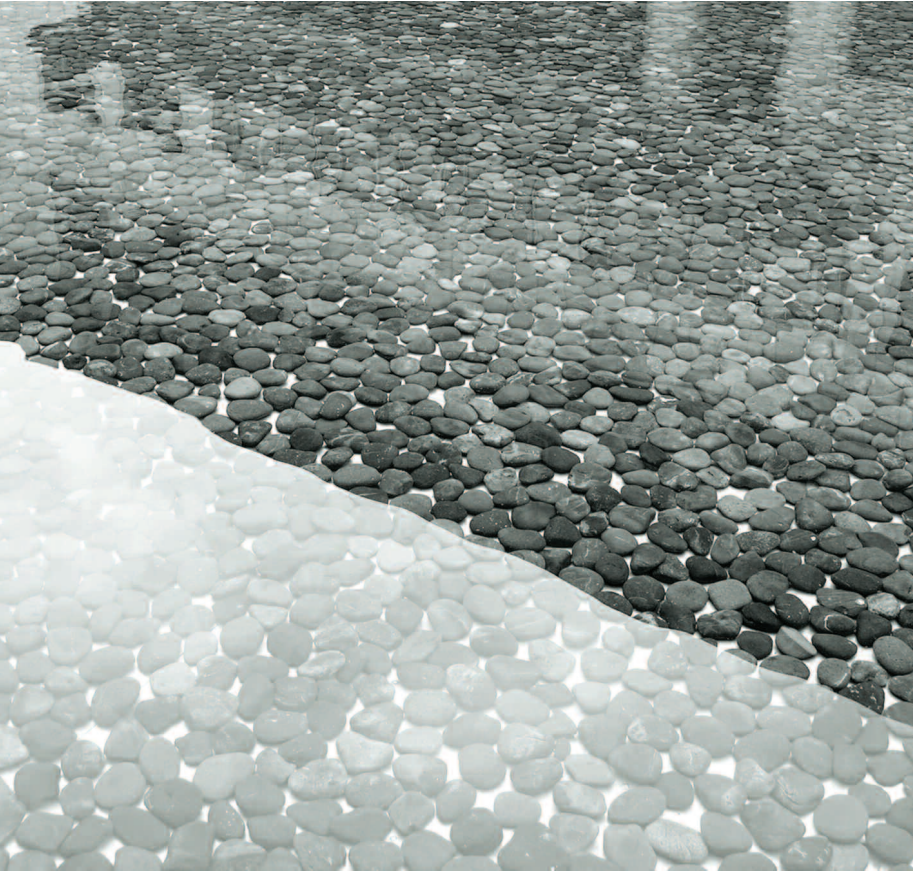


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BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

# NEW CHAN FORUM

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Chan  
Fellowship



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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS & GEORGE MARSH

We start this issue of *New Chan Forum* with an important call to action by our Teacher Simon Child, a call to examine our heritage and current identity, and work for an effective future.

Our literary heritage is introduced in articles on the core sutras of the Buddha's teachings and the *Dao De Jing*, a foundation text of Daoism and Chan.

The down-to-earth nature of Chan in daily life is a theme of the second article in our series on right livelihood.

The retreat reports this time reflect upon a Silent Illumination retreat and a Western Zen Retreat. Please keep retreat reports coming. They are witness to the transformative power of the retreat process, when safely held in the arms of the Buddha's teachings.

## DHARMA TALK: WHO ARE WE?

SIMON CHILD

*Western Chan Fellowship AGM Teacher's Address, February 7th 2015*

From time to time the WCF committee has been urged to manage things 'properly' and develop vision statements, strategy documents, and similar. We've even had some professional input into such processes from skills within the membership. These exercises have often been unsatisfactory, the problem being that we haven't always seemed to share a common understanding of what the WCF was for, what it was supposed to be doing, and so we lacked the basis for forming a coherent vision for the future.

The same applies when we extend discussion into the wider membership. We find that there are very divergent views among the membership, often quite firmly held, often based on a hidden assumption that their view is (or should be) the WCF view and the WCF priority. Sometimes this conflict of views is noticed and it may be asked, "What is the WCF?" In this talk I shall share my understanding of where the WCF is now, where it has come from, and where it needs to go.

Who are we? Let's explore that

It is necessary to look deeply into this phenomenon that goes by the label of WCF because without a coherent understanding of who we are, and where we are, and where we need to go, we find ourselves pulled in all directions and moving nowhere, with risk of stagnation. And in several ways that is what has happened and is happening.

We have had some growth over the 18 years of the WCF. Instead of having only one person, John Crook, qualified and able to lead retreats,

we now have several, and correspondingly we run two to three times as many retreats per year as we did 18 years ago, in several locations around the UK. In the early years we had about ten local groups and now have around twenty. We've gained about 20 associate members in the last couple of years. But the number of full members has only increased from about 55 in our early years to 60 in 2004 to 69 at present.

In a technical sense we have had some growth, but that is hardly spectacular growth over a period of time approaching a generation. And hidden within those figures are some signs of problems. The average age of WCF membership has increased over the years. On a glance through the membership list I see that nearly half the members are aged over 60 yet the founding members included only two or three aged over 60. Just look around the room now to see that part of the WCF growth has been amongst pension-claimants, due in large part to the founding and early members growing 18 years older without a matching infusion of newer younger members.

I know that when I talk about growth I am pressing buttons which reveal hidden assumptions in some of you. I hear comments such as, "We like WCF small and intimate, that's what we like about it and we don't want it to change into some big faceless corporation". "It works for us as it is, why change it?" Hold those thoughts for now, I'll come back to them.

In what other areas do individual views diverge, or we are unclear where the WCF stands?

#### STYLE OF PRACTICE

Is WCF an organisation which emphasises intensive retreat practice, or

daily life practice, or both? Historically we have undoubtedly been the former, and all members have experienced intensive retreat on several occasions as it is a requirement for membership. Consequently all members have an appreciation for intensive retreat practice, but we vary as to our understanding and application of practice in daily life and maintenance of ongoing practice.

#### SELF OR OTHER

Some members see WCF primarily as an organisation which can support their own practice, providing practice opportunities and teaching. Others regard the function of WCF to be a provider of practice opportunities, support, and teaching to others including newcomers.

#### BUSINESS OR DANA

For some the WCF is in effect a service provider with whom a transaction is made – a retreat booked and the fee paid. For others, membership of the WCF is an opportunity for *Dana*, to volunteer time, expertise, or money, towards spreading and supporting the Dharma.

#### ENGAGEMENT

We vary in our involvement with the environment and society in ‘non-Dharmic’ contexts – some see it as separate from their practice and some see it as part of their practice.

#### TRADITIONAL, OR MODERN

Similarly we each place ourselves, and our view of the WCF, in different places on a continuum between traditional and modern, between East and West.





Photo: George Marsh

SUZHOU GARDEN THROUGH SCREENS

#### LAY, OR MONASTIC

We are all lay practitioners practising in a lay context with lay Teachers. For some this is perfectly appropriate and comfortable, with their teachers having a similar life experience to them including juggling work, family, relationship, and financial commitments. For others this situation may harbour something of a compromise, feeling that if life circumstances enabled them to become monastic then it would be better to be full-time dedicated monastic practitioners, with them perhaps also looking up to monastic teachers as full-time professionals.

#### RELIGION, OR NOT

We have a very complex relationship to that continuum that runs from religion to self-improvement and therapy. For some their practice is emphatically secular and their attitude to ‘religious trappings’ is one of merely tolerance or of acceptance for their functional or aesthetic value. For others WCF is their religious institution and ritual observance may be important to them. For yet others there is an unclear middle ground, which might sway towards one side or the other as they make heartfelt connection with some aspects or find functional or aesthetic value in others.

#### CHAN, OR GENERAL BUDDHISM

Another complex area is to consider the very tradition that we practise and teach. Our title includes the word ‘Chan’, and our defined lineage and my transmission are in a specific tradition of Chan. But Chan draws from other traditions and WCF quite appropriately does so too. We go further than that and have taught other traditions such as *Mahamudra*, and in some respects have an element of a Western ‘psychodynamic’ approach to practice. Different members connect more strongly to differ-

ing parts of this spectrum of Dharma, and so we are not all coming from the same place when we discuss future projects and developments.

#### PRACTICE, OR STUDY, OR BOTH

We have a variable relationship to the balance between meditation and theoretical study of the Dharma. We continue our meditation practice but with variable regularity and intensity. Most of us do some study but very few have undertaken systematic and comprehensive study of Buddhist theory.

#### FELLOWSHIP, SANGHA

In our title is the word 'Fellowship' and each of us connects to that in different ways. For some it is the prime purpose of the WCF, to provide a supportive sangha of fellow practitioners. For others who tend to solitary practice, or who are distant from other members, this part of our name is almost irrelevant and of little interest. And for yet others it remains an aspiration but not well-realised except in local groups because our geographical dispersion means that there are many members we have never even met.

#### RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY

This is a style of practice that WCF has never offered, though John intended to do so at Winterhead. There are few in WCF who might be interested in this, but there is an element of natural selection in operation here. In the main such people have left us and gone to find this elsewhere. i.e. it isn't that there is no interest in residential community practice, but that there is little interest in it amongst current WCF members because if individuals are seeking that then they don't join us. This is an example of the way the organisation and the membership shape each

other, but sometimes unhelpfully to the exclusion of practitioners with valid but differing interests.

#### MAENLLWYD

We all have a love of Maenllwyd, having all had good experience of being there on retreat. But for some that is a rather macho love, Outward Bound bravado. For others it is a past love, and they are no longer able to manage it, for example due to physical infirmity, or due to inability to get sufficient sleep in the dormitory accommodation to enable good practice the next day.

For some Maenllwyd is the only place they believe real retreat is possible, and John Crook tended to speak that way even though he was also perfectly happy teaching at other venues such as Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York, and at Dłuzew Palace near Warsaw. Others, including WCF members as well as non-members, deliberately avoid going on retreat at Maenllwyd and will only retreat elsewhere for reasons of disability, sleep quality, or simply for comfort.

This issue was especially prominent when last year we investigated buying a property. Some were enthused at the thought of upgrading the accommodation for our practice. Others were horrified, saying that they would only contemplate it so long as any new venue was less comfortable than Maenllwyd! Some regarded accessibility as an important feature of any property, to open up the practice to more people, whereas for others only the more isolated and inaccessible rural idylls were worthy of consideration.

No Wonder!

Consider the various items I have listed above and reflect on the implication that if pressed on where they stand on each of these points prob-

ably everyone else in this room would place themselves slightly or significantly differently to you. No wonder we find it difficult to agree on how to move forward, when we are each starting from different places. We don't all even have the same view on which way is forward!

How did we get here?

To those of us who have been around a long time it is quite clear how we got here. The WCF formed around John Crook and his interests and skills. The WCF has been moulded by that origin, both in terms of the 'culture' and priorities of the WCF and also in its organisational structure with the constitution clearly fitting like a glove around John's interests!

John had very diverse interests. He not only practiced Chan but also Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. From this position he advocated Open or non-sectarian Buddhism, borrowing as appropriate from multiple traditions. He was also deeply concerned about nature, the environment, and society. There was John the academic, the scientist, John the adventurer, explorer, and experimentalist, John the Shaman, healer, poet and writer, and more.

For each of those who gathered around John and the WCF their point(s) of connection differed, some identifying more with one aspect such as Chan or Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, or with his academic fields of psychology and behaviour, ecology, social issues, or with his travel in the Himalayas, etc. For most there was more than one point of contact, but probably for no two people was the exact mix of connections identical.

Thus we have a really very disparate membership of WCF, all with very different expectations and motivations for being involved with WCF. This created the situation I have described where we may lack co-

hesion as a group - we may all, with good motivation, and from our perspective perfectly appropriately, pull in different directions.

There are other factors which we could bring into this discussion, but hopefully this is enough to establish both the problem and the history of the problem. We are a disparate group, not always realising or acknowledging how different we are, and yet we are trying to engage in a common enterprise that is not fully defined.

### What to Do?

We need to start by understanding and acknowledging our disparate nature, which is why I've gone into these matters in detail. This isn't intended as a preliminary to eliminating differences! There is great richness in our diversity, and much of it is a very beneficial resource for our endeavour. But what is our endeavour?

Though we can encompass nearly all of the above, we do need to refocus and prioritise. I want now to pick out what I believe we need to consider as primary and deserving our full energy and attention. The rest follows from there either fitting in and being supportive, or not fitting in and not something that we need to include in our considerations.

I see two main principles.

### CHAN

We need to affirm that we are a Chan organisation, that Chan is our primary orientation. We could be a generic Buddhist organisation, and that would be a valid thing to be, but that is not what we are. The WCF was founded, with the word Chan in its name, and the lineage specified in the constitution, to facilitate the ongoing transmission of Chan in the West.

We can and should continue to value and learn from all traditions, in the spirit of Open Buddhism. In any case that is the spirit of Chan itself, as taught by Chan Master Sheng-yen. Shifu emphasised the importance of a wider understanding of Buddhism, and that Chan is not something outside of mainstream Buddhism but is based on the foundational teachings of the *Agamas*, also incorporating Mahayana developments and Chinese schools such as *HuaYen* and *Tientai*. We can learn from and use practices of other traditions where this supports our Chan practice, but we are primarily Chan practitioners.

#### CHARITY

Secondly, we must remember that the WCF is run by us but it is not run for us. The WCF is a registered charity, and its purpose is to advance the education of the public in the principles of Buddhism. We exist primarily to spread the Dharma.

Though we are a membership association, we are not a club which is created to serve its members' needs. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to consider our own needs and preferences when making decisions about the WCF. The WCF is a *Bodhisattva* organisation, embodying the *Bodhisattva* spirit of putting others before oneself. The members – you! – are those who have stepped forward as *Bodhisattvas* to take personal responsibility for contributing to the WCF efforts in spreading the Dharma, contributing whatever you are able to offer.

Considering it this way, our reflections and decisions on the WCF should not be intended to shape it to suit ourselves. Indeed we should be prepared to shape in it in ways which don't suit us if that is what is most helpful to the public. This bears on the point about growth that I raised earlier. Though it might be convenient for us if the WCF remained



PHOTOS: George March

SAPLINGS AND THEIR ANCESTORS



small and easy to manage, this does not fulfil our responsibility to reach out and offer the Dharma to those who are able to hear it, including particularly those younger newcomers who may become the future teachers to continue the lineage after we are gone.

### Putting it Together

If we work from these two clear principles, which in fact are already encapsulated in the prime Object of our constitution and our registered charitable status, then the rest falls into place.

- Where our diversity is a strength, which mostly it is, then we make use of it to assist in fulfilling our primary purpose of transmitting Chan to the public.
- In the few areas where diversity is muddying our presentation, or wasting energy by pulling us in opposing directions, then we need to de-emphasise or let go of these aspects, or apply them more selectively.
- When an alternative view is based on self-concern or concern for other members, rather than on the general public good, then we need to acknowledge that to ourselves and not hold on to it.

### Mission

My intention today is to place a firm marker as to who we are and where we are. My conclusion is no different from the founding principle of the WCF, the primary Object, I quote:

*To advance the education of the public in the principles of Buddhism by providing training in Buddhist meditation, Buddhist philosophical insight and Buddhist precepts by means of the teaching, practice and transmission of the Chinese Linji and Caodong traditions of Chan, as transmitted through Master Sheng Yen.*

I want us to be grounded in that first principle, and actualise our second principle which is that we are a charitable organisation, we exist for the benefit of others, and as members of the WCF it is our individual responsibility to contribute to fulfilment of that task.

I started off with some management-speak, about ‘Vision Statements’ and ‘Strategy Documents’. Our difficulty in formulating those was that we had not reminded ourselves of what comes before that, our ‘Mission Statement’. I hope that we are now clear about our mission, and the diverse and valuable resources that we have amongst ourselves to realise it, and that you are in a much better position to begin to envision the WCF in five or ten years from now and develop a strategy to achieve that.

## Vision

Looked at in this way, most of the tensions and polarities I mentioned earlier become strengths. The problem was not these views and interests and preferences in themselves, but that they may have been given primacy over and above our fundamental *raison d'être* which is to transmit Chan to the public. However in regard to two of the points it is important that we do not avoid confronting them and that we do come down firmly on the correct end of the continuum as we envision the future WCF.

## Growth

Unless we transmit Chan to the next generation then the spark of Chan which was ignited by Shifu and John, and nurtured by WCF over the last 18 years, will die out. Without introducing Chan to a younger generation and creating at least one or two new teachers amongst them, which takes many years of training, the lineage will die here. This is why I consider

growth to be important, particularly growth in the number of younger participants in our practice. I'm not seeking world domination, but reasonable and manageable growth, accepting that our practice may never be of mainstream interest but making it available to those who can appreciate it.

I need the WCF members to share this vision of introducing the practice to the next generations and to support them as they develop their practice. If you haven't previously considered your role as a member in this way, please reflect on it and consider whether you want to assist me in this. The next point bears on this.

### Contributing

We need to get to grips with the issue of whether we are consumers of what WCF offers, or whether we are providers of it.

If our sense of our relationship to WCF is that of a consumer then we are not helping to spread the Dharma other than to ourselves. It is of the nature of being a registered charity that what we do is for the general public. As members of a charity our responsibility is to support the organisation in its mission, or else we are members only in name. Perhaps that has not always been made explicit, but I want to make it so now.

That support might just take the form of good wishes, but hopefully many will offer more than that, making use of skills and interests to support, to be involved with, and to initiate activities on behalf of the WCF. Historically the group leaders have done most of the 'outreach' work, while the retreat leaders lead the retreats. The WCF admin has been managed by a small committee with an even smaller group, the Officers, doing most of the administration. This is barely sustainable and is limiting further development.

I remember mentioning a couple of years ago how another Chan group describes all members of their group as ‘volunteers’. And I know of another Buddhist group which automatically allocates tasks to all its members. A couple of years ago we appointed a volunteer coordinator ([volunteering@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:volunteering@westernchanfellowship.org)) to try to encourage and facilitate more participation by members. There have been some good results from that, but it is fair to say that the response to calls to volunteering – in the newsletter, at AGMs, and on occasions such as end of retreat announcements – has not been overwhelming.

Can we turn this around so that it becomes the norm that a WCF member regards it as natural that they not only participate in WCF activities as a recipient, but are also active in assisting WCF to run its activities, and its promotion, and everything else that WCF needs to do to fulfil its Objects?

### Whole Organisation

For many years I’ve been saying that we are not a ‘whole’ organisation. We offer fragments of Chan, but not the whole of Chan. We offer occasional intensive practice, with only patchy support for ongoing practice via an incomplete network of local groups. We have done little to provide Dharma education for the public. We offer few alternative activities and it is difficult for a newcomer to get to know us and what we are about, without their having to engage almost immediately in meditation practice which is not appealing to all at first encounter.

Most other organisations have ‘easier’ or alternative ways to get to know them before you become more deeply involved: social events; taught courses; allied activities such as yoga, taichi, arts, environmental

activities; shorter more local and perhaps less intensive retreats which are accessible to those with demanding work and caring responsibilities and those with low incomes. For those who want such ‘easier’ initial contact they find it in other organisations and have no reason to transfer to us subsequently. For those who want more intensive support such as residential practice we have no option for that and they leave us and go and join another organisation.

We have a small working team and we are administratively overstretched. This is a significant factor in the persistence of these gaps in our offering, and this is another reason why I consider growth to be important. There is a chicken and egg problem in a small organisation providing the personnel resources to stimulate growth. But growth, including attracting new younger members who might prove to be future teachers, is required if we are to fill some of the gaps – geographical gaps due to our thinly dispersed membership, demographic gaps due to our ageing membership, and gaps in our range of offerings due to the small number engaged in offering such activities.

I’m hoping that our members who are currently not so active in WCF work will become so, to enable us to bridge this resource gap, and this is where our diversity is a valuable asset that can expand the range of our activities. There isn’t even any difficulty over funding such new activities. A couple of years ago we announced a ‘projects’ fund that any member could apply to for appropriate funding for a project they proposed. To date there has not been a single application.

#### VISION SUMMARY

Taken together, these three constitute my Vision for the WCF over the coming years:

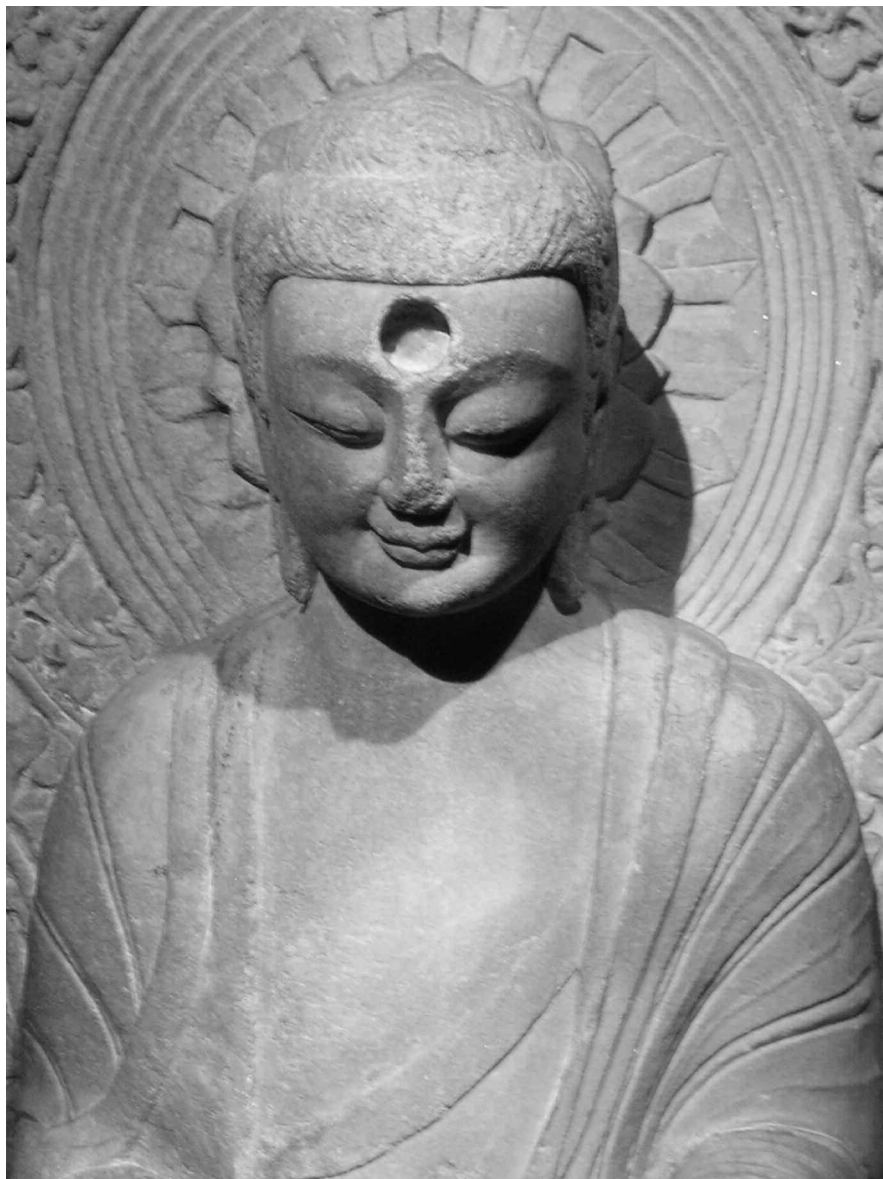


PHOTO: George March

SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA, SHANGHAI MUSEUM

- An organisation supported strongly by its members,
- in the mission to transmit Chan to the public,
- striving to become a ‘whole’ organisation which is more accessible and growing, able to broaden and deepen its Dharma presentation and support.

## Strategy

Having analysed the situation in the way which I have outlined, it is clear that most of the polarities that I identified earlier do not need to be problematic for us so long as we keep aware of our primary mission. For most of these points inclusivity, or the Middle Way, is the appropriate route for the WCF.

We must continue to offer opportunities for intensive practice. We must continue to cultivate and support daily life practice. We must also expand our other activities which will enable newcomers to make contact with us and encounter practice for the first time. These are not in opposition to each other, except in terms of workload for our personnel.

We don't need to agonise over whether we are traditional or modern, Eastern or Western. In the main we occupy the middle ground, using an essentially traditional practice but with adaptation to our culture and our more modern context, not mimicking Eastern forms but not abandoning them either. Chan is universal, transcending time and place, with the regional adjustments being important but relatively minor.

We don't need to agonise over whether we are religious or secular. Individually we are at different places on this spectrum, but organisationally we have tended to occupy the middle ground, neither wholly secular nor wholly religious, perhaps a form of “secular religion”, and

that is appropriate for us. To be wholly religious would not be something we can present authentically, and would not appeal to the majority of those in the general public who might be interested in our practice. To be wholly secular would not be authentic either, given that the roots of our lineage and our practice and our authorisation and credentials to teach come from a mainstream religious institution.

We are a lay organisation with lay practitioners and lay teachers. We should respect monastic organisations, practitioners, and teachers, but we don't need to idealise them. Often they themselves will describe monasticism as just a lifestyle choice. Often monastics will be frank that their practice is not very good, or that they are not really interested in meditation, their strength being in commitment and dedication to helping others.

Due to our history of intermittent intensive practice and geographical dispersion we probably have a higher proportion than many organisations of practitioners who are comfortable as solitary unsupported practitioners, but we also have those who wish for a supportive sangha. We can respect both approaches, and aim to provide for those needing support, which would be easier if we were a larger organisation. Provision of a residential practice option is also something that we can be willing to accommodate. Of course it is more difficult to arrange and we are not currently in a position to support that, but we needn't rule it as out of the scope of a future WCF.

And regarding Maenllwyd, as Buddhists we must be aware of our attachments! We have fond associations with Maenllwyd, and it has served us well and hopefully will continue to do so. But we must recognise that it does not serve well for all and we must seriously consider how we can



be more accommodating to these latter who are currently dissuaded from practising with us.

## Property

It is worth a brief mention of where I stand on the property matters that we discussed last year. This discussion suffered considerably from the very confusion that I presented at the beginning of this talk. Some assumed that a WCF property would be intended to be a Maenllwyd replacement, and asked why the need to replace Maenllwyd, and assumed the only acceptable property could be one similar to Maenllwyd in character and environment. My idea, and some others saw it this way too, was of a different type of venue, one which could host shorter more accessible events as well as longer intensive retreats, and also perhaps offer a residential training option and facilities for solitary retreats, and also be a WCF centre where sangha meetings and similar could be held. Maenllwyd is only really suitable for one of these purposes whereas such a multifunction venue could be very helpful enabling WCF to widen its range of activities and cultivate connections, as I have been describing above.

Unfortunately we ran into difficulties with the financial modelling, essentially in regard to the risk of a small organisation such as ours being able to support a mortgage in the event of insufficient donations being raised to purchase outright. Again this is where growth of the WCF may be beneficial, as a larger organisation would be more likely to succeed in such a venture. It is still worth keeping our eyes open in case the ideal property appears on the market at a reasonable price. Given the variation in property prices around the country the SW or SE seems the

least likely place to find a property, with the Welsh borders and Midlands being possible and farther north being cheaper still.

### Presentation

Finally I want to say something about our presentation to the public. Our actions will be less effective if we are not noticed and recognised for what we are. Though I'm not particularly into branding and such like it is relevant as we are in a crowded market-place, much more so than we were 18 years ago, with many other well-established and larger Buddhist groups, and also the strengthening secular mindfulness movement. What can we do to make people notice and listen to us instead of one of these other groups?

We do need to have a clear 'offer', clarity about what it is that we do and why we do it. I've referred to our appropriately using practices from other traditions such as Tibetan and Theravada Buddhism, and allied activities such as arts and yoga and so on, and I stand by that. But for public consumption as our shop front display we need to be clear that we are a Chan organisation. This is both accurate, and distinctive. When we have other activities they must be clearly in the context of Chan practice which is our basis, and avoid presenting us as an apparently hotchpotch muddled organisation with no strong heart.

Unfortunately Chan is not well known by the general public, so we immediately have the problem of explaining it, and this also bears on the question of the name of the WCF. We have had endless discussions about our name 'Western Chan Fellowship'. This is still unresolved but the discussion has highlighted our pulling in differing directions.

For some the word ‘Western’ is the key word, indicating for them a Western psychodynamic approach rather than an Eastern religion, and perhaps indicating something modern rather than mediaeval. For others the word ‘Chan’ is the key word, signifying our lineage and the specific nature of what we present. And for others the crucial word is ‘Fellowship’, offering or aspiring to community, sangha, like-minded friends. Unfortunately there are problems with all three of these words!

- Specifying ‘Western’ could be seen as divisive, or exclusive. To the general public who know that Chan has Oriental origins the word Western may imply we do not have authentic origins.
- ‘Chan’ is gaining familiarity in the Buddhist world but has little recognition by non-Buddhists who typically think first of Jackie Chan. Apparently they have this trouble at the New York Chan Center also, taking phone calls from people looking for ‘Mr Chan’!
- And ‘Fellowship’ is a rather quaint and somewhat obsolete word, having more popular association with Christianity or academia (and now *Lord of the Rings*) than with our intended meaning of Sangha or community.

So we do have problems with our name, which doesn’t really convey the nature of our organisation, but we have struggled to find an alternative.

- We can probably drop the word ‘Western’.
- We have considered whether to replace the word ‘Chan’ with ‘Zen’ to gain more public recognition but there are downsides to that. To public perception Zen is associated with Japanese Zen, with its somewhat rigid and sometimes militaristic expression. Zen also can be seen sometimes dissociating from Buddhist principles and precepts,

emphasising form above these. There is also a history of scandals, including some recent and current, associated with Zen. And the word is frequently abused as a general purpose marketing word. It might also be tricky to trace our origins to DDM if we alone of their descendants use the word Zen which may appear to align us with Japanese traditions. An option is to use the word Chan but qualify it as ‘Chan Buddhism’.

- We’ve explored alternatives for Fellowship such as a Sangha, Circle, Network, and similar, and also whether to use organisational terms such as Association.

We’ve also considered ‘poetic’ names which don’t cause us problems with the common understanding of words such as Chan or Fellowship, but it is tricky to find names that don’t seem just random and disconnected from our practice. The creation of the new organisational structure that we are planning seems an obvious opportunity to adopt a new name, so suggestions please ASAP!

## Endnote

The key messages that I want you to take away today are:

1. We are a Chan organisation, a very eclectic Chan organisation with a very diversely skilled membership.
2. It is essential that the members of our charitable organisation step forward to contribute to the development and success of WCF.
3. That success depends totally on our involving newcomers, especially younger newcomers, if the WCF is to survive into future generations. But it can’t be done without your contribution.

## ORIGINS

*Chan was the extraordinary child of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Daoism. Here Hugh Carroll and George Marsh introduce the core texts of each, the source material for our Chan practice. The unique qualities of Chan developed from both, as the Indian teachings grew and adapted in the sympathetic Daoist culture.*

## PART 1: THE CORE SUTTAS

HUGH CARROLL

*Hugh gives talks introducing the Buddha's original teachings, pointing us back to reading the texts of seven early suttas.*

Once John Crook returned from China and told a story about a monk called 'Master Moonshine' who asked him what we were studying in Britain. John said, *The Heart Sutra*, to which the monk said that he thought we should start with the basic *suttas*! On hearing this story I realised that I didn't really know what these basic teachings were about. All the emphasis was on the '*special transmission outside the suttas*' – which kind of implies that you should know what the *suttas* are on about in the first place. So, off I went to read up a bit. They come from an oral tradition and can be very dry and repetitive for a modern reader so I found that reading them after sitting in the morning in a formal way helped with that. Just read them. It helps to set aside any boredom that might come up beforehand and this turned out to be a great idea because if you persist with them there are loads of amazing things in there. There are supposed to be over 10,000 of them! Here are a handful of core *suttas* in a logical progression. I'm not going to try and give a detailed explanation of them

here; the article would be too long. Plus, of course, I'm still getting my head around them.

### *The Kalama Sutta*

A group of people say to the Buddha, "Some people teach us that there is karma and there is rebirth. Other teachers come and say that that's rubbish. What do you teach?" He says, "You are uncertain about things that are uncertain and you are *right* to be uncertain." When I first heard this it was like the sun coming out. I have spent a lot of time being told how it is by folks who spend half their time denouncing others. We have so many ideologies, views, politics and theories coming at us it can be bewildering. Rather than take the opportunity to pontificate about his own teaching he starts from where they are, which is a state of uncertainty. Having a starting point of it being ok to be uncertain seemed really radical and new to me. He goes on, "If you know something is good then follow it, and likewise, if you know it's bad then don't." Mmm, I thought, so I'm supposed to make up my own mind then. He asks them if they think greed, hatred and delusion are bad for a person and they agree that they are. He says that if someone abandons these and cultivates kindness, compassion, equanimity and joy then it will be really good. It's kind of impossible to argue with that isn't it!

Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma:

### *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*

This is the *big* one, the main one, sometimes called 'the elephant's footprint' because, as all other animal footprints fit inside the elephant's, this *sutta* is the container for all the others. The Buddha lays out the scheme

of the four ennobling truths of suffering, its arising, cessation and the path to its cessation. He says that it arises due to craving for sensual pleasures, and for becoming and non-becoming. This is short-hand for ‘dependent origination’ which we’ll come to later. Now, who wouldn’t want to know about the ending of suffering?

### The Characteristics of Non-Self: *Anattalakkhana Sutta*

This is the second teaching given by the Buddha chronologically. During the first, Kondanna ‘got it’ but the other four of his friends didn’t. At some point he helped them out and they made it that second time. He asks them, “Is form self?” to which they reply no. “If form were self it would be possible to say of form, ‘Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus,’ but since it is not possible, form is not self.” The same pattern is then followed for feeling, perception, ‘volitional formations’ (the tendencies and unconscious biases) and consciousness. Most of us find it easy to see that the body is not one’s self but increasingly mysterious and confusing to think of feeling and consciousness as not self. The idea that my consciousness is not a ‘self’ has been the single most surprising and radical idea I’ve ever heard! “Any consciousness whatsoever – past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness – is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’ ” The Buddha goes on to point out that not only are the faculties of sense, feeling and consciousness not self, but they are impermanent and ultimately unsatisfying too. Not-self, impermanence, and ultimately unsatisfying are the three characteristics of all phenomena.

### *The Ananda Sutta*

Before we whizz off thinking that the Buddha is teaching that there is no self, something often heard in Zen circles, there is an important caveat at this point. A guy named Vacchagotta asks the Buddha, “Is there a self?” The Buddha remains silent. Vacchagotta then asks him, “Then is there no self?” Again, the Buddha remains silent. The guy then walks away, understandably, and Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant and cousin asks him why he didn’t answer the man. He replies that if he had said yes then Vacchagotta would have sided with those who hold that things have an eternal essence, the ‘eternalists,’ and if he had said no then the man would have veered to the opposite position and thought that things have no essence and sided with the ‘nihilists’. These two extremes of view are seen popping up throughout history and are currently being championed by the religious fundamentalists on the one hand and by the radical atheists on the other. In the struggle of these two opposing views we have the ‘eternalists’ who feel they must maintain that position or else there will be no meaning to life. The ‘nihilists’ feel that phenomena are linked in complex but logical interrelations and are processes that do not have supernatural forces acting on them. As in *The Kalama Sutta* there are those who maintain that there is rebirth and karma and those who do not.

The Buddha is not teaching that there is no self but rather pointing to false assumptions about ‘me’. That’s rather a subtle point isn’t it! One needs to calm down and concentrate a bit to get this. The structure of language itself tends to lead us into thinking of things as things rather than processes. An interesting thought experiment that can help dissolve this tendency is to ask if a thing is the same or different to how it was in





CAMBODIAN ELEVENTH CENTURY, BAPHUON STYLE

the past. Apply it to yourself even. Am I the same person as I was when I was a child or am I a different person?

### Dependent Origination: *Paticcasamuppada Sutta*

The Buddha once said that, “To see the Dharma is to see dependent origination - to see dependent origination is to see the Dharma”. This is the detailed exposition of how suffering comes about. By seeing it in full one undoes the process and thus we have here both the second and third ennobling truths, both the arising and cessation of suffering. The process of the arising of suffering (*Samudaya*) is given as a scheme: “Because this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.” The cessation of suffering (*Nirodha*) is the opposite scheme: “When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.” Now that relation is established we are given the twelve links that bring about suffering (*Dukkha*). Not seeing, or ignorance, is the requisite condition for the arising of volitional formations, which are in turn the condition for the arising of consciousness, which conditions name and form, the senses, contact (of the senses, things sensed and consciousness), feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth and finally, “aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair”.

Starting from ‘not seeing’ and going through all these steps we come to *Dukkha*. I notice how this is the condition for ‘not seeing’ again, thus creating a circle. A vicious circle at that! This is conditioned existence. Spinning on, around and around in one giant, interdependent process.

Everything that is thought, said or done is thus interconnected with everything else and so really matters. Karma and rebirth can be understood in these terms. At the same time there is no supernatural ‘soul’

and there are no controlling forces in play, so everything thought, said or done is simply empty process. It is not being done by or to anyone and so really does not matter! It really is a brilliant resolution of the argument between the eternalists and the nihilists. We can have what is good *and* true. We can have ‘meaning’ without ‘God’. In other words we can have the clarity and intelligence of the view of things as process without it collapsing into terrible, bleak meaninglessness. We can have the intuitive, heartfelt view of the primacy of love and compassion without having to, “believe six impossible things before breakfast.”

### The Path: *Magga Sutta*

Next comes the path (*Magga*) that leads to the cessation of suffering. This is the eight-fold path of right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Let’s think how they link together in reverse order like this – to really see how things are the mind has to be super concentrated and clear. To develop this it helps to have a basis of general mindfulness. The effort that is used needs to be tuned just right so as not to under or over shoot. If a person’s livelihood is basically ethical they won’t have disturbances arising from it. Likewise their day-to-day actions will be helping their practice if they are springing from good and harmless intentions. Speech often comes before action and is also an important factor in maintaining a trouble free mind-state. Thought comes before speech (or should do!) and so it’s best to cultivate it positively by resolving on all that is good and to work towards abandoning all that is harmful. All of this can really get going if a person accepts the four ennobling truths as a basic orientation.

### The Establishment of Mindfulness: *Maha-satipatthana Sutta*

“This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of Unbinding.” Here is where the practice comes in. All that has come up to here can seem very intellectual and intimidating even, but its purpose is to provide a basis for a person to trust the practice and to follow it. The simplicity of maintaining “total presence,” actively engaged in the moment by moment flowing of experience, this is the real point. It isn’t an intellectual position or an ideology but a mode of being.

This presentation is about as succinct as I’m willing to make it because the full thing is really a whole talk and meditation session for each *Sutta*, plus an introductory session and a concluding session. There is a slideshow and there are exercises throughout. It was presented as a nine week course at a college in Swindon some nine times and has found form as a weekend course. There are plans to write it all up much more fully.

For your reference you can find all these *Suttas* at [swindonchan.org](http://swindonchan.org)  
<http://swindonchan.org/index.php?page=sutras>

## PART 2: LIKE A FISH HIDDEN IN A SPRING: THE *DAO DE JING*\* OF LAOZI AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CHAN

GEORGE MARSH

*The Core Suttas gave Buddhism its theoretical foundations and the Dao De Jing gave Buddhism its 'Chan' character.*

Daoist ideas permeated all aspects of Chinese life before Buddhism arrived in China: philosophy, science, medicine, arts, physical fitness, cooking, agriculture and governance were all seen in terms of Daoist principles of constant change, the balance of yin and yang, and flow. When Buddhism arrived in China in the first century BCE, it was interpreted in the light of Laozi's *Dao De Jing*.

The *sutras* of the Buddha's teachings are much studied and much admired in Chan, but let me also make a case for marvelling at the teachings of Laozi, which give Chan its distinctively playful style, quite different from the language of the Pali canon which can be dry and repetitive, as Hugh Carroll says. Laozi lived in China at more or less the same period as the Buddha lived in India, and each of them had vivid experience of the mystical vision. The Buddha was a brilliant intellectual and theorised his insight. Laozi was anti-intellectual and only reluctantly put his wisdom into words; words which were enigmatic and allusive. There is a much-illustrated story that he was leaving China through one of the Western gates and the gate-keeper, Yin Xi, refused to let him go until he had written down his wisdom

\* We should all be using the pinyin system of transliteration now, so, though the *Dao De Jing* is better known in English speaking countries as the *Tao Te Ching* and Laozi is better known as Lao Tsu, I shall spell in pinyin, though translations will be quoted accurately as originally spelled.

for the Chinese to keep. He wrote the eighty one short chapters of the *Dao De Jing*, now the most translated book in the world.

### The *Dao*

Laozi describes the *Dao* in Chapter 34:

*The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right.*

*The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back.*

*It fulfils its purpose silently and makes no claim.*

(Quotation from the Feng and English translation)

The *Dao* is nature's flow. The word means 'way,' or 'path,' or 'guidance,' and seems to be used for the way of nature, the way nature is, and also the source of nature's creativity. More prosaically it is just the way things are and the way they function. There is a way to fry a small fish, for example, and you'll make a mess of it if you don't have some care. Laozi scales this up.

*Govern big countries*

*Like you cook little fish*

(Chapter 60, Addiss and Lombardo)

It is ultimately a mystery. The universe is there, life teems, everything changes – what is the mysterious way it works?

*It is like the mother of all under heaven,*

*But I don't know its name –*

*Better call it Tao.*

*Better call it great.*

(Chapter 25)



THE GATEKEEPER YIN XI AND LAOZI AT THE WESTERN GATE

Laozi is careful not to define it as a philosopher would. He says that it cannot be known, and that the word *Dao* does not capture it. The closest he can get is a tautology:

*Tao follows what is natural.*

‘What is natural’ is the Chinese word for nature, *ziran*, which David Hinton tells us is made of symbols meaning ‘self-generating’ or, more vividly, since the ideogram for fire is part of it, ‘self-ablaze.’

The *Dao* is the underlying self-generating order of the universe and the original creative source of all things. This Chinese view is an energetic, unified, harmonious, temperate, continuously changing vision of nature (unlike the angry thunder and lightning gods of the Greeks or the merciless sun gods of the Middle East); and Laozi goes on to say that our attitude should be to follow its lead, to accept it as it is, to harmonise with it, and not to try and control or dominate nature.

*The universe is sacred.*

*You cannot improve it.*

*If you try to change it, you will ruin it.*

*If you try to hold it, you will lose it.*

(Chapter 29)

And his images for the way to harmonise with nature start with water:

*Best to be like water,*

*Which benefits the ten thousand things*

*And does not contend.*

*It pools where humans disdain to dwell,*



*Close to the Dao...*

*Only do not contend,*

*And you will not go wrong.*

(Chapter 8 in the Addiss and Lombardo translation)

In Chapter 28 Laozi commends feminine and childlike qualities:

*...keep a woman's care!*

*Be the stream of the universe!*

*Being the stream of the universe,*

*Ever true and unswerving,*

*Become as a little child once more.*

(Feng and English translation)

The *Dao* will nourish one and have a good curative effect if one respects its subtle workings.

*Tao is empty –*

*Its use never exhausted .*

*Bottomless –*

*The origin of all things.*

*It blunts sharp edges,*

*Unties knots,*

*Softens glare,*

*Becomes one with the dusty world.*

(Chapter 4, Addiss and Lombardo)

Adam, a member of the Portsmouth Chan group, explained this perfectly: “The practice of meditation has blunted my sharp edges, untied my knots and softened my glare,” he said.

Everything changes. Language tries to subdivide the flow and freeze the movement. Laozi is sceptical, wary of naming the parts. He contrasts the *Dao* with things that can be defined by naming, in the very first words of Chapter 1:

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.*

*The name that can be named is not the eternal name.*

(Feng and English)

And he goes on to elaborate an argument that associates the naming of things with a separation from the source, a distancing from reality's mobile suchness. Naming, and all the labelling and discriminating that language use implies, is a kind of possessiveness, a control mechanism, leading to the human desire to own, to cling (a theme that exactly matches the Buddha's insights, and the Buddha's emphasis on how things are perceived or misperceived):

*The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.*

*The named is the mother of ten thousand things.*

*Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.*

*Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.*

But he avoids making this contrast into a great universal dualism:

*These two spring from the same source but differ in name...*

*The gate to all mystery.*

There is a health warning with the *Dao*. Laozi seems to write of it as an ultimately unknowable ineffable mystery. Or does he? Perhaps he is making the more limited point, not that it is ineffable, but that language can-

not capture it. He is laconic, and sometimes obscure in writing about it. But he implicitly gives it some attributes: integrity, wisdom and healing power. Is it an active agent in the world?

*Tao hides, no name.*

*Yet Tao alone gets things done.*

(Chapter 41 Addiss and Lombardo)

Is it nearly a god? At one point he tells us:

*The Tao begot one.*

*One begot two.*

*Two begot three.*

*And three begot the ten thousand things.*

(Chapter 42)

but never says any more about this, and changes the subject immediately:

*What others teach, I also teach; that is:*

*“A violent man will die a violent death!”*

*This will be the essence of my teaching.*

(Chapter 42)

so it is difficult to see what he means by one, two, three and the ten thousand things. It is wide open to wild interpretations. Some have founded a religion on this and worshipped the *Dao*. There are superstitious Daoist cults in China today. Some have seen it as a philosophical origin myth like Plato's *Timaeus*, with a Creator, a Demiurge, and junior gods. But judging by all the rest of the *Dao De Jing*, most interpreters see it as another way of saying that the *Dao* is a word pointing to the phenomenon

of self-generating growth and change in all things: the ten thousand things are manifestations of nature's way, arising mysteriously out of what a mystic perceives as a unity. Laozi specifically cautions against worshipping it.

The Chan teachers of the Golden Age of Zen, a thousand years after Laozi, often use the word *Dao* for the spiritual path or the way of practising. They use other terms for the indefinable mystery at the core of things and absolutely refuse to turn it into an idea by defining it. Bodhidharma uses 'mind' ("This mind has no form or characteristics, no cause or effect, no tendons or bones. It's like space"). Huineng uses 'Essence of Mind' ("Our Essence of Mind is intrinsically pure; all things are only its manifestations"). Huang Po, Linji's teacher, uses 'One Mind' ("All the buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible.") Linji warns against naming, "...the mind ground. If you can get it, use it, without putting any more labels on it". He also, like Laozi, warns against treating it as sacred. Many of the protagonists of the *koans* collected by Hongzhi and Mumon use the term 'Buddha nature,' as in the famous first *koan* in *The Gateless Gate*, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" The answer "No," is the health warning: do not interpret the *Dao* or the Buddha nature as an idea, as something sacred, or as anything distinguishable from all that is in nature.

The greatest Chan teachers sound very like followers of Laozi when attempting to articulate a response to the mystery of *ziran*:

*If you try to grasp Zen in movement, it goes into stillness. If you try to grasp Zen in stillness, it goes into movement. It is like a fish hidden in a spring, drumming up waves and dancing independently.* (Linji)

It is impossible to say anything at all more than the tautology of Laozi: it is a mystery; nature is nature.

*There is something in the world that is neither in the sphere of the ordinary nor in the sphere of the holy. It is neither in the realm of the false nor in the realm of the true. (Wuzu)*

Chan literature, following in the wake of the *Prajna Paramita sutras*, is philosophically sceptical about what can be known, or proved, in logic: there is nothing that can be asserted about the mysterious reality of nature. You cannot characterise it or list its attributes. The Chan adepts are more muted and cautious than Laozi when writing about what he called the *Dao*, and they call Mind or Buddha nature, but they have not jettisoned the *Dao*.

### The Ethics of the *Dao de Jing*

Laozi is sceptical about those who trust words for fixing the ten thousand things in their place. Equally, he is sceptical about theory; he distrusts scholars and intellectuals. And he is very sceptical about public preachers and political moralisers:

*When the great Tao is forgotten,  
Kindness and morality arise.  
When wisdom and intelligence are born,  
The great pretence begins.*

(Chapter 18)

Laozi's jaundiced view of most moralising reveals a much more nuanced sensitivity to the complexities of moral behaviour than, "Do not steal." He tells us not to collect treasure and stealing will cease. Not to glorify heroes and people won't be so quick to fight. It is a morality grounded in

a feeling for what is natural, and not too clever (he does not trust cleverness), and a deep distrust of claims to virtue, of spiritual pride. Things have gone wrong if you need to point out the virtues, thinks Laozi. More than that, he sees that rule-bound morality and categorising actions into good and bad may do more to exacerbate problems than to solve them. In Chapter 38 he writes that benevolence is the next best thing if *Dao* is lost, but that after that there is a decline into righteousness and once that is lost there is only propriety.

Chan master Dahui later wrote in similar style:

*Good and bad come from your own mind... When your mind is clean and clear, all entanglements cease... Both substance and function are in their natural state... your own mind's marvellous function of change and creation... enters into both purity and defilement without being affected by or attached to either.*

This is a morality that tiptoes through the world, accepting nature's way, not trying to control anything and suspicious of category labels such as bad and good. It sees the system, with multiple causes and conditions, all interrelated. It is very different from the rule-bound ethics, proscribing a wide range of human behaviours, that came out of Indian monasticism, or, for that matter, the rule-bound commandments of Christianity, marinated in punitive notions of sin and evil. In ethics, the Chinese Chan teachers like Dahui follow Laozi more naturally than they follow Indian Buddhist monastic rules.

### *Wu wei* and the *De* of the Sage

For people to harmonise with the flow of nature and act with authentic good feeling they must not strive too hard, or try to wrest control with

energetic power. The ideal is *wu wei*, effortless action that goes with the flow, “nothing acting,” and it is another of the great themes of the *Dao De Jing*.

*Non-doing – and nothing not done...*

*Make the least effort*

*And the world escapes you.*

(Chapter 48, Addiss and Lombardo)

*Act and you ruin it.*

*Grasp and you lose it.*

(Chapter 64)

Simon Child teaches that, “Enlightenment is being out of the way.” *Wu Wei* is being out of the way, in the sense of not making the least effort to force the result, not acting with an ulterior purpose, an agenda, not grasping.

For Laozi, ‘the Sage’ is a major literary theme, as it is centuries later in the writings of the Chan masters of the Golden Age of Zen. The characteristic way of being of the enlightened person is described: Laozi tells us in the beginning, in Chapter 2, that:

*...the Sage is devoted to non-action...*

*Lives but does not own,*

*Acts but does not presume,*

*Accomplishes without taking credit.*

(Addiss and Lombardo)

The Buddha made the same point: ‘My practice,’ the Buddha said, ‘is the nonpractice, the attainment of nonattainment.’

In the far East, Laozi himself has always been recognised as the archetypal Sage, the model of the enlightened man.

*I take no action and people are reformed.*

*I enjoy peace and people become honest.*

(Chapter 57, Feng and English)

*...the Sage is sharp but not cutting,*

*Pointed but not piercing,*

*Straightforward but not unrestrained,*

*Brilliant but not blinding.*

(Chapter 58)

‘The Sage’ is a Daoist subject which the early Chan literature dwells on at length. All the writers give accounts of how enlightenment transforms a person, and use fulsome imagery for the great skills of the sage. “Zen adepts just remain free, and are imperceptible to anyone... They walk on the bottom of the deepest ocean, uncontaminated, with free minds...” writes Yuanwu. In a beautiful passage, Hongzhi writes:

*The worldly life of people who have mastered Zen is buoyant and unbridled, like clouds making rain, like the moon in a stream, like an orchid in a recondite spot, like spring in living beings. Their action is not self-conscious, yet their responses have order.*

‘Action that is not self-conscious’ would be a perfect definition of *wu wei*. Hongzhi is heir to Laozi and Dogen is heir to Hongzhi. Dogen studied with Hongzhi’s successors at Hongzhi’s Tiantong monastery.

*Dao De Jing* means the classic of *Dao* and of *De* (*Te*, in the Wade-Giles transliteration). “*De*” is the *Dao* as a guide to action; how to respect the



subtlety of the way things are and harness the integrity, the wholeness, of *Dao*. *De* is “virtue” in the sense of a quality, and also somewhat in the Greek sense of power or inner energy. It is acting like a sage, guided by *Dao*, *wu wei* style, without presuming, without desire, without a personal stake in the game. The model is a good parent:

*Tao bears them and Te nurses them...*  
*Bears them without owning them*  
*Helps them without coddling them,*  
*Rears them without ruling them.*  
*This is called original Te.*

(Chapter 51, Addiss and Lombardo)

In Chapter 49 Laozi says:

*People who are not good*  
*I also treat well*  
*Te as goodness.*

*Untrustworthy people*  
*I also trust:*  
*Te as trust.*

(Addiss and Lombardo)

In Chapter 68 he outlines the “*Te* of not contending:”

*The accomplished person is not aggressive.*  
*The good soldier is not hot-tempered.*  
*The best conqueror does not engage the enemy.*  
*The most effective leader takes the lowest place.*

This is all of a piece with Laozi's way of appreciating the power of water to wear down stone, the strong grip of a baby, the usefulness of the empty space in a bowl, the effectiveness of feminine qualities. Go with the grain. Respect the nature of things. There is a way to clean and fry a small fish without charging like a bull at a gate. And don't be clever:

*Ruling through cleverness*

*Leads to rebellion.*

(Chapter 65)

### The Daoist inheritance in Chan Buddhism

The teachers who founded Chan, from Bodhidharma in the fifth century to Hongzhi in the twelfth century, took from the traditions of both sages, Laozi and Sakyamuni Buddha, and from Mahayana philosophers of the first and second century, to blend a Daoist Buddhism. The theorising and moralising of early Indian Buddhism were dropped. Meditation, as an individual's inner path, or *Dao*, to discover truth for him or herself, became the central and only practice. 'Mind', or 'Essence of Mind', or 'Buddhanature' was the focus of their writings, as *Dao* had been the focus of the *Dao De Jing*. Chan masters express hardly any interest in mainstream Buddhist ideas like suffering, rebirth, karma, meritorious deeds, ritual, scriptural knowledge and fussy ethical rules. Impermanence, on the other hand, which had always been at the heart of the Daoist account of nature, a continuous flow of changes seen in terms of yin and yang qualities in a dance of sixty four hexagrams symbolising decay and regeneration, was a strong theme in Chan. "The murderous demon of impermanence is instantaneous," wrote Linji. "It does not choose between the upper and lower classes, or between the old and the young."

The Buddha's teaching of *anatta*, no permanent self, now deepened and extended by the Mahayana debates on *sunyata*, the emptying of self, and the absence of self-essence, was at the very centre of the Chan vision. Bodhidharma's, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy!" set the tone for China. Chan is a distillation of Buddhist theory into practice and paradox. Philosophical Indian Buddhism gave Daoism a much firmer foundation in a theory of perception and a theory of conditioned causation. From that solid base, Chan could afford to indulge the subtle watery spirit of the *Dao*. Laozi's Daoism had several features which were retained in Chan. And as we have seen, there are Chan themes that were present in different proportions in both the Buddha's and Laozi's teachings.

The stripping out of inherited conditioning in order to clear the mind is a great theme of the Buddha's teaching. "Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements," he said. How to drop the defilements clouding the mind remained absolutely central to Chan teachings of the Tang dynasty. But Laozi also touched on this aspect of mind. The *Dao De Jing* tells us in Chapter 33 that:

*Knowing others is intelligent.*

*Knowing yourself is enlightened.*

and in Chapter 48 that *wu wei* is the process:

*Pursue knowledge, gain daily.*

*Pursue Tao, lose daily.*

*Lose and again lose,*

*Arrive at non-doing.*

*Non-doing – and nothing not done*

Letting go. Unlearning. Losing. These were Daoist themes but the *Dao De Jing* did not spell out what one must unlearn. In the Buddha's teaching it was explicit: conditioned responses of attraction and aversion; all judgments and conditioned ideas. Clearing the mind is the topic that dominates the writings of the Tang and Song dynasty Chan masters. They develop what are only hints in the *Dao De Jing*, but much more substantial analysis in the Pali Buddhist sutras, into the core of their teaching. One or two quotations from any number will be sufficient to make the point, starting with Seng Tsan's, "Simply avoid picking and choosing," through Huang Po's, "If you students of the Way desire knowledge of this great mystery, only avoid attachment to any single thing beyond Mind," and coming to Yuanwu's:

*Shed views and interpretations that are based on concepts such as victory and defeat, self and others, right and wrong. Thus you pass through all that and reach a realm of great rest and tranquility.*

Hui Neng was the founding father who preached it: "The mind should be framed in such a way that it will be independent of external or internal objects, at liberty to come or go, free from attachment and thoroughly enlightened without the least beclouding." He summed up: "...so far as we get rid of all delusive 'idea' there will be nothing but purity in our nature."

## Conclusion

Chinese Daoist anti-philosophy was the mother of Chan; Indian Buddhist philosophy was its father. The child of these two inevitably has a sense of subtlety, a sense of humour and a sense of paradox. Chan is a Daoist

form of Buddhism with Chinese characteristics. The *Dao De Jing* is more mystical, mysterious, poetic and enigmatic than the Pali *sutras*. It is a foundation text for my Zen.

## TRANSLATIONS

*Tao Te Ching* trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, London, Wildwood House, first published 1973.

*Tao Te Ching* trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo, Boston, Shambhala, first published 1993.



FROGS BY JANE SPRAY

## POEMS

*We publish two nature observation poems by John Crook, drafted on a trip to Antarctica in 1995, with thanks to the Crook family for permissions.*

## ELEPHANT SEAL

JOHN CROOK

DING DONG

BONG...

ONE FOR YOU BOYO !

Young elephant seals are having a go  
advanced machismo  
on the shores of the South Shetland Islands.

Their causeways gouge the beach  
shingle sand ridged and pushed aside  
tank tracks of blubber sacks  
a pile of huge brown slugs  
pullulating, fat wobbly belliglugs  
peristalting up the shore  
playing little boy games of push  
me over if you can!

Raise chin, a wrestler's chest  
high on great flippers,  
swing side to side, judge your time  
then thump him.

Who's a big boy then?  
They're at it weeks at a time  
getting bigger all the while  
an elephantine adolescence.  
Small fry dodge and weave,  
equals fight it out, sharp teeth  
scraping blubber padded flanks,  
blood stains on the sand.

Behind the noise and flurry  
girt mountain of a beast,  
a stranded not-quite whale.  
Nobody answers his roaring challenges  
shovelling around, flattening the sand.  
Future beach master,  
Sumo seal, clumsy dump truck  
of the ocean shore,  
*Rolling Thunder*  
champion of the ring.

## LEOPARD SEAL

JOHN CROOK

Old dinosaur face  
the leopard seal  
snoozing on an ice floe  
opens an eye  
as the Zodiac comes up.  
O my God another interruption!  
Clumsily he lifts himself to look around.  
We roar and judder just  
offshore of him  
clicking photographs.  
He's had enough of this –  
sea-serpent headed  
stunner of penguins  
mini-monster of the floes  
easily down into the dark  
he goes.  
Where is he now we wonder,  
sharp teeth below our bottoms  
with only the rubber boat between.



## RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

HENRY GRAY

*In the last issue Sarah Bird wrote of the challenge of founding a right livelihood business. Here Henry Gray addresses the same questions. Your take on this theme could appear in our next issue.*

In 1995 I lived in Weymouth. I was unemployed and needed something to do. A friend of mine, Billy, gently pushed me through the gates of Weymouth College saying, “you’d be good at stone carving”. I applied, got in and, rather frightened and bewildered, started learning about stone and carving from former Portland stonemasons.

The next two years were a process in which my body, muscles, and mind learned to use a mallet and chisel and all that comes with that learning. A relationship developed with stone, with tools, and most importantly with other people.

My interest in stone carving, masonry and letter-cutting caught fire. It became a passion and, although the course was officially only 15 hours a week, I spent all week studying and practising. Stone carving and stone took me over.

Who is making what?

I wonder how many of us actually choose the livelihood we end up in, let alone manage to choose “right livelihood”. At best, for me, it was a series of guesses and responses to my circumstances, strung together to get me to where I am now.

Towards the end of the course I got a job at Salisbury Cathedral, working on the West Front restoration project. When I left there I worked

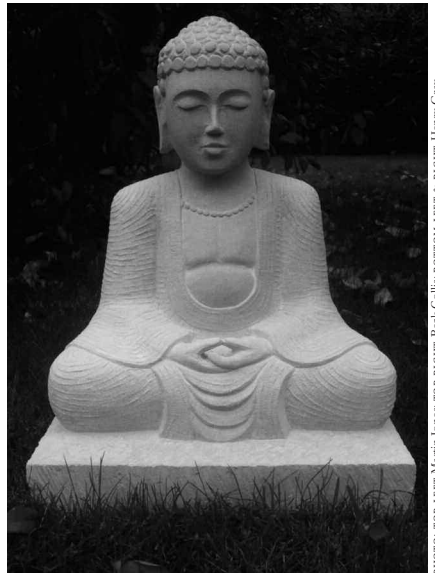
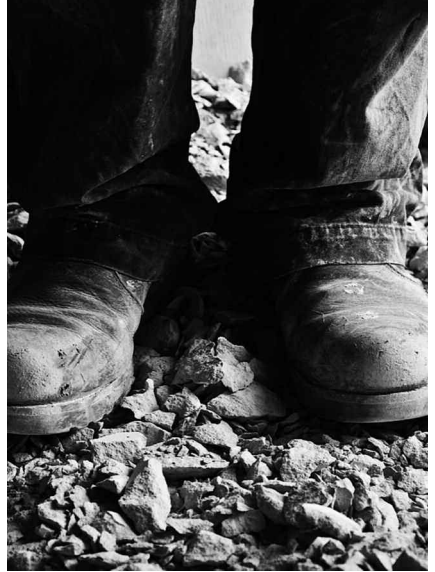


PHOTO: TOP LEFT: Martin Jones; TOP RIGHT: Beck Collins; BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT: Henry Gray

HENRY IN HIS WORKSHOP — AND SOME OF HIS WORK

for various commercial firms and restoration companies in the South-West, working on historic buildings and churches, which I have always loved. I set up my own business in 2002, having gained seven years' experience. At that point I felt my apprenticeship was served. I felt comfortable calling myself a mason.

The thing about stone is that there is no pretending that the mistakes you make aren't there. A carver friend of mine came up with the pithy comment "you can't bull\*\*\*\* stone". Faced directly with what you have carved, you cannot get away with saying that it is someone else's fault. You have to accept it and work round it or start again.

For a long time my work was like a hobby. I had a "what will be will be" attitude. Only in the last five years have I started to look at my work as my livelihood, as a serious means of earning my living. Up until this point, the idea of right livelihood was an ideological concept for me. I found work or work found me. "Business" for me was a dirty word. I did not think about money particularly. I thought I was un-materialistic.

I realise in retrospect that this was far from the truth, that what I thought was "trusting in the universe to provide for me" was just irresponsibility and a fear of looking at my relationship with money, work and business. I had only a vague idea of how much I spent and what on. I tended to undervalue what I did and worked well below my skill level. This started to change when I looked honestly at the numbers, and at my attitude towards money, business and work.

Serenity, I have discovered, is in the clarity and God is in the numbers. I am learning to attend to the things I incline to turn away from: accounts, emails, designs, clients, invoices and all the other things that support earning a living for myself and my family. This is about the heart,

the mind and the body, about the relationship I have with my clients, money, business and work. About being here for the whole caboodle as best I can and acknowledging how much I attempt to avoid.

The physical work itself is a journey between the surface of the material and the finished carving. The effort I make ends up on the floor, being swept up and hopefully used to fill holes on farm tracks. Finding a way to the finished carving is about the not knowing, the uncertainty, the grey area. This situation may be different from other areas of my experience, but my need to be with simply not knowing is the same. I have had to learn to wait for a bit, and only then respond to the stone, or to a grieving client commissioning a memorial, or to a student needing to be encouraged to reach inside for what they need to learn.

What I have been doing over the past few years has involved teaching stone carving and making things from stone for and with people. Both are worthwhile activities on the face of it. However, my work relies on the quarrying of stone out of the ground, which has a damaging impact on the environment. What I do both helps and harms. I could say at least I don't kill for a living or sell drugs or make pornography, but comparing myself with others is not helpful and just leads to prejudice and madness.

What I do is important, but the way that I do it makes the difference between unhelpful actions and treasure. Kindness, gentleness, humour, honesty, integrity and being clear about cost make a livelihood worth living. So does realising my true value and being honest about it with myself and others. What matters is what I bring to the job and the kind of relationships I have with other people, because all professions, all livelihoods, have many facets, and it is important to start from where we are, not from some ideological stance.

I would rather be a soldier with integrity and honour, than a stone carver living in a dream. Better to make something than be “creative”; better to behave kindly than be “spiritual”. (Better still to combine both: to make a nice cup of tea for someone who needs comfort!)

So in summary I suppose right livelihood for me is about acknowledging who and where I really am. It is about providing for myself and my family, being clear about what I make, how much it will cost and when I can get it done by. It is about working with whatever humility, tenderness, courage, honesty, humour and openheartedness I can muster in any given moment.

Practice makes progress.

*Readers who have been on retreat at Maenllwyd may find something familiar about the bottom left image on page 56: it is the clay maquette for the carving of Heruka now to be seen on the beam in the Maenllwyd dining room.*

## RETREAT REPORTS

*At the end of all Western Chan Fellowships retreats we are asked to write brief reports on our experiences during and immediately after the retreat. This gives the retreatants an opportunity to reflect on their experience, on what they have learned and how they have progressed. Their experiences can also be very instructive for the rest of us, so we are printing reports here, anonymously, from recent Silent Illumination and Western Zen retreats.*

### REPORT I

I arrived at Hourne Farm with considerable apprehension about the retreat. It was to be far longer than any I had done before and I wasn't sure about how I would manage a truly silent retreat, having done mainly Western Zen retreats. How would I be able to understand my thoughts if I couldn't express them? And the pain – on my previous retreat I had struggled badly with physical pain in sitting and I was very nervous of 9 days of such pain.

However the first few days allayed much of these fears quickly and I settled into the method amazingly easily – it seemed so natural to allow my awareness to settle and simply become aware. I realised that in the past I have tried hard to reject all sensations except those I am meant to be concentrating on. The instructions from Simon always seemed to come at exactly the right moment; in a morning before exercises I might be thinking about a certain issue with the meditation and Simon's few words addressed them perfectly every time.

After a few days the instruction to open the awareness even further brought me to my first serious blockage and I asked to speak to Simon

about this. We unpicked issues I was having with anger and fear and feeling unable to express them. In fact I had difficulty even recognising anger as it arose, and I found I was desperately trying to push the feelings away, which was causing a great deal of physical pain, especially in my chest. Expressing some of these emotions left me literally shaking with fear and rage. I went to investigate this further.

After waking up early the next morning I decided to try to go right inside the physical sensations of the anger and found my whole body spasming almost uncontrollably. Every time I allowed the tension in one part of my body to come into my awareness it started jerking about, making my arms and shoulders jump and shudder. Strangely this also relieved the pain in my chest and my mind became clearer. Simon noticed the spasms but seemed unconcerned so I allowed this to continue without trying to change anything, including throughout the first time I have been time-keeper. The next morning the main shudders had settled but my face started twitching and contorting instead! I found myself pulling the strangest of expressions, really showing the emotion I was feeling – grimaces as fierce as a tiger with anger, and my whole body contorting like Scrooge with a desperate feeling of clinging and grasping. But also for the first time great huge grins of joy and a feeling of wanting to jump with excitement at other times. My shoulder blades suddenly pulled back and downwards, pushing my chest outwards as I felt confidence, even pride, wash through my body. It was as if a Genie had been released from a bottle and taken over my body – the genie of my long forbidden emotions. Forbidden by my own fear, and although I could see the root of the fears, under scrutiny with Simon I found that they often had no basis any more. So many times my mind had taken one incident, locked it in crystal and

taken it as an eternal truth. Even as these things came to light I could see my mind trying to lock these new lessons up in a similar way as ‘the answer’. I would find my mind wandering whenever it had been very clear, as a beautiful new analogy to explain what I had experienced flashed into mind and I followed this thought, aiming to tell Simon about it. My need to impress with my insights was stunningly strong! But the words of Master Sheng Yen would appear; whatever you find, it is not what you are looking for, even Enlightenment is not it. It reminded me to stay with this new moment and experience how this one feels, rather than trying to catch one that is already past, or find one that has not yet appeared.

The insights into my own thought patterns came thick and fast, each session of meditation or work period, or even rest period seeming to let me see something new. There were many painful times of accepting emotions that I wanted so hard to reject. Things that I felt I shouldn’t feel. But I found that I could let these feelings in. And the method of Silent Illumination finally became clear when I had the formal interview with Simon – I was so terrified of this interview, as it brought fears of tests, and of being judged right to the fore. But by accepting the feelings as they arose, allowing them to be (telling Simon how I was afraid of what he would think!) they lost some power. I could widen the awareness to notice that as well as these painful feelings and thoughts, there are also so many other sensations to experience at the same time. This somehow diluted the emotions and gave the thoughts less of a driving seat in the moment while still allowing the feelings to be present.

After this the meditation settled down into really accepting every thing that each moment presented, and in the final day I felt my awareness widen naturally, not forced as I had tried earlier, so that it felt I was



simply aware of everything as it was there. I had previously had some idea of what ‘Oneness’ might feel like and had tried to make happen. And I may not have experienced it truly but what I felt was somehow nothing special and yet also something I had not experienced before in meditation – it was as if this is exactly how things should always be, naturally. Unusually I find I do not want to describe it as this will make my mind fix it into stone, and so to search for it again in future. It was all things; mind, body, emotions, sensations, environment, all in awareness, all being noticed and experienced, none with particular priority or importance. Completely different from my past experiences, when one or other will be in the main part of awareness, particularly thinking, and all others ignored or pushed away.

Returning to the busy world of every day was initially difficult – the train station was overwhelming. But I had to change trains and wait at a busy station later on, and realised that I was trying to hold onto calm rather than experience what was really happening. And the moment I noticed I was tense, slightly afraid and impatient, then it was like slotting perfectly into my own skin. I remained alert and seemed to operate perfectly in tune with what was needed.

Overall I have found this to be a most profound and wonderful retreat and I am so grateful to have been able to attend

## REPORT II

I was amazed to see how much came up during the communication exercises.

It went on till the last exercise unhindered by my attempt to tie things up and put a nice bit of wrapping paper around them.

It can be summarized in 'Who am I when nothing is happening?' because I really do not know who I am when I am not continually adding to my sense of self by putting a few more compliments in my nice warm bath of pride (all invented, but still nice and warm to soak in). And it was good to see the advantage of pride, to see why I like it and why I really do not want to let go of it, rather than denouncing it as bad.

A few days later I find that something has happened to my constant train of thought. It doesn't work so well any more. And where before I had always dreamed of this good buddhist life full of mindfulness I now find myself more aware, yet don't know whether this is what I wanted.

And it is all very much about me and I, and I feel they have been dented badly, my belief in them, my fun in them, my comfort in them, and now it isn't as cosy any more. I always felt/hoped that Buddhist retreats were there to make ME happier, and this retreat has been very different. I have seen more of the clockwork of my thoughts and can't put the front plate back on. It feels I have caught myself out, maybe for good, and it certainly does not make me happier. More aware yes, more awake yes, but out in the cold with the wind blowing, rather than warm by the fire soaking in all the wise thoughts that have raised their heads at the retreat.

Yet it also feels that I am running less hard, that what I fear is already there and I can't run away from it. I feel it in my chest, all the time, no idea what it is. The two of me are more joined up, with the manic one less manic and the doopy one who eats chocolate more present all the time but without the chocolate. It is not a happy gathering, but it is a more true gathering.

To be all right with being a nobody, rather than jumping around in order to be a somebody. Not attractive, not easy, but requiring less batteries. And I try to look after myself better and that is a new feeling. It is a bit scary to stand still and take the time to notice how I feel and what I want/need. Am I cold, am I hungry, am I tired, rather than just doing everything that is on my list to be done, not thinking about the person who is doing it or whether I can make the process more enjoyable. Process not product. A different focus. I have to slow down to feel how the process is, and that is a new way of doing things. We'll see.

So here I sit, with new warm thermals, and having just eaten a very nice sandwich, life can't be that bad!

Thank you very much for your kindness and understanding. This retreat was good, not in the way I wanted it, but all the better for that.

### REPORT III

*Closer than your own face*

*More intimate than your breathing*

*It's always here, but 'here' is already too far away*

Thank you Simon for an excellent retreat. I have found particularly useful your comment that even though one may not be in touch with the state of silent illumination, or how things really is (to quote S. Suzuki, I think), it is really wonderful and helpful to know that it is there!



# 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 elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

## Visit our Website

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

Our website includes:

- Introductory articles on Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation
- A digital library of Dharma talks by Chan masters
- Reports of participants at our retreats
- Details of activities and events, including our retreat programme
- Back-issues of this journal
- Contact details for local meditation groups

## Contacting Us

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For further information on submitting a contribution please contact the editors at [editor@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org)

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## Forthcoming Retreats in 2015

## EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

*Saturday 27 June to Thursday 2 July 2015*

Leader: Hilary Richards Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Friday 31 July to Sunday 9 August 2015*

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

## WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 1 August to Thursday 6 August 2015*

Leader: Jake Lyne Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Friday 11 September to Sunday 20 September 2015*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Saturday 7th November to Saturday 14th November 2015*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

## WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 5th December to Thursday 10th December 2015*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales







*One should do nothing other than what is either  
directly or indirectly of benefit to living beings,  
and for the benefit of living beings alone  
one should dedicate everything to Awakening.*

BODHICARYAVATARA

