

禪 Western
Chan
Fellowship

SPRING 2015 NO. 49



NEW CHAN FORUM
BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

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Cover Image: The Lingering Garden in Suzhou by Sophie Temple-Muir
Design www.robbowden.com • ISSN 2047-9514 Print • ISSN 2047-9522 Online
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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

GEORGE MARSH & PAT SIMMONS

Simplicity seems to have emerged as the underlying theme of this issue of *New Chan Forum*. The first three articles in this issue of *New Chan Forum* consider the “ordinariness” of Chan practice. How can we simply be with, and investigate, what arises in our meditation? How can we open to and accept the enlightenment experience offered to us by each passing second of ordinary life? And what are the practical implications of our Chan experience? What is “right livelihood” in everyday life, and how can we achieve it?

The poetry pages introduce a new form you are unlikely to have seen before, and give us an encounter with beginner’s mind. And, as usual, we have a selection of retreat reports – all, as it happens, from Simon’s Shattering the Great Doubt *koan* retreats.

This is the first issue of *New Chan Forum* that we have co-edited, taking over from Eddy Street. It has been very encouraging to discover how many people are willing to share their insights and experiences. We plan to produce the next issue for Summer 2015, and we are already looking for contributions. Articles, poems, images – we will welcome them all. We’re happy to help with editing, or to discuss your ideas before you put fingers to keyboard. Do contact us on editor@westernchanfellowship.org

DHARMA TALK: BEING WITH

SIMON CHILD

A Dharma talk from a 10-day intensive Silent Illumination retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, May 23 to June 1, 2014

Common misunderstandings

Yesterday everybody had an interview. One of the purposes of interview is to respond to your questions. Perhaps we also need to respond to the questions you didn't think of asking because you thought you knew (but you were wrong.) We [the interviewing teachers] were looking out for some common misunderstandings. Some of them are so common we don't really have to look for them; we can just assume they're there, and yesterday you didn't let us down.

There are two common misunderstandings I want to mention. One is, those who've read perhaps too much (or maybe they've not read quite enough) have not understood what they've read, but have picked up ideas and pointers, and then they think they *know*, and they follow this sense of knowing and delude themselves further. We hear people saying things like: "The task of my practice is to get rid of myself. I am a delusion, I am not here" or "You are a delusion, you're not there" or "I don't need to face this problem, it's all imaginary." This is a person who's read something about emptiness and thinks they know what it's about, but they are making themselves more confused.

There is actually quite an easy remedy for someone who believes they don't exist. You say, "Oh, that's great! So please now stop taking your share of the food; there will be more for others to eat." Some try and brave that out, and pretend it's OK, because it's in the future. They don't

actually have to commit to it until the next meal; they've got thinking time left. Another approach is: I can pick up the stick and say "I've seen a delusion on that chair and I want to beat it away. You don't mind, do you?"

Certainly there is a teaching about no self, no mind, emptiness. But it's one that is easy to misunderstand. So be wary of being caught in your own cleverness. You've read something; you believe you've understood it but you haven't, and you are creating difficulties for yourself. For example if you believe that situations in your life don't need to be confronted because they're delusions, you are setting yourself up for a life that's more painful than necessary. We need to respond to the demands of life.

Awareness of thought

Another common misunderstanding is: how we handle *thought* in the practice. This is revealed by people who state that the purpose of their practice is to empty the mind and get rid of thought, to have a blank mind. Some people take this to quite an extreme. Yesterday somebody told me their strategy was to have an axe ready for each time a thought appeared: cut off the thought. On a previous retreat, someone gave me a very clear image of his practice. He was watching a rabbit hole waiting for the thought to appear, and the moment the thought appeared, he was ready – with his machine gun. That's a true story. This wasn't a teaching he got from me, though.

This reveals an attitude that thought is somehow bad; it's in the way; it shouldn't be there. "It's rather a nuisance, it's disturbing my mind!" It's easy to see where this mistake comes from; again it's really just being a victim of our own cleverness. When we start off with practice we are

taught methods of calming the mind. We experience for ourselves how a mind which has very many thoughts tumbling over each other can indeed, through training, become a mind with much fewer thoughts. So it's natural that we extrapolate, and think "obviously the objective is to have *no* thought! So I will get myself there! I will get rid of the remaining thoughts!"

We might hear people talk of experiences of indeed having no thoughts, and this confirms our sense that "to be a better practitioner we must get rid of every thought." No. That's too extreme an extrapolation. Indeed we do have practices to calm the mind, and they may involve cutting thought off to some extent by limiting the awareness, focusing on a single point. We narrow the awareness and thereby cut off "awareness of" the thoughts. Do we really cut off the thoughts? Or do we just cut off awareness of them? See, there is maybe the first trap – if we narrow the mind down, it can *seem* as though there are no thoughts. But maybe we're just overlooking them, because we're not looking at where they are. We've trained ourselves to focus intently on our object of practice, and we get good at it, so we're training ourselves to overlook what else is going on.

This is a very useful start to practice, when you have a mind that is so wild, full of thoughts and videos of all sorts – you know that experience. You can't really engage in much practice until it's calmed down to some extent. So there are various methods to help it calm down. But the extrapolation was incorrect. Even though people may have the experience of no thought (and some of you have had that experience) that doesn't mean that's your destination. Here is a somewhat different interpretation: the purpose of calming the mind is so that you can become



PHOTO: SIMON CHID

TIANTONG TEMPLE, ZHEJIANG PROVINCE, CHINA WHERE MASTER HONGZHI NAMED SILENT ILLUMINATION AND DOGEN LATER TRAINED

very clearly aware of what *is* there. And that's a different endpoint, isn't it? It's not cutting off, denying, overlooking or avoiding. It's saying "this mind is somewhat calmer now; I can really see what's going on. Before, I couldn't see the beginning, middle, and end of a thought; they overlapped too much, and crowded each other out. And now, with this mind that is somewhat calmer, I can observe the process of thought. I can see indeed how a thought has a beginning, a presence, and an end. I can see that thoughts are transient" and so on.

Investigate the mind

So you can investigate the nature of thought, the nature of mind, when the mind is calmer. This is not something you can do if you've cut the mind off, trained yourself to ignore it. You then don't have that opportunity to observe the mind and see how it works. So these are two different ways of developing the understanding of practice, and the first one, the extrapolation "my task is to get rid of thoughts as completely and as quickly as possible" is a misunderstanding. I would put forward the alternative which is: when you've calmed the mind sufficiently, you're in a position to investigate the mind.

Remember again these two aspects of practice, presented to us by the Buddha. Often we need to do *samatha* (calming the mind) first, because of the state our minds start in. Then we investigate the mind (*vipassana*.) In silent illumination, we're doing both. But the calming of silent illumination is not a cutting-off sort of calming, it's rather different from that. So how does that work?

It's worth bearing in mind that if you compare practices, you could say that the two main methods of Chan (*huaou* and silent illumination)

are more advanced than the other methods which can help to prepare the mind. The other methods can help illustrate different aspects of mind, while silent illumination and *huaou* can take us all the way to enlightenment. The advanced methods don't have these built-in limitations of awareness, constricting the mind in that sense. Being a more advanced method therefore gives us different challenges.

One of these challenges is how we handle thought. It can be particularly challenging because maybe, until picking up this advanced method, you trained yourself to this attitude that thought is something "in the way", the enemy of your practice, a disturbance, a distraction. And now you're being told that's not quite so. This is confusing for people; it's counterintuitive. It even feels almost dangerous sometimes in the sense that you've put in a lot of effort, long hours of painful legs, to develop a certain calmness of mind and now it seems at risk of being disturbed by a shift in the method. You feel a sense of "this is not right, I don't believe this, I disagree" and you resist opening the awareness. But if you're going to be moving yourself forward along the path towards enlightenment, at some point you need to be able to have a mind which is wide open.

If I want to paint a caricature of the Buddha, do you imagine him as someone who had a rather narrow attention? Someone who didn't dare open his attention wide in case it disturbed his practice? That's not my image of the Buddha. So you could say you're preparing yourself, testing it out. You're finding out what the difficulties are, and through practice you find ways of handling these difficulties, and indeed you find it is possible to have the mind open wider. Ah! Hmm, that's interesting. You could say you're nudging yourself towards enlightenment.

Still, in silent illumination we talk about sudden enlightenment, we don't talk about gradual enlightenment. But certainly we talk about gradual cultivation; that would be reasonable. We're gradually exploring and getting to know the mind, getting to know its obstructions, getting to know how to handle them, and finding that indeed we can! There *are* ways forward. We find that, yes, we can keep the attention wide open, confront an obstruction, and keep the mind open and handle it. We don't have to retreat into our rabbit burrow. That's a dangerous place, a rabbit burrow, isn't it?

Opening the awareness

So we're exploring the capacity of our own mind, our own awareness and, yes, we are challenging it. Opening the awareness is challenging: it makes it more likely that the mind wanders away because you are giving it more things to be interested in and attach to. If you are sitting here with a very narrow focus, very intensely concentrated, you're not so distracted. People walking around the room, traffic outside, birdsong – you're not paying any attention to that, it can't disturb you. You hardly perceive it. But then if you open the awareness and you perceive the richness all around you, it can be almost overwhelming and you immediately attach to something, start having a discussion with yourself about it. So opening the awareness is tricky and challenging but also crucially important.

In terms of this practice of silent illumination we can trace the origins of it, in some ways, back through history. We can also find the basis of it in the sutras. In Shifu's book *Hoofprint of the Ox*, when he is talking about silent illumination, he uses the *Diamond Sutra* as an illustration of

the approach to practice. There is a famous line in the *Diamond Sutra* from which Hui Neng the sixth patriarch became enlightened:

Without dwelling in anything whatsoever, allow this mind to arise.

“Without dwelling in anything” points toward silence, towards nonattachment. “Allow this mind to arise” points towards illumination, towards the mind being fully awake and present. It doesn’t say, “without dwelling in anything whatsoever, make sure the mind doesn’t arise.” It doesn’t say, “without dwelling in anything whatsoever, be very careful as the mind arises.” Just: allow the mind to arise. Brighten the mind, be fully awake. Be fully attentive without dwelling in anything whatsoever.

That phrase “without dwelling”, that’s pointing to nonattachment, brings up another area which people find difficult sometimes. Nonattachment is perhaps a little bit difficult to describe. But if we think of attachment, it’s becoming over-involved, over-identified, over-immersed in a particular thought and it’s drawn you off-centre. You’ve lost your wide-open awareness, you’re preoccupied with something. The other extreme is avoidance of attachment, and this is where the phrase non-Buddhists often use about Buddhists comes from: “Buddhist detachment.” Detachment is not quite the same as nonattachment. Detachment has a negative quality about it, an avoidance, a dualism. So it’s not about avoiding, and it’s not about attaching. It’s somewhere in between. We can call it nonattachment. To put it another way: you’re not so concerned whether you end up involved or not involved; there is no strong preference, there’s just an acceptance. “Yeah, this is in the mind, or this isn’t in the mind. I’m really open to either possibility.” If you are attached, you want to keep it in the mind. And if you’re detached, you’re trying to



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keep it out of the mind. But nonattached means, well if it's there, it's there, and if it's not it's not. No big deal. I'm not shaken by its presence or its absence.

So without dwelling in anything, without being concerned about what's there, nevertheless let awareness arise and inform you what's there. It's tricky; it's finding a balance, and we easily lean one way or the other. Of course our personal histories lead us to have certain avoiding behaviours and certain attaching behaviours. We feel safety in certain objects and circumstances and we don't want to let them go. Then we feel risk and danger in other situations and we put effort into avoiding them. The mind which is not dwelling, the mind of nonattachment, allows itself to experience *all* that is present. Now that doesn't mean that

it doesn't respond to dangers; of course it does. It doesn't mean that it doesn't respond to need. It can go and eat that food that the other person is no longer eating. That's not attachment; attachment is when you get obsessed with food. The *Diamond Sutra* is pointing towards us having a mind functioning in awareness. It's not telling us to restrict the mind, to only allow certain types of mental activity to occur. It's just saying, be present with the mind.

Trains of thought

For another way of looking at the issue of attachment and nonattachment I've made up a variation on the metaphor of the host and the guest that Master Hsu Yun used to talk about. We can look at this way, if we are aware of the phenomenon of a thought becoming a train of thoughts. A thought arises in the mind and there's no particular problem with that. But thoughts link to other thoughts. They create ideas and another thought joins them and maybe these become problems, or solutions, or opportunities. Images are painted in the mind by thoughts congregating. A common phrase in English is "a train of thought"; one thought leads to another. Sometimes it's interesting to reflect, when you find yourself thinking about something: how did you get there? Often we have no idea because we've not been paying attention. I once caught myself out and I thought "How on earth did I find myself thinking about this?" I was able to trace it back; maybe 15 thoughts had linked together and ended up at a completely different place to where it started.

Now, there's no problem with thoughts doing this. They create these trains and it's okay. We can just let these trains of thought pass through the mind and show themselves to us. But we don't attach to them; we're

not engaging with them. The problem is our tendency to board the train and follow it to its destination. We hop on the train and it takes us away to some future fantasy, or back in time to something that we want to fix (even though it's already happened). We get tangled up in these trains of thoughts. The image that works for me (rather than Hsu Yun's host and guest) is: you are the railway station master, and the trains are your guests. There's no problem with trains coming and going in a railway station. But it *is* a problem if you hop on one and travel off 300 miles; then you've abandoned your duty. So by all means have thoughts coming and going through the mind, forming trains of thoughts, congregating. But don't jump on them. Observe them, but don't board them.

There is another example from the sutras, of how we can handle thoughts during our practice. This is from the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, and is also taken as one of the *gongan* in the *Book of Serenity* (Case 45).

At all times do not produce delusive thoughts,

Also don't try to stop or annihilate delusive states of thought.

Now, we don't have any great difficulty agreeing with the first line: "At all times do not produce delusive thoughts." That's fairly straightforward, isn't it? The challenge comes after the comma: "also don't try to stop or annihilate delusive states of thought." That's a bit more challenging, if you have the idea that your task is to purify the mind by ejecting unwholesome thoughts. But the sutra tells us, "Put away your machine gun, put away your axe. Don't annihilate deluded states of mind." Hmmmm. So that means that if a deluded state arises, you don't stop it. Huh! Maybe that's a rather different idea of practice to what you thought you were



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doing. Sitting there with a deluded state of mind – that actually makes practice easier, doesn't it? Sitting there deluded is quite easy, and quite a common experience really. Maybe we're better at practice than we thought...

No, it's not quite meaning that either. If you have deluded states of mind, and they are held within awareness, it's not saying that *you* should be deluded. But if there's an obstruction in the mind based on a misunderstanding of some situation, maybe provoking an anxiety, don't annihilate that. Use it as an opportunity to investigate how you create your own delusion, a sort of case study. The mind is holding this painful idea, this anxiety, fear, or grief. Positive feelings, negative feelings, whatever has arisen in the mind, here is your opportunity to investigate it. This word "investigate" is a little bit difficult to understand, so let's look at how this might work. Investigate, illuminate, floodlight – we're not in denial about this thought, because we're clearly aware of it. We don't regard it as an aberration that shouldn't be there, or should be got rid of. We just say "Oh, yes that's what's in my mind; I'm feeling anxious, sad, negative, confused. I'm feeling happy, joyful, free." Anything. Any state of mind, don't annihilate it – investigate it.

Silently investigate

Master Hongzhi was the one who gave the name to the practice "silent illumination". These phrases like "silently investigate" come from his writings. How do we "silently investigate," what does that mean? When we find ourselves holding one of these states of mind, we silently investigate, which means we illuminate it; we allow the light to shine on it. We allow it to be seen, felt, tasted. There's no aversion or avoidance; we fully experience it. Rather than our usual habit of trying to shy away

from some experiences and pull towards others, we just continue sitting in the presence of the state. No avoidance, no denial. Here it is; I'm experiencing it. At this moment, I'm feeling this way. It is so. No running away. To investigate "non-silently" would be to start a wordy, intellectual analysis, a review of past experiences and personal history (which can also be useful, because it can sometimes illustrate the origins of some of these states). But a silent investigation is just sitting there with it, no deliberate delving back in history, no deliberate classification.

Indeed, classification and naming can actually get in the way; here's an example of how the sheep pen exercise I mentioned a couple of days ago has its limitations. Some of you have found that a useful exercise, and it *is* useful. That's why I mentioned it to you. But the reason that sort of approach is useful is *because* of its limitation. What it does is take a number of thoughts about the same topic and put them together to make it more manageable for you. But that loses some subtlety. If the thoughts were about your boss at work there are probably overlapping issues, different examples and problems. Since they all have a common theme of "problems with your boss at work", the sheep pen method worked to help concentrate the mind. But now with a silent investigation, if you just label it as "boss at work" it sort of turns off the investigation. You have no incentive to pay any attention. "Oh I know what that is." You've categorized it, labelled it, put it in the cupboard and forgotten about it.

"Silently investigate" means not applying words and labels, because these are limiting. It is simply "being with", and maybe noticing, the mixture of feelings. Maybe the complexity of memories arising is not just one incident; maybe there are various similar things jumbled together.

But if you jump quickly to saying “I know what that is” and you name it, you are in a sense detaching from it. You are shutting it away. So, silently investigating is just “being with”. A thought arises in the mind and you are just with it. A feeling moves through the body and you are with it. A sound touches the eardrum and you just let it do that. If you jump to naming the species of bird because you are a birdwatcher, in a sense you’ve lost contact with the bird—it’s just become something in your tick list of “birds I’ve heard”. You’ve distanced yourself from the actual hearing experience.

So, to “silently investigate” is just “being with”, and being with *as it changes*. A more analytical investigation would be looking back in history deliberately. Silent investigation might include some awareness of the history of the situation, because it just comes to mind. That’s the way the mind works; thoughts get triggered and thought trains form themselves, you don’t have to go and create them. You’re sitting, something has arisen, something else arises, and then something else arises. There may or may not be a connection between them. You’re not *trying* to make connections; sometimes the connections are obvious. You just continue sitting. This full awareness, this openness to what’s arising, *is* the silent investigation. Disconnecting from experience means there’s no investigation. Controlling the experiencing; labelling it, categorising it – is not silent.

So you are bringing yourself to just “sitting with” whatever is there. You’ve been starting that off by sitting with the body; every sensation it gives you, you experience it. You don’t start saying “Hmmm, I need more of this sensation and less of that; I wonder why that one is gone.” You simply sit with whatever the body is bringing you at this moment.

This extends to whatever the wider awareness is bringing you. It's arrived, it's with you and you accept it. The sound of bird song that is so prominent here. The sunlight coming through the windows at different angles. Brightness, shadow. A memory. A sadness. A joy. All of these things just present themselves to our awareness, and we remain silent but we also remain present and bright, which *is* the investigation.

Constructs of mind

If you are cutting off thoughts, you are missing the chance to get to know the constructs of your mind. Because what's presenting itself to you is partly the direct perception of a sound, but it's also the construct of the mind that gives a name to the sound. It's also the construct of the mind that joins the sensations together, creating objects, creating stories. We don't need to do this deliberately, it's doing itself out of habit. And by watching the mind you are watching your own habits in play. You're watching how you construct your own experience of the world, you are watching it happening and you remain silent and you continue watching. This watching is a very deep investigation. It can be quite challenging; watching yourself displaying your habits, you begin to feel embarrassed about them, uncomfortable for some of the ways that you think and behave. But here they are playing themselves out in front of you. You remain silent. The video of "me" can be quite uncomfortable, can't it? But we don't switch it off – watching it *is* the investigation. We make sure the projector for this video is on full brightness, fully illuminated. We don't want to miss anything.

This points to the value of this investigation process. It's teaching us about how we view, react to, and actually construct our own world. Be-



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cause we have habitual patterns of behaviour, certain perceptions become something wonderful and we attach to them. Certain other perceptions become something frightening and we shy away. We create our own world to a very large extent as the *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us, in the opening verse of the evening service:

*To know all the Buddhas of the past present and future, [i.e. to become enlightened]
perceive that all worlds of experience are created by the mind.*

You are creating your own world of experience, and if you practise silent illumination you can observe it happening. Mind grows more still and you actually observe this process from beginning to end. You observe, for example, a direct perception of sound, but you notice how you name it; the name is coming from a person or an animal, or from the building. Then an attitude attaches itself, an attitude of joy or irritation or judgment. This usually happens in a flash, unseen. Because you've cultivated a habit of watching the mind, of observing and being present with whatever the mind presents to you, you find yourself noticing far more than just body sensations. You notice the activity of mind. You notice how you are creating your own sense of irritation from simply the perception of a certain type of sound. Well, it's not that that particular sound is inherently irritating, because twenty other people around you are hearing the same sound and they are not irritated. So it's something about you.

Silent and non-silent

There may be another slight point for confusion here: with silent illumination, I'm telling you that "silence" is you not adding anything to it, but then here you are finding yourself adding something. You're adding

an interpretation, a reaction. So does that mean you should cut off these things? No. What it means is, you take them as something to be observed. What you *don't* do is react by cutting it off. The deliberate action of "cutting off" would be non-silent. Allowing the mind to show you how it behaves and acts, *is* silent. It's the interfering which is non-silent. I hope that's not too confusing. But the point is, you stay with whatever the mind presents you. There's no plan to steer the mind a certain way, no plan to avoid negative, unwholesome, deluded thoughts. And there's no plan to amplify pleasant, happy, generous thoughts. You observe what the mind brings, you observe how it reacts.

You are investigating the nature of your mind in quite a deep and challenging way. Sometimes it takes you to difficult areas, but then, that's very useful. Because if you investigate a difficult area, you can begin to understand the nature of *why* you find that difficult, and this can be very important. If you habitually shy away from difficulty, you're limiting yourself. There are certain things in life that you don't do, that you avoid. You may shape your life so that you are not confronted by these things. But in silent investigation you may find that something you've always assumed is challenging or frightening turns out to be a mistake. You drew a conclusion in the past from some particular event, and it got stuck in the mind and you haven't challenged it. Now as you sit there you find yourself challenged by the circumstance arising in the mind and you also find, "Oh, that's why I feel challenged." That presents itself to you, and you find, "Oh, that isn't challenging any more. My life has changed; I see things differently." You can release this rather stale, habitual reaction and find freedom from fear of that particular situation which always led you to avoidance before.

This type of practice takes you deeply into some of the dark corners of the mind, and this is very useful. It's useful in the sense of your worldly life-experience because it can free you from some restrictions you've put on yourself. And it's useful in terms of your meditation practice because it frees you from some obstructions. Certain obstructions to your practice have to do with fears and anxieties and the way you build yourself to be safe from them, keeping the mind closed. But actually if you dissolve these away by confronting them, you find that practice flows more freely. The mind takes one more step toward stillness – one of the guards has gone off-duty permanently, he's retired. So there's less noise in the mind; the mind is more open and freer. Clarifying the mind in this way has benefits in terms both of your personal life and of your practice; they go together. It's useful either way.

I'm saying these things to point you towards why it is that we say "allow the mind to arise". Allow yourself to experience whatever arises. There is no editing, no filtering. There's no judgment on whether this is an appropriate thought to be here now or not. It's already here; it's in the mind. Watch the process triggered by that thought. Watch how you react. Get to know yourself, and get to know how you limit yourself. Find your own way towards freedom.

Having no obstructions

Since this is somewhat stepwise as you move through different obstructions, we can call it "gradual cultivation." Hopefully you can see how it is leading you towards a mind which is ready for enlightenment; a mind which is ready to become totally open and not waver, not retreat or be afraid – because it's already dealt with all its fears, there's no longer any

obstruction. But at the moment, obstructions are there. They're waiting for you to investigate them by simply allowing them to be there in full awareness. Allow them to show themselves and tell you about themselves, if you are willing and have the strength and focus to stay there with them. They are often not at all what you assume. We live by assumptions, habits of thinking. But when we confront our obstructions we are very surprised by what's going on. They're often actually quite minor concerns which have become amplified and fossilized. They've become stale and outdated and no longer relate to our current situation. So actually it's safe to investigate these even when it feels scary.

Commit yourself to your practice. Commit yourself to a fully open mind. Commit yourself to confront what the practice presents you with, and in that confrontation, rather like the Buddha confronting Mara, be present with what is there. The Buddha didn't close his eyes and pretend that Mara wasn't there. He just said "Oh, Mara, this is what you've brought me now, is it? Okay, what's next? Bring me some more." Take that attitude. Don't be fixed on the idea of closing the mind down, having a sort of limited silence and a dull mind. Commit to opening the mind, letting whatever arises be fully experienced, and whatever follows that to be fully experienced, and whatever follows *that* to be fully experienced. If they link themselves together you will see those links. If they don't, that's OK too. You have no programme here, no expectations. You are just watching the mind, investigating the mind, and it is a very deep practice. So see where it takes you.

ENGAGING IN POST-ENLIGHTENMENT PRACTICE EVEN IF...

EDDY STREET

Searching for wisdom

One of my favourite enlightenment tales involves the master Yunmen, who lived around AD900 in southern China. He went to study with the master Muzhou and this is the account of his enlightenment.

When Muzhou heard Yunmen coming he closed the door to his room. Yunmen knocked on the door.

Muzhou said, "Who is it?"

Yunmen said, "It's me."

Muzhou said, "What do you want?"

Yunmen said, "I'm not clear about my life. I'd like the master to give me some instruction."

Muzhou then opened the door and, taking a look at Yunmen, closed it again.

Yunmen knocked on the door in this manner three days in a row. On the third day when Muzhou opened the door, Yunmen stuck his foot in the doorway.

Muzhou grabbed Yunmen and yelled, "Speak! Speak!"

When Yunmen began to speak, Muzhou gave him a shove and said, "Too late!"

Muzhou then slammed the door catching and breaking Yunmen's foot. At that moment, Yunmen experienced enlightenment.¹

This story interests me because it contains all those usual elements of the enlightenment process that we think must exist. Here we have someone who is not clear about himself, so he goes to seek someone he considers to be clear and who might have the answer to his problem. He is looking for instruction to overcome his difficulty. He has to battle to get

heard somehow and he struggles to get himself into a position where he might receive the information that he so desperately wants. His struggle ends in a different way to what he imagined and it comes suddenly. Indeed, it comes with some pain! Then like all enlightenment stories, this one stops at the moment of enlightenment and doesn't tell us what happens next!

We all seem to struggle to find out what happens next for ourselves. Yunmen, of course, has some idea of what is happening next, or to be more precise he has an idea of what is happening now. He was known for his direct teaching and, indeed, he understood the problem that we all face as practitioners. Here is a quote of his:

*So let me ask you all, what has so far been the matter with you? What do you lack? If I tell you that nothing whatsoever is the matter I've already buried you. You yourself must arrive at that realisation!*²

What's the matter?

So let us ask the question: what has been the matter with you? What is it that you lack? These questions were undoubtedly around at the beginning of your practice and you clearly thought that doing meditation would provide you with some answer. Then, in a manner similar to Yunmen's when he approached the master, you believed you must go through some kind of process to find the answer because you believed there is an answer. However, as Yunmen tells us, there is no answer to this question, certainly not in the way that we imagine. So how are you going to "arrive at that realisation?" It is with these ideas floating around that we keep knocking on the door and continue with our practice as we have constructed it. But it is important to look into this and to ex-

amine what it is that leads us forward and what our intention is. It is important that we examine the underlying issues in our practice for in doing so we can find that there are particular kinds of problems that we create for ourselves.

Struggling to attain 'mastery'

Firstly, we somehow can come to see meditation as being a skill or a task in which we must become very proficient. It can seem as if what we are trying to do all the time is to attain mastery over something. We can easily get into the position of believing that if we can only master the technique then enlightenment will be ours. We come to think that the solution is in doing it properly. This way of thinking often emerges from our overwhelming desire for instruction from a revered source. Then, because of this, our minds can turn even the simplest suggestion from that source into a demand we place on ourselves. So if a teacher says follow the breath, it quickly ceases to become something that we do at that moment and it becomes something that we have to do and something that we must strive to do perfectly and continually. It becomes something that we have to master, something that we have to do in order to gain control of what we think may be controllable. Very often, rather than being just suggestions for how to sit and noting what may arise, instructions for meditation often and rapidly can become something that we use just to beat ourselves up with. We can easily lose the essence of the focus and berate ourselves for not being able to do it properly.

Not only does the instruction become a demand but we also have a tendency to make it the key to what we consider would be successful. This is because we fall into a way of thinking that believes it will be our

own successful action that will produce a result. We can easily believe that the instruction contains the necessary conditions that must exist for us to become successful and hence become enlightened. Therefore, an ability to follow the breath consistently and with concentrated effort becomes in our mind a precursor of enlightenment. It becomes a key that will unlock the door for us. The problem that arises as we practise over time is that we can come to acquire many keys, putting them on a key ring; so we move from thinking how can I find *the* key, to thinking *which* key on my key ring is it? With this mindset, our sitting ceases to become the occasion for just sitting, as we become focussed on this being our chance, our opportunity to gain mastery. Here we create an obstruction to the experiencing of the moment. If we recall the *Heart Sutra* it says:

Bodhisattvas relying on Prajnaparamita have no obstructions in their minds. Having no obstructions, there is no fear and departing far from confusion and imaginings they reach Ultimate Nirvana.

Sometimes this word obstructions is translated as hindrances. But whatever translation you use we are talking about something that gets in the way.

Obstacles

So what is it that gets in your way? Or perhaps who is it that gets in your way? We can see that in the first instance what gets in the way is our attitude and approach to meditation itself. Then as we encounter difficulties because of this hindrance we don't seem to get to where we want to be through the process of meditation. At this point we can create a spiral of problems for ourselves, a cycle of difficulty. We end up with some illogical ways of thinking such as, "if I were enlightened I wouldn't get in

my own way and I wouldn't have any obstructions to my practice. So somehow I must find a way of becoming enlightened as clearly what is stopping me becoming enlightened now is the fact that I'm not enlightened so I'd better work on becoming enlightened in order that I can become enlightened." This is the convoluted way in which our mind works.

Of course, some of us fall into the psychological archaeology problem, in which we consider that all our hindrances and obstructions are deep within us. We can come to believe that these problems are deeply buried and only touchable by deep sustained practice. Then we end up thinking, "Oh if I wasn't me I wouldn't have all these problems and I'd be meditating much better and I would become enlightened". In fact, often the biggest hindrance that we face to our just sitting is the fact that we saw meditation as being a solution to our problems rather than it being a wonderful opportunity just to sit.

As we continue in the manufacture of our own problems we can end up believing that if we are not getting to where we want to get to, then surely a consequence must be that our own personal path is a very problematic one and this "poor struggling me" is the path which has to be followed. We consider that our path must involve a lot of work and effort and we can expect to encounter all sorts of difficulties. This is where we adopt what I call the Olympic approach to meditation. Clearly to win an Olympic gold medal in athletics or swimming or bike riding you have to give up a tremendous amount and produce a concentrated effort in your desire to reach this goal. So Olympic athletes often live away from their home in training camps, eat special food and generally put aside the simple pleasures of life in order to hone their skills and perfect their expertise. We can all create this mindset about our meditation. In fact,

part of the in-house conversations of Sangha groups is always about difficult practice sessions that we have endured. We even tell each other stories about how difficult some retreats were for us and how hard it was sitting on the cushion, the unearthly time we had to get up and how cold it was. It can become like the Monty Python sketch where each character is trying to outdo the other by saying how difficult their home life was. One person begins by saying that he only lived in one room.

Python 1: You were lucky to have a ROOM! We used to have to live in a corridor!

Python 2: Ohhhh we used to DREAM of living in a corridor! It would have been a palace to us. We used to live in an old water tank on a rubbish tip. We got woken up every morning by having a load of rotting fish dumped all over us! House!?

Python 3: Well when I say "house" it was only a hole in the ground covered by a piece of tarpaulin, but it was a house to us.

No gain: just sitting

We can come to view the meditation session as an endurance event, as if the only goal is getting to the bell. However, meditation is not something that is done correctly or incorrectly; it is not something to master; it is not that we are trying to turn meditation into something that we are good at. Barry Magid talks of the underlying intention in meditation as being “no gain”.³ This speaks to the idea of the absolute value of each moment, where there is no means to an end and this often stands in direct contrast to what we do in most of our life. We do everything to achieve or attain something. Even in our motivation for practice; we begin it so that we can get somewhere. Magid calls this our secret



PHOTO: George Marsh

GUAN YIN, POLY MUSEUM, BEIJING

practice⁴ – the very *personal* reason that we begin practice: in order to become a certain type of person, to get rid of certain characteristics, or to live in a certain way. Underlying our practice, we have this secret aim such as to become a calm, welcoming, open person as opposed to the closed, angry, unhappy person we feel ourselves to be. It is as if we have a plan for what we want our meditation and practice to “do” for us. We come to view our meditation and our practice in the same way as when we buy a piece of equipment for our kitchen or an app for our mobile phone. We want something that washes our plates or boils water or puts us in contact with other people and sends photographs across the Internet. All these things “do” something for us and our belief is that our personal satisfaction and ease will come from having these things. With this attitude, we approach practice by expecting it to do something for us and that something we hold inside as a secret which we cherish and often cover with Dharma “chat”.

The true purpose of meditation is just to leave everything as it is. To put aside all our projects, aspirations and improvement plans and just let be. By leaving everything just as it is, we can then begin to experience and appreciate the intrinsic beauty, stillness and equanimity in everything. This indeed is the religious purpose of meditation: experiencing the nature of the universe, including everything that is ourselves and others and everything else, just as it is. Of course, the immediate difficulty we encounter here is appreciating that if this is the case then what is the purpose of practice itself and how is it that enlightenment seems so elusive? If it is the case that in meditation you just flow, then what is the purpose of doing it as a practice? Indeed when we come to this point, we arrive at Zen master Dogen, because this was the central question

that he posed for himself and for us. Indeed, he expressed it as an on-going *koan* which he stated in the first sentence of *Fukan-Zazengi* (*The Universal Guide to the Standard Method of Zazen*):

*The Way is originally perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent on practice and realisation? The true vehicle is self-sufficient. What need is there for special effort? Indeed, the whole body is free from dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? It is never apart from this very place; what is the use of travelling around to practise?*⁵

The correct mental attitude for zazen according to Dogen is one of effortless non-striving. This is because for him enlightenment is already always present. The primary idea underlying Dogen's Zen practice is the "oneness of practice-enlightenment". For Dogen, the practice of zazen and the experience of enlightenment were one and the same. This point again is clearly stressed by Dogen in the *Fukan Zazengi*:

Practice-realisation is naturally undefiled. Going forward in practice is a matter of everydayness.

This then brings us right back to the questions that Yunmen asked of us:

So let me ask you all, what has so far been the matter with you? What do you lack? If I tell you that nothing whatsoever is the matter I've already buried you. You yourself must arrive at that realisation!

How do we arrive at that realisation, given that it "is naturally undefiled" and "is never apart from this very place." The difficulty that we all encounter here is how to allow the everydayness of enlightenment into our striving against our perceived lack of enlightenment. Kazuaki Tanahashi

helps us with this when he says, “Dogen accepts this image of a linear process of seeking.” Here, he is saying that Dogen recognises that we all start out seeking to reach a goal and this too is a component of the process. As Tanahashi goes on to explain, Dogen:

...also talks about the way as a circle. For him, each moment of practice encompasses enlightenment, and each moment of enlightenment encompasses practice. In other words, practice and enlightenment – process and goal – are inseparable.

What is being said here is that trying to reach the goal is part of the process and the process itself is enlightenment. Tanahashi again:

The circle of practice is complete even at the beginning. This circle of practice-enlightenment is renewed moment after moment. ... At the moment you begin taking a step you have arrived, and you keep arriving each moment thereafter. In this view you don't journey toward enlightenment, but you let enlightenment unfold. ⁶

So as enlightenment is always present, how is it that we can so easily fail to recognise this? We struggle so hard to find a breakthrough when in fact what is important is realising the absence of a breakthrough. So how can we begin to experience the non-seeking aspect of our own unfolding enlightenment? Do we have to sit here and wait for it to happen? However much we try, it is difficult for all of us to give up the idea that in enlightenment there is some kind of difference. So how can we examine that for ourselves? It may be useful therefore to think of what might be different if we were experiencing being enlightened. How would this moment be if suddenly we were an enlightened person? What

would this moment be like if it was after enlightenment; if it were the moment following our awareness of enlightenment? How would this moment be different? What sort of experience do you imagine you would have if you were sitting here right now after your enlightenment? What would be your post-enlightenment experience?

An experiment

Here we can now try some experiments. Just sit here now this minute and think about the answers to those questions. Imagine you are enlightened in the way that you think about it. How is this different from how you imagined it to be? How could it be different? What is actually happening at this very moment?

So let us see if we can undertake a practice that eliminates some of our problems with meditation and construct a practice based on our experiment of “what it is like for me to be enlightened”. Let us see if we can eliminate the mindset of endurance and competitiveness and having to put ourselves through something which is going to be difficult, if not painful. So at home just once in a while, instead of your usual meditation session, sit in a chair, have yourself the mindset that this is something that you are going to do in which you will not report to anybody, perhaps not even “report” it to yourself by going over it after you finished. Perhaps just find a time which is different from your usual set period of meditation. Just sit and be quiet, turn off the radio or TV, don't check your phone. Just let there be a moment of not doing anything. Maybe if you begin to do this, you will start to identify what your project or plan is for yourself in meditation. Maybe you will be able to articulate what it is you are trying to achieve by becoming enlightened. Maybe you will be able to verbalise what your secret practice is. We do need to know



BEACH AT BROADHAVEN, PEMBROKESHIRE

what drives us and it is helpful if we allow space for these intentions to arise. Then when you have found it you can put it down.

So sit in a chair; there is nothing to be endured. No bell is going to be rung at the end. Just put your emphasis on presence, on being present. Be open to the experience of what is happening to you. Try to avoid distractions; just sit there in your chair looking at what is opposite you: the wall, window, the empty computer screen or whatever. Notice the noises around you; there is no need to follow them; just let them be. Focus on what is arising within yourself and don't try to put anything inside yourself. The biggest distraction we can have is following our thoughts. Appreciate the thought as a potential distraction but treat it as a thought, an ordinary bodily function, allow it to come, allow it

to go and then move on. If you do follow a thought pattern then that is okay, watch when it starts, watch how you want to follow it and watch how it stops. Just focus on your experience moment to moment; just let it be.

Ask yourself the question, am I looking for a particular state of mind? We can become enamoured with talk of the still mind, of the empty mind, of the complete calm egoless mind, which takes over our body. Don't be focused on looking for experiences. Experiences are just experiences; no one is better or worse than the next; they are all just part of the flow of who we are. Give up the observation and the searching for particular states of mind. This involves a major shift from imagining that we are moving from where we are to somewhere where we want to go. There is nowhere to go - our thought experiment is that we are enlightened already. There is no movement of getting from here to there. There is no way that you can get lost or go down the wrong route. The flow is the flow.

The things we do and what goes on in our mind are what we do and what we are. Allow them to rise and allow them to fall. Allow there to be movement and change. Undertaking just being in this way allows "meditation" to naturally flow into other activities, so eventually all activities are of this quality and the active sitting on the cushion or in a chair does not define our meditation or practice. It just becomes one of the other activities of who we are. Of course, it is hard to leave things alone but that is what this practice is about.

So it is very useful to say to yourself, what would my practice look like if I were enlightened. If suddenly everything became wonderful for me and I was this enlightened person I've always wanted to be, how

would I practise? Would I sit on my cushion? How would I deal with other people? How would I share my daily life? What I'm inviting you to do today is to practise as if you are enlightened. This practice is one where you have fully appreciated, realised and actualised Dogen's central *koan* of practice – enlightenment. As I am a Buddha do I need to practise and as I am a Buddha this is my practice.

NOTES

- 1 A Ferguson (2000) *Zen's Chinese Heritage*. Wisdom Publications. Boston. Page 259
- 2 U. App (1995) *Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Chan Master "Gate-of-the-Clouds"*. Kodansha America, Inc page 48
- 3 B Magid (2013) *Nothing is Hidden*. Wisdom. Boston
- 4 B Magid (2002) *Ordinary Mind*. Wisdom. Boston.
- 5 http://www.sfzc.org/sp_download/liturgy/21_Fukanzazengi.pdf
- 6 <http://www.tricycle.com/web-exclusive/fundamentals-dogens-thoughts>

THE SEARCH FOR RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

SARAH BIRD

In some ways, looking for “right livelihood” was what led me to Buddhism in the first place. It was 2004, and I was working for Blackwell Publishers, commissioning their psychology books. I was becoming more and more uncomfortable with what I was being asked to do – to produce new books that would sell, rather than new books that were useful to the world. I went to see my boss about it, and questioned this – it had simply stopped making sense to me (although of course I knew it made sense to the business – and the books we were doing *were* useful). I didn’t know it at the time, but what I was really doing was questioning the capitalist model.

So I left my job. Searching for meaning, I guess. And I ended up in India for a year where, in December 2004, I sat my first Buddhist retreat (10 days of silent *Vipassana*) and my world got turned inside out and upside down.

I got back to the UK, and started training as a chef. I wanted to set up an organic restaurant, and provide hospitality. Instead, after my training I got a job as a baker and salad-maker. I was entirely hopeless at both (and extremely poorly paid) so a few months later I went back, tail between my legs, to my ex-boss at Blackwell. “Any work going?” I asked. “Yes – we need a commissioning editor for business and management.” How ironic! “Business – yuk,” I thought. I took it – I needed the money.

In the few months that I was back at Blackwell’s I tried to find a kind of business that interested me, and I clearly remember reading Sara Parkin (ex Green Party) on good, sustainable business. It could be done differently. It could encompass love and humanity. So I started trying to

commission a list of books in the area, but then was promptly made redundant when Blackwell was acquired by Wiley.

Luckily, in that time I had come across the Masters in Responsible Business Practice at the University of Bath, and after a brief period trying to set up my own charity, I realised I needed help and community, and I enrolled for the Masters. One of the course founders was Peter Reason, a very old friend of John Crook's, and suddenly my Buddhist ideas and my work and academic interests started to converge. The Masters was quite different from what I had expected. The agreed subject of my second year thesis was: "What am I here for?" We used action research, ancient wisdom, modern management thought, collaboration with colleagues and quite a lot of meditation and body work to explore where it was that our joy might meet the needs of the world. "Enquiry" we called it. I guess John would have called it "Investigation".

And it provided a space and a container for a great deal of "not knowing". I had no idea "what I was here for." I genuinely thought I had left publishing far behind. What the hell was I going to do, work-wise, when I finished the course? It was only on the penultimate day that it all dropped into place – without fanfare, just a quiet, grounded sense of knowing. I was sitting with this question: "I have met all these bodhisattvas in the last couple of years. How can I work to support them?" And I suddenly remembered that I had been a publisher – why not set up a publishing company that published "books from a better world" (or perhaps even better: "books from an awakening world")? Could we share the stories of people who were exploring brave and authentic ways of thinking and being? And use them to explore 10,000 approaches to Dharma? The publishing company, later to be named Vala, was born.

And if I'm honest, at that point I thought that was it. Hallelujah. I'd found the "answer" to what my role was in the world – setting up Vala – and all would run smoothly from now onwards. I imagined myself setting up the business, and finding the right books, and they would simply shine and bring about deep change. Tad-dah. The publishing world would notice and change their business practices. It would be easy. And we'd make enough money to live on. Or I would, as the one paid employee. Job done.

The experience hasn't been quite as smooth and linear as that! The very first step was the vision. We wanted to set up a business that wasn't profit-oriented, and that came out of people, not business – grass roots. And a grass roots that was thoughtful, caring, interested in building a more loving, more sustainable world, that was well-connected. If we weren't profit-oriented and we came out of a community of wise people, surely we would produce books that the world needed at this difficult time. This is how we described Vala to potential investors/co-op members, as we launched a community share offer (which eventually raised £22,000 from 120 investors to start us off, until we became profitable):

Vala Publishing Co-operative is a group of people who participate in the business of producing books. Members of the co-operative are co-owners of the company, and manage it democratically: we debate what we should publish, suggest authors, support the writing process, get together for book-making evenings to customise printed books and promote and sell Vala books through our own networks, as well as through conventional bookshops. We will join together to celebrate and launch each new publication. Our books are thoughtfully and beautifully written and produced. They

explore and celebrate life, and may lead us in new and unexpected directions. We hope that they will appeal to a wide audience.

We've done a lot of these things, and published (so far) nine fabulous books including two that came directly out of the WCF – Marian Partington's *If You Sit Very Still*, and Florencia Clifford's *Feeding Orchids to the Slugs*. Thanks to our co-operative model, we have been able to bring some great minds into publishing – designers who know about sustainability, a chairman who knows about business, a marketing person who is an expert in complexity theory. We have built community – and have enjoyed some fabulous launch parties.

However, there have been mistakes and many pitfalls along the path. I now see (partly thanks to the patience and insight of Simon in interview) that I, as Vala's leader, became rather delusional! I developed a strong image of Vala in my head as a goddess. In fact, Vala is named after a mystical being in William Blake's mythical universe, representing the natural world – a sort of Gaia for the Industrial Revolution. But in my head she became an all-powerful goddess, and I was her handmaiden, who was to carry out her work in the world. Fundamentalism started to rear its head, and I became entirely obsessed. When things were going well, I was on cloud forty-nine (in fact at times I thought I *was* the goddess). When things were going badly, I felt like I was personally responsible for the world not being saved from going to the dogs – because I wasn't working hard enough on my personal Vala mission, so our books weren't selling enough to make authors happy or the business work. It all became a bit of an ego trip. Thankfully, a deeper wisdom (and the help of others) had led me to set Vala up as a co-op. If I'm honest it didn't start off operating as one – more like a benign dictatorship – but



FLORENCIA CLIFFORD WITH THE FIRST COPIES OF HER BOOK TO COME OFF THE PRESS



SARAH BIRD AND MARIAN PARTINGTON AT THE LAUNCH OF MARIAN'S BOOK

now it is becoming so, and the work is being more fully shared, although it is hard, when we can offer little or no money for work undertaken.

I used to polarise “good” and “bad” business, and I don’t do that any more. It’s damned hard, making a livelihood from a business, and I now am much less quick to leap to judgment of that ex-boss of mine at Blackwells, and indeed of the capitalist system. That’s not to say I don’t want it to change – I desperately, desperately do – but trying to operate outside of the system is extremely hard. In retrospect, I wish we had been able to engage more publishing professionals at the beginning. We had some expertise but too often I relied on instinct and inspiration.

That’s not to say that inspiration hasn’t been important. There have been some beautiful, entirely non-businessy moments. Like the time I left a copy of our first book, Geoff Mead’s *Coming Home to Story*, as an offering at William Blake’s grave in London. As I left it, in reverence, I looked back, and the January light caught the silver of the cover – and it felt like the world stopped for a moment. The man who found the book got in touch with us weeks later, and told us how important the words of the book and the finding of it had been for him.

We do struggle financially, and yet we are still here, three years down the line, with many books in the world that might not otherwise have gone into print. At the very least, all have been greatly influenced by our way of doing things, particularly as we give much more editorial support, especially to first time authors, than other publishers are able to do. At the moment it isn’t a full livelihood for me – I need to find other work and do Vala part-time. I have learned a massive amount from it, and Vala’s shape continues to shift and emerge. The on-going questions for

me are “When I drop my illusions about what Vala is, what is left?” and “How do we produce books that ease suffering?”

You can follow our adventures by signing up to our newsletter at www.valapublishers.coop.

ONE-LINERS

STUART QUINE

I introduce for our poetry pages a form that will be new to most of us: the one-liner. Stuart Quine is a Zen meditator in the Silent Illumination tradition and writes a remarkable amount in one beautiful line. See what you think. This is followed by a poem by Pat Simmons. – George Marsh

white rice in a white bowl winter sunlight

“Not yet, not yet,” says the tumbling beck

cloudless sky a perfect day of no importance

unravelling the storm crowflight in rain

drunken moon under stars I stumble home

as real as any dream cherry blossom

gone to seed in the coupling yard grey heads of willow herb

new year's day only the wind comes to my gate

JACK DISCOVERS IMPERMANENCE

PAT SIMMONS

“If you cut off my head,” he asks, aged four,
“what would you see?”

So we talk.

About blood and bones, and tubes
for the food and air to go down.

“And if you burnt me all up,” he asks,
“what would happen?”

So we talk.

About ash rising fine
on the wind, a butterfly’s wing,
to flirt with the sun.

“And where would *I* be?” he asks.

So we talk.

About the completely untenable
no-Jack hypothesis.
A world without Jack to see it,
a not-even-space where Jack has been.

“But Jesus came back,” he says,
“when he’d died. He rose
from the dead. They told us at school.”

So we talk.
About beautiful stories,
and what grandmas don't know.

And I want to say:
"In this life, boy, you hang on tight,
push off and swing into space,
not knowing where you will land. Or whether."

And I want to say:
"Sit with the mystery unknowing.
The only thing certain is now,
and that's pretty improbable."

And I want to say:
"Reach for the light,
but don't think you can hide there.
It's for seeing, not escaping."

And I want to say:
"I love you, small speck
of thistledown, spinning off
into the dark."

Instead, I ask:
"And did you read today
to Mrs Ferguson?"

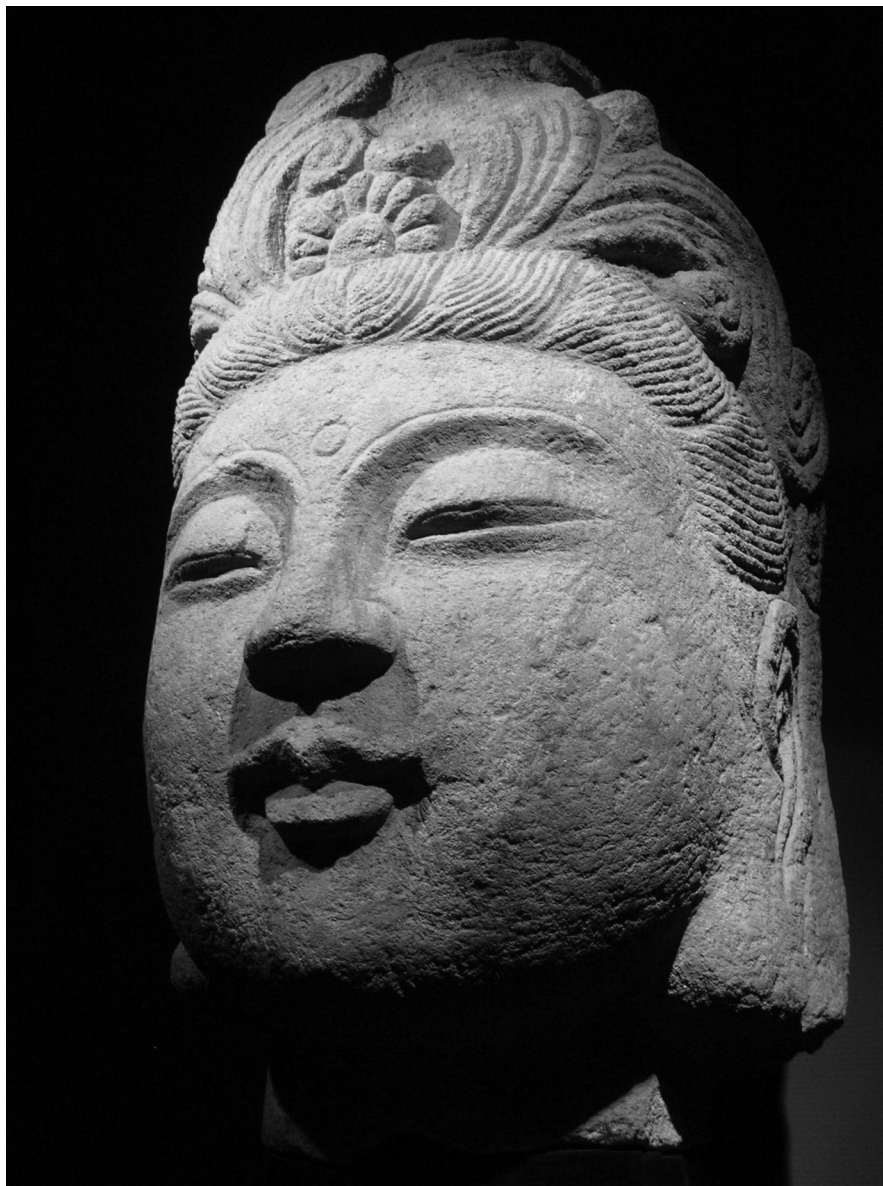


PHOTO: George Marsh

BUDDHA HEAD, POLY MUSEUM, BEIJING

RETREAT REPORTS

At the end of all Western Chan Fellowship retreats we are asked to write brief reports on our experiences during and immediately after the retreat. For many retreatants this is a valuable part of the retreat, providing an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and the ways in which they have progressed. We print three reports here, anonymously, and are grateful to the writers for sharing their experiences with us. We can learn much from them about the experiences of others on retreat, and they often provide pointers for our own understanding. The following reports are all from Simon's Shattering the Great Doubt koan retreats.

REPORT I

This was my first *koan*-based retreat, and I approached it with some trepidation. Although I have been practising for 14 years, sitting *shikan-taza* for nine years and in the last five sitting in *koan* practice, my *koan* practice had never previously been subject to the discipline of an intensive retreat. My aims were to deepen my *koan* practice, to use the retreat to better understand a number of the dysfunctional patterns which have occurred in my life, and, I hoped, to achieve an enlightenment experience, something which I had never previously managed, despite diligent daily practice (over an hour a day) for 14 years.

Although nervous, I have found the Western Chan Fellowship to be a friendly and supportive organisation, and I was encouraged that this retreat was to be led by Simon Child, with whom I have worked on two previous occasions. I knew Simon to be a Retreat Master of great knowledge and subtlety but, most importantly for me, I felt him to be a person

of the utmost integrity. Embarking on such a challenging retreat involved trust in the leader, and I had that trust in Simon.

The first full day of the retreat was concerned with calming the mind and participants were encouraged to use their usual practice to settle, or to use the phrase employed by Simon to “brighten the mind”.

On the second day we were introduced to *koan* work. My experience of *koan* study had been based on the traditional *Rinzai* approach, where there is a set “curriculum” of *koans* to be “passed” in a set order and I had worked only with the first two in this curriculum – “mu” and “original face”. I did not know what to expect from the Western Chan approach, and was surprised to be given a printed sheet which contained 18 *koans*, only a few of which were vaguely familiar to me, and to be told that we needed to choose one of these. Simon explained that we should find a *koan* which appeared to have some personal resonance and that we would have time to choose. For me, this was not necessary because immediately one struck me; this was:

Goso said to his monks: “Seijo’s soul separated from her being. Which was the real Seijo?”

It was not the apparent theme – of identity, life, dying and death – which provoked a response in me, but the use of the word “soul”. For me, this led to old and long-suppressed feelings about my upbringing as a Roman Catholic and issues of guilt, damnation, hell and torment.

I won’t repeat in this report Simon’s explanation of the function of a *koan* and the debate as to whether it can be said to be meaningless or have meaning, albeit a meaning not susceptible to a conventional rational response. An important point though was that by choosing a *koan* in the way suggested, i.e. by choosing one which had a significant emo-

tional “hook”, the likelihood was that the *koan* would embed itself more rapidly.

I spent much of Monday and Tuesday (days 3 and 4) in an emotional turmoil. The *koan* forced me to confront of a whole set of deeply held beliefs and implicit assumptions about me in the world, primarily as sinner, destined to burn in hell for all eternity for the heinous crime of eating meat on a Friday and failing to confess. Although on a conscious level I believed that I had jettisoned all these beliefs, I was to find that, although hidden, they lurked within. Virtually every time I repeated the *koan*, these issues surfaced. The deeper the meditative experience, the stronger the images of despair, and visual experiences which reminded me of scenes from paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. Some of the Bosch-like experiences were not painful to undergo, even though the scenes they portrayed were appalling; indeed after a while they seemed to have some sort of purging effect, leaving me feeling quite calm, if a little dissociated.

By the middle of day 4, the meditations began to take on a lifeless, dry quality, with the imagery (such as there was) in black and white or much muted dark colours. Every attempt to investigate the *koan* seemed like a monumental effort. It was, to use a metaphor which Simon employed in one of his talks, like “wading in treacle”. In my second interview with Simon, I presented this difficulty. He said that, whilst the experience of dryness and lack of emotion was a common stage to experience, commonly referred to as “the desert”, he suspected that something else was going on in my experience and that feelings were being blocked. He advised me to attempt to bring some colour into the imagery and to investigate the possibility that there were feelings being repressed.

I followed this advice in subsequent sessions and on the evening of the Tuesday something began to shift and I increasingly saw that the manner in which these thoughts and beliefs about damnation had so firmly embedded themselves had its origins in a set of events quite outside the sphere of religious indoctrination. The context was my experience as a younger brother in a family of two children, both boys. I had idolised my older brother, had always felt inferior to him, a feeling reinforced by my parents who told me, amongst other things, that I was not as intelligent as him. John, my brother, was to me an impossibly glamorous figure. Always top of the A stream of his highly competitive and academically excellent grammar school, regular winner of school prizes, a top footballer in his school team who had trials for Lancashire schoolboys, good-looking and desired by many of the local teenage girls and acknowledged leader of a group known as “John’s gang”, who were in fact a pretty well-behaved group of kids. Aged seven, shy, lonely, with very few friends, not very good at sport and, although doing very well at school, being constantly told that I could never match up to John, I felt like an absolute nobody.

Then John had a row with my dad, and was thrown out of the house. Aged 15, he went to live with his granny and never returned to the family home. I was heartbroken, but was never allowed to express my feelings. Instead, the loss of John was presented to me by my mum as something which caused my dad, and only my dad, pain, and I was told by her that we would have to protect and look after him. My feelings in all of this were completely overlooked. I became lonelier, became very fat and morose and started to experience bullying at school.

The insight as to how the events of my brother going and my belief that I was damned were enmeshed came in one session when the words

“I wanted him [this meant John] to play with me” appeared as I investigated the *koan*. As I sobbed, insight after insight came but in essence they came to this: to be always seen as second best, and then as nobody at all, was utterly intolerable to me. I needed to be important. If I could not be important for good reasons, by being loved, then I would be important by being hated. As an evil sinner, I could not be insignificant because God thought I was important enough to be always in his thoughts as an object of hatred.

With these insights and the associated emotional release, the quality of my investigation changed dramatically. Although these psychological aspects did not disappear (and indeed many more insights unfolded throughout that evening and the next day) the investigation focused much more on the words of the *koan*, on the meaning of the terms “soul”, “being”, on life and death and on the growing knowledge that rational thought could not help me to resolve it. Some very deep and powerful insights, many beyond words, came to me.

Then on the evening of Wednesday, the 5th day, I had the most powerful meditative experience of my life, an experience which feels as if it has turned my life upside down and inside out. I am not sure if I can describe it as a direct experience of the enlightenment state, because my subjective recollection is that there remained separation between what I was seeing and experiencing (or what was seeing and experiencing me) but other than that experience of separation, the experience was extraordinarily intense, and lasted for some 20 to 25 minutes.

In that period, I knew the emptiness of all things, and I experienced all thoughts, things, and ideas as simply flow. Ephemeral, ethereal, of no importance but of the utmost importance all at the same time. I had an

image of objects falling and knew that gravity was also flow. I also saw time as flow, but there were limits to what I could see and experience and I knew that I did not have a complete understanding of time, although it seemed to have some special quality or relationship with everything else which flowed. I knew the “answer” to my *koan*, which was simply that Seijo was and is emptiness and flow.

After the experience I did not feel elated but instead felt that I had failed in some way because of the sensation of separation. I told myself that this was not the real thing, and that I should pack my bags and go home, or mentally turn off and coast through the rest of the retreat. This urge to run away was so strong that I felt unsettled. Had I had an enlightenment experience or not? Was I a failure or not? Was there any point in my practice? I temporarily stopped trying to investigate the *koan* but constantly repeated the Four Great Vows, concentrating mostly on the vow to attain Buddhahood. All this was designed to get me focussed and back as a full participant in the retreat.

The next morning I asked for an interview with Simon and recounted my experience and my reaction afterwards. Simon could not confirm that I had had an enlightenment experience, but did say that the phenomenon I described – of having a glimpse of enlightenment without necessarily a complete experience of it – had been known to occur. My answers to the questions he put to me were consistent with my having had a glimpse of an enlightenment experience, if not more.

Encouraged, I continued to sit and to investigate my *koan* diligently. As I did so, and as I participated in the rest of the retreat the fruits of what I had experienced began to reveal themselves. Simon’s talks took on increased significance. I saw, deeply, that compassion and action in

the world flow from emptiness and that it could not be otherwise. I saw that the heroic compassionate actions of many in the world carried out without this understanding were in many ways even more heroic and extraordinary because they did these things without this insight. For the first time in my life I fell in love with humanity, and knew that in doing so I was, for the first time, also falling in love with myself.

As I meditated some words from the Wordsworth poem *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* kept coming into my mind:

...that best portion of a good man's life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.

I cried copiously whenever they appeared. I saw that these small actions of kindness and decency were a part of the path towards Buddhahood. Only when I got home and re-read the poem did I realise that, although Wordsworth would certainly have used Christian terminology, this insight came to him during one of his enlightenment experiences:

...Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

As I continued to investigate the *koan*, my attention switched to the obvious theme of the *koan*, death, and it was during a walk across the fields

that a further insight came to me: for the first time in my life, the event of my death held no fear for me. This was an immensely liberating realisation which allowed me to truly live.

My whole experience of the retreat was extraordinarily positive. I know that I will have to wait and see how much of the positive benefits remain with me as the power of the immediate experience fades. Even if only a fraction of the insights I had remain, it will still have been one of the most worthwhile experiences of my life. My knowledge of the liberating power of the Buddha's teachings has been deepened immeasurably by the insights I received and I am grateful beyond words.



LAMA YURU GOMPA, LADAKH, INDIA

REPORT II

My *koan*:

Ling Zingpo visited Master Fubei Heshang to pay her respects. They sat together and drank tea, she asked him, "If a true word can't be spoken no matter how hard you try, how will you teach?"

Fubei said, "Fubei has nothing to say."

Ling was not satisfied. She placed her hands inside the opposite sleeves of her robes and cried out: "There is grievous suffering even within a blue sky!"

Again Fubei had nothing to say.

Ling said, "To be a human being is to live in calamity."

I joined this retreat after practising Silent Illumination for several years. Before that I had worked on the *koan* "What is Mu?", which had taken a long time to break through and I decided I needed a rest from that! Silent Illumination is such a beautiful, gentle practice it was exactly what I needed after Mu, but recently I had been feeling that practice had become very quiet and I wasn't really moving any more. In fact my blocks just kept coming back and my cage seemed as impenetrable as ever.

I chose to work with this *koan* featuring Ling Zingpo and Master Fubei Heshang, as Ling immediately appealed to me: I too was not satisfied! But why did she set him a trap with her first question, making any verbal response impossible? Then why wasn't she satisfied? I identified with her exclamation of suffering even within a blue sky. How could he not respond again? Surely he would find a way to connect with her after her cry. Ling's final remark felt so sad, "To be a human being is to live in calamity."

Prior to going on retreat I had been feeling dissatisfied with my own life, despite having a comfortable home, a good job, a supportive partner and a beautiful dog. I blamed myself for some personal difficulties, feeling unable to connect with my partner at times. I was frustrated by my work, which seemed so pressured and task-orientated. And my nice home didn't feel like enough: I wanted to live somewhere more inspiring. Also, I was troubled by all the world events recently: horrible atrocities in the Middle East and the worst ever ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. Maybe I should head off and volunteer to do something to help?

My dissatisfaction loomed large, encouraged by thinking of Ling. But with the help of Simon, I unpicked things again and saw behind my personal troubles, going back to my history of insecurities, self-criticism and sense of never being good enough. Events from childhood and conclusions I drew from them had formed a way of thinking which had developed into a habitual sense of dissatisfaction. Yes, there is grievous suffering even within a blue sky, but without dropping my self-concern how would I ever be free?

And what about Fubei? Why didn't he have anything to say? What would I say? Surely he could respond as a human being to such a cry, even within the restraints of his position.

Each day Simon gave us such wonderful appropriate Dharma talks I felt he was talking directly to me, an experience shared by others at the closing remarks. What a gift to have a teacher who can respond to a group in such a way. He also offered personal interviews, which helped clarify my misunderstandings. At one of these another whole layer of my cage revealed itself, when I realised I needed to break free from the form of the practice itself and the warnings and guidelines of Zen.

During the whole week we were blessed with the most amazing Indian Summer weather and I took to the fields and hills at every opportunity. After a while it wasn't possible to hold such a strong sense of tragedy; the drama somehow didn't fit ... the sun shone and the red kites circled and soared. I kept coming back to practice and the *koan*, which led on to my habitual response to things. I realised I could let go of some of the things which shaped my past. Even some of the helpful guidelines for right practice were now blocking my clear view. With each insight and careful attention, I felt myself put down and release a heavy burden, which I had carried for a long time and had even picked up again after leaving it before.

Simon had asked me at one interview "What true word can you say?" I was walking up the hill one day, pondering this and realised the answer: "I am *Alive!*" This answer took hold and became a vibrant source of energy and zest for life.

Then the day shines clearly, just as it is. My ordinary mind is revealed, without obstructions, to be joyful and contented. The beauty of life can be seen, although the calamity remains. I am enormously grateful to Simon for his compassionate help and for his encouragement to trust myself and spread my own wings even tentatively to test the air.

I have been home for a few days, and reflecting on last week is helping me again to see how important it is not to just pick up my habitual attitudes and practices. This freshness must be renewed, and until I learn a new way, I cannot guarantee the old burdens won't return. I am now doing the washing and shopping, going back to work and continuing practising.

REPORT III

Another breakthrough retreat in more than one regard: a liberating confrontation with my personal life *koan* and a broken rib due to a lack of early morning awareness.

Picking a *koan* was easy this time. Without much hesitation I chose the *huatou*: “*Atop a hundred foot pole, how can you step forward?*” without the slightest idea why I chose it.

Then, on the second day – the retreat had only just started – during rest period I sat on the stone bench behind the kitchen. I was still in the early phase of repeating/reciting my *koan*. The sun was shining, it was very peaceful and quiet except for the lambs baaing. My eyes fell on the big tree which has the Green Tara at its foot. The moss was shimmering with moistness, the green of the grass and the colours of some wild flower blossoms seemed somehow pure and very intense. Suddenly I felt or rather I realized that all I saw was *Love*, the trees, flowers, grass, mountain etc. – not an expression of love but *Love* itself. The whole universe was *Love*. And how could it be otherwise: how could the process or act or event of things permanently manifesting into existence, this constant creative becoming, ever changing and inherently empty, possibly not be a great big *Yes*?

The experience was very deep, intense and short. I returned to my *koan*, which proved to be as recalcitrant as usual. I continued repeating and reciting without getting into contact with it. Or so I thought. At some point I realised I again was manoeuvring myself into the trap of expecting the *koan* to work in the same way as other *koans* had. But while I was inwardly lamenting about my practice and struggling with the method, the *koan* obviously co-operated with Simon’s comments, stimuli

and verbal nudges during the interviews to do its mysterious work on a subconscious level.

After a few days and through a few stages it led me to a root of a life-long psychological obstruction, the most basic structural mental biases which shaped my whole experience of the world, myself and my life in a way I never touched during an earlier, otherwise successful, psychotherapeutic process.

It led me to the root of a complex of beliefs, deeply rooted convictions and automatic emotional response patterns which connected a seemingly indissoluble feeling of un-belonging (to groups, persons, the world), a more or less well concealed sense of worthlessness/unworthiness and the fear of being exposed and expelled. This I already knew, and I also knew it was connected to the way my father had treated me in early childhood. But up to now, at the age of 62, I had not been able to let go of this complex of self-images and reactive patterns. I had quite successfully built a complex construct of behavioural strategies for dealing with this pattern or for avoiding situations which could actualize it. I had not become a social outcast or developed pathological behaviours. But this did not mean I was free of the inner processes. I was definitely not free.

During an interview Simon led me to the heart of the matter: why do you still believe in your father's opinions about you? You know that they are not the truth. Why can't you let go of them? This was a question I had asked myself many times, usually in a critical accusing voice: why can't I let go, for god's sake? After all the therapy and my chan practice? And my insights and experiences?

I had some answers, which I now gave to Simon: if I gave up these beliefs it meant that I would betray my father. I would make him a liar.

I would make him an evil person. I would distance myself from him. I would cut the bond between us.

Simon insisted: it all took place a long time ago and your father is dead. You know it is not true. Do you want to live a lie? I answered with a simple psychological truth: on the deepest level children are forced to love their parents; it is programmed into us; we cannot simply stop that. Simon did not let go: what exactly is it that stops you? Is it fear of your father? The question brought my thinking process to a kind of stop. No, it was not fear ... It was ...

Then something broke through – more than a thought or an idea, but a total body-mind realisation, something that had never ever before dawned on me: I had always felt pity and a very deep compassion for my father, even as a child. Why? Because he had lost his mother early and his favourite elder brother during the war and he had totally fallen out with his father, because he blamed him for both deaths. When I realised all this, I was overwhelmed by compassion, a compassion I had known about because of my own conflicts with my father and my convictions and judgements about him.

I was shaken and in tears. Then, after a short while, the energy changed. It felt as if something was leaving my body and being replaced by a “lightness”. And suddenly my whole image of my father transformed: he “shrank” from this overwhelming being with the power to define the world for me, to a smaller normally sized human being on the same level with myself, at my eye-level. His beliefs or convictions were just an expression of his own suffering. I did not have to believe in them.

It felt as if a fresh breeze was blowing through all of me. The feeling of not-belonging, worthlessness and unworthiness, that had always

lingered somewhere in the background or underneath, had disappeared.

Now, four months later, it is still like this. I actually can't even find this feeling or emotionally remember it anymore. It is just something I know from the past.

I don't know whether Dogen had this kind of psychological catharsis in mind, when he wrote about the "life-*koan*", but I consider *Atop a hundred foot pole, how can you step forward?* to be my life *koan*.



Western Chan Fellowship

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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.

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NEW CHAN FORUM

Published by the Western Chan Fellowship

Registered Charity Number 1068637

ISSN 2047-9514 PRINT

ISSN 2047-9522 ONLINE

Correspondence address:

New Chan Forum, 33 St Martins House,

Clarence Parade, Southsea PO5 2EZ

Design: www.robbowden.com

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Leader: Hilary Richards Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

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Saturday 4th April to Saturday 11th April 2015

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Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales



*You must completely withdraw from the invisible pounding
and weaving of your ingrained ideas.
If you want to be rid of this invisible turmoil,
you must just sit through it and let go of everything.*

HONGZHI

禪 Western
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