SPRING 2025 NO.67

NEW CHAN FORUM

BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

禪 Western Chan Fellowship

CONTENTS

Guiding Teacher: Dr. Simon Child • Editor: Sarah Bird
Contributions for future issues (articles, poems, artwork) welcomed. Please send to editor@westernchanfellowship.org.
If possible, please send as .doc documents.
Cover Image: Unsplash. Designer: www.robbowden.com

Western Chan Fellowship

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

SARAH BIRD

Welcome to the Spring issue of the *New Chan Forum* – my first as Editor. As I type I look out of my window at a cold, grey February day in Bristol. By the time you read this I trust that the season will have changed and warmer, brighter days will be returning.

This issue focusses on compassion.

We start with a talk on 'Where is the compassion in Chan?' from Simon Child at the Summer Silent Illumination retreat at Shawbottom, transcribed by Jeanine Woodward. I particularly appreciate what he says about how compassion may grow naturally in the spaces left vacant by unhelpful habits, unearthed through practice.

Anna Jedynak then explores the potential and pitfalls of compassion, and Marian Partington meditates on 'A stone heart' – a piece that came out of a writing retreat at her home in mid-Wales.

A *New Chan Forum* issue would not be complete without some poetry: David Valentine-Hagart and his ode to grief, followed by an anonymous haiku written on retreat at Shawbotton.

The next issue will focus on practice. Please send in your submissions!

WHERE IS THE COMPASSION IN CHAN?

SIMON CHILD

A question which is commonly asked on retreat is, "Where's the compassion in Chan?" We're sitting here, self-absorbed, navel-gazing, ignoring everybody else, not talking to anyone, just focusing on our own enlightenment. Where is there any hint of compassion in this practice?

Of course there is compassion, but this is a real question worth exploring and untangling. Chan certainly is compassionate; compassion is very strong in Chan and indeed in Chinese culture. However, what we're doing here on retreat is only a small snippet of the whole of Chan practice. We come on retreat for a particular style of practice and that is what we're doing. This retreat practice is, in the technical sense, wisdom-focused rather than compassion-focused. There are practices which are more compassion led – or example it's a strong feature of Tibetan Buddhism, and of Christianity – but it's not to the fore in the way I'm presenting Chan practice in this meditation retreat setting, and hence not in the way you're practising Chan at the moment. That can bring up the question "Where is compassion? Is it absent? Is it overlooked?" No, it isn't.

Cultivating Insight

On retreat we're primarily engaged in a particular form of practice which is wisdom-focused; we're cultivating insight. I think it was Stephen Batchelor who coined the phrase 'Meditation Buddhism' for Western Buddhism because Westerners are very focused on meditation practice, and perhaps particularly focused on retreat as the 'real' practice.

GWANEUM (GUAN YIN) STATUE, NAKSANSA TEMPLE, SOUTH KOREA

We might consider it a Western tendency or even 'corruption' of practice to be strongly focused on retreat practice and not on the rest of Chan practice.

I did some interviews on Zoom during the pandemic lockdowns and I remember one person saying to me, "I can't wait to be able to get back to proper practice!" I said, "Why? What are you doing now? Aren't you doing proper practice now?!" Just because you're not on retreat doesn't mean you can't do proper practice – but it is a common attitude to identify retreat as being the real thing. That's an error. We have quite a few things to unpack here.

Retreat practice

We do about a dozen 30-minute sittings per day on retreat; that's about six hours a day of sitting meditation, for six days – thirty-six hours. If you do one retreat a year and you consider that as a year's practice then, averaged over the year, that's not even an hour a week, it's about 6 minutes per day! Even if you attend two retreats a year, and few people do more than that, it doesn't add up to all that many hours of sitting meditation.

There is a particular quality in the intensive sustained practice on retreat which is valuable, bringing a lot of hours closer together which facilitates continuity and consistency. But there isn't really a great quantity and there isn't a consistency across our whole life. There is an opportunity for cultivation in sustaining your practice across the few days of the retreat, but how about sustaining practice across your whole life?

It is common to regard retreat as 'real practice', but it's only one specific style of practice. There's a whole lot of other life situations in which

to practise, and lots of other styles of practice: in our lives we can practise in the same way as retreat, in the form of sitting meditation, but also in other ways such as in activity (which you might say we are rehearsing when we do walking meditation and work periods), and also in interaction, and in relationship. Interacting with other people in our everyday life brings a different quality to practice, it brings things up in us; it triggers some of our sensitive points in ways which might not happen in the rather isolated environment of retreat.

Admittedly there is some degree of interaction on retreat even though we have the retreat rules of silence and of not interfering or interacting with other people, but it is a lower-level and less challenging degree of interaction than in everyday life. With this many people in this size of place, we do encounter each other and interact to some extent. Work periods often require some words or other interaction, and things need to be passed at the meal table. In the corridor or doorways we need to pass each other. How do we respond to such events as passing each other in the corridor – perhaps with excessive offering to give way; we can get stuck in the corridor for five minutes with both of us gesturing "No, you first, you first". Who dares to go first, to put themselves first? This can be problematic in corridors and doorways!

On retreat we are generally keeping to the practice of avoiding or reducing interaction, perhaps avoiding eye-contact and other non-verbal communication, so as not to stir up the mind that we are trying to settle. The degree to which this differs from our everyday mode of interaction can be highlighted when the postman drives down our track in his van, bringing a letter or a parcel for us. They might meet the phenomenon which I call Zen Zombies, people walking around with blank faces,

avoiding eye-contact, avoiding getting engaged with the visitor… if you look around, you'll see that's what's happening, everybody around you is a Zen Zombie.

At Dharma Drum Retreat Centre in upstate New York a public road goes through the campus and retreatants cross that road quite often, walking between the Chan Hall on one side and the dining hall and dormitories on the other. I remember that quite early on there we were given the instruction, "Behave normally with the neighbours", "wave at them and maybe even say hello; we don't want them to think we're weird".

One person who was on retreat here a few months ago told me of an encounter with one of our neighbours. We have a new neighbour in the house more or less straight up the hillside there. That house was a holiday cottage for many years but it was sold recently. The people who live there now stopped him as he was walking past and said, "Excuse me, can you just explain? We see you all going out for walks, but you all go out alone, you don't go with anyone else." I can see that might look a bit weird from a distance. I sometimes laugh at the people up on the Roaches ridge when I can see a long line queuing up to have their turn to stand on the trig point and take a selfie, but how might they perceive us down here? On retreat we're behaving differently and we're behaving in an individual, isolated, sort of way – albeit for a very good purpose.

It's not that what we're doing is inappropriate. However, we are behaving in a way that doesn't transfer into our everyday lives, though some people make the mistake of trying to do that; they try and preserve their retreat routine when they get home. They sometimes say they want to 'bottle' their retreat experience and take it home; they want to take the

whole experience home with them. For most people their life circumstances don't accommodate that; very quickly they get some frustration and disappointment, perhaps also domestic conflict.

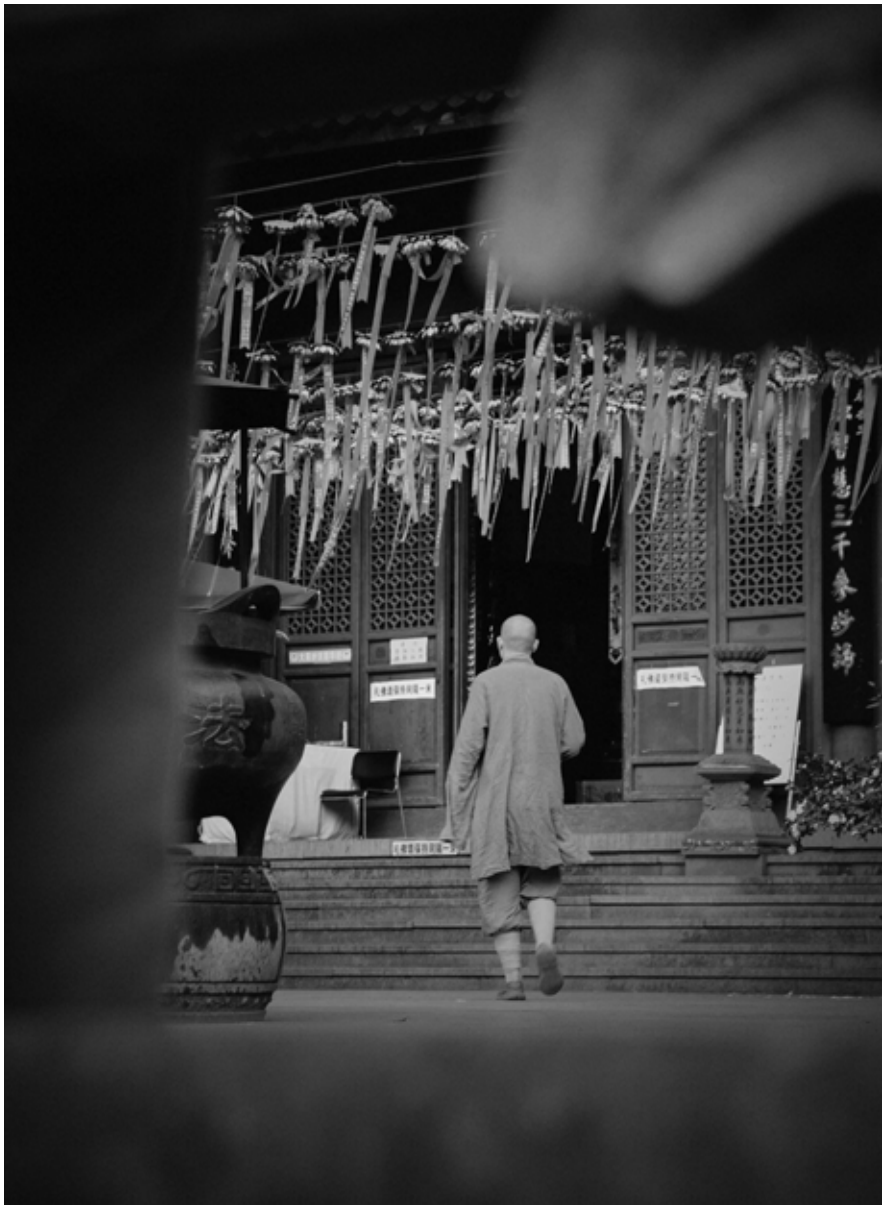
What we're doing here on retreat, what we're training in here, is very valuable but it isn't something which is portable as a whole package into our everyday life. The meditation practice itself, the method of opening our awareness, that can be carried into everyday life, but the retreat style of practice, no; it doesn't fit.

Monastic practice

In response to that some people think, "I really want do a lot of retreat practice. I'll become a monastic; I'll be on permanent retreat." That's not how it works when you're a monastic. For a monastic it is like everybody else: you get up in the morning and you go to work nine-to-five and then back again, and in the evening, you have a meal. Except it's not quite nine-to-five work; it's more like five-to-nine, seven days a week. Get up early, morning sitting, morning service, temple clean up, breakfast – and then you do the day's work.

They all have job allocations: it might be administration, it might be book-keeping, it might be preparing publicity material, it might be cooking or gardening, and so on. It's not really nine-to-five, it's more that they work from when they finish breakfast say seven-ish in the morning, until evening service, evening medicine meal, and then they have an evening sitting and go to bed.

It's not permanent retreat. In fact it can be quite like their everyday life before they became a monastic. I've heard stories of some who were fed up with their role in the corporate world and decided to become



monastics. What sort of job did they get allocated as monastics? They may be known to work well in a particular professional role in the corporate world – so, even though it is what they were running away from, they may be allocated a similar role in the Dharma Drum organisation! For monastics it definitely isn't permanent retreat.

An interesting thing is that most monastics are not particularly interested in meditation and retreat – some are, but it's a minority interest. When they're in the Sangha College at Dharma Drum Mountain they have a choice between what they call the Chan Hall Track or the Chanting Track: are they going to become the people who run the Chan Hall or are they going to become people who lead chanting services? About ninety percent choose the Chanting Track. When I meet monastics at different times, such as when I've led retreats in New York, many are not particularly interested in meditation, and often not particularly good at it; it's not their speciality, it's not their interest. They've ordained for different reasons; often it is genuinely for a life of service, service is something they want to offer. The cooking is a great thing – they're happy to do the cooking, feed people on retreat – they're not so interested in joining the retreat and sitting meditation. That's just a mindset of approaching practice.

This attitude has a long history. There's an interesting series of books by Holmes Welch on Chinese Buddhism. He covers three periods, and the second book – *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900 to 1950*,[1] covers the period leading up to the time of Mao Tse Tung. He describes how, if you're a monk in a monastery, the trick was to get yourself a 'good' job. If you get a job in administration, in the kitchen, in the fields, that was a good job. If you're a senior monastic you might

be a supervisor or manager but being one of the workers was also good.

The trick was to get yourself a job of some sort, because if you didn't get a job allocation, you had to go and sit in the Chan Hall! Even that wasn't quite the lowest of the low; the lowest was to be appointed supervisor of the Chan Hall because then you had to be there every single period and no excuse – you had to do the time-keeping and you had to keep giving talks. That was an unpopular allocation. It is the same now; meditation and retreat is not the major interest of the majority of monastics and it's not what they do all the time. If, for you, intensive meditation on retreat is the real thing then becoming a monastic is not the way to go.

Daily life practice

My point is that focusing on retreat alone isn't the way to approach practice. Other styles are key, particularly practice in relationship and in everyday life. They're not completely separate from what we're doing here but they are distinct in that the environment is different. In everyday life people don't always give way to you in the doorway, nor on the road, not even when you've got a green traffic light; it doesn't work the same. You need to have a different mindset for approaching these situations, yet with the same principle of being open and aware, experiencing what's going on so that you can respond accordingly. If you're not paying attention to what's going on then your responses will be automatic, arising from your personal history, and may not necessarily be appropriate to *this* situation. You need to respond to *this* situation, not to a thought stream that you've brought with you from the past which is leading habitually towards a certain direction of action or thought. You've got to take account of *this* moment, and if at this very moment you've got a green light *and* there's a car coming across your path, you don't just carry on saying, "I'm green, I'm OK"; you have to suddenly change tack, you have to be aware of and respond to your whole situation and context and not to the green light alone.

Silent Illumination is a practice which is very useful to refine and hone while you are here on retreat, so that it can be continued when you are not here, continued effectively during your life. Again, interactions with other people are one of the key things because these are most effective at wheedling out of us our various habitual tendencies: our responding to certain people in certain ways, reacting to certain events in certain ways. A lot of ingrained conditioned behaviours, responses and attitudes are revealed to us in everyday interactions.

Sitting here on your cushion you might be facing up to some of these as memories, but not many of them are being triggered just by routinely moving around the place and passing other people. In our everyday life there's much more propensity for that, so there are much richer opportunities to practise – to witness and understand your own fixed responses and behaviours and to see through them. It's difficult because there's so much going on, it's so quick and many events just slip by unnoticed and you don't see through them. But if you're a practitioner who cultivates a mind that is open and aware, you will notice more than the non-practitioner. Some of these times you will notice and think, "Oh, I'm not going to do that anymore, that's pointless, harmful. Waste of time." You will find some habits get released and you will become clearer and a bit freer. Then there might be another realisation, and you get even clearer and freer.

PHOTO: Claire Martin

The difference, sitting here now on retreat, is that it's largely based in memory. A memory or a scenario comes to mind, and as you see them you're reviewing them and remembering and recognising patterns, so it's useful. But if you're aware while these reactions are actually arising in a moment of everyday life, that's different because at the actual moment you have the possibility, potentially, of not following your habit this time, never mind resolving not to do it next time. You might be sharp enough to not do it this time. You might slip and do it out of habit, and perhaps regret it, but that is also helpful: it will confirm to you that that you shouldn't have done that, it wasn't appropriate, making it more likely you will succeed in avoiding doing it next time.

With more training, and more aware experience of our own interactions with others, the mind clarifies and our openness improves and can be more constant. Training in everyday life, in interaction, has a different quality and intensity compared to retreat practice, but has the same general principle: seeing what's arising, and with that seeing, we are releasing – acknowledging nevertheless that only sometimes are we present in this way and very many moments do slip past unnoticed.

Compassion

We're in our everyday lives much more than we're on retreat. Many, many hours are spent in our families and our workplaces and our everyday lives, and these are all opportunities to practise. But, going back now to where I started, these are also opportunities for compassion. We improve our opportunities for compassion as we continue the practice and clear our minds of some of our rather unhelpful habits (which are often also rather annoying to other people). As we persist in our practice, compas-

sion can grow naturally into that space: we can be more present and available to others and become more pleasant to be with. You might be perceived as more approachable and accessible, and there might be a closer relationship which can be a compassionate one.

As we continue to work on our so-called mundane insights, our worldly insights, the clarifications of our personality and habits, then it's easier and more natural for compassion to arise – because our self-concern is diminishing.

Self and no-self

We often talk about self and no-self in Buddhism. It's helpful to read that word 'self' as 'self-concern', because that illustrates the problem with self: selfishness, self-concern, over-protectiveness of self, based on a misunderstanding of the nature of self.

But, if we're not there yet – which we're not – there's still the issue of self arising and self being an obstacle to compassion. "That person could benefit from some of my time, but am I prepared to give up that time?" or "This person could benefit from some of my money or one of my possessions, but am I prepared to give them up?" That tension arises naturally, leading to a question: "What are my limits?"

We're confronted face-on when this arises. You could brush it under the carpet and as a distraction say, "I'm busy – I have something else to do now". But if we're a practitioner we will face that dilemma, and this problem comes up: where do I draw the line? Is it appropriate to have a line? Is it a movable line? Does it depend on the person and their need? Does it depend on me, or on my resources?

This is a question that confronts us when we face the issue of compassion. The general tendency is for compassion to become more natural and easy and open as we become less tangled and knotted, less confused and selfish, less self-concerned and over-protective. Ultimately, in a state of no-self, which means no self-concern, then compassion is just automatic. Master Sheng-yen's phrasing – and I can't quite find the precise wording he used in the past,[2] is something like, "Compassion is the action which arises from the Wisdom of Emptiness". The Wisdom of Emptiness – Wisdom with a capital W, Emptiness with a capital E. Realising Emptiness means self is not in the way at all; the phenomenon of self has stopped acting. None of your actions are self-directed; they're all directed to others because there is nowhere else to direct your actions.

This is difficult to explain because the frame of reference for this way of talking isn't one that you have available to draw on – our only frame of reference is self-concern and operating from the self. With the Wisdom of Emptiness, when your insight reaches the depth of Realisation of Emptiness, self is no longer an obstacle to compassion. One of the phrases is, "The appropriate response arises." The appropriate response to whatever the need is, whatever the situation is.

The appropriate response might be to feed this body as well as others; the Buddha didn't neglect himself, he carried on eating all his life. But he also didn't indulge himself, and that's the point. If you reach that stage, the Wisdom of Emptiness, self not in the way, then compassion is automatically there. In that sense, wisdom and compassion are equivalent; they arise together. They're different in concept – that's why we have two words – but ultimately, it's one state, Wisdom and Compassion coming together.

Compassion when unenlightened

You may have heard of the image, 'the bird of Buddhism has two wings: Wisdom and Compassion'. They need to be balanced, otherwise the bird will fly down in a death spiral. They need to be balanced and they are automatically balanced when realisation is very deep. In terms of our retreat practice you could say they're not yet balanced.

Retreat practice is indeed Wisdom-focused, cultivating insight, potentially leading us towards the realisation of no self, of Emptiness. But it can be a long path, and we're not there yet, so where's the compassion then? Compassion can still be expressed in everyday life. There might be a certain obstruction to its flow, and you might be aware of that obstruction to its flow – that might stimulate you to continue your practice, to deepen it. Compassion is there, even if limited. It might be a bit distorted – there might be self-concern mixed up in it or obstructing it. It might be a bit 'do-gooder', being a do-gooder for your own self-esteem rather than genuine compassion. It might be a "Notice me, notice me being compassionate" sort of 'compassion'; that happens as well. When self is hanging around there are likely to be flaws in the expression of compassion. This is one of the reasons for the emphasis on the teaching of no self even though it's very difficult to grasp and realise.

You might think, "OK, it's best I don't concern myself with other people for now, I should wait until I have got the Wisdom of Emptiness." No, that's not it! Your Chan training may take a lifetime, but people need some help now and you can offer it, within your capacity, within your availability. So do it.

There's an important flip here. Deliberately trying to be compassionate becomes a practice in itself, because that highlights your self-concern

to you, your sense of 'self'. If you're deliberately trying to be compassionate, it's hard to avoid such questions, Where's my line? What's my limit? Why am I holding back? Am I giving too much? Is what I'm doing OK? The practice of deliberate compassion is a practice of investigating the self.

Contemplating a silent mind

Wisdom and Compassion are not separate, but they can be treated separately for the purpose of discussion and also for intensifying something. On retreat we are intensifying the direct approach to insight: settle the mind down; investigate the mind; investigate phenomena; penetrate through, and we may approach no-self or experience it.

Some of you have spoken in interviews about how your mind really can go very still, to a state where you could say that thoughts thin out – the mind is there, waiting for the next thought which hasn't yet started forming. The Chinese word *huatou* applies here: 'the head of thought' or 'the mind before thought' – that's where your attention is; your attention is on the mind before a thought arises. Then a thought begins, some sort of ripple or movement in the mind. Initially it's not clear what type of mental phenomenon it is, but there's a short process of it reshaping from an indeterminate movement in the mind to become recognisably a memory, a feeling, or an idea. You're there along with the mind, before all this starts happening, and while it is happening – yet the mind remains still and undisturbed.

Sometimes what arises is the thought of self, and you can see the formation of the idea of a self which wasn't there when there were no thoughts. Self is a thought, it's a concept, it's an idea. It's a very strongly

pervasive thought or concept on which we anchor virtually the whole of the way we run our lives. But it's a thought which isn't always there; it's there so frequently that we assume it's constant and continuous, representing something in us which we call a self. It's a bit like a movie film; if you play the frames fast enough it looks as though movement is continuous. If your mind is producing 'self ideas' fast enough, we assume there's a self. But if the mind settles so still that the next thought of self hasn't yet arisen – the previous one has gone, and the next one hasn't arisen – then we may taste no self. This is accessible directly through our practice if we can sit with sharp attention and a silent mind. If the mind is not silent, if the mind you're looking at has too much going on, then the pervasive assumption of self continues through and frames our understanding. If the mind becomes so still that you can be there at that point of self-thoughts arising, or before self-thoughts arise, then you can perceive this directly.

I mentioned Master Hongzhi. One of his writings gives an idea how still to be:

> *In the great rest and great halting, the lips become mouldy and mountains of grass grow on your tongue.*[3]

That's how still the body needs to be, and that's a metaphor for the mind as well.

This might sound like too big an ask: "Is that possible, is that possible for me?" You won't know without trying it. It is possible for some. You can't plan it or force it – that effort of forcing comes from "I want it to happen", and that is to reinforce the sense of self: "*I* want it to happen!" No, it's just something that may slip in and you see.

Self-compassion

Someone once described it to me as, "I can see the self selfing – and it's painful", painful because it's what creates division and splits in the mind. Self gets in the way of compassion and in doing so it also becomes a barrier to self-compassion, because we become knotted and defensive around this sense of self and our mind closes down.

Yes, compassion includes self-compassion. As I mentioned, the Buddha continued to eat; he didn't reject food and say, "No, I'm nothing, I may as well die now and that's it." He just carried on living a normal human life, but without selfishness and self-concern distorting his actions and choices. If people wanted to be taught, he'd teach them and if if it was beneficial to talk, he'd talk. He just carried on in this way. Self-compassion was there, in the conventional sense, in terms of looking after himself.

Questions and concerns

It happens occasionally in interview that people come to me and say they're getting frightened by the practice; they don't like the sound of this disappearing business, self disappearing, and they make excuses like, "My partner wouldn't forgive me if I came on retreat and disappeared!" That's a misunderstanding of what this is, because you don't have the frame of reference to really understand it.

It's not that you disappear; it's more like your sense of self is revealed as being a construct, a concept, a thought, rather than representing an object, something permanent and fixed. This has implications for the way we see ourselves in the world and the way we see the world operate. From that frame of reference, we see things

very differently. However, you still goes home to your partner at the end of the retreat, as yourself, living that role. But you're less attached, less precious about yourself, and correspondingly more available to others, including your partner. Don't be scared. My standard answer to that concern, which may be a bit too jokey for some, is along the lines – you've read all the books; none of the ancient Masters said, "Stop meditating; it's dangerous, you'll disappear!" None of them said that; no, they said it is good to meditate. If there's a disappearing, it's of your selfishness; that's not so bad, is it? It's not so scary that your selfishness might disappear.

Contact with others, interaction, compassion, is closely linked to Wisdom, to Emptiness, to diminishing self-concern and selfishness. Wisdom with a capital W, Emptiness with a capital E, point towards Compassion with a capital C, because in Emptiness there's no obstruction. From a perception of emptiness, from a perception of no self-concern at all, there's no obstacle to compassion.

There is another concern that sometimes arises in relation to compassion. If you're that close to others, how will you cope with it when you feel all their pain and suffering? Remember that there is a sense in which you're not there. There is a perception of their pain and suffering which is why the compassionate action naturally arises. How could it not; what else is there to do? You respond with what needs to be done. The compassionate action naturally arises and yet there's no 'cost' to it because the accountant called You is no longer at home; there's no price to be extracted from you. It's not that you don't feel pain – you recognise pain, but you don't feel it in the sense that you might do in other circumstances – you don't recoil from it. There's no You to recoil, there's

no You to be suffering it. But it is known; you are aware of it, and you respond.

It's difficult to convey this because you're not in the appropriate frame of reference to fully receive everything I'm saying. At least you can receive the idea that there is a different frame of reference which is available for you to experience through practice, and that if you enter that frame of reference then this will all become clear and make perfect sense. The parts of the Sutras which are not clear will become clear because they're written from that frame of reference. Hongzhi's writings also become clear when you've joined him on the 'other side' and you realise what he's describing: the 'other shore'.

Intrinsic to the way we're practising cultivation of wisdom, we are also cultivating compassion. We could say the cultivation of compassion is a 'by-product' of cultivating wisdom, and it's not where our focus is, but it's not an irrelevant by-product. As we persist in our practice and go deeper into our insight, compassion is coming up alongside, maybe even unnoticed by you, but it might be noticed by those you go home to.

Commonly on the first evening of retreat people say, "I've come again because my spouse told me it was time for me to come and do another retreat; the effect of the last one has worn off and I'm irritating again, or so they tell me." We once had four people in a row say it and the fifth one said, "Yes he's right – I told him he had to come again!" People do notice. It may be a bit strange if you come back from retreat different, especially if it's a big difference that's noticed. Most often it's a smaller difference – you're that bit less irritable, you're that bit less careless.

There is another question that comes up sometimes. People may say, "Well you could do this compassionate stuff, but why would you?" If you're 'not there' and therefore you're not affected, why would you bother doing anything to help? Let's consider the image of a Buddha who has the potential to be compassionate but doesn't bother, and he's just left sitting surrounded by a mess – which he could fix, but he doesn't. That doesn't make much sense, does it? If he has the capacity to do stuff to help people around him and, shall we say, clean up his own garden, clean up his own environment, why wouldn't he? There's no cost to him in doing it. Leaving it as a 'mess', living surrounded by suffering which could be helped, why would he make that choice?

Continue your practice

These are tricky things to try to explain and understand. All we need to do is to continue the practice as I've spoken about it, realising it has the potential to go extremely deep – to go all the way, if I can put it like that.

One time on retreat Master Sheng-yen said he regards methods such as counting or following the breath, reciting mantras, reciting Buddha's name (which is a common practice for the Chinese), as 'preparatory'; they are useful to prepare the mind to pick up a deeper practice. He said that in the Chan tradition the two main deeper practices are Silent Illumination and huatou practice, because those two have a greater potential to take you all the way – that was the way he put it. It's not that, for example, a breath practice can't take you all the way, but such a method has inherent traps in it. It traps you into narrowing your attention onto the breath, and similarly a recitation practice may trap

you on the recitation itself. At some point you need to open out the awareness, but those methods don't have that instruction in them, so they can trap you.

Cultivating an open awareness like Silent Illumination gives you the potential to go all the way. Let everything through – remember, whenever a thought appears, be aware of it, and it disappears;[4] that might not happen straightaway for you, but over repetition, it disappears, the mind gets clearer, the thoughts get thinner. You may have a spell when there seem to be hardly any thoughts, or no thoughts, a gap in thinking. Don't label it, name it or claim it, but just settle, wordless and, as per the poem, words drop away;[5] there are no words conceptualising, verbalising – they drop away. There is presence with the basis of mind which has yet to produce the next thought. It requires you to settle deeply, which is why we cultivate a very still atmosphere with silence and with sitting. Possibly you'll touch that point and have some insight into the nature of self, and the nature of all your other thoughts, and how they arrive and where they come from.

Continue the sitting in the same way, nothing different to be done except to persist, but notice if you're getting caught on something, if the mind is pulled off centre, if you're going off on a thought train; return to just presence, return to just sitting, return to just being – and let it look after itself.

NOTES

1. Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950*, Harvard University Press 1967
2. Talks on retreat at Gaia House by Master Shengyen in 2000 https://dharmaseed.org/retreats/2798
3. Translated by Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu, *Cultivating the Empty Field*, North Point Press 1991
4. Translated by Chan Master Shengyen, Directly Practice "No Mind", in *Chan Magazine Summer 2023* https://chancenter.org/en/publication/chan-magazine
5. "Silently and Serenely, one forgets all words", Translated by Chan Master Shengyen, Silent Illumination, in *The Poetry of Enlightenment*, Dharma Drum Publications 1987

PHOTO: Eva Simmonds

HELPING OTHERS

ANNA JEDYNAK

In the Buddhist tradition, masters make different statements about helping others. Some warn that improving the world should always start with oneself, because until one helps oneself, one cannot help others. By acting from a disturbed mind, we harm rather than help. The Tibetan yogi Milarepa said of helping: "If there is not the slightest degree of self-interest in such earthly matters, this is acceptable". He didn't say that helping is recommended or useful, but only that it is sometimes acceptable. In our culture, against the background of our habits, this may seem shocking.

On the other side we have Roshi Bernie Glassman, who actively gave help and attracted others by his example. He opened a bakery, employing people in distress for various reasons, e.g. the homeless or former drug addicts, who found help there to find their way in life. He organised street meditations, the fruits of which were brought into the service of society, and retreats at the site of the former Auschwitz Nazi camp. Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh was involved in the peace movement, and likewise to some extent Shifu Sheng Yen.

This dual Buddhist approach to helping others is also reflected in visual symbols. The Bodhisattva of Compassion has 1,000 pairs of eyes to see people's miseries and needs well, and 1,000 pairs of hands to help effectively. Buddha, on the other hand, sits motionless, his eyes downcast, his hands held together by his lower abdomen, supported by his feet. He does not look like he is about to move into any particular action.

We are influenced not only by the dual Buddhist suggestions for helping, but also by our native Western tradition, which became ingrained in us as we grew up. According to it, helping is strongly recommended and evasion is reprehensible. This is one of the important criteria for judging people in our society.

How do we find ourselves in all this? Some of us engage in helping with different motives for doing so, but others don't, mindful of the cautions heard in many zendos to help ourselves first. Both attitudes carry certain dangers.

If we decide to repair the world and actively alleviate suffering, it is very often the traditional approach to helping that appeals to us, which we have had the opportunity to imbibe from an early age. In the process of socialisation, we learned to behave according to the prescribed social model.

We were praised and valued for helping, we gained a good reputation in the eyes of others or even in our own eyes. Refusing to help exposed us to criticism and negativity. We may want to help in order to gain merit or, to put it in more contemporary terms, to gain social capital. We may hope for gratitude, for a return, for some kind of gratification, for a religious reward such as going to heaven or obtaining an auspicious rebirth.

This approach probably occurs in many cultures. Suffice it to mention the Chinese Emperor Wu, to whose court Bodhidharma – a famous and admired sage from India – arrived. The emperor first of all informed Bodhidharma of his contribution to the development of Buddhism in China: he supported monks, built monasteries, initiated translations of the sutras – but the most important question posed afterwards was, "What merit have I gained?" Let the master make the spiritual conversion rate available, let the emperor find out how much his actions are

worth in spiritual currency. Or perhaps, under the pretext of the question, he simply wanted to boast to Bodhidharma. We are not so straightforward as to ask directly what merit we have gained, but we may tacitly expect appreciation or respect.

It may also be that we are motivated by a sensitivity to suffering and a desire to put the world right, but it escapes our notice that it is our own shortcomings that we project outwards. We think that we are disturbed by the misery of others or the bad device of the world, while we are really disturbed by our own baggage. So we intend to put our surroundings in order. We set about doing this diligently, so that things will finally be as we think they should be. In doing so, we neglect to turn inwards. Interestingly, with such motivation, even successes in fixing the world don't bring the expected relief or satisfaction.

On other occasions we are pained by someone else's pain, but this is different from the Buddhist compassion. We are motivated by a desire to relieve our own pain. We say: "Something has to be done about it, because I can't bear to see them/him suffer."

Finally, the motivation to help may be a desire to dominate and exercise control. We may then find it difficult to accept help in order not to fall into dependence on others as the recipient. The fear of infirmity in illness or old age may be accompanied by a desire to spare relatives the trouble, but it may also be underpinned by a desire to avoid being dependent on others. Financial support for relatives may be combined with special expectations of them. This motivation sometimes goes hand in hand with the belief that I know better what is good for the world. (There is an old joke about three scouts who report to their leader that they have taken an old lady across the street. Why so many

as three? Because she didn't want to and it took all three of them to persuade her).

All these impulses to help others can be strongly rooted in us and more or less consciously come to the fore. At the same time, we hear in places of practice that we should start with ourselves. This can cause a certain split: on the mat we sit in the conviction that here is the right place to start to improve the world, while in our daily action we follow social expectations and our habits. This is not conducive to the integration of practice with life – yet a mature practice cannot be separate from life.

At other times, we take cautions such as the one from Milarepa firmly to heart and consciously refrain from acting on our surroundings. We wait until we are spiritually ready enough. This attitude, in turn, brings other dangers. We may discover the charms of sitting quietly, away from the commotion and needs of the world. We can see that becoming preoccupied with another's unfortunate plight and helping out sometimes disturbs the peace we are meant to cultivate on the mat. Thus, for the sake of practice we distance ourselves from helping.

Simon Child once said that the refusal to help explained by the need to attend to spiritual training first is sometimes an excuse for laziness and selfishness. It is nicer to sit away from the hustle and bustle of the world in an incense-scented room than to help someone stressed and irritable who instead of thanking us, is even nagging us. Master Chi Chern, Shifu's Dharma heir, once addressed the retreat participants: "You are so urgent for enlightenment that you would be most happy to pass on your vexations to others." John Crook used to talk about the two wings of practice: wisdom and compassion. Using only one wing results in going in circles. In a similar vein, a Chan practitioner, who later

became a monk in the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California, used to say that cordoning ourselves off for meditation from other people's needs builds a wall between us and them, and it can then be very difficult, if not impossible, to work in solitude to break down our sense of self-isolation.

So how do we get into a situation where both helping and holding back can have negative effects? Very simple advice is given by Shifu Sheng Yen: there is no one set path, different actions are good as long as their motive is compassion.[1] He cites the story of two kings who ruled two neighbouring states in ancient times. Both had spiritual aspirations. Each was strongly determined to attain enlightenment, but also strongly compassionate towards the people. In both kingdoms, the subjects were committing evil acts instead of caring for each other, and this negatively affected their daily lives. They were leading a difficult and bad lives.

Each of the two rulers chose a different path to help people. Sarvajnasiddha, later Buddha, vowed to quickly attain Buddha State to liberate all beings. He recognised that subjects needed to practice and meditate in order to abandon a harmful way of life and move away from suffering. But in order to help them do this, he first had to do it himself.

Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, on the other hand, vowed to liberate beings from suffering so that they could live in peace and attain enlightenment, even before he himself crossed the threshold of enlightenment. He wanted to help them in ordinary matters, bringing order and harmony to their lives and taking care of their basic needs so that they would have a better starting point for serious meditation. Moreover, to make their practice more effective, he wanted to encourage them by his own example on how to serve others.

Such was Shifu's speech about the two ways of the two kings. Was one better than the other and is one of them more worth following? Shifu puts it simply: it is a matter of individual aspiration. Neither way is better or more effective. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin. One must look within oneself and see what one's vocation is, what one aspires to – as long as compassion is the primary motive. This is an essential point. In a similar vein, St Augustine said: "Love and do what you want." For both kings, the starting point was concern for the situation of others rather than interest in their own spiritual achievements. Similarly, as a young monk, Shifu Sheng Yen felt a strong determination to study the Dharma in order to then make it available to the people.

So compassion is the most important thing. However, there are two pitfalls on the road to compassion, which sometimes occur together. The first is that all selfishly tinged reasons for helping can appear in the mask of compassion – and we then succumb to the illusion that it is compassion that motivates us. The second is to take the idea of compassion for compassion itself.

This is also true of other states of mind, such as e.g. the state of oneness: we hear what it consists of, we form an image of it, and from this we are convinced that we experience it. Similarly, it is possible to be guided by an image of compassion, rather than by compassion itself felt in the heart. Since much is said about compassion in Buddhism and many words are spoken about it, it is very easy to dwell on the idea of it.

In the Diamond Sutra we find the following passage on the distinction between compassion and the idea of compassion: "Subhuti, what I just said about kindness does not mean that when someone is being charitable they should hold onto arbitrary conceptions about kindness,

for kindness is, after all, only a word and charity needs to be spontaneous and selfless, done without regard for appearances." And a little before that: "Practise kindness and charity without attachment and you can become fully enlightened." [2]

Teachers who see into the state of mind of their students can help in unmasking the idea of compassion as something that is not compassion itself. In ancient China, a certain high-ranking governor became a disciple of a Zen master. He took a long spiritual holiday from his administrative duties to stay near the master and practise under his guidance. When he was about to return to his ordinary life, strengthened by the results of his training, the master asked as a farewell: "How will you govern the people in your province?" The governor replied: "With wisdom and compassion, of course." The master concluded: "So then they will all suffer greatly."

If we don't get trapped by the idea of compassion, another difficulty may await us. Namely, we may discover that we lack genuine compassion. For example, we catch ourselves looking for excuses to evade helping. Or there are flashes of compassion, but with a significant admixture of egocentric motives. This can be a shocking discovery! What then? Various Buddhist ways of developing compassion can be used, but the most important thing is to see very clearly what is going on in the mind. We deal no differently with any thoughts or emotions that arise during meditation. We don't need to remain in their power. We don't have to either cling to them and follow them, or try to fight or suppress them. In both cases, we are giving them our energy. Even if they become quiet for a while under our pressure, in the long run we strengthen them in this way.

Instead, we can impartially, without getting involved, be aware of them. They then become one more phenomenon in the field of our consciousness, as harmless as listening to the rain falling.

Whenever we adopt a thought in this way, it dulls its blade and it weakens. It weakens even more the next time, and the next... This path was shown to us by the Buddha, saying: "Mara, I see you." He didn't say: "Hm, what are you saying, Mara? I'll answer you in a moment!" Nor did he say: "Shut up! Get out!" Nor did he say: "Admittedly, you are a nuisance, Mara, but I hope you will finally go away one day." Just: "Mara, I see you." Nothing more is needed.

What do we turn away from when we sit with our face to the wall? Not from others and their needs. Rather from our habits, from blindly following them. From reactive thoughts, emotions and actions. We turn away to gain more space, silence and stillness. If we take this opportunity to courageously meet Mara and review his tricks - including those for helping others – we don't need to bother whether to help or rather meditate. Wholesome decisions then make themselves.

NOTES

1. *Chan Magazine*, Vol 39, No 2, Spring 2019. https://chancenter.org/en/publication/chan-magazine
2. *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. Alex Johnson https://www.lifelonglearningcollaborative.org/silkroads/articles/diamond-sutra-translation.pdf access from Jun 10, 2024

PHOTO: Jordan Acomba

THE STONE HEART *Written on Writing Retreat, May 24th 2024*

MARIAN PARTINGTON

Walking through the wet grass, with a notebook and pencil in my pocket, towards the river bank. The Rowan blossom is swaying in the slight wind offering plates of bunched, white, pearl buds. A few have opened into five white petals, crowned and softened with feathery stamens. Pausing to gaze, a moment of delicate awe arises.

With loppers in hand I continue upstream along the path by the river. Something always changes by the river. Its life rushes by. Sometimes roaring, sometimes chuckling. Today, just the fast flow, gushing around the rocks. Orangey brown, imbued with its peaty moorland source. Curlews and skylarks open their throats to the sky.

There is a large, heart-shaped rock on the side of the path, now buried beneath brambles. It needs to be seen and sat upon again, its chambers curving and set. A stone heart defended by thorny, tenacious, far-reaching bramble roots, firmly anchored beneath the rock.

Once a young Buddhist man from Bristol chose to meditate upon this rock. His patient imprint remains. Sitting so still and so silent, he bore witness to the river song, bringing warmth to the rock, unmoved by the biting midges.

My need to reclaim the rock becomes urgent. It needs space and sunlight. The heart of stone needs to be breathed back into life.

Following the barbed bramble stems from leaf to root, the tangled mass of it all, the thorns pierce my gloves. I cut and pull. Gradually the space is cleared, bringing the moss in its wake. It is hard work.

I think of farmers clearing the land of brambles, rocks, stone and bracken. Somehow men heaved some of the rocks to build our house three and a quarter centuries ago. The midges begin to bite but I can't stop. The rock that may once have been a boulder in the river is emerging like the heart of a dinosaur.

It becomes a surface upon which to make a mark. There is already a letter O formed by the sinuous tendril of a long root pulled from the earth. A snaky circle. Its bulbous end was jammed under the edge of the rock. This becomes the short stroke that hangs like a tail from the O, forming the letter Q.

Question

And I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. EZEKIEL 11:19

What makes a heart of stone?

Brambles are adept at defending themselves and spreading with impunity. Their roots lurk, embedded under rocks and stones. They are fast growing and rapacious for land. Their thorns tear and puncture cloth and flesh. Baring their barbs, they are unapproachable.

This is a place of impenetrable pride, self-centredness and a deluded feeling of defended safety. The fort of a stony heart has withdrawn its bridges and become isolated from attack and connection. It is cut off from being seen to be vulnerable, exposed and fragile. Yet it is fragile, requiring self justification, an entrenched superiority. It is in fierce opposition to all that threatens to enter.

This is the ground of trauma, polarised, unyielding and vengeful. A deep wound staunched by denial, fear, confusion and lack of connection.

Hardened by the pain of betrayal, injustice and resentment, it is a heart that has turned away from life. It has become brutalised in its brutalising. It is starved of love.

The heart of stone has become a story: frozen, paralysed. The brambles need to be stripped away, the mind cleared, trained and purified by vigilant investigation and prayers.

There is a crack, beginning to allow love to be received and given. Light and dark are not separate. There is no separation. This is beyond concepts, beyond right and wrong. Something gushes through.

GRIEVING FOR MILLIE

DAVID VALENTINE-HAGART

Suddenly
The presence of
Absence
Yet her bowls still sit
On the kitchen floor
Her bed
Her donut of comfort
Still lies outside
Our bedroom door
I cannot move them
Yet
Though she is so sudden gone
I must ease myself gently
Through this grief
These things are yet remembrance
Of our little friend
Her sudden unexpected end
Death, the unexpected thief
In due time
They will be washed clean
And then put away
Like all memories
Until then Millie
Until then
We feel so keen
So very keen
The presence of your absence

ANONYMOUS HAIKU WRITTEN DURING A SNOWY RETREAT IN JANUARY 2025

midwinter
a hare's tracks
returning to solitude

RETREAT REPORT

SHAWBOTTOM FARM 2024, LEADER SIMON CHILD

This was my tenth Silent Illumination retreat. Looking back over previous retreat reports, there is a constant theme: when will I stop manipulating my meditation and learn to let go?

My typical retreat would begin with the feeling that finally I have learnt the knack of meditation – how to conjure up the (rather self-indulgent) experience of floating in the present moment. By Wednesday the "method" would have reduced to a fruitless exercise of attempting to revive (my recollection of) the initial blissful experience. Then towards the end of the week, I would realise that I was just chasing concepts, and that I must somehow let go of the desire to achieve the meditation experience through my own efforts.

Maybe this retreat was a breakthrough? Simon kept the instruction almost entirely to the practical level of how to meditate. Two key points that I had heard many times before:

1. Relax, don't try to "do" anything, and don't worry about what happens.
2. Just observe the thoughts – let in, let be, and let go.

That's all. This time it all seemed to ring true. The sense of relaxing was almost palpable. I recall at my first Silent Illumination retreat in 2014 finding that my thoughts were so insidiously entwined in my conscious experience that I was seldom able to separate out anything that I could clearly observe! This time, I seemed to be able to settle into a place where I could sit quietly, like a birdwatcher, watching quite dispassionately, sometimes sensing a thought before it formed into words. Or even, at times, becoming aware that there were no thoughts. It all seemed very passive, just how things are in the present moment.

A week after the retreat, the experience is still with me. I am so very aware of the danger of congratulating myself for "learning the knack" that I am deliberately nurturing a sense of humility and gratitude.

And sitting here, typing this report, my feeling of gratitude is very real!

Thank you.

PHOTO: Claire Martin

RETREAT REPORT: AWARENESS IN THE EVERYDAY

SHAWBOTTOM FARM 2024, LEADERS JULIET HACKNEY & ALYSUN JONES

In order for me to go on retreat there had to be a negotiation with those I would leave behind, my wife and my stepdaughter. It is all too easy to forget the personal cost to others of the absence of those going on retreat. The initial reluctance to let me go, in time moved to acceptance that I could.

This was my first retreat and it was "Awareness in the Everyday: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness". The retreat was led by Alysun Jones and Juliet Hackney. Happily I had already met them both through Zoom.

I had joined Alysun's course, "Introduction to Meditation, Buddhism and Chan" in January. This was important for me as it opened a door of interest and encouragement to delve that little bit deeper into Chan. Juliet I met through zoom when I started to attend her Dales Chan sitting group that meets on a Wednesday evening.

So the day dawned for the retreat. The weather was good. It was dry and sunny. This was especially important to us as my wife was to drop me off at Shawbottom Farm in the middle of a remote moorland location. It has a certain raw beauty and poor weather would have made getting there difficult. We found it and how lovely it is. All modern well-kept accommodation and a beautiful Meditation Hall.

I was welcomed, and after a brief introduction to the others taking part on the retreat, the rules were explained and the retreat began. It was a silent retreat, which in one sense was a great relief. No need to explain who I was or why I was here. The silence gave us all space to focus on our practice and to appreciate new dimensions to it that we could not have imagined or even discovered by ourselves practising at home on our own.

There was a certain rigour built into the day and gave it structure. Silence, early rising, outside exercise in the open air, and lots more meditation periods than I would ever contemplate doing at home. And, for me, herein lies the beauty. A physical challenge hand in hand with thoughtful guided meditations on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to our everyday lives. Each day was dedicated to one of the four. Each was not an abstract lecture about the *Satipatthana Sutra* but rather each was directed personally at us so we could reflect upon each in turn and allow them to touch our own lives.

In truth these were uncomfortable moments for me. I had to face the reality of the obstructions I had put in place in different ways. But then came a palpable softening in my attitude to be really open and loosen my grip on a well-maintained grudge.

Somehow it worked. A change of perspective. What was in effect a petty grudge, when set against the enormity of all the problems in our world. It was a movement towards a diminution of the self. Can I call it relief? Maybe not, but something had changed.

My interviews with the leaders allowed me, maybe for the first time, to articulate the things I would not normally talk about to anyone. Painful things which I saw as separate from my practice, and which, in fact the leaders pointed out should be the very heart of it. I now see the painful struggles I have endured are the very root from which all transformation and compass can grow.

As the retreat continued I had a very real deepening sense of silence and a new depth to the meditation itself. All I can say now is I have changed. I know I have. I have, for now at least, a calm determination that will not let me let those I love down.

禪 Western Chan Fellowship

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 includes accessible accommodation. (see below for new retreat programme)

Visit our Website

www.westernchanfellowship.org
This includes:

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

Contacting Us

To contact any of the Officers of the WCF please go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/contacts/committee-and-officers

To contact any of our UK Groups and affiliates go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups

To contact our overseas Groups and overseas contacts go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups/overseas-groups

Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always delighted to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. If possible please send as .doc documents, to the Editor, Sarah Bird, 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.

Forthcoming Residential Retreats

We will also be offering our programme of residential retreats at Shawbottom Farm, our beautiful new retreat centre near Leek in Derbyshire. Shawbottom is a simple and very comfortable centre, with such mod cons as underfloor heating and electric lights! It includes accommodation for a wheelchair user and helper, and is accessible by public transport.

ILLUMINATING THE MIND
12 to 19 April 2025
Leader: Simon Child

INVESTIGATING KOANS
24 to 31 May
Leader: Fiona Nuttall

MID-SUMMER SILENT MEDITATION RETREAT
28 June to 3 July
Leader: Alysun Jones & Juliet Hackney

SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT
18 to 27 July
Leader: Simon Child

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT
23 to 28 August 2025
Leader: Jake Lyne

WEEKEND CHAN RETREAT
26 to 28 September
Leader: Simon Child

INVESTIGATING KOANS
4 to 11 October
Leader: Simon Child

SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT
15 to 22 November
Leader: Fiona Nuttall

WEEKEND CHAN RETREAT
29 November to 4 December
Leader: Simon Child

NEW CHAN FORUM
Published by Western Chan Fellowship Charitable Incorporated Organisation (registered charity no 1166162)
Correspondence address: New Chan Forum, 22 Lilymead Avenue, Bristol BS4 2BX. Design: Rob Bowden

If you want others to be happy,
practice compassion.
If you want to be happy,
practice compassion.

THE DALAI LAMA

禪 Western Chan Fellowship