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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

GEORGE MARSH

Welcome to the Winter 2017 issue of *New Chan Forum*, which leads with a spiritual autobiography by Fiona Nuttall, Simon Child's first dharma heir. Fiona also offers a poem in honour of the late John Crook, our founder and original inspiration, as does Didi Crook, John's sister, in memoriam six years on from his death in 2011.

Anna Jedynak writes about meditation, this time setting it in the context of spirituality and religion with admirable clarity. Diana Warner tells us about the bumps on the road to becoming clearer about her political activism. And we have a poem of meditation from Steve Smith.

I am glad to say we have found room for a range of retreat reports in this issue. Retreat reports get to the heart of the process of what we are all about: dismantling the false ideas of self to find the true centre hidden within.

I'm glad to say we have many contributions from women again. Please keep the contributions coming: articles, art work, retreat reports, poems and photographs; all will be welcome.

## THE PATH TO TRANSMISSION

FIONA NUTTALL

When I was asked to write something for *New Chan Forum* about how I ended up as Simon's Dharma heir I took a sharp intake of breath. How could I get that down in sentences? It has been a long, perhaps even tortuous, journey with many side roads and incursions into various unexpected places. I discussed this with some Christian friends of mine who I consider to be part of my wider Sangha and whom I turn to periodically for reflection and consideration. The three of us have been on journeys that could be called spiritual or seeking or some such, and it is helpful at times to look at both our similarities and our differences. We looked at the inherent difficulties in attempting to journal such transitions and agreed that it was problematic. At the end of the day, my journey has been my own but the one feature that I am acutely aware of is the connection with certain individuals who made a difference at critical points along the way. Not all of those people have been obvious connections; some are not Buddhist or even meditation practitioners and yet they have still been a source of inspiration, hope or support. Others might be more those expected. But all had a significant role along my life line.

I remember as a small child being fascinated with the natural world: the way the grass moved in the wind, the fall of light on a wall, or the shafts of sunlight cutting through clouds and sending beams of light down to earth at an acute angle. I had no idea what any of this meant, but I knew at some level that these things and I were not separate and

that it was important to 'see' these things and notice them. I was sent to Sunday school at St. Francis Church in Manchester and learnt the standard Christian stories – and also some elements of imperialism as we collected money for 'poor African babies,' which makes me cringe nowadays to recall. Religion was just a cultural aspect of my life at that point.

When I was ten we moved to Cheshire and my world changed. I knew no one there apart from my family and the social and cultural framework altered as I became aware of class differences. I went to Sunday school at St. Cross and began to meet people from a wider range of backgrounds. The Sunday school there included reciting parts of the Daily Office – including Evensong with its references to death – and I was ripe for realising that religion and life were inextricably linked. I joined the church choir, eventually becoming head choir girl, and I fell in love with liturgical music. However, entering adolescence I looked for more than the weekly and yearly routine of services and festivals with the colours, music and emotive aspects that were drawn out in that liturgical calendar. The standard offering of the Church of England had something missing for me.

I struggled with the need for priestly mediation that the Church imposed. Surely there was a way of having some kind of personal, unmediated connection with God? So I began a series of experiments with this: a regular practice of prayer (daily), reading and silent contemplation. This was a kind of expectant waiting for connection. I also enjoyed the outdoors and felt some kind of 'communion' there, though with what, I would have been hard-pressed to articulate. Despite my close connections with the established Church, there was no one to speak with about any of this, apart from a couple of school friends who were similarly inclined. This shift in my focus from an establishment base to a singular,

individual one suited me but I had no frame of reference for it. With hindsight I would say that I was seeking a more mystical approach. The books I read made no reference to any of this and no one I knew seemed to practise anything like it. One of the things that did come my way, however, was a retreat at the Diocesan Centre in Chester run by nuns. This was my first experience of a silent retreat! It was for a youth group and there were lots of activities in amongst the silence, but that opportunity to be still and quiet felt very precious. I almost resented the rest of the programme, being quite happy with this new thing I had discovered. I remember talking to one of the nuns while I was there and frankly don't recall much of the conversation except that I was encouraged to return and be a part of my local Church community, which was not what I wanted to hear.

As I grew older the discrepancies between my world view and that presented by the Church grew larger and more frequent. I could not tolerate the view of women as either virgins or harlots, necessarily dependent on men and preferably attached to them both legally and in the sight of God. The only acceptable women were married either to men or the Church. I had flirted with the idea of being a nun, but could see that this was too restrictive for me. That was the only option of active engagement in the Church and this seemed to me to be quite wrong. At that time women could not even be deacons in the Church, let alone priests. All spiritual activity had to be mediated through a male and my growing feminist tendencies did not sit easily there. In late adolescence I realised that I was gay and that further separated me from many Christians who were convinced that I and those like me were not 'in a state of grace' or, worse, were possessed by the Devil. Eventually I just

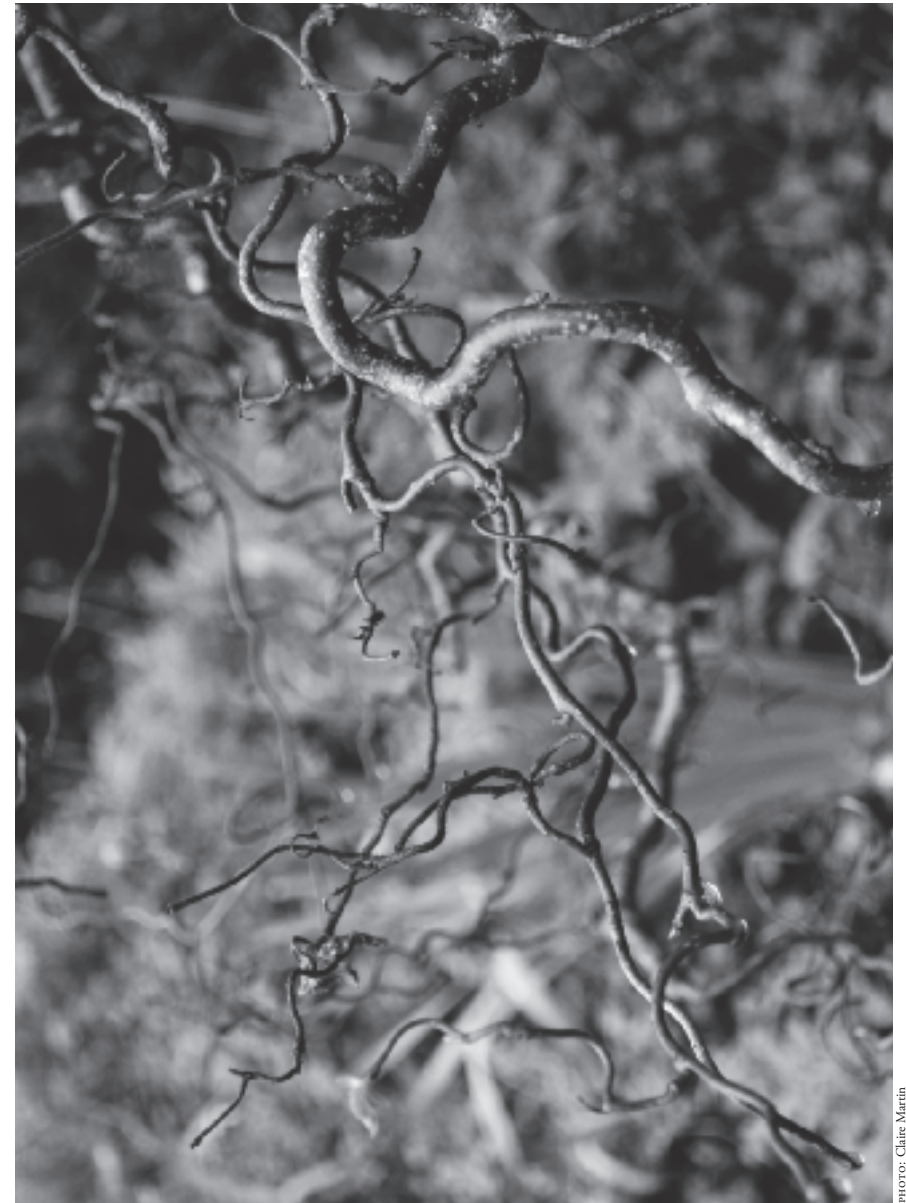


PHOTO: CLARE MARSH

stopped my active connection with the Church and threw myself instead into politics and community work. Periodically I would venture into a church feeling that I had lost something, but still failed to find it. I enjoyed (and still do enjoy) being in Cathedral spaces especially places like Durham or York Minster but I always veered towards sitting silently in a side chapel rather than attending a service, though I still like church music!

Community work gave me an outlet for being alongside people in trouble, disenfranchised, or suffering. I worked in a voluntary capacity with adolescents in mental health care, disadvantaged kids who would not otherwise have had a holiday, adults needing literacy skills and people needing legal help via a law centre. This seemed more practical than any religious activity and as a student I had the time to do it. I entered the world of work and sexual politics and once again felt that I belonged.

But still there was something missing. I started attending Quaker services which were less hierarchical and patriarchal and involved silence. They were also committed to social action and peace work and were accepting of various sexualities. I made friends in the gay wing of the Quakers, then called Friends Homosexual Fellowship (FHF). I went to a Yearly Meeting: a national gathering where, that year, the focus was on women's issues and women self-organising. I thought for a time that I had 'come home'. Some friends I made there are still very important to me. But there was still more 'God' than I wanted and after a time I drifted away again.

After a couple of near misses with violence on the streets I decided that I needed to learn some self-defence and ended up at a karate school. I went to a women's self-defence class and enjoyed the sense of agency

that gave to me. The teacher was a black belt and she was a woman. At the end of the course I decided to go for the normal karate classes and the discipline that imposed was highly formative. I went from a women's class once a week to training five days a week in the space of a couple of years. I went to competitions and joined the display team. I also started reading more about Japanese culture and came across my first Zen book, 'Moving Zen' by Paul Nichols, which was actually more about karate than Zen. There was also a monthly column in one of the magazines I read, 'Combat', that was about the mind in karate which from memory was called something like 'The still voice'. Zen became lodged in my memory, but I knew no way of finding any Zen.

In 1991 I had a picture calendar called 'Prayer'. Each month was assigned to a different religion and an associated photograph depicted some feature of that faith. One month had a picture of a Soto Zen monk in zazen in a traditional Japanese garden. He looked so serene sitting there in his robes and the picture made me weep. Here was someone who had access to something that was missing from my life. I wanted some of that.

I found a Buddhist group nearby run by a nun in Tibetan robes. I started attending with a work colleague, Julie. We went regularly and I began to get some sense of the principles behind Buddhism, though the meditation was very short and focussed around whatever it was that was being taught that week. I got more involved and went to regional teachings and was being encouraged to go to a meeting with the main teacher. For some reason, I balked at this. Roundabout this time my work colleague told me that she had found a Zen group advertised in Bury. So we went to the Mosses Community Centre in Bury, one Friday



night and walked into a very plain setting, with a man in normal clothes: Simon Child. So I was introduced to sitting with eyes open, looking at a wall. The thing that really grabbed me though was the walking meditation. Perhaps it was the link with movement and karate, perhaps it was the idea that meditation was not static, but I fell, hook, line and sinker at that point. As we walked out at the end of the session, I asked Julie what she had made of it. "I hated it" she said. "I'm never going back." Well I loved it and have been going ever since.

Simon lent me dozens of books, pretty well judged in terms of my understanding. I would devour these, we would talk about the content and then I'd ask for another. I also found Joko Beck for myself and finally found a book on Zen that made sense to me. She wasn't esoteric, she was practical and yet also very deep. After some time attending the group and subjecting Simon to all manner of questions week on week, which he was always able to answer, I decided it was time to try a retreat. I had no real idea what a retreat would be like, but I felt that some kind of total immersion would be a good thing.

It was October. It was a Western Zen Retreat. It was run by John Crook. It was at Maenllwyd. And I had no idea what I was walking into. I gave a lift to another first time attender and we got lost en-route. We eventually pulled into the yard in the pitch black and a figure came out to meet us. I instinctively knew that this was John, despite never having met him or seen a picture of him. It was as though I had known him before. I slept in 'Barn North' on an airbed. I loved the ancient nature of the place and the lamplight, candles and fires, the nooks and crannies, the Green Man on the wall, the metal candle sconces, sadly now removed and even the absence of places for ablutions. I hated getting up at five,

having to run up the hill before the morning exercises and the sheer exhaustion of sitting hour on hour. I thought about running away. I was convinced everyone else was sitting in bliss and that it was only me suffering so badly.

John's talks were, however, inspirational and highly motivating to me. His interviews were insightful, penetrating and supportive. I didn't run away. Suddenly apropos of nothing identifiable, the misery lifted and I began to enjoy the process. Every time I thought I had found the answer to the question 'Who am I?' I realised that I had not. Eventually this became funny and I laughed to myself. I couldn't understand why John would not just tell me what to do in order to find this elusive answer. Other people were 'answering' their questions and getting new ones. Why wasn't I? At the end of one frustrating interview John said 'Go up the hill Fiona'. I couldn't tell if this was another metaphor or a simple instruction. I took it as the latter and found my 'answer' in a heart-opening transcendent experience with a tree. My next interview was a different experience, with me describing rather than asking and actively stopping John from interjecting too much! It was a delightful sharing. At the end of the retreat, as we were all chatting and unwinding, John suggested that I try a Silent Illumination retreat since I seemed to fall into that practice naturally. I ignored that suggestion for three years, fearing the extra discipline, the even earlier start and the absence of the communication exercises with the accompanying sense of connection with another. But prompting from Simon made me go along to one and the rest as they say is history. Later I met Master Sheng Yen, first at Gaia House in 2000 and again at Dharma Drum Retreat Centre in New York State.

I also had contact with a number of other teachers from other traditions. Following a karate injury and subsequent surgery I couldn't 'sit' in the usual fashion. So I took myself off to the Buddhist Summer School run by Dick and Diana St. Ruth at Leicester University. There I met Ajahn Sumedho (now Lung Por Sumedho), Geshe Tashi and Jisu Sunim. Indeed Geshe Tashi was the first teacher I took refuge under, as it was not offered in the WCF at the time. This exposed me to the Theravada, Tibetan and Son traditions, with their different emphases and teaching styles. It also introduced me to the monastic approach, rather than the lay approach of the Western Chan Fellowship. There was more in the way of teaching on philosophy, theory and the Vinaya under these teachers. The other aspect that came to the fore at Summer Schools was the peer support and learning that went on there. I developed a number of Dharma relationships that survive to this day and that continue to be a source of support to me, most notably, perhaps with a friend who went on to become a monastic in the Korean tradition and who is now known as Mu Sang Sunim. Annie, Gloria and another Fiona were in a group with us too and it was that grouping that led to me seeing the benefit of Dharma Buddies in terms of mutual support and challenge. I learnt a lot at those summer schools and I owe a debt to Dick and Diana for the work they put into those events and to the straightforward and honest support I've had from them over the years. Indeed when I was made Dharma heir, one of the first phone calls I made was to Dick and Diana to discuss it. Over the years I've visited a number of teachers; Geshe Damcho, Thich Naht Hanh, Geshe Thinley, Sul Gok Sunim, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Ken Jones and gained much from them. But I kept returning to the WCF because of its unique approach and because it



FIONA AND THE DALAI LAMA

was a lay organisation, but within an established tradition and lineage from Master Sheng Yen through John Crook and Simon Child.

After one particular retreat with John, I realised that it was time I gave back rather than continue to merely take. I wanted to be part of offering this marvellous opportunity for retreat. I said to John that I would learn to cook the Maenllwyd way. I did my cook training under Pete Lowry and then fledged at the Silent Illumination week of a three week retreat. In those days we had to coax the Rayburn into flame each day, heave solid fuel around and time the baking of bread to coincide with a sweet hot spot in the Rayburn's day. We cooked on camping stoves and it took easily an hour to get a pan of rice to boil for twenty people.





MAENLLWYD BY DIDI E M CROOK

We had to be proficient with Vapalux and Tilley lamps and be able to cook in near darkness at times. I loved it. A year or so on from that, Simon asked if I would take on being guest-master. I laughed, saying he only wanted me to do it so I could fill in for the cook in an emergency and because I could take apart and reassemble a Vapalux lamp. He agreed that I was correct in my assumptions! So my retreat time became filled with guest-mastering rather than cooking and yet another skill set had to be amassed. The opportunity to provide support to the retreat, retreatants and to the Leader was precious. It was an expression of the Bodhisattva Vow. Master Sheng Yen had often said that we could be ‘baby bodhisattvas’ and learn as we went along and that was what I did. Along the way I fell in love with koans, continued to process my own life and history and developed an interest in Everyday Chan: the application of Chan in ordinary life. For me, if there was no impact on how I lived my life, there was no point in any of the practice. I was more interested in being in a ‘Pure Land’ in this life than waiting for another life.

At one point I questioned whether I should become a Buddhist monastic myself. Would that be the ultimate offering to the Dharma? I struggled with this for some years, having many conversations with Simon about it. I considered training under Shifu at Dharma Drum Mountain, going to Korea, and staying in Britain as a trainee. Eventually, after some helpful conversations with Ajahn Sumedho, one of his senior nuns and others, I made the decision that I need not go down that route, but could still cleave to a Dharma-based life. The nun I spoke to was particularly helpful with this decision, saying that she felt it was possible to live a Dharmic life as a lay person. I guess that was what I wanted to

hear. So my commitment to the WCF increased as a vehicle for expression of that style of committed Chan life.

In the early years of this century I went on two of John's trips to Buddhist sites. The first was the Silk Road tour across China from the eastern seaboard to the western borders near Kazakhstan, taking in the caves at Dunhuang and several Tibetan monasteries. Each of the trips had special moments of connection with either the people or landscape of a place and I felt blessed to be in such company. At an airport somewhere, John and I had a discussion. He said he'd heard that I had given a talk at Gaia House and asked me how I had found it. I remember replying that it was terrifying, not because of the public speaking aspect, but because it mattered that I made sense to people because it was the Dharma I was talking about. The responsibility felt enormous. Interestingly, John agreed. The second trip was to Himachal Pradesh in North Eastern India. Again we were headed for a Tibetan monastery in time for a festival and again there were moments: sharing red rice with festival-goers, presenting white khatag scarves to lamas and losing my fear of heights in the foothills of the Himalayas. Spending that time with John and others made me realise the value of pilgrimage: another form of total immersion in a different culture, time away from the usual and an opportunity to connect with places and people, both present and past. John was, of course a master at gaining access to lamas and places normally forbidden. Without him I would never have sung Chinese Buddhist chants in a cave full of Buddhas at Dunhuang before the official site opened. Nor would I have gazed on a statue of Padmasambhava in a monastery museum and felt as though I was thrown into the Timeless. John was someone who knew not only how such things 'felt' but also

what they meant: spiritually, empirically and neuro-physiologically. You might say that John was who I was looking for when I was fifteen.

John asked me if I'd like to start training in leading retreats. With my work background in Social Care, I had some appropriate training and I began sitting in on interviews with both John and Simon. I had been going to the Leaders' retreat each year for some time and started taking an interest in how dharma talks were put together and how to engage people on a one to one basis and in groups.

Years later I ran my first five day Chan retreat, later still a Western Zen retreat and then seven-day Silent Illumination retreats. Along the way I also started the Manchester Sutra group that has been meeting monthly for years. It has been a great source of peer exchange and is an example of Sangha building in the 'ordinary' world. I continue to learn as well as to lead retreats. Simon continued to be a source of information, a role model and a shining example of equanimity, one of the characteristics that I knew I was deficient in. One day, on a train, he confirmed my kensho experience.

In 2013 I attended an event in Escondido for newer Buddhist teachers called the Gen X event. There were teachers from America, South America, Canada and Europe attending. It was here that I first got to spend time with Rebecca Li who had been Master Sheng Yen's interpreter over many years. Rebecca and I have become firm friends since then and I appreciate her understanding of the Dharma, her openness and her support. Since Rebecca's own transmission we are officially Dharma sisters under Simon Child, but in reality we were Dharma sisters prior to that by virtue of our shared connections and commitment to the lineage of Master Sheng Yen in western society.

I was at a WCF committee meeting in Stroud when we heard that John had died. It was devastating news, so soon after Shifu's demise too. But as we sat around together, coming to terms with what we had heard, I recall a real determination arising within me. The main thing John would have wanted was for us to carry on. Everything he had given us over those years was about continuing to make the Dharma accessible. It was our job to continue, to teach, to lead and find ways to bring Dharma to the world we live in. We had to stand on our own two feet and get on with it as best we could. I miss John greatly. I wish he was still around to ask advice of, or just to watch and absorb his presence. I like to see Ros's portrait of John at Maenllwyd. The image really captures some of his compassion, humour, erudition and insightfulness. It reminds me that these are qualities that I need to develop in my own way as I, with all others, make our contribution.

I continued to fit my retreats into my annual leave allowance while I worked for a Local Authority. This was tiring and limiting, but was the only way I could do it all. It was about a pragmatic solution. One weekend, driving back from another committee meeting with Simon, we stopped for coffee at a motorway service station. Chatting about the future development of the WCF, Simon said he'd been meaning to ask me something. Would I take on being his Dharma heir? He wanted to give me the option rather than just putting it onto me. Such sensitivity is typical of Simon. There were lots of reasons to decline. Was I ready? (Is anyone ever ready?) Was I worthy? (No one is.) Did I have the skills? (Who knew what they even were?) What did it mean? (It meant being an independent teacher and needing to find my own heirs.) How would others respond? What would be involved? Did I have the time? Simon

agreed to give me time to mull it over. After sitting with it a few days the only answer that came was 'Why would I say no?' It wasn't about me, it was about the Dharma. I had set a wheel in motion years before when I'd said to John that I wanted to give something back. I went to Simon and said 'Yes.' Some time later the ceremony happened at the Pointing Out the Great Way course that we ran at Barmoor.

Since then I've become increasingly aware of the need to start training up more, younger, people to become the retreat leaders of the future. I want there to be 'John' and 'Simon' figures for the fifteen-year-old 'Fiona's' of the current age. I want our wonderful opportunities to continue to open up into the future, for people to find 'who they are', to find release from suffering. To continue to provide a space to open the heart and feel the love that is unconditioned, unbounded, universal.

I am immensely grateful to the people I have met along the way: teachers, guides, fellow practitioners, fellow retreatants, authors, monastics, thanka painters, Dharma friends, friends from other spiritual traditions, and non-Buddhist mates who have done their best to keep me level-headed. I hope to continue to learn, since approaches to Dharma are numberless. I have made and will make mistakes, inevitably. I hope for forgiveness when I do.

The journey continues.





photo: Claire Martin

## MEDITATION, SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION

ANNA JEDYNAK (GUO-DING)

Meditation, spirituality and religion can work together; however, they can also work apart.

We can meditate as if doing a technical exercise, engaging neither spirituality nor religion. Meditation works then on the psychological level, similarly to psychotherapy or personal development training. It is usually undertaken to improve our personal situation from within. We don't feel comfortable enough with ourselves, so we want to get something (e.g. peace, better concentration, harmonious relations, happiness) or to get rid of something (e.g. fear, chaos, bitterness). Meditation is about our affairs and our well-being. It starts at the point where we are and usually it is the point of self-centredness. We have no idea why meditation would help us, however we believe it will. Maybe we have some fantasies about it, maybe other meditators have influenced us, or maybe we want to taste something new. We try to follow instructions on how to meditate well, so that we can get the benefit.

On the other hand, there are religious people, some of whom are not much interested in meditation or spiritual inquiries. Both in Western and Eastern countries, they appreciate tradition and accept explanations of the world provided by religion, as well as the religious support for morality.

### Spirituality

Spirituality arises from a vague, sometimes non-verbalized belief that



there exists something much greater than us, as we appear to ourselves; that something unknown and ungraspable goes far beyond our small affairs and problems; that it is worthwhile to direct our attention and energy toward this “something”, whatever it may be, and to be open to changes this stance can cause in our lives. All that can be interconnected with the feeling of mystery. The mystery seems attractive and calls us to meet it. Even if we cannot resolve or master it, maybe we can just touch it. We become more and more amazed at life itself and more sensitive to what it brings to us and others.

Spirituality can arise spontaneously or can be inspired by religious teachings, or can develop from meditation (including the one practised originally as only an exercise). Meditation makes us more still and quiet. It removes some of our beliefs about the world, ourselves and others, or at least it loosens the grip of those beliefs, making them less important. As a result, open, free space is revealed, inviting us to explore it, and to walk toward the unknown. The “unknown” is a still, aware mind, embedded in the present moment. It tends to look directly into existence itself. This type of spirituality doesn’t need any religious support. It can do without it, although sometimes it is actually supported by meditation based on methods drawn from different religious traditions. On the other hand, there are people interested in spirituality appealing directly to religion for various reasons.

Different religions treat spirituality in different ways. They interpret spiritual experiences according to their teachings, suggest how to deal with them, what to do when they occur, and what extra practices can be undertaken.

## Buddhism

Buddhism is rather modest. The act of becoming a Buddhist consists in taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma (his teachings) and Sangha (the community of co-practitioners), taking the so-called Buddhist vows and committing to basic moral precepts.

### The Precepts

One’s morality can be based on common social norms or on just taking care about others, independently from norms or codes. This latter attitude will be supported by spirituality. However, if that attitude has not been developed yet, following the precepts prevents us from harming others. It also diminishes egoism, and in this way prepares the ground for spirituality, to which egoism is a strong barrier.

In a traditional, simple form the five precepts for lay Buddhists are: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to use alcohol or drugs or offer them to others. Recently, the precepts have sometimes been enlarged, e.g. not to kill people, and also not to kill someone’s peace or joy; not to use drugs, and also not to use unwholesome contents on the internet, etc. Also, the precepts are sometimes supplemented by the positive part, e.g. not to steal, but to be generous; not to engage in sexual misconduct, but to be loving and responsible.

Moral precepts for lay people in Buddhism are understood in an open way. They are conducive, not prescriptive. They show the direction which is conducive to personal development; they do not impose commandments. They differ in various schools (e.g. in some schools they consist of 10 points), are expressed in general terms, and are interpreted in detail by the person in question.



### The Three Refuges

What is specific in Buddhism is taking refuges and vows. Taking refuge in the Buddha usually means appealing to the example of Shakyamuni Buddha who lived 2500 years ago and to the tradition he originated. However, it can also mean taking refuge in our nature (fundamentally not different from the Buddha's nature), trusting it and relying on it.

Taking refuge in the Dharma means in the Buddha's teaching, but also the way the universe works (for this is what the teaching is about). Refuge in the Dharma in the basic sense means to accept the teaching, but also it can mean to accept the process of life with all its stuff and to be ready to harmonize with it.

Taking refuge in the Sangha can be comprehended in a narrow or wide sense: as a strictly monastic community, as a local group of practitioners including lay people, as all Buddhists, as all people, or even as all sentient beings. So taking refuge in the Sangha can have different meanings.

Buddha didn't deal with many points that are usually dealt with by religion. That's why there are some doubts whether Buddhism is a religion at all (it depends on the definition of religion). He didn't teach doctrines about supernatural issues. The only thing he was interested in was how the mind created suffering and how it would be possible to get liberated from this suffering using skilful means, including spiritual practice. When asked if he believed in God, he kept silent. When asked where does a saint go after death, he tried to turn the questioner's mind toward more vital points. He described the human condition and he proposed precise methods useful for fundamental improvement of that condition. One of them is meditation directed toward spiritual inquiries.

### The Vows

The Buddhist vows are about following the direction given by the Buddha. They are about what we would do now rather than what we would do in the future.

The vows are: to liberate innumerable sentient beings; to cut off endless vexations; to master limitless approaches to Dharma; and to attain supreme Buddhahood. In other words, that means to release the suffering of all beings; to stop feeding or supporting our own shortcomings and vexations, based on the illusion of "I", to be aware of them and let them be exhausted; to apply the Buddhist teachings to all the various situations of our life; and to practice the Buddha's way, deepening our understanding of the mind and life and proceeding with liberation from suffering caused by the misusing of the mind.

The task can seem hopeless, as we vow to deal with "innumerable" beings, "endless" vexations or "limitless" approaches. However, the meaning of those expressions is that no matter how many beings are to be helped, we will continue helping; no matter how many vexations we experience, we will continue getting rid of them, etc. The vows are mutually interconnected. A person full of his or her own vexations is hardly the best person to liberate others from their vexations.

### Beliefs

In the course of time different Buddhist schools arose, adjusted to local cultures and based on various interpretations of the original teaching. Thus the Buddhists can believe (or not) in different things according to their traditions, habits, and attitudes. However, what is more important in Buddhism than the content of beliefs is to recognize what the very



PHOTO: Lewis Bennett

nature of a belief is and how it is produced by the mind. People who have different beliefs and aspirations can share the same Buddhist framework; what they have in common is a general world-view and sincere attempt to follow the moral precepts and to develop wisdom and compassion, as well as respect for and gratitude to the ancestors on the spiritual path. The core is: no harming others or oneself; acting from empathy, care, loving-kindness; and – in many cases – spiritual investigations. These meditative investigations help to develop the proper attitude in everyday life and to test and confirm the Buddhist teachings by reviewing one's own experience. Formally taking the refuges, the vows, and the precepts guides one's life and reinforces one's engagement.

#### Ritual

The rituals and ceremonies can work in a similar way. They just strengthen our dedication, engagement, and commitment. Also, they create or reinforce our connection with numerous past generations of practitioners, as we chant the same words they have chanted for centuries. We are more clearly aware of our long Buddhist tradition than and of distinguished meditative achievements of some of our main ancestors. That can encourage us to practice more inquisitively.

However, various Buddhist traditions prescribe various meanings to the rituals. Some Buddhists worship the Buddha or other highly developed beings, pray to them or ask for the propitious future circumstances of life. The rituals are usually correlated with the beliefs of a given tradition. In general, the more rich the beliefs in a Buddhist tradition are, the more important, meaningful, and elaborate the rituals within that tradition are. Chan emphasizes studying and meditating rather than de-

scribing in detail invisible worlds or paving the way to them by means of the rituals.

The important function of rituals and ceremonies is to enable people to express feelings triggered in the course of Buddhist practice. E.g., prostrations open us to our feelings of gratitude or repentance and give us the opportunity to express them this way. Or while chanting together with others we can realize how helpful and supportive communal practice can be.

## AN ACTIVIST AWAKENS

DIANA WARNER

I was initially drawn to Chan out of a sense of loneliness. Two acquaintances were already participants in the Bristol Chan group: Sarah Bird, whom I knew from yoga practice, and Sally Masheder, a neighbour and fellow GP. I liked them a lot and I wanted to get to know them better. I had started meditation but was searching for a method that suited me. I also wanted to protect the planet and people – to be an ‘Eco Warrior’ – but I was afraid, and did not know how to. I recognised that Sally and Sarah were also searching and that they were both finding Chan helpful. Eventually I found my way to the Bristol group’s meeting (those who have been to the Coach House where we used to meet, will understand why it took two attempts to find it!).

Over the subsequent years my political activism and Chan practice have gone hand in hand. They are not separate. Both falter and stumble at separate times, occasionally surge ahead confidently. I have been on several retreats over the years, gradually gaining a deeper understanding of myself that is not a wordy description but more like a body and soul awareness. Through yoga practice I have also been learning body awareness and presence in the moment, meditation and yoga becoming one thing and interchangeable.

Slowly, meditation and work in everyday life have coalesced so that the benefits of meditation have often become present during activity, allowing concentration of purpose, especially at work. To meditate has

become easier. However, I have often had little time, or inclination, to meditate, or I have been overwhelmed by daily life.

Continually, I have been searching for a more effective way of activism. I have demonstrated a lot, been arrested at Faslane nuclear submarine base, co-led an effective health professionals' blockade of Faslane. More recently I have become involved with politics and the Green Party, to the extent of standing for parliament. I have read widely to gain understanding of the influences of economics and the pernicious effects of increasing financial inequality and its drivers, as well as the causes and the effects of war. I have looked within myself and seen the reverberations of these external forces within me.

#### Standing as Green Party Parliamentary Candidate in the General Election: What I Learned as a Buddhist

This turned out to be a mightily challenging experience and a great way to expose my limitations! The sheer amount of extra work involved was not compatible with continuing my job as a GP. My meditation slackened off, at exactly the time when it would have been very useful and given me more energy, but I became just too tired and life felt too hectic. My deep-seated dislike of conflict reared its ugly head, and at later hustings I heard myself beginning to adjust my responses to questions so that I did not stand out too far from the other candidates. And I was surprised by the inner pressure I felt at times to adjust what I was saying if I knew that my statements would be unpopular.

I began to see some of the pressures that can sway our politicians to do what they may not have done at the start of their careers. It is well known that standing for parliament can be traumatic and I am not alone

in being much more reluctant to engage with formal politics after such an experience. In future I have decided to act in keeping with my strengths and passions rather than out of a sense of obligation. This resolve has become fiercer as my meditative practice deepens; in this way I can be both more effective and more able to rise to the challenges in my path.

#### My First Two Retreats

I am lucky to have been able to attend three Western Chan Fellowship retreats this past year. The first two have helped with the process of looking deep within myself to see what is important, what my limitations are and why they arise, what are the next possible steps. I tend to be introverted and have had to work hard to feel more comfortable during social interactions. The January retreat gave me a deeper insight into how I imposed difficulties with social interactions onto myself. On the second retreat in April came the realisation that I could behave in any way at all, that there is freedom to decide to act any which way. Here is an extract from my April retreat report:

What is here? Sitting, a body. It can do anything, go anywhere. The body is attached to a name: Diana Warner. All is open to it, it is open. There are certain things Diana has traditionally done, and others, like sunbathing, traditionally not. Yesterday I did sunbathe: does that merit a new name? Perhaps not. How about Diana the murderer? Would that require a new name?

I understand Jake's earlier description of the true person of compassion, just doing, with no thought of compassion as such; like an ordinary-look-



ing stone with a heart of jade, compassionate action results without deliberate attention to a compassionate intention. Action arises naturally out of a compassionate heart from a position of authenticity and awareness.

These insights have translated into action on both a personal and activist levels. I have addressed a difficult ongoing personal relationship with a new openness and honesty, which has been reciprocated. This has enabled me to move forward with greater understanding and confidence. I have responded generously to an urgent request for extra funding by [www.jolibatrust.org.uk](http://www.jolibatrust.org.uk) and I have become actively involved with [www.conscienceonline.org.uk](http://www.conscienceonline.org.uk).

The Conscience Campaign is pushing for taxpayers to be able to have the portion of their taxes that goes to war diverted to building peace. Quite a lot of my inner work has been trying to come to an understanding of the effects of war on my family dynamics as I grew up, and the long lasting effects on myself. I have awareness not only of the devastating material effects of present wars, but also the less tangible effects on the psyche of all those involved and on future generations. So this campaign is close to my heart. Here is (a part of) my statement of conscientious objection – I feel good that it was quoted in parliament when Ruth Cadbury, MP, read out her private member's bill (see website):

I am a GP (family doctor). I was born in the aftermath of WW2. Both my parents were psychologically damaged by war. I know how living through war haunts families, affects the way the children grow up and deeply affects the adults the children become.

I insist on the right as Conscientious Objector for my taxes to be used to forge peace and not to be used on the mechanics of war.



TARA'S TREES BY DIDI E M CROOK

My work with the Conscience Campaign has become a vital expression of myself and I am developing ideas to carry the work forward in a way that I may well find challenging. Already I see personal benefits. Allowing myself to be open, vulnerable and honest, towards the end of a longer meditation, and perhaps for the first time as an adult, I thought deeply about my paternal grandmother, who was gassed in a German concentration camp. From this meditation came the following poem, written at dawn. With the writing of it, something I didn't know existed, that has been troubling me, has been resolved. This is how the poem ends:

*In Memory of Anna Lewen, my Grandmother*

I open to her pain, her far away passions.  
 How was her last look at the sky? How was her last breath?  
 What knowledge was hers, what endurance?  
 What despair?  
 Buried deep, I pull her to the surface.  
 Mud encrusted, rank, in all her glory.  
 I breathe into her. She and me.

I have always known the basic facts of my grandmother's death. Though it seems extraordinary, I have never, at least as an adult, let myself think at all deeply about the reality of her murder, never let myself imagine what it must have been like for her. Opening myself at last to her pain, I realise that I am opening something in myself which has been kept shut away and buried all my life. I realise that this shutting away has robbed me of much of the strength that I need if I am to be a genuinely effective eco activist.

I have been asking myself what is important for me and have come to a decision that I am at last ready to become an effective Eco Warrior. Working with the Conscience Campaign in a way true to the Bodhisattva path, without clinging to things or to any goal but committed to enhancing life and to limiting war, seems to be a good start. I now know I can do, and can give, what it takes.

My Third Retreat

A solitary goose flies honking overhead. The business of the sheep farm continues around us. We walk, do our tasks, eat and sit.

As Simon reads I relax. There are several koans on the first page that will do. Then Simon reads out my koan. There are parts of it that hold my attention.

The master of Ringeho cottage held out his staff and said to his disciples, "When, in olden times, a person reached the state of enlightenment, why did they not remain there?" No one could answer, and he replied for them, "Because it is not of much use for life." And again he asked, "After all, what will you do with it?" And once again he said in their stead,

*Taking no notice of others,  
 Throwing her staff over her shoulder,  
 She goes straight ahead and journeys  
 Deep into the recesses of the hundred thousand mountains.*

Ah, just what I thought, enlightenment is of not much use for life. And I liked the idea of spending the week journeying into mountains.

A communication exercise with a twenty year old fellow retreatant reminded me how vital the work was to me. I responded to her enthusiasm



and took up the koan in such a way that I could allow its urgent questions to work upon my practice.

At last I become the enlightened wanderer, taking no notice of others and going straight ahead.

The Chan Hall has become too confining and I take a long hike up into the hills, keeping the fence to my right so no chance of getting lost. I disturb a few ground-nesting birds and navigate my way through vegetation, taste fruit and feed banana skin and satsuma peel to the ground.

Afterwards at interview Simon asks me, 'Who has returned from the walk?' There is freedom, happiness and laughter but 'Diana' is not an adequate description.

That night I dream of my late father and am able to acknowledge him fully, to say 'Hi' without emotional upset. I am aware that this journeying is not always going to be so straightforward.

I empty myself of self. Here is freedom and spaciousness. Myself and not self:

Eco warrior, bodhisattva, powerful and true.



## WHALE WATCHING

STEVE SMITH

He was sitting waiting,  
Sitting on the sea  
In a fragile shell, like half an egg.  
He was watching for a whale.

He was sitting still and all about  
Was movement and uncertainty  
When time swallowed him.  
When he swallowed time,  
And waited more.

Sat while the sea consumed him  
And he swallowed up the sea.  
There was to be more sitting,  
More sensing of the turmoil;  
Gulls and wind and breaking waves,  
He swallowed all and all was gone,  
And all was there again;  
Until his hope of whale was almost gone.  
And yet, and yet  
Others had seen it.

The pregnancy  
Of stillness on the waves  
Of anxious doubt.  
There would be no whale.  
Why did he wait?  
There would be no whale.

And still he sat,  
Sat still among the breathing waves,  
Where now there rose from deep within,  
Arose, arose, immense, immense,  
A glorious whale that leapt,  
And fell. Leapt and fell. Down it smashed,

Down on the vestiges of certainty and doubt.  
A creature from the depths fell from the sky,  
Dissolving words and meaning, time and self,  
And swallowed all the boatman thought he knew.

And so his craft was cast adrift  
Upon an ocean he could never wish to quit.

Face wet with his resolving tears.  
 Now, where air and sea and whale  
 And all are one, the man  
 Arrives at somewhere he has always been.

He, that had travelled in a cranium shell,  
 Who'd glimpsed and felt the whale that rose and fell,  
 Unable quite to tell what he has seen,  
 Would never be the same as he had been.

APRIL 2017

## RETREAT REPORTS

*We publish selections from retreat reports written after Western Chan Fellowship retreats, to illustrate the range of experiences people go through as they investigate themselves in silent meditation. These reports are printed anonymously and may be lightly edited.*

### RETREAT REPORT: REFLECTIONS ON CHAN TASTER WEEK DERBYSHIRE, FEBRUARY 2017

The first day was just awful really. Sitting there, facing myself. It was like torture. No distraction, no 'phone a friend', no reading, no internet, no work, no walking the dog, no watching tv. Just sitting there, having to face what emerges in my mind. I found it unbearable. I really did think I could not bear to stay and started thinking about how I could just leave. I was cold; it didn't matter what I did, how many socks I wore, how many blankets I wrapped myself in, I was cold. The people opposite, by the radiator, were hot. I was kneeling in the draft from the door and I was cold. I thought about being cold, and why I was cold and why it was so unfair not to be able to move and swop with one of the 'too hot' people. I thought about a work situation I was worried about. I thought the same thoughts for hours and hours and hours. I could not bear it. I asked for an interview with Fiona, because I had to do something other than sit there and I was worried I would just get up and go home. I can't remember much about the interview, other than it was a relief to be seen and heard and that it was such a help to reflect a bit on where all this comes from, this busy mind. I spend my

life, when I am not worrying (and indeed even when I am worrying), putting into words in my mind how I would say this (whatever 'this' is) to someone else. I have a constant conversation going on in my head. It is boring, frustrating. I felt real anger towards myself – started to imagine myself shouting at myself to shut up.

The redeeming features of day one were the birds on the feeders behind the Buddha – I secretly bird-watched when we did walking meditations, and in between the sessions. I secretly looked up the birds in a bird book, indeed saw three birds I had never seen before (siskin, goldcrest and brambling). It was such a relief to be secretly naughty. The other redeeming feature was the chanting. We chanted 'om', starting at different times, on different notes. It went on for at least twenty minutes and was a great pleasure. I played around with singing in harmony and with introducing a discordant note – no change there then. It was very satisfying and uplifting and made present the community that we were becoming.

The second day started in the same vein, but a bit less going on in my mind. I liked though, this idea of Silent Illumination – Fiona explained it in her morning talk. I had heard it before but it landed a little more deeply. Being silent is not about, err, having a silent mind, but having a mind in which you can watch the thoughts that arise. Just watch, don't try and stop them, just observe. Then, the theory goes, the quality of Xin – translated as heart-mind – means that insights emerge. Fat chance, I thought, as I watched the usual stuff go on and bored myself with my boring, mindless, endless 'not being able to be there' – as so busy thinking about the past, the future and, of course, the cold, my cold feet. I had a great, escaping thought. I needed to go to a pharmacy

to get something. I spent half the morning rehearsing how I would introduce this and to whom. Would I ask permission? Would I sneak away? Would I inform? What would happen if I told (a) rather than (b)? Would (a) tell me to talk to (b) and might I be told I could not go? This took up hours. In the end, in a rather unnecessarily assertive way, I informed (b) I was going, that I knew where I was going (before (b) had a chance to ask) and I would not be long. What freedom to drive away (I didn't actually know where I was going). Then the insight came as I drove along. Did I realise that almost all the things I think about are negative? I had run a workshop recently. The feedback forms were more than averagely positive, with 17 out of 20 giving me pretty wonderful reviews. But three were less effusive. Guess what I focused on! What would happen, I thought, as I drove merrily through Snake Pass, if I consciously thought about positive things? I tried it, and, guess what, I felt different, more embodied and relaxed, less on trial. It later occurred to me (another insight) that in my upbringing, my parents were very hot on 'dire punishment'. Stepping out of line would see me smacked and put to bed, where I would have ample time to reflect on my crimes and misdemeanours. Maybe this negative conditioning had trained my brain to reflect on the negative and I had not had balancing reflective moments when I reflected on how good I was, or nice I was or how well I was doing – or how lovable and loved I was!

And, the best bit was the chanting of 'om', and the birds and the growing sense of knowing all these people and sussing them out and being in community, despite us not talking. I noticed too how much I want to be acknowledged by others, how I want to be smiled at and connected to. I felt that harped back to a sort of existential question over

my existence (never mind my identity). Still doing it (this smiling for recognition) after all these years, and/but noticing the sense of shame it evokes to notice myself noticing.

The third day was totally wonderful! Fiona introduced the idea of koans, having given one of the funniest descriptions of how we hold beliefs and worldviews by telling a long story about her Mother's washing up bowl. I was crying with laughter, partly because I have washing up bowl issues too. Maybe it's a Northern thing. When thinking Fiona, think of Victoria Wood and Alan Bennett meeting the Buddha. The humour makes accessible the subtlety and clarity of the points she makes. As someone else said (when we weren't speaking over the clearing up in the kitchen – well just speaking a bit), 'here is someone who is absolutely on her game.'

I'd never done this koan thing before and was really interested in the direction Fiona gave – see it as something personal to you, start by asking yourself where you fit into the koan. I chose to work with a story about a fan with a handle made of rhino horn. The Master asked his follower to fetch the fan. The follower said, Master, it is broken. The Master said, 'Then bring me the whole rhinoceros'.

I started to 'xin' this – who was I in this story? It came to me as a shock that I was the broken fan. Tears rolled down my face. I was broken, of no use. Then I thought/felt that in fact I could not be used any more, and that I was still of beauty. I basked in my beauty for a while. I saw the fan with a horn handle, polished, brown and beige and white, with the fan made of long white feathers, beautiful to behold. Then I got a sense that the fan was trampled into the ground and broken. 'Then what?' someone said in my inner vision. I was shocked by the violence

of the act (in my heartmind) but then thought of dust to dust and ashes to ashes. That is what happens.

Later I started to think about the rhino. I became the rhino, small eyed, a bit stupid, blundering along. I thought that he/I/it was useless, emasculated, without its horn, and that a cut off horn, when broken, is useless too. But that a rhino with a broken horn is still a rhino, can still live and be in the world. That we all have scratches, or broken nails or limbs; that no one is perfect, and if we take the perfection of us (the horn) then it is no use without the rest of us, particularly when it stops being perfect. I am only complete if I embrace the bits I don't like, am ashamed of, as well as the bits that I (or others) do like. You can't have my horn without my bulk and rough hide and bad breath!

This insight seemed miraculous and it was as if I was not 'thinking' it but it was emerging viscerally. I felt I was whole but imperfect, but perfect in my imperfection. I was only whole if I recognised that the whole means you accept and include the 'bad bits'. And I 'knew' this rather than thought it! It was exhilarating! I wanted to jump up and down.

I felt on fire with all this, flowing, exhilarated...

Then I started to think about the web of relationships, Indra's net. What was the point of me in this web? And I found myself thinking, what was the point of my Mother? I went to the experience of us chanting om each day. We were not all the same in that chanting. Some people quietly held onto one note, some people, like me, soared around and changed things. I thought about the fact that for a while, I was quite prominent in the chanting, singing quite loud, singing high, singing low, singing deliberately discordantly and noticing how that changed what

others did. Did they follow the shift in key or did they ignore it or what? Then I stopped chanting. And things carried on. There was a sense in that the ripple of what I had introduced into the chanting carried on, was not entirely forgotten – and, equally, a sense that things carried on perfectly well without me. I had a unique part in the web of life, I left a memory, a glimmer of what I had brought - and then life went on. My uniqueness was shaped to some extent by my Mother, by my reaction to life, by my woundedness and my strength (which is which though?). I was still tousling to see what my Mother was for. I realised I resented her ease and happiness which seemed to some extent to be at my expense. But, I felt, she was still playing a role in this web of ‘om’ and ‘it’ is; all these things just are as they are. I have the cards in my hand that I have – it is not planned or pre-ordained, has no purpose or intention. I can play them well or I can play them badly, but feeling it is unfair to have the cards I have does not get me anywhere. There is no point to me being my Mother’s daughter, there is every point. There is no point to striving, there is every point. Gosh, I thought, I feel I am coming to terms with something that has dogged me all my life. No purpose, purpose, no point, every point. How did all this understanding emerge? Where did it come from? What was my role in creating this emergence? They seemed like the wrong questions. Maybe the question was, ‘Was I changed by this experience and was my ‘knowing’ expanded?’ Did I know myself better? Was I settled in/by that knowing? I felt I was.

So, in a way, that was it. The following morning, I felt tired, glad to be going home, looking forward to coffee and bad things to eat. But it felt easier to be there, exhilarating. We did the last morning exercises in the yard, in the dark as the trees emerged from the gloom, as the stars

appeared from behind the clouds, as the owl hooted. I resolved to do morning exercises every morning, to meditate every day, to come back to the felt sense of this koan and embrace this expanded knowing. But first, to find a bacon sandwich!

#### RETREAT REPORT: SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT CROSBY HALL, AUGUST 2017

...Day two. Koan day. I eventually plumped for one that, rather arrogantly, I believed I could answer. Hah! Silliness. We sat, the Koan playing in my mind as I searched for an answer. After a few sessions, Simon brought in a communication exercise whereby each retreatant sits with another and takes it in turns to answer a question on their Koan. I was coupled with the most open and honest individual I have met for an age and he really opened up about what the Koan was ‘dredging up’ for him, I was astounded! What is he doing? Why isn’t he even discussing an ANSWER? I did, I went through a number of answers with him, but his honesty was infectious and I ended up digging into myself more than I thought; I found myself admitting that the answers I had, though good, were largely pseudo-Buddhist bullshit from ‘How to answer a Koan 101’. What if I went to Simon with my answer and he was like, ‘Yes! You are a Buddhist Master in disguise!’ – truly, that’s the level of my thoughts at that point. I continued to sit, went to bed fairly happy with my day’s work and awaited my first meeting with Simon, where I would test myself – and him, to a degree.

Day three. One-to-one day. Same routine. My meeting was early, by now I knew my Koan pretty much by heart and had cemented the answer in my head, “Thusness” was my response (I won’t tell you the entire Koan). It rang hollow to me, but there we go. Simon got my answer and





LONGMEN GROTTOES, CHINA.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

gave a slight exclamation, at which my heart jumped, before he asked, “So what are you?”

Boom.

No answer.

Nothing.

Failed.

Simon sent me back to the Chan Hall and asked me not to look for an answer, don't try to impress – it's pointless, just sit and let the Koan do its job. Well, I was pretty down. It felt as though my Koan had had its head severed and was flailing around without direction. But then it all changed. It was like looking at an optical illusion; I shouldn't investigate the Koan, let it investigate ME, let what arises arise. This was a turning point for me. I found so much in me that was just me, habits and conditions that I thought were me, were not. They were decisions, choices that I make automatically – like my constant decision to try and impress others – it wasn't concrete, I didn't HAVE to do it! This then led to a number of other, often deeply upsetting, insights into my 'self' and my conditioned habits. Wow. I now understood to a degree, I wasn't here for enlightenment (let's be honest, who doesn't come to a retreat without some hope of a taste of enlightenment? You don't buy prosecco without wanting to be a little tipsy) I was here to witness, to see myself and how my habits affect others around me – often to terrible levels. The day finished with another communication exercise, and again my partner allowed me to be completely honest about things I haven't really ever opened up about. Bed time.

Day Something or Other (they have all merged now). This time it was Fiona's turn to investigate my practice and I just sat there and

opened up, tears and everything. I felt so good! I couldn't believe what I'd dealt with, or started to deal with, it was incredible. Fiona gave me more pointers and things to practice on and showed me what would probably happen now. I sat. I chanted. I even stayed up late to sit through the night as long as I could – I really felt on the verge of something.

Day whatever. Another insight into myself today – sparked by another retreatant trying not to giggle. This started me off giggling and the combination of giggling, sitting and my Koan together wracked my body with absolute joy. It took me a while to realise what it was. I hadn't felt joy for decades. This led me onto another deep, Koan led investigation; this time it was happy and hopeful, it was wonderful! I really felt like I was 'cleaning house' as it were. Again a meeting with Fiona, who cut away the dross and polished my insight so I knew what was valuable and what was old habitual bullshit. I was determined to stay up again! I could taste enlightenment! I would chase it down and, and, and.... Oh. Mistake. I had gotten carried away and now, after chasing what wasn't there, I'd merely wasted my time on a phantasm. And got a cold to boot.

The last day petered out, my energy levels low. I couldn't do much serious practice and, if I'm honest, my mind started to wander back to home.

As seems routine, Simon and Fiona asked us what we had each got out of the retreat. Personally, it felt, and still feels, like the most valuable experience of my life. I seriously dealt with parts of myself that were deeply ingrained that made choices for me, without my knowledge; that caused me fear and trepidation and blunted my relationships with those I love. It healed those parts of me and, though I still have these conditioned habits, I now also have a choice as to whether I follow them or not. But the greatest thing I got from this retreat? My Joy. I got my joy

back, and I didn't even know it was missing, I mean, where could it possibly have gone..?

#### RETREAT REPORT: WESTERN ZEN RETREAT WITH HILARY AND REBECCA, MARCH 2015

Dear Hilary and Rebecca,

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

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

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

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

And it is all very much about me and I, and I feel they have been dented badly, my belief in them, my fun in them, my comfort in them, and now it isn't as cozy any more. I always felt/hoped that Buddhist retreats were there to make ME happier, and this retreat has been very different. I have seen more of the clockwork of my thoughts and can't put the front plate back on. It feels I have caught myself out, maybe for good, and it certainly does not make me happier. More aware yes, more

awake yes, but out in the cold with the wind blowing, rather than warm by the fire soaking in all the wise thoughts that have raised their heads at the retreat.

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

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

Process not product. A different focus. I have to slow down to feel how the process is, and that is a new way of doing things. We'll see.

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

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







### 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

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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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#### ILLUMINATING THE MIND

*Saturday 6 January to Saturday 13 January*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

#### MANCHESTER DAY RETREAT

*Sunday 21 January*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Elms Community Centre, Manchester

#### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 10 February to Thursday 15 February*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

#### A TASTE OF CHAN

*Monday 19 February to Friday 23 February*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Hagg Farm Education Centre, Derbyshire

#### INVESTIGATING KOANS

*Saturday 7 April to Saturday 14 April*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

#### STONE CARVING AND MEDITATION WEEKEND

*Friday 27 April to Sunday 29 April*

Leader: Henry Gray Venue: Grays Carving Studio, Salisbury

#### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 28 April to Thursday 3 May*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

# INVESTIGATING KOANS



A RETREAT WITH FIONA NUTTALL  
MAENLLWYD RETREAT CENTRE, WALES

APRIL 7<sup>TH</sup> – 14<sup>TH</sup> 2018

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

*To progress in these methods requires a sustained focus and so this retreat is recommended particularly for those with previous experience of intensive retreat, and prior attendance at a Western Zen Retreat is advisable, but serious beginners are also accepted.*

[WWW.WESTERNCHANFELLOWSHIP.ORG](http://WWW.WESTERNCHANFELLOWSHIP.ORG)







*Minds are as vast and boundless as the empty sky.*

*There is no limit to the number of clouds that sky can contain.*

*A mind that no longer seeks to transcend itself or hopes to banish the clouds  
from the sky – a mind that allows itself to be ordinary – is special indeed.*

BARRY MAGID

