

WINTER 2015 NO.51



NEW CHAN FORUM
BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP



Western
Chan
Fellowship

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Cover Image: Claire Martin

Design www.robbowden.com • ISSN 2047-9514 Print • ISSN 2047-9522 Online

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS & GEORGE MARSH

Once again we bring you a varied and interesting selection of articles: the first of two articles by Simon Child on *koan* investigation (a process of self exploration launched with 'great doubt'), a description of how two Buddhists use their practice to deal with chronic physical pain and a review of a welcome book celebrating women in Buddhism.

This issue of *New Chan Forum* coincides with two significant points in the development of the Western Chan Fellowship.

Ken Jones, who died in August, was a high-profile member of our sangha, and we remember his enormous contribution to the Fellowship in two articles and a selection of his haiku poems.

And, to balance the sadness of this loss, we have the joyful news that the Fellowship has a new Dharma Heir: Fiona Nuttall received transmission from Simon Child at a simple and moving ceremony on 1 November. We share the picture below with our readers.



THE GREAT DOUBT

SIMON CHILD

This is the first of two articles edited from retreat talks by Simon Child introducing koan-study and explaining how to penetrate koans. The second article, in the next issue of New Chan Forum, will be called The Shattering of the Great Doubt.

Why is it that you practise?

Why *is* it that you practise? It's a relatively unusual activity amongst humanity for people to be doing this so it's a fair question to ask: why are you doing it? We could extend that and say: why do you do anything; how come you do things in the world, in your life? There's a question of motivation: what drives us, how we decide what to do, how we bother to do anything. Sometimes we can give a coherent story about this; often we can't – often it's largely unconscious, subconscious, habit. We do stuff because we know we should do it, or have to do it, or want to do it, or something like that. But it's not necessarily very coherent or even rational.

We can make up reasons and say it's something to do with lacking something - we need something or we'd like to have something; we'd like to have money, or we need to have money to survive, or we'd like to have certain material possessions – we enjoy them. Or we want success in relationship; we want to be happy. Sometimes it's to do with safety; feeling unsafe, feeling insecure. We do things to try to adjust our situation.

There's an implication here that we're not satisfied with our situation; we're not satisfied with the way our life is or the way the world is; we're uncomfortable about certain aspects of existence. It may be very small matters such as what's going to happen today, or what are we going to

eat, or what's the weather going to be like; it may be larger matters of career, of relationship; and it may be larger again on a global scale. Our urge to do something, to choose an activity and to follow it, arises in some way from some sense of dissatisfaction with just staying as we are. In some ways this is of course all very obvious, but it may be important just to state it as a beginning point to where we go from here.

Arising out of this dissatisfaction, by which of course I am referring to what the Buddha called *dukkha*, this sense of being not at ease with how things are – sometimes in a more extreme way that we could call suffering, or maybe in a lesser way that we just call feeling uneasy, dissatisfied – we are led to want to resolve it. We have various strategies that we try to employ: seeking, acquiring, avoiding, comparing, judging, criticising, complaining – you can add more words to the list. This is a large part of our way of encountering the world, judging it: 'Is this good for me, bad for me? Can I get something out of this? Am I in danger, do I need to avoid this? How can I get more of this? How can I hold onto what I've got and not lose it?' This process of trying to resolve our sense of unsatisfactoriness in this way – by acquisition, by judgment and so on – makes the mind very restless because it's so busy judging this changing world that we live in. It's not as though we can make an assessment once and stick to it because something else happens and then we have to reassess the situation and make another decision, another choice, and then again and again. We complicate it further by bringing in memories of the past and play out potential scenarios for the future, rehearsing a million and one scenarios as to how we'll handle them – even though we know that probably the million and third one is the one that'll actually happen.

A huge amount of our energy is devoted to this game of trying to resolve our acknowledged or unacknowledged sense of unease at the way of being in the world. Of course there are very good reasons why we do this; we can look at biology, such as survival requirements in Nature – this is a mechanism which has helped us survive and will continue to help us to survive; it's not something we have to give up on. We do need to seek out healthy food and eat it, otherwise we'll die. This is not a completely pointless game, but it's a game which has become overblown. It occupies almost our every moment and it stumbles over itself with multiple overlapping games going on; games of relationship, tangling with games of career, tangling with games of accommodation, tangling with games of... and so on. The mind gets very busy, very distracted, somehow fumbling along and making it mostly work out quite a bit of the time but also going badly wrong at other times. And then there are more recriminations and judgments, adjustments, trying harder, and so it goes on.

In many ways it's also how we approach practice; we approach practice as a possible solution to all our other problems: 'If only I can get enlightened, then the rest won't matter.' Well the Buddha needed to eat as well, didn't he; he needed to find some food and eat. He wasn't subjected to snowy weather but if he had been he'd have needed to find some shelter. So that's a rather simplistic view, but it's certainly an attitude that we could be picking up: 'Yes, if I could practise and get enlightened, everything is solved.'

In this way we are practising with a seeking mind, we're practising with an attitude of gaining – gaining something which will make us safe, permanently safe and secure. Do any of you recognise that in you? If that isn't your motivation for practising, what is it? It may be less extreme than



that but there's probably some hope of at least finding some sort of peace, some sort of ease of being? These motivations are often subconscious, unconscious, we don't necessarily recognise them. But this is how we approach our life, and this is how we approach our practice.

Rather than saying don't do it, we can turn practice into a way of playing that game but playing it on itself. What do I mean by that? Don't say, 'This game is making me restless and agitated, I won't play it; I'll drop out of it.' That doesn't work, put as baldly as that, because we're left rather dull, bored: nothing to do, nothing to eat. No, we need to play that game to some extent. But playing the game too much disturbs us. Can we find some way of beating the game without playing the game, or playing the game in a way which beats itself?

Beating the game

Practice turns towards investigating the game itself. We look into this process of trying to achieve fulfilment through acquisition. We do it by setting ourselves up with some object of practice and investigating the process of travelling there, the path. We make sure that we experience the path itself and this is a good starting point. There's a stage of practice we call unification of body and mind; if you're fully present in your experience you're experiencing your own travelling of the path and this is a step in investigating the path itself. If the mind is scattered all over the place, playing its usual games of worrying about work and worrying about relationship and worrying about money and worrying about food, it's not present in the body; it's all over the place. But if it's just experiencing itself being here now, it's experiencing the practising and experiences the wants and urges arising; it's very much present in that process.

So this becomes a rather different sort of game, if I can put it that way; the practice turns you in a different direction. This is deliberate and actually the destination of the practice is indeed in a different direction; the enlightenment that you seek, the peace that you seek, is to be found within. It's not to be found without, it's not something that you could go and buy if you could find the right supermarket with it in stock. It's found through investigating your own way of being in the world, it's found in investigating the mind through which you relate to the world and to yourself.

The practice is an invitation to go in a different direction than usual; rather than imagining that you can acquire enough from the world to make you safe and secure, rather than imagining that if you reach out and grasp often enough and successfully enough you'll be there, it's more saying, 'Look within'. The methods of practice are tools to help us look within.

There are different tools and we may need to learn how to use a few of them because there are differing conditions of mind, differing circumstances, we're not always in the same situation. Particularly at the beginning of a retreat, when the mind is very unsettled, very scattered, we need to find a way to settle it; typically we arrive in a rather scattered condition. But it's possible to encourage the mind to settle, to allow it to settle, to nudge it in the direction of settling, and that indeed is achieved partly by deliberately letting go of the game; notice when the mind wanders and just let go of it. Notice when you're in some imagined scenario of the future and let go of it. Notice when a memory has trapped you into rehashing an old scenario, looking for a different outcome or for understanding of it – and let it go. This aspect of practice is just letting go of

the game. But don't imagine that just cutting it off completely is the destination, the end point – it's not – it's a direction of travel for now which is relevant because of the mind being scattered.

You all know various tricks to help you settle the mind, various methods of practice: maybe using the breath, counting the breath, following the breath; maybe using a mantra, a recitation; maybe using a body scan, body awareness, relaxation – various different methods which can help you have a focus to which to return when the mind wanders. Having somewhere to return to when the mind wanders makes it easier to cut off the wandering; you can switch from the wandering to your focus of meditation. Choosing a focus, it doesn't really matter which one, is a useful device for you to help reduce the tendency of the mind to wander. By returning to a focus which is in you, in the breath, in the body awareness, or in a recitation, it helps this process of unifying body and mind. The body and mind come to spend more time together, they're not so separate. You're nudging yourself towards being more present throughout the day, throughout the retreat, by the simple device of returning from wherever you've wandered back to here and now.

These are various methods of calming the mind down. In themselves they're not the whole of the practice. Master Sheng Yen described these methods as 'preparatory', not to diminish them, because they're very important and we need to make use of them, but to point out that they have certain limitations in them which can stop you taking the practice further. By cutting off the wandering mind you're losing a chance to investigate the mind. By narrowing your attention on to a specific focus you're not really investigating the whole of your mind. Though they are very useful these methods have inbuilt limitations.

The two main methods of Chan, Silent Illumination, and *gongan* or *huaou* practice, are methods that have different qualities to the preparatory methods, and Shifu described these two methods as being methods which can take you all the way. The power of the preparatory methods comes from their limitation, their narrow focus, but this limitation can restrict you from going further. Their power comes from their ability to help you capture the wandering mind, but it's captured by an artificial trick which may itself trap you if you're not careful. At some point you need to step outside that trap and have a more open practice, a practice which allows the awareness to present to you whatever it presents without getting caught by these games that we habitually engage in.

The Koan method

I tend to use the word *koan*, the Japanese word, as an overall word for this approach. The corresponding Chinese word is *gongan*, and also in Chinese we have *huaou* – and these two are made more distinct in Chinese practice than they are in Japanese. It's just a technical distinction: *Gongan* relates to the stories, the longer stories, while *huaou* relates to a shorter phrase which may be taken from one of the longer stories. What I've found works as a way of convenience is to use the word *koan*, the Japanese word which tends to include both, when I'm referring to both, but if I want to refer specifically to one or the other I'll refer specifically to either *gongan* or *huaou*; that's just a trick which seems to work.

These methods, whether *gongan* or *huaou*, are also methods of providing a focus to which your practice can return; your mind wanders away, then you remind yourself that you've taken up this practice of engaging with a koan and so you return to the koan. This, as we'll find out over

the next few days, has somewhat different qualities to returning the attention to the breath or to body awareness. The koan has a capacity to engage you because of the nature of your seeking mind.

When presented with words we tend to respond by trying to solve them, by trying to work them out, by trying to find the solution to the puzzle that seems to be there. So this is not a neutral focus for the mind. It's a place to return to, but it's also a place which can get us trapped into trying to solve riddles which can be a negative aspect to it. However, because of our tendency to engage with these things it makes it a more powerful place to return to, and it also makes it a place which, through our engagement with it, challenges us in other ways. It spots our sensitive points, it spots our buttons and presses them, and so it becomes a more active investigation.

We may use quite strong words about this practice; we talk about 'great angry determination'; we talk about 'great doubt' and 'great vow'. These superlatives are not accidental. This is a practice which can engage you very strongly and that's part of its power. You may tend to drift a bit with other practices, but you don't drift once this koan practice has got you. If you do drift you readily come back, but you tend to drift less and less because you become very strongly engaged with the koan; it's not a neutral focus like the breath or body awareness, it's very engaging, very challenging, sometimes hard to look at but also hard to look away.

This takes us in a somewhat different direction; it is a focus which helps us to be concentrated and present, but it has this extra quality of developing an investigation of the mind, an investigation of our experience. As it triggers responses in us we're automatically investigating our responses, our habitual responses, our tendencies to behave in certain

ways; it triggers them and we're present with them and so we are investigating them. It has the trap that we might fall into a wordy investigation: the thinking process, the ordinary everyday seeking mind trying to solve – and that isn't it. But we can also find our way beyond that trap into a wordless investigation, into a 'being with' which is very alive.

[Editor's note: Retreatants are directed how to choose a koan, how to familiarise themselves with it, and make their early investigations. Simon Child then leads them deeper into the practice.]

Engaging with the koan

When you become engaged with the koan, it 'fights' back, and that fighting back is important, in fact it's crucial. The whole point of the koan is not for you to solve the koan, it's for the koan to solve you. It needs to work on you, and you need to allow it to do that. This is the beginning of a shift into the other sort of investigation, the non-wordy investigation, the non-intellectual, non-conceptual investigation. It's experiencing being with the koan, experiencing the koan touching you or prodding you or kicking you. Maybe you had a taste of that when you first heard the koan and that's partly why you chose it. But maybe you slipped away from that way of interacting with it and began thinking about it. Now, having given up on the thinking game because it tied you in knots, you're more open to staying with the koan and staying with what it brings you – and it brings you these nudges and prods and discomforts and recognitions and so on. It's pointing a searchlight into you and highlighting parts of you which you might otherwise overlook: reactivity, tensions, negativities.

The koan is becoming a tool of active investigation. This is good. If you start trying to capture this in words, you're back into the conceptual,



PHOTO: Claire Martin

intellectual approach and it's not so personal anymore; it's a little bit distant, a bit third-person, it's like a story about somebody else. But if you're into just experiencing being with it and what arises, this is first person – ouch, maybe.

This is where the mnemonic, 'Let through, let be, let go,' comes in very useful. Whatever is triggered by the koan, allow it to be triggered; let it through into awareness. Don't be evaluating it as an answer or a non-answer or a blind alley, because that process of evaluation is a conceptual process – it's flawed, it's limited, so don't apply that. Whatever presents itself to you, let it through. Let it be there in experience; not influencing it, pushing it away or holding onto it; not justifying it or judging it; not trying to join it with other things to make a nice conceptual model. Just experience.

Maybe you've already had a taste of this, that these koans through their poetic imagery can bring some unexpected feelings. Some koans have fairly stark images of impermanence: death, or maybe isolation. Loneliness, loss and other feelings may be evoked directly from the fairly obvious wording of the koan – but then there are the more subtle layers, hard to even name them and identify them, but they're felt as a 'ooh, hmm'. It's not so easy to let go of the koan at this point because it's got you intrigued: 'What is going on here? What's that going on? It's almost like it's trying to tell me something but I can't see what it is.'

You may have several layers of things going on at the same time. There maybe intellectual frustration at not having been able to find an answer in words and concepts. There may be the fairly stark imagery of some aspect of your koan, and then there's maybe a more subtle undercurrent. But the common theme here is that you haven't quite worked it out and

that's a bit uncomfortable; you haven't quite understood what's going on and we're not comfortable with that. It's hard to let go of the koan because we don't like to leave something unresolved, so we look back at it again and again and again. But somehow, as we continue, it becomes even more unresolved; instead of getting clearer, it becomes less clear.

This sense of not quite getting it, this sense of being intrigued as to what's going on, is the beginning of what's called the doubt sensation, generating the doubt. Don't look for a specific sensation, it's not really that, it's more like a sense of not knowing. It's that meaning of the word 'doubt' - an air of 'unknown', of mystery - something to be solved but so far unsolvable. As we persist, rather than getting nearer to a resolution we seem to get further away because, as we persist, keeping looking back at the koan, we find other parts of the koan that also we can't quite make sense of. It gets to the point where we want to throw the whole thing out of the window, but we can't because we need to know.

It's touching our vulnerability of not knowing, our sense of wanting safety through knowledge; it's touching our pride that likes to be able to solve things; it's touching specific parts it touches, maybe to do with impermanence, maybe to do with loss, maybe to do with... anything. And so on. We may have a conglomeration of uncomfortable feelings around it - not necessarily uncomfortable but typically there is the discomfort of not knowing. It has a strong sense of something which needs our attention, something which must be resolved, but which we can't find a way forward with.

We're moving towards the 'Great Doubt'. It can become something which takes us over, though we're not there yet. It's heading in that direction because what it's doing, as it goes along, is gathering together our

other doubts, our unknowns. We begin to realise that we don't really know anything; everything that we thought we knew, we can't use it to help us with the koan; it lets us down. Most of our knowing is a provisional sort of knowing, it works, it gets us through, but when we look into it deeply we realise it's based only on assumptions and extrapolations. At this moment here, now, with this koan jeering back at us: 'You can't solve me, you can't solve me'; our knowing lets us down.

How do we move forward? It's a curious sort of 'game'; some people complain it's a rather artificial game; we're setting up a tension that didn't need to be there; if we hadn't picked up the koan we wouldn't be so tense, and as meditators we should be just trying to relax, shouldn't we? Why are we creating trouble for ourselves?

This practice has a particular quality which makes it worthwhile engaging with this. Yes, it is an artificial trick, but then all methods of practice are artificial to some extent: why bother to tell someone to count their breath? It's not even as if at the end the of the day they know how many breaths they've had, because they stopped counting and started again once they got to ten! Koan practice is a trick, it's a device. It's a useful device because it highlights in a very vigorous way just how much we live on assumptions that we know, but we actually don't know.

When deeply challenged we find we don't know. We don't know the essence of Zen, we don't know the essence of ourselves, we don't know who we are, we don't understand life and death. In our everyday life we skim over these rather awkward issues and we get on with going to work and having relationships and what have you. It works out most of the time, but underneath all this we don't really have a clue what's going on. This seemingly innocuous koan from a thousand years ago or more - some

inane characters having a bit of a chat – has broken through this veneer and left us feeling lost. But that's a rather negative way of putting it; we may feel energised: 'I've got to find this out; it's become the most important thing, it's the only important thing. I've got to break through this.'

Great Doubt

This is getting to the Great Doubt; it's totally overwhelming you, obsessing you, consuming you. The only question of your life is working on this koan, because this has become your pointer, touching your most basic underlying doubt; it's revealed it, exposed it to you. It's also the tool of breaking through, because by continuing working with the koan the attention becomes totally sharp and clear. You've found that any answer that comes to mind doesn't quite fit, and so you discard it; you don't become attached to wandering thoughts. You notice the thoughts just in case they might seem to help, but they're discarded, you don't attach to them. Another idea comes along and you notice it because you're desperate for a possible idea – but you discard it because it's not the 'answer', it doesn't resolve the sense of not knowing.

The koan is moving you towards a totally sharp, present, clear awareness. Everything is noticed in case it might help you out of the situation, but everything is discarded because it isn't the solution. In this very sharp investigation, this sharp attention, this wide open attention, you see through things which ordinarily you let pass by; you see through habits of behaviour and vexations, you see through attitudes, because you're seeing them so sharply, because the mind is so empty of clutter. The koan has achieved the function of clearing the mind and it's achieved the function of sharpening the attention.

Yes, it's a somewhat artificial trick, but it's a good trick; it's a trick which trains the mind, which opens the mind, which sharpens the mind. It helps the mind to see through its usual clutter, and it can break through to seeing things in a totally different way without any of the usual previous clutter, any of the assumptions, any of the habits, any of the attitudes; they're all let go and there's a total clarity of seeing.

This is a description of how you can engage with the koan and where it might take you. You can block it from taking you there if you attach to 'solutions' to the koan, if you just daydream with it and don't really pay it much attention, if you tell yourself you know the answer and so you're just playing the game for the sake of the form. It's certainly easy to not make progress, but it's also easy to make progress if you allow yourself. Tune the mind so that it's paying attention to the process of you engaging with the koan, so that it notices itself attaching to possible answers and perhaps getting rather proud at having found them – but also it notices that, to be honest, it's not completely satisfied with the 'answer'. You know it's only a provisional way of looking at it, and that enables you to let go. Because you're looking for total satisfaction, you're looking for total clarity, a clever twist of words doesn't satisfy you.

You may become trapped if you think you've got the right words because you've heard about this koan; you know what the so-called 'answer' is. Or you've read some Dharma theory and you know it's 'empty' or it's nothing or it's everything or something like that. These are just concepts – do they match your current experience? To find out you'd better be in touch with your current experience.

Don't be trapped by theoretical knowledge or past experience. This current moment's experience is your work on the koan, or, it's the koan



PHOTO: Claire Martin

working on you. Be very present with it, be very attentive, and allow it move in its own way through these different phases. If wordy intellectual thoughts arise, just let them wander through the mind. That's part of the process of letting go of them, by seeing them and realising they really don't satisfy in a deep way. If you suppress them, it just creates a tension in the mind and they keep on arising and it just distracts you.

By all means allow your clever intellectual constructions to arise and be examined, and let them go and try again, and then maybe another one arises. Maybe mixed in with them, because this isn't necessarily sequential, mixed in there may be something different. Maybe it's more a feeling about the koan, maybe something is evoked, maybe something's triggered – let it through. Whatever the koan produces let it through, experience it, be with it, know it, but don't hold onto it. Don't push it away and don't hold on. It goes when it's ready, to be replaced either immediately or later by something else, and then the same applies: let it through, don't judge it, just experience it.

Over a period of time you develop a certain relationship with your koan, which John used to call 'getting the taste of the koan'. The 'taste' is a feeling about the koan, or of relationship with the koan. You have a sense that this koan is about loneliness, or this koan is about fear, or this koan is about something else. That's your understanding of your relationship with the koan, or it's your understanding of the characteristics of you that the koan is poking at. You allow that taste to emerge because it helps you to acknowledge and stay with something which you might otherwise avoid; you might avoid confronting that you're afraid or lonely or whatever it might be.

Sometimes the process of a taste emerging highlights a particular phrase or word from the koan. It may be as though a *buaton* is emerging from the koan; you have looked at the whole koan and its taste is summarised for you in one phrase or one word. Picking up that one word is the same as picking up the whole koan. It's not that you've taken that word out of the koan, it's more like that for you that word is the koan; that's all the reminder you need of the koan because by now it's so well known to you. If you find that happening that's fine, but check it's not a way of avoiding or overlooking something else in the koan which is also important to acknowledge.

You find a shorthand, maybe a phrase, a word. Later maybe you don't even need any words, because by now you have this sense of not knowing and this itself is your prime investigation; the 'doubt' itself becomes the object of investigation, the sense of not knowing that's always present which makes you always be present with it.

As well as talking about great doubt, we talk about great determination, indeed great 'angry' determination – this gives us some idea of the energy to be applied when working on a koan. Don't let it slip away from you. Remember Master Sheng Yen's advice: whenever you are working with a koan or *buaton* pick it up; if it slips away, pick it up. Don't be satisfied with just feeling at ease and peaceful and calm, thinking, 'Oh, practice is going well!' No, practice is going badly; you've lost your koan – pick it up. It should always be with you at all times, and if it's not, pick it up again.

It's very active practice, very dynamic – it changes. Effort is required; it's not a passive casual process, it's something in which you have to engage fully. If you do so the rewards can be great, indeed it can push you very hard and push you a long way. From our first faltering steps with

the koan we can take the practice further. That is your task for today: to pick it up in a more continuous and deeper way. Don't let it slip out of your grasp, and if it does slip pick it back up again immediately.

REMEMBERING KEN JONES

HILARY RICHARDS

Hilary Richards' address at Ken Jones' funeral.

Remembering Ken fills me with gratitude. To have known and worked with him over the past couple of decades has been such a privilege. He was a great teacher, contemplative and poet. The words that stand out in my memory are some of the phrases he used when teaching Zen, and I am using some of them here. Of course Zen is impossible to teach, but Ken had a gift for pointing out the Way using complicated philosophical statements with simplicity and relating them to the everyday. He drew on the writings of ancient and modern Zen Masters and thinkers, making sense of it for himself and for us here, now. This is from 13th century Japanese Zen Master Dogen.

Every creature covers the ground it stands on, no more nor no less, it never falls short of its own completeness.

Ken knew his ground. He stood on it surely while he inquired into living, how he was with the world, in his body and with his mind. Ken would talk about the long shadow of egotistical self-interest which can cause so many destructive arguments and ruin relationships. Ken understood his own shadow and towards the end of his life had very little shadow at all: when I last saw him he had an internal glow.

He liked to spend time on solitary retreats: walking, contemplating and living on Plynlimon. He found a cave up there, now known to us as Ken's cave, where he would spend a week or so entirely on his own, cold, damp and in solitude, becoming one with the mountain. All he had with

him was a sleeping bag, basic food and an image of Kwan Yin, the Buddhist Deity who represents compassion. In fact he has left some Kwan Yin statues on the mountain, if you are up there and you look very carefully you may spot one. Ken had a wonderful, playful sense of humour. For more than a decade he ran what he called his "Flagship Retreat" at Maenllwyd. I used to help him with these events. Beforehand we would set up the Chan Hall together, with Kwan Yin, Ken's special guardian, on the Altar. He left the flowers to me and on one occasion I picked Welsh poppies from the garden. Picking too many once, I put those left over in a small jar, which was by the sink. The following day, on the draining board, I found this Haiku –

*My false teeth mug
filled to overflowing
with her little yellow flowers*

His mission was to help others discover the Great Way of Zen, to help each of us to understand our own Way, our own being and discover our own "Mind Forged Manacles". We all struggle with our internal "Skull Cinema" replaying old stuff in our heads - the problems we have with what or who we think we should be and what we are. He used to quote Krishnamurti "All human misery is held in the space between this and that": this being what we have and that being what we would rather have. The differences in our experience can be called Dualism, Duality and Suchness. In his last talk just a few weeks ago he gave some wonderful teaching, drawing on his love of landscape to explain suchness. The thorn tree on the mountainside, stark, alone, bent by the wind – just is. The old fence post – just is. But in relationship with us Ken demonstrated the possibilities of being, communicating and alive,

just so: the suchness of Ken, who knew who he was and allowed himself to change with the flow of life, engaged, maintaining integrity and growing in Wisdom.

Ken's contribution to Zen in the West was to make it accessible and understandable for Westerners. Whilst he recognised the importance of sitting meditation, he balanced this with teaching on open awareness, landscape, emotional honesty and communication with others. Relationship is so important in our lives. All of us here knew Ken in our own particular way and in him we found love, warmth, openness and above all honesty. His truest relationship has to have been with Noragh, who shared his life and love and was his soulmate.

Ken had a huge sense of Social Justice. He realised that Buddhism has potential to change the way the modern world functions – our big problems with global warming, overpopulation, inequality, war and “The Butchers Block of History”. He was instrumental in setting up the Network of Engaged Buddhists – peaceful protest, how to be kind, how to help, but not to be encumbered by the needy self.

To conclude here are two passages from Ken's writing The first from *How to be Kind* – which is what he taught.

The inner work of emotional awareness remains crucial, where, in both our kindness and unkindness, we are ripened to become deeply kind people working unreservedly for a kinder world.

And a secondly from his *Ageing – The Great Adventure*:

There is a paradox in Buddhism sometimes called the doctrine of the two truths. It cannot be understood by any amount of thinking about it. We can only experience with our “don't know” mind, what it is to live timelessly in time, and to be old and yet neither-old-nor-young. We can

live beyond life-and-death, and yet still age and die. As the Heart Sutra says: ‘...No withering nor death, nor end of them...’

In such life-and-death we truly are at home — or whatever you wish to call it: the Tao, the Universe, the Buddha Mind.

Life and death have been likened to a great waterfall. For a brief moment the water of the river is flung out in isolated droplets, drawn down and down by the pull of gravity. Finally with a crash they come together to form the great river again.

Ken was an exceptional, lively, contemplative and energetic jewel in the waterfall of life.



KEN JONES 1930 – 2015

KEN JONES: THE LIFE

KEN JONES IN CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE MARSH

In his influential book *The Social Face of Buddhism* (1989) Ken Jones theorised a Buddhist inspired vision of political liberation by transposing the Buddha's individual psychological insights onto society as a whole, and deconstructing the dangerous ego attachments found in political movements. In 2003 *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* revised and updated his major work. Ken was also a pioneer in British haiku and haibun writing, forms in which his playful wit flourished and moments of mindful awareness came sharply into focus. As his death approached he collected essays on 'Everyday Buddhism' and Westernising Zen together with a selection of *haibun* which recorded retreat experiences and his approach to the end of life in a volume he thought of as his memorial. It is called *Beyond Mindfulness: Living a Life Through Everyday Zen*, and it was the occasion for our interview with Ken to review his life.

Since the millennium Ken also developed an alternative personal style of retreat within our sangha and he had a loyal following amongst us. He was a contrarian, as he readily admitted, so his retreats expressed eccentric priorities and reflected his particular way of being. He downplayed *zazen*, *koan* study, enlightenment, the transmission, and what he scornfully characterised as "the Asiatic cloud nine stuff" of the tradition, and promoted instead: emotional awareness in the body, social-political engagement, exegesis of Dogen's obscurities, and insights into relationships. All this was done in a spirit of lightness, playfulness and what he called 'suchness,' with a great care for the participants. It meant that he was a constantly surprising – even shocking – talker, criticising our received ideas and cher-

ished beliefs with philosophical panache and amusing thrusts of fine phrasing. He was a delightfully stimulating conversational companion, whether you agreed or not, and generously convivial in argument. But how did he live the two lives of a communist and a Buddhist, and end up in old age with this idiosyncratic marriage of the two? He tells us the story, in his own words...

GEORGE MARSH

Early Years

I was born in Burnley in 1930 and my life describes a bowl-shaped graph with a decline from childhood to a low point in adulthood and then a rising line to a happier and more fulfilled old age. I spent most of my life as a needy neurotic – and dangerous with it – but I regard myself as a Golden Boy who has been let off the hook by the gods. I have committed great follies but now I feel immense gratitude that in my seventies and eighties I have been given ten years to become mature! I now have a lovely wife, fine friends and may have time to die well. Even the cancer, which I have had for twelve years now, has in some peculiar way heightened my awareness in leading retreats and writing poetry.

I was raised in a Liverpool Welsh middle class family. My mother was neurotic and socially ambitious; my father was a warm, humane and liberal man. I remember sitting with him watching Liverpool docks burn in the blitz as shrapnel banged off our bin lid. I joined the Communist Party. Looking back I can see that, though I had an authentic concern for suffering humanity, my desire to save mankind was driven by a needy self, which at that early stage I did not understand. I went into the army after the war, and then to university, but I never took my degree because

I had a nervous breakdown. I took a job as a library assistant and slowly over the years my professional career crawled its way back through night class study and an M.Sc. in Education towards becoming a lecturer in higher education. My Communist Party career took me to a middle management position (managing a railway-building youth brigade in Czechoslovakia) and then to a role as counter-intelligence chief. I had to check out foreign communists to see if they were spies. I remember the military attaché at the Soviet embassy teaching me Russian billiards as his Order of Lenin jangled on the green baize and Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin gazed down upon us. MI5 tailed me around, identifiable by their government issue shoes! One job I had was to select youngsters who would be sufficiently gullible to be sent to the USSR and return singing its praises.

Two crises

But a great disillusion came. It was a time of crisis, almost like a breakdown, as the revolutionary ideology began to unravel and my doubts led me to question dogma, which led in turn to suspicions in the Party that I was unreliable. I was expelled from the Party as a police spy! And that was the biggest hinge in my life. My doubts had been about how the ideology applied to the person. It was an ideology dealing in mass movements, but not taking account of the human being. I found another path by reading about Buddhism and meditation. I still wanted, as a needy self, to liberate mankind from suffering, but by a completely different means. How could I make the two kinds of liberation, the social and the existential, both cohere into a single system of understanding, and a guide to the way to live my life?



KEN JONES

I was fortunate to meet other like-minded socially conscious Buddhists when I was at this low point in my life, in need of reassurance and support. Buddhism had no place at that time for social theory and did not apply its insights to the explanation of great historical mass delusion, so reconciling it with the suffering of social follies over the ages was still an important quest for me. Most Buddhists were sociological illiterates and saw society as an aggregation of individuals. But this is just not so. I began working away at the British Library reading room and Marx Memorial Library as if my life depended on it – as indeed my sanity did – trying to develop a socially engaged Buddhism. I received an early introduction to the practice of emotional awareness from my first teacher Irmgard Schloegl (later the Venerable Myokyo-ni), of the Buddhist Society's London Zen Centre. I wanted to feel more secure, less needy, and to create a utopia in both myself and in the world. I struggled in frustration, desperate for enlightenment. After years of work I had a manuscript ready for a book, *The Social Face of Buddhism*, which Wisdom finally published in 1989. It was one of the first books on the subject and went through several editions. It was an important event in my life, and a shaping of my ideas on social engagement, clarifying my way forward.

Irmgard Schloegl objected strongly to my combining Buddhism with my commitment to social engagement and I left the London Zen Centre feeling battered and bruised. I was never good at institutionalisation. I'm a contrarian, and a lonely one, ploughing my own furrow. I am a wheel-tapper, a canary in a coalmine, which can make me unpopular. I become defensively opinionated. Relationships deteriorate and I feel hurt. The way I left the London Zen Centre and the way I left the Communist Party have marked similarities.

Eventually I found a congenial sangha with Genpo Roshi. He picked me up out of the gutter, down after my trials at the Buddhist Society, and I am grateful for that. But we were not really on the same wavelength. He was not an intellectual and not much of a teacher for me. His Kanzeon zen was the same wrong path as the London Zen Centre: zazen, zazen and seeking 'enlightenment,' the great myth of zen. I did not make much progress with him.

It began to dawn on me that my practice was upside down, a reflection of my own neediness. If I could just let go, be at ease and feel okay about myself, the anxiety could be dropped. I was useless as a meditator and felt humiliated at my wandering mind and no insights. One day, waiting for the number 61 bus in Leeds, I had a dramatic insight: that acceptance of this situation was the way ahead. It occurred to me that I could accept that I was just no bloody good at it. It was a revelation! Me, successful in my politics and my career, and ambitious, but a flop in zazen. It was a liberation to let go of the need to succeed. Insights take time to sink in and mature into the life, but it did end years of frustration, struggling to be a good Buddhist.

I began to come out of my despond with the help of two new influences: I was excited by reading American books on 'Everyday Buddhism,' particularly the writings of Joko Beck which were characterised by a practice of emotional awareness in the body; and I met John Crook. John was very important to me. He was a good friend and fellow spirit, playful on the one hand, and institutionally strict on the other. We liked each other and could talk freely. I saw him as an invaluable mentor rather than a teacher, so it was his playfulness that I learned most from.

Developing my own retreats

I was invited to join Dave Scott of the Stonewater Zen Sangha in Liverpool in teaching an annual retreat. It is a very traditional Soto Sangha with long sittings, dharma talks, and interviews. I like the people and the Liverpool working class down-to-earth flavour of it, but the Asiatic formality is not really my style. Arising out of this experience of teaching I began to plan a synthesis of my insights in order to develop a new style of retreat of my own: I would base it in emotional awareness in the body, which is at the heart of Everyday Buddhism. We would explore our addictions, insecurities and delusions and discover together how we all face the same kinds of difficulties. I would incorporate modern educational workshop teaching methods using small groups, flipchart brainstorming, feedback plenary sessions, various playful exercises starting in the body, private study on structured questions, set readings, and feed all these influences into the silence of *zazen* within a context shaped by dharma talks. I tested some of my ideas in Liverpool, and after a while John Crook let me lead retreats by myself at Maenllwyd and gave me my freedom.

The challenge was how to help people to incorporate ideas like ‘suchness,’ (a term I prefer to ‘emptiness’ because it is more comprehensible) into their everyday lives. I don’t aim at enlightenment or refer to it at all. To be aware of one’s needy self is the first step. Trust is developed in safe playful games. Present experience is focused through repeating the question, “Tell me how it feels?” This question is like a wrecking ball, or like a koan. We only half-live our lives, seeing fuzzily, when the self gets in the way. Each retreat is a survey in miniature of the Great Way from its beginning to its end. We start as needy selves, and by the end of the retreat a shift into wisdom and compassion is imagined: “What would it

be like?” Retreatants are offered a taste of how wisdom and compassion will be. Acceptance is practised in imagination in the same way: “How would it feel to just accept the irritations and vexations of, for example, a relationship?”

Usually my retreatants ask about ‘Engaged Buddhism’ and want to talk about it. The last discussions lead into political issues and action to help the world. The aim is to learn to love. We address the wonderful Shin-Ichi *koan*, “If there is nothing you can do of any avail, what do you do?” And I tell of the bird that flies for a beakful of water to drop it on a forest fire.

I am a theorist of socially engaged action, but rather expect others to do it. I talk the talk, but I don’t run a soup kitchen. My priority now is existential rather than societal, and I teach it through retreats; but I remained President of the Network of Engaged Buddhists until last year.

KEN JONES

Ken Jones was talking to George Marsh in September 2014. The new book, *Beyond Mindfulness: Living a Life Through Everyday Zen – Talks & Writings*, Alba Publishing, £10 (incl P&P in UK; + P&P overseas), is available from: Alba Publishing, PO Box 266, Uxbridge UB9 5NX (cheques made out to Alba Publishing). Also available from Alba Publishing is a posthumous collection of Ken’s wry *haibun* tracing the progress of his reactions to cancer from diagnosis in 2001 to facing up to death in 2015.

Ken’s ‘Everyday Zen’ is articulated in his website www.kenjoneszen.com. Ken’s gentle irony and profound wit have found their best expression in his haiku poetry, and we publish a selection here on the poetry pages of *New Chan Forum*.

HAIKU

KEN JONES

A selection of haiku by Ken Jones

Rolling home
with my stumpy shadow
and half a moon

From lamp to lamp
a rakish fellow
striding forward, falling back

We laugh and kiss
picking strange pebbles
by a roaring sea

Dead fly
I was with it
when it died

Surprised by joy
in happy vacancy
I wash the car

Old age
strange women
smile at me

Nothing to celebrate
I open a can
of mushy peas

Stacking firewood
this summer evening –
how simple death seems

Fear and dread
spread thinly on my toast
to spice the day

Good days, bad days
always on my plate
the leaping blue carp

A gentle thud
and miles of grief
for a small life gone

No future, past or present
only a china cup
the tea growing cold

Among Christmas brambles
a Red Admiral
fluttering, fluttering

Battered mooring posts
each one stands
in its own reflection

Plunging dream boat
capsized
by the clatter of my alarm

Even when he smiles
a stranger now
him in the mirror

Into the sadness
a pair of mating ducks
alighting on our pond

Winter twilight
cutting timber by the Rheidol
all there is to know



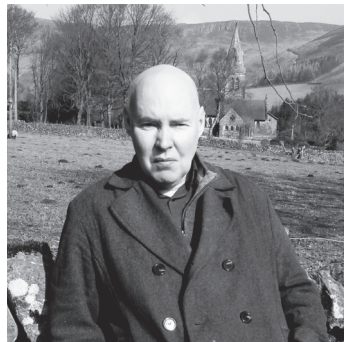
THE WAY OUT OF SUFFERING: TWO WHO LIVE WITH PAIN

GEORGE MARSH

'All states are without self,' when one sees this in wisdom, then one becomes dispassionate towards the painful. This is the Path to Purity.

DHAMMAPADA 279

We do not want suffering; we do want happiness. However well we manage to avoid encountering things we don't like, some kinds of suffering are going to catch up with us sooner or later, and this is the reality the Buddha's teaching addresses. How much will the Buddha's insights be able to strengthen us when we are up against inescapable suffering? Let me introduce two experts who live with daily physical pain.



Stuart Quine describes his condition "In 1985, at age twenty-three, I found that when I grasped something tightly it was difficult to release my grip and that sometimes my jaw muscles would seize causing me to slur my speech. My GP referred me to a neurologist who diagnosed early adult-onset *myotonic dystrophy*, a congenital condition resulting from a disordered coding of chromosomal DNA. For twenty years this was little more than an occasional inconvenience and if there was a gradual decline in my health it was imperceptible. I continued to walk in the hills, beachcomb and explore ancient cairns

and standing stones. However, in my mid-forties there was a sudden marked decrease in my health and after struggling for a couple of years it was mutually agreed that I could no longer manage the physical demands of intensive care nursing. I was redeployed to a semi-sedentary position but again this proved too much for me and I elected for early retirement. My condition had stripped me of my career. Following retirement my health has rapidly deteriorated. The increasing systemic wasting of my muscles means that I am usually on the edge of exhaustion, my gait is unsteady and I become severely short of breath even on mild exertion. I have learnt not to even attempt to run for a bus, to be careful on steps and cautious of ice. It is as if old age has arrived twenty-five years early.

If there is a positive aspect to this situation it is a reduction in my pride and a willingness to reach out and ask for assistance. Recently exasperation has started to yield to acceptance.

To use a phrase of Soen Nakagawa, we will all "join the majority".



Adam Lewis describes his condition "When I was a teenager, I was told that my mother, grandmother and uncle all had a mysterious disease called *Ankylosing Spondylitis*. My relatives seemed so good at hiding the symptoms that this information seemed utterly irrelevant to my life.

And then I started getting back pain. My parents looked worried. They decided to have me tested for the bafflingly titled *Human Leukocyte Antigen B27*.

Over a number of years, it became obvious that I too had this disease. The mind stabbing pain that frustrated my ability to live or make a living was torture.

With medication physiotherapy and some complementary healing techniques I have overcome some of the suffering. The remaining pain, fatigue and limited mobility I have learned to live with.

Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is an inflammatory condition of the spine which produces pain, stiffness, deformity and disability throughout adult life.

There is no cure. Physiotherapy, exercise and anti-inflammatory drugs are the cornerstones of treatment.

AS is a chronic progressive disease. It is characterised by periods of flare, leading to slowly increasing spinal and peripheral joint damage.”

Buddhist perspectives on pain

- “I have been causing a lot of my own suffering that could have been avoided,” says Adam Lewis, who lives with the daily management of his physical pain.
- “*Dukkha* is not pain but our mental reaction to pain. We can control our response,” says Stuart Quine, monitoring his physical decline, the weakening of his body.

Adam explains: “Woe is me! Self pity. Taking it personally. I’m singled out! These attitudes are a feedback loop causing even more physical pain as muscles tighten and spasm with stress and resentment. The mind affects the body. On and on.”

“Don’t suffer more than you have to,” counsels Stuart. “Don’t add to it.

Dukkha is inherent in conditioned existence, so it does not help to indulge states of grief and anxiety. Be kind to yourself.”

“One may receive unfair blows,” Master Ukyu calls after a monk in Case 75 of the *Hekiganroku koan* collection. He dishes out some unfair blows to his student just to make the point clear. It is not a matter of fairness or unfairness. One may receive unfair blows. “According to the sutras, evil deeds result in hardships and good deeds result in blessings. Angry people go to hell and happy people go to heaven. But once you know that the nature of anger and joy is empty and you let them go, you free yourself from karma,” says Bodhidharma, as reported in *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma* (translated by Red Pine). “Your anger, joy, or pain is like that of a puppet.” Indulging anger and a sense of unfairness leads to much additional misery. Unfairness is what is. It is not personal.

Recognising the reality one must face is the first step. The cure for a self-created destructive spiral into more misery is, as the Buddha taught, interrupting the cycle of indulging the victim ego and of wishing things were different. The culprit is wanting more, wanting something else, which in the Second Noble Truth is called ‘desire,’ ‘craving’ or ‘thirst’. “I teach the way out of suffering,” the Buddha proclaimed. “It is the complete cessation of that very ‘thirst,’ giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation from it, detachment from it” (Mahavagga). Adam and Stuart call it ‘acceptance’ and have very interesting accounts of how to do it.

So how do you do it? “I say to myself, ‘It’s a message system, not pain.’ I don’t ‘let it go’ – that’s too active. I accept it – and then it lets go,” says Adam. “I now just sit to sit, not for an outcome. Dropping my picture of how the world should be, I accept what is. The breathing is the main way to get into the body. I’ve had a relationship with the disease, and

demonised it. I fought it. My attitude has changed, but not to gratitude. It is easier to love it than to be grateful! Best is unconditional acceptance. It is not the gene's fault for mutating." The apportioning of blame is wasted effort, as he explains. "I don't make others responsible, and I forgive myself. Meditation helps to alleviate the suffering I inflict on myself."

"Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here, should be posted above the *zendo!*" says Stuart. "Cultivate an active acceptance. Abandon hope, drop the insistence that things should be other than they are. It is as it is! That truth is non-negotiable. It is not useful to run away with feelings of self-pity and indulgence, but nor is it any good to deny and repress them. You need authentic experience, whether resentful or joyful. Without denying your experience, do not indulge in needless worry, anxiety or speculation. I'm an absurdist, so self-pity is inappropriate for me anyway. I don't feel injustice of the Why me? kind. My illness is the result of a miscoding in the bases of my chromosomes; that's why. You approach resolution when you accept things are as they are.

"Acceptance feels quite active. The activity is the continual dropping of hope, of wishful thinking. I fluctuate between acceptance and exasperation. I do seek medical assistance and negotiate strategies for effective pain management. Unmanaged pain can be more debilitating than the illness itself."

Stuart has some further advice: "Do not diminish your life to its immediate orbit. Go out – feel the sun or the rain on your face. Maintain connections with friends and family." He warms to the theme of living fully: "Jiyu Kennet used to say, 'In life be a hundred percent for life; in death be a hundred percent for death.' And 'Spring does not become summer; firewood does not become ash,' is a *koan* from the *Shobogenzo*. Each phase is its own totality. Contemplate your life as it relates to

boundless time and space; infinite *kalpas*, myriad worlds. This is my big perspective."

Adam expresses his big perspective like this: "It's an impersonal universe. I used to be a bit of a drama queen, the centre of the universe, with special suffering. Now, on my regular trips to hospital, I look around and I know I'm not special. Many people suffer."

"When we're deluded there's a world to escape," teaches Bodhidharma. "When we are aware there is nothing to escape... To be impartial means to look on suffering as no different from nirvana, because the nature of both is emptiness." This is not a trick of pretending that it does not hurt, but a vision of the impartial nature of reality and a big perspective on one's self-concern.

Adam discovered the transformative power of the impartial for himself: "I had an anger problem. It built up in my body and it was not enough to tell myself not to be angry. So I faced the anger, just being with it, not looking for any outcome. Staying in the moment is very helpful. I'd read about it for years in Alan Watts but I indulged anger, or went into my head, intellectualising, avoiding the pain by reading books, by theorising. My understanding of it has improved greatly since I have been practicing meditation. I sit with it. I forgive myself and accept. I'm no longer avoiding my distress. I can see that the anger does not really exist. I'm much more engaged in life now, thanks to meditation, and thanks to the sangha, and I find joy and reward with them."

Stuart also reflects on what he has learned through the progress of his illness and his own meditation practice: "My dad used to say, 'Don't let the bastards grind you down,' and, 'If you want anything doing, do it

yourself,' so I tried to be self-sufficient. Circumstances have forced me to accept help. And I am touched, choked. I'm grateful.

"I have lost my sense of pride about sitting in beautiful full lotus. My prostrations are a mess. In some ways it is positive though. Meditation is letting go of stuff and nowadays more of the stuff is discomfort and inadequacy. But the idea that suffering is good for you I find indecent. I'd give it all up – the development of patience and fortitude – for a walk in the hills."

Stuart knows that the average life-span for people with his condition is sixty years and has a philosophical (in both the popular sense and Buddhist sense) attitude to life-span. "I don't understand the existential terror of death people have. Life seems implausible anyway! Although I fear a squalid death, I think when I am dying there may be visceral dread, but not philosophical fear.

"I don't have anxieties or fears of the future. If, as the Buddha declares, there is no separate substantive self, there is no timeline from the present to the future and no self to travel through a succession of nows." He describes a vision that shapes his attitude. "Sometimes you stumble into boundlessness, a state of grace. For example, I had a significant experience of it returning home in a roundabout way after a retreat at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey. I was on a beach, sitting on a rock, watching ants scurrying about. There was an extraordinary sense of connectivity – with everything, everywhere. In a sense, I was not there, but I was, in the boundlessness. Ironically, I was interrupted in this state of grace by a Tibetan Lama!

"These experiences are few and far between, memories after the event, and subject to revision, but very significant. I make no claims for

them. I am not a better person for them. But they give me perspective. The ever-present contains all possible pasts and futures. It is boundless and everything is within it. I mean an infinite number of connections, as in Indra's net."

"Buddhism is easy to misunderstand," Stuart maintains. "People give themselves a hard time, trying to be worthy, to make themselves do what they don't want to do and falsify themselves, living up to ideals. I am convinced that compassion is the foundation of existence, so I don't do special *metta* for myself or others. Cultivating compassion is unnecessary. Compassion is not an emotion. Nor is love. Love is to allow things to be as they are and to unfold according to their nature."

Stuart Quine was talking to George Marsh in Sheffield. Adam Lewis was talking to George Marsh in Portsmouth. Our thanks go to both.

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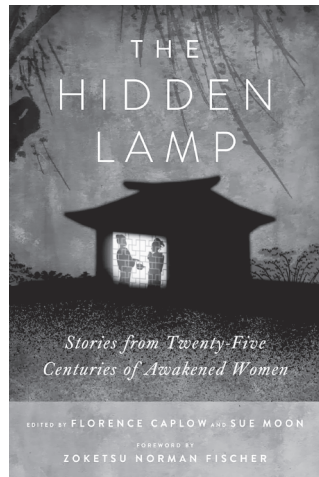
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THE HIDDEN LAMP: BOOK REVIEW

PAT SIMMONS

Pat Simmons reviews an anthology of and about awakened women.



Years ago I was in a koan retreat, working dutifully away at my *koan*, which featured an encounter between four monks and their teacher. An idea came to me: supposing I were to assume that the monks' Chinese names were in fact women's names, that – shock horror! – the 'monks' were women. Why should their teacher, indeed, not be a woman!

As I made this mental adjustment and started pretending to myself that all five people were women, the effect was quite startling. First of all, I saw colour flooding my image of a scene which I had been seeing in black and white. No, I do not think men are at all colourless, but this was my instinctive response to the transformation I had created in my mind.

And then I found myself taking into myself these four monks (three foolish, one wise) and their teacher, in a way that had not been possible up to that moment. I recognised in myself the folly of the three clever-clever speakers, the sensible, (slightly grumpy) down-to-earth quality of the wise one, and the authority of the teacher. At last I could really identify with the *koan* and work with it. It had become me.

Male and female – and all points in between – are only attributes, of course, and anyway most of us can make some sort of imaginative leap

into a different gender. Nevertheless, women are half the human race and they have been important members of the sangha from the beginning. Any tradition which ignores their experiences and insights impoverishes itself. And there were no women in any of the *koans* I had been given to choose from.

But the times they are a-changing. On my most recent *koan* retreat I could choose from a fair number of *koans* featuring women. And *The Hidden Lamp*, published just over a year ago, is also part of that change.

Its structure is simple: 100 *koan*-type 'stories from twenty-five centuries of awakened women' (to quote the book's subtitle), with commentaries on them by modern women Buddhists from around the world, including Western Chan retreat leader and teacher, Hilary Richards.

These awakened, or awakening, women are a lively and varied lot: wives, mothers, daughters, widows. Plenty of nuns, as you might expect, but servants, traders, bathhouse keepers, teashop owners, slaves, herdswomen, fishwives, queens, sex workers and doughnut makers as well. They find enlightenment when their cooking catches fire, or the bottom falls out of their water bucket, or they are washing up or being forced to start looking for a husband. They crack jokes, they grieve, they feed milk to the Buddha.

One figure occurs again and again, in stories from many countries and many centuries: that of the 'old woman'. As often as not she is nameless and of low social status, but she has won through and become a powerful figure, full of simple and profound insight and not afraid to criticise the supposedly wise: 'He's a good monk, but off he goes just like the others,' observes one, of a succession of holy men. Deshan is so humbled by the penetrating questions of another that he burns all the notes and commentaries he has written on the Diamond Sutra.

Many of the other women are also willing to challenge those in authority over them, often in quite startlingly bawdy and explicit language. Nuns in particular seem often to face a hostility from monks that expresses itself in crudely sexual language – and they give as good as they get. They know that, even with many wiser men, their sexuality is experienced as a challenge, and this in turn is a challenge to them. They face it unashamed. Miaozong strips naked to face Wanan, informs him that all Buddhas are born from women (she puts it less politely than this) and then dismisses him with a majestic ‘I have met you, Senior Monk. The interview is over.’

It is not always that ‘easy’, of course. Ryon Genso has to scar her face with a hot iron before Hakuo will accept her as a disciple, and Changjingjin sees herself initially as ‘a woman with the three obstructions and five difficulties and a body that is not free’. Sariputra tells the naga princess that she cannot achieve enlightenment because she has ‘the body and obstacles of a woman’.

Over and over again, however, the *koans* make the same point: that ‘each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet,’ that ‘at the time of being free from delusion and realising the truth, there is no difference between men and women.’

‘It is a great relief to finally have access to this rich material’, says Norman Fischer in his Foreword to the book. The editors, Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, write of having to read through hundreds of *koans* and similar stories, just to find the one that even mentions a woman. I found it exhilarating just to read these stories, and moving to read the insightful, often very personal, commentaries by modern women.

Norman Fischer also points out that we have all – men and women – been short-changed by the over-emphasis in Buddhism on the experiences of men. Traditional male-oriented *koans*, he thinks, represent an almost exclusively ‘grasping’ way of teaching: withholding wisdom and leaving the seeker to struggle (heroically) alone. He sees the *koans* in this book as belonging far more to the ‘granting’ way: ‘the kindly way of clear and helpful teaching, in which even your confusion and suffering is part of the path’. This may be a generalisation (some of those old women can be pretty enigmatic ...) but certainly I found a lightness and grace in many of the stories which I experience as both attractive and helpful.

‘Never before in the history of Buddhism,’ write the editors, ‘have women been so prominent or empowered as Buddhist teachers, nor, until now, have scholars and translators brought to the West so many of the old stories about women. So finally the lamp can be uncovered, for the benefit of everyone.’

The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women, ed Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, 2013, Wisdom Publications.

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 their experience and what they have learned. Here we print extracts from a report on the Silent Illumination retreat of February 2015, anonymously.

Thursday

Simon gives another amazing, and uncannily accurate, Dharma talk. It is a huge relief to hear about compassion in Chan. Simon says, “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re all on a solitary retreat” – that would explain it! If this is a solitary retreat, albeit with supportive conditions, no wonder I’ve been feeling lonely.

I need to drop the words, the concepts.

Going to see Simon for my second interview is like going to see Father Christmas: I wait my turn; draw back the curtain on my approach; and there is a man with a white beard, a gentle demeanour, and kind eyes. But it’s not a matter of exchanging pleasantries and getting a present, although that’s what I’d like... I trip over my words, glad to be talking, trying to cover everything from the last couple of days, wanting to present a nice, ordered summary.

And then, BLAM! Simon is too good at this, dammit. “Are you here, now?” “I think so, yes...” “Who are you?” I start to squirm. “I am a small knot of anxiety in my stomach.” “Is that because we are going off

script?” No – and that’s true. The problem is that I’ve been here before, on retreat with Ken Jones, and I know what’s coming next. And I don’t think I’m going to like it. I talk about expectations, my need to control, not feeling good enough, etc. etc. I tell him about the poster I like; Relax – Nothing Is Under Control. I should get a copy for my noticeboard. Simon points out that he doesn’t have any expectations – and nor is it likely that anyone else here has any, given that we’re in silence. He continues to probe; “Why can’t you let go? Why is it so hard to let go? Would you miss it?” “No...” (OF COURSE NOT, YOU IDIOT, I scream silently – what a relief it would be to just let go of all this old crap! I’m sick of peeling back the layers of the onion, and always getting to this same place.) “Do you want to keep hold of it? Do you identify with it? What is it attached to?”

I just about manage to stumble back to my cushion before the flood-gates open. The tears spill onto my cheeks as the rain runs down the window panes. I wipe my nose on my sleeve. The trails of snot look like a snail has crawled over my arm.

At the lunch table, I think about vulnerability. And then it hits me. What I’m attached to is a self-view of a tough exterior, and a vulnerable, gentle interior, which needs to be protected and nurtured like a flower. That is a LIE. Even if it was ever true, it’s not the case any more; I’m not who I was.

There is no central core to the onion.

The earth tilts on its axis. It’s like having a rug pulled from under my feet. I feel like I have been cracked open.

I remember the line from the contract for the retreat – we are each here with our own “peculiar *koan*”. How can I break this habit? I need to question how I see myself, and notice how others see me. I need to be open; not being protective of an imaginary characteristic.

My internal radio plays Marc Almond:

*Something's gotten hold of my heart
Keeping my soul and my senses apart
Something's gotten into my life
Cutting its way through my dreams like a knife
Turning me up, turning me down
Making me smile, making me frown.*

Before the afternoon meditation, Dave makes an announcement about the toilets. He can't resist a joke – “Make Your Minds Shite” – and we all fall about laughing. It's a good release of energy. Mark catches something in his hands, and I get up to open the door of the Chan Hall, breaking the rule of going clockwise round the room to get to him in time. I look at him questioningly; “A butterfly”, he responds. “Go well”, I whisper, as he releases it.

I go out for the afternoon walk, despite the rain, and decide to walk down to the crow skeleton. Perhaps that memento mori will help me reflect on impermanence. When I get there, it doesn't make me feel any better. I stand and look at it for a while as the rain soaks me to the skin, then turn back again.

Bright orange brick dust. Rows of raindrops hang from the gate and thorny hedge.

My internal radio plays a whole list of songs:

Burt Bacharach:

*Make it easy on yourself
'cause breaking up
is so very hard to do*

Clannad:

*Why must I worry?
Try not to hurry like other people
Why must I hurry?
'Cause you know yourself
That's not the way*

Morcheeba:

*It's all part of the process
We all love looking down
All we want is some success
But the chance is never around.*

I am in a foul mood. Suddenly, I realise I am feeling very sorry for my SELF.

This is the charnel ground. I think of the horse from Ren and Stimpy; “No Sir, I didn't like it”.

At the end of the day, Simon gives us some wise words – we need to keep going; this is not the time for a summing up; don't coast along until the end; keep practising. Dammit, he's right again! It's like he's some sort of telepathic genius.



PHOTO: Claire Martin

Friday

I dream about a Christian Union party in Paris, where we all play Scrabble.

I have the beginnings of a cold, and get carried away with thoughts of frustration (Who gave me this cold? The rest of the week is ruined!) before remembering to investigate what's actually going on, not what I imagine is happening. It turns out to be a slight sore throat, and nothing more; a couple of paracetamol and a scarf, and I feel okay.

Simon talks about The Method of No Method.

And then in meditation, when I think It will elude me, because of tiredness, or circular thoughts, or a cold, It arises; clear and bright, energy flowing.

Saturday

Simon has some sage words for us about the past and future. Memories and planning are natural and helpful; obsessing about them is not. What can we change with our minds during our sitting? Not much...

You are not the same person you were when you arrived.

Instead of having a cup of tea, I grab a pear, and sneak in to the Chan Hall. In the silence, alone, I make my offerings to the Buddha. I feel immense gratitude for all those who have helped me along the path so far.

After the final meditations, Simon announces that there are three people taking refuge for the first time. Not strictly true, I think; I've been going for refuge for many years now. And yet, it is the first time that THIS me is going for refuge, in THIS context. It is a beautiful ceremony, with lots to process. We are given our Dharma names: Maria is Always Radiant, Mark is Always Caring, and I am Always Investigating. They feel very fitting.

Afterwards...

The thing I am most struck by in writing up my notes is that there was nothing I didn't already "know" at an intellectual level – impermanence, non-self etc. etc. – but it is the physical experience of understanding the Dharma that has such a profound effect. It is impossible to describe what goes on in, and as a result of, hours upon hours of meditation over a short space of time. Words can only get me so far.

I am hugely grateful for the experience of the retreat – particularly Ken for putting me on to the Western Chan Fellowship in the first place, and Simon for leading the retreat.

I'm looking forward to connecting more with the WCF, and to continuing my practice.



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

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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To contact any of our UK Groups and affiliates go to:

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Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always happy to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. For further information on submitting a contribution please contact the editors at editor@westernchanfellowship.org

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

Forthcoming Retreats in 2015

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

Saturday 5 December to Thursday 10 December

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

Forthcoming Retreats in 2016

SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

Saturday 9 January to Saturday 16 January

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

Saturday 6 February to Thursday 11 February

Leader: Jake Lyne Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

Saturday 2 April to Saturday 9 April

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

Saturday 28 May to Saturday 4 June

Leader: Jake Lyne Venue: Bala Brook, Dartmoor

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

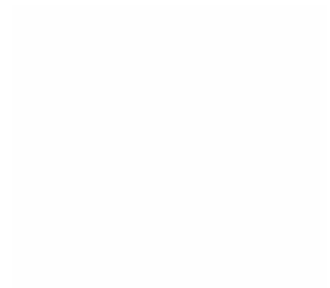
Saturday 25 June to Saturday 30 June

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

Friday 5 August to Sunday 14 August

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





*Looking deeply at life as it is
in the very here and now,
the practitioner dwells
in stability and freedom..*

BHADDEKARATTA SUTTA

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