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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS & GEORGE MARSH

In this issue of *The New Chan Forum* we publish the second, culminating part of Simon Child's account of koan practice, *Shattering the Great Doubt*, and the third in our series on 'Right Livelihood', this time reflecting on the moral context of the life of a solicitor. Eddy Street helps us by offering an illuminating way to read difficult texts by Dogen, using terms from *The Heart Sutra*. In addition, as usual, poetry pages find images for the Dharma and Retreat Reports convey vividly what it is like to experience a series of liberations in the intense environment of a meditation retreat.

The images in this issue were photographed in the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris, which houses the most wonderful collection of Asian arts, much more abundant than anything in London, Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong. It is well worth a special visit to Paris. Just go to the Iéna metro station and you are there, with the rich traditions of India, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan (where Buddhism met Greek sculptors left behind by the armies of Alexander the Great), China, Tibet, Nepal, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Japan.

## SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

SIMON CHILD

*Simon Child continues his account of koan practice, introduced in the last issue of New Chan Forum, by describing the breakthrough to enlightenment. We thank Jeanine Woodward who transcribed the original recordings of these edited retreat talks.*

What do we think we're playing at? We are sitting here, with our minds mixed up, confused, upset, tangled up, knotted up by words from a thousand years ago. What are we doing? Is that something useful, or even sensible, to be doing? It wasn't what Bodhidharma told us to do when he came from the West; he didn't tell us to pickle old koans for a thousand years then chew on them and swallow them. So what are we doing?

We are doing something somewhat strange and artificial. It's a device, it's something which has been invented, and we're doing it because it has proven useful; it's proven itself over the centuries. We could say it's something invented by the Chinese; Bodhidharma didn't bring it to China. But we could also say that the Buddha practised it. The Buddha became very deeply touched by the questions of existence, of life and death, of suffering – and those were his koans: 'What is suffering?' 'What is human existence?' He didn't know. He was struck by doubt, a very deep sense of not knowing, and he couldn't find the answers in his life in the palace and so he left, according to legend, and even left his wife and baby. The questions were so important, so overwhelming, that he had to solve them. This was not a small doubt, this was a great doubt, which drove him to seeking for many years, trying everything including some quite extreme ascetic practices which nearly killed him. The search took him

over. But eventually he did find it possible to break through and find a way to understand human life and existence and suffering, and to be at ease with it.

You could say that the Chinese invented or maybe reinvented or re-discovered this method. The Buddha practised it; any answer that came to him failed to satisfy him. He was taught many techniques of meditation and many ascetic practices. He debated with many philosophers, but he did not accept any of the offered answers. It would have been very tempting to do so, wouldn't it: 'Ah yes, this makes sense!' But it didn't satisfy. He knew that a philosophy or some transient mental state was not it. What was required was a revolution in his sense of existence, and that was the breakthrough that he eventually made, sitting under the Bo tree. It amounted to a complete change in the way he related to the world: 'Ah now, yes, I see. Aah...'

With our koan we are following in the footsteps of the Buddha. The koan triggers us into noticing the attitudes and views that we hold and which we believe to be in some way our 'truths,' the facts of our history or our personality. We reflect on these and we find: 'Oh, I assumed it was so, but it turns out to be just a story I told myself!' Or, 'It turns out to be a story someone else told me and I believed it, huh!' And we find... we find we can't trust our sense of knowing who we are; we find we can't trust our sense of knowing what the world is, what existence is, because somewhere along the line we've picked up an idea, a story, and it turns out we picked up a provisional idea; it had some usefulness in a particular situation; it was an approximation, but it doesn't bear close examination. As we progress with investigating the koan, instead of getting nearer to a resolution we find ourselves getting further away.

We start off with a puzzle, the few words of a koan on a piece of paper, and the rest of our life pretty clear and sorted. As time goes by we find that the words on the page have shaken our sense of ourselves, because we spot that we've been living a web of stories, some of them comforting stories, some of them rather uncomfortable stories. We've clung onto them for some reason; they fitted; maybe we leaned on them as an excuse; or maybe we just believed them as a truth. As the web of stories starts to disintegrate the doubt sensation increases; instead of diminishing as we might expect from a successful investigation, the sense of not knowing increases. More and more so-called fixities of our existence crumble away as no longer fixed: 'That attitude that I hold about myself, it's transparent, it's just an idea. It has a certain degree of resonance with the way I've been, but it's not an ultimate truth.'

We need to allow the koan to work on us in these ways; we shouldn't limit its scope. It needs to be allowed to prod at each corner of us. It's uncomfortable, not knowing. That discomfort might take us away from the process as we get a bit afraid and troubled by it, but it can also take us deeper into the process because we realise we need to look more closely. The problem is that the more closely we look, we find we don't know then either; the doubt gets bigger and we find ourselves desperately searching, desperately wanting to know. Needing to know becomes more important than anything else, but we do not have a way to know. We are on the lookout; all phenomena that arise in awareness are noticed, our attention is extremely sharp, but we attach to nothing because nothing satisfies us. Nothing resolves this doubt, this discomfort. It can become totally overwhelming; 'I must solve this, nothing else matters'. In this state people may become relentlessly absorbed.





PHOTO: George Marsh

The Japanese teacher Hakuin is reputed to have been in this state, walking through the town bumping into people, bumping into lamp posts!

This is a strange state and as Hakuin found out it's not one which really works in everyday life in the market place, which is why we can only really engage in this practice in the deepest way in a supported environment like a retreat. In this environment you can just be here without worrying; it works out. You're supported, and knowing that, sensing that, you've got the possibility of plunging deeper and deeper – partly by choice, because you want to persist with the practice, and partly there's no choice, you've just got to do it because you can't be left not knowing. The Buddha couldn't have just given up and gone back to the palace and said, 'No, it didn't work out.' That was not an option.

There can be times when the practice weakens. Master Sheng Yen used to say that when you're in the great doubt it can go two different ways. The commonest way is that it dissipates; it slips away to small doubt, or even to complacency. But if sustained the doubt can also 'shatter' or 'explode.' These are words which indicate the suddenness and the drama of it, because it can be very dramatic and unexpected. It might just be, 'Ha! Yes... I see. Hmm.' It might be no more dramatic than that, but indeed it might be a great big explosion of emotion and noise – the shock of seeing things differently can be so great.

Persist with your koan; let it persist in its investigation of you. If you find your attention dissipating, pick the koan up and persist. Don't let the practice slip away from you, having put the effort into it so far. If the koan slips away, pick it up; if the mind wanders, bring it back. Feel this shift into a more total absorption in the koan – which is another way of saying that you and the koan have become one.

The words of the koan are not really the point of the practice; the point of the practice is *not knowing*, this uncomfortable void waiting to be filled by knowledge but failing to be filled by knowledge. Our habit is to fill lack of knowledge with knowledge, even if it's an approximation, even if it's just something that will make do for now. But in this process that seems not to be an available option; the intensity of our gaze, the intensity of our attention, means that we don't fall for approximations. We think 'No, that's not it; that doesn't satisfy me.' Don't allow yourself to be satisfied in this way; have a hunger for knowing but don't be satisfied with half-knowings.

What is the 'shattering'? What is a breakthrough? What did the Buddha discover? We can only talk about this in metaphor because there isn't a language to convey something like this. But the metaphors can give us some idea of how radical it is. If you remember, the Buddha's enlightenment phrase was, 'House builder, I have seen through you; the rafters are fallen down and will be no more.' What is the metaphor indicating? It's indicating his world of mental constructions: the house, the beams. He'd realised he was living in a world of mental constructions; he wasn't living in the world that actually is. He was inhabiting a world that he'd constructed in his mind, but it turned out that his so-called knowing of that world was just an assumption, was just an idea. It didn't actually fit the reality as he now perceived it. As he continued his sharp attention he suddenly saw things differently; he saw beyond his own mental constructions, and he saw them as merely constructions and not as fact.

What are these mental constructions? How do we understand that term? What does that phrase mean?

Largely, our minds are preoccupied with a world of objects, of relationships between objects, of interactions, of names, of differentiation, duality and multiplicity, but all of that is mental construction. We see things and we relate to them as things, as objects, but that very objectification comes from us. Other people could look in the same direction and not see the same things, because their minds have different histories and different preferences and different ways of interpretation.

For a common object that we have a shared experience of and we have names for, we are likely to come up with the same name, maybe each with a bit of a different understanding of it but still the same name. We think there is a thing, but actually, if we just look behind the surface a bit, this ‘thing’ turns out to be rather ephemeral, indeed a construction which can be deconstructed.

Think about a river. We all know what we mean by a river; quite possibly you’re visualising one now as I’ve said the word. Maybe you’re standing by a river and I come up to you and say, ‘Where is the river?’ and you just point: ‘There is the river.’ We chat for a bit and I say, ‘Where’s the river now?’ and you point again. I say, ‘Well, no, because that river has flowed away. This is another one isn’t it? Same river? How does that work? Oh, maybe you’re not talking about the water, are you talking about the river bed, is that what you mean by the river, or the banks? Take the water away, there’s still a river is there?’

‘No, you need to have water for it to be a river.’

‘Oh, but the water went away, I saw it go. More water’s come... oh this is getting a bit confusing. So it’s not the banks, it’s the water, but it’s not any particular water; it’s that there *is* water that makes it a river.

Oh, so... so the river isn't a 'thing' because the thing you pointed at first is out of sight and you still say this is the river.'

It's the process of flow, that's what we call a river. It's not a thing - we can't pick it up, we can't hold it, it doesn't stay the same. It's in its very nature that it doesn't stay the same. If it stayed the same we'd call it a pond; it has to be flowing, it has to be changing, for it to be called a river. So our sense of this as an object is rather strange. Does it really have a beginning? I know little trickles of raindrops run over the grass, fall into a depression, possibly become a stream, then join other streams. Really our idea of a river is just a definition based on two streams joining together to make something larger and of a certain size and then we'll call it a river, and where it hits the sea we'll call it the sea. In between we'll call it a river as long as it's flowing - but if it stops flowing we won't call it a river.

It's a mental convenience to think we know a river as an object but its very nature is that it's changing and its very nature is that it's constructed by definitions: there must be flow, there must be a certain width and so on, otherwise it's not a river. So it's very much a mental shorthand, a convenience, something that we know as a river but it doesn't relate to any one object. It is confusing because we're so used to just handling objects. And the river's a particularly interesting metaphor to use because the nature of change is built into the definition of 'river' and therefore almost by definition it isn't an object even though we treat it as such; it's not something fixed that we can label and say 'This is the river.' It has to be running away from us or it isn't a river.

This process of change applies to everything that we might call an object; the change isn't necessarily a flow in the same way as the flow of

a river, although it might be. It's the change of impermanence – everything is changing, there isn't a single thing which is staying the same. Even objects which we assume have some solidity and permanence, in their own way they are also flowing. They're in transition between where they came from and where they're going to. That transition might be quite brief in the case of something like a mayfly or a raindrop; it could be hundreds or thousands of years in the case of something like a lump of metal, but it's in transition, it wasn't always so and it won't always be so. That bell will not always be so, it will develop metal fatigue and crack. Within a few billion years the sun will swell up into a red giant and engulf the Earth. The earth itself certainly won't always be the same as it is now; its timescale is quite long but it's flowing – can you see it? It's moving, very slowly.

Some things are moving more quickly – but nothing is staying. Mentally we construct a bell as something stable because that's convenient; we know where it is, we know how hard to hit it, we know where to put it away at the end of the retreat and we know where to find it when we arrive for the next retreat. It can seem predictable and that's convenient. But that's only an approximation; the reality isn't so. That reality isn't so for anything, including our own mental worlds which we've neatly compartmentalised in many ways; we've created those compartments; we've constructed our own view of the world; we've constructed ideas; we've constructed facts; we've constructed histories; we've constructed relationships and viewpoints and prejudices and attitudes, and that's the world we inhabit.

The Buddha's discovery was that there's a world behind all that where rafters can fall down. We can do without the world that we've con-

structed. In fact we're better off without it because it ties us in knots, it upsets us, it confuses us, it limits us. And the shattering is that moment when we just suddenly see the constructions and the release of the constructions.

When it happens you inhabit a different world; you might call it a purer cleaner world; it's clear of the obstructions of old wooden beams and lumps of metal you might trip over and so on. John Crook liked to quote a Tibetan teacher who called it 'mind being clean-clear'. Then the doubt isn't there; the doubt can indeed drop away because now you know. It's not the knowing of naming of objects; you're not back into creating categories and constructions; it's just, 'This is so. This I know; there's no doubt.' Until then you were encountering the constructions, and although not seeing through them as constructions nevertheless you were not feeling fully comfortable with them. When you looked at them closely enough you could see how you'd constructed them from ideas and history and from thoughts and anxieties. What you hadn't realised until this point was that every single one of them was a construction and you could let go. That is a revolution in your way of relating to the world; probably for the first time in your life, direct contact with the nature of existence. The phrase is, 'Seeing the Nature'. 'Seeing the nature of emptiness' is the fuller phrase, emptiness being a technical word referring to the inherently changing world being based not on objects of some fixity but of flow, change; that is its essence, that is its nature.

Seeing that, realising that in a deep way, frees you from attachment because there is nothing, no thing, to which you can attach. How can you attach to a river? Can you pick it up and take it home with you? Nonsense. Can you stop it flowing with your hand? You can't do it with a



PHOTO: Claire Martin



river and you can't do it with anything else either. This physical example is a metaphor for emotional attachment too – how can you have an emotional attachment to a process of change that has been seen through as such? It can't be done, and it becomes so clear that it can't be done that you give up all thought of doing it; you give up all frustration at not being able to do it because it's just so obvious. So the suffering of attachment and aversion drops away because it is seen as a totally pointless game.

Tying yourselves in knots with these thousand year old words does have a point. It's not a point which is easily reached because of the tendency of the mind to wander, to lose its focus, to become dissipated, to be unwilling to give up attachments – all of these get in the way. But if you can persist with the practice, and pick it up again when you lose it, and pick it up again when you lose it again, and keep it moving by being willing to challenge your knowns – you can find this mind which is a hundred per cent attentive, experiencing every phenomenon presented to it yet not attaching to a single one, not claiming any as an answer. In that total clarity it sees these constructions as constructions, as creations of the mind, none of them as ultimate truths. They are just creations of the mind which you probably created to cope with the world, to console yourself, to find a way of getting by sometime in the past, and you see them as such and let them go. You drop into just being with, just this, becoming part of the flow, not resisting – pointless to resist the nature of existence – at ease, free. This practice can take you there. It may fail to get you there because the mind is tricky to train but it's possible for it to take you there. This is why we persist in this rather special environment of retreat where we have the best opportunity to deepen this practice and take it all the way.

In the context of a retreat you can simply drop in to the doubt sensation and stay there. Whole-heartedly engage with the koan; totally experience the engagement; allow it to touch you wherever it touches you. It's not just an intellectual challenge, it's a bodily challenge, it's an emotional challenge; experience every part of it because it's in this total experience that you have the possibility of seeing through your habitual tendencies and constructions. If you directly confront each mental phenomenon then you can see through it and beyond it. You just have to be totally present now – half a second is longer than necessary! Cultivate the doubt very deeply.

Master Sheng Yen used to say: 'Small doubt, small enlightenment; great doubt, great enlightenment.' Are there different enlightenments? What did he mean by that? Well, don't get too tangled up in that but there is a sense in which there are different strengths of experience, different durations – not different degrees of clarity but there are differences if, for example, you visit it only very briefly. If you visit it and stay there a long time and look around and realise the total enormity of it and also see the stupidity of some of your vexations then the vexations are dissolved on the spot. If you only visit briefly, maybe only one or two vexations come under the searchlight and you return to your usual reality and most of them are still there. But if you have a great enlightenment, many different obstructions and vexations can be permanently dissolved because from this new perspective they're just unsustainable. Even when you return from that state into your everyday confused state, you're not going to fall for them again because you know they are nonsense. But still, other vexations missed out on the cleansing; they are going to trip you up; there are still many more to work on, so practice continues.

Make careful use of the opportunity for practice. If you have any tendency to slip away and daydream, be firm with yourself; pick up the method. If you have any tendency to create no-go areas in the mind, areas which you are not going to allow to be investigated, don't do that. Any tendency to give yourself time off, to be easy on yourself, is wasting opportunity.

All of our assumptions about our place in the world, our understandings of the world itself, are invented – pretty creative, aren't we? In a state of not knowing, knowns become not-knowns, the mind becomes cleaner and clearer, ready for that breakthrough. You can cultivate that mind; you're already doing it. Persevere. Persist.

## READING DOGEN

EDDY STREET

*Dogen's writings are adored by many, but others get lost in labyrinthine sentences and wonder if his Japanese is translatable. Eddy Street offers an outline map.*

For many people reading Dogen is somewhat unfathomable and there is no doubt that for the ordinary reader it can be a perplexing task. As Buddhist practitioners, we should perhaps consider our motivation as to why we are reading him in the first place. We often read our texts with the hope that they are going to give us something. This could be just instruction and indeed, in some places Dogen provides us with instructions that are very specific, particularly about the formalities of sitting and conducting ourselves doing daily chores. He writes about matters of daily living in a monastery, about how to conduct the ceremonial, as well as issues concerning the Master-disciple relationship. However, this straight-forward instruction is often not quite the instruction we are looking for, as what we often seek is a 'clue'; something that will give us a hint and a nudge towards enlightenment. We often seek an idea that will fill a gap in our understanding of what the Dharma is about. All with the hope that when we have this understanding we will move towards enlightenment and perhaps even become enlightened. This approach however can cause us problems. So how should we read Dogen?

In his time in China Dogen collected three hundred stories (*koans*) drawn from Buddhist Scriptures and Chinese Chan texts, a collection known as the *Mana Shobogenzo*.<sup>1</sup> His book of ninety five discourses or

fascicles is known as the *Kana Shobogenzo – Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*.<sup>2</sup> This contains the most well-known of his talks, where he explores the Dharma meanings and spiritual significance of themes contained in the stories he collected. It is in these commentaries that many readers find difficulties, especially if they have a ‘seeking a clue’ mindset.

Dogen’s discourses are talks that arise out of his deep understanding of training and practice in the Chan tradition and the way the canon of early texts reflect that. They arise from Dogen’s mind of meditation and are presented to his monastic and lay disciples who are listening from their mind of meditation. Dogen’s approach is to point to ‘the walls and fences’ of our intellectually based mind and he requires us to recognise the duality within it. He wishes us to cease our dependency on the discriminatory mind and to ‘drop off our body and mind’, so that non-duality can be appreciated. But, he wishes us to do this in a way that does not reject the intellect itself or deny its natural and useful functions. In one way, we can say that Dogen’s aim is to apply ‘the mind of meditation’ to all of one’s daily activities.

Essentially, what he is attempting to do through the use of ‘inadequate’ words, is to express the experience of reality as it is and how that emerges through the endeavours of meditation. Dogen clearly asks the question of Zen – “how do we live each moment fully and meaningfully?” – a questioning that is undertaken by realising and actualising the non-separation of the universe. Despite the way our minds separate things into different components - subject and object, me and you, I and the universe – everything is one reality. Dogen recognises that for reality in action, the only time that exists is now and the only place that exists is here. This, of course, is the Chan understanding of life, the oneness



PHOTO: Claire Martin

PORTRAIT OF A FAITHFUL LAYWOMAN, AFGHANISTAN 4TH CENTURY

of reality and the centrality of the present moment. Dogen does not simply explain this view of reality as what he seeks to do in his writing is to direct the reader into that process of reality in action.

We find words to be inadequate because reality is beyond verbal expression, beyond the categorisation of any vocabulary, but in order to communicate we have to resort to words. Dogen's use of words is therefore sometimes poetically majestic, sometimes playful, sometimes with a play on the words used, sometimes with the use of symbolic stories of the old Chinese masters. It is this wordplay, this use of the literary, providing an expression of action in reality that sometimes can make Dogen difficult to read.

Before we look at a few examples there is one thing else that we need to appreciate in Dogen's writing and this is his understanding of non-separation when applied to practice itself. This is termed 'the circle of the way'. In a circular manner, each moment of our meditation encompasses all four elements of our activity; aspiration, practice, enlightenment and Nirvana. For Dogen, the last is a state of serenity where all egotistic thoughts and desires are at rest. Hence, each moment of meditation naturally contains enlightenment and the aspiration for enlightenment; it also contains the ordinary practice of sitting and the experience of settled ego-free serenity. Each moment of meditation actualises the Four Noble Truths. With this understanding of meditation, there is no goal of attaining enlightenment, as the aim merely is to practice. Similarly, if a state of non-duality and serenity is experienced, we do not need to grasp onto it and remain there, as it is already part of our nature; practice involves the realisation of non-duality, together with the actualisation of practice in duality.

In order to come to grips with some of the way in which Dogen writes I will base myself on Katagiri's ways of thinking when providing a commentary on Dogen's *Zazenshin*.<sup>3</sup> He points out that we can consider that there are three stages of understanding reality.<sup>4</sup>

In the first stage everything is seen in the usual everyday objective way. We use judgements and categorisations. All things according to the categories we use are seen as separate and independent, each with its own quality, each with its own 'form'. This 'form' of each and every thing is directly derived from the categorising ideas we construct in our heads about all things. To make use of *Heart Sutra* ideas in this stage 'form is form'.

The second stage is referred to within the *Heart Sutra* as 'form is precisely emptiness and emptiness precisely form'. Here we have an observation of impermanence; a realisation of the interconnectedness of everything. There is an appreciation of the true nature of everything which is empty of any inherent quality. We have the appreciation and actualisation of non-duality and we could also say of this that, 'form is not form'. Or to put it another way, the reality of things is not the same as the ideas we have in our heads about them.

The third stage is beyond the stage of 'form is precisely emptiness' as this is the true unification of duality and non-duality. To continue with our expressions from the *Heart Sutra* it is 'form is precisely emptiness/form' and 'emptiness is precisely form/emptiness'. This third stage is where the practitioner attempts to bring her actualisation of the nature of reality with its non-dual quality into the operation of everyday (duality) life. It is the penetration of form into emptiness together with the penetration of emptiness into form.



In his writing Dogen is inviting us to appreciate these three stages and to recognise the wonderful unity of living daily life where we know from within our being, ‘form/emptiness’. His use of wordplay leads us into this realm by undermining and demonstrating the inappropriateness of concepts and categories and directly pointing to the interconnectedness of the universe. His wordplay in fact clearly builds on the exchanges we find in the classic Chan stories that make up the canon of koans in our tradition.

So let us look at one example. Here are the closing words of one of his more well-known pieces, called the *Mountains and Waters Sutra*:

*An ancient Buddha said, “Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.” These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains. In this way investigate mountains thoroughly. When you investigate mountains thoroughly this becomes the endeavour within the mountain. Such mountains and waters of themselves become wise persons and sages.* <sup>5</sup>

In the second sentence Dogen writes, “These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains”, a seemingly meaningless repetition. However, from what we have discussed above, Dogen is saying these words (mountains are mountains) do not mean ‘form is form’ (duality), the words are referring to ‘form is emptiness/form’ i.e. the form/emptiness of mountains. He goes on “in this way investigate mountains thoroughly” so in the form/emptiness of mountains, Dogen is inviting us to investigate the nature of the universe. He goes on, “When you investigate mountains thoroughly this becomes the endeavour within the mountains”. In the more cumbersome way I have adopted here we can say – When you investigate the nature

of non-separation and impermanence in your daily life, that investigation itself becomes the centre of the universe and indeed the way in which the reality of the universe is actualised. To add to this Dogen goes on to say that due to the interconnection of the universe, “such mountains and waters themselves become wise persons and sages”. Hence, with true intimate interconnection, practitioners actualise the universe and so mountains, practitioners, sages etc. all express the unity of being.

Let us take another well-known example, this time from the *Genjokoan* (*Actualising the Fundamental Point*):

*To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.*<sup>6</sup>

So if we now put it in the mixture of understandings that Dogen uses, together with his often-used repetition of the same word we arrive at: *To study the self* (form) *is to forget the self* (form is emptiness). *To forget the self* (form is emptiness) *is to be actualized by myriad things* (form is form/emptiness). *When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away* (form is form/emptiness – unity). *No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.* What is implied in the last sentence is that within the unity of the universe, no trace (emptiness) and the continuation of no trace (form), interpenetrate each other (form is form/emptiness, emptiness is emptiness/form). With this example, we have a brief outline of the whole process of practice.

But it is not all difficulties with word play when reading Dogen, for sometimes his poetic language just points directly to the action we should take in our practice and the attitude we need to adopt. Here is a final example of his writing taken from the collection of his short talks to his monks.

*Entering the water without avoiding deep-sea dragons is the courage of a fisherman. Travelling the earth without avoiding tigers is the courage of a hunter. Facing the drawn sword before you, and seeing death as just like life, is the courage of a general. What is the courage of patch-robed monks?*

*Dogen said: Spread out your bedding and sleep; set out your bowls and eat rice; exhale through your nostrils; radiate light from your eyes. Do you know there is something that goes beyond? With vitality, eat lots of rice and then use the toilet. Transcend your personal prediction of future buddhahood from Gautama.<sup>7</sup>*

Here he is comparing the courage that practitioners require with the mythical courage of fishermen, hunters, and samurai in combat. Through his encouraging of his monks, he points to how the rituals and routines of our daily life require our ongoing active attention to every aspect of our experience. Here we see also his idea of the oneness of practice-awakening as for Dogen enlightenment is not some goal for the future but is there in day to day activity. The last line, “transcend your personal prediction of future buddhahood from Gautama”, refers to Shakyamuni Buddha's predictions in the *Lotus Sutra*, of enlightenment for all those who find joy in hearing the sutra. Dogen is telling us not to sit back and listen to the Buddha but to drop future aspirations and take our courage in both hands and live our lives moment to moment by totally engaging with what is in front of and within ourselves. Now I think that is a pretty good ‘clue’!

## NOTES

- 1 Kazuaki Tanahashi & John Daido Looi (trans) 2005 *The True Dharma Eye. Zen Master Dogen's Three Hundred Koans*: Shambala . Boston
- 2 Kazuaki Tanahashi (ed) (2012) *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye. Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Shambala. Boston
- 3 Dainin Katagiri (2007) *Each Moment is the Universe*. Shambala. Boston. p140
- 4 I am using here just one method of considering Dogen's writing. A similar approach uses Dongshan's Five Ranks. See John Daido Looi "Dogen and Koans"  
<http://www.mro.org/mr/archive/24-2/articles/dogenandkoansdaido.html>  
(accessed 07/12/2015)
- 5 Dogen. Mountains and Waters sutra p 164 in Kazuaki Tanahashi (ed) (2012)
- 6 Dogen. Actualising the Fundamental Point p29 in Kazuaki Tanahashi (ed) (2012)
- 7 Dogen. Dharma Hall Discourse 239 pp. 238-239 in Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura (trans) (2010), *Dogen's Extensive Record*. Wisdom. Boston.



PHOTO: George Marsh

## IMAGES FOR THE STATE OF CHAN

GEORGE MARSH

*Chinese poetic imagery strikes Western readers as fresh and direct because the focus is first and foremost on the thing in itself, not the metaphorical comparison. The metaphor is the after-resonance..*

On our poetry pages this time we are able to publish new translations of Chan poems by Chinese monks of the formative years of our tradition. Charles Egan, director of the Chinese programme at San Francisco State University, has brought out *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China*, and he has kindly given us permission to quote some of his translations. His book frames the poems between a useful fifty page history of the development of Chan Buddhism, and very full tail notes on Chan ideas in the poems, and on the monks – several of them known to us already as the stars of Zen dialogues from the koan collections – who wrote these extraordinary verses.

## CLOUDS ON THE STREAM

Stretching and curling to what purpose?  
 Twining around the stream and belting the void above.  
 You have form, but are not an encumbered thing;  
 Following the wind, leaving no trace behind.  
 Don't blame me for always pursuing you:  
 Floating without roots, you're just like me.

– JIAORAN (730–799)



PHOTO: George Marsh

DRAGONS IN CLOUDS, KOREA, 19TH C.

Clouds must be the ultimate image for non-attachment, here encompassing everything, from the stream to the void above. “Leaving no trace behind” was an aspiration often expressed in Chan literature concerning how the enlightened person moves sensitively through the world without disturbing it or being showy. Charles Egan tells us that Jiaoran became a monk at Lingyin Temple near West Lake in Hangzhou and was the first to apply Chan terminology and concepts to poetic writing. He theorised the High Tang poetic style as, “...the fusion of feeling and scene,” as we see here in using landscape and natural scenes to express the liberation felt in zazen. The imagery is specific to the theme chosen. In other contexts clouds might (and do) suggest ignorance and confusion of

mind, but not here. In another poet's hands, bees can become an original image for ignorance and confusion of mind:

BEES AT THE WINDOW

The door is open,  
     but you won't go out;  
 Smacking against the window –  
     such foolishness!  
 A hundred years of stabbing at old paper;  
 When will you poke your heads through?

– GULING SHENZAN (9TH C.)

Windows in China were made of oiled paper, but the image of stabbing at “old paper” has a double meaning reminiscent of the opening warning in Bodhidharma's quatrain defining Chan: “A special transmission outside the scriptures.” The meaning of Chan will not be found by only studying old scriptures but by direct transmission, heart to heart. Egan tells us that in the Chinese text the first phrase is a pun on the gateless gate, ‘empty gate,’ a metaphor for Buddhism.

Guling Shenzan was the master who was the hero of a death story, well worth quoting again (from *Graceful Exits*):

When Zen Master Shenzan was preparing to depart this life, he shaved his head, bathed himself, and had the temple bell sounded to summon the congregation and announce his departure. Then he asked, ‘Brothers, do you understand the voiceless *samadhi*? Those assembled answered, ‘No, we do not.’



The master said, 'Listen quietly, without cherishing any ideas.'  
 With the congregation on the very tiptoe of expectation that they would  
 hear about the voiceless *samadhi*, Master Shenzan withdrew from the  
 world.

LIVING IN THE MOUNTAINS

My hut is no bigger than a ladle,  
 But within, I do as I please.

Colored clouds  
     rise from doors and casements;  
 The moon and stars  
     are suspended on the porch.

Thoughts end:  
     my mind becomes tranquil;  
 Dust dissolves:  
     the world is just thus.

The southern wind reaches my sitting mat,  
 Rustling through six empty windows.

— HANSHAN DEQING (1546–1623)

Note: He is not the same Hanshan as the famous Cold Mountain poet Hanshan

A hut can be an image for a way of life in the world, or for the mind of  
 meditation. In this poem we get the interbeing of clouds arising from  
 inside, and moon and stars almost within reach. 'Dust' and 'empty win-  
 dows' have special Chan meanings of course. The last line refers to the

six senses as described in the Buddha's teaching on the ways the organs of perception filter reality when 'full' of feelings, assumptions, reactions, ideas and volitions, so that we lose the direct experience we would have with senses 'empty' of any extras.

Chan poets aiming to write 'the fusion of feeling and scene' constantly face the conundrum of writing selflessly, without just withdrawing from the scene and denying their personality. Whilst doing as he pleases, Hanshan Deqing manages to convey the deeply pleasurable state of mind of one who seems airy and insubstantial, almost transparent, and allows the breeze to blow through his unencumbered senses.

Hanshan Deqing apparently wrote out *The Flower Garden Sutra* in his own blood to honour his parents. In 1582 his lectures on the sutra drew ten thousand people daily. Like some other distinguished masters, he found himself drawn into court politics for a while, then denounced, imprisoned, defrocked and sent for a soldier. He was later reinstated and spent ten years rebuilding Huineng's temple at Caoqi in Guangdong. His 'flesh-body' (mummy) is still there today. Selflessly, no doubt.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen monks of China*, by Charles Egan, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

*Graceful Exits: How Great Beings Die (Death stories of Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist, and Zen masters)*, ed. Sushila Blackman, Shambhala, 2005.



PHOTO: George Marsh

## SMALL BUDDHAS

KAREN ROBBIE

Passing time  
losing myself  
in small birds.  
Tweets & twitters  
of delightful buddhas,  
never reaching  
the crescendo  
of a troubled world.  
Slipping in,  
a pigeon sits,  
cooing gently,  
with the kindly nature  
of a monk in grey robes.

## RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

JEREMY WOODWARD

*Jeremy Woodward writes the third in our series of reflections on 'right livelihood.' Please keep them coming, articles on squaring one's ethics with one's occupation.*

### Background

If you had suggested when I was a student that I would become a lawyer, I would have refused to believe you. Everyone I knew studying law at university was reactionary and very traditional.

During my time at university I did some voluntary social work, which I found interesting and rewarding. So, when I graduated the first thing I pursued was social work. I went to work for a social work project in West London as warden of a hostel for people trying to re-enter society.

It was a classic (and ridiculous) situation of unqualified good intentions overriding any sort of professional underpinnings. I was the youngest person in the hostel and left after six months following an incident where only the patience (over 3 hours) of someone I had never met before saved me from being attacked by an armed resident high on LSD.

I returned to Devon severely chastened. I had dived in at the deepest end with very few aids and sunk. I then spent a couple of years doing odd jobs in the Plymouth area.

### Introduction to the Law

During this time I got to know a Plymouth solicitor, David. David has a strong social(ist) conscience and channelled this through his work. I came

to realise that in the provinces this might be a career which I could square with my current outlook.

I enrolled in a six-month conversion course for those with a non-law degree and eventually joined David's firm, where I was to spend the rest of my working life: another 38 years.

### Being a solicitor

By inclination I am not an advocate, that is I'm not good at thinking on my feet. I am also not a natural litigant, not being sharp enough to always be watching my back. I'm competitive and a very bad loser.

I naturally gravitated to property work as I love plans and maps and get satisfaction from collaboratively working with clients and other professionals. Over time as I came to know individual clients better, there evolved with some a mutual respect and understanding so that I could tailor advice to their particular outlook.

### Ivybridge branch office

The role of trusted advisor was one which took decades to evolve. It started when I spent the 80s running a semi-rural branch office in Ivybridge. Much of the work there was conveyancing, with a few wills and commercial property transactions.

In order to get involved with the town and its affairs, I became secretary for several years of the traders' association and was invited to join the local Rotary Club (from which I have only recently resigned). I learnt early on in my time in Ivybridge that wheeler-dealing and politics (with a large or small "p") are not a milieu in which I thrive. Also being involved in this milieu is completely incompatible with the confidentiality with

which one must treat all client matters. Friendships and clients from this time are still with me today.

I learned several lessons in Ivybridge, particularly that intelligence and education are not the same thing. I had several clients and friends who had little formal education but who, by any standards, had emotional intelligence and business savvy in areas where I was completely lacking. Several clients came to rely on me to understand their business documents, which they either could not read or could not reduce to simple statements. These people usually had developed phenomenal aural memories and ability to read face and body language.

I used to say, only half in jest, that I applied Woodward's Law and occasionally the English Law got in the way. For me a solicitor has a remit which is rooted in getting what the client wants within the law, in a pragmatic and supportive manner. Civil law is based on the resolution of interpersonal matters in a practical way as fairly as possible, striking a balance between the rights and needs of individuals. Finding a solution in this context is a challenge I continue to relish.

### Meeting Chan

In 1998, after being given a tape of Sue Blackmore's "A Place of Silence" programme,<sup>1</sup> I attended my first retreat at Maenllwyd as a complete novice. At the initial go-round, when John asked us each what meditation method we practised, I just said "None, that's what I am here to learn!" I returned enthused and as there was no local WCF group in Plymouth I tried various other Zen traditions in Plymouth.

I began to subscribe to New Chan Forum and every time a new issue landed on my doormat I felt my spirits rise.



BODHISATTVA, VIETNAM 9TH CENTURY



A huge influence on my later working life was a seven-week stay in 2003 at Plum Village in France. It was quietly transformative in that when I arrived knowing no-one and nothing about Plum Village except that it was a place offering warmth and a dharma context, almost all of my labels dropped away. I found this hugely liberating. As one fellow English visitor commented, I lost all fear.

One close friend (and latterly loyal client) of 40 years has since commented that this was when my legal practice really took off.

I returned to the UK understanding that, while I respect, even revere, Thich Nhat Hanh, my personal path lay with WCF.

A couple of years later my probate colleague abruptly jumped ship for a bigger firm, to fulfil her ambitions. The anger I felt at the time of her departure was turned into a very good practice for me. At one point I was reading something from her and just had to leave the room to be with my anger. This enabled me to feel it and really be with it in a way which was healing. A key moment in the development of my everyday practice.

By now I had been with the firm for almost 30 years and the adage that you get the clients that suit you was beginning to prove itself. At the request of several clients, I sent them a report of my time at Plum Village. I have found that, despite the differences of detail, a community of spiritual practice respecting differences has been an enriching aspect of my evolving relationship with a number of clients, several of whom are practising Christians.

It may be a function of the length of time I have spent at one firm that my attitude to people and the law has both influenced the culture of the firm and chosen my clients for me. Increasingly, those wanting a

“lawyer” – someone to help them get one over someone else – didn’t come to me as that was not the service I was offering.

I was building relationships with clients, their families and their affairs. This involved working hard and all hours, and getting things done by working within the system while not being hide-bound by it. Increasingly, this involved aspects of dharma practice such as just waiting and not rushing at things. If I told clients at a certain point that this was the time to do nothing and see what happened, they accepted it; they were often surprised how well this turned out. Without, I hope, preaching, I sought to bring clients alongside me in accepting uncertainty.

When they rang up with a tricky problem, clients also got used to trusting me when I said I would sleep on it and come back in 24/48 hours. This approach arose both from my recognition of my inability to think on my feet and also from the “reflection not reaction” approach to life I had taken from John Crook’s article “On Making a Difference” in NCF35. This worked for me, and clients also found that when I rang them back (and I did every time – often a surprise in itself) sitting with the problem had led to an unexpected and effective approach.

At the same time clients got used to being listened to. In an interview room with two or three people in it the professional is often the one perceived to be in a position of power and influence. For the professional to just listen was often a new experience for clients, enabling their concerns and wishes to be heard. Thank you WZRs which taught me much of the power this gives a situation.

By this time it often felt that my working life had come a complete circle as so much of what I was doing was social work by another name. I wasn’t helping the poor but I was often helping the lonely and confused

who are hiding away in all corners of society. It never ceased to surprise me how openly sharing one's common humanity, compassion if you like, bridges almost any gap. Time and again my work humbled me.

Good relationships mean repeat business which, as any marketing consultant will tell you, is the best and cheapest way of generating work. Towards the end of my working life, I reached a position where work just kept coming.

This was helped by my retirement from the firm's partnership in 2010 as I had become bored and tired of management. I wasn't doing it well and had become a bit of a curmudgeon. The result for everyone was fruitful. I got even more work and more out of that work and the firm got ever more income from a more focused and efficient employee. The last three years of my working life were, in terms of fees and job satisfaction, the most productive of all.

Which brings me to the question of selling one's time, that is charging fees to private clients.

Lawyers are the second oldest profession and, like the oldest and other professions working in the private sector, essentially sell our time. Is there something innately wrong about being paid for one's time?

I have always found the hourly rate I was charged at difficult to accept and yet I know that it was the going rate for senior solicitors in Plymouth. One client said to me that I was expensive but worth it. I took that as a compliment, but I well remember the shock at a WCF committee meeting when, in the context of needing professional advice, I mentioned my hourly charging rate (+ VAT of course!).

However, I rarely had a bill unpaid and was known not only for getting bills paid promptly but also rarely having the fees queried. This took a

lot of care. I never sent out a bill unless either it was in line with what had been originally quoted or I had rung the client to discuss the fees and agreed a figure with her/him. This was sometimes a free-market negotiation (some clients know that you value their repeat business as much as, if not more than, they value your services). At other times, there was more give and take, especially when a particularly good result had been obtained or I had manifestly put in effort above and beyond.

Perhaps the most rewarding application of practice and right livelihood in my later years was the most unexpected. Before Home Information Packs were introduced in 2007, a meeting of local firms was called to see how we could best react to this. Although by this time I was doing little conveyancing as such, I felt that this was an opportunity for local solicitors to co-operate to the advantage of both themselves and clients. With my lack of political intuition, I ended up being chair of the group formed at the meeting.

With a lot of small firms involved and historic local mistrust between them, I made it my mission to take all “self” out of my role. Acting with conscious altruism and quietly treating the whole project as a practice for myself, I helped to bring the project to fruition. Letting go of any seeking of personal gain enabled things to develop openly. Trust was re-established and common aims realised.

So can being a solicitor ever be seen as a right livelihood? At one’s most defensive: someone needs to do it! More than that, a solicitor has much to offer, sometimes in difficult situations. And I realise that time and experience increase what one can offer and the depth of that offering. It surprises me how often several complementary aspects of one’s experience (including one’s professional life) can be combined to produce an

enhanced outcome for all. Now that I have retired, this seems to be happening more and more.

Is it only in retirement that right livelihood can be realised?

## NOTES

- 1 This programme can be found on Susan Blackmore's website at:  
[www.susanblackmore.co.uk](http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk)

## 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.*

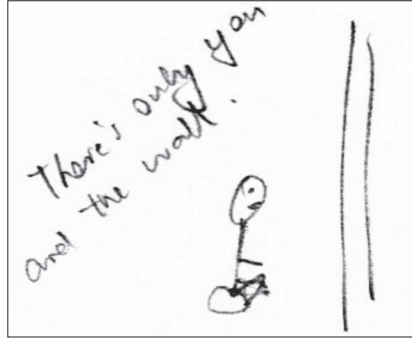
### EMOTIONAL AWARENESS RETREAT: JUNE – JULY 2015

The sunshine retreat – that’s how I shall remember it. How extraordinary it was – and not just because it’s the first time I have ever been warm at the Maenllwyd.

I have come to think of Maenllwyd retreats as lying on a continuum from the toughest and most endurance-demanding (Chan and Silent Illumination) to the most varied, interesting and least heroic (WZR) but this one was way further out in the WZR direction – unpredictable, delightful, and full of new challenges. We spent plenty of time outdoors, including choosing a patch of ground within hearing distance of the yard bell (our ‘stance’) where we were sent for sessions of sitting in the sunshine and contemplating the kind of stories we tell ourselves, the sort of person we are, our favourite mental and emotional evasions, and our life’s difficulties.

On one memorable occasion we were given a large sheet of cartridge paper and asked to reflect on our own life as if two old friends were to meet up and ask “Well, how has it gone for you?” I chose as my ‘old friend’ John Crook whose presence still seemed all around me up there even though he died almost exactly four years ago. Imagining telling him

what's been happening I filled my sheet completely with scribbled stories interspersed with tiny little sketches. One of these was of me sitting facing the wall on my first retreat here in 1981 and facing images of horror, fear, torture and rape. As John said then, "There's only you and the wall, and the wall's not doing it". My little stick figure looks somehow so touchingly sad that I include it here.



The following day our instructions read "Day 3 – Exercise 4, Turning straw into gold" from which we were to return with our own personal koan. I sat there, high above the house, looking out over the lush green landscape bathed in sunshine and, without looking ahead at the list of questions to follow, read the first instruction; "Dwell on a difficulty, affliction or pain in your life. As you sense this, how does it feel and how does it affect your body?" Noticing these bodily effects was a major theme running through the retreat and made me realise (yet again) just how much I tend to dwell in my head, ignoring the rest of my body with its many reactions and fluid feelings.

I chose to dwell on a very recent falling out with my son and pregnant future daughter-in-law – a typical life difficulty I suppose and one that needs thought, kindness and hard work to resolve. I turned it over and over, feelings lots of tensions, heart flutterings, tummy wobblings and muscle twitchings. That done I turned to the first of four questions: how have I responded so far? That done I moved on to question 2 and was completely thrown – indeed thrown into laughter. This was not the ob-

vious next question I had expected. It was this:

“2. What does this problem ask me to let go of?”

As I laughed the answers came flooding up. I want to be a good mother – the best mother, I want to be a good mother-in-law, I want to be a good grandmother. All this wanting! It’s obvious what I have to let go of isn’t it! But can I?

Trying to find out, I asked myself why I want to be a good mother and thought of another, more fundamental question that my dear father once asked me when he was in his nineties and already far into dementia, “Why do we want to be good?”.

I could see that it’s all about fear – fear of being bad, fear of being in trouble, fear of being hated. Of course! It’s because I want to be loved! And this led me to a great realisation – extraordinary! Freeing! I don’t need to go on wanting to be loved. I really don’t. It’s over. I don’t have to spend the rest of my life always wanting other people to love me – or at the very least approve of me, or even less not disapprove of me. The lush green glowed, the sheep went on bleating but something changed.

Of course, I reasoned later, we all need to be loved but I have been loved, am loved and will probably go on being loved and loving others. What I don’t need is to go on wanting to be loved as well.

So this gave rise to my koan for the next communication exercise (we had only three of these and I would have loved to have more). It was, “Why do I want to be loved?” Exploring that question with the help of a silent, listening partner, and continuing the practices of feeling emotions in the body and just sitting, began an enormous change that is still (one week later) playing itself out. I began to realise how often, even sit-





Photo: Claire Martin

ting in retreat, my mind is full of what other people think of me – how I must appear from the outside whether there’s someone there, sitting opposite me, walking past, or even when I’m on my own. And these are all fantasies! All imaginings, stories, made up irrelevant ideas. People may think something or other about me, or more likely not think about me at all, but my own imaginings are just invention. So then?

This relates to the great space. I have often glimpsed the vastness of mind before but only in unstable snatches. I think I had misunderstood it, or grasped too hard at the glimpses when they came and tried to turn spaciousness into something it is not. On this retreat I found spaciousness to be just obvious. In interview I found myself – to my surprise and even horror – saying “My mind is larger than the things in it”.

This combined in a magical way with our practice of feeling emotions in the body. I had initially found this very unfamiliar, difficult and strange, but as the retreat progressed I found I could easily feel bodily, emotional reactions if I set my mind to it and summoned up some courage. This new skill seemed to combine with increasing spaciousness to destroy the power of those superfluous fantasies; the “Do I look calm enough?”, “What is he thinking of me?”, “Will I be in trouble?”, “Am I behaving correctly?” fantasies.

Now when these thoughts arise I also feel a kind of tension or fluttering and can see them bubble up. And where do they bubble up? Into a great space. For the first time in my life – and for goodness sake, I’ve been practicing Chan for over thirty years! – I can let them go. It’s not that I do anything to let them go. It’s just that they are arising into this vast space which is far, far larger than they are and eminently capable of absorbing them and much, much more. So the thoughts (I look like this, I did that

wrong, I must seem like this, they'll think I'm stupid) bubble up with their associated feelings, and as I notice and welcome them they seem to hover for a little while and then dissolve away into the great space. The terrible tension that at first accompanied them dissolves away as well. Gone.

I have always loved John's "Let it come, let it be, let it go" (and its other small variations in wording). Now I saw it in a new light. There is no 'doing' in this process if there are no obstructions. Things bubbling up simply bubble up, stay for a while and dissolve away. Gosh! A process that began as a fight, then turned into a struggle, into a balancing act and probably many more variations, has turned into the most natural thing in the world – simply being with whatever comes up and not interfering with it. Gosh again!

Even to me this all sounds a bit far-fetched but amazing things happen on retreat at the Maenllwyd. Next comes going home and finding out how the real world deals with any lessons learned. In this case the family troubles took a nasty turn for the worse and now one for the better. Who knows what comes next, and the 'real world' has a habit of filling up and trampling on a lot more of the great space than on retreat. Even so, the space is there, as it must always have been, and goes on absorbing the world. I am practising these new skills at home in a busy life. I keep noticing bodily feelings and instead of blocking them or trying to ignore them, I just let them arise and go. I keep noticing all those "how I appear from the outside" thoughts, and just noticing them seems to weaken their power. They often amuse me rather than scare me now.

How silly it was to spend so much time and effort trapped in bodily tensions and fear created by constant fantasies about how I must look

from the outside instead of living mindfully where I am in the midst of this vivid and ever-arising world. As the verse from the Hsin-Hsin-Ming that we recited every morning says “If your thoughts are tied you spoil what is genuine”. This sunshine retreat has loosened a few more of my terrible tied up knots.

#### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT: FEBRUARY 2016

I am not sure where or when the journey to Maenllwyd began, but it had its roots long before the day of our arrival for a Western Zen retreat in February. It was a relief to arrive on that darkened Welsh hillside, and somewhat surreal to enter the gas-lit farmhouse and find a small crowd of other retreatants, talking, laughing, drinking tea – all of whom had also made their own journeys there on that wild night. I sat watching the chatter, stomach churning, but quietly excited by the prayer flags strung between the beams and the carved face of the Green man looking down upon us from the corner.

As the time for silence approached that evening I became worried. My partner and I were attending the retreat together, and I was not sure how ‘weird’ it would be for us not being able to communicate for five days. As a couple we talk about everything, and I knew that during the retreat we would both be going on important personal journeys. I worried about not staying connected during this process and how we would reconnect at the end. We were both committed however, and over the coming days the emotional space that silence between us allowed was very important in retaining our individual focus and progress. That night, as I climbed to the sleeping gallery above the Chan hall, I read a small notice ‘Seekers on the path, do not spend your time in vain’, my heart

leapt, I knew that after years of searching, I was in the right place, both literally and in terms of my mind-set and resolve.

‘Who am I?’ That question would become lodged in my very being for the next few days; it was the focus of meditation and accompanied me everywhere. With a reasonable level of self-awareness and having been interested in Zen Buddhism for a few years, I was able to discard more obvious things quickly, until I arrived at concepts such as ‘awareness’, ‘awake’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘present’. That evening, during the communication exercise, things started to come together, I was able to summarise my understanding of the question more fluently than I had been able to before, and like a bird circling ever closer, I felt I was being drawn inward, magnetically, to a resolution. I knew that I had come as far as I could go intellectually, and that the momentum of the question was taking me somewhere beyond. I was ready and unafraid of the ‘answer’. In the final meditation of the day a phrase rose to the surface, ‘I must escape through a trapdoor in my mind’...but where was I to look for this trap door?

Early next morning, Jake our teacher led exercises in the turbulent darkness of the yard. There had been gales overnight and still the gusts roared through the trees. With his uncanny knack for dropping words, like smooth pebbles, into the pool of our minds, he talked about the present moment - how when we are distracted it contracts to almost nothing, but by noticing we expand it and can experience a greater spaciousness. He drew our attention to the light sparkling in the wet mud at our feet and the elusive state of ‘ordinary mind wanting nothing’. Back in the Chan hall, pre-dawn, sitting deep in the glow of candlelight, I had nothing left to say to my listening partner, I could express nothing about



TREE GODDESS, INDIA, 10TH CENTURY

PHOTO: George Marsh

myself that was not evidently and profoundly present in that moment. The trapdoor in my mind, the 'gateless gate' was no other than the present... the perfect, complete present in which there was nothing left to be done, it held everything and yet was always evolving, flowing, ever-new. I said to my partner 'there is nothing here that I am not... anything I do or say is the answer... I am here, just this'. Dazed I stood up, bursting with joy, and on legs that felt disconnected from my body I circled the Chan hall and bowed to Buddha. Sitting back down unable to speak I reassured my partner that I was indeed happy! I had slipped from the narrow box of what I 'thought' I was and into a broader ocean.

Later in my interview with Jake and Dan, I expressed this moment of insight as a collision of mind and present moment, leaving something in its wake which could not be explained in words. 'Where are you now?' asked Jake... I took a deep breath, raised my arms to take in all around us, and smiled. Afterwards, however, I sometimes found myself trying to trace, or hold on to, the steps that led me to the brink of that insight, worried about 'forgetting the way'. But that fear was, I feel, groundless. I cannot 'un-experience' that moment, and after I stopped trying to hold on to it, I found that it settled upon me gently, like the snow on the hills around us. I also know that it can't be taken for granted, that I must stay 'awake' and practise in order to maintain the freshness of that boundless, natural awareness. Previously the mind of judgement and clinging formed my reality, but now my mind has been turned 'inside out'. I am better able to observe the times when I judge or cling, and see them only as diminishing or restricting a much fuller and richer being. I visualise judgement as a pair of shark-like jaws biting a chunk out of my awareness!

As a beginner on the path I know it will take both courage and energy to meet the circumstances of life and stay fully awake. I knew that after the retreat, the pressures and uncertainties would surge in again, and that it would be tempting to run back to the 'life boat' of my ego to defend and control. This has after all, been the habit of a lifetime. What happens if, through fear or anger, I feel myself falling into old ways? On retreat I came to understand that even in the most difficult times, if I am mindful, I can fall no further than the present moment, and that the present is always the best position from which to deal with what comes. To be fully available, on the cusp of the unfolding moment, is I think, a great and gentle strength.

Two days and two questions later ('what is freedom?' and 'what is surrender?'), and Jake was delivering another inspiring talk in the Chan hall, this time talking about Buddhism as a bird with two wings, wisdom and compassion. His comment that without compassion the bird cannot fly, found a weak spot, and I realised that I would have to confront something uncomfortable that my previous two more abstract answers to 'freedom' and 'surrender' had veiled. I have trouble with compassion. Telling Jake this in an interview was a surprise, I did not know it was coming; it just tumbled out with the force of a truth. It is not that I don't feel, or don't care, in fact in the past I probably cared and felt too much. So after some discussion we agreed upon the question 'what is kindness?' Jake told me that I would not find an answer to this in the same way as the others, it was a question through which I would need to feel something. After the retreat this remains my question, and in seeking an answer I know I will have to be very honest with, but perhaps also kinder to, myself. Later that day we did a dance meditation in the Chan hall, it



was brilliant and exhausting, and to my surprise was the best meditation of the whole retreat. In bypassing my brain I had accessed something truer and deeper than I had before, I lay there feeling like my shell had been cracked open a little bit, and it felt great!

On the final day I stood looking out across the snowy, sunlit hills, the trees and hedges formed a latticework of shadows, the earth was glinting. I heard a rush and instinctively spread my arms to the sky as hundreds of fieldfares streamed overhead ‘chakking’ heartily. Above the bare trees a red kite tilted in the sunlight. That morning at a ceremony in the Chan hall, I had taken Refuge and the Precepts with two others. Before the retreat, becoming a Buddhist always seemed to be a decision that had ‘to be taken’. What changed after five days at Maenllywyd was that it was no longer a decision external to me; it seemed natural, as if there was nothing to decide. I had also been reluctant about ‘becoming’ a Buddhist because I thought it was too much to live up to and that I fell too far short of the mark. I understood things differently now. I became a Buddhist precisely because I am a flawed person and have perceived a path to becoming more aware, generous, kinder, loving and joyful. I trust this path, it sits well with my rational and questioning mind, but it also appeals to my imagination and it inspires me more than anything else I know.

I remember the retreat as a magical and almost sacred time, the beauty of the Chan Hall lit by candles, the focussed energy of 14 people sitting in silence, the deep darkness of winter nights and warmth of wood fires, lying on my bunk watching red kites and clouds, the sound of the wooden ‘clappers’ fading into silence at lights-out, the way that simple things regained their meaning, every act was significant. My reunion with

my partner when we paired up for the final communication session was emotional too, it felt like I had travelled 100 miles in my mind without him, but we found that we were both deeply joyful for the experience. Now, a week after the retreat, the insights I had are still present and working within me. I am excited about the journey I have undertaken to learn what it is to be a Buddhist and look forward to returning to Maenllwyd again in October for a Silent Illumination retreat.



PHOTO: GEORGE MARSH

TIGER, MOUNT OF TAOIST IMMORTALS, KOREA 18TH CENTURY



# 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

To contact any of the Officers of the WCF please 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](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org)

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## Forthcoming Retreats in 2016

### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 25 June to Thursday 30 June*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### DAY RETREAT

*Sunday 10 July*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Manchester

### SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Friday 5 August to Sunday 14 August*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### AWARENESS IN THE EVERYDAY

*Saturday 3 September to Thursday 8 September*

Leader: Hilary Richards Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Saturday 1 October to Saturday 8 October*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 5 November to Thursday 10 November*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Saturday 3 December to Saturday 10 December*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales







*Without the bitterest cold  
that penetrates to the very bone  
how can plum blossoms send forth  
their fragrances all over the universe?*

DOGEN

禪 Western  
Chan  
Fellowship