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© 2012 WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP LARGE COVER CALLIGRAPHY: 'CHAN' BY MASTER SHENG-YEN

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION BY EDDY STREET

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*As we move forward, New Chan Forum is changing slowly in the way in which it presents itself. When the NCF began the Internet was only in its beginning phases and the Fellowship used the Forum as a context for discussion about ourselves and news of members and local activities. These matters are now ably dealt with digitally on the website and this publication can now focus on its other aims of making available educational material and providing an opportunity for written ways in which we express the Dharma.*

*In this edition, Simon Child, the WCF Teacher, presents the issues that face us in being Western practitioners and in particular he outlines the process of our Western Zen Retreat. This description will be very useful to individuals who are considering coming along to this particular retreat as will the Retreat Reports which are all from participants on a Western Zen Retreat.*

*In a mixture of other articles this edition also offers the 'pleasures' and 'pitfalls' are working with Mu in George Marsh's personal account of his struggle with this koan. George has also edited the poems that are presented.*

*Together with Rob Stratton, I offer a way of looking at the 'calm' in what appears to be 'chaos' in taking photographs. Alysun Jones provides a tribute to David Childs by presenting his own words as he prepared for dying and Ken Jones' haibun in a subtle way also touches on our 'living' issues. Finally, we have a recipe from one of Maenllwyd's long-time cooks, Pam Butler and as she says in her cook's instructions "grind the mixture" – so please do so with all the articles in this issue and see how it tastes!*

## CHINESE ZEN COMES WEST: FINDING NEW EXPRESSIONS WHILE PRESERVING AUTHENTICITY

*Simon Child*

*This is an edited version of a talk given as part of the Distinguished Buddhist Practitioner Lecture series at Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at Stanford California USA May 3rd 2012. It is based an earlier version of the talk given at the Chan Meditation Center in Elmburst, Queens, New York, USA in October, 2008.*

I am going to explore some of the issues which arise in teaching Buddhist practice in the West, and hence in being a Buddhist practitioner in the West. I will give some detail on one particular approach which we have used in our organisation for over 30 years, and which we call the ‘Western Zen Retreat’ (WZR).

As Buddhism has spread around the globe it has encountered differing cultures and has adapted its presentation in order to communicate the teachings more effectively. There are several aspects to this adaptation, including translation into the local language; external forms may be amended, lost, or new forms created; a different emphasis may be given to the various pre-existing methods of practice, and new methods may be developed.

For example, as Buddhism migrated from India to China it made use of local cultural references and terminology, notably from Daoism, and new methods of practice arose such as the *Gongan* method, better known by the Japanese word *Koan*. Similarly, as Buddhism entered Tibet it borrowed from the indigenous Bon tradition in its development there.

My presentation today is about the adaptation that is occurring and needs to occur as we are in the period of Buddhism entering the West and encountering our different cultures. Of course, this is a live issue for all Buddhist groups in the West, and I know others have their own way of understanding and implementing this, but I will be focusing specifically on how I understand some of the issues and what we have been doing in our organisation the Western Chan Fellowship..

### INTRODUCTIONS

My tradition is from the Chinese Chan Buddhist lineage. Chan is not such a well known term, so just to clarify: Chan is the precursor in China of what later became Zen in Japan. Zen is the Japanese pronunciation of Chan. Because Japanese terms such as *Koan* are often better known than their Chinese equivalents, for clarity I may sometimes use Japanese terms where they are broadly interchangeable with the Chinese equivalents.

Though you may have heard of my lineage master, the late Chan Master Sheng Yen from Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, probably hardly any of you have previously heard of the Western Chan Fellowship, nor of me or my teacher John Crook, so I shall start by giving you some background on our Sangha.

## Chan Master Sheng Yen

Chan Master Sheng Yen died in 2009 and was one of the most well-known Chan Masters of modern times, so I do not need to say too much about him. Of note perhaps is that, relatively rarely for a Chinese monk, he was both a serious practitioner having undertaken intensive meditation practice including prolonged solitary retreat, and also a serious scholar having learned Japanese and taken a doctorate in Buddhist studies in Japan. He founded Dharma Drum Mountain, one of the largest Buddhist organisations in Taiwan with branches throughout the world. A particular project of his was to try to bring Chan to the West, and he taught regularly in the US for 30 years. In New York City there is his Institute of Chung-hwa Buddhist Culture and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in upstate New York. There are local chapters throughout the US including the Bay area, and offshoots such as my own organisation and others in Europe.

## John Crook

My immediate teacher John Crook became interested in Buddhism as a teenager following a spontaneous experience of oneness whilst bird-watching in the forest. He found that nobody, neither parents nor teachers nor clergy, seemed able to explain this experience to him, but in the writings of Buddhism he found some understanding of this. He pursued this interest in Buddhism thereafter and throughout his life. When he was drafted for British army National Service and posted to Hong Kong in the 1950s during the Korean war he explored monasteries there and received some teachings. He studied Zoology at university and specialised in animal behaviour, and in 1968-69 he spent a year as a research fellow in animal behaviour in the US at Stanford University. He died suddenly, aged 80, July 2011.

During the late 1960s it was the 'flower power' era on the west coast of the USA and during his time here John became very involved in the personal growth and encounter group movements. He continued this after his return to England, and he took up the practice of meditation much more seriously, learning from both Zen and Tibetan teachers. From a synthesis of personal growth techniques and Zen practice, he subsequently developed what he called the 'Western Zen Retreat' which I shall describe later.

As his original Chan teacher in Hong Kong, Yen Why Fashi, became older and unable to teach, in the 1980s John looked for a new teacher and found Chan Master Sheng Yen and started attending his New York retreats. This led to Master Sheng Yen visiting UK to teach. In 1989 he gave John permission to teach on his behalf, and in 1993 gave full Dharma Transmission to John making him his second Dharma Heir, an unusual recognition for a lay person.

At this time, John asked how he should teach in the West. Sheng Yen replied, "I am Chinese, you are a Westerner, you find out!" Sheng Yen recognised, perhaps from his own experience of teaching in the US that the teaching must adapt to its environment. Subsequently he asked John to bring the WZR to his retreat centre in upstate New York, Dharma Drum Retreat Center, and either John or myself have led this retreat there annually for over ten years, as well as other more traditional retreats.

## Myself

I trained with John Crook from 1981, attending many of his Western Zen Retreats and also later the more orthodox style Chan retreats. I also trained on retreats with Chan Master Sheng Yen from 1992, and in 2000 he gave me transmission as his third Dharma Heir. I had trained with John to lead the Western Zen Retreat and the other retreats that we offer in the Western Chan Fellowship, and I succeeded John by being appointed as head Teacher of the WCF following his death last year.

## Western Chan Fellowship

The Western Chan Fellowship is our lay Buddhist organisation, founded by John Crook in 1997 with myself as founding Secretary. We run a programme of intensive Chan retreats and coordinate local meditation groups across England and Wales, with some associated groups in Europe.

## TRANSMISSION OF DHARMA TO AND WITHIN WESTERN CULTURES

So let us turn to the main theme of this talk, transmission of Dharma to and within Western cultures. What are the problems, what possible solutions, and what have we been doing in the Western Chan Fellowship?

I need to give a caveat here – a health warning. I shall be dealing in generalisations, perhaps even stereotypes, in some of what I present, for example when referring to contrasts between Western and Chinese personalities. Please do not take offence at this. I am generalising for the purpose of exploration to discover themes which may warrant further development, not to pick on individuals and comment on their particular characteristics.

When I use terms such as ‘Western’ and ‘Chinese’ or ‘Asian’ I am referring to a person’s social background, e.g. where they were brought up, and their education and family circumstance, I am not referring to their racial origins. A person with Chinese parents may be a ‘Western’ person with a Western personality and worldview if they were brought up and educated in the West.

On reading my descriptions both Chinese and Westerners may say “I am not like that”. Indeed that may well be true, because there is a great variety in people and of course characteristics overlap. However, there are some points which apply more to most Westerners than to most Chinese, and vice versa; so for the purposes of exploration it is quite fair to generalise.

Nevertheless, we also need to be cautious about generalisations. For example, it is clear that not all Westerners are the same. There are differences between people from different parts of Europe, and of course in the different subpopulations in US. Moreover, of course not all Asian peoples are the same. Also, the Chinese in the US are at least partly Westernised due to where they live and being exposed to Western culture. Similarly some Westerners may be partly Sinicised owing to an interest in Buddhism and an exposure to Chinese and other Asian cultures.

What I am presenting here are not just my own ideas. Even though I am not an academic there is academic research to support some of what I am outlining, for example, in the field of Chinese psychology (e.g. see Bond 2010). I am also grateful to those people, both Western and Chinese, who openly and honestly share their worldview with me, for example in personal interviews on retreat, as this has educated me in the divergence between the Eastern and Western worldviews, including views of self. It is also worth mentioning that the East-West dimension is only a part of this topic. There is also the matter of our living in a different age from the time of the Buddha and the time when Buddhism evolved its forms in Asian countries. As the world, which historically was an agrarian society, has become more globalised and more industrialised, we need to consider how the modern educated mind is able to assimilate expressions which would not have been meaningful in past less-educated times. Therefore, the topic is broader than just 'Eastern' and 'Western'.

Why am I talking about the characteristics of peoples, when we are here to talk about how to express the Dharma? Well, to match the communication to the audience we need to understand the characteristics of the audience.

#### ASPECTS THAT MAY WARRANT CHANGES OF PRESENTATION

There are various aspects to explore. Let us start with:

##### Translation and Cultural Issues

A moment's thought shows that some changes in presentation are required to convey the Dharma to a Western audience. For example, translation from Eastern languages into Western languages such as English is essential because hardly any of us know or will learn the original languages of the teachings. However, translation is not straightforward. Despite the best efforts of the translators, nuances of meaning can be lost in translation, especially when languages such as English and Chinese are structured so differently.

A specific example of translation difficulty is that Westerners do not always understand that when the term 'Mind' is used in Buddhist literature or by a Teacher that it may include 'Heart' or feelings, as the Chinese word *Xin* includes both these concepts in one word: Heart-Mind. This may lead them into misunderstanding that 'Mind' refers solely to processes of thinking and consciousness, and to overlook that the teachings are also addressing the emotional world of the practitioner.

A related issue is that the Chinese word for 'sensation' includes sensation of feeling and emotion. Again this can cause confusion when Westerners interpret this word to be referring only to physical senses such as touch. For example, when taught about the 'doubt sensation' in *Huatou* and *Koan* practice some mistakenly think that they should be looking for a response in their physical senses.

Sometimes translation alone is not sufficient. Western Buddhists typically do not have a background understanding of Dharma from their education at home and at school. Chinese people may have been brought up in Buddhist families, or at least in a culture which knows of Buddhism, and so may have



absorbed Dharma concepts as part of their primary worldview. Hence, Westerners may bring more ignorance and misunderstandings to their practice and usually need more education in basic Dharma.

To take a step further, forms of expression whether in words, or in physical objects such as statues, or in ceremonial events, may not have resonance for people who have been brought up with a different symbolism as part of a different culture. Therefore a 'cultural translation' or explanation may be required as well as a translation of content. It may be more appropriate to tie-in to the symbolism of the audience rather than trying to explain symbolism from another culture. For example many old Chan stories have culturally-based imagery such as dragons and lotus and jade which need explaining to Westerners – why waste time explaining if we can use examples already known from our own upbringing?

Just as Chan in arriving in China incorporated features of Daoism, perhaps now in the West Chan should find a way to use Western cultural concepts, perhaps even to replace some of the familiar Daoist and other historic cultural references. This might be as trivial as using stories, images, and personalities from sport or soap operas, but more seriously we can also make use of cultural and psychological archetypes and modes of expression such as the unconscious.

### Education and the Thinking Mind

I am told that traditional Chinese education is somewhat 'authoritarian' and hierarchical, with students learning facts from an authority figure whom they are to assume is correct. In contrast we Westerners are taught to question and evaluate for ourselves, challenging the teacher if what we are told does not make sense. We are taught to use thought and logic to approach problems and consider the validity of proposals. It is a natural habit for us to respond in this way. This affects our response to Dharma instruction and our relationship to our teachers.

Hence, typically, Chinese are more willing than Westerners to accept authority figures, to put their own opinion and ideas down when hearing those of an authority, to be more humble about their own views. Westerners may not accept the word of a Master. We may be willing to be proved wrong, but only if the case against our viewpoint is well argued! This may be arrogance, but more often it simply the way we have been educated, to have an enquiring mind which respects facts and argument more so than authority.

Consequently, Master Sheng Yen commented that Westerners were less likely to do just as they are instructed when explained a method of practice. He said that a Chinese practitioner will take the instruction then go and apply it. A Westerner will ask questions wanting to know – how it works – what evidence there is for it – percentage success rates at reaching Enlightenment – how to estimate progress – how long it will take to succeed – documented case studies; and so on.

If these concerns are brushed aside as irrelevant the Westerner may decide not to take up the practice assuming it must be just superstition if there is no adequate theoretical or evidential basis for it.

## Model of Self

In general Asian peoples, not only the Chinese, may have what psychologists refer to as an 'Embedded Self'. Their sense of self is embedded in their family and community, and they have much less sense of a personal self which is separate from others than do Westerners. Culturally it may be regarded as shameful, lacking in humility, to talk about or be concerned about one's self, one's own feelings and emotions.

Meanwhile Westerners have an 'Individual Self'. They do have concern for their family and friends, but they also have a clear distinction in their mind between their self and their family. We Westerners naturally do talk about ourselves and our opinions, which is a way to learn about ourselves as we discuss with friends, and it is also a way of repentance in owning up to our errors and foolishness. It is also a way of compassion, allowing another a hearing to let them talk about themselves.

Consequent to these differences, people from different backgrounds may hear a very different message when they hear the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. Chinese may hear a message about putting down self as being a way to end the social errors of selfishness and hence have no reservation about it. However, Westerners may hear a quite different message. Having identified with their individual self it can seem that no-self implies annihilation and they sometimes interpret this quite literally as meaning they may disappear and no longer be able to relate to their partners or family. This needs explaining to Westerners. I occasionally have to reassure frightened practitioners that they are in no danger of disappearing but simply that if they continue to practice it is their faulty understanding of self which is the only thing liable to disappear.

So Chinese may experience this doctrine as something very positive and to be welcomed, while Westerners often feel threatened by a misunderstanding that this is about 'getting rid' of a self which they actually find quite natural and useful. These are two very different hearings of the same teaching with both based on the differences of the upbringing of the hearer.

## Monasticism v. Lay Life

Historically the main training methods evolved exclusively for a monastic model of practice with lay people rarely engaging in intensive and ongoing training of the mind. This history can mislead us into assuming that only monastics can reach deep realisation. It can also mislead us into thinking that we must all aspire to a monastic model of training as the only valid approach because that is the one that has been handed down to us.

We are in a different situation in the West (and it is changing in the East too) and our practice needs to adapt to this. Nearly all Western practitioners are lay people. This means they usually have busy and committed lives with work and family and less opportunity for formal sitting practice, so they must rely more on continuing practice away from retreat and off the cushion. For those who proudly say they meditate 30 minutes almost every day I coined a phrase, '23.5 hour Zen' and ask them 'How about practising all the rest of the time, not only during formal sitting periods?'

The challenges of everyday lay life such as work and relationship issues can be part of a more thorough training if practitioners take up methods which they can apply in their particular circumstances. Engaged Buddhism is a term which for some may be narrowly identified with specific political activism or charitable helping. But it can also be understood as a broader concept which points to various forms of practising within one's everyday life. These might be international and global, but might be local and small-scale, or even on a scale of one – engaging in your own life wholeheartedly and mindfully.

Therefore, an emphasis on cultivating everyday awareness, supported by the precepts and by contact with fellow practitioners, your lay *Sangha*, is one way forward here. This enables us to continue investigating the nature of our mind as it reacts to differing circumstances throughout the day.

### Karma and Rebirth

Many Westerners do not accept the doctrine of past lives (though it is also true that many others do). In both Europe and the US some practitioners raise this with me as a problem for them. An explanation and presentation of the process of cause and effect is required to take account of this. Cause and effect can still be explained without needing to assume a literal acceptance of rebirth. The Buddha did not ask us to believe his teachings, he asked us to test them for ourselves and see if we find them useful. So, we do not need to impose doctrines on practitioners who do not find them helpful or who may find them confusing or off-putting because they are not supported by scientific evidence.

There is another issue in this area. In the Buddha's times rebirth was seen as a 'bad' thing – a failure to escape the cycle of death and rebirth and hence exposure to another round of suffering existence. In a reversal of this understanding some Western practitioners, especially those from Christian backgrounds, may understand rebirth as 'salvation' and another opportunity to gain the enlightenment they may fail to gain in this life! This can lead to a lazy attitude to practice – "life isn't too bad now, and I'll get another chance next time around, so I don't need to be too concerned about my practice".

### Devotional Practice

Westerners involvement in and response to 'devotional' practices such as chanting, making offerings, and prostrations, is quite variable. Some will adopt them quite willingly and comfortably, but others will be inclined to reject these as superstitious or theistic phenomena. Some may interpret them functionally, such as following or respecting tradition, or using chanting as a concentration practice. Others may find them touching the heart in various ways, such as the use of prostrations for practice of repentance or gratitude. So again these teachings need to be presented in a way which takes account of these divergences of understanding, in order to avoid confusing the audience.

### Motivation to Practice

Typically, Westerners are goal-orientated, seeking self-development, seeking relief from distress, or seeking Enlightenment, so at least in the early stages their practice is very self-centred. This is not necessarily so for a Chinese person who has been brought up in a Buddhist family and is simply and

naturally continuing the family tradition as a 'habit' or a cultural norm, perhaps even a 'religious duty'. These different motivations need different teaching approaches to engage such persons. Master Sheng Yen commented that, being driven by seeking personal gain, Westerners often put more effort into their practice, but that their weakness is in failing at long-term persistence. He said the opposite applied (in both respects) for his Chinese students.

Whilst we recognise the importance of the Enlightenment experience, John Crook was always careful to set it in the context of a lifelong 'Enlightening Path'. It's not a matter of seeking an experience and then treating it as an endpoint or a credential of some sort, but more like a step in steadily developing one's human potential in an ongoing manner.

### Taking it Forward

Methods of practice and teaching have changed over the centuries, in response to the needs of practitioners and the circumstances of their culture, education, etc. I think we could use the term 'evolution' here, and I find it interesting to reflect that all of this past evolution of the practices and methods of presenting the Dharma occurred in response to the needs and characteristics of Asian practitioners. As I have discussed, this may not all be applicable to Western lay practitioners because of our differing psychology, culture, and education, and indeed may even be unhelpful in some cases such as where Westerners misunderstand letting go of attachment to self as a denial or annihilation of self. I believe this process of change needs to continue, in some cases maybe needing only minor tweaks such as translation or finding new metaphors, but there is also scope to consider more major changes such as developing new methods of entering the practice.

Westerners are used to learning through interaction and to exploring their problems by discussion. The traditional Chan/Zen interview with the Teacher focuses on the method of practice, but we find it can also be helpful in retreat interviews to allow time for discussion with participants of the obstructions arising in their minds. This can help them to let go of attachment to their concerns and to then settle more deeply into their practice.

For some this raises a question as to the boundary between Chan and therapy. However, remember that a key purpose of practice is to clear our obstructions through whatever methods are effective (skilful means), so that we can penetrate to the underlying basis of mind. Remember that the Buddha was also in some sense a 'therapist', using devices to help to release people from everyday suffering, and one of his titles was the Great Physician. For an example of this read the story of Kisagotami and the mustard seed where he helped a young woman come to terms with the death of her child by leading her to realise that death comes to all (see *Kisagotami Theri* translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2010). Helping people relieve the obstructions caused by internal conflicts in their minds is an important step in facilitating them to focus on their investigation of mind.

Westerners will tend to employ the thinking mind. They have been brought up to rely on this, so we need to accommodate this tendency. Thinking is not 'It' but use can be made of thinking on the Path. Instead of telling people not to think, we find ways to harness thought to enter the practice.

In our Western Zen Retreat we use a 'communication exercise' to help practitioners use thought to exhaust thought. We do not teach that the answer is to be found in thought, but we show practitioners ways to use thought to go beyond thought, to use words to go beyond words. The communication exercise is a specially constructed verbal exercise which is not a conversation, and neither is it psychotherapy. Sometimes it is called 'communication meditation' because it is actually a form of meditation, and it is introduced with careful and detailed instruction.

### Western Zen Retreat

The Western Zen Retreat is a retreat format designed by John Crook in 1975, arising from his experience of traditional Zen retreat and also his experience of personal growth work. Because of these mixed origins it can be easy to misunderstand it, and it has been misrepresented as being not a 'proper' Buddhist retreat but more like 'therapy' or a 'psychology workshop' but this is not the case. It is actually quite a difficult process to describe as to understand it properly really requires the experience of the retreat.

The form is very much as a traditional Zen retreat, with a rule of silence, rising early, a strict schedule of sitting meditation practice, work practice, Dharma talks, individual interviews, and so on. It is a five-day event, commencing one evening, running through four full days, and then ending on the following morning or afternoon. The practice is based on investigation of the *Huatou*, a short phrase often taken from a koan. This is one of the traditional methods of focusing on a question; a question that does yield to a logical solution. Typically we use the question 'Who am I?' though other questions may also be used. Inserted into the retreat and replacing some of the sitting meditation periods, is an exercise derived from the personal growth movement, but modelled on the Teacher/student Zen interview. We call this a 'communication exercise', or 'communication meditation'. Confusingly it uses speech and yet it is definitely not a conversation nor a conventional spoken interaction. What occurs during this exercise is carefully constrained by the rules we specify about how these periods are to be used. I will try to explain how this works, but you do really have to experience it rather than to try to think yourself into it.

These half-hour communication meditation periods are broken into segments by a bell being rung every five minutes. Practitioners sit in pairs, the pairings being different for each separate half-hour exercise. During the five minutes, only one person speaks in answer to their question which is put by the partner: (typically) "Tell me who you are". The speaker then tries to share his/her experience of who they are, and the other person listens and does not interfere in any way. They do not respond, converse, argue, approve, or do anything. They appear somewhat passive but are attentive and maintaining eye-contact (mindful listening).

After five minutes, on the sound of the bell, the roles are reversed. Now the other is responding to their own question, which may also be "Tell me who you are", but it is instructed that they respond from their

own internal inquiry, not by responding to the comments of the one who just finished speaking. This is not a conversation and the two 'responses' are kept separate even though they may naturally cover the same content to some extent.

Initially the responses may be somewhat conventional: name, age, occupation, marital status, children etc. But the question is put again every five minutes and so then what to say? Repeat the same? Or find something else to say?

Repetition may occur, but naturally drops away. Not only does it bore the speakers to say the same thing over and over, they also do not feel satisfied with these responses. They have a sense that there is more to who they are than just a list of attributes and roles, and so the question remains unanswered.

As the exercises continue, and they are moving to different pairings, they naturally reflect internally, "Well who am I? This is curious, I can't say", and then something comes to mind which seems to relate to their sense of who they are and they share that with their partner. Perhaps it is a story from their past which seems significant in some way, perhaps some feeling arises in the moment which is shared, or perhaps something else. Again, this does not bear repeated retelling. Whilst it somehow relates to their sense of who they are, it does not encapsulate the whole; they cannot find a way to express who they are.

The internal inquiry continues during periods of conventional sitting meditation, which occur for at least half the periods of the retreat, approximately alternating with communication exercises. In both sitting meditation, where they internalise the question in the traditional format of working on a koan or huatou, and in communication exercises where in essence they do the same but additionally vocalise their internal responses, the participant asks themselves their question. In each case they do not find a response which gives a sense of satisfying the enquiry.

This becomes very puzzling, even disconcerting. "Why can I not say who I am, it seems such a simple question, and an important question, and yet not only can I not find words I also am beginning to realise that I do not really know who I am".

They are moving towards entering the doubt described in traditional koan practice, and generally do so more quickly than in a traditional retreat format as they are aided by the communication exercise. In traditional sitting many people waste a lot of time in dullness and day-dreaming, but when a bell rings and another person sitting in front of you requests a response this brings you out of any dullness and focuses you sharply on the question and hence avoids waste of practice time.

Practitioners become deeply engrossed in their question over the course of just a day or two and are now engaged in traditional huatou practice, investigating the question spontaneously at all times, when sitting, when eating, when working, on waking in the night: "How ridiculous that I do not know who I am. Who am I? Who is walking? Who is tasting the food?" and so on.

They have used words and thinking to enter the practice, but now they are moving beyond words and thinking, having found that these do not satisfy, and now enter a wordless internal investigation into their own experience of being themselves in the present moment. If words arise which might be grasped as 'answers' they have a mechanism in the communication exercise to test and discharge them and so not be deflected from practice by believing they have found an 'answer'.

There are traps that can be fallen into on this retreat and our leaders are well-trained in managing what can be a challenging process, by monitoring the proceedings and by quite frequent personal interviews with the participants. I do not need to go into all these issues now, but what I do want to do is to highlight some of the several processes for the participants which go on in parallel on this retreat.

This use and encouragement of words and thinking seems more effective as way of getting practitioners to move beyond thinking than simply telling them not to think. We let them use their thinking to the point when it exhausts itself and has no more responses and then they naturally enter no-thought. This is better than, as some may try, using their mind to try to suppress thought. As the Chan poem the *Xin Xin Ming* (Affirming Faith in Mind) tells us "Attempts to stop activity will fill you with activity." Chan Enlightenment is not found through thought, but that does not mean that thinking should be suppressed. Dogen instructed "Not trying to think", but he followed that up by saying, "nor trying not to think".

A key point is that as I have described, this method is a quick and effective way to get practitioners to enter the doubt which is an essential part of traditional huatou investigation.

Repentance is an important part of Chan practice, and is also facilitated in this retreat. By sharing with others, what arises in the mind, one is sharing one's mistakes. Naturally, unless you are very hard-hearted, in talking to another of your mistakes you will also reflect on these and learn from them. It can happen that we try to protect ourselves by only telling the part of the story that makes us look good, avoiding acknowledging our error and shame. Interestingly this type of story tends to recur to the mind and needs to be retold, until eventually it is told fully and honestly, and then with humility and repentance release from the story can occur.

We carry, often unknown and unseen, fixed views that we have acquired from our culture, from our parents and teachers, and from our life-experience. These become habits of thought, attitude, and action, and may influence us in ways we do not understand. The self-exploration of this retreat can uncover these habits, for example as we find ourselves telling a story and recognise that our part in the story exposes an impulsion to a way of responding that may not have been the most appropriate. This discovery allows a re-evaluation of these views which can free us to drop them as they are often time-expired and not relevant to our current lives. Nearly everyone completing this retreat leaves feeling freed of some burden, often in a quite significant way.

The seemingly 'passive' part of the exercise, listening to another, is a very important aspect of the process too. Hearing the heartfelt stories of the many fellow retreatants, including the difficulties of their

lives and their acknowledgement of their guilt and shame, leads to profound compassion for the human condition. It may also normalise our understanding of what we may have considered to be our uniquely difficult circumstances – it turns out that others suffer too, perhaps even worse than us!

Whilst calming the mind is an important aspect of this retreat, you could say that the WZR primarily emphasises investigation of the mind. Experience shows that many meditators can get trapped in the comfort of calming the mind but find difficulty making the transition to the inquiry aspect of practice, investigating the mind. We find that practitioners who have taken part in the WZR learn about investigation in a very experiential way, and are able to carry this learning into more traditional retreats such as our Silent Illumination and *Koan* retreats, and importantly also into their everyday life experience, whereas others may find this a more difficult concept to grasp and are more at risk of getting stuck in quietism.

#### POSTSCRIPT

In exploring these issues, I am not wishing to suggest a fundamental underlying difference between Chinese and Western minds, nor between the Enlightenment potentials of different peoples, not at all. I am merely pointing to what we might regard as ‘superficial’ differences between minds, based on culture, upbringing and education. These ‘superficial’ differences are important because it is the ‘surface’ of our mind which contacts and interprets the environment, and specifically which encounters then responds to Buddhist teaching and methods.

You could say that I am also looking mainly at the superficial aspects of the practices, the entrances to the practices. However, practice entrances are important. It is not so often that a person is open to direct mind to mind transmission, what Bodhidharma referred to as Entrance through Principle. But we can find methods of practice to teach as entrances to the Way. Once fully engaged then the history of the practitioner and the entrance chosen seems less important, as in any case they are by now practising in the traditional ‘mode’ of wordless inquiry.

I have been exploring the reasons why we sometimes present the teachings a little differently to the traditional methods, and hopefully establishing the validity of doing so. Always we must be, and are, careful to preserve the heart of the practice, but for continuation to the next generation we must also be careful to communicate the Dharma in a manner that is effective and is understood by the recipient. The Buddha adjusted his teaching to his audience, and as Dharma is a relative newcomer to the West it seems appropriate that we continue to do the same. Hence alongside the traditional practices we also offer these alternative approaches to practice.

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## CONSOLATIONS: PREPARATION FOR DYING DAVID CHILDS (1946–2011)

*A Tribute by Alysun Jones*

*And so, full of his life, came  
not to the falls, the whirlpool or the cliff  
but to the brim  
and held a moment above it  
seeing everything.*

From 'Notes' by David Childs (2010)

How do we, or indeed, do we, prepare, or think about our own deaths, as Buddhists? Having a life threatening illness may trigger thoughts about dying. But we all face death at some point. It is our common humanity.

David was not a Buddhist. Having said that, he studied more Buddhist texts than I ever will. He sat in meditation regularly. He had a deep, enquiring mind. He faced his coming death.

Towards the end of his life David began to write a series of 'Consolations'. A total of twenty five thoughts to prepare and steady him in the process of dying ahead. These remained unfinished and in note form. They may be helpful in aiding us to think about death with eventual acceptance, as David did.

Many of the 'Consolations' are immediately accessible and need no added comments, like the following, very touching attitude to dying:

*Just be Brave  
Attractively simple, like relaxing in the face of something too massive, mixed and complicated to work out. From a little child I knew how to do that and it's something a little child can do. Just be brave.*

And, simply:

*The relief of getting rid of things.*

In other consolations, David seems to be helping turn the mind in such a way that death appears to be quite natural. This helps to protect us against what David refers to as the 'No, please no' attitude to death:

*Imagining an extreme future where you would never have been  
Or that the next generation will die and the one after that – However much you wish not to die, its naturalness is shown by the idea of children dying before you. Or your grandchildren.*

Linked to this, in some 'consolations', he imagines life continuing, much as ever, but without him there..

*Love the tenderness of youth  
As what you know and is now independent of you. A couple turned and smiling at each other. Although out of your life, the loveliness of that is going on.*

Most of us have, at some time, recognised a fear of death, and David, in his early life, used to experience this as a kind of existential panic. However, with his typically curious attitude, David wanted to explore and investigate, despite the apprehension:

*This is a special chance to find out and say something about death. Its happening is different from the knowledge that might be experienced earlier in life as panic realisation (though that panic is also still there). The earlier question is largely to do with how to live with fear; this is about how to face an imminent ending. It's a new discipline, an unavoidable need for working out something new. Even if, as usual, it can be neglected like a long night's sleep before the dawn execution.*

What follows on is his attempt to work through this 'new discipline'. In doing so he seems to discover how death and life and awareness are intimately connected, how holding on to life and its possessions, results in a panicky terror of dying, and visa versa:

*Death(s) and live(s) corresponding. A tender sadness in death, gentle and regretful, but 'carried' corresponds to having achieved a love for the freshness and vitality, the waking of living (and so the terror of everything wrenched away parallels the business of living for the collection of attributes or stuff.)'*

Awareness seems pivotal in living and dying. Indeed, central to the function of our lives. The very first 'consolation' expresses our intrinsic function of awareness in the world:

*Mind without object is dreaming. Mind with its own objectives is egocentric, self-creating, fantasy. Object without mind is indeed objective. Lump. Animal awareness brings the world to light. Human awareness to knowledge.... Perhaps it is only we who can bring things out in this way so they are known, present rather than just happening; noise, fire and blood perhaps but still happening. Those words are not a proposition or a dogma, but an instruction how to be, so that the description is always true. Of course the world exists without us but it cannot shine out.*

I recall here Dogen's Self-receiving *Samadhi*:

Grass, trees and walls bring forth the teaching for all beings, common people as well as sages. And they in accord extend this dharma for the sake of grass, trees and walls. Thus, the realm of self-awakening and awakening others invariably holds the mark of realisation with nothing lacking, and realization itself is manifested without ceasing for a moment.

In his final days in intensive care, wired up to many monitors and mains oxygen, David was trying hard to communicate something to his children. No one really understood what he meant when he said 'I don't need to protect myself'. Only later, reading these 'consolations' did I finally understand that he was referring to letting go of any self concern. This is expressed as:

*So there is something like discernment which must develop through practise and experience but also needs balance that comes with not needing to protect oneself and being able to have a general good natured sympathy to everyone else.*

Finally, the very last 'consolation', hastily scribbled on a memo note perhaps captures the essence of David's thought best of all:

*All this talking misses the real point. Just go outside into the weather where the air is moving and something lives and grows.*

## POEMS: THE FRAGRANCE OF DUST

*Poems by James Norton*

*Edited by George Marsb (georgemarsb@ntlworld.com)*

*We welcome a friend in the dharma, James Norton, whose new collection *The Fragrance of Dust* is launched in July 2012 by Alba Publishing ([www.albapublishing.com](http://www.albapublishing.com)). James is an Irish writer and a student of Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Sakyong Mipham, James has kindly allowed us to print here a sample of the poems and haiku from his book.*

## MUTE CELESTIAL

*Into black the amber pours  
The ripeness of an afternoon.  
A bald head gleams, an upraised glass  
Sparkles into emptiness. Take out the pen.*

*Its shadow creeps across the page  
Like a gnomon fingering a dial.  
Wait for it—perhaps this time  
Voice the mute celestial.*

*Fold the paper, put the pen away,  
Hapless un-annunciate.  
The little thing too huge to say;  
Mumble thanks and slink outside.*

*On the corner, in the rain  
The promise offers yet again.  
Smells of fruit and flowers float  
Above the hawker's guttural shout.*

*Buy a loaf and eat it on the way.*

## AT THE AILLWEE CAVES

*Tongue be still  
and mind quiet, clear  
as a stone pool.*

*Heart, swell.  
Be ample as these caverns,  
full of listenings.*

*Bring here a lifetime's roaring  
and say, enough:  
here is the living core.*

*Bow, head and stiff neck,  
as a bear, as a deer drinking;*

*to the kill, and to the gorging;  
to the red on snow, to the melting  
and to the new green;*

*the first coming of the upright ones;  
and to the last cindered star, bow.*

## WHAT THE SHED-BOY SAID

*Poor folk about me  
 'prisoned by their bricks, glazed  
 and mortar'd-in—what's rain to them,  
 its music playing leaf & stone—  
 do they hear the gardens sing?  
 But worry what the house is worth—  
 whether to buy, or let, or sell.  
 Carpet-muffled comes the storm.  
 The oak above me shakes its crown;  
 never so many acorns fell.  
 Last night I heard the vixen scream;  
 the dogs went wild and bayed a while.  
 And so I thought — yeh,  
 blest that in a cabin dwell.*

## HAIKU

*Who's more wide-eyed  
 them or us—?  
 Nest of wild kittens*

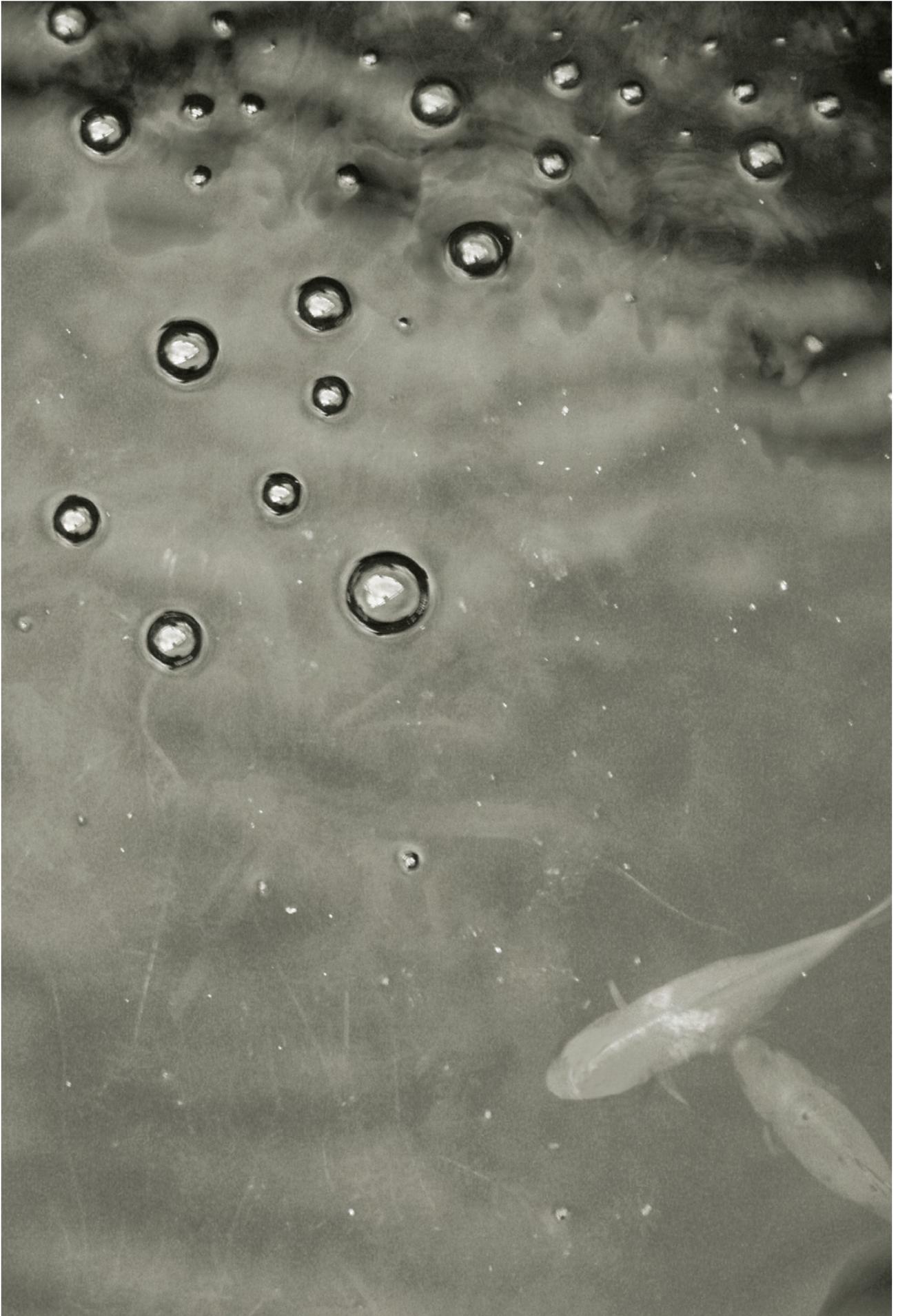
*In the cries of swans  
 the winter lake finds voice  
 reeds white-feathered*

*Clouds underwater  
 sail through the flooded trees  
 their shadows lapping*

*Leaf-drip—  
 an invisible roofer tap-taps  
 nails into fog*

*Washing its face  
 so very daintily  
 a graveyard rat*

*Mountain rain  
 in this hooded jacket walks  
 my ancestor*



## MEANINGLESSNESS THAT MAKES SENSE: WORKING WITH MU

*George Marsh*

Traditional *koan* study under a fierce Japanese Roshi is tough.

...each session had its own special terror. Novice monks were repeatedly whacked with a *kyosaku* that looked more like a long baseball bat. Monitors patrolled the room menacingly, taunting and poking with the stick to see if your attention would wander from *Mu*. But *zendo* drama paled in comparison to meeting *Mu* in the *dokusan* room. “What is it?” Roshi would roar, inches from your face. Periods of *zazen* were a quest to find something essential, something that would make the utterly exposed humiliation of *dokusan* less devastating... sometimes your best answer, wrought from hours of painful sitting, just made him shake his head as if to say, “My God, just how dull are you?”...Presenting my understanding to Roshi would result in his hair-raising roar: “You have explained the meaning, but now SHOW ME!”

(Grace Schireson in Ford, and Blacker 2011. p283).

“What is *Mu*?” People who have a natural flair for living in the moment and delighting in ‘What Is’ do not need this *koan*, but seekers after meaning, and neurotics like me, desperate to work out how things hang together and what they are for, do need it. As an academic, I concluded quite early on that the study of literature and philosophy was not going to satisfy my need for meaning. Knowledge of ideas would not bring me to feel at home in the world – I would need some form of experiential realisation. The greatest challenge was my reading about the holocaust – life and death and meaning in extremis. It posed the ultimate question, and not one that a bookish answer would ever settle.

Logotherapy came out of Auschwitz with Viktor Frankl, who concluded that meaning was going to be found outside oneself, by giving oneself to something greater. Bruno Bettelheim came out with a psychology of healing stories. Primo Levi came out with the bleak conclusion that we are either The Saved or The Drowned (though he wrote about exceptional people later). A balanced academic synthesis of this learning would be nowhere near good enough for me. It was not reason that would answer. William Blake had written something stunning about the status of Reason which I always found fertile:

Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight.  
(The Marriage of Heaven and Hell)

I sought the Energy. I had some experiences of what Blake calls the Energy and I thought of them as sort-of religious experiences, though I was not a believer. I refer to those times when you forget yourself in a transcendent absorption in watching dragonflies mating, or a disappearing speck of skylark filling heaven and earth with song, or a lake so still you dare not breathe for fear of disturbing it, times when the numinous is glimpsed in things and the world is made fresh. To quote Blake again:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite, and in my experiences of those times out of time, that is how it felt, infinite. It was difficult however to interpret or theorise these glimpses and make meaning. What was the numinous? What does “infinite” mean? How to conceive of it? A sort of god? The experience is blissful and perfect. Is it a glimpse of ‘love’ running through the creation? A personified god was absurd to me. Perhaps it was best described by what the Buddhists called Buddha Nature and progressive theologians called the Ground of Being which could be found in all things, or at least in some things, at least in wonderful things. But what about in Auschwitz?

Joshu’s *Mu* has enormous prestige in the canon of Zen history and Zen literature due to the stunning claims made for it since Mumon, the editor who put it first among Zen koans in 1228, called it the Gateless Gate, “the one barrier of our faith”. He wrote, in what is surely the best literary blurb in history:

Make your whole body a mass of doubt, and with your three hundred and sixty bones and joints and your eighty-four thousand hair follicles concentrate on this one word “*Mu*”. Day and night keep digging into it. Don’t consider it to be nothingness. Don’t think in terms of “has” or “has not.” It is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball. You try to vomit it out, but you can’t...Gradually you purify yourself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes... You are like a mute person who has had a dream...Suddenly *Mu* breaks open...At the very cliff edge of birth-and-death, you find the Great Freedom...you enjoy a samadhi of frolic and play.

(trans. Robert Aitken, quoted in Ford, and Blacker 2011 p19).

Joshu’s *Mu* is a snatch of dialogue. A monk asked Joshu, “Has a dog Buddha Nature?” Joshu answered, “*Mu*.” (trans. Sekida 1977). That’s it. But this apparently daft bit of dialogue is reputed to be transformative and generations of brilliant adepts and teachers swear to its great power to drive one on to enlightenment, so those of us seriously studying Zen have to take it on trust that it is worth sweating blood to understand it. First, a few footnotes. Joshu was a Chinese master of the ninth century called Zhaozhou Congshen, and the Chinese word he used was “*Wu*,” not “*Mu*”. His editor in 1228 was Wumen but the Japanese call him Mumon. We use the Japanese forms of these names and of *Mu* by convention because it is largely through Japanese translators that Zen has reached the West.

Chinese has no words for ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Have you got any money? Got. Can you give me some? Not give. “*Wu*”, like the modern Chinese expression *meiyou*, means, “not have.” Has a dog Buddha Nature? Not have. By extension, *Wu* – or *Mu* – has a range of negative meanings, including “Nothing,” and “Without.” Sekida (1977) takes the *Mu* in this *koan* to mean Nothing. The triple-named Americans in *The Book of Mu* seem to have chosen to read it as ‘No’. Joshu’s *Mu* is familiarly known in American Zen as ‘the No koan.’ Some footnoters tell us that dogs would have been thought of as low, dirty creatures, but I do not think that the status gap makes much difference for the purposes of our koan.

There is an earlier version of this *koan* in which Joshu answers, “Yes,” to one monk and, “No,” to a second monk; and there is an even earlier version in which an unnamed Master says, “Yes,” when asked, “Does

a dog have Buddha Nature?” but, “No,” when he is asked, “Do you have Buddha Nature?” But never mind the scholarly background, the stripped-down version that Mumon gives us in 1228 in *The Gateless Gate* is wonderfully essential and leaves no escape. Has a dog Buddha Nature? Not have. Nothing. Without. No.

Buddha Nature is the Essence, the Ground of Being, the numinous, the transcendent. In religious language it is the divine, but the phenomenon does not have to be described in religious terms and one could call it the life force or a mystery or use Blake’s term, Energy. It is called by some Tang teachers *The Unborn*, and by others *One Mind* or the *Absolute*. No doubt, it substantially overlaps with what some people in a different tradition call ‘God’. I am struggling with the language here, as people have through history. Associations with words like ‘divine’ and ‘God’ take us in a dangerous direction, but it is clear that the question about having Buddha Nature is absolutely fundamental. What is sacred? What is ‘God’? Is there a spiritual dimension to life? Spiritual is another unsatisfactory quasi-religious word, but it is the known English shorthand for what I would rather call awareness, though that is a bit flat. We will use the koan’s phrase Buddha Nature.

The Buddha taught that all sentient beings have Buddha Nature. Everything has Buddha Nature. So my first responses contemplating this koan were to wonder what Joshu was playing at, contradicting what we all know to be true: we have felt the presence of Buddha Nature and we have found it deep in ourselves in the great silence of meditation. We would have difficulty defining it and we do not mind if you call it something Christian or Atheist or Hindu or poetic. However, there is something more than inanimate material, something mysterious and creatively fertile and wonderful in us and around us and in all things, surely... isn’t there? And it is not about a dog, is it, although the dog is a charming character in this story. It is about me. Do I have Buddha Nature? Not have. Nothing. No, says Joshu, echoing the story of the originator of Zen, Bodhidharma, who told the Emperor Wu, when asked what the first principle of the ‘holy teachings’ was: “Nothing holy.”

I have been told many times that you cannot solve a *koan* rationally, that *koans* are designed to frustrate your rational habits of thought and put enormous pressure on you, until, as Mumon says:

Gradually you purify yourself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes... Suddenly Mu breaks open... At the very cliff edge of birth-and-death, you find the Great Freedom.

Nevertheless, I must start by clearing the way with some logic. What if Joshu had said, “Yes”? I ask myself. The answer would imply that the dog has an identifiable element called Buddha Nature. Then you have the universe immediately split between the sacred and the profane, the ultimate dualism. The dog is a dog, but some special part of it is Buddha Nature and therefore the other part is the dirty ordinary part without Buddha Nature. The extraordinary element is distinguished from the ordinary. If I have Buddha Nature, my Buddha Nature then becomes something a bit like a soul, a special numinous spirit. The Buddha’s most astonishing teaching was that there is no soul. There is no permanent unchanging Self, in people or in things. People and things are interconnecting processes, but the Buddha denied that there is

any central unconditioned permanent command centre or moral centre or ‘spirit’ or identifiable core. This is Buddhism as the science of the mind. The term in Buddhism for this idea is *anatta*.

An Atman, or Soul, or Self, is nowhere to be found in reality, and it is foolish to believe that there is such a thing.” (Rahula 1959).

So, though the Buddha teaches and we all suspect that there is some numinous quality to the universe, if we define it as Buddha Nature that is a possession of the dog, or a part of me, then we are dangerously close to asserting a soul, and of splitting everything in the universe into the sacred and the profane, when the special characteristic of experiences of the Energy is that everything is a perfect unity. What Blake calls, “the infinite, which was hid,” is all of a piece. The mystical vision, as reported by people in all cultures who have had these experiences, does not consist of selected highlights from Reality, particularly exalted and pure things, lit in a golden glow, but a vivid perception that ordinary reality is a great oneness. We cannot go down the route of believing in Buddha Nature that is a special possession of the dog, or a special spirit in me. In fact, splitting the creation into parts that are holy and then the not-holy, Buddha Nature and the rest, the soul and the body, the elect and the damned, the pure and the polluted, the Good and the Evil, is exceedingly dangerous, and at the end of that road lies genocide, and every kind of atrocity. That’s where Auschwitz originates. Thank you for the warning, Joshu. Not have. Nothing. No.

I also worked on *Mu* by meditating, trying to reach *Mu* by not thinking, by getting in touch with the great silence. I am in love with it and I try to write poetry about it and think of images for it and I talk to myself about it and I come up with ideas: that it is a calm energy, a vast oceanic sense of potential, of coiled-spring vibrancy, of blissful peace... Alright, that is not really a useful definition of any kind, it is just taking an attitude. I try again. It is a buoyant emptiness. Hmm. Shodo Harada in *The Book of Mu* is on the same track (Ford, and Blacker 2011 p124):

Buddha Nature is pure human nature... It has no colour yet it has light and a life energy that brings wonder. It is energy that has no form yet has the ability to make all things happen...

In quantum mechanics there is apparently a creative vacuum which is the basis of all sub-atomic reality, an emptiness out of which every particle is created and back into which it is annihilated. Is that what Joshu means by Nothing? Has a dog Buddha Nature? Nothing. The answer is beginning to look to me like an assertion about the creative Ground of Being out of which every reality springs, the Emptiness of the Heart Sutra perhaps. Buddha Nature is Nothing, or Emptiness, says Joshu, if *Mu* means Nothingness, and I know Emptiness because I am in contact with it in meditation. I struggle to define it but I feel that there is something wonderful and that it has a mysterious energy and unity and creative potential. I begin to build up my ideas about Emptiness, known in Buddhist theory as *sunyata*, and to read about it and study it. I am on the track of *Mu*. I love my Void. The frustrating thing is that the brilliant Zen giants of the past will not endorse my poetic ideas about energy and coiled-spring and buoyant oceanic space. Huang Po, published in 858, writes entirely in negations:

This Mind [his term for it is One Mind] which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the category of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought of in terms of new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces and comparisons. It is that which you see before you – begin to reason about it and you at once fall into error. It is like the boundless void which cannot be fathomed or measured. The One Mind alone is Buddha, and there is no distinction between the Buddha and sentient things, but that sentient beings are attached to forms and so seek externally for Buddhahood. By their very seeking they lose it, for that is using the Buddha to seek for the Buddha and using mind to grasp Mind.

(trans. Blofeld 1968)

On retreat in Wales I tried to articulate my own sense of the Nothingness as quiet energy and blissful unity and so on and David Loy told me that Nagarjuna said that to say anything at all about *śūnyata* was to seize a snake by the tail. Having any conception of it at all was a terrible error. Huang Po had perhaps been saying something similar. I learned that Nagarjuna was a linguistic philosopher and great sceptic in the second century of our era engaged in deconstructing all metaphysical claims made by the schools of thought flourishing around him. He maintained that you could not say anything about ultimate realities. To say that they existed, or did not exist, or both existed and did not exist, or neither existed nor did not exist, were equally meaningless because they were either self-referential bits of language, or tautologies, or could be reduced ad absurdum. Nothingness, therefore, was not a lovely Void place, or hidden dimension, with special transcendent and numinous qualities creating reality. It was the absence of the fixed characteristics in things assumed in our deceptive uses of language, which we imagine are real because we have names for them and the names do not change. It was quite impossible to say anything at all about them, rather as Huang Po had defined by negatives: it is not this, not that, not anything, but that does not mean that it does not exist. In fact, Nagarjuna goes further. It is only because all things are empty of fixed essences that change is possible, and hence life is possible. So emptiness is not a great nihilistic nothing, but the necessary condition for life. Nagarjuna has a nice word for all the hypostasized abstractions we have which delude us into thinking they represent real identities: *drishti*, which means rubbish.

On another meditation retreat I met an Estonian academic, a follower of Linnart Mäll, a great modern scholar of Buddhist scriptures. He gave me a copy of a Linnart Mäll collection of essays, including essays on *śūnyata*. Mäll had a new interpretation. *Śūnyata*, he said, should be translated ‘zero.’ Zero in Buddhism, he writes:

does not mean the absence of something or negation of something but overcoming (or, rather, ignoring) the opposition between a positive statement and a negative statement, ‘+’ and ‘-’. It means all interconnections are seen as indefinable.

(Mäll 2003)

*Śūnyata* is the neutralisation of opposites. Mäll quotes a Russian, Stcherbatsky:

Every composite thing contains nothing real over and above the parts of which it is composed.

(Mäll 2003)

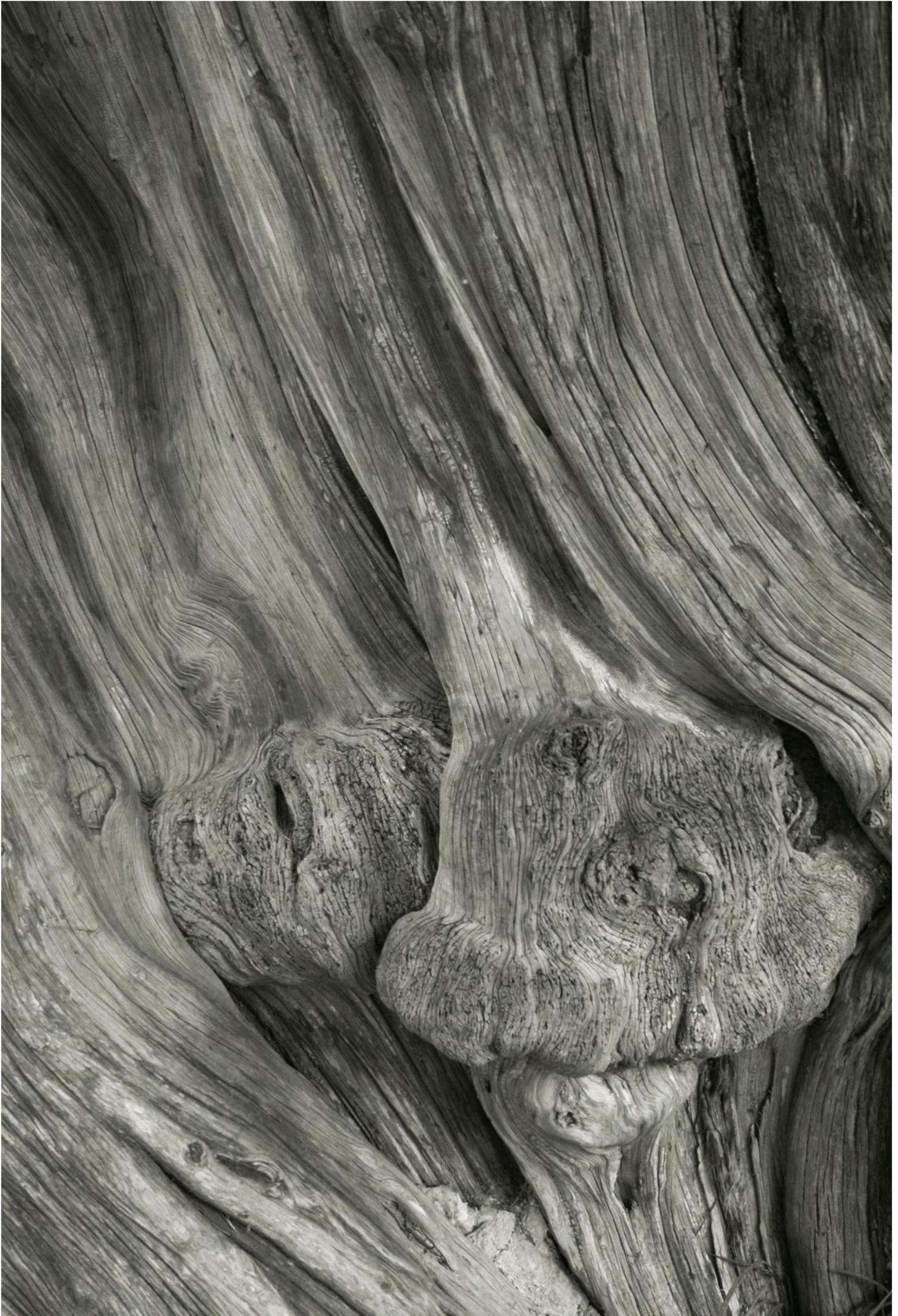
The conclusion one draws from this is that although we have a noun for the composite thing that fools us into thinking it has a fixed identity, the noun is *drishti*, rubbish. The dog has nothing specially ‘doggy’ and unchanging in addition to the sum of its parts functioning together in the environment. Apart from its noun ‘dog.’ In my meditation I discovered that what we might call ‘the zero attitude’ was wonderfully liberating: don’t add anything; don’t take anything away. Focus on what you experience and don’t add anything. Be zero. “You purify yourself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes,” Mumon had written, so this was all part of the desacralising process.

I realised that the idea I had constructed of the lovely Great Silence – the emptiness out of which all is created, the love flowing through the universe and so on, was all a reification of ‘Nothingness’ into a beautiful ‘Somethingness’. What I was now doing was ascribing qualities to it, and that it was becoming a new and improved Buddha Nature and Joshu was still there muttering, “Not have Buddha Nature,” at me. “No.” I had reified Emptiness into something full. Not have. No, said Joshu. Nothing holy, said Bodhidharma.

This *koan* is uncompromising, and leaves you no room for your favourite ideas at all. Joshu has you trapped. He dismantles all conceptualisations. I was exceedingly reluctant to give up my sense of Buddha Nature, the Essence, the special sense of Life in the universe, the Absolute, its quiet subtle energy and gentle numinous power, its peace and love – I felt I knew it from experience. But the attempt to find its identity and define it had to be abandoned. I was in love with my conception of Emptiness but Huang Po and Nagarjuna and Mäll and Joshu and Bodhidharma were chorusing, “No!” Joshu was wagging his finger at me. I came to Buddhism looking for a beautiful inspiration to give meaning and focus to my life and they were all saying, “No!”

I went back to the *koan* again. The problem was the word “have”. You cannot separate out the Buddha Nature as a property of the dog, or of me. If there is Buddha Nature, it is inseparable from the dog, or from anything else. Either the dog is Buddha Nature, all of the dog is Buddha nature, or it is not. What can Buddha Nature add to the dog? If it means any speck more than the natural processes of life then it is a “soul” or some such idea and you have another snake by the tail. When you look at it like that, then the two things mean the same and the whole question is meaningless. To say that everything is Buddha Nature or that everything is not Buddha Nature ultimately becomes a tautology: everything is everything. Any generalisation you make about “Everything” is meaningless – or, rather, it is taking an emotional attitude. To say that everything is Buddha Nature expresses your reverence. To say that nothing is Buddha Nature expresses your dry cynicism. Neither of them has any objective meaning. If you cannot separate out Buddha Nature from everything, then you are left with the tautology, and you must not separate it out or you end up with Auschwitz. Joshu steers you away from all hierarchical or dualist systems of thought. Forget about Plato and Descartes and theologies of good and evil. You cannot separate Buddha Nature from the dog.

There are two levels here, of course. In our ordinary lives, using the constructs of language, we make distinctions all the time, we separate out ideas about qualities, abstract them, and very useful they are too.



But each named distinction is a construct of our language, and does not refer to a fixed separable identity in reality. Distinctions are convenient and functional for everyday tasks, but they do not tell us which part of the dog is holy.

I watched dogs playing, and children playing. They play and explore and then follow a new drive and act in response to what they find. 'Buddha Nature' would be a pompous idea imposed upon them if it meant any more than What Is. Nothing special must be attributed to one part of the creation to label it more or less than what all of it, interwoven and interconnected in thousands of ways, just is. Joshu was forcing me to give up my own conceptualisation of Buddha Nature, which meant all notions of holiness or the sacred or a life force. All such inherited human cultural ideas had to be ditched. The very idea of myself was a reification due to a grammatical trick of language. I sit down, I eat, I laugh, I love you, all of these statements imply that there is an "I" which is separable from the sitting, the eating, the laughing, the loving, just because we have got a first person pronoun. Perhaps the Blake phrase would come in handy here too: The sense of self is the bound or outward circumference of my Energy, the defining edge where activities are communicable.

What is the need for Buddha Nature anyway, gilding the lily of What I Am, my animal reality? It is meaningless. You cannot separate it out and you cannot say anything about it and you cannot find it apart from everything that is, and so it is meaningless. I had now arrived at the dead end of logic. There was nothing more that reasoning about the koan could do. Now I had to follow Mumon's instructions and live it every hour of every day, swallow it as a red hot iron ball, and redouble the purifying of myself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes.

Joshu had blocked off all avenues and left me in the existential place: face to face with What Is, with no conceptual comfort blanket, with nothing holy, with no tenable ideas at all, and no way of interpreting What Is to make meaning, without finding him there wagging his finger and saying, "No." How was I to make meaning, or choose a meaning, or understand life, with him there all the time saying, "No"? Not only is the koan meaningless, it teaches something more: things are meaningless. There is no meaning to be found, - at least, not in ideas about the sacred. Joshu was brutally uncompromising. He left no escape. There was nothing there except what you could find for yourself. You are responsible for your response. You face things without authoritative reassurances. No dogma. No belief system. No theology. Nothing to hold onto. You have to be self-motivating and accept what you find, with no supportive ideology, and certainly no fantasy about the comforts of religion. As Barry Magid puts it:

Why are we alive? We are alive!...Why do fish swim? They are fish! Why does the bear shit in the woods?  
(Magid 2008, p 257)

Life in the world is a miraculous mystery, the universe is astonishing, we have not the foggiest idea what it all means, or why we are here, so our only task is to be aware, and fully experience the wonder of it all.

But carrying around Joshu's "Not have Buddha Nature" and Bodhidharma's "Nothing holy" in my mind, muttering them to myself, proved to be amusing and delightful. I found a new pleasure in confronting a

flowering tree, or a dog, or a child, or the sea, and giggling about nothing holy. It was ironic, paradoxical, and absurd. Nothing holy threw me back into an appreciation of the reality of how things are. If I do not have to think anything about things, but just meet them as they are, they are liberated and express themselves brilliantly. It was a cleansing of the doors of perception. We see the world through a veil of preoccupations, concerns, plans, judgements and interpretations. Clear away all that *drishti* and see it fresh, without adding anything, without putting any names or characteristics or definitions or judgements on it, and there is a vivid, beautiful suchness to be found in the zero attitude. There is the infinite, in everything: there it is! It has been lurking there all along! – and to call it nothing holy is hilarious, and true, or not true, it does not matter, and it amounts to the same thing either way. The dog comes alive again in all its glory, not a puzzle but a dog! I go back to meditating on the breath. What could be more glorious, blissful and extraordinary than being an aware animal, breathing, in this world? Don't add anything. Whether I am finding Buddha Nature or not is irrelevant and meaningless. Joshu's *Mu* has proved to be the most positive No in history! It stymies my mind and throws me into direct experience.

But, is it a philosophical dead end? Is meaninglessness a terrible form of nihilism? Buddhism is sometimes accused of emphasising suffering and being pessimistic and miserable. If Nothingness – the Void, *sunyata* – is reified into something holy, is not that nihilism at its worst? Nagarjuna corrects us: “Whoever makes a philosophical view out of ‘emptiness’ is indeed lost.” It is a misreading of *sunyata* to think that Buddhism worships Nothingness.

At this point Joshu pops up again, saying to me, No! Not have. This is not an idea, not a philosophy, not an assertion about reality and not an assertion about Nothingness. There is no Nothingness. There is no reason at all to suppose that your existential response to that will be misery and despair and amoral cynicism. On the contrary, it will very likely be a sense of liberation, joy, belonging, and deep gratitude. Buddhism is about happiness. Paradoxically, Joshu's big bald “No!” is life-affirming, reassuring and beautiful. It brings your awareness into focus with unobstructed clarity. Joshu denying holiness points you back at the wonder of what is. The No is a big Yes, but you don't need to plump for either Yes or No. You are free of such judgements.

*Mu* has become a matter of living vividly in the present, with nothing between me and the suchness of things, and it is a great delight. It was not a barrier after all, but a Gateless Gate. It was right under my nose all along. So Joshu's liberating “No!” to everything has put to rest my anxious search for meaning. I don't need that anymore because it is clear (“We are alive!”). I am deeply grateful to Joshu. He takes you to a place where theology and philosophy and reasoning become meaningless but where you fall through a hole and find the Energy, a completely fulfilling acceptance of life, a place where the questions do not matter anymore. Having no ideas about things liberates all things to teach you, and they very kindly do. It is necessary to give up conceptualising, and then to throw oneself wholeheartedly into awareness, to discover that the universe is love. The creation is sacred and glorious. Perhaps these are just attitudes I adopt, because everything is also just ordinary, which is another attitude. Now having reached this point

I took the next step, which was to give the heart. I surrendered wholeheartedly to the ordinary-sacred, the bog-sacred world. I gave it love, and took it for love and it was love, bog-sacred love. Joshu has not proved that there is no Buddha Nature, not at all – my conclusion is that everything is Buddha Nature and wonderful, but, as Laozi implied, that is for lack of a better word:

Compelled to consider it, I call it Great  
(trans. Feng and English, 1973).

Meaninglessness is not without sense. Defining the ways in which you cannot define Buddha Nature or the Energy or whatever you call it is not quite meaningless in itself but demarcates what is meaningless at the heart of assertions about reality. It tells us what we know that we cannot know. The irreducible nuclear core of meaninglessness in language and analysis does, in spite of its absurdity, lead to a valid and vivid conclusion: give up the big questions about meaning and experience the suchness with full awareness. The meaninglessness is a necessary recognition of paradox and contradiction: reality is made up of all possible opposite qualities all inseparably tangled and intertwined – not just the qualities of this koan, the sacred and the mundane, inextricably bound together, but all such oppositions. Trying to disentangle the qualities and to generalise about them or choose between them is futile. The meaninglessness is amusingly instructive, a form of creative paradox that sends us off in a more fruitful direction. We come to the end of where language can clarify, and go off into a different form of direct experience, and that is a liberating breakthrough. Mu breaks open, as Mumon said.

However, to return to the beginning, and the most difficult question, does this help me understand Auschwitz? It does not help me at all to imagine how people could perpetrate such crimes, though I am convinced that it is the tyranny of dualistic thinking that makes it possible for people to categorise groups of other people as not sacred and rationalise brutality for themselves. What it does do, because very brave people have demonstrated that they can do it, is to show the magnificent attitude to take to the inescapable reality of death and impermanence. Etty Hillesum in her transit camp on the way to Auschwitz came to this compassionate attitude:

Every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable,

she wrote:

We ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated and oppressed.  
By our own hatred.

She addresses the questions of Joshu's *Mu*:

What they are after now is our total destruction. I accept it. Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors – I accept it as one mighty whole. Life is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided you make room in your life for everything, and accept life as one indivisible whole. But as soon as you try to exclude certain parts of life, refusing to accept them and arrogantly opting for this and not that part of life, yes, then it does become meaningless because it is no longer a whole. (Hillesum 1996).

Etty knew she would be murdered. That is a starker version of what confronts us all: time is limited and life is precious. The insouciant attitude is what Mumon said at the beginning:

...enjoy a samadhi of frolic and play.

Chinese master Linji put it with characteristic force:

Enter hell as if strolling in a pleasure garden.

The courageous Etty Hillesum writes,

The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent (ibid p.294).

We have to rid ourselves of all preconceptions, of all slogans, of all sense of security, find the courage to let go of everything, every standard, every conventional bulwark. Only then will life become infinitely rich and overflowing, even in the suffering it deals out to us (ibid p.170).

She writes to her friend, as she is waiting for the next transport of cattle-trucks:

If you don't have the inner strength while you're here to understand that all outer appearances are a passing show, as nothing beside the great splendour inside us – then things can look very black here indeed (ibid p.326).

Joshu has kindly given us the means to enlightened awareness. The *koan* is a:

kind of technology, a hack for the mind

as John Tarrant calls it (The Book of Mu p269). How daft is it to worry about whether a fresh green leaf is holy or unholy? This is the ultimate extension of the Buddha's teaching about anatta: the end of all attempts to isolate a "soul", or a "spirit", or a fixed identity, in leaf or dog, man or woman. It is a liberating transformation of perception.

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## POEMS

## LONG HAUL

*Aurie McKay*

*Webs of fungi spread beneath the roots of trees,  
 Each exchanging food with each.  
 In minute channels of ages' long communion  
 New shoots of trees unfold in sudden sprays.  
 Dangling heads of flowers and catkins  
 Pollen vital food for bees on wing  
 And moss forms mats of green on branches  
 Targeted by bumblebees for nesting young.  
 Bees zone with careful flight on blooms,  
 Stamen to stigma to swell new fertile fruit,  
 Their forage is the food to make young bees.  
 Grey curls of lichen form on rocks and trees  
 Amazing marriage meeting fungi – algae  
 Formed from drifts of wind that blow vast  
 Streams of seeds ever seeking niches new  
 To settle, root, produce new richness.  
 Small birds collect fronds of lichen  
 To make soft nests sewn up with cobwebs,  
 Fly to and fro to feed the fledglings  
 In tumbrel aeronautics finding prey.  
 So new birds come to sing, to give new joy.  
 Reproduction, Pollination, Germination  
 Mere names for detailed patterns moving  
 through life's paths of precision  
 Exchange and growing*

## JOHN'S ASHES

*Ned Reiter*

*The wild hill,  
 And everything present,  
 Everything passing,  
 Sunlight spilling  
 Through urgent cloud,  
 Autumn rain  
 Softening the turf.  
 No tomb  
 No headstone  
 No memorial plaque –  
 Flying ashes,  
 And a final dance  
 In the arms of the wind.*

*Maenllwyd*

10th September 2011

## COOK'S MEDITATIONS: GOMASIO

*Pam Butler*

*Gomasio* is a mix of sea salt and roasted sesame seeds ground into a coarse powder. It is a traditional Japanese flavouring (*goma* – sesame seed, *shio* – salt) and is always on the table at lunch and supper at the Maenllwyd. *Gomasio* is highly rated by those following a macrobiotic diet who say that is almost a medicine in itself due to its anti-acid effect: “a thousand times more effective than AlkaSeltzer,” says Harold Kulungian on his Macro Diet website. “One half or a full teaspoon eaten directly from the palm of your hand will strengthen digestion and improve energy immediately.”

*Gomasio's* rich nutty taste is especially good with rice and makes even the simplest dish of plain boiled rice and steamed or stir-fried vegetables into a tasty meal. *Gomasio* keeps almost indefinitely in a glass jar with a well fitting lid. It is always nice as a cook to arrive in the Maenllwyd kitchen and find that the cook from the previous retreat has left a gift of a jar of *gomasio* on the shelves above the sink.

To make *gomasio* you use a surprisingly small proportion of salt to sesame seed. The proportions can vary from 18 parts sesame seeds to 1 part salt for people following a low salt or macrobiotic diet, up to 12 to 1. You will have to experiment to find the proportions that suit you best, but start with a 12 to 1 mix.

### TO MAKE GOMASIO

*125 gm organic sesame seeds*

*2 teaspoons sea salt*

- Put a clean heavy frying pan on a medium heat and put in the seeds and the salt. To ensure the seeds toast evenly, keep them moving all the time, stirring with a wooden spatula or spoon in one hand and shaking the pan with the other. Gradually the seeds begin to darken to gold and then brown and start to pop. Keep stirring, it is really important not to let them burn.
- Stop when the seeds are a medium brown colour, between 3 and 5 minutes – again you will need to experiment, some people like the stronger ‘toasty’ flavour of darker brown *gomasio*. Remove the pan from the heat and keep shaking it and stirring the seeds as the pan cools down, otherwise the seeds on the bottom continue cooking.
- Then grind the mixture and it is better to grind by hand if possible. Tradition demands that *gomasio* is ground in a *suribachi* – the Japanese mortar with grooves on the inside and a wooden pestle. It smells lovely and it is a simple relaxing activity. You can whizz the mix in a blender for just a split second, if that is all you have, but it is harder to control the final consistency which should be a grainy mix rather than a fine powder. If grinding by hand, put just a couple of spoonfuls of the seed and salt mix into the mortar at a time.
- Store in a clean screw top jar.

## HEARING PHOTOGRAPHS

*An exploration by Eddy Street and Rob Stratton*

Rob has managed to earn a living in photography as a 'professional' while Eddy has the interest of an 'amateur'. They frequently discuss their shared involvement in this activity.

*How extraordinary! How extraordinary!*

*The insentient express the way! How mysterious!*

*If you listen with the ears it is incomprehensible*

*If you hear sounds with the eyes it is truly knowledgeable.*

Dongshan

### BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

A feature of what is loosely known as Zen art is the image (*Zenga*) that offers in an inherent calming and contemplative manner an expression of the truth of the universe. Typically following the Japanese painting tradition of a few brief brushstrokes an image tends to be one which captures the essence of nature and in doing so of reality itself. This is very easily translated into photographs where the image of just one moment is presented as the simple picture of the plant or a cloud or a stream flowing through the dappled light of a wood.

Additionally in the traditionally artistic presentation for communicating the ineffable the artist/teacher would offer a few words alongside the image (*San*) which can be used as a way of deepening the experience of hearing 'sounds with the eyes' and similarly this method has been applied to photography. Here is an example of this approach presented by Eddy:



*Neglecting to wonder  
sheep  
feed in the snow*

Of course photography can be used in other ways to 'capture the moment' and not just in a quiet reflective calming context. As Chan practitioners we are interested in the ways in which the process of taking a photograph and contemplating the image is itself practice and in doing this we have been interested in those images which we have captured which express aspects of life other than the calm abiding quality of objects in nature. We have become interested in pictures which capture the active and involved elements of life. We wish to present below two images one taken by each of us. What we present is the thoughts of the photographer and the reflected process of the other person about each image. We hope this inspires others to take photographs and look at them with their ears.

## WOMAN ON BRIDGE



**EDDY:** Out on one of my photos safaris; just go somewhere, walk around taking photographs of what takes my interest. I walked to Treorchy from Trehebert on a grey wet day. I'm ready to have something for my lunch. As I'm walking over a railway bridge I see a discarded loaf of sliced bread lying in the gutter. It's open and the slices are lying there slowly soaking up the dirty water from the rain. I become interested in the discarded food and the people walking past it. I take photographs as people approach, some looking at the bread some oblivious of the wastefulness. I cross over the road to look at the scene from the other side and I become interested in the people walking across the bridge. I take images of people as they enter the frame and then I wonder if I should capture somebody as they leave the frame. A woman walks by and quickly I take a photograph and instantly forget it as my attention is drawn to something else.

At home, I am surprised by the image. The blurred nature of the way the woman is walking across the bridge. The way her body mirror the angle of the girders. The symmetrical link of the human form with the constructive form. But it is not the form which draws the attention, it is the synchronicity of the form. The way disparate elements naturally hold together and are not held together. In the photograph I see the woman walking across the bridge her body and the girders in sync, out of sync, in sync. Gone!

**ROB:** My first reaction is to pass over this image. It's uncomfortable and unattractive. Its edgy composition makes me want to pass it by. Even the woman in the picture is marching out of it. Alone, she is walking fast and purposefully. Her aloneness makes me uncomfortable. It seems that for her – like the viewer – this is a 'non place'. A discarded moment. It's wet. Traffic is splashing by. There is little to be gained lingering on an ugly industrial bridge in the South Wales valleys that you can't even see over. She is focussed on getting somewhere more comfortable. She seems unaware of the bridge, and certainly of the strange relationship she has with it, captured here in a fraction of a second: How the uncompromisingly functional symmetry of the bridge's girders is mirrored by her ephemeral, angular figure! She could have been drawn in, spontaneously, by the bridge's architect, bored of his ruler, yet not quite able to let go of it.

The play of angles draws my attention to the extraordinary relationship between woman and bridge. What is it saying to me? I get 'permanence' and 'impermanence'. Clearly this white haired woman is impermanent. She's barely in the picture. Like the space in the picture, most of her life is behind her. Yet, the bridge too is ageing. They are not so different. But for me that's not quite it. That's too neat. It doesn't seem to be what the picture is saying. Yet the bridge still says "Permanence" to me. I find myself with permanence of another kind: The constancy of the bridge's insentience, an endless patience, a 'waiting for nothing', a silent offering to the vulnerability of the woman's sentience. Unaware, she rushes on. The fragility of her human form. She too is rusting away. This picture speaks of the relationship between 'Sentience and Insentience', of the suffering inherent to human life, because, unlike the insentience of the bridge, we care to live, and live more comfortably. We mind going rusty! Seemingly unaware of her relationship with the bridge, and therefore of her own insentience, she marches swiftly on to the next place where she wants to be, like we do so easily in our own non places, such as walking to and from the car, missing what is happening, cut off from the wider context of our relationship with the world around us.

Yet there is a clue here, a way in, for her foot offers a moment of un-blurred stillness, an opportunity for integration. Place your attention on her foot, and she's present! Her foot's contact with the ground brings her into the picture, bridging sentience and insentience. She's still moving, but there is also an opportunity for relationship with the insentient, for connection on a glum day in the Valleys. It's never too late, because the only time to notice is now. The moment your foot hits the ground!

I like to imagine she went on to enjoy the company of an old friend in a warm cafe, where hot cups of tea are condensing up the windows. Of course, she may rushing to catch a bus so she can join Samye Ling in Caerphilly, just down the road. We'll never know.

A Verse

*Rain raining*

*Cars Swishing*

*Bridge walking*

## BRIDGE JUMPING



**ROB:** As a 'professional' photographer, this has given me an opportunity to re-visit photography through the 'Beginners Eyes.' Working to the tight deadlines of daily newspapers, I've learnt to make swift, uncompromising choices when selecting the best image to send the picture desk. I took this picture on a walk in the park a few years ago. Kids jumping off a bridge? Can't walk past that. I'll stand here so the jumper stands out against the water. Click! I know it works, but I've long got used to it. I have to see past the familiar to give it a fresh attention. I've never tried to listen to it before. I wonder if this idea of Eddy's is going to work. I've no idea what it's going to say...

Looking at it now there is something spiritual about the boy's jump from the bridge. For a moment, he is flying. In this instant, he could be rising out of the Taff, not falling into it! (Falling downwards and upwards!) Of course, like Icarus, his flight is doomed. In a moment he will plunge into the Taff, water and bubbles rushing by. It's gone so fast, yet for this moment he is free. He's done the hardest part,

letting go! A death defying moment, or perhaps death embracing – of fear and exhilaration as he surrenders to the leap. Yet, just now, he has surrendered to the void and is liberated. His flight and death's proximity makes him feel very alive. This is a moment of exhilarating presence. Fear is transformed. Now it does it for him, and he falls, the moment of falling full of excitement, of raw experience, the rushing void so close. (You can't jump off a bridge and worry about your homework at the same time.) Soon he will crash, water rushing, into the Taff, scream and holler as he rushes round to do it again. Perhaps he will cross this bridge again in many years to come, rushing by in the rain, and remember.

I guess we're always falling. Sometimes I can fall like the boy in the picture. Sometimes, fearful of what is going to happen next, I fall like Icarus. In sync, out of sync, in sync, out of sync, in sync, out of sync, in sync. Splash!

**EDDY:** At first I am unable to see what is happening. Are those cages? Certainly a child walking in the air away from me. And then I know this location and the elements of the image quickly fall into place. I have been there, walked the bridge and watched the naughty boys daring each other to jump into the water even though there is the official sign saying "Danger. Deep water. No swimming". And the girls giggling nearby. Move from the memory to the image. A boy running in the air held in space, just by himself.

As always someone misses the point directing us elsewhere; attention taken away from the step into space. Is the dog looking? Will his "*Mu-ness*" take in the jump/walk. The man looks not concerned or interested. Even though the eyes in the picture are occupied elsewhere all are held together in this moment of moving in space. Hold it and let it go as you wonder at the moment of space.

A Verse

*standing on the gate between heaven and hell*

*jump!*

*But not when you're told!*

## RETREAT REPORTS

*Retreat reports are an integral aspect of our journal and one much approved by Shifu. We print them mostly anonymously and are most grateful to our practitioners for sharing themselves so generously with us. In reading these reports, we learn much about the experiences of others on retreat and after and they often provide pointers for our own understanding.*

### UNTIL NEXT TIME...

As I neared Maenllwyd I could see where I needed to get to as I recognised it from the pictures but I wasn't sure which way to go. One way had a closed gate and appeared to go further away from where I wanted to be, and the other way was an open gate and appeared to head more in the direction of where I was trying to get to. I decided to take the route which seemed to go towards where I wanted to be, and as I headed across the field I had a sense that I was going the wrong way. It was a rough drive, a route that few take (without 4 wheel drive) but I made it.

On reflection this could describe my life, I had taken a difficult path, one which few take but somehow I had made it this far. I was greeted by Fiona to whom I said, 'I think I came the wrong way', to which she smiled and replied, 'Well, you got here'. What a great response, I felt really welcome and knew I was going to like it there.

I was right; it was as if nothing could prevent me from being happy, comfortable and at ease. I was liking it so much that I even questioned whether I was taking it seriously or whether I had some defence mechanism in play preventing me from facing myself. Come on, getting up at 5am, up and out within 10 minutes to do exercises in the yard. Nobody should enjoy that, right? Not having time to drink the only cup of tea in the morning, having to queue for a shower then not having enough time to even dry properly. I began to look at what I could possibly be enjoying and I came to the conclusion that routine and good healthy food work well with me. I also felt incredibly comfortable around these people and felt that it was a safe place to be.

My question was 'Who am I?' I started this process thinking that I was two different people. One being an outgoing, happy, confident sociable person; the other being vulnerable, needy, anxious, and someone who shuts themselves away not wanting to see anyone. I suffer from social anxiety and it was suggested that this could be that I'm scared of being found out, that I am probably hiding something. This got me thinking, what could I be hiding? I even said that I hadn't done anything majorly wrong in my life at least not to anyone other than myself...mmmm that got me thinking even more.

I began to share some of my experiences in the communication exercises which I found really difficult to do to begin with. I recognised that I mainly told my story without an emotional attachment with it, in a kind of, 'this happened.. then.. that happened' kind of fashion. Getting in touch with and showing my emotions to others in the group felt like a huge challenge.

The interviews brought up more shit that I wasn't sharing in the group some of which was really serious for me, but it was as though that couldn't keep me down for long either. This caused some difficult thoughts and feelings as I was thinking that I didn't deserve to be happy. Fiona and Simon were great in the interviews, each time I saw one of them I was able to connect with my feelings. They listened then just seemed to know what to say, but I still didn't know the answer to 'Who am I?'

At times, when meditating, or walking and sometimes whilst running I get a sense of calm and peace. I was thinking that this was what I was aiming for, that this was me underneath all the shit that I had accumulated through my life. I was thinking that if I worked through everything that came up then I would be able to connect with who I am for more than just fleeting glimpses. With this idea I had to try and get somewhere, to reach a goal.

I had an interview towards the end of the third day and my conclusion was just that, I was someone who still had a lot of shit in their barrel to work through. This felt like I hadn't really learnt anything, I knew that before I came. Okay I had worked through lots but I didn't really feel like anything had changed. I was over half way through the retreat and I felt disappointed with that conclusion.

After lights out, I fell asleep pretty quickly and slept well until I woke up suddenly. I felt wide awake and the first thought that came into my head was the answer that I had been looking for!!! I felt really excited and I just knew that it all made sense, everything made sense. I didn't have to hide, or run away from, or get to anywhere!!! That was it; I couldn't sleep then, so I crept out and went up the hill side where I could see millions of stars. There was no light pollution and the sky was clear, it was totally amazing. I stayed there for quite a long time thinking that it was nearly time for lights to come on and time to get up but I had no idea what time it was. I usually tell the time using my mobile and obviously didn't have that so I had no idea. I decided to creep back to bed and it was still ages before it was time to get up.

After exercises in the yard, Fiona spoke to us about the process and who we were. Her words made utter sense and it was funny because she couldn't have spelt it out any clearer. Yet I couldn't get it before?! I was very emotional that day and although I cried a lot I couldn't remember the last time that I had laughed so much either. It was all good, I was really getting in touch with my emotions and I felt love for everyone in the room.

I had so much to reflect on that I said that I felt that I didn't need another question; this had changed so much for me. I had sadness around not knowing the answer years ago, and sadness that I may go home and forget what I had learned. Yet I also felt so happy and relieved that I knew. 'I know who I am!!!!'

On the final day I noticed a lot of reluctance to leave. I had had the best time, good and bad seemed all good. I wanted to stay in touch and swapped email addresses and I was almost the last to leave. I believe that I was trying to hold onto the experience, grasping it with both hands. I had to let it go as all experiences are forever changing, Impermanence!

On the way home I got lost. Somehow I ended up driving along single track roads in the Brecon Beacons. I had been relying on my sat nav and I noticed an annoyance and concern around my predicament. I was tired and really my thoughts were already about getting home and having a bath. Then once I recognised this I felt a sense of, 'it's alright', it was actually beautiful here and although I was lost, I knew who was lost!! This brought a smile to my face and I began to look at my experience. I then had thoughts around, if only when my sat nav had lost its signal it had the ability to turn round and say, 'I don't know where I am, I am lost' instead of just keeping going and making it up as it went along.

This is how I feel that I had been as a child, starting off knowing where I was going then getting lost along the way. Then instead of speaking up and facing my vulnerabilities, I began to make it up by seeing myself as two different people!!!!

Until next time...

*WZR Maenllwyd August 2011*

### 30 YEARS LATER

The retreat gave me a space and context to deal with a situation that seemed overwhelming and allowed me to feel grief and sadness freely, without any preconditions or parameters but just simply for what they were. It helped me to reconnect with my feelings and allow them to flow through me or out of me. The support of the group and everybody working together on their inner world within the structured order of the retreat routine created a wonderful window for me to briefly examine my inner world. It was long enough to see clearly that it is a knotty and complex one where there have been plenty of closed doors and barriers to growth for a long time. My problems have not gone away but I have arrived at a better place.

Sometimes it was hard to believe that the process of communication exercises and koans is anything but a lot of nonsense, but the guidance and direction of the leader put me right on that one. Also I could see right into my mind of 30 years ago when I attended a retreat for the first time as a reckless 19 year old - an unexpected experience that brought back a lot of memories of the time, like coming home again, and enabled me to think about my life more broadly. I know that I have a home at the Maenllwyd, finding the place exactly the same, even the same dust collector and grubby old carpets!

Coming back into the world, it is cluttered, difficult and noisy. But I know that I have something in my heart now which will not go away and I can keep my questions "What is Love?" and "Who is all this happening to?" with me. It is strange, having to have the courage to believe in what has really happened.

*WZR Maenllwyd February 2012*

## NOT A BAD STARTING POINT!

The WZR was my first retreat with the WCF. Before that I had been practicing Zen in the Soto tradition for about eight years. I participated in about half a dozen *sesshins* with *Roshis* from Japan, and sitting one period of forty minutes daily at home.

What brought me to the WCF were two things: firstly at his age *Roshi* had become too fragile to come to Europe to hold *sesshins*; secondly and more importantly during most of my eight years of practice I felt very disoriented and lacked practical and concrete guidance in my practice. The personal interviews I had mostly left me confused. Confusion, I guess, in a way is not a bad starting point for practice. But the insecurity, about whether I was doing it “right”, made me constantly change my method from counting breath to following breath to *shikantaza* (similar to silent illumination, I suppose).

I lacked a minimum of practical advice on how to go about sitting, working with the body and the mind. For a long time I thought, there probably was no way to give such advice in a clear and understandable way – until by chance I got hold of one of Master Sheng Yen’s books. And there it was, in clear words and altogether practical: how you go about it when you sit on the cushion, be it silent illumination, koan practice or any other method.

Internet research led me to the WCF website and what I found there, seemed to be what I was looking for. And quite close too, just across the channel. But it took me another three years before I decided to give it a try.

### The Retreat: Circumstances

When I arrived for the retreat, I was a little reserved at first, because of the psychological aspect of the retreat. I have gone through some psychotherapeutic processes, considered this kind of work successfully finished, and didn’t want to misuse Chan/Zen for therapy. But the idea of “emptying the bucket” nevertheless made a lot of sense to me. So my reservation wasn’t very strong and I was willing to leave it behind easily.

What I loved immediately was the remoteness of the place, the nature surrounding it, the simplicity, not having electricity etc. – and the delicious food the cook prepared for us! She increased my love for vegetables at least 300 percent!

What I did not expect and had to realize during the first couple of days was something else: how much I was attached to the outward form of Japanese Zen practice, its style, aesthetics, “purity“ etc. Initially, the eclectic mixture of imagery in the retreat hall including Chinese, Tibetan and other symbols; nobody sitting even in half-lotus fashion etc. made me sceptical towards the retreat – but only until I realized how many preconceptions I had about what Zen/Chan practice, a Zen teacher, a retreat etc. had to be and look like. And all the time I had considered myself to be so open-minded. A very good lesson. Today I can only laugh at myself. The practice of the retreat and my interviews with Simon were so effective, that all these preconceptions evaporated in less than 72 hours.

## The Retreat: Practice

The retreat opened more than one door to practice for me, and finally set me on the right track, for which I am very thankful.

“Emptying the bucket” was a practice, that took me through a couple of deep-seated conceptions I had about myself, the “stories” I have been telling myself about myself, which had not been approached in psychotherapy: how I was such a “good” and peaceful person; how I was too “good” to be successful in this world; how I was somehow “special”. They all turned out to be nothing but myths I had learnt to tell myself during my childhood.

I was particularly confronted with my self-image as a basically non-aggressive person. I never wanted to be as irascible as my father, because it scared me. When during sitting I was confronted with a co-practitioner who was especially noisy and – as I conceived it – not considerate of disturbing the others, an immense anger built up inside of me. I realised that I could be as irascible as my father, only I had never dared to let it out, because of fear of the destructive consequence. When the retreat ended I had developed a deep sympathy for the person who had almost driven me crazy, and felt thankful towards him for having given me the opportunity to learn.

The retreat also took me beyond psychology, to a deeper level of realisation. This was triggered by Simon’s advice to look out for the mental processes or mechanisms that take us away from the present moment. This started a period of observation that continued when after the retreat I spent two more days hiking on the Welsh coast. By observing my mind, I ended up with an exhaustive collection of thirty-eight mental mechanisms that usually take me out of the present. They seem to work independently of will and quite autonomously. (Examples: worrying what others think of me; expecting/foreseeing something good or bad to happen to me; involuntarily producing judgements about people; internally commenting on what I am doing at the moment.)

At first, I thought of them as a kind of zoo of strange creatures, living a life of their own, beyond my will. Then something Simon said made me think of them as “ghosts” living and cavorting in a house. The next thing I realised, I myself was that house. Shortly after that, there was moment of inner silence and the thought “the ghosts have left the house”. This was followed by the realisation that those ghosts were nothing to be rejected, because they were “me”. And I even felt affection towards them. Later, that night, a poem appeared in my mind – in English and not very good, but I shall include it here anyway:

*What takes me from this moment*

*Are other moments*

*Long turned into dust*

*Which should be thrust*

*Upon the dark and fading*

*Ships of time*

*Instead they cling  
To where they were conceived  
Like ghosts that do not know  
That they are long since dead*

*And dance and play  
As if alive  
Obstructing clearer views  
Like cobwebs or grey dust  
Like good old friends  
Who've overstayed and missed  
The time to say goodbye*

On the day before last something Simon said while we were on our cushions triggered an experience that is hard to describe: it was a fundamental realisation – as much bodily as mental, as if the blinds I had been wearing all my life had been ripped from my eyes. Simon had described how we never see the world “directly” but filtered through our unconscious preconception, ideas etc. I had heard and read this before and always could easily agree intellectually. But only at that moment I really “understood” what this actually meant: the tragedy of lives being wasted, if experienced through all those filters, and being caught in a spiders web of opinions, concepts, judgements etc. It left me deeply shaken, in tears and the sentence “what a waste!” echoing in my mind for hours. When the sitting ended and I stepped outside, I really “saw” the valley, trees, pebbles, clouds – as if for the first time, unfiltered, and even to call them “beautiful” would have added something superfluous. This way of seeing the world stayed with me for some days until it got lost in everyday life back home.

*WZR Maenllwyd March 2009*

## WHO?

*Ken Jones*

*I turn up the flame  
from the snaking wick  
coiled in my flammable heart*

Although he is my lifelong friend I'm in two minds about him. Sometimes I don't recognise him at all, with his ugly old face. Or I don't like the way he can behave.

*Perched on the wing mirror  
robin preens himself  
and shits*

Then I play at being top dog and growl at him. But when he's being helpful and kind, now there's a man after my own heart. And isn't it strange how other people seem to like him more than I do? The best of times is when he lets his shoulders drop and we're drawn in together and lost, in a landscape, another person, a poem or whatever. Beyond all that neediness and choosiness, like this oak which shelters us from the autumn rains.

*Branching without a thought  
this way and that  
for two hundred years*

The trouble is that every morning there's the two of us, grimacing in the shaving mirror. Tomorrow I'll offer a smile.

*Guttering  
my smoky flame  
muttering to itself*

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Chan is the Chinese ancestor of Zen Buddhism. The Western Chan Fellowship is an association of lay Chan practitioners, a lay Sangha, based in the UK. We are registered as a charity in England and Wales, with contacts in Europe and the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

### VISIT OUR WEBSITE

Our website [www.westernchanfellowship.org](http://www.westernchanfellowship.org) includes:

- Introductory articles for newcomers to Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation.
- A digital library of Dharma Talks by Chan Masters and many other articles.
- Retreat reports of participants at our retreats which give a valuable insight into the retreat process.
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- Back-issues of this journal New Chan Forum.
- Meditation group details and general contacts.

### CONTACT US

To contact any of the Officers of the WCF please go to:

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We are always happy to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. For further information on submitting a contribution, please contact the editor, Eddy Street at [editor@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org)

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*5th January to 12th January 2013*

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四十七世天童宏智禪師



CHAN MASTER HONGZHI ZHENGJUE 1091-1157

*Hongzhi's conception of "silent illumination" is of particular importance to the Chinese Caodong and Japanese Soto Zen schools*



All the harm, fear and suffering  
in the world are caused by attachment to the self:  
why should I hold onto this great demon?

SHANTIDEVA

禪