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New Chan Forum No.6: Winter 1992

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PRACTISING MIND

The Bristol Chan Group is moving from strength to strength. Our weekly meditation evenings at the Iyengar Yoga Centre in Bristol are well attended. Group sitting is an important adjunct to personal practice and we warmly invite you to come along. John has inspired us with his talks on the Heart Sutra. We publish an edited version of his initial lecture in this issue.

This small journal of The Bristol Chan Group is beginning to gather a distinct readership and to attract thoughtful criticism and comment. Discussions about Zen and Christianity have been provoked by the articles in our last edition. Some of us hope to meet at the House of Prayer in Westbury on Trym to continue the dialogue. Buddhists, Christians and 'those who are not quite sure' attend our group which is enriched by the differing ideas and experience. As Linda Fisher says in her letter inside, "The bonus will be discovering that, understood with a pure heart, all Spiritual teachings spring from one source."

The weekend retreats at the Mendip Painting Centre, Rickford continue to be popular. In October John led a weekend which included a talk with slides of his recent extraordinary journey to the sacred Mount Kailash in Tibet. We publish the talk he gave us during this retreat, "Death and the Sky." Many of the group have connections with the 'caring professions' and this essay will have particular meaning for those so involved. So too, the Dharma View from Shifu entitled "Chan and Psychoanalysis".

The retreat reports make extraordinary reading. Each retreat experience is unique but a common thread of honesty, discovery, wonder and ordinariness runs through them. We are grateful to the authors.

Details of retreats at the Maenllwyd in Wales and at Rickford are published at the end of this newsletter. We are particularly pleased to welcome Martine Batchelor from Sharpham House, who will be leading a weekend at Rickford next year.

DHARMA VIEW

Master Sheng-yen

CH'AN AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

This dialogue is reprinted with permission from the Institute of Chung Hua Buddhist Culture in New York. It was first published in Chan Magazine Volume 12, Number 4, Fall 1992.

Question: How is Chan similar or different from psychotherapy? Is the relationship between student and Master similar to that of patient and therapist?

Shifu: There are similarities and differences. The goals of Chan are to eliminate ignorance and vexation, to see in to one's self nature and to realize bodhi. We can say the goal of psychotherapy is to eliminate or alleviate a persons internal conflicts, confusion, contradictions and sense of helplessness, etc. Thus they are similar in that they address issues of the mind, and that their goal is to help people come to a level of clarity. The difference is in the degree of clarity. Psychology doesn't speak of self-nature and spiritual awakening. It tries to help a person become more stable and to understand and deal with his or her problems. If therapy is successful a person can become somewhat wiser and happier.

Not having studied Western psychology and psychoanalysis in depth, I do not have a good understanding of what therapists do. I am more qualified to talk about Chan. It is better to talk to psychologists about therapy. With this in mind I will try to answer questions.

Student: In Chan, how does one deal with personal problems? Does one just treat the symptom or does one not bother with it at all? The advice I am usually given is to ignore whatever arises in my mind while I meditate. Causes and conditions and causes and consequences are many and complex, so that it is difficult to find the direct source of a problem. Could one say that the Chan attitude is: If you can't find a cause, don't bother with it?

Shifu: Chan does not address specific psychological problems and their causes. The Chan Master will rarely analyze a personal situation. Rather, the Chan Master leads people to pose their own questions. When people are restless, they should find the questions and answers themselves. It is for students to realize that, after all, problems exist because they are attached to a particular idea of self. People are creating problems for themselves. Therefore, they must come to realize and resolve the problems themselves. Depending on the role of the therapist in various schools of psychology, Chan is either similar or different in this matter.

There are two categories of practice. One is the practice of no method and the other is practice with a method. The first can be summed up by the Sixth Patriarch's words, "Thinking of neither good nor evil, where is your mind right now?" This approach ultimately leads to the Ts'ao-tung (Soto) sect's method of silent illumination. Practice

with a method may be based on gongan, hua-t'ou, or counting the breaths. In the practice of no method, the practitioner maintains awareness of thoughts as they arise, but does not respond to them. Eventually, thoughts lessen until wisdom manifests. In the practice with methods, the student also ignores vexing thoughts, but by turning the mind towards a method, the mind becomes focused one-pointedly; eventually, the method itself will disappear and wisdom will manifest. The goals are the same: the meditator realizes that the problems that cause restlessness and instability are rooted in and created by the illusory self. For Chan, analysis and explanation are not necessary.

In some forms of psychology, the therapist engages in dialogue to find out what has been happening in the patient's mind. Patient and therapist aspire to come to some understanding of the problem. Chan Masters typically do not do this. Therapists may try to determine patients' problems by associating symptoms with the systems or theories they are versed in. This is not always reliable because everyone has a different life story and experiences. Therapists may believe their analysis and approach are objective, but they may be wrong.

Furthermore, to rely fully on science is limiting. There also exist things not measurable and observable. For example, therapists cannot cope with problems deriving from karmic force or demonic obstructions because their theories do not address these types of problems. The Chan Master does not try to solve personality problems. Students are given methods and they deal with their own problems.

There are people with a variety of psychological problems that cannot be helped by Chan. However, when they undergo therapy, they may come away from each session with a feeling of ease or consolation. The problems may not be solved but there is temporary relief. That is not to say that therapy is useless, but for many patients therapy can become a crutch to get through the day or week. Real progress is never made.

Everybody should be able to practice Chan, but there are those who are not interested. They do not have the confidence or are not willing to make the effort. Until these factors change, these people simply cannot and will not be able to resolve their problems through Chan.

I guide students in their practice. I really do not have to put on the hat of a therapist, but there are people who have been on several retreats and have not solved certain persistent problems. Therefore, during retreat interviews, I may ask questions and play the role of therapist, even though I have no formal training. I base my teaching and guidance on my own understanding of the human mind and Buddhadharma. For this reason some retreatants may feel they have gained benefits similar to those of therapy. What I do is not typically Chan, however. The typical role of the Chan Master is to throw the problem back at the practitioner, with the advice to just continue with the practice.

Some people tell me all their problems as if they want me to read their autobiography. I don't have time to listen to all of it, so I say, "I don't want to know the details, so I'll give you a method to use." Here is an analogy. There is a kind of parasite which attaches to the body and sucks blood. Suppose you find your body covered with these parasites.

One way to help yourself is to pick them off one by one. That would take a long time and require much effort. A much simpler solution is to throw salt on them, and the parasites will fall off. Chan is like the salt treatment for parasites. It does not address every individual problem.

To deal with problems in each instance is to try and remove the parasites one by one. It is messy and sometimes dangerous. While you are picking one off, the rest of them have time to penetrate further. Or you may only have stunned them; or worse, you may cut one into three pieces only to create more parasites because they can regenerate. Psychological problems can be like this. When you think you have finished dealing with a problem, it can reappear in another form, or in many other forms. There is also the danger of parasites getting on the therapist. It is better and easier to throw salt on the body.

For this reason many therapists have expressed interest in Chan and Buddhism. Numerous analysts and therapists have come here to practise and have developed more insight. They tell me that Chan reinforces and supplements their methods. A therapist incorporating Buddhist teaching is like a tiger with wings.

Student: I have been in therapy for ten years. There is a concept in psychoanalysis called denial. For example, somebody in an office yells at everyone and then thinks that no one likes him. He doesn't realize that he is causing people to dislike him. He is totally unaware of his problem. That is denial. Is this like ignoring your problems in Chan?

Shifu: It is not the same. With Chan you are aware of what you are doing or thinking or saying. It is just that you detach yourself from the problem. That is the method to use. Most problems are due to attaching to a view of self or a recurring thought. If you ignore the thought and do not respond to it, eventually it will cease to come up and bother you. For most problems coming up while meditating, ignoring them is the best method. If you have another method for dealing with those problems, then use that method.

If, during retreat you encounter problems and don't know how to deal with them, it's probably best to ignore them. Or you could ask me for guidance. I may also tell you to ignore the problem, or I may give you a method to deal with it.

Student: Should this way of dealing with problems while meditating carry over into daily life as well?

Shifu: If you meditate on a regular basis, yes. I am not saying that people should go through life ignoring and denying their problems and difficulties, but most problems are not serious. By dwelling on them, we blow them out of proportion. These minor problems are best ignored. Problems that have been around for a long time and show up in many forms need to be addressed. Such problems need special attention. If you need help, I will listen and perhaps offer guidance, or you could go to a therapist.

Student: Psychotherapy usually deals with neuroses, not psychoses, so things like demonic obstructions do not usually come up, although I am sure there is a lot of stuff from people's past karma that comes up and influences problems.

Psychotherapy deals with motivation. If you are supposed to write to a friend and you procrastinate for no apparent reason, then there might be something blocking your motivation. That's neurosis. Psychosis is when you cannot deal with reality even on a simple level.

Good therapists do not tell you your problems. They try to get you to realize what your problems are. They also deal quite often with early childhood. A child who had difficulties dealing with parents may find similar but magnified problems arising in adulthood.

Finally, psychotherapy is in the realm of small self or ego. It's been helpful for me. It helps me get through everyday problems. But I couldn't exist only with therapy. It's like running around in a dark room bumping into objects. Therapy gives me some bearings, but I am still in a dark room with the objects.

Shifu: Thank you for enlightening me on the role of psychotherapy. I like it that therapists allow patients to figure out their own problems. I also like your last remark. One can get a lot of benefit from therapy, but if one depends exclusively on it, it's still like running around in a darkened room. Therapy has its uses but it is not enough.

Models of therapy are usually developed by a single person. That person's life, experience and karma influence what he or she thinks and feels. Therefore, a psychological model is often a study of the mind of its inventor, and not necessarily an accurate picture of people in general. Also, therapies are often based on scientific method, so they have to do with things that can be observed, measured, proven. If it cannot be proven or disproven, it is not science. Therefore, it is difficult for analysts to accept things like demonic obstructions and karmic force.

On the other hand, things like hearing voices are not necessarily caused by demonic obstructions. It is useful to know something about psychotherapy. Some who cannot benefit now from Chan, would be wise to seek help from therapists. I have sometimes advised people to go into therapy before attempting intense practice. There is no harm in meditating an hour or so each day, but going on intensive retreats is another story. Chan and psychotherapy can work hand in hand.

Student: I am still not clear on one issue. How is the Chan way of ignoring the problem different from denying or repressing the problem.

Shifu: One does not ignore problems in the ordinary sense. You do not repress your thoughts and desires. You do not force them out of your mind. You allow thoughts to enter your mind and leave your mind. Be aware of them but do not follow them. This is difficult to do, and only people who practice diligently on a regular basis can develop the clarity and will power to do this.

You cannot make thoughts and desires go away. They will come, in one form or another - disguised, in dreams, intermittently, in floods. Meditators must use their experience and knowledge of Buddhadharma to identify and come to terms with their problems. Also, it is best to perform some type of repentance practice, such as prostrations, to help

reduce self centredness. These are all useful techniques, but there are no guarantees they will work all the time.

Meditation makes you clearer as to when thoughts and feelings arise as well as the motivation behind them. You begin to see the roots and seeds of vexation within you, and with such clarity comes the ability to deal with them better. You can refrain from acting on these thoughts and feelings. If you don't water weeds, they won't grow. If you do, then your garden will be over run. Some people don't mind this. Many weeds produce beautiful flowers. At least, you will know who is responsible for the consequences.

Awareness brings control and power, power to deal with your vexations. You may give in to them anyway, because you can't do otherwise or because you want to give in. There is the saying that ignorance is bliss. Those who are completely controlled by their thoughts and desires have no idea why they do what they do. They say, "This is who I am," and suffer the consequences time and time again. Some blame others. Others just resign themselves to a life of suffering.

Hopefully practitioners are different. Hopefully, meditation, repentance and the Dharma can bring one greater self-awareness, self-control and humility. However, Buddhists are not perfect and the spiritual path is not always smooth, straight or clearly marked. That is why what we do is called practice. For all of us there will be times when the flood comes. The best advice I can give for times like that, is to keep your mind on your practice, learn how to swim, keep your head above water, and get on to higher ground. Learn how to survive your own self-created floods.

THE PRAJNAPARAMITA HEART SUTRA

Introduction and background to the Sutra

Edited text of a lecture given by Dr John Crook to the Bristol Chan Group 4th, November 1992. This is the first lecture of a series and will be continued in future issues.

When the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara
was coursing in the deep Prajnaparamita,
he perceived that all five skandas are empty,
thereby transcending all sufferings.
Sariputra, form is not other than emptiness
and emptiness not other than form.
Form is precisely emptiness
and emptiness precisely form.

The Heart Sutra is certainly the most important scripture in Zen. It summarises and captures some of the root notions which are fundamental to the teaching in Zen. The original versions are in Sanskrit. However it is well known to the Japanese, the Chinese and also to the Tibetans. It is not a scripture of the Southern school. It is a scripture of the second turning of the wheel of the Dharma when the Mahayana or Great Vehicle scriptures began to be produced. In fact the Heart Sutra is a summary of an enormous body of literature known as the Prajnaparamita Sutras.

There was at one time in India a tremendous number of scriptures which were written to try and convey the Great New Idea of the time. This was the heart of the Great Vehicle the Mahayana, namely, the voidness of absolutely everything. This was not just selflessness or the absence of self in the person or the mind but corresponding emptiness of the entire cosmos. Few were able to understand this emptiness which does not mean nothingness. (Buddhism has never been nihilistic.) In these scriptures there was a presentation and exploration of this concept of emptiness and the practices associated with it.

The scriptures were collected together by the monks into a large book known as the Scripture of Great Wisdom. This was enormous and because it was really a packaging together of numerous repetitions it became completely incomprehensible. It was really used for chanting. Nobody actually understood it. After all, emptiness is a difficult thing!

The teachers decided that they had to capture the heart of this vast book and present it in a simple form everybody could understand. Hence the Heart Sutra came to be formulated as a summary of the essential issue. The other summary of a similar kind is known as the Diamond Sutra which comes from a different text but is exploring the same issues.

This literature, the Prajnaparamita, eventually became the subject of extensive philosophical criticism. There was a school of logic which eventually gave rise to the next phase of philosophical criticism, namely the Madhyamaka and Cittamatra schools. These both have their roots back in the Prajnaparamita sutra from which the Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra are the brilliant crystallisations.

But what does the Sutra actually refer to? The versions that we have in Zen are very short ones, the Tibetan one is considerably longer. The Tibetan version gives much more of the content of the original idea. There is an opening statement which sets the scene. The Buddha has gathered all his disciples together on the top of the Vulture Peak mountain, which still exists in India today. They were not only ordinary people, but Brahmins, warriors, monks, Kings and important people of the time. Also strange spirit like creatures, gandharvas and mysterious powerful protectors, mythical beings and dragons. They are described in the Tibetan Scriptures in loving detail. They were all on the mountain waiting for the Buddha to speak. But the Buddha was in deep, deep contemplation. Throughout the sutra he says absolutely nothing. A little character called Sariputra is the one who says "Hey! Can anyone tell me how to practise? How can

"I practice the Great Wisdom Teachings?" Of course, this is a literary device to produce an answer. The Buddha, however, continues in his profound contemplation and meditation and it is left to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara to give an answer.

Here we need to pause a little bit and look in to the background of these writings. The character of this sutra is mythical. In the earlier stories of the Pali school of Southern Buddhism the stories are of remembered events, they are historical and probably close to what actually happened. But the Prajnaparamita Sutras were written several hundred years after the death of the Buddha and are re-inventions. In the Heart Sutra, this idea of a great gathering is being used as a device to present the philosophy and the teaching. Furthermore, Avalokitesvara was not a person. He is a projection of a particular quality of Buddhahood. One of the interesting things that happened over the hundreds of years after the Buddha's death was the shift to the personification of Buddha quality. For example one of the Buddha's qualities is kindness, so people began to think of a particular Buddha of kindness. Many Buddhas begin to appear in the literature who are not historical Buddhas at all but are ideas, such as the Shining One, Resplendent Beauty, and Glorious Insight and Great Wisdom. Some of the scriptures of this period refer to gatherings which are just many names referring to psychological qualities. The most important are the Bodhisattvas or the Buddha's sons, Wisdom Beings who provided the teachings.

Avalokitesvara is a condensation of the idea of compassion or of kindness. This function of the Bodhisattva is hidden in his name, Avalokitesvara. Isvara is one of the titles of Shiva, it means Great Lord. Avalo is a Sanskrit word meaning the One Who Looks Down. This can be interpreted as the mother who looks down at her nursing child or as one who looks down from a high place and sees the suffering of the world and the impossibility of saving everyone. Because he has vowed not to become a Buddha until everyone is saved it also means that he has no hope of ever becoming a Buddha and a tear drops from his eye. Of course this becomes the feminine Tara. These Sanskrit stories are full of a wonderfully rich tapestry of myth making.

In this story up on the Vulture Mountain, Avalokitesvara is sitting and he takes compassion on Sariputra. This is described in the Sanskrit version which has been translated into Tibetan. The Chinese version starts off with the opening lines and the reply. Even the question is not given in this Zen version of the Heart Sutra. Sariputra had asked "How can we practice?" It is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara who answers. Incidentally, this tradition of question and answer still happens today and it happened to me when I was in Hong Kong. On Lan Tao island there is a Buddhist monastery. I visited about two years ago and went to see the Master at the end of the Retreat. His name is Sun Yap. He is a very attractive dynamic old man. I asked him about method. "Ha!" he said, "Method!" as if it was a dirty word. Then he pointed to a scripture hung on the wall and said, "That". That was translated as "Heart Sutra". I then asked "How?" He pointed to another scripture hanging on the opposite wall. This translated as "What is IT?" So the tradition of asking a question and being given the Heart Sutra still exists today.

The Heart Sutra is crystal clear, that is IT. How to Practice. Why didn't the Buddha answer? He just provides presence. It is almost as if at this stage in the development of Buddhism the notion has developed of the Buddha as a Cosmic Buddha rather than a human mind. This was a move to experiencing the Buddha as a Cosmic Mind rather than a natural human teacher.

Now, what was Avalokitesvara doing when he was asked the question? He was coursing in the deep Prajnaparamita. What is this coursing in the Prajnaparamita? This translation is by the scholar Conze and the word coursing suggests someone dynamic, coursing like a greyhound, or flying. The translation from Throssel Hole says, "When one with deepest wisdom of the heart that is beyond discriminative thought, the Holy Lord Great Kanzion Bosattva knew that the Skandhas five were, as they are in their self nature, void, unstained and clean". To understand the Heart Sutra we have to understand that the answer we are given is coming from a person with a very particular experience, that of "oneness with the deepest wisdom of the heart which is beyond all thought".

The word Prajnaparamita comes through in its Sanskrit form. This means "Perfection of insight", the highest, clearest, most straightforward or most important insight. This word insight does not just refer to an intellectual insight like the solving of a mathematical equation. It is not to do with words. This is explicit in Roshi Kennets version which says "Deepest wisdom of the heart which is beyond discriminative thought". In other contexts the word Prajna means no thought, something which is insight. The word is supremely important. The two great principals of Mahayana are Prajna and Karuna. Karuna means compassion and Prajna means insight. In practising Buddhism, the two most important ways to proceed are in the practising of insight (Prajna) and of compassion (Karuna).

Avalokitesvara was experiencing this insight. As practitioners we need to capture in ourselves what this implies and what it means. An insight which is beyond all discriminative thought is like an "Ah Ha!" experience. One in which you suddenly see something - "Ah, it's SO!" If you think about it, the moment when this something strikes has no content. If you capture the moment of "Ha!", in that moment there is wordless insight. Of course you then go on to think about it and put it into words. It's like someone saying to you "Do you see that bird over there?" You look and you look in the trees and can't find it. Then suddenly, you do - and it's "Ah! There it is after all". Again if you capture the moment of realisation when you see through the camouflage, it is not discriminative thought, it is recognition. This insight has a quality of recognition. But what is being recognised? Well the scripture tells us. "When the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was coursing in the deep Prajnaparamita, he perceived that all five skandhas are empty".

What is meant by the Skandhas? The skandhas have been talked about in Buddhism since the days of the Buddha. In the Pali scriptures they are talked about as the Kandhas. They were the Buddha's description of the nature of the mind. He said that the human mind is made up of five parts. Sensation, perception, volition, the samskaras

and consciousness. Sensation is like touch. Perception is knowing that you have been touched. It is a clarification of what something is. For example you know that a noise is a cuckoo calling rather than a cuckoo clock. Volition is willing or wanting or craving or needing. The samskaras are the predispositions which make all of us different, our complexes and the karmic residues of our personal past. Finally consciousness is what makes us aware of all these processes. These five words are a total description of the nature of the mind, a model of the way the mind works.

In the early scriptures of the Buddha, contemplation of the mind is very important. Avalokitesvara's practice comes from the early writings. What he perceives, is that the Skandhas are empty. Coursing in the deep insight means that in the period before the question was asked here is one who is in a profound meditation on the nature of the mind. He has pressed that meditation to such a point that he has complete insight into it and this reveals the emptiness of the mind. We are talking about meditation practice. The answer comes straight from that meditation from the "Coursing in the great Prajnaparamita". Most of the middle part of the Sutra is a direct explanation, in language, of what Avalokitesvara was experiencing in his practice, before the question was asked.

We now have to try and get some notion of what it is like to be in a profound state of meditation which has been pressed so far that you perceive that your mind is empty. We could try to do that with one or two simple exercises, not that we can find out what the Prajnaparamita actually is but we may be able to generate a simulacrum of it. This is a traditional teaching especially with the Tibetans, setting up a psychological trick which makes you think "Ah! I see". But then they say, "Well you haven't actually seen it because that takes another fifteen years of practice!" But by doing this exercise you can see the kind of direction in which you can move and think about it. The hook we have to get ourselves off is that insight has got anything to do with the intellect or discriminative thought, even though the language suggests that.

Here is the exercise which is derived from Douglas Harding.

Let's look at something in front of us, here for example the Buddha. Just sit comfortably and look at the Buddha. Don't do anything else such as think "What is coming next" just LOOK.

Now ask the question, "Where is what I am looking at?"

Now if you ponder you will find that you are inclined to say "well it's a few yards in front of me", or you may say "well it must be in my head somewhere". In other words, is it there, or is it in my head, or is it neither. And then you say "well what is my experience of where it is?" Now if you are thinking it is over there, you are experiencing it over there. But if you are experiencing it as being in your head, it gives a different kind of feeling. Your experience of looking at the object is shaped by the constructs you impose upon it. So it is not so simple.

As one goes in to the issue of where it is, it is not so clear because in actual experience, not in terms of thinking, you can't really tell.

Now stay looking at the Buddha. It appears that there is something out there. It has got a certain shape and colour and size. You seem to be at the opposite end from what you are looking at. In other words if you were the Buddha who was looking back at you, you would see your face. But it isn't your face that is looking. It is something behind your face which is looking at the Buddha.

Can you experience that which is behind your face? Go slowly into this.

Take your time and then you can ask yourself the question, "That which is the other side of the room has shape, but does that which is behind my face have shape? Look to see, don't discuss it in your head. Place your awareness at the place where you are looking out from. Is there anything there which has shape?"

That which is on the other side of the room has a certain colour. That which is behind your face, does it have any colour?

That which is in front of you has a certain size. That which is behind your face, does it have any size?

In fact is there any word at all that you can use to describe that which is behind your face from the locus out of which you are gazing? Indeed, has that locus even got any place in actual experience, not in logical inference?

Now if you follow along, what do you find in that place? Is there a word? Void? Silence? Spaciousness? Nothing at all-ness? Emptiness? At this point we have to be very careful for all this is manifesting. We can turn on the language again and find sensation, perception, volition and consciousness. All these words do have a meaning. There must be some kind of situation of interdependence between these words and this curious business that when I actually start looking at them I can't find them. Something very strange happens here when words are only names. When you look at the place where the names should be, you don't find them. So when you say the mind is empty you're not saying there is nothing there but that it is empty of what the names would seem to say is there, the descriptions are not it.

You must imagine that Avalokitesvara was sitting and had turned his gaze inward to the spot out of which his normal visible attributes from other people would have been manifested. If he turned his gaze back to that spot and if he applied his discriminative intellect he would say, "Ah yes, there is some sensation. Ah yes, there is perception too. Ah yes, and some volition. Ah yes, there is consciousness. And also, there is a certain predisposition there too. How interesting! But if I actually look at it, at that place where all these things manifest, do I find it?"

Imagine that Avalokitesvara has taken up as his practice the nature of the mind. This can be a form of Koan. What is the mind?" As a skilled practitioner he wouldn't be

asking himself from the intellect, he would be looking directly into IT. He would find emptiness.

A sensation comes in one ear. "Can anyone tell me how to practice Great Wisdom?"

"Form is emptiness and emptiness is form" is what comes instantly from such a meditator.

To be continued...

1 D.E. Harding, Head Off Stress, pub. Arkana ISBN 0 14 01.92026

TALIESIN, AT THE COURT OF MAENLLWYD

A poem in old Welsh style

I am chief doctor unto six thousand,

My country of origin was the Land of Angles.

Ruth and Hilda called me Roger.

I was the question set Sir Gwain;

I am the father of three doctors;

I am the husband of their mother;

I am the voter much misled;

I am a debtor, yet a householder;

I am little Gwion's hurt child;

I am a sleeket cowering timorous beasty;

I am a dense thicket of thorne;

I am a carpenter with arms full of tools;

I am a communication channel

Of shining copper, without blemish or obstruction;

I am a thought in the mind of the whole;

I am a delusion of my right brain;

I am an epiphenomena of chaos;

I am the breath of God;

I am a fart from the backside of Annwyn;

These are all words
They are symbols of symbols.
Standing for something which they are not
All a delusion;
All an illusion.

I sail down the ski-jump of my breath;
I burst into the boundlessness of space;
I am recollected moment to moment
As a puff of smoke run backward.
I am the flame of a thermic lance
Which marks my track through space and time.

Then I was for five days
In the womb of Maenllwyd the cauldron
I was originally little Gwion
And at length I am Taliesin.

Roger Green

SERMONS AMONG STONES AND TREES

NOT NOTICING

John Crook

This talk is dedicated to the memory of Georgina Marjorie Crook. It was delivered to the assembly of practitioners at the Two Day Retreat in Rickford, October 24th 1992.

Two things are omnipresent in our lives and yet day after day we fail to notice them - death and the sky. Every day people are dying: if they are our dear ones we know and feel it but the fact of everyday dying, next door, in the neighbouring street, all over town, we choose to ignore. I do not mean the accidents, murders and genocides that are the focus of our news bulletins, I mean ordinary everyday death which is as common as birth.

The sky? How often do we raise our eyes to the great blue dome? On a bright day we notice the sunlight, shining clouds and the shifting shadows moving with the clock. Yet we rarely look deliberately up into the azure haze, passing on and out into unimaginable

spaces. Some of us never look. Yet there it is above us all the time. At night how often do you look out between the stars and wonder how far you can see? What is it, this endless space, this awesome void?

Death and Space; awesome, needing the reflective moment few of us give time for; they are outside the run of our concern. Big mind rarely comes from small mind. We usually need a shock.

When you sit at the bedside of a dying person or have the privilege of nursing someone whose life is moving to its close, there is a great opportunity. It is like going on a retreat knowing it could be your last. On the one hand there is the tragedy of passing time, the ending of a personal epoch, the severing of identity. On the other there is often a curious tranquillity as the mind accepts the inevitable. Tears and peace come to inform one another. It is vital not to avoid this experience by taking refuge in gossip or the repression of painful feeling. You have to be really there or you learn nothing.

The Tibetans have a meditation on death. In this process you envisage the slow dissolution of personal attributes. The earth element dissolves into water, water evaporates into air, air disappears in space. The dying self traverses each stage at differing speeds depending on circumstance. In these meditations the practitioner visualises these processes, partakes of them emptying the self of attachment and moving with the flow of dissolution. This is natural, the end game of a cycle which is eternal. In the presence of the dying the practitioner goes through this cycle mentally or verbally, assisting the passage of the other through the stages, passing through the intermediate ones to final peace. Sometimes these phases occur rapidly, all at the time of death, in other cases many of them are complete before the final breath is drawn.

When death has come it is good to sit with the dead far into the night with a candle burning, shadows moving on the beloved face. At first, overwhelmed by disbelief, it is as if the other will turn and speak, waking up once more as on so many mornings. But gradually the room resolves itself, the presence of the other slowly leaves, withdrawing into a deeper silence wherein the night sounds come, wind, leaves flying past the window, night bird's call. You say a prayer. You wish all well, God speed. And then you are alone. The room is empty. The other has gone on. Where? How? What is the meaning? What is it? In the silence the candle burns as you turn to your own rest.

Often the mind itself decays long before death. How can one help the one who is dying without awareness, grimly holding on, fighting every moment towards the end. The aim must be to facilitate tranquillity so that the natural dissolution can move peacefully on its way.

At such a time, remember the sky, letting the mind go beyond the visible into the eternity of space itself. Maybe this will be frightening and it reminds us of the need for profound meditation on the emptiness of all things including the great Universe itself. Cycles of life and death are surrounded by the awesome void of space. Yet here too there are constant arisings and fallings, comings to be and goings out of existence, the becoming and ending of stars, galaxies, worlds. We exist within great cycles like huge mandalas,

realms within realms. The nature of being has many modes, not all of them conscious. The realms contain each other. At what level is the brain aware? The neuronal level differs from the mental yet the latter could not be without the former. What then are we?

A mind that probes beyond the relative sees the Universe as "perfect". Indeed whatever could it mean to say it was "imperfect"? The Universe is none other than it is and the only word for it must be perfection without an opposite. Since you and I are contained by, pervaded by, born into and of the Universe, we too partake of this perfection. We are quite simply what we are. To wish otherwise is a form of rejection, attachment to illusion, ignorance and assertion of self. And self we know is highly soluble.

Each one of us works out our karma as best we can. In relativity there is pain and distress. God, the fickle bastard, seems cruel, uncaring, rewarding the righteous with injustice. Yet in the transpersonal vision there is an opening space, the unchangeable root of change. Here is the Eternal of which we cannot speak, for to speak is relative. We can however gaze out between the stars letting go into free fall. Goodbye is present at the ending and in the beginning. And miraculously, without comprehension, love appears in a rising light.

How does the river flow? The stream descends as it must, moulding itself in flow around the rocks and boulders finding its natural way. "Going to where the water ends" means the ocean and the sun raised vapours forming again into great clouds, the never ending return. And the sharp rocks, the obstacles, gradually become softly shaped into round stones all fitting the watery bed in natural patterns. Obstacles and water all shape each other reciprocally. There is a lesson here.

How does the river of experience flow? It runs as it must, a never ending stream which, in the freedom of its own nature, shapes all obstacles as its bed. Broken stones become smooth surfaces, each one fitting the next in a pattern of karmic creation. How does the river flow? Interdependently as it must within the eternal. When you feel this in your life and meditation you have learned to ride the Ox.

DARKNESS?

It's a dark night

The trees stretch their limbs in the breeze.

The air is cool and the nostrils flare.

Suddenly, the clouds part

And there stands the moon, bright and serene.

Ron Henshall

RETREAT REPORTS

We continue to present reports written by participants after retreat at the Maenllwyd. These reports are anonymous. We are grateful to the authors for their honesty in their writing and for sharing their experiences with us in this way.

MIND IN FLOW. CH'AN RETREAT REPORT, MAENLLWYD, APRIL 1992

I have just returned home, and it seems sensible to write the report before the memories of the retreat begin to slip away. Yet even by writing about it, the events seem so strange and wonderful that words alone cannot express the sheer depth and vast space that has at times punctuated the practise; the clarity of perception, the long silences that can only be likened to the desert, not a silence that is threatening, but the clear silence that you get at high altitude in the mountains, or the space far out at sea in a small boat. Yet to get there is like treading a maze, a labyrinth of one's own illusions, the tricks of one's own mind, the beliefs and structures that slowly but surely have to be worn down, the conditioning, the expectations, the pain, the deception of one's own ego, the clouding over of events and their true origin, the shunning of responsibility for ones own actions, the lack of humility, respect and repentance. All these are obstacles to the path, the human mind like an otter swimming under water seeking the big fish in a large pool.

Even getting to the retreat had its problems. It seems that I am always the last owner of cars, there is nobody else down the line but the scrapper! Well, the garage took the head off the engine to replace the rings two or three days before the retreat, and even now, ten days later, the head is still off and the piston rings still on some shelf in Swindon. And so I had to get a lift, a bus, a taxi, a train, another taxi and then two lifts.... but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Such amazing conversations with complete strangers talking about themselves, their wives, about cremation, death and what to do with ashes, talking to the dead - and all this within half an hour of leaving home.

Of course, when I got to the Maenllwyd I slept in the barn. I love old barns. For the last eight weeks I had been night lambing. This meant that I had had ample opportunity to meditate in the early hours in the sheep pens or beneath the stars. Sometimes forty minutes passed in a twinkling, but I did arrive very tired, not only had I worked a twelve hour shift for all that time seven days a week but I had been sleeping in the day which meant that on arrival at Maenllwyd my internal clock was not adjusted very well and I was rather "jet lagged".

Day one was hell... not so much the pain of sitting but the dozing off in every session. Drowsiness set in in a big way. The Zendo was really crowded, the air was close and I was next to the woodburner. Normally I love woodburners, it is the only heat I have at home, but somehow, being sat next to one all day made dozing off a temptation I could not resist. Normally I sit in barns, but they are half open and the wind swirls around; claustrophobia began to get at me a bit. I live alone and had spent the last eight weeks

seeing virtually nobody so being stuck in a Zendo with more than thirty other people was a bit of a shock - rather like being in a tube train stopped between stations. Irritation began to set in.

Yet I had been in the army. I recognised the authority of Shifu immediately; and promptly resisted it for at least the first two days. I had never met him before and he struck me as a small wiry bird, a Shanghai sparrow. It felt as if we were all prisoners, no time to yourself at all, and the discipline total, like prisoners of war being indoctrinated. At first, I even resisted the chants. I felt almost like a Tibetan in a Chinese labour camp and thus the Chinese language grated in my throat for a while. There was vast resentment, it felt like being back at school or enduring the basic army training where you are stripped of all illusions and ground down to dust in a matter of weeks.

Only afterwards did I find out that Shifu had himself been in the army and even Guo Yen Hsi had been in the South Vietnamese Navy. Somehow the military leaves its traces everywhere and it is instantly recognised by those who have been through the same mill. Yet it is not all bad, there are extraordinary things about being in a tight discipline, close to other human beings, that simply do not occur in ordinary life except in times of disaster or calamity. Guo Yen Hsi was sergeant, major and adjutant; timekeeper, chanter, disciplinarian and above all, example to us all. Only on day three did I feel compassion for his discipline.

The first interview with Shifu was basic in the extreme. He simply identified which method I was using, which considering I wasn't quite sure myself, was just as well.

Normally, on John's Western Zen Retreats I work on Koans and indeed have been doing so for the last fourteen years on and off. The last retreat had been in January this year and the koan had been "What is beyond?" What indeed? I knew that in a sense the retreat had started then and lambing had been an intermediary continuation. I had at times experienced quite long stretches of emptiness, usually looking at dried grass blowing in the wind, either in the farmyard or on river banks or at my favourite spot beside a weir and old lock on the River Parrett with the constant roar of water in the background. But as for practice, my mind was scattered and tired.

I started with nothing and then tried "What is beyond?" but that seemed too ambitious at this stage so I reverted to a simpler koan, "Who am I now?" just to clear the air of uncertainty. This worked and for the whole of the third day I used it. The first moment of great clarity came during tea and I could have sat there for ever. Tears came and I was sitting next to Eddy.

Sometimes on retreats you keep meeting people over the years to whom you never really speak but you just know that there is a great common link. I was very glad that Eddy was there. I mean he's a great lump of a bloke and looks as if he has come out of one of the mines in Merthyr. There is that feeling of great warmth about him that the Welsh certainly have and it's to do with the mines, the danger, the comradeship. I've never talked to Eddy about this but I have been down mines and the feeling between the men is very much the same as the feeling between men in the army, only it's

underground and it's Welsh and it's to do with coal. The feeling is unspoken but you know instinctively that you are in the same boat. The image that came up was one from several years ago when Eddy took a group photograph after a retreat. There was something about the way he took the photograph and got everybody together, yet he himself wasn't there. Somehow the combination of his rough and ready exterior and the care with which he took the photograph was very moving and it came back to me several times on the retreat. Often it seems these past experiences act as a trigger for emotions of compassion, and yet they only come out of that clear space.

What I found extraordinary about this retreat was the way in which past events came thick and fast and interlinked on ever deeper levels, until every single experience of emptiness I have ever had was linked like a chain. I could move along it from one event to another like an eagle circling or like an otter just gliding under water, each event like a glimpse working deeper and deeper. I began counting breaths.

The meditation became easier and the walking outside was very helpful as was the direct contemplation, something which, during lambing, I have perfected over the last twelve years. Shepherds do it all the time, and are even paid for it... you observe but do not label, and working with 1500 sheep you have to be able to spot the smallest problem long before it emerges. As far as work was concerned I was sent to the woodshed, which I loved and spent most of the time perfecting the art of splitting large logs, some nearly three feet long, cleaving them deftly, "and not a jot does the eye's grasp wander."

The food was extraordinary, though in the early stages I got a little worried about the quantities. I am used to a fairly hefty diet doing long hours and manual work. Here I was down to 1000 calories a day, if not less. I started licking my plate... I had even looked forward to the food as I always have to do my own cooking... luckily the quantities increased gradually and my stomach heaved a sigh of relief! The food was brilliant thanks to the cooks. Then Shifu's informal talks at the meal table sank home. The translation from Mandarin to English via Paul Kennedy had its own beautiful rhythm and ripples which are hard to describe. Paul was having a hard time sleeping and sitting and yet it never once seemed to affect his translation which had a directness and a humour which I think affected us all. I shall never forget him trying to explain to Shifu what the term "spaced out" meant or "Celtic Twilight". Thankyou Paul. Somehow listening to the Chinese and then to the English gave time for what Shifu had said to sink in, also there was a quality about the talks and their relaxed nature which allowed the mind to relax. More than once I found myself in a very clear space whilst he was talking. And the same with washing up. Very often the work was done in the Zendo, but the fruit appeared either outside or in the quiet moments where the mind was not doing a simple job. Often I have noticed this in my work, either shearing, lambing, chainsawing, sawbenching, cider making or scything. All these quite skilled, indeed very skilled jobs require a high degree of awareness. Yet when the mind is at peace with itself, it lets go and the job takes over. Indeed some of the older people I have worked with have a Zen presence and attitude precisely for this very reason. Their whole lives have been spent

perfecting one or two very skilled jobs and they can often let themselves go... in the middle of the task.

Day 4. Events kept coming up, even my first glimpse of emptiness at the tender age of 13 whilst fagging at school, one lunchtime. I was so involved with serving out food and being ordered around, I remember sitting down and then quite inexplicably being in a space where the din of 600 voices and 1200 knives and forks and 30 trollies suddenly disappeared and for thirty seconds or so I saw everything very clearly but heard nothing. I sat there until someone nudged me and I had to do another job. A year later I was left at home for a weekend and suddenly burst out crying for hours. It was the first time in my life I had been left alone. It was extraordinary. The crying was not sadness, but joy and love at just being alive as I moved from room to room.

I was fourteen at the time and had already started writing poetry. Often I would go up onto Dartmoor and walk alone all day. Indeed solitude became a necessity, a way of life. My first poem was about the homecoming of Sir Francis Chichester and the dialogue between him and Sir Francis Drake whose statue stands on Plymouth Hoe. I was 13 and the whole school was there all day peering into the distance trying to make out his small boat, for he had just sailed singlehanded around the world. We did not realise it, but we were in a very meditative mood, thousands of people just looking. "Immanence without hope". The vast horizon of open sea and the harbour below. The feeling was extraordinary, as if in slow motion the small, frail boat was escorted in. Often I had watched boats coming and going from Plymouth for my father was in the Navy, but never a small boat this size. Everybody was deeply moved and there was a strange and beautiful silence as each kept their feelings to themselves.

What, you might say, has all this to do with a retreat in Wales? I am now 38 and yet all the events of every retreat and quite a few other events that occurred before I was ever interested in Buddhism came to the surface. One was in the Afghan Desert between Herat and Khandahar. The bus broke down and there was a three or four hour delay in the middle of nowhere. I went off into the desert. I had been travelling hard for two weeks or more and then suddenly in a wadi, away from everyone else, the stillness of the desert hit me and I cried again. It had happened once or twice before in Turkey and Iran on long bus journeys, usually in the desert looking out of the window day after day, just looking half in focus, meditating in fact, and then it comes. The whole ground of ones being moving up through the body and out through the eyes until there is nothing left except this wonderful feeling of peace and acceptance.

A year or two later I met John and he taught me about meditation. Yet I had been doing it without thinking for a number of years, and the very act of formally sitting down to do it seemed at first to be somewhat artificial. It took several retreats before I answered the first koan "Who am I?" and I realised how small I am and how vast the Universe. There was a branch just swaying gently in the breeze in front of me, one flower and one blade of grass just moving backwards and forwards. It was a very powerful and deep experience and none has been as deep since then, but rather like echoes they keep coming back... and that was what kept happening on this retreat until there were at

least a dozen images interlinked. The clear space and then the tears, not streams, just a few trickling down as each image returned. One in particular that kept coming up was that of Monet's garden at Giverny on the Seine. Monet, who not only made the pond in Japanese style, but made the whole garden. He spent thirty six years painting the pond.

When I visited it with my wife several years ago I wandered around as everyone else did just casually looking, sitting down, reflecting. Everyone was happy. There were bus loads of French tourists, probably out from Paris for the day, maybe they came every year, maybe they came several times a year, there was an extraordinary feeling, but it did not hit me until a year or two later when the image came up on retreat and I sensed, not so much Monet's painting, but his presence, or rather what was left of his contemplation. What was once his retreat and isolation was now thrown open to the public, and yet I sensed, not only that he had had many experiences looking at the pond, but that somehow he was very happy that at long last everyone could enjoy what he had enjoyed. The last twenty years of his life, after his wife died, were spent alone.

What I felt was not only the direct experience but somehow his happiness that so many people wanted to come and see the garden. And in the house, many Japanese prints... and this led on to another experience linked to the Hokusai Exhibition recently in London. That atmosphere that you get in art exhibitions rather than galleries, where everyone is peering over each other's shoulders, direct contemplation again, broken only by quiet voices and peering at the catalogue. It was not so much the prints and drawings that affected me, but the effect they had on other people, and then I overheard an attendant talking to another attendant saying that they had just had one ex prime minister of Italy and the President of Lithuania through that afternoon. Somehow it seemed extraordinary, so many people from all walks of life drawn from so many countries just to look at the work of one man. I felt as if Hokusai's wave was about to break over me.

The wave lasted for the whole of the last two days of the retreat. It was on the point of breaking many times. At one point I was standing at the end of the garden looking at wool blowing on the fence, then down at the daffodils, when the image of Eddy and his camera came back and then I suddenly realised for the first time the true significance of "There is no time." The words ran through me like the stream and I cried again. I did not know it but Shifu was watching me through the window of his room some way off.

I went and sat in the woodshed and pondered these things. Then came in and we had to talk about our experiences. I found that I could not say anything except that how extraordinary it was that we were all here and that I had learnt the true meaning of not just silence but keeping silent. I who love words, accepted that to say most one must say least.

Of course there were many other things about my personal life that I could add which were very revealing, but as Shifu said "Once you start to talk about that, it goes on for ever."

I ended the retreat with a strange sense of failure. I realised how much I had to learn, how much more there was to accept, to repent, to respect, the whole spectrum of Buddhist vows and precepts, the real thing, and not just the self indulgent introspection. Sleepiness and lack of concentration in the first two days had been a major problem and not having a wall to look at was, I think, an important point. The sense of failure dogged me slightly because I knew how close I was to catching the big fish, the feather on the fan, and yet I had caught and re-caught many minnows. I know now I was not quite ready for it. I still have much to sort out in my own life, and to accept my failures and to look more deeply at things in myself that I do not like... Great Doubt?

Perhaps one of the most moving things on the retreat was Guo Yen Hsi's smile on the last day when he and Shifu came in to deliver the last lecture. Normally he only smiled in response to a joke, but here, for the first time, he was smiling of his own accord and so was Shifu. They were like gardeners come to view the fruit in the orchard. Then Guo Yen Hsi took out his camera and started taking pictures as Shifu talked. Eddy was behind me and it felt really good.

Without John none of this would have happened. Without the Korean war when the West was actually fighting the Chinese, none of this would have happened, without Mao Tse Tung, Shifu would not have fled to Taiwan and the Teaching would not have reached the West... rather like the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism for the same reasons. It felt good chanting in Chinese in the early morning with the kerosene lamps dangling from the wooden ceiling, the Buddha from Hong Kong, the feeling of touching on something that had nearly been wiped out, like planting a seed.

Even now words seem too long, and yet, sitting beside the stream such clarity, first the sound, clear and ringing, then the small world in the palm of one's hand, dew drops on the end of small blades of grass above the rushing water so small and yet so perfect in their inner beauty just as they are, the Universe in one small drop.

Out of silence the stream flows

The sound of chanting in the early morning.

Dried grass blowing in the wind

The axe descending.

The small leaves of chestnut unfurled

Like Shifu's words after the meal.

POSTSCRIPT. Imagery on Retreat

There is something else which is not strictly part of the retreat, yet I want to tell it. On the last Western Zen Retreat I had an extraordinary sequence of images. For many years I have had Buddhist images come up whilst in deep meditation. Some of these I had recognised as from paintings in Karsha monastery, Zanskar. This imagery could easily be explained by the large number of slides that I have and my interest in Tibetan art in general. I even managed to identify at least one of the pictures. This I took to be a perfectly normal event and paid no attention to it.

What occurred on that retreat was this. After a long evening chant of AH OH HUM I felt like a vase, and indeed my hands formed an empty vessel in front of me. The image of Tara came up and was very clear and vivid. Then a completely new shift... an old Chinese Taoist painter with a long beard. Then followed what I can only describe as an extraordinary sequence of Chinese paintings, maybe one a second for five or ten minutes. They went through the four elements and were all simple peasant scenes. Earth, water, wind and fire. Very beautiful and none of them I have ever seen before. They were quite the most beautiful array of paintings I have ever seen. Simple and yet filled with meaning, and then at the end, flames, as if they were all burnt up, as if this old man was showing me hundreds of years of work that was destroyed in the cultural revolution... and then the scene changed to a party of people fleeing over barren wastes as if over the Tibetan plateau, yaks and yak-hair tents, snow and ice, and then over a pass into what looked like Breughel's winter scene but it was modern and in the West.

For a large number of years I have also seen scenes of monks in monasteries that I have never visited. Shaven heads bowed and at least on one occasion the sight of a Buddhist monk being burned alive in the meditation posture. This I agree could have been triggered by the picture of self immolation of a Buddhist monk during the Vietnam war. These images, in whole or part, also came up during the Chan retreat and I am fairly certain that the monks were Chinese. If they were Tibetan I would have recognised them by their robes and their looks. I know one shouldn't pay attention to these sorts of images but they formed an important message; the transfer of a deep and beautiful knowledge to a frozen West. Also, during the Chan retreat, the images of monks became part of a larger assembly and parts of the monasteries became apparent.

As no one else seemed to mention the arising of images I thought I would include this as an example of what can arise in the mind during meditation. I simply treated them as wandering thoughts, letting them through and then forgetting them. Even so, it would be nice to know if the paintings ever existed, and if they did not, where did they come from? It is possible that they were the complete work of one man, and that man was the one I met before the images started.

Maybe the whole thing is just an allegory for the transfer of Chan to the West and the man is Shifu himself. Who knows? Just to be shown them was an extraordinary privilege and a wonder I shall probably never again witness.

Ah well! I must tend to the soup and get some more logs in. Sheep shearing starts soon.

A WESTERN ZEN INTERVIEW

Teacher: Tell me who you are?

Participant: I am the answer.

Teacher: What is the question?

Participant: Moment to moment.

Teacher: What do you feel?

Participant: Space with no boundary or pressure. (THIS SPACE DID NOT FEEL VAST OR LARGE OR IN ANY WAY OVERWHELMING, YET ONE SENSED IT HAD NO END, WAS TIMELESS, AND HAD EXISTED BEFORE THE BIG BANG, WHICH WAS EXTENDING INTO IT.)

Teacher: What do you hear?

Participant: Silence.

Teacher: Can you hear the stream outside?

Participant: No. Just silence, but perhaps the occasional tick from somewhere in another room. (THIS SILENCE WAS PALPABLE, LIKE A CLEAR FOG FLOWING FROM MY RIGHT SIDE, AS IF ENTERING FROM SOME OTHER PLACE WHERE IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN. THIS SILENCE WAS OLDER THAN TIME, HAD EXISTED BEFORE THE BIG BANG: IN SOME PLACE, THIN ENDURING SILENCE AND AS A DOOR OPENED INTO THIS SILENCE IT WOULD WELL OUT AND OVER ALL WHO LISTENED)

Teacher: What has become of the question?

Participant: It has fallen away. Ceased to be.

Teacher: Now all you need to do is wait.

Participant: To quote T.S.Eliot, Four Quartets, 'East Coker'.

I said to my soul, be still,
Wait without hope,
For hope would be hope of the wrong thing:
Wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing:
There is yet faith.
But the faith and the love and the hope
Are all in the waiting.

Teacher: Yes, wait.

CH'AN RETREAT, APRIL 1992

WHY? WHY? WHY?

Physically, I did not find the retreat too difficult. Having regularly practised the one hour meditation sessions traditional in vipassana, sitting for half an hour at a time is not much of a problem for me. And the exercises offered during the breaks between sessions were enough to get the stiffness out of my limbs. Alternating between sitting cross legged and kneeling also helped me avoid any major discomfort and apart from an occasional few minutes, tiredness was never a problem in spite of the shortness of sleep. My only physical difficulty was a disturbing sensation in my neck, which comes from time to time due to long sessions at the keyboard of my computer. However, I foolishly allowed this sensation to dominate me on the first day, resenting it as a ruse to unsettle me over the week ahead, but Shifu's advice to rub it if it became too bad was both compassionate and liberating. Two of my companions on the retreat also massaged it for me, and this helped to ensure that by the third day it had ceased to trouble me.

But what had my neck problem taught me? Mainly that I had come to the retreat with my head too full of the need for physical endurance, too caught up in the anticipation of long hours of sitting, too anxious to arrange everything in the small space around me to suit myself. The problem with my neck taught me that I was in danger of skating across the surface of the retreat, bringing too much of everyday thinking to it, too intent on doing the retreat rather than on living it.

At no point did I entirely lose this sense of doing, though it became less strong after the first two days. It arose in part because having wanted to experience a true Chan/Zen Master for many years, I had pre-

programmed the area of my mind that tries to find my small self within an experience, instead of allowing the experience to speak for itself. The lesson my neck problem taught me in those first two days will remain with me. And in absorbing the lesson, I found myself readily accepting the strict routine of the retreat. As I did so, a curious thing happened. On the third morning, the morning boards that roused us at 4.00am ceased to be a call to duty, and became instead just sounds. I heard them for the first time, as they arose out of the stillness, each steady clap alternating with silence, and yet the clap and the silence both part of the same continuing process, and with no distance between this process and my own mind. The whole experience was exactly in its place, just itself and nothing more. Afterwards I felt great gratitude to the Guestmaster, walking through the mud and rain of the early morning with his morning boards. Were the boards the Guestmaster, or the Guestmaster the boards?

After the morning boards there was early morning yoga. My mind, by this time, had usually become preoccupied by my surroundings, intrigued by the anonymous shapes in the 4.00am darkness and the rustle of clothes as we swung our arms and bounced our knees. Shih-

fu himself, in his white face mask, was the only person easily identifiable, and he seemed to float in the air on a small rise of ground in front of us, as insubstantial as the morning mist.

After the morning yoga, the still, silent meditation hall was especially welcoming, almost comforting, with the cushions just as we had left them at the close of the final sitting the previous night. They seemed patiently to await our return. And always half way into the first session I was lifted by the song of the first bird, suddenly arriving within my meditation with a sweet, startling clarity. The morning boards of the animal world. How would the enlightened mind hear the sound? Just as I heard it. No difference.

Within the meditation sessions my mind became busier than I had expected. At no time was there the calmness that I have experienced in the past. Perhaps I was disturbed by the excitement of being there. Yet I felt no impatience with my mental chatter and this surprised me. Perhaps I was too self indulgent, feeling that just to be on the retreat was the important thing. I began on the first day with my usual vipassana practice, watching the breath, feeling the subtle sensation as the breath came and went, but the retreat only really started in earnest for me when I had my first interview with Shifu. I spoke to him initially about watching the breath, and told him of those experiences in meditation when my mind becomes clear and still and thoughts drop away to be replaced by a focused stillness in which there is only a sense of awareness. He listened carefully, then cautioned me against what is called in Zen 'sitting in a cave with ghosts'. I wondered if I had not explained myself properly and had given him the impression I was talking about the drowsy, trance like state which I knew all too well was to be avoided. Then I dismissed the idea. If Shifu said I was in danger of sitting in a cave with ghosts, then I was in danger of sitting in a cave with ghosts. Thus I discovered that there was another state, however subtle, that was a trap on the meditator's path.

In my second interview with Shifu I told him of the koan meditation I have been practising intermittently over the years. "And what", he asked, "is your koan?"

I told him, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the East?"

Shifu half smiled and answered at once, almost jokingly, "Because he had nothing better to do". He then asked me what was my answer to the koan, and when I told him he remained silent.

Armed with Shifu's permission, I turned from the breathing at the next meditation session and concentrated on the koan. But immediately a doubt arose in my mind. During my past use of the koan it had spontaneously reshaped itself in my mind from the form traditionally used in Zen - "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" to "Why did Bodhidharma come from the East?" This reshaping had appeared rational to me at the time. After all, Zen, Chan, Bodhidharma, call it what one liked, had come to us from the East, not from the West. Absurdly, I now allowed myself to become distracted by the problem of East or West, and I wished I had asked Shifu whether it was acceptable to use the koan in this changed form. In order to calm this distraction I

dropped the koan and went back to concentrating on the breathing, but at the same time I felt a deep sense of identity with the koan, as if Shifu had given us to each other.

At the next interview, I returned to the problem of East or West and asked Shifu in what form I should use the koan. He confirmed that it should be used in the original "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?", and I realised the foolishness of my attempts at rationalising East and West. Shifu then told me from now on not to return to my breathing as a focus in meditation, but to work always with the koan.

The following day while working with the koan an answer arose, clear and very simple, and so obvious I felt a surge of joy. But when I told Shifu at my next interview he said, with each word clearly enunciated and separated, "That answer is wrong." I felt deep gratitude to him. His words showed me I had for some years been in danger of taking the wrong path in my attempts to realise Zen. Then Shifu said:

"Don't ask yourself for the answer, ask the koan. Keep asking WHY? WHY? WHY?"

"And when answers arise?"

"Treat them like other thoughts, drop them."

"And in those moments when one is not asking the koan?"

"Keep the sense of enquiry. Chew on the koan, like something sweet."

"Is it possible for the mind to be still, and yet to be asking the koan?"

"It is possible."

"And is this the right koan for me?"

"All koans are equally good if you choose them yourself."

So I began to ask the question of the koan "Why? Why? Why?" Even without examining it intellectually, rational answers arose. Why did Bodhidharma come from the West? Because he had nothing better to do. Why? Why nothing? No-thing. How could there be something better to do? Impossible. Insights about the Bodhisattva mind seemed to emerge. An answer even arose to the question that had long puzzled me, why Bodhidharma had sat for nine years facing a wall when he was already enlightened, cutting off (so the story goes) his very eyelids in order to keep himself from sleeping. But the koan itself remained silent. For the rest of the retreat it became my companion, inside and outside the meditation hall, sometimes friendly, sometimes irritating, sometimes exciting, sometimes boring, sometimes a little intimidating, just like a real person. And in the days after the retreat I found myself enquiring into the nature of that "Why".

But there were other things that happened outside the meditation hall that were also important to me. In some ways the kinhin walking meditation was more of an experience even than the sitting. For years I have worked with kinhin in my tai chi practice, and always there has been something lacking, some sense of unsteadiness, as if body and mind refuse to be one. Yet in walking in that muddy, bumpy field, where the grass became trodden by us into a circle, I realised that in the unsteadiness, as I slowly set down each foot in turn and transferred my weight to it, there is only the unsteadiness. And then the unsteadiness becomes experienced for what it is, a simple sure presence. It is only by denying that moment of uncertainty, as one places the foot on the ground, by trying consciously to transform it into steadiness, that uncertainty arises. If the mind is there in the contact between the foot and the earth, then mind, body and earth become one.

I also came to value the short walk down to the bottom of the field where we practised kinhin. There was something about this walk that seemed to capture the essence of the retreat. For although we all walked separately and in silence, the boundaries between us faded, and there was only a shared quiet, almost dogged determination.

On this retreat there was none of the "preciousness" I have experienced elsewhere, and find unhelpful. None of the obvious, visible guru worship. None of the hopes of bliss, of altered states, of ecstatic revelations. Just a sense of presence, of things in their place, of life being lived, ordinary yet miraculous. And in the kinhin there was also the physical presence of Shifu himself, in plastic overshoes and a woollen cap pulled tight around his ears, and the wind off the Welsh hills tugging at his robes. And in his commands of "faster, faster" as we changed from the slow to the fast walk, I was caught up in a deep sense of compassion, the compassion of the Master towards me, compassion in which I was allowed to share, so that his compassion was not something given to me, like a gift from outside, but something he called forth in myself. And Shifu's compassion was the centre of the retreat, the still point around which everything else moved.

I find it difficult to write about Shifu, without sounding overstretched, artificial, as if I am creating false experiences through my delight in using words, and without sounding as if I am falling into guru-worship, which was not at all a part of what happened in this, my first direct contact with him. So what is there for me to say and how is it possible for me to say it? The only words which ring at all with the truth of that experience is that here was a man to whom I had nothing to give. Certainly it would be correct to say that he wanted something from me, but it was wanted for me, not for him. So for the first time in my life I stood before a man for whom there was no need to dissemble. No need to try and project a persona, to pretend to wisdom, to show kindness for the sake of kindness. In that realisation there was no great rush of emotion. It was something much deeper, and yet not deep at all. Something immeasurably profound, yet perfectly obvious and straightforward. It was perhaps my first experience of a human being standing without ego. And yet even to say that reveals the presence of my own ego, as if I have a right to make such a judgement about another person. So better perhaps to remain silent, and to recognise what happened in my meetings with Shifu was a transmission to me of

something outside the scriptures, which cannot tarnish with the years. "Chan", said Shifu one morning before the first meditation began, "is Buddhism".

And my impression at the end of the retreat? Chiefly one of great yet tranquil gratitude. To the Guestmaster, for his quiet authority, for his hard work and powers of organisation, for his years of study and of searching which made the retreat possible, for his compassion in enabling us to sit with Shifu, and for his morning boards. To Paul Kennedy, for seeming to capture the spirit and the humour, as well as the essence of Shifu's words, and for his own implacable determination to fight off jet lag and serve us all. To Guo Yen Hsi, for the beauty of his chanting, for the warmth of his smile, for his discipline in the meditation hall, for his guidance on the necessary stretching and relaxing exercises between sittings, and for demonstrating so clearly the nature of the true relationship between a monk and his abbot. To the Maenllwyd, which sheltered us with its simply, kindly presence, to the wind off the Welsh hills, to the early morning darkness, and to the first note of bird song each morning. And to Shifu, for showing me that the Patriarchs can be taken at their word.

ZEN AND CHRISTIANITY

- a short exchange, with comments

"In Buddhism there is no God..."

(Followers of Zen, drop the "No God" as well!)

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life..."

(Christians, walk that way! But first,
You may need to ease your grip on the sign post!)"

Ron Henshall

BOOK REVIEW

A BUDDHISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENT

John Crook

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MAURICE ASH: THE FABRIC OF THE WORLD

A resurgence book

Green Books, Hartland, ,8.95 (1992)

Maurice Ash has written an extraordinarily succinct and compelling account of our philosophical understanding of environment and the manner in which faulty metaphysics have distorted our attitudes. This is not an account of "the" environment we all inhabit but an analysis of the importance of the meanings we attribute to this concept. The significance of his work is focused in the realisation that the idea of environment holds a redeeming possibility in a world besotted with the materialism of our times and the misapplication of science. Yet this vision is itself threatened with betrayal by those who could best promote it; a betrayal based on the absence of an appropriate understanding. The threat comes on the one hand from the sentimentality of New Age idealism and, on the other, from those who see the environmental issues as contained within the old Cartesian paradigm.

The philosophical approach is one to which Maurice Ash has been deeply attracted for some years; the deconstructive examination of meanings as the uses of words in the manner of Wittgenstein. This process of 'deconstruction' has led to the abandonment of almost all metaphysics of the Western world which originated in Greek thought. Traditionally we see ourselves as separate from the world so that we and the environment are two things. Such dualism, which is the basis of scientific observation in traditional experimentation, leads us to suppose that environment is something outside ourselves which we can manipulate to our advantage. Such a view tends however to split up our experiences of the world into numberless dualities each considered separately; the complex web of interconnection is not perceived. Had our forefathers been able to see the multiple consequences of inventing the internal combustion engine it is unlikely that they would have developed it, argues Ash. The same applies to many of our scientific achievements which have let loose the technologies of our time with scant consideration for the interdependence of their numerous consequences.

The pivot of dualism is the assumption that self is the opposite of context. Yet what if this fundamental dualism is questioned? We begin by unravelling our conceptualisation of self and soon discover extraordinary enigmas. We find that the self we think ourselves to be is no more than an attribution; a term in a story that might be otherwise told, a

reification of a process that is inherently open, not closed and which lacks other than conceptually created boundaries. And this reification of self reappears in the whole process of supposing that abstract terms can stand for things when in truth they only indicate conceptions. The closer we get to 'self' in critical thought the less clear are its boundaries and hence its separation from 'environment' is called into question. We are in fact in endless open communication with all around us enabling us to say of the Universe, "I am not it, yet it is all of me." As this realisation dawns we are impelled towards a vision of wholeness in which our roles assume a responsibility unsuspected previously. Yet to conceive of a whole in an uncritical holism is to subscribe to an idealism that could become yet another mistaken ideology. This is because a careless view would see the 'whole' as a reification to be manipulated and hence throw us back into the arms of the dualism we have just rejected. The whole is un-measurably open and cannot be idealised. Such an idea is so confronting to traditional Western intelligence that rather than finding ways of moving with it we have fallen into decadent despair.

Ash writes (p4) "...if this bankruptcy is not yet universally recognised - and it isn't - this must surely be because people still suppose the mechanisms for controlling events... can continue to be operated, could we but sort out the levers. And they suppose this because they know nothing but mechanistic thought." Strong words indeed.

Our concern for environment is an expression of how meaningless our lives have become. In an extended discussion Maurice Ash rejects all approaches in which abstractions about 'the' environment could lead back into ideologies based in dualistic thinking. Only that which is immediately apprehended can make sense. So he focuses on the "small is beautiful" approach because only in local issues can people be truly involved without misleading abstraction. There are perhaps dangers in this approach for I feel it is far from clear that the philosophy necessarily implies that some orders of scale are more important than others. When, for example, does 'small' become 'big'? Where are the boundaries? In any case a locality is inevitably interdependent in innumerable ways (ecologically, geographically, economically, socially) with its neighbours and the relations between them crucial to each. While the shortcomings of the nation state are clear so also must be the fact of interdependence of location within a wider sphere. A pond is not necessarily more beautiful than the ocean. Perhaps a pond is comforting for those who find the ocean awesome. Yet so far as beauty or relevance is concerned both have their place in the scheme of things. Indeed it is exactly this problem of the desirable relations between regions and larger units that underlies the discussions of 'subsidiarity' in the context of contemporary European politics. Maurice Ash indeed admits the role of the 'large' to be inescapable but his taking refuge in 'lifeboats' leaves a number of important nettles ungrasped.

Ash is aware that the contemporary philosophy of deconstruction is little more than a rediscovery of a whole of a philosophy of being that marked deeply the whole tradition of Indian thought and feeling. The prime focus of Madyamaka philosophy in Buddhism was on the 'emptiness' of concepts. Emptiness implies that no self and no thing has an

inherent existence as an entity; everything is process, the aspects of which are all interdependent. Ash writes "The encouraging thing is...that Wittgenstein...entirely by his own efforts virtually reconstituted the thinking of Nagarjuna...from nearly two thousand years ago. This is ...a measure of the distance we ourselves have yet to travel" (p31). Indeed in his emphasis on environment as interdependence, Ash comes near to equating the term with Emptiness itself. To do so might have led him to some interesting conclusions for the 'emptiness' of Buddhism is no mere intellectual construct; rather it is a pivot for a whole way of being based on meditative enquiry. Even so Ash's whole project lies within the field I term 'Buddhistics' wherein these ancient concepts are seen to have a vital relevance to our contemporary dilemmas.

The final chapter, buddhistically entitled "Right Livelihood", indeed emphasises this theme. "The fulcrum of that world whose values must...change if catastrophe is to be averted is the metaphysical self. And the agent of this transformation is the notion of environment. Environment, it might be said, is that to which no Self, in its capacity of a detached observer, can belong. Environment annihilates Self, just as it negates the discrete objects that...compose the reality of the world. The world is composed, not of objects...but of forms of life, of being...of relationships: and not of relationships between things, but between relationships in infinite regression, with no ultimate reference. An environment is hence a form of being in which observer and observed are dissolved."

Ash seeks the supercession of our limiting cast of thought and his project is an exploration of possibilities and of ultimate questions which, like koans, cannot perhaps be intellectually resolved within the frame of language. The heart felt intuition of meditation is also needed here. Our Western individualism needs a total reconsideration, says Ash, and the way forward is through the understanding of connections wherever they occur and upon whatever scale. If, as Ash finally implies, we must be mad before we are sane at least endeavours such as this may act as a red ribbon through a minefield.

Maurice Ash is a bold and convincing writer capable of passages of great philosophical insight and beauty. I can see him at his desk working on an idea; an alternative occurs to him and down it goes in parenthesis. For some this will make his text a demanding read. I counsel persistence for there are jewels here that need to be widely appreciated. Ash wants to "offer a gift to whoever will receive it, because I think I have something to impart." He has, and anyone perplexed by the dilemmas of our time would do well to listen.

Extract from a letter received from Linda Rose Fisher

..."From what I have witnessed over the last two decades, Chan is not at the 'popular' end of the scale. Consumer attitudes even creep into spiritual attitudes, so Chan, which comes with no frills attached, is not seen as an attractive alternative to Western religions. I think if people take up Buddhism as a point of protest, in rejection of Christianity, then they have begun with bad motives. What we are talking about here is;

a)changing paths - which is flippant, lacks staying power, impatient. It is the opposite of these failings which will produce a good Chan student.

b)rejection - again this is uncharacteristic of Buddhism which teaches 'acceptance'.

For these reasons I was encouraged by the article (in New Chan Forum No.5) entitled "Zen and Christianity". The real Chan cannot be traced geographically - but then neither can the real Chan practitioner. In this sense problems about 'cultural baggage' don't exist. But on the level where it does exist weak traits should be discouraged. I see this as a pretty good reason for not rejecting Christianity. The bonus will be discovering that, understood with a pure heart, all Spiritual teachings spring from one source.

What Chan is about is 'mind training' so all that is required is to have a mind! Therefore any of us, is at this moment, ready to practice Chan. As none of us has either seen or felt a mind we know that they don't have shape, size or colour or speak with accents, nor do they belong geographically to one location. We don't even know if they are attached to our bodies. What we do know about training is that it is tough. Think of all that is required to train the body to excel - single mindedness, perseverance, good health, moderation, right attitude and sincerity. It's the same for 'mind' training. This could be one reason why Chan will never be at the popular end of the scale of Buddhist interest.

WINTER BUDDHA

After midnight, when the still streets
drip from the trees audibly soft leaves
and I smile to hear sleepy voices
silenced by a closing window's sound,
I take a match to an incense stick
and set bright the dark candle in my private shrine.

With six slow breaths the pillared flame
sets this brooding throne aglow
where, pivoted upon some silent thought,
the golden face spans inwardly
the space between the symbol and the seen.

Come close, with eyes as camera
trace the perfections of a latent shot,
memory projected on a screen,
moment immortalised perhaps or trapped;
perceive, half hidden under downcast lids,
the open eyes now fixed yet flexible
filling quietened rooms and grateful heart
with the silent quality of the street-
space between windows
treading softly between couchant forms.

John Crook October 1969