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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

GEORGE MARSH

In this issue of the *New Chan Forum* there are teachings on the Buddha's perceptual theory of the Five Skandhas, and on two Sutras. In a dharma talk given on retreat at Maenllwyd Simon Child elucidates how our perceptions can be constructed from seeds of habit, and how they can be distorted or mistaken. Then we have two essays on fundamental texts for the Chan school, *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, and *The Lankavatara Sutra*.

Poems, and retreat reports make up the rest of the journal.

If you have ideas for articles, or for subjects that we should address, please write to the editor. We are always looking for interesting new material. Artwork and imagery would be very welcome too. I look forward to hearing from you.

THE FIVE SKANDHAS

SIMON CHILD

Our Guiding Teacher, Chan Master Simon Child, 淨宏傳法 Jing-hong Chuan-fa, is the second Western Dharma heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen of Taiwan, receiving Dharma Transmission in 2000. This is a transcription of a dharma talk he gave on a Silent Illumination retreat in September 2017. Our thanks go to the transcribers.

Yesterday I mentioned the 12th century Chan Master Hongzhi whose writings on Silent Illumination have survived and been translated into English. He was based at the Tiantong monastery in South East China, about an hour or so drive from the city of Ningbo. I've visited there three times. It's quite a large interesting monastery, with a very active practice still going on. Nowadays many of the monasteries in China are more like tourist sites, and Tiantong Si is also a large tourist site attracting thousands of tourists per day. However it also, tucked away in the Chan hall, has monks who are practising very seriously so it is still an important practice monastery nowadays.

Back in the day it was important then too. There's another important famous teacher associated with this monastery, about 80 years later than Hongzhi but the same monastery and almost certainly doing the same practice of Silent Illumination. This is the 13th century Japanese master Dogen. Those of you who have studied Japanese Zen have probably heard of Dogen – he was the founder of the Soto tradition in Japan. The story of Dogen is that he wasn't very impressed with the teachers he found in Japan. They wanted to pass him too easily and he didn't



TIANTONG MONASTERY

want to be fooled and tricked by this. This is a good attitude. If a teacher is praising you too much it might be that they are just trying to collect acolytes, and Dogen was having none of it. Every time someone approved of his understanding he said, “well you’re no good because I know I don’t know”.

Dogen took the rather dangerous and arduous journey across the seas to China to find a good teacher. He rejected quite a few teachers in China too, but eventually in Tiantong monastery, when he met the teacher there, Master Rujing, he thought “ah, this one I can train with”. He stayed there training and one day had an enlightenment experience. And again the master confirmed him. Dogen said “don’t confirm me too easily”. The master said, “No, I’m not confirming you too easily. You have seen”. And so this time, yes, he was satisfied, he had been taken seriously and had found a teacher that he trusted.

It is important not to believe the teacher just because they have the title of teacher... check out the teacher, check out their understanding. You may not be in a very good position to check out their understanding but at least you can have a sense of, “does this feel right for me, am I being accepted or praised too easily, or is this teacher a little bit off the mark in some way”. This was a good attitude of Dogen’s. In this way he received the confirmation of this teacher and received the transmission and returned to Japan where he founded the Soto tradition. This was an important step in the transmission of the teachings to Japan and Dogen is very widely recognised as an important and significant teacher.

The Soto practice of Shikantaza is very close, pretty well the same as, the practice of Silent Illumination. It probably is the same practice but the presentation is a little bit different. Dogen presented it a little bit

differently in the culture of Japan and no doubt I am presenting it a little bit differently in the culture of the UK. There’s a need for cultural adaptation to convey the teaching that’s behind the words, not just parroting the same words.

Many of Dogen’s teachings are available to us as his writings have survived. They are often obscure to study but there are some quite well-known quotations from which we can take something very directly. The one I’m going to quote to you now is, I think, pinned up to a wall somewhere upstairs. I’ll give you the first line of it. It goes, “To study Buddhism is to study the self”.

If you want to study Buddhism the way forward is to study the self. That might not be what you would first think. You might think “Well if I want to study Buddhism then I’d better get the books out and get reading and try and understand all the Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan and Chinese words. No. Dogen said that if you want to study Buddhism then the starting point (and ending point) is to study the self. Let’s reflect on that a bit. Is he saying something rather strange and unusual here or is he saying something very obvious?

Think back to the story of the Buddha – how did he make his breakthrough? He made his breakthrough by studying the workings of his own mind. ‘Study’ in the sense of a silent or experiential investigation. It’s not a conceptual study of self. It’s not that instead of getting out the Buddhism textbooks you get out the psychology textbooks and then you’re on the right track. That’s not what it means. No, it’s in first person experience of this person that the way forward is found.

Why? Because, as the Buddha pointed out, the trouble lies in what this first person is up to, creating these various stories and knots and

traps for ourselves. The Buddha spotted himself creating his own suffering through craving and aversion. Mostly we don't catch ourselves doing it, we only find ourselves in the aftermath of having done it and having suffered it. But by 'investigating' our own mind, by silent introspection, there is the possibility that we recognise ourselves doing it. And that is the true study of what the Buddha was teaching us.

We could formulate it in words and philosophies, and there are many, many books written with these words and philosophies, and that certainly has its uses. But ultimately you must test the philosophy against your own experience, otherwise it's just a conceptual theory. It might be an internally consistent elegant conceptual theory but if it doesn't actually fit with your own experience of your own being then it's not much use to you. So why not start with your own experience? Look into your own experience and see what's going on. It's perfectly possible that you'll make the same discovery as the Buddha. With the same result – liberation, freedom.

Still, the various difficulties of life appear. Legs get broken, we get ill, we get older and we die. The Buddha wasn't denying that. But he was saying that along the course of our life we don't have to 'suffer' these various events of life – we can experience them without suffering. It's a big important difference. And the difference, he pointed out, is in the way we react to these events, our habit of moving towards or away from them. Moving towards something we want with the fear of not being able to get it, or having got it then fearing losing it. Or moving away from something we don't want, with the fear that it may catch us, or perhaps if we've got it we fear that we can't make it go away. Sounds almost too simple, but it is that simple. It's also very difficult because we are so

entrenched in our habits of being this way. In part we are entrenched in these habits due to our biology and the survival instinct. We do need a certain amount of survival instinct, a certain amount of moving towards and away, but we overdo it. In relation to virtually every single little minor phenomenon we form a view about it and react to it. That's overdoing it.

If you look inside your own mind you'll find yourself fussing about things that don't need fussing about. It doesn't actually matter if they go the way you don't want them to go, there's no harm done. This process of investigating the mind, of studying the self, is absolutely key. This is why the Buddha pointed us that way. He pointed us towards enquiry into the nature of mind, into the phenomenon of mind. Dogen reminded us to 'study the self', to use the words of this translation. Again this is not intellectual study, rather direct first person experience of your own self. It's not a matter of me investigating your self. It really is a first person investigation.

With these discoveries of how the mind works we find that it's possible that the way the mind works can change. If we've seen through the mind doing unnecessary stuff then we can release that stuff. But it's not always easy because we've developed quite strong habits of being.

This is where it gets quite interesting, as the Buddhist teachings are very close to modern Western psychology teachings. They even use some of the same words like conditioning or conditioned responses. We've learned ways of being which have arisen from our experience of life e.g. coping strategies – something happened, we did something, it seemed to more or less work so we just store that one away, "I'll keep that one in mind for the future, do it again when it happens again". Especially if

it happens more than once and it sort of works twice, we're hooked then aren't we? It's the same basic phenomena with conditioning in western psychology. If we are looking into the mind we can see this going on.

There is a Buddhist model for it. It is just a model, an analogy – it's not trying to represent any neurophysiology or anything like that. When we've ingrained a response in this way we store a 'seed' of the action and the seed is ready to sprout at a moment's notice when a similar situation arrives in the future. It's sort of an autopilot. If you recognise how quickly you respond to events, this is a pretty fast germinating seed! Like a millisecond-response seed. But the action appears in response to an event. An expression on someone's face "Oh, I've upset them... what shall I do?" You do whatever you do. You mollify them or you defend your viewpoint or whatever it is. You trot out something automatically. You've built up a library, a seed bank of responses, and we trot them out very, very quickly and readily.

I'm pointing to here to the fourth of the five skandhas which are mentioned in the *Heart Sutra*. The *Heart Sutra* really requires you to know other teachings because it is referring to other teachings. The five skandhas is a well-established teaching and this comes in here. The fourth of the five skandhas is translated in the text we are using as 'volition', sometimes as 'impulse'. The sanskrit word is *samskara* and I'm told that the literal translation is 'habit-seed' so you can see the connection there.

For those of you who don't know let's just look briefly at the five skandhas. These are a system, a categorisation if you like, of the various aspects of human existence. It's rather like the sheep pen exercise... many of the phenomena you experience in being 'you' could be cate-



gorised as fitting into one of five sheep pens or five ‘heaps’. That’s what the word skandha means - it’s not five sheep pens, it’s five heaps but you see the similarity. Five collections.

There are the bits to do with ‘form’, physicality, the body. That’s the first skandha.

Second, there is ‘sensation’. Here ‘sensation’, the word ‘sensation’, has a rather narrow technical meaning. Some of the words here have a rather jargon usage, you have to be a little bit careful about what is meant. It’s a little bit different than our everyday usage of the word. Here ‘sensation’ refers to experience of contact. Contact of the form with the environment, contact between the body and environment, that particular experience of contact. So... touch, light, warmth, something like that. That’s ‘sensation’.

Thirdly, ‘perception’ is what we make of that sensation. That ‘sensation’ of warm contact with the environment might be interpreted as a sunbeam on my cheek or “I’m sitting too close to the fire”. Or “my dog is up on the back of my shoulder again breathing on me”. We interpret the sensations and thereby create perceptions. A sound is heard and we have a go at guessing what it is. I’m putting it that way, ‘guessing’, because we get it wrong from time to time. Some sounds we just recognise and register the perception as, “there’s a bird singing”. Maybe the first couple of times you heard the logs crackling on the fire you didn’t know what they were. But now you are familiar, you jump straight to a perception of “log crackling” if you bother to register it at all.

We can make mistakes in this process of perception. This illustrates the fallibility of the mind and there are similes for this in the sutras. A well-known one is the example of the coil of rope on the ground in

the gloom. Or is it? Is it a snake preparing to pounce? There is a perception of light and shadow, of shape, of a spiral. There is a ‘sensation’ shall we say of light and shadow. What’s our ‘perception’ of it? Well we could perceive a coiled rope left lying carelessly on the ground, or we could perceive a coiled snake. These require rather different responses. Perhaps we tend to err on the safe side and say it could be a snake – I’ll walk around it. Or maybe we don’t err on the safe side and one day we get caught out. That’s how natural selection works – those who don’t err on the safe side... there are fewer of them around! The ones who err on the safe side, the cautious ones, they’ll be around a bit longer.

Our caution comes at a price – we may experience anxiety about every little shape that might be a slight spiral. You see how we can overdo it. Where does it end? This is the difficulty. We are living in an uncertain world. There isn’t enough light at dusk to say whether it’s a snake or a rope. But it’s literally a matter of life and death to know whether it’s a snake or a rope. We can get anxious. We can get ourselves in knots, we can get avoidant behaviours.

Here is another fun example of the difficulty of perception which some of you have heard previously. The retreat centre that I teach at in upstate New York, the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, is quite a large property, about 130 acres of mostly woodland and they also have a 5-acre lake there. It’s quite nice to go and stand by the lake and walk by the lake. I was there one lunchtime – it was probably during a work period because there was no-one else there. I was standing near the edge of the lake, where the stream enters the lake. I hadn’t quite reached the water’s edge, I was standing maybe 10 or 15 yards back. And I could hear this sound of... well... a rustling sound or crunching sound, on



BEAR PHOTOGRAPHED BY SIMON CHILD AT DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER

the other side but further upstream. I could hear this sound approaching. What is it? A twig breaking? Is it a cat stepping on it? Or is it a tiger? And are you going to hang around to find out?

I heard this sound, and I'd seen previously that some of the neighbours walk their dogs across this property, so naturally my interpretation, my perception, was of a dog walking along. But it was a very loud sound, and the panting was quite loud too. "That's a big dog" I thought. And then just between the trees I saw... "There's the dog", I thought, "that black shape". "It's a very big dog...". "It's a bear! It's a black bear!" Which they hardly ever see there. Oooh.

I'm not used to seeing black bears so I thought "what do I do about this? Do I run away? Do I stand still?" I did know that you mustn't go up a tree because they are better climbers than we are. So I thought "Oh well it'll probably just go past". And it knew where it was going. It came across in front of me and did a sharp left turn where there was a tree that was fallen down like a bridge down the bank to the lake. So it came down the bridge and into the tall grasses. And these were just the other side of the stream about 20 yards from me. I could see the grasses waving around... but where is the bear? All of a sudden the bear appeared at the water's edge to get his drink of water.

I didn't know whether I was supposed to stand still or run away... or what am I supposed to do? I picked up my camera and took a photo anyway! Maybe it was the click of the shutter, or maybe it was the big black snout of my DSLR camera, but the bear didn't seem to like it and s/he turned and went away so it all worked out. S/he just did a U-turn and went back up the log. Half way up the log s/he turned back and looked at me, then carried on their way. I found out later that what you're

advised to do with black bears is just make lots of noise and fuss so they see you before they get close, because they don't like being startled when they are surprised by first seeing you close up. If you make a lot of noise and fuss before they get too close then they go away.

The point of the story is to demonstrate how perception can be imprecise and may deceive us (am I labelling the sound of an approaching bear as just a dog out for a walk...) Perception may deceive us fatally, or at least negatively. Therefore we tend to err on the cautious side - we are over cautious and we overfuss. We create a lot of trouble for ourselves by our unnecessary anxieties, the overfussing. But we can't totally dismiss it as we can't deny, as the story illustrates, that a certain amount of fussing and caution is useful - I am now more aware of black bears at that retreat centre and what to do if one appears close up. They've only ever seen 3 or 4 there the whole time they've been there 20 years or more, so it's not very common. I was told that the first person who saw a bear there was one of the Taiwanese monks, who of course knew nothing about black bears. The baby bear went up the tree and he thought this was cute so he went up the tree to have a look at it which wasn't very wise. But anyway it worked out.

Based on our perceptions we produce a response. We tend to take the shortcut of going for our learned responses. They are conveniently available, they are rehearsed, they generally work out, we know what to do, we don't have to start working out from first principles how to deal with a situation, we've already got a strategy. When a situation looks a lot like one of 'those' situations, when it's pretty similar, on autopilot we yank our seed out of the seedbank and germinate it, all in a fraction of a second, and the response is generated. This word volition, the fourth

of the five skandhas, refers to our impulses or habitual responses, our tendency to react from our past learnings and conditioning.

We do also come across situations that we have no idea about how to react to, something new to us and we are rather flummoxed, and then and we flounder around a bit trying to work out what to do. We may not like that and can feel rather uncomfortable. But having made it work somehow or another, we store that away for the next similar time. We build up a repertoire of responses in this way. They are not always the most skilful responses - but they are the ones that we have learned - and we tend to repeat them.

The fifth skandha is consciousness. It sort of integrates the experience of the first four, it's what holds the awareness of this happening, and it is what receives the sensations and perceptions and impulses and directs the actions and experiences the actions. You can call it a sort of integration, an overarching awareness, a presence, an experiencing, which integrates these individual fractions.

If you were to look into your own experience this morning you may well find that you could use these five sheep pens or heaps and it would work. The body is present experiencing sensations, put it in the heap labelled 'form'. Or you might just have a sense of light or sound, undifferentiated, unnamed. That would go in the heap labelled 'sensation'. You might find yourself, you will find yourself, having perceptions. That bird tweeting out there, that sound of the stream. You might have a slight moment's hesitation "is that the sound of the wind or sound of the stream that I'm hearing?" You might even deliberate for a moment, then conclude, "it's the stream". That's perception. And then there is 'volition' or impulse or habit. How do I respond, and this may be very

different depending on the circumstances and the person. Some might respond to a bird by trying to identify the bird. John Crook could identify most British birds just by their song, he didn't need to see the bird. Most of us might just hear birdsong and not even think about whether it's just one bird or several birds – “yes there is birdsong heard” – and we stop at that point. But some will start naming the birds and wonder whether it's male or female bird or a young one, or wondering, “Can I see it? I'm supposed to be meditating facing the wall but if I lean my head back far enough I can see out of that window...”. An impulse arises to respond to that perception which is based on that sensation.

You might notice your habit of trying to name the birds, of trying to identify them. And then there's that one that you can't identify – if you know all of them except that one then that could be a bit annoying couldn't it? You find yourself getting irritated. This is a response to not knowing. You could imagine yourself as an expert on birds, but there's a bird you've seen or heard and you don't know what it is. There is a sort of gap in the mind and there is an irritation or annoyance. You've let yourself down, that's what you're saying.

All of this is just arising out of the way our minds work, the way we operate. This applies to each one of us. I can investigate it in myself but you must investigate it in yourself. I can talk about it, I can give some pointers, but you need to see if it's true for yourself. It probably is, as we are based on very similar biology. We have some different genes and so on but the similarities are very great. There will be differences in the details – some might get caught by certain things more than others, or may respond in different ways. But these basic components seem to be present in all of us, though the conditioning that we've individually

experienced is very wildly different. The life experiences, the different circumstances we've encountered, the different traumas and opportunities, are very different for each one of us. Correspondingly our individual repertoire of behaviours and responses is quite different. Therefore you need to investigate your own mind and your own responses.

There are similarities and we can broadly classify types of responses. Like the aggressive type of response – ‘attack is the best form of defence’ type of response that some people habituate. And then there is ‘retreat is the best form of defence’. Hiding, avoiding being noticed, some people go for that strategy. Both strategies have their successes so each of these could get reinforced and internalised as the way that I respond. “It works for me... I've tried it out many times and the score is quite positive... I'm going to keep doing it.” But typically it's not thought through in that way, it just happens.

Even in response to very similar situations two people might adopt different responses. Two siblings in the same family, in response to the same family dynamics, can adopt very different strategies with varying degrees of success and dysfunction. But as long as there is some degree of success and survival the responses tend to get fixed and internalised, and they continue even if overall they're rather dysfunctional. You can witness these processes happening now, in your own responses throughout the day, and this is part of the importance of maintaining practice throughout all activity.



photo: George Marsh

THE SUTRA OF COMPLETE ENLIGHTENMENT ON DELUDED THOUGHTS, STATES OF MIND, AND DISCRIMINATION

HARRY MILLER

Harry Miller has studied Buddhist meditation for over 40 years. He was a student of the renowned Zen teacher, Chan Master Sheng Yen for 30 years. Mr. Miller edited the Chan Newsletter and has contributed articles and translations to Chan Magazine, the journal of the American branch of Dharma Drum Mountain in New York. He teaches meditation and philosophy at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens where he is also a board member. He holds a BA in French and English literature from Sarah Lawrence College, an MA in Chinese Literature and an MPhil in Comparative Literature from Columbia University. He recently translated Master Sheng Yen's book Right and Wrong Require A Gentle Approach from the Chinese.

Some years ago, I was on a retreat with Simon Child and he read a passage from *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*. Hearing this was an insightful moment, and I found it to be a very helpful teaching in that it leads to a way of orienting the mind so you do not have to be caught up in illusions about what you are experiencing in any given moment. As a wise guide to any form of meditation, this passage points the way to recognizing the subtle tricks of the mind. This is a profound explication of mindfulness – being aware or conscious of consciousness, with clarity and freedom, we do not have to be controlled by the actions and content of the mind.

From a Chan point of view, we try to see the direct nature of the mind, both things just as they are, and us just as we are, with no dis-

crimination. This is Dong Shan's "Just This" and Juzhi's One-Finger Chan, or the moment when Shifu's master yelled at him "Put Down."

In *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, the Bodhisattva of Pure Wisdom asks the Buddha, "What are the differences in the actualization and attainment between all sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and the World Honored Tathagata?" The Buddha speaks about illusory projections of the mind that sentient beings make, and he says that since beginningless time they have a deludedly conceived "self" and have never known the succession of rising and perishing thoughts. The Buddha goes on to say that when these processes are fully understood, the distinctions between sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas that the Bodhisattva of Pure Wisdom is asking about will no longer be valid. At the end of the chapter, the Buddha gives a teaching on how one should orient the mind and practice to come to know this true reality. The Buddha declares:

1. 善男子,
2. 但諸菩薩及末世眾生,
3. 居一切時不起妄念,
4. 於諸妄心亦不息滅,
5. 住妄想境不加了知,
6. 於無了知不辯真實,
7. 彼諸眾生聞是法門,
8. 信解受持不生驚畏,
9. 是則名為隨順覺性。

Translated into English:

Virtuous man

All bodhisattvas and sentient beings in the Dharma Ending Age

Should at no time give rise to deluded thoughts!

Yet when their deluded minds arise, they should not extinguish them.

In the midst of deluded concepts, they should not add discrimination.

Amidst non-discrimination they should not distinguish true reality.

If sentient beings upon hearing this Dharma method,

Believe in, understand, accept, and uphold it and do not generate alarm and fear,

They are 'in accordance with the nature of enlightenment.'

The *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* provides guidance for very advanced practitioners, but I believe that its teachings are relevant to the day-to-day lives of most of us ordinary sentient beings. The simplest Buddhist teaching can be shown to have enormous complexity and the most complex teachings can be shown to have relevance to what is here and in this moment.

So, I will go through this passage line by line and look closely at the implications:

Virtuous man

I start by making a slight but necessary change. Many of the sutra passages begin with the phrase "Virtuous Man." There are certainly cultural and historical reasons for this, but I choose to render it Virtuous Man or Woman. I don't think the Buddha would object to this.

Then there is the issue of "virtuous." What is meant by that? Ancient India had a caste system, determined by birth. The highest caste was

the brahmins. The Buddha had many discussions and sometimes confrontations with brahmins who believed that they were assured of a happy life and a fortunate rebirth because of their caste. But the Buddha believed that a man or woman's life was determined by the qualities of their actions, not the condition of their birth, so he said:

Who has cut off all fetters and is no more by anguish shaken. Who has overcome all ties, detached. He is the one I call a brahmin. Who has cut each strap and thong, the reins and bridle as well...Who does not flare up with anger, dutiful, virtuous, and humble...Who has laid aside the rod against all beings frail or bold. Who does not kill...Who leaves behind all human bonds and bonds of heaven...Whose destination is unknown to gods, to spirits, and to humans. An arahant with taints destroyed. He is the one I call a brahmin.

By invoking the word "virtuous" the Buddha is indicating that his words will be heard and appreciated by someone on the bodhisattva path. For us ordinary practitioners, being virtuous just means being sincere and having a willing heart. We may not have cut off all fetters and be immune to anguish, but we recognize the problem of suffering and the issues involved in understanding our minds.

So, line by line:

*All bodhisattvas and sentient beings in the Dharma Ending Age
Should at no time give rise to deluded thoughts!*

Bodhisattva, many of us know, refers to a being who has the ability to attain Buddhahood but has postponed its final attainment in order to remain in the world to help sentient beings. And *The Sutra of Complete*

Enlightenment is addressed to bodhisattvas of the highest achievement and renown such as Manjusri, Samantabhadra, and Maitreya. These are beings who are very close to Buddhahood, yet they are asking the Buddha important questions about proper understanding and the proper way to practice.

However, there is a broader, more down-to-earth understanding of bodhisattva, which can include anyone sincerely on the path, or anyone you encounter, even and sometimes especially those who give us a hard time. To reinforce this point, the Buddha directly addresses bodhisattvas as well as ordinary sentient beings, so it is clear that the message is for everyone, that there really is no distinction to be made among sentient beings. The sutra actually states,

In Absolute Reality, there are indeed no bodhisattvas or sentient beings. Why? Because bodhisattvas and sentient beings are illusory projections. When illusory projections are extinguished, there exists no one who attains or actualizes...Because sentient beings are confused they are unable to eliminate illusory projections.

There is a relatively simple explanation of why there are really no bodhisattvas or sentient beings: we tend to label, characterize, and judge everyone, including ourselves. Those labels, characterizations, and judgements are superficial and impermanent, yet we hold on to them as if they were absolute truth. A more profound understanding lies in seeing through the mechanism of desire, cause and effect that produces these illusory projections that we make and the states of mind we cling to. To penetrate this thoroughly is to see the nature of the mind itself.

So, the purport of the sutra is, among other things, to help us eliminate illusory projections and perceptions. Our whole lives have been conditioned by this illusory mental activity. Our projections and perceptions are seductive and give us an unreliable sense of “who we are.”

Recognizing that unreliability and its cause is not easy.

The sutra says that “at no time give rise to deluded thoughts.” Literally it says “at all times dwell such that you do not give rise to deluded thoughts.” What would it be like to dwell without deluded thoughts? What are deluded thoughts? Generally, they are additions or subtractions and spin offs from what the mind is actually experiencing. There are many levels to deluded thoughts. Superficially, a thing is just a thing. If you have a watch, that’s what you have. But you may think it’s expensive or cheap, better or worse than your friend’s. You may regret having bought it or are very proud of your ownership. The delusions, illusions, or confusion inherent in such thinking are based on an original misapprehension – that it is “my” watch. Before you bought it, it belonged to the store or someone else. Once you’ve purchased it, the watch itself hasn’t essentially changed, but your perception of your relationship to it has. That relationship is impermanent, incomplete, and conditional, and exists only in the mind. Based on this original false premise, we create and proliferate thoughts in an almost endless cavalcade, and believe that what we perceive and think is reality itself. In the example of the watch, one thought links to another so your thoughts are not really “watch-related.” The watch itself was left out of your thoughts a long time ago. What is left are only self-engendered, ever-changing thoughts and feelings.

This kind of *prapanca* – the continual percolation and proliferation of thoughts – not only applies to objects, but to the environment,

other people, ideas, relationships, and even your thoughts about your thoughts. If you get upset about something, it’s quite possible that you will get upset about getting upset. Ultimately, deluded thoughts derive from the illusory sense of self, others, sentient beings, and an entire lifespan - concepts that we take as absolutely real, despite the fact that our perceptions of them are incomplete and subject to moment to moment change. We are caught in the basic idea that we and what we perceive is the “subject” and everything outside of that is the “other.”

There is a passage in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* where Huck comes into a small town on the Mississippi that has been embroiled in a bitter and bloody feud for years. Huck tries to find out what caused the feud, but nobody remembers who started it or for what reason they’re fighting. Thinking and perception have become entirely divorced from the causes that first engendered them. Our minds engage in this kind of behavior all the time, on both gross and subtle levels.

To dwell without deluded thoughts would be quite an accomplishment. The instruction to refrain from deluded thinking should not be surprising to anyone who has done even a little meditation. This instruction should be all we need, so why doesn’t the sutra just stop here? What more is there to say?

The next line is:

Yet when their deluded minds arise, they should not extinguish them.

The sutra doesn’t stop at the previous line, because Buddhadharmā recognizes how difficult it is to perceive deluded thinking and tame the mind.



photo: Tony Gill

This next line begins to deal with that difficulty. “Yet when their deluded minds arise, they should not extinguish them.” This line can be divided into two parts. The first refers to the deluded mind arising: When we begin to practice, we are exhorted to strive diligently, to practice hard, to tame the monkey mind. We understand that our mind will wander away again and again, and we must make a continual and unrelenting effort to bring it back to the method.

That seems to be Shenxiu’s intent in *The Platform Sutra* when he wrote this *gatha* (poem):

身是菩提樹 心如明鏡臺
時時勤佛拭 莫使有塵埃

*Our body is the bodhi tree
Our mind is a mirror bright
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour
And let no dust alight.*

PRICE & WONG TRAN.

Diligent striving is also the concern of The Four Noble Exertions. These are four of the 37 Aids to Enlightenment (explained in Master Shengyen’s *Things Pertaining to Bodhi*), which are found in both Theravadin and Mahayana teaching. After one has calmed the mind using the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the instruction is:

*To keep unwholesome states not yet arisen from arising
To cease unwholesome states already arisen
To give rise to wholesome states not yet arisen
To continue wholesome states already arisen*

These are straightforward instructions that concern right and wrong expressions of body, speech and mind. In this way, we keep the defilements (dust) off the mirror and we keep the mirror bright and shiny. Of course, we distinguish – dualistically – wholesome from unwholesome.

However, the next part of the line from the sutra is striking: “yet do not extinguish the deluded thoughts.” How can this be? Letting deluded thoughts stay undisturbed in the mind would almost seem like letting a thief have the run of your house. Imagine all the damage that could be done! But that would only happen if you attached to the thoughts and that is discouraged by implication in the first line, “do not give rise to deluded thoughts.”

It is the wisdom of the sutra to acknowledge that the mind does not follow our wishes. Whether or not we’d like deluded thoughts to arise, they will arise. One Japanese master compared the mind to the stomach. Just as the stomach secretes gastric juices, the mind secretes thoughts. It is quite natural. The problems arise when the thoughts are reified, attached to, identified with, taken as self, and made into a story or narrative. That is when we start seeing flowers growing in the sky – one of the metaphors for illusion that *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* brings to our attention.

However, if thoughts, deluded or otherwise, are left alone and observed mindfully, they are self-liberating. That is, if left alone, they naturally extinguish of their own accord. That is because what generated the thought is now in the past. Causes and conditions have changed and what originally initiated the thought is no longer salient or important. The illusion of continuation can only be reinforced by a new, deluded thought. Without the support of subsequent thoughts, a thought, once orphaned and un nourished, will just fade away.

Thus, Hui Neng, who was destined to be The Sixth Patriarch, answered Shenxiu’s poem with a rebuttal:

菩提本無樹 明鏡亦無臺
佛性常清淨 何處有塵埃

*There is no bodhi tree
Nor stand of mirror bright
Since all is void,
Where can dust alight?*

PRICE & WONG TRAN.

All of the givens in Shenxiu’s poem have been taken away. There is no mind, no body. There is nothing to generate thoughts and nowhere that they are contained. This translation says all is void, but the literal Chinese is that Buddhature is always pure and clean, which amounts to much the same thing.

Thus, there is no need to extinguish deluded thoughts because there is nothing to extinguish.

The next line reads:

In the midst of deluded concepts, they (practitioners) should not add discrimination.

In the last line we learned not to extinguish deluded thoughts. They should have gone away by now, right? Not exactly. Deluded thoughts have a way of seeping in through the slightest hole or crack.

At this point it might be in order to explain the three Chinese words that are used for mental activity in this passage.

In the line that introduced “deluded thoughts,” the Chinese word is *nian*, which does mean thought, as in one thought after another. In the line above,

what is translated as “concepts” is *xin* in Chinese, literally heart/mind. This can also be interpreted as “states of mind.” In the next line (which we haven’t spoken about yet) the Chinese word is *xiang* and this can be translated as thinking or perceiving. The sutra covers every kind of mental activity, so that emotions, moods, symbols, etc. are all included. In all cases, when “deluded” is used, the Chinese word is *wang*, meaning deluded or illusory.

At this point in the sutra now, deluded concepts are still present. Despite our best efforts, it is nonetheless the case that mental activity transpires in the mind, so that it is in a particular state – happy, sad, angry, desirous. Now what?

Even though a particular state of mind has arisen, the understanding here is that the practitioner is nonetheless mindful and aware of that state. Why not simply let it go and not attend to the mind state? Possibly that would work, but now there is more activity and the allure and seductiveness of the mind state has risen to the point where there is temptation. What kind of temptation? It is the temptation to add a sense or concept of “I,” to insert one’s own viewpoint. The translation says “add discrimination,” but it could also mean to “add understanding or knowledge,” that is, to further conceptualize.

How would this work in real life? Let’s say you are at a meeting at work and have given a presentation and a colleague is disparaging your work, unfairly, as you perceive. Your state of mind is anger. Here many of us would say, “I’m angry,” or “you’ve made me angry.” However, a more skillful response or acknowledgement, is that “anger has arisen in me.” “I’m not anger itself.” There are many more examples of how you could add discrimination, such as giving your opinion when it’s not called for or acting out of lust or power when it’s not appropriate.

If you were by yourself and meditating, any kind of state of mind might arise. There might be a temptation to analyze rather than just witness it. You might make some clever observations about the state of mind and relate it to other experiences that you’ve had and you might feel very proud of yourself, or if you found that your state of mind escalated and you couldn’t control it, you might become angry at yourself.

The mind can move from simple thoughts to subtle and complex states of mind. Single thoughts may be more noticeable, but subtler states are harder to detect because they can be fainter and yet more pervasive. They endure longer than single thoughts. States of minds are a kind of mental environment where it is easy to add observations, ideas, make determinations and judgements.

The sutra alerts us to be aware of these subtle states.

Amidst non-discrimination they should not distinguish true reality.

This is the last and most subtle line of the core teaching about illusory states of mind. It is understood that you are following the earlier instructions and you are aware of concepts and states of mind and you are not adding discrimination. I wouldn’t exactly call this a state of non-discrimination, as stated in the translation, but the effort not to discriminate is being made. What can be left in the mind now, if you are not attaching to thoughts and they are self-extinguishing and you’re not adding judgement to any given state of mind? There is still discrimination itself, still consciousness and awareness, still subject and object. There is still dualism – this is real, this is not. I am here, you are there. This is a very subtle level, very strong and pervasive, at the deepest, uttermost core of our conditioning. Shifu makes an analogy comparing this most subtle

state to someone looking out of a window. Everything outside is perceived clearly, but there is still a window. At the last stage, the window is completely removed. This is a state beyond conceptions and illusions, so the sutra states: If you say there is or is not enlightenment, then you're wrong. Eradicate labeling and attachment. Remember, the sutra says that "‘attaining’ illumination and realization is a hindrance. Thus, a great bodhisattva is constantly in realization without abidance, where the illumination and the illuminator simultaneously become quiescent and vanish... The teachings of the sutras are like the finger that points to the moon. When one sees the moon, one realizes that the finger is not the moon." We are cautioned not to make a too literal interpretation of the teachings.

*If sentient beings upon hearing this Dharma method,
Believe in, understand, accept, and uphold it and do not generate alarm and fear,
They are 'in accordance with the nature of enlightenment.'*

These last three lines contextualize all the lines that have come before. They stand back from these intense instructions of how the mind works and give some perspective about how this teaching should be encountered and understood and what its implications are.

Cutting to the chase, so to speak, diving into the heart of the matter, the sutra shakes the listener into waking up to what has been presented. So, when you hear this Dharma door (that is a direct teaching by the Buddha that when followed can lead to liberation), how do you react? If somehow you are struck or moved by this teaching, if it makes sense and seems like it could be explored, then perhaps you believe it, you investigate it to the point where you understand it, realize the implications of that understanding, and you accept it. You then try to integrate it into



your life, and seek to become more familiar with it. Finally, you will try to uphold it – master the sutra so that you can explain it to other people. That’s one reaction.

Another reaction is that you find the whole thing unsettling. Non-duality? That’s too much for me. Give up my thoughts and prejudices, my likes and dislikes? I would lose my identity. I wouldn’t recognize myself. It’s really too difficult to understand.

By the way, I don’t think that this second reaction is unreasonable. You really must have the right set of causes and consequences, the proper interest, mindset and timing before you can give a method like this the proper attention. And if it is unacceptable today, that doesn’t mean that it will be unacceptable tomorrow.

But to someone who does take up the challenge, if you will, then the sutra says that when you follow these teachings and integrate them into your mind and life, then you will comport yourself in such a way that you are in accord with the awakened mind.

The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment explains that it provides both gradual and sudden teachings to adapt to the needs of sentient beings. In practice, we may find ourselves practicing, partially practicing, and sometimes forgetting to practice at all. We may find that sometimes the sutra makes sense and sometimes it doesn’t. We may try and give up, try, and give up, two steps forward, one step backwards. This is a very natural process. The sutra calls this teaching a Dharma door. We each have to find our own door.

Complete Enlightenment: Translation and Commentary on The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment, by Ch’an Master Sheng-yen, Shambhala, Boston and London, 1999.

THE LANKAVATARA SUTRA

JULIET HACKNEY

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The *Lankavatara Sutra* is one of the major texts of Mahayana Buddhism and is fundamental to the school of Chan/Zen. Its origins are obscure, but it was written in Classical Sanskrit, which was the language of the Brahmins in India and is clearly addressed to an audience familiar with the basic concepts of the Yogacara school of Buddhism. What sets it apart from the other sutras is that it points readers beyond the teachings of the early Yogacara school to their own minds, which is still a hallmark of Chan.

It is said that the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who became the first patriarch of Chan, introduced the *Lankavatara Sutra* to China some time in the 5th century, and that he passed on its teachings to his successor, Huike, and told him everything he needed to know was in this book. DT Suzuki said “The reason why Bodhidharma handed this sutra to Huike as containing the essence of Zen Buddhism must be sought in this, that the constant refrain of the Lankavatara is the all importance of an inner perception or self-realization” (1 p102). It also focuses on the Bodhisattva path that still dominates Mahayana Buddhism.

Translations

The *Lankavatara* is referred to as containing 36,000 verses, apparently originally being a collection of verses covering all the main teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. The vast collection of verses became a source from which the Masters selected texts for their discourses. Over time

the verses were largely forgotten. There are only 884 remaining, retained with their commentary discourses. The sutra only became known in the West when DT Suzuki's *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* was published in 1929 (1) and his subsequent translation was published in 1932 (2). He described it as "A Mahayana text difficult in more than one way to understand perfectly as to its meaning.." (2 p102) It was edited by Dwight Goddard, who produced an "epitomized" version for the sake of easier reading (3).

Red Pine translated the 300 pages of discourses from the Chinese, which was published in 2012 (4). He describes it as a difficult project: "Sometimes I felt like I was trying to see through a wall" (4 p18). He has not translated the 884 four line verses.

Having tackled both the translations I feel grateful for their efforts. The product does not make for easy reading, but it is possible to understand, and the teaching is so exciting, so relevant to this day, that it feels revolutionary! This article is entirely based on their work.

Setting

Lankavatara means Appearance on Lanka, referring to the Buddha's reputed visit to the island of Sri Lanka. The sutra opens with the Buddha instructing one of India's serpent kings in the Dharma. As the Buddha reappears from the serpent king's watery realm, Ravana, the ruler of Sri Lanka, invites him to his nearby capital in the hope of receiving a similar discourse. The Buddha agrees and proceeds to the Castle of Lanka, on the summit of Mt Malaya, where he finds an assembly of Bodhisattvas and bhikshus. They are already advanced practitioners (perfect masters of the various Samadhis, the tenfold Self-mastery, the ten Powers, and the six Psychic Faculties). However, the Buddha sees their mental agita-

tions (like the surface of the ocean stirred into waves by the passing winds) and offers them a discourse on the Truth of Noble Wisdom that is beyond the reasoning knowledge of the philosophers as well as being beyond the understanding of ordinary disciples and masters, realisable only within the inmost consciousness.

"Consciousness is a self-fabricated fiction."

Mahamati arises as the head Bodhisattva and requests answers to 108 questions. The Buddha goes on to instruct the assembly in the illusory nature of all things which we think of as real. He responds to the questions by telling Mahamati that the questions themselves are projections of his own and others' imaginations. As Red Pine puts it "They are tantamount to pie in the sky. A statement about pie in the sky thus becomes a statement about no pie" (4 p4).

The Buddha tells Mahamati "Because the various projections of people's minds appear before them as objects they become attached to the existence of their projections." So how do they get free of such attachments? The Buddha continues: "By becoming aware that projections are nothing but mind. Thus do they transform their body and mind and finally see clearly all the stages and realms of self-awareness of tathagatas and transcend views and projections regarding the five dharmas and modes of reality." (4 p182-3)

Having proclaimed the illusory nature of such Yogacara categories as the five dharmas and three modes of reality, the Buddha directs Mahamati to its source, namely consciousness itself. He then explains how consciousness works and how liberation consists in realizing that consciousness is a self-fabricated fiction, just another illusion, and how bod-

hisattvas transform their consciousness into the projectionless tathagata-garbha, or womb from which buddhas arise.

Red Pine points out that “Such a teaching is not something everyone is prepared to hear. But Mahamati continues to ask questions and the Buddha continues to answer, yet in a way that always leads his disciple back to the two teachings that underlie this sutra: the “nothing but mind” of Yogacara and the “self-realisation” of Zen.” (4 p5).

As the Buddha guides Mahamati through the conceptual categories of Mahayana Buddhism, he tells him that these too are projections of the mind and that reaching the land of buddhas requires transcending all conjured landscapes including that of the tathagata-garbha. Summarising the process whereby practitioners follow such a teaching the Buddha says, “Who sees that the habit-energy of projections of the beginning-less past is the cause of the three realms, and who understands that the tathagata stage is free from projections or anything that arises, attains the personal realisation of buddha knowledge and effortless mastery over their own minds.” (4 p73)

In the *Lankavatara Sutra* the experience of self is divided into:

THE FIVE DHARMAS

- name,
- appearance,
- projection,
- correct knowledge and
- suchness

THE THREE MODES OF REALITY

- imagined reality,
- dependent reality and
- perfected reality

THE EIGHT FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- the five forms of sensory consciousness,
- conceptual consciousness,
- the will or self-consciousness, and
- an eighth form known as repository or store-house consciousness, where the seeds from our previous thoughts, words and deeds are stored and from which they sprout and grow.

These concepts provide a system to account for our awareness and allow us to look at how our worlds of self-delusion and self-liberation come about, how enlightenment works, how we go from projection of name and appearance to correct knowledge of suchness, how we go from imagined reality to a perfected reality, how we transform our eightfold consciousness into buddhahood (4 p15-6).

“Let all conceptions go.”

John Daido Looi pointed out that:

Central to the teachings is the view that words and ideas are not essential to the transmission of the dharma. This view is a reflection of the well-known four tenets that Bodhidharma used to describe Zen. He said that Zen is: 1) A special transmission outside the scriptures 2) With no reliance on words and letters 3) A direct pointing to the human mind 4) And the realization of buddhahood. Bodhidharma was essentially saying that words, letters, and scriptures are at best a description of reality and not the reality itself. The truth of the teachings must be personally realised by each individual, and the only thing sutras...and teachers... can do, is to directly point to the human mind.

Red Pine explains:

The Buddha tells Mahamati to let all conceptions go, let the five dharmas go, let the three modes of reality go, let the eight forms of consciousness go, let the tathagatagarbha go, let everything go. (4 p16).

Red Pine makes the analogy with drinking a cup of tea. The cup of tea is the universe of our awareness, which is mind itself. (4 p16)

The Buddha's advice in the *Lankavatara Sutra* is for us to drink that cup of tea and not concern ourselves with where that experience fits into some previously constructed matrix of the mind. Of course, drinking the cup of tea of the mind doesn't take place in space, nor does it occur in a crowd. Hence, the Buddha offers this ancient advice: "If bodhisattvas wish to understand the realm of projection in which what grasps and what is grasped are nothing but perceptions of their own minds, they should avoid social intercourse and sleep and cultivate the discipline of mindfulness during the three periods of the night." (4 p79)

Dwight Goddard points out that the *Lankavatara*: (3 pxvi)

...is not written as a philosophical treatise is written, to establish a certain system of thought, but was written to elucidate the profoundest experience that comes to the human spirit. It everywhere deprecates dependence upon words and doctrines and urges upon all the wisdom of making a determined effort to attain this highest experience. Again and again it repeats with variations the refrain: "Mahamati, you and all the Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas should avoid the erroneous reasonings of the philosophers and seek this self-realisation of Noble Wisdom."

Excerpts

My experience of reading the sutra was inspiring but profoundly disconcerting, rather like working on a koan. Reading about the mundane understanding of reality being a completely false view held by the ignorant and deluded, then going back to work the next day and continuing to live in it, can be demoralising. However there is hope!

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE CESSATION OF THE MIND SYSTEM?

By the cessation of the sense-minds is meant not the cessation of their perceiving functions, but the cessation of their discriminating and naming activities which are centralised in the discriminating mortal-mind. By the cessation of the mind-system as a whole is meant, the cessation of discrimination, the clearing away of the various attachments, and, therefore, the clearing away of the defilements of habit-energy in the face of Universal Mind which have been accumulating since beginningless time by reason of these discriminations, attachments, erroneous reasonings and following acts. The cessation of the continuation aspect of the mind system, namely the discriminating mortal mind the entire world of maya and desire disappears. Getting rid of the discriminating mortal-mind is Nirvana.

But the cessation of the discriminating mind cannot take place until there has been a 'turning-about'; in the deepest seat of consciousness. The mental habit of looking outward by the discriminating-mind upon an external objective world must be given up, and a new habit of realising Truth within the intuitive-mind by becoming one with Truth itself must be established. Until this intuitive self-realization of Noble

Wisdom is attained the evolving mind-system will go on. But when an insight in the five Dharmas, the three self-natures and the two-fold egolessness is attained, then the way will be opened for this ‘turning-about’ to take place. With the ending of pleasure and pain, of conflicting ideas or the disturbing interests of egoism, a state of tranquilisation will be attained in which the truths of emancipation will be fully understood and there will be no further evil-outflowings of the mind-system to interfere with the perfect self-realization of Noble Wisdom. (3 p40-1)

IS THE PURIFICATION OF THE EVIL OUT-FLOWINGS OF THE MIND WHICH COME FROM CLINGING TO THE NOTIONS OF AN OBJECTIVE WORLD AND EMPIRICAL SOUL, GRADUAL OR INSTANTANEOUS?

The evil out-flowings that take place from recognising an external world, which in truth is only a manifestation of mind, and from becoming attached to it, are gradually purified and not instantaneously...

The evil out-flowings that arise from illusions of the mind and the infatuations of egoism, concerns the mental life more directly and are such things as fear, anger, hatred and pride; these are purified by study and meditation and that, too must be attained gradually and not instantaneously...

But the good non-outflowings that come with the self-realisation of Noble Wisdom, is a purification that comes instantaneously by grace of the Tathagatas... (3 p63-4)

WHAT IS THE FRUITAGE THAT COMES WITH THE SELF-REALISATION OF NOBLE WISDOM?

After experiencing the ‘turning-about’ in the deepest seat of consciousness, they will experience other Samadhis even to the highest, the Vajravimbopama, which belongs to the Tathagatas and their transformations. They will be able to enter into the realm of consciousness that lies beyond the consciousness of the mind-system, even the consciousness of Tathagatahood. They will become endowed with all the powers, psychic faculties, self-mastery, loving compassion, skillful means, and ability to enter into other Buddha-lands. Before they had attained self-realization of Noble Wisdom, they had been influenced by the self-interests of egoism, but after they attain self-realization they will find themselves reacting spontaneously to the impulses of a great and compassionate heart endowed with skillful and boundless means and sincerely and wholly devoted to the emancipation of all beings.” (3 p65-6)

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EMPTINESS WAKA

ALEX COLLIER

What is there to grasp
When there is nothing to lose
Point the finger; where!
What can you truly possess
In a world of constant flux

BUDDHA-NATURE

ALEX COLLIER

There is nothing new under the moon
There is no you, for anything to happen to

Though you write your name on the dotted line
There's no individual for that word or sound to define

Others may speak of your praise or ills
But there's no one talking and nothing said
When you disregard illusion and the mind stills,
How can an eye look upon itself?
The only illusions to hurt you are your own
To fall in league with a "self"
Is surely to bring suffering heavier than stone.

DEAREST FRESHNESS WESTERN ZEN RETREAT, NOVEMBER 2018

PAT SIMMONS

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Time rears up, paisley-patterned. No need
for underlay. Or even floor. Wells
out of its own guts. Weaves itself
out of itself second by second by second.

Now. And now. And now. Has me knotted in
under and over and through, in crimson green
black yellow blue. Has me turning unfurling
into new nows. Repetition no rest.

The chairs pile grain on grain to build themselves
again. My bones join cell to cell in fresh
rigidity. Meanwhile the busy world
with needle of light stitches its own next instant.

And a lily petal falls, the first again.
And now. Each moment of dying is new. And now.



Photo: Rob Bowden



PHOTO: Peter Jackson

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 1

...The next morning I sat with Dan in his 'office'. The office was a little log cabin, perched on the side of the mountain, with a wide open door and incense wafting out. His eyes were amused and his feet looked cold as he questioned me.

'So what?' he told me. 'So what if you have the answer? So what if you don't. So what if you feel your emotions. So what?? Acknowledge it, accept it, and let it go.'

After that I got it.

I am a naturally questioning, self-doubting kind of person. I'm also sensitive and a little over emotional. I tried to hide these traits in the past but my new way of thinking told me 'So what?' I'm likely to remain a results driven person because that's how my brain is wired. If I am mindfully aware that I can't plan everything perfectly then that is ok too. Change is life and life is change. There is only one true reality and that is the present.

I also know that the last two lines are clichés, but so what? Those clichés are liberating.

On the last night we had another dancing meditation session. Typically this would fill me with dread. This night I didn't care so much, I couldn't stop grinning. I still wasn't the best dancer but so what. It was

so much fun. Dan's presence filled me with joy.

The morning of the final day arrived. I realised I would miss working in the kitchen. I would miss sitting down for cups of tea with my new friends in silence. I wished everyone well.

At 2.45pm my taxi driver arrived. Cautiously, he parked at the bottom of the winding drive in his new trainers that he didn't want to get dirty. As I gathered my belongings and trekked down the hill I felt an overwhelming gratitude for the last five days.

Since re-entering reality I'm mindfully trying to: live in the present, make eye contact, stop harmful thoughts, acknowledge my emotions (before letting them go) and to encourage the joy in others. This feels a pretty good way to live.

Thanks to Jake and the Western Chan Fellowship for helping me find this path.

RETREAT REPORT 2 – NEW YORK – FROM THE ARCHIVE

The third week in March I participated in a 7-day silent Koan Retreat at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in upstate Pine Bush, New York. Seven days spent focusing on a short exchange between a head monk and a zen master written maybe a thousand years ago. 7 days of silence.

On the second day we were directed to pick the koan or huatou (basically the punch line of a koan, used commonly by Ch'an, the Chinese parent of Zen) with which to work for the remainder of the retreat. "Pick the one you feel has some connection to you," was the only guidance here. Eagerly I read through the dozen or so choices. Several times I read through them, but found myself drawn to none. No problem though. Remembering the old Zen saying, "Don't just do something.

Stand there!" I confidently picked none. See, I'm at my best when I'm not in my own way. I've noticed this more and more at work. My most successful interventions with clients – particularly in emotionally charged situations – come when I don't know what to say, but just allow the words (or silences) to appear. So, knowing (believing?) that the appropriate choice would bubble up on its own without my intellect and emotions interfering, I opted to go with whatever I heard my voice say. It said, "I pick this one:"

Head monk asked the master, "How is it that pure, original nature immediately gives rise to mountains, rivers, and the great earth?" The master replied in a loud voice, "How is it that pure, original nature immediately gives rise to mountains, rivers and the great earth?" The head monk suddenly understood.

My brain, of course, immediately demanded, "So why'dya pick this one?" I immediately responded, "Its repetition makes it easier for you, my concussion-damaged brain, to memorize." Of course that wasn't it.

Next came periods of sitting, walking, working and eating meditations on the koan. Brainwork – developing chains of logic, piles of clues, heartfelt examinations of whatever emotions came along – told me I was onto something. O, what a brain! Soo smart! But first there were two minor matters that had to be brought into compliance with its emerging theory.

The master spoke loudly, but with what inflection? Did he simply mirror back the head monk's intonation only louder to call greater attention to it? Was he cynical? Were his words simply loud words, nothing but the disconnected flatness of one's words into a telephone repeated by the voice of an automated respondent: "Click one if you said one..."

seventyfive...west7-ty...six...streeet...?” Was his volume angry? Was it lyrical? Curious? Did that matter?

Whatever the voice, what was the intention? Not the meaning, though. There’s never meaning in these things. Meaning in Zenland is no more than an overlay, an addition, an arbitrary and gratuitous mind product. It’s not part of reality. I explored all these possibilities if only casually. Something had begun to call me and I was not about to be distracted from it.

As for the question being asked and repeated, not for a minute did I take the business of the pure, original nature’s activity as having to do with the heart of things. I, in my ungrounded wisdom, knew it wasn’t about that. In perhaps my third interview, when I was asked, “How is it that pure, original nature immediately gives rise to mountains, rivers and the great earth,” I replied without thought, “It has no choice. That’s what it does for a living.” I believe that answer was greeted with a smile. But, as I do, I get ahead of myself.

My first response to the koan was that, indeed, the head monk did suddenly understand. Yes, I knew that koans sometimes lie, but still, it did say so. More than that, I wanted him to succeed if only as an encouragement for my success. See, at this point, despite all the teaching, I really wanted to *solve* this koan, to get it *right*, to be the *Zen Star* of the Retreat. In fact, some part of my brain was already rehearsing a fittingly modest silent acceptance response to the unspoken accolades of my teachers and fellow meditators.

Here’s where the brain was going: my logic, arising from my work as a therapist, rested in the belief that clients held their own answers (so why not the head monk?) and that by mirroring, by repeating what they’d

say, we cool and spiritual therapists simply direct them lovingly and respectfully back to their own insights. Clearly the master, no matter what his intonation, was doing what I’d do. Thus I could identify with him as well as with the head monk. Hell, this was truly all about me and I had this thing coming and going and my life approach was being validated in the process and who could possibly doubt my stardom?

At my first interview with John Crook, the retreat’s prime leader, I told him what I’ve told you. We talked warmly, almost conversationally about my findings. I felt soo good! He concluded that I’d made a “good start”. I left the interview swimming in “GOOD” and ignoring “start.”

More sitting, walking, eating, sleeping, chanting and working. I maintained the men’s bathroom (cleaning floors, urinals, toilet bowls and sinks, stocking toilet paper hand towels, soap and hand lotion) and water station (stocking teas – no sugar please, napkins and cups) in the meditation hall. Then, two days later, an interview with Simon Child, the second leader: Simon took photos during retreats. Last year he actually came upon a bear and snapped it a few times. His easy-going presentation complemented John’s scholarly precision. Both have marvelously developed senses of humor. I looked forward to sharing my conclusions with Simon. Conclusions, I say, because two days of subsequent meditation on the koan hadn’t moved me an inch from my findings as reported to John. In fact, I was so sure of myself that I often returned to counting breaths during zazen (sitting meditation) rather than work at all on the koan. When you’ve got it, you’ve got it.

And so it was with great pride (humbly rendered) that I voiced my flawless findings to Simon. Simon at first looked at me quietly. Then, and I’ll never know how he did this, his face morphed from that of a

delightful family physician completely into that of a fierce, bushy eye-browed scowling zen master monster. “By selecting your approach,” he said in a voice so powerful it needn’t be loud, “you’ve bypassed all the other possibilities.”

Damn! Damn damn damn!!!

I was instantly devastated. The brain’s confidence and pride (“ego” seems to fit here nicely) suddenly lay shattered on the interview room floor. I’d been good-cop/bad-copped! I’d been stripped of my strengths. I was...I was...back on my mat, kneeling toward the great wooden Buddha, feeling weak and empty and, yes, stupid. But again something was happening. I’d latched onto an understanding of the koan based on a very personal, ego-based logic, and however arbitrary it might be, to me it was compelling...compelling. Suddenly this was no longer about right or wrong or stardom or defeat. Again something was happening! Feelings fell away as I realized this had become about...commitment! In my life I’d made and would undoubtedly continue to make commitments here and there based on things deeper than intelligence, things deeper than feelings.

Now love came into the picture. This time, for the first time, I knew what that meant: love that is beyond the popular emotion and in my understanding ultimately motivates pure, original nature – the one that immediately gives rise to mountains, rivers, the great earth and (o my God!) me!

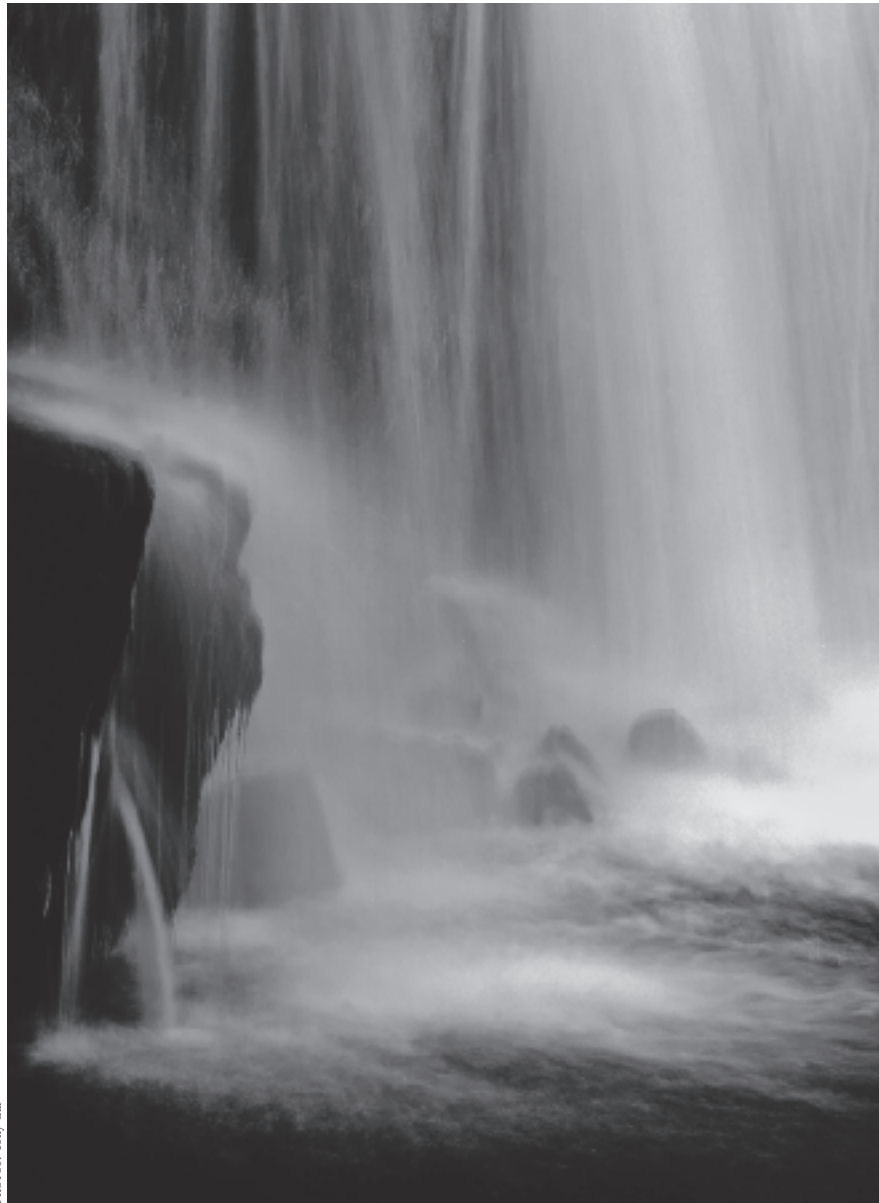
I’d left the head monk and the master halfway around the world in another millennium and made the koan mine, made it an endlessly wide road of undetermined length and no particular direction. The koan had become my life koan.

And I knew that, should I bring this to him, John would smile and tell me that my good start was continuing. Simon, on the other hand, just might show me a photo of a bear.

RETREAT REPORT 3: GAIA HOUSE KOAN RETREAT

I have found it difficult to put into words the profound experience of confronting myself which the Investigating Koans retreat gave me. Your early morning short but very precise talks about the practice always answered some searching questions about what to pay attention to in terms of the practice. When, after the exercises, you asked the group encircled just outside the entrance to Gaia House to ‘come closer’ I learned to trust that something would be said which would help me on the journey with my Koan. On the penultimate day (I think, but not entirely sure) you said it was time to swallow the koan so it became part of who we were. You also said that we could get to the stage of getting a red hot ball stuck which could not be spat out or completely swallowed. These were very powerful images which served to deepen the practice and internalise the experience of being with the Koan and being truly present without the hindrances of all the mental constructs which are a barrier to experiencing life as it emerges. I had an opportunity to see into my mind and the Koan revealed to me how much dark baggage I carry which stops me from going ‘down the mountain barefoot’; an image which offered total liberation. During my interview with you we explored this and you said something which was very powerful about the simplicity of this idea. I worked with this extensively on the retreat.

In one of your talks you encouraged us to see thoughts as a train and we can act as the station master. You advised us that we didn’t have to



photos: Tony Gill

get on the train. What a relief! During the meditation sessions this was a useful practice tool. The suggestion of 'not knowing' also helped me to open up to this possibility and let go of a survival strategy which I realised I overuse. This is a tendency to form a theory of what is happening and then try to fit observations into this. Another liberating step; not knowing! What a joy!

The concept of the deluded mind you often referred to in your talks was a very powerful one and I started to explore the extent of my own deluded mind and how rarely I experience each moment truly authentically. My family of origin were survivors of atrocity during the Second World War so I was brought up in a family who were deeply traumatised. I learned from an early age that the world is unsafe and dangerous. Unpredictable, murdering people rather than tigers lurked in the shadows.

I also had some deep insights for the first time which really astounded me. I was very bothered by the image of the sandals wrapped in the pilgrim's robe until suddenly during one meditation in the hall something suddenly revealed itself about my relationships which I had been totally unaware of and which has been preventing me from having authentic long term relationships.

The enquiry work into our Koans in pairs was really powerful as the process of verbalising and being listened to helps to process thinking in a different way to silent awareness.

When I first saw the retreat timetable I was surprised at the resistance I experienced, particularly during the first 24 hours. A habit of resisting anything I feel is being imposed emerged. The word 'meditation boot camp' kept coming up in my mind and I found myself smiling at my old habit of how I deal with something where I didn't feel in control.

One thing that struck me was the relationship with others on the retreat. Although we were in silence most of the time there was an awareness of other retreatants and I felt a deep connection with them and their preferences. I noticed small details, which would be missed had we been talking, such as where different people liked to leave their shoes before going into the meditation hall, preferences for where they liked to be outside during the breaks and how they moved. These were comforting.

My second interview with Jake turned over a very large stone and something which I have been very unsettled about was exposed. Luckily your very wise advice on the last day about not making big decisions about relationships has been heeded and I am continuing to use the Koan and the practice to experience relationships more authentically rather than through the layers of habit and defence mechanisms.

Deep gratitude for the gift of this retreat. I feel like the journey has just begun and I have deepened my commitment to the practice.

Thank you so much to both you and Jake for your knowledge and wisdom.



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.

Visit our Website

www.westernchanfellowship.org

Our website includes:

- Introductory articles on Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation
- A digital library of Dharma talks by Chan masters
- Reports of participants at our retreats
- Details of activities and events, including our retreat programme
- Back-issues of this journal
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For further information on submitting a contribution please contact the editors at editor@westernchanfellowship.org

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Forthcoming Retreats in 2019

EXETER DAY RETREAT

Saturday 2 February

Leader: Jake Lyne

Venue: Kenton, Exeter

ILLUMINATING THE MIND

Saturday 9 February to Saturday 16 February

Leader: Simon Child

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

A TASTE OF CHAN

Monday 18 February to Friday 22 February

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Hagg Farm Ed. Centre, Derbyshire

INVESTIGATING KOANS

Saturday 9 March to Saturday 16 March

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

Wednesday 17 April to Monday 22 April

Leader: Simon Child

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

CONNECTED PRACTICE

Saturday 18 May to Saturday 25 May

Leader: Hilary Richards

ILLUMINATING THE MIND

Saturday 25 May to Saturday 1 June

Leader: Jake Lyne

Venue: Bala Brook Retreat Centre, Dartmoor

STONE CARVING & MEDITATION WEEKEND

Saturday 25 May to Monday 27 May

Leader: Henry Gray

Venue: Grays Carving Studio, Salisbury





When you assert that phenomena exist inherently you are asserting that they do not originate in dependence on causes and conditions and thus that phenomena actually do not exist. For if phenomena do not depend on causes and conditions, then they should have independent existence throughout the three times. Therefore there cannot be any inherent existence for functional phenomena which arise from causes and conditions...

NAGARJUNA

