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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

EDDY STREET

An essential task for us is to express Buddhism in a Western form within its lay practice context. This task forms the themes of this issue which comes in our new format. To provide an important pointer on our Western Buddhist lay practice we are very pleased to present a transcription of a talk given by Simon Child on the approach required to establish our own way to practise. Pat Simmons provides us with written version of a talk in which she succinctly outlines her approach to practice. Jake Lyne introduces us to the life of the important Japanese master Hakuin. As lay practice extends and develops, different forms of activity outside of formal retreat will come about and Hilary Richards presents an account and reflection on the connected practice event organised by our Sangha.

From approaches to practice we then move to expressions of the Dharma. George Marsh has chosen a poem from the mystical tradition of Britain to illustrate some similarities between our native traditions and those of the East. George takes us further into East–West comparisons with his own view of the parallels between the account of the Enlightenment experience in Mumon's koan MU and William Blake's work on the spiritual experiences of Job. The retreat reports in their special way present retreatants' own experiences arising in the wonderful structure of Buddhist practice at our retreats. Florencia Clifford then takes up this expression in terms of the cook's meditations which here is presented as a retreat report – with recipe! All these articles invite us to investigate our own experience – just do it...and find out where it leads.

## FINDING A WAY TO PRACTISE

SIMON CHILD

*A talk given at a weekend retreat 28th April 2013*<sup>1</sup>

### Bodhidharma's no dependence

Bodhidharma, the 28th Patriarch in India, lived around a thousand years after the Buddha. He brought Chan to China, establishing the Chan tradition and becoming known as the First Patriarch of Chan. He was not the first to bring Buddhism to China; Buddhism was already there, as represented in the famous story of Bodhidharma's encounter with the Emperor asking how much merit he had gained by building and supporting temples – Bodhidharma replied, 'None.'<sup>2</sup> A form of Buddhism was already present in China, and the Emperor was actively supporting it, but Bodhidharma brought a different perspective; he was not interested in the traditional external forms, and this is the basis of the well-known verse from Bodhidharma:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures,*

*No dependence on words or letters,*

*Direct pointing to the human heart,*

*Seeing into one's own nature.*

No dependence on words or letters, including scriptures. We can extend that to no dependence on any sort of forms: temples; ceremonial; practices; anything. He was pointing out that these forms are not the essence of Chan. Can the essence of Chan be conveyed in words? It can be talked about somewhat indirectly, pointed towards, but can it be conveyed, can it be transmitted in words? No. We can talk about the taste of a lemon

cake for example. We can talk about the taste as much as we like, but it is not the same as tasting it. We can talk about cake, but it is not the same as cake itself.

In this verse, Bodhidharma is pointing out the dangers in being trapped in particular forms, in specific descriptions. Yet we have lots written about Chan and we have forms such as statues and the structure of a retreat. We have a liturgy; we have all this type of activity. We talk about not depending on it and yet we make use of it – so what's going on here? Why talk about not talking? Why keep talking on and on about not talking? Why write books about not using words? It's all a bit strange, isn't it?

It is not that the words and the forms do not have any use; for someone who can't find the way these can be quite helpful to give them a pointer. But do not trick them (or yourself) into believing that you are giving them the destination; you are only giving them a hint, a pointer. These various writings, these various external forms, ceremonials, all this activity, has its use so long as we do not fall into the trap of believing it is the thing itself. It is useful, it is a skilful means, but it is not the thing itself.

Different people have different affinities for different types of supports for their practice. For some people words are very useful – they can engage with words and they can grasp the concepts. They can turn them over in their mind and make that intuitive jump away from being stuck in a concept into allowing an experience. Those words can be very useful for that person. For another person, those same words might be a trap: they might get tangled up in them; they might spend too much time trying to understand them; they might actually believe them. Similarly for other types of forms such as ritual or statues or whatever it might be; certain people have

an affinity for these and it touches them in a certain way which opens the heart and they respond, 'Aah, now I see...' Meantime someone else may see a Buddha statue as something like a garden ornament and have no interest in it. It touches different people in different ways.

Bodhidharma's verse is not denying the usefulness of various forms and words, and indeed his verse is itself formed of words! It is about having a correct relationship to them, it is about realising our propensity to grasp, to believe 'I've got the words, so I have the thing' or 'I'm near to the thing, I must hold onto these words – they're getting me closer.' If you're careless the words can take you further away; the forms can get you further away. Use them skilfully, take them as pointers, as hints, as nudges. The real place to be looking, as Bodhidharma tells us in the phrase 'direct pointing to the human heart, seeing into your own nature', is into your own experience, into your own being, looking into your own first-hand experience of being. Rather than grasping at words, or the concepts conveyed by words, look at the phenomenon of grasping itself, look at your grasping mind.

Looking into second-hand words that someone else has spouted, perhaps even third or fourth-hand recycled words (someone talking about somebody else's words) - these might give you a nudge to look into your own mind, but take care that at some point you actually drop the words and investigate your own mind. Here 'mind' refers to the Chinese word *xin*, heart-mind: direct pointing to *xin*, heart-mind – look at your whole being.

### Forms of Practice

Over history and in different countries, different forms have emerged. It is well-known that as Buddhism entered China, it mingled with the pre-





Photo: Eddy Street

BUDDHA AMOGHASIDDHI, LANTAU ISLAND, HONG KONG

existing Daoist forms, and consequently there is a certain amount of Daoist expression in Chinese Buddhism. As Buddhism entered Tibet, it mingled with the pre-existing Bon religious forms and so there is a certain amount of Bon in Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, you could say that in his time the Buddhism of the Buddha mingled with Indian culture, the Vedic Hindu culture, and certain expressions relate to that. Buddhism, by way of using skilful means, uses the language of the culture it encounters and finds means of expression which can make contact with people of that culture, using a language or a form that they already know or have some understanding of.

We are practising Buddhism in the West. Although some people may have some interest in Daoism and in Bon or whatever, they are not of our native culture. These forms may seem somewhat alien – perhaps that makes them more interesting, more mysterious, exotic, but they are not of our culture. So it begs the question, if the presentation of Buddhism changed as it entered China, and as it entered Tibet and other countries, what way might it change or does it need to change as it enters the West? Should we be adopting it wholesale, copying it, or should we be finding our own expression – and what might that be? How are we sure we are finding authentic expression? We need to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. There is a potential problem here because we are making our choices somewhat egotistically; we are choosing what we believe might be best (or easiest) for me.

This is not a simple matter and it is something which, in some ways, just evolves on its own over time. However, the reason I am expressing it this way is because we can narrow it down. Rather than just saying ‘Buddhism in the West’ or ‘Buddhism in Europe’ or ‘Buddhism in Britain’, we

could be saying ‘What’s the appropriate expression of Buddhism in you, in your life?’ How might you absorb the teachings in a way which is meaningful to you, how might you express them in your own life?

You may find it supportive to adopt forms which have come from the East – in a sense that is the default starting position, since those are the forms we are offered. But you may also discover other forms which are helpful to you. If they help support your practice, there is no problem with that. Find ways in which you can support your practice.

There can be difficulties about simply adopting an Eastern model for it is not only an East-West difficulty as there are also other cultural differences. There is ancient versus modern – a lot of Buddhist culture is of course old, which is fine, but it also means it may not fit with the way we live today. Another big difference is the question of lay versus monastic. Buddhism in the East has been centred around monasticism – the monastics run the temples, the monastics do the teaching. The role of the lay people, who are the majority, has largely been to be supportive of the monastics. This is not the model that has been developing in the West for even though there are monastics they are much fewer than lay practitioners. Also even though there are established Western monasteries, some of them are not thriving so well as they are finding that those who established the monastery are still there, getting older, but there are not so many people interested in joining them. It might even be that some examples of Western monasticism last only one or two generations. Most of us are not interested in monasticism; it may not be available to us for practical reasons, as for example, we have families and other commitments which mean that even if we were interested it would not be available to us.

## A Western model

There is a different sort of model emerging in the West which is not centred around traditional monasticism. I am not making a value judgment on monasticism, saying it is good or bad. It is simply an observation; a well-established observation that in the West the main interest in Buddhism is amongst lay people who may practise at least as seriously as monastics have done in the past in the East. Westerners tend to practise differently from historic and current-day practice in the East. In large parts of the world Buddhism is practised by both lay and monastic as what we might consider a ‘folk religion’, with Buddha and Bodhisattvas being worshipped very much as the gods of other religions. This is not the predominant form in the West, so we are already finding a different expression.

Western Buddhism has been characterised as being ‘Meditation Buddhism’. From the range of practices in Buddhism, of which there are many, Westerners tend to focus on meditation practice, ‘because I can get enlightened by doing my meditation, can’t I? Hmm... so I’ll focus on that please, yeah...’ It is wonderful that people do intensive meditation; that has always been an important part of practice, but it is worth noting that in many ways it is not the dominant form of practice in worldwide Buddhism.

There is an interesting book on Chinese Buddhism<sup>3</sup> which surveys how the monasteries functioned. You could hardly call them formless as they had become large institutions; they had large buildings, and land-holdings for which they took tithes from the people who farmed the land. If you were a monk arriving at or living in a monastery, your hope was to get a good job, such as to be in charge of the office. If you could not

be in charge you could hope to get a reasonable post such as kitchen worker. The worst was to be left without a job because then you were not allowed to do anything except go and sit in the meditation hall all day, and that was the lowest of the low!

Many Westerners have the idea that being a monastic means you get to practise sitting meditation all the time. It does not quite work like that. Monastics may never even get an opportunity to sit on a retreat – they are too busy working, too busy looking after the institution. Many monastics work more hours per day than many lay people, just fitting in time for a morning and evening sit and service and otherwise working 5am to 10pm.

There is an ideal in some people's minds that 'to be a monastic and to practise all the time and do all that non-stop meditation, it's really wonderful, it's really the real thing'. But then... 'I'm a failure because I can't do that. I'll go on a retreat sometimes and I'll sit on my cushion as often as I can, so I'll do my best.. But it won't be enough... Oh...'

This attitude to practice can get in the way, especially when thinking about how we can practise as lay people. It is not helpful if we hold this particular image of practice as an ideal, thinking that the 'real thing' is practising on retreat nearly all the time. It is not helpful if we think that what we should do is practise sitting meditation all the time, all day, permanent silent retreat, and that being a monastic would enable us to do that the whole of our life. If we think like this then we are setting ourselves up for failure because that is not going to happen (whether we are monastic or lay). We have various responsibilities in our lives, we have things to do, we have people to relate to, we need to earn money, and all the rest of it. To carry that sort of model in our mind is actually dysfunctional; it disturbs us; it sets us up for failure.



PHOTO: Eddy Street

MASTER XUANZANG, XIAN, CHINA

## Practice in our lives

In terms of how we practise in our lives, we need to consider what is the appropriate form for us as lay people? We need to be aware that we may have unknowingly internalised some model about how it should be done if it is to be done properly. The important question is: what is your way of living your practice?

Hopefully it does involve spending some time on intensive retreat, because retreat has a certain quality of experience which is hard to find in everyday life. The cumulative effect of serial periods of undistracted meditation is not easily found except on retreat. There is value in spending some time on retreat away from everyday life, where you discover that it is possible to settle more deeply than usual. The value in settling is not so that you can grasp the experience of being settled - the value in settling is that you create a better opportunity to notice your bad habits, your tendencies, your preconceptions. As the mind settles, you tend to find these

things sieving out – you are left with certain things which do not go away so easily and you are left with certain things running around the mind. It is not a problem that these issues do not settle down easily as this is actually the point of the practice - to highlight to you what you are carrying. You are carrying various fixed ideas; you are carrying various attitudes. On retreat, the mind settles to a certain extent but then you find it plateauing and not settling completely. You find certain matters become highlighted by being present in what is by now a clearer mind, and you realise that you are carrying these obstructions and this gives you a chance to work through them, to release them.

Part of the value of an intensive retreat is that it brings to the surface things which may otherwise be hidden in the noise of everyday life. They are hidden, but they are still affecting you. If you are carrying habits of attitude, prejudices, preconceptions, fixed views, then these are affecting the way you live your life; they are affecting your choices in your life. They are not always doing so at a conscious level; they are working at you below the surface. With intensive meditation on retreat, as you drain out the mind, it is as though the surface goes lower - it is a bit like draining out a pond and you suddenly see an old pram sticking up: 'Oh, I forgot that was there. Bit of work needs doing in this pond of mine.' So we can see that retreat has this quality of going deeper and digging away at stuff which might otherwise be left untouched but which is still affecting you and contributing to your actions from underneath.

But what about practice when you are not on retreat? There are still issues that can be worked through when you are not on retreat. Some of this only gets triggered in specific circumstances in everyday life so you are hardly likely to notice it and work through it on retreat. You need to

cultivate the skill of continuing your practice in any circumstance; Chan is not a retreat-only practice. Do the arithmetic. If you attend retreat, shall we say two weeks a year, it is something like four per cent of your life you are spending on retreat. So ninety-six per cent of your life you are not on retreat – you had better find a way of practising during that ninety-six per cent. The corresponding figures for those who sit half an hour on the cushion (to whom I ask, ‘what about the other twenty three and a half hours a day’), is only about another two per cent of your life. For an awful lot of the time you are not on retreat, and you are not on a cushion. You need to find a form of practice, a form of investigating the mind, which is applicable to all circumstances. We can call this mindfulness practice. Be aware of the situation you are in; be aware of your environment and those around you. Be aware of your contribution to the situation, such as your own actions and speech. Especially be aware of the self arising and reacting; the self-concern possibly distorting what might otherwise have become a more appropriate action. Self-concern arises in the moment, triggered perhaps by certain circumstances, certain stresses, certain people, certain demands. If you are paying attention then you can notice this happening even in the midst of life. You need to cultivate the skill of watching the mind, perhaps by training on the cushion whether at home or on retreat, but then make it a continuous activity which carries on throughout your life.

Meditation as a formal practice of sitting on a cushion has great value; do not misunderstand and think that I am disparaging that. What I am talking about is the importance of extending your practice beyond the cushion so that it becomes a part of your life, because most of your life you are not on the cushion. Continue your cultivation so that it becomes



automatic in all circumstances, so that your default state becomes one of being aware; your default state is to notice when self-concern is arising and beginning to distort your actions. If you can be aware at this point then you have an opportunity to retune the action before it happens, to make an adjustment, to refrain from saying what you are about to say or not to do what you would nearly always otherwise have done. This is different to regretting something afterwards; this is influencing it before it happens, which becomes possible as a result of training the mind to be present and attentive in a continuous way.

What I am pointing towards here is how you can practise in your life. We do not need to call it Western or Eastern, monastic or lay, ancient or modern. Maybe there is no need a name for it. It is pointing you towards continuing your cultivation whatever the circumstances you find yourself in. Do not wait for quiet, relaxed surroundings saying, 'I'll only practise then; it's too hard until I get there.' No, practise in every situation. Of course, there are distractions, and the mind wanders and you will find it difficult and you will have lapses – but treat those as reminders to redouble your efforts. Throughout the day, just catch yourself – the mind has wandered. Throughout the day, catch yourself – self-concern distorting your actions, and you realise 'Oh, I've done it again.'

### Find your way

Find a way of living your life; find a way of living your practice, and if you find some of the traditional supports that others have developed are useful for you, good, use them. For example, some people find that liturgy can be very helpful, and some not. Some find forms such as altars helpful and some not. Some find reading helpful and some not. Some find lis-

tening to teachings helpful and some not. With a certain amount of trial and error, you can discover what seems helpful to you. If you find them not so useful, maybe there is no need to use them – but it is still useful to know about them, even though they are not your prime method, and then you will be ready for circumstances when they could be useful to you. For example, some people never usually recite mantras, but perhaps one day their mind is particularly disturbed, maybe due to a particularly stressful situation, and in this case reciting a mantra may be ideal – picking up a mantra recitation gives a stronger focus and can capture the wandering attention in a way which other practices do not. This just one example of how it can be useful to have several different practices available to you, even if you rarely use some of them.

Bodhidharma pointed out that we are not dependent on any of these forms, methods, words; none of these is the thing itself, but potentially they are all useful in various ways. Indeed, Bodhidharma did not make this statement and then shut up and stay silent, did he? He is known for sitting facing the wall for about nine years... but he did some teaching as well. There are some other writings of his; he just did not give up at that point. This verse of his is itself a pointer and it is a useful one – it is often quoted and I am quoting it now, and others will quote it. So even the words which tell us there is no dependence on words, they are useful.

Be open-minded and exploratory and discover what is useful for you to support your practice in different circumstances, particularly in the busyness of your everyday life. If you do not find a way to support your practice during your life then practice can become rather disjointed – a retreat once or twice a year, sitting on the cushion maybe most days but perhaps somewhat dreamily and sleepy because you are tired after a busy

day at work. If that is the extent of your practice then it loses its continuity. If you can make your practice continuous - on-going - then it develops a power.

This power may not be immediately apparent because, especially in everyday life when there are distractions, you can tend to pass judgement on yourself and become disheartened. 'I'm not doing very well; I'm not getting as settled as I did on that five/seven/forty-nine day retreat, so I'm wasting my time.' No, that is not correct. That you are noticing you are not settled is already good practice; it means that you are noticing the state of your mind; it means that you are noticing your tendency to wander. If you are aware of not practising very well, then you are already doing good practice! When you are not even aware of not practising very well, because you are not actually bothering to practise, because you have given up – that is not so good.

Having an orientation to practise, having an intention to practise, and noticing that it is quite tricky, difficult and that you get distracted then noticing that you have dull patches and that you have patches when you are blank and out of it and forget to practise - noticing this is itself a key part of practice. If you keep on picking yourself up, then you can establish an ongoing practice as a lay person in the modern West. This is how people practise; you find a way to cultivate an attention which continues to be available outside of the formal practices. It becomes part of your life. You accept that it has its own qualities which are different to sitting on the cushion; you do not make a comparison and judge it better or worse. You just let it flow, and when it has a hiccup you pick it up and continue.

Occasional intensive practice such as on a short retreat like this, or on a longer one, gives you a taste of the depths to which your mind can set-

tle, and it also gives you an opportunity to cultivate some skill in working through what you discover when it does settle. Then those practice skills are carried through to your everyday life; to the extent the mind can settle, you let it, accepting that it won't necessarily be so deep; to the extent that you can notice your obstructions arising and work through them, you do that. In this way practice continues throughout the whole day, throughout the whole week and throughout your life.

## NOTES

- 1 Transcribed by Jeanine Woodward
- 2 See the First Case in Thomas Cleary, (trans). *The Blue Cliff Record*. Shambhala. Boston, MA, USA. 2005
- 3 Holmes Welch: *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism: 1900-1950*. Harvard University Press. Harvard, MA, USA 1967

## STEP INTO THE CIRCLE OF WONDER: BEING PRESENT IN THE PRESENT

PAT SIMMONS

*Version of a talk given at a Bristol Chan Group day retreat, March 2013*

Many years ago, long before I discovered meditation, let alone Buddhism, I was staying with my sister, who then lived in a shared house in London. For some reason we went into someone else's room, and there I saw something that took my breath away: a piece of paper on the wall with written on it in beautiful calligraphy, "Be here now".

That was all it said, but the effect on me was quite spectacular. Forty years on I can still remember every cell in my body responding to that simple command. I felt all my limbs relax, and my spirits soar.

In an instant, I realised that I hardly ever was here now, and that to be so would make me happier, calmer and more in charge of my own life. Ever since, I have been trying – often with little success – simply to be here now.

In my experience, being here and now is the basis of all insight and wisdom. This is where we are, and if we are ever to experience eternity, timelessness, stepping into the circle of wonder – whatever – this is where we will do it. This is it. This, too, is where we are going to manifest love and compassion, the only time and place available to us for doing so.

So, in some respects this retreat is going to be a modest occasion. All I am offering you is a chance, a few hours, to improve your skill (and I think it is a skill) at being present, occupying your life fully in its present manifestation, being aware of who you are right here and now. But if you

manage this task – and for many of us it is a difficult task – who knows what might be the result?

So, let us begin by looking at Now. We spend a lot of time in Buddhist meditation, as well we might, contemplating time, and the impermanence it brings in its train, the impermanence which it is. The past is no longer here, we say, and the future has not yet arrived. The only part of our experience that is real is Now.

And that Now is barely more than a mincer that takes the future and turns it constantly, instantly, into the past. As soon as we experience Now, it has gone. We never arrive at it, never get the chance to sit down in it with a nice cup of tea and put our feet up. To inhabit the present moment is to be continuously watching the birth and then the simultaneous death of each nano-second. Dogen says “You may suppose that time is only passing away, and not understand that time never arrives.”<sup>1</sup>

John Crook often used the metaphor of a surfer riding the wave of time. We are constantly on the crest of the wave, he used to say, hurtling constantly forward into – into what? We never reach the beach, except perhaps at death. I love that metaphor. I think it is powerful and illuminating.

But I think a lot of talk about being in the present runs the risk of creating a polarity between Now and Not-now. But our Now contains our past, and is already creating our future and not just our own past and future. As Dogen says, “Just actualise all time as all being.”<sup>2</sup>

The wave we are surfing does not just contain – it actually is - the energy of the thrust that got it going. The present is the past, just as each note of a melody is also the notes that preceded it. We are riding the past as well as the present. Past and present are not separate: they are one.

Time is flow. We are flow, rather than an endless procession of now-now-now instants.

It is less easy to see the future in similar terms, because we do not know what it looks like, so we cannot recognise it, but we all know that in this present instant we are creating our personal future and an infinite number of other futures. Each note of a melody is the notes that will follow it.

To deny these connections between past and present, present and future, may make it simpler to rest in the present, but it also severs important strands of what is often called Indra's net, that web of total universal interconnectedness. "In essence all things in the entire world are linked with one another as moments,"<sup>3</sup> says Dogen.

It may seem that the Here, of "here and now", is a simpler matter. Sure, it is subject to time, so is less permanent than we might think. But at least it is just here - isn't it?

We now know from physics, if we have not already picked up on it in our own practice, that Here is not simple at all. All around us in every direction – every direction - stretches the universe: the ordinary simple universe we think we know, as well as all the other universes that physics and mathematics are now telling us probably, in some way, also exist.

Magically we are here, right here, and nowhere else. Our occupying of this space is one knot, one connection, among the infinite number that make up Indra's net.

And that one tiny knot is pulsating and heaving. We are literally empty collections of atoms placed in a somewhat provisional relationship to other empty collections of atoms. As we sit here in stillness, our bodies are vibrating in a wild dance of atoms and molecules and other very small

things, and the cushions, chairs, floor, the soil somewhere under the floor, are whizzing around in similar fashion.

At the same time, the planet we are all taking for granted as we sit on it, is hurtling through space at some unlikely speed, while it spins dizzily round on its axis, now facing the sun, now whirling us round to face out into the infinite darkness of infinite space.

The discoveries of physicists, our own discoveries in meditation, reveal the strangeness and mystery of Here and Now.

It is exciting stuff. It is scary stuff. It is just ordinary stuff.

And in the centre of all this wild, exhilarating and confusing dance, we sit, each one of us. The itch in our right big toe, the blinking of our left eye, the sadness, boredom and joy we are feeling, are all part of what is going on in the universe this moment.

We are utterly unimportant, and yet the whole universe has been moving forever towards us being precisely where we are this minute.

As the subtitle for this day retreat I used part of a phrase that we are all familiar with: “Being present in the presence of the present”. But I only used part of it: “Being present in the present”. The full phrase ups the emphasis wonderfully, but it can also create another polarity: “us” and “the present”.

The simple fact is that we are the present moment: it is not something we can be present “in”. As a matter of simple physical fact – nothing mysterious or “spiritual” – here-and-now has no other manifestation than us. We are the present; we are Here-Now.

I think this is part of what Dogen meant by “being-time” or time-being. “Mountains are time,” he said. “Oceans are time.” “Since there is nothing but just this moment, the time-being is all the time there is.” And



we are time – “The self is time,”<sup>4</sup> according to Dogen. We are here and now as here and now manifest themselves this instant in this spot.

Which, of course, is another way of saying we have no absolute permanent self. We are as impermanent, as provisional and unlikely, as Here and Now.

Once we start to see beyond one polarity the others start to dissolve. I almost cheated in my publicity for this retreat in using that beautiful command of Hongzhi’s: “Step into the circle of wonder”. But the circle of wonder is not something we can step into: we are already in it. Indeed, we are it.

Hongzhi encourages us to go further: “Wander into the centre of the circle of wonder”,<sup>5</sup> he says. If we have the courage to open our eyes fully – and I cannot say that I ever have – we will become aware that we have already done so. We are there. We are that centre.

In John Crook’s words, “Time and space are simply the ring through which the tiger jumps.”<sup>6</sup> We are the ring. We are the tiger.

## NOTES

- 1, 2, 3, 4 Zen Master Dogen, *The Time-Being (Uji)*, from *Moon in a Dewdrop: writings of Zen Master Dogen*, North Point Press, 1985
- 5 Zen Master Hongzhi, *Practice Instructions: The Bright Boundless Field*, from *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi*, ed and trans Taigen Dan Leighton, Tuttle Publishing, 2000
- 6 John Crook *On Pursuing that which Leaves No Tracks*, see Western Chan Fellowship website <http://w-c-f.org/Q181>

WILD IVY:  
THE LIFE OF ZEN MASTER HAKUIN <sup>1</sup>

JAKE LYNE

In the history of Zen, Master Hakuin (1689-1769), an iconoclast, polemicist, humourist, poet and artist, stands out like a kingfisher darting upriver through sunlight and shadows.

The koan, 'What is the sound of one hand?', was invented by Hakuin and considered by him to be the most effective tool for bringing lay and monastic Zen students to Satori in the first stages of training.

*Even when not listening,*

*Lift up one hand –*

*The cuckoo!*

In his early life, Hakuin was affected by a vivid fear of the seemingly interminable terror that would be inflicted in the hell realms by ice, needles, fire and boiling oil, on anyone who did not "break free from Mara's web of delusion".

He was an intense young man, subject to extreme highs and lows in his spiritual quest. He was unsure about which of the three main Japanese religious paths, Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, to follow in order to save himself from future torment. One day, in the temple library of a bad tempered scholar priest, nicknamed "Old man Bao", to help him make his choice, Hakuin closed his eyes and selected a book at random from a pile of books. He landed on "Spurring Students through the Zen barriers"<sup>2</sup> and was deeply impressed by it. He took this book as his teacher, being unable to find a suitable living master at the time.

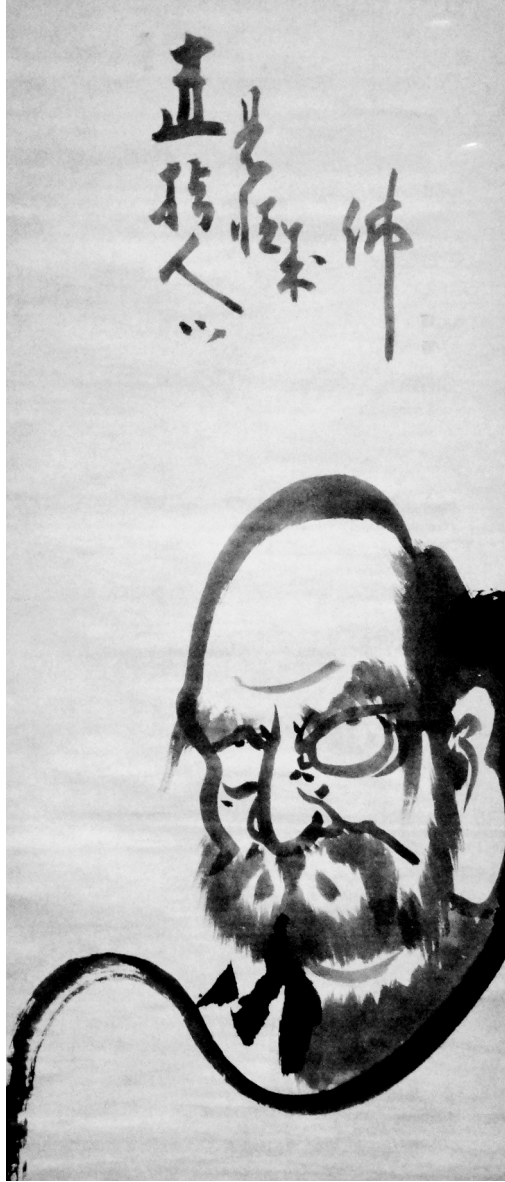


PHOTO: Wikipedia Commons

BODHIDHARMA BY HAKUIN

His first breakthrough came when he was 21 years old. Disappointed in an encounter with a famous teacher at Eigen-ji temple, Hakuin writes,

I hid myself inside a shrine room dedicated to the lords of the province, vowing to fast and concentrate single mindedly on my practice for seven days. At around midnight on the seventh and final night of my practice, the boom of the bell from a distant temple reached my ears: suddenly my body and mind dropped completely away... Overwhelmed with joy I hollered out at the top of my lungs!

My yells brought my companions running from the monks' quarters. We joined hands and they shared with me the intense joy of the moment. After that, however, I became extremely proud and arrogant. Everyone I encountered seemed to me like so many lumps of dirt.

Hakuin considered his enlightenment as on a par with that of Old Yen t'ou, widely regarded as the most enlightened master for hundreds of years. He was given a high ranking post in the monastery there and then, which probably encouraged his arrogance. It was fortunate for Hakuin that he met Etan Zosu, a teacher at Shoju-an temple, who brought him back down to earth only a year after this event.

After I had set forth my understanding to the master (Etan Zosu) during dokusan (personal interview), he said to me, "Commitment to the study of Zen must be genuine. How do you understand the koan about the Dog and the Buddha-Nature?"

"No way to land a hand or foot on that," I replied.

He abruptly reached out and caught my nose. Giving it a sharp push with his hand, he said, "Got a pretty good hand on it there."

I couldn't make a single move, either forward or backward, I was unable to spit out a single syllable. That encounter put me in a very troubled state. I was totally frustrated and demoralised. I sat red-eyed and miserable, my cheeks burning from the constant tears.

The challenge for the master in such a situation is to deflate the student without harming their motivation. Etan Zosu restored Hakuin's confidence by giving him koans to work on, saying that "Anyone who gets through one of these deserves to be called a descendant of the Buddhas and Patriarchs."

Hakuin's trials were not yet over. Whilst in a nearby village, he became so absorbed in the koans that he failed to notice that he was trespassing on someone's land. An elderly woman came out of her house, broom in hand and began whacking him repeatedly and violently on the head. Hakuin was knocked unconscious! However, when he came to, he found that all the koans were penetrated completely. Just as in the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, the ministrations of the opposite sex seemed to be critical to the awakening, though in the case of the Buddha the approach of Sujata was more gentle and kind!

Etan Zosu, at the same time as recognising Hakuin's insight with three taps of his fan on Hakuin's back, entreated him never to be satisfied with trifling gains, but to devote himself to post-satori training.

Hakuin took this to heart and in his own teaching, gave equal weight to satori and post-satori training. Post-satori training means never becoming complacent, but keeping on with training until more difficult barriers are encountered. Hakuin continued to train relentlessly, at one stage to the point of exhaustion or Zen sickness. He took a long time to learn how to contain his zealous nature, so that he could maintain focus whilst not damaging his health.

Hakuin was an excoriating critic of Zen practice that did not meet his high expectations. A teacher who misled or indulged their students, bore responsibility for potentially not saving them from hell and might well fall into a hell realm themselves. He was especially critical of the Soto sect and its Silent Illumination practice. Inter-religious hatred tends to be strongest between closely related sects, and Hakuin was certainly a fomenter of conflict between Rinzai and Soto Zen. He thought that Silent Illumination practice had the potential to harm the country.

If the various lords and high officials were to neglect their visits to court and cast aside their governmental duties, and practice dead sitting and silent illumination; if the warriors were to neglect their archery and charioteering, forget the martial arts, and practice dead silent illumination; if the merchants were to lock their shops and smash their abacuses, and practice dead silent illumination; if the farmers were to throw away their ploughs and hoes, cease their cultivation, and practice dead silent illumination...the country would collapse and people drop with exhaustion. Bandits would arise everywhere and the nation would be in grievous danger.<sup>2</sup>

For sixteen years from the age of 25 to 41 Hakuin was troubled by the following quotation:

*Since the time of the Buddha, every wise and eminent priest who has lacked the Mind of Enlightenment has without exception fallen into the paths of evil.*

What is The Mind of Enlightenment? In our own day several famous Zen teachers who have fallen from grace have claimed to be acting from the mind of enlightenment. Hakuin however was troubled, he could not understand what it meant, until one day:

Suddenly, unexpectedly, I saw it – it was as clear as if it were right there in the hollow of my hand. What is the Mind of Enlightenment? It is, I realised, a matter of doing good – benefiting others by giving them the gift of the Dharma teaching.

In the spirit of his realisation of the mind of enlightenment, he responded to all requests to teach the Dharma and as his fame spread so too did his travels to many provinces in Japan. But Hakuin spent the rest of his life living in Shoin-ji, originally a tumble down, small provincial monastery, near the place of his birth that he restored over many years.

Both the good times and difficult times have passed;  
 Now I am content –  
 Never again will I search  
 For another mountain.

Norman Waddell's *Wild Ivy* is a marvellous translation of Hakuin's writing, conveying something of the humour, vigour, and seriousness of this great teacher. The focus of the book is on Hakuin as a Zen master. Hakuin was much more than this; he became famous for his remarkable poetry, writing and calligraphy, much of which survives. If you like *Wild Ivy*, you might also be interested in *The Sound of One Hand*,<sup>3</sup> a beautifully illustrated book that celebrates Hakuin's artistic works.

Hakuin taught students to totally immerse themselves in their practice at all times in all activities. For anyone who feels they have mastered Zen, who can now put Zen into practice without needing to train, Hakuin mentions one final, firmly closed, tightly locked gate. If one day you are blessed to be able to find it, please attend to it.

## NOTES

- 1 Norman Waddell (trans) *Wild Ivy. The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin* Shambhala. Boston, MA USA. 1999
- 2 J. C. Cleary (trans) *Meditating With Koans*. Wisdom Publications. Somerville, MA, USA 1982
- 3 Audrey Yoshiko Seo and Stephen Addiss. *The Sound of One Hand. Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin*. Shambhala. Boston, MA, USA. 2010





PHOTO: ROB BOWDEN

EMEI SHAN MOUNTAIN, SICHUAN PROVINCE, CHINA

## CONNECTED PRACTICE FOR WESAK: AN EXPERIMENT FOR LAY CHAN PRACTITIONERS 2013

HILARY RICHARDS

### The Background

The sangha is important for Buddhist practice. It is the third Jewel of Refuge. However, it is not always possible for people physically to come together either for short meditation sessions or for longer periods on retreat. In order to address this and as part of the invitation to develop new ideas and experiments in Chan, the Western Chan Fellowship offered a “virtual” sangha event to allow practitioners at different locations to practice together over the celebrations of Wesak 2013. We called this “Connected Practice for Wesak”.

We built on the experience of the Cardiff Chan Group who had previously run an Enhanced Practice period.<sup>1</sup> The proposal for the event was agreed by the WCF Practice Committee. It was advertised on the WCF website with links to Facebook and it was promoted by email to those on the WCF mailing list and by post through the WCF Newsletter. I acted as co-ordinator.

Participants were invited to join for a period of 12 days around Wesak into a commitment for connected and enhanced practice, undertaken in daily life, at home or in the workplace. This increased the opportunity for mindfulness in daily life and offered the silent support of knowing we were not alone in our practice. In addition, a mindfulness bell was rung at noon each day, when everyone, wherever they were, could join the silence marked by the Noon Bell.

## The Evolving Practice

This opportunity for practice was used in many different and creative ways. In total, 48 people formally signed up and these were divided about equally between men (23) and women (25). Many more joined unofficially. Only about half of the formal participants were WCF members. Each participant chose how they wished to enhance their practice and this depended on personal circumstances and choice. Many participants intended to use the opportunity for more meditation practice combined with mindfulness practice and observation of the Noon Bell. Participants were invited to state how they would use the time:

- I am intending to sit, come what may! - at mid-day on each of the days as well as incorporating mindfulness into my daily activities. It will be especially good knowing that others are choosing this moment for silence.
- I will sit every morning and evening from 6.30 – 7.30 encouraged by others doing the same.
- I will pause to take three mindful breaths at moments during the day and take a breath before answering the phone at work.
- I will take extra care with a challenging relationship.
- I want to make an extra effort to be thankful for the food I eat and to eat it mindfully.
- A random act of kindness every day.
- Mindful travel to and from work as far as possible. This will usually mean abandoning the car for the train.
- We will be walking for a few days along the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, which should be a good time and place for silent reflection in magnificent wild places along an ancient route of pilgrimage.
- Mindfully let our hens out and feed them at 7.15am.

- Attempting mindfulness throughout the day as much as possible, using prompts such as when switching on the kettle.
- To feel gratitude. I don't know why this came to me, and it is not gratitude for anything specific, just gratitude.

There were many excellent ideas. It was clear that experience of 'attending to' the Noon Bell<sup>2</sup> was a useful element of the practice. Here are some comments:

- My target was small – to listen for the bell at mid-day every day!
- We rang an answering bell each day at mid-day on retreat at Bala Brook
- Every time my noon alarm went off I thought of all the other folk stopping or taking a moment and sometimes I stopped and took a moment to appreciate my surroundings and the experience of what it was like to be there.
- The 12 noon bell was a good reminder to come back to the moment and recall the practice. In fact, I left the reminder on my phone for a week after the end of the practice. A rather nice coincidence was that the church bell near my office rings on the hour and this drew my attention out into the world around me.
- I did not attempt to remember to stop at the noon bell as this did not fit in. I am not usually aware when noon is but I quite often thought about it being rung, and it had a resonance that way, if not exactly always at 12.
- I had some friends from other groups joining in from other parts of the country and one of my friends said that come 12 noon she looked at her clock and felt the energy of others surrounding her because we were all doing the same.

- I was inspired to clean & hang up the heavy old bronze school bell which has been lying around our yard for too long. We hung it with a stout rope on an apple tree in the garden, and rang it with gusto at noon.

### Feedback and Reflections

Following the event, we asked for feedback. Everyone who completed the evaluation, (41 participants) stated they would join in a future event.

Of these 41, most had heard about the practice mainly through the email mailing list and newsletter as well as through their local groups (12), with some finding out via Facebook (2) and the WCF website (2). Several people told friends who joined in unofficially. Members of one Chan Group joined in without 'signing up' and reported it to be very beneficial and important. One local group went on to email a weekly gatha to their members to help maintain the momentum of the connected practice period.

Nearly everyone reported that they were pleased with how things had gone, with several commenting they recognised any failings were their own. All were grateful for the opportunity and there are lots of ideas for doing things differently. These include more use of WCF-talk; establishing a dedicated internet forum for discussion or using Skype; a telephone list of people who might be available for a supportive chat and a type of communication exercise on the phone every day.

Caring responsibilities in particular can make regular practice difficult and attending a retreat impossible, so we were interested to find out if the connected practice period was useful for this group of people. Some participants with caring responsibilities found their practice easier and more focussed but a few said it made no difference.

It was clear that the experience of being involved in the event had an impact for how a future event would be approached. One participant stated that she would engage in a future event “with an awareness of the challenge connected practice poses”. Another would like to try again and “be a bit more connected this time – a bit more AWAKE!” Here are some other comments:

- A vital part of practice is to integrate it into your daily life. Anything that can help with that process is welcome.
- Doing little things can make a difference to one’s practice and day; Connected Practice clearly can encourage this.
- I like such a simple but powerful idea of joining other people in practice.
- I realized that I should do more practice in my everyday life than I usually do, and that it was possible to do so without too much sacrifice of normal activities. I enjoyed feeling 'connected' to others and found it very encouraging.
- The sense of being part of a different and almost ‘anonymous’ group brought new insight to the concept of interdependence.
- This Connected Practice period for Wesak seems to have concentrated the mind and practice, and has thrown up some unexpected and memorable moments.

This experiment in lay Chan practice was a success. As someone commented, “It was just good to feel connected.” Everyone found the mutual support of the Connected Practice format to be helpful and encouraging. This enhancement to daily practice proved a valuable tool in integrating practice into daily life. The WCF could run more Connected Practice periods, making them part of our general programme.

## NOTES

- 1 For general instruction see “Period of Enhanced Practice” on Cardiff Chan Group web page <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups/cardiff-chan-group/>
- 2 For an article by Rob Stratton on ringing the Mindfulness Bell go to the Cardiff Chan Group website and click on the link next to ‘Daily 1pm Bell’

## CONNECTED PRACTICE EVENT IN MAY

A similar event will be run 18th–29th May 2014.

See WCF website for details:

<http://w-c-f.org/Q342> scroll down for ‘Connected Practice.’



LAMPS AT MAENLLWYD

## WESTERN MYSTICISM AND CHAN

GEORGE MARSH

You are a mystic if you have had a direct experience of the mystical vision, a sense of the interconnectedness of all things in awesome and mysterious unity. You have felt that you “...Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour,” as Blake put it. You have let go of self-concern and lost yourself in what Zen master Sokei-an called, “This peculiar love of Great Nature.”

The mystical vision is the inspirational source of all religions, though characteristically only a relatively small number of contemplatives bear witness to it. Aldous Huxley, following Leibniz, called it ‘The Perennial Philosophy’. But it is not limited to religions. Rationalists and scientists experience the awe, and a few inspired poets and artists in all cultures always dedicate their working lives to celebrating it.

There are many correspondences between the mystical vision as described by enlightened Chan teachers and the underground mystical thread in some British poets. It is important to find connections between the Buddhism of our tradition and our own native culture and to illustrate the universality of the great themes that are articulated so well in the literature of Chan. Here is a poem from the Celtic tradition that expresses something of the same spirit, it is an ancient druidic song in Gaelic supposedly by a bard called Amergin from the Bronze Age.



*I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,  
I am the wave of the ocean,  
I am the murmur of the billows,  
I am the ox of the seven combats,  
I am the vulture upon the rocks,  
I am a beam of the sun,  
I am the fairest of plants,  
I am a wild boar in valour,  
I am a salmon in the water,  
I am a lake on the plain,  
I am a word of science,  
I am the point of the lance in battle,  
I am the God who creates in the bead the fire.  
Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the mountain?  
Who announces the ages of the moon?  
Who teaches the place where couches the sun?*

## CONFRONTING 'MU' AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF JOB

GEORGE MARSH

The Hsin Hsin Ming by Seng T'san is full of bracing shocks. "Try not to seek after the true," it counsels. (What?) "Only cease to cherish opinions." (Eh?)

The "one great barrier of our faith," Joshu's MU koan, is a meditation upon "Nothing," an invitation to stop clinging to all the somethings that one believes, the cherished opinions, and to float free. It is a hard path, to relinquish deeply rooted cultural ideas. Mumon instructs, "make your whole body a mass of doubt... Gradually you purify yourself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes you have held from the past." The question is whether in our own British culture there is any equivalent advice on this stripping down of all one's cherished beliefs to discover enlightenment?

London's great mystic engraver-poet William Blake, late in his life, in 1817 when he was sixty, illustrated The Book of Job as part of his ambitious project to offer, "The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no." His modest plan was to rescue the Bible from the priests and moralisers and recreate it as a call to imaginative transcendence, thereby redeeming Western civilisation! His radical re-interpretation of The Book of Job culminates in a MU-like recognition. In Plate 11 of the series of engravings, Job in his despair confronts his own notion of holiness and realises with a terrible shock that he has projected himself into his false picture of a cruel God. Later plates in the series explore the implications of this insight for his view of the world and his new sense of a human and humane divinity.

The Bible story of Job starts with God and Satan having a bet. Satan bets that if he torments Job enough Job will curse God. God bets that Job will remain constant. The horrible torment duly unfolds, and Job is brought

to the point of despair, to curse the day he was born, and to complain of God's injustice. Job's friends are "miserable comforters" who argue that Job must have deserved his suffering. God's ways are mysterious but he must be right whatever tortures he inflicts. A debate about the justice of God's cruelty ensues, a grim theme, but adorned with some of the most memorable poetic phrasing in the King James Bible.

Blake re-interprets this story in the light of his mystical vision, deconstructs the ghastly God character that Job and his friends believe in, ignores the fruitless debate on the justice of suffering, and rejects the morality of cruel punishment. Blake replaces Job's conception of God as an internalised authoritarian parent or ruler, a self-projection of disgust, with the words of Christ in the St. John gospel: "Ye shall know that I am in my father and ye in me and I in you... If ye loved me, ye would rejoice..." Blake took these sentences seriously. He believed that, "God only acts and is, in existing beings or Men". In his combative way, he proclaimed that, "those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God." "...men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast." "There is no other God than the God who is the intellectual fountain of Humanity." What people all over the world are really praying to, he asserts in *The Divine Image* in *Songs of Innocence*, is "the human form divine."

*For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.*

Twenty five years before his *Job* designs Blake had coined his phrase "mind forg'd manacles" for the ignorance of people who need to be liberated from

their rigid and repressive ideas. Plate 11 shows Job frightened in a nightmare, chained by devils, when his God appears to him. Blake uses this psychic drama to reverse the values of the Bible story and show the moment when Job realises that the God he has worshipped is a mirror image of himself, with a cloven hoof and a serpent body, bullying him with the tablets of the law. In Blake's vision, this is a trick with which Job has tragically fooled himself, and by implication one with which the Christian church has also fooled the faithful of Europe; they have turned a loving sense of the holiness of life into a monster of authoritarian control. Blake finds an apt quote from St. Paul: "Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of Light and his Ministers into Ministers of Righteousness."

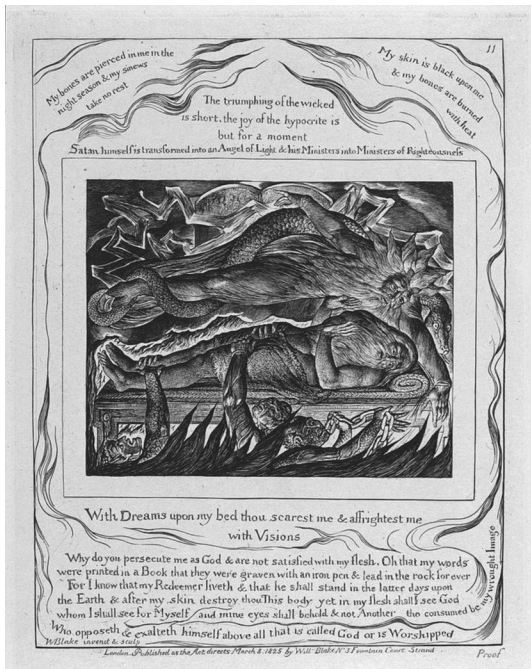


FIGURE 1: TITLE PLATE II "WITH DREAMS UPON MY BED..."

What follows this realisation? “Suddenly Mu breaks open,” writes Mumon. “The heavens are astonished, the earth is shaken... At the very cliff edge of birth-and-death, you find the Great Freedom.” The way that Blake represents this new freedom is to quote from *The Book of Job* its wonderful language for the greatness of God, which we Chan practitioners would call koans of Suchness: “Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew? ... Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?” In Plate 14 Blake illustrates a phrase from *Job*, “When the morning Stars sang together, and all the Sons of God shouted for joy.”

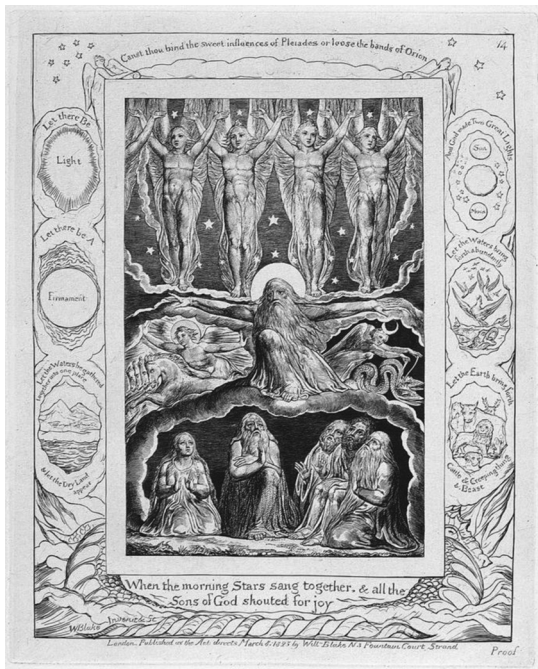


FIGURE 2: TITLE PLATE 14 “WHEN THE MORNING STARS SANG TOGETHER...”

The torment is over. Job finds joy in the creation again. The terrible storm in his head caused by clinging to a brutal and controlling vision of God, and trying to justify hideous sufferings as the work of God, has been relinquished. Blake's Job is released into a new relationship with the world around him, which Mumon would call Great Freedom. "Only cease to cherish opinions," wrote Seng Ts'an, and D. T. Suzuki wrote: "The essential discipline of Zen consists in emptying the self of all its psychological contents, in stripping the self of all those trappings, moral, philosophical and spiritual with which it has adorned itself ever since the first awakenings of consciousness. When the self thus stands in its native nakedness, it defies all description."

Blake had seen the world like this, stripped of its trappings of belief and unclouded by conditioned perceptions. His insight was that, "Everything that lives is holy." That "The body and the soul are not distinct". That, "Energy is Eternal Delight." That, "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." Mumon described this infinite, which he called the Great Freedom: "...you enjoy a samadhi of frolic and play."

I wish poor Blake, soldiering on unappreciated and alone against the armies of ignorance, could have read Mumon and Seng T'san. He would have understood instantly. He would have laughed with delight.

## RETREAT REPORTS

### VARIOUS

*Retreat reports are an integral aspect of our journal and one much approved by our teachers. We print them 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.*

### I. WHOSE FACE? A KOAN RETREAT

I recall sitting in the sitting room at Maenllwyd, mentioning that one of the reasons for my attending the ‘Shattering the Great Doubt’ retreat was the length – nine days – as well as a wish to go deeper. Sleep wasn’t easy that night, though I managed.

The following day practice began. A day of settling in, which I found had its usual difficulties in attempting to attune my mind and body into the many sits and the schedule of the retreat. On the second day the koan practice was introduced. We were given the sheet with the koan and huatou and told we could go away to explore and find the right one for us. I sat by the fire – a safe place for me, it felt. It did not take as long as I expected to narrow down my choices to three or four koans and then finally a choice between two – one koan and one huatou. The huatou had spoken to me quite strongly when Simon had spoken it himself, though, after playing it over in my mind I found it a little disturbing. Because of this I went with the ‘friendlier’ koan. Then, after we had confirmed our final choices in the Chan Hall, I made a turn around after Simon mentioned we should go with those koans that connected with us on an emotional level, even if that was fear. So I changed my choice and went with

the shorter and more unsettling huatou. That choice affected my whole retreat, quite obviously.

That day, I walked up the hill in the horizontal rain, asking the sheep 'how do you do this?' while reciting my huatou like a robot again and again in my head. It took some time to get the exact wording correct and, after a communication exercise that evening, I felt as if part of it and the whole, were shining a spotlight on myself within me. The next day I reached a rut where I became stuck repeating the words again and again in my head. In my interview with Simon and Pete I recall laughing for the first part as, during my meditation, I had been staring at the stick next to Simon's stool feeling as if I wanted to bash myself over the head with it. Simon advised me that I should experience the huatou, not think it through, not imagine pictures, see with it - almost be it. I recalled then an experience of this nature the previous day when I had been attempting to look behind my own face, something that had always rung strong with me from John Crook's 'On Pursuing That Which Leaves No Tracks'. When I informed Simon that I felt someone else was using my face, he told me it would be a good idea to try and find out who that person is. So I returned to sitting, experiencing the sensations that my huatou stirred. After some time I came to feel that that other person was an invader, a fake, a fraud, something I clarified in that evening's communication exercise. Yet, I still could not put my finger on the right word for who that person using my face was.

Early on in the next day, I had a sense of unsettledness about me. I remember even feeling quite angry, out in the yard, stomping about in my undone boots. I continued my search for that person, that fraud, the trickster, what I even labeled at one point as a 'lie'. During the sit just be-



fore lunch tears began to stream down my face. Something didn't feel right. Something was unsettling me hugely and all kinds of physical things were happening in body and head. I remembered Simon saying that, when the great doubt arises it will be even more important than food. And I love eating. I sat through lunch. I think I sat until the work period. I had been crying uncontrollably for a while as the person I was looking for wasn't there. And yet they were still there too.

After that moment and a rather long chat with Simon and Pete, the retreat changed for me. I can't remember the passage of days too well. They were not easy. My *huatou* almost became me. It would not let me go or leave me alone. Continually asking and demanding of me. And I had Simon too, saying to me after every interview, 'Continue your investigation.'

I do not know what I would have done without the guidance and support of Simon, Pete and Flo, who were there for me during the days when, usually in the morning I would have some sudden shock to my system, as if emerging from deep water or from a dream. The world had come into sharp focus. What followed were many walks, many long sits by the fire, many sits on my cushion where I didn't feel the need to get up for the breaks. Anxiety came, joy came, tears came – laughter came, I remember, when simply staring at a piece of carrot cake. The readings of the 'Hsin Hsin Ming' and 'On Pursuing That Which Leaves No Tracks' resounded with me deeply, as did those of the Heart Sutra. Over those days the overwhelming scope of what lay ahead hit me. Much to work with. A journey only just beginning.

I'm sure it was the last full day of practice – I can't remember – but I had a talk with Simon, which settled my mind and body. I had been

given words, had something told me, that part of me had wanted to hear, though part of me didn't mind. Afterwards, I sat on the wall outside the refectory and fell into the world. Then at lunch I laughed again. And I had never laughed so hard. That aubergine on my fork. Nothing wrong with it. I think that was the reason I laughed – it was just an aubergine. I needed those moments of laughter. I recall though, not long after that, an old negative habit washing over me. Just to bring me back - to make me aware of what I still had to work with and the practice ahead.

And the retreat ended. There are many things I have left out. Though I do want to say how I felt such a great connection with everyone on the retreat. All the tears and the smiles and shared laughter. I am extremely grateful to have had that experience and, in a way, support. I am also grateful of the place itself, the Chan Hall, the refectory, the cottage, the hillside, the sheep, the river, all of it.

I am now back home, beginning my practice with what has been given to me. And it is alright. I thought I would find it tough, this 're-entry' after the retreat. Though it has been one of the most seamless returns I have had from a retreat.

## II. Flowing. A Koan retreat

The koan continues to be helpful in daily life, as I noticed particularly yesterday, doing my early morning exercises. It is all about mindfulness in the immediate present moment in all I do, think and feel, and in whatever is taking place externally, from my bodily sensations and movements to the actions of others and to movement in the environment (wind blowing the daffodils). Holding my little grandson by the window, his gaze is transfixed by the moving scene as his eyes follow a bee in flight

and work out the difference between sunlight and shadow (April's still-bare tree branches in strong morning sun). At five months-old this scene is all very new and a puzzle. The koan is a 'child's eye' view of the world: innocent, wondrous and accepting of all that comes.

The final paradox, "It is like this, yet it is not like this" is not a contradiction. One can try to describe reality yet it cannot be described. Both are correct.

Driving home from the retreat a hymn came to mind, from my Methodist upbringing (before my parents became Quakers when I was twelve). This one happened to have been written by a Quaker: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, and I sang it to myself as I drove. I don't believe in a Lord and Father, yet I do believe in a Lord and Father, and the paradox is fine by me; the hymn flowed well with the winding Welsh roads and touched a similar place to that described in the koan yet with the added dimension of Love.

Throughout the retreat, I found the Koan hard to remember as a flow of words. I could remember it in a disjointed fashion, word by word although certain phrases stood out as phrases. This made internalising it rather difficult as I was always searching for the next bit when reciting it to myself. Even now, the most important line is the first one, but still I have to think hard what the last three words are. It is helpful to say this line to myself as I go about my life. It brings me into awareness of the present, in stillness and activity; it encompasses everything.

The morning of the second-last day was the only time when the whole koan flowed easily through my mind from the moment I woke up. The previous evening I had lost interest in the koan, and I had felt the third Communication Exercise to be one too many. Now the words came easily



PHOTO: Eddy Street

ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB, MAENLLWYD

to mind. Following morning exercises, everyone was drinking tea. I stood by the kitchen wall and observed the scene. There was a feeling of great stillness but also of containment, wholeness, as if one could put one's arms around the entire room. It had an eternal quality as a still moment between activities (I was soon to be time-keeping) and this gave it more potency; a kind of 'buzz' yet very calm and still at the same time. This was 'the mind moving with its surroundings'.

In the meditation periods towards the end, and particularly the last day, this still energy was present. It was suggested we 'swallowed' our koans and concentrated on Not Knowing. I rarely recalled the koan to mind after that, but went more into Silent Illumination (my usual practice). This was more alive than often is the case, lacking quietude or dullness but containing what John used to call, 'more Zip'. It was good to stay here and not bother with the words yet the words were never far away. "It is like this, yet it is not like this" became obvious over supper: of course, it has to be both because how could one say it was or wasn't like this? It is, is true, because it is; it isn't is also true because it's not in the words; how can it be? I wouldn't say that the koan 'dropped' as others described. It just continued to be enjoyed, and still continues to be enjoyed. To answer this completely one has to be in the state of mind described, which I was not in. I'm not sure that any further studying of the koan would have done it for me, but to continue to 'follow this flow' in my daily life is good and useful, – and that's the main point of it all.

## COOK'S MEDITATIONS – WHAT THEN?

FLORENCIA CLIFFORD

The preliminary tasks and days ahead of cooking on a retreat at the Maenllwyd are laborious and intensive. Sourcing ingredients to cook lovely meals requires time, care and attention. My style of practice means that I do not plan a specific menu for a retreat. This allows me to awaken the creative muses, and to be playful and spontaneous whilst gauging the mood of the retreat, the changes of weather, and the call of the pantry. All the same, I have to think very carefully about quantities, produce and variety. I have frequent nightmares in which I arrive to cook a retreat in Wales without food and all the shops in the vicinity are shut.

Some of the preparations are dull, like buying loo roll and cleaning products, packing my bag for the week; but I love to source the food, particularly to pick neatly packed boxes of fresh vegetables and fruit, stack them in the boot of my chock-a-block car, and mix them with bags of sundries and condiments, bunches of seasonal flowers and herbs, like a promise of a thousand delicious feasts.

The prospect of cooking for a ten-day retreat was a bit daunting, almost hard to contemplate, but the fact that it took place in September made it more appealing. I adore early autumn: the light, the colour and the crops. Autumn has its own energy, livened up by the hyperkinesia of the migratory birds frantically fuelling up before their voyages, the leaves browning, berries bursting on branches, the pinking of apples, pumpkins and squashes splashing yellows and oranges on earth ruts. There is so much to savour, like the sharp and perfumed taste of plums, pears, quinces or sweet roots like parsnips and beets.

The day before I left, I spent the afternoon picking fruit from the orchard at the farm, a small stretch of land that oozes plenty through its ancient trees, some planted over a hundred years ago. I filled a big box with plums, anticipating them stewed in a perfect marriage with porridge, or atop a cake sprinkled with cinnamon. I found some tiny speckle pears and many old English apple varieties, which quickly filled my wooden crates. Along with the glorious feeling that I get from harvesting and foraging, I love the action of gathering that connects me, humbly, with my humanity. The orchard looked like a postcard of generosity, like the start of a sonnet; the trees offering treasure with open arms with the sun shining for short moments, the light, musical.

On my journey I realised that my summer had been plagued by worry and dread, the type of horror arising from fear of the future, which feels connected with moments of sudden uncertainty throughout my life. I am going through some fundamental transformations in my domestic life and I notice that I cling to what I know and I fear the prospect of letting go. I lose trust in my self, I become suspicious, and rapidly my mind becomes a hell realm and I have to try hard to step out of it. It makes me and those around me suffer. I know I have a lot of work to do, both literally and metaphorically, but I arrive on retreat without an agenda.

Once on retreat and after settling in on the first day, I managed a walk up the hill at tea time. The sheep were grazing and the light had the quality of September. So did the colours of the trees, the valleys below reflecting the change of season. I often try to breathe in colour, invite it in, and let it infuse me. Rain suddenly started pouring, what a drag, so I ran back.

On my way down, I heard a tree. I stopped. There was a cacophony of sound coming from it, so strident, and although I knew it was from all the birds resting and nesting in its branches, it was as if the tree was the one mak-

ing the noise. I could not see the birds but the tree stood there like a party host, like a holder of fun, rumpus-filled. A few steps later I found a beautiful branch that had broken off one of the silver birches at the side of the track. It had no leaves and the wood had interesting red tints and half a dozen wispy branches. I picked it and took it with me. By the time I got back to the house I was soaked.

The kitchen at the Maenllwyd had enjoyed another round of renovations. The last rayburn was never very efficient, so it was removed and a gas range was placed in its corner. The wooden counter underneath the window, which I know most cooks really missed, had returned. The newly installed gaslights were a delight, with a light quality similar to the Tilley lamps, but without the endless fuss and leakages. In the sitting room an enormous wood-burning stove roared constantly and welcomed the giant kettles on its top, keeping them warm. For those fearful of feeling cold on retreat, like me, things were looking up. I admit that I was reluctant to accept these changes, but the task is to find beauty regardless. The same magic energy of transmission that I felt existed in that kitchen nearly ten years ago still exists in its new, modernised state if you open up to it; the heart of the kitchen beats at the rhythm of the cook's heart, like a perfect archetype.

One morning, at 5 am, I went to retrieve some milk from the stream. The sky was dark and filled with stars, yet the rain poured heavily. Throughout the morning the sun shone and I cooked, baked, cleaned, wrote a bit. As I sat for lunch I noticed that swallows and martins were still clutching their stay. Birds and trees were connected to whatever was brewing in me. Then Simon gave out the koans. This huatou picked me:

*When the tree withers and the leaves fall – what then?*



I managed to find an area not too far away to make a phone call to confirm my mid week order from a Welsh Cooperative. Food was running out fast. Standing under the dense foliage of trees, I heard a woodpecker. Toc-Toc, Toc-Toc. As I lingered trying to catch a signal, I also found a sheep corpse lying on top of the roots of a giant tree hidden away from the view of the flock. I collected moss and branches. Near the hut, I picked rosebay willowherb flowers, which looked like pink fairies, for Padmasambava's altar. I felt that I was cooking something else, something to do with that hullabaloo tree, that branch, something to do with nests and migrations, with change, as a metaphor of my circumstances and me.

Practice has helped me to re acquaint myself with nature, finding beauty and meaning in that which surrounds me: plants and insects, the sky, the soil, the mountain. Cooking is training and it is practice, it is training in bodhicitta practice. As the retreat progresses a very strong sense of joy in the simple tasks arises, and I notice how I begin to open up to my fundamental goodness. My mind quietens but the kitchen remains tempestuous and active, with everything that needs to be done plus all my conflicting emotions that arise unexpectedly, as I stir a pot, or line a baking tray, as I find myself sobbing whilst I decant the chocolate cake batter, as I smudge the edges with a spatula. But there is a sense of trust in the practice and in the process that expands, enabling me to experience myself in a state of happiness that is blissful because it is connected to my nature.

This is a hungry group with a high male: female ratio and there is a sense of intense hard work in the Chan Hall. The more I cook the more they eat. The kitchen feels energetic, pure action meditation. Outside the ground is slicked by rain, and in that tiny space I am cooking and roasting, baking, chopping, toasting, grinding, salting, steaming, I am stir frying, stirring, smelling,

watching, waiting, kneeling, standing, trotting backwards and forwards to the refectory. I am testing and tasting and watching people savour, I am setting, re-arranging, cleaning. I make teas and stocks, I boil kettles, I am resting and reading and jotting down notes. I feel joyful. I inhabit the kitchen and each moment. It feels beautiful.

The abundant bread plates have to be replenished sometimes during a meal, the jars of preserves and condiments are scraped clean and replaced on a daily basis. I hardly have any left overs and have to put signs on the cake for people not to take more than one (generous) slice. For a cook there is no better compliment than people eating and appreciating the cooking, I love to provide delicious and abundant food whilst I gauge their process. If people need to eat, you provide the food; you begin each dish with an offer and a wish, for it to be beneficial to those who eat it. I remember a monk once saying to me that if you take food as a medicine, no matter what it is, it cannot harm you. This retreat needs fuel. I make brownies that have magic restorative qualities. Each soup has a vegetable as the star. The spice rack is working alongside me.

I took a walk to the hilltop; the wind had a retching quality, like sea spasms. The flocks of birds seem to have gone; the landscape is rapidly yellowing. I took a trip to both Rhayader and Llanidloes to collect the midweek order. I brought back brown paper bags filled with fresh bread, and boxes of vegetables grown in the Welsh valleys. A proper autumn harvest: I had a box of oddly shape carrots and different coloured beets, swede, cabbages, wonderful mucky celeriac with wriggly tails. I was eager to cook it all and devised a plan for the new arrivals. Lentil cottage pie with pink root mash, lemony baby courgette pasta, carrot cake with cardamom icing, stuffed aubergines with North African flavours...

I began to create nests for the silver birch branch with moss and wool I found on my walks. The rosebay willowherb flowers were turning to seeds that looked furry, like the feathers of a young baby bird. I placed the nests on the branch, which stood by the fireplace in the refectory, each a ritual of setting up a home, of providing warmth and shelter, of comfort. I hung little twigs and seeds held by cotton string. Feathers. Each walk was part of a creative process of recreating that tumultuous tree-home, in silence. My concerns and worries for the future had begun to dissipate; the huatou had begun to question What then? In an almost angry tone, as if saying, why are you asking that now? Stop worrying about then. Be now.

The work periods were a real community effort; the kitchen crew helped me so much in the production of meals and in the general keeping of the different parts of the house. The garden was slowly being transformed. Beautifully dug earth furrows, raked grasses and roots transplantations, mulched flowerbeds. The woodpile in the sitting room was relentlessly replenished, up to the ceiling; the logs lined up and ready to feed the hungry stove. The loos sparkled. There was also a lot of spontaneous laughter from a retreatant; it felt contagious. On one of my journeys back from the stream, I noticed the window of the tool shed with the rows of redundant paraffin lamps. They were lined up and left out, and I could hear them say, we want to play too. It made me sad.

The last full day was one of glory, sunshine, warmth, and that sense towards the end of a retreat when faces are glowing and people are beginning to come down, yet the intensity lingered. I had stewed the speckle pears the night before, pears the size of a soup spoon; I had decided to stew them just sliced in half. No peeling and no coring, I also left the stalk. I stewed them in a medium size pot with a bit of water and sugar, a cinnamon stick, all on a light boil. They were so delicious but above all, they were enchanting to look

at and taste. I also made another plum cake with ground almonds and spices. The back kitchen felt barren. Things began to go back to their storage places, and as I felt that I was getting ready to go home, I realised that practice makes me feel comfortable with uncertainty, with the uncertainty of my future, with the not knowing where am I going next. The prospect of future becomes flexible and fearless because the future is not distant, it is the next second and it feels continuous, it is here, it is now.

### Plum and Almond cake.

*250 grams of butter*

*250 grams of brown sugar*

*½ teaspoon of good quality vanilla*

*4 eggs*

*125 grams wholemeal self raising flour*

*175 grams of ground almonds*

*pinch of baking powder*

*100 grams of almonds*

*15 plums*

*Mixed spice*

*1 tablespoon of muscovado sugar.*

*A pinch of sea salt*

First heat the oven at 180C. Place the almonds on a tray and toast lightly. Chop them roughly and set them in a bowl. Add the muscovado sugar, the mixed spice and pinch of sea salt and mix together. Cut the plums in half and remove the stones. Turn the oven up to 220C.

Line a rectangular baking tray. I used a 16' by 12'. In a big bowl mix the butter and sugar until soft and sugar has been dissolved. Add vanilla and eggs and beat the batter until homogeneous. Add the ground almonds and sift in the flour and a pinch of baking powder. Mix well. Decant onto the baking tray and arrange the plums face down evenly and close to each other. Sprinkle with the almonds, muscovado sugar, mixed spice and salt mix. Bake in the oven for at least 30 min. You might need to turn the oven down slightly. The almond topping will brown and caramelise the plums. You can make it with pears, apricots, or peaches.

For more recipes from this retreat visit Flo's blog:  
<http://feedingorchidstothelugs.wordpress.com>



PHOTO: Florencia Clifford

# 禪 Western Chan Fellowship

## About Us

Chan is the Chinese ancestor of Zen Buddhism. The Western Chan Fellowship is an association of lay Chan practitioners, a lay Sangha, based in the UK. We are registered as a charity in England and Wales, with contacts in Europe and the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

## Visit our Website

[www.westernchanfellowship.org](http://www.westernchanfellowship.org)

Our website includes:

- Introductory articles for newcomers to Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation.
- A digital library of Dharma Talks by Chan Masters and many other articles.
- Retreat reports of participants at our retreats which give a valuable insight into the retreat process.
- Details of our activities such as our retreat programme and other events.
- Back-issues of this journal New Chan Forum.
- Meditation group details and general contacts.

## Contacting Us

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## Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always happy to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. For further information on submitting a contribution, please contact the editor Eddy Street at [editor@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org)

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## Forthcoming Retreats

## SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Saturday 22nd March to Saturday 29th March 2014*

Leader: Hilary Richards, Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Saturday 26th April to Saturday 3rd May 2014*

Leader: Simon Child, Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 10th May to Thursday 15th May 2014* **Note:** *Alteration from initial announcement*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall, Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Wednesday 18th June to Wednesday 25th June 2014*

Leader: Jake Lyne, Venue: Bala Brook Retreat Centre, Dartmoor

## HOW TO TRAVEL THE GREAT WAY

*Saturday 26th April to Saturday 3rd May 2014*

Leader: Ken Jones, Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Friday 25th July to Sunday 3rd August 2014*

Leader: Simon Child, Venue: Hourne Farm, E. Sussex

## SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Friday 5th September to Sunday 14th September 2014*

Leader: Simon Child, Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

SHATTERING  
*the*  
GREAT DOUBT

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A RETREAT WITH SIMON CHILD

MAENLLWYD, WALES

APRIL 26<sup>TH</sup> – MAY 3<sup>RD</sup> 2013



*The ancient Chinese Zen practices of investigating Huatou and Gongan (Koan) are best practised in a supportive environment such as this intensive 9-day silent retreat. As one becomes deeply absorbed in the practice, mental constructions drop away and one is confronted by a realisation that one does not know the nature of existence and one's fundamental assumptions of life are groundless. Staying with and cultivating this 'doubt', it can become all-consuming 'Great doubt' which may 'shatter', giving a direct insight into reality which may be what is known as an Enlightenment experience.*

*To progress in these methods requires a sustained focus and so this retreat is open only to those with previous experience of intensive retreat. Prior attendance at a Western Zen Retreat is recommended.*







*A practitioner asked,  
What is the ultimate teaching of all Buddhas?”  
Chan Master Fayuan Wenyi said,  
“You have it too.”*

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