



NEW CHAN FORUM

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CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION <i>Pat Simmons</i>	3
TEN YEARS ON: REMEMBERING DR JOHN CROOK <i>Simon Child</i>	4
HOST AND GUESTS: A RETREAT TALK <i>John Crook</i>	17
NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AND MEDITATION <i>Anna Jedynak</i>	25
THE HISS OF LIGHT: A HAIBUN <i>Marian Partington</i>	36
CHAN AND EVERYDAY LIFE: TWO IMAGES <i>Paul Goddard</i>	41
KEEPING COMPANY WITH THE COSMOS <i>Peter Reason</i>	45
THE PANG FAMILY AND THE EVERYDAY MOODS OF ZEN <i>Eddy Street</i>	50
POSTSCRIPT <i>Susan Blackmore</i>	59
ABOUT US AND RETREAT INFORMATION	62

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Contributions for future issues (articles, poems, artwork) welcomed. Please send to editor@westernchanfellowship.org. If possible, please send as .doc documents.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS

This issue of *New Chan Forum* begins and ends with memories of our Founding Teacher, John Crook: a formal commemoration by Simon Child, a transcript of one of John's innumerable insightful and inspiring retreat talks – and then finally an odd scrap of his writing showing his creative striving to find *just* the right image for a truth he wanted to convey.

Those of us who were able to join together by Zoom in July to remember this remarkable Buddhist teacher, scholar and poet will be pleased to have the chance to read the talk that Simon was unable to deliver on that occasion due to technical problems. And reading Susan Blackmore's short contribution gives us all a chance to discover John as an ever-restless poet and thinker in mid creative flow.

I hope that John would be pleased to read this whole issue in all its rich variety: to see that the Fellowship he founded is in such good health and that more than ever the people associated with it are continuing to learn, study, think and share with a power and generosity similar to his.

TEN YEARS ON: REMEMBERING DR JOHN CROOK,
FOUNDING TEACHER OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

SIMON CHILD

On 17 July 2021, ten years after the death of John Hurrell Crook at the age of 80, the Western Chan Fellowship held a Zoom gathering to remember and celebrate this remarkable man and teacher. The following is an adaptation of a talk written by Simon Child for that gathering.

John had such a full and diverse life that it's not possible for me to give his full biography this afternoon. I have to be quite selective, focusing primarily on his Buddhist life and career as it is relevant to our Fellowship which he founded in 1997 and for which he was the Founding Teacher.

I remember that one time in 2009 I was at John's house. I think we had just returned from leading a retreat together in Poland. He passed me a slim red A4 booklet entitled *A Tale of Two Houses*,¹ saying, 'You'll need this one day to write my obituary!' It was his writeup of his family history and his own early years, and of relevance to us today is the story which he sometimes told of an experience which was pivotal for him.

It was during World War II and I think he would have been around 13 or 14 years old, living with his family in the New Forest, attending boarding school during the week. He was a self-taught bird-watcher who had no binoculars but who taught himself to identify just about any British bird by their song and by close observation of their behaviour. He was in the habit of exploring the woods alone or with his sister Didi



JOHN CROOK, BIRDWATCHING

when not at school. He wrote:

One day I was returning slowly home through a wood of tall beeches when a Grey Squirrel popped out of a hole in a tree trunk a few feet before me and sat still on a branch regarding me. I was immediately filled with an extraordinary joy so intense that everything seemed to spin and merge as I fell to the ground amazed and weeping, crying out spontaneous thanks to Christ for so beautiful a world; There was no thought in this, I seemed overcome by a moment of oneness with all things.

He described to me how he did not find anyone who could understand or explain to him what had happened – neither his parents nor school teachers nor local clergy. Yet eventually, as he read widely, he discovered that Buddhists not only knew and wrote about such experiences, they may also access them through their Buddhist practice.

This sparked his lifelong interest and engagement in Buddhism. Subsequently he had some other spontaneous shifts in consciousness, for example when seeing red kites circling at Maenllwyd. Some of these experiences were confirmed in 1989 by Chan Master Shengyen as ‘seeing the nature’, the so-called enlightenment experience.

During the Korean war in the early 1950s John was called up for army national service. Being a recent university graduate he was sent to officer training then posted to supervise a defensive gun battery on a hillside overlooking Kowloon Bay in Hong Kong. I don’t think his gun battery ever fired shots in anger but he described with a smile how their training shots sometimes went rather too close to junks sailing in the bay!

Before setting sail on the troopship to Hong Kong he decided to educate himself in the culture of the land to which he was heading, and

during the voyage he read Christmas Humphreys’ book on Buddhism.² During his spare time in Hong Kong he would often visit temples and monasteries. He also attended a series of teachings on Chan Buddhism given by a lay teacher, a student of Chan patriarch Xuyun, who was kind enough to translate his teaching solely for the benefit of John who was the only non-Chinese speaker attending. As John put it himself in his book *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon*,³ which chronicles some of his exploits in Hong Kong, Buddhist study and exploration was not the way that most soldiers spent their free time, but that is what John did!

Following his national service John went to Cambridge to study for his PhD. During his time there he was secretary of the Cambridge University Buddhist Society. One talk hosted by him during his time there was by the same Christmas Humphreys whose book he had read on the way to Hong Kong. Following his PhD, John’s career took off. So far as I am aware he did not have much involvement with Buddhism during those early years of his academic career. I imagine he was preoccupied with his work.

In the late 1960s / early 1970s he spent two years on a Fellowship at Stanford University in California, and during that time he became involved in the ‘experimental psychology’ and personal growth movements, including events such as Encounter Groups. I think it was this that triggered him to take up the practice of meditation. Following his return from Stanford he visited Samye-Ling Tibetan Buddhist centre in southern Scotland and it was there that he was introduced to meditation practice. He also attended retreats at Throssel Hole Buddhist Priory (as it was then called) in Northumberland to practise Soto Zen under the teacher Roshi Jiyu Kennett, an English woman who had trained in Japan.

So John already had Chinese Chan influences, from his lay teacher and explorations in Hong Kong, and he subsequently gained both Tibetan and Japanese Zen Buddhist influences. Furthermore, he continued his experimental psychology interest, training in the ‘Enlightenment Intensive’ process and establishing the Bristol Encounter Centre in his home city of Bristol. Looking for a base for these activities led him to seek out and buy Maenllwyd, a rather derelict farmhouse on a Welsh hillside. He held encounter group activities there, and in 1975 he also held his first Western Zen Retreat, which was his fusion of the Enlightenment Intensive process with the structure of a traditional silent Zen retreat.

I was a medical student in Bristol 1975–1980. In 1976/7 a student society I was involved with was looking for someone to run some group exercises and I was recommended to ask John Crook whether the Bristol Encounter Centre could help us out. I ended up talking to him about this in his office at his home in Alma Road Bristol, and I remember noticing the Buddhist artefacts there and being a bit curious about them. My society did get to have our group activities, but it was a different member of the Encounter Centre who ran those for us, not John.

By chance in 1978 I heard a talk about meditation and became interested in it, and later in the same series of talks John spoke about his Western Zen Retreat. It was January 1981 when I first attended a Western Zen Retreat, led by John at the Maenllwyd. In several ways I was hesitant and unsure about the venture when I arrived, but John’s energetic and committed leadership carried me through and I subsequently returned again and again, finding the practice very effective for me and appreciating John’s insight, his energy, and his skills in running the events.

John’s approach to his own practice and his teaching was quite eclectic, and alongside the Western Zen retreats he also ran other retreats such as Soto style sitting, and also invited other teachers to the Maenllwyd such as Geshe Damcho Yonten.

At that time he was a self-appointed teacher with no formal authorisation for what he was doing. In those days that was common and not an issue for any of us as we were happy with what he was doing. But it did have some drawbacks – for example he found that the Buddhist Society in London would not recognise him. He had wondered about making a proper connection with a more formally recognised teacher.

John had continued to make occasional visits to his original lay teacher in Hong Kong, Mr Yen Shiliang, who had subsequently been ordained and become the monk Yan Wai Fashi. On a visit in the mid-1980s John found Yan Wai Fashi in hospital and it was apparent that he had become too old and deaf to continue teaching. When John left the hospital he browsed the Buddhist bookshop across the road and found only one book in English. It was *Getting the Buddha Mind*, by a Chan Master called Shengyen who taught in New York as well as in Taiwan.

It occurred to John that attending teachings and retreats in New York would be easier than travelling to Hong Kong, and from 1986 he practised regularly on retreats in New York with Master Shengyen. John published his collection of retreat reports from these retreats in *New Chan Forum* and these are available for you to read in issue 20 (1999).⁴ John also persuaded Master Shengyen to travel to UK and lead retreats at Maenllwyd in 1989, 1992, and 1995, and at Gaia house in 2000.

On one of those retreats in New York, in 1993, Shifu Shengyen greatly surprised John by formally transmitting the Dharma to him,

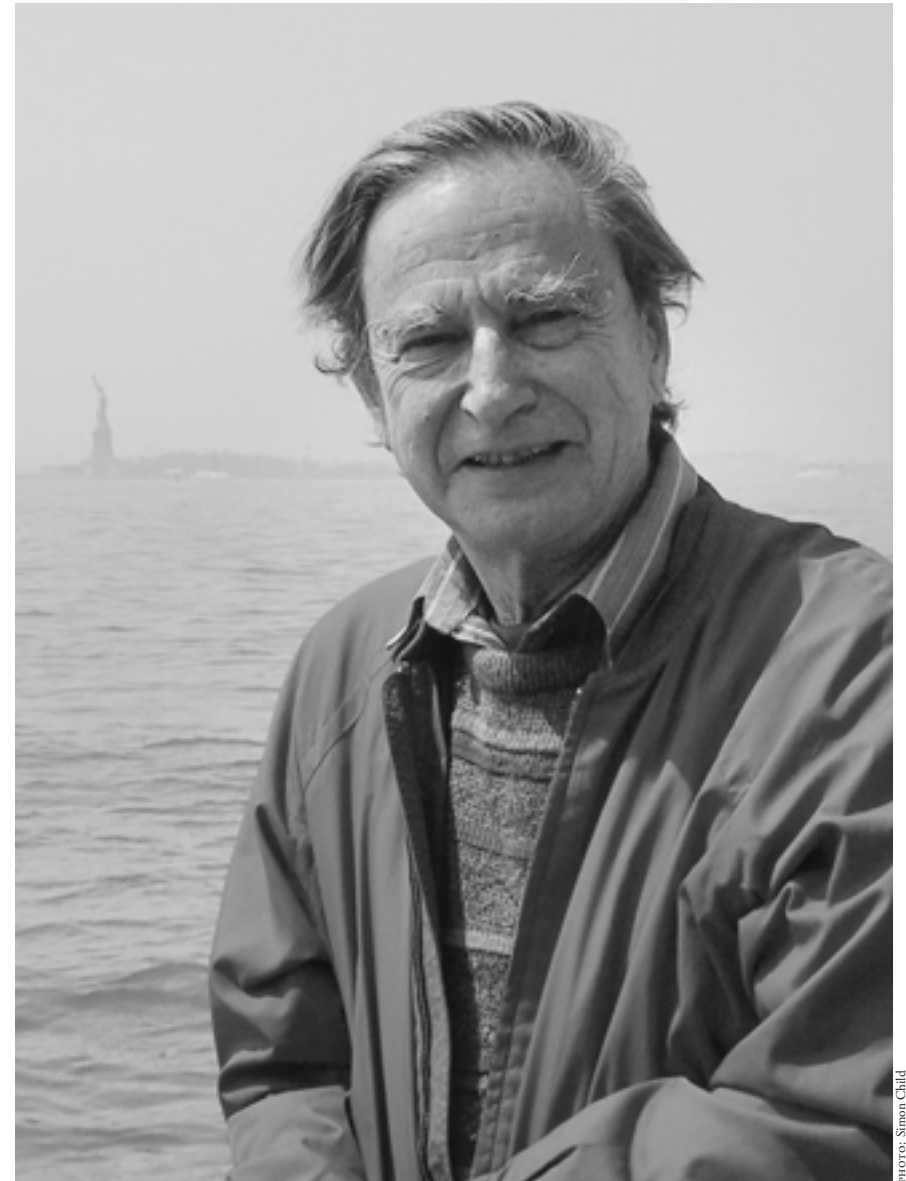
thereby making him a fully authorised independent Chan teacher, a direct descendant in the Chan lineage. This was a very significant event and he took the responsibility very seriously indeed. It invigorated his Chan teaching and led to further developments.

Following the retreat at Maenllwyd with Master Shengyen in 1989 some of the participants wanted to continue practising together. Since they all lived in or around Bristol they formed the Bristol Chan Group. They also started publishing *New Chan Forum*.

Soon after his transmission in 1993 John set in motion meetings to investigate the creation of a national Chan institution, as a vehicle to continue spreading Chan Dharma beyond his own lifespan. In 1997 the Western Chan Fellowship was established with a carefully considered constitution and was registered as a charity.

John continued teaching actively right up until his sudden death in July 2011. For example, he and I led a retreat together in Poland in May 2011 despite the back pain and mobility problems he was then experiencing. But he did make a deliberate choice to lead fewer retreats during what turned out to be his last few years, because he wanted to devote time to researching and writing his last book, *World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism*, which was published in 2009. He was able to make that choice because under his teaching and supervision the WCF had gained several additional retreat leaders, not only myself but also Hilary, Jake, Fiona and Eddy.

Inevitably given the time constraints, this has had to be a rather sketchy and primarily factual description of John's Buddhist career. I feel I have not adequately conveyed his overall breadth and depth, so let me conclude by giving you a glimpse of a few more of the many facets of John Crook.



JOHN CROOK, NEW YORK

He was an adventurer and an explorer and he several times undertook trips to the Himalayas, and other places such as India and China. Sometimes these trips were pilgrimages, perhaps just with a travelling companion or maybe leading groups of interested people. Sometimes the expeditions were primarily for academic field research such as for his contribution to research on the anthropology of Ladakh, but even then they usually included an element of pilgrimage and Buddhist research as he sought out remote monasteries and caves occupied by solitary yogins.

He had an eclectic approach to Buddhism, exploring and practising and drawing his teaching from multiple traditions, especially Chan, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. He was also influenced by other teachers such as Krishnamurti. He coined a phrase, 'Open Buddhism', indicating that he was open to practitioners moving around different teachers and traditions and he did not require students to commit to him personally as is common in some Buddhist traditions.

He was an academic in the psychology department at Bristol University, where he was Reader in Ethology, the study of animal behaviour. Some of his original research was significant and well-regarded, and a recent book⁵ credited John as the 'founding father of socio-ecology'.

John once told me that his colleagues at the university said that until he went to Stanford University in the late 1960s he was a proper academic scientist, but when he returned with an interest in such things as encounter groups, meditation, and even Buddhism, he was seen as having gone a bit soft in the head! This of course was told with a laugh as John liked to tell stories against himself. But probably it's true that there was a change in him as it was from this time onwards that he became much more involved in Buddhist practice and teaching.

Many of the early participants in his encounter groups and Buddhist retreats heard about these events through their contact with him at Bristol University, and so naturally the participants were often fellow academics and students of Bristol University. This in large part explains the SW England bias of early WCF membership. Yet it also explains the wide geographical dispersion of WCF membership as of course many students, including myself, do not settle in the region of their undergraduate studies but either return to their hometowns or follow job opportunities anywhere in the country or elsewhere in the world.

Perhaps as a result of his boarding school and army officer training – or perhaps it was naturally John! – he carried an air of authority and decisiveness. He also loved to experiment – whenever he heard of something that appealed to him, such as a new approach to meditation or to teaching, he would say 'Let's try it out!'

He was a raconteur and poet and writer. He loved telling stories during his Dharma talks; in fact he loved telling stories at any opportunity! He often wrote poetry, and some of this was published from time to time in *New Chan Forum*. Following his death his son Stamati collected John's poems into a volume entitled *Letting Go*, available as a printed book or as a free ebook.⁶

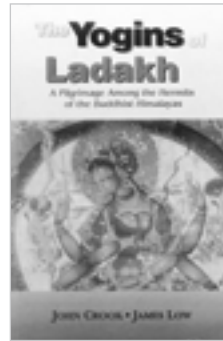
For a long time I managed the production of *New Chan Forum*. Typically I might remind John that we were due for an issue, and he might respond that he didn't have much material but would see what he could do. Four to five days later I would receive an email attachment containing a whole issue of NCF which contained various pieces already submitted by other people plus three to four long and varied articles written by John at high speed especially for that issue. Stamati also collected



Space in Mind
John Crook & David Fontana



Catching a Feather on a Fan
John Crook



The Yogins of Ladakh
John Crook & James Low



Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon
John Crook



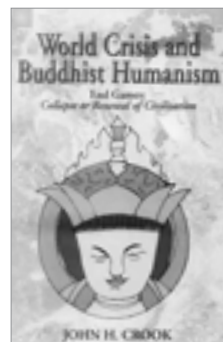
Illuminating Silence
Master Sheng-yen & John Crook



Chan Comes West
Master Sheng-yen, John Crook et al.



The Koans of Layman John
John Crook



World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism
John Crook



Circling Birds (published posthumously)
John Crook

John's very many writings for *New Chan Forum* into a thick compendium called *Circling Birds*.⁷

John's writings extended well beyond *New Chan Forum*. He continued to write and present psychological papers even after his retirement, and for many years he was an occasional writer of book reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement*. He also published several books in his own name and was a contributor of chapters to several others (*see left for a selection*).

He was very interested in the human condition, and in the condition of individual humans. He was very concerned to help people find their way out of their suffering. This was perhaps most obvious in his careful and penetrating retreat interviews, much appreciated by many of us present today, but also more generally in his care for the authenticity of Dharma teaching and its continuation. It seems almost trite to say it, but as a direct lineage descendant of the Buddha his concern for helping others to address their suffering was completely appropriate and in accordance with the Buddhist tradition, and we have all benefited from it.

To follow, let's hear from John himself. Overleaf is a transcript of a Dharma talk given by John on the second day of a Western Zen retreat in 1988.

NOTES

- 1 *A Tale of Two Houses* can be read online at <http://johnhurrellcrook.com>
- 2 Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism*, Pelican Books 1951
- 3 *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon* can be read online at <http://johnhurrellcrook.com>
- 4 <https://westernchanfellowship.org/dharma/new-chan-forum/new-chan-forum-issue/1999/new-chan-forum-20/>
- 5 Tim Clutton-Brock, *Mammal Societies*, May 2016 Wiley-Blackwell, ISBN: 978-1-119-09532-3
- 6 See <https://www.lulu.com/search?contributor=John+Hurrell+Crook> or <http://www.johnhurrellcrook.com/>
- 7 See <https://www.lulu.com/search?contributor=John+Hurrell+Crook> or <http://www.johnhurrellcrook.com/>

HOST AND GUESTS: A RETREAT TALK
(GIVEN AT WESTERN ZEN RETREAT IN 1988)

JOHN CROOK

We have been doing a meditation called searching the heart in which we have been allowing the experiences of our lives as they are remembered to rise within us – to tell us their story and bring us their feelings. In this way we have been reviewing and uncovering and allowing to emerge that which we are. Maybe we have also been seeing that, when that isn't happening, there is a quality of silence.

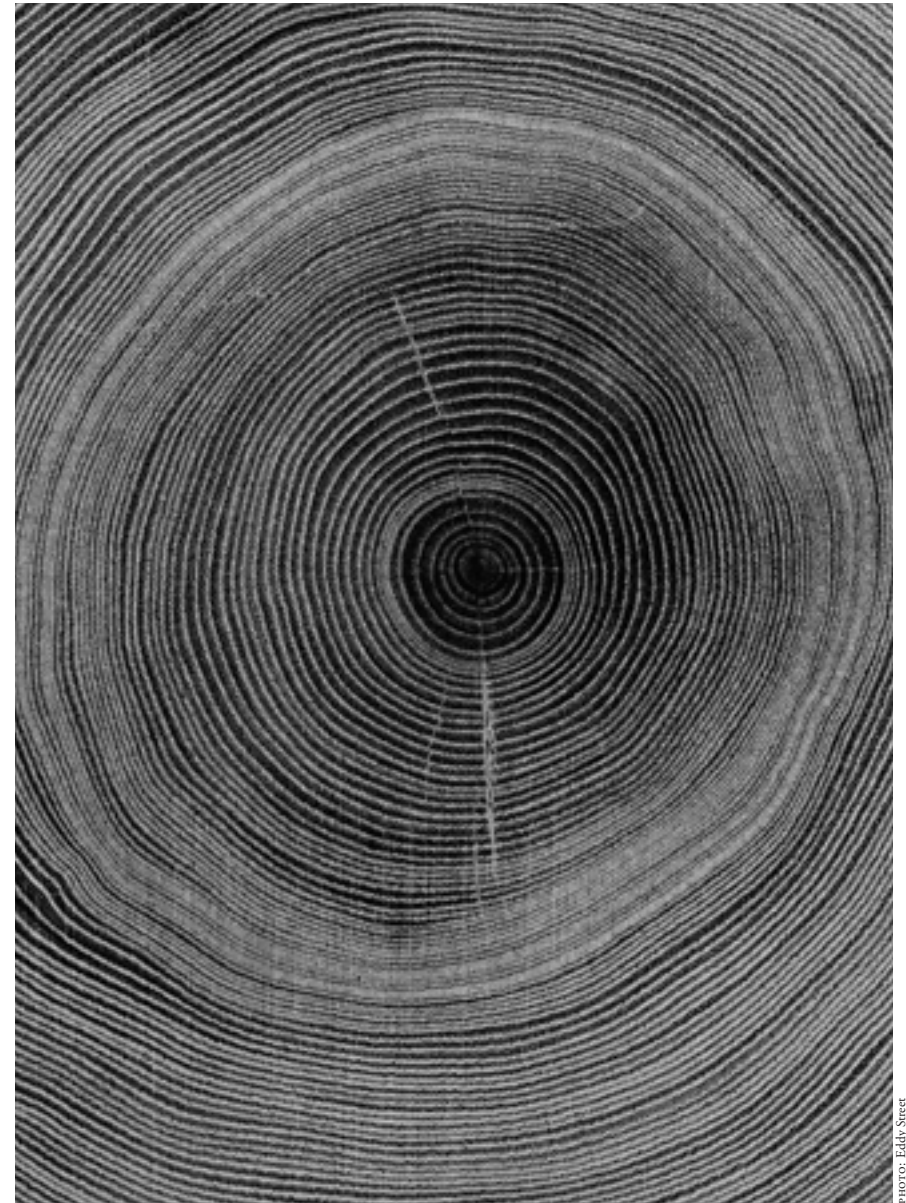
How does all this happen? Well, there's a very old description of the nature of mind which is quite helpful. That is, that we have the senses – the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and touch – and each of those senses feeds into a consciousness in the mind. So the mind is made up of awarenesses which come from the eyes, ears, nose, and these experiences which come in through the senses are sometimes remembered and stored in a store-room. When we sit in meditation, what happens is that at the same time as the simplicity of the white wall and the sounds of other people in the room and the feel of the carpet beneath us as we sit, at the same time as these sensations are arising within our consciousness, so memories come up and paint their picture for us. In the mind there is this kind of picture-painting going on.

But there's an additional kind of consciousness and that's called the trickster and the trickster says to us, 'Ah, all this consciousness, all this activity, it must be me, and this thought, this show, this cinematographic show, is belonging to me' – makes me possessive and careful, and pro-

tective. So that everything that arises within this show appears to have some bearing upon this person, me, who is vulnerable. And so we seek to edit out from our pictures that which is painful and try to look at that which is beautiful and pleasing. And so we go on being preoccupied with feelings, attachments and pains which are rooted in this notion that this whole cinematographic show which we are experiencing is somehow Me.

And that is why in this meditation there's a peculiar quality about much of our searching of the heart: the quality of attachment, so that as the memory comes up we feel the hurts and the pains – we feel as if something is being done to us – we feel victims. And that is because of this attachment, because of the trickster, which makes us feel as if there is something in here – a thing called 'me'. If you go hunting for it, you will find it difficult to locate: you will find the pictures; you will find the sensations of smells and hearing and vision and memories and storytelling. But if you go looking for the 'me', that may be difficult to find. In fact, you are asked to look for it. In the Chinese teachings there is an instruction which a Chan Master may give in a retreat, he will say: 'Tsan! Tsan means 'investigate'. It means, 'OK, you think there's a 'me' there – so look for it! Find it. Dig in'.

So you search and you will find memories: pains, hurts, insults, joyous moments, happinesses, blisses, smells, tastes, a day on the river, a day on the yacht, a flight across the Atlantic. You will find all these things. But where will you find the me? And occasionally when the mind gets tired something appears – a gap, a silence. And you become aware that all this going on – these consciousnesses of the senses, these memories, these pictures – all of it is going on, as it were, on a kind of screen, but you can't see the screen because there are only pictures on it, except when



the gap happens. Then you find that there isn't a screen there at all, but an open window, and beyond that window is a strange landscape through which strange winds blow on remote wild mountains and in which there are the sounds of great oceans. But before you have had more than a glimpse up comes a picture, obscures the window, and there's the great scenario of Tom, Dick and Harry in full force.

So one has a feeling that maybe there is something else about mind than just this perpetual, attached, painful, sometimes joyous story-telling, which is the history of 'me', which seems to be somebody inhabiting this carcass, which has a rather short duration – lucky if it makes 70 years. There seems to be a hint and the Chan Master will say 'Tsan – investigate – find out! Have you seen something in that gap?' When suddenly the whole phantasmagoria disappeared and you looked as if through a window. Investigate.

And the Chinese Chan Masters tell a useful metaphor – a useful story. They say 'It's like this, you see. If you are visiting an inn, the things you see most of the time are the guests – fellow guests. There they are, having their meals. There they are sleeping in their bedrooms. There they are visiting the toilets. There they are, quarrelling. There they are, smiling. There they are, putting on their best manners. There they are, eating. There they are, speaking to the waiter. There they are, paying their bills. The inn is full of guests and that's what you see most of the time, in the inn, the guests. And these guests are like your thoughts. They float through the inn doing all their different things. But where is the owner? Where is the host?'

We spend most of our waking consciousness in the position of being a guest – filling our minds – buzzing around – being preoccupied: the guest

mind. But imagine what it would be like to be the host, who entertains these guests. The inn-keeper – silent, quietly there – while the guests float through. The silent mind is the host, is the inn-keeper. The guests are the moving thoughts and the painful feelings. They come and they go – but the host remains. But the host is rarely seen, as the foyers are full of the guests – the dining rooms are full of the guests. Where is the host? Where is the inn-keeper? Tsan! Investigate! Find the inn-keeper! Find the host!

Because it is said that the mind which we normally see, the mind of the guests rattling about, is a born mind - it's born and it's created. It is always making new pictures and new stories. But there was also at one time an unborn mind which was silent, and the strange thing is that that unborn mind has not disappeared. It lies behind; it is always the background for the show which the guests are making.

And this unborn mind – so-called unborn because it is not contaminated by thoughts, feelings and the rushings about of guests - the unborn mind, behind it, is the host. Tsan – investigate! Discover the host! Do not always be attached to the activities of the guests. You can watch the guests as you search your heart; they rise within you, they circle about, they play their games, and they pass away, and another one comes up and another one goes. But have you seen the inn-keeper? Is he in the garden, outside the window?

To find the inn-keeper when one has such a very noisy hotel is quite difficult, and so the Chinese have given us a method to do that. The method is like this. They say, well, thoughts are usually haphazard and all over the place and you get attached to them so easily, you get caught up in the thoughts and there you are, away you go. So why not give the mind a fixed thought, a very simple fixed thought, like one guest. If there



PHOTO: ROB STRAIN

JOHN CROOK, WCF LEADERS RETREAT 2006

is only one guest in the inn, it might be easier to find the inn-keeper. So we have one thought and that one thought is the name of Buddha, say, it might be ABCD, but one normally uses the name of Buddha. It doesn't matter, you can choose any name. The name of Buddha normally used is Amitabha.

So you set up a pattern in your mind – you feed it through, and you say in your mind's eye, 'Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha' and you set up a repetitive pattern: Amitabha – Amitabha – Amitabha – Amitabha. The guest keeps going down the foyer, through the dining-room, all over the place. Amitabha, nothing but Amitabha everywhere. Amitabha.

Just keep it turning, Amitabha. And then at some point, Amitabha, you don't say it.

Amitabha...

And you look into the hole out of which the word might have come but didn't.

Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha...

Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha...

Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha...

This is called looking into the space before the thought arises. The Chinese 'huatou' – a huatou is a pre-thought. So, tsan, investigate – what is a pre-thought? We can find out.

Amitabha, Amitabha, Amitabha...

Look into the gap created, and when one looks into that gap that is created, with practice and as the mind becomes still, so one begins to see that there is an expanding silence. You are discovering the host. Everything is going on holiday – the corridors are silent – the windows are open – the host is relaxing. Just be an inn-keeper – investigate!

In today's practice, if you so wish, you may take up that method this morning and explore it and see if it gives you some insight into the way in which the mind can be silent, that you can be a host to your own thoughts. And the host is very quiet – it is the guests who are disturbed. It is an activity of witnessing. You get yourself into the position of witnessing the activity of the mind instead of being identified with it.

Probably yesterday, as the thoughts arose, we identified with it. Some image would come up and we identified with it. 'Hah, how beautiful, how nice that is – I'd like that.' Or, something the opposite: 'Oh dear, oh dear' – so a negative identification. But whichever it is, you are in there. You are caught up in it, your feelings come up. But as soon as you begin to create a little gap and witness it, already your centre of gravity is swinging somewhere else. You are no longer caught up; you are be-

coming the witness. So up comes something and, ‘Um, that is interesting – well, here we go again. We seem to have been there before’. And you witness it.

But the witnesser is not caught up, is not imprisoned, is not the prisoner of his or her own thoughts, is not the guest, captured as it were within a hotel. The witnesser is the host: free to watch one come – watch another go – passing through. Witnessing is a crucial aspect of this type of meditation. To practice shikantaza you have to discover how to move your centre of gravity – out of being identified with your thoughts and feelings into being the one who witnesses, because it is the one who witnesses who can fall still and thereby see.

NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AND MEDITATION

ANNA JEDYNAK

Right speech, part of the Noble Eightfold Path, is defined as speaking without lying, verbal aggression, intriguing, slandering or idle chatter. In recent times, a Swedish psychologist Marshall Rosenberg has developed a way of speaking more effectively and honestly, called nonviolent communication (NVC). It not only promotes ways of practising right speech, but also supports meditation practice.

NVC makes a distinction between the speech of the heart and speech which is alienating from life. Our observations, feelings, needs and requests that we would like to direct towards others are the speech of the heart (OFNR). In contrast, the speech alienating from life is formed out of generalisations, interpretations, judgements and demands; it involves criticism, intimidation, manipulation and commands. It may be partially useful, as generalisations and explanations are, but often serves verbal violence, both direct (as in shouting or making threats) and concealed (scoffing, blaming, manipulating...). It is often used in situations where the language of the heart would bring better mutual understanding.

The students of NVC learn to communicate by speaking only about their observations, feelings and needs, and by making requests. This language is neither easy nor quick to learn. In the process of education and socialisation we have been encouraged to use the alienating language of judgements and restrictions, and we have also been filled with nervous anxiety about our performance. As a result, the sentences intended as speech of the heart are initially often not recognised as such. The NVC

student experiences difficulties in distinguishing observations from interpretations and judgements, feelings from beliefs, and needs from operating strategies and whims. What s/he believes to be a request is often a concealed demand or intimidation, since a request made with a more or less evident suggestion that there will be disapproval if it is denied is not truly a request.

A gradual introduction to the speech of the heart opens the NVC student to her/his actual emotions and to a profound contact with her/himself and with others. Her/his observations, feelings and needs do not have to be restricted to her/his own life. They may include all that happens to others, care and worry about them, joy in their company, being happy for them, or the need to help them.

We usually believe that the cause of our feelings lies in our environment, in what we experience at the present moment. NVC distinguishes the ‘impulse’ from the ‘cause’ of a feeling. Only the impulse is found in the present experience. NVC recognises that our negative feelings are caused by our needs that have not been satisfied, and our positive feelings are caused by needs that have been fulfilled. This perspective encourages us to seek alternative strategies for meeting our needs, if we are unable to implement the strategy we believed to be the only one possible. Typically, we are quite aware of what we want and how we would like others to behave, but we find it difficult to name the basic needs we seek to meet what we want. Most conflicts are caused by clashing strategies, in cases where each side insists on following their own. In NVC it is crucial to be able to name the needs that the strategies are developed for. It may not be easy, but such clarity enables us to choose alternative strategies that will enable both sides to satisfy their needs. The negotia-

tions may only be undertaken after having defined needs, otherwise they are conducted blindly, without understanding the basic problem.

The speech of the heart doesn’t really give opportunities for argument - or even for difference in opinions. It is difficult to say “That’s not true!” to someone who is merely voicing their observations, feelings, needs or requests. Yet, it may happen that the people using the speech of the heart will find themselves among people who use the alienating language. They may then be subjected to scathing criticism, disregard, ridicule or intimidation. In such a case the ability to listen from the NVC point of view will become even more useful. Listening is more difficult than speaking. The adepts of NVC, upon hearing the alienating language of others, can understand the direct meaning of their words, but they can also hear the deeper message: what is alive in those people, though repressed and ineptly expressed. They are able to listen to them as if they actually spoke non-violent language: in judgements and opinions about others, the adepts of NVC can hear expressions of feeling. In demands and intimidation, they can hear requests; in stubbornness and contempt, unfulfilled needs – and so on. They not only listen to them in such a way, but also respond to their statements as if they were non-violent communication. The sleeping part of the others is then inclined to come alive and in time people using the alienating language may gradually become predisposed to speak in a way closer to NVC. It is more probable in a sustained relationship, but possible in shorter contacts too. A well-established NVC is contagious!

Still, such a way of listening to others is not easy. Very often we do not have enough time and patience to take good care of our partners, because we first have to recover from their wounding statements. Before

we are able to consider their needs, we usually go through the following typical reactions recognized in NVC training:

Initially we react to them (aloud or in our thoughts) in a way similar to how we have been addressed. We are angry, make allegations, use rough invectives, possibly wish them not too well at all! We judge them bitterly. When the emotions drop a bit, we still remain in the realm of judgements, but our opinions become more balanced. We begin to realise our partial contribution to the conflict and tend to turn the blade of criticism on ourselves. ‘If I had thought...’, ‘How could I have forgotten...’ – and so on. We may feel guilt, shame, and become angry at ourselves. When these emotions quieten down they make way for the speech of the heart, although initially also directed at ourselves. We become aware of our own negative feelings and unfulfilled needs. We may feel wounded and yearn for peace and quiet. As long as we are unable to take care of ourselves and our own comfort we won’t be able to make a step forward and take care of the feelings and needs of others. Only later on can we respond to their message as if it was NVC. In the course of training, the students of NVC learn to go through the process more quickly and in time they can listen to unfriendly communication and almost immediately respond to the unspoken need as if it were expressed in NVC. This reaction depends on the emotional charge in the situation, whether it’s new or recurring and on the relation between the people involved.

Empathy and the ability to listen to our partners with utmost attention are very important in NVC. Because of our empathy, our partners will know that we listen to them and pay attention to their feelings and needs. It’s not the same as giving them good advice, telling, persuading, looking for solutions or analysing the cause of their problems, distracting

them from difficult matters, drowning the problem in words or changing the subject, suppressing the emotional message, showing examples of even more difficult problems... Empathy means giving attention and space for others to voice the matters that are currently important and alive in them. While listening, we open up to the message and let it resonate in us. We may let others know that we are in fact paying attention to them by means of body language or through repeating the message in our own words, but we don’t add anything. We become mirrors for the highly emotional messages of our partners.

Empathy is very useful in all difficult situations in which the people involved seem to have different goals. With sharing their feelings earnestly and listening empathically to each other, people become engaged in mutual well-being. For though it may not be possible to contradict an NVC statement, it is still possible to deny a request. When people have compassion for one another, their needs include more than their own personal desires and they tend to lean towards a sense of community. It becomes much easier then to find a strategy that will satisfy everyone. Requests are being refused much less frequently. When they are, it is not taken personally, but rather understood as a response to the needs of others.

Aside from speaking and listening, the NVC training involves working with one’s inner voice, which reacts to situations habitually and usually differs from NVC. We may learn to listen to our own thoughts as we listen to the voices of others, with attention to their feelings and needs within their messages of domination. We learn to uncover our own feelings and unfulfilled needs in our critical attitude towards others and our opinions about how they should behave. Such discovery usually defuses

our tendencies towards destructive emotions and inspires us to put more effort into a constructive search for ways to help. Working with one's own thoughts and reactions is also effective for recognising the unfulfilled needs of others that their destructive or hurtful actions emerge from.

There are many similarities between NVC and meditation. At a certain stage they progress hand in hand, complementing and facilitating each other. The task of meditation is performed in silence and solitude, while NVC deals mostly in relation to other people. They join forces in the following ways:

1. Nonviolent communication promotes direct contact with life, focused on observations, feelings and needs, making requests and complying with the requests of others. It abstains from idle theorising, generalising, diagnosing and judging. It refrains from debating the accuracy of convictions and arguments in dispute.

Similarly, meditation encourages us to focus on experiencing what is actually happening, on perceiving and acting accordingly. It does not sustain redundant deliberating that is distant from the present moment, or complicated, detached views of the world. Both practices value the specific over the abstract. Both open us to perceiving what is alive within us.

2. Buddhism teaches that attachments result in suffering. Marshall Rosenberg has also related to this Buddhist teaching. He perceived that attachments are our favourite, well-established strategies we are reluctant to abandon. It is difficult to feel relaxed and to operate in harmony with

others when we are immobilised in the grasp of our attachments – or strategies motivated by our attachments. NVC encourages us to uncover the needs that our favourite types of action are based on, and to form alternative strategies suitable to the situation. It does not negate our needs, but then again it points out the destructiveness of persistently demanding that they be met in one way, that could prove harmful to someone, and not any other. It teaches us to be more flexible and open to different solutions. Similarly, the Buddhist Middle Path is balanced between self-indulgence and self-mortification. The insight developed in meditation may reveal to us how we haven't been fully aware of the unfortunate strategies we have fashioned to fulfil some of our needs. For instance, the inclination to control people or to accumulate excessive wealth may be an unconscious expression of a concealed striving to feel unity with the world. Finally, it is recommended in the Buddhist tradition to entrust worries or troubles to the good forces in the universe, with an accepting attitude towards any solution that might present itself – possibly one we have never even considered yet.

3. Empathy developed in NVC is very similar to Buddhist compassion. In NVC we learn to hear the not explicitly articulated feelings and needs of others, and to understand motivations for their actions. This view serves well to see others as people like us, who have similar needs, even if sometimes they fulfil them in a destructive or inept way. Buddhism teaches us to be open to various situations and meet them with a mind empty of expectations, so whatever happens to others resonates within us. We realise the conditions they are under and instead of judging them we focus on awakening compassion and understanding. Both NVC and

Buddhist practice make us respond with our actions to whatever is happening to others. Fulfilling their needs becomes a need of our own. We gain the awareness that by helping others we actually help ourselves and hurting others is really hurting ourselves.

4. In meditation we discover the arising of unwanted, disturbing thoughts. It is useless to try and forcefully repress them. We can only become fully aware of them and perceive them as merely thoughts, a process of some kind, and not get involved in their narrative or identify with them. This way their seductive power weakens. Likewise, during the NVC practice we discover in our minds thoughts distant from nonviolent communication: judgemental, critical, and demanding. It is not constructive to follow their thread, or to condemn ourselves for having them. Accepting them and listening to their voice in an unprejudiced, distanced manner may prove fruitful. Sooner or later we will discover what needs and feelings bring those thoughts to us and we will be able to look at ourselves and our relations with other people differently. Meditation and NVC support each other in their ways of treating those of our mental habits that we find appalling and destructive.

In both fields we react exactly at the point we are in. We haven't really been granted any other option. We do not ignore unwanted reactions, we do not suppress them, we do not imagine that we have achieved a level we are still actually very far away from. We do not evade making contact with ourselves and do not feel obliged to fit into any pattern. We are present in the real situation, not an ideal one. Only in this way can we patiently dig through whatever the situation brings us.

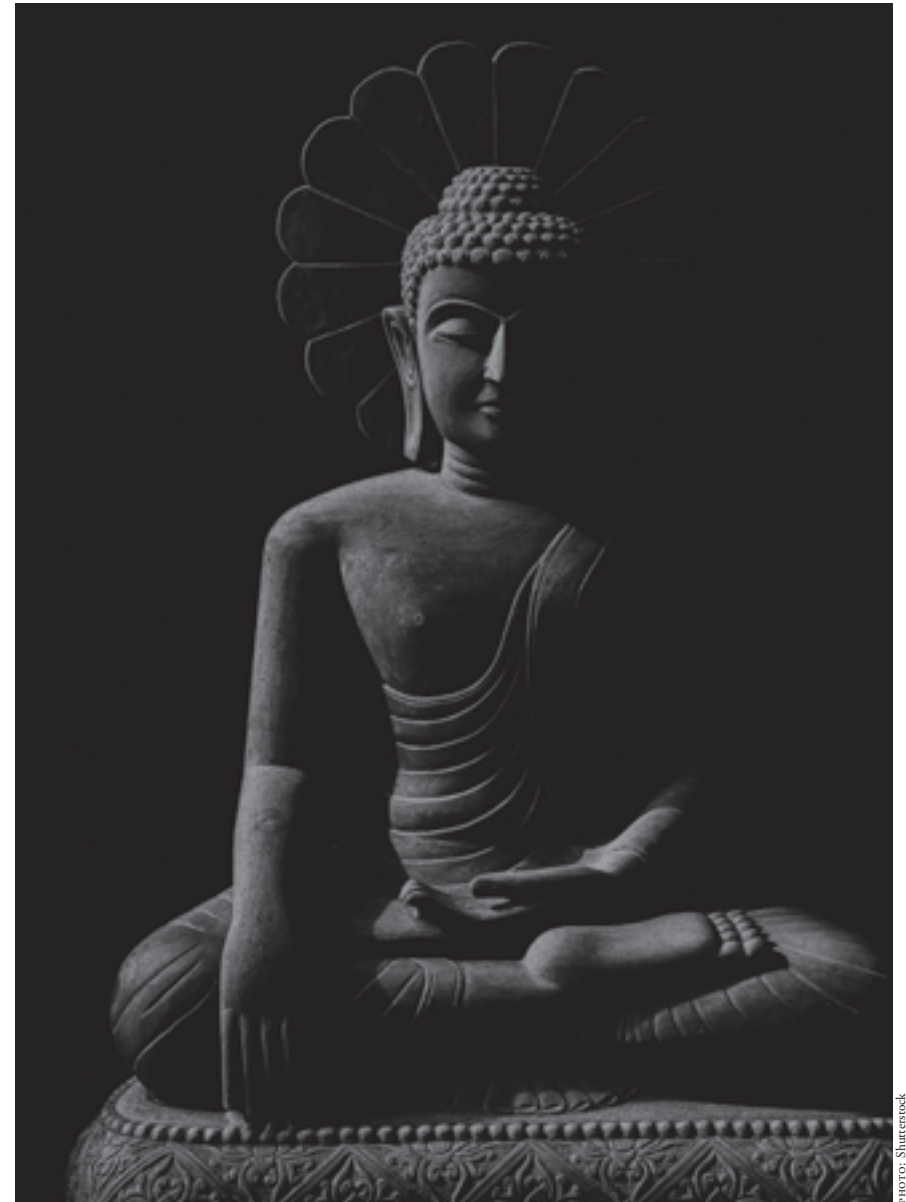
5. Neither meditation nor NVC can be used as a means to achieve some already made-up goals. Sometimes beginners attempt this approach, expecting that NVC will allow them to play out relationships with others as they please; and beginners to meditation imagine zazen will present them with a new, better version of themselves. But it doesn't work that way. The practitioners maintaining this approach are likely to become disappointed and frustrated. Both kinds of training – if carried out honestly – lead to a profound inner transformation. This change cannot be planned, controlled or rushed. There is no point in forcing achievements. There is however a point in allowing for and developing our own inner motivation. In both cases this motivation is fuelled by curiosity. In NVC we are interested in other people, their experience, views of the world, intentions and aims. We readily take part in what is important to them and share with them what is important to us. Eventually we feel the need to cooperate and become ready for fulfilling our needs mutually. In meditation we are curious as to how the mind works and what life is about. Why do we experience the persistent and unpleasant turmoil of emotions and thoughts in our minds? Obviously we do not want it! Who has put it there and how? Why is it that it has this power over us? What stands between us and happiness and fulfilment in our lives? Is it possible to avoid vexation?

In both fields motivation is fuelled by personal doubts and curiosity. An inquisitive mind is open to what's going to happen and doesn't decide in advance what should happen. Lively motivation makes authentic commitment possible, and in consequence we gain better insight into our human condition and gain an ability to act in a more healthy way. The motivation emerging from cool calculation or mechanical imitation re

mains superficial and dry, and it is unable to stimulate our energy. Many people experience this kind of motivation becoming more alive in time. If it doesn't, it may only assist us to incorporate certain techniques, but it will not awaken our potential. Moreover, the techniques will not prove as efficient as we would like them to be.

6. Both meditation and NVC shape the practitioner's responsibility for their feelings and attitudes – each in their own way. Buddhism teaches that our present state of mind has been shaped by our past actions. We have no choice but to accept this inheritance. The way we proceed with it will shape our future states of mind. In this sense we have to take responsibility for them. NVC also rules out shifting the responsibility for our emotions to the people that surround us. It points out that dispositions to our emotional reactions are within ourselves. What's happening on the outside, including the actions of others, is only an emotional trigger. In the Buddhist terminology we would say that such events activate our karmic roots.

As we can see, many similarities can be found between the two practices, or rather the two attitudes towards life. In the foundation of both lies a similar spirit. If an NVC student turns to meditation, his/her NVC practice will become clearer and more open. It will proceed with more awareness and ease. If a meditation practitioner reaches out towards NVC, s/he will receive a great tool linking meditation with communal life. NVC is a meditation in action, or rather in contact with others, and it forms a link between silent sitting on the mat and everyday life amidst the intertwined activities of people.



THE HISS OF LIGHT: A HAIBUN

MARIAN PARTINGTON

1994

I attend my first Western Zen Buddhist retreat at Maenllwyd. The small Welsh farmhouse stands on a hillside at the end of a rough track below a narrow wooded valley, which leads up to a bare horizon. It just sits there, with no electricity, amidst the fields of sheep, aloof and barely visible from the straggly village some way below. The eastern horizon offers wide skies for the sunrise and a distant view of hills across the valley. A clear night sky becomes a 'river of stars'. Inside, the firelight and Tilley lamps bring a flickering glow to the low beams.

tea poured into mugs,
steam rises –
the hiss of light

The teacher welcomes us and asked us why we have come, what are we looking for?

I had very recently been confronted by the traumatic fact that my sister, Lucy Partington, had been abducted, raped, tortured and murdered by Frederick and Rosemary West. She had been missing for twenty years. Lucy was one of twelve 'victims'. I had just wrapped her bones in response to a dream.

when I kissed your skull
the dome of the sky
took root in my heart

Someone says he is looking for the ultimate reality. That resonates. Maybe I had tasted this place in the first dream when Lucy spoke to me from a water meadow shortly after her 'disappearance' in 1973. The words 'the peace that passeth understanding' came to mind. Lucy's words:

'if you sit very still
you can hear
the sun move'

I begin to learn how to sit very still, how to meditate. I 'took refuge' in 1995 with the visiting Chan Master Shengyen. My Dharma name is *Guo Guang*, Fruit of Light. Lucy's name is also rooted in light from the Latin *lux, lucis* – light.

1995

finger nails
full of clawed earth –
the enormity of a vow

on a distant bank
foxes with cubs
playing in the sun

1997

tears and snot
drip from my chin -
how many bowlfuls?



severed pine branch
 a wound that alters,
 the sway of it all

1998

weeding:
 docks, thistles, nettles
 making space

2000

Chan Master Shengyen's words to me: 'Just know that your pain is relieving the pain of others'.

through this body
 the depth of suffering
 suddenly realised

2004

trees burdened with snow
 I offer you
 the springing of the branch

2019

Sleeping on a platform in the Chan Hall at a seven-day silent retreat at Maenllwyd. It is 4.30 a.m.

Clack! ... Clack!

The sound of wooden clappers approaching across the yard wakes us.

fire crackles
 flickering of wicks
 the smell of paraffin

morning exercises
 in the dark yard
 the hoot of an owl

On the third day I am time-keeping. My hip becomes intensely painful. Silently I ask, 'Please tell me what you need, you are part of me?' An answer comes: 'Less pressure'. I adjust my posture. There is a shift from claustrophobia to release. Many thoughts, many sufferings arise. I strike the gong to end the session.

rising sun
 on the rim of the valley
 golden sheep

scraping frost from windscreens
 the yard empties –
 old lamp on a sill

CHAN AND EVERYDAY LIFE: TWO IMAGES

PAUL GODDARD

I was thinking today that I really don't know anyone who doesn't like toast. I'm sure they are out there, but they must be few and far between.

I love toast.

Because my old trouble plays up now and then, I'm limited to sour-dough, but I've got the knack of it. A while ago I noticed that I eat it in such a way as to provide the maximum amount of satisfaction. Eating bits I find boring first and looking forward to the finale, an exquisite combination of bread, butter and jam. Quite absurd, and noticing this hasn't put a full stop to my mind's pernicketies.

This movement we have, of trying to work things to make them perfect, is pervasive. In fact all the senses are experienced mostly through our ideas of what or how things should be. I think the flip side to toast perfection is a certain wish for control and resistance to what is, a resistance to the bare reality of things, and it's most pronounced when we feel the victim of something.

I had a difficult few hours over the weekend and it was just as I was coming over the brow of this emotional hill that I saw clearly. A wish for both control of, and a resistance to, the things which I felt were causing me problems.

There may be fear, or anxiety or sadness, but on top of this is another feeling which we seem to actively cling onto. The mind says, I don't want this, I don't deserve this, I don't like this feeling, I want to get away. It can be quite awful.

But to respond in this way is at some level putting ourselves at odds with the reality of the moment, of what is. We may have feelings of sadness or loneliness or anger but then we resist these feelings with such aversion that the body and mind suffer even more.

The bodily felt sense of resistance can actually be separated out and we can appreciate better how it casts our sense of things in stone, limiting the fluidity and changing nature of feelings which have arisen. Stultifying the creativity we have to transcend it. Our resistance is a problem, our resistance is futile.

With a certain freshness I appreciate wisdom of the four practices of Bodhidharma: accept karmic retribution, enduring the results of our past actions; align with conditions; seek nothing; practise the Dharma.

These are practices which demand we simultaneously open to the reality of our life, including our resistance to it. Because only in that moment of recognition can acceptance, compassion and understanding be found.

Toast anyone?

Everyday Chan: two images

I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day, and then, I must watch my reaction to it. I have no other way of spotting both my denied shadow self and my idealized persona.

FATHER RICHARD ROHR

I remember when my son was a youngster and we had a birthday party for him at a local leisure centre. The room was packed with kids and mums and me. We had a long table with food, jelly and crisps, and after a few games all the kids were ushered around onto the little chairs for

something to eat. Things were going ok. Then my wife needed to pop out for a mo. This meant I was in charge. No problem.

They were quite an energetic bunch and as the seconds and minutes, which frankly felt like hours, went by the energy seemed to lift. Kids were getting up and running around the table; then one threw a cake. Others reciprocated. I found myself trying to placate, then be commanding, finally giving a firm telling-to one little boy who showed me his bum, that we don't do things like that at parties. I could feel myself morphing into something between Basil Fawlty and Pee-wee Herman.

No one seemed to be helping me. Couldn't they see I was struggling, hear the pitch of my voice? I made eyes with the look of perplexity on another mum's face.

Where oh where is the invisibility cloak when you need it.

My wife did come back, eventually, and I was ok after a couple of large Vimtos. But I felt I'd lost a little prestige. A prestige I never had or needed.

For me, humiliation comes when my sense of self has indeed morphed into something bigger than usual. As the sense of self grows, so does the importance and relevance of my story. Then everything is seen through it and lived through it. The flip side to this is when the self is allowed to become less important, so the story has less power, and I live life through more presence and awareness. Life is lighter, I am lighter.

Even if a solid, independent self cannot be found behind the layers of thought and sensation, it feels real enough and we ignore it at our peril. I know because I do it all the time. Our sense of self needs consideration and care as it is a reflection of many things: The generations before us, our childhood experiences and our present understanding. But it is not just psychological. It's a reflection of our environment, our

physiology, when we are tired or ill or happy or sad.

My moments of humiliation arise from relying on a skewed perspective, a false sense of who I am, how I present myself and how I feel I am seen. My idealised persona, as Richard above writes, is shown to be false. It is in those moments that I cannot deny I have not been authentic with myself or others.

But to consider ourselves an island of dysfunction ignores our interdependence with our whole world. If we can search back, we may find that we have been expecting too much of ourselves, are overly stressed, overworked or lacking sleep. Maybe there's been a number of things pressing. Slowly we may begin to rely on the safety net of old habits to save us.

When things build up, I slowly lose touch with the present and the gateway for rumination breaks open like a lock of a canal.

Thoughts can be addictive and so it is at these times, when I finally realise things have gone too far, I get back on the wagon. This entails really applying myself to samadhi meditation and Dogen's advice to 'Think not thinking'.

Slowing things down, not allowing thoughts to gain a hold as soon as I rise in the morning, taking time to feel the soles of my bare feet as I make my way across the bedroom and reducing my engagement with unhelpful thoughts throughout the day. You could say back to basics, but it is these little incremental steps that guide me back to the very real refuge of being present. Not coping but re-alignment.

We really are such delicate flowers, requiring consideration and care and a knowledge which can only be gained through experience.

So I say, what helps you grow?

What helps you bloom?

KEEPING COMPANY WITH THE COSMOS

PETER REASON

It was still fully dark when I was first drawn from sleep; the guestmaster was raking out the wood burning stove in the Chan Hall just below where the male retreatants slept. A few minutes later we were all aroused by the sharp clack of mallet on wooden board, signalling time to get up. I scrambled into layers of warm clothes and was up and out into the yard in time for morning exercises. The near-full moon had travelled across the sky during our sleeping and was now just visible over the roof of the old farm buildings, lighting the edges of the scattering of clouds. The Orion constellation, bright overhead when we went to bed, was now dimly visible on the horizon.

Our teacher walked to the middle of the yard, clapped hands three times, and led us through morning exercises. Afterwards, we gathered round to hear her words for the day. Now we were settled in the middle of the retreat, she asked us to be aware that each moment of perception was unique; and invited us, before going in for our early tea, to take a turn around the yard, opening our senses to the particularity of this morning. I walked the few paces down to where the stream tumbled under the gate and listened to its percussive music; others stood gazing at the clouds or looking up into the still-naked trees that stood over the yard. But not for long, I soon turned back up the muddy slope to the main house to slip off my boots and sit in silence with my companions, nursing my hot mug of tea. And when the bell was rung, we filed out in disciplined quiet, tugging our boots on, to make our way once back across the yard.

In the Chan hall, the meditation bell was sounded three times. We sat for an hour in flickering light from the oil lamps, each facing our portion of wall, each seeking in our own way to notice and let go of our stream of thoughts; to discover – without striving – that empty space where the human mind is quiet and opens directly onto the world. Then we turned to face each other, chanted the ritual of morning service – the sutra, the vows, the aspirational prayers – and once again filed out of the Chan Hall, bowing to the Buddha as we did so, across the yard yet again, now in the gathering light, to have our breakfast.

So unfolded the morning routine of our retreat. Not a word had passed between us, other than from our teacher. We had been instructed to maintain inner and outer silence, to draw into ourselves and withhold all forms of social communication, so that each person's retreat could follow its own path.

After breakfast we were sent on our way to our different jobs – chopping vegetables, stacking firewood, mopping floors – that kept the practical affairs of our retreat running smoothly. But now something strange and beautiful and quite unscheduled happened. We had been awake for nearly two hours. During that time the moon and stars had faded, and the February dawn slowly emerged. Now, at last, the sun was rising from behind the distant hills on the far side of the valley. A line of clouds was lit from below, stretching orange and red across the southeastern sky. A sliver of an arc crept above the sharp line of the horizon, followed, so slowly, by the whole sphere.

I had stopped on the threshold to the Chan Hall, absorbed; sunrise takes place every morning, and every morning is utterly different, utterly special. These are moments of transition, moments of grace when we

can be most aware that the wild world is beyond human control. Today, the whole sphere of the sun stood clear, deep and intense, encompassing the whole earth with light and warmth that winter morning.

When I drew my gaze away, I realized that many of my fellows had also stopped, each arrested at a different spot in the yard; each standing, silently facing the rising sun, in a spontaneous shared ritual of attention and honouring.

After a short while, the deep intensity of colour faded, full daylight emerged and the sun, now too bright to gaze at, set off on its daytime transit across the sky. One by one we dispersed to go about our morning tasks.

* * *

As we stood and watched we were each in our separate worlds yet curiously drawn together in an unspoken intimacy. How does this come about? In his account of the world-view of ancient Chinese sages and poets¹ David Hinton describes how through the discipline of Chan meditation, the mind empties of the stream of thought that maintains our sense of personal identity; the boundary between inner and outer fades away; we may experience ourselves as part of a seamless web of life. Empty mind 'attends to the ten thousand things with mirrorlike clarity...'

Of course this is not an experience that can be actively sought after but one that one may prepare for and may arise in a moment of grace. Maybe, midway through our retreat, we were ready for this opening, a moment not arising when sitting facing our piece of wall but gifted to us by the sun's rising.

Hinton points out that at such empty moments, perception is itself a spiritual act: as 'identity becomes whatever sight fills eye and mind',

it takes on depths beyond the separate self, isolated from others. The shared experience ‘things utterly simple, utterly themselves, and utterly sufficient’ offers new possibilities for friendship and intimacy. He tells how for poets in ancient time

... it was common for friends to sip wine together and watch the moon rise, for example, or mountain peaks among clouds, or plum blossoms in evening light. In this, they were doing nothing less than sharing identity.

Such experiences are maybe not confined to meditation retreats. Have we not all experienced moments of shared intimacy: at dawn and dusk; when the fathomless night sky opens to the universe; when a rainbow arcs across the sky, strong wind howls through the trees; when a child is born or an elder dies? As Gary Snyder tells us, such moments take us out of our little selves into the wider whole.

Yet even more than this, Hinton tells us empty mind is nothing other than Absence, that elemental loneliness from which, in Taoist thought, the ‘ten thousand things’ emerge into Presence and into which they fall back. The friendship you and I can share as we gaze together at the sunrise is more than lonely people sharing experience or even identity. It is the Cosmos keeping itself company.

NOTES

1. David Hinton, *Hunger Mountain: A Field Guide to Mind and Landscape*, Shambhala, 2012



THE PANG FAMILY AND THE EVERYDAY MOODS OF ZEN EDDY STREET

The Pang family lived in China in the 8th century and all were lay Zen practitioners. The father is the most well-known with many of his encounter dialogues and poems being recorded. His wife was also an accomplished practitioner as were his son and his daughter, Ling Zhao, and she also has a number of her Zen conversations recorded and used as koans. This story is from those recorded sayings and involves most of the family.

One day, while the Layman was meditating in his sitting hut, he suddenly cried out, “It’s hard, hard, hard! And I’ve put ten coats of linseed oil on this platform too!”

His wife said, “It’s easy, easy, easy! Just turn your eyes to the floor, lower your feet to it, and be on your way!”

Ling Zhao said, “It’s neither hard nor easy! The mind of the Patriarchs is in every blade of grass!”¹

So what is happening in this story that we can use in our practice? We have Mr Pang meditating in the space he has created for his cushion and where he has devotedly oiled the floorboards but things are not going well for him. Even though he has tried to make the conditions for himself as perfect as possible with a shiny pristine floor, he is finding his sitting difficult today. Mrs Pang hears his cries of hardship and contradicts him by telling him that the practice is easy; he needs to improve his position, set himself for kinhin, begin walking and all will be solved.



THE THREE PANGS (LAYMAN PANG WITH HIS WIFE AND DAUGHTER),
ATTRIBUTED TO YÜEH-SHAN 1280–1368

The daughter hears this conversation and she lets her parents know that it is not helpful when considering practice to think in terms of the duality of ‘hard’ and ‘easy’. She tells them that they need to drop discriminations in their practice and then they will find the true teachings of the ancestors. In another version of this teaching story² it is the son who offers the teaching of dropping conceptualisations and discriminations and the daughter makes a fourth point: namely that practice is beyond even these three elements of ‘hard’, ‘easy’, and ‘nondiscrimination’. In our version of the story, however, there is no fourth person present who pulls the narrative together as it is left to us, the readers, to resolve all the elements into a view of an all-embracing wholeness that is practice.

As we contemplate the totality of the story we can see that it points to an actively interacting system in which the elements are essentially a part of the whole but the whole itself is much more than merely the sum of the parts. Ling Zhao, indeed, gives a clue of the ‘much more’ as she points us toward “every blade of grass”. We can see the whole involves ‘hard’, ‘easy’, and ‘nondiscrimination’ separately and also as a togetherness that incorporates the hard and the easy and the mind of nondiscrimination but is beyond all these things. Of course in this story it is not that Mr and Mrs Pang are foolish and do not understand the Dharma and it is not that their daughter only appreciates a part of Zen practice. They are all capable practitioners and they are all responding to the moment and for us they are responding to practice in a way that is helpful. We can look at what they say and their responses to each other not just as separate individual comments but as an interconnected functioning wholeness that directs us toward an understanding of the moods, movements, and the completeness of practice.

Hard

So what do each tell us about Zen practice? Mr Pang is absolutely right: sometimes it *is* hard. Sometimes it is difficult to find our way to our cushion and then sometimes on the cushion it is very difficult to become settled. We can readily be disturbed by wandering thoughts and difficult emotions. We can get lost in the feeling that somehow or other we are not doing it right. Obstacles can arise in our practice and what happens to us can make us feel as if we are lacking in some way. We can try to force something and sometimes we may create impossible ways to ‘succeed’. However, there is a value in this hard aspect of practice in that it

reminds us of why we came to practice in the first place. It is said frequently that we all come to practice for the wrong reasons and when it is hard we are reminded of these reasons and it provides a motivating drive for us. When it is hard we can appreciate the refuge that is practice. We come to learn time after time the way our mind works and undoubtedly when things are tough there is an important lesson in the development of understanding who we are. Certainly the hard element of practice repeatedly points to the nature of our personal psychology and consistently lets us know the nature of our individual make up. The ‘hard’ lets us know about those things that we have to accept and find resolutions in their arising and falling away. We need to recognise the reality of separation in our lives and honestly face the nature of who we individually are. It reminds us that we have to put in the effort. This is the psychological perspective and our ‘hard’ difficulties have the power of bringing us to practice.

Easy

Mrs Pang is also correct in that sometimes practice is easy. It is easy as she suggests for when we are struggling with our sitting, we can stand up and do some walking meditation, we can put one foot in front of the other and as we make the transition from sitting to walking we can feel its straightforward nature and rest in the knowledge, ‘I know how to do this’. It is easy when we are able to flow with the routine of one thing following the other – as our foot touches the floor, the other foot lifts and goes forward. It is easy as we hear, see and join in with the rhythms of practice. It is easy when as Tuesday evening comes we get up and go along to the meditation group as this is what we do. When we arrive

we find it very easy to sit on the cushion in an appropriate posture. We know all the words of the chants and where the chants are in the liturgy book and we can feel ‘this is easy’. Our familiarity with what happens on the cushion and what happens in our lives lets us know that practice has a straightforwardness about it. It is about the comfort and familiarity of the routines and rhythms of practice regardless of whether they be chaotic or hard. The ‘easy’ has the power to let us know that practice is a part of our lives because it is our life and we can proceed in a matter-of-fact manner with it. This is the living, breath in then breath out, perspective.

Non-discrimination

In our story along comes Ms Pang to comment on ‘hard and easy’ and she reminds us that ‘when the opposites arise the Buddha mind is lost’. It is an important feature of practice that we examine our conceptualisations about ourselves and our way of judging the people and things that are around us. It is important not to be stuck on what we think is right or wrong, pleasant or unpleasant, hard or easy. It is important to be aware of and put down our prejudices. We need to move away from concepts and techniques and relate to things differently - not as ideas we agree or don’t agree with and practices that we can do well or badly. It is necessary to allow the mind to settle and experience the ‘mind of the patriarchs’. Here is a space in which things have no inherent quality of concept or judgement. Through illuminated silence we can come to experience the nature of mind. This has the power of presence, the power of sitting in the unadorned nature of the universe. It is the power of attention and awareness without the encumbrances of those obstacles

that arise in our mind. This lets us know that beyond the pain and the discomfort and everything we identify as suffering there is a release by ‘putting down’ our mind of ‘opposites’. Then engulfed by this silence, we are not ‘wise’ or ‘holy’ as discriminations have been dropped – we just are. We are not this or that: we *are*. Then when we discover peace within, the world comes to rest as well. This is the practice perspective of aware experience and it also points to one of the fruits of practice as we settle into it.

Life as it is

To resolve the story as a whole, a fourth perspective emerges – a perspective that includes all of those positions we have examined already as well as a totality that includes but is more than those individual positions. This is a perspective that experiences the hard but does not push it away, it experiences the easy and does not push it away, it experiences the dropping of distinctions and through the awareness of clarity and wisdom it appreciates the nature of our life just as it is. This fourth perspective includes these and takes us ‘beyond’, back to the beginning. It is the perspective that is about the understanding of how the phenomenal world around us is not separate from us but is a part of us and we are a part of it and it also includes our experience. The real world is there and can be experienced just as it is – in its totality, without prejudice, without judgement, but with recognition of those elements that are in it. This mood of Zen is the experience of reality just as it is, with ourselves as ordinary human beings living an ordinary life in an everyday manner. We are not separate from anything. There is nothing outside this great reality – this perspective is manifestation

of life as it is and we are a manifestation of life as it is. We can't make the parts of reality we don't like go away. We can't wipe the slate clean of our history and of our selves – the universe includes all. It includes us when things are hard, it includes us when things are easy, it includes us when we are still and silent, it just includes us as we are. We can truly find the Dharma in everything we do. No element is superfluous, each element is a teaching and each teaching is a way of living with full awareness in our everyday life. This element is about active practice in everyday living. The power of ordinary be-ing. Each moment is an opportunity to enter into the everyday now. This is the practice-realisation perspective.

Illnesses and remedies

As we can see, each of these moods contains an important element of our practice and we need to recognise the way we, as individuals, move through them: in and out, back and forth, in our own random way and at various points discovering our own 'gesture of balance'. However, we do need to be aware of the dangers and problems with each of these moods. The danger of the hard element is that we become discouraged, we lose our energy and we have an image of ourselves as someone who 'just can't do this'. We can allow our negative self-images to arise and dominate. The antidote to this is having compassion for ourselves and taking a moment to appreciate our essential humanness. It is important to be kind and forgiving to the person that we are. Another antidote to being stuck in the hard is also to remember the easy. But with the easy there are 'illnesses' as well. We can become lazy and complacent and assume that everything we do is fine. We can avoid testing ourselves and

we can see difficulties merely as things to be dropped rather than uncomfortably examined. We can develop a dharma pride which sets ourselves above others. We can follow just our own sitting habits rather than engaging in the true rhythms of practice. We can also lose our moral compass. The remedies to these maladies are to maintain an ongoing investigation of the teachings and a helpful relationship with our practitioner friends – we require a continual connection to the Dharma and Sangha. We require a clear view of all aspects of the Eightfold Path and we need to appreciate that the path is there to guide us when we wander away.

The 'sickness of the clear mind' is the idea that this can be held onto all the time and that an aim of practice is to rest in some continual blissful state. The creation of goals and places to get to and the idea of a permanent Nirvana prevent us from obtaining the awareness and clarity that exist naturally. The notion of a fixed enlightened state is merely another opposite, as is the habit of just going on retreat merely to obtain some wonderful experience that somehow will see us through the hard times. These ideas hold us back from just practising and responding to the world and our life as it is. The medicine for this is the acceptance of impermanence, even of the quality and moods of our mind. This medicine also involves a large dose of giving up on gaining ideas and appreciating that there is nowhere to go and nowhere to get to. Self-acceptance is the first dose of this remedy. Finally the fourth mood – the sickness of the ordinary mind is to miss it and the remedy is practice.

Verses to Complete

By way of completion here are some verses by Mr Pang:

Not wanting to discard greed and anger.
 In vain you trouble to read Buddha's teachings.
 You see the prescription, but don't take the medicine –
 How then can you do away with your illness!
 Grasp emptiness and emptiness is form;
 Grasp form and form is impermanent.
 Emptiness and form are not mine -
 Sitting erect I see my native home.³

My daily activities are not unusual,
 I'm just naturally in harmony with them.
 Grasping nothing, discarding nothing.
 In every place there is no hindrance no conflict
 Who assigns the ranks of vermilion and purple? –
 The hills' and mountains' last speck of dust is extinguished
 Supernatural power and marvellous activity –
 Drawing water and carrying firewood.⁴

NOTES

- 1 p. 113. *The Sayings of Layman P'ang: A Zen Classic of China*. Trans, J. Green. Shambhala. Boston. 2009.
- 2 p. 20 *Wanting Enlightenment is a Big Mistake: Teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn*. Shambhala. Boston. 2006
- 3 p. 135 *A Man of Zen The Recorded Sayings of Layman P'ang* Trans, R Fuller Sasaki, Yoshitaka Iriya & D. R. Fraser. Weatherhill, New York. 199
- 4 R Fuller Sasaki, Yoshitaka Iriya & D. R. Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 49

POSTSCRIPT

SUSAN BLACKMORE

Rushing off to begin a solitary retreat last month, I suddenly remembered that I wanted to check something in the liturgy so, in a hurry (yes, I know!!), I grabbed the first copy I could find and set off to my hut. Only later, once I'd settled down, did I take a look and realise that it was a very old copy indeed. To my surprise, there, on the front cover (*see overleaf*), is some writing in John's hand: a totally different version of my favourite of all his poems 'No guru' His writing is hard to decipher but I think this is what he wrote:

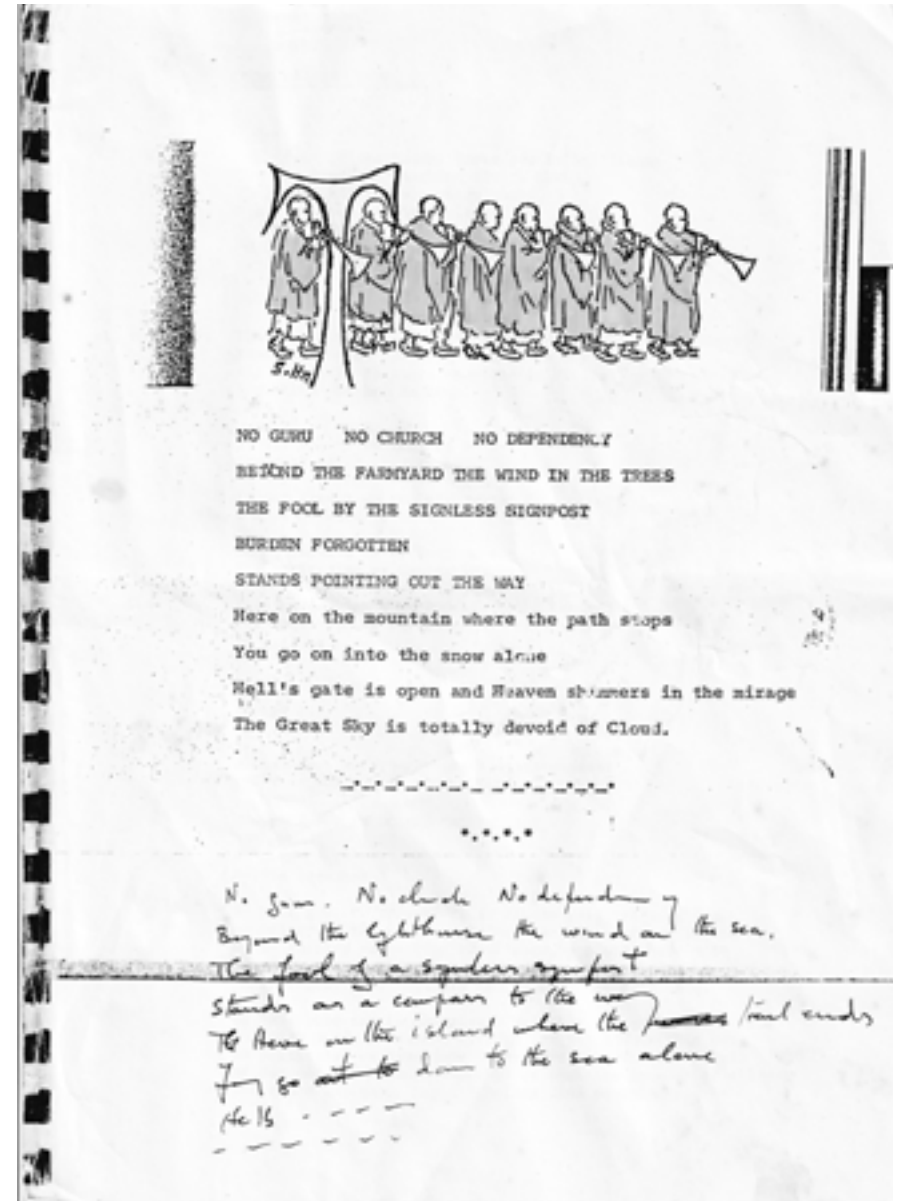
No guru. No church No dependency
 Beyond the lighthouse the wind on the sea.
 The fool by a signless signpost
 Stands as a compass to the way
 Here on the island where the trail ends
 You go down to the sea alone
 Hell's - - - -
 - - - - -

I laughed when Alysun Jones told me she imagined John composing the scribbled verse on some Greek island. I'd imagined him bird-watching on a cold and windswept Lundy Island. Whichever islands inspired him I realise that the meaning of 'No guru...' translates to anywhere.

How old is this copy? I thought of cleaning it up to print it here, but I prefer it as it is, probably copied on a Xerox machine in the early 1980s.

There were no colour photocopiers then, at least not readily available, and I think the orange robes must have been added by hand in each copy. I have another copy and the robes are coloured yellow. It does take me back to those early, tough, and wild, retreats when John had not long bought the Maenllwyd, there were holes in the roof, a very smoky Raeburn, and we ate, slept, worked and meditated in the house.

I hope you enjoy a few more inspiring words from the master!





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

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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.doc. 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.

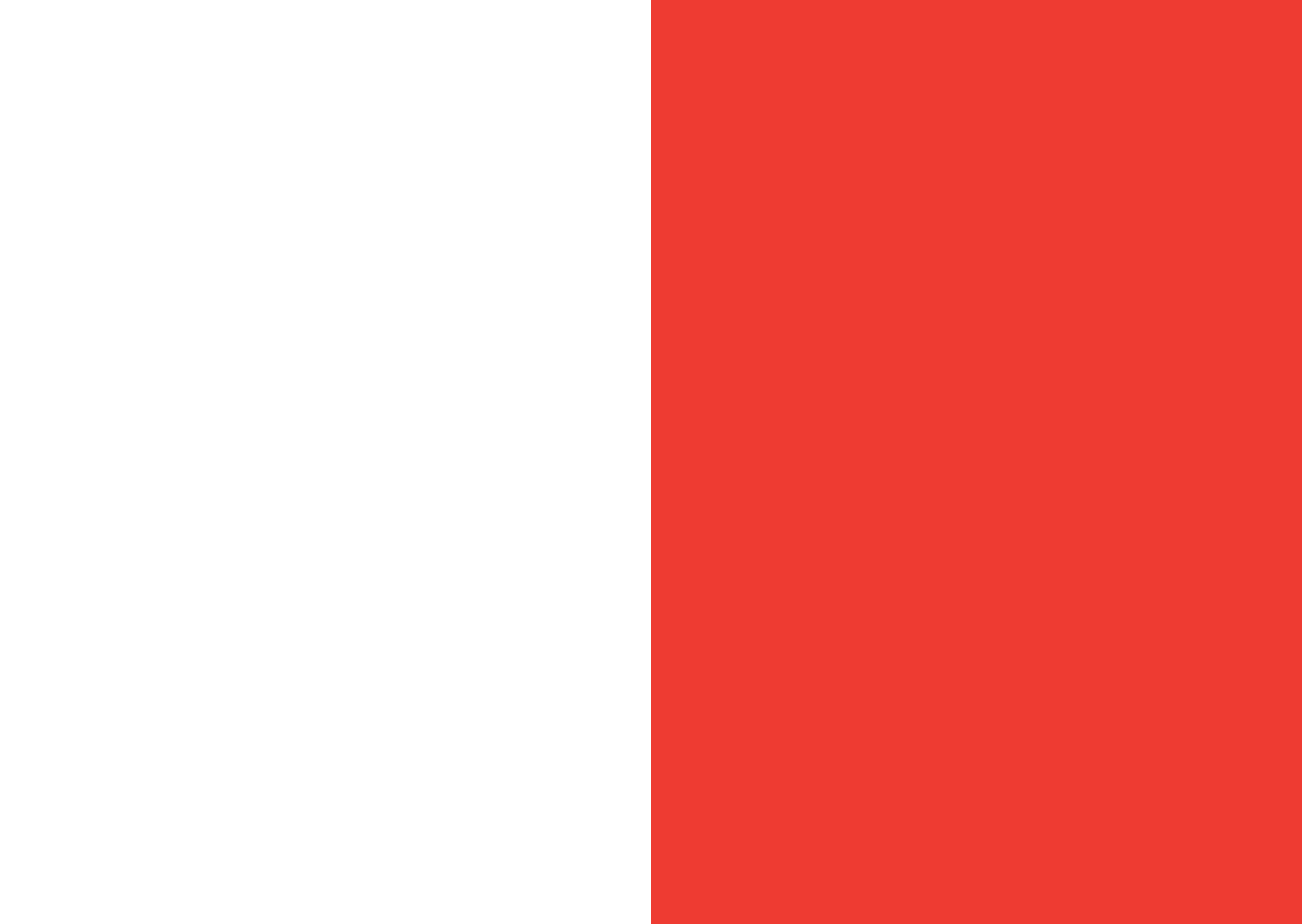
Retreats & local meditation groups

COVID-19 has caused a halt in our in-person events but triggered a growth in our online events. In particular, many of our previously 'local' groups are now meeting online and are able and pleased to welcome participation by people who are not local to the group.

There are events held on most weekday evenings, and also weekend daytimes. Visit the Online Events page of our website to see the full list of activities, as well as details of our new online day and week-long retreats.

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Authentic self-acceptance has nothing to do with either pride or self-reproach.

It is the straightforward recognition of how things are.

The practitioner simply moves along as best he or she can with whatever presents itself.

Occupying the present with such presence is authentic being.

JOHN CROOK

