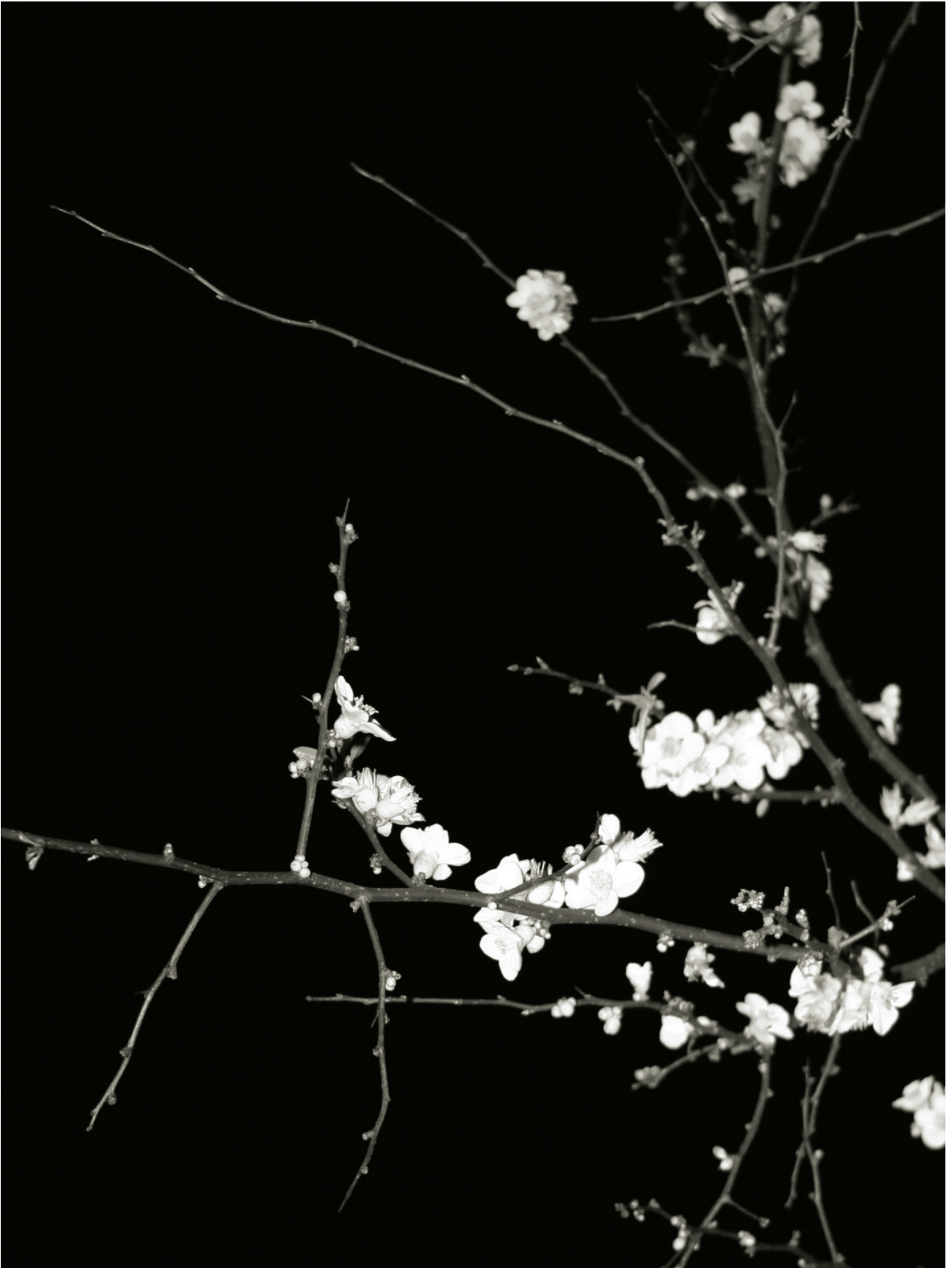


PHOTO: CHERRY BLOSSOM AT NIGHT ROB BOWDEN

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*Just Now – no other time.
The birds in the spring time trees sing at sunrise.*

JOHN CROOK (1930–2011)

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