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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

GEORGE MARSH

Welcome to the summer edition of *New Chan Forum*.

In this issue Simon Child gives a dharma talk that navigates a range of subtle distinctions to clarify what 'silent illumination' means – and warns of the rocks on either side of the channel. *Being With* is an elusive state in which the mind flows freely, and it is not quite what we might suppose.

Anna Jedynak's third article on meditation describes how one extends meditative mindfulness into everyday life so that it becomes an integral part of the eightfold path for us. We thank Anna for her helpful essays on how meditation practice relates to all that is going on around about us.

There follow three shorter articles, two poems, a selection of retreat reports, as usual, and a book recommendation. And it all slips into a beach-bag for summer reading.

If you have ideas for articles, or feedback for me on the future role of the New Chan Forum, please email me at editor@westernchanfellowship.org.

STOP PRESS I have had an advanced sneak preview of a major new *Buddhism* exhibition being prepared by the British Library at St. Pancras. It will open in October next year, 2019, a little before we find out what Brexit means, and will feature Theravada and Mahayana books and illustrations, from all regions of Asia, including some from their Dunhuang library cave manuscripts. I hope to interview the curators for our next issue.

BEING WITH

SIMON CHILD

A Dharma talk from a 10-day intensive Silent Illumination retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, May 23 to June 1, 2014

Awareness of thought

A common misunderstanding is how to handle thought in the practice. This is revealed by people who state that the purpose of their practice is to empty the mind and get rid of thought, to have a blank mind. Some people take this to quite an extreme. Yesterday somebody told me their strategy was to have an axe ready for each time a thought appeared: cut off the thought. On a previous retreat, someone gave me a very clear image of his practice. He was watching a rabbit hole waiting for the thought to appear, and the moment the thought appeared, he was ready – with his machine gun. That’s a true story. This wasn’t a teaching he got from me, though.

This reveals an attitude that thought is somehow bad; it’s in the way; it shouldn’t be there. “It’s rather a nuisance, it’s disturbing my mind!” It’s easy to see where this mistake comes from; it’s really just being a victim of our own cleverness. When we start off with practice we are taught methods of calming the mind. We experience for ourselves how a mind which has very many thoughts tumbling over each other can indeed, through training, become a mind with much fewer thoughts. So it’s natural that we extrapolate, and think “obviously the objective is to have no thought! So I will get myself there! I will get rid of the remaining thoughts!” We might hear people talk of experiences of indeed hav-

ing no thoughts, and this confirms our sense that “to be a better practitioner we must get rid of every thought.” No. That’s too extreme an extrapolation.

Indeed we do have practices to calm the mind, and they may involve cutting thought off to some extent by limiting the awareness, focusing on a single point. We narrow the awareness and thereby cut off awareness of the thoughts. Do we really cut off the thoughts? Or do we just cut off awareness of them? See, there is maybe the first trap – if we narrow the mind down, it can seem as though there are no thoughts. But we’re just overlooking them, because we’re not looking at where they are. We’ve trained ourselves to focus intently on our object of practice, and we get good at it, so we’re training ourselves to overlook what else is going on.

This is a very useful start to practice, when you have a mind that is so wild, full of thoughts and videos of all sorts – you know that experience. You can’t really engage in much practice until it’s calmed down to some extent. So there are various methods to help it calm down. But the extrapolation was incorrect. Even though people may sometimes have the experience of no thought (and some of you have had that experience) that doesn’t mean that you set that as your destination. Here is a somewhat different interpretation: the purpose of calming the mind is so that you can become very clearly aware of what is there. And that’s a different endpoint, isn’t it? It’s not cutting off, denying, overlooking or avoiding. It’s saying “this mind is somewhat calmer now; I can really see what’s going on. Before, I couldn’t see the beginning, middle, and end of a thought; they overlapped too much, and crowded each other out. And now, with this mind that is somewhat calmer, I can observe

the process of thought. I can see how a thought has a beginning, a presence, and an end. I can see that thoughts are transient”, and so on.

Investigate the mind

When the mind is calmer you can investigate the nature of thought, the nature of mind. This is not something you can do if you’ve cut the mind off, trained yourself to ignore it. That gives no opportunity to observe the mind and see how it works. So these are two different ways of developing the understanding of practice, and the first one, the extrapolation “my task is to get rid of thoughts as completely and as quickly as possible” is a misunderstanding. I would put forward the alternative which is: when you’ve calmed the mind sufficiently, you’re in a position to investigate the mind.

Remember again these two aspects of practice, presented to us by the Buddha. Often we need to do samatha (calming the mind) first, because of the state our minds start in. Then we investigate the mind (vipassana). In silent illumination, we’re doing both. But the calming of silent illumination is not a cutting-off sort of calming, it’s rather different from that. So how does that work?

Silent Illumination doesn’t have these built-in limitations of awareness, constricting the mind in that sense. This brings different challenges to other methods and one of these challenges is how we handle thought. It can be particularly challenging because until picking up this method you may have trained yourself in this attitude that thought is something “in the way”, the enemy of your practice, a disturbance, a distraction. And now you’re being told that’s not quite so. This is confusing for people; it’s counterintuitive. It may even feel almost dangerous in the sense



photo: Claire Martin

that you've put in a lot of effort, long hours of painful legs, to develop a certain calmness of mind and now it seems at risk of being disturbed by a shift in the method. You feel a sense of "this is not right, I don't believe this, I disagree" and you resist opening the awareness. But if you're going to be moving yourself forward along the path towards enlightenment, at some point you need to be able to have a mind which is wide open.

If I want to paint a caricature of the Buddha, do you imagine him as someone who had a rather narrow attention? Someone who didn't dare open his attention wide in case it disturbed his practice? That's not my image of the Buddha. So you could say you're preparing yourself, testing it out. You're finding out what the difficulties are, and through experience of practising in this manner you find ways of handling these difficulties, and you find it is possible to have the mind open wider. Ah! Hmm, that's interesting. You could say you're nudging yourself towards enlightenment. Still, in silent illumination we talk about sudden enlightenment, we don't talk about gradual enlightenment. But certainly we talk about gradual cultivation; that would be reasonable. We're gradually exploring and getting to know the mind, getting to know its obstructions, getting to know how to handle them, and finding that indeed we can! There are ways forward. We find that, yes, we can keep the attention wide open, confront an obstruction, and keep the mind open and handle it. We don't have to retreat into our rabbit burrow.

Opening the awareness

We're exploring the capacity of our own mind, our own awareness and, yes, we are challenging it. Opening the awareness is challenging: it makes

it more likely that the mind wanders away because you are giving it more things to be interested in and attach to. If you are sitting here with a very narrow focus, very intensely concentrated, you're not so distracted. People walking around the room, traffic outside, birdsong – you're not paying any attention to that, it can't disturb you. You hardly perceive it. But then if you open the awareness and you perceive the richness all around you, it can be almost overwhelming and you immediately attach to something, and start having a discussion with yourself about it. Opening the awareness is tricky and challenging, but also crucially important.

In terms of this practice of silent illumination we can trace the origins of it, in some ways, back through history. We can also find the basis of it in the sutras. In Shifu's book *Hoofprint of the Ox*, when he is talking about silent illumination, he uses the Diamond Sutra as an illustration of the approach to practice. There is a famous line in the Diamond Sutra from which Huineng the sixth patriarch became enlightened:

Without dwelling in anything whatsoever, allow this mind to arise.

“Without dwelling in anything” points toward silence, towards nonattachment. “Allow this mind to arise” points towards illumination, towards the mind being fully awake and present. It doesn't say, “without dwelling in anything whatsoever, make sure the mind doesn't arise.” It doesn't say, “without dwelling in anything whatsoever, be very careful as the mind arises.” Just: allow the mind to arise. Brighten the mind, be fully awake. Be fully attentive without dwelling in anything whatsoever. That phrase “without dwelling”, that's pointing to nonattachment, brings up another area which people find difficult sometimes. Nonattachment is perhaps a little bit difficult to describe. But if we think of attachment,

it's becoming over-involved, over-identified, over-immersed in a particular thought and it's drawn you off-centre. You've lost your wide-open awareness, you're preoccupied with something. The other extreme is avoidance of attachment, and this is where the phrase non-Buddhists often use about Buddhists comes from: "Buddhist detachment." Detachment is not quite the same as nonattachment. Detachment has a negative quality about it, an avoidance, a dualism.

In practice we're not about attaching, but we're also not about avoiding. It's somewhere in between. We can call it nonattachment. To put it another way: you're not so concerned whether you end up involved or not involved; there is no strong preference, there's just an acceptance. "Yeah, this is in the mind, or this isn't in the mind. I'm really open to either possibility." If you are attached, you want to keep it in the mind. And if you're detached, you're trying to keep it out of the mind. But non-attached means, well if it's there, it's there, and if it's not it's not. No big deal. I'm not shaken by its presence or its absence.

So without dwelling in anything, without being concerned about what's there, nevertheless let awareness arise and inform you what's there. It's tricky; it's finding a balance, and we easily lean one way or the other. Of course our personal histories lead us to have certain avoiding behaviours and certain attaching behaviours. We feel safety in certain objects and circumstances and we don't want to let them go. Then we feel risk and danger in other situations and we put effort into avoiding them. The mind which is not dwelling, the mind of nonattachment, allows itself to experience all that is present. Now that doesn't mean that it doesn't respond to dangers; of course it does. It doesn't mean that it doesn't respond to need. It can go and eat that food when it is time to

eat. That's not attachment; attachment is when you get obsessed with food. The Diamond Sutra is pointing towards us having a mind functioning in awareness. It's not telling us to restrict the mind, to only allow certain types of mental activity to occur. It's just saying, be present with the mind.

Trains of thought

For another way of looking at the issue of attachment and nonattachment I've made up a variation on the metaphor of the host and the guest that Master Xuyun used to talk about. A thought arises in the mind and there's no particular problem with that. But thoughts link to other thoughts. They create ideas and another thought joins them and maybe these become problems, or solutions, or opportunities. Images are painted in the mind by thoughts congregating. A common phrase in English is "a train of thought"; one thought leads to another. Sometimes it's interesting to reflect, when you find yourself thinking about something: how did you get there? Often we have no idea because we've not been paying attention. I once caught myself out and I thought "How on earth did I find myself thinking about this?" I was able to trace it back; maybe 15 thoughts had linked together and ended up at a completely different place to where it started.

Now, there's no problem with thoughts doing this. They create these trains and it's okay. We can just let these trains of thought pass through the mind and show themselves to us. But we don't attach to them; we're not engaging with them. The problem is our tendency to board the train and follow it to its destination. We hop on the train and it takes us away to some future fantasy, or back in time to something that we want to fix

(even though it's already happened). We get tangled up in these trains of thoughts. The image that works for me (rather than Xuyun's host and guest) is: you are the railway station master, and the trains are your guests. There's no problem with trains coming and going in a railway station. But it is a problem if you hop onto one and travel off 300 miles; then you've abandoned your duty. So by all means have thoughts coming and going through the mind, forming trains of thoughts, congregating. But don't jump on them. Observe them, but don't board them.

There is another example from the sutras, of how we can handle thoughts during our practice. This is from *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, and is also taken as one of the gongan in the *Book of Serenity* (Case 45).

At all times do not produce delusive thoughts,

Also don't try to stop or annihilate delusive states of thought.

Now, we don't have any great difficulty agreeing with the first line: "At all times do not produce delusive thoughts." That's fairly straightforward, isn't it? The challenge comes after the comma: "also don't try to stop or annihilate delusive states of thought." That's more challenging, if you have the idea that your task is to purify the mind by ejecting unwholesome thoughts. But the sutra tells us, "Put away your machine gun, put away your axe. Don't annihilate deluded states of mind." Hmmmm. So that means that if a deluded state arises, you don't stop it. Huh!

Maybe that's a rather different idea of practice to what you thought you were doing. Sitting there with a deluded state of mind – that actually makes practice easier, doesn't it? Sitting there deluded is quite easy, and quite a common experience really. Maybe we're better at practice than we thought...

No, it's not quite meaning that either. If you have deluded states of mind, and they are held within awareness, it's not saying that you should be deluded. But if there's an obstruction in the mind based on a misunderstanding of some situation, maybe provoking an anxiety, don't annihilate that. Use it as an opportunity to investigate how you create your own delusion, a sort of case study. The mind is holding this painful idea, this anxiety, fear, or grief. Positive feelings, negative feelings, whatever has arisen in the mind, here is your opportunity to investigate it.

Silently investigate

This word "investigate" is a little bit difficult to understand, so let's look at how this might work. Investigate, illuminate, floodlight – we're not in denial about this thought, because we're clearly aware of it. We don't regard it as an aberration that shouldn't be there, or should be got rid of. We just say "Oh, yes that's what's in my mind; I'm feeling anxious, sad, negative, confused. I'm feeling happy, joyful, free." Anything. Any state of mind, don't annihilate it – investigate it.

Master Hongzhi was the one who gave the name to the practice "silent illumination". These phrases like "silently investigate" come from his writings. How do we "silently investigate," what does that mean? When we find ourselves holding one of these states of mind, we silently investigate, which means we illuminate it; we allow the light to shine on it. We allow it to be seen, felt, tasted. There's no aversion or avoidance; we fully experience it. Rather than our usual habit of trying to shy away from some experiences and pull towards others, we just continue sitting in the presence of the state. No avoidance, no denial. Here it is;



IMPERMANENCE BY SIMON CHILD

I'm experiencing it. At this moment, I'm feeling this way. It is so. No running away. To investigate "non-silently" would be to start a wordy, intellectual analysis, a review of past experiences and personal history. But a silent investigation is just sitting there with it, no deliberate delving back in history, no deliberate classification.

Indeed, classification and naming can actually get in the way; here's an example of how the sheep pen exercise I mentioned a couple of days ago has its limitations. Some of you have found that a useful exercise, and it is useful, that's why I mentioned it to you. But the reason that sort of approach is useful is because of its limitation. What it does is take a number of thoughts about the same topic and put them together to make it more manageable for you. But that loses some subtlety. If the thoughts were about your boss at work there are probably overlapping issues, different examples and problems. Since they all have a common theme of "problems with your boss at work", the sheep pen method worked to help concentrate the mind. But now with a silent investigation, if you just label it as "boss at work" it sort of turns off the investigation. You have no incentive to pay any attention. "Oh I know what that is." You've categorized it, labelled it, put it in the cupboard and forgotten about it.

"Silently investigate" means not applying words and labels, because these are limiting. It is simply "being with", and maybe noticing, the mixture of feelings. Maybe the complexity of memories arising is not just one incident; maybe there are various similar things jumbled together. But if you jump quickly to saying "I know what that is" and you name it, you are in a sense detaching from it. You are shutting it away. So, silently investigating is just "being with". A thought arises in the mind

and you are just with it. A feeling moves through the body and you are with it. A sound touches the eardrum and you just let it do that. If you are a birdwatcher and you jump to naming the species of bird, in a sense you've lost contact with the bird—it's just become something in your tick list of "birds I've heard". You've distanced yourself from the actual hearing experience.

So, to "silently investigate" is just "being with", and to continue being with as it changes. A more analytical investigation would be looking back in history deliberately. Silent investigation might include some awareness of the history of the situation, because it just comes to mind. That's the way the mind works; thoughts get triggered and thought trains form themselves, you don't have to go and create them. You're sitting, something has arisen, something else arises, and then something else arises. There may or may not be a connection between them. You're not trying to make connections; sometimes the connections are obvious. You just continue sitting. This full awareness, this openness to what's arising, is the silent investigation. Disconnecting from experience means there's no investigation. Controlling the experiencing; labelling it, categorising it – is not silent.

You are bringing yourself to just "sitting with" whatever is there. You've been starting that off by sitting with the body; every sensation it gives you, you experience it. You don't start saying "Hmmm, I need more of this sensation and less of that; I wonder why that one is gone." You simply sit with whatever the body is bringing you at this moment. This extends to whatever the wider awareness is bringing you. It's arrived, it's with you and you accept it. The sound of bird song that is so prominent here. The sunlight coming through the windows at different angles.

Brightness, shadow. A memory. A sadness. A joy. All of these things just present themselves to our awareness, and we remain silent but we also remain present and bright, which is the investigation.

Constructs of mind

If you are cutting off thoughts, you are missing the chance to get to know the constructs of your mind. Because what's presenting itself to you is partly the direct perception of a sound, but it's also the construct of the mind that gives a name to the sound. It's also the construct of the mind that joins the sensations together, creating objects, creating stories. We don't need to do this deliberately; it's doing itself out of habit. By watching the mind you are watching your own habits in play. You're watching how you construct your own experience of the world, you are watching it happening and you remain silent and you continue watching. This watching is a very deep investigation. It can be quite challenging; watching yourself displaying your habits, you begin to feel embarrassed about them, uncomfortable for some of the ways that you think and behave. But here they are playing themselves out in front of you. You remain silent. The video of "me" can be quite uncomfortable, can't it? Don't switch it off – watching it is the investigation. We make sure the projector for this video is on full brightness, fully illuminated. We don't want to miss anything.

This points to the value of this investigation process. It's teaching us about how we view, react to, and actually construct our own world. Because we have habitual patterns of behaviour, certain perceptions become something wonderful and we attach to them. Certain other perceptions become something frightening and we shy away. We create our

own world to a very large extent, as the Avatamsaka Sutra tells us in the opening verse of the evening service:

*To know all the Buddhas of the past present and future, [i.e. to become enlightened]
perceive that all worlds of experience are created by the mind.*

You are creating your own world of experience, and if you practise silent illumination you can observe it happening. Mind grows more still and you observe this process from beginning to end. You observe, for example, a direct perception of sound, but you also notice how you name it; the sound is coming from a person or an animal, or from the building. Then an attitude attaches itself, an attitude of joy or irritation or judgment. This usually happens in a flash, unseen. Because you've cultivated a habit of watching the mind, of observing and being present with whatever the mind presents to you, you find yourself noticing far more than just body sensations. You notice the activity of mind. You notice how you are creating your own sense of irritation from simply the perception of a certain type of sound. It's not that that particular sound is inherently irritating, because twenty other people around you are hearing the same sound and they are not irritated. So it's something about you.

Silent and non-silent

There may be another slight point for confusion here: with silent illumination, I'm telling you that "silence" is you not adding anything to it, but then here you are finding yourself adding something. You're adding an interpretation, a reaction. So does that mean you should cut off these things? No. You take them as something to be observed. What you don't do is react by cutting them off. The deliberate action of "cutting off"

would be “non-silent”. Allowing the mind to show you how it behaves and acts, is silent. It’s the interfering which is non-silent. I hope that’s not too confusing. The point is, you stay with whatever the mind presents you. There’s no plan to steer the mind a certain way, no plan to avoid negative, unwholesome, deluded thoughts. And there’s no plan to amplify pleasant, happy, generous thoughts. You observe what the mind brings, you observe how it reacts.

You are investigating the nature of your mind in quite a deep and challenging way. Sometimes it takes you to difficult areas, but then, that’s very useful. Because if you investigate a difficult area, you can begin to understand the nature of why you find that difficult, and this can be very important. If you habitually shy away from difficulty, you’re limiting yourself. There are certain things in life that you don’t do, that you avoid. You may shape your life so that you are not confronted by these things. But in silent investigation you may find that something you’ve always assumed is challenging or frightening turns out to be a mistake. You drew a conclusion in the past from some particular event, and it got stuck in the mind and you haven’t challenged it. Now as you sit there you find yourself challenged by the circumstance arising in the mind and you also find, “Oh, that’s why I feel challenged.” That presents itself to you, and you find, “Oh, that isn’t challenging any more. My life has changed; I see things differently.” You can release this rather stale, habitual reaction and find freedom from fear of that particular situation which always led you to avoidance before.

This type of practice takes you deeply into some of the dark corners of the mind, and this is very useful. It’s useful in relation to your worldly life-experience because it can free you from some restrictions you’ve put

on yourself. And it's useful in terms of your meditation practice because it frees you from some obstructions. Certain obstructions to your practice have to do with fears and anxieties and the way you build yourself to be safe from them, keeping the mind closed. But if you dissolve these away by confronting them, you find that practice flows more freely. The mind takes one more step toward stillness – one of the guards has gone off-duty permanently, he's retired. There's less noise in the mind; the mind is more open and freer. Clarifying the mind in this way has benefits in terms both of your personal life and of your practice; they go together. It's useful either way.

I'm saying these things to point you towards why it is that we say "allow the mind to arise". Allow yourself to experience whatever arises. There is no editing, no filtering. There's no judgment on whether this is an appropriate thought to be here now or not. It's already here; it's in the mind. Watch the process triggered by that thought. Watch how you react. Get to know yourself, and get to know how you limit yourself. Find your own way towards freedom.

Having no obstructions

Since this is somewhat stepwise as you move through different obstructions, we can call it "gradual cultivation." Hopefully you can see how it is leading you towards a mind which is ready for enlightenment; a mind which is ready to become totally open and not waver, not retreat or be afraid – there's no longer any obstruction because it's already dealt with all its fears. At the moment there are obstructions. They're waiting for you to investigate them by simply allowing them to be there in full awareness. Allow them to show themselves and tell you about themselves, if

you are willing and have the strength and focus to stay there with them. They are often not at all what you assume. We live by assumptions, habits of thinking. But when we confront our obstructions we are very surprised by what's going on. They're often actually quite minor concerns which have become amplified and fossilized. They've become stale and outdated and no longer relate to our current situation. It's safe to experience these even when it feels scary.

Commit yourself to your practice. Commit yourself to a fully open mind. Commit yourself to confront what the practice presents you with, and in that confrontation, rather like the Buddha confronting Mara, be present with what is there. The Buddha didn't close his eyes and pretend that Mara wasn't there. He just said "Oh, Mara, this is what you've brought me now, is it? Okay, what's next? Bring me some more." Take that attitude. Don't be fixed on the idea of closing the mind down, having a sort of limited silence and a dull mind. Commit to opening the mind, letting whatever arises be fully experienced, and whatever follows that to be fully experienced, and whatever follows that to be fully experienced. If they link themselves together you will see those links. If they don't, that's OK too. You have no programme here, no expectations. You are just watching the mind, investigating the mind, and it is a very deep practice. See where it takes you.



Foto: Lewis Bennett

MEDITATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICE

ANNA JEDYNAK (GUO-DING)

When we meditate, we try to make our minds bright. It is not so easy! At first we find our habitual scattered thoughts, confusions, distractions and nervous tensions, and gradually we try to let them go; we allow them to calm down, relax, and eventually melt away. We put special effort, attention and energy into this. We try to return to the present moment, the sense of place, the feeling of being in the body, with no mental interference, and no internal commentary on what is going on. Sometimes we focus hard on a chosen object (a candle, breath in the nostrils, or the rise and fall of the belly), so that no room is left for chaotic thoughts. Sometimes we focus on a word or phrase, like a mantra. The focus keeps the mind occupied with our method and disciplines it. The skill we are learning is: paying attention to the now, with a clear mind, that brightens as it becomes clearer. I shall now address how the attentive skill of mindfulness can bring benefits into our everyday working lives.

Daily life practice

After a while we get up from our meditation mats and return to the affairs of everyday life.

As soon as we put our conscious interest into something other than observing the mind, we automatically allow our well known chaotic anxieties and tensions to come back. We are so familiar with them that their presence seems quite ordinary and natural. Scattered thoughts control us again, while we see no need to escape that control or even to study

what the runaway thoughts are doing to us. We are not alert to how much they shape our mental environment.

In our daily life we take our visual or verbal view of the world for reality itself. We treat it seriously and believe it. The more energy we put into creating it and the more we cling to it, the more difficult it is for us to distance ourselves from it. We can meditate and live this way for years, with no progress. It doesn't help us with our life, which runs along its old tracks.

But meditation can develop in another way. Mindfulness, first practised on the mat, can enter fully into our lives and into all our daily activities as well. Life then goes on with less tension and chaos, concentrated on the present experience moment by moment; in touch with what just exists rather than with the fictional world created by our imaginings and thoughts. We still may plan for the future and reach for the past – however, we clearly know that we are in the present. Our attention is embracing not only our everyday tasks, but also the manner in which we perceive them and the manner in which we just exist in the midst of them. It is directed not only to the external world, but also inwardly, to our own consciousness, to our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and motivations. We try to avoid identifying with them and, instead, keep some distance from them. We perceive the way thoughts and feelings come and go as an ongoing process of apparently random flow rather than as something stable and constant that is me.

Repeated patterns, old habits

In everyday life many various events occur around us, and we react to some of them habitually. We have a chance to discover the repeated

patterns of our unwholesome responses. We can see more clearly in the larger context what we do and why we do it. Instead of reacting habitually and mechanically to some well-known situations, we discover a space between the stimulus and our reaction to it. If the reaction is unwholesome, we can stop it.

Revising the reaction doesn't need to be necessarily a deliberate, goal-oriented activity. We don't necessarily need to continually talk to ourselves in silent words about what is going on or to undertake any special intention. We don't need to straighten up our attitudes methodically or to strenuously shape our emotions or responses, according to what we think they should be. It is enough in many cases if our reactions and habits reveal themselves in silence, just as they are. In silence – that means, with no additional comment, no explanation or valuation. All the manoeuvres of the mind are brightened then, due to the focused attention on what is.

When we perceive them this way, our affairs are slowly going to straighten up by themselves. Sometimes the causes of troublesome states of mind or of harmful behaviour just drop out under the spotlight of scrutiny. The same happens with long-standing emotions that are out of date and now irrelevant. We don't need to look into their origin or to examine our past. If only we see them clearly, they gradually give way. We don't need to condemn ourselves and also we don't need to blame others. We know ourselves directly, become more familiar with ourselves as we are, and in this way can develop self-acceptance.

With mindful attention we can develop more sensitivity and more compassion towards others. And then, as a result, we are more likely to restrain ourselves from harming them, and to support them when

needed. Moral life becomes easier and more natural. Having given up our critical attitudes to others, we are more disposed to accept them, as we accept ourselves.

Meditation and everyday life practice

If we sustain such attention all day long and then we come back to the formal meditation, it proves to be smoother and easier. We don't need to impose ourselves on it. If there are some disturbances (and usually there are) they don't blow us over. They are not strong enough because they had no opportunity to flourish or to be invigorated during the day.

Mindful life and meditation support each other, and after a time the split between them fades away. They are not two different ways of dealing with the mind. Rather, there is one flexible way, which can be naturally adjusted to the circumstances. Mature practice of meditation is not different from life itself. Meditation that does not forcefully impose anything on the mind, and by means of sharpened attention allows the chaos and tension just to leave us gradually, expands itself to embrace everyday life as well in quite a natural way. The mind just reflects what there is, without adding anything. We can more and more easily hear the silence of the mind in the midst of everyday noise.

Meeting people, thinking, making decisions – there are far more stimuli in everyday life. But although there is much more going on, the mindful mind is still just reflecting what there is. And the mind still doesn't add anything extra to what there is. Its focus is observing, not interpreting and elaborating. We do not need to add a moral ambition either. Mindfulness is not a crusade. It is just alert awareness. That doesn't mean we should limit our concerns to the absolute minimum. We can write

poems, meet friends, joke with them, visit other countries... However, whatever we do, we are aware of what is going on around us - and within us – at each moment. Then all the unnecessary burden of worry drops out by itself.

Attention adapts itself to the circumstances. In the course of daily affairs it embraces as much as it needs to in any given situation. In everyday life attention is primarily directed to external events, while on the mat it is more directed to the still mind (or indeed not quite still, if that is the case).

Meditation extended to daily life strengthens our practice, and it serves life. Meditation limited to sitting on the mat constantly starts from the beginning, since the mind goes back to the state it was in before the meditation, as soon as we get up and go about our business.

How can we help the process?

A question arises: how can we deal with integrating meditation into life itself? How can we help the process?

The attention we learn on the mat expands into other situations by itself, if it is strong enough. And sustaining it in the midst of activities strengthens it. But what if meditation is not strong enough, if it hasn't reached the critical mass needed to be extended naturally? Which kinds of meditation are helpful for bringing into our daily lives and which ones are not? Which attitudes are helpful for developing everyday attention and which ones block it?

First: what it is better not to do. If, especially in the case of beginners, our attention is only developed on the mat and not strengthened in daily activities, and we become dissatisfied with the results of the



photo: Claire Martin

meditation, we tend to put pressure on the mind and try to make it fulfil our expectations better. And we try to force the mind to be quiet. This can only be effective in the short term, if at all. Longer term, it will exhaust us, or even dispose us to give up practice for a while. It may be the case that we can keep our mental discipline on the mat, by force, for better or worse, however with our exhaustion, and our disposition to stop, the mind reasserts its habitual patterns as soon as we stop meditating. Mind's unwholesome habits and tendencies are reactivated. Later on we go back to the formal meditation on the mat - and the cycle starts all over again.

We may not find our forced meditation good enough, or effective. We blame ourselves for meditating "badly," and feel displeased, helpless, frustrated. The negative feelings carry over into daily life. In order to "improve" the quality of life we can try to suppress the problems we have generated in this way. We might try to apply narrow meditation methods such as focusing on the breath to our everyday life, intending to sustain it in the same way as it is done on the meditation mat, forgetting that life is governed by other rules and needs. Such a practice would be useful neither for discovering the patterns of our behaviour nor for transforming them.

Another strategy would be more useful: even if our meditation is burdened by a large amount of tension, and thoughts are scattered, we can just try to diminish that excess stuff gradually, bit by bit. The first crucial step is to notice it. And acknowledge it. The second step is to see that we ourselves are involved in the confusion somehow. Although we try to relax, we feel our muscles tighten. Although we notice a wandering thought, we prefer following it to leaving it alone! So we must observe

our own tendency to like the habits of the chattering mind. Then we can try to stop sustaining them, just letting them go whenever we are conscious of them. They come back repeatedly, and we repeatedly perceive them, and repeatedly let them go. Every letting go weakens them. Meditation is not doing something special; rather, it is ceasing doing habitual things we have been doing constantly. But first they must be recognized. Even if we stop indulging our habits, we find that they return. However if the mental chatter does not meet conducive conditions it weakens, and bothers us less frequently, fading to a flicker like a fire starved of fuel and oxygen.

As habitual anxieties and obsessions weaken, more space opens up for mindfulness in everyday life. The strength of meditation increases as well. However, now it is a real, stable strength, different from the strength based on a firm intention of controlling something forcefully. Attention starts to embrace various aspects of daily life in a natural way.

In order to support this process, it is good to think of meditation as a series of efficient, slight steps, that we enjoy. Every letting go of a thought is such a step. In our everyday life we will more willingly find room for a positive mindset in place of the frustration caused by over-ambitious expectations and by pressing the mind.

If our practice doesn't embrace our life in a natural way, by itself, we can try to make it do so by means of a conscious intention. However, we should be cautious. Practice in the midst of daily activities has so many different aspects that trying to remember all of them all the time and to bend our lives to desirable attitudes which are not yet "ours", can interfere with the flow of our energy. As a result, we can get dispirited. The ideal obscures the reality.

Actually, we can only practise with what is real, so it can be useful to narrow down, at least at the beginning, our demands on ourselves. For example, we can allocate a certain time of the day to set aside for diligent attention. Sustaining attention all the time is exhausting for a beginner, while keeping consciously mindful for an hour or two is more realistic. Or we can identify what means work particularly well for us, helping us to sustain attention during formal meditation, and we can try to apply just those means in everyday life, in short breaks between our activities. For one person it might be coming back to the present moment. For another person, noticing the feelings in the body. For another, focusing on the sense of his or her own existence. Or it could just be relaxation. It is not necessary to keep constantly in mind the whole list of things to be kept in mindful awareness through a busy day. Those issues will emerge by themselves, according to the circumstances, and our goals will take care of themselves. Anyway, it is still worthwhile to apply skilful means wisely for sustaining attention.

Later on, when the practice unifies with life more and more, attention still needs to be sustained without being forced. Mindful attention enables us to see things as they are and to adjust our actions to what can reasonably be helpful. Mindfulness enables us to stay in harmony with the current circumstances.

ILLUSORY SELF

HARRY MILLER

In *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* is an important teaching about the illusory self that chauffeurs us around samsara.

The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment, in the chapter ‘Bodhisattva Cleansed of All Karmic Obstructions,’ states:

Virtuous man, since beginningless time all sentient beings have been deludedly conceiving and clinging to the existence of self, as the essence of a real self, thereby giving rise to dual states of like and dislike. Thus, based on one delusion, they further cling to other delusions. These two delusions rely on each other, giving rise to the illusory paths of karma. Because of illusory karma, sentient beings deludedly perceive the turning flow [of cyclic existence]. Those who detest the turning flow [of cyclic existence] deludedly perceive nirvana, and hence are unable to enter [the realm of] pure enlightenment. It is not enlightenment that thwarts their entering; rather, it is the idea that ‘there is one who can enter.’ Therefore, whether their thoughts are agitated or have ceased, they cannot be other than confused and perplexed.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said that

The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering endlessly in the realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of “I” you would find it easy to be free and free others, too.

But do we really perceive of a thought that is “I”? I think for most of us it is a very abstract idea.

Sometimes on retreat a teacher will ask, “who is sitting?” “who is walking?” These can be very misleading questions because we don’t immediately identify any such activity with a “who.” We just sit or walk in a fog. Perhaps someone calls our name and then we partially wake up. This is not to say that the deep concept, the understanding, and the functioning of self are not operative within us. If we weren’t misled by a false sense of self, there would be no need to study Buddhadharmā. The illusion is powerful, but the underlying reality is not directly accessible to us. If we try to look for the self, we have to look for its traces, the subtle underlying motivation for all of our actions. Otherwise, when we think of self or identity, we imagine getting out our driver’s license, social security number, or pay stubs to prove who we are. If we were to actually try to behold the workings of the self, we’d have to look through infinite time and space, so strong is the fabrication and connection to what ultimately turns out to be an illusion.

So the self, or the way we know ourselves, is not really a thing to be identified.

That is why it is so confusing when someone first hears the teaching of anatta, the concept of not-self or no-self. It’s common for someone who is first introduced to this concept to ask, “You mean I don’t exist?” Of course, anyone who asks that question is neglecting to ask, “Who is it who’s asking the question: ‘You mean I don’t exist?’”

In short, the idea of self, as central and important to us as it is, is rather abstract and unreal, even though it is the only reality ordinary sentient beings tend to know. We don’t wake up in the morning and say,

“well, here’s my self waking up, my self drinking coffee, my self getting on the bus. We’re concerned with all our plans and desires and fears and conceptions in general. This concept of “self” is rarely foremost in our minds, yet there is something that seems to be motivating us.

Rather than look for the self as a thing or something that defines who you “are,” try to understand the self as a pattern of actions.

If I’m planning to have dinner with a friend tonight, a flurry of thoughts will pass through my mind. That activity is the self. If I think about a problem I’m having with my car and I want to get it repaired, those thoughts are the self. If I think about an argument I had with my wife or child five years ago, that memory is the self. There is a cliché of something that is hidden in plain sight. That is an accurate characterization of self.

“Self” is a noun and nouns seem to have “thingness” associated with them, even if they are abstract nouns like “injustice,” “love” or “beauty.” They may seem abstract but they are often solidified in the mind - they are “mind things,” which we hold on to or push away.

But then when we look at the self as a pattern of actions, another problem comes up: Buddha said: “so indeed, these states not having been, come into being. Having been, they vanish.” Then the Buddha counsels: “Regarding these states, abide unattracted, unrepelled, independent, non-attached, free, not identified, with a mind free of barriers.” Recognizing impermanence, it is possible to elude the clinging that often comes with thinking.

These things that we identify and reify as our “self” come and go in an instant. Thus, we are basing an enormous amount of energy on false identification, which is unreliable, and in the final analysis non-existent.



PHOTO: JANE WHEELER

But the identification with our experience is very compelling, hard to see, and hard to overcome. This is why there are so many teachings that point out some very basic errors in our perception and understanding.

As Wei Wu Wei said, “Whoever thinks that they exist objectively is like a dog barking up a tree that isn’t there.”

So, I will close with a teaching that may seem simpler than the passage from *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*.

The Buddha gave his son, Rahula, very straightforward instructions as to how to orient his mind towards whatever is experienced:

Rahula, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every form is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

This is perhaps a more accessible and understandable passage than the one that we have been discussing, but in essence, it is no less profound. It is applicable at anytime, anywhere, to any mind state. With this observation and understanding, there will be no room for deluded thoughts, states of mind, or discrimination.

Complete Enlightenment: translation and commentary on The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment by Chan Master Sheng-yen, Dharma Drum Publications 1997 and Shambhala 1999.

IS THIS LIFE, OR IS THIS DEATH?

GEORGE MARSH

A koan is a teaching tool to challenge you to solve the insoluble. It is a most ingenious Chinese invention in the history of Zen education. It is not entirely silly. You can solve the insoluble, but you do not get a 'solution' that is transferable to other people as a gobbet of knowledge. And you do not get an 'answer' that is in the form predicted by the question. What you get instead is a series of insights about the assumptions built into your thinking, your language and your perceptions. And you somehow mysteriously come to a sense of satisfaction with the meaning even though you have no 'answer.'

As an example, take koan number 55 from *The Blue Cliff Record*:

One day Dogo, accompanied by his disciple Zengen, went to visit a family in which a funeral was to take place, in order to express sympathy. Zengen touched the coffin and said, "Tell me please, is this life or is this death?"

Dogo said, "I would not tell you whether it is life or it is death."

Zengen said, "Why don't you tell me?"

Dogo said, "No, I would not tell you."

On their way home Zengen said, "Please be kind enough to tell me. If not I'll hit you."

Dogo said, "Strike me if you like, but I would not tell you."

Zengen struck Dogo.

Your task, on a koan retreat, or in your practice at home, is to meditate upon the koan. I am attracted to the burning question, *“Is this life or is this death?”* Can I resolve the disciple Zengen’s anxiety?

You carry the koan around with you in your mind in daily life and apply it like a measuring instrument to all that you encounter: chicken tikka – *“Is this life or is this death?”* Dead leaves, fading flowers, flourishing mosquitos – *“Is this life or is this death?”* In the end you have to make your own peace with the conundrum, in your own way.

The question that I choose as my focus is about life and death; all life and death, not a specific corpse; and it challenges me to investigate the life and death in me. I start by feeling the life in my belly, as I breathe, in my meditation. I feel it, or, at least, I am conscious of it. Is it inside me or outside? Is it generated by my biology, or by the environment that makes the food, the air, water and sunlight? Impossible to tell. Is there a “life force,” and is it inner, or universal? Impossible to tell.

It is life; or it is some inspiration in the universe that keeps life going and is beginningless and endless. My life is short, I know, so why does “life” feel beginningless and endless? I have a striking insight: it is not personal. It is not “my” life. It is greater than me, and indifferent to me, in a benignly neglectful way. In that sense “my life” is empty. The “my-ness” of it is an illusion; my sense of being in charge of it is empty flimflam, a fantasy of self reassurance. There is life, and I am hitching a ride on it for a short while.

‘What is my “Original Face” from the time before my father and mother were born?’ (that is another koan) – and, I add, as I think about it, ‘What is my Original Face after my grandson will be dead?’ It is a universal life, the possession of no one. To name it would suggest that it is

a great thing, and that it could be worshipped, but that would be inappropriate. It is not an it. It does not give a damn for me, and it is wonderful. What is it?

*No doer of the deeds is found;
 No one who ever reaps their fruits.
 Empty phenomena roll on,
 This only is the correct view.
 No god or Brahma can be called
 The maker of this wheel of life.
 Empty phenomena roll on
 Dependent on conditions all.*

Buddhagosa, 5th century

My death would not be a personal thing either, I reflected. There is a great impersonal living process going on, irrespective of anyone's opinions or desires, and we are all grist to the mill. The universe churns out life, all of which ages, decays, transforms, dies and is recycled. Like my life, my death is also "empty" of myness. It is quite unconcerned with notions of deserving, justice or care. "Death is just the end of the assumption that there is someone who owns Life" (Unmani Liza Hyde). *"Empty phenomena roll on."*

The life and death of each moment

On retreat in Normandy I had another insight, feeling for the first time the full force of the phrase, "The life and death of each moment." It began when I tried to recreate in my mind the pleasure of being hailed by Mathilde, daughter of my friends. She appeared in a garden, to my

surprise, and called out, running towards me. I was delighted to see her again. Can one keep hold of a special moment like that? Can we recreate it? Can we sustain its life in nostalgia's aspic? No. It lives gloriously, and then it is gone. You cannot preserve it anymore than you can keep a dewdrop fresh in the fridge.

A second insight came quickly: if one is living vividly in the present moment the potential for experiences of great joy and fullness is all over the place, all the time. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "M'installant dans le moment présent, je sais que c'est un moment merveilleux."

Mathilde may be especially wonderful, but, in fact, watching any old bee nosing in any old flower is beautiful, as generous a gift as the universe has to offer, and available at this time of year all over the place. When one is completely clear in Ordinary Mind and focused on the present marvellous moment, all moments are vivid bliss. But time moves on. You can't hold any of them. They die, all of them. You have to move on to the birth of the next.

What an incredible waste of life it is that we miss so many of these gorgeous, vivid experiences all around us all the time! They are born in their fullness and then fade as our attention shifts to the next.

What do I mean by "born"? The same flowers are here in the garden today as were here yesterday, a little older, but to a quick glance, the same. The trees are the same. Some things have relatively stable continuity over time, relatively much longer than flowers or even trees, – so how is glancing at them the "birth" of them? Do I give birth to Rouen cathedral by looking at it?

Yes. It is the noticing. Instants are born in one's consciousness. There is no continuity in the mind's vivid perceptions, in full attentiveness.

It is in constant motion. It flows without stopping. It is time. The noticing is not a copy of yesterday's noticing of the same flower, the same tree, the same cathedral, and cannot be so. The perceptions flare and die, flare and die, flare and die, moment by moment, each one the distillation of the whole universe, and all its life, in this second. This second is the only bit of time that is alive, and it is already dying.

The great mystic William Blake puts it like this:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

The continuities are reassuring constructs in the background. They are a notional framework, but they are not where we live. We live and die each moment, in our beady looking, riveted on a close-up; or listening, note by delicious note. Tasting. Touching. That is how we are alive in the present. We live where our attention is fully focused. "Eternity" and "Infinity" are concentrated there. The relationship is best expressed by Blake again: "Eternity is in love with the productions of time."

The Heart Sutra

In the following morning's service we chanted *The Heart Sutra*. I was struck by how lines of text are like our journey through time. They remain the same through a thousand years as ink printed on paper, but when your eye travels along the lines, and you voice them, your mind flares with the imagined fullness of a word or phrase. It leaps into an idea and its implications and then attention smoothly moves on, echoing

or resonating with the idea and adding to it the next one. The silent symbols spring into life and speak their meanings.

You lose attention for a bit, distracted, or recalling an earlier phrase, and miss half a sentence, which lies there dead, as you pass by without bringing it to life. According to how focused you are in the moments of your reading, the words leap into life briefly and then fade and die as you move through the space-time continuum of the text.

There is a physical landscape of short-lived or long-lived stable things, a mix of continuities, through which one moves, carried by time: flowers, trees, cathedrals, and the culture of historic texts. But one actually lives in the mind's constantly-roving attentiveness, which has no continuity, not even the appearance of permanance. Living moments flare in one's perceptions, fade and die, flaring and dying. *"Is this life or is this death?"*

I would not tell you.

I would not tell you, but my answer to myself is this. It is. Life and death. Each of them separately. Both of them together. Neither of them. It's impossible to tell them apart. The words are nonsense. But I am content.

You do not get a 'solution' that is transferable to other people as a gobbet of knowledge. And you do not get an 'answer' that is in the form predicted by the question. What you get instead is a series of insights about the assumptions built into your thinking, your language and your perceptions. And you somehow mysteriously come to a sense of satisfaction with the meaning even though you have no 'answer.'

THOUGHTS FROM BRUM

MARGARET HOLMES

This is to relate my experience of having ME/CFS, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and my recovery, with reference to my Buddhist practice. So first going back a bit to look at the context of getting ME: since reaching pension age and retiring from my various part-time jobs (Councillor, Interviewer, Receptionist/Librarian), over 10 years ago, my life continued to be something of a busy juggling act. I started teaching Yoga, became a trustee of a local charity, as well as regular swimming, long walks, meeting friends, family activities and, after getting divorced, keeping up with a new partner who unhelpfully lived 150 miles away on a boat. My Buddhist teacher at that time, Aloka, was often telling me I was doing too much and should simplify my life. Then 3 years ago at the end of 2014 I had the ‘flu, from which I didn’t really recover for at least 2 months. After that I decided I’d better cut down on some things (keeping hens and some of my yoga classes).

Then early in 2015 I had the strange virus which I’d had occasionally for the last few years, usually after being particularly busy. It would start with a severe headache and dry throat for about 2 days and then leave me feeling exhausted for several days after that. This time the exhaustion didn’t leave me, although after a few weeks I did manage to celebrate my 70th birthday with a big party and a Ukelele band, which was great, even though I was completely shattered for a week afterwards. I was very happy that my teacher Aloka had managed to be there, which was just a few weeks before he died. My doctor was unable to find anything wrong

with me and had no suggestions, so after 3 months of feeling continually tired I visited a therapist who told me I had ME. It can be described as a physical condition with a neurological element.

A close friend told me about something called the Lightning Process which had cured her daughter after she'd had ME for 20 years. But I was discouraged from trying it, partly because it sounded very expensive, and partly because my therapist said it only worked for about 80% of people who tried it, and if it didn't work they ended up in a worse state than before. Still I was determined to recover somehow so I tried various things recommended by the therapist: Pacing, Massage, Detoxing, EFT, Tapping, DVDs, webinars, visualisations and guided meditation. Some of these helped initially but nothing worked in the long term. I had so little energy then that just washing, dressing, cooking and washing up was about all I could manage in a day, although I did keep up my regular meditation practice. On a good day I might manage the five minute walk to the shops or have a friend to visit, although even talking for any length of time was exhausting.

After about a year, in 2016, I joined the Birmingham WCF group. It was fairly new and had started just the year before. Before that I had belonged to two other Buddhist organisations, in each case leaving due to feeling the need for a Buddhist teacher. The open and inclusive nature of the WCF was very attractive and I felt at home from the beginning. I particularly liked the fact that the founder of the organisation, John Crook, was a poet, as well as an academic and an adventurer. The words of the puja that he wrote and which we recite at our meetings are very beautiful and inspiring, with their many evocative images. When I felt well enough to get there the WCF group was like a haven of tranquillity

amongst the fear and anxiety that come with CFS. And during that time the caring, love, and kindness that I received from friends, family, my yoga teacher and the WCF group kept me going when the future stretched out bleak and lonely and seemingly with no end in sight. Simple friendliness like talking to someone on the phone such as a bank clerk or a receptionist could cheer me up for a long time afterwards if they were kind and helpful.

Another thing that helped was watching Tara Brach videos on Youtube. She is an American Buddhist teacher, and her talks were full of compassion as well as humour – lots of funny anecdotes to illustrate a point. What she taught was cultivating acceptance of what is, using an acronym RAIN: Recognition (that there was an emotion such as fear), Acceptance (that that's the way it is right now), Investigation (bringing a kind attention to it) and Not identifying (by offering love and compassion to the suffering 'small self', thereby coming to identify more with the awareness that's relating to the small self). So while I was never able to fully accept the draining exhaustion and isolation, the process of accepting the situation and investigating the accompanying feelings and offering them kindness, this in itself made the whole thing more bearable; I was able to take a step back from the anxious self and see a wider perspective. It is a similar process to the four Tasks, based on the four Noble Truths, as outlined in his talk on the WCF website by Stephen Batchelor.

At the end of last year a third person told me of her success with the Lightning Process and I decided to investigate it more fully. It was a 3 day course with the coach and as much follow-up support as you might need. There were elements of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming),

positive thinking, self hypnosis, and modelling (based on studying the mind-set of people who had achieved outstanding success in various fields). For me what made the process work was having face-to-face contact with an enthusiastic coach who had complete belief in the effectiveness of the model and was able to convey that belief to the practitioners. We were encouraged to set ourselves a goal for the first day, something a bit more demanding than what we thought we could do. So I went for a drink in the pub with my friend Mary after she drove me back from that long first day. Then I got on a bus for the first time in 2 years to get back home. I can remember walking back from the bus stop and realising I'd not worried about my energy for at least 5 minutes. That was like a turning point, finding that I was actually capable of doing more than I'd thought. By the end of the 3rd day it felt like a switch had been flipped in my brain and I was feeling cautiously optimistic. That evening I was able to walk all the way round our local park, a groundbreaking achievement! I think that this Process would work for anyone with ME as long as they were prepared to believe in the possibility that this Process might work for them.

Since then I have continued to do more and more of the things I'd missed for such a long time – walking, swimming, going out in the evenings, and particularly, going on retreats. But still for the first few months, although I had a lot more energy I would sometimes get headaches after I had been especially busy. I wasn't sure if the extra activity had caused the headache or if it was due to anxiety, often subconscious, about doing too much. Then in June on the WCF Koan retreat I had an interview with Simon and talked to him about it. His advice was that if a headache came, to just accept it as being 'that's how it is at

the moment'. I had tried that approach before, but somehow his telling me that made all the difference; soon after that retreat the headaches stopped.

Now I don't have ME any more, and no longer worry about 'overdoing it', knowing that if I get very tired I'll be ok after a night's sleep. However I have finally simplified my life as Aloka had long ago advised me to do. I am sometimes content to have days just pottering about, not feeling I should be doing something useful. The experience of that recovery has impressed on me the subtle but enormously powerful effect of the mind on the body: what finally made the difference was finding the confidence and the belief that I could do the things that I wanted to do. Also, looking back on that scary time I can say that those two years taught me the huge importance of simple kindness. Whilst I had ME, when I felt continually on edge and anxious, it was the only thing that made life bearable. So I can agree with the Dalai Lama and say "My religion is kindness". Since I joined the WCF group we have been studying 'Training in Compassion' based around Norman Fischer's book of that name, and that feels very appropriate. The fortnightly meditation and interesting discussions that we have are definitely something to look forward to. The group was initially quite small, but has been gradually growing and now we often have a healthy eight or nine members at the meetings, and long may it continue, on its two wings of Wisdom and Compassion.

MEDITATION

DIDI E.M. CROOK

Stillness
within, looking out
Resting
on a point of balance

Awareness
watching inward

Noticing
No comment
Move on

Awareness
hearing the world

Noticing
No comment
Move on

Awareness
seeing
what is

Noticing

No comment

Move on

Awareness

thoughts come and go

Sometimes on two levels

at the same time

Noticing

No comment

Move on

Awareness

sensing

subtle body

vibrations

ever moving,

ever changing

Noticing

No comment

Move on

IT IS SIMPLY THIS

MARTIN TREACY

It is simply this!
Nothing more is to be said.
After years of restless wandering
I return home at last;
Once more I am again a golden-haired child.

I was trying to remove this illusory 'I',
but running restlessly hither and thither,
How could insight arise?

For a moment mad mind stops;
'Self' and 'Other' dissolve.
Just being, totally, now:
A man with nothing further to seek.
Events pleasant and painful
Just confirm and deepen insight
And I warm my hands gently
Before the Three Fires' glowing embers.

RETREAT REPORTS

We publish retreat reports anonymously, and sometimes in extracts. Please keep them coming. They report on the silent, secret, inner workings of a retreat.

RETREAT REPORT: ZEN MEDITATION AND RUNNING RETREAT, BARMOOR 2017

I have come back from my first retreat with a sense of a body; my arms, legs, knees and feet have all become solid, living parts of me. My body has become a refuge from tumbling, terrorising thoughts and can now bring me, moment to moment, into the world. Prior to the retreat I felt like a wandering head-on-a-stick, a ‘teetering bulb of dread and dream’, looking outwards through dimmed eyes and looking rabidly inwards. But during those few days in Yorkshire something seemed to drop down, or drop away. I could feel gravity through my bones and cold air on my skin and fantastic, open stillness.

I loved the morning exercises, waking up in the dark and going out to the yard to welcome the day, peaceful, alert and intent. I loved the food! And the care we took to eat. I loved the running too, although I found the vastness and beauty of the moors quite impossible to contain in my awareness and had to settle with the earth beneath my feet and swinging arms and legs. Maybe once, we reached the top of a hill and stopped to look around, I saw the sky and the grass and the sheep with clarity. My mind was quiet enough to ask nothing and just see – ‘ordinary mind, wanting nothing’.

Sitting in meditation was sometimes wonderful and sometimes very

hard. This was the first formal instruction I had received and I learnt so much about the practice from Jake and Stuart. I was also constantly surprised by the intelligence of my body; during some sessions, feelings of sadness and anger were so entwined with physical sensations that I didn't want to continue. But with these feelings was also catharsis and an easing of certain knots that I've carried for a long time.

An owl was hooting as we did our morning exercises on the last day. I felt like it was a good omen to send us home. But arriving back to my life has been hard. Fifteen minutes of cycling through central London and the mind of clarity and joy that I found in North Yorkshire seems pretty remote. But, as Jake said, we should give it up graciously. And I have the wonderful feeling that it's really still here (my body is still here!) and with a daily practice I will be able to get some of it back home.

RETREAT REPORT: GAIA HOUSE JUNE 2017

At the age of fifty-six I have found myself in an insecure and troubled place for many reasons: broken long-term relationship, empty coffers, career collapse and a recent bereavement. Chronic insomnia was placing my problems on the brink of mental illness, of hopelessness; my troubled mind shouting loudly all the time to come up with solutions and not succeeding. My mind was so chaotic, troubled and, delusionary; firing up a million competing thoughts per second, that I worried for my sanity. I fully expected my mind to snap. It seemed only a matter of time.

In the past I have found secular mindfulness meditation helpful. I practiced alone with various recorded guided meditations, which succeeded in silencing the mind, and sometimes allowed me to sleep, but

without any wider philosophy of acceptance and investigation of the difficult thoughts colliding in my mind, such as the Chan practice supported, secular practice was of limited positive effect.

After registering for the ‘Investigating koans’ course at the Gaia House, sitting in its beautiful grounds I listened to the cacophony of bird song looking out into the rolling hills and breathed a long sigh of utter relief. In my heart I knew that I’d had made a good decision to attend the course.

At the opening ceremony, before our first meditation, I was struck by the great care taken by our teachers, in looking after our needs with regular exercise between meditations and one-to-one interviews with the teachers. However, I was troubled that the meditations were not to be guided, worried on reviewing the intensive schedule that I would be unable to sit with my thoughts without a guiding voice. However, from the outset, the meditation sits were workable for me. Indeed time often flew by. Moreover, having initially worried that the silence would be a lonely experience, being removed from the usual social dynamic of getting to know people and all the pressure that that involves allowed me to focus in on my delusory mind.

What struck me from the outset of the meditations was that the mind fills up with so much fantasy and proposed thoughts, spinning out a web of unreality based on the events of the past, added to fearful imaginings of the future that the present had no house room in my mind. Difficulties I needed to focus upon and feelings I needed to experience, however painful, were being hijacked by a constant chatter of irrelevant made-up stuff that had no positive effect at all. I was fortunate to be able to immediately connect with the basics of Chan philosophy, which almost

immediately, not only calmed my mind, but allowed it to go through the fire of the pain I was presently experiencing rather than dwelling on the past and future. Or, as Simon Child advised: let the trains of unhelpful thoughts come into the station but watch them leave. Do not get on board with them.

With that in mind, I experienced a prolonged fantastical, delusionary thought stream during meditating. This imagined nonsense involved another retreatant. My deluded mind tried its best to convince me that although I did not even know this person's name, sexuality or circumstance, that we were meant to live our lives together. That this 'meant to be' relationship would solve all my problems. On the one hand, I knew this was a crazy diversion away from what my true focus needed to be, but my mind was persistent with this rubbish for two days, before I was able to let that particular train leave my busy station. In fact, it vanished as completely as it had arrived. It was, however, such a helpful experience which profoundly illustrated to me how powerful the deluded mind can be.

The Chan principle of persistently engaging in the practice of meditation to identify one's true self, as opposed to the masks one presents to the world and to oneself I found during the course and beyond a painful (sometime hilarious) process, though ultimately illuminating, most necessary. As the days of the course progressed, I found many of my unhelpful or damaging personality traits were difficult to exactly identify, often terrifying to acknowledge. However, I soon realised that this process was necessary in order to leave them behind. And this process continues, now that I am home. Day by day, step by step, my meditation is neutralising these self-slandering traits.

Another profound experience I had about three days into the retreat was after an interview with Simon. I told him of my problem with chronic insomnia, bouts of which I have experienced regularly since my abusive childhood. I explained that, regardless of how tired I might be, as soon as my head hit the pillow, something in me yelled, 'You can't sleep,' and when it did, I would not sleep. I further explained that I had not slept much during the retreat because of this. Simon, and I paraphrase, said that my delusionary mind was convincing me not to sleep and that I could simply counter this negative statement my delusionary mind was repeating, 'You will not sleep!' with, 'Oh yes I can.' That night I slept much better, albeit fitfully and have slept much better since. This has illustrated to me that I can train my mind to serve me better in many ways.

When Simon first introduced the Koan technique of meditation to the group, I admit I was sceptical. However, and I have no idea why, but by focusing and refocusing on my chosen Koan, it helped me enormously. I have grown to love my Koan which has illuminated many dark corners of my mind and continues to be a mysteriously good influence on my meditation.

And, so, all in all, my report of this retreat is a glowing one. It was not easy. Sometimes I thought I might bolt. I am so glad I did not. I have continued to meditate, without voice guidance, since my return from Devon. I have booked another retreat, this time in Wales. I am grateful to myself for getting myself to Gaia House, grateful to the generosity of teachers Simon and Jake, and to the other retreatants, whom I had the great privilege to be presently silent with.



PHOTOS: LEWIS BENNETT

RETREAT REPORT: WESTERN ZEN RETREAT, MAENLLWYD

This was my second Retreat with the WCF; my first a little over 9½ months ago was the introductory Taste of Chan with Fiona in Derbyshire. Prior to that I had no experience of meditation at all.

If the first Retreat helped me to understand and accept events impacting significantly upon my life the second, a Western Zen Retreat at Maenllwyd, surprisingly helped to clear out baggage I had been carrying since childhood. I say surprisingly given I am very close to national pension age and frankly, was stunned to feel the overwhelming release following the resolution of ‘who am I?’

This Retreat, safely and comfortingly led by Jake, in the beautifully isolated surroundings of Maenllwyd (chilly temperatures, glorious wood-burning stoves and composting loos and all) was another step in my newly discovered practice, and how special it was!

I was a little anxious I may not feel the same profoundly moving effect from this my second Retreat as I felt from the first. But, in spite of deliberately arriving with no expectations at all other than the desire to be open to whatever came, this Retreat proved just as powerful and, perhaps more pertinent to me personally, extremely valuable to my spiritual growth.

I am a planner and an organiser, both by nature and from learned behaviour in my 50+ years of professional life. I have probably spent so much time planning for the future (professionally, domestically and personally) that I have missed the greater portion of my life that could have been lived in the right here right now. Indeed, now I’m back in everyday life, I still catch myself reflecting and thinking ‘how can I underscore the value I have gained from the Retreat and bring it to bear on my every-

day life?’ But for me this is the point – I now catch myself planning and am able to surrender that process and just be! Whatever comes from the Retreat, supported by my continued practice, will be; and it will be entirely welcome.

In one of his Dharma talks Jake discussed opportunities for extending the benefits of Retreat into everyday life and as he put it, extending practice when not just sitting. When one catches oneself about to go to the dark side – that is practice; when one feels negative emotion and catches it before damaging reaction occurs – that is also practice; when one comes across a moment of beauty in someone else’s behaviour or in the natural world and smiles gratefully inwardly – that too is practice.

I look forward to attending future Retreats and may even do further WZRs but for now, I am calmly more aware of things in the moment and relishing the opportunity to experience right here right now, the joy of life in all its forms.

RETREAT REPORT: EXTRACTS FROM SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT REPORT, JANUARY 2018

...My job in the work period was to clean and maintain the composting toilets! Not one of a squeamish nature, I accepted my lot and as the days went on, watching my aversions, I started to appreciate the challenges that the retreat offers.

Watching my mind, both on and off the cushion, was at times quite shocking, to see the relentlessness of my narcissism; everything revolving around me; and the desperate need, it seemed, to want to alter reality to my own ends, so that I would look/feel ‘better’ in my own and others’ eyes. And when that appeared I tried to find some tenderness for myself,

rather than a punitive, controlling reaction, which was what seemed to come automatically.

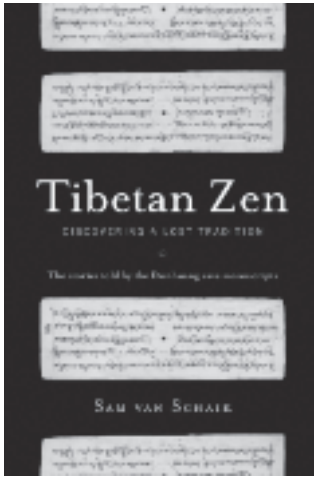
What emerged for me over the days was that I was increasingly making allowances for all this 'nonsense', and experiencing in that softening towards myself a sense of peace, and stilling of my mind. Helped too by a strong sense of common purpose in the meditation hall. To sit with 20 others and experience the stillness of the group was powerful and inspiring.

Whilst I don't consider myself a Buddhist, whatever that is, I left with a deep sense of gratitude that the place exists and it exists through the practice of others who have maintained a link back through time to the 'ancestors', the great teachers of the past.

BOOK REVIEW: TIBETAN ZEN

EDDY STREET

A review of Sam van Schaik's Tibetan Zen: Discovering a Lost Tradition (2015), Snow Lion, London.



This book is of interest to our Sangha for several reasons. Firstly, John Crook always maintained a link with Tibetan traditions through various practices, especially Mahamudra, and that link continues with our Tibetan based liturgy on Western Zen Retreats. Secondly, this book originates from translated manuscripts of the International Dunhuang Project, a project to which our Sangha made two related sponsorships, a translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra* by Bill Porter (Red Pine) and the digitisation of a copy of the *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra* (the *Diamond Sutra*) held in the British Library. A third reason is that the book represents an opportunity to study some aspects of the early development and history of the Chan tradition.¹

In the Dunhuang caves, the majority of the manuscripts are in the Chinese language but here it is just the Tibetan language manuscripts, dated between the 9th and 10th centuries CE, that are translated. This provenance marks them as the earliest known source material for Tibetan Buddhism. At this time distinct lineages or schools of Chan had not yet emerged, even though this is implied by traditional stories, but modern

research strongly suggests that there were a range of different sanghas usually around a single master practising an approach that emphasised meditation (dhyana). Hence, in talking about ‘Chan’ at this time, we need to consider it as being an over-arching term covering various versions that can be grouped together via particular resemblances. These include instructions on how to meditate, teaching on the inherent nature of Buddha Mind within the ordinary mind, the ritual bestowing of the Bodhisattva precepts and a transmission through linkages to Bodhidharma. Under this umbrella of Chan was a version which can be labelled ‘Tibetan Zen’ with its own distinct tradition incorporating some elements of Tantric Buddhism.

The author of this volume has written a well received book, ‘Tibet: A History.’² and is a well-known translator of Tibetan. Here, he provides an excellently structured volume, beginning with a comprehensive introduction and followed by chapters on such issues as ‘Encounter and Emptiness’, ‘Debate’, ‘Observing the Mind’, ‘Zen and Tantra’ amongst others. In each chapter, each theme is discussed in terms of its history of the time and therefore there is a constant appraisal of the way the translated document is linked to the development of Chan generally. Under each theme are translations of important and exemplar Tibetan language manuscripts composing just over a third of the book. The author has chosen not to present the standard sutras found in the manuscripts but rather those documents particular to the practice of Chan within the Tibetan culture of the time.

Van Shaik takes an archaeological/cultural perspective in considering the manuscripts rather than the usual textual approach. In the latter, it is the text alone that is given importance and the translating commen-

tator usually undertakes an examination of the ideas within that text, their origin in earlier texts and their development in later presentations. However, by taking a cultural approach the author is able to consider all of the discovered artefacts within the context in which they were found. Utilising this approach, the manuscripts are seen as being an assortment of source material for sermons, services and/or initiation ceremonies used by monks, lay practitioners and teachers alike. As such, they have an importance for the understanding of the development of meditation practices and of the centrality of taking the Bodhisattva precepts.

The manuscripts also provide a possible preliminary insight into the development of the question and answer format that make up the ‘master-student’ encounter dialogues found later in Chan stories and koans. It is now well understood that many of these stories are apocryphal and were constructed in such a way to provide an aid to teaching. In these documents there are several passages of question and answers – for example in the translation of the manuscript entitled *A Summary of the Practice of the Instantaneous Approach*, we have:

Question: Do you see this finger?

Answer: I see it

Another question: Are you seeing it now?

Answer: I am seeing it.

Question: If it is possible to see this finger when it exists, how can you see it when it doesn't exist? This is a great marvel! (page 106).

It could be that these question and answers initially formed an aide memoire for a teacher explaining something to a group of students. Then quite likely, they were incorporated into a liturgical structure of question

and response and hence provided a teaching within a ceremony. It is easy to imagine how this arrangement developed into the ‘recorded’ encounters between master and student that have become well established in our tradition.

As one would anticipate in any Chan document there is a focus on meditation instruction. For example in a chapter on ‘Debate’ the question is asked,

“How does one observe the mind?”

“Turn away from the six sense doors and then observe the mind. If discrimination stirs, do not think that it exists or does not exist, is pure or impure, is empty or not empty, and so on. Be without concepts, not even thinking of not thinking.”

(page 124).

Undeniably familiar instructions.

Throughout the translations, there is a clear demonstration of how at this early time in the development of Chan, the *Lankavatara Sutra* was a central spiritual source and it was used more than the Perfection of Wisdom literature which only came to prominence later.

It is very possible that Chan teachers from China played an important role near the beginning of the development of Buddhism in Tibet, but clearly, it did not survive to become part of the established spiritual life of that area. The traditional story of Chan’s disappearance from Tibet was that there was a debate between the ‘Tibetan’ approaches derived from India represented by the Indian monk, Kamalasila, and the Chinese monk Moheyan representing Chan. The Indian approach was based on graduated methods in which the Tantric and Sutra teachings were carefully laid out as steps toward enlightenment, whereas the Chinese teacher

emphasised concept-free meditation rather than a multitude of methods. The story goes that in the debate Moheyan was soundly beaten and the Tibetan Emperor banished Chan from the land and hence the graduated path approaches became firmly established in Tibet. The scholarship in this book however demonstrates that this story is a myth and not dissimilar to many others in Chan history was possibly constructed for pragmatic political reasons at a later date. It is also apparent that Moheyan was not just a defeated monk but an important early Chan master.

There was not a distinct entity of ‘Tibetan Zen’ made up of Chan and Tantric elements but rather there were texts and teaching lineages derived from a variety of influences all contributing to a variety of approaches. For example, in one document, there is a prayer to Tantric deities alongside a document of Chan interpretations of some Buddhist concepts and the manuscript’s construction suggests the differing approaches rested side-by-side in a teaching context. The documents also suggest that the common Chan-based meditation instructions of the time, ‘observing the mind’, were included in the phases of the Tantric system of generation, completion and transcendence practices. This suggests that the usual context for the practice of Chan meditation was often within a Tantric framework. Indeed, several of the documents display the interpretation and assimilation of the one approach through the other. The essence of the meditative approach within this ‘Tibetan Zen’ tradition, is identified as ‘instantaneous’ but as a method it was harmonised with various practices that are found in many traditions and it was also harmonised with the need for a graduated approach to practice. Here, we see an essence of Chan as practised today.

Within Tibet, Chan as an approach declined eventually, becoming practically non-existent by the 12th century, with its decline occurring slower than the myth of banishment implies. Its demise did not however undermine the clear underlying links between Chan approaches and Dzogchen and Mahamudra practices.

This volume can readily be recommended to those who are interested in the early history of Chan and in this respect, it is a very worthwhile companion to the history of Chan provided by John McRae, both being based on modern methods of historiography. It will also be of interest to those who wish to read original manuscripts that are the foundation of our tradition and without doubt, with regard to the idiosyncrasies of our own Sangha's history, it provides a valuable link to a distant past which is now more fully illuminated.

NOTES

- 1 In his first footnote the author explains how, for simplicity's sake, he uses the word 'Zen' instead of potential others. I will use the nomenclature 'Chan' as most, if not all, that is discussed is connected to Buddhism with its historical and geographical links to China.
- 2 Sam Van Schaik (2013) *Tibet: A History*. Yale University Press. New Haven, Conn.



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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EXETER DAY RETREAT

Sunday 15 July

Leader: Jake Lyne

Venue: Kenton, Exeter

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

Saturday 28 July to Thursday 2 August

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

ILLUMINATING THE MIND

Saturday 18 August to Saturday 25 August

Leader: Simon Child & Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Crosby Hall Ed. Trust, Liverpool

CHAN BRUSHWORK RETREAT

Friday 31 August to Wednesday 5 September

Leader: Jake Lyne & Jos Hadfield

Venue: Roselidden Farm, Helston, Cornwall

AWARENESS IN THE EVERYDAY

– WORKING WITH WHAT ARISES

Saturday 8 September to Thursday 13 September

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

INVESTIGATING KOANS

Friday 14 September to Sunday 23 September

Leader: Simon Child

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

RUNNING & ZEN MEDITATION RETREAT

Saturday 6 October to Thursday 11 October

Leader: Jake Lyne & Stuart McLeod

Venue: Barmoor, North Yorkshire

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

Saturday 20 October to Thursday 25 October

Leader: Jake Lyne

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

ILLUMINATING THE MIND

Saturday 3 November to Saturday 10 November

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

INVESTIGATING KOANS

Saturday 1 December to Saturday 8 December

Leader: Simon Child

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales



108 hindrances
108 dharma gates
Why would anyone turn down
the opportunity offered
by each second?

GATHA BY STUART QUINE

