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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

GEORGE MARSH

Welcome to the summer issue of *New Chan Forum*. It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce Rebecca Li, Simon's second dharma heir who was given the transmission in a ceremony in New York on June 5th 2016. Many of you will not yet know her, but we hope to see more of her on our British retreats. I am sure you will find her spiritual biography interesting.

Simon's own retreat talk this time explores ways to apply the right effort to living the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Anna Jedynak writes beautifully about meditation in the first of three articles equally useful for those starting out on the path and those with more experience. Eddy Street gives us a history of 'work' as a meditative and mindful practice in Chan monasteries and broadens it to apply to all of us in our daily lives.

Pat Simmons has withdrawn as my co-editor and I thank her for all that she has done for the *New Chan Forum* over the last three years. Happily, she will still be helping and making contributions. She always wanted to see more women prominently represented in our pages so I hope she is pleased with this issue.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA LI

GEORGE MARSH &amp; REBECCA LI

*We introduce Simon Child's second dharma heir, Rebecca Li, interviewed by Skype from New York in January 2017. She edited the text and added some content that was not covered in the interview.*

*Was there religion in your childhood? Was there any sign of transcendence or vision? How about influences from Chinese culture?*

I grew up in Hong Kong, which is a very Westernised place, and went to an English school, so I never searched for Buddhism. In fact, I almost became a Catholic in secondary school. The most memorable early experiences that might have primed me to be open to Buddhism were two. When I was about seven I was in my father's hardware store in Hong Kong, and while alone I had the strong feeling that I was in the wrong place in the wrong body, like I didn't belong there. It was a very strong and shocking feeling. "Why am I here?" I wondered. At that moment it felt like I belonged somewhere else. That memory and feeling stuck with me, and while I didn't have any ideas beyond the feeling of awe at that strange feeling at the time, because it did stick with me so vividly I suspect it helped open me to the idea of past lives when I was eventually exposed to Buddhism. That said, I am not sure for one to practice Chan that it is necessary to believe in rebirth, but I definitely don't close my mind to that possibility.

Later, when I was about eight, in Elementary School, I heard Hui Neng's four-line verse ("There is no Bodhi-tree / Nor stand of a mirror bright / Since all is void / Where can the dust alight?") on a TV show.



REBECCA LI AND SIMON CHILD

I asked my mom, who was also watching, what it meant and she just said it was something Buddhist. I didn't experience any realization or anything like that but I did find it intriguing, and thought that maybe Buddhism, whatever that was, would be interesting. My family was not religious nor was my mother Buddhist, but I did think at that time "If I ever have a religion it might be Buddhism." So even though I never pursued it, or sought it out, that openness to Buddhism remained, so when I finally was exposed to it I had an open mind.

In addition to my family not being religious, we were also not brought up "traditionally". The Confucian values of family, filial piety, duty and obedience are very strong for the Chinese. It is much more so in Taiwan

and China than in Hong Kong, but it is still a common set of values in Hong Kong as well. However, my father was considered something of an eccentric because he taught us not to blindly respect someone just because s/he is an elder or an authority figure but we should think for ourselves whether that person's views and actions are sensible, so I became very independent in judgement. This later affected how I related to Buddhism and Buddhist teachers. But more on that later.

*How did you come to Chan? Tell me about your first meeting with Master Sheng Yen.*

It was not until I was a graduate student in California that I encountered Buddhism and began to feel its pull. I was going through a period of deep sadness after losing a friendship which had been very important to me at that time. A number of people treated me as someone who could help them with their problems, but in fact I had real problems of my own that I was not sure how deal with. I thought I must do something different, to try a new approach so I joined an Aikido class, feeling the need to connect my mind and body. It was an attempt to break my mode of living at that time which was very cerebral and focused on abstract ideas. I became interested in meditation after reading Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* in which he said reading, something I was doing a lot of, was a form of escape and perhaps we should try meditation. Even though I had no idea what meditation was, I was intrigued by the idea. I also met David at that time, now my husband, who was taking Qi Gong and Chan meditation classes.

David told me about the meditation classes he was attending with Gilbert Gutierrez, a student of Master Sheng Yen who later became one



REBECCA LI AND SIMON CHILD, TRANSMISSION CEREMONY, NEW YORK, 2016

of Master Sheng Yen's Dharma heirs. Hearing about that, I found myself reading a few of Master Sheng Yen's books. They were a revelation to me. They explained so much, and many things started to make sense, in particular my friendship difficulty. It made sense that changes in causes and conditions lead to the coming into being and the passing away of impermanent feelings and connections, unfortunately even including friendship. But this helped me understand that what I was suffering over was a natural process, and that even though it was painful it was how things work.

My very first class with Gilbert Gutierrez was on Yogacara. I knew nothing at all about it conceptually, but did feel that it made sense somehow. One person in the class also reported on a seven-day retreat that he just attended with Master Sheng Yen in Queens, NY. For some reason that sounded like something I definitely wanted to do, and the sooner the better! In addition, Gilbert's wife Ellen was Taiwanese and she had practiced for a long time, including under Master Sheng Yen. She had a lot of compassion and wisdom and influenced me deeply. One thing she told me at the time was, "Don't go to any random teacher. You need to be careful who you follow. It is important to follow someone with clear lineage so that you will not be led astray." Growing up in Hong Kong where we were taught to be sceptical about self-proclaimed masters of all kinds, such as those claiming the ability to turn copper into gold, I took her advice to heart. Based on what I read and his background, I felt that Master Sheng Yen would be a good teacher for me to follow. Years later when I worked on Shifu's autobiography, I found that he practiced with new religious groups in Japan and it helped me become more open-minded about teachers from all backgrounds. As I met teach-

ers from different traditions, it has become clear to me that it is an individual's practice and conduct that makes one a worthwhile teacher.

Around that time, Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) was due to make his first visit to California and I was absolutely sure I wanted to take refuge with him. As his visit approached I got very sick all of a sudden, and I remember this thought arising in my mind, "Maybe I will be too sick to travel to the refuge ceremony." I was shocked to see that thought and said to myself, "Even if I have to crawl, I'll go." It was a taste of the practice of angry determination that Shifu would often talk about in retreat, and I knew that it was essential for keeping us on the path.

I have to say that I felt a strong connection to Master Sheng Yen from the beginning. I had not met him in person until that refuge ceremony and I did not know much about him other than a few of his books I have read (it was before the time of Google), yet I was sure that I wanted to follow him on my spiritual journey. Later on, I met many people who have studied with many different teachers in their search. For some reason, I felt that I had found my teacher when I met Shifu; there was no need to look anywhere else.

There are four lines that emphasize how rare it is to be born with a human body, what an opportunity it is, and how rare it is to meet the Buddhadharma and have access to liberation. These lines made a very deep impression on me. Master Sheng Yen started his journey along this line, feeling that Buddhadharma is so wonderful and it was such a pity that so few people knew about it. This was why he devoted his life to sharing the Dharma and I felt a similar calling to do so. Following Master Sheng Yen has thus always felt like accepting his invitation to everyone to join him to share the Dharma.

In the mid-1990s, Shifu's intensive retreats were held in the Chan Meditation Center with enough space for only thirty participants. It was very difficult to get accepted to a retreat. I was so happy, after one failed attempt, to finally have the opportunity to attend a seven-day intensive retreat even though that involved flying across the country all by myself. In that retreat, like the next few, I was mostly dealing with drowsiness from jetlag and a drastically different daily schedule than my usual night owl life. When it was my turn for an interview with Shifu, I didn't really have any questions for him. For some reason, I would just start crying as soon as I sat in front of him and could not stop. I remember feeling, "Thank goodness, I finally found you again!" Recalling this now still tears me up. It was as if I was with him a long time ago and got separated, like a child who got separated from her parents in a crowded market, and the joy I felt was like being reunited with my loved ones. At the end of my first retreat we had a sharing. Because my Mandarin was not good, I shared my experience in English. After I finished, Shifu looked me in the eyes and said, "You are going to help a lot of people." It was a vivid memory because I was puzzled. I did not say anything extraordinary. I was barely able to stay awake during my meditation. "How on earth am I supposed to help a lot of people?" I thought to myself. Perhaps that comment helped put me on my path as I would use that to remind myself to make myself useful for others as I engage in the practice. It was that mentality that guided me as I served as Shifu's interpreter, board member of Dharma Drum Retreat Center, Dharma teacher, and as a retreat leader.



*How did you learn the specialist Buddhist vocabulary to translate for Master Sheng Yen? Please share some of your stories of traveling with him.*

I did not speak much Mandarin when I first met Shifu at the retreat in New York. I only had one course in college and my listening comprehension was still quite poor. I had to rely on Ming Yee's translation to understand Shifu's Dharma talks. When I was invited to be trained as Shifu's translator I tried much harder to learn Mandarin. One difficulty was that he spoke with a strong accent which I could not follow at first. I learned to understand Shifu's accent by listening to his recorded talks again and again, and listening to the translations of his previous translator (Ming Yee) to get to know the technical vocabulary. To learn the Buddhist terms I bought a Buddhist specialist dictionary and collected all kinds of glossaries that listed Buddhist terms in Chinese, Sanskrit and English and memorized them. As I gained more confidence in my translations, I moved away from trying to find the perfect translation for a specific term. I teach sociological theory which also has a lot of specialised language, and I have found it much more helpful when I explain these concepts to my students in layman's terms and minimize the use of jargon. The goal is to understand the idea and the word used to communicate the idea is merely an approximation, so what is important is to work out what the idea really means. So I would ask Shifu to explain the concept to me and then construct my own English equivalent. I guess I did alright since from time to time Shifu would comment that the English explanation was clearer than the one in Chinese!

In this way I got to know Shifu well. We travelled together quite a bit, mostly for religious leaders' meetings and also for a retreat in Switzerland. Since we shared hotel breakfasts together and worked together I

had a different point of view from those who treated him as a god. I did not just see him as someone up on the stage or pedestal. I saw him as human, as a monk, and as a practitioner like the rest of us. Because my dad told me a person has to earn your respect I judged Shifu as I found him, not based on others' notions, or mystical beliefs. Shifu most definitely earned my respect. He did so by being a serious practitioner, and by adhering to the Buddha's teachings sincerely and treating each person with genuine respect.

Shifu had a very weak stomach, so he always travelled with an attendant who cooked his food for him and often with a secretary and other helpers as well. After 9/11 in New York he was invited with other religious leaders to the World Economic Forum, held in New York in 2002 to show solidarity (it is usually held in Davos, Switzerland). Entourages were severely restricted. Only a single translator was allowed, so I had to be his food attendant, secretary, liaison with Taiwan as well as translator, but he happily pitched in. So between us we did the faxing, secretarial work, reporting to Taiwan and so on. I did my best serving him food, knowing that I was probably breaking all kinds of protocols as attendant since I did not really know what they were. It was totally not a problem for him that things were not done the usual proper way or in the correct sequence. And he was willing to chip in and do whatever needed to be done. He was capable of not being the VIP, and did not have a self-important ego.

When I had the responsibility for running the retreat centre in upstate New York he was able to play the role of President without always being in charge. If people tried to lobby him for changes at the retreat center, he would refer them to me. He did not have to exercise his power. When

I read about abuses of power in some other Zen communities Shifu's example stuck with me. It is important for the teacher to be aware that just because others let you be the power, you do not have to.

When we were working on his autobiographical book *Footprints in the Snow* he used to completely forget about his Master's "dignity" and he would act out scenes from his childhood and youth to me. I remember him down on the floor demonstrating the push-ups he did in army training, a wonderfully informal man reliving it all for the book.

On a trip to Jerusalem for another meeting of religious leaders I saw how quickly he absorbed large quantities of information and could understand why he was so successful. I gave him a briefing, using the information I read, on the history of various sites we visited and the city itself. A film crew from Taiwan was traveling with us for a documentary of Shifu. When I saw Shifu's interview on this trip, he repeated everything I told him about the history of the sites. It was really impressive what a fast learner he was, especially when he did this amidst a busy meeting schedule for the religious leaders. Also on that trip I saw him forego his special meal, out of a delicate concern for others who could not eat at the same time, knowing that he would suffer for it later. To this day, I still draw on things I learned by watching Shifu's responses to situations during our travels when I try to figure out how to handle difficult situations I encounter.

*Could you share with me some of your retreat experiences?*

When I started attending retreats with Shifu, they were not divided between *huaou* and Silent Illumination. I mainly learned how to use the breath method and it seemed some participants were practicing



MASTER SHENG-YEN AND REBECCA LI

with a huatou. Those were very important retreats as they laid the foundation of establishing right views and proper attitudes toward the practice for me.

In my early years serving as Shifu's translator on retreats, I attended several huatou retreats mostly because they were the ones that fit into my schedule. I was a slow learner and it took me a while to appreciate how powerful huatou practice was. Then in 2004 when I travelled with Shifu to Switzerland to translate for him at the Silent Illumination retreat I told Shifu that the huatou still came up on its own. He said, "That's okay. In the depths of silence there's the question anyway." It helped me understand that the separation of the two styles is somewhat arbitrary. They are different doors to enter the same room.

My first Western Zen Retreat with John Crook in 2001, however, transformed my practice. The combination of communication exercises and intensely personal interviews pushed me deeper into my practice. Because of that, I consider John my second teacher besides Shifu. I believe his approach is an important innovation in Chan to meet the needs of practitioners living in the modern era. I was able to see through many of my vexations in the retreats with John, which were often co-led by Simon Child and Hilary Richards. After Shifu stopped travelling to the U.S. for retreats, John and Simon became my main teachers. Besides participating in their retreats, I began my training with them first as guest master and then with Simon to conduct retreat interviews. I started training exclusively with Simon after John passed away in 2011. The training was a very important part of my practice in those years. They helped me work through a lot of deeply entrenched habitual tendencies. Learning how to conduct retreat interviews and lead the Western Zen Retreat

was one of the most difficult things I have undertaken. I wondered many times if I could ever get it. Learning how to persevere through it all was one of the many great gifts I received from Simon for which I am forever grateful. In a retreat I sat with Simon in 2010, causes and conditions came together and Simon informed me that I had seen the nature and I wrote about it in a retreat report. I can't help but feel that I am the most fortunate person on earth. Meeting and practicing with a great master like Master Sheng Yen is already a great blessing. I was also able to meet and study with two other great masters, John Crook and Simon Child, along with others who have taught me on the Path. The only way I know to repay their kindness is to share the Dharma using what I have learned from them.

*Now that you have received Dharma transmission, what do you want to do with it? Will you lead retreats in Britain? Will you start your own Sangha? Will you teach in a traditional Chinese or modern Westernized style, or reform the teaching in some way?* As you can see, I came to Chan like many westerners or “convert Buddhists” did. The way Shifu taught in the West appealed to those of us with more scientific minds like John Crook, Simon Child and myself, people who are not prone to swallow beliefs based simply on authority. John adapted the teaching to incorporate a learning style more common among the western-educated. This is the style I can relate to the most and I find helpful to practitioners in my retreats and classes.

As for whether I will lead retreats in Britain, we will see how causes and conditions unfold. Fiona Nuttall is my dear Dharma sister and I will support her in whatever way she needs me. I co-led a Western Zen Retreat with Hilary Richards in 2015 at Maenllwyd and had a wonderful

experience. It was a lot of fun and we received a lot of retreat reports from the retreatants. I think they could sense the joy Hilary and I were feeling as we shared the space. I have made many friends with the Western Chan Fellowship sangha over the years and would cherish the opportunity to practice with them again, on whichever side of the pond that may be.

As a Dharma heir my most important responsibility is to carry on the lineage and identify someone with the Great Vow to commit to carrying it on as well, while continuing my practice and teaching. It has struck me how much there is to do. Besides my full-time job as a sociology professor, balancing my responsibilities for Dharma teaching, retreat center business, family and civic life will be a lifelong practice. As for any specific plan, I have not yet made any major decisions yet. I have been doing a lot of thinking, considering my abilities and limitations as well as feeling out the shifting causes and conditions. I am giving it some space to allow things to take shape. I have been thinking a lot about teacher training, knowing full well how long it took to train me when I had such dedicated teachers. I still remember how many people started when Shifu began training us to be Dharma Lecturers in 1999 and how few finished the training, and fewer yet stayed on as teachers. It reminds me again of the importance of Great Vow, as Shifu often emphasized. So I have also been thinking, “What can I do to instill that Vow in students?”



## RETREAT REPORT

REBECCA LI

*Extracts from Rebecca Li's breakthrough retreat report of 2010*

I continued to hear the silence and maintain an open awareness of body, mind and environment. I found them to be arbitrary categories, none carrying more weight than the others. They arose like bubbles or ripples in a body of water and disappeared without a trace, leaving the mind back to silence. Yet I noticed a thought that arose rather consistently: “I can report this to Simon.” After a while, I realized that I had this tendency of doing things to please others. Underlying these thoughts was the belief and feeling that I would be happy if I could bring the news and make the teacher happy. This childish reliance on others’ affirmation was laid bare in my mind. “Why couldn’t I stand on my own and take responsibility for my practice and my life?” I asked myself. It was clear that it was the main source of suffering in my life. This subtle samskara had caused me to doubt myself at a deeper level even when I was convinced that I was doing the right thing by my rationality and intellect. I needed to resolve this riddle, “Why can’t I grow up to be a truly independent person?” I continued to watch the mind with everything arising and perishing, with this question gnawing at me in the background.

On the next day, after the morning meditation, the mind was very calm, clear and spacious. When the bell rang, the stillness continued and I could have continued sitting. Then the mind stirred as others prepared for morning service. I watched the mind giving rise to thoughts of giving up and allowing leg discomfort as excuse. I sensed resistance of some



sort in the mind and I investigated further. I found the answer to my question. I discovered a knot in the heart hidden deep down; I realized I did not believe that I too could go all the way in the practice. That's why I allowed myself to give up rather than pushing on in the practice. As I shared this revelation with Simon, it was extremely emotional. It was a huge lump of sorrow wanting to be pulled out, displayed in the open and let go. After the tearful recounting of the story, the sorrow was nowhere to be found. The belief about my inability to amount to anything in the practice that seemed to have defined my being at the deepest level showed itself as nothing more than another thought. It has been heard, and now liberated, no longer having anything to do with me. I shared this revelation in the interview with Simon. He said, "The mind is empty," and I responded, "Indeed."

\* \* \*

I told Simon that I couldn't believe all the books that have been written about this. It is just right here, in front of our face. We both burst into laughter. Simon said that's why the Buddha would not teach at first. I said, "What would he talk about?" Simon then said that people practiced for years, going through lots of difficulties, to find this, the ordinary mind. I said, "I still can't get over all those books written about this." We burst into laughter again and we laughed so hard that Simon had to wipe off some tears. He asked, "Who is enjoying the joke?" The laughter is now gone. There is silence. I responded, "No more joke."

\* \* \*

He then said, “You still have not answered my question. Have you discovered the emptiness of yourself?” I told him yes, with a smile. I told Simon, “This silence is really loud. How can we not hear it? Our mind must have been really noisy!” We both had a good laugh. I told Simon that thoughts and sensations arise and perish moment to moment. Nothing matters. Yet, this “nothing matters” is not nihilistic. Even though everything is impermanent, it does not mean that it is meaningless. When they arise, they serve their functions. Then they perish. Everything is fine, perfect as it is.

I continued with the practice sitting, walking, eating, resting, working, using the washroom, showering. The silence of the mind stayed with me. The wood-creaking sound of the Chan Hall comes and goes. The sound of someone coughing comes and goes. Cool air touching my body when I walk by a window. Sensation of the knees from the bending and buttock from the pressure on the cushion, while crystal clear as I sit, disappears as the legs are released. Not a trace of the idea of the pain remains. Thoughts arise and go away. None of these stick to the silence, like birds leaving no trace whatsoever after flying across the sky.

\* \* \*

I discovered that my father loves me. In fact, what happened was I allowed myself to believe that my father truly loves me. In the previous evening, a strong emotion arose as the thoughts of my father reminding me of my Chinese birthday came through my mind. The feeling hidden beneath this memory that had been obscured by other notions about my father revealed itself. I was not paying attention. Sitting on my cush-



REBECCA LI, SIMON CHILD AND FIONA NUTTALL

ion, with a clear mind, his deep affection for me was clear. Related to this, I also discovered how truly deeply I love my husband. The fear of emotional attachment was not there. It is okay to love and to accept love and to want to be with my loved ones. Everything is fine. Words cannot describe the fundamental importance of this discovery, that love is perfectly fine. It makes me human.

When standing in the breakfast line on the Friday, something happened that made it appear as if someone was going to skip in front of me in line. The thought that consists of my belief about how the line was supposed to work arose and perished. It was followed immediately by a more “Dharma” thought, telling myself that it is okay and it is all causes and conditions. This thought too arose and perished. I discovered

that they were both thoughts. The so-called “Dharma” thought was not more real or inherently true than the so-called “self-centered” thought. They are both empty. Then I realized that the Dharma-self has been bullying the non- Dharma-self because of the erroneous belief that the former is more true, thus sometimes depriving the chance of the latter to be given a fair hearing. It became clear where the resistance that manifested in the form of resentment, guilt and rebellion that arose from time to time came from. This is another thing that had apparently been bothering me in the deeper corner of my consciousness. The discovery freed me.

During the morning service, thoughts about the past arose while the chanting was going on. I realized that thoughts about the past are as much a part of the present as everything else, the chanting, the sound of the Dharma instruments, the sound of the room, etc., happening in the present. A thought is no different from a sound, both arise and perish and thus empty; the latter no more real nor pure than the former. These so-called “wandering thoughts” or “illusory thoughts” are not a problem and there is no need to fear them. Some of my “Dharma-related” views are slowly being illuminated.

\* \* \*

The mind can function perfectly fine without my being involved. I continued to practice no-method. When sitting, I did not meditate, but just sat. When I got up for the standing exercises, I let go of the method. Everything was crystal clear, perfectly fine. The mind does not need any method. The mind is pure, immaculate, perfect in itself. I realized that I had been reluctant to let go of the method.

\* \* \*

It then became clear to me that, over the past day, I had slowly learned to let go of the Dharma, as instructed by the Diamond Sutra. It was not easy and I could see why the Buddha found it necessary to give this instruction. The Dharma, with its method and views, had served its purpose. The mind is naturally bright and clear. It does not need these words.

One last thing to report – when I was sitting on the toilet, the body was doing its thing. Sound of the fan came on. Footsteps on the floor. Water running from the faucets. Faucets turned off. Sound of lever of paper towel dispenser being pushed. No need for me to be here. Simon asked if I came back. I said, “Yes, I needed to leave the toilet.” He asked if this happened before. I told him, “a number of times, while eating, walking, sitting, when the self was not needed. Self comes and goes. It’s okay.”

Simon then told me, “It is clear that you have seen the nature. Congratulations.” I thanked Simon. Although one may think that this ought to be a moment of great excitement or joy, it was really quite an ordinary moment.

\* \* \*

That evening after everyone retired, I paid my gratitude to Shifu by doing some prostrations. No word would be sufficient in describing my gratitude. My deep gratitude also goes to John Crook and Simon Child who gave me personal guidance over the years in Western Zen Retreats and Koan Retreats. The discoveries made in those retreats were invaluable

for preparing me for this retreat. I cannot help but feel that I have to be one of the most blessed people in the world, having encountered not one but three great masters to help me with my practice.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND RIGHT EFFORT

SIMON CHILD

John Crook used to like to say that the essence of Chan is self-confrontation. I've already spoken about Dogen's saying, "to study the Buddha way is to study the self". And on the first evening here a few of you mentioned you came here to understand who you are. Why this emphasis on self, who we are, confronting ourselves. What's the use of it?

I've spoken about how your koans bite back on you, start investigating you. You start off thinking you're investigating a koan but it ends up with the koan investigating you. Why is it set up in this way? Why is that useful?

You could say that the truth of the teaching of the Buddha is available to be witnessed in our own experience of ourselves. We are exemplars of the teaching of the Buddha. Consider the teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Most of you know this teaching but I'll recap it briefly as I go along. It arose out of the Buddha considering how he could explain what he'd discovered. For some time after he first had his enlightenment he didn't think that it would be possible to share it with people, because he couldn't find a way to explain it. In the Four Noble Truths he wasn't explaining the experience itself but he was explaining, pointing out, a way of seeing things which helps lead you in that direction. Because he was teaching humans he was pointing out characteristics of human beings. We can follow this teaching deeply into ourselves and when we do that we find the truth of it. It's quite straightforward and we can witness this in the operation of our own

experience. This is why it's so valuable to be led in this way, to be prodded in this direction.

### The First Noble Truth

Let's take the first of the Four Noble Truths; *dukkha*. Life is experienced in a way which is unsatisfactory. Often this is translated with the somewhat stronger word 'suffering', but the weight of that word may distract you from the essence of the message and a better word may be 'unsatisfactory'. It points out that we are ill at ease most of the time. We don't feel at ease. We feel dissatisfied. This could be in a big way if there's something major going on in our lives. It could be in a much more minor way such as the raspberry jam being at the wrong end of the dining table – that's unsatisfactory isn't it? – for some people at least. It creates a little niggle, "I've got to do something about that". You point at it but no-one notices. You whisper but no-one notices. You speak out on a silent retreat because you must resolve this dissatisfaction of there being no raspberry jam within reach. And jam appears and satisfaction is gained. Or is it? There's more yet to fix in the world, isn't there?

Lots of things are unsatisfactory in our experience. We know that many of these we cannot do much about so we niggle along and put up with them. But it's very much a sense of 'putting up with' rather than just saying, "it's ok". Hence the Buddha pointing out that we're dissatisfied with the way things are. I think that as you've been working on your koans, for most of you the koan has touched something in you and you realise that there is some aspect of you, of your life or of your experience of life, that's unsatisfactory, that could have been better, should be better. "It's not fair." "It's not right." "I'm not as successful as I could be", and so on



and so on. Different phrasing for different people and different circumstances but there's a sense that it's not quite how it could be or should be or ought to be or might have been. It's not satisfactory the way it is. That's what the Buddha was pointing out with the first of the Noble Truths and we are discovering that in our own experience.

We may brush over it because we have a sense that we can't do anything about it, and therefore it's not worth fussing about. It might be that we find it uncomfortable to face so we hide from it. We realise that we can't fix it so we ignore it and we overlook it. We don't realise it's there until maybe something like a koan points it out to us. This is where the resonance with the koan is very interesting. Some of you don't know why you've picked your koan but you've probably picked it because there is some resonance with something and it's probably a resonance with something in you that doesn't feel very comfortable.

### The Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth of the Buddha pointed out that this unsatisfactoriness was basically due to the three poisons; ignorance, craving, aversion. It tends to get phrased mainly as craving and aversion but ignorance comes in there too. Craving, wanting something. Wanting it to be something other than it is. Wanting it to be other than it is because it's unsatisfactory as it is. You can see how this works out can't you? If it's unsatisfactory the way it is, naturally you want it to be some other way. Craving. Grasping. Greed. Wanting it to be some way other than it is. If you reflect on what the koan has touched in you, I think you will see a taste of that. And its opposite, or its complement depending on which way you look at it, aversion. Craving is wanting what you haven't got, aversion is not wanting what you've



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got – it's the same thing, just in negative. It's wanting things to be other than they are; "I've got this but I don't want it. How can I shake it off?". Having something you don't want is as unsatisfactory as not having something you do want. Looked at in this way these Noble Truths are really straightforward. They're testable in our own life experience. And they are testable in your own experience as you're sitting here on the cushion with your koan. The koan is prodding you saying, "You don't like this, do you? You're not very comfortable with this, are you? You wish this had turned out differently, don't you? You wish you'd got that promotion. You wish that partner you wanted, wanted you. You wish the jam was closer." (I'm not picking on the jam person, it's just a good story!)

You can see that happening in you every day, many times a day. And you see your response is to try to fix it, to want it to be fixed. Sometimes that can be achieved but there are other things which we can't fix. The koan rubs our nose in those as well, and this is where it gets more confrontational.

Some of you have chosen koans with words like impermanence in. Can you fix impermanence? That's more challenging! Something out of reach can be fixed, maybe, with the cooperation of others, but impermanence, can we fix that? How are you when you're left with something which isn't satisfactory and can't be fixed? This is when the practice gets rather more confronting and rather more difficult and potentially more painful. How do we deal with that? We have all sorts of strategies for dealing with difficulties in life and often these are to do with avoidance: we switch off; we face the other way; we distract ourselves. Indeed we find ourselves doing that in meditation too, don't we? Can't we go off on some wonderful day dreams as a way of distracting ourselves when the practice looks like taking us to a darker corner of ourselves? What wonderful sto-

ries we can create – but are they doing the work that needs to be done? Are they confronting what needs to be confronted? If the mind is wandering off, is it really exploring the koan or is it avoiding the koan? Is it really investigating you or is it avoiding investigating you?

When the mind goes off like this be very sensitive to what's going on here. It's not that you have to trap the mind. The exploration of yourself and of your koan can go quite wide so you're not necessarily off-course when other ideas begin to arise and you let them through, and emotions present themselves and you allow yourself to experience them. You're not necessarily off-course, so don't be cutting them off. But when you've let them through, fully experience them, be with them, and then you may get a sense of whether this is something that you're creating as an indulgence, as a smoke screen, or whether it really is informing your investigation. Quite subtle and quite difficult to get right. But be aware it could be wrong or it could be right, and get a sense of that by being very intimate with it, really experiencing it. As the work with the koan progresses it gets more difficult, in the sense that it gets more subtle, and it's also less familiar territory. This is new, maybe you've not been here before, maybe you're not really sure what's going on, but still you have to persist.

### The Third Noble Truth

Remember the Third Noble Truth of the Buddha, the possibility of release from unsatisfactoriness, from suffering, from being ill at ease. Now that's an interesting one when we've just said that some of these unsatisfactory situations can't be resolved, they can't be fixed – yet somehow we can be at ease with them? How might that happen? How might it be that we could be at ease with impermanence when we tend not to be at ease

with some of the manifestations of impermanence such as death? How could it happen? How could the Buddha say that was possible? This is what he's pointing at with the Third Noble Truth. You have to find your own way through here, but for example maybe it's your attitude to impermanence which is the problem, not impermanence itself. Maybe that's what needs to give way. You may not be able to deliberately change that but you could be open to the possibility.

Picking on the example of impermanence, that's another manifestation of grasping, grasping onto something, not wanting it to change. Holding on, craving. If we can let go of craving and grasping, maybe impermanence is not such a big deal and we can be at ease with it. But in our everyday way of looking at things it's a very challenging investigation. Still, the Buddha pointed out the Third Noble Truth; it's possible.

I often say this Third Noble Truth is miraculous because it might not be possible. It might be that we're hard-wired into craving and aversion and dissatisfaction as part of our biological survival instinct. It might be that it's hard-wired into us and it's not possible to step outside of it. But in the Third Noble Truth the Buddha says it is possible to step outside of it. Indeed many people who've followed the Buddha have confirmed it is possible to step outside of it.

This teaching gives hope. It might seem rather difficult. It might seem rather impenetrable when we look at it in terms of the harder examples, but we can look at it in terms of the easier examples and see that we've already had examples in our life of genuinely letting go of craving. We've been bothered about having something and we just, "Ah! Forget it", and feel at ease with not having it. I hope we've all had that experience at least once in our life, in a small way. So it is possible to be experiencing craving,

for it not to be fulfilled, and for that to be satisfactory. Huh! It is possible! Maybe that's a clue to the way forward. So, again, the koan is working its way in you and through you and it's illustrating the Noble Truths.

### The Fourth Noble Truth and Right Effort

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path: various attitudes and ways of being, including the practice of meditation which we're engaged on here. We put in the 'right' effort, Right Effort being part of the Eightfold Path. We put the right amount of effort into practice. We don't slack off. But we also don't need to overtire ourselves and overdo it. We're mindful of our effort and we apply the appropriate effort according to the state of our practice and the state of our body and mind. If we're rather tired and slumping we might need to apply more effort to continue to practice, or we may need to respect the tiredness of the body and rest a little. If we're in a good space and practice is just flowing then to apply effort might be harmful, it might be forcing it, creating a duality between now and some imagined future achievement, rushing ahead.

Tune the effort. Tune the practice. This requires you to be sensitive to the state of your practice and the state of your mind and make the appropriate adjustments. Be clear about what you're doing and whether you need to review. Ask some questions so you understand what you're doing. Are you approaching the practice with the correct attitude. What is the correct attitude? Are you approaching it with the correct amount of effort and diligence? Maybe you are approaching it too tensely, too seeking, too striving? Or are you too casual, lazy?

Practice can reach a point where practice is just automatic, but if it's not there yet you need to apply the method. Sometimes people get the

idea, “meditation should just happen, I shouldn’t be doing anything, if I’m doing something I’m interfering”. If you’re at the point where meditation is looking after itself then that’s great, but mostly that’s not where you are. You actually need to do something. You need to remind yourself to practise. Maybe you need to straighten up your posture. You need to bring yourself out of daydreams. You need to pick up the koan. There are certain things you do need to do to practise effectively when the practice is not running totally automatically completely by itself. You’re not usually in the state of automatic practice, so do be prepared to put some effort into the practice.

Master Sheng Yen used to talk about two opposite approaches to practice, but it’s more a continuum than opposites. You could indeed have a relaxed approach to practice. Or you could have a very energetic determined approach to practice. If you’re taking the determined energetic approach then you make a vow, “I will not move at all during the sitting, however much my legs hurt I will sit here. I will not move for three sittings in a row, I will just sit there through the breaks. I will not let my mind waver at all. I will stay firmly with the koan the whole time”. Quite a solid, determined, vigorous approach to the practice. Or you could take a more relaxed approach, “I’ll sit here and I’ll pick up my koan and I’ll notice what goes on, and my mind will probably generate some noise and I’ll allow that to wander through the mind. I’ll pay attention to it. I’ll experience it”. And that’s it. Just hanging about with your koan somewhere in the offing. Both are perfectly valid approaches. Both can go wrong. The vigorous approach can get too tense, too striving, too goal-orientated. You’re fixed on a future success, that’s where your mind really is, it’s not on the koan at all. You overtire yourself and you collapse and you’re not able to practise for

the next twelve hours. Overdoing it is not good. But too casual, too relaxed, and it can just slip into laziness; might as well just get out a deck chair and a novel mightn't you? Sit by the fountain and, yeah! Aha, around the room there seems to be some recognition of that one!

There is a deliberate practice to be applied, there is a method, and we pick up the method and we make use of it. But we have to tune it appropriately to our situation. If we've got a lot of energy and stamina we could indeed practice more vigorously and that's what Master Sheng Yen recommended if you had the energy to do it. But equally if you haven't got the energy to do it, don't try and do it; you'll just tire yourself out and collapse and waste lots of time recovering. Practise according to your ability.

Self-confrontation requires a certain amount of energy and commitment and dedication and determination, and there are some strong phrases used in relation to this practice: Great Vow; Great Determination; Great Doubt. Great Vow means that you really are determined to push through with this practice. It's not something you're treating lightly, casually, just as a cultural experience. You're here to practice. You're here to get somewhere. Where that somewhere might be shouldn't be too fixed in the mind because you might be having the idea of getting enlightened, whatever that means. You might be having the idea, "I'm going to fix something in myself". The practice isn't fixed in that sort of way. It takes you, as you've already discovered, around some surprising routes and corners. Don't have an idea of a specific destination, instead have an idea of doing the practice. The vow is to do that practice, it's not to reach a specific goal. You've got a sense of the practice being worth doing, based on your own personal experience and perhaps also on your understanding of and confidence in the Buddha's teaching. We could use the word 'faith' as well, Great Faith,





PHOTO: CLAIRE MARTIN

though ‘faith’ is a tricky word for some of us. We have a confidence that this method is worth persisting with. We have a confidence that meditation is worth doing. With Great Faith, Great Vow, we’re going to make good use of the time. We’re not going to waste it.

Great Determination is sometimes phrased as Great Angry Determination, which gives you a sense of the vigour of it. You don’t have to go around the place shouting and raging, it’s not that sort of a thing, but you have to have that sense of strength, of energy, “I really am going to stick at this and push it through”.

And then the Great Doubt. This is not something you can create, but it’s something which may arise from what you might call the smaller doubt. It starts from just being intrigued, curious about the koan. Curious even about, “What made me pick this koan? What was going on there? Hmm, this one stood out to me more than the others, I wonder why?”. Maybe an inkling of something in you is revealed. “Hmm yeah, there’s something unresolved in me. I can’t find a way to resolve it. I’ve spent years trying to resolve it”. And ‘doubt’, not in the negative sense of, “I’m never going to resolve it”, it’s more in the sense of, “I don’t know, I need to know, I need to sort this out. I can’t carry on not knowing”.

As we penetrate through these various layers of our personality, and our twists and history and so on, there’s still yet more unknown. Even though we make discoveries, and we do make discoveries, we find ourselves still up against not knowing. The traditional phrasing in Chan is not knowing about birth and death. Not knowing where we come from at birth, not knowing where we go to at death. We might phrase it differently. We might say we don’t know who we are. We don’t understand life. We don’t understand death. We come up against things that we find we can’t

break through, but we feel that we must break through. How can we live if we don't know what life is? How can we live without an understanding of who we are, and what birth and death are. How can we know how to live? Of course we can just bumble along, but are we living the right way? These are not so easily pushed through. The sense of 'not knowing' increases as we realise we are not going to pass through so easily. Also the sense of 'needing to know' increases.

This is now edging towards the Great Doubt. There are various descriptions of this and one of these is that it's like having a red hot iron ball stuck in your throat. You can't cough it up; that will burn your mouth. You can't swallow it; that will burn your stomach. That may be a rather violent image but it conveys that sense of, "I've got to do something but I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do, but I can't just do nothing". It conveys that sense of urgency but also of stuckness, there's no obvious way to go; "I don't know, but I must know".

The red hot iron ball is a rather violent image, and Master Sheng Yen once changed it. He said, well it doesn't have to sound so violent; it could be you've got a sweet stuck in your throat and you can't move it. Still this sense of something stuck – something has got to be fixed but can't be fixed. The Great Doubt.

If you reflect upon some of the issues you've been touching in yourself, in some cases these are very significant issues in terms of how it is to be you in the world. Are you being you, or are you somehow being not you? This is important, maybe this is very important. Maybe the Doubt arises in relation to, "I'm just not the way I could be or should be. This is not me. I've lost me. I can't find me". Practice can take you to that point and then you may get to feeling, "How ridiculous, I don't know who I am.

This has got to be sorted. I can't find a way through, but I can't ignore it". This relates to what I mentioned previously about the attention getting sharper and sharper. You're desperate for clues to resolve this doubt, so you're paying attention to everything in case it helps you to break through. So you notice everything, but nothing helps you. It's just, "Oh yeah, it was that". Thoughts arise and are noticed but they don't help you. It's not to be solved through thought.

The practice pushes you in this direction, for different people at different speeds and with different intensities, different strengths. This is all very very individual – this isn't a prescription that you should end up in this way. This is a description of what might happen so that if it happens you have a sense of what's going on. It's not something you can make happen, but you can set yourself up for an intense practice by practising diligently, consistently, persistently, not slacking, not weakening. But where it actually goes is entirely individual so we have to see how that turns out. At some point this doubt can shatter – suddenly, you have broken through, you do understand, you do see, you do know how to live, you do know what life is. It didn't come about through ideas, through thought, through anything. You just reached a point where you just stopped getting in the way. Up until then you've been in the way. Your ideas and fixed views have been in the way, and the koan has pointed them out to you, and you have relinquished them – you are free.

### The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths offer us a useful way of understanding this process.

- I. The first truth is that we tend to never be satisfied with what is, the strength of that dissatisfaction varying from little niggles to heavy suffering. We may cope with this, in part, especially where it is particularly painful or seemingly unresolvable, by suppressing awareness of it. But the poetry or imagery of the koan may penetrate our defences and bring our dissatisfaction to awareness.
- II. When the mind is provoked by the koan into awareness of its own state, we perceive the second truth, that we are mired in ignorance craving and aversion. We notice how we tie ourselves in knots, wanting things to be different, wanting impossible things, ruminating and scheming and despairing.
- III. The third truth tells us it is possible to be free from all this. This may seem hard to believe, particularly when we are in the midst of suffering. But we do each have small experiences of release, from occasions when we have let go of our fight with reality and accepted things as they are. We can see, theoretically at least, that it may be possible to extend this principle to more challenging matters.
- IV. Fourthly we are offered a path, an Eightfold Path covering wisdom, ethics, and mental cultivation, which helps us to release our troublesome fixed views and attitudes. In a retreat there is clearly an emphasis on mental cultivation, but all other parts of the path are also in play and taken together we can find liberation. Admittedly it isn't always easy to find our way through but it is possible if we persist and are willing and able to experience and confront whatever presents itself to our awareness.

*With thanks to the transcriber: Sian Thomas*

## MEDITATION AND ITS BACKGROUND

ANNA JEDYNAK

Meditation itself cannot be replaced by any words that can be said about it. But before setting off on a journey, it is worth having a look at a map.

Meditation means investigating the mind: observing it and its phenomena directly and non-verbally. Meditation means listening to the silence of the mind. It is the exploration of a realm beyond everyday din. However, it is not easy to keep our attention on that realm, especially at the beginning. So we can use various techniques of meditation, helping to concentrate and stabilize the mind. Usually we try to focus on one chosen object. It could be one's breath or a silent repetition of a particular word or phrase. We direct our attention to it and remain with it, without any other particular efforts. Gradually our awareness naturally embraces the silence in the background while our minds are stilled by holding steady on the chosen object.

### Wandering thoughts

But then we discover that that is not easy. Different thoughts circle round our heads without our will or permission. They come and go as they please. They distract us and pull us away from the current experience. The mind resembles a radio, broadcasting sounds on different wavelengths. While meditating, we don't fight with the thoughts and we also don't follow them. We are aware of the process and content of thinking, however we try not to be involved in its content.

Only that which is taking place right now is real. Thoughts usually concern what has been or will be. Only what exists right now can be ex-

perienced. Once we start thinking about it, it has already become the past. Observing the workings of the mind, we notice that we are not perceiving reality directly but through our various thoughts. We discover that sometimes they are a cause of anxiety and disorder. We do want to use thoughts when they are helpful and useful, but we don't want them to rule us. We want to be free from their control; to gradually remove the mind's filters. We long for a direct contact with reality.

### Change and the Self

And reality changes. All of it. Some things change quicker, others – slower. Not all changes are visible right away, though they always take place from one moment to the next even if the shift is very small. What appears to be a thing is in fact a process. Using words to name things suggest that the name signifies something lasting, stable, defined as separate from all other things. In fact, everything takes shape in relation to other things, as a result of many interwoven causes. Nothing is a separate, lasting whole. Nothing has an intrinsic essence which can be separated from the universe. Only by thinking about things, can we present them as lasting and independent.

Observing the impermanence, and the mutual connections in the world, helps in meditation. It liberates us from rigid beliefs about the world and ourselves. It helps us shift from thinking about how things are, or should be, to experiencing what is taking place right now. Instead of perceiving ourselves as a defined free-standing separate piece of the world, we can experience our body from within. We can simply feel, hear, see - and observe the fluctuations of the mind. Then the thoughts start quietening. They become replaced with the awareness of the pres-

ent moment. At the beginning, old habits of scattered thought can get in the way of our alert attention. That's when an object of meditation is useful – we pay attention to that, to keep the attention rooted in place. With time, meditation becomes more stable. The chosen object becomes less important and the attention directs itself to what is beyond the thoughts.

The lack of permanent, separate essence applies not just to things surrounding us, but also to ourselves! Why would we be an exception? If you think about it – there's no reason at all. We are not lone islands; we react to the environment and we influence it. The cells of our bodies constantly die and are reborn. Different states of mind start, develop and pass. It is easy to agree with this in principle, but such agreement won't lead to significant changes in our lives. Such changes can come, when this is experienced directly, by looking into the mind. And that is much more difficult than thinking about the non-existence of the self. It is obstructed by the deeply rooted habit to use one's vision of one's "I" as the reference point for our thoughts, emotions and actions.

In meditation, the gross thoughts quieten first, then the more subtle ones follow. Life becomes smoother – simpler, more stable, less exposed to tension and mental chaos. We inhabit the present moment more frequently. We do reach for thoughts, when we need them, but we are increasingly less bound by them. When they appear of their own accord, we know they are only thoughts.

The most persistent thought though, is the one about one's self. We look for the essence of ourselves in something that in fact is a mental construct made out of clustered impressions, memories, thoughts, feel-



ings, desires and expectations. We identify with that construct. To see through its nature – that is, to realise it is only a construct – is possible when the deceptive activity of the mind ceases even momentarily and the only thing remaining is a clear awareness of what is. However, sometimes it can seem that the “I” centred mindset has subsided, but it is still operating covertly.

Before the nature of one’s self is recognised, the lack of knowledge of this can be troublesome. The belief in a separate self causes us to take undue care for its wellbeing. We want lasting satisfaction of all its needs for a self perceived as relatively constant, though life, whose essence is its constant changeability, cannot provide this. We are automatically drawn to sources of satisfaction, in a bid to control them, pin them down and not to lose them. When things turn out differently than planned, we suffer not only the difficulty or pain, but also the negative thoughts, frustrations, fears or anger we add to that. The perception of a separate self leads to a more or less defined sense of dissatisfaction or something missing.

And yet we cling on to the selves we ourselves constructed, because that seems safer. We are so used to identifying with this construct, that releasing that grip can cause sudden fear, or other forms of resistance. Difficult thoughts and memories can surface from the unconsciousness. That is why it is good to consult a more experienced practitioner, if that is needed.

## Illusions

By continuing the journey through the mind we will not lose our lives, our consciousness, or our reason. We will only lose some illusions. Those

who leave illusions behind do not regret it. They don't consider total impermanence or the lack of a separate "I" bad news. On the contrary, revealing the illusion of the self removes a cause of much of their trouble. They flow with life through its various circumstances, favourable or not. By being less focused on themselves, they are naturally more aware of the feelings and needs of others. They don't harm others and act in their interest. Not because they have learned a code of behaviour, or are particularly dutiful or strong-willed, but rather because they are relaxed and compassionate, and they react to their surroundings and to another's pain or joy.

It is our daily life which is the test of meditation. Immoral behaviour or even harmful thoughts or emotions reveal to us that the illusion of the "I" is still alive and kicking, and that there is still a lot to do in meditation. Essentially, meditation and care for others are mutually supportive. Meditation weakens an egoistic attitude and opens a space for more empathy with others, while caring for others weakens the being centred on one's "I". Meditation and mindful awareness through the variety of daily activities in everyday life are mutually supportive.

Becoming free of the illusion of the "I" is not a singular act, but a gradual process. There can indeed be ground-breaking events during it, but the process itself takes time. In the course of meditation we become more skilled at recognising thoughts as thoughts and we don't get involved in their content. Thoughts and emotions no longer feed each other; we experience spaciousness and clarity of the mind; the sense of the "I" weakens. Sometimes it can be forgotten, but we are still encumbered by it and it can be expressed in different impulses, especially in challenging circumstances.



The mind habitually and automatically sustains the construct of “I”. But when it stops doing so even for a moment, it recognises what that “I” really is. Afterwards the construct returns. That isn’t a bad thing, because we do need it in daily life: to go about our business, to work, to socialise with others. If the insight into the nature of the self is superficial, the “I” can continue imposing itself as a real thing. But deeper insight leaves no space for the illusion of the self. Still, old habits, forged by the “old” way of perceiving the world, may crop up. Our shortcomings aren’t automatically discarded by the insight, rather they are highlighted by it. Meditation allows us to see how mismatched the old patterns of behaviour are against the new perception of the world, once the nature of the self has been recognised. How strongly this recognition will affect our lives is determined by how solid our practice was leading up to it, how deep this recognition was and how open we are to it shaping our day to day thoughts and actions.

## Enlightenment

The word “enlightenment” has many meanings and it can be used to describe different stages of the above process.

1. One of the meanings equates enlightenment to meditation itself.
2. Another – to the feeling of being one with the universe.
3. Still another – to any insight into the illusive nature of “I”.
4. Yet another – not any old insight, but the profounder kind which leaves no illusions as to the nature of the self, even when the “I” construct returns.
5. Then – an enlightened way of life, free from any habits based on that illusion and a full awareness in different circumstances.
6. Sometimes you can hear that we are all already enlightened in the sense that no one needs to “remove” their “I”, because you cannot remove what was never really there to start with.

Mixing these different meanings leads to confusion. Enlightenment in the 4th and 5th meanings listed above, even when not fully realised, is the natural product of consistent practice. It cannot be speeded up by any mental manipulations or by a forceful, ambitious approach. It is better to relax, observe the present moment attentively and open up to the current results of meditation.

## BAIZHANG AND WORK PRACTICE

EDDY STREET

A feature of most Buddhist retreats and certainly an important part of our retreats is work practice. It is so natural an element of what we do that we do not think about the way the practice originated and we certainly do not think about the Chan Master who instigated the practice as, originally, it was not a part of the activity of Buddhist monastics.

At the time of Buddha and in the Indian sanghas that followed him the monks and nuns spent their time meditating and studying in the ‘forest’. On the Ganges Plain they were usually near places that had a population and they would sustain themselves by begging – the daily collection of Dana. Indeed for many monastics work was prohibited and when monasteries were established the work was done by lay practitioners and/or workers. Hence the way daily work was organised was a result of these Sanghas being near people who supported them by providing Dana. Buddhism then developed in China and there were changes in the way the Dharma was practiced due to this geographical and cultural move. Initially Chan monastics resided in the monasteries of other schools such as Taoists, but gradually practice developed and Chan monasteries were established. These monasteries tended to be in the mountains and not near actively engaged populations and as a result there were few lay supporters who could provide material sustenance for the monastic community. Consequently, there was a need for the monks to become self-sustaining and initially there was a tradition of following the practice of hermit monks in that they foraged amongst

the natural resources around their living space. However, monasteries began to grow in size and soon they had to cultivate and produce their own food.

Then along came Baizhang Huaihai (720–814 CE, also known as Paichang Huai-hai, or Hyakujo Ekai). He was the third holder of the Chan lineage that comes from the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638–713, Eno in Japanese). Baizhang was a Dharma heir of Mazu (Ma-tsu) and amongst his own students were Huangbo (Huang-po) and Linji (Lin Chi, Rinzai). To function efficiently, people living together with a common purpose need a set of rules to regulate daily life and Baizhang is attributed with constructing the rules for Chan monasteries, usually known as *The Pure Rules for the Community*. There is in fact no extant copy of his rules, but all subsequent Chan monastic practice is recognised as being based on his rules and also on his design for a monastery's layout and buildings. Baizhang's rules were important in that they established Chan as an independent Buddhist school and so Chan communal practice is taken as beginning with Baizhang.

An important way in which these rules were significantly different from the traditional Ganges Plain approach was the inclusion of work practice. The rules simply say, "all members of the community must participate equally in carrying out the practice of communal labour."<sup>1</sup> The monks had to work in order to sustain themselves. Baizhang did not actually initiate work practice within Chan communities, as this occurred in earlier generations, but its inclusion in his rules made work a necessary element in monasteries. It also facilitated the practice being seen as an excellent way of expressing the meditative mind in everyday activity.

The traditional story about Baizhang's approach to work concerns what happened when he became elderly and his 'Record of Sayings' tells the story as:

*When the master did chores he always was first in the community in taking up work. The people could not bear this so they hid his tools away early once and asked him to rest.*

*The master said "I have no virtue; how should I make others toil?"*

*The master having looked all over for his tools without finding them, also neglected to eat.*

*Therefore there came to be his saying that "a day without working is a day without eating," which circulated throughout the land.<sup>2</sup>*

There are many stories and encounter dialogues about work practice, as clearly what Baizhang was attempting to do was to institute the principles of zazen and meditative study into work. Many of these stories about work are included in the well known koan collections.<sup>3</sup> Stories about Baizhang himself also appear in a number of koan collections.<sup>4</sup>

Work practice was therefore an essential element of the activity in Chinese monasteries and as Master Sheng Yen recounts, it was known as 'Universal Invitation':

*This was a time when everyone was invited to do work at the monasteries. This was sometimes called *ch'u-p'o*, literally 'going to the mountains,' but it did not necessarily entail field work. It might include various chores around the monastery.<sup>5</sup>*

Here we can see that the 'universality' of the invitation clearly indicates that it applies to all whatever their rank or station and in this way work applies to everyone in the same way that the Dharma applies to everyone.

What is also interesting is that chores were called *Ch'u-p'o* or *chupo* which harks back to the ancestry of work practice, to the time when being in the mountains meant that it was necessary for monastics to do work.

In our more modern practice, short work periods are essential elements of our meditation retreats. It is a practice that is organised for the benefit of the community (sweeping, cleaning, food preparation, etc.), but it naturally involves our personal activity and in doing this it places the 'self' within its social context. As an activity it links the internal processes occurring during retreat with outside physical activity; it links body and mind by embarking on activity. This is in distinction to other occasions on retreat when mind and body are linked by different processes. Work is also generosity in action. It is an active giving to other individuals; it is giving to the group and it is giving to the universal Buddhist Sangha.

With the idea of generosity contained in work, we not only recognise the historical change in Dana practice but also the significance of morality and ethics (*sila*) that underlie work practice. The emphasis has changed from Dana being offered by lay practitioners to the monastics to Dana being given by all to all. We need to see all our labour as Dana, as giving. It is a practice of generosity. Unfortunately, a talk on giving and generosity is usually left to the end of a retreat, when requests for donations are made on behalf of the Sangha and teacher. Although undoubtedly there is a value in this, it has the untoward effect of separating the work necessary for communal living from its basis in giving – it makes it seem as if 'work' and 'giving' are different activities at different times. They are not separate, they are both manifestations of Dana, one of the six perfections (*paramitas*), it is the *danaparamita*. Both work and giving are





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the same activity of supporting others and the offering up of yourself to the practice that is all around you. Indeed to speak of generosity at the beginning of any Dharma activity would be following in the Buddha footsteps, as in the Pali sutras the ‘talk on giving’ (*danakatha*) was invariably the first topic discussed by the Buddha. He would start many talks by emphasising the value of generosity and his discussion of this virtue would precede his introduction of other Dharma topics.

The practice of giving that is involved in labour for the community is important because its cultivation undermines self concern and it does this by the offering of the self to the community. In undertaking our communal chores there is no basis for making any comparison – “am I doing it better than”... “is somebody watching me”... “am I getting it right” etc. Work as an act of giving occurs when the giver and the receiver are non-dual, when there is no separation between the ‘I’ and the ‘us/we’. It decentralises self importance by focussing on the total environment surrounding us. Work is undertaken for its own sake and the benefit of others, thereby creating a freedom from duty and obligation. It is undertaken without any expectation of receiving something in return. It is to serve rather than to help and this serving is inspired by compassion and caring. It comes naturally from the heart and it conveys joy and freedom.

Work is a meditation and is equally important as sitting and walking meditation. The focus is to undertake the task mindfully and not see it as an obstacle getting in the way of us sitting or resting. It is simply meditation in action within an atmosphere of mutual support. It is an opportunity to observe reactions and responses to doing something active and therefore it is available for investigation later. In this way, we can

move toward an appreciation and indeed a realisation of moment to moment mindfulness in our everyday lives. The message here is the need to actualise doing what you're doing, while you are doing it. As work takes up a substantial part of our lives there is great value and benefit in mindfully realising that our day-to-day labour also has a quality of giving. There is a way in which we can develop the tasks of work into goalless activity. With this attitude, work becomes 'continuous practice', it becomes a part of the 'circle of the way' written about so eloquently by Dogen:

...continuous practice is undivided, not forced by you or others. The power of this continuous practice confirms you as well as others. It means your practice affects the entire earth and the entire sky in the ten directions. Although not noticed by others or by yourself it is so. Accordingly, by the continuous practice of all Buddhas and ancestors your practice is actualise and your great road opens up.<sup>6</sup>

Continuous practice is pointing us towards the realisation that all activity is permeated by the Dharma and all activity involves The Great Matter, which brings us directly back to Baizhang and work. We are able to appreciate the nature of this continuous practice from a koan involving Baizhang:

*One day Baizhang addressing his assembly said, "Plough the rice field for me and I'll instruct you in the fundamental principles of the great matter."*

*After the monastics had ploughed a rice field for the master, they said, "Now master please instruct us in the fundamental principles of the great matter."*

*The master spread open his arms.<sup>7</sup>*

In his gesture of ‘That’s it’, Baizhang is inviting us to recognise that ploughing a field is instructing us in the Dharma. In the same way, sweeping, cutting vegetables, cleaning toilets, etc all provide Dharma instruction and through this work we enter into continuous practice and our great road opens up. It is a teaching of how to live our lives – engage in your activity and fully enter into its practice.

## NOTES

- 1 trans Steven Heine p221 in S. Heine (1999). *Shifting Shape, Shaping Text*. Honolulu. University of Hawai'i Press.
- 2 trans Thomas Cleary p26 in T Cleary (1979). *The Sayings and Doings of Pai-chang*. Los Angeles. Centre Publications
- 3 For example koans numbers 23 68 70 83 93 126 128 149 216 267 268 271 275  
Master Dogen's 300 Koan collection see in Kazuaki Tanahashi & John Daido Looi (trans) 2005 *The True Dharma Eye. Zen Master Dogen's Three Hundred Koans*. Shambala. Boston
- 4 See koans numbers 2 54 102 108 110 118 128 182 in Tanahashi & Looi op cit
- 5 Chan Master Sheng Yen 'Life in a Chan Monastery.' *New Chan Forum* No. 5 Autumn 1992. p2
- 6 Dogen. Continuous Practice Part One p332 in Kazuaki Tanahashi (ed) (2012) *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye. Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Shambala. Boston
- 7 Koan 268 p364 see in Tanahashi & Looi op cit





Photo: Claire Martin



### About Us

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 elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

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## Forthcoming Retreats in 2017

### MANCHESTER DAY RETREAT

*Sunday 25 June*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Elms Community Centre, Manchester

### WEEKEND RESIDENTIAL RETREAT, DEVON

*Friday 14 July to Sunday 16 July*

Leader: Hilary Richards Venue: Brimpts Farm, Dartmeet, Devon

### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Saturday 29 July to Thursday 3 August*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### SHATTERING THE GREAT DOUBT

*Saturday 19 August to Saturday 26 August*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Crosby Hall, Liverpool

### SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

*Friday 8 September to Sunday 17 September*

Leader: Simon Child Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### AWARENESS IN THE EVERYDAY

*Saturday 30 September to Thursday 5 October*

Leader: Hilary Richards Venue: Maenllwyd, Wales

### RUNNING AND ZEN MEDITATION RETREAT

*Saturday 28 October to Wednesday 1 November*

Leader: Jake Lyne with Stuart McLeod Venue: Barmoor, N. Yorkshire

SHATTERING  
*the*  
GREAT DOUBT

禅

A RETREAT WITH SIMON CHILD  
CROSBY HALL, LIVERPOOL

AUGUST 19<sup>TH</sup> – 26<sup>TH</sup> 2017



*The ancient Chinese Zen practices of investigating Huatou and Gongan (Koan) are best practised in a supportive environment such as this intensive silent retreat. As one becomes deeply absorbed in the practice, mental constructions drop away and one is confronted by a realisation that one does not know the nature of existence and one's fundamental assumptions of life are groundless. Staying with and cultivating this 'doubt', it can become all-consuming 'Great doubt' which may 'shatter', giving a direct insight into reality which may be what is known as an Enlightenment experience.*

*To progress in these methods requires a sustained focus and so this retreat is open only to those with previous experience of intensive retreat. Prior attendance at a Western Zen Retreat is recommended.*







*The Mind is the Buddha, nor are there any other Buddhas or any other mind.*

*It is bright and spotless as the void, having no form or appearance whatever.*

*To make use of your minds to think conceptually  
is to leave the substance and attach yourselves to form.*

*The Ever-Existent Buddha is not a Buddha of form or attachment.*

HUANGPO

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