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Personal Experience

Buddhism is rooted in personal experience. However sophisticated some Buddhist philosophy may seem to be, its source is always experiential. The question "What is experience?" lies then at the root of Buddhist thinking. Experience is a heart matter. Too much analysis can lead one away from its essential presence and it's tacit understanding. In Buddhism it is in the relation between heart and mind that insight arises. In this edition of our journal we provide several heart and mind approaches to experience whether on the cushion or in the work a day. Buddha mind pervades them both. Enjoy.

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Editorial: The London Atrocities

Chuan-deng Jing-di

Within a few hours of the bombs in London, Simon and I received phone calls from Shih-fu's secretary asking after us and the welfare of Fellowship members especially in London. We are grateful that none of us have been killed or maimed in these events. Some of us, however, will be closer to the dead and to bereaved families than others. The fact that the bombers were British Muslims from Yorkshire has made us realise that the whole nation is involved in the process of neutralising such dangerous criminals and considering the reasons behind such an appalling event. It is of course a matter for national shame.

It will be a long time before the full story is told and the reasoning behind such an attack made clear. The confusion around these issues, politically, socially and ethically remains great. We cannot afford not to think about it. There are serious dangers of discord and even violence in areas where multiple faiths live together. It is not enough for religious leaders and politicians to make resounding statements. Everyone must be involved. In this matter there is no place either for thoughts of revenge or for denials concerning a certain degree of responsibility. We need a harsh realism if understanding is to emerge on so painful and so divisive an issue.

What seems evident is that a minority of extreme young Muslims, born and brought up here, educated here, lovers of cricket and sports, is so indoctrinated with mindless hate that they are willing to kill and maim large numbers of totally innocent fellow citizens – including fellow Muslims. How can this be?

It will do little good for Islamic leaders to proclaim that such activities are entirely outside Islam, that these people are not Muslims and that the Koran contains nothing that could be used as justification for such attacks. The perpetrators themselves proclaim an extremist version of Islam which, even if it is total anathema to the majority of Muslims and barely capable of any scholarly support, none the less has close links to movements within Islam in the Middle East. Such extreme activities have some historical basis in the strict sects of Arabia (Wahabism) and have found expression in the Taliban movement and in Al Qaeda. Today these ideas are widely disseminated on the Internet and have from time to time been preached in our mosques. What are the roots of such extremism leading ultimately to acts of such barbarity?

There is a deep sense of grievance in the Muslim world. It focuses on the failure of the West to enforce UN resolutions on Israel but has a wider significance in that a minority of extremists see the whole democratic world of the West as an hypocrisy and as an affront to the Islamic faith. In a very general sense of course Muslims are not entirely alone here – the entire anti-globalisation movement and the Western failure to meet the demands of climate change is also engaged, as is the debate over the legality of the Iraq war.

What gives this grievance an irrational and barbarous turn is the poverty, deprivation and lack of political representation for such issues in the dictatorial, authoritarian and often corrupt government of many Islamic nations. Where a significant number of people feel powerless to engage in adequate reform or heal the wounds of the Middle East a process is set in motion quite well understood by social psychologists such as the late Professor Henri Tajfel of Bristol University.

Where a minority is unable to achieve representation or influence within a majority there is a tendency to turn within, to reject the social norms of the majority, to seek revolution and to create a world view of revenge and destruction often with a 'spiritual' justification. These terrorists have principles and beliefs that their behaviour is not only ethical but blessed by God. A few verses in the Koran can evidently be distorted to give such extraordinary assurances.

To heal such world wide, social sickness, the international community requires not only political action by the great powers but also an extension of the mere condemnation of atrocity to a proper examination of the moral, social and communal environments that allow these failures in political representation to take such drastic turns.

In particular, it is surely vital for the entire Islamic world to face up to its contextual role in such disorders and to engage in vigorous condemnation. Any preaching of an extremist nature in mosques needs to be actively rejected because disaffected youth is especially prone to respond with violence when it appears justified through only too effective propaganda. Within the British Muslim communities young people need to be included in dialogue so that the temptations of extremist views are exposed, openly discussed and the means to transcend them found. The challenge will doubtless be considerable, perhaps requiring something of a renaissance within some aspects of Islam itself. The whole relationship between Islam and the modern world of participatory democracy and its mechanisms evidently needs a renewed evaluation by the faithful.

Beyond the Islamic world itself, it will be essential for British citizens to resist the marginalisation of our Muslim communities. To this end Buddhists need to study and to express our appreciation of Islamic positivity in so many realms of thought and action. Islam is a religion of righteousness that merits an appropriate respect.

Britain can be proud of its multiracial achievements and the wonderful rainbow city that is modern London, so full of vigour, multicultural expression and the cohesion that engendered the Olympic bid's success. If this is not to be lost in divisiveness, strife and hate, of which Christians in our dubious history, we must recall, are equally capable, each one of us has to think deeply about our contribution to a better world.

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

The Ten Koans Of Layman John

John Crook

In the course of his many years exploring the Dharma, John has had the good fortune to encounter many excellent teachers. At these meetings the conversations could be profound, deeply philosophical, include advice on meditation or simply a sharing in friendship. Now and again however John was thrown a ball he could not catch. These moments were deep occasions for thought and meditation. They remain for John the key turning points in his development of understanding. Since they all had the form of koans he has written them up here in case they may be of interest to others.

John's pilgrimages remind one of Sudhana the young pilgrim in the Avatamsaka Sutra who was sent from one teacher to another in search of wisdom. These teachers came from all walks of life, some reprehensible, some ordinary, some exalted. Every one of them had wisdom to provide, helping him on his journey. The lesson is that buddhas can be found waiting at bus stops, on trains, in the next seat of an aircraft. Sometimes they knock on one's door. Sometimes one glimpses them passing by. With so many buddhas in the world we all need to keep a look out for them and ask them for their help. Keep travelling. Keep asking! (Eds)

1/ Layman John went up to London to see the nun Myoko-ni. As they sat together he told her of his new retreat centre, the retreats he was running and his hopes for its development. He had come to ask for any advice she might have. As time went on Layman John found that Myoko-ni was saying very little. She made no comment nor did she give any advice. So he spoke some more – and then, somewhat hurriedly, again some more. Still no comment. So he stopped and said, “I am wondering what response you have to what I am telling you”. Myoko-ni looked at Layman John and said, “I have no response.” Layman John suddenly understood.

2/ Layman John was visiting Kyoto. His host, a professor from the biology conference he was attending, took him to meet an English-speaking master living in one of the compounds of Daitokoji temple. The weather was terrible, downpours of rain, lightening and thunder. They sat in a room where a skylight let in the rains that rustled away down some guttering. Layman John was introduced in a flamboyant manner as if he were a Western expert in Zen. He feared the worst. The master smiled in a polite greeting. Just then there was an enormous flash and a roar of thunder. The Master leant forward and said “Doctor John–Tell me - where does the thunder sound?” Layman John hesitated and then muttered something about it being both in the sky and in the head. “Very superficial, Doctor John, Very superficial.” commented the Master.

Well then - where *does* the thunder sound?

3/ At Bo Lin monastery on Lantau Island intensive retreat was in process. Layman John sat entranced. It was his first “sit” in a genuine Chan hall. He was so happy to be there he barely noticed that the sitting lasted one and a half hours starting from four am. The monks were hidden behind the mosquito nets of their cubicles. Three cubicles away sat Master Hsing Yat, a wispy bearded ancient with long sleeves to his robes almost reaching the ground. His shape was dimly visible through the netting. After some time Layman John became aware of strange sound permeating the silence of the hall. “Gnrrrr Gnrrr, sklmp.” Layman John wondered what this might be and gradually realised it came straight from the Master's cubicle. The master was richly and sonorously snoring. Layman John had rarely been so delighted. Behind his net he quietly bowed towards the master who suddenly awoke with a snort. Silence resumed in the hall. What about the Master's snoring?

4/ Layman John had been given a rare opportunity. Master Hsing Yat, believing that no mere Englishman could meditate, had none the less approved of John's sitting and permitted a very rare interview. All the monks were jealous.

What was Layman John to ask? He remembered his own teacher's emphasis on method so he asked "Can you tell me what your method is?"

"Method?" almost shouted the Master as if it were a dirty word. "That!" and he pointed to a Chinese scroll hanging on the wall. The characters read "Diamond Sutra."

"How?" responded Layman John

"Like so" responded Master Hsing Yat pointing to another scroll which read "What is it?"

End of interview. Layman John bowed.



5/ Layman John was discussing the finer points of the Dharma with Geshe Damchos Yontan at his Lam Rim Centre in Wales. They were deeply into such things as *prajnaparamita*, *madhyamaka* and emptiness. They were both quite excited by their discussion. Suddenly Geshe-la stopped and looked at Layman John.

"John", he said. "When were you last kind?"

6/ Shi-fu and Layman John were walking in Westminster Square. A great swirl of traffic was passing around it, engines roaring, horns hooting. Suddenly in amongst the turning wheels John saw a pile of horse dung neatly stacked just as it had fallen and quite undisturbed by the traffic. It seemed incredible that a living horse should have passed that way in all that traffic and left so clear and neat a testimony to its presence. Layman John drew Shi fu's attention to the unlikely pile saying, "Shi-fu, Look! Here's a pile of horse shit but where's the horse?" Shi-fu looked at it and said, "What need have we of the horse?"

7/ A small group had gathered at the house of Bodhisattva Krishnamurti to discuss the great matter. Layman John told the story of the Zen master who has ascended the rostrum to deliver his sermon to the monks when a bird had begun singing outside the open windows. He had stood with his flywhisk raised until the bird had finished. Then, lowering his flywhisk, he had said "Oh monks – that is all for today!" and retired to his room. Krishnamurti, that great speaker, said nothing.

8/ Layman John and his wife Eirene were visiting the shrines of Apollo at Delphi. They came to the tiered theatre and while John climbed up on the marble terraces Eirene declaimed the great speeches of the ancient playwrights from the circular stage below. At every point on the terraces the time-sharpened words rang out distinct and clear. John and Eirene were delighted. Ghosts of the ancient world swirled about them. But what about the breeze-filled silences of the pine-clad hills?

9/ The Stagna Rimpoche was in residence at Sani Gumpa in Zangskar preparing the place for a visit to the old mountain kingdom by the Dalai Lama. He was busy sewing up brocade hangings on an old sewing machine when Layman John came to tea. Layman John asked the Rimpoche, "Rimpoche-la, I have heard that Milarepa, the great yogin, once said that in the vast empty spaces of the high mountains there exists a strange market where one might exchange the vortex of worldly life for boundless bliss. Where might I find such a place?" Still whirring away on his machine, the Rimpoche said, "There are a great many books on such matters. It might be wise to begin there."

10/ Layman John and Yogin James were drinking chang with the yogins Nochung Tse and Gonpo up at the little, tree shaded monastery of the Tigress on the Hill in Zangskar. It was one of many convivial meetings. James said, "John and I have been talking about the mind and the yogins' path to understanding. We want to ask you what you understand by the mind." The two old yogin friends seemed to freeze in shock. Nochung Tse picked up his prayer wheel and begun intoning "On mani padme hum" in a loud voice without pausing. Gonpo looked most uncomfortable, rocking from side to side as if trying to make up his mind. Then he said, "Since the two of you have had the benefits of training in meditation, why don't you go and do it? Then you would have no need to ask such a stupid question!"

Through The Looking Glass

Jake Lyne

It is well recognised today that Buddhist ideas have a strong psychological component and that, because they are based in yogic methodologies unfamiliar in the West, they can throw up themes and variations of the greatest importance to Western practitioners. In this article Jake draws our attention to some of the profound puzzlement which both eastern and western thinkers experience in probing the mysteries of the mind. Here are some ideas that other psychologists among us may well wish to discuss. Eds.

Sunyata And The Ghost In The Machine

The heart of Buddhist philosophy is variously referred to as Sunyata, emptiness, no-self, non-duality, “not no-self” etc. Non-duality is not just a matter of intellectual interest. Dissolving one’s reliance on misconceptions about self and other is the path of liberation that Buddhist practice affords. Sunyata is not simply a concept and therefore cannot be discussed easily. Chan Masters have found innovative ways to communicate about Sunyata using paradox and poetry, and the Madhyamika philosophers have used dialectic, which relies on logic, to disprove propositions or fixed ideas about the nature of self and reality.

Something like the perspective afforded by Sunyata is evident in modern philosophy. For example in *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle sets out to demolish what he calls “the official theory” rooted in the philosophy of Descartes, which purports that mind is separate from the physical world, but engaged in a somewhat mysterious dualistic relationship with it. This mind Ryle called “the ghost in the machine”. Descartes’ motive for developing a dualistic theory of mind was to avoid what appeared to him to be the only alternative, that of reducing a human being to nothing but a biological machine. Ryle proposes a non-dualistic perspective from which the concept of “an inner world” and the reduction of a person to merely being a biological machine are both challenged at the same time.

Liturgies used on retreats at the Maenllwyd remind retreatants of Sunyata, for example the beautiful Tibetan Nyingmapa Hymn, “Invocation of the Void”, part of which is reproduced here:

*“Within the birthless all things take their birth
Yet taking birth is naught that can be born”
“Within the ceaseless all things cease to be
Yet ceasing thus is nothing which can cease”
“Within the non-abiding all abides
Yet thus abiding there abideth naught”
“In non-perception all things are perceived
Yet this perception’s quite perceptionless”
“In the unmoving all things come and go
Yet in that movement nothing ever moves”*

The “official theory” is believable because it seems to be common-sense, true and practical, such that any challenge to it can sound strange and paradoxical. In this article I plan to address one particular phrase from the Nyingmapa Hymn: “this perception’s quite perceptionless”. The reasons for doing this are to try to relate some experiences that occur in meditation practice to current ideas about perception, and to expose subtle preconceptions intrinsic to the “official theory” that might interfere with practice.

Perceptionless Perception

Let us for a moment rely on the dualistic concept of “inner-outer” as a device to pose a seemingly absurd “externalist” question that will lead into this discussion, before later seeing what happens if this concept is removed.

Question: Is it possible that visual, tactile and auditory perception take place “outside” rather than “inside” our heads?

On a bright, soft spring morning many years ago I remember looking across a valley in the Himalayas and seeing a person walking down a mountain path a long way off – he looked so tiny below the towering mountains. I was struck by the remarkable fact that we are able to perceive such grandeur and space as a complete and vast image, despite being little-headed creatures. How is this possible?

Recently a completely unremarkable though clear moment of direct contemplation gave a clue to understanding the relationship between objects of perception, perceptual processes and experience. On peeling a satsuma at the end of a silent illumination retreat, it seemed that the *perception* (i.e. not just the origin) of the sound of the satsuma being peeled was located in the same place as the visual image of the peeling and that both of these were located “out there” at the place in which they were happening and not “in here” on the other side of the eyes and ears. Could such a perspective be accounted for given what is known about sensory perception?

Direct contemplation is a meditation technique which emphasises visual and auditory perception. A choice is made between visual contemplation of an “object” such as a tree, stone or stream on the one hand, and contemplation of sounds (without focus on any particular sound) on the other. The instructions are to be aware of the visual object or sounds without any conceptual, naming or memory process and without a sense of subject (you the watcher or listener) in opposition to the object. Typically, instructions for direct contemplation will be something like “let the sounds come to you, don’t seek out specific sounds”, or “notice the visual impressions created by the object of contemplation as you actually see them”.

Billions of years of opportunistic evolution have resulted in visual and auditory systems in which the barest of weak signals (photons and air vibration at varying frequencies) interact with the most delicate stereotactically arranged receptors (retinas and ear drums) to create information which is processed to create a three dimensional world of vision and sound. The two systems of information (vision and hearing) are mapped to each other so that sight and sound are located appropriately and processed in such a way that whole environments (scenes) and the elements of environments (e.g. objects) can be perceived as required.

Our usual sense is that the world “out there” is seen or heard through the holes in our heads. But it cannot be like this. Retinas are not holes, they are opaque; all that comes into contact with the eyes and ears are the raw data of visual and auditory perception (unprocessed photons and vibrating air). We are not directly conscious of this nor of any of the other intermediate steps in the hierarchy of intricate processing which follows, starting with chemical processing in the retinas and mechanical processing in the inner ear and ending with meaningful perception.

The raw data is more or less instantaneously and reliably transformed into the world we are conscious of. This processing is completed in the brain, but our experience is that the fully completed, three dimensional world model is “out there” located at the origin of the photons and sound waves upon which it depends. What is more we experience ourselves looking out there from in here to see it.

But that is not possible – how could the model we have made in our heads get back “out there” to be seen? Even if it is out there, surely we don’t have to have a second glance, this time to see the completed picture, after having already “looked” a first time in order to receive photons onto our retinas?

Hologram World

One way out of this problem is to think of perception as a hologram or three-dimensional image created by the brain, which is mapped to function perfectly in relation to different

species' requirements. Here the hologram is being used as a metaphor, which will be questioned later.

Given that eyes are only designed to process photons at a low point in the perceptual hierarchy, eyes do not "see" the completed hologram, any more than ears hear the sounds that occur within it. So how is this hologram perceived and where is it perceived from?

If eyes are not needed at the final stage of perceiving the hologram, why have the idea that it has to be "looked at from over here" through any organ? What if the hologram, which appears to be "over there" is perception in itself without any need for there to be the idea of me "over here" perceiving it from a fixed standpoint? If the hologram is in itself perception what more perception is needed to perceive it?

From this perspective the perceiving, the perceived and the perceiver are redundant expressions for the same process which is inseparable from the hologram itself. Another way of putting this would be to say that the perceptual process is the hologram itself. It is clear that the picture on the wall is over there and my eyes are over here receiving photons of various wavelengths that are reflected off its surface, but by the time I get to "see" it, the perception is fully processed. There is no need to construct the idea that I am looking at the fully constructed picture, because "looking" with eyes already happened at the stage in which the retina responded to "raw" photons. Since perceiving is the very nature of the hologram, there is no need for a second round of looking through the eyes at the completed image in order to "see" it.

In fact to say "the perception is fully processed" is not quite correct. Our normal idea of perception is rather static, as if there are fixed objects that get translated into fixed and final images in our brain. However, it is more accurate to say that perception is continuously unfolding in and of itself. The play of light on objects is forever changing, and the visual apparatus is forever responding to the data stream of light, never stepping in the same river twice.

To continue with the externalist hologram metaphor, how large does the hologram need to be? From one point of view it might seem that it is rather tiny and fits inside our own heads. On the other hand, because it is a useful and highly accurate map and because the capacity to create this map was perfected in the process of evolution and infant development, based on bodily interaction with the environment, it is perceived to be precisely the same size as whatever world we happen to be looking at, whether this be a small room or a view of the mountains. In small environments such as a room, the hologram needs to be accurately to scale, whereas accuracy becomes less critical or even impossible at greater distances and will be informed increasingly by non-perceptual assumptions (e.g. some early human societies perceived the stars to be nearer to the earth than the moon).

We have the capacity to extrapolate effortlessly from immediate perception to inference and so the environment we see is known to be located in a wider sense of place. For example, we know that we are in a rectangular room, even if only a portion of the room is being seen, and we have a sense of where that room is in relation to the rest of the world.

It is easy to slide towards solipsism as you begin to get your head around the idea of the hologram. This is a particular danger if you are inclined towards the emptiness side of the "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" equation. If this is a problem ask someone in your hologram to douse you with a perceived bucket of ice-cold water, a remedy that will work for all but the most severely afflicted!

A proposition that follows from this metaphor is that although perceiving occurs in a three dimensional model created in the brain (more precisely, perceiving is the very nature of the model), the fact that it is accurately mapped to the world and is the only means of directly perceiving the world, implies that a sound or sight that is originating even several miles away is being perceived "over there" right where it began and not over here, even

though the perceptual process is dependent on the visual system which is located in our heads.

In other words perception occurs at its *perceived* point of origin (or at its perceived location). The structure of this proposition is important. A proposition that “perception occurs where an object is located” would be crazy were it not for the fact that identification of an object’s location is itself dependent on perception.

.....
Try this practice:

Relax your body and mind. Ignore the common-sense notion that objects “out there” lead to perceptions “in here” or in your brain. Spend some time opening to the sense that the perceptual process itself is happening “out there” at a distance from you.

.....
According to the ghost in the machine model of perception, “we” are in our heads looking out, and we are inside our bodies experiencing physical contact with the world. However, with the hologram metaphor, there is no need to have a separate “me” in here looking out. This also applies to the parts of the body that can be seen. There is no need for a me in here to feel the movement of my fingers and the pressure at my finger tips as I type, because the proprioceptive sense can also be identified as occurring at its perceived point of origin, which coincides with where the hands are seen to be.

No-Hologram World

Whilst the hologram metaphor is useful for setting up a rival to the “official theory” of perception, and as such might be useful for freeing us from solitary confinement within the skin, nevertheless a hologram smacks of a larger and more invisible confinement.

So the next step in this argument is to remove the hologram metaphor with its attendant problems of location i.e. whether it is inside (solipsism) or outside (externalism) of our heads, or whether it rests in a no-mans-land between inside-outside. However, the proposition that perception occurs at its perceived point of origin can be retained at this stage of the argument.

This step is consistent with the Sabba Sutta, “The All”:

The Blessed One said “What is the All? Simply the eye and forms, ear and sounds, nose and aromas, tongue and flavours, body and tactile sensations, intellect and ideas. This monks, is called the All. ”

The Buddha warns against trying to get behind phenomenal experience to essences (soul, being). This means neither seeking to find the substrates of phenomena, i.e. the “true” world that phenomenal experience depends upon, nor seeking to find the true essence of mind/ experience that exists independently of particular mental or perceptual contents. The Sutta continues:

“Anyone who would say, “Repudiating this All, I will describe another,” if questioned on what exactly might be the ground for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range. ”

The Sutta implies that only that which can be experienced by the six senses can be known (including awareness of the contents of mind as a sense). This phenomenalist approach might be taken to be too narrow since it seems to deny inference, experiment and imagination. It states a philosophical position that is primarily concerned with being and within that limit is useful. But after 2000 years of scientific enquiry and huge inroads into

knowledge about that which lies beyond the range of the senses the Sutta seems to be anachronistic.

But so far as the question of experience is concerned, it is true that all that is known must be known through the senses. Therefore in one sense there may be no fundamental contradiction, if it is acknowledged that inferential and experimental insights depend at some point on sense data. So, for example, the hypothesis that there are electrons of a certain mass was supported by evidence from cloud chamber experiments. Scientists did not see the electrons, but their existence could be inferred partly by the visual evidence detected in these experiments.

What is at issue here is the relationship between experience and objective reality. John Searle in his illuminating book “Mind: a brief introduction” makes a distinction between first person ontology and third person phenomena. The former roughly corresponds to experience and the latter to the physical world, i.e. biological processes, objects and so forth. A central feature of his thesis is that first person experience is dependent on or caused by third person phenomena but not *ontologically reducible* to them. In other words consciousness is neither *nothing but* biology, nor some kind of soul.

This is not too far from the Madhyamaka perspective, in which phenomenal experience is a “dependent arising” that requires brains, senses and non-brain phenomena. Such a viewpoint stops short of supporting either of the “extremes” of materialism (the machine, or biological reductionism) or idealism (the ghost). It also stops short of providing a theory of how perception and consciousness work, e.g. what are the detailed links in the chains of dependency, but because of the non-dogmatic stance there is no contradiction with subsequent scientific investigation in principle. Having said this, Madhyamika’s and Searle refute the materialistic standpoint that underpins much of current scientific thinking about the mind in favour of a non-dualistic standpoint. (Incidentally Searle’s philosophy is not identical to the Madhyamaka perspective in that he errs on the side of there being a “self”).

This leads to the final step in the present argument. The remaining problem, which is obvious in the “official theory” of perception, but more subtle with the metaphor of the hologram, or with the proposition about perception being at its perceived point of origin, is that they all assume the independent existence of perception. They all suggest that perception can be separated from the perceiver and that which is perceived. But the Sabba Sutta implies that perception cannot be found in isolation from what is perceived, that neither of these can be found without a perceiver, and that a perceiving subject cannot be found in isolation from objects of perception and mental contents. In other words they are mutually dependent concepts that are useful for communication, but independently unfindable in phenomenal experience.

Perceptionless Perception And Stages Of Practice

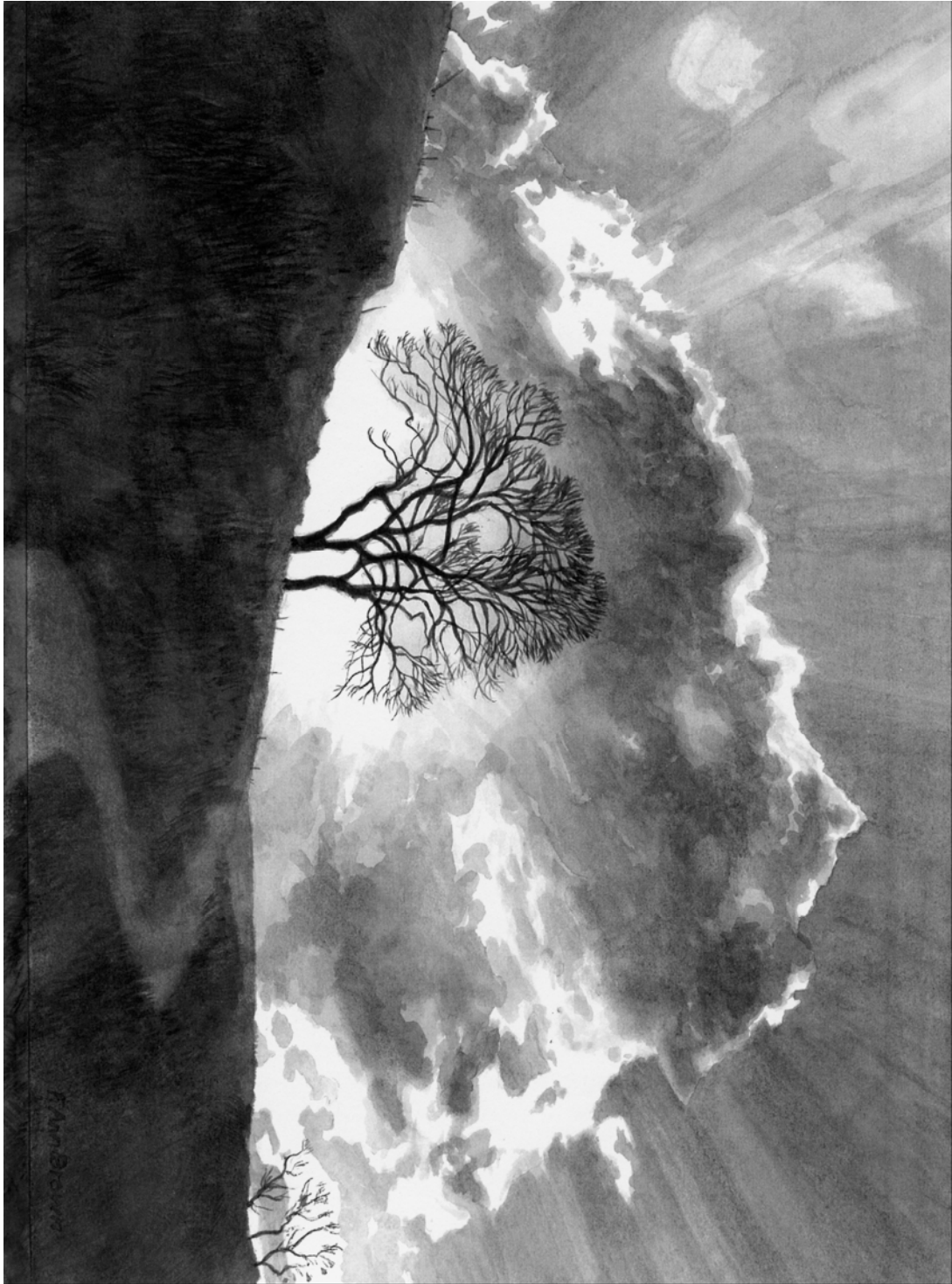
Although Chan is a sudden path which emphasises the result or fruit of practice, Master Sheng Yen teaches that there are stages that might (although not necessarily will) be passed through when practicing Silent Illumination meditation. These are concentrated mind, unification of mind and body, and unification of mind and environment (oneness). The fruit of practice is sometimes referred to as “seeing the nature of emptiness” or no-mind, or Buddha mind and such insights can be shallow or more thoroughgoing.

In this discussion of perception we may have a partial framework for understanding these phases as a progressive dropping of false inferences. The phase of unification of mind and body accords with dropping the coarse aspects of the illusion of the ghost in the machine. This has been described as the “True Person” appearing and may be associated with a feeling of confidence and peace of mind.

When body/mind and environment come together, the gross aspects of the linear illusion of me as opposed to it, you or they are dropped. This is a way of being, which, in the argument presented here is analogous to the hologram worldview in which perception/experience unfolds in itself without the need of anyone to perceive it. This is oneness, in which “perception occurring at its perceived point of origin” is known or experienced directly (not necessarily thought about). Experiences can occur in which the mind as a whole might become more luminous, spacious, or projected into space, a sense of universal loving kindness might arise, or bodhisattva archetypes might be perceived or even met. However, these “phenomena” may be mistaken for absolutes: it is the quality of a practitioner’s response that indicates to the Chan Master whether or not, at a more subtle level, the distinction between self and other remains. At this stage of practice Master Sheng Yen emphasises the need to “put down all phenomena” and continue with the practice; this does not mean blocking out or shutting down such phenomena, but rather not becoming attached to them as they unfold.

It would follow that if no-mind is realised, even subtle illusions which rest on unconscious assumptions about the nature of perception, experience and mind fall away. This is of course difficult to write about from within those illusions. However, the distinction that Searle makes between first person ontology and third person phenomena might be a useful framework. Perhaps the root of all illusion about self and other is confusion between these two categories, that is first person ontology becomes confused with a third person perspective from which “I”, “it”, “you” and “they” become objects in our minds.

With the realisation of no mind Master Sheng Yen teaches that the way is clear for compassion and wisdom to function naturally and freely, and at such a time there would be no further need to be concerned about whether “this perception is quite perceptionless” or not.



Winterhead Solitude

Rebekah Kenton

1. *Opening*

*Forget-me-nots must go.
I must forget.
Don't clutter your solitude
with the roots of past summers.*

*My inner melody is composed
of strong winds, a week long.*

The Buddha sits alone.

2. *Uphill*

*Each gate needs a different technique
to open.
I thought I'd reached the top of the hill,
but behind it was another.
The last gate did not open.
Slow effort, breathless.
View.
The right view?*

3. *Koan*

*A cloud across the pond
drops across the water.
I am thirsty.*

4. *Exploring*

*First a few lines, like a sketch-drawing.
Then a few brush-strokes of colour and gold
on the face and hands.
My Buddha-nature is taking form.*

*Sitting like a statue
Is a new dimension.
On the surface not alive
but inside is empty, vacant.*

*What a sweet illusion
is this luminous Flower of the Path,
this yarrow-green Paradise
in pure Buddha-lands.
And yet the fruit
is not.*

5. Talking to Buddha

*In your presence
I try to discover my own.*

*Not the body, not the mind, not the heart.
What is then
this avalanche of light?
As if the Wheel of Life were turning
Inside out,
the visible returning to the invisible.*

*Dear Buddha,
I must admit:
This is my deepest secret
That I don't understand.*

6. Kinhin on Grass

*At first, I follow the footsteps
of my Teacher,
later my own.
Ah, path-keeper, how did you know?*

*This is a long journey.
Going nowhere?
It does not matter.
Each round is more awake.
Circles become spirals
and I ascend
into clarity.*

*Footprints will not remain
on this diagram.*

7. Tantra

*Taste Tantra!
Start with stinging nettles
but cook them first!*

*Don't cook snake fangs!
According to ancient wisdom
poison and nectar
come from the same source.*

*Heaven seems a vast place,
but where is the entrance?*

8. *Evening Song*

*Lights of distant cities
at the horizon.*

*Not even a candle needed here.
I take the mystery of dusk
as it comes, slowly.
The landscape fades into mind,
sinks into memory
behind my eyes.*

*Nature goes to rest.
The scent of dusk awakens my soul.
There, the mystery of the Other;
I do not dare to call it Love any more.*

*Distant cities slow down, go to sleep.
I fall deeper and deeper into dusk.
What is Other
Is not mine.*

9. *Inner Fire*

*I am both the fuel
and the meal
for the table of the Gods.*

*Sometimes the flames flare cold
like icy fingers of death,
making me feel
whiter than a ghost.*

*Life is blood
green in plants,
in me
boiled to red,
Slow cooking.*

*Until
no more colours,
no more flames.
Just a radiant smile
For the table of the Gods.*

Exploring The Use Of Koans In Chinese Zen

Talk given by John Crook during retreat in the Maenllwyd Chan Hall, 1997.

Transcribed by Rob Alexander, edited, abbreviated and compiled by the author.

I'll talk this evening a little bit about the use of koans or questions in the context of Chan practice and I want to do that especially in the light of what we've been practising.

When one first explores the literature of Zen one gets the impression that the use of the Koan or questioning is completely the opposite approach of the type of meditation we've been mainly talking about and practicing here, namely Silent Illumination or, as the Japanese call it, Shikantaza. And there are some good reasons for that impression.

There were, in China, two different schools respectively emphasising a 'gradual' and a 'sudden' approach. In the sudden school the idea was that you could solve the problem with a question based on a koan story to yield an instantaneous discovery, whereas the other way was by study or by sitting on a cushion and slowly making your way to a solution through calming the mind in meditation.

Contemporary scholars have shown that nearly all the discussions that have split Chan into those two attitudes were actually mistaken; that there's much more in common between the two views than had formerly been thought, and furthermore a lot of the polemics was actually, you might say, Buddhist politics.

This distinction has none the less persisted, particularly because in Japan there is a very particular use of the Koan in the Rinzai school contrasted with the very particular use of Shikantaza in the Soto Zen school. Indeed, if you specialise, as it were, in one or the other approaches, they do become two contrasting even competitive methods.

I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about the history of these things. The point I'm coming to is that in Chan of this last century, Master Xu Yun brought many of the different approaches together in one practice that allowed different emphasises that could be chosen as practice depending upon the needs of the monk or meditator.

The reason for this was that the situation of Chan in China in the early part of this last century was chaotic. Even before communism there had been a great deal of destruction of monasteries. Master Xu Yun was instrumental in re-establishing many monasteries and many practices, but in order to do that he had to pick and choose from the surviving methods which were available. He focussed especially on the methods of contemplating the Koan and the methods of Silent Illumination. You could chose your focus and vary the relationship between them. So what we have in Chan today is a remarkably wide range of possible ways of practice.

So, how is the Koan used in present-day Chan derived from the 'reformation' of Master Xu Yun. How does Shifu Sheng yen present it?

If one reads the works of Shifu and Xu Yun together, you get a pretty good picture of how a Koan can be approached in Chan. The way I'd like to talk about it here is to develop the idea of enquiry. After all, questioning a koan is an enquiry. But enquiry also occurs in Silent Illumination. A very important aspect of Silent Illumination is the moment when one looks into the developing silence with the implicit question "What is it that is going on here?". The mind is alert with an enquiry, not a verbal question but an enquiry. It is this enquiry, this alert looking-into the silenced mind, or the silencing mind, that generates illumination. And this is very important for us to realise. It's no good sitting on one's cushion endlessly mulling over the same stuff, one has to really adapt a very questioning viewpoint; not a question as such but a kind of investigative look, what the Chinese called Tsan.

Sometimes you read in the stories of Chan that a master will suddenly shout "Tsan!" My original teacher in Hong Kong, Mr Shiliang Yen used to emphasise this point of "investigation". Investigation in Silent Illumination is an alert looking at what you're on about.

As I have said many times, investigation can be applied at whatever level you're at. In any retreat some people may be sitting there with their minds buzzing with thoughts, worries and troubles. Others may be in a pretty clear condition. There are always great contrasts between people on retreat. People have different karmas, different problems to work with. It would be most surprising if everybody was going at the same speed and doing the same thing. This issue of enquiry applies to whatever stage one is at.

Let's take somebody who is really very troubled by wandering thoughts and issues. As we've said before, what you do with that is ask yourself what on earth you're on about. "What's going on here?"

One doesn't just sit there and let the turmoil whiz round and round and up and down a cul-de-sac, a one-way street. One says to oneself, "Well there's no doubt I'm up a one-way street that's going nowhere, but what am I doing in it, how did I get here, how do I get out?". One takes a dynamic, investigative perspective. This requires a certain toughness, because there may be bits and pieces of that one-way street which you're particularly anxious to avoid, and you may not entirely know, until you actually bump into them, what it is you're avoiding. But that's still part of the investigative business. When the mind is in that state the investigative attitude is very important. Habits are very difficult to break.

Maybe there's another person sitting on the very next cushion who's had one or two blissful moments and is very peaceful, yet somehow it's a bit stale. A similar question applies there. Not so much "What am I going on about?" but "What is this that's happening, what's happening now?" Obviously it is a quieter and less confronting question, but it is appropriately investigative.

I sometimes tell the story of somebody who has goldfish bowl. A friend comes into the room and says, "Oooh, that's a nice goldfish bowl, what's in it?" You look at the goldfish bowl and you see two fishes swimming round, so you say "There are two fishes swimming in the goldfish bowl. " and the person says "Anything else?" and you say "Hmmm.... not anything else, just two fishes". "Wrong!" he says, "There's something else in there as well". So you start looking.... you can't see anything but two fishes going round and round, chasing each other and making faces. So you spend a long time looking at this goldfish bowl and seeing two fishes go round in it.

Your friend, keeps saying "Look further, it's not enough, look further, there's something else in there as well!" So after a long time you think "Well, I've really got to look into this. " So you sit quietly, collect yourself together, you sit back, and you look at the goldfish bowl, and you say "Well, what's *in* the goldfish bowl. Well first of all course there's the water..... ohhhhh. The WATER, of course, that's what's in there as well as the two fishes, the water, how obvious. "

And it's like that. But it requires that investigative, peaceful, slightly withdrawn, let's have a real look at this", eyeing it from one side and then another, the kind of investigative attitude in order to spot what's absolutely obvious. But only obvious afterwards, as it were.

So, as we've been seeing all the time, this attitude of investigation is terribly important in the practice even of a so-called "gradual path"-- which is a dubious misnomer anyway because all realisations are actually sudden. Now what happens if, while you are sitting there, your investigation suddenly takes the form of an actual verbal question.

I once had a curious experience on retreat with Master Sheng yen. A phrase came up in my mind, "Dogen is offering to Dogen". It would not go away. It was going round and round in my head while I was trying to do Silent Illumination. So I went to Shifu and said,

“Look, this phrase ‘Dogen is offering to Dogen’ is going round and round. What shall I do?” Shifu smiled and said, “Well, you’ve got a question there, haven’t you? What is it? What is it saying? There’s a koan in this, you’d better look into it.”

So, although I was practising Just Sitting, he had said “Take this up as an issue, as a question.” Something had come to a focus in meditation and when something comes into focus like that it becomes a Koan. There’s something to be gone into there. And that would apply to any such question which comes to a sharp focus.

Now, of course, that’s a little bit different from having a question set to you by a teacher, or choosing one from a book or something. That’s a bit different. But it’s very typical of the Tsao Tung approach. Remember what Dogen said about this (of course it wasn’t only Dogen, because it came from his own teacher in China) he said that “the Koan arises in everyday life”. There are quite enough questions and problems welling up all the time without having to use a fabricated one from some ancient bit of history, stuck in some book by some collector of stories. You don’t have to have such a Koan, the Koans are coming up anyway.

But the issue is that a Koan, to be really powerful, has to have, it has to point somewhere. It’s no good taking up as a Koan, “Is today Tuesday?”, because of course you can answer that question, you can look at a calendar and say “No it’s not, it’s Wednesday/Thursday/Friday/Saturday/Sunday/Monday”, I mean you’ve only got seven options as to what it might be. And if you know what it was yesterday you can fairly well work out what it is today.

Of course, you might be totally lost on a desert island in which case it might be a real Koan. Because you have no calendar... it begins to get interesting. “No calendar... so what day is it today?” Now, that’s a Koan. When there’s no calendar, and you ask what day it is, there’s a Koan.

Similarly, imagine you’re flying in a rocket right out past the moon, somewhere in the direction of Mars, and you casually say, “What day is it?”. Well... no light, no day. Just the rocket revolving; black/white/black/white/black/white as it flips round before the sun. That’s hardly a day. So you have to think “What day is it on earth? There aren’t any days up here. Indeed what is a day?” A day is the revolution of the planet, and the revolution of the planet is being shone upon by the sun so it is dark and light, dark and light, dark and light, every 24 hours. That’s what a day is. But when you’re out there... the sun just shines, and it’s black except where the sun hits the vessel. What’s a day up there? It’s become a Koan. Is it a meaningless question? Depends on what clock you’re using. It turns into “What is time?” and there you have it.

Well, it’s similar on a retreat; depends on what “clock” you’re using. In other words, what is the context, where are you trying to get to, what are you using time for? So issues can arise in the sitting, or they can arise in everyday life. And if they point, as it were, beyond themselves, they’re very probably Koans.

I’ve a picture of a Koan of this kind. It’s a signpost, you know, just an ordinary road sign, except there’s nothing written on it, and it’s stuck on the top of a cliff, and it’s pointing straight out over the Atlantic ocean. “Where would you go to?”, that’s the Koan, where would you go to with a signless signpost pointing straight out over the ocean. Which is actually the state of our lives, which is why it’s a Koan. What is the purpose of this life? Is there any purpose in it at all? Is there any purpose in the cosmos? Well, one doesn’t have to doubt the vastness of space, the immensity of the thing. What’s it there for? Who made it? Why am I here? Have I any purpose? Or do I invent one? All of these are Koans. And of course they’re terribly important, basic in our lives. It is the resolutions of those questions which bring meaning to us.

One of the tragedies of the present time is that the contemporary, materialistic kind of world in which we live has no ultimate meaning, apart from making money. So that we’re

faced, very often, with a meaningless existence. That is meaningless in the old sense, when meaning was given by the religion into which you were born. Nowadays one is not born into a religion, one is born into a chaos of ideas, people thinking one thing and then another. This particular age is in many ways as decadent as ancient Rome before it fell and there are some interesting historical parallels if you actually look into this.

The Koan is vividly before us the moment you open a newspaper or read the Economist or think about the state of the planet. And unless one has some kind of an approach to those questions, ultimately life gets meaningless, and depressive, and lonely, and unrelated, and one indulges in numerous compensations: drugs, confusing love affairs, co-dependencies, psychotherapy, all of which are palliatives for an absence of meaning.

But there's something also quite vibrant about this in a way. The very fact that there is no given meaning, means that one can face the Koans of existence without all that old superstitious nonsense of the past. Without all the stories of hells and heavens and angels and all that stuff. They were only prisons, after all, comfortable prisons of the mind. But we've thrown that stuff away, so we're left naked on the cliff top with the sign post, with nothing written on it, pointing straight out over the ocean. What do you do next?"

Well, someone has just sent me a cartoon showing two rather miserable looking monks sitting on their cushions. One is saying to the other- "Nothing happens next. This is it!" Go into that one. Sky gazing at the clouds passing the blue immensity of space might open it for you.

Books of Koans are nonetheless useful, if you want to use them, I don't want you to think that I'm in any way debunking the use of old Koans. I'm not, I'm merely saying that it's a relative approach and it's not necessary to use them. But they can be enormously valuable. Why? Because these old Koans are the puzzlements of past time, when two deeply reflective masters or monks had a conversation about one of these burning issues. And one of them came up with a question and the other answered it. They said "Ah, yes" and our question becomes "What the hell are they on about?" (laughs)

Sometimes I open a book of Koans, look at it, "Yeah, right, yeah", turn over the page, open another one "Cor blimey, don't get it, I just don't get it". It's like that with Koans.

One key Koan is the simple question "What is this?" A Chinese monk might have thought about this when he sat on his cushion and heard a bird singing outside the window. He may have thought, "Ah, what's this?". And that's a real question.

"So what is this?"

Now, the first thing to do when a question arises like that is to take a reflective, contemplative attitude. Forget meditation and all the techniques, just consider, "What's going on here? What is this? Well, there's a bird singing, but it sounds a bit different from usual. Is the difference out there, or is the difference in here? Mmmmm. Birds sing every day, every morning rather like that, but I haven't heard one so clear before. So the difference must be in here. Mmmmm. Wonder what that is? What is this? What is this? Well, it's nearly end of a seven day retreat, perhaps that's got something to do with it. Well, I have noticed some changes in the past few days.... "

So you mull it over, as it were, you actually think, surprise, surprise. You think "What is this? What's going on here, there's something puzzling, strange, my mind is so clear, clear as a bell, what is this, what is this clarity?". And, so, you kind of ponder it and explore it and ponder it and explore it. And this is valuable, but only the preliminary skirmish.

You sit there, and you're puzzling, "What is this? What is this?", and you've thought about it from every possible angle and nothing comes up. You've cleared the ground a bit, there's no more 'brush wood' around. The countryside is wide open, but the question is still vividly there.

Master Xu Yun suggests that what you do then is to let the question come up, but don't try to do anything with it at all, just let it come up, and kind of 'do its own thing'. You've tried everything else, you know, you've gone to the edge of your own thought, this way, this way, upwards and downwards. You've explored the ground but the question is still untouched.

As you let it crop up look at the instant before it arose, look just ahead of the thought. The question is really just a noise, almost a mantra, except that it's a very meaningful question for you because you've already explored it intellectually and thinking-wise, so it's a profoundly puzzling and meaningful question, there's a 'great doubt', around this question now, there's a great doubt inside you. "What is this? What is it?" You are profoundly puzzled.

So, Master Xu Yun says allow it to come up, but don't look at it any more, just let it come up. The place to look is just in front of where it is arising, that's where you should look, and that's the practice.

Now you can begin to see the close similarity between this use of a question and Silent Illumination. Here we have almost a Silent Illumination practice.

The beauty of the method is in the intensity of the question. The repetition of the Buddha's name for example is calming, quietening, almost silencing. Which is fine, it's intended to be so. But the intensity of the question and the doubt which is around it makes questioning a very pointed exercise, one-pointed. The mind is highly one-pointed, there's a different flavour about the work. That's why it may yield a 'sudden' response.

And indeed Master Xu Yun goes on to say that the response to such a question can be quite sharp, it can have the nature of a sudden breakthrough. Whereas Silent Illumination progress tends to be gradual, like a flower growing until suddenly it blooms: in the intensity of the Koan question, the whole thing can break quite suddenly.

In Xu Yun's own account he'd been puzzling over a Koan in this way, for many days, many retreats in fact. He was at a tea break. And, someone came to pour him out tea, but Xu Yun was clumsy, the teacup fell down and broke. His mind was so taut that it broke too. At that moment, he saw the solution to the Koan, an immediate experience of no-self.

I once asked Shifu, "What happens in these moments?". I was wondering whether it was the ending of thought so I said "Is it that thought ends?". He said, "No, it's not that thought ends. Thought is always sort of creeping about somewhere or other. It is not that thought disappears. It's that self disappears." At that moment in Xu Yun's account his sense of himself as a question vanished, and there was just the broken teacup.

These are matters about which we find a number of Chan masters have written and talked about. Somebody might have a wonderful flash of experience, but its impact may be short-lived and minor in the long run. Why? Because the other aspects of that person's training have not been developed. And this is almost certainly one of the reasons why, in our present time, a lamentably large number of western masters, for whom there is no reason to doubt their 'kensho' experience, have then failed miserably ethically and morally?

Why could that possibly be, one asks oneself. There's no reason to doubt the enlightenment experience. It's probably because in Zen training more than merely a focus on enlightening experiences is required.

I remember, once, I had some kind of an experience of that sort, and went to speak about it with Roshi Kennett when she was over in Britain at Throssel Hole Priory. She said "Fine, but it's a bit like a kensho orgasm isn't it, really? The trouble with you is you're going 'one, eight, six, ten, two, five'. No no no, you mustn't go like that, you must go 'one, two, three, four, five, six'". Then I understood what she was saying.

It's no good having an experience which is maybe well advanced, well down the path, if you're neglecting the simple things like being kind, being thoughtful, struggling with one's difficulties, working with the everyday Koans: "What shall I do now that my child is in hospital with whooping cough?", or "What can I do about my lover, who doesn't seem to love me any more?" or, the other way round, "What can I do about this relationship when I've started to love somebody else"

These are burning issues, and they're not at the end of the road, they're right down there at the beginning, raising questions of mindfulness, ethical behaviour, simply trying to be 'good'.

So Xu Yun would stress that there's no need to rush into using Koans. You can use the Silent Illumination approach, if that is appropriate for you. It may even be appropriate for you not to use that either; just watch the breath. Just calm the mind, forget about reading all about this Zen stuff; chuck it out. Just calm down man, okay?

There is a modern Japanese story of a man who kept coming to the master terribly confused. Whatever he did, nothing seemed to help him whatsoever. He had all sorts of high-flown ideas about being a monk, he was obviously the most unsuitable person to be a monk, but nonetheless he these ideas about being a monk, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Finally, the master said, "You want my advice? You've been in this state, you've done twenty retreats, you're still the same, nothing's touched you. I suggest you do something very very simple". He said "What's that? ". He said "Go and make prostrations to the statue of Kuan Yin, every morning, a hundred times, and just keep doing it. " So the man who was at his wit's end, dropped all his arrogance, and said "Yeah, okay, I'll do that. " He didn't come back to the monastery for six months. When he came back the master said to him "How are things?" He said "Fine, fine. I've begun to understand what illusion is. " "What had he done? Just done that which was appropriate to his nature. He needed to let go, and to ask "Please, help me. " He didn't have to think "What is it that's helping me? Who is Kuan Yin? What is Kuan Yin? Kuan Yin is just a statue. What is the meaning of a statue?" None of that concerned him. He just found the statue, and did as the master had suggested. Fortunately, he had the sense to see the wisdom of the master. He let go of his self concerns and found a simple sanity.

A wonderful story, very important story, I think, for all of us. One of the beauties of Chan is having this wide range of possible activities, of possibly ways of practicing, One can choose a way which is suited to one. It's not like going to a rather more narrow approach which says "Do this, do that, " and that's the right way to do it. But rather, it's more subtle. If you go with Shifu, have an interview with Shifu, you spend a lot of time kind of mulling over what would be a good approach.

This is why interviews in Chan are quite important. What both participants in interview struggle to do is to share an issue which the practitioner is bringing up, to find out what is the way through. Sometimes it really is very difficult. Who knows? Sometimes one just doesn't know. Neither the teacher, nor the practitioner. No idea. What can one do then? Well, you can start bowing to Kuan Yin. Might do you a lot of good.

Koans are used in a very subtle way in Chan. They can be used in an entirely classical way. Master Sheng Yen trained in Japan in the Rinzai method. He's very well aware of the powerful value of the use of an orthodox Koan, and he'll sometimes recommend that. He'll talk at considerable length about the development of the great doubt, and how one can penetrate the Koan using a very orthodox Rinzai/Linji way of speaking.

Personally I have found Master Sheng Yen at his best in the more subtle negotiating of "Well, what is it we should do together, what is the question here?" That's where his mastery really shines forth, for me, to me. That's where I find him such a subtle teacher. And also of course, for me personally, his teaching in Silent Illumination is extremely profound.

So, this is evening I have been sharing with you a perspective on the use of Koans. Lets spell that out right now in practical terms for this retreat. Much of what we've been developing together is essentially the Silent Illumination approach. That's fine, there's no need to do anything extra; continue with it. But it might be the case that some of you find a puzzling Koan arising within that practice. If that happens, it might be a good idea to take up that Koan and focus on the issue which has come up.

I would suggest is that before you change your method, you come and speak about it with either Simon or I, and we will discuss whether that might be a good idea or not. It might not be a good idea; it might be better to stay calm, collected. It might even be better simply to watch the breath. Sometimes one has funny ideas about one's ability when a lovely question comes up, but actually you're not ready for it. One's Karmic state may be not such as to make it valuable to do that.

If you'd like to ask a question, feel free; if not we'll sit in a few minutes.

Questioner 1: What about when imagery comes up, not necessarily a thought, but are images similar to a thought?

John: Yes. Images can be treated in the same way as thought. I mean, they are thoughts, but they're pictorial, so there's no special recommendation here. Of course, images are quite interesting in a different way from thought in that of course they can lead on to dreams and fantasy. Perhaps the image is a more direct door to one's unconscious world. But apart from that it's just Makyo, as the Japanese would say, it's illusory, from the point of view of the task.

Q 1 again: Well you said to look in the gaps, But then this imagery, say of Amitabha comes up. No real thoughts, but imagery.

John: Ah, well look between the gaps between the images. If the image is continuous, you have to break the image somehow, which the Tibetans do very effectively by suddenly shouting "Phat!".

Breaks, breaks the image and throws you into a state of surprise. "Phat!". Breaks the image.

Q 1 again: Silently, we do that silently?

John: You can do it loud if you like. But you're only allowed one in every half hour!

Questioner 2: So you're saying that a Koan could be an image, because an image can be paradoxical can't it? One image can have two.....

John: Strictly speaking, no, a Koan is not an image, strictly speaking a Koan is a question, which has a verbal form. But I think, if you mean you have an image that comes up which is deeply puzzling for you and which you wish to investigate and go into, you could use it in a similar style, yes.

The thing about images, they tend to change of their own accord, whereas questions stay the same. Questions have a formal structure to them, a linguistic structure, so they stay constant. Whereas if you're trying to investigate an image in this way, the image is liable to shift and move, so it's more slippery.

Questioner 2 again: It might provide you with answer by shifting?

John: Well the answer actually doesn't lie in the image. Remember that what one's looking for is what lies between, behind, beyond, around, the image. And images are just pictures on pages. What is the paper?

Q 2 again: The space between the shifts?

John: Yes. You can try it, yes, If you have an image that you want to investigate, by all means do so.

Questioner 3: When you asked us to go outside this afternoon and sit down, a very strong question came up. I've been wondering about how to bring it into the practice. I mean, I recognise the question as one of the so-called "unanswerable questions" the Buddha did not discuss.

John: Well, a lot depends on what the question is and what its context is, where it comes from. A question can sometimes be a very personal one like "What shall I do about a certain situation?" That's not a Koan. It's a very important question but it's not a Koan. I don't know whether you want to talk about your question here or whether that's more suitable for an interview. Maybe we need to share what the question really was.

Q 3 again: I don't mind. The question has to do with the Mahayana idea that there's nothing that needs to be done, etcetera, etcetera, there is no path, and no suffering. And yet, the world that we live in is full of people suffering, It's full of people like us going to retreats, and going back, and coming back. That's a very personal issue for me.

John: Indeed that is a very genuine Koan. You need to sharpen it into a question that has only a few words in it, one which you can then use as a vehicle for the investigation. This is a deeply paradoxical and problematic issue which takes us into the whole issue of what is meant by emptiness. An ancient Buddha once said (Huang po) ¹, " Do you not see that the fundamental teaching of the Dharma is that there are no entities having absolute existence. What are not entities from an absolute perspective are indeed entities in their relative aspect? One who understands this is a true monk and can practice rightly. " If you can sharpen up your concern into a sharp-pointed, one-pointed question which feels right to you, than that would be a Koan to use.

Questioner 4: You have admonished us a number of times to make our minds bright. I take it from that that when I sit with my eyes open then that's brighter than sitting with my eyes closed, and when my eyes fall shut and imagery happens, that side of it is not very useful so I return and open my eyes. Is that the right approach?

John: Not quite, not quite right. 'Make your mind bright' really means 'investigate'; it means 'find out what you're on about, don't sit there doing nothing'. Investigate, make your minds 'bright!'. That's what that means.

You refer to eyes open and eyes shut. It is true that the meditation is rather different if the eyes are open or shut. Basically, if the eyes are open then one can be more alert, and one is more easily able to feel the world around you, the room around you.

The value of the eyes shut is that sometimes one wants to go 'in'. One doesn't want the world, you want to go 'in'. Turning the gaze inward, into the darkness as it were, is also very valuable. By using both methods on a retreat, one can discover a broad view of one's own meditation practice. One can discover what it is like to go deeply inwards; one can also discover what it is like to come out again. There's an expression used in Mahamudra practice - 'co-emergence', it's all about relating the inner and the outer.

Q 4 again: When imagery happens for me, I'm not in enough control to investigate.

John: Oh. Well, one has to let it run, until a certain amount of calming-down occurs. It's true, at times, there's not much one can do, except just let it exhaust itself. Remember the image of the beer bottle. There's a lot of fizz in the beer bottle, you take the top off and the bubbles come up. If one sits patiently for long enough, the bubbles run out.

The thing you have to watch is that you don't keep regenerating them. The mind can have a way of 'regenerating' the bubbles, not letting go of the issue, but keeping on feeding the

¹ Chu Ch'an. 1947. *The Huang po Doctrine of Universal Mind*. Buddhist Society. London. p 51.

issue, milking the issue. Like 'poor me'. "Poor me, I never get anything right, my mummy did this and so I'm awful," or "My sister did this so I'm awful." You go round one loop and recognise what you are doing. Then you have a chance to say "Oh well, that's that, that's me doing my 'poor me' thing again. " You have a chance to drop it and do something else.

But some people don't catch that moment, they go round again "Poor me, here I am in this awful Zen hall, with all these awful complicated talks and this dreadful Chinese chanting. Poor me. " So you go round again! Now, the problem is, how do you break that. This is where interviews are very useful.

A Rainy Morning

Ted Kooser

[This poem was included in the print edition of New Chan Forum 32, but for copyright reasons cannot be included in this online copy of the journal]

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Celebrating Tibetan New Year In Dharamsala

Sue Birch and Caroline Birch

We arrived into the cloud of unknowing. Literally; an impenetrable grey fog clung icily to the ramshackle buildings of the town and cloaked the surrounding landscape; removing all trace of the mountains and valleys beyond. Rain poured. It was freezing.

Three days of travelling had brought us to Dharamsala in Northern India, or McLeod Ganj to be exact, foothills of the Himalayas, home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government in exile and several thousand Tibetan refugees. The journey, long talked about in idle moments, then, in a flurry of motivation and commitment had become a reality just three months before, had almost not taken place at all as just three weeks prior to departure I had been diagnosed with Breast Cancer. The surgeon proposed to operate on the very day that we were supposed to fly. After much soul searching we agreed with the specialist that if an MRI scan did not show up any further nasty surprises, then we would postpone surgery and make the journey. Caroline and I felt compelled to go to Dharamsala at exactly this time. It was February. We wanted to experience Losar, Tibetan New Year, at its very heart from both a cultural and Buddhist perspective.

According to Tibetan custom, Losar, the most important festival of the year, which usually falls around February, marks the annual passage of the sun. It is a time when Tibetan astrologers calculate the following years' calendar, dividing the solar year into twelve lunar months. The festival days of the following year are scheduled according to the phases of the moon. Many days are considered to be auspicious and some are thought to be inauspicious, but among the most auspicious are the first fifteen days of the New Year. This time celebrates the fifteen days, on which, in order to increase the merit and aid the devotion of future disciples, Buddha displayed a different miracle on each day. It is thought that during this time the effects of positive and negative actions are multiplied ten million times.

For my part, I wanted a taste of what really goes on for the Tibetans at this time, how would it feel to rub shoulders with thousands of maroon robed monks and nuns on a daily basis? I wanted to know what Tibetan people are really like. In a nutshell, I wanted an intimacy with the roots from where my practice stems. Losar was the perfect time, when few westerners would be braving the cold; the town and temple would be full of Tibetans. It was also approaching the time of His Holiness' annual public teachings, a complete event in itself, so we knew that he was going to be in residence.

The shock and stress of diagnosis had landed me with a bout of 'flu just days before departure. Four days before leaving I had the MRI scan. The next day the hospital phoned. 'Good news' said the nurse 'There's just the one cancer in there, you can go on holiday!'

It was a relief to leave the clinical issues behind, although the knowledge that I now had a life threatening condition, in many ways became gently and irretrievably woven into the experiences that were to follow. In spite of everything and 'flu permitting, I abandoned myself to the glorious adventure in hand.

After one day in McLeod Ganj we moved out of our three star hotel, cold as a refrigerator and into a Tibetan family guest house, also cold as a refrigerator, but warm with smiles from Kalsang our host and his lovely family of mother, uncle and a variety of sisters and brothers. It being Losar day, the family invited us in to their cosy living room. We were invited to make offerings from the mountains of Tsampa flour and salt which was part of the food offerings in the family shrine room, and then we enjoyed our first taste of Tibetan hospitality as we sat with the family around the fire, shared the festive food and drank quantities of tea.

Losar, this year, the year of the wood bird, was a five-day holiday for most folk. Losar day, falling on a Wednesday, meant that three days of festivities could be tucked on to the

weekend. Many of the shops and restaurants closed for the five-day period. The atmosphere in the town almost crackled with expectancy and excitement, as did the streets as fireworks and bangers ricocheted wildly about the place. The Tibetans managed to skilfully combine their devotional practices and their party going tendencies quite seamlessly.

We did not have far to go to experience how families celebrated. Despite the dismal weather, the streets suddenly erupted with Tibetans, strolling arm in arm, wearing their finest new clothes, delightfully, all in traditional dress, half or full length Chubtas or Tsarers, huge coat like garments made of thick woollen fabric or sheep skin, often trimmed with Leopard skins, tied at the waist or hips with bright sashes, adorned with huge chunks of turquoise and amber.

Everyone greeted everyone. 'Tashi delek' - Good Luck - Congratulations. We learned to say it as they did, by dropping the 'k' sound off the end. All around us there were flurries of activity. Our neighbours burned huge boughs of juniper outside their back door, everywhere, new prayer flags were hoisted into position. Someone began each of the first five days by blowing a conch shell into the still mountain air at exactly 5 o'clock each morning. The sound of our family's prayers and pujas floated over our balcony. We sat in the chill air against a stunning backdrop of towering snowy peaks and listened to the low rhythmic hum of Uncle Tashi's incantations, often accompanied by drum beating and cymbal clashing. Dozens of butter lamps burned in his window. Monks arrived to perform special Losar Puja for the family.

We soon found 'Mr Dalai Lama's Temple' as it was described as we asked for directions. The main Temple or Tsuglakhang (central cathedral) situated on a high promontory at the far end of town, although apparently a plain substitute for its 7th Century namesake in Lhasa, looked impressive enough and as though it had always been there. I felt completely at home, even though we later discovered that for several days we had been entering through the exit. We soon learned the temple protocols, however, and daily visits soon became our daily practice. I can scarcely find words to express the mixture of privilege, humility and joy that I felt, as, along with a constant stream of devotees, monks, nuns and lay people, we made our daily circumambulations, turned the prayer wheels and made prostrations. Each day we went to 'pay our respects to the Buddha' three main images in the Temple, that of Sakyamuni Buddha, three metres high and made of gilded bronze, and to his right Padmasambhava and Avalokitesvara, side by side, facing Tibet. Sometimes we sat silently, simply absorbing the peaceful atmosphere. We came to know the faces of the regular visitors to the temple, as they came to know ours. Many had travelled far, from Ladakh, Mongolia and of course, Tibet itself in order to celebrate this sacred time. Everywhere, there were people, many elderly, in dusty, travel worn, traditional clothes, making grand prostrations, spinning Mani wheels, muttering mantras. A monk who spoke some English, having seen that we were asking questions, often took the trouble to explain to us what was going on, and on one occasion demonstrated the intricately carved butter sculptures, depicting the life story of the Buddha

Day three of Losar and things really started to get going. We rose at 6.15 and headed for the temple. Before long we were swept along on a huge tide of people, bearing large plastic bags of prayer flags and Khatags. We found our selves at Ihagyal-ri. (Ihaseol Ground), a sacred place where Tibetans perform rituals of appeasement and atonement to the protecting deities and guardian Gods. It lies below the residence of His Holiness on the Linkhor (holy circuit) footpath. Fridays according to Tibetan custom is an auspicious day to hang prayer flags. This was Losar and a Friday, the place was a riot of colour and activity. Hundreds of Tibetans scrambled up the hillside to hang prayer flags, we added our khatags to the fluttering collection. Down below, a large group of monks led the lay people in chants of prayers and aspirations. A full monk orchestra blasted and punctuated the incantations. At the end of the ceremony, we all threw flour in the air. It was glorious. Afterwards, groups of women and men linked arms together in long rows and burst into a

spontaneous display of traditional singing and dancing. There was much hand clapping and smiling. The whole thing was over by about 9.30, so we completed our walk along the holy circuit, back to the temple, to discover a large party of monks had arrived in one of the prayer halls and were in full flow.

What puja the monks were perfuming remained a mystery to us, as in spite of frequently asking, no one ever seemed to understand the question. For six days, from 6 am to 3pm they chanted prayers, the experience of it was fantastic. Hour upon hour, with barely a break, the low, rhythmic growl of their voices, rising and falling, speeding and slowing, bells ringing pulsed through the air. Sometimes they wore yellow over their robes, sometimes the most amazing head gear, a sort of pointed skull cap which fastened under the chin and then an incredibly ornate head dress fastened over the top. Food offerings and sacred objects that appeared to be part of the days' ceremony sat in a large mound in front of the head monk. Senior monks holding dorje and bell performed the mudra with their hands. I let the sounds fill my mind, felt the pulsing energy fill my body. Not understanding words became irrelevant. On some days, the ceremony culminated in a fire puja. After eight hours of virtual non-stop chanting, the monks filed out of the prayer hall to the covered outer area, and began a whole new ceremony. Flames, a metre high leapt from a prepared hearth. The head monk, sitting above and slightly behind the fire poured food offerings and the collection of objects from the days ceremony in to the flames. The energy was palpable. The ornate headdresses were exchanged for yellow hats and a procession of monks walked around the assembled crowds blowing conch shell, horns, clashing cymbals, bearing incense. They eventually processed back into the prayer hall, followed by the community of monks. The fire was left to rage and burn itself out. The lay people surged forward to capture some of the sacred ash as a keepsake. Seizing the moment, feeling so affected by such powerful energy, in true Maenllwyd style I wrote out a few lines and slipped the folded paper into the burning embers. I later wrote in my journal 'I truly believe in the cleansing, transforming power of the fire. No need to take anything, the effects will live on in my heart'.

It was not long before we seemed to have friends all over town. This may have been partly due to the fact that we had begun taking Tibetan Language lessons and were cheerfully trying out our Tibetan on anyone we happened to come into contact with. This usually produced an eruption of delighted hilarity and a spontaneous Tibetan/English conversation class. Our conversations with our new Tibetan friends however were sobering and often deeply moving. We talked to many who had made the terrible journey across the mountains to flee the Chinese. We heard stories of gripping fear, of hunger and cold, and the heartbreak and loneliness of leaving families and homeland behind. Many have not had contact with family since leaving Tibet. Mails are particularly unreliable between India and Tibet and the use of telephones are complicated and expensive. Refugees and their families suffer terribly from not knowing what has happened to their loved ones. Individual stories were told without a trace of self-pity, they spoke with sincerity from the heart, because we asked.

Conversations from the heart became normal, joyful even. The effect of being there was rather like being on retreat. I found my defended hard-edged self begin to soften and cease resisting, everything just flowed. Every waking moment seemed filled with simplicity, smiles and laughter and openhearted sincerity.

It was in one of our café conversations that we met Takla. Shy and unconfident, he had been in Dharamsala for a year and a half, having fled Tibet, via Nepal. He was traumatised from his experiences and missing his family dreadfully. Slowly, though his spoken English was poor we heard his story and understood something of how dejected and miserable he felt. He almost seemed to have given up, and was thinking about going back to Tibet and risk prison so that he might see his family again. A bond seemed to grow between the three of us and I decided that I would keep contact with him, if he wished, to encourage him and offer support. In the event I didn't have to say anything because Takla had already

decided that he wasn't going to let go of us. He solemnly asked me if I would be his mother. It seemed the most simple and obvious thing to do and I was extraordinarily happy to agree. We went to the temple at Norbulinka, a centre dedicated to preserving Tibetan culture, and in front of His Holiness' throne, in a ceremony of our own devising became mother and son and promised to care for and respect each other.

The weather during our stay was amazing in its drama and changeability. I began to understand the notion of appeasing the spirits of the mountain. The spirits of our particular mountains seemed to be having a major tantrum. Rain and fog, interspersed with sunshine and snow showers eventually gave way to solid days of torrential rain, freezing fog, thunder, lightning and a bitter wind and then, deep snow. Eventually, the gods, apparently exhausted became quiet. A hazy sun peeked out from the mist and at last, things began to settle down. The snow, however, provoked a frenzy of playfulness in the Tibetans. It was impossible to go out in the street without being pelted from all directions with snowballs. Old ladies built giant snowmen, the old man from the recycle shop spent a whole day lovingly fashioning a snow stupa. People slipped and slid along the frozen roads, clinging to each other and laughing as they fell, whilst monks staked out rooftops to hurl giant slabs of snow at the hapless folk below. Cars could no longer get around and the whole town turned into a playground.

In two days the snow was gone. We were transformed from bleak mid winter to glorious spring over night. The time for His Holiness' teachings was fast approaching and the town began rapidly filling up. Thousands of monks and nuns suddenly appeared, as did westerners and people from all over the globe. McLeod Ganj took on a 'Bethlehem' air and soon it was impossible to rent a room anywhere. People were sleeping in the streets.

Five days before the teachings began, vast numbers of monks and nuns arrived at the temple and sitting in endless lines of serried rows intoned prayers and chants, from dawn till dusk, in honour of the occasion. They were fed and watered by a quietly efficient army of lay people who periodically produced massive cauldrons of food and brimming pots of tea as if from nowhere. The generosity of the Tibetans seemed to know no bounds as they happily fed all passing humanity, regardless of whether they wore robes or not.

The week developed into a smorgasbord of delights. One afternoon, we just happened to call in at the temple and were treated to a marvellous display of dialectics, a method of debate that tests knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, performed by the monks from The Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. Without announcement, and with an apparent absence of tight security, His Holiness suddenly appeared from inside the temple and sat on his throne to watch the debate. We were only a few yards from him as he passed by later, to return to his residence. It was thrilling to be so close, to bow low, to show respect to him. After that, we enjoyed being in his dazzling presence on a daily basis as the teachings got underway.

It was not easy to understand the English translation, transmitted via fuzzy static on FM radio and after a while we gave up trying, deciding that we would study the translated text at home and just enjoy the atmosphere of being in the moment. It's hard to describe the preciousness of being there. The joy I experienced as I breathed in the timbre of his voice, that unmistakable deep-throated chuckle, and witnessed the obedient devotion by which his people received his wisdom and compassion. I felt very blessed. On our last day, on leaving the temple we got caught up in a human river of thousands that flowed very slowly along the road. We were stuck in a logjam of folk as a motorcade inched impatiently through the crowds. Curiously I looked into the car windows and suddenly realised that I was gazing into the face of His Holiness the Karmapa. We bowed immediately. His Holiness nodded an acknowledgement and bowed back, and then the car was gone. 'Good grief' said Caroline 'We've just been clocked by The Karmapa', and so we had. It was an extraordinary moment, a split second in time, of presence, of connection, of being seen, and one that will stay with me.

Leaving McLeod Ganj was not really sad, just something we had to do. Our son and brother waved us off, clutching a new text book for his English studies and waving Caroline's umbrella which he said he will look after until she returns. Now that we are home, I struggle to share the truth of what we found there. How do you describe a love affair with mere words. Every day, we were touched by warmth and humour and such open hearted sincerity that our hearts simply melted. We mingled with a people who have been so touched by tragedy and have lost so much, yet who shine with friendliness and generosity. It was indeed a lesson in humility. In the West, we so often think we should have the best of everything, perhaps without realising how fantastically fortunate we are. We pick and choose our teachings and Dharma groups as if buying in a supermarket, yet how many of us truly live our Buddhism. From a people who, when in Tibet risked imprisonment and torture for the 'crime' of carrying a photograph of His Holiness we learned lessons of kindness and simplicity, courage and forbearance. During our stay, we never heard anyone complain about anything.

In a recent email, Takla attempting to sum up the essence of His Holiness' teachings, wrote,

'Never to harm other people and do the virtue action as much as possible, meanwhile, subdue your untamed mind, this is the core of the precious Buddhism.'

Amen to that.

The weather, apparently, improved dramatically after we had left, although on our last day, the clouds disappeared and a brilliant sun shone out of a pristine blue sky. The mountain scenery was spectacular. We could see for miles.

I struggle to decide at what point our journey really began. Was it when the plane touched down in Delhi? When we met at the bus stand of Terminal 3? When we conceived of the idea to go – together – mother and daughter – to Dharamshala for Losar? Or is it more realistic to assume that our karmic predispositions had had it mapped out for us since beginningless time? Whichever way we looked at it, we felt our pilgrimage had led us 'home.'

'Home' to the heart of our family bond – together we stood! (And shared and inspired and laughed 'til we cried)... 'home' to a landscape so familiar it triggered off memories of dreams we had dreamt years before.... 'home' to His Holiness and the hub of Tibetan Buddhism as it now exists in *their* home from home.

That rare feeling of home, oneness with a place, at peace with its ebbs and flows.

That's not to say that the weather was very embracing to begin with.

Having arrived in a freezing cold cloud of relentless rain, we were soon to learn that the mountain environment could be very changeable indeed.

This being the first time I'd spent any duration in such a place, I was overjoyed to observe how the ever-changing nature of the weather was such a support for the mind to stay present.

No wonder mountainous regions are the chosen spot for serious meditative contemplation!

Observing the weather automatically became my practise.

I began to see how it was all movement – it all happened out of space – out of emptiness. It was emptiness taking a form, taking an appearance.

In seeing it's transitory nature, I was able to see in parallel the illusory nature of my emotions and feelings: sadness came and sadness dissolved, suffering came and suffering dissolved, joy came and joy dissolved. A variety of emotional feelings came and they dissolved. Just as they arose, they dissolved.

I felt so liberated in the knowledge that just as the weather is in constant flux, so there *are* no intrinsic emotional feelings, nothing is fixed, everything is always becoming.

I saw clearly that the path to happiness is to consciously develop an approach of fluidity – to live in accord with the Way...which for us on our trip meant being armed with a rainbow broolly each at ALL times, regardless of how blue the sky sometimes looked!

The setting we found ourselves in really was spectacular. Snow capped peaks loomed in and out of view around the town and the far-reaching plateaux of the north Indian plains could be seen far below.

There were bookshops and Buddhas, prayerwheels and pilgrims, restaurants and rickety rickety roads.

Monks and nuns mingled through a thoroughfare of Tibetans, Nepalis, Indians, Kashmiris, meaningful looking tourists, cows, cars, motorbikes, holy men, dogs, children, rickshaws and who knows what else on winding streets that fell away steeply in parts.

This was all accompanied by the glorious scent of burning juniper and the sound of Om Mani Padme Hum (and other musical delights) being played full pelt in shops and stalls.

Heaven on Earth as far as we were concerned.

Having found ourselves a Tibetan run Travel Lodge, complete with balcony and exquisite views – an ideal spot for meditating and gazing at birds of prey - we made it our priority to find the Dalai Lama's Temple before Losar began.

It was thrilling to behold. Words can't express how happy I was to be there, eyeing up great stacks of plaited loaves, intricate butter sculptures and tables full of tsog (food offerings), presumably to be dedicated the following day.

We were unable to enter the temple however, or indeed find anyone to give us any information about proposed happenings, all useful information being kept very close to the communal Tibetan chest. We resolved to try our luck again in the morning.

Unfortunately for us, we were not quick enough out of our chilly beds and the first of the Losar happenings happened without us.

Arriving at the temple to find masses of finely dressed folk piling *out* of the grounds, we were a little disappointed to say the least. Never the less, we were overjoyed to be allowed inside, where we did some prostrations, had some tsog, donated money and stared in awe at the fabulous golden statues of Guru Rinpoche and Chenrezig. After this we spun the prayer wheels and circumambulated the temple three times before splashing off in the rain to get some tomato soup.

It was so lovely seeing all the Tibetans in their wonderful regalia (all wishing us a hearty 'Tashi Delek' and 'Happy New Year' from beneath their umbrellas) and just listening to the sounds of celebration – people laughing and singing and fireworks and bangers being set off by the kids.

It seemed our luck had looked up later on, when the owners of our guesthouse welcomed us in for tea. What joy!

We found the whole family sitting together beneath big blankets watching His Holiness on T.V.

They showed us their shrine room, gave us some tsog and invited us to stay and chat around their gas heater, whereupon we were endlessly plied with rice pudding, sweets, biscuits and refills of tea.

We were so grateful for their generosity, which really only compounded our horror much later that night, when we returned from an evening's revelry (Tibetans sure do like a party) only to find we had been locked out. Their furry doorbell, a noisy Tibetan Terrier, woke them up and after some time and commotion the old lady got out of bed, bare-footed, to let us in. Oh dear...

On the third day of Losar was another celebration and thankfully this time we didn't miss it. We'd got the message that you had to be up early.

A conch shell had been sounding in the darkness for an hour before we rose at 6 am – really, winter retreats at Maenllwyd have been an excellent training for this!

Heading straight for the temple, we watched a group of monks doing morning puja. It was amazing to see them all doing the mudra with their hands, ringing bells, swaying and chanting in a low throb. We then followed others on a winding path that curved down the hill, past His Holiness' house and temple, towards lower Dharamshala.

It was glorious – with prayer flags and prayer wheels, white-washed stone piles and rocks carved and painted with mantras.

We arrived into a clearing whereupon we were witness to an assembly of monks with instruments – long horns and short ones, drums and cymbals – all blowing and clattering like mad.

Great clouds of sweet juniper smoke engulfed us as we queued up with the many others to walk around the chortons and climb the muddy hill to see the auspicious tying up of new prayer flags. Then it was back down and round again, this time to observe people pouring whisky and other drinks into buckets until they over-flowed. I wish I had found out the significance of this. I imagined it had something to do with offering preciousness and abundance.

We listened to the orchestra (sounding not dissimilar to the Chenrezig invocation on mahamudra retreat) and then the chanting began, both monks and lay people (in their best hats and frocks) sitting beneath a big shelter.

Elderly Tibetan men and women wandered around with teapots, polystyrene cups and biscuits for everyone to share.

After they had finished their prayer for the long life of His Holiness, there were speeches, great rounds of applause and we were all given handfuls of flour.

Mirroring their custom, we joined in with several raisings of the arm, before throwing it into the air with an almighty 'Ho!'

Everyone was covered in the stuff, beaming with joy!

Such simple splendour! How special to have been an anonymous but equal participant in their ritual.

Then followed a multiple-patting session, white dust flying everywhere.

To round things up, a collection of folk in full-on Tibetan regional costume began to dance in a line. There was lots of foot stamping and shuffling, singing and merriment. It was great fun. A rival singing/dance troupe started up a few metres off and before long both

groups had joined forces and formed a circle that increased in size as others plucked up the courage to join in.

It was wonderful to see such spirited people, mainly women, unabashedly doing their thing.

The following day, we returned to sit in meditation up amongst the wildly fluttering flags. Afterwards we attended a fire puja at the temple. It was mesmerising – the flames were roaring and all the monks were adorned beautifully with yellow and multi-coloured costumes over their robes, some even donning pointed, cone shaped strap-on headgear.

Rain, thunder and lightning rumbled, splashed and crashed all around, as if being made to do so by the energy they had created. It felt very powerful. Afterwards, many onlookers gathered ashes and burning embers to take away with them for good fortune.

We found ourselves chanting Green Tara's mantra and meditating on our sheltered balcony a while later, as another storm took hold. It was absolutely amazing – a total sensory overload, with grumbling thunder, rain that grew so shockingly loud one really just lost oneself in it and lightning that flashed in the sky a purpley UV sort of tone. Visibility faded and expanded, then suddenly, as if someone had flicked a switch, the clouds parted to reveal blue sky and the fluffy pink clouds of sunset that had been there all along! It was quite sensational.

One day we had snow, hail, rain, thunder, lightning, thick fog, sunspots and a fierce wind. Trying to get around in the damp, dense fog was probably the most hard going of all and in the afternoon we were driven back to bed with a bottle of beer each for comfort!

Very early the following morning, on mum's birthday, our guesthouse man, Kalsang, woke us up with an earthquake warning.

We got out into the street and before long, found we had wandered to the temple whereupon we stumbled across the magnificent sight of hundreds and hundreds, probably thousands of monks and nuns gathering together for prayers.

It was an extraordinary experience.

We listened to their rich and intoxicating resonance for hours as we sat in the swirling damp mists of fog that infiltrated everywhere.

And then it snowed. And snowed and snowed, turning everyone into children.

All rules were suspended, the usual etiquette of friendliness and respect having been thrown out of the window, and everyone waged snowball war. Monks hurled great clods of ice at passers by and big gangs of lads staked out street corners. Most other perpetrators took aim from their rooftops, where we were helpless to retaliate.

The floor was so slippery you couldn't run away, you just had to laugh along and get hit. Once again our brollies proved to be priceless possessions as they aided our protection.

We found ourselves amid a sea of crimson robes at the temple again a day or two later. This time we were given a sort of greasy rice pudding with apricots in, out of an enormous cauldron, which tasted buttery and left a white residue on your fingers when you tried to wash it off.

Other westerners being conspicuously absent, we noticed we were mainly joined by bejewelled Ladakhis and Tibetans in all their finery. I was in love with everyone in their outfits (and with those handing out food without distinction, giving to all) – so made up was I – to be there – welcome at their celebration.

The weather did improve and some days were just gorgeous – bright and warm and twittering with bird life. We went on many walks, through the rhododendrons and the pines, slate-scattered hillsides and up beyond the snowline.

Oh the pleasure of walking and climbing...

We were so happy, having joyful, open-hearted exchanges with everyone we met. Befriending pals (adopting one), mainly young men, who told us their brave stories of escaping from Tibet, walking for 28 nights or so over the Himalayas, lying down in the snow during the day so as not to be seen.

I was struck repeatedly with an overwhelming love and huge pain for everybody – compassion I suppose. Anything could trigger this off – the sight of someone, words in a song, a trip to the very upsetting photographic archives at the museum...

As our time passed, we certainly felt we had integrated into the place. This was made undoubtedly easier by the fact that we'd been taking Tibetan language classes and every encounter provided an opportunity to practise a few words. The Tibetans felt like kindred souls and without exception, they made us feel exceedingly welcome in their community.

Before long, the town began to fill up with people who had come for the teachings. We were glad to have seen it before it was overrun, as the atmosphere did change slightly, the prices went up and tables were generally full at restaurants.

Arriving at the temple on the day before they began, it was our surprise and joy to see monks in animated debate (lots of tai-chi type movements and clapping hands), being watched over by His Holiness himself! What a treat!

The next day was Buddha day and H. H. kicked off with a talk about the life of the Buddha. How nice it was to see him up on his throne, in his own back garden, around his people and to hear the distinctive tone of his voice, his chuckle. ...what a shame we couldn't understand a word though! We resolved to buy a FM radio before the teachings properly began, so as to be able to tune into the translation.

When he had finished, we were privileged to see him walk past us, close enough for us to see individual hairs on his head. What a blessing! It was very, very moving to see him in detail – Chenrezig incarnate!

For the next two days' teaching we found ourselves a lovely spot with ample legroom and a fantastic view. The only trouble being the distortion in our headsets, which created a scenario where we were only able to understand *some* of what was being said. It was better than nothing though and where there was clarity, there was inspiration. I certainly feel as if I gained a valuable message about *really searching* to find truth within the dharma - about the importance of taking it on for my self in a deeper and more rigorous way. So with that, and the teaching about fluidity that I had learnt from the weather, I determined to re-enter the path with openness and commitment.

As we left the temple on our last day, and headed up the hill towards our waiting taxi, we had the good fortune to see the Karmapa go past us in a car. Spontaneously we clasped our hands together and bowed, as he did too, whilst fixing us with a deep gaze. We felt as if he had looked right into us.

What an uplifting end to a fantastic trip! Only, it's not really the end as we plan to return and in some ways, we never even left.



The Second Massacre at Wormhoudt:

West of Esquelbeq Road

The Last Ditch Stand Of The Second Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment,
May 28th 1940

Words from Brigadier General Anthony Crook, MC

Poem by James Crowden

My cousin Anthony died last month. He had been ill for sometime. A man of few words he had been persuaded to put together his story of World War II.² He had seen action as a doctor of the second Warwickshire Regiment at Dunkirk when the regiment had been commanded to make a last stand before the bridgehead. It was wiped out. Captured, he endured several years in POW camps making two escapes and being retaken. Incarcerated in Poland, he was released by the advancing Russians and commanded to take the ailing soldiery left under his care all the way to Odessa. He accomplished this adventure with the loss of only one man.

During the Dunkirk battle a number of British POWs were murdered in a barn in a massacre committed by SS troops. Anthony was witness to what was certainly a second massacre but one not officially recorded.

Jame Crowden is especially interested in personal recollections which he records for an archive. He interviewed Anthony in the last year of his life and formed a warm bond with him. James uses the words spoken by Anthony in the construction of this poem. It suggests the laconic phrasing whereby the precisely memorised traumas of that period were so often buried to hide the intrinsic pain. We need to honour the heroism of that period and acknowledge so much hidden courage. JHC.

*Laid out like a row of dolls, in the lane,
Feet in the ditch as if on parade.*

*Their bodies face down on the verge.
Thirty or forty men. It all looked too tidy.*

*The whole of 'A' Company
or what was left of them.*

*I was allowed a quick look.
I turned their faces over*

*Captain David Padfield, a good friend,
And next door the Company Commander*

*Major Chichester-Constable.
Seeing 'A' company killed,*

*So mathematically,
I think they must have been trying to hide in a hedge.*

*And the Germans picked them off quite easily,
Being a doctor you see people alive one moment*

*Then dead the next. You get used to it.
No good. No good. I think it was a massacre.*

² Crook, A. 1996. *Barbed-wire Doctor: One Doctors War*. Pentland Press.

*It was too mathematical to be anything else
We only heard about the barn years later.*

David Baynham of the Warwick Museum (+44 (0) 1926 491653), St Johns House, Warwick, CV34 4NF confirms “Major Constable last seen attacking with his revolver. No other eyewitness accounts available after that moment.”

James notes that the German unit was none other than the SS Liebstandarte Adolph Hitler under the command of the notorious Sepp Dietrich - although he was not present. The man thought to have ordered the massacres was Lt Mohnke who was eventually captured on the eastern Front and only released in 1954. He died in 2001.

How To Clean Your Toilet - The Fun Way

Instructions On How To Clean Your Toilet

A Weekly Funny Just In From Australia, Thanks to Jo Horwood

1. Put both lids of the toilet up and add 1/8 cup of pet shampoo to the water in the bowl.
2. Pick up the cat and soothe him while you carry him towards the bathroom.
3. In one smooth movement, put the cat in the toilet and close both lids. You may need to stand on the lid.
4. The cat will self agitate and make ample suds. Never mind the noises that come from the toilet, the cat is actually enjoying this.
5. Flush the toilet three or four times. This provides a "power-wash" and rinse".
6. Have someone open the front door of your home. Be sure that there are no people between the bathroom and the front door.
7. Stand behind the toilet as far as you can, and quickly lift both lids.
8. The cat will rocket out of the toilet, streak through the bathroom, and run outside where he will dry himself off.
9. Both the commode and the cat will be sparkling clean

Sincerely,

The Dog

The Question

Ken Jones

Skyline far off
the fretted gate
always there

As in some obsessive love affair, I am drawn back again and again. This lonely strip of water, now black, now silver, now prussian blue. Here I sit and pace the shoreline, night and day.

Sixteen hundred feet up. Lost on a moor of heather covered knolls, of textured browns and greens and yellows, sour bogs and black peat hags. My little world apart -- this solitude of ruffled water, circumnavigated in all of half an hour. The way round the lake is barred at one end by a livid green tongue thrust out through the tawny moorland. Across it, humping and squelching, I lay a trail of stepping stones

My weight on a stone
the whole bog
shudders and quakes

I have grown fond of these bogs. They have attitude.

Each little tussock
celebrating tussockness
its own way

The stony shoreline is bright with lichens. At one end rises a miniature cliff, sheltering a pine – the only tree for miles. The lake is fed by a stream, falling into an elegant bathing pool before finally tumbling into the lake. Nearby is a rough stone shelter, piled up a hundred years ago or more by some other lover of the lake. It has been cunningly curved against the sneaking winds.

In the stone shell of a snail
curled up cosy
on my bilberry bed

Tŷ Malwoden – the Snail House. Out on the point I have raised a cairn. Its white quartz cap catches the first and the last sun of each day – however rarely offered. From beneath an angler's umbrella I flick the question back and forth across my mind, with never a bite. Deftly shied, my slates skip and skim, but never reach the other shore.

This afternoon I take my wanting mind and needy heart for a stroll around our world. A pale shadow turns up to complete the party. A Greek chorus of wild-fowl chortle and chuckle in the reeds. And the wind blows as usual.

Clattering over
shards of slate
to make my presence felt

However, by the time we have returned to where we began all of us feel the better for it. The heart has eased, the mind stopped fidgeting, the shadow a richer black. Also, there is the discovery, in different places, of three magic boulders. Once settled on them, all agitation dies away, and there is only the sweet song of the wind and the waves. Each I mark with a quartz stone.

And by night time the wind has fallen. The question is forgotten.

A crescent moon
comes floating
on a raft of stars

The morning after...

On a boulder, where the stream flows into the lake. Between the babble of the brook and the lapping of the waves –

A skeleton
breathing air
and pumping blood

The Moor³

R.S. Thomas

*It was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
Breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.
There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions - that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.*

³ R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems*, J.M. Dent, a division of Orion Publishing Group. Permission to reprint is gratefully acknowledged.

Retreat Reports

In the spring seasons of 2004 and 2005 John, Simon and Hilary were invited to present a Western Zen Retreat at the Pinebush meditation centre of Dharma Drum in the hilly woods of upstate New York. These reports from practitioners in the US show how they have responded to our presentation. It is good to know the WZR is a valuable addition to the retreat process in the US as well as in Europe. We are very happy to be able to assist Shifu in this way. As usual we have lightly edited the reports sent us and they are given anonymously.

Monks Passing along the Corridor

This report was contributed by a Polish practitioner working in New York and who attends Shifu's retreats at the Dharma Drum Centre.

At the beginning of the retreat John asked the participants what was the reason for their attending it. I think this is an excellent way to begin anything, particularly if it involves such deep and wonderful experiences as arose during the retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Every retreat is, in a sense, a process that starts at a certain point in time. Our intuitions as to why we come to a retreat like this, vague as they might be, are worth exploring, casting flitting thoughts into words, giving a more concrete and clear dimension to one's understanding.

A question like this can help in seeing where we are going and what our expectations are – what we really want. To see this might shed some light on our existence. For example, why did I become interested in Buddhism and, as a result, what my expectations may be. An honest answer to a question like this may be of interest to many people, even those who have been practising Buddhism for a long time. Always, whether we want it or not, we are defined by our karma about which, often, we have only superficial awareness. Any attempt to confront this inert/torpid rolling stone ball is something unbelievably wonderful. Such a confrontation can be a beginning of a true way to freedom. The retreat thus began in a wonderfully logical way.

At once, I comprehended that is not a chitchat kind of question. John said that this kind of a retreat is a good one as a first retreat for people interested in Buddhist practice or personal development. Thinking this way of starting a retreat was very appropriate and considering myself to be a beginner, I approached this question very seriously.

I heard about this kind of a retreat (the WZR) a few years ago in Poland from John himself and immediately I was very interested in attending one during which I would be forced to speak and to answer fundamental questions, answers to which everybody was supposed to know. This is completely a different situation from what usually happens at retreats that I have attended. Every teacher was talking on my behalf and, even though, they were genuine masters, it wasn't always the case that their words resonated in my mind sufficiently to allow my ignorance to lift to a sufficient extent so that I could understand my relationship to everything around me. In my life, I have spent many days and nights in retreats during which, in quietude and silence, occasionally interrupted by Dharma talks and lectures, I was trying to find appropriate, useful, and applicable answers to my life-long questions. By now I had lost faith in the efficacy of retreats which seemed to me to be only small islands on the great ocean of suffering, appearing only for a moment to quickly disappear back in the chaos of everyday life.

In the recent months, many things happened in my life which made my quest for finding an answer, which would allow me to understand why people so commonly behave in ways totally opposed to what buddhas and bodhisattvas teach, an urgent matter. Owing to ignorance, greed, and anger, we create, for others and ourselves unceasing suffering. We lose awareness of when we inflict harm onto others or of when we are harmed by others. Even though my conviction that everyone has the genuine ability to become a buddha is

very strong, often, I am not able to find, in myself or others, the space in which our intrinsic buddha-nature can manifest. Often, I perceive it as a contradiction. I know that, in reality, there can be oppositions, but there is no room for contradictions since they would exclude each other although the world is actually full and complete.

Of course, I am talking about the nature of reality and not about people's opinions on this vital issue. A model based on a theory containing contradictions will not work. The existence of reality means perfection and complete co-resonance of all things regardless of their form. The world, as a composite of matter, energy, and time-space, exists. It is a model that works and so is perfect without contradictions. On the level of human existence, suffering cannot be in contradiction to enlightenment and the Buddhas are alive even in people who are lost in their ignorance and lack a sense of morality and humanity. Goodness is not, therefore, in contradiction to evil, etc. Suffering and pain experienced as a result of past and present deeds penetrates human life to the core. So what is the nature of suffering? What is it? What causes this illusory and, in reality, non-existent suffering? What is the source of it and why can't we stop creating it?

With this mind set and with a tremendous determination to break through the way my mind constantly works to generate the same pattern of thinking without being able step out of the vicious circle of constantly repeating myself, I started this retreat. It is not pleasant to be like a machine in which someone continually plays a pattern according to the same scheme to the point of nausea; it is not pleasant to be a frozen and immutable structure impossible to change.

For a number of years, I have been fruitlessly working with many koans so now, I thought that it would be interesting and beneficial to work using the Western Zen Retreat approach. A simple game of redirecting a question, an answer, a thought, or anything that appears to the consciousness of a person back towards the one from whom the question originated, can be a tool that successfully examines illusions that produce the egotism that separates us from the world. This separation is exceptionally dangerous because, on one hand, while it allows for the existence of love, on the other hand, it also allows for the existence of hatred leading to a human killing a human or another sentient being, many of which die each day and end up on people's tables. The existence of the ego creates a lot of suffering.

To describe the above-mentioned processes, John uses an analogy of emptying a barrel to see what would happen when it is empty. Thus, with all the questions, we were asked to reach and look at that which appeared on the surface and continue to do so until nothing surfaced. Everybody began with a simple and, at the same time, difficult question "Who am I?" This simple question creates so many ways to express the ways we see and think about ourselves. An attempt to give an answer combining conscious and sub-conscious themes, can produce a life-long narration about oneself rather than realising that there could be silence there instead. During the retreat, this reality check was facilitated by the leader's bell stuck every five minutes which stopped one's never ending narrative.

In life, there are many similar 'bells' that ring when we are not able to say anything more. It is worth remembering it. There are an infinite number of threads making up our ego that covers up our true nature. Each of us is surrounded by a unique, mysteriously threaded cocoon. To get rid of it, one has to have a very close look, trying to find the thread that would allow one to disentangle it. There might be quite a number of these main threads so it is worth finding them to figure out one's structure. If we do not know our personal blueprint we might not be able to uncover our pristine, pure nature with which we were born. Although the ego might be an illusion it is the only thing we have, and it is only with our ego that we can work. The question "Who am I?" seems to be, in this context, very effective so long as we are serious about it without creating yet another illusion about an illusion. Other questions, "What is love?" for example, can be use in a similar fashion.

At some point in my life, I realised that my opinions about myself were only an illusory edifice around something that is a mystery for me. During a conversation with John, I told him that I was not interested in trying to comprehend something that, in reality, does not exist. I am often tired to see the same movie about myself and the world around me being played again and again. I would like to rest from this and I am dreaming of a day without thinking or, at least, a day without those ‘uninteresting’, old thoughts.

I also told John about a moment during one of retreats with Shifu when I was able to hear what is water, wind, and trees which, to a certain degree, allowed me to disassociate from the creations of my ordinary mind. If I am interested in a question then it is one of Dogen’s about suffering or Master Basui’s: “What is it?” After my interview with John, I started to work with the question “What is it?” which totally changed the situation in which I found myself. Because this question is a universal one for me, touching on that which is indefinable and indescribable, I began to pay attention to everything that was appearing to my mind, particularly the present moment. I started to listen to and feel my body and breath. Everything was in its own place, nothing needed to be created, my breath was becoming deeper and deeper, my body becoming more relaxed by itself. My thoughts were coming and going. The past was, the future will be, everything else is here. I was light and free.

Looking for answers to my question reminded me of being in a movie theatre and, being disinterested in the movie itself, trying to see the white screen in front of the projector beyond the jumping pictures of the movie. At some point it came to me that, maybe, the screen does not exist and all that exists are the pictures but John reminded me of the Heart Sutra, “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” and so there is no separation, no contradiction – everything interpenetrates everything. This time of being concentrated on the present turned out to be the first time for a long while that I experienced true rest, allowing me to relax the body and mind.

This refocusing of my mind turned out to be truly interesting. Often, I think about a concept I call structural changes. One’s personality is like the structure of a crystal defined by the atoms which are its building blocks. It is a form which can be ‘filled’ by electrical charges or light when the structure comes to life creating ephemeral forms. The structure has been changed. It often seems to me that all the effort to change myself occurs on the level of creations arising at the intersection of my surroundings and the structure-myself. Suspending these creations and not attaching to them might allow me to see the structure that creates them. It would be nice to follow the line of light to arrive at the projector itself. For me the question, “What is it?”, “Who am I?”, or other koans is like shooting at my structure to destroy it and, at the same time, rebuilding it anew. I think the path paved by Sakyamuni Buddha is an attempt to change personality on this structural level.

John’s lectures, simple and logical and touching on such profound issues in an un pompous way, are really wonderful. I often lose, listening to them, the sense that they are about the Dharma because that is sometimes presented in a way that almost causes me to fall asleep. During John’s lectures I feel that they are about me, about something that can help me. This intensifies during his interviews when I feel I am not judged from the point of my ‘un-enlightenment’ or my ‘mistaken understanding’. Many times, I have been told that something is incorrect, or that I am ‘mistaken’. I am sorry but, on some level, there are no mistakes since, as I mentioned before, mistakes cannot be in opposition to truth; mistakes lead to truth. What defines a master is his or her ability to use student’s mistakes to help the student transcend them and proceed along the path. Mistakes are only a stage on the path. Something brought about this mistake and it serves something. In the case of my conversations with John, I clearly feel that they are about me and about finding the thread which will lead to untangling the tangle of suffering which is what my life has become. These few conversations with John and Simon Child clarified many issues for me and the retreat structure, seemingly complex, led me to contact or relate to the present moment. I

often feel that, wherever I go, I bring myself into play making it difficult to contact that which is. It was very nice to see "what it is" without engaging my self in it.

I am truly grateful to all the retreat participants who, with such honesty and energy, worked on their own questions and took part in all the stages of the event. I am grateful to them for listening to me and for letting me listen to them enriching my faith in how deep is the human soul and in how similar we are to each other. Some two days after the retreat, I realised that I could start to really 'play' with real humanity which will gradually allow me to learn it and taste it.

The retreat re-awakened my faith that we are exactly what we have created and that we can sever the knots in our creations to contact that which is much deeper thus arriving at true humanity and love. I think that suffering ceases to exist when we disengage from it in such a way.

I decided to retain this state of mind by visiting a Buddhist monastery thus continuing the retreat with John Crook. The first day was full of thoughts brought about by the wonderful tranquillity of the place. During the following days I discovered that tranquillity not only brings about thoughts whereby the mind can occupy itself but also it absorbs them when one does not pay much attention to them. I spent a lot of time meditating, melting into the simplicity of the surroundings in which I found myself. I sat there without any plan; sometimes the sitting period lasted thirty minutes, sometimes three hours. Sometimes one could hear gentle steps of the monks passing along the corridor.

How Is The Open Path Maintained?

It's been almost 3 weeks since returning from the Western Zen Retreat to life in Manhattan, to bicycle commuting through city traffic to my work with recovering alcoholics and drug addicts in the Bronx; three weeks and still the keenness and bliss of the retreat have yet to wear off. Others notice and respond to the subtle changes in me. Wife, friends, co-workers and even my joke-a-minute brother-in-law have asked about the retreat and listened--full of questions--to my bumbling, "I-can't-really-put-this-into-words" descriptions of what went on both inside and outside me. Even when I backtrack and explain that there really wasn't an "inside" and an "outside," they smile, nod, and ask more questions. I slow down and smile, and it becomes "we smile."

Their questions went to the heart of the Western Zen Retreat:

- How can you meditate while you're washing a floor?
- What was your answer to your question?
- OK, so it was about the process and not the answer. I understand that, but what was your answer?
- You really couldn't talk to each other?
- You danced? Really???
- Your back didn't hurt?
- Didn't you get bored just noting your breath? - listening to the same question over and over again? - answering the same question over and over again?
- How did you know when you got it?
- How did the leaders know the right answers?
- You had to listen to somebody without even nodding?
- What do you mean: you're not the same person who went up there?

- If you never talked with anyone, how can you be so sure that they're such great people?
- When's the next one?

Sometimes it seems the questions never stop. Sometimes I answer with words. Sometimes with a smile or a gesture. Sometimes I just shake my head slowly and grin. More often my answers show in the way I wash floors at home or listen to my clients' anger or notice when a co-worker is suffering and put my hand on his shoulder. It's in the way my bike moves through traffic only to stop when a pedestrian walks out from between parked cars. It's in the way I delight equally in rain and sun, cold and warm almost-Spring days. My answers are even present in moments of lost temper and mindless, petty tetchiness. It's most certainly there when, kneeling in meditation, I smile that my mind has rambled off on a mission of its own.

In this way for almost three weeks now I have been answering the question, how is the open path maintained? Every day I am grateful for those who gave me that question, those who share it with me, and those who, every day, offer me new opportunities to answer it.

Book Review⁴

John Crook

Hotz, Michael (ed) 2002. *Holding the Lotus to the Rock: The Autobiography of Sokei-an, America's first Zen Master. Four Walls Eight Windows, New York.*

It seems strange that so little has been published concerning the life and teachings of Sokei-an Sasaki who taught Zen energetically in New York from the 1930's till his death shortly following release from internment in 1945. He created the First Zen Institute in America and his influence remains strongly felt. As a native Japanese who adopted the USA as his home from 1906, Sokei-an can rightly be called the first American Zen master.

This valuable book will be of great interest not only to all contemporary students of Zen, for it contains much wisdom, but also to historians concerned with US-Japanese relations in the early 20th century and the mutual influence each country had on the other. It is also a very good read, full of incident, humor and subtlety in which a Japanese mind in a highly distinctive voice struggles to come to terms with the "noisy" West.

Our knowledge of this remarkable man comes from the records kept in New York and utilized by Mary Farkas for her articles in "Zen Notes", the journal of the First Zen Institute. Farkas, a student of the master, collected letters, photos and art and memories of anyone connected with Sokei-an and added them to another archive put together in the 1930s and 40s by another student Edna Kenton, a biographer and the Institute historian. Some of the teachings in this collection, particularly those concerning the Platform Sutra of Hui-neng, have been published in German under the title "Der 6. Patriarch kommt nach Manhattan" (Agatha Wydler, translator, Theseus Verlag, Kusbacht, 1988) but the present book appears to be the first work devoted to understanding his life, based likewise on this archive.

The book was not written as an integrated autobiography by the master himself. Michael Hotz, enamoured of his subject through repeated delvings into the archive, has put together the text from numerous fragments and the coherence of the work owes much to his editorial skill, diligence and, we can also say, love. It is the story of a lifetime's adventure.

Sokei-an was born in 1882 to a family of a Shinto scholar priest. Since the priest's wife was childless, his mother was imported. Two years after his birth, the husband's wife returned and his biological mother left to become a successful singer and dancer. As with some other Zen masters, it was perhaps the unusual circumstances of his birth that gave rise to Sokei-an's restless character. His life history is replete with wanderings. He probably inherited his artistic side from his mother.

We find him as an adult in the army driving a dynamite wagon in Manchuria, but meeting Master Sokatsu, one of the early teachers of a reformed Rinzaï Zen in the Meiji era, he became interested in Buddhism and proceeded to train. Eventually he travels to the USA together with Sokatsu to found a Zen farm which failed, and eventually a Zen community near San Francisco. In 1910 all of Sokatsu's group returned to Japan but Sokei-an remained in the States, wandering and crossing the continent doing casual work, living with his wife and child with native Americans on an island off Seattle and endlessly woodcarving, a skill which often gave him useful employment. He wrote about America in Japanese, sending his writings back to Japan for publication. After his family returned to Japan, he lived in the bohemian Greenwich Village, New York, writing, reciting, translating in both English and Japanese and in many ways living the free-style life of a lay "dharma bum". >From time to time Sokei-an returned to Japan for formal training and after some deep experiences Sokatsu conferred "inka" on him, confirming his Zen insight and enabling him to teach.

⁴ Originally published in TLS.

Back in New York, Sokei-an's new status was reflected in the profound seriousness with which he now undertook the difficult task of training American lay practitioners. It is clear that he had a considerable presence. Farkas refers to the Zen atmosphere near him "It was like standing next to a big gong and feeling its vibrations go right through you."

The autobiographical texts describe all these adventures in a very personal manner. Discussing teaching, he is very direct: "It is not so easy to find a Zen master. If a Zen master can teach by lectures, a boxer can teach boxing by correspondence. If you wish to study Zen, come to me and I will look in your eyes and find out whether you know Zen or not." Clearly strong stuff and Alan Watts only lasted three weeks of "sanzen" (koan training) with him. Others however passed many koans, a considerable achievement in the 1930's. " To pass a koan given by a teacher is not so difficult, but to pass a koan given by actual life - that is wonderful.... Zen in the sanctuary of a Zen master is like learning to swim in a pool. But to swim in the ocean of life is the koan given by the tathagata (buddha). That is the koan we have to pass."

"Yes, there is a transcendental world. How can you get into it? If someone should ask me, "Have you entered it?" I would answer "Yes". If he should ask me, "Are you still in it?." I would say "Well - I haven't come out of it." Oh, Sokei-an, you are kidding. You are here speaking to me, with your eyeglasses, your nose, your voice. How can you be in the transcendental world? "I cannot explain.... I am here with you, I can see you, but you fail to see me, the man who is in the transcendental world."

This book is full of openings on the "transcendental." How can it be that it turns out to be so ordinary? To find out you must travel further with the Master!

Notices

Submissions to New Chan Forum - Editorial Policy

We welcome your contributions, whether articles, poetry, artwork, retreat reports, letters, or whatever else. However we do not promise that we shall publish your contribution, or in which issue it will appear if we do so. Owing to the workload involved, our policy is that we do not acknowledge materials received. Where possible submissions by email to **editorial@WesternChanFellowship.org** are preferred for articles, poems, etc, since this obviates the need for retyping or scanning. For artwork email submissions are also useful, but in addition non-returnable copies or originals by post may be helpful since then if required we can rescan them ourselves at higher resolution than may be appropriate for email attachments. Thank you.

The articles in this journal have been submitted by various authors and the views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Western Chan Fellowship.

Data Protection Act IMPORTANT Please Read

We keep the NCF mailing list and the WCF membership list on a computer database for administration and mailing purposes. If you do not wish your details to be kept on a computer database then please write to the Membership Secretary. There are sometimes circumstances where it may be helpful to use this database in other ways, and we would like your permission to do so. We would of course do so sensitively. The circumstances that we have in mind are to contact individuals in a geographical area e.g. (i) to attempt to form the nucleus of a new local meditation group or (ii) to respond to enquirers who wish to discuss Chan or WZR or meditation with a contact in their locality. If you would not wish your details to be released in such circumstances then please write to the Membership Secretary and your wishes will be respected.

Illuminating Silence – Available at Discount Pricing

The WCF has bought a stock of the book “Illuminating Silence” and is now able to sell it at £8.99 which is less than the cover price and also includes free UK postage and packing. This is a key book for us, including as it does the teachings at two Maenllwyd retreats with Master Sheng Yen on the method of Silent Illumination, and also other texts and retreat reports by John Crook. To order your copy (everyone should have at least one!) send payment to Jake Lyne (WCF treasurer), cheques payable to “Western Chan Fellowship”.

Solitary Retreats

westernchanfellowship.org/solitary-retreats.html describes several opportunities at Maenllwyd (using either the new hut or the main buildings) and at Winterhead House.

Free Solitary Retreats at Winterhead House

John is sometimes away abroad and during these times free Caretaking Retreats may be offered. If you wish to take advantage of these offers please contact John. Enquiries will be gratefully received.

Further information on Winterhead House and the facilities for solitary retreats are available here: westernchanfellowship.org/winterhead.html

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