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CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION <i>Pat Simmons</i>	3
THE EDGE OF A CLOUD <i>Simon Child</i>	4
THE DIAMOND SUTRA <i>Edd Phillips</i>	28
HAIKU: PURIFICATION <i>Jake Lyne</i>	22
MINDFUL RUNNING <i>Stuart Macleod</i>	41
BOOK REVIEW: ILLUMINATION BY REBECCA LI <i>Jeremy Woodward</i>	47
ABOUT US AND RETREAT NEWS	50

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS

My sincere apologies if you don't receive this issue of *New Chan Forum* ('Autumn/Winter 2023') until spring 2024! The delay is partly the result of my going down with Covid, but my real problem was a lack of material.

Until now I've been in the happy position of having a backlog of articles and poems. This time I've had to chase! I think the end result is excellent and I'm particularly pleased to have a new contributor on board – Edd Phillips' article on the Diamond Sutra was written originally for WCF's Pointing Out the Great Way course, and I'm wondering if any course participants have essays they'd be willing to share.

Meanwhile I'm delighted with Stuart Macleod's article on Zen and running. This really is Zen in everyday life. Running is never likely to be part of my everyday life, but I can certainly take what I learn from Stuart's article into my weekly yoga class.

And I'm very pleased with the transatlantic flavour of this issue. Simon's article is based on a Dharma talk he gave in New York and I'm sure that Jeremy Woodward's review of Rebecca Li's new book will encourage people here to read it and learn more about the way Chan is developing in the United States.

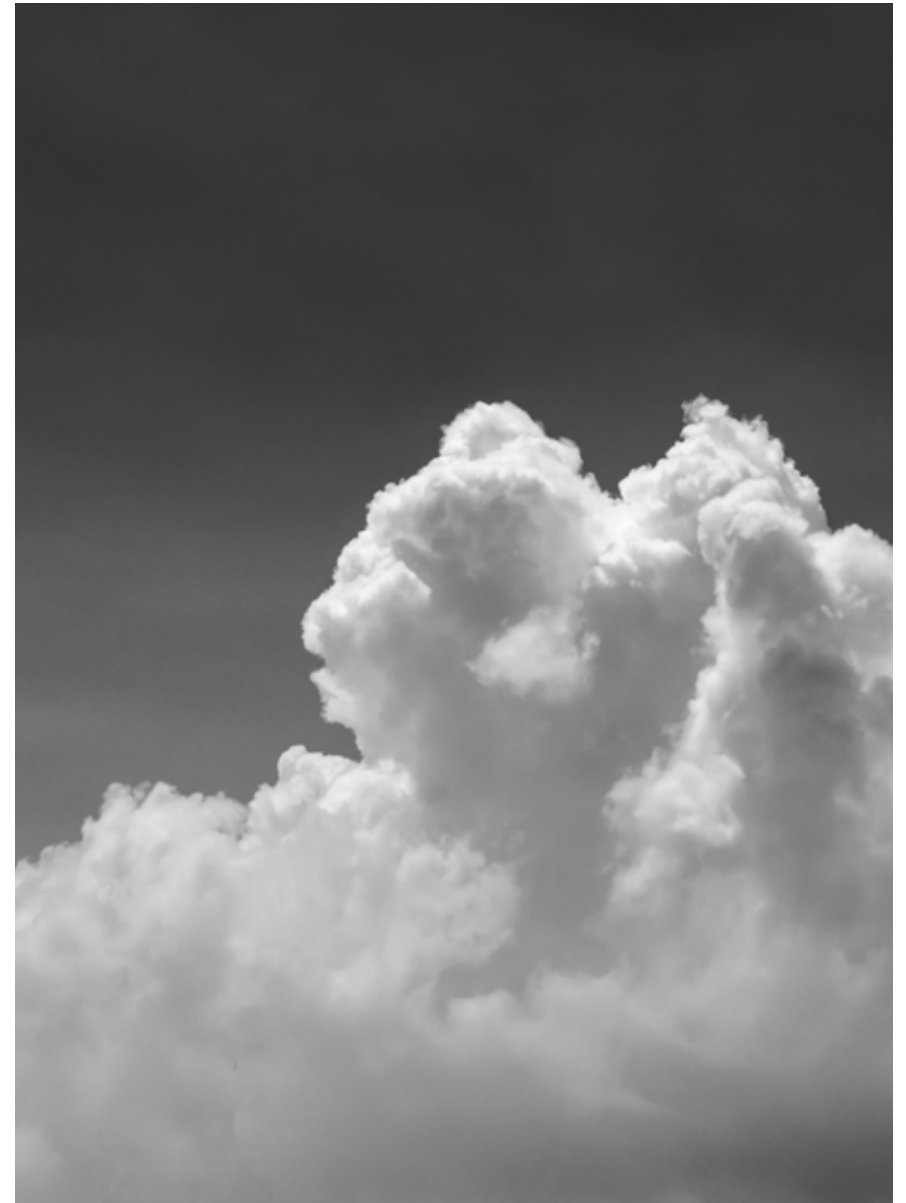
So I hope you enjoy this latest issue of New Chan Forum. And – please – get writing for the next one!

THE EDGE OF A CLOUD

SIMON CHILD

Today we have a blue sky, with a few little clouds. Yesterday we had plenty of clouds but not so much blue sky. Weather changes. Clouds slide around in the sky. Of course the sky is always blue, but we can't always see the blue because of the clouds. How do we understand the cloud? A fluffy object floating in the sky; if we know what it's made of we think of it as water drops. Sometimes it sinks down to the ground and creates a mist or rain. Some of us know different names for different types of clouds.

We all have a general idea of what the object we call a cloud is. But, like most things, it's not quite as simple as that. If you were to get a nice long ladder and I asked you to climb up to where the cloud begins, would you know where to stop climbing? Where is the edge of a cloud? If you're pointing, you'd say it's just there, between the white and the blue. But as you get closer, I don't think you're going to find a border. You're going to find a bit of the sky where there are some drops floating. If you move one way there are more drops, but if you move the other way there are fewer drops. Maybe you get to where there's only one drop every three inches, or every six inches, or one drop every foot. Are you still in the cloud? Or are you outside the cloud? How many drops do you have to have, to count as "inside" the cloud? It's not as though we've got a thing which stops. If we've got a piece of cable, we can follow it to the end. But what about a cloud? There isn't an edge, is there?



This seemingly discrete object floating in the sky doesn't quite fit that rule in our mind that something will have an edge. What we call the edge of the cloud is when it's dense enough to stop the sky looking blue. When it's not dense enough to do that, we say it's not the cloud. Then there are the in-between bits where we say it's just a bit of haze. It is really determined by our vision, and maybe by the brightness of the light, as well as by the density of the drops. It is completely arbitrary.

Density of Water Drops

You might think I'm being a bit fussy and silly, but there is a genuine point here. The idea of a cloud as an object that we can manipulate in our weather forecasts, and in our paintings and poems – it's really just a construction of mind, based on rather arbitrary criteria of the density of water drops being enough to make the sky look white or grey. The idea of the cloud is a creation of the mind.

There are water droplets in the sky, even in a blue sky. We know that scientifically. Sometimes there's a greater density of water drops, and for convenience we label that phenomenon as "cloud." We're easily tricked into thinking there's something we can label, especially with a noun, as an object that has its own existence. Actually, it's simply a name for a particular phenomenon which happens to be manifesting at this moment. The so-called cloud only has to thin itself out and it's no longer a cloud. All the water droplets can still be there; they're just spread out wider. Where did your cloud go?

Or, indeed, clouds can appear in a clear blue sky. Warm air rises, water vapour condenses, and suddenly a cloud is there in the middle of nowhere. Where did your cloud come from?

We tend to fix this phenomenon of "cloud" in our mind by applying convenient labels. These labels are useful for making weather forecasts and assessing air turbulence for flights. I'm not saying the word "cloud" doesn't apply to some phenomenon that's out there in the sky. But our understanding of a cloud as an object goes a bit too far. It makes an assumption that there's a thing there. In relation to clouds, this might not seem very important. But this is just an example of where we're heading with this Buddhist word "emptiness."

Arbitrary Labels

Emptiness doesn't mean "vanished" or "nothing there." You could expand the phrase (because it's really a shortcut); the full meaning is "empty of inherent or independent existence." There isn't a cloud "thing" there which stands alone and carries its cloud "nature" around with it. It's an arbitrary label that we apply to a certain density of water drops, without even knowing that's what we're doing.

It's rather like how the Inuit have many words for snow, more than most other cultures. Snow is a big part of their lives, so they distinguish more finely between different types of snow. Having labels for different types of snow is useful to the Inuit, and having words for different types of clouds is useful to us in practical ways such as forecasting weather and turbulence.

It helps us in understanding or manipulating our environment if we can apply labels, because behind the labels there are recognizable processes which can be useful for us to know. But the label doesn't point, as we tend to assume, to the nature of the object that we've created through our mental processes. These labels are functional.

A common example for an object when talking about emptiness is a table. Here's a table sitting in front of me. It's a bit small, a bit different from some tables which have longer legs, but I've got my notes on it, and my recorder. We have an object which I'm using as a table. I use the word "table" and you recognize it. But what if I wanted to reach a high shelf? If I put my foot on it and stand – is it still a table? Or is it a step? Is it a table that I'm using as a step? Or is it a step that I'm using as a table?

We all have a common-sense idea of a table sitting here, and it works, it fits. But it's not so clear cut. The nature of "table" turns out to be the nature of "step." We take it as a table, we use it as a table – no problem, it works. But it is not inherently a table. This is the point, it's really in the eye of the beholder, the function you want to apply to it. The name relates more to the function and to our manipulation of the object than it does to any intrinsic quality of the object. This table is empty of being a table. It has no inherent "table-ness" in it, nor any "step-ness."

A Virtual World

We use examples of objects like this to show how, naturally in everyday usage, we slip into dividing the world into objects so we can manipulate them in the mind. We're not relating directly to the nature of what's behind the so-called object. We're creating a mental model. You could say we're inhabiting a virtual world, manipulating raw sense data into discernible objects so we can make use of them. But these are not really the objects they appear to be. They're illusions on the 'computer screen' of our vision. A white blob on your computer screen could be a cloud.

An object with a flat surface and some legs could be a chair, or it could be a table, or it could be a step.

I'm labouring this because it's not always easy to get, but it's quite important in understanding this rather tricky concept we call emptiness. Emptiness is not a very good word, but we have not found a better one. The original Sanskrit word, *sunyata*, isn't a very good word either, according to those who understand Sanskrit. There isn't an everyday word for this concept because it's not one we deal with every day. We bypass it and go directly to getting by in our lives in this world of objects that we have some understanding of and can manipulate. It's useful. It's expedient; we just get on with it. But, like all expediency, it can lead to problems. It can lead to a quick solution, but it can also lead to confusion. This is why it's important for us to try and have some understanding of the Buddhist teaching of emptiness. That teaching is trying to release us from that misunderstanding called "ignorance" which leads to confusion and mistakes.

The Edge of "You"

The prime object of emptiness for us to consider is ourselves, but we resist this. You're willing to go along with me when I'm saying the table is empty and the cloud is empty. But what about you? Or me? Does the same thing apply? There is particularly strong objectification and identification with "me," with "I." Ultimately, materially, we're not so different from a cloud or a table, are we?

We might imagine we have a definite edge, the so-called skin bag – outside that is not me, and inside that is me. But even physically it's not as simple as that because this skin bag has holes in it! Air gets into our



lungs, crosses past the skin bag and gets into the bloodstream. That bit of oxygen, that's come in through your mouth or nose and dissolved into your bloodstream, is that "you" now? Or is it not you until it becomes part of a cell? At what point does that oxygen that's come from the air into your lung, into your bloodstream as dissolved gas, and later gets incorporated into a cell, at what point does that molecule of oxygen become "you?". That boundary is not quite so clear after all. It's a bit like the cloud – where's the edge of you?

Carbon dioxide takes the reverse route. Chemicals in your body become carbon dioxide, which becomes dissolved in the blood, which crosses the lungs and gets breathed out. There's a flowing process here. The same with food particles that take a different route down and get into the intestines and get absorbed, travel down the bloodstream, and get incorporated into the body.

I've been talking about us as a physical object. This boundary of ours that we imagine as clearly saying "this is me," is really quite fuzzy and literally porous. But It's also not so clear what we are as a mental object. Again, we assume it is clear; we have a sense of identity and we might assert it if people question it. But through your meditation practice you might be starting to doubt that as well.

We commonly get identified with our particular personality qualities, our habitual tendencies, our style of being: "This is my value, this is what I believe." And we find ourselves, perhaps unexpectedly, questioning these fixed factors when they arise in meditation – perhaps a value you picked up from parents or schoolteachers, and that you internalized and live from – perhaps awareness of that arises in the clarity of meditation and it seems a bit alien. We might find ourselves saying, "Well,

this *was* my value, but it doesn't seem to work for me anymore." By this means a value slips away, a value that you had thought you'd defined yourself by.

Nothing is Fixed

A way of your being in the world that may be a defensive, self-protective way of being, may come to be seen through the lens of meditation as unhelpful. Around that attitude of self-protection, there's a whole cluster of behaviours developed and fossilized. But the underlying motivation for behaving that way now seems a little bit less solid, a bit less appropriate than it did.

These behaviours may be what you're known by; your friends recognize you as someone who behaves this sort of way. This is edging towards the emptiness of "you" – what you assumed was fixed, definable, identifiable, turns out to be in flux just as much as the cloud that can expand and contract, that can fall out of the sky and turn into snow. Just as much as the water that can be swallowed by you and become part of your body, and then be expelled and go into a river, and eventually evaporate and become a cloud again. You're part of a big cycle that's moving both physically and mentally, as flow, as change. Is there anything that's fixed in there? Have you found anything yet that's fixed? This is part of the purpose of meditation – to reveal to you that though you have assumed certain things are fixed, they are not fixed. And then to reveal to you: there's *nothing* fixed.

At this point people sometimes get scared. It challenges our fundamental sense of existence, of "me" being the centre of this universe. Does anyone doubt that they are the centre of the universe? Everything

refers to "me"; that's how we work our way through the world. It's not so surprising that we have different ideas of certain things, because we're looking at them from different reference points. This is how we can get into clashes and confusions. Two people can experience the same event and come away with very different perceptions of it. It wasn't what happened at the event, it's how it relates to their view of themselves and their world, and what use it is to them, and what threat, and they will perceive it differently. Also, they can change their perceptions because they're not fixed. It's all very fluid.

Our sense of our self largely hinges on these patterns of behaviour and thought that we've identified with. But when you see through these patterns as no longer being appropriate or useful, there's this challenge to your sense of "you." Are you willing to change that view of you?

Fossilized Behaviours

There can be a tendency to hold on to these thoughts and behaviours, even when you have seen them as no longer appropriate, because there can be a fear of feeling lost if you don't hold on. It can be difficult to shake these things off. It's rather like long-term prisoners who finally get out of jail and they find the world outside confusing and difficult. Some will commit another crime so that they can go back to the place that feels like home, the only place they feel they can really fit. That happens. There is a sense in which we do that too, when we discover something which is binding us, but can't bring ourselves to let it go.

Are you holding on to something? Probably many things, through fear of not having them to lean on, not knowing what to replace them with. If you've done a certain behaviour all your life, it's filled a lot of



gaps where you might not have known what else to do. What will you do, next time that particular situation arises, if not to follow your usual potentially unhelpful response?

You might find the presence of mind to respond in a more appropriate way next time. In some situations you might do the same behaviour as you always did, because on some occasions it is appropriate, but now you do it in awareness and by choice rather than as a habit. Disidentifying from a particular behaviour or attitude doesn't mean it is taken away from you as such; it means you become more skilful in making use of it, or not making use of it when it's not appropriate.

The emptiness behind this highlights the way we get stuck in patterns of behaviour which become objects of identity; they become fossilized. The technical word is "reified"; they get turned into things. There is no inherent you there – there's a collection of behaviours and attitudes and experiences and sensations, rather like a cloud is a collection of water droplets. To go further than that is to trap yourself into a fixed way of thinking. It's quite challenging to un-think your way out of this.

I've been talking about insight into emptiness arising through your practice in relation to mental phenomena, attitudes, habits – it can also arise through your sensations. One person on this retreat commented to me that he's been trying really hard to find his body awareness. He can find the sensation, say, of the leg, but he can't find the body that's having the sensation. Yes, that's correct! No body to be found! But, don't we automatically add one? We jump from a sensory contact with the environment into a whole structure of me being a body sitting here meditating. Really, there's just the sensation.

You Should Train Yourself Thus

I've brought with me the Bahiya Sutta, one of the short suttas from the Pali collection. Bahiya was a seeker; it sounds like he wasn't a Buddhist seeker at the time the sutta starts, but he had a sense of "Am I getting anywhere? Am I already there? Where am I?" In the sutta a devata, a heavenly being, said to him "No, you're not getting anywhere. But if you travel and see the Buddha, he can teach you, because he knows."

Bahiya went and found the Buddha. The Buddha was out on his alms rounds, so Bahiya interrupted the Buddha and said, "Oh blessed one, teach me the Dharma! For my long-term welfare and bliss." And the Buddha said, "Not now, Bahiya, we're doing our alms rounds."

A second time Bahiya said, "It's hard to know what dangers there may be for the blessed one's life, or what dangers there may be for mine." (Meaning, you might not live until the end of the alms rounds; you'd better tell me now!) And a second time the Buddha said, "This is not the time. We have entered the town for alms."

A third time (Bahiya was quite persistent) he said, "It is hard to know what dangers there may be for the blessed one's life, or what dangers there may be for mine. Teach me, oh blessed one, teach me, teach me!" The Buddha gave in and taught him, in a very direct teaching, which bears on what I was saying just now.

The Buddha said, "Okay then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: in reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

'In reference to the sensed, only the sensed,' there is the sensation of the leg. That's all there is; there is no need to add the idea of a body. If something is heard, there's no need to add a story about it. But we so easily jump into making a story that creates a mental object which explains a sound for us.

If we hear a particular sound then instantly, within a second, the whole process occurs: we recognize a sound as the bark of a dog; we assume there's a dog there; then we might start a story in the mind about "I wonder who's walking a dog past here? I wonder where they're going? What sort of dog is it?" And then there's the attitude of "I don't like dogs, I'm scared of them." Or "I like dogs. I'd like to see it and stroke it."

This all develops within less than a second. If you're watching your mind you can see this happening. But the whole story may be a complete fantasy; perhaps I hid an electric dog-barking machine outside the door earlier! We like the sound to be identified and labelled and have a place in our mental model, because then we know how to react. We know whether to move towards the sound because we like dogs, or to move away because we don't. We have to have a response ready to deal even with sounds like that.

The Buddha is saying, drop out of that. In reference to the heard, only the heard. If a sound is heard – there's only a sound. Any more than that is a fabrication. Statistically, you'll get it right quite a bit of the time. But not all the time, because we make misidentifications, or because people like me will try and trick you with electronic dog-barking machines. We tend to feel safer having a story and knowing which way to move, but I'm saying "there was a sound; no need to create a story to explain the sound."

Awareness Operating

The Buddha is saying, “You should train yourself thus: in reference to the seen, there will only be the seen; in reference to the heard, only the heard; in reference to the sensed, only the sensed; and in reference to the cognized, only the cognized.” If there is a thought, leave it at that – don’t develop it into a train of thoughts. That is how you should train yourself. A very simple direct instruction, and very close to what we’ve been doing here. In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen – “only” means silence, not adding anything, and “the seen” means illumination. Awareness is operating. Likewise for the other senses.

The sutta goes on: “When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, and only the heard in reference to the heard, and so on, then Bahiya, there is no ‘you’ in connection with that.”

If there’s a sound out there which is not yet identified as “dog,” and there’s a sensation somewhere down here in the position of “leg,” then the senses are operating, but nothing is developing beyond that – no “you” is developing either. “You” are a construction of the mind, and the idea of a body behind senses is a construction of the mind. The idea of “your” cognizance, “your” thinking, “your” mental processes, which you so quickly identify as “your” thoughts – take out the word “your” and they’re all just ideas presenting themselves to awareness.

It’s no different from a bird that flies in front of you when you’re sitting outside, and flies away again. An idea flies into awareness, and flies away again. A sensation, which wasn’t there before, is there now, and then is no longer there. There is just this passing flow. Where’s the “you” in that? It’s only there when you put it there. Until you put it there, there’s just the flow of experience. The habit is to refer this flow

of experience to “me,” to create a model of the world in which I’m in the centre and everything is judged in its importance in relation to me.

But now, practising like this, it’s different – there is just what there is. Form is Emptiness. There are indeed various mental phenomena. “Emptiness” isn’t saying there’s nothing there. It’s saying the way we understand what is there, the way we manipulate it and use it and respond to it, is misled. It’s ignorant. We’re deceiving ourselves.

This isn’t to deny the material world. It’s not to deny the phenomenon of a body. Form, of course, is one of the five skandhas, and we recognize form. But form (the body) is empty of inherent separate existence; the Heart Sutra repeatedly tells us this. It’s a creation of the mind. Still, there’s the phenomenon of the body which the mind creates. A sound becomes a dog bark, and then the volition, the impulse to react a certain way to the perceived presence of a dog. That whole process can be dropped, and, if there’s a sense phenomenon, we needn’t create a sense of form out of it.

We could create a sense of form out of it, and that would be “emptiness is form.” But just now we’re doing “form is emptiness.” At this moment, no, we don’t create a form. It’s not wrong that we sometimes create a form. Emptiness IS form, these are the same thing. This is another case where it’s not split into two. Reality has these two aspects of form and emptiness, emptiness and form. And sensation and emptiness, and emptiness and sensation, and volition, and so on.

The five skandhas are empty of inherent existence. But still there are phenomena we call “form” (or “sensation”, “perception”, “volition” or “mental cognition.”) These phenomena really occur, but not in the way we’ve tended to treat them.

Getting this conceptually is tricky, but this is what it's pointing at. Through practice there can be a realization of it. These little things I've been pointing out, that you could experience in your practice, could point you that way. But this is not something you should be trying to do from now on. That would be a huge mistake. If you've started to think, "Okay, my task is to not be here. I'll have the body awareness of not having a body," Don't do that. No, your task is to practice.

Notice Your Tendencies

The main purpose here is to notice your tendency to create a mental world. You may, every now and again, catch yourself out doing that. You can catch it when you hear a sound that you don't immediately recognize, and then there's a certain anxiety – "what was that sound?" Something in the environment unknown? That's uncomfortable for us, and we're listening really sharply, to see if it comes again and we get a second chance to identify it. This is an example of you trying to fit something into the model you've built up in your mind of what's around you. And if it's something we don't recognize – we focus on it, don't we? If there's a coiled shape on the road; we don't just walk past it. We inspect it, trying to work out, is it a snake? We have this strong urge to fix things in our minds, so that we know what they are. We reify them. We can't rest until there's an explanation. We have to make one up, if there isn't one.

Again, this is a way of getting by. It enables us to put that thing on one side and move on to the next thing which needs attention. We're creating a story the whole day long. The story is empty of true reality. Our nature is emptiness, which is shorthand for saying we're empty of inherent existence, we're not fixed objects in the way we tend to assume.

Impermanence

We accept impermanence. We know the body changes, ages, dies. But the nature of impermanence means that our attempt to fix things is doomed to failure. The cloud spreads out across the sky and is no longer a cloud. There never was a cloud thing, there was a temporary phenomenon of water droplet density, and it dispersed or evaporated or it fell to the ground.

There is a temporary density of various chemicals and molecules sitting in front of you here, gurgling and making some noises into a microphone. I'm quite interested in this particular phenomenon, it's quite special to me, but it's still just a temporary phenomenon, which will pass. It has already changed from when it first sat down, breakfast being digested, various body cells being renewed, chemicals transported around the body. This body has changed while I'm sitting here, and so have all of yours.

And this mind has changed; various phenomena have passed through it, diverse thoughts and ideas and mental constructions have been created, or seen through, or both. This is an ongoing process. We can give the name "me" or "self" to this process. It's something just rolling along in its own way, and we can witness it through sitting, watching the mind. We can experience it.

But can we do that without then taking the next step of creating a story about it? Can we just simply sit and watch the show, without being a critic reviewing the show and trying to improve it? We find that harder to do because we've invested a lifetime in this particular show. It's really special to us and we can't just leave it alone. But maybe we can at least entertain the possibility of that. And maybe, as the mind settles, there

can be some moments when we don't automatically leap to a story, but just allow something to be as it is.

See if you can trust yourself to just sit here, whatever comes. In that way the mind can become very deeply silent. The narrator, the raconteur, goes off-duty and takes a break, and there's only bare perception. Of course still there's a habit to build on the perception, and you may witness that happening. In the spotting of it, it can release itself.

Thoughts Arise and Disappear

There was a very interesting article by Master Sheng Yen in the Chan Magazine a few years ago. It's not his own teaching, it's one that's been used throughout the history of Chan. The earliest I have found it dates back to the 12th century but it's been used since then in various poems and so on. It's simply the observation: whenever a thought arises (thought here means any mental phenomenon – memory, feeling, perception, etc.), just be aware of it and by itself it will disappear. You don't need to make it go away. You don't need to develop it. If you simply genuinely allow it to be seen, are clearly aware of it – that is the whole of the practice. The rest looks after itself.

If we deflect ourselves from seeing it clearly by immediately launching into a story, a categorization, and a reaction, then it's not seen clearly. It's sort of glimpsed, and then we go into automatic pilot mode and do something with it. But if you just allow yourself to clearly experience it, by itself it will disappear.

If the phenomenon arises and by itself it disappears, there isn't that in-between step that we tend to do of creating the self and working out how it relates to us. If, in relation to the sensed, there is only the



sensed, and there isn't a story added, then there is no "you" there! It's not as though you've slipped away or gone off to one side, no, you're not there. Because the "you" is just one of your stories, albeit a very persistent pervasive story, and in this case you haven't developed the bare sensation into a sensation woven into a story of you. Yet there is still this phenomenon of you; again, this is not denying that. It's more a way of expressing our understanding the nature of you.

Another way to put this is: it's more like the sense of self that's under investigation here. We're not doubting the processes of self, such as your having the intention of walking to the dining hall and your body getting up to do that. It's the sense of ownership of the process, the identification with it, the sense of "me" in it, which is confusing us. If a sound unrecognized creates a sense of danger, but on investigation it turns out there is no danger – then the sense of danger doesn't mean there is danger. Having a sense of self doesn't mean there is self.

The Release of Suffering

We tend to slip from a sense of self into an assumption of self, into operating from self. But these teachings are pointing out to us that that's going a step too far. You know that saying of Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." That's a rather big leap. He might have just said "I think, therefore there seems to be thought." Better still, he should have stopped at "There seems to be thought." Because the rest is just a story that we create to explain it. The sense of self that arises strengthens it for us and traps us into believing it.

There are the phenomena of physiology and biology, chemistry, feelings, memories; all this stuff is in motion and we dip into the experience

of it, catch a sensation and tell ourselves a story. We build up a story and we believe it. It creates a sense of self. This fiction is quite a long novel we've been writing during our lives.

The reason why this is important is because it's the key to releasing our suffering. We can refer back to the second noble truth, craving and aversion. Craving and aversion are largely anchored around defending this sensed self. Our prime objective in life is to defend and support and develop the self that we sense. We've been tricked, by evolution, by biology, into putting ourselves as number one. That creates a certain survival instinct, which is how evolution works, but it also creates tension, unhappiness: "I'm not getting what I want, oh dear, I won't survive." Or, "I'm getting too much of this, I don't like it." Suffering, dissatisfaction, virtually all in relation to "me."

Of course, we have some sense of the suffering of those around us. I'm not saying we're completely selfish; only about ninety-five percent selfish! You may think about somebody else's suffering, but even then, how much of that is related to your part in their suffering, or your wanting to feel good for having helped them? It all gets tangled up. We could say the centre of our self-concern is ourselves, and that's perfectly reasonable from the biological point of view. However, most of us are fairly well-assured of biological survival, for a few more years at least, yet we create so much fuss around unnecessary things like food preferences or minor aspects of our social identity; our concerns about them are excessive.

A lot of our mental fussing is totally unnecessary when we realize that our basic needs are already largely fulfilled. We can just simply sit here and find peace, freedom from craving and aversion and from the ignorance of assuming a self to be what it is not.

Don't Get in the Way

I've been presenting it theoretically here to try and give you some conceptual understanding that practice has the potential to give you a personal realization of this – those moments when the sense of self isn't even there to be found because you're not creating it at that moment. As the mind settles into practice, and as your attention sharpens and becomes more continuous, you stumble over these moments – these “gaps in the matrix”, shall I say. Something is experienced differently from your usual mode of being. Usually you just gloss over it or are too busy to notice. But when the mind is settled, you can come across these moments where you realize that the identification with a certain value system is not intrinsic to you. It's been created through a thought process, an impregnation of the mind, but it's not you. There's that sudden gap which can be sensed as a vulnerability, a risk. It can feel uncomfortable, but it can also be sensed as an openness, an opportunity, freedom. It can slip by you because it can be brief. Or it can be clearer and bring with it implications that other things are also not intrinsic to you. We've built a whole superstructure, a belief system, around this sense of self and the urge to protect it.

Again this has some biological value – I'm not dismissing it entirely - but hasn't it got way out of hand? Almost entirely our twenty-four hours are taken up fussing about this particular story of “me.” Take a break from it and you'll be surprised: the world continues to work okay without you interfering. Actually, you are totally unnecessary, even to yourself. Bit of a shock, but with that shock is an understanding of the depth of how far this goes. It really is that radical, it really does cut to the root. The root of our suffering is this fossilization of a sensed self

into something to be protected at all costs. All energy, all time and attention are used in that direction. But we can cut ourselves free from this painful and pernicious habit.

The sharpness of your practice, the sharpness of your attention, the silence of the mind, allow things to be noticed which are usually overshadowed by mental activity. Keep practising with attention, with a mind that's as still as you can find it to be, using the method, watching the show without writing the review or creating a script and, maybe, the emptiness of the show will become apparent.

But don't try and force it. Just sit there with what comes. The practice looks after itself. You can get in the way of it. You cannot speed it up. Your task is simply not to get in the way.

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THE DIAMOND SUTRA

EDD PHILLIPS

The Diamond Sutra is one of the most well-known of the Prajnaparamita sutras (perfection of wisdom texts) of Mahayana Buddhism and takes the form of a discourse between the Buddha and one of his elder disciples, Subhuti, before a large assembly of monks. In this encounter, the Buddha strips away one by one his disciple's misconceptions and doubts, each time refining the questions posed. Throughout the text, Subhuti's understanding and experience of the true nature of reality are honed to a point where it allows him to bring to fruition for himself and the assembly the 'Consummation of incomparable enlightenment'. Master Han Shan, the 16th century Ch'an Master, says of this Sutra:

It was said: 'When all one's doubts and repentance (for them) are wiped out for ever, one will abide in the wisdom of reality.' This was the aim of the sutra.¹

In this Essay, I will explore some main themes of Diamond Sutra and how it has influenced me personally, as well as offering my own reflections on it. The two main translations I have used as reference are those of A. F. Price from the Shambala publication *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng* and of Charles Luk's translation of *The Diamond Cutter of Doubts A Commentary on the Diamond Sutra by Ch'an Master Han Shan*, which can be found in his book *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*.

I first picked up a copy of the Diamond Sutra during the Dalai Lama's visit to Nottingham in 2008. I read it over a long period, reflecting on its

contents before meditation sessions. I have re-read it a number of times since, which is possible due to its short length and it being broken down into 32 short verses. Later, I picked up the Lu Kuan Yu text, which gave me further insight into the structure of the sutra as well as a look into how a Chan Master from the past would have analysed it. This was a harder read as it was not broken down into the 32 verses. Luk says on this that, in the past, the text 'has been wrongly divided into thirty-two chapters which seem to be unconnected random sayings'.² The commentary by Han Shan gave me further insight into aspects of the text that I had previously missed, such as how the nature of the Buddha's questions subtly shifts to allow for a further honing of Subhuti's understanding.

The Sutra itself begins with a scene setting: the Buddha going about his ordinary life on his alms round. On his return, Subhuti praises him and poses a question:

O World Honoured One, when virtuous men or women develop the supreme-enlightenment mind, how should their minds abide and how should they be subdued?³

The question here is taken from Charles Luk's translation, though in Price's translation 'Consummation of incomparable enlightenment' is used instead of 'Supreme enlightenment mind.' In Sanskrit this is called *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. I prefer Price's translation here, as I feel it conjures an explanation of enlightenment into English well, especially with the use of the word 'consummation'. The Oxford Learners Dictionary describes consummation as 'the fact of making something complete or perfect'.⁴ Here it is used to great effect to show enlightenment as a process rather than a fixed thing.

Right off the bat here Subhuti has asked *the* big Buddhist question: How do we become enlightened? That is where this text really cuts through, as it does not offer concrete answers, but instead continues to pose further questions – thus allowing Subhuti (and I feel the reader of the text) to deepen his understanding of the consummation of incomparable enlightenment.

One of the early devices of this text is stating that something neither is nor is not. In some places, it can be used by the Buddha, such as from very early on where the Buddha states:

Yet when vast, uncountable, immeasurable numbers of beings have thus been liberated, verily no being has been liberated.⁵

And in other places it can be used by Subhuti himself answering a question of the Buddha's, such as here:

As I understand Buddha's meaning there is no formulation of truth called the consummation of incomparable enlightenment. Moreover, the Tathagata has no formulated teaching to enunciate. Wherefore? Because the Tathagata has said that truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is not.⁶

This deals with a very difficult concept to express in words: the apparent existence of things, but also that, at the same time, the non-*existence* of these 'things'. From the wrong seeing of this, the Buddha states that delusion arises.

Connected to this, another device used is Subhuti responding to the Buddha's questions by saying 'x is merely a name'. For instance, "Stream entrant" is merely a name.⁷ It is used in many different ways throughout the text to affirm the voidness of things. Concerning the



FRONT LINE OF THE CHINESE DIAMOND SUTRA, 868 CE, BRITISH LIBRARY.

short excerpt above, it is around here that the text deals with the aspect of no self as well. The Buddha questions Subhuti and he answers on the labels given to the different ‘stages’ of enlightenment. Such stages can give us something to anchor our practice to and aspire to, but here they are challenged by attachment. Even just saying ‘I am’ (in the case of this translation ‘Such am I’) we fall into the trap of giving ourselves and the supposed stages of our practice something solid we can cling to as well as attaching to a fixed version of ourselves.

It is partly this kind of reflection upon nondualism which, roughly half way through the text, assists Subhuti in a realisation which moves him to tears. He conceives an idea of fundamental reality, but knows that to realise this he must be aware of and see that this realisation is not a fixed thing in itself. If you read the commentary by Chan Master Han Shan, he states that the reason why Subhuti had been so moved was that this was the point where the Buddha was moving his understanding toward that of the Mahayana. He says that these discourses were the first gate to the Mahayana through the cutting off of all doubts and that Subhuti is being moved towards becoming a bodhisattva by realizing his essential mind.

After his realization, Subhuti re-asks his initial question now that he has reached a new point in his understanding. Han Shan comments on how this new section proceeds:

From now on, the [second half of the sutra] deals with the elimination of doubts harboured by Bodhisattvas who are already awakened to the prajña but who do not as yet relinquish the idea of the wisdom which could realize (prajña). They grasp this wisdom as an ego. This is the self-preservation and self-awareness of ego.⁸

The Buddha is now talking to a different audience, not just to Subhuti. In Han Shan’s commentary he states that the previous section had resulted not only in Subhuti’s awakening but in the ‘dissipation of the whole assembly’s doubts’.⁹

It is soon after this subtle change (at the end of verse 18 of the Shambala edition) that the text comes to what has probably been one of the most influential lines of the Sutra on my practice:

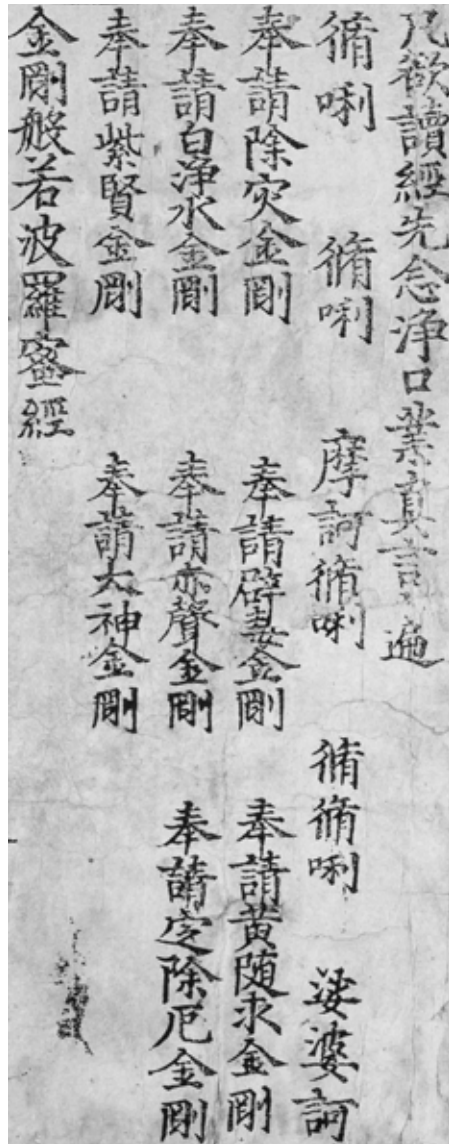
Subhuti, it is impossible to retain past mind, impossible to hold onto present mind, and impossible to grasp future mind.¹⁰

Since my first reading of this text, I have often reflected on this statement like a Koan. I have drawn upon its worth at such times as when my mind has been clogged with future thinking. It can cut straight through future thinking and, subsequently, when my mind tries to alight in the present, it still has no substantial ground to rest upon. It like a process of constant motion and stillness combined as one that brings silence to the mind. The mind has nowhere to alight and loses its substantiality.

In the second section of the sutra, the questions and the answers given are extremely subtle in their refinement of Subhuti’s understanding of anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. For instance, Subhuti asks:

In the attainment of the consummation of incomparable enlightenment did Buddha make no acquisition whatsoever?¹¹

Here again we see the importance of the word consummation. After confirming Subhuti’s question, the Buddha states that the consummation of incomparable enlightenment is attained through freedom of



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SUTRA, 868 CE, BRITISH LIBRARY.

separate selfhood, which he supports by saying (not for the first time) that there are no living beings to liberate. Again, there is teaching here on not trying to fix something permanently; otherwise, as the Buddha says on this subject, he would be partaking in an ego. He goes even further on this point by saying that ego is the same as non-ego, clarifying the existence/nonexistence paradox that this text so skillfully plays with.

In the penultimate verse, the Buddha speaks of cutting off ‘the arising of [views that are mere] aspects.’¹² ‘Views’ seems to be a good word to use here. These false views that see things as fixed are themselves not fixed either and themselves need to be seen through. It is at this point that Han Shan states that the last of Subhuti’s doubts were relinquished and says of the whole assembly:

their false views were broken up successively one after the other, and with the elimination of all idea of form and appearance, the mind had nowhere to alight.¹³

Before moving to the last verse of the text, I want to mention a recurring device of the text that offers an integral aid to bolster what I have spoken of above. It is the use of the benefits of material charity in comparison to the merit gained from receiving, retaining and teaching, only four lines of the text (or sometimes the whole text). These statements are made by the Buddha when he speaks to Subhuti at certain key points throughout the text. The extreme scale used to make these comparisons is of such magnitude that it makes it impossible for the reader to imagine, let alone calculate. In many of these cases the Buddha uses the sand grains in the Ganges River as multiplier. For instance,

at one point the Buddha multiplies the Ganges River by the sand grains in the Ganges River itself and then states:

If a good man or woman filled three thousand galaxies of worlds with the seven treasures for each sand grain in all those Ganges rivers, and gave them away in gifts of alms, would he gain great merit?¹⁴

From here, he would then state that this extreme amount of merit would not compare to that attained by someone who did some form of receiving, retaining, using or explaining only four lines of the sutra. This really shows how this text is trying to say that it is more important than many other texts that came before, such as those of the Hinayana.

It has even tempted me with the line of text I use as koan. Maybe I could get some of that boundless merit if I went out there promoting that line? This was an interesting temptation of my mind that arose in my practice and actually helped me see through some of the desires I seek through it. It is a temptation that I have since let go of. This experience made me a little more wary of the text as I returned to it for this essay, though, what I had missed in previous readings was how this issue is dealt with in the text itself. Shortly after Subhuti's realisation, the Buddha says that he cannot explain the extent of such merit gained as it would arouse suspicion, a point further supported when the Buddha says, 'the significance of this discourse is beyond conception.'¹⁵ The translator leaves a footnote here commenting: 'The extent and value of its meaning cannot be materially gauged.'¹⁶ If the fruits of this discourse were conceivable then it would put them in a position of being fixed which is counter to the actual teachings themselves contained within it.

Returning now to the final verse of this text, we find the Buddha offers a verse or gatha in relevance to what has been taught throughout:

All phenomena are like
A dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow.
Like dew and lightning.
Thus should you meditate upon them.¹⁷

Or in the A.F Price version, they use a translation by Kenneth Saunders from 'Lotuses of the Mahayana' (Wisdom of the East Series):

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.¹⁸

In this poetic conclusion to the text, we are left with some practical advice from Master Han Shan. He informs the reader that for those who wish for the true void to appear they should meditate upon the dream, illusion, bubble, shadow, dew and lightning - something I have already explored in sitting meditation as well as in daily life. It helped to settle and silence my mind like other practice methods, so is something I will perhaps look into now and then in the future. I also used the latter translation to meditate upon much like a Koan, which gave me a different flavour of settling. I do love that translation for its simple poeticism too.

So, in this final gatha, I have been given something to work with in my practice. But not only that. I can truly say that, despite the challenges I faced putting the concepts of Diamond Sutra into words, writing this essay has provided me with a much greater understanding and connec-

tion to this key Mahayana text. For me it has been a reflection upon Subhuti's and the assembly's journey, which I feel has subtly guided my own along that path of consummation of incomparable enlightenment. For that I am truly thankful.

NOTES

1. 1987. "Ch'an and Zen Teaching." In *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, by Lu K'uan Yu. Century Paperbacks. 155
2. (Yu, 1987, p. 149)
3. (Yu, 1987, p. 158)
4. (Anon., n.d.)
5. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 19)
6. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 24)
7. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 26)
8. (Yu, 1987, p. 189)
9. (Yu, 1987, p. 188)
10. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 39)
11. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 43)
12. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 52)
13. (Yu, 1987, p. 204)
14. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 29)
15. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 36)
16. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 160)
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18. (Mou-lam, 2005, p. 53)

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PURIFICATION

JAKE LYNE

Look up!

Soot grey snowflakes
dancing, whirling, falling, landing –
white side up.

MINDFUL RUNNING AS A WAY TO GREATER JOY
AND EQUANIMITY

STUART MCLEOD

Over the last five years, I have been offering workshops that blend a range of mindfulness-based practices with running and explore what it means to bring a mind orientated towards present moment awareness into physical activity.

My work in this area in fact began in 2017 when I co-created and supported a five-day WCF retreat led by Jake Lyne, which we called Zen Meditation & Running. Based at Barmoor in the wild terrain of the North York Moors, the programme followed the basic structure of a Silent Illumination retreat, but we included a daily trail run starting with 45 minutes and building to over an hour and a half towards the end of the retreat. Participant feedback was extremely encouraging and I took confidence in the fact that it is entirely possible to engage in serious Dharma practice when introducing what we would consider to be less conventional activity, involving sustained aerobic effort, into a traditional retreat programme. As one participant shared:

I loved the running...although I found the vastness and beauty of the moors quite impossible to contain in my awareness and had to settle with the earth beneath my feet and swinging arms and legs. Maybe once, we reached the top of a hill and stopped to look around, I saw the sky and the grass and the sheep with clarity. My mind was quiet enough to ask nothing and just see – ‘ordinary mind, wanting nothing’.

Since this time, I have trained with Bangor University as a teacher of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and now use the framework of contemporary mindfulness-based interventions for my current teaching.

Firstly, let's consider what it is that defines a run as a mindful run. To explain what is meant by mindfulness to newcomers to contemplative practices, I use Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness as 'the awareness that arises through paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.'

Paying attention on purpose

Running with mindfulness firstly has to do with actively choosing to pay attention to both body and mind, and specifically the body in effortful motion. That's a very different starting point to how we can often find ourselves switching into a state of automatic pilot when engaging in a familiar activity. Instead we are running and knowing that we are running.

Paying attention in the present moment

To pay attention is to be present. We are present with our embodied experience – knowing the difference between the body in stillness and the body running; present with our mental and emotional state – knowing what thoughts may be present, recognising our prevailing mood; present with our environment - sensing the terrain beneath our feet and the unfolding landscape before our eyes.

Pay attention non-judgementally

In being present we offer the possibility to be open and receptive to our



changing moment to moment experience. Such openness can be characterised by a growing capacity to embrace all of our experience as it arises without reactivity, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. For example, we might experience the arrival of rain on our run as simply 'raining' rather than an irritant that is somehow impairing our experience.

Having established a sense of what mindfulness is in running it is worth considering why bringing mindfulness to such an activity might be of value to us.

My coaching experience in recent years has brought me in to contact with a broad range of runners from the highly experienced to complete beginners. A common theme that comes up for people is how running can sometimes be a struggle, both mentally and physically. Others notice

that their enjoyment and pleasure in running have diminished over time and this is something they are keen to rediscover.

One of the key benefits of applying mindfulness when running that I like to focus upon and explore with others is how we can cultivate the capacity to engage in an activity that can be both physically and at times mentally demanding, with more joy and equanimity.

As regular runners will know, sometimes when we run, the body feels great and the mind is focused and relaxed. Other times we may be battling negative self-talk and bodily discomfort. It can be a real revelation for people unfamiliar with mindfulness and spiritual practice to consider and experience that these are all temporary states that will come and go. Recognising these facets of experience as being transient by nature may be something which we can all intuit at some level, but I've learned not to underestimate the value of realising this personally for those who may never really have considered this before.

If we can meet all of this with a mindful attitude, we learn to contain the full breadth of our experience without judgement. This is the view of equanimity. True equanimity does not deny or disregard the difficulties that will arise when we run, nor does it cling unnecessarily to the joys of running. Learning the skill of establishing a mind that inclines towards the present moment without judgement can then begin to open a doorway to a greater sense of calmness, composure and stability.

To sustain our liking or disliking of these fleeting moments only takes us further away from our direct experience. In the words of Rumi, we “welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows...”.

Equanimity, in allowing us to drop any grasping at or aversion to our experience, has the taste of freedom from the judging mind. This is what

it means to find equanimity in our running. We can learn how to cultivate this quality simply by paying attention in the ways described above when we run. With practice we can begin to run free of judgement, with mindful awareness and attention as the key.

Joy as a naturally arising state of mind

I have described joy as another potential benefit that we can experience when running, particularly through the application of mindfulness. How can this be supported when knowing from my own experience that on some occasions when we run it can be largely experienced as dissatisfying?

We have just considered the fruit of equanimity as offering a sense of freedom that transcends the dualities of good and bad, liking and disliking. As we develop our muscle of mindfulness we are learning to become a broader and deeper container to hold the never-ending flow of our experience. In growing our capacity for the mind to become less troubled by judgements of this or that, we can begin to look more deeply at the qualities of our natural state of mind. We may associate the unperturbed mind with feelings of clarity, focus, ease and rest, which in turn can bring forth a natural sense of joyfulness.

The Buddhist view of the mind's true nature identifies joy as one of its fundamental qualities, and the cultivation of mindfulness is offered as a means to more readily access such innate attributes of the mind. As we train ourselves in becoming more mindful in all of our day-to-day activities, we can begin to more regularly experience this quality of joy as naturally arising.

If joy is therefore recognised as a natural quality of the mind, then applying mindfulness when we run offers an access point to the joy which is always present and available to us. Joy can arise when we learn

how to establish the mind of equanimity. We learn to let be and let go of the busy judgemental mind. We learn how to get out of our own way.

This takes me back to the wide-open moorland landscape of the North York Moors. The same participant reported before the retreat feeling “like a wandering head-on-a-stick, a ‘teetering bulb of dread and dream’ looking outwards through dimmed eyes and looking rapidly inwards. But during those few days in Yorkshire something seemed to drop down, or drop away. I could feel gravity through my bones and cold air on my skin and fantastic, open stillness.”

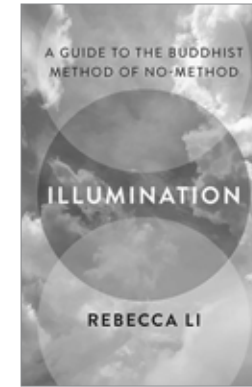
Having spent much of the last half an hour running steadily up a long, shallow climb, when we paused on our run, causes and conditions seemingly offered an opening to ‘ordinary mind, wanting nothing.’ I sense there was something in this person’s experience which echoed qualities of equanimity.

I make no particular claim for running as a spiritual practice per se, and yet it is an entirely natural activity, intrinsic to being human – at least for those that are fortunate enough to be able to run – and indeed fundamental to our survival once upon a time. There is something about its completeness, the way in which running fully engages both body and mind, and which can frequently test body and mind at their edges, which I believe lends itself as a gateway to practice if we’re prepared to look and to engage, and from which we can derive great benefits to support us on the path.

Stuart McLeod leads the Kent Chan Group and is the founder of RUN:ZEN which offers mindful running coaching, workshops and retreats (runzen.co.uk).

BOOK REVIEW: ILLUMINATION BY REBECCA LI

JEREMY WOODWARD



This book feels familiar, like a homecoming, with its frequent references to Masters Sheng Yen, John Crook and Simon Child – Rebecca Li’s three teachers to whom she dedicates it. It is also simultaneously very challenging.

Rebecca’s background, born in Hong Kong and then studying in America while being the regular translator for Master Sheng Yen over many years, gives the book a western sensibility with an underlying deep appreciation of Chan’s Chinese roots.

Throughout the book, the English is plain and so lucid. No retreating into technical language or philosophical musings: the phrase “causes and conditions” appears on almost every page; the word “karma” is nowhere to be seen. Other Sanskrit words are only used at the first reference to the relevant English translation. While her core phrase – total clear awareness – speaks to it at many levels, there is only a single, passing, appearance of “mindfulness”!

The scene-setting frontispiece texts are the first six lines of Hongzhi’s Silent Illumination poem and the Hongzhi quote “Stay with that just as that; stay with this just as this” which she references as a leitmotif throughout.

Rebecca is very clear that Silent Illumination is an experiential whole of life practice: “the natural state of being fully human” or perhaps, to

use Fiona Nuttall's phrase, the honest dance of common humanity. It can start on the cushion but is not limited to the cushion. It requires paying attention, moment to moment, to every aspect of one's life.

The book is suffused with several repeated themes, starting with the one-line quote from Hongzhi above. Silence and Illumination are not separate but two sides of the same coin. Silence is not emptying or silencing the mind; it is non-reactivity to the activity of our minds rather than the absence of activity itself. John Crook's "let through, let be, let go" becomes a mantra throughout. Our vexations are our habitual reactivity to events and so activate suffering in a very simple equation – experience of the present moment + vexation = suffering. Recognising vexations every time they surface and then, with clarity, changing one's reactivity is the task of Silent Illumination practice.

It all comes down to her signature phrase "total clear awareness" which seems to be analogous to paying attention to every moment, each such moment being the unique coming together of particular causes and conditions.

It is structurally clear and well thought through. After a personal introduction and three introductory chapters, she lucidly summarises the four noble truths and the eightfold path followed by seven chapters on what she calls, in relation to vexations, modes of operation, namely craving, aversion and then five types of delusion – trance, problem-solving, intellectualising, quietism, and forgetting-emptiness. These chapters constantly challenge one's habits and then provide ways of countering those same habits or modes of operation. I finished none of these chapters unchallenged! As you would expect, the final chapter brings everything together beautifully and concisely.

This book is a remarkable manifesto for the relevance of Silent Illumination in avoiding suffering and living in the world with Wisdom and Compassion. Highly Recommended.

P.S. Jeremy has nearly finished reading this book for the second time!

Rebecca is a Dharma heir of Simon Child. Her other two teachers were Chan Masters Sheng Yen and John Crook. The book is available from all good bookshops and also from Amazon.



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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.

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*Subbuti, it is impossible to retain past mind,
impossible to hold onto present mind,
and impossible to grasp future mind.*

THE DIAMOND SUTRA

