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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS

Hello everybody, and welcome to the spring edition of *New Chan Forum*. 'Journeying' is a major theme of this issue: Hughie Carroll gives a graphic account of the first part of his pilgrimage to Ladakh, which leads into Eddy Street's contemplation of the Zen of Making a Journey and Jane Spray's moving and enjoyable account of visiting Huangshan.

My thanks to everyone who has contributed to this issue. I've now taken over from George Marsh as editor of the *New Chan Forum*. Having assisted him with a couple of issues, I know how hard he worked, and what a wealth of knowledge and understanding he brought to the task. I feel I'm stepping into rather large shoes!

And I know that *New Chan Forum* is a hungry monster! If I'm to fill the next issue (which I hope will appear in September) I need contributions: articles, book reviews, artwork, poems. I need them from *you!* And I need them by late April.

You don't need to be a Buddhist scholar – I'd much prefer something that springs from your own experience and insight. I'm happy to discuss ideas with you before you start writing. If you're not a confident writer we can help you to edit what you write. (If you are, we'll still edit you if necessary!)

So do email me at [editor@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org). And I'd welcome feedback on this issue or the role of *New Chan Forum*.

## HABIT-SEEDS

SIMON CHILD

*The first part of this dharma talk appeared in New Chan Forum 57, under the title The Five Skandhas. Here we continue and conclude the transcription of this dharma talk, which was given on a Silent Illumination retreat in September 2017.*

When sitting on your cushion you witness your own responses and they mostly relate to memories of events. If you carry on your practice through activity you witness your responses in relation to an instance of the now, a perception of the now. When doing your work period with someone you may form a view as to whether they are doing their share, whether they are doing more than their share and thereby showing you up, or maybe they are not doing something quite as nicely as you would do it. You find yourself with a viewpoint arising, a judgment. If you reflect on this you might find, “I tend to have this judgemental view of people who are doing things more nicely than me, or less nicely than me”. Our tendencies are revealed during these moments of minor interaction that we have with others on retreat; just passing things up the meal table; doing work periods; passing each other in the corridor; or failing to pass each other because someone is just staring into space and you can’t get past. These low-level interactions generate responses in you and, because you are a practitioner and you are paying attention in that very moment of interaction, one of your habits is revealed to you, one of your conditioned responses.

What do you do with that? Firstly, you just observe it, experience it. You might notice that this is rather too generalised a behaviour, and it’s



PHOTO: Kieran Vass

not really appropriate for this moment. “It’s what I tend to give rise to but that’s not serving me very well in this moment, and I recognise that often it doesn’t serve me well. It’s a rather old stale behaviour from a different life circumstance many years ago, and I’ve just carried it on, on autopilot. Hmmm. I hadn’t noticed that I was doing that.”

This is what I mean when I say that sometimes it can just evaporate. When you see yourself responding like that, and you realise you have done it so many times without noticing that it wasn’t very satisfactory, but now it’s seen through and, oh, there’s also distaste with it. Maybe it tends to arise again on a future occasion, but now this distaste is to the fore and you think, “I’m not going to do that again” or, “I’ve caught myself about to do that again”, and it doesn’t happen anymore. Or, “I did do it again but the experience of that reconfirms that I don’t want to carry on doing it”. Through this awareness of what’s arising, through the clarity of awareness that the practice can bring to each moment, these habits are seen and released.

Let me clarify how I am using the word ‘habit’ – I am referring to a very broad range of phenomena. I’m using the word ‘habit’ because of the connection to the word *samskaras* – ‘habit-seeds’ and ingrained behaviours – but it’s much wider than that. It’s not just habitual behaviours and actions, it’s also habitual attitudes, habitual thought patterns, fixed views, rigid ideas. It’s assumptions, which are a form of fixed view. We have assumptions about how things are. We have assumptions about how other people are. Because they are assumed they are sort of internalised, and we just use them without questioning them.

When I use the words habits I am also including prejudices which are a sort of assumption. You might think “I’m not prejudiced”, but we

all have what we can call pre-judgements, we make a judgement before we have all the information. Again, it’s part of our biology. It’s been demonstrated that we form an impression of people within the first two or three seconds, based perhaps on their hairstyle, or the expression on their face, or the type of clothing they are wearing and the social class that we impute based upon that. We form an impression as to whether we want to get to know someone better or keep away from them. And it’s all over in a few seconds. It becomes internalised and after that it takes quite a while before the view can change, and such a change requires quite a lot of new information through encounters which we may not be willing to have if we have formed a negative view. Within just a few seconds we have formed a pre-judgement of this person whom we hardly know – an impression that has become fixed as a view. We do have prejudices, sorry to tell you that, but we do. This is part of our fixed views and fixed ways of being, and you can catch this out in your own experience.

This is the value of the practice – by being clearly present in your own experience you can catch out your behaviours, your attitudes, your views, your assumptions, your rapid judgements. Does that sound a bit nicer saying ‘rapid judgements’ instead of prejudices? Rapid uninformed judgements, yeah, but that’s what they are. And you notice yourself doing it.

It happens on retreat too. You are sitting with people in this room that you have never spoken to, never really met, though you’ve seen them across a meal table, and you’ve seen them across a meditation hall. It sometimes happens that when you eventually hear someone speak it completely contradicts the view of them in your mind that you didn’t know you had formed. You’d formed an expectation and a view and it gets completely turned upside down.

This is why Dogen and the Buddha both tell us to look inside. This is why I'm pointing you towards illuminating the mind. This is why Hongzhi points towards 'silent introspection', contemplating your own 'form' in the wider meaning of form than just the body... the being. Look into your being, experience it in the now. Notice your tendency to experience it framed in past experiences... "this is like that, it's like that time... I know what to do, I'll do this". Instead, notice it fresh. This moment is fresh, this moment has never been here before.

There are similarities to other moments – you've sat on the same cushion before, maybe even in the same posture. But there are also differences: this moment is different; this person you are meeting, or somehow relating to, or avoiding relating to, is different. There are similarities but there are also differences. Maybe your mood is different, maybe their mood is different, maybe their life circumstances have changed since last time you met, maybe yours have changed. There are similarities but there is a complete uniqueness, newness, freshness about this moment.

Bringing old judgements and habits to the moment is only really an expedient means of getting through life when it's complicated and busy. We need them, we really do need these shortcuts and habits. It really wouldn't work if you needed to get out of that door to go to the toilet but you hadn't internalised how to open a door, or what a door handle was, or how a door latch worked, and you had to work it out from first principles every time. How to open your car, how to drive it. We need certain habits and learned behaviours. But we also need to learn how to step out of them and not be trapped by them.

It's too easy to coast along on an autopilot of old ingrained habits which sort of work most of the time, and if we get into trouble then

find a way out of it. As opposed to thinking, "this moment is a new moment, absolutely literally new, it's just arrived. All the old moments have had their uses, I've learned stuff from them, but maybe if I'm fully present and attentive and aware I'll spot that in this moment the old habit doesn't fit. There are enough similarities for the old habit to offer itself, that seed begins to sprout. But no, not this time, a better way of responding, a more appropriate way of responding offers itself from the moment." With the mind fully illuminated you are fully aware of the moment and your response fully fits the moment as well as is possible. With the mind silent, the old habits quiet, the appropriate response for this moment can arise, and for the next moment, and the next. See if you can spot this possibility for yourself, of allowing the moment to bring what the moment brings. If it evokes a conditioned response, that response does not have to be put into action – it may not be appropriate.

You may spot that some of the patterns you have been following have an origin in your history. You may or may not recognise or understand the origin, or you may not be in contact with it, and that's ok. Or you may be very clear that you adopted that strategy in response to a particular life difficulty. It may be that you are not experiencing that life difficulty anymore, maybe you are no longer living with that difficult person that evoked that response in you, maybe this coping mechanism is no longer helpful. Worse than that, maybe the conditioned response is dysfunctional.

I once was talking this way to someone on retreat. This was someone who was obviously very intelligent and smart. Actually she used the word smart about herself quite a lot, but, honestly it was true, she was obviously very sharp and bright, she had a way of working out everything.

Except, well, what about things that cannot be worked out? She was not so good on those. She didn't like it when I pointed out that her smartness was dysfunctional when relating to others on a feeling level, because it didn't work there for her. Even what we might call our positive qualities can be dysfunctional too. They get in the way and we rely on them too much. It rather stung her when I said that but later on in another retreat she said, "It really hurt me when you said that but you were correct, I see it".

Even what we think are our good habits can be problematic. Often our so-called good habits are trying to be nice, trying to be light, trying to impress, all that stuff. How about being authentic? How about being now? How about being real? That means being real in this moment which is new. A past programme doesn't cut it. We have the past programmes available for when life is fast-moving, for example if we are driving and we have to get there, and all the rest of it. We have these rapid responses, and for practical reasons we often have to make use of them. But not all the time – we can be aware of them, questioning them, and realising that "I'm doing it that way because that's how I get by, but something's not quite right, is it?"

Maybe we can find another way. This doesn't mean we have to give up all our old habits – we are very well-skilled in them, well-rehearsed, and they have their uses. But we mustn't feel impelled to use them regardless. This is the alternative translation of *samskara* as volition or impulse. We may feel impelled, compelled, to do things in certain ways. There may be a story in the back of the mind that this is a safe way to do things – you've done it this way lots of times and you're still here so it's good. Or, maybe it's good enough, but it's not actually good – that's different.



Photo: Tony Gill

This whole business of looking into the mind is looking for how you tie yourself into knots. It might be at a very basic level, of misperceiving, of taking a sensation and drawing the wrong inference, the wrong perception. That happens, but we learn from those and we tune ourselves. Much more complex is the next stage of ‘volition’ or ‘impulse’ or ‘habit’. Really really complex. But this is what we see if we look into the mind. We see our mind holding certain views, and defending them, holding them quite rigidly perhaps. We find ourselves impelled to act in certain ways which, even if we know they are not quite really ‘it’, feel safe and familiar. The more we confront ourselves with this, and this is where the word ‘confrontation’ really comes in, the more we confront ourselves we may acknowledge that we are doing something that seems safe and familiar and adequate, but is not good enough, there is scope for change. Sometimes the change just happens, because it’s untenable to continue the same way. Sometimes it’s a bit stickier – sometimes the sense of safety traps us in to wanting to continue the same behaviours. Even though we now sense there is a degree of dysfunction, there is still some sense of safety in hanging on to past habits. Particularly if we don’t quite know where this behaviour came from it can be hard to let go of it. This is why it can be useful if we do know, and recognise it. “Well, it arose in that particular situation and I’m just not in that situation now so it feels safe to let go of this”.

However that information is not always available to us. It might be that it is just be an accumulation over time from multiple small events, rather than an individual event that we remember. We may have a misperception of an event such that the event itself, even if we remember it, doesn’t seem relevant. It may have been just a childhood misunder-

standing of some situation. We may be left feeling it’s a bit difficult to let go of something even though we know it’s not right. It’s left a bit stuck in the mind, it’s left a bit stuck in the behaviour. How to handle that?

It’s basically the same message of, “Let through, Let be, Let go”. It hangs around in the mind and you let it be there, not chasing it away. Or if does go away then you don’t chase after it hoping to force a resolution. You let it drift away. It’ll come back. And all the other stuff comes too. This is where the non-selective nature of this practice is very important, the openness, the evenness. Let through whatever comes into the mind even though it seems quite trivial or irrelevant, just a bit of white noise. You are not in a position to judge whether it is relevant. Quite often what comes through, eventually, is a supporting story for the first story, like your reinforcing evidence. Sometimes there are three or four or five stories tangled together. The key may be something which is so trivial that you overlook it, you can’t imagine that it’s significant. And maybe by itself it isn’t, but it’s that last bit of ‘evidence for the prosecution’ that makes you feel you must carry on behaving this way. It feels unsafe to do otherwise. But once you see that little thing in relation to the others, in the context of the others, you think “Oh, that was so obvious I never really looked at it properly but now I see that it’s been locking me in”.

Of course this is just a way of putting it, it’s different for each person and for each issue. But when something seems stuck it can be that just allowing this open flow can lead to it unsticking. The missing pieces of the jigsaw come into view because you allow them to flow past awareness. At some point, in front of your eyes, the jigsaw fixes itself. “Ahh... ohhh... I get it now, I didn’t get it before”. You couldn’t get it before





photo: Claire Martin

because some pieces were missing. But if you allow the mind to flow, then the pieces appear. Whether they will appear in five minutes or five years... who knows? But just keep doing the practice and stuff shifts and makes sense, and the sort of sense it may make is a sense of, “this isn't right to carry this on. Even though I'm a bit scared of changing, the thought that I might carry on like this is even more horrifying”. The scales tip. “It's not tenable to carry on like this, even though I've not found an alternative strategy that feels better or safer. I can just see that this way of being, this fixed view of mine, this attitude I hold, this way I lash out or this way I hide, it's not good enough and has to stop.” And then the next moment comes and you may find a response which feels a bit fresher, a bit more appropriate, a bit newer, and maybe also a bit scary because it's untested. But even the untested scary one is better than carrying on the way you've carried on. You find it possible to change. You find change inevitable.

This is where this investigation of self is taking you, and it goes very deep. Ultimately it goes all the way because, as the Buddha discovered, when you cut off all habitual thoughts and tendencies you live fully present. It doesn't mean that you forget the past, it doesn't mean that you become stupid and repeat the same mistake every day. You bring the learning from the past with you, but you're not bound by it. You're free to find a fresh response in this moment. You are fully informed because your awareness is wide open. Total illumination.

This practice is an invitation to dig deep inside into unknown layers. Maybe to say ‘digging’ is too active, that sounds like you're directing it and striving. It's more like allowing the lemonade bottle to fizz and to fizz and to fizz until the very last bubble comes out. But you're paying

attention because you need to see these bubbles. This is where the metaphor breaks down because the ones you don't see sneak around the bottom and come in again. Yeh. You have to see them to see through them and discharge them. If not, they have this habit of going round and round.

You are journeying into the unknown. In relation to the practice, and to the retreat as a whole, John Crook sometimes used to use the image of the 19th century European explorers in Africa, their 'journey to the interior' – they had absolutely no idea what they were going to find. Or maybe it's the early sailors who thought they lived on a flat earth but nevertheless sailed west, knowing the possibility that they might fall off the edges of the earth, not knowing what they were going to find. You don't know what you are going to find in your own mind. There is stuff that you have repressed there for years. There is nice stuff, by the way, as well as nasty stuff – you've not allowed yourself some stuff that you feel you haven't deserved yet. There is stuff that's been repressed, stuff that's just been forgotten, simply forgotten or overlooked or which didn't register as particularly important at the time yet somehow it is a crucial part of this jigsaw that is half-assembled in front of you but still doesn't really make sense. Just allow it all to flow. Take the risk of being open to what's there. Be prepared to be shocked and ashamed and surprised and upset and overcome with joy or laughter or anger or tears. Or just bemused... "Have I really been doing that, good grief, huh", and it's gone.

Anything can arise... very open. We don't know. I certainly don't know what you've got in you, you've hidden it too well up until now. You might have a clue, or you might have absolutely no idea at all. That clue might be inhibiting you because you have a fantasy that it's going

to destroy you or overwhelm you. If it does get overwhelming, we are here to support you. We've got various tricks to rescue people who need rescuing. That's partly what the interviews are for, and that's partly why we offer extra interviews when required. We've got various tricks for if it does seem to be getting out of hand for you. Actually it's safe but you might find that you're not tolerating it very well. There may be an appropriate limit to self-confrontation... take a break, we can rescue you.

If you have trust in that then maybe you can allow yourself to go as deep as the mind will go. No need to hold back. You may need some courage, you may need to confront some fear, you might need to take risks. But think of the alternative. What's the alternative? Carrying on the robotic habitual behaviours that have been trained into you by life experience. Anybody volunteering for the robot life, or would you prefer the human life? Which one do you want to go for? Being fully human. Remember that the Buddha was a human. I know that some Buddhist traditions present him as a god but that is more as an inspirational character. The Buddha was a human being who walked on the earth, ate food, went to the toilet, slept, you know, human. Fully human. Fully present. Fully being. And he's inviting you to follow the same path, and I'm also encouraging you to do so.



HUGH CARROLL, LADAKH 2005

## PILGRIMAGE TO LADAKH PART 1

HUGH CARROLL

### Leaving

It is April 2005 when I hand back the keys to the landlord. The nest my wife and I had made was hard to leave. We have a last hug and I say goodbye to this woman who doesn't want to be my wife any more. Most of my stuff is sold or given away and the tech job is over. I get in the car that my mate is going to drive to the airport. As we pull away and the landlord and ex recede behind us I realise that the last time I had no keys of any kind was when I was five years old. As I decide that my new 'home' is going to be the practice of 'looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now' (a quote from a Buddhist text called the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta*) I have a tremendous sense of the release of tension and excitement at my upcoming adventure. It is the first time any light has fallen into the darkness of my broken heart in a long time.

With the collapse of the marriage I felt that if I trudged on by myself in that wee flat and the IT job I had chiselled my way into, I would just not make it. Way too sad and lonely to survive for long. So it was an opportunity to do *The Pilgrimage!* The plan was to go to the big four sites of Buddhism – where the Buddha was born, where he got enlightened, where he started teaching and where he died. But first, Ladakh! My teacher, the late, great John Crook, had spent a lot of time up there in the high Himalayan desert kingdom. He wrote a fabulous book called *The Yogins of Ladakh* all about it and I wanted to visit as many of the people and places in that book as I could. We had decided that it would

be best to go there first since it was springtime. Doing the big four sites of the main pilgrimage straight away would mean landing myself in the ferocious heat of the North Eastern Indian summer.

### Arriving

The plane lands in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, and taxis along the runway. A big dog lopes along and merely glances over its shoulder at the plane bearing down upon it, unconcerned. The pressure doors open and the cold mountain air lets us know straight away that we are really high above sea level, some 3500 metres. By the time we have walked over to the terminal the effects of that altitude start to take effect. My legs feel very heavy but my head is helium-light. I am met by my host Ngawang, who looks after me and advises that one should do very little while one is acclimatising to the altitude. Between naps I meditate.

*half a day in the air*  
*the world wildly different*

*sizzling skies*  
*Martian Himalaya*

*behind the noise*  
*the same silence*

*of home*

### Leh Hospital

Within a few days I start getting diarrhoea which doesn't ease up. Ngawang advises that I go to consult with a doctor who takes a few minutes to decide that I should be admitted to the hospital and be put on a drip since I'm so dehydrated. They take me to a room with two beds. An Indian lady is lying on one with an oxygen mask on. They hook me up to a saline drip whose stand has a missing wheel. Around 9pm the lights go out and the lady's oxygen machine turns off. I wrestle the drip stand into the blackness of the toilet where there is no paper and no flush. This happens some dozen or so times over night. In the pre-dawn darkness I can see a little from a street light that there is something wrong with the drip. I take it over to the window to get a better look and see that my blood has backed up into the tube, it is no longer delivering the hydration. No one answers when I press the 'nurse' button – ah, the electric is out. I stumble along a dark corridor trying to find someone. The dizziness and weakness make me stumble and lurch. There is a light and some voices. I call out but can hardly produce any sound. The corridor seems to get longer the more I struggle up it. I dig in deep and concentrate on not fainting before making it to the light. It all seems very epic and life-and-death right then. At last I get to the voices. One says "you shouldn't be out of bed!", the other says "your drip is blocked!" in an annoyed sort of a way. They sort me out. When it gets light the electric comes back on but there is some problem with the Indian lady's oxygen pump machine where its electric socket has stopped working. There is one above my bed on the other side of the room from her. They stretch the wire to it, going right over me. It strains on its feeble little pins. I keep saying "why don't you swap us over?" but no one



TSULTIM GYATSO AT RIZONG GOMPA 2005

listens. Eventually one of the nurses says “why don’t we swap them over?” and so they do. As the gaggle of doctors and nurses start to leave I see that they haven’t changed over our notes hanging on the end of our beds. I have to whistle to get their attention to tell them about it. They swap them over and leave. By the time I am discharged later that morning they have put three litres of saline into me and I’m as weak as a kitten.

### Rizong

The next suggestion was to go to Rizong Gompa and find Geshe Wangdus. The kitchen is ancient and the monks are really funny. One day at meal time during the chanting, one monk, Tsultim Gyatso, flicks a bit of greenery off his finger that lands on his friend. He looks shocked and stops chanting for a moment. Everyone giggles but carries on chanting. The guy picks the leaf off his robe and continues the chant with everyone looking to see what he’ll do. Eventually he flicks it back and everyone falls about laughing, their feet in the air and hooting. Wonderful!

Tsultim Gyatso always had that amused look and a powerful presence that went with it. It was a joy just to hang around with him, not that we could communicate much, but just being there was a tonic.

The life of the monks there seemed incredibly austere. The full training involves the “preliminaries”, four sets of one hundred thousand prostrations, Vajrasattva sadhanas, mandala offerings and guru sadhanas. Eventually they get to the “Yogas of Naropa”. These had been kept secret for hundreds of years and were the source of the amazing tales of supernatural abilities that came to Europe in the 19th century. Possibly

the most famous of these is the practice of sitting out in the snow, overnight, wearing only a wet sheet. This would be a good way to kill someone quick as the temperatures we are talking about will go to minus 60 degrees and beyond on a regular basis. In addition to these rigours they are also kind of expected to do a solitary retreat at some point. Traditionally they are for three years, three months, three weeks and three days. Sometimes this is done in complete darkness! In addition to all this there are also the even more secret practices of the Vajrayana, matters involving Tantra and so forth about which they will not speak if you are not properly initiated. Hanging out with these guys, the Yogins, was an incredible thing for me and I found some of them to have an amazing quality about them. They were all at once both hugely “weighty”, carrying a really impressive gravitas, and at the same time light-hearted, wispy, ineffable. I was invited to tea in one monk’s room. He sat on a mat around three feet square, just big enough to sit in a meditation posture on. He had a few plants and tea making things, some thangka paintings and lots of religious paraphernalia. I asked him where he slept and he said “right here!”. I ask him if he lies down there and he says “no!”. There was a thick, felt blanket over an empty window space. There was no glass in it! Some of the coldest temperatures on planet earth happen throughout the winter in Ladakh. What was this monk made of?

I had a few magic tricks to show them: “pen behind the ear”, “elastic bands”, a “paddle” type trick with a lighter and so forth. One day I was showing the kids there and an older monk came over to see what was going on. As soon as he saw the first trick he turned quickly away and walked off. Most strange I thought. This was the first time I had seen this reaction and I didn’t know what to make of it. It was explained to

me a few weeks later (see below). The meditation lessons from Geshe Wangdus didn’t go so well after I lent him John’s book. He had it returned but didn’t come himself. He basically stopped having anything to do with me. Someone suggested that it might be because he was a different sect from the one investigated in the book. Who knows..

### Ayu Lhamo

John’s friend Ngawang had been our host in the village of Sabu, just outside of Leh. Also staying there was Dave who was doing research for a PHD on “Indigenous Knowledge Practices”. We had become close during long conversations about “life, the universe and everything”. We talked about the Dharma most of the time. It was a real tonic for me to have a chum to talk to. I kept returning after each of my little trips and we could convene and talk them over. Ngawang one day invites us to watch a DVD he has. It is about “Ayu Lhamo” and is called something like “Demons and Sorcerers”. In the video there are a few really scary scenes. Live footage of a meeting with the great woman who is supposed to be visited by the “Lha” or spirits of place. She shrieks, jumping up and brandishing a sword, running towards the cameraman who flees. She is famously fierce. She lives in a village near Leh called “Ayu”.

A plan is hatched to visit her the next day. Our chum Gyatso (“ocean”) wants to help with the interpretation. It is a long walk over scrubby desert and when we locate the little house it appears to be all locked up. We walk around it until we find another door which opens to our knocking. There are loads of people inside an ancient kitchen. The ceiling is very low. There are too many people to really see what is going on. I hand some money over to buy a “khatag” scarf, the lovely white

silk scarves that are presented as formal presents. There is a group of Russians who all seem to be wearing white. One of them is in front of Ayu Lamo asking her “how many grandchildren will I have?” She gets really cross and raises her voice. She is apparently speaking in Tibetan rather than Ladakhi. The interpreter reports that she has said “it is impossible to say”. With an imperious wave of her hand she dismisses him, looking daggers at him. He retreats looking pale and the whole group of them are bustled out by Ayu Lhamo’s helpers. The atmosphere is highly charged.

Someone pokes me on the knee and I look up noticing that she is looking right at me and beckoning. I go up and offer the khatag and bow. She is wearing a kind of cloth crown and a scarf over the bottom half of her face. She is very thin, very old and has the presence of an actual deity! I’m awestruck. She glances at me in the eye for the briefest of moments and then talks in Tibetan for quite a while. This is translated into Ladakhi by her guy. Gyatso translates the Ladakhi into English for me. “You meditate a lot. You should keep your mind still and not dwell on problems. You should find a Rimpoche who can help you find your way.”

She asks me what my trouble is and I tell her a bit about a serious fall I had, the sickness and weakness that has followed it, my wife having an affair and leaving me and the terrible loneliness that has come with it. She asks where I am going next and I tell her of my plan to visit Gosang: a famous meditator stayed there in the distant past, it appears in John’s book. She says I should ask for a “khuntup” when I get there. I have no idea what that means. She dismisses me and I go back to my place feeling all emotional. No releases or resolutions. After seeing what seems like hundreds of various types of health care professionals I was

kind of hoping for some shamanic magic of the real kind. I had worked for a circus years before, and had suffered a fall when a stunt went wrong during a rehearsal. There had been a very intense near-death, out-of-body experience which had eventually led to a diagnosis of chronic, acute Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The consultant who diagnosed me had been Terry Waite’s doctor.

After the shaman talked to a few more people I was surprised to be beckoned up for a second time. She wanted me to describe the fall experience to her. After I finished telling the tale she takes her sword out of a brazier of burning coals, sticks her tongue out, leaning over towards me, eyes blazing. She puts the flat of the sword on her tongue. There are sizzles and steamings. She blows on my face. I’m sent away again. Sitting back in my place once again, I feel even more emotional. Bits of confused, traumatised memories start to emerge and I’m not sure where I am.

A third time I’m called forward after she’s seen more of the villagers. This is where my memory is a bit mixed up. She pulled the glowing coals over and suddenly pushed my face into the smoke, throwing juniper on to make clouds of fragrance. Holding my neck very firmly she won’t allow me to escape the choking fumes. It is hot too. She takes a hand bell in one hand and a “phurba” or “ghost dagger” in the other – both formal Tibetan Buddhist sacred items. Ringing the bell close to my ear, frequently clonking me on the side of the head, she chants and jabs me everywhere with the three-sided phurba. It’s painful and very, very weird. As this is going on, and it goes on for what seems like ages, I start to have vivid memories of the accident. Trauma responses take over and I don’t really know where I am. Images of fire, dragons, immensities of

darkness pulling me into the endless abyss. Eventually she lets my face up away from the smoke, she ties special threads around my fingers, gives me a specially knotted khatag scarf, gives me sacred rice and sacred Tibetan medicines. She asks me to sit beside her and after I move she sees to more villagers. I don't take it in as it takes ages to normalise from the intensity. When she has seen everyone including my chums, she leans forward, right down to the ground and makes a lot of weird noises and clicks and then BAM! suddenly the "lha" have left and she is once again a ninety-year-old Ladakhi grandma. Her relatives and helpers make tea and invite us to stay. I start to ask some questions but she says that she can never remember anything that happens when she is in the "trance" or whatever the hell has just happened!

Eventually we leave, stumbling out into the fierce Himalayan afternoon, all jazzed up. Dave tells me that when I was in my own kind of trance I was crying really hard. He said that he looked around and saw that everyone in the room, including himself, was crying too, everyone except Ayu Lhamo. I felt like I had truly been met by "the deity", that the enormity of the trauma had been taken really seriously by someone qualified enough to have a meaningful response. For the fourteen years since the accident I had felt a powerful need to try and tell the story, always hoping that it would somehow help me leave it behind. After meeting the shaman, that need lessened a good deal.

### Staglung Rimpoche

I had been asking around for news of Staglung Rimpoche. He was one of the highest lamas of the Dzogchen tradition. A tulku, ie he consciously reincarnated himself; he always returned with a withered right arm.

Various rumours had circled around about his whereabouts and ill health. Someone said they might have news of him at a monastery near Leh, a place called Karnarlung Gompa in Choglamsar. When I arrive they tell me that he is actually there that day! Great good fortune. He is indeed ill and has been resting. We had to wait for an interpreter anyway and so another long wait ensued.

There then followed two or three hours of loitering on a terrace being sort of grilled about who I was, why I was there, what did I want with Rimpoche, what was my practice and so on. At last everything is ready and we go in to a dark shrine room. Rimpoche is sitting on a raised dais, there is incense and thangkas hanging. It is all very impressive. He asks me a few questions, more grilling, and I produce John's book. There is a section in it on him, a picture too, but he didn't react at all when he leafed through it. My credentials established, we got into a proper Dharma conversation. I was looking for the right way to practise, given my own ill health and issues. The trauma from the accident had turned me into a very pale shadow of my former self. He wanted to know all about the accident and gave me some pretty general advice. He asked for my mala beads and did something with them, I couldn't see what, for around five minutes or so. He eventually looked up with the most enormous grin I think I've ever seen! It was as though the sun had suddenly come out in that darkened room. He was very happy and told me that everything was going to be all right, that I was already going in the right direction and that all I had to do was keep going. He asked me "what will you do back in your country?" I replied "I hope to find a way to help the Dharma". He said "I hope so too!"

That was clearly the end of the session and so making the ritual pros-



trations, we left. On the way out the interpreter, Paljor, said “do you know what Rimpoche has done for you?” I said “not really, what?”. He told me that the business with the mala was a super-special-secret divination thing. He said that he had “looked into my mind-stream and had seen my future”. The fact that he was so happy about it was very good indeed! Apparently a very rare and special privilege had been granted me and I felt awestruck because of it. The take-away advice he gave was that one’s practice should be continuous and you should not force it.

### Gotsang

Ayu Lhamo had asked me to get a “khuntup” - whatever that was. I decided to ask for one when visiting Gotsang, which had been one of the places in John’s book. The bus from Leh left me at the side of the road, where I could see away in the distance Hemis Gompa. This is one of the main tourist attractions and an important monastery. Up behind it, somewhere in the mountains was Gotsang where a famous monk from the middle-ages, Gotsangpa, had practised. Some passing locals had told me that there was a bus coming that would go to Hemis so I loitered around. When I got on, an important looking monk invited me to sit next to him on the crowded bus, budging over to make room. He didn’t have much English and I could only say a few words in Ladakhi so the conversation was a bit sparse. He noticed I was wearing mala beads and asked if I was a meditator. I put my hands in the zazen posture and mimed not doing anything – the easiest mime that there is! He said that I should stay in the monastery with them rather than find a guest house. When the bus arrived he sprang up and produced a big bunch of keys and started throwing out instructions to lots of younger monks who

beetled off to do his bidding. Two of them picked up my bag and asked me to follow them. We got to a room that looked like someone was staying there already. I had become very tired on the journey and wasn’t really thinking straight. If I had been, I would have worked out that this was the senior monk’s own room! The penny dropped the next morning. I felt pretty embarrassed!

Next day I set out for Gotsang. It was madness really since the ME symptoms were pretty bad and digestive rioting had eroded my sleep. I would climb the steep trail and rest by turns. It became a bit of an epic and after several hours I was resting more than I was walking. At last I made it to the little white gompa in the Himalayas. Producing John’s book to show them had an amazing effect. They saw a picture of Shakyashri on the cover and went bananas, taking turns to hold the book on their heads and pogo up and down! I couldn’t believe my eyes.

When they calmed down they ushered me inside to where an English speaking monk was working at printing sacred texts. Tea was brought and people crowded around. After a wee magic show people left us to talk. While I explained about John, the book and everything he calmly kept printing from a woodcut. There was a smudge so he couldn’t use that piece and had to throw it away. He gave it to me to look at. By this time I had learned some of the Tibetan alphabet and tried to sound out a few words. Even if I got it right I didn’t understand what they meant! After I got through a few words he joined in and whizzed through a few lines in that deep-voiced Tibetan chant that they do. I realised that he wasn’t looking at the text and when he finished I asked him if he had memorised it. “Of course, we all have” he said gesturing not at the scrap of paper I was holding but at the entire wall of the room which held a

bookcase containing what looked like thousands of wood-block printed books. They get together periodically to chant the whole thing. It is just expected that as part of their training they memorise the whole of the Tangyur and Kangyur.

Deeply impressed, we went on to talk about the khuntup that Ayo Lhamo had mentioned. He said “follow me” and took me on a tour of the place. There was one room in which I felt an enormously powerful atmosphere. There was a mat with some clothes propped up in a little pyramid. He explained that it was where a recently deceased lama had spent twelve years in meditation! There were goosebumps and tingles as my mind played tricks on me. Perhaps I hadn’t yet recovered from the walk up to the place, but oh my Lord it was a funny feeling. Down and down windy stairs we went until he started burrowing in an ancient alter. I think we must have been way underground by that point. He produced a little square of folded paper with inked designs, stitching and wax on it. He told me that it was a “khuntup”, that it would bring me good luck and protection. I should wrap it in blue cloth, keep it with me and not let it get wet. It is in my wallet still!

## THE ZEN OF MAKING A JOURNEY

EDDY STREET

We human beings are journeying people. We emerged on our historical path as wandering hunter-gatherers. We now make sense of our lives by understanding them as a journey: an unfolding story of who we are and what we do in the world. We travel through time as we think, talk, and worry about our career arcs, our family histories, or our financial forecasts. We construct narratives of the paths we have followed and will follow. In our better moments, we think, talk and pray about our spiritual journeys. We frame our lives by our stories about the journey that has been, and the journey that will be. A journey is therefore not just between two places, but is about living and interacting with all points we meet along the way and at the same time we observe the route as it evolves in our mind's eye and in actuality in the world around us. We create an image of a place where we started and a place where we hope to end. Being on a journey is therefore about being a part of that route and also being above the route and looking down on it. In a very significant way, journeying is an elemental part of who we are as human beings.

### Sacred Journeys

We find that actual journeys have an importance in nearly all spiritual traditions in the form of pilgrimages. In our tradition, we undertake a pilgrimage to help us remember the Buddha’s teachings and to connect with their living location, for example to Lumbini, the place of

Buddha's birth or Sarnath, the site of his first teaching. These are sacred journeys to sacred places to pay respect and to experience a direct connection to our historical spiritual past. Early Indian practitioners were seen as 'wanderers', who were free of worldly attachments. The mendicant's life was identified as being on a journey in which the travelling was only a part. Japanese itinerant monks travelling around looking for a new teacher are known as 'unsui', which translates as "clouds, water", natural phenomenon that have a flow and a movement of their own. Although these models of travelling have a distinct spiritual purpose for the Zen practitioner, we are aware that in touching the sacred we meet ordinariness and indeed vice versa (see koan 300 in Master Dogen's *The True Dharma Eye*<sup>1</sup>). As John Daido Loori says in his response to this matter: "The truth of ordinary and sacred, wherever it is encountered, is, after all, in your hands alone."<sup>2</sup> Certainly then to go on a spiritual journey, can in itself involve an ordinary path and destination; we can go on a sacred journey by taking a simple walk.

#### The Journeys of Basho

The spiritual approach to an ordinary journey was adopted by Basho, the 17th century Japanese poet, who is credited with establishing the present form of haiku. Although he had travelled previously, in 1684 he set out on his first journey purely for the sake of spiritual and poetic practice. His aim on this journey was to 'face death' and thereby to temper his mind and his poetry. He called this "the journey of the weather beaten skeleton",<sup>3</sup> meaning that he was prepared to face a 'death' of any description on his travels. The journey was a very rewarding one for



PORTRAIT OF BASHO BY HOKUSAI, LATE 18TH CENTURY

Basho and he produced a number of works on his experience and he wrote a travel journal.

*Another year is gone –  
A travel hat on my head,  
straw sandals on my feet*<sup>4</sup>

Basho based his travelling on the principle of ‘lightness’, a notion that rests on the tenth Ox Herding picture, in which the ox trainer returns to where he lives and moves through the mundane ordinary world, fully taking part in life through the process of spiritual awareness. So, whatever the nature of experience or suffering that comes along, the traveller just smiles with a calm, non-attached attitude but being fully engaged as life emerges. Basho recorded his journeys in a style closely resembling his haibun, which always included short verses and in these he evoked nature’s beauty and the inherent evanescence and impermanence of life. His journals can be called records of a ‘wandering heart’ and the modern equivalent of these can be found in the work of Ken Jones.<sup>5</sup>

However, if we base ourselves on Basho’s example it would be erroneous to consider that the purpose of the journey is to produce a journal or verses for others to admire. On the contrary, the journey or walk simply is to provide an opportunity to be present in a place and to value the experience that arises as a consequence of being in that place. Indeed the experience of being in a place can be used as a jumping-off point for following what is evoked and the internal processes and memories that this sets in train.

In order to appreciate how this process can begin we can use the idea of the fifth century Chinese scholar Liu Hsieh, who in his poetry criti-

cism wrote about ‘yu wei’ or the ‘aftertaste’ of a poem and this notion can be applied to things we encounter in ordinary life. Hence with many of our experiences, an aftertaste lingers in our memory, waiting to be prompted by a new event encountered on life’s journey. Consequently on an actual journey we can meet both the past and present as it is held within ourselves. By being present at a place on a journey we can meet our self and the dropping of the self. The journey becomes the universe and assists us in becoming whole and forever changing. This process is summed up by a translator of Basho’s *Narrow Road to the Interior*, Sam Hamil: “the journey itself is home. The means is the end, just as it is the beginning. Each step is the first step, each step the last.”<sup>6</sup> In this way we can see each journey as a pilgrimage: a sacred journey not just to where the route takes us, but to the interior workings of the self. It is a pilgrimage to the ordinary mind which involves an attitude of visiting something sacred and of paying respects to that which arises. As John Muir, the American naturalist, comments: “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Inner and outer landscapes – undertaking a journey

So how then can we form an ordinary journey into a sacred one? How can we encounter the spiritual on an ordinary walk or on a visit to an ordinary place? Firstly, we need to note what happens on any journey - we can become interested in any or every distraction that comes along and with each distraction, all the while, our memory ticks through its filing system, bringing up images, feelings, and all sorts of ‘aftertastes’ and remembrances that have attached themselves to us. This is what we can observe as each step and each place along the journey’s route, induces

something in us. Hence with this process, each place, even each step can become an exploration of location, of reflections, of memories, of emotions, of thoughts and of the evolving presence of all this. Essentially and always, a journey is simply an exploration of what is there and what is arising at the moment. Sam Hamill again on Basho: “his journey is a pilgrimage; it is a journey into the interior of the self as much a travelogue, a vision quest that concludes in insight. But there is no conclusion.”<sup>8</sup> We can arrive at a place and note all that is present both internally and externally and this is a process similar to that met in meditation.

So as we undertake a journey with this orientation to travelling, along our path, we begin to recognise something as familiar – a thing itself or a memory or an association with it. We will be meeting the familiar in terms of “I know this”. There will be the recognition of the comfort of the familiar and the security of that which is always present for us. As Rebecca Solnit observes, there exists for us all a “tangible landscape of memory, the places that made you and in some way you too become them. They are what you can possess and what in the end possesses you.”<sup>9</sup> So meeting the familiar involves garnering something from our memory and some link about who we are will arise as we recognise our presence in that place at that time. We always take our self, our ‘landscape of memory’ on any journey and this always emerges. It is this which once recognised can then be put down, as the putting down allows the freshness of the moment to arise. It is this that permits the difference and novelty of any place to be encountered and accepted. Indeed it is all this that makes the journey possible.

What is required is curiosity about what is here and what is just around the corner. Here we need to remember that it is not just the phys-

ical location that is ‘here’ and ‘around the corner’ for these places are also present in the process of our mind. ‘Here’ and ‘round the corner’ are both part of the inner and outer landscapes. We need to develop a process of investigation, which inquires about ourselves, ‘Where am I now?’ ‘What could arise within my mind, will it be familiar or different?’ ‘Where will I end up on this wandering?’ The wandering journey is therefore both an outside activity as well as an inside process. You pay your money for your tickets on the bus or the train and the journey takes you on its own path; looking out the window you can also observe both the passing countryside and the travelling of your mind. As Nicolas Bouvier notes in his book on his journey to the Kyber Pass: “Travelling outgrows its motives. It proved sufficient in itself. You think you are making the trip, but soon it is making you – or unmaking you.”<sup>10</sup> Any kind of journey has the potential of throwing you onto yourself in a different way. It can remove many of the everyday worries of life that we carry around but then fills it up again with issues of the moment. A journey’s process can move us from the familiarity of our habitual ways into a new view of those habits as well a putting down of those usual patterns of our self.

There always is a relationship between the context of where we are at any moment and the process of what is going on in our mind and our memory. For in this process one moment leads to another and we move in some way and travel from where we have been to where we believe we are going. At each point on our route what happens is that a small occurrence or some object in a place becomes a stimulus for remembering and a stimulus to curiosity. These things interact with each other, so we wonder about the relationship of ourselves to these stimuli.

‘Why did I think that?’ ‘Where does that memory in this place take me?’ ‘Why is it like that?’ ‘How did this come to be?’ In this way each occurrence and each place becomes the centre of the universe, it becomes the middle of the compass and also the direction away from it. This process can be determined by serendipity, sometimes by happenstance and sometimes by our conscious or even unconscious intention. We very easily move from the landscape in which we are physically situated into the landscape of our mind. Indeed these are not separate places, there is no boundary between them, they are part and parcel of each other, always ongoing, always changing, always reflecting our self in the universe. Inner and outer geography have no separation.

Each place and each occurrence offers us a sign post to where the next moment may be, but it is important to know that the signpost is also just a signpost pointing nowhere, as the sign went missing long ago. As we say in our Chan Hall Opening Ceremony:

*The fool by the signless signpost  
Stands pointing out the way.*

So to be present in any place at any time, our investigation is to find out where we are. Then when a sense of that arises, our curiosity is pricked such that the signpost does suggest the next place and a route evolves for us to follow.

### Framing a story

As we allow ourselves to be in a particular place, everything that arises demands a story. We like stories, as they fill in the gaps; they give us some confidence in the difference between inner and outer worlds. This is be-

cause they are external frames for the process of putting together bits and pieces of ourselves. As David Loy says, “The foundational story we tell and retell is the self, supposedly separate and substantial yet composed of the stories “I” identify with and attempt to live.”<sup>11</sup> Basho’s journeys are made up of a collection of stories with their haiku. Stories act as stepping stones on journeys and indeed there is a way of considering each journey as merely a number of stories that have been assembled in some order. The order may come from the inner geography or indeed the outer geography and when they coalesce into a journey, a sense of the wholeness of the narrative and the narrator arises.

It is not just ourselves that we meet, for on any kind of journey we naturally connect with others. “Just as writing allows us to read the words of someone who is absent so roads make it possible to trace the route of the absent. Roads are a record of those who have gone before and to follow them is to follow people who are no longer there.”<sup>12</sup> In any place we stand, it therefore places us in a community, an actual one, a historic one and the one we create in our own mind. Here our journey thoughts set us on a course of sharing and it is in shared memories, shared places, shared narratives that our community stories arise and by this means we come to feel a part of each other. It is in the recognition of sharing that we move from the ‘me’ to the ‘us’ and it is in the recognition of our component nature that we move from the ‘us’ to the ‘all of us and everything’ with each of us merely being a part of something bigger. By this means all our journeys are destined to find their meaning by intersecting this great journey. Naturally we find and construct insights and meaning for ourselves as we travel in this way, however the nature of these self-revelations do not have a lasting character. Nicolas

Bouvier is again aware of this process and its impermanence. “That day I really believed that I had grasped something and that henceforth my life changed. But insights cannot be held for ever. Like water, the world ripples across you and for a while you take on its colours. Then it recedes, and leaves you face-to-face with the void you carry inside yourself, confronting the central inadequacy of soul which you must learn to rub shoulders with and to combat, and which is paradoxically maybe our surest impetus.”<sup>13</sup>

### Destination?

With this process of openness, a journey can become one of refuge or respite as well as an exploration. Each journey can begin in a different way, with the idea of the route being stimulated by a personal story or an historic event or just pure curiosity. The route can be somewhat serendipitous but it will be a route followed from a starting point to where a decision has been made for it to be concluded. There is a way in which each route develops its own meaning. There can always be distractions, trips down dead ends, long ways around and just going down some narrow lane to see where it gets to. An outline of a physical wandering is identical to the wandering and movement of memory and of mind. At some point we must end up somewhere in order to think of the next step but in that ending up our mind can take us down its own cul-de-sac. In taking such journeys there is the constant meeting of yourself.<sup>14</sup> Again Nicolas Bouvier lets us know what such journeys entail, “Carried along on the hum of the motor and the countryside passing by, the journey itself flows through you and clears your head. Ideas one had held onto without reason depart; others however are readjusted and

settle like pebbles at the bottom of the stream. There is no need to interfere; the road does the work for you. One would like to think that it stretches out like this, dispensing its good offices, not just to the ends of India but even further until death.”<sup>15</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Dogen trans Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Looi, 2005. *The True Dharma Eye. Zen Master Dogen Three Hundred Koans*. Shambala. Boston.
- 2 Dogen *op cit* p. 409.
- 3 Makoto Ueda, 1982, *Matsuo Basho*. Kodansha International. London p26.
- 4 Makoto Ueda, *op cit* p. 27.
- 5 Ken Jones, 2006, *The Parsley Bed – Haiku Stories*. Pilgrims Press. Aberystwyth.
- 6 Matsuo Basho, trans Sam Hamil, 1998, *Narrow Road To The Interior*. Shambala. Boston p. xx
- 7 John Muir, 2013 *My First Summer in the Sierra*. J. Missouri, Saint Louis Missouri p. 125
- 8 Matsuo Basho *op cit* p. xx
- 9 Rebecca Solnit, 2006, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Canongate. Edinburgh. p. 117
- 10 Nicolas Bouvier, trans Robyn Marsack, 2007, *The Way Of The World*. Eland London p. 13
- 11 David R. Loy, 2010, *The World Is Made Of Stories*. Wisdom. Boston. p. vii
- 12 Rebecca Solnit, 2014, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Granta. London. p. 72
- 13 Nicolas Bouvier, *op cit* p. 317
- 14 Descriptions of journeys I have undertaken can be found at <http://eddyswanderings.blogspot.com/>
- 15 Nicolas Bouvier, *op cit* p. 47

## THIS

JANE SPRAY

Listen-stop...

up there, black shape, moving  
among bare beech branches  
cawing sound, echoes through...  
distant dogs bark,  
space and stillness  
slowly opens  
deep into one...

Slowly, back down from Crabtree Hill,  
off the track, a fallen tree,  
moss, tears, laughter  
don't know what I am  
don't know what love is

just this, just this,  
and this:

the  
    little  
        foamy  
wandering  
    stream...



PHOTO: TONY GILL



HUANGSHAN

JANE SPRAY

Yellow Mountain

the  
sound.....

*pin*e*s in the wind*

the emperor long gone  
through shifting mists

now tourists  
in yellow rain capes  
swarm and fidget  
bugs on your flanks  
twisting up down  
on granite stairways  
edged with gaping rustic balustrade

magnolia's white flame

stone  
monkey  
perched on a rock

pine  
reeling off  
from a cliff

we peer  
over edges  
on windy ledges  
cling to hats

so much space  
between

a lens cap falls  
space

wait for

## TEACHING MINDFULNESS IN SCHOOLS

SIÂN THOMAS

A few years ago, I was approached by the Headteacher in my school to ask if I would be interested in teaching Mindfulness to our students. I am a science teacher but was already known as a regular meditator and had ‘come out’ as a Buddhist at work by leading a Chapel service about Buddhism, so my Head felt I was best placed to lead this initiative in the school. When I replied that I didn’t really know much about how to teach Mindfulness she promptly told me that was not a problem as she knew exactly who I should go to and was willing to pay for me to train with them. This started the ball rolling for my training with the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP), and has led to me teaching over 300 girls in my school and 120 year 6 children in the local primary school to date, plus a familiarity with a huge range of strange acronyms.

A few months later I found myself sitting in a room full of strangers starting the 8-week MBSR course (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) as a prerequisite for attending the training course to learn to teach .b (or dot be as it is pronounced). There are a few different organisations leading Mindfulness in schools in the UK and the Mindfulness in Schools Project is just one, but is fast becoming the largest and most well known. It has a course for primary school children called Paws b, for secondary children, called .b and programmes for teachers to teach other teachers and for parents. This is the organisation with which I have studied and trained, and they believe that it is important for mindfulness to be learned from experienced meditators. As a result they insist that all those



attending their programmes have completed, as a minimum, the standard 8-week course of MBSR. This is the reason I was in a room listening to a softly spoken woman inviting me to eat a raisin mindfully and then discuss it with the people sitting next to me.

The 8-week course was an interesting contrast to my experiences with Chan and meditation up to that point. My resistance to these practices, which I viewed as lesser than Chan, and the assumptions I had about the secular mindfulness movement in general have been challenging throughout the training and as I've continued through to teaching. But as time has gone on and I have become more confident in the programme and in my own 'voice' to teach it I have found each lesson I teach has been as important a learning experience for me as it is for the young people in my class. Seeing the effect it has had on the young people I've taught, I've come to believe that Mindfulness has an important role to play in the way the teachings of Buddhism can be offered secularly to those who are put off by the unfamiliarity of the practice of meditation or the trappings of religiosity.

But I get ahead of myself. After the 8-week programme there was a compulsory 6-month wait before I could attend the training week. During this time I was expected to meditate daily for half an hour, and to write an essay of between 1000 and 2000 words explaining why I would be suitable for the training course, which was a little like applying for a job, but in the end was not as difficult as I expected. Meditating daily was also not a challenge as by this time this was a part of my daily routine. However it was advised that I try all the different practices I had learnt in the Mindfulness course, which to be honest I found much harder and mostly did not do. I found visualisation meditations very

stressful as I could not imagine a mountain and feel myself grounded like the mountain and nor did I relate well to guided body scans or other meditations. In retrospect there may have been benefits in listening to other people guiding meditations a little more, but mostly I found it was not a problem for teaching the Mindfulness .b or Paws b courses. Eventually, after all these hoops were jumped I was able to attend the 5-day training course to learn to teach .b.

The course was fantastic and the training to prepare us to teach the programme was meticulously planned. It is now 10 years since MiSP was started by Richard Burnett and Chris Cullen. They were both teachers who had completed Mindfulness courses themselves, felt the benefit it gave them, and wanted to offer it to the young people in their schools. There was no national programme then so they set about planning and trialling their .b programme. It is now in its 10th version. It consists of 10 sessions, each one hour long. There are powerpoint presentations with short videos or activities to engage children and young people, along with short practices, the length and depth of which increase gently as the course progresses. As it is intended to be part of the regular curriculum in schools it is written knowing that not all students would have chosen to be learning this, so it is clearly secular, invitational by its nature and encourages us as teachers to allow students to make their own exploration at their own pace. Ground rules of expected behaviour are agreed at the start, making it clear that no-one has to do anything they do not want to, but that allows those who do wish to try it to feel comfortable and supported in trying.

The lessons are well organised and very experiential in nature. From the very beginning there are short practices each lesson with time to dis-



photo: Claire Martin

cuss together as a group or in small groups how the students found each practice. The idea is to normalise all experiences and to encourage an attitude of curiosity and kindness to oneself. After a while the lessons get deeper and look at how our minds tend to rumination and worry, but how we might have a choice in how to react or respond. By lesson 6 we are consciously looking at how to notice thoughts without being carried away by them, or at least noticing when we have been carried away. Lesson 7 really challenges students to stay, with curiosity, in a difficult situation by passing round a Shockball, which will randomly give them a small electric shock (for younger children we use something less scary!), In lesson 8 there is a focus on gratitude and noticing the good in our lives. Then we finish with students writing a letter to their future selves, which I keep and return to them up to a year later.

After the first few courses I asked the students to fill in a questionnaire so I could see the impact it might be having on them. I was thrilled to see that over 72% had found the course useful and wanted to do more of the practices. Some of my regular science classes ask me to start with a meditation (perhaps they just want to avoid work!) and the younger ones in particular take well to it. Some continue it privately either using the same practices or apps such as Headspace, which our school subscribes to for their use. Recently one of my Year 7 girls (age 11) came to me at the end of a different lesson to ask about how to not think while meditating, which brought up a very interesting discussion and showed that she and her friend have obviously been practising since we completed the course over 6 months ago.

Of course it's not all a bed of roses running a mindfulness course for teenagers. Teenagers have a tendency to act like, well, teenagers. Standing at the front of a room of thirty 14-year-olds one particular Tuesday afternoon just before the end of the school day I remember again that I really don't enjoy teaching lesson 5: mindful movement. Getting a roomful of them to sit still and focus inwardly when one or two get giggly and bored requires all of my self-control not to get cross and tell them off. Walking around the room and quietly catching the eyes of the miscreant usually does the trick. But mindful movement requires getting all of them to walk slowly in a form of *kinhin*. It's raining outside so my original plan of spreading out over the grass outside has not turned out to be possible so we're walking on two parallel lines in the corridor outside the Head's office. The temptation for them to high-five as they pass each other turns out too strong, despite my regular reminders to "stay in their own bubble". I sigh inwardly and we go back

to the classroom early. Getting angry would spoil the experience for those who are engaging and focused so it is a difficult balance and sometimes you have to cut your losses. Back in their seats we discuss why it was so difficult and they surprise me with their self-awareness of their reasons and impulses, so I let go of counting this as a failure after all.

Another issue I continue to struggle with is the things I think mindfulness leaves out. There is no explicit discussion of compassion. As a teacher you can bring this out during the discussions, but the mindfulness movement as I've experienced it so far leaves that as an implicit self-discovery rather than a key part of the dharma. Many students struggle with the focus on breathing, noticing how they try to control their breathing and get it 'right'. As this was an issue for me for a long time I am able to connect with them over this and take care in my teaching and meditation guidance to emphasise there being no 'right' experience of body or breath awareness. But given that as mindfulness teachers we can be at any point on this path of discovery ourselves, there are bound to be other teachers who do not recognise this, and equally very likely to be other mindsets or difficulties that I do not recognise.

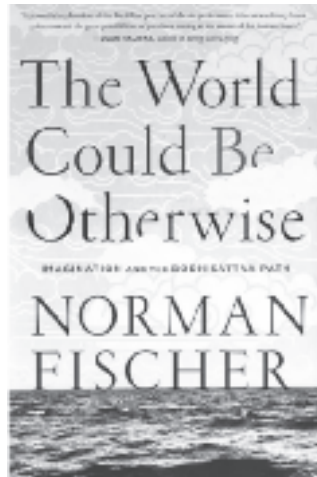
Mindfulness also lacks specific moral discussions. Buddhism, with the precepts and eightfold path, brings that element to the fore, putting a foundation on which to build the experiences. Meanwhile mindfulness focuses on personal development, connecting with the idea of getting better, making ourselves better, as well as reducing our personal suffering. One of the key ideas on the first lesson of Paws Be is that the pre-frontal cortex allows us to concentrate, make choices and be our best. These are helpful messages for children, but sit slightly uncomfortably

for me alongside my own practice of letting go of the need to be better or to improve or to strive.

All this said, I have seen that there is a direct benefit to the students I teach as they become aware of this very natural way of being, and begin to investigate for themselves how their own minds work. I have found teaching the younger ones particularly rewarding as they are generally much more open and able to connect immediately with the practices. It has certainly been eye-opening to see, from the inside, how the mindfulness movement is growing and becoming more accepted and mainstream. The misunderstandings surrounding mindfulness come to the fore but are open to discussion now in the staff room and workplace. The Deputy Head in my school once told me she is terribly envious of the serene way I walk around school, which seemed terribly funny to me as at the time I was very stressed. Teaching mindfulness allows a new generation of people to get a taste of the dharma without being put off by its religiosity or history and to give an experiential understanding of what it means. My students know I am a practising Buddhist and that this is where my interest in meditation comes from, so the door is open if they want to know more. Perhaps they may choose to return to it later in life in one form or another, in which case, it is a gift I am happy to give.

## BOOK REVIEW: THE WORLD COULD BE OTHERWISE BY NORMAN FISCHER

JEREMY WOODWARD



This book had been winking at me since the beginning of the year. For several years, Norman Fischer's writing in *Tricycle* and elsewhere has been a source of pleasure to me. He writes lucidly and with a poet's eye and phrase. Eventually, a couple of months after it was published, I gave in, bought this book, devoured it and then just reread it straight away. That's rare for me.

Its subtitle, "Imagination and the Bodhisattva Path", gives some of its flavour. As a poet, Norman is very aware that words can be both useful and useless, often at the same time. He addresses this paradox and difficulty several times in the book. "Imagination is a warm breeze that loosens up what seems rigid and cold" (p.28) enabling one to overcome these obstacles. For him, "Imagination isn't an escape from reality. Imagination deepens and enriches reality, adding texture, depth, dimension, feeling and possibility. The truth is, all that is creative and ennobling in us ultimately sources in the imagination. Without imagination reality is too flat, too matter-of-fact, lacking in colour and fervour. "To go beyond the possible to the impossible, we need to imagine it." (p.3). The book addresses the aspiration of the bodhisattva path. The four great vows of the Energy Bunnies of Buddhism (bodhisattvas) "are perfectly impossible, so we know we can't take them as ordinary goals. They are imaginative goals, taken in an imagi-

native world by imaginative beings. ... Such vows point out a direction and inspire our feeling and action, but they don't pressure us." (p.17)

After this point of departure, Norman examines the six paramitas with great compassion based on a lifetime's practice. Generosity can be taking care of oneself as well as others; Ethical Conduct is rooted in kindness to oneself and others. Without Patience (he can't find a better word, whose limitations he explores, for *Kshanti*; is it just "keeping on keeping on"?) the other paramitas will eventually fail. Joyful Effort (*Virya*) includes pithy explorations of vows, courage and hope. Meditation is seen in the context of other similar Sanskrit words and then explored very practically via *samatha* and *vipassana*. Finally Understanding (*Prajna*) addresses at some length "words", why he uses this word for *prajna* and, not for the first time, emptiness – this time in depth.

And there is so much more. Each chapter ends with considerations of Dogen's take on each paramita together with the relevant verses from both Tokme Zongpo's *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva* and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines* rounded off with Meditation and Daily Life Practices. Such richness entwined with personal reflections and practical suggestions. There are so many highlights for me that my copy is festooned with markers and highlighting. As it is not a text book, there is no index so, if you find yourself regularly feeling "Oh Yes!", the advice would be to use whatever marking system you like to use or start a new one.

Perhaps the biggest shift on first reading was his exposition of the 16 Bodhisattva vows which, for the first time, I understood in their lay completeness. Now, what was that practical advice on handling anger?...

*The World Could be Otherwise*. Norman Fischer, 2019, Shambala Publications

## 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 image that comes to mind when I try to sum up the retreat is of a triple: a three-legged stool, a tripod, a triptych. This represents what were for me the three components of the retreat: the huatou, the brushwork, and the sitting. Each locked into the other.

I can't remember the exact words of the huatou but in essence Joshu asks Nansen how to pursue The Way. Nansen tells him that making efforts to pursue the way will not work – that will drive it further off. What then is to be done, asks Joshu. Thinking is delusion, says Nansen. Not thinking is blankness. The familiar Zen dilemma. But Nansen hasn't finished... "Ordinary Mind is the Way" he says. This too is pretty delphic. What is 'ordinary mind'?

We met this dilemma again in the brushwork, in a slightly different form. When the instruction has been given and you have practised a little on newspaper you come to the moment when you are faced with a blank white sheet. In your hand you have a brush loaded with ink.

What are you going to do? If you think about the ideograms and how you are going to do them you fall into a kind of paralysis. Too much technique. If you don't think about them then you will simply have some marks on paper at the end which bear little relation to what you have practised. Not enough technique. Neither is satisfactory.

You come to some kind of resolution of this dilemma in action. The energy builds up inside you until it is irresistible and you bring the brush down onto the paper. From that point things get a little easier: the logjam is moving. Day to day mind is still there because it is commenting as you go along; it is whispering that this bit is good and that isn't and there's not long to go now and so on. For me, it could not stop the flow but I imagine the danger of paralysis reasserting itself is always there.

When you sit down to start a session of sitting meditation the dilemma is there again. If you think too much about what you are doing then you are not just sitting. If you don't think about what you are doing then you are just drifting.

A comparison which comes to me is with learning a foreign language. You have to learn some grammar at the start. You may become very good at that – the structure of the language. You pass all your exams with top marks. Then you go to the country where the language is spoken and realise you are incapable of going into a café and buying a cup of coffee. Your head is stuffed full of technique. After a day or two you accept that you simply have to throw yourself in, forget the grammar and start speaking. The natives, after all, are not worrying about their subjunctives.

Maybe this is what Nansen was getting at with his phrase 'ordinary mind'. It is that point where you start to bring the brush down; where you start to speak hesitatingly in a foreign language; where you stop worrying about whether you are doing the meditation right. What you are doing is by its very nature right because it balances out thinking and not thinking.

When I reflected after the retreat it occurred to me that this point, this moment, is not so uncommon in daily life. We just fail to notice it. I realised this in the session at the end of the retreat where each participant speaks about their experience. Just as I was about to speak I realised that this was exactly the same feeling as with the brushwork. You are poised. There is silence. You are going to fill it – not with marks, but with remarks. You pause, the energy comes and you start to speak. I jotted down other everyday examples as I sat in a café after the retreat. This is what I came up with.

- Knifepoint denting fruit skin as you start to peel
- Turning the ignition key - the cough of the motor
- Your foot on the first step of the staircase
- The striker rising to the crossed ball
- The resistance of the bicycle pedal as you start to move
- Dodgems – the moment before impact
- A spanner against a tight nut - you begin to turn it
- The moment of diving into the swimming pool
- The tram arrives and its doors open with a hiss; stepping forward

Each of these seems to be characterised by a minor build-up of energy which demands expression in the physical world. It may seem to be a split-second but I wonder... Here is a haiku.

*I turn a doorknob  
knowing the hinge creaks  
sudden silence*

At some point during the retreat the phrase “mind on mind” came to

me. I don't know whether I have read it somewhere or whether it was just spontaneous. It's not entirely clear to me what it means but the meditative experience often seems to consist of watcher and watched and these can disappear just as speaker and language can become one; or, presumably, artist and brush can become one. In the end, it's not hard to be yourself. I really enjoyed the retreat..

## RETREAT REPORT 2

I arrived not knowing what the retreat was going to be like. I knew we would investigate the question “who am I?” but preferred to find out how once I got there to avoid expectations or anxiety.

I was very much looking forward to the luxury of having everything organised for me. I would not have to make any decisions, just follow instructions and bells. This time, I didn't even wear a watch and it all seemed to work quite nicely. Being self-employed, I'm often overworked so not having to deal with emails, phone calls, commuting as well as housework and family life meant I was actually free to stop and take a look at the person actually doing all these things, day in day out. I had a vague idea of what I wanted to work on but didn't want to force it into my meditation. However, quite unexpectedly, it did come up in the communication exercises but also during interviews, sitting, work and even eating meditation.

I was brought up in a house with a very strict Catholic father and a mother with very ambiguous religious beliefs in a very traditional society which I fled over 15 years ago. It was a loving family but I never really found my place in that sort of bubble in which I lived. I've lived with very strong conditioning of who I should be, who I should be with and



what I should do with my life. Meditation and Buddhism had no place in that life.

I found the exercises of repeating over and over “Who am I?” really helped untangle these conditioned thoughts from how I really feel and see them clearly for what they are: other people's baggage that I've made my own. During an interview, Simon, who has a wonderful sense of humour said something like “stop taking other people's stuff!” when we were talking about it. I encountered so much pain and resistance to the idea of taking refuge which would mean really letting go of all this “stuff” that wasn't mine but that was running my life.

On day 3, I got all sorts of physical ailments: sore throat, upset tummy, pounding headache, brain fog...I was clumsy and uncoordinated. It was quite embarrassing in my interactions with others. However, I decided to stay and “ride the monster” instead of letting it ride me. This led to a wonderfully calm sense of lightness and resolution on day 4. I also managed to not dwell too much on this and continue paying attention to other details that came up during practice so more cans of worms turned up for me to take home and work on.

My refuge ceremony on day 5 was perfect because it was the opposite of what I had imagined: no fancy dress or social pressures. Just me affirming what I know in my heart that I am, and accepting “this is my path”. It has been for nearly two years now, only now I can embrace it fully. I've been home for nearly three weeks and this feeling of lightness still persists. It's like something very deep has shifted. I've found fewer excuses not to meditate and I have found that it's actually true that the more you do it, the easier it becomes. I sometimes find myself wondering if this feeling will go away soon as I might still be in a sort of post-

retreat state but that self-doubt is also something I've learnt to just take into my practice, as it comes.

I'm very grateful for Simon and Dan's guidance, generosity and support as well as that of our tenzos, time keepers and guest master in helping me in this process.



### 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](http://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
- Contact details for local meditation groups

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### Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always happy to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc.

For further information on submitting a contribution please contact the editors at [editor@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:editor@westernchanfellowship.org)

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### Forthcoming Retreats in 2020

#### WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

*Thursday 9 April to Tuesday 14 April*

Leader: Simon Child

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

#### ILLUMINATING THE MIND

*Saturday 23 May to Saturday 30 May*

Leader: Jake Lyne

Venue: Bala Brook Retreat Centre, Dartmoor

#### INVESTIGATING KOANS

*Saturday 6 June to Saturday 13 June*

Leader: Fiona Nuttall

Venue: Maenllwyd Retreat Centre, Wales

# INVESTIGATING KOANS



MAENLLWYD RETREAT CENTRE,  
WALES, UK

JUNE 6<sup>TH</sup> – 13<sup>TH</sup> 2020

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

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

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*You are a seeker.  
Delight in the mastery  
of your hands and your feet,  
of your words and your thoughts.  
Delight in meditation  
and in solitude.  
Compose yourself, be happy.  
You are a seeker...*

THE DHAMMAPADA

