

AUTUMN 2020 NO.59

NEW CHAN FORUM
BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP



禪 Western
Chan
Fellowship

CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION <i>Pat Simmons</i>	3
PRACTISING IN CURRENT TIMES <i>Simon Child</i>	4
INVOCATION OF THE VOID <i>Jake Lyne</i>	13
JOURNEYING INTO MYSELF <i>Richard Spalding</i>	25
POEM: STILLNESS <i>Laurence Smith</i>	41
HAIBUN: WALK SIT WALK <i>Will Turner</i>	42
THE SURANGAMA SUTRA <i>Juliet Hackney, Kitty D'Costa, Alysun Jones & Hugh Carroll</i>	44
BOOK REVIEW: UNRAVELLING: THE REDTHREAD HAIKU SANGHA ANTHOLOGY 1997–2019 <i>Eddy Street</i>	51
MEMORIES OF MAENLLWYD <i>Pamela Butler, Nicholas Salt et al</i>	53
ABOUT US AND RETREAT INFORMATION	66

Guiding Teacher: Dr. Simon Child • Editor: Pat Simmons

Contributions for future issues (articles, poems, artwork) welcomed. Please send to editor@westernchanfellowship.org.

If possible, please send as .doc documents.

Cover Image: Crane by Rob Bowden. Designer: www.robbowden.com.

© 2020 WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS

Welcome to the autumn 2020 issue of *New Chan Forum*.

It's a rather special issue, as it marks the departure of the Western Chan Fellowship from Maenllwyd, the ancient mid-Wales farmhouse where we've held retreats for many years. Maenllwyd is a beautiful and special place, and I think that the memories in this issue form a fitting farewell to a place that has been important for so many of us. I hope you enjoy reading them, and maybe being reminded of your own experiences in this wonderful and eccentric retreat centre. Our new centre, in the Peak Centre, is undoubtedly going to be equally wonderful – and possibly equally eccentric, but with electricity!

As usual, I'd like to make a request for material for the next issue of *New Chan Forum*. I need articles, book reviews, poems and artwork, and I need them by the end of December, so do please get writing or drawing *now*.

We are living through unprecedented times, as Simon reminds us in his article. I hope that the wisdom and insight of the articles and poems in this issue will provide us with a little help in finding our way through.

PRACTISING IN CURRENT TIMES

SIMON CHILD

Simon reflects on impermanence and non-self in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I felt a dilemma when our editor Pat Simmons asked me to write an article for this issue of *New Chan Forum*. Should I write about how our lives and practice are affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic – clearly a major topic – or should I write on a more traditional teaching theme? How could I consider not writing about COVID-19 when it has had such major effects on our lives, yet how could I write about it given the longish lead-time for publication of *New Chan Forum* and the likelihood of the situation changing significantly between writing and it going to print? By the time of publication will the first wave have ended or be ongoing, or will we be experiencing a second wave? What will be the economic, societal and political fallout by this autumn? How can we know?

I'm also aware that each of us is having a different experience of this COVID-time. Some have experienced significant personal illness, and for some there will have been death or near-misses very close to home, perhaps within their own family. Most have experienced disruption to their routine, and for some this might have brought catastrophic financial and social difficulties whereas for others it is really just a minor inconvenience. And then there are those who are enjoying lockdown and the opportunity for quiet time undisturbed by visitors, catching up with their gardening, DIY, and household chores.



After some distraction and procrastination, I arrive at early June with my duty to write this piece still hanging over me. As it happens, this morning the news headlines are not about COVID-19 but about “America on Fire”, the widespread protests across the US following the death of George Floyd. Is this just some recurring local news topic on a different continent from myself and the majority of our readers, and which will fade in a few weeks like previous sad stories of deaths at the hand of US police or of US school shootings? Or maybe this is the event which will finally trigger change for good, change for true equality and justice. Or is this the beginning of something potentially even larger than COVID-19, the beginning of the end of the American Experiment, the trigger for a world war as the American government flails around in an election year seeking someone to blame for its ills? How can I know?

I cannot know. You cannot know.

We are uncomfortable with not knowing. We feel unsafe. We want to fix it. We cling to small knowings, such as assuming that things will likely carry on as they are, or that patterns will repeat themselves. But even when reassuring ourselves in these ways we do not find ease because we also know that things may change instead of continuing, and that the repetition of patterns is variable and unreliable.

So much of our time and mental energy is devoted to managing our lives and our personal world, to the extent that we think we can manage them, in the hope or assumption that we can manage them to our advantage. But we can never be sure of how well this will work or whether it will all go wrong. In a world where (or so it appears) cause and effect rule supreme, surely we can cause the effects that we want? But there is so much that goes on not only outside our control but also even beyond our knowledge which

acts as causes for future effects which impact on our lives. We cannot even predict what is going to happen and much less can we control it.

I’ve heard some saying of COVID-19, “this is a great lesson in impermanence”. On one level that is so. It has been shocking how suddenly and by how much the situation can change for all humans in this planet with the arrival and spread of an essentially untreatable and unvaccinatable viral infection, including the societal changes and restrictions imposed and adopted to try to manage this new situation.

But to focus on the fact of change alone is to miss an important part of the situation. Of course impermanence is so and we hardly need reminding of that. More significant, I think, than the fact of impermanence is our relationship to it – that is what is worthy of our investigation and what is prompting our current reactions.

What is your relationship with impermanence? Do you welcome it or regret it? Do you accept it or deny it? Is it more complex and nuanced than that for you? Even to ask such questions indicates a misunderstanding, a belief that impermanence is somehow optional.

Change or impermanence is the essential characteristic of all phenomenal existence. We cannot say of anything, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, “this is lasting”; for even while we are saying this, it would be undergoing change. All is fleeting; the beauty of flowers, the bird’s melody, the bee’s hum, and a sunset’s glory.¹

Impermanence is inconvenient. Change intrudes on and thwarts our plans. In relation to our own lives, and the lives of those we love, impermanence is frighteningly unavoidable yet we often seek to avoid facing the reality of death.

Even as we grudgingly concede some positive aspects to change (the joys of autumn and spring, the beauty of a baby growing into a child and maturing into an intelligent caring adult) we continue to resist it. The impermanence of life itself casts long shadows into our minds and dominates our relationship to impermanence, casting impermanence as a negative phenomenon. But do you think permanence would be any better? John Crook liked to demonstrate graphically, by freezing mid-sentence, that permanence means being eternally, permanently frozen on the spot with no prospect of ever moving. Is that better than impermanence?

But, again, we are not in fact offered a choice. We don't have a choice of either impermanence or permanence. Nor do we get to choose impermanence for aspects of our life that we don't like and permanence for those that we do like. "Change or impermanence is the essential characteristic of all phenomenal existence."

Impermanence is not the problem. It is our resistance to change that leads to suffering, unease, stress (*dukkha* in Pali). Our wish, and even our belief, that we can hold on to some desired things and states, and stop them from changing, inevitably leads to frustration and disappointment. Our attachment to things remaining as they are creates dukkha when we realise or simply fear that they will not so remain.

The fact of change is evident to us. The cycle of day and night. The passing of the seasons. The changes of our moods and thoughts. The rising and falling of the fortunes of our lives and relationships. The frailty of human life. Even things which appear stable eventually change. Even solid matter itself changes, with fire, erosion, rot, and with radioactive decay of atoms.

Even so, one of the Buddha's most fundamental teachings was on impermanence. Given that it is so evident why did he feel it necessary to talk about it? And he was not alone in so doing. Famously, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who was approximately a contemporary of the Buddha, said "It is not possible to step twice into the same river".

Rationally, and experientially, there is change, there is impermanence. Yet emotionally there is belief, or perhaps mere hope or desire, that we can avoid change regarding some desired things or states. The Buddha emphasised the truth of change to challenge this tendency in us. Why? Because this is the key to understanding how we create *dukkha* for ourselves, through our habit of blinding ourselves to the changing nature of all the phenomena to which we cling, and thereby creating consequent frustration, fear, grief and confusion.

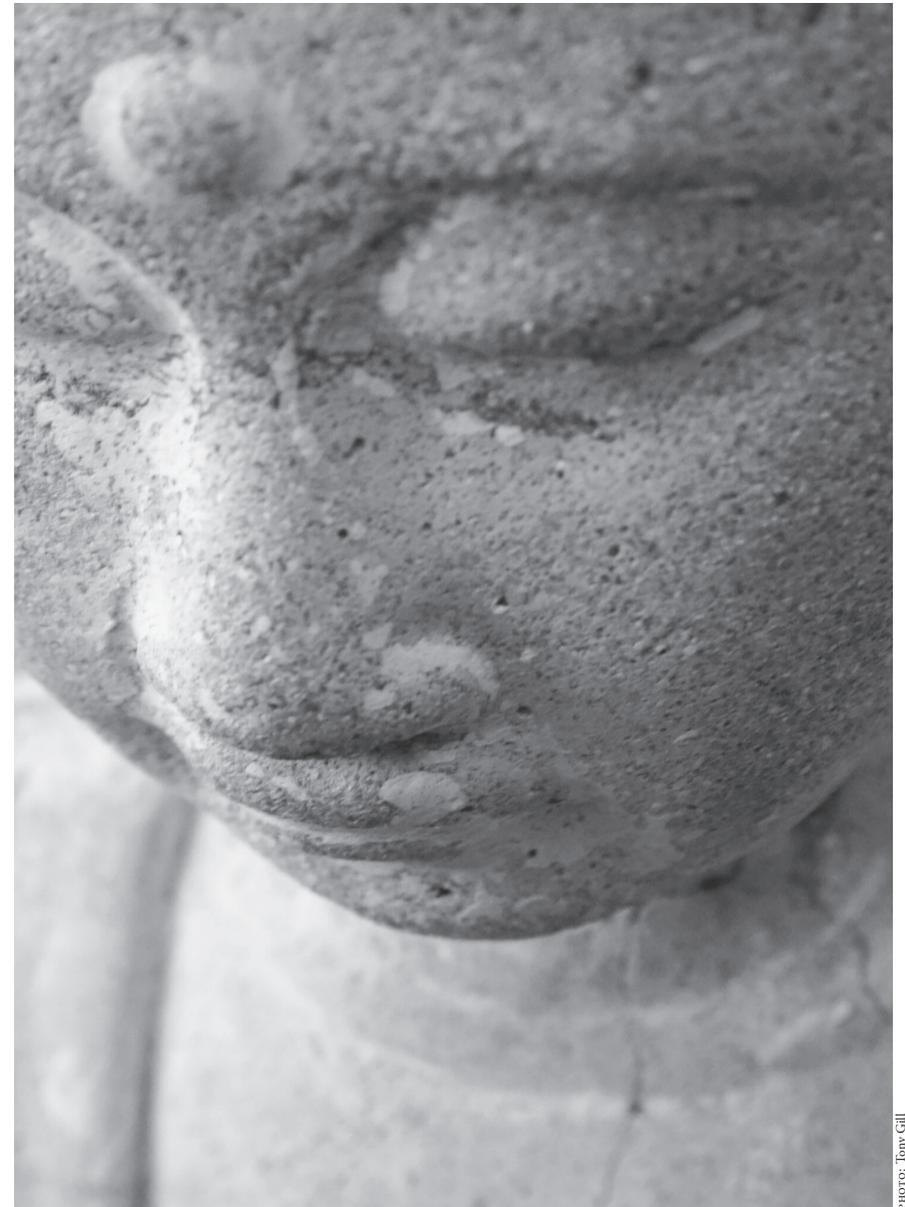
This teaching on impermanence or changeability (*anicca* in Pali) is also important in relation to the Buddha's teaching on non-self (*anatta*). Put simply, the Buddha points out that our sense of self appears to us to be continuous and enduring, and we make life decisions based on promoting and protecting this being which we imagine has the potential to be permanently enduring if we protect it well enough. However the Buddha also points out that there is no permanent self or "self-thing" in the first place, that even we ourselves are subject to change, and however much we hope and aim to protect ourselves we also will not endure. Our ignorance about the impermanent and empty nature of our being leads to *dukkha*, the frustration and grief and fear that we all experience.

The Buddha presented this triad of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta* as the "three marks" or three characteristics of our existence. Impermanence and non-self are just so. *Dukkha* is also inevitably so, inevitably our experience,

because of our failure to understand and accept the first two. However it is possible, as per the third noble truth, to be released from *dukkha* if we can penetrate and actualise the teachings. We need to release our deluded emotional attachment to a desired but imaginary and unachievable world where change is not a universal law, where constancy is available if it suits our needs and wants. We penetrate these teachings through hearing, studying, and contemplating them. We penetrate them through our meditation practice which reveals to us that indeed our mind is working in the way the Buddha described, emotionally invested in an assumption and craving of permanence and self-entity.

These characteristics apply to all times. But perhaps changeability is even more apparent in current times of pandemic, of climate change, and of political, economic and societal upheaval. Perhaps the deeper meaning of the Buddha's teaching on non-self is more readily apparent at a time when the fragility and impermanent nature of our very existence is thrust into our faces by the unseen spread within our communities of a virus which kills seemingly at random. In the face of that, can we still believe our self-story of the permanence and overriding importance of "me"?

In your meditation, don't seek to exclude unease, fear, grief, or whatever else might arise. Don't seek to 'sanitise' your meditation by creating a false experience of a settled mind. I know that some people are finding it harder to settle in meditation at present, both because of disruption to their routine and also because of a mind unsettled by and ruminating on current events. This mind you have is the mind you practise with. If anything, this may be a better opportunity for meditative investigation than a so-called 'good' meditation with a calm settled mind. Stay in



contact with the activity in your mind. The very difficulties that are challenging you at present may give you an opportunity to ‘see through’ your deeply held assumptions and beliefs. In ‘normal’ times it is easy to sustain these beliefs of self and permanence without ever considering them critically. In current times it may be impossible to let them slip by unchallenged as your whole life experience is challenging them.

Any time is a good time to practise. This time is always a good time to practise. Perhaps our current “this time” is indeed an especially good time to study and practise the Dharma. The three marks are all much more “in your face” at the moment than is often the case. When life is somewhat easier it is easier to delude ourselves that there is no *dukkha*, that we are a solid permanent agent in a life of which we are (more or less) in control. But maybe your deluded certainty on these matters is being challenged by current events and a breakthrough is possible.

NOTES

1 <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel186.html>

INVOCATION OF THE VOID

JAKE LYNE

*Oh wondrous Dharma most marvellously rare
 Deepest mystery of the perfect ones
 In non-perception all things are perceived
 Yet this perception's quite perceptionless¹*

Of the five *skandhas* mentioned in the Heart Sutra, form or *rūpa* represents the body; feeling, perception, volition and consciousness represent aspects of the mind. *Skandhas* means aggregates or components that when taken together, comprise something that has no independent existence without or beyond them.² A central theme of the Heart Sutra is emptiness: “form is emptiness and emptiness is form, form is precisely emptiness and emptiness is precisely form”. The sutra continues, “so also are sensation, perception, volition and consciousness.” Sensation, perception and consciousness are mental and emotional processes, and volition refers to intentions, especially those that orient us towards or away from something, or that result in indifference. Therefore, not only is form emptiness, but also mind (the other four skandhas) is emptiness and emptiness is mind. The sutra is saying body and mind are emptiness, and emptiness is body and mind; together, the skandhas represent the whole person.

This resonates with the concept of no-self. No-self means there is no unchanging, separate, permanent self, inner essence or soul. This is contentious: most other religions assume there is some enduring essence



and some Buddhists who subscribe to the doctrine of rebirth propose a continuity of clarity and awareness from one life to the next.³

We all recognise a sensation of self, sometimes weak and barely noticeable and at other times strong. Usually it's strong when we are threatened. When somebody wants to take something that's ours, the self reacts, or if we feel unjustly criticised, the self comes strongly into view. The sense of self is weaker when we are concentrating on a task, helping others, or feeling contented.

When I look for my sense of self in meditation, it is always attached to something going on in my mind: a judgement, an attitude, a feeling, the content of my thoughts, my body, my social self and so on. What the sense of self identifies with shifts and changes all the time.

Unquestioned, self seems to be a real thing, doesn't it? There seems to be an 'I' mediating all these experiences. However, if we look deeply, do we really find such an 'I', or is the feeling of separation between our experience and the self that is aware of it merely an assumption? Is there an independent self-essence, or a mental chief executive observing everything whilst running the corporation of Me? This is a question about the nature of mind.

The Chinese word *Xin* is translated as mind, but the Chinese character comes from a pictograph representing the heart, because in ancient China it was assumed that the mind was located in the heart. *Xin* is often translated as heart-mind, because Chinese people do not make the same distinction between mind and emotion as we do in English. In Buddhism, the term *Xin* is not neutral about heart-mind; implicit in it is a view that our natural goodness, even if hidden, underlies everything about us. Goodness becomes distorted by greed, hatred and ignorance, but an

aspiration to practice points us back towards our natural goodness.⁴

In the WCF liturgy book, there is a poem called the *Xin Xin Ming*. It was probably written during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), although its authorship is ascribed to Sengcan, the third patriarch of Chan who died in 609. *Xin Xin Ming* has been translated as *Inscription on Faith in Mind*.⁵ It may have been written as a counterpoint to Pure Land Buddhism that was influential at the time and continues to be important today. According to Pure Land teachings the Buddha Amitabha resides in a pure land beyond the western horizon. A person can be reborn there by reciting his name, “Amitofou, Amitofou, Amitofou”. Pure Land Buddhism is an ‘outer path’, since the practitioner puts their faith in Amitabha, an external deity, whereas Chan meditation is an inner path, focusing on the nature of mind and personal experience. The *Xin Xin Ming* emphasises faith in mind over faith in external deities.

According to Chan, faith in mind is central, but what is mind and what is the relationship between mind and enlightenment, or Buddha? Versions of these questions crop up in several Chan koans, with contradictory answers: “mind is Buddha”, “mind is not Buddha”, “no mind, no Buddha”, “it is not mind, not a Buddha, not a thing” (Gateless Gate koans 27, 30, 33).⁶ There is an amusing story about this in *The Koans of Layman John*.⁷ With his friend James Low, John Crook befriended two yogins in Zanskar and during one of several friendly meetings said, “We want to ask you what you understand by the mind.”:

The two old yogin friends seemed to freeze in shock. Nochung Tse picked up his prayer wheel and began intoning “Om mane padme hum, om mane padme hum” in a loud voice without pausing. Gonpo looked most uncomfortable rocking from side to side. Then he said, “Since the two of you have had the benefits of training

in meditation, why don't you go and do it? Then you would have no need to ask such a stupid question!”

Dogen was awakened when his teacher shouted “drop off body and mind” to a sleeping meditator sitting next to him. The shout shocked Dogen into dropping off his own ‘body and mind’. Sometimes at the beginning of meditation periods, we ring the hand bell and say “make your mind bright”. What if you can't find a mind to make bright, as Simon Child says he experienced once on retreat?

Given all this, what sort of thing is mind and what can no-mind mean? What we call mind comprises many cognitive processes and emotions, infused by awareness. It includes everything we experience, and we know that our experience is entirely mediated by the brain. Because of this, we very reasonably think of the mind as situated in the brain. The brain encodes new sensory data all the time, always functioning in the moment. It is refreshing when you think about it: we never step in the same mental river twice. But for the phrase no-mind to be meaningful, we have to conclude that there is no essential mind that is independent of these cognitive processes. One of the verses in the *Xin Xin Ming* is as follows:

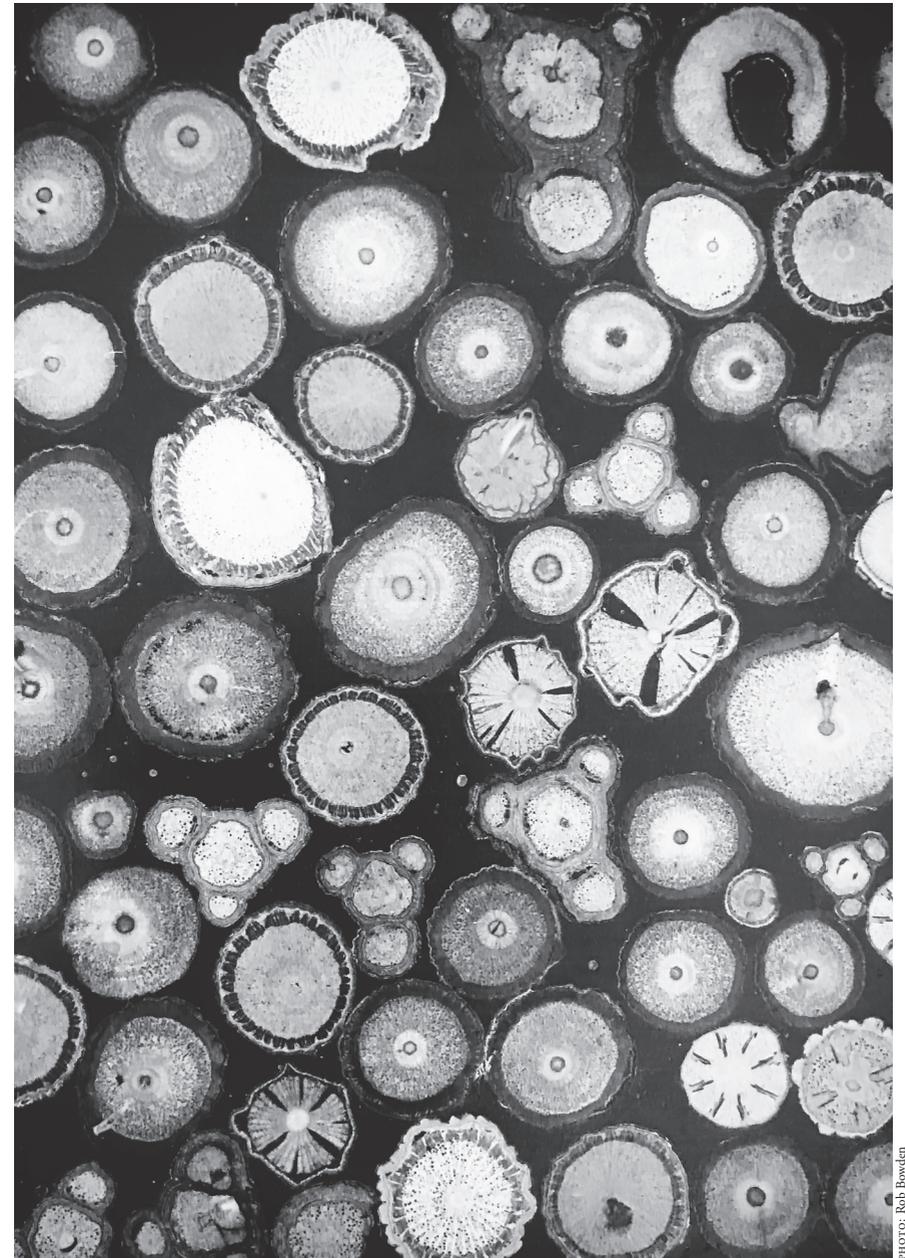
*If thought objects disappear, the thinking subject drops away,
for things are things because of mind, as mind is mind because of things.
These two are merely relative and both, at source, are emptiness.*

If we examine our experience we may find that this statement seems to be true. Take consciousness: we are only ever conscious of *something*, we don't experience consciousness unconnected from the objects of consciousness. Likewise perception is never separated from the images, feelings, bodily sensations, sounds and so on that we perceive.

Likewise, volition is always a matter of orienting towards or away from or intending or doing something. This fits perfectly with the *Xin Xin Ming* – “mind is mind because of things. These two are merely relative.”

Where then is the mind located? We consider that the brain is the seat of consciousness and experience. But is this way of looking at it incomplete? The brain is not an organ in isolation. It is seamlessly connected to our social and physical environment and to bodily experiences of pain, distress and pleasure. According to neuroscientists, there may be as many as 14 to 20 senses, including motion and balance, proprioception, and sense of self, to give four examples beyond the usual five. The very fact of experience and the possibility of pleasure and pain makes the brain quite unlike a computer, at least up to now; perhaps computers able to experience are on the way! Whilst the brain is a defined organ, it depends on the bodily and external senses in order for us to have experience.

This raises a curious possibility. What if our experience, say of sight, is better understood as located where we see the objects of sight to be? Normally we think of our experience as located somewhere in between our brain and the outside, we just don't quite get to the bottom of it. We settle for a sense of being a person in here close to our eyes, looking at an object out there. It is true that visual processing is in the brain, but what about the experience of seeing: where is that? What if your visual *experience* of this page is where the page is, rather than in your mind or some place in between? We say “my hand hurts”, implying a split between the hand and the one who feels the pain, but where is the experience located: in your mind or in your hand? What if your *experience* of your hand is where the sensations of the hand are, at the end of your arm, not somewhere undefined between your mind and the source of the sensations?



This might sound implausible, but it's entirely plausible. Eyes are receptors; only electrical impulses travel up the optic nerve after processing by the retina. A visual image doesn't go ready-made to the brain and there is no spy hole in the eye through which to look. The brain uses these data to create a visual image and by means of depth-perception projects the image accurately for distance and space. The result is a very accurate representation of the external world, allowing us to reach out for things and not bump into them. *Intrinsic* to the process of creating the image is conscious awareness. The image is imbued with consciousness; there is no need for a separate self that looks. What we see is in itself our experience of visual perception. According to this idea, the experience of seeing, rather than the process that creates the experience, doesn't depend on an internal observer looking through a spy hole. It is experienced exactly where the object of sight is located. You could say the bird is let out of the cage. The view we see *is* the act of seeing; it is non-dual. That's what non-duality means: non-dual perception. Consciousness being intrinsic to the world our mind creates is worth emphasising. Another way of saying this is that visual consciousness fills the space we see before us, not as some vague cloud, but just in the very act of seeing. The same principle applies to hearing.

An implication of this is that the sense of being an observer looking out at the world and commenting on what is going on is a mental construction. Knowing where we are and having an idea of how we are coming across to other people is essential in order to function properly. It all gets bundled up into our sense of self – me, in here, thinking about things, with a certain social status etc. Our minds automatically generate a dualistic model of the world – I and thou, I and it, here and there.

But whilst this is necessary for everyday functioning, a split between observer and observed is not necessary for perception to occur, because perceptual awareness is implicit in experience. We can get a feeling for this if we relax our tight grip on 'me in here'. In opening our minds like this, we loosen our hold on self-centredness and self-concern, and our sense of ownership of our perception becomes weaker, allowing us to simply experience the world as it appears.

This way of understanding perception may underlie unusual experiences some people have described. Very occasionally a sudden, vivid and startling sensation may occur in which it seems as if the mind leaps out of the skull into the world around, and there no longer seems to be a central point of observation; the lotus bud opens suddenly and unexpectedly. In his book *On Having No Head*, Douglas Harding describes such an experience.⁸ He mentions that the precursor to the experience was that he stopped thinking, exactly as stated in the *Xin Xin Ming* quotation above. This is different from having a blank mind; in this kind of experience thought totally disappears, just as a jug of water poured onto hot desert sand immediately dries up. When the mind opens in this way, it doesn't feel like I am observing it from in here anymore and it becomes quite clear what non-duality means, not conceptually, but in experience.

So far, I've explored non-duality in visual perception; the same principle applies in our social world. Objective social experience is not possible; we see each other through our personal frames of reference, influenced by our roles and the social context in which we live. We inter-are, as Thich Nhat Hahn put it. We do not have a separate independent social existence: that would be a contradiction in terms. Our view of ourselves and of each other is co-created. We don't necessarily see it like



photo: Rob Fawcett

that; we tend to take our own standpoint for granted when assessing the opinions of others. Instinctively, we divide the world with our ‘them and us’ minds: roundheads or cavaliers, remainers or leavers, public health guardians or economic guardians, big enders or little enders. A ‘them and us’ mentality can take on a dangerous momentum. Populism and Fascism depend on fostering differences, but they feed on genuine concerns that deeply affect people’s lives. To neutralise populism we shouldn’t be naive, but it is necessary to cultivate the art of listening if we don’t want to be trapped in a divided world.

This exploration of *Xin* has been through concepts and ideas, but it is important not to confuse practice with conceptual understanding; the purpose of clearing away brambles is to support practice so that we can freely walk the path, allowing what comes to appear. Silent illumination is the main practice of the Caodong school of Chan, founded by the teachers Dongshan and Caoshan, hence the name of the school. Caoshan was entrusted with the Dharma by his teacher Yunyan. On leaving Yunyan to become a teacher himself, Dongshan asked Yunyan how he could convey Yunyan’s understanding of reality. After a long pause Yunyan said “Just this is it!” Dongshan left and became lost in thought about this exchange. At some point, whilst wading across a stream he caught sight of his own reflection in the water and suddenly the meaning of Yunyan’s reply became clear. Dongshan wrote a poem to express his insight into non-duality or suchness:

*Do not seek from another,
Or you will be estranged from self.
I now go on alone,
Finding I meet It everywhere.*

*It now is me,
I now am not It.
One should understand in this way
To merge with suchness as is.*

You may wish to experiment with this: try sitting with “It is now me” and after some time sit with “I now am not It”. Then what are you?

From Exeter Day Retreat talk September 2018, transcribed by Claudia Merriot

NOTES

- 1 “Invocation of ‘The Void’”: a Nyingmapa hymn for the generation of mindfulness, in *The Way of Power* 1970, Trans. John Blofield and in the WCF liturgy book.
- 2 *Early Buddhism* by Sue Hamilton, Curzon 2000 for a detailed explanation of the Skandhas
- 3 <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>
- 4 *The Meaning of the Chinese Cultural Keyword Xin* by Li, Ericsson and Quennerstedt, *Academic Journals* 4(5) pp 75-89, 2013
- 5 <http://chinesecenter.megatrend.edu.rs/docs/doks/govori/PajinXin.pdf>
- 6 *The Gateless Gate* by Koun Yamada, Wisdom 2004 and *The Gateless Barrier* by Zenkei Shibayama, Shambhala 2000.
- 7 *The Koans of Layman John* by John Crook, Lulu 2009.
- 8 *On Having No Head: Zen and the Rediscovery of the Obvious* by Douglas Harding, Inner Directions, revised edition 2006.

JOURNEYING INTO MYSELF

RICHARD SPALDING

Richard traces a personal journey that has taken him through valleys, mountains, nature and Chan

I guess that there have been innumerable points over the years that have acted to shape me up for my current exploration into myself, even after six-plus decades. One recurrent feature throughout has been my own bloody mindedness. This encouraged me to pursue real and virtual journeys that protected me from the external noise that often sought to disrupt my development. I never took kindly to being told what to do, even though this created its own difficulties and obstacles. My aim here is to explore some of the key themes that have shaped my life thus far, especially over the last few years as I encountered Chinese Zen, the work of John Crook and the Western Chan Fellowship. Many of these themes have a focus on particular places as experiences that built knowledge. Some caused me to question my decision-making, others to delight in raw happiness, others to wallow in profound despair. Early encounters with nature gave way to a yearning for the higher mountain locations, where spiritual practice and development seem often to be found. All of these tales feel like precursors to entering the hardest place of all: that of encountering, experiencing and developing self. Simon Child paraphrases the words of Dogen in suggesting that if you want to study Buddhism the way forward is to study the self. ‘Study’ in the sense of a silent or experiential investigation.¹

Using the guiding ideas of Chan Buddhism to support this search for myself has offered me great support and clarity in recent times.

Through this ongoing silent investigation a new world has begun to open up to me, but first some contextual stories seeking to explain just how I got to this point. These stories carry a profound personal importance, allowing me to see how my physical, psychological and metaphorical journey into the ‘mountains in my mind’ has been at the heart of the struggle for a very long time. Involvement with the work of the Western Chan Fellowship over recent times has truly awakened both excitement and the desire to learn more. My recent journey has a central focus on finding a way to let go of ‘holding on and holding back’ as so beautifully described by Pema Chödrön in her description of ideas surrounding renunciation.² This is not an easy undertaking for me after so many years of sealing things away in my heart.

Looking up to imagined mountains

My interest in mountain landscapes started because I grew up in the largely flat central Lincolnshire vale which separates the wolds to the east from the edge to the west. There was something magical about the journey home from school. The early winter darkness closed in on giant banks of cloud backlit by the disappearing sun, leaving Lincoln cathedral silhouetted from the vale and presumably illuminated from the Trent valley. In these moments, I often imagined those clouds as foothills populated by mountain cultures as yet unknown to me. Living in such semi-flatness caused me to imagine hills and mountains, even molehill-sized ones, in the search for some relief. Beyond my gaze were even flatter landscapes where I hardly ventured: places like the Isle of Axholme to the north and the vastness of the fenlands to the southeast. I knew nothing of Chan at this stage. This was only to open itself to me some fifty odd years later.

We went on our bikes to collect hessian bags of verge-side tares, cow parsley and clovers to feed to the rabbits that my Dad kept out the back for meat production. This acted to supplement his meagre income as a farm labourer. I owe him so much for alerting me to the ever-changing nature of nature, moment to moment with its cycle of life, death and renewal.

Looking down with dismay on entrapment

Following the rules of the Methodist Church, within which my father’s family was deeply committed, I found nothing much to celebrate. When I went to the chapel to help Dad I always remember my fear of getting left alone in the dark corridor between the chapel and the schoolroom. I felt the same fear many times and was always relieved when we locked the heavy door and hid the key under a brick. What seemed to offer ‘certainty through service’ to the chapel that my father followed simply wasn’t for me as I began to break away from expectations that I would follow in his footsteps, as he had followed in his father’s shoes. Life was a-changing and the sense of escaping this entrapment was a freedom to savour. I still knew nothing of Chan, yet with hindsight, I can now see that the notion of impermanence was perhaps stirring in my continuing imaginings as I sought other ways ahead.

Looking up to, and getting amongst, the real mountains

Trekking from south to north across Nepal through the terai, across the middle hills and up into the foothills of the Himalaya, in the late autumn of 1979 was magical. It certainly channelled my desire to leave the largely flat landscape of home, where my imagination of being amongst high

peoples and places first stirred. Lest you think that this article is a mere travelogue, I do want to reinforce what I now realise to have been missing. Whilst my personal fitness goals were more than tested, I still lacked any appreciation of the place of spirituality in such locations. Even my diary entry below doesn't explore the significance of links between Buddhism, place, society and environment amongst these high places. The magnificence of *Dahlia imperialis* and *Ficus religiosa* provided village shade in the Middle Hills of Nepal. My diary for Sunday 18th November 1979 records 'The first sweated climb and then rest under a huge *Ficus religiosa*. We are heading for Okhaldunga and the Sun Kosi river'. I wonder now if the imagined villages in the clouds from the school bus window were those very places I trekked through that autumn forty years ago?

Going higher still to Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, India

I came to Ladakh (Little Tibet) in the summer of 1982 to study human adaptation to the harsh mountain environments, though without ever exploring the role of monastic life and the links to social structures and practices in such places. I remained profoundly ignorant of these matters, even though I professed to know something of how the modern world was beginning to impact on the economy and ecology in such out of the way places. Casting a glance back, I now see that these experiences were developing a foundation for future self-exploration that would involve opening my heart to fear and its challenges and opportunities.

I sat next to irrigation channels feeding melt-water through a system of storage ponds to barley and vegetable plots. Above me, deep-rooted thistles were growing where a gully had been created by sudden (and unusual) rain in this high-altitude desert. Below, a vivid green agricultural

landscape softened the blinding light of the mountainside. I was in this place as an adventurer, even though I often felt fearful of going too far off the tracks between village and monastery. Adventuring into myself still remained far off. I knew that even then, but could not approach it quite yet. My diary entry of Friday 9th July 1982 suggests that ... 'this trip will have an extremely significant role to play in shaping my future attitudes to the rest of my life'.

Enthralled by fantastic tales from the mountain

I have become increasingly interested in Buddhism (especially Chinese Zen) in the past eighteen months, and its relationship to specific places, through the writings of John Crook, the founder of the Western Chan Fellowship. Crook led the University of Bristol's major field expedition to Ladakh and Zangskar in 1980 to carry out wide-ranging research into all aspects of life in the Himalayan Buddhist villages. In 1959 he had looked up from the Vale of Kashmir to the then forbidden road to the Zoji-la pass toward Ladakh and recalls 'a caravan was descending between the mist-shrouded trees, and I dreamed of Leh.'³

My own dreaming still focused on seemingly fantastic tales of physical exertion and endurance sitting alongside arduous spiritual practice among such mountains. The writing of Alexandra David-Neel from her journeying across Asia over a fourteen-year period from 1910 describes her encounters with what she called 'psychic sports'. A whole chapter of her book is dedicated to stories of particular meetings with (and observations of) those practising feats that combined mental concentration with a variety of breathing gymnastics aiming at different results, some spiritual, some physical. These include almost unbelievable accounts of tramping at a rapid

pace over several days and nights to cover huge distances and the development and control of internal air in a technique called *tummo* – breathing for heat creation to keep warm in hermitages in winter mountains. These encounters sit next to an even more mind-boggling tale of David-Neel and her companion Yongden coming across a naked man with iron chains wrapping his body. Yongden identifies the man as a *lung-gom-pa* (an adherent of these training regimes) as he explains to his companion:

That man is a *lung-gom-pa*. I have already seen one like him. They wear these chains to make themselves heavy, for through the practice of *lung-gom*, their bodies have become so light that they are always in danger of floating in the air.⁴

The writings of David-Neel certainly excited my imagination and John Crook also refers to her in his joint writing with Tibetologist James Low.⁵ The following lengthy quotes from my diary help to chart the commencement of my own exploration of Chan Buddhism in very recent times. These quotes seem to have spurred me on to explore within myself to see what I might encounter *rather* than spending so much time exploring the journeys of others. In that sense they do set the context for the beginnings of my own internal investigations. They seem like the final flourishing of the easy work before the hard work really begins.

Trance walking:

One evening when we were trekking I found that one of our party was so far ahead of us that we could not call to him. In order to catch up with him I began walking faster. After a while, as my feet swept through the dust, I attained a flowing rhythm, which, with breath and pace integrated, became curiously effortless in spite of the altitude. After three

quarters of an hour I reached him and we arranged to stop for the night. As the tents were set up and I rested, my mind felt as light as a feather and filled with the spaces of the mountain. I could understand something of the practice of trance walking reported originally by Alexandra David-Neel whereby certain monks train in a walking meditation that enables them to cover vast distances at extraordinary speed. It no longer seemed to me to be such an improbable feat and the experience deepened my interest in such practices.⁶

Meeting the yogins:

One morning, I noticed two extraordinary figures descending the hillside. Their long dreadlocks and their robes were blowing in the wind and they had the rolling gait of those who travel far on foot in the mountains. At the sight of them I was struck by something exceptional in their demeanour and we invited them to take tea with us. They were by no means young and one of them had a pronounced tremor in his hands, yet their eyes shone with energy and their manners had the brightness of those who are alert to all that goes on around them and view it with amused tolerance. These two men had a psychological assurance, an inner certainty that was quite different from the scholarly attainments and logically organised faith of even a learned monk. I found it difficult to express in words what this quality was but I was to find it in several advanced meditators; if one word will do it is freedom.⁷

Breathing the air of Chan at Maenllywd

My first retreat with the Western Chan Fellowship was called Coping with the Everyday. I don't know exactly why, but I booked anyway.

Deliberately reading nothing prior to retreat, I decided that I would try to throw myself into whatever came up. What actually came up was unexpected. It seemed I was using the retreat opportunity to begin casting off huge quantities of emotional trauma related to the long-term, ongoing and often profound mental illness afflicting my wife. If I had taken a tear bucket with me that would have been useful. The farmhouse and Chan hall were nestled and protected by the east-facing slope of the grey mountain. Surrounded by giant ash and sycamore through which the wind roared at night, this seemed a magical place from the moment I secured the last farm gate and approached the sloping yard.

After Maenllywd – coming to myself through practice, group practice, reading and building

I returned filled with joy that I had found an avenue through which to develop my practice. I certainly saw the importance of regular sitting and also felt able to attend my local Chan group, which settled me down even further. My wife Kate said I returned buoyant, excited and enthused, alive and full of hope. The need to build a meditation cabin in the garden became all-consuming and my use of six-inch nails to anchor the structure kept my local ironmongers busy.

Returning to Maenllywd – looking at a wall as experiential investigation!

My next retreat was called Illuminating the Mind. This time I did read about silent illumination techniques that might provide support if the going were to get tough. It did. Master Sheng-yen talks about the practice of Chan being akin to:

...climbing a glass mountain. Furthermore, its surface is covered with oil, making it extremely slippery. If you try to climb it, there is no way you will not slide down! Nonetheless, this is the task before you.⁸

Stepping up and sliding down with frequent regularity needed to be countered by steadiness and trustful steadfastness in our teachers. I did trust their instruction and committed myself to practice in what was an arduous, unrelenting and utterly demanding encounter. The woodworm-riddled supporting beam of the wall of the Chan Hall became my theatre of visions and movement. My brain filled the developing emptiness with moving images of Max our dog and this was followed by a three-dimensional shore scene with crabs riding the surf, long alligator-like creatures and squid amongst the waves. As the light faded I noticed how the candles began to cast a huge silhouette onto the wall above the beam. This was my silhouette.

On leaving the hall I watched one of the group walking down the sloping yard of grey, sticky mud. I heard them making very low, guttural sounds that were animal-like in their ancient-sounding insistence. I felt as though I was on the set of Peter Greenaway's sumptuous, glorious and yet bewildering *Prospero's Books*. The image of Caliban, the deboshed fish, has come to me just now. When the retreat reached its conclusion I asked the person whom I had clearly heard making those animal-like noises what they signified. They looked at me bemused and askance. I was genuinely surprised by their response and so said nothing more at that moment.

The daily walking and gazing on this retreat provided yet more noticing of nature outside of the rigours of the sitting practice. From the intense cold on the hands before dawn, to the startling clarity of the dawn itself on the hills backlit by the rising sun, the mist-filled

valley on another dawn and the sky bedecked with stars some nights and filled with scudding cloud on others. From the green of the mole-hills on the field boundaries, to the sound of my breath on the steep and sometimes frozen farm track high above the retreat. Perhaps beyond this noticing was the twilight din of hundreds of starlings coming together to prod the pasture for food and thereafter surging up into the oak to continue their chattering. Suddenly they were coming across to my left and I hoped they might rest again so I could see them better at close quarters. They all disappeared and were gone for the night, out of my eye or earshot. Meanwhile, in the dining hall, my gaze fell on the whole of the plastic tablecloth covered in culinary herbs, rather than just the oregano illustration surrounding my bread-crumbed plate.

A wider picture of things seemed to be emerging. These sitting and walking experiences suggested to me that my brain was acting to fill these new spaces of potential illumination as counter to the threat of developing stillness. My mind-set seemed to be shifting.

I really did not have a clue what was going on here, but let it all wash through and over me as I longed for a cup of tea and a piece of cake. The stripping back of the befuddlement created by anxious over-thinking in my everyday life at home was being replaced by something that allowed me to see things differently. These encounters were new and helpful, if totally unexpected moments to take back with me. I asked my wife Kate to offer some thoughts here too and she suggested that I seemed to have been stimulated on a different level by this retreat. She used the words frightened, regretful and resigned to describe my current difficulties of accepting my life next to



BUDDHA AT MAENLLWYD, WALES

her illness. Yet she saw me entering a period of transition to another place.

Chan as supportive bridge – facing fear and supporting others better whatever arises

I feel sure that for many of us able to stay well (thus far) during the enforced great pause during the time of the coronavirus, a range of emotions from joy to deeply rooted anxiety and fear have surfaced. I mentioned to Joe as I practised ‘socially distanced’ gardening for his mum that I had visited Ladakh in 1982. His eyes lit up and he emerged some weeks later with Andrew Harvey’s account of his journey there the year before. Harvey recounts two moments, which resonated strongly within me. One was his trip on the bus to Stok, ten miles outside Leh, where he says:

I have come to Stok to see the Palace of the Rani of Stok, but as soon as I am standing in front of it I do not want to go in. To be out here, in this light, with all the day before me, and to go into those small rooms . . . I want to walk, to walk up the trail in the mountains, to be alone with the mountains and the summer streams in the valley.⁹

My own reaction when I arrived in Stok on foot in the intense heat and startling brightness of the Indus valley in midsummer was remarkably similar. I guess that Harvey was not fearful of going into the palace, but simply preferred to be up the mountain. I think I was afraid of some kind of entrapment once more or maybe I merely had a desire to rest in the shade that day. I truly cannot remember.

The second moment seemed genuinely fearful for him as he went to a turbulent, communal healing encounter with an Oracle. He recalls:

I realised too that witnessing the Oracle’s violence, and now exploring the range of fears it had awoken in me, was an extraordinary opportunity - an opportunity for a clarity that included violence and did not seek refuge from it, that could contain without judgment a knowledge of what that violence was, and what the distress it caused me revealed to me that I had left unhealed and unexamined in myself, I had wanted to repress the violence that I knew came from my mother and grandmother: by repressing that violence I was also repressing the wisdom that was hidden in its fire. I understood too, that part of my love for Eastern philosophy had been a desire to have done with that inner violence once and for all, to live beyond it in a harmless serenity. But no true transformation can be achieved by a neurotic refusal of a whole side of the psyche; I could not progress, I saw, until I no longer used my love for the East as a way of pretending to myself that I was not violent and not destructive. I began to understand that night, for the first time, the inner usefulness, the psychological value, of the Terrible Deities painted for meditation purposes on the walls of the gompas. I saw that in their frank portrayal of the horror of anger, desire, greed, and lust for power, they did not merely terrify the on-looker, they gave him an opportunity to confront those parts of his energies which he was repressing, to confront, understand and master them, to turn them, as the Oracle has turned her hysteria, into a power to heal.¹⁰

I am not a Buddhist scholar like Harvey, but nonetheless his writing has been deeply influential in taking my own thinking and practice forward. The two examples provided me with further momentum to approach my own fears, as well as finding a clearer direction in what I

see as the unfinished business of this life. Coming to Chan has given me much thus far and has continued through further engagements with some of the final writings of John Crook. In particular, his pre-science at the end of his book on the potential role of Buddhist humanism in supporting the growth of what he calls transformative education:

An education capable of counteracting the beguiling attractions of worldwide consumerism will have to be fundamental providing not only a fresh world view of global application but also including practices in economics and psychology that fulfil not only human needs but also meet human aspirations for a fulfilling life.¹¹

Perhaps even more tellingly, he argues that such a shift to a new order of things:

...will be difficult to achieve because addiction to a seeming self-fulfilment through the acquisition of ego enhancing commodities or to security through superstition has become so deeply rooted.¹²

Furthermore, and finally, he argues that:

The answer is perhaps only another great tragedy, a catastrophe sufficient to collapse the old order and bring on the new - a unified planet running on hydrogen, eco-literate and attempting to restore the terrible damage of the last two centuries, democratically structured round an United Nations government and with effective forums for resolving conflict, a self-aware world of which we at this time can only dream.¹³

I do not know if the time of coronavirus through which we are all living right now is that moment of catastrophe. I do know that my brief encounters with Chan during the last couple of years has taken me to a rich ground of experience, practice, literature, thought and action which has taken me beyond external adventures and explorations into a new world of direct encounters within myself. These have included my sense of needing to continue teaching about nature and gardening, using Chan practice as personal guide and support for myself and others. I still don't know much about Chan, but my journey into myself has truly started.

Heinrich Harrer took a photo of the Zangskar River in Ladakh where the waters make their way to join the Indus. It shows two men crossing the fast-flowing greenish melt-water on a structure described by Harrer as 'a primitive bridge over the River Sangskar, a precarious contraption of osier shoots, birch twigs and rope'.¹⁴ For me, it looks really sophisticated in its use of local materials to allow human communication across the river valley. As a metaphor for my journey into myself through Chan, it helps me to feel the range of emotions, many unexpected, that have arisen thus far.

I have reached this point recognising that I need to be open to all emotions that arise; that my path to peace within may lead through hell and that love is indeed having the heart touched in the valleys of suffering. The landscapes of fear written about by Yi-fu Tuan¹⁰ has also re-emerged from my bookshelves to reaffirm my own need to also engage with fear as a potential way of achieving ongoing personal growth.

NOTES

- 1 Child S. *New Chan Forum* Winter 2018 No. 57 p7: The Five Skandhas. Western Chan Fellowship.
- 2 Pema Chödrön 1991 Renunciation Like a Raven in the Wind. *Tricycle – the Buddhist Review*.
- 3 Crook J. H. and Osmaston H (Eds.) 1994 p xv *Himalayan Buddhist Villages – Environment, Resources, Society and Religious Life in Zangskar, Ladakh*. University of Bristol.
- 4 David-Neel A. 2007 p169 *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. Souvenir Press.
- 5 Crook J. H. and Low J; 1997 *The Yogins of Ladakh – A Pilgrimage Among the Hermits of the Buddhist Himalayas*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers PVT LTD.
- 6 op cit
- 7 op cit
- 8 Master Sheng-Yen and Dr John H. Crook 2002 *Illuminating Silence – Insights on the Path of Chinese Zen*. Watkins.
- 9 Harvey A. 1984 *A Journey in Ladakh*. Fontana Paperbacks, London.
- 10 op cit
- 11 Crook J. H. 2009 *World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism – End Games: Collapse or Renewal of Civilisation*. New Age Books, New Delhi.
- 12 op cit
- 13 op cit
- 14 Harrer H. 1988 (Reprinted). *Ladakh: Gods and Mortals Behind the Himalayas*. Himalayan Books New Delhi.

POEM: STILLNESS

LAURENCE SMITH

open summerhouse
 lemon morning haze

dawning stillness
 in the bay

the sea's breathing
 deeply drawn

the magnification of surf
 spreads out to naught

unbounded pause
 between the now and then
 before a thought
 darts a spry

wren

landing on my head

standing

the feather touch, the tickle
 puts a smile
 upon the Buddha

conjuring

an oceanic sparkle to the day

HAIBUN: WALK SIT WALK

WILL TURNER

Down the steps by the bridge the environment changes. Town roads are left behind; the flowing Dart meets the eyes and ears. The footpath, after weeks of hopping and skipping to dodge the mud, is now dry.

Primrose flowers are fading; masses of wild garlic are about to bloom and river-side willows are in full flower. Just visible through the trees, a mute swan sits on a nest, protected by her nearby mate.

The river flows greenly south, high after last night's full moon; it carries flotillas of organic matter, logs, branches and twigs, all of a lovely tangle.

Full moon tide flow

Debris carried out to sea

Willow flowering.

A little further along is a low-lying area which floods, the water covering the just visible marsh marigolds; their bright yellow flowers reflect the morning sun. Across the flow, Snipe Island is home to a flock of Canada geese; their honking carries across the quiet locked-down town as they fly down the river at dusk.

Reaching the weir I sit on a branch to watch mandarin ducks on the far bank, their exotic plumage not out of place among the verdant green of new growth.

In this activity I am still, just present. The words of my koan from January's Western Zen Retreat come to mind: 'Tell me what freedom is.' Who needs the words?

It is time. I've had my exercise quota. I return through the town, past the closed shops and the no-market square, past the empty Golden Buddha Centre, also closed for the duration.

Interesting times

No folk arrive for practice

Next door the cherry tree blooms.

Up through the Chicken Run woods homewards.

THE SURANGAMA SUTRA

JULIET HACKNEY, KITTY D'COSTA, HUGH CARROLL AND ALYSUN JONES

A Western Chan Fellowship Dharma study group reflect together on this influential manual for spiritual practice

We are a small group who want to deepen our knowledge and practice through studying the Buddhist sutras.

Why study the Surangama Sutra?

This sutra, the *Sutra of the Indestructible*, is almost as popular in China as the *Lotus Sutra*. It is also up there with the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It is in fact one of the early texts to be given to newly ordained Chan monks. It is one of a special set of sutras called *Dharma Paryayas*, 'transformative teachings' that function to transform those who hear or recite them in traditional ritual ways. We found studying it transformative, and really recommend it.

Kitty writes: "Reading and studying the *Surangama Sutra* is like recognising an old friend among a crowd of people. As a Mahayana sutra it claims all kind of powers, including the power to protect in the time of danger: "But in any area where this mantra exists, all such calamities are prevented". Sharing the sutra with dharma buddies is like being in a warm cocoon filled with light or like being a point in Indra's net with four glowing jewels."

Juliet adds: "I enjoyed discovering the story and teachings in the *Surangama Sutra*. It really is a superb read, which I enjoyed sharing with our dharma friend Sophie Muir, while we were away trekking together

last year. Putting together presentations for our study group really helped me to ensure that I understood the details and could convey them to my friends. However, just as Ananda discovers in the early part of the sutra, understanding and practice need to go hand in hand in order to move along the path towards liberation. The text needs to be read for oneself and practice needs to be done by oneself to fully reap the benefits."

Why is the sutra little known in the West?

The original sutra is only available in 8th century Chinese and is written in a 4-character metered prose. In order to conform to this style, translators were forced to omit characters essential to meaning and also rare characters, allowing ambiguities of meaning which made allusions to doctrines that were not explained. The translation that we read, from the Buddhist Text Translation Society, was very approachable and had really helpful excerpts from the commentary by Venerable Master Hsuan Hua.

Synopsis of the sutra

The sutra begins with Ananda on his alms round. He is going to the poorer part of town (unlike some of the other monks who favour the food of the richer quarters!). Whilst on his rounds, a courtesan confuses him by reciting a spell and attempts to seduce him. She is pretty successful, but just in the nick of time Shakyamuni senses his distress and causes a Buddha to appear where Ananda is, and to recite the *Surangama Sutra*. As belt and braces, Manjushri is sent along to break the spell of the courtesan. Ananda is very upset by what has happened and requests instruction in the Dharma so he can avoid future transgressions.

1. The Nature and Location of the Mind

Buddha asks Ananda where his mind is. He leads him, by way of logic, to conclude that his mind is neither inside his body, nor outside, nor in between, nor anywhere else. Buddha distinguishes between our ordinary mind and our true mind, which is our real nature and identical to the awakened mind of all buddhas.

Kitty writes: “In the first part of the sutra, the Buddha uses the logic of his time to demonstrate emptiness to Ananda. I was fascinated by the logical arguments, which consisted of syllogisms and tetralemma, and my first presentation to the group was on this subject. It enabled me to explore a subject which I was drawn to, while also drawing out the insights and views provided by our dharma study group.”

2. The Nature of Visual Awareness

The Buddha demonstrates that visual awareness does not move although objects move in and out of it. This is also true too for all the other senses... touch, hearing, taste, smell and (the sixth sense in Buddhist theory) the thoughts in our mind. Obviously, in our normal way of perceiving the world, we are in the world and reach out to it with our senses and mind. Now, the Buddha instructs us to disentangle our awareness from its objects and to separate ourselves from the conditioned (*Saha*) world.

3. Why on Earth Would we Want to Stop Paying Attention to our Conditioned World?

To start with, our involvement leads inevitably to dissatisfaction and suffering. Secondly, if that’s not enough, the Buddha tells us, the condi-

tioned world is not real. It’s an illusion, although the illusions all come from the Matrix of the Thus-Come-One, (the Buddhas) and are not separate from it. Fundamentally, everything that comes and goes, that comes into being and ceases to be, is within the true Matrix of the Thus-Come-One, which is the wondrous, everlasting understanding – the unmoving, all-pervading, wondrous suchness of reality.

How do we move from the True mind into illusion? Illusion all begins with our dividing of our reality into self and other / observer and observed. In fact, reality is unified. There is a disturbing parable of Yajnadatta. He falls in love with a face, with perfectly clear features, that he sees in the mirror one morning and supposes he must have lost his own head. He goes mad.

Kitty continues: “My second presentation was on the creation story provided in the sutra. The creation story begins describing how adding an ‘understanding’ to enlightenment results in the differentiated world and the separation we experience. This section resonated with the Chan practice of let it be, let it through, let it go.”

4. Instructions in Practice

The Buddha instructs us to focus our sense faculties from outward (our default mode) to inward. In other words, to detach the sense faculty from its objects. What then remains is pure awareness without an object.

Hugh writes: “For me the most interesting part of the sutra is the idea of ‘reversing the senses’, particularly that of hearing. We are more used to the language of ‘host’ and ‘guest’, but this idea of paying attention to that which attends as a reversal of the normal direction, from inner to outer, I find very useful.”

5. Which of the Faculties of Perception are Best to Direct Inwards?

Some twenty-five of our best loved Bodhisattvas and sages (including Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Sariputra) relate their enlightenment stories and advise on which sense provides the best method for getting enlightened.

Avalokiteshvara, not surprisingly, focuses on sound, and this comes out as the best method overall.

Juliet writes: “I enjoyed preparing a presentation on Avalokiteshvara's experience: *“I redirected my hearing inward... my awareness and the objects of my awareness were emptied ... then even that emptying and what had been emptied vanished ... Then ultimate stillness was revealed.”* The commentary encourages us to listen to our true nature: *“What is your true nature? When you hear it you will recognise it... After you have listened within, your mind and the enlightened nature of hearing will eventually merge. And then in some unexpected way, at some unexpected moment, you will suddenly become enlightened.”*”

6. Purity

In this section we are reminded that, along with meditation, the practice of the precepts is essential. The two go hand in hand.

7. The Mantra

The mantra is written in Chinese. Kitty was able to find various recordings of the mantra being chanted, which were a joy to listen to. As Kitty pointed out earlier, the mantra claims many positive benefits to those who chant and those who hear it.

8. Levels of Being

This is a lengthy section which serves as a road map for bodhisattvas becoming Buddha. There are sixty stages. Hugh found the theme of as-

piration to become a bodhisattva and Buddha to be really inspirational.

The section begins with some wonderful instruction: *“So, although you might want to return to the Truth (from ignorance), this is falseness. Do NOT add understanding to your enlightened understanding. Just dispense with ignorance”.* (Simple!)

Here is a description of some of the stages along the way. They are beautifully written: *“As they become steadfast in this Wisdom and its light, their minds extend everywhere in clarity and stillness – a stillness that is wondrous, constant and unchanging”* *“They abide in the unconditioned and will no longer lose ground.”*

The chapter ends with some additional practices for the bodhisattvas on the brink of supreme enlightenment. The images are very touching: *“They are like a piece of wood smouldering when it is being drilled.”*

“They are like a person standing on the summit of a mountain with hardly any solid ground beneath his (her) feet.”

“They are like someone who endures something which cannot be repressed yet cannot be expressed.”

9. Fifty Demonic States of Mind

Juliet writes: “The chapter describes in detail various states which may occur at different points in practice and how to avoid being diverted by them. The practitioner needs to be aware of these states, to see them for what they are and to take no notice. At the end there is a wonderful piece about the experience of *“full illumination of that refined state of mind... You will attain the perfection of full awakening, in which there is nothing that is attained.”* I find it completely wonderful that at the end there is nothing that is attained. That is true freedom.

Final comments

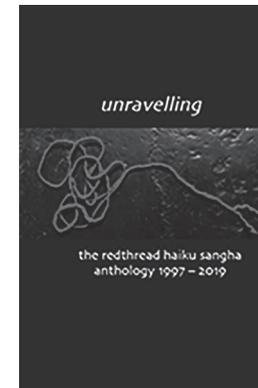
This sutra has an amazing ability to speak to us today and at this time. We all derived great benefit from reading and discussing it. Obviously, it is of its time too. We did find the stress on the importance of celibacy not very useful or applicable, and similarly the need to avoid members of the onion family (as they increase anger and sexual appetite according to the text). Some of us found the threats of demonic hells rather distasteful.

Hugh found this sutra, in common with Mahayana sutras generally, way too heavy on the ‘outer path’ type of discourse, requiring subtlety to get around the ‘blind faith’ aspects of religion with a capital R to focus on the helpful parts.

Overall though, we would urge you to give it a go. You won’t be disappointed.

BOOK REVIEW: UNRAVELLING – ANTHOLOGY OF THE REDTHREAD HAIKU SANGHA 1997 – 2019

EDDY STREET



Of the art forms that are associated with Zen the writing of haiku is the most accessible. Surely anyone can write a brief three-line verse which pointedly does not rhyme. But it is not as easy as that; it requires a motivation to express what is arising and a self at ease to allow the clarity of that expression. The Redthread Sangha is a group of Zen practitioners who between themselves have shared their writing of haiku and haibuns, with our own sangha providing a number of members. After many years of joint practice they have now produced this anthology in which, rather than ‘unravelling’, they pull together the best of their work.

In haiku there is a ‘showing’ – a ‘showing’ in which there is absence – of what? Of the writer? Of the reader? Of the object? Of the intention? And then after its reading just nothing is required. In this anthology the different authors, as one would expect, offer differing styles and foci of their showing. Consequently, in its reading, there is no journey to follow, only the intimate meeting of several people in their expressive endeavours. But, as one would anticipate in a collection of haiku by meditators, there is the quiet simplicity that is a feature of the contemplative perspective, with many of the pieces referring to retreat and other contexts familiar to New Chan Forum readers:

Faded moths

hang in cobwebs

– North barn ghosts

Jane Spray

Amongst the appendices is an excellent piece by the late Ken Jones on guidelines for writing haiku and, given this instruction and the variety of work that can be consulted in this volume, in its own way the book offers an opportunity to try out a composition and take inspiration from its authors. It is indeed a volume that induces thoughtfulness and reflection. And the title: well it comes from a verse in the contribution from Noragh Jones entitled Death Haiku – For Ken:

funeral tea

Ken's ghost flitting, knitting up

our unravelling selves

Noragh Jones

And there is a contribution from Ken himself:

Small noise in the empty house

something shifting

to how it needs to be

Ken Jones

Unravelling: Anthology of the Redthread Haiku Sangha 1997–2019, Edited by Jim Norton. The book can be obtained by contacting the publishers: info@albapublishing.com

MEMORIES OF MAENLLWYD

In September this year (2020) the Western Chan Fellowship will cease using Maenllwyd, a remote farmhouse in mid-Wales, as its main retreat centre. We will instead be using a more central venue, in a wild and beautiful area of the Peak District National Park, with improved accessibility and other facilities. Our connection with Maenllwyd goes back many years. It was owned by John Crook, our much loved and respected founding Teacher, and holds dear memories for many of us. We share some of them below.



Photo: Michael Croker

Silent Ruminations by Nick Salt

Standing at the door of Maenllwyd on a damp November afternoon we watched the convoy of cars winding its way up the track from the village. This was the Radnorshire Planning Committee on its way to carry out a “site inspection” in the middle of a Chan retreat, and we were ready for them.

John Crook had been wrongly advised about planning permission for the old barn at Maenllwyd and had asked me to go ahead without it for the design and conversion into a new Chan Hall for the retreat centre. After completion a planning officer arrived to find out what was happening, following a malicious anonymous telephone call. John was later asked to make a formal application for retrospective planning permission, and eventually the Planning Committee decided to defer their decision “pending a site inspection”.

Out in the yard they listened to John’s careful introduction to Maenllwyd, in which he skilfully skirted around controversial words like ‘Buddhism’, ‘meditation’ and ‘silence’ (“mustn’t frighten the horses” he said). We then filed into the Chan Hall, where the retreatants were sitting in perfect silence. The Members seemed to be impressed and tiptoed around with reverence. “Please tell me”, I was asked in a low whisper, “why are some people facing the wall?” Had they done something wrong?

Back outside we were explaining the principles of the composting toilets when a smile of recognition spread across the face of one of the older Members. “There’s nothing new about all that”, he said, “it’s just the same as the old ‘ty bach’ we had down the bottom of the garden when I was a lad.” This realisation opened up a flood of childhood memories about their ‘privvies’. “We would tear up the Radnorshire Express into squares to hang on a piece of string behind the door.” “Ours never smelled bad, and it was the only place you could get a bit of peace.” The ice had been broken.

Back at the house Tim had laid on tea and cake, and when the Committee was happily settled John asked for questions. We were well prepared for all the usual practical concerns. After a thoughtful silence a cautious hand went up: “Excuse me Doctor, but could you please tell me if your religion has a god?” It was one of the few times that I ever saw John Crook struggle for

an answer, but he soon recovered his poise and managed to put together a brief introduction to Buddhism.

Other hands shot up. “How often do you meditate?” “Is meditation the same as prayer?” “Why do you sit on the floor?” “Are there many Buddhists in Wales?” “Do Buddhists recognise Christ?” John answered with his usual care and tact, and the kitchen filled with genuine interest, goodwill and extra cups of tea. They had obviously got their teeth into something intriguing.

The visit was over, and an impromptu meeting took place down on the road. The local Member, a retired farmer, came over for a chat. “We were just saying that it was one of the best site inspections we have ever had”, he said. “Who would have thought that such interesting things were going on in the hills of Radnorshire?” I sensed a genuine sympathy for what they had just discovered was actually happening up at Maenllwyd, as opposed to the local rumours. “And by the way, the Members asked me to thank the Doctor for the very nice tea and cake”.

Two weeks later the official planning approval arrived, confirming the ‘change of use’ of the Maenllwyd barn from ‘agricultural’ to ‘a training facility’ (John’s careful words). A simple barn constructed long ago to shelter cows, sheep and ponies had outlived its original purpose, and had been transformed into a space where others could sit in silent rumination beneath the ancient oak timbers. I have always believed that buildings have spirits, and that here we had somehow managed to guide this one on into its next life through the *bardos* of redundancy, change of ownership, design proposals, planning permission, demolitions and building works. But now even a much loved Chan Hall cannot escape impermanence.

Cooking For Maenllwyd Retreats by Pamela Butler

My memories include the whole rhythm of a retreat from planning and ordering the menu, driving the car-load of food, unpacking and putting everything away, the kitchen crammed then gradually emptying out, the way the kitchen assistants always turned into a swift and efficient team and worked so hard and so willingly.

Walking out of the Chan Hall, across the yard and into the silent house. The birds and a little squirrel face peeped out by the eaves, just above the drainpipe, then quickly withdrew like a naughty little child spotting a teacher. The changing weather and the landscape in all seasons glimpsed from windows and doors as I raced through the house, or fetched milk from the stream, watching the tiny birds that nest in the bank outside the kitchen window, the rabbit that once burrowed in the garden outside the back door. Once, rats took up residence, in the staircase via a drain. I sat with a cup of tea and watched one scurry out and drag a piece of rice cake loaded with porridge out of the compost bin and across the floor; that was a worrying retreat. Birds sang, squirrels raced along the roof of the Chan Hall. I walked outside often, leaving the meditators silent inside. I remember the human warmth that was present during the mealtimes.

How time rolls along! I glance at the clock and know how many tasks I can fit into that precise number of minutes. The tasks that must be done run through my head and then I enquire into the extras that can fit in - mix the bread dough, line the cake tin, weigh out the ingredients, but put them aside to mix later. A sense of time precise and fluid but never ending.

How the shops in the neighbourhood changed over the years! When I started cooking at Maenllwyd there was the Spar shop and greengrocers in Rhyader selling cheese and very ordinary onions. Fruit was apples mainly.

By the time I finished I could buy local handmade cheese; there was a well-stocked food co-op and a wholefood shop in Llani. I could buy local artisan bread.

The kitchen, dim lit and mysterious through the archway, was always a special place. Smells of cooking wafted out among the wood-smoke and incense, telling of the comfort of good food after arduous sessions on the cushion. I had been coming to the Maenllwyd for five years, knowing only Tim's magisterial presence in the kitchen, when amid the announcements at the end of a retreat was a call-out for more cooks. I went to speak to Tim before driving home. He thought I could do it and said he would be happy to train me. I said I would think about it. Next morning, I was still in my dressing gown when the postman rang to deliver a late Christmas parcel from my brother. It contained a large stainless-steel teapot and a book on vegetarian cooking! I rang Tim.

I had always enjoyed cooking, worked shifts in my local bookshop café. Learning to cook in the Maenllwyd kitchen was all about timing and learning the hundreds of little jobs – just how long the Rayburn took to bake a dish (oh those half-raw stuffed aubergines!), how important it was to rotate the oven contents as the top shelf and the side next to the fire were significantly hotter (when baking bread, the tins had to be rotated every 15 minutes). I had to learn how to light the paraffin lamps (stay calm), where to place a ladle, exactly how many things had to be placed on the tables for each meal. Learning how to light each of the calor gas heaters in the refectory (each one slightly different), keeping an eye on the fire, ensuring the Rayburn never went out. I loved it all.

It was the hardest work I have ever done. From getting up at 5am and riddling the Rayburn, to the final sweep and wipe round the sink at 8pm,

there was always another job to do. I would take a 40-minute break mid-afternoon and fall instantly into deep sleep. In summer the deep grass up the hill at the bend in the track was the best place for a rest, after the time I fell asleep in the back garden and awoke to find the rest of the retreat solemnly sitting in meditation around me. Sometimes in the last sits at the end of the evening my legs would twitch non-stop with exhaustion, my mind racing with lists of jobs to be done; other times, my mind was as quiet as the silent kitchen.

Tim planned my training by suggesting we cooked together for the first three days. On day 2 I cooked lunch alone; on day 3 I cooked supper alone. Tim would come over from the Chan Hall an hour or 30 minutes before the meal and race around completing all the jobs I'd missed or forgotten about. Gradually he withdrew. Midway through the retreat a wonderful thing happened. I started to fly. Cooking became meditation.

I was lighting the oil lamps on the refectory altar and I thought "I'm losing touch with the sacred". From that moment it started to change.

I requested an interview with Simon. I wanted to talk over with him how you could keep in touch with the meditative mind, while learning lots of things, being very organised and efficient and with a hundred other tasks all pressing for space. We talked about the previous Mahamudra retreat and I told him about the Chenrezig sadhana. From that developed the notion of being Chenrezig cutting the carrots.

I was in the kitchen preparing supper: courgettes and carrots with avgolemono / bulgar salad. The house was quiet. I knew how I wanted the vegetables to be - even though I had never made this sauce before. I knew how I wanted the salad to be. There were bowls of prepared vegetables, chopped garlic. I chose and chopped the herbs I wanted to use. I knew where the oils

and other things I needed were. I got them down from the shelves. I was Chenresig preparing supper.

You could cook for a retreat without any understanding of what people might be going through - I suppose. But I don't think it could mean anything like as much if you didn't have some idea of what people go through on retreat. I found it very moving to see the glum, silent crew shuffle into the refectory and I would hope from the bottom of my heart that they would find the food as satisfying and comforting as I always had.

Just as the cook cannot know what is going on for the glum and silent crew who shuffle in to the refectory, I suppose no one else can know just what is going on for the cook as grace is said and food begins to be served.

The little ritual associated with this developed in strength and potency as the week progressed. Lighting incense in front of Guru Rinpoche's picture became a prayer of thankfulness that the meal was prepared and ready, and a prayer that it would nourish and comfort everybody in the way that they most needed.

Taking the offering outside to the statue of Tara became a heartfelt offering of the best that I can be. A private offering of all that had brought the meal to be, while behind me there's the bustle and clatter of everyone being served. John sometimes talked about 'spirits of place' and the protection they provide. I am sure that these beings protect the cooks. They challenge us, make us work our socks off, but somehow, the retreats are always fed, the meals always reach the table. All the Maenllwyd cooks I have known and been so privileged to work with - Tim, Pete, Miche, Sean, Florencia, Ian - and the cooks who carry on the tradition now and into the future will know that it is a great privilege to support the life-changing, world-changing work that meditators take on, alone on their cushions.



photo: Simon Child

One time John came into the kitchen where I was working and said to me “You radiate happiness.”

Personal Recollections by Susan Blackmore

December 1981 was cold, the temperature was -17 C and the Welsh lanes mere narrow gaps between 15 foot walls of snow. On my third attempt in the dark, I finally found Philip’s farm but could get no further. Then, with huge relief, saw two lights coming down the hill. It was John and Roger, with a spare walking stick for me, and we struggled up to the house together – my first view of Maenllwyd and I was seven months pregnant. I wrote in my diary that we sat with the others, “a fire burning, in the intense cold, a supper of scrambled eggs and then the ominous noises of dripping as the thawing exposed all the cracked pipes. So there’s to be no Rayburn, and no running water, and a lot of clearing up to do!” I was let off fetching water from the stream. As all of us ‘old-timers’ remember, we slept under the roof of what is now the refectory. An owl flew in and out through holes in the roof and snow gently blew onto our sleeping bags. Sitting in the Buddha room with only a paraffin heater for warmth we could see our own breath in the cold air. Even so, I wrote that, despite my fears, the meditation was “neither cold nor boring”. I had many struggles and tough times but that intense and dramatic first retreat set me off on a lifetime of sitting at Maenllwyd. How I will miss the place!!

Personal Recollections by Hebe Welbourn

It was getting dark as we drove across the fields up to Maenllwyd, in 2010, and I remember feeling so happy to be coming home yet again. I had been on many retreats there and loved the place. Going into the Chan Hall was wonderful. Unfortunately, it was to be my last retreat. That first evening I fell

badly on the unlit, uneven, staircase. My confused memory is of stepping clumsily into what felt like a bottomless hole in the floor – but it wasn't bottomless because I actually fell and badly scraped both my arms and a leg. Dan, the Guestmaster, kindly drove me to hospital in Aberystwyth. We had a marvellous conversation, in the car and then in the hospital waiting room, about everything under the sun, and I refused to put my mind into the pain so it didn't really hurt. I continued the retreat, and had a beautiful week, spending much of my time lying on my bed. But I haven't been back to Maenllwyd.

Personal Recollections by Cynthia Morgan

Memories of my first few retreats at Maenllwyd are, primarily, of:

- incredible bodily discomfort (instant constipation on seeing that there was only one flush toilet, and the alternative was being poised paranoically on a thunderbox in a draughty barn, situated too far away from the door to hold it shut with a foot or stick),
- great joy at the quality of Tim's cooking and the humanity of cake in the afternoon,
- instant attachment to John Crook, who seemed like the essence of kindness to me,
- instant attachment to Tim, who gave me coffee to ease the sick headaches caused by its withdrawal,
- a great love of the silence that came when we all sat on our *zafus* and silently illuminated (or slept or wept),
- the joy of dancing in the field, primal screaming, and falling on our backs to look up at the sky and become absorbed into a world of clouds, sunshine, birdsong, and the odour of sheepshit,

- running up the hill in the morning with the John Crook's "thoughts for the day" revolving in my mind. Wish I could still run...
- feeling as high as a kite most of the time, and determined to give up smoking and start a more earnest meditation practice when I left. This did not happen.

I haven't made it to a retreat for quite a few years now, but I hold it in my heart always. It made me cry when I read that the retreats would no longer be held there – seems as if I never did learn the art of letting go.

Personal Recollections by Marian Partington

Pondering my experience of the buildings and landscape of Maenllwyd (grey rock), two trees come to mind. Firstly, one of the two sentinel Scots pine trees on the ridge above the Chan Hall. It had lost a large limb during a storm, leaving a raw stump jutting out of its side. As I lay back on the dead, scaly branch, its wrenching from the strong trunk soaring above me came alive. It resonated deeply during the early days of grieving for the traumatic loss of my sister. The whole rhythm of the tree was altered without the balance of its severed limb. The tree was wounded and yet continuing. There was a connection that brought acceptance and insight into the reality that every violent death affects the rhythm and sway of our shared humanity and indeed the fabric of all forms of life in the universe that we are growing and dying in. The need for gentleness, compassion, healing and forgiveness for this state of woundedness, caused by the three poisons, became clear. The Buddhist vows took root. Secondly, fourteen years later, there was the old hawthorn tree which stands alone, remarkably upright, on the hillside above Maenllwyd. A natural landmark and resting place, offering a bird's eye view across the valley to the spacious eastern horizon. An assembly of family,

friends and disciples of John Crook (*Chuan-deng Jing di*) made their way up the hill, gathering around its roots and trunk, beneath the shelter of its branches and late summer leaves. He had chosen this place for the second ritual of scattering of a portion of his powdered bones. The Tibetan horn was extended like a telescope, its belled mouth resting on a convenient shoulder, its mouthpiece a few paces away. The hollowed human thigh bone and two conch shells were blown. Tibetan bells were rung. This orchestra of Tibetan instruments filled the air with an ancient monastic cacophony, blasting through time and space, honouring the life of a Chan Master. John's sister, two children and grandchildren circled the tree, casting his remains to the wind. Thank you Maenllwyd, grey rock, for letting 'the universe do it'.

Personal Recollections by Mike Masheder

I met John Crook in the 1980s but for family reasons did not go on retreat at the Maenllwyd until 1994. It was a Western Zen Retreat, as usual for a first retreat. I didn't know what to expect but I know it was a wonderful boost to my understanding of Zen/Chan. It was a bit tough for me physically because I had been offered 3 weeks of astronomical telescope time at Jodrell Bank. Fortunately I was able to leave the work with a student but on retreat I was well jet-lagged, having got used to working from 10am until 2 or 3am most days! However, I coped remarkably well and the experience was transforming inasmuch as it felt like the first stepping stone.

Over the years I attended many retreats there. I always found them hard going, not so much from the psychological or spiritual point of view but mainly the physical side of the regime. By the end of the first full day I would always be promising myself to never let myself do this again. Eventually I learned to just say to myself: "Ah Mike, there you go again". There were a

number of important turning moments: one time when I was being troubled by memories that I thought I had left behind, in an interview with John, he simply said – with exquisite timing: "Oh come on now, it's the fifth day and time to drop all that"; my heart and mind heard "it's the fifth decade and time to drop all that". Those memories have not troubled me since. A moment to treasure.

It was good that my late wife Sally and I were able to share our Chan experience – though never on retreat together. I continue to be so grateful to John and the Western Chan Fellowship folk for the extraordinary event when we scattered Sally's ashes at Dogen's Cairn just above Maenllwyd.



PHOTO: SIMON CHILD



About Us

Chan is the Chinese ancestor of Zen Buddhism. The Western Chan Fellowship is an association of non-monastic practitioners – a lay sangha – based in the UK and with contacts elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to Buddhists and non-Buddhists, and we welcome everyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, class or disability. Our new retreat and meditation centre in central England – to be opened shortly – includes fully accessible accommodation.

Visit our Website

www.westernchanfellowship.org

Our website includes:

- Introductory articles on Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation
- talks by Chan masters
- reports by participants at our retreats
- details of activities and events, including our retreat programme
- back-issues of this journal
- contacts for local meditation groups

Contacting Us

To contact any of the Officers of the WCF please go to:

www.westernchanfellowship.org/contacts/committee-and-officers

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

www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups

To contact our overseas Groups and overseas contacts go to:

www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups/overseas-groups

Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always delighted to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. If possible please send as .doc documents, to the Editor, Pat Simmons, at editor@westernchanfellowship.org. She will also be happy to discuss with you any ideas you may have for contributions. You do not need to be a Buddhist scholar – she would prefer something that springs from your own experience and insight.

Update on Retreats and Covid-19

Unfortunately we continue to be unable to hold residential retreats. Maintaining social distancing will be important for some time to come, especially for participants and staff who fall within protected groups due to age and co-morbidities. It is very difficult to arrange appropriate distancing for all activities (sleeping, eating and meditation) in the physical space available at retreat venues. We are keeping the situation under review but it seems that we must expect disruption to residential events to continue well into next year.

Some of our local groups are meeting online and welcome new members. We plan to schedule some shorter and longer online retreats and other events and will list them on the website when they are finalised.

Our 2020 AGM will be held online via Zoom on 5th September. Our special event on 26th September to celebrate Maenllwyd will now also be held online via Zoom instead of at Maenllwyd.

NEW CHAN FORUM

Published by Western Chan Fellowship Charitable Incorporated Organisation (registered charity no. 1166162)
ISSN 2047-9514 PRINT ISSN 2047-9522 ONLINE
Correspondence address: New Chan Forum, 22 Lilymead Avenue, Bristol BS4 2BX. Design: www.robbowden.com





*All conditioned things are impermanent.
When one sees this with wisdom one turns away from suffering.*

DHAMMAPADA

Thanks to impermanence everything is possible.

THICH NHAT HAHN

禪 Western
Chan
Fellowship