

NEW CHAN FORUM

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Principle and Practice

What is the Principle and what the Practice on the path of Buddha Dharma? The articles in this issue throw light on these vital questions at an important time. Our Dharma Advisor and Patron, the Venerable Chan Master Dr Sheng-yen, is retiring from his headship of the Dharma Drum Mountain following his benediction of the Venerable Guo-dong as Abbot President. We wish the new Abbot well and trust we will get to know him in the near future. Shifu however remains the founder and spiritual leader of Dharma Drum and thus remains our patron and our inspiration. Our best gift to Shifu at this time will be our continuing practice and development of Chan Dharma in Europe and, as testimony of our endeavour, we dedicate this issue of New Chan Forum to him with profound respect and affection. In our opening article we listen again to his words of wisdom.

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Cultivating Wisdom and Compassion

Master Sheng-yen

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To attain wisdom and nurture compassion, we must first learn to cut off vexations. All vexations, including pain and pleasure, begin with attachment to self. We are attached to self because we do not understand the true nature of existence, which is impermanent, void of self-nature and empty. Not recognizing this, we seek all sorts of benefits. When we fail, we are disappointed; when we succeed, we cling to our gains or we want more. All this gives rise to more vexations and so on, without end.

To restore wholesomeness, understand impermanence. The Diamond Sutra teaches that all phenomena are impermanent - non-abiding, formless, and empty. The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, overheard a phrase from this sutra about "mind not abiding," and became enlightened. A mind not abiding is not attached to anything yet functions freely, expressing wisdom spontaneously. When wisdom functions freely, there is also compassion. Understand impermanence and you begin to let go of vexations.

The Diamond Sutra also says that thoughts of the past, present, or future cannot be grasped. When we look into our mind, the past thought is gone, the present thought is becoming the past, and the future thought does not exist. Our ideas, whatever their time dimension, have no true existence. When we truly understand impermanence through our mind, we won't be so attached to our views; at the instant of realizing that, our thought stream is enlightenment, in accord with seeing self-nature.

When we recognize the unreality of our perceptions, with nothing to attach to, vexations will not arise. This is how to cut off vexations and realize Bodhi. Impermanence is the ever-changing flux of thought. Accepting it is a step to being a good practitioner. When you can directly, truly experience the mind as being without substance, at that very moment you will realize no-self.

Recognizing impermanence is the beginning of wisdom. Each day we recite the Heart Sutra, which encourages us to use the wisdom of the Buddhas to perceive impermanence. Use this wisdom to sever vexations. If you can experience impermanence of the mind, you will realize that the so called mind and its attachments are nonexistent. Our body and its sensations - pleasure, pain, comfort or discomfort - are also impermanent. Realizing the impermanence of mind itself, there is immediate liberation. What more is there to seek?

So I encourage you: when you practice, please understand the workings of impermanence. Do not think that you are working on the method. In practice, there is no success and no failure. If you judge yourself, you create vexation. From now on, there should only be the method and the working on the method.



Introducing Silent Illumination

A Talk given on Silent Illumination

at the 3 week retreat, May 2005, at the Maenllwyd

Simon Child

John has just spoken about the two entrances to Dharma, through Principle and Practice, which Bodhidharma taught us all those centuries ago.

Silent Illumination corresponds to a state, either you are in Silent Illumination experiencing the Principle or you are not. If you are actually in Silent Illumination you are no longer Practicing - you are in the state. What is it like to be in that state? The name gives a clue – Silence and Illumination. Even so one could fall into the trap of thinking there are two things here. Actually these are two aspects of the same state. Silence means the fussing mind (memories, fears, wants etc) is silent. It's not that you don't hear. You do hear the birds singing. If you tune them out you don't have Illumination. With Silence and Illumination your mind is clear and reflecting what is there, not lost in a trance.

The clear mind is like clean glass; the fussing mind is like dirty glass. If you can get your mind to the state where it is clear then there is a chance of seeing through the glass. Illumination is the aspect of alertness, knowingness. We must have both of these qualities present, Silence and Illumination. There are many practices which can give you a quiet still peaceful mind but at the cost of cutting off awareness. Equally we can have a very Illuminated mind in the sense of having many thoughts and ideas, plans, but it's not still. Silent Illumination means bringing both together in balance. Your practice is only as good as the weaker of the two. If your mind is very good at being silent, switched off, silent, it doesn't matter how clean your glass is, you're not looking through it. Equally it doesn't matter how hard you are looking through the glass, if your mind is too busy the glass is too dirty to see through. But if you can bring together cleaning the glass and looking through the glass, then you are moving towards Silent Illumination. So as we practice remember to check this balance. Are you leaning towards one aspect or the other?

If you think you are doing well, check your practice. Are you are doing well at both aspects? If your mind is calm, check it is a genuinely open mind as well, not suppressed. Are you sacrificing some openness to achieve a shut down stillness? Quietism is one of the risks of this practice if you overvalue a still mind and become protective of it after hours of practice. If Silence and Illumination are not emerging together, check your practice. Check your mind is clear and calm and also open and alert. In the beginning stages of practice there can seem to be a contradiction between these two. Many methods deliberately tune down awareness in favour of cultivating stillness. If you have a narrow focus such as on the breath, it helps calm the mind but there is a price paid in shutting down awareness. You get so good at focusing on the breath that you lose awareness of things around you. This is helpful at this early stage of the practice but is not helpful long-term.

There are stages towards Silent Illumination and to the extent that you are in balance between Silence and Illumination you are on the right path. Your attention is not fully alert, and your glass is not fully clear, but to the extent that you have some of both you are going in the right direction. Master Sheng-Yen describes this practice in various stages. One stage doesn't suddenly transform to another, these are just convenient descriptions. The first stage is bringing the body and mind together. If your mind is somewhere other than in your body, then that suggests your mind is not still, it is wandering. So bring your mind together with the body by being aware of your body. That's the Illumination at that stage. The stillness or silence is the mind being in the right place, with the body. Bring the mind and body together in the experience of being you. So there's no longer a body sitting here maybe aching a bit and a mind

over there doing its own thing. There's only one thing happening which is you being here, present and knowing that you're here. This is the first stage of Silent Illumination.

Any time you find your mind has wandered away, bring it back here with your body. If you find that you are not aware of your body, be aware of that and bring the mind back to what the body is doing, for instance sitting, walking, or eating. Can it be called Silent Illumination if you are eating food but not tasting it because your mind is somewhere else? All the time bring the mind back to where you are and know yourself. After a while that becomes something you are indeed able to do. You have a more solid sense of being present here. You know the experience of having mind and body together.

As you become more settled in that way you can allow the awareness to expand because the experience of being you includes sensory input. Hear the birds, feel the wind, smell the incense; that's all part of the experience of being you. Allow your awareness to expand to include these things. Don't go out and look for these things, but just allow your awareness to expand naturally and you will not lose your centre, your presence. Somehow you become larger as your sphere of awareness becomes wider without losing your centre. Just as you know the feel of your own body you also know the bird is singing. The sheep is baaing. You know there is a thought wandering through your head. You know there is a bit of backache and it's all the same quality of knowing. There is not any distinguishing between inner and outer. There isn't any fussing about one or the other. Quite simply you are present but in a wider more expansive way than previously.

There are various gradations within this expansion of the sense of self as you allow your still mind to expand its awareness without being disturbed. The Illumination continues to expand. But if you start to fuss about any of this, for instance congratulating yourself, you've lost it and you're back at the beginning. So start again.

This moving through the stages it not something you decide on and make happen; it happens by itself when you are ready. The only part you can do deliberately is to centre yourself. If you can maintain this centring, then the stages progress naturally. So how do you start off this practice of centring yourself? Actually you do not necessarily need a method, you can just be there and do it.

That works for a few people, maybe naturally when out in nature, sitting with a candle, or sitting on the cushion in meditation. If you are one of those people then just do it this way, don't bother much with 'method'. But bother just a little bit. You may be falling into a different state and you may be wise to check it out. Most people need a method though and may fall into it by using a method. One method is following the breath.

As you attend to your breath, the experience may flip so that instead of attention on your breath coming and going with gaps between, in and out, there is instead a sense of the space behind the breath, the background in which the breath is arising. So you are anchored now not on the breath but on the continuous silent space within which the breath arises. If your attention is on the space, perhaps your mind is Silent. If you are clear about that space, perhaps you are Illuminated. So following breath, your attention can suddenly flip in that way.

There is another way the breath can move into Silent Illumination, a little more deliberately. The traditional way of teaching Silent Illumination is to place awareness not on the breath but on the whole body, not a part of the body but the whole experience of the body. This can arise from concentration on the breath by letting the awareness of the breath in one place, such as the nostrils, expand to the throat, the trunk and then expand to being in the whole body. Instead of being preoccupied with one part of the body your attention is given evenly to the whole body. Whatever happens within the body you will notice it. Not analyze it or think about it, but your receiving of that information is centred in your own body experience.

From here you can later open your attention outwards but it's a mistake to try to rush that. That will simply add thoughts and ideas. It's customary to advise people on Silent Illumination retreat to stay 'inward', keep eyes down, don't engage in looking at other people or the landscape. We may stay confined within the property rather than go out for walks, to help us gain this experience of our own body. If we are out looking at hills and rabbits and crows and sheep and hares we do not clearly know we are in our own body at that point. So it's advisable to curtail these activities to some extent to establish a very firm clear awareness of yourself. Later when that is established you can gradually expand your awareness to the environment. But don't rush into this, wait until you have a very clear and firm sense of yourself, not just in sitting periods but when walking, eating and whatever.

When you're walking know the sensation of walking, the muscles moving, contracting and relaxing, the pressure on your heel and your toes, the evenness or unevenness of the ground, the wind touching your cheek. If you are practicing Silent Illumination well, you will notice these things. You don't need to be generating them or checking them, you will just notice them because they are there and you are tuned into your experience. So, to the extent that it is helpful, firstly do isolate yourself from what is going on around you. Withdraw within the confines of your body but within that confine be aware of everything. Be ready for whatever may come into your experience. Some people find this easy. They have a good sense of their body experience. Others find it harder, their sense of body is vaguer. There are exercises that can help and we'll do these as we go along.

Be aware of everything, but don't do anything with what your mind notices. No commenting or fussing. That is not Silence. But if you are not aware, there is no Illumination.

Nalanda

The Place that Confers the Lotus

David and Aurie McKay

Following our pilgrimage to the monastery of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh in 2005, David and Aurie went on a personal pilgrimage to various sites in India. Here is the account of their visit to Nalanda. Eds

When Major General Alexander Cunningham, the head of the Archaeological Survey of India, arrived in the village of Burgaon some 60 kms north of Bodh Gaya in 1862, he was to discover that the extensive mounds and ruins there were not the remains of a royal palace, but of the great monastic university of Nalanda. This was confirmed by the excavation of a red clay seal bearing the inscription ‘Nalanda Mahavihara Arya Bhiksu Sangharya’ ~ ‘Venerable Community of Monks of the Great Monastery of Honoured Nalanda’. Cunningham had been guided there by the detailed directions of Hsuan Tsang, a 7th century Chinese Buddhist traveller who had studied and taught at Nalanda University for twelve years.



Sariputra Stupa, with university/monastery ruins in the foreground.

So what might today’s visitor see and experience at Nalanda? The excavated ruins cover an area of about 14 hectares, with a row of eight large and three smaller rectangular monastery/colleges aligned north/south separated by a wide space from a parallel line of four temples/caityas to the west. All the edifices are built of red brick, successive development being constructed on top of earlier remains and discernable by different brick tone. Each monastery was entered from the west and had a shrine room in the middle of the eastern row of cells facing the entrance. Vihara/monastery no.1 is a particularly fine example of Kushan architecture (approx 100 – 250CE), with cells on two floors built around a central courtyard from which steps lead up to what was probably a dais for the masters to address their students. Hsuan Tsang gives us a description of the whole complex:

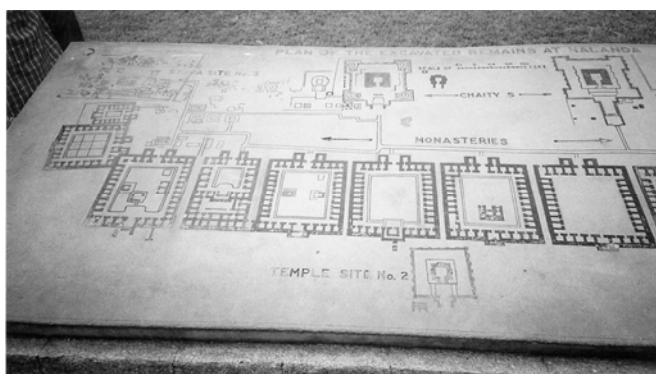
‘The richly adorned towers and the fairy like turrets like pointed hilltops are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the vapours of the morning, and the upper rooms tower above the clouds. From the windows one may see how the winds and the clouds change shape, and above the soaring eaves the conjunctions of the sun and moon’.

Over all this broods the enormous truncated pyramidal mass of the Sariputra Stupa, Temple no. 3 on the site plan. Built of the red bricks to a present height of approximately 80ft it was found, when excavated, to have originally been a very small structure built over by seven subsequent temple accumulations. Standing in the middle of its own court, it is surrounded by smaller stupas many with large and small Buddhas in various mudras, ‘earth witness’ and ‘turning the dharma wheel’ seem to have been particular favourites of the Nalanda sculptors, many being

examples of the Gupta phase of Indian art. Inscriptions on the lotus petals on which Buddha sits read:

'Tathagata has revealed the cause of those phenomena which proceed from a cause, as well as the means of their prevention. So says the Great Monk'.

Other site details are best summed up by quoting I-tsing, a contemporary of Hsuan Tsang's, who visited Nalanda and records: 'A whole area of the campus of Nalanda was set apart for the libraries and was covered with huge many storied library buildings', lodging perhaps the first library in the world. Besides the great structures there were on the campus ponds with lotuses, well devised footpaths, extensive pleasant lawns, mango groves and lovely flowerbeds. Moreover, there were innumerable shrines embellished with a wealth of sculptural art.



Site Plan

As one wanders around the ruins of Nalanda, the omnipresent Sariputra stupa raises the question of when the place was founded? There was a mango grove at Nalanda in the Buddha's lifetime and he is reputed to have often sojourned at that place; Hsuan Tsang writes that 'five hundred merchants bought it for the Buddha for ten kotis of gold pieces'. Jain texts say it was a suburb of Rajagriha (present day Rajgir, with Vulture Peak nearby), capital of the Magadha kings. Mahavira Vardhamana, one of the twenty four great Jain tirthankaras (gurus) and a contemporary of the Buddha's, spent fourteen rainy seasons at Nalanda. Sariputra was born there and, indeed, died there giving his last discourse. Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE is said to have made offerings at the Sariputra chaitya and had a temple built there; the basis of what became the subsequent stupa. Ashoka also built a vihara there.

Historians differ as to when the vihara became a university; for example biographies of the master Nagarjuna, believed to have been born around 150CE, are quite specific about his having received ordination at Nalanda monastery at the age of seven. Further, his teacher Rahulabhadra is said to have lived there for some time before that. Certainly Nalanda university was flourishing by the 5th century CE. Education was provided free, no degree was granted nor was a specific period of study required; to study or have studied at Nalanda was sufficient. Various royal patrons, local and foreign, supported the place, surrounding villages providing the daily necessities.

By the time Hsuan Tsan was studying under the abbot Silabhadra in the 7th century, the university was a Mahayana powerhouse. Student monks numbered 10,000 with over 1,000 masters; they came from all over the Buddhist world including China, Mongolia, Korea, Turkistan, and Tibet. The four university gates were manned by erudite gate-keepers who subjected aspirants to a rigorous oral entry examination; those who were admitted were then interviewed by the masters, four out of five being rejected. Not all the students were necessarily Buddhist, Hindu Brahmins and sadhus being admitted too, as Hsuan Tsang humorously testifies.

The monks' time, measured by a water clock, was divided between study and Buddhist rites and practice. There were schools in debate and discourse. Principal studies were the Mahayana (especially the Madhyamaka during the Gupta age – 4th and 5th centuries CE), Vajrayana (from the mid 8th century, the Pala age), Hinayana, Brahmanical and Vedic texts, logic, philology and grammar, ayurvedic medicine, astronomy and mathematics. A school of Arts and Crafts flourished which included bronze working, as the remains of a metal smelting furnace (with pieces of metal and slag) testify at temple site 13.

Walking with our guide around the ruins, we felt a very strong 'sense of place'; indeed, after we had paid him we felt drawn to once again wander in silence through this powerful place and meditate next to the Sariputra Stupa. Famous names who studied at Nalanda (some becoming the abbot) include: Nagarjuna, Vasubhandu, Silubhadra, Virudeva, Padmasambhava, Shantideva, Santirashita, Abhayakaragupta, and Naropa. A quotation from 'The Life and Teaching of Naropa', which I happened to be reading at the time of our pilgrimage to Nalanda, sums it all up beautifully:

'At that time the staff of Nalanda requested the Elder bsTan-pa'dzin-pa (Naropa) to become their abbot and they conferred upon him the name 'Jigs-med gros-pa (Abhayakirti). The venerable Abhayakirti defeated all the non-Buddhist scholars and he composed the following verses:

'With the iron hook of grammar, the lore of knowledge,
Logic and spiritual precepts,
I, the Elder Abhayakirti
Have scattered the opponents, as a flock of sparrows.
With the axe of grammar, the lore of knowledge, logic
And spiritual precepts
I have felled the opponents' tree.
With the lamp of certainty in logic and precepts,
I have burnt the darkness of my foe's ignorance.
With the sacred jewels of the three disciplines
Have I removed the dirt of impurity.
With instruction's battering ram
Have I conquered the vicious city of bewilderment.
At Nalanda in the presence of the King
Have I felled the ever trembling tree of the heretics.
With the razor of the Buddha's doctrine,
I have shaved the hair of my opponent heretics
And have raised the banner of the Buddha's doctrine.'

At that time 100 learned Hindu teachers shaved their heads, were converted to Buddhism, and were followed three days later by another 600. The inmates of Nalanda university hoisted the great banner, beat the big drum, blew the conch of the Dharma and were full of joy and happiness. The great king Digvarman showed his faith in and respect for the venerable Abhayakirti, bowed many times to him, and touched the latter's feet with his head saying, 'I am happy to be your patron.' After the defeat of the heretical doctrines, this great scholar spread the Buddha's message for eight years'.

In 1197 CE the Moslem invasion led by Bhaktiar Khilji destroyed Nalanda and its sister university at Vikramshila.

Postscript: Sitting in our hotel room in Bodh Gaya I recalled our guide at Nalanda pointing at the impressive pile in the distance and announcing it as the Sariputra Stupa. 'Ah', said I with suitable reverence, 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form'. His look of bewilderment was priceless. Another mad Englishman!

Death and Dying

In the spring of 2006 the WCF fielded a conference in Bristol on the theme of Death and Dying presented and organised by the Bristol Chan Group. We had talks, workshops and much discussion. The closing dinner was a fine occasion for Sangha building and getting to know one another. Although the theme might seem gloomy, in fact everyone found the occasion to be of much personal value. Here we present John's opening talk and a discussion of "Euthanatos", the good death, contributed by Sister Ruth Furneaux. Eds.

The Conference on Death and Dying

Introduction

John Crook

Let us begin with a quotation:

"One thing hastens into being; another hastens out of it. Even while a thing is in the act of coming into existence some part of it has already ceased to be. Flux and change are forever renewing the fabric of the Universe, just as the ceaseless sweep of time is forever renewing the face of eternity. All things fade into the storied past, and in a little while are shrouded in oblivion. Even to those whose lives were a blaze of glory this comes to pass; as for the rest, the breath is hardly out of their bodies before they are lost to sight and hearsay alike.

To what must we aspire? This and this alone; the just thought, the unselfish act, the tongue that utters no falsehood, the temper that greets each passing event as something pre-destined, expected- emanating from the one source and origin."

So wrote Marcus Aurelius in 161 AD, the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor, campaigning against the barbarians on the eastern frontiers. The sentiments are ones of which the Buddha would approve. There is here a certain affinity between the Buddha's thought and that of one of the founders of Western humanism.

Meditations on death and passing form the fabric of many religions – indeed, they are perhaps at root primarily what they are on about. Yet many of them end by putting forward false hopes and illusions of which the Buddha would not approve. Three main preoccupations lie at the root of most religions:

The fact of impermanence and lack of security

How death may be met

What happens after death?

It is probably the third that has the greatest influence on thought about the other two.

Let us be clear: Science, which is a description of nature, says nothing about what happens after death. Indeed how could it? Likewise, modern Humanism, which is sometimes critical of reductionistic science, remains none the less agnostic about what happens after death. Yet, outside the academies, we all continue to wonder. Christians still have their Miltonic Heaven and Hell. Islamic terrorists go to paradise with their houries.

Buddhism is not so clear. There are two traditions, which we may call Folk Buddhism or vernacular belief and in contrast the philosophical perspective.

In Folk Buddhism there is a strong emphasis on reincarnation stemming from traditions in the ancient world well established before Buddhism. Yet the idea here is not at all what many people actually suppose it to be: it is not the 'you' or 'me' in our complex selfhoods that are reborn in successive lives- far from it. What passes from one death into a new life is 'unfinished business' i.e. incompleting Karmic retribution. Karma depends on intention, not at all on accident or unintentional acts. So, what passes on are the intentions of a previous time that have not yet reaped their reward or come-uppance.

The Tibetans express this in some detail. The embryo is formed from egg, sperm and social residues of your previous unfulfilled intentions that unite in fertilisation. It is therefore a threefold entity that emerges from the womb. This set of ideas can be translated quite readily into a modern understanding. When we are born, and indeed even prior to birth, we receive influences from the social conditioning of parents, and later on from teachers, that come down from previous generations. Indeed, a third – social – element quickly impacts on our biological lives coming from the psychological past, even a remotely distant past. A modern humanist is not however arguing that there is a direct link between what YOU did in a past life and the result in the present because the karma that influences the child has a collective origin.

In the philosophical tradition there is no self other than an imputation from the activities of the *skandhas*. The idea of ‘me’ is an inference or imputation arising from observing sensation, perception, cognition, and karmic origins in consciousness. Cognitive construction creates an ‘I’ much as electronic processes create an image on a television screen. The experience of ‘me’ is virtual. Yet we become attached to this image as all we have: – we long to sustain it, fear its loss, dread its death. We invent endless scenarios whereby we can survive death to live again elsewhere and where we hope our enemies will suffer for their sins. We surround our lives with heavens and hells that become the objectivised prisons of our own making.

Yet, if we actually examine this precious self, this I or me, in yogic meditation as indeed the Buddha did, we discover that it consists entirely of memories, hopes, and complex projects to obtain our ends – all of which constitute a kind of narrative. We are one and all stories – hopefully believing we have existence. And of course indeed we have - but not in the form that we think conventionally. There is indeed EXISTENCE but only NOW – the past is dead, the future not yet arisen. Instead of flowing with this flux using skilful means to negotiate its rapids we resist it, invent fixities and defend them – sometimes to the death. Buddha said – let go of this illusory self – flow with the moment – right now even over the waterfall.

“What did the earwig say as he fell over the cliff – erewigo”¹

Zen practices suggest we should take our vivid awareness of the present right into the moment of death. This is an idea of which Marcus Aurelius would have approved. If life becomes impossible, he said – let it go. Yet, in our present age with its emphasis on mundane individuality, it becomes difficult to think of self-dissolution without horror. So, we hide death away. Unlike Greek mountain villages where the elderly sit smiling on the doorsteps, we put our old people in badly smelling homes often far from being residences of kindness, indeed sometimes of loveless starvation. The fact is – culturally – we fear death even though death is as natural as birth. If you want life you get both. Yet, sometimes we do meet the challenge of death in such a way that its sting is surely removed and the fear conquered.

Don Ball was given the choice of living helplessly on a drip for six more months or quietly slipping away in a kindly coma. He signed his life away and waited. I was with him for a while on his last day. Some years before he had been on a WZR with me in Wales. He had chosen to work with the question ‘What is Death?’ His answer on the last day of the retreat was: “John-Death is Now!” As the day of his passing came, he was able to recall that profound experience and told me so. Just before he slipped away he told his son “You know I am enjoying dying – but I am afraid no one will believe it “His son told him “I think your friends will understand.”

Another friend recently began to suffer from a severely debilitating form of lung cancer. He foresaw months of slow suffering not only for himself but also for his loved ones. He made up his mind to travel to Zurich to precipitate a legally assisted suicide. His wife, son and two others accompanied his wheel chair on the flight to Zurich. Afterwards they spoke with admiration of the kindness and compassion with which the whole matter was resolved. As the hour approached, he spoke individually with each of his loved ones and then they sat together

¹ A saying much loved by my father.

with him as the glass of terminating drugs was brought. He sat up and lifted the cup. With a broad smile, "Cheers!" he said and departed.

But what to do where fear remains? The Buddhist seeks to apply both Wisdom and Compassion. Wisdom to face the koan 'what is Death?' and compassion to be with those who are nearing the end of their lives in kindly understanding. Mindfulness allows attention to the possibility that the sick and ill know more than you think. Recent research suggests that forms of consciousness persist often long beyond their apparent disappearance. Great care is needed. Care of the elderly should be in preparation for death and not in denial of death. Carers need to have come to terms with their own attitudes to their own death. They need training in the practice of empathy with failing minds and to support intelligence where it remains through discussion that is not condescending. There are deep problems in Western institutional care of both elderly and the dying to which Buddhist thinkers need to address themselves and make their voices heard.

I want to conclude with a further quotation, this time from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta describing the response of monks to the death of the Buddha at Kusinara. After Ananda had discussed with the Buddha what to do with his remains after his death, the text reads as follows:

"And the Venerable Ananda went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the door post. Alas I am still a learner with much to do! And the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me!" Then the Buddha enquired of the monks where Ananda was and they told him. So he said to a certain monk; "Go monk and say to Ananda from me: Good friend Ananda, the teacher summons you." "Very good Lord" said the monk and did so. "Very good, friend" Ananda replied to the monk and he went to the Lord, saluted him and sat down to one side. And the Lord said, "Enough Ananda, do not weep and wail! Have I not told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda - since whatever is born compounded is subject to decay - how could it be that it should not pass away?"

And he goes on to praise Ananda, encourage him and recommend him to the monks.

Later on, after the Buddha's death, the Venerable Anuruddha uttered this verse:

"No breathing in and out – just and with steadfast heart the Sage who is free from desire has passed away to peace- with mind unshaken he endured all pains; by Nirvana the illumined mind is freed."

And the Venerable Ananda said, "Terrible was the quaking of the Earth. Men's hair stood on end when the all accomplished Buddha passed away. And those monks who had not yet overcome their passions wept and tore their hair, raising their arms, throwing themselves down and twisting and turning crying, "All too soon the Blessed One has passed away, all too soon the Well-farer, has passed away, the Eye of the World has disappeared. But those monks who were free from craving endured mindfully and clearly aware saying, "All compounded things are impermanent – what is the use of this?"

Then the Venerable Anuruddha and the Venerable Ananda spent the rest of the night in conversation on Dharma.²

Let us now proceed to hear what our speakers and workshop leaders have to show us.

² Walshe, M (translator) 1995. *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. In: The Long Discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the *Digha Nikāya*. Wisdom. Boston Mass. p 265f.

Euthanatos

Sister Ruth Furneaux

Euthanatos - dying well, good death

Euthanasia - an easy mode of death

At the beginning of practice, my teacher¹ said to me that the bottom line for any practitioner is to die well. It is a Buddhist common place that practice is about coming to see through life and death; however experienced we may be that does not mean that we have done so and can afford to be cavalier with the lives of others: indeed most people are more afraid of life than death until that is their mortality becomes a pressing issue. This is why most zen teaching does not attend to eschatological concerns but in living fully here and now, whatever arises in the here and now.

When the inevitable complacency about practice arose in people, he often said 'Are you relying on some peak experience? Don't do it, don't rest on your laurels'. On the other hand, to those building up either anxieties or certainties about what happens post death, he would say, 'All is well'. Thus, he would address the immediate experiential moment of the meditator. Even H.H the Dalai Lama has said that he has no certainty of 'making it'.

Yes, people get older, the certainties of the meditative experiences of their thirties or so are challenged by the actuality of their peers', relatives' and friends' physical, mental decline and death!

It is understandable that when the conditions of living and dying begin to strike home and the actuality of death needs to be faced, the apparently easy 'answers' of meditation, the beautiful and insightful sayings of Zen, seem not to match our experience of everyday life. It is then that, commendably, we start to question and call it investigation. This of course was the Buddha's spur to practice - to seek the causes of 'birth, sickness, old age and death'. The Heart Sutra, the Scripture of Great Wisdom, speaks of 'Until we come to where old age and death have ceased - and so has all extinction of old age and death, and here there is no suffering'. It is wise to notice that bit of the Perfection of Wisdom and not confuse it with the questing of our own conditioned minds.

Often, what we cannot bear is our own suffering in watching others suffer. Often the wish to 'save' others from pain and indignity, even at their own request, on the grounds of what we mistakenly may believe to be love, is our own confusion and unwillingness to await the appropriate time and our ignorance of other deeper means of helping them, whether medical, allopathic and complementary or otherwise. Love or *agape* means unconditioned; quite different from the *raga* or *lobha* of Buddhism which is the result of attachment and wrong views. Check up on Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva of 'active love' riding on a white elephant.

I speak as someone who has been in lifelong pain, whose mother committed suicide when 'I' was a small child, who was offered a lectureship by the Open University on Death and Dying to train professionals, who has accompanied and watched the death process in a number of beings, who has worked as a healer and carer with many terminally ill people, some of whom have been screaming in constant and unremitting pain, and who has put her own life on hold several times to be with dying beings in their last months, who has taken on herself wittingly the pain of two dying beings in their last months and who has just been diagnosed with colon and kidney cancer. I say this to indicate that what I am about to say does not come from idealistic inexperience.

One day I heard a program on the radio in which people who had drowned but been resuscitated after some considerable time (up to 40 minutes) reported that while watchers on the shore saw a

¹ John Garrie Roshi.

body thrashing and calling out in apparent agony, fear and distress - what the person themselves experienced was 'bliss'. When I reported this to Roshi he said "Ah yes, a bit like the practice". What we may think is going on from a conditioned viewpoint is not necessarily what is going on at all. H.H. Dalai Lama in talking about the death process says that what is going on is not what we normally experience as conscious but is at a much more subtle level of awareness.

Many beings pass on quite smoothly, may go through the good death without any help from us, except to be with them. Actually we all make the transition effectively 'alone', as indeed we take each step in meditation effectively alone. No-one does it for us. Some however don't.

I have witnessed the 'after-death' phenomena of beings whose lives have been taken away untimely. My own teacher was one such. He was on morphine for a heart condition, the medication shocked him into death untimely. He was unable to let go and move on, he was unprepared and a senior student had to talk him through the death process - after apparent death, and it worked. Even very experienced meditation teachers can be taken unawares and not make the 'good death' - even if they have seen through it all in meditation and the daily and moment-to-moment 'dying in the belly'.

To help focus the mind of meditation we can look at three actual events:

1/ Ten years before he 'passed on' (remember that life and death is a process) Ajahn Chah the great forest teacher suffered a stroke. This caused great inner searching by his disciples - he appeared to be a useless 'lump'. I am told that at times he would be able to croak out 'Kamma, kamma'. This is the man who earlier in life had taken on willingly and consciously the kammic resultant of having acted unwisely, knowing no other way at the time. (I believe it was the killing of insects at the Wat).

A western Theravadan teacher tells me of an event which occurred while he was waiting for this 'lump' to be carried past. This monk had not yet started teaching and had grave reservations about it. He had a sore throat. As Ajahn Chah passed by, the monk tells me there was a direct connection between him and Ajahn Chah. The throat condition disappeared, he is now a teacher. Perhaps the monk's mouth was opened to teach - at any rate Ajahn Chah, despite his physical condition was still teaching.

2/ As an 18 year old I offered 16 hours per week nursing help at a local hospital at weekends to chronic and terminally ill patients. The young mind wanted to 'give back' to the community, for help she had received. One day I went in to find a woman who had previously been quite bright, had become yellow and pallid. She said, 'You wouldn't feel it because you're young, the electricity is affecting me' and she passed on the next day. Doubtless she would have been thought to be confused by the staff, but I wondered. Now I know she was probably referring to Chi, the Vital force, to becoming Yin at the approach of death. Consider Rinzai's koan given to his monks on the death of his good friend Fukai, 'Where is the energy of Fukai now? Can you answer? Do you know? If not be very careful how you approach the death of others'.

3/ As a 27 year-old I started two stroke associations in London to help those suffering the aftermath of strokes. This was a mere 3 years after the medical fraternity had been shocked to find that people having had major strokes and thought to be 'vegetables' were in fact quite conscious of everything going on around them and what was being said 'over' them. This new understanding was due to a 40 year old articulate business woman coming out of such a stroke and reporting on it. How many had been left to drift away? Not much has changed. In 1996 a close relative who had suffered a stroke was treated as unable to hear, respond or feel pain by hospital staff and even though I was able to communicate with her and eventually managed to get hydrating liquids re-instated for her. The staff thought it was 'kind' to help her die by starvation and dehydration.



With the rise of Alzheimers conditions, there is a similarity with the ignorance and fear that was current with strokes 30 or 40 years ago. I have 'cared for' beings with Alzheimers conditions 24/7. Without the benefits of meditative practice, knowing the confusion of ourselves with conditions arising and the bringing to wholeness the core of loving gentleness at the centre of each being, we too are likely to fear the processes of dissolution and death in everyday life and at the moment of passing.

Meditators are in a favourable condition to 'come to know' the many 'states', experiences, and conditions that arise in practice which may bring fear, and to work with it in themselves. Christianity calls this the 'darkening of the intellect', 'memory' and 'will', that they may be purified. These states are well known in certain texts in Buddhism and among serious practitioners and teachers. I quote from Bh. Buddhadasa on the responsibility of 'coming to know'.

'With concentration the citta is perfectly ready to perform its duty, namely to grow in knowledge and understanding from moment-to-moment'.

This is not however done by speculation or conditioned views giving rise to even more conditioned views, however argued or reasonable but, as he says,

'Wherever it goes, the concentrated mind (samadhi) sees things according to reality. If we look within ourselves we see things according to truth.'

It may be comforting to some to believe that consciousness does not survive brain activity, that mind and brain are synonymous or that consciousness does not survive in any form. Comforting blotto. This is annihilationist. We should remember that if we speak or encourage others to take the lives of people or to take their own lives, it is not us whose consciousness will be going through the resultant delusion. It is the result of fundamental confusion. The attempt to kill what is not killable. This is why the Zen ceremonies of Segaki are done every year but also for murderers and suicides - because in ignorance they have attempted to kill the unkillable. Whenever we think, speak or act with greed or hate we display that delusion. To think there is something to be got rid of is not 'the deathless' of Buddhism, it is the activity of dualistic mind.

It is worth considering that first precept 'Do not kill', (sometimes put more realistically as 'attempt not to kill') in the recognition that we all kill all the time, if not deliberately then in careless unmindfulness and delusive attempts to be caring and loving, or it may simply be that our karmic resultant arises and we know no other way - at the time. To continue doing so, especially deliberately, only brings more vexations for ourselves and for others. It is more humble and potentially more illuminating to admit we do not know.

I may be wrong but in my experience, and other teachers agree with me, it is not possible to see through birth and death by continuing to kill especially deliberately. The thought and action itself clouds the mind to 'reality'. The admission of not knowing and diligent practice in order to 'come to know' is a clarifying process, while the perpetration of views, opinions and judgements does the opposite.

'Regarding her death, those of high, intermediate and low understanding saw different things. The most advanced ones saw Machig herself become enveloped within mists and clouds. Then she went off beating her drum, blowing her thigh bone horn and shaking her six bone ornaments. They saw the dakinis of the five families bear her aloft and carry her off. Those disciples of middle development saw Machig's body shrink in size until it was like an aruca nut. Then it vanished in white light. The ordinary disciples saw her body take a great fever and then she had a long sickness and died.'

The great yogini Machig's death appeared differently to disciples of different levels of development.²

² Crook, J.H., & J.Low. *The Yogins of Ladakh*. Motilal Banarsidass. Delhi p 315

This piece on the death of the 12th century Tibetan woman teacher reminds me of a discussion I had recently with a Lama. When I asked him if he taught his students (he has or has had some well known students, some of whom are teachers in their own right) some of the matters of meditation of which we had been speaking, he replied “No, their minds and hearts aren't developed enough. We have to start with compassion and kindness”. How developed is yours? Do the views and opinions you voice on matters of life and death come from insight in meditation or from the ignorance of knowing nothing else. How would you have seen the death of Machig, do you suppose?

So, I would like to warn those who speak apparently kindly and reasonably from the compassionate wish to be of help to other beings, be very careful, you know not what you do. A small pointer to all this is experience on the cushion of pain. Full acceptance and perhaps the knowing that one is clinging to the insubstantial and impermanent as permanent brings the release from pain. Suffering is the not knowing of this.

There are no easy answers to all this, but euthanasia is certainly not one of them. Hospice, meditation, contemplation and wise use of many forms of medicine are certainly part of it and Buddhists and ‘spiritual practitioners’ of all kinds have a responsibility to be at the forefront of first training themselves and then being of beneficial aid to others in ‘seeing through’. I dare say even the much disparaged *jhanas* can be of some aid in this respect.

‘At the moment of dying we are everything we have been in life, absolutely everything counts’.
(Master Sheng-yen)

Buddhism has a wealth of experience and knowledge of consciousness which could be of such great benefit to the world and to other religions. Even to attend a proper Buddhist funeral is a transparent and radiant experience like no other funeral I have been to. A funeral with experienced practitioners which becomes ‘not-two’ with all the ‘good deaths’ that ever have, are and will be, is not a ‘do-it-yourself’ affair. What a pity to take a modern and worldly way out through a mistaken view of ‘how far we are on in our practice’.

There is a great ‘rightness’ and well-being when one has accompanied a being in their last months, days, hours, given the care, attention, medication. One can, through increasing knowledge, meditate with them and see ‘their’ process come to completion at the appropriate time - not forced in any way. Patience is the first of the qualities of virtue that need to be present for enlightenment. There is a rightness and peacefulness for them too, when the two are indeed not-two in seeing it through, when they have been encouraged by your lack of fear and anguish and not to have sought a way out - but rather the way in.

In the meantime, as practitioners we practise moment-to-moment, dying in the belly – really dropping ideas and opinions not drawn from clear experiential insight. Sceptics would find it worthwhile to practise *metta*, being spacious enough in heart and mind to hold open the possibility that what advanced meditators report about loving kindness might just be so.

Richard Hunn (Upasaka Wen Shu) Passes Away

Adrian Chan-Wyles (Upasaka Heng Yu)

6th September 2006

"Many of us will remember Richard personally, perhaps especially from his warm and characterful leadership of a weekend retreat for the Bristol Chan Group held at Ross Cuthbert's painting studio some years ago. I regretted Richard's disappearance to Japan as he was a valued colleague but I rejoice to hear that his life was so good there. We remember his life with gratitude" JHC

Richard Hunn passed away on the 1st October 2006, in hospital, in Kyoto, Japan. He was suffering from cancer.

He spent much of his adult life propagating and preserving the spiritual essence of life, in its many guises, and myriad forms. Part of this immense task, was the practice of Ch'an Buddhism - the method of which was very close to his heart. He had met Charles Luk (Upasaka Lu Kuan Yu), in Hong Kong in the 1970's, and tirelessly worked to keep the 'Ch'an And Zen Teaching Series 1, 2, & 3', in print. Together of course, with Charles Luk's other texts, translated from the Chinese, into a good and reliable English format. Texts such as the Surangama Sutra, The Nirveda Vimalakirti Sutra, Taoist Yoga, Secrets of Chinese Meditation, Practical Buddhism and the very important autobiography of Master Xu Yun (1840-1959).

This biography, entitled 'Empty Cloud' (the literal translation of 'Xu Yun'), was edited by Richard in the 1980's. This was during the time that he lived in Thorpe Hamlet, Norwich. The foreword, written by Richard, emanates a peaceful compassion, and reflects, I think, a deeper, underlying perfection and tranquility, that permeates across many planes of being. And at this time, the 'Norwich Ch'an Association' was functioning. Richard held Ch'an weeks, (times of intensive meditation), and kept in contact with many people around the world, through the written word. 'Ancient China had a postal system' as Richard once pointed out to me, and with that example in mind, he kept a varied and extensive written communication. There is a Ch'an tradition of instruction via letter, as many Ch'an masters lived in the remote hills, and were difficult to find. And it was initially by the written word, that I came to know him.

In the late 1980's, and early 1990's, Richard and I exchanged a number of letters. I enquired about the 'true essence of mind', and he gently but firmly showed me my 'Mind'. Then, suddenly, (and for almost a decade), we lost touch with one another. His life changed rapidly, and so did mine! I never stopped thinking about him however, and eventually, I managed to track him down! He was re-married, immensely happy and living in Kyoto, Japan. From about the year 2000, he would bring groups of Japanese students to visit England for about a month or so, and after the students had returned to Japan, he would visit his parents in Norwich, and then come and spend a week or so at my home in Sutton, south London. During these blissful times, we would discuss life, laugh a lot and meditate intensely!

This situation continued more or less up until 2004. From 2005 onwards, Richard's health started to decline, slowly at first. He was diagnosed with cancer in August 2005. From 2000 to 2004, we met, and when apart, wrote to one another quite extensively, and this, at times included emails, which Richard disliked for being too impersonal. We also talked on the 'phone.

Richard's wife, Taeko, and his son, Charles, have asked me to convey the sad news of Richard's passing, to those who may have known him, or who may have known of him. To the last, he kept his Mind bright and clear.

There will be a memorial held at Gorseton, in Norfolk (UK), on the 26th of October, 2006. The memorial will consist of both family and friends of Richard.

Anyone who feels that they might like to attend, please contact Mr. Charles Hunn on the following email, for further details; charleshunn@yahoo.ca

Introducing Katsuki Sekida

A. V. Grimstone

When I was studying for my doctorate in the Zoology Department at Cambridge I was dimly aware that among the members of staff was an interesting man by the name of Dr. A. V. Grimstone. It was a big department however and I think I only met him once or twice around the departmental tea table as his field of research was different from mine. Much later, after I had left Cambridge, I came across an influential study of "Zen Training" by Katsuki Sekida and discovered to my surprise that its careful editor and interpreter was none other than Dr. Grimstone. Fascinated by the thought that a fellow biologist was also involved with Zen, I resolved one day to meet him. Sadly, I have to say that years went by, until this year, I suddenly decided to do so. I did not even know whether he was still alive but, on contacting Pembroke College, I found that 'Bill' was very much so, well loved and deeply engaged in college affairs, writing a history of the college chapel among other things. When Bill came down to the West country to visit his brother, we had lunch together at Winterhead. A certain amount of arm twisting persuaded him to write an account not only of Sekida but about how he became involved in Sekida's valuable and novel presentation of Zen. This is an account of an important event in the transmission of Zen method and insight to the West. JHC.

There is an intentional ambiguity in the title. The main aim of this note is to introduce readers who are unfamiliar with his work to the writings of a remarkable Zen Buddhist thinker, Katsuki Sekida. A secondary purpose (imposed upon me by John Crook, who asked me to write this piece) is to explain how I came to edit and provide introductions to Sekida's two books, *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy* and *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*.

Katsuki Sekida was born in 1893 and began his practice and study of Zen Buddhism in his early twenties. In a beguiling chapter in *Zen Training* ('A personal narrative') he describes his struggles as a young man to overcome his fear of death.

"I dreaded dying . . . waking and sleeping, I was preoccupied with the thought that when I died I would be consumed and there would be nothing left of me . . . This world was literally a living hell. It puzzled me to see people living nonchalantly. 'Don't you feel frightened at the thought of death?' I eagerly asked an old man of good worldly understanding. 'I have already lost my teeth,' he said, 'my eyesight is dim, my hairs can be counted. I have forwarded my petty effects already.' What stupidity! Don't be a liar! . . . I felt I would like to hold him down and make him confess the truth".

He found his way out of this crisis by beginning to meditate. Subsequently he undertook traditional training in Zen, practising with some of the most respected Japanese Zen masters and completing lengthy koan study. However, he remained a layman and was a school-teacher, teaching English. He retired from that occupation in 1945, after his wife died, and thereafter devoted his energies wholly to practising, studying and writing about Zen Buddhism. It was at this time that he began to develop his distinctive ideas about Zen.

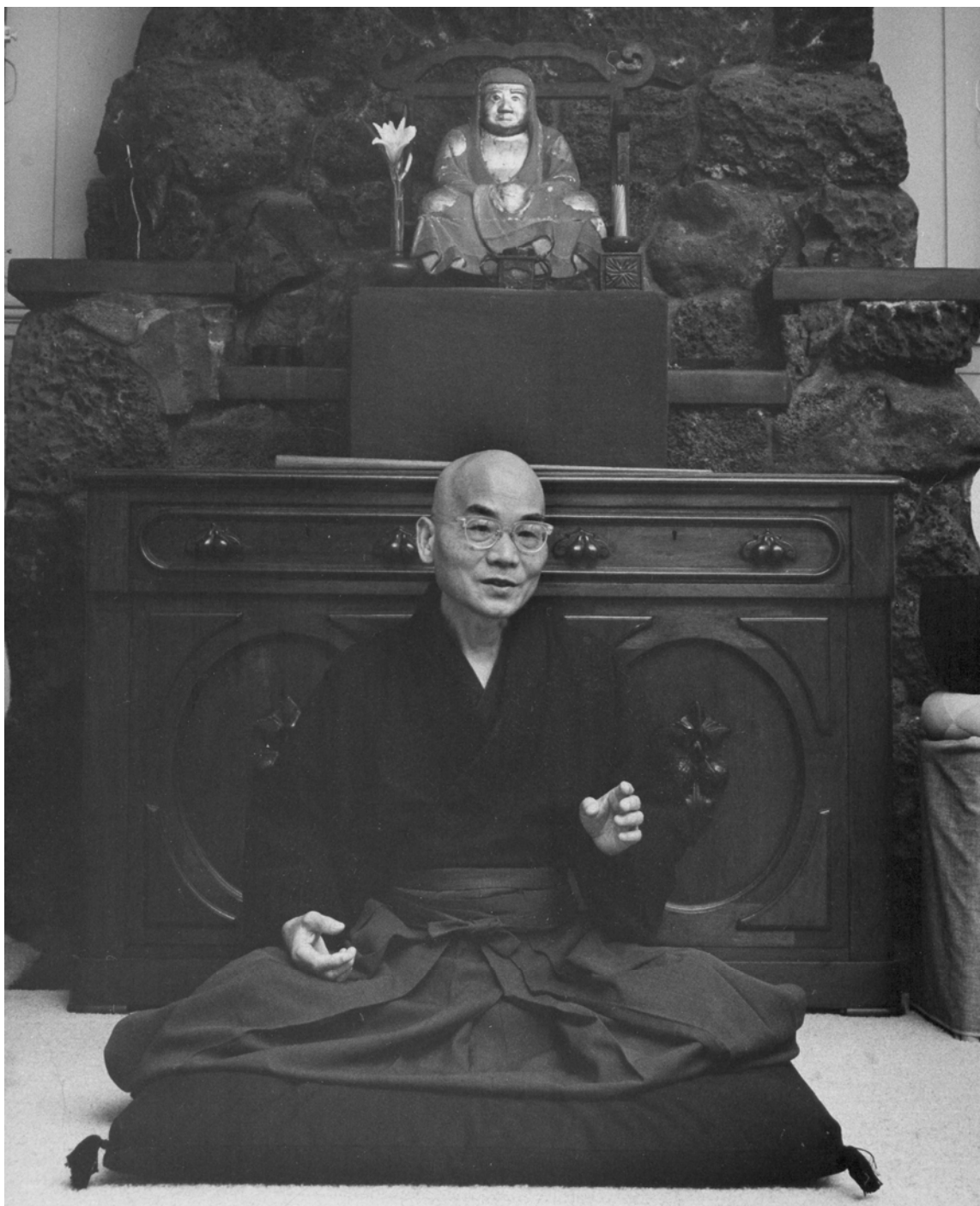
In 1965 he was invited to become the resident lay-teacher of a Zen group (the Diamond Sangha) in Honolulu. This had been founded by Robert Aitken, a scholarly man with a deep and long-standing devotion to Zen. He had practised in Japan and ran the group with exemplary dedication and good sense, along traditional Japanese lines. (A brief autobiography is to be found in Aitken's *Taking the path of Zen* and he is the subject of a chapter in Helen Tworikov's *Zen in America*). Aitken eventually became a roshi, but that was not until 1975 and until then the authenticity of the group depended upon visiting Japanese masters – first Soen Nakagawa Roshi and Hakuun Yasutani Roshi and later Yamada Roshi – who came regularly to lead sesshins. Needless to say, they were all deeply immersed in the traditional methods of Japanese Zen.

My own experience of this group and meeting with Katsuki Sekida came about as follows. Until retirement I was a cell biologist and in 1968 spent a period of sabbatical leave working with a colleague in Honolulu. I was planning to return to England via the Far East and by way of preparation read a good deal about Japan. Much of Japanese culture is of course based on Zen and I had previously dipped into the literature: D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts and the like (the available range at that time was limited), emerging with the usual mixture of interest and bafflement. In Honolulu I came across Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen*, published in 1966 and the first book to give much explanation of how Zen is actually practised. From it I learned that there was a Zen group in Honolulu. Enquiry led me to Robert Aitken's house, Koko An where the group met. I was made welcome and, somewhat diffidently, began to attend the meetings on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. I noted in my diary, "An image of Bodhidharma presides over the room, incense is burned and there is a serious and formal air about it all". Usually 10-20 people were present. The format was that we sat for two periods of half an hour, there was a certain amount of chanting, then either Aitken or Katsuki Sekida would give a talk, followed by more zazen, then tea and informal talk.

Sekida was a small bespectacled man, shaven-headed, dressed on these occasions in a black robe. He spoke slowly, with intense concentration. After hearing him talk for the first time I wrote: "Mr Sekida, the Japanese lay teacher who leads the group, spoke at some length about the technique of practising zazen and how to breathe while doing it. I have not found anywhere else such emphasis on the purely physiological aspects of zazen, and it struck me while he was talking, seated cross-legged in front of Bodhidharma, how incongruous it was, for a group of people earnestly seeking enlightenment to be listening to a long description of how to manipulate one's abdominal muscles while breathing . . . He also spoke about the desirability of our experimenting for ourselves, and how trial and error was never a waste of time. Also about the need for absolute dedication and earnestness. He acknowledged that much of what he was saying he had said before, but he was desperately anxious to make his account of how to enter samadhi as accurate and full as possible. Further, if we were practising earnestly we would come up against problems and would *then* be in a receptive state to take in his advice, whereas if we merely listen much would pass over us. At different stages of our progress we would hear different things, even though he said much the same each time. Finally, he said that while at present it was necessary for Americans to receive Zen from Japanese teachers, there would come a time when American Zen was created, with its own form." I did not know it at the time, but this paragraph encapsulated the essence of Sekida's thinking.

About a month after this I was invited to go to Koko An one afternoon to talk to Mr Sekida privately. I found him in his little cottage in the garden, sitting writing. We had a long and interesting talk. Sekida's approach to Zen was wholly rational. He wanted to teach Zen in a way appropriate to the modern world. He had come to greatly dislike the traditional mode of Zen training, which eschews analysis and in which the student is not uncommonly left to his own devices and forced to discover everything for himself, often under psychological pressure. He thought this a waste of time, and saw no reason why Zen should remain "a mysteriously shrouded wilderness". He was keenly interested in its psychological and philosophical aspects and how they could be related to Western thought (I remember him remarking at one point, "I have been reading Heidegger today"). He was firm in saying that Zen is not mystical, though he agreed that the word may have to be used sometimes for want of a better one. I think he found it a relief to talk to someone who was primarily a scientist, rather than a Zen Buddhist.

Soon after this, largely in a spirit of enquiry, I participated in a sesshin at Koko An led by Yasutani-roshi, with Mr Sekida acting as translator. It was an interesting and revealing week, in which the main thing I learned was that this intensive, traditional, ritualised form of practice was not for me. The message I took away was to forget about the ritual and paraphernalia, the bells and bowing, and just learn to do zazen, as Sekida was urging. When I told him this afterwards his response was succinct: "I hate the traditional method".



Katsuki Sekida talking to the Zen group in the zendo at Koko An, Honolulu.
Bodhidharma presides behind him.

I kept in touch with Mr Sekida after I returned to England and particularly valued the series of essays in which he set out his thinking and which were circulated with the newsletter of the Diamond Sangha. These largely formed the basis of a manuscript submitted for publication in, I believe, early 1971 to Weatherhill (publishers of *The Three Pillars of Zen*). The book was rejected as being repetitive, too discursive and lacking a clear plan. In the autumn of that year Mr Sekida came to England at the invitation of the London Zen Group. He visited me in Cambridge in November and I saw him again in London in December. He was still working on his book and very anxious to see it published. It must be remembered that Mr Sekida was now aged 78. He wondered if I might be able to help. With some misgivings I agreed to try, undertaking to look at the manuscript and think about his suggestion that I should write an introduction. Six months later the revised manuscript arrived. I noted in my diary, "It is a big pile of paper, much of it the same as his Diamond Sangha articles, but with revisions and new material. There is still much repetition and the train of thought often isn't easy to follow. It will mean some hard work and delicate negotiation with him and a publisher. In some ways the problem is analogous to translation: to retain the sense and the individuality of the writing while striving for clear expression".

It took me over a year to revise the manuscript. I rearranged the material, cut out repetitions and did a lot of re-writing, trying to convert a collection of essays into a book. As a biologist and as editor of a cell biology journal I knew something about writing and editing, but my practice of Zen was limited. At times I was more than doubtful about what I was doing. However, I was encouraged by the fact that Sekida was often writing like a scientist. In my introduction I tried to ease the path of Western readers into unfamiliar ways of approaching Zen, explaining how Sekida's ideas related to what they might already know about traditional Zen and how Zen could be connected to Western thinking. To my great relief he accepted my revision of his text, with only minor alterations.

The book was submitted again to Weatherhill in May 1974 and accepted without change in July. There was a good deal of correspondence between Weatherhill, Mr Sekida and myself about the title before we hit on *Zen Training: methods and philosophy*, which sums up the book well. I saw the book through the press and it was published in September 1975. It has been in print continuously ever since. Weatherhill went out of business in 2004 but their titles were taken over by Shambhala, who have reprinted it. Altogether, over 81,000 copies of the English version have been sold and there are German, Italian and Spanish translations.

In *Zen Training* Sekida undertakes the first detailed analysis of how best to do *zazen*, analysing posture, the mechanism of breathing, the focusing of the eyes, the handling of the abdominal muscles and so on. From this, more speculatively, he proceeds to an analysis of perception and consciousness as a basis for the interpretation of Zen experience. His message throughout is that the aim of *zazen* is to reach what he terms absolute *samadhi*: the condition of total stillness, in which "body and mind are fallen off," no thought stirs, the mind is empty, yet we are in a state of extreme wakefulness. "In this stillness the source of all kinds of activity is latent". *Kensho* (the enlightenment experience) may occur as we emerge from *samadhi* and Sekida does not seek to diminish its importance, but absolute *samadhi* is the prior essential, precious in itself and altogether more important than having a "poor, commonplace *kensho*". His book is engagingly written, full of examples from actual experience and at times written with poetic insight. He draws on a remarkable range of reading in Western literature. It is worth noting that Iris Murdoch, in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, discussed with considerable respect some of the ideas expressed in *Zen Training*, a point taken up by several reviewers.

Once *Zen Training* was accepted and long before its publication, the manuscript of a second book began arriving from Mr Sekida. I had known that he was working on this but had not quite taken in that another editing job was coming my way. As my wife said, reading his letter, "He doesn't give you much option, does he?" In his talks at Koko An and in essays in the Diamond

Sangha newsletter Sekida had sometimes, like many Zen teachers, taken as his subjects Cases (or koans) from *Mumonkan* (“The Gateless Gate” or “Open Check-point), one of the two great koan collections. Koans are the intractable, seemingly insoluble problems or statements that cannot be approached by the ordinary reasoning operations of the mind but must be resolved by prolonged, absorbed attention, usually beginning in zazen but often extending from there into ordinary life, until the koan infiltrates the mind. Koans are of different kinds, some suitable for the beginner, others for later practice. Each contains some element of Zen teaching. They are used to a greater or lesser extent in all schools of Zen. In *Mumonkan* (composed in 1228) the monk Mumon Ekai collected 48 Cases, to each of which he added a comment and a verse, often as puzzling as the koan itself. There are several English translations, usually with commentaries. Sekida’s version contained a new translation and his own commentary on each Case, novel in being written from the standpoint of *Zen Training*. As might be expected, he provided much helpful elucidation without revealing the “answer” (there is often no single answer anyway) to the koan.

After completing *Mumonkan* he proceeded to another famous koan collection, *Hekiganroku* (“The Blue Cliff Records”), tackling it in the same way as *Mumonkan*. *Hekiganroku* is an earlier text, the work of Setchō (980-1052), an outstanding Zen master and an accomplished poet. It contains 100 Cases, each with Setchō’s appended verse. A subtle, often difficult work, this has always been a challenging text. About a century after Setchō had put it together, another Zen master, Engo, aiming to make it more approachable, added to each Case an introduction and other explanatory matter, of which some was subsequently lost; only his introductions are now usually printed.

Editing this material was in a way simpler than working on *Zen Training*, in that there was no need for re-arrangement or pruning. The task was instead to try to ensure that the text was translated into the clearest English that its unusual nature permitted. Since the original was often paradoxical, self-contradictory and allusive, and was written in a condensed, involved, often poetic style, this was not always a simple matter. Mr Sekida sent me the material in batches, which I would work on and return to him for his comments, often more than once. I remember many hours spent struggling with Setchō’s verses, which of course really needed a poet versed in Zen Buddhism and the Chinese language to do them justice. While my understanding of much of this material was at a purely conceptual level, I learned a great deal about Zen in editing it. The whole job took over two years and the resulting book ran to over 400 pages. Weatherhill accepted it in November 1976 and it was published the following year. Gratifyingly, Philip Kapleau pronounced it, “a product of Herculean labour, wrought with dedication and understanding”. Shambhala have recently reprinted it.

Katsuki Sekida died in 1987. He was delightful human being, a deep thinker and a great pioneer. The Japanese Zen establishment was not enamoured of his approach and he was often criticised, sometimes humiliated. Yet if Zen is to emerge from its oriental wrappings and be taken up more widely in the West it must surely, for many of us, be via the route that Sekida opened up. I am glad to have had some part in making his ideas known.

Haiku: One Mind

*rising from sitting -
breath startled! – plunged into now
blue sky all there is.*

*Nigel Jeffcoat
October 2006*

Retreat Experiences

It is fascinating to relate that in terms of experiences on retreat this past year has been exceptional. A number of people have had important insights on retreat and three of the most clearly expressed of these form the materials we are publishing in this issue. It is important not to classify or evaluate such experiences on some scale of quality. This can do a retreatant a major disservice through promoting ultimately destructive feelings of their excessive self-congratulation or disappointment. So we leave the question of their nature to one side.

There is however much to be learnt from their publication. They show what can happen when someone from a traditional Buddhist background or a well focussed practitioner with experience of meditation succeeds in “letting go”. Perhaps one feature in common in these accounts is the willingness to suffer through painful experiences and go beyond them in an acceptance of a forward questing. This is true “tsan”, investigation as the Chan masters say. In abandoning rigidities of attitude and attachment tears arise yet out of tears can come some extraordinary joys. What these insights may have been will be shown in due course through the long term effects they may have in a life of Dharma. These accounts also tell us something of the interview process that is a vital aspect of the work of our retreat masters. Eds

Keep Practicing!

Retreat report: Western Zen Retreat

New York, Spring 2006

The retreat was a scientific experiment and the constants were meditation, eating, working, sleeping, waking, meditating. The repetition of the same actions over time showed the illusions of the mind and how untrustworthy the mind is. After the turmoil came a calm and then an essence appeared.

Who Am I?

I can't describe who “I” am any longer. All labels have dropped as they are all illusions. Formally, I was an Asian American creative-type and female. Seeing for the first time who “I” was made me crack up. The labels that I once accepted meant nothing. In fact, “I” have always belonged to affinity groups whether they were Asian or female support groups and on a very deep level, they are all based on falsehoods. They provide support but it is based on an ‘us’ against ‘them’ mentality, which is illusionary.

What Am I?

For the first time, in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere, I was able to address the internal self. During the first communication exercise, I was crying over some painful point in my life. The next moment I felt fine. The moment after that there would be more upsetting things and then so on. This happened continuously until the constantly recurring stories fell away. First it came as a fear. And then there was nothing.

What Is Love?

My heart sank slightly when I learned I would be cleaning the bathrooms. I had read about work practice and but I still couldn't help feeling a slight twinge of heavy heartedness. There are nine sinks and about 6 or 7 toilets and showers. Who could know that a few days later, while mopping the expansive floor, compassion began flowing. The people who appeared to be strangers in the beginning were no longer different from myself. Wiping the sinks until they shined brightly, I was making sure there was not a drop or smudge left on them because suddenly all of the people on the retreat had become dear to me. It wasn't a clinging affection, but the purest compassion for people so vulnerable and fragile yet having all the answers within themselves.

How Is Life Fulfilled?

Before the retreat I had spent most of my time worrying and being stressed out. I had everything I could ever want: a wonderful soul mate, a terrific family, good health, a good job, yet I was still not fulfilled because I felt something was missing. The retreat illustrated what true fulfillment was. It was opening a door and taking care that it didn't slam shut. It was standing in line and allowing the person in front of me to have space so they did not feel rushed. It was pushing a chair in. It was walking slowly on the sidewalk from the dorms after the rain and making sure not to step on the earthworms.

What Is It?

Simon asked this and no answer came.

An answer came through seeing meditation as a forest. The forest is made up of trees, but how many trees does it take to make up a forest? "It" cannot be grasped. When this was relayed to John in interview, he said 'Yes, one could take apart anything with that thinking (Can one find a chariot through looking at its parts?)' He also mentioned Spring which could not be grasped as a thing. But he pushed further and said that the answer while pointing in the right direction, remained too technical. Through a gentle verbal pushing from John, the comfortable footing of ego slipped to where there was no intellect and uncertainty came in. Then he asked: "What is it?" and the answer came. BLANK. It was hilarious. Nothing there. Then the ego came in and "I" felt disappointed because "I" felt John had handed "me" the answer. He said to go into it a bit more. The realization was that if one was explaining what "it" is to some one, a little push from someone who knows better is necessary. Answers are not gotten in a way that one expects them to come,, they arise in different forms and ways.

It Is Not You And You Are Everything

All this was understood or experienced on a level where it was apparent what this meant. When I asked about the next step after having a bit of a new awareness, John replied to "keep practicing". This would help at challenging times when the "I" reappeared. On one level, reappearance means that the ego is not part of "it". "You are everything" means that when the ego is present there is separation from "it", "you" create your happiness, "you" create your suffering. As long as there is a "you" present, there cannot be a true understanding. This is also a helpful phrase because it reminds one that whatever the situation is, it is not completely true. Say for example, I feel lonely because I feel I have no friends or boyfriend, then this phrase reminds me that the bad situation is not me and I am actually the universe. The problem with that is that I still have the idea that there is an ego present. So, while comforted, one would still need to practice more.

Conclusion:

Upon returning home, all areas of my life have greatly improved. I thought I had become enlightened or "saw something". However, John and Simon wisely and gently told me that it wasn't 'Kensho' and to not worry about it and continue practicing. They are correct in this assessment because if there is an ego present to desire confirmation, then more practice needs to be done. In the Ch'an Magazine for Winter 2006 Master Sheng-yen talked about the dangers of claiming to be "enlightened" when one really isn't and then to misrepresent Buddhism. This is very dangerous because if the ego should reappear and "I" lost my temper or said something foolish, another person may think: "THAT'S how a Buddhist person is?" This would be very detrimental to everything that Master Sheng-yen, John, Simon, Hilary and all Buddhists are working very hard to cultivate. I'm not very familiar with Buddhist history or texts and I am learning more about them now by reading and asking questions.



Seeing The Wonder

Silent Illumination Retreat April 8th-15th 2006

The context for attending this retreat feels important. It was the first retreat I had sat as a participant for 2 years – I had acted as Guestmaster on a couple of retreats since then, the last occasion being six months previously on a Western Zen Retreat, when I had sat in on some interviews with the retreat leader. I had really enjoyed this, but I continue to feel it is a privilege to be asked to develop in this role – sometimes I wonder if I will be up to it. Self-doubt, I have learned since I first came to Wales seven years ago, is a samskara which can have an insidious hold on me: and it usually shows itself on retreat. There was to be no exception this time.

The seventh anniversary of my first visit was another strand of this retreat's context. Why it should feel significant I'm not sure: maybe it has something to do with the notion one reads about here and there, that we are literally transformed every seven years or so – a completely new set of cells construct us during that period. To say that I have been transformed in other ways over the last seven years smacks of hyperbole, but neither do I want to minimise the impact that Maenllwyd has had on me during that time. Discovering Chan and struggling to open myself to what I intuit as its profoundly liberating impulses feels like a gift and a blessing which has been bestowed on me, for which I could not be more grateful. So I think that part of my purpose in coming to sit again was the opportunity it would give me to express that gratitude.

The third strand of my everyday life which I brought with me to this retreat was a period of disturbance and difficulty in my professional life which went back almost two years. The direction of my career had been disrupted by management decisions outside my control; two consequences of this were, firstly, a move to what sounded like a job which would bring me back on the course I had set myself, but which turned out to be nothing of the kind: and secondly, disruption to my training as a psychotherapist. One of the consequences of these events was that I found it increasingly difficult to make time in my life for regular meditation, either on my own at home or at the weekly group which I had been attending on and off for a year or two. I felt both guilty and frustrated about this – and I was apprehensive about sitting a full retreat following some months when I had hardly sat at all. On the positive side, I had been in a new job for four months which felt very promising, and I had the feeling that maybe I was moving on from what had been an unsettling time.

The retreat began well enough. My sitting was OK, and I felt that over the years I had been coming here I was sufficiently familiar with my obstacles for them to have become manageable, and less overwhelming than in my early visits. Towards the end of the first full day I noticed another retreatant going into the interview room, and for some reason this unsettled me as I went into the hall for the start of the period. Is he having difficulties already?, I said to myself; this seemed to knock my own confidence, and as I sat on my mood darkened and familiar feelings of a sort of helpless paralysis and inadequacy invaded me. I took these feelings to bed with me, and they remained there the following morning. They were joined by another familiar feeling, which became most evident during morning service: a childish, sullen resentment of what was going on around me, and a reluctance to add my voice to the chanting and recitation (on a previous visit this feeling had got the better of me and I had left the hall for the duration of the service).

Later that morning the first full round of interviews began. Of course when my turn came these feelings found their outlet, and as I sat crying I tried to articulate my sense of helpless frustration that this pattern should be repeating itself once more. Had I learned nothing in the past seven years? We tried to work out what was going on together, and it was not straightforward: grief was certainly a part of it, but relief also seemed important – relief that once again I had come to this precious place, where I had found during my very first visit that

so much buried feeling could be allowed to flow and fall away from me. Simon seemed to think that my meditation was doing its work – I was “with” what was arising as I sat (silence), and I was clearly aware of it! (illumination). Simon also felt that there might be some more subtle, as yet unclear, facets to this particular “knot”, or koan – so there is more enquiring to be done here. In doing so, I also need to consider how projection and transference are operating in my relationship with retreat leaders, whoever it may be.

Later in the retreat I described this early upset in terms of a sudden stormy squall hitting a ship as it leaves the harbour. From then on, my voyage settled, the sea calmed: my sitting improved, and I felt I was acquiring a richer and more three-dimensional understanding of Silent Illumination and its subtleties. Equally importantly, I found I was being kinder to myself as I hit tricky patches – I had more spontaneous, playful conversations with myself, and invented new ways of bringing my awareness to bear on my whole body. As the days passed I had a deepening experience of my body as immensely solid, weighty, even rock-like; and I noticed that the experience of physical discomfort or pain was subtly altered the more my awareness broadened. My mind gradually quietened and became more spacious and relaxed. This process was assisted by Simon’s morning talks, which often seemed to be in tune with something that was surfacing within. Of special relevance to me was his suggestion that we need to cultivate a balance between humility and confidence as we encounter the ups and downs of practice – if we fall into pride at our progress, or excessive self-doubt, then ego is present and silence will retreat. I found this enormously helpful.

On two evenings before supper we made prostrations. This gave me the opportunity to express gratitude for having found Chan, Maenllwyd and everything that I have discovered in the last seven years. Tears of relief and joy flowed, mingled with laughter and delight at having such an opportunity given to me. Bowing, prostrating – these aspects of practice acquired a new energy and significance on this retreat: they are emphasised in the Opening Ceremony, which Simon explored in one of his talks:-

“We vow to bow in gratitude for life, for being together in this place and time. We bow knowing full well that a man or woman cannot live without suffering. We bow knowing full well that a man or woman cannot live without at some time hurting another. We bow in the knowledge that the path to peace may lead through hell. We bow in contrition, gratitude, tenderness.”

In his talk, Simon joked that maybe we usually just recite the ceremony without paying too much attention to the words. For me they have always been intensely moving, and there are points at which I struggle to speak, so beautifully do they catch at my heart:

*“In our hearts we reflect upon-
The perfection of silence.*

*In our hearts we reflect upon –
The perfection of love.*

*In our hearts we reflect upon –
The perfection of compassion.”*

The weather during the retreat was entirely typical of Spring, and of these Welsh hills: driving rain, mud, wind, cloudy skies, clear skies, bright sunshine in a bright blue sky. The fields were full of ewes with their lambs, who would maraud around the hedgerows in excitable gangs. We could sometimes practice kinhin or direct contemplation outside, usually in the late afternoon as the wind dropped. Spring seemed to be taking hold at last.

The last full day of the retreat was bright and sunny. My sitting continued to feel solid, and I did not slip back into the mire which had briefly stuck to me earlier in the week. I was sitting in the hall during the first period after lunch, and felt very stable, sitting through the brief break. Towards the end of the hour, not long before the walk, there was a sudden shift in my perception, which I described later to John and Simon as being like the negative of a colour photograph – I saw myself in these terms just sitting there on the cushion. There was a sort of “turning around” in my body as tears welled up, and I just sat there letting it all flow. Quite quickly it switched to delighted laughter, and the two impulses came and went as they would. By now everyone had left the hall for the walk. I felt strange – slightly shaky, and my breathing had changed. I stood up slowly, thinking I would do some prostrations to calm things down. I did them, but the strangeness persisted as I stood facing the altar: I found myself saying, “What is it?” over and over, as I looked around at my surroundings. All was exactly the same, but not so at all – it is very hard to describe the feeling it evoked. I began to walk tentatively towards the door, and my body continued to feel shaky – the thought of a new-born calf taking its first shaky steps is the image that I used later.

I walked out into the yard, into the dazzling blue of the sky and the bright sunlight. Everything seemed bathed in a luminous intense stillness, a sharp clarity which seemed too much to take in: everything appeared quietly and intently SO. It was as if I had been blind from birth, and that following a miraculous operation to cure me, the bandages had been removed from my eyes, and I was seeing the world for the first time. I sat on the bench against the wall of the Chan Hall, gaping wide-eyed at this intensity, this too-much-presentness; still I asked “What is it? What is this?”, as I held onto the arm of the bench for safety, still shaking slightly.

No-one was around. I needed to talk to someone. I’ll see if John is in his room, I thought. I made my way over to the house and went upstairs. “John?” I called, querulously, outside his room with its door ajar. No reply, and I realised I had disturbed the cook taking his rest in the corner. I returned to the yard as quietly as I could, and resumed my seat. Before long Simon emerged from the house. “Simon! Simon! I need to talk to you”, I cried, and he came over and led me into the library and we sat facing one another as we had so many times before. There he was. Here I was. I just sat and looked at him, and he looked at me, and once again, we were just SO. It was overwhelming, and I don’t recall all I said, but I bet I was inarticulate and rambling and crying with the weird wonder of it all. I kept leaning forward intently to look at Simon, and there was nothing in the way, and I grasped his hands and said “You’re Simon, aren’t you?”, and he said “Yes, just me – no projections.” “What is this?” I asked, and he said “You’ve got out of the way.” “Is there a name for it?” I asked a moment or two later, and Simon said “One mind”. I continued to sit facing him, crying and smiling like an idiot, gasps of wonder still bursting from me in rapt astonishment: Simon said “You’ve got me going now”, and we stood up and hugged each other.

I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering up the hill and into the fields, still with the sense of someone newly-born: my limbs felt strange to me, and every look or touch I gave to my surroundings felt fresh and dazzlingly clear. The grass and moss were unutterably grass-y and moss-y: the sheep blinking at me were revealed in all their essential sheep-iness, and I gasped in wonder yet again as I looked at them. (Only “I” was not doing any of this, I guess – hence the sense of unmediated intense clarity in the experiencing that was taking place, devoid of – or, at least, much less coloured by – the normal fog of interpretation with its attachments and disdains.)

I made myself a mug of tea and got some cake from the kitchen, and sat by the stream where it goes through a concrete arch. The stream bubbled away beneath me as the shadows gradually lengthened down the steep wooded valley above the house. Above me were the tight sharp buds on a slender tree, a deep pink in colour, set against the deep blue of the early evening sky. People drifted into view and took up positions here and there to practice Direct Contemplation.

I wandered down into the fields below the Chan Hall again, now in full shadow, and stood among the ewes and lambs for a while. The lambs continued to bleat and bounce around in constantly changing groups and alliances. I turned to see Simon at the door of the hall, and waved, and he beckoned me. I went up and sat in the library with Simon and Jake, and recounted my experience in more detail as far as I could. As I did so, I was swept up in great gusts of the most intense, gutsy laughter possible, and reaching out to feel the solid presence of things in the room, such as the small desk, or my chair. That made me laugh even more. It felt as if the universe was laughing.

Later I shared my experience with John in his room, and we also talked together the following morning in the quiet of the first sit of the day. He told me that, of course, the experience would fade, but that I should not become depressed about it. It would give me confidence. Had I really been silent illumination? It seemed so. I said I felt stunned by what had occurred; but now, looking back a week or two, the more enduring feeling is that of being blessed. As I walked through the park during my lunch break just now, seeing the burgeoning blossom and unfurling leaves on the trees, I knew that it was still there: just out of sight, slightly obscured – but it didn't matter.

One morning after our exercises in the yard, Simon had talked about our normal waking and sleeping states. Did we think we were really awake now, just having left our beds and our unconscious world? He challenged us to really “Wake up!” as we continued to practice. And during another talk he considered Hongzhi's poem “The Lancet of Sitting Chan”, which I think ends with the line, “Where does this wonder exist?”

I did wake up.

I have seen the wonder.

Everything In Its Place **Koan Retreat, April 2006**

I approached the retreat with some trepidation owing to my being workmaster, my first time on a retreat of any size. Previously I had carried out this role, but only on smaller retreats and very much as an assistant. This time I had to get things organised and, most worrying of all, get up in the morning and get things started! Not only that, but make sure I didn't miss giving any signals and let the retreat get behind. The first night I slept badly, dreaming of not waking up. Having got through the first night, and the terrors of dealing with the dreaded Tilley lamps at 4.30 am, things settled down and I began to relax a little and even to enjoy myself.

I selected the koan in which Joshu goes to visit Linchi, who responds to a question about the Dharma by saying ‘Just now, I am washing my feet’. Joshu leans forward as if to hear more, and Linchi looks up and says ‘So, do I need to toss out another ladleful of dirty water’. Joshu then leaves. Something about this slightly edgy dialogue appealed to me, not least the apparently rather sour rejoinders of Linchi. In working on the koan, both reflecting and pondering on it in meditation, it became more resonant and personal and crystallised into Linchi's ‘just now’. What was Linchi's ‘now’?

In the day or so that followed I spun around this phrase, using it as a focus for meditation with increasing involvement and fascination, though with plenty of lapses too. ‘Breathing is so interesting’ I remember thinking at one point. By late afternoon on the third day there was a strong sense of presence and feelings of sweetness and even bliss arising within the meditation. By the time of my interview that afternoon, I was experiencing a very clear but warm state of mind, solidly established and quite steady. The interview however made it clear to me that, while the meditation might be strong, I had missed the point of the koan. What about Joshu? Somehow, I had neglected him completely. A bit cast down I returned to sitting, and later saw

that I should focus more on what had happened between them. What was it that they both understood in that interchange?

The next morning, on the fifth full day, I had a strong image of a connection flashing between the two of them, mirroring their talk and gestures. This image seemed to be the trigger for the unfolding of a whole series of experiences, over which I had no influence or control; I just rode them as they washed through and took me over. During the morning service I had a powerful sense of understanding the 'form and emptiness' phrases in the Heart Sutra; I could not have said what I meant by understanding, it was simply a powerful experience of connection, that these lines were suddenly and briefly meaningful. The sense of connectedness then spread to everything. As I looked around the Chan Hall I felt that everyone and everything was responding to everything else in a continual interplay; in retrospect, almost a dance. I began to cry, deeply and steadily, from neither sadness nor joy, but just in response. The sense of interconnectedness then metamorphosed into something more. The phrase 'part of the sea' came into my mind. From being aware of everything being interconnected, I became completely immersed as part of the ocean. Everything was the ocean in an endless ebb and flow. After a while I emerged from this, only to be swept on into something entirely different.

Suddenly, explosively, with no warning or transition, I was looking down into a void, suspended over vast space as if falling. A phrase leapt into my mind - 'I can't find myself!'. Writing this now, it is impossible to recapture the absolute reality of this experience; the best I can say is that I had fragmented and was scattered like dust throughout this void. This experience was brief, as best I could judge, and I came to in the Chan Hall sobbing deeply and shaken to my core. I felt as if I had been in an explosion, as if a bomb had exploded next to me. I was dazed, disoriented and had a drastic sense of dislocation, as if everything in the world had changed. I sat through breakfast in a dazed state, not frightened or alarmed, but in no condition to take on the duties of a workmaster. The only comparable sense of dislocation I had ever had was after a major bereavement, when it seemed that the whole world was irrevocably and forever changed.

Fortunately I was helped by the guestmaster, who suggested I might go for a walk rather than try to handle the work period. I set off up the hill to find I had entered an extraordinary world. I looked curiously around, examining both inner and outer worlds. At full strength this state of mind must have lasted an hour or more, so I had the wonderful luxury and opportunity of time to observe and appreciate. I knew this was an opportunity to understand something, though I didn't quite know what. 'Tsan' I said to myself. This world was strange, not frightening but abruptly and absolutely different. What were its features?

The first thing that struck me, and continued to strike me, was that everything seemed 'right'. Everything was absolutely in its proper place, doing exactly what it should; every stream, every stone, every tree. The sense of rightness was like coming home after a long journey and seeing a familiar room, with everything in its place, reassuring and deeply satisfying. I sat and admired the wonder and perfection.

The second feature was that I seemed, in a way I could not understand, to be both present and absent at the same time. I had a strong sense of physical presence and I seemed to be able to think and reflect on things, if I wanted to. However, I was absent in the sense that I did not seem to be 'in the way'. Thoughts appeared with great clarity, but once past they left no trace and did not disturb the perfection. There was none of the usual fuss, random reactions and bothersome intrusions, though I only realised later how absolutely all this had cleared away.

Third, and linked to this, was an extraordinary clarity and sense of the aliveness of everything. Looking around, I responded to everything with immediacy and sensitivity. 'The thousand things enlighten me' I thought, and this seemed at the time to be not an insight, but just a recognition, a matter of simple observation.

A fourth feature, deeply puzzling, was the absence of my own personal feelings and responses. There was an immediacy and sensitivity to experience, but somehow without my usual personal responses and feelings. Did I feel good? Did I feel bad? I tried to understand this odd state of affairs. Feeling good or bad, normally such a dominating issue, did not seem to be of much account. Later, coming down the hill, I reflected on this again. Were my feelings important? They didn't seem to be at that moment. Well, if not, what was important? The answer came – walking down the hill. This again is hard to describe. The best I can say is that the raw, simple, complete experience of walking was primary, sufficient in every way. I had a strong sense that all my personal responses were still available, but had been set aside some distance away. They were there but not engaged.

Although I did examine and reflect on these experiences in turn, and it seems clearest to describe them that way, they were not in fact separate. Rather, I gradually noticed different facets of this world. The overall experience, was complete and integrated, powerfully and unarguably so, with all these features simultaneously present. Later in an interview, John asked me if the Dharma seemed obvious at this time. I had not previously thought of it in this way, but replied unhesitatingly that 'obvious' was exactly right. It may have been strange, but everything was just there for me to see and experience.

Sometime later, engaged in the retreat again, I was sitting on a bench and thought of the story in which the monk presents a poem in which the mind is described as like a mirror; practice is to polish the mind so that no dust settles. Hui Neng, responds in his verse to the effect that there is no mind and nowhere for the dust to settle. This seemed perfectly, almost casually, clear to me; a simple matter of description. In the void I had experienced there was obviously nowhere for dust to settle. Writing this now it seems almost arrogant, but at the time it was just as if someone was pointing out a particular kind of tree in the yard.

I was also helped, in an interview, to notice that the sweetness and immediacy had a quality of movement and flow. Did I understand the Heart Sutra in relation to what I was describing? No, I had not thought in those terms; intellectually the Heart Sutra had always seemed quite opaque although I understood it. John reflected back what I had been saying. "Oh, you mean the unfolding quality. Yes, of course". As he spoke I had a strong experience of fragility, of the fragility of the mind and of the world, one aspect of this flow and movement. Yes, John explained, remember the flower the Buddha offered to Mahakashyapa. Suddenly I understood; the flower is the fragility of the world, the sweetness, the flowing, changing quality.

These experiences continued to varying degrees the whole of that day and the next, and after the end of the retreat. Feelings of rightness, immediacy and sensitivity came and went. I began to also notice the sense of flowing and movement, which continued intermittently several days after the retreat ended. All of these were underpinned, by a strong, almost overpowering clarity and illumination which seemed to co-exist with my ordinary mind. The illumination that emerges from silence during meditation, may leave one feeling clear and spacious but the experience afterwards is not quite the same. Now however it was there in the background all the time. I only had to take my attention off my immediate activity, and there it was with an almost physical energy and brilliance.

Reflections later

The experiences continued to echo and bring further reflections. I feel as if I have been given (and given is certainly the word) an incredible 'experiential tutorial' – in which many different experiences were presented for understanding and appreciation. Reading one of Shih Fu's books just after the retreat I saw a description of wisdom. 'Things are as they are, vivid and clear. You can respond appropriately and give what is needed. Clear awareness of things as they are, in this state of selflessness, is what Chan calls wisdom'. This was, for once,

completely clear. Other things continued to clarify; the sense of rightness, it suddenly struck me, exists precisely because one's personal preferences are absent.

I had two interviews after the initial experiences, both enormously important. In the first, I very much needed to talk. I needed above all to share these overwhelming experiences with someone who would understand. I was still very much within the experience so much of the first interview was questions and checking, with my struggling to explain and describe. This interview steadied me and helped things to unfold further. By the next day I was able to reflect more and begin to assimilate the experiences to some extent. John drew much more from me than I had realised myself, expanding my understanding and helping me appreciate what was happening and how it linked to the many things I had read but not fully understood. It is not customary to write about these interviews in our reports, but these interviews strongly influenced the course of both the experience and understanding.

Now, writing again almost three weeks later, I am deeply but quietly grateful for all of this. At the time my sense of gratitude was oddly muted, which was puzzling as on previous retreats I have often had deep feelings of gratitude. I felt initially that this was because the experiences had the quality of being obvious and, in a sense, unremarkable. This may be partly the reason. However, on further reflection something else emerged – the raw fact of my own irrelevance in the face of this experience. This vision of the world, for all its beautiful qualities, was absolutely stark and uncompromising, like being in a wonderful but unforgiving landscape. I am grateful now, but at the time gratitude was perhaps not a possible response to being shown to scarcely exist at all.

What enabled this to happen? A gift certainly. There was nothing to suggest that I was working harder than anyone else; if anything I was struggling to maintain a proper focus. I was tired, and stretched. Being the work master though gave me an important outward focus. I couldn't fuss too much about myself; I was too busy. I am also tempted to think of this as marking a point in a long struggle over the last few years to get myself 'out of the way' in meditation. Gradually, I have more and more seen myself as actively creating problems within meditation and on a previous retreat to actually experience a real surrender. There is something else too, deeply precious beyond any of this. My mother had died two years before. For me, as for many people, a terrible and deeply unsettling loss. I was conscious, and a little apprehensive, that the anniversary would fall during the retreat. Many of my prostrations were in gratitude for my mother. The morning of this second anniversary was the morning of the ocean and the void. Perhaps my mother's final loving gift.



Friends of Manjushree Vidyapith School and Orphanage (FMVSO)

David Brown and Di Gallagher

Last autumn John Crook organized a 2 week journey to the Buddhist sites of Arunachal Pradesh in the Himalayas of North East India. The remote district of Tawang is situated at 10-12,000 feet in an area of outstanding natural beauty but relative impoverishment. Access requires 2 days of tiring journey along winding mountain roads made treacherous by mudslides and avalanches. There is no access by rail or air.

The prime target of the expedition was the Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Tawang, the first refuge of the Dalai Lama when he fled Tibet in 1959. The Tawang region was part of Tibet for over 300 years and was only integrated into India in the 1940's. The town of Tawang lies some 20 miles from the current border with Tibet and only 30 miles from Bhutan's eastern border.

Whilst the whole journey was most memorable, an unexpected highlight for many of the travellers was a half-day visit to the Manjushree Vidyapith School and Orphanage, situated just outside the town of Tawang. The orphanage was founded in 1998 by a dynamic and caring young Buddhist monk, who was born in one of the mountain villages near Tawang.

The harsh climate, difficult terrain and minimal healthcare in this remote and isolated region mean that many adults and children die from disease as well as natural disasters and accidents. Many children are left with either no parents at all or are effectively destitute. Some are also severely physically handicapped.

Manjushree Vidyapith School and Orphanage (MVSO) was established to rescue children whose prospects would otherwise have been very poor indeed. The vision of Manjushree Vidyapith is:

- To provide a home and close-knit loving family for orphans, physically disabled or destitute children of the Tawang district.
- To provide a modern education and sound moral values.
- To inspire the young people to act with a good heart, to become leaders in their communities, and to help bring peace to the world.

Members of the group were all deeply moved and inspired by the incredible work being achieved with scant resources and it was felt that we could and should contribute in some way. As a result, a new charity has been established called Friends of Manjushree Vidyapith School and Orphanage (FMVSO). Website: www.fmvso.org. The mission of FMVSO is to 'help sustain, improve and expand the facilities of the school and orphanage'. FMVSO is a charitable trust, registered with the Charity Commission of England and Wales.

In April-May this year Diana Gallagher returned to Manjushree with her son Rory and they spent 3 weeks living and working at the orphanage. Diana gathered detailed information on needs for support over the next couple of years.

FMVSO is seeking donations to support Manjushree Vidyapith School and Orphanage with funds for the following 3 priorities:

- Support for children through sponsorship of daily living and education costs at a rate of £18 per month per child, ideally to include ongoing communication with individual children.
- To raise £1000 over the next 6 months as the beginning of a fund of £12,000 which needs to be raised over 6 years to support 4 children as they move out of the orphanage and into higher education. Some of the older children will soon be reaching their final years of education at Tawang and will be looking to train for their futures.

- £1000 is required to complete the girls' hostel upper floor ready for occupation, hopefully by August this year. The hostel is partly built from donations received by the orphanage from other donors over the last several years. Even though fund-raising only started recently, FMVSO has already raised over £5,000, most of which has already been transferred to the orphanage bank account towards this building project and so only the relatively small amount of £1000 is needed to complete the project.

There are of course other longer term needs including major building projects but the above three priorities will be the focus for fund raising during 2006.

FMVSO has established links with other UK donors who support Manjushree and they are now contributing to the orphanage through FMVSO. Contributing through a charity has tax advantages for tax-payers and the joint effort also enables a more strategic approach to long term support of the orphanage. In addition we have established links with supporters in the US and New Zealand with whom we are sharing ideas and information.

If you personally would like to contribute then please contact Di Gallagher (Secretary & Treasurer of FMVSO) on orphanage@fsmail.net for details of how to make your contribution.

David Brown (Chair of FMVSO)

Di Gallagher (Secretary and Treasurer of FMVSO)

Remarkable Events in India

Vishvapani

11th October 2006

I'm currently in India, staying in Nagpur, on assignment from Tricycle to cover events around the 50th anniversary of Dr Ambedkar's conversion and the foundation of the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement. As well as this there is huge second wave of conversions underway.

Until now the Ambedkarites Buddhists have largely been from Dr Ambedkar's own community: the 'Mahar' sub-caste of Maharashtra. The movement is now expanding dramatically to include other communities in Maharashtra, notably the Matangs - a second group of ex-'untouchables' - plus the 'criminal and nomadic tribes'. On Monday I was at Diksabhumi, the conversion ground in Nagpur where Dr Ambedkar's own conversion took place. I have never seen so many people gathered together before: 1-2 million people, including many becoming Buddhists for the first time and leaders of communities which will be becoming Buddhist en masse over the next few weeks.

Buddhism is also being adopted by groups in many other Indian states. On October 14th I will be in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, where 200,000-400,000 will become Buddhists. On the same day and on other significant dates in the next two months there will be large ceremonies in Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Punjab, and many other states, in which I think it is reasonable to say that millions of people will become Buddhists for the first time.

A common response to such news is scepticism: how can mass conversion be meaningful, and is this not just politics masquerading as Buddhism. I can only say in response that my impressions of Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra are that they are sincere, many are practicing effectively and the movement has considerable depth - compared with its origins in the 1950s, the community has come a long way both spiritually and materially.

Seeing what is happening here in India I feel I am watching history in the making. These are huge events, and yet they are unknown in the West and almost entirely unreported. If you type any combination of conversions, India, diksabhumi, Buddhist and so on into Google, you will find almost no coverage in either the Western or the Indian media. It is a deafening silence.

I am writing to appeal for your help in telling the world what is happening. These people are among the most disadvantaged in the world, and their choice to seek a new identity in a path that offers non-violence and spiritual depth is truly significant. It is also an important episode in the history of India and of Buddhism as a whole. When there is so much meaningless reportage in the world, it seems important that events like these, which are genuinely significant and a cause for optimism are going unreported. And these events are the best opportunity to get coverage in the mainstream media that we will find for many years.

To address the lack of information I have started a blog:

<http://www.ambedkar2006.blogspot.com>

Each day I am writing a full article including interviews, personal accounts, news, information, background and accounts of the progress the Buddhist movement has made so far. Because I am working for Tricycle and also doing some work for the BBC world service I have access to major figures in this movement, and through my Buddhist friends in India I have opportunities to travel and meet people in many situations here: I will be visiting remote untouchable villages, traveling to Hyderabad and Tamil Nadu, and meeting community leaders. Here are some suggestions for how you might help:

- Read the blog to find out more about what is happening. You can also post comments.
- Pass on this email to others who may be interested and ask them to do the same

- Feel free to copy or reprint any of my articles online or in print magazines:
 - I am an experienced writer and they are produced to a publishable standard.
 - I would only ask that you credit me as author and include a link to the blog site.
 - I am not asking for any payment, though donations to help me cover my costs are welcome.
- Make a link to my blog from any websites you yourself run.
- Follow up any contacts in the mainstream media who might cover the story themselves (or ask me or someone else here to do so).

If you have reliable news of events in India over the coming weeks, or contacts who could help me to gather that, please let me know.

You can contact me at vishvapani@mac.com

Book Reviews

Sun Shuyun (2003), Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud

Harper Perennial, London, £8.99

Eddy Street

My very good friend, Mark has asked if I will go on a pilgrimage with him to the Buddhist sites in India. A first step in Mark's preparation for the trip was to give me this book about a traveller who goes to the very places we plan to visit. I am not the greatest lover of travel books, only the best I have found worthwhile and in itself this is not the greatest travel book but it is a delight for all the other aspects of reflection that it brings.

The author Sun Shuyun grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and her contact with the Dharma was via her grandmother's Buddhist prayers. With this introduction added to a growing awareness from contact with the outside world Sun Shuyun decided that she wanted to follow the footsteps of one of the greatest Buddhist pilgrims of all time, Xuanzang. This is the Buddhist monk who in the 7th century (CE) travelled along the Silk Road from China, across Mongolia, through the area that is now Afghanistan and Pakistan and into India where he collected the sutras, then to return to the court of the Emperor in China. This is the character on which is based the monk in the well-known Buddhist fable 'Monkey'.

In this book I learnt a great deal of what Xuanzang saw during that time and how Buddhism was developing. I learned also about the history of different kinds of Buddhisms and the way in which the political influences of the time have an impact on how the Dharma was practiced. The Chinese devotional practices of a Pure Land variety are very different to other ways in which the Dharma was and is followed. Xuanzang actually became a devotee of the yogacara school during his sojourn in India and his interest served in some way to revive the Dharma in India at the time

I also learnt about the way in which old people continue with their Buddhist practice within totalitarian China and how the imperial Europeans destroyed so many of the artefacts of Buddhist art. All these parts of the narrative are presented with the context of the current political situation in these countries dominated as they are by state direction, Muslim fundamentalism, religious, political and racial persecution. As pilgrimages are also essentially inner journeys, the most significant we learn about in this book is that of Sun Shuyun herself. At the start she acknowledges herself to be a sceptical person brought up within the excesses of a totalitarian regime but with a respectful love for her grandmother but gradually as her geographical journey evolves she acquires an understanding of Buddhism that we would welcome in our own company. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book which gave me an insight into the history of Buddhism that otherwise I would have no knowledge of and which introduced me to a fellow traveller on the path. I good preparation for the journey Mark and I will make.

**Kim Gutshow, 2004, Being a Buddhist Nun
The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas.
Harvard University Press.
John Crook**

“Being a Buddhist nun” is an extremely valuable account of the life of nuns in the Himalayan valley of Zangskar, a region of Ladakh in N.W India. The work is driven by a deep sense of injustice and a compelling focus on its nature and origin in a remote society still basically medieval in character. It is a highly gendered work in a necessarily gendered field of study. It is certainly true that the arrival of women scholars in such fields as primatology and social anthropology has opened up and corrected a perhaps largely unconscious neglect of the feminine by earlier male workers. Patriarchy is not something that ruled in the past, its presence may make itself felt even now in the liberal and democratic West. The gendering of a research topic is of course accompanied by a comparable gendering of review and assessment but fortunately reflexive self-understanding within post-modernity enables discussion to occur without the rancour of a previous generation. It is perhaps none the less unfortunate in this work that a major chapter on marriage, exchange, work patterns and responsibilities of the two sexes is entitled “The Buddhist Traffic in Women” and an illustration of nuns prostrating before a high lama is captioned “Bowing and scraping “. Such use of words reflects a western bias rather than indigenous perspective.

Kim Gutshow had the guts and the determination to endure some thirty nine months of research in one of the most demanding high-altitude environments of Asia, including three winters in the primitive accommodation of a cliff-top nunnery and making three trips down the notoriously dangerous Chador gorge by way of the frozen river. Having studied Tibetan at Harvard she was able in time to develop fluency in the Zanskari dialect. This long term residence and linguistic ability has enabled her to present an unrivalled account of monastic economy and social anthropology in Ladakh. Her text is full of “thick” description, delightful anecdotes, biographies of courageous and not so courageous nuns and accounts of the personal joys and sufferings of individuals. Although she focuses on the often lamentable ways in which nuns suffer discrimination she is not unduly disrespectful of the monastic system to which they belong, rather she subjects it to a prolonged and penetrating examination and interpretation.

Gutshow focused primarily on the nuns of Karsha nunnery but familiarised herself with other nunneries throughout Ladakh. She contextualises her prime focus with detailed accounts of the farming economics and social structure of Zangskar. Although the bulk of this material had been researched in detail earlier, work to which she makes rather scant reference, the specific details of life in Karsha add considerably to a comparative account. It is interesting to note, for an example, that the monks of the great Karsha Gompa use books in their accounting whereas in the previously studied sTongde Gompa across the valley the bulk of the accounting was simply done by memory.

Her prime thesis examines the causes of discrimination in Buddhist society which are often puzzling given the clear statement within Buddhism that men and women are equal and both capable of attaining enlightenment. There is also an equally puzzling contrast between the clear philosophical rejection of any objective reality to social categorisation and the ‘emptiness’ of co-dependent personal terms, and the rigid social enforcement of gender roles both within and without the monastic system. This puzzle is general to Buddhism and appears equally in China as well as in the Himalayas. Only perhaps in modern Taiwan are nuns now accorded a respect similar to that of monks. Folk belief differs greatly from the ethical philosophy of high lamas and it is folk belief that rules. There is a belief, for example, that women cannot attain enlightenment from their female bodies. For this they must be reborn as male. Many women despise their femininity and wish to be reborn as male.

Gutshow sees the prime problem as enshrined in the folk beliefs surrounding the idea of 'merit'. During a lifetime, merit needs to be accumulated so that future rebirths will be an improvement on the present. While this amounts to the clear expression of attachment to self and the operation of desire, both of which prevent any possibility of enlightenment, Buddhist ethics encourage the earning of merit through selfless behaviour. Generosity is therefore a pleasing aspect of Buddhist culture. However, merit can also be acquired through financing monastic ceremonies, teachings, and sponsoring numerous rituals many of which are only remotely Buddhist and hark back to earlier beliefs. Since monks are assumed to be pure, giving to monks acquires more merit than giving to others. Giving to nuns in their disadvantaged female bodies does not rank highly in a process of merit acquisition. There is thus an elaborately developed "economy of merit", which conflates with a differential distribution of gifted wealth to the disadvantage of nuns and the very great advantage of monks. Kim explores and elaborates this thesis in convincing depth. Much of the poverty of nuns and their poor ability to generate income or capital for their institutions arises from this non-doctrinal, folk basis of vernacular Buddhism.

The arrival of female anthropologists and accompanying do-gooders has promoted change in the traditional system so that financial aid is now given, often quite copiously, to nunneries in Ladakh. Gutshow herself has been able to help her nun friends considerably in this way. This has enabled nuns not only to improve their accommodation and buildings but also to spend more time in the study of scriptures and ritual. In general there is steady improvement in the life of Himalayan nuns and this is not only due to outside aid. Attitudes in Ladakh are changing, although the fundamental misconceptions of Buddhist thought seem to remain untouched. The whole doctrine of merit clearly needs re-examination and a new presentation. Kim is however by no means starry-eyed about the future. In her last chapter she points out that such changes in wealth and status have not occurred without resistance and resentment. The partial withdrawal of nuns from labour on their home farms contributes to economic difficulties for their families and a reduced support for monks. Outside influence is not always welcomed. As usual thoughtless or biased do-gooding can be counterproductive. In addition, wealth promotes greed and misuse of funds as well as occasioning theft and fraud. Even so there does seem to be a clear movement towards putting the Buddhist house in order with respect to women's rights. In this the Himalayan example is clearly well ahead of comparable movements elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East. As Kim concludes, outside support together with changing attitudes within the laity "will spell the difference between victory and defeat for Buddhist monasticism in the coming years."

Yet there is some evidence that Kim Gutshow's argument remains slightly parochial. During our recent visit to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh we found large, comfortable well endowed nunneries near the town of Tawang with its famous Gelugpa monastery. At a major empowerment ceremony in the monastery nuns had been allocated some of the prime seating to hear the rimpoche's sermons. I had the impression that nuns in Tawang were well supported and respected in a way Kim did not find in the western Himalayas. These brief observations suggest that a further research enquiry into the differences in the ways nuns are supported between the two ends of the Himalayas would be well worth while.

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.

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

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