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CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION <i>Pat Simmons</i>	3
ENLIGHTENMENT <i>John Crook</i>	4
WAR: A VIEW FROM POLAND <i>Anna Jedynak</i>	8
KALYANA MITTA: COMPANY ON THE DHARMA PATH <i>Sian Thomas & Guy Roberts</i>	12
STORIES FROM THE ZOOMIVERSE <i>Richard Spalding</i>	18
MAENLLWYD: MOMENTS OF BEING <i>Nigel Jeffcoat</i>	28
URGYEN DZONG: A POWER PLACE IN THE HIMALAYA <i>Michael Cocker</i>	41
MUSING <i>Paul Goddard</i>	52
BOOK REVIEW: IN LOVE WITH THE WORLD <i>Hilary Richards</i>	55
ABOUT US AND RETREAT NEWS	58

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PAT SIMMONS

Apologies for the rather late arrival of this issue of *New Chan Forum*: Simon Child has been completely caught up in project-managing the final stages of creating our new retreat centre, and I've been nursing a broken arm (and nose, but that's less necessary for typing...).

I hope you will find this issue informative and stimulating. One theme which seems to have emerged from articles that people have sent me this time is particularly to do with human beings relating to each other, with or without compassion. Anna Jedynak writes movingly from Poland about the war (or Special Military Operation, according to President Putin) taking place so very close to her own country, and her response as a Buddhist. Richard Spalding, Sian Thomas and Guy Roberts, on the other hand, consider what they have gained from sharing the wisdom of fellow-members of the Western Chan Fellowship sangha.

By contrast, Nigel Jeffcoat's article describes a deeply personal inner process, experienced over a number of years. The main purpose of *New Chan Forum*, it seems to me, is precisely to share the many differing experiences and insights of those of us who are involved in some way with the Western Chan Fellowship, and I think this issue certainly does that.

ENLIGHTENMENT

JOHN CROOK

From John Crook's New Year Teisbo 2011

Perhaps our greatest mistake is our Zen exaggeration of the importance of enlightenment – or rather our failure to understand what this requires. Although all branches of the Buddha's Dharma focus on enlightenment, only in Zen is such a fuss made about having an 'enlightenment experience', defined as a precise psychological event. Furthermore, it is we in the West who engage in this error most clearly. There are historical reasons for this but that no longer excuses us from making this sometimes harmful mistake.

Let us be clear about this. An 'enlightenment experience', or *Kensho* in Japanese (Chinese *Kaimu*) is an event that follows from the practice of a one-pointed mind in which all awareness of the ego-self disappears for a time, revealing a state of extraordinary illumination, clarity and joy. This experience is quite unusual, rare and marked by the wonderment of self-absence. Such a moment may sometimes occur quite spontaneously outside practice and outside Zen, and that tells us that it is a quite natural, if rare, occurrence depending, like everything else, on certain conditions, either spontaneously or acquired through practice.

So why is it so significant? The reason is that it is an experiential verification of what is otherwise known only in thought or theory. Even so, this does not mean that one is now an 'enlightened being'. Master Sheng Yen sometimes said 'I am not enlightened!'



MAENLLWYD

All that Kensho means is that someone has understood something deeply and personally and thus ‘attained’ a level of insight more clearly than most. It means no more than that.

Now – pay attention! The teaching is repeatedly made that Kensho is impossible to reach by any kind of ego thought, will or intention. The reason is obvious: if the ego is active, even unconsciously, no Kensho can possibly arise. Yet, speaking bluntly, many of us in the Western Chan Fellowship – and that may include long-term practitioners – seem incapable of realising this and stumble on egotistically and often unconsciously, trying to get to a place we are preventing ourselves from reaching. And in our blindness we forget that it is within the practice of egoless, compassionate kindness that lies the path to understanding Dharma.

Be careful! Examine yourselves, because anyone capable of even moderate mind-reading of others easily perceives the expression of such egotistic desire. Master Sheng Yen, for example, was noticeably sharp in detecting it and returning such false aspirants to the starting base.

But you may well say: surely an aspiration to achieve such insight is natural. Yes indeed, but it is essential to understand the paradoxical nature of this quest. Only through dropping of the ego inclination towards self-importance and through the practice of kindness to others can you even step upon this path. Indeed, as the Tibetans tell us, it is precisely through compassion that wisdom arises.

So what should our resolution be? The answer is the renewed attention by all of us to kindness. The practice of ‘Metta’ is crucial here. It is an everyday practice. Let thoughts of tolerance, kindness, forbearance and love arise in the place of self-justification and criticism of others.

Compared with this, any meditational statistic, such as the length of one’s retreats, whom one chooses as a Teacher or which ‘school’ one follows is of little or even no significance.

It is worth recalling the very first practice recommended by old Bodhidharma. If someone is angry with you contemplate what it is that you have contributed to the other’s anger. So often we react to another’s anger or scorn by rejection and self-justification. Don’t do that! Reflect on our own demerits in the situation, and find a way through that lacks antagonism. Not easy – but that is the Bodhisattva way. It applies to each one of us.

WAR: A VIEW FROM POLAND

ANNA JEDYNAK

War – sudden, cruel, brutal. In besieged cities people are dying from lack of food and water. Hospitals, schools and humanitarian corridors are being shelled. Civilians serve as human shields. Groups of people, including children, have been abducted deep into enemy territory.

Heroism and sacrifice of some, meanness and perfidy of others, indifference of yet others. Our disbelief, indignation, fear... We can feel unexpectedly stripped of our habitual mental supports. How can we find ourselves in this situation?

Some of us may be tremendously disturbed and lose stability (especially those living closer to the war zone). Others may distance themselves from the bad news and try to protect themselves from uncomfortable feelings (especially those living further away). What protects us from both attitudes is Silent Illumination – understood in a broad sense, used not only on the mat but also in the midst of life's affairs. Silence and illumination are also present in other types of practices under different names, e.g. stillness and awareness. They can be a great help to us now.

Illumination means that we are aware of everything that is happening. We don't repress or push anything to the periphery of consciousness. In a situation of war, we allow other people's pain and horror in, even though it generates our own pain and horror and perhaps throws us out of safe ruts. Silence means that we do not build unnecessary narratives around what we experience. Yes, emotions arise: horror, sadness, com-

passion, anger, helplessness, terror, frustration, desperation, maybe a desire for mental escape, maybe an irrational sense of guilt because we ourselves feel free from danger. Feelings are inevitable, but they do not need to be intensified or preserved with a flood of thoughts and confusion. Let them run their own course, let their energy burn itself out or be usefully spent.

These two elements of practice can help us develop the readiness to open up to the situation and, without escalating confusion, respond to it as we can. And what can we do? Reality sets us different tasks, depending on the circumstances of our lives. Different people may feel predisposed to different forms of assistance and to provide it in different ways. Let us be careful not to burn out too quickly. In general, we can show financial assistance to refugees. We can refrain from purchasing goods from the aggressor country and from companies still cooperating with it. We can support an independent media that directs its message to the citizens of the authoritarian state, where a huge part of the population depends only on lying propaganda. We can sign useful petitions. We can shape public opinion and influence governments in our countries. The latter is important in the long run, especially in Western Europe. There is a danger that the aggressor regime will make superficial changes, declare itself trustworthy, and some liberal democracies will once again be deceived. Let us not allow this to happen.

May we be guided by compassion and openness to the needs of others. May we not hate the perpetrators of suffering. May we understand that they, like us, are also results of their own conditionings. May we remain sensitive, calm, and stable. Action based on concern for others,



UKRAINIAN PROTESTER, LONDON

PHOTO: Rob Bowden

rather than a boastful belief that the world should conform to our concepts, affects countless levels of existence.

May there be an end to the suffering of the victims of war.

May all people of good will live in peace.

And people of ill will, too.

P.S. Humour sometimes helps in difficult situations. Do you know what the title of the most famous novel by Leo Tolstoy is? *Special Operation and Peace*.

Anna writes from Warsaw.

KALYANA MITTA: COMPANY ON THE DHARMA PATH

SIAN THOMAS AND GUY ROBERTS

SIAN: I have been very lucky to have a Dharma buddy (*kalyana mitta*) for quite a few years and then more recently to acquire two more buddies! The relationship with each of them is different, and they bring different aspects of my practice and life to the light, so it has been wonderful to have each of them. With my first buddy we were quite organised in how we worked together at first, each taking in turns to discuss our practice, both on and off the cushion, and then discussing what came up.

Nowadays we try to meet every month or so for a coffee/lunch/cake and dharma chat (pre-covid of course) which allows the conversation to flow easily and without pressure. Over the years our original structure has long since disappeared, but we still meet, eat cake, and talk about everything to do with life and practice.

One of my other buddies and I have started recently having a very structured Zoom meeting where we take turns in a communication exercise and then have a general discussion afterwards. The questions we choose for ourselves each time have varied but included ‘What is life?’ ‘What is practice?’ etc.

My third buddy and I have a phone call every couple of months and just chat and see where the conversation takes us.

The beauty of the discussions in each case is that they are, in my experience, much more in-depth and open-hearted than conversations with

most other people (but not all) in my life. There is a level of trust and willingness to share the heart of a story as well as, or often instead of, simply the details and facts. It allows each of us to touch the parts that become sticky in everyday life and to be able to see them more clearly for ourselves. There is no expectation of either of us fixing or giving advice to the other and it is beautiful simply to share how life is, in all its painful and wonderful fullness. It helps me with my own process of ‘let in, let be, let go’ and it is beautiful to see it happen for the other person.

Over the years I have been amazed at how closely similar my difficulties match those of my buddies, despite how superficially different our lives are to each other. It is a joy and a gift to have others to walk alongside me in this path we call Chan, someone who speaks the same language and is willing to touch matters of the heart in the same way.

DHARMA FRIEND

It’s not that you lead the way, although sometimes you do.

It’s not that I help you up the rocky climbs though, sometimes, I do,

But walking with you in these woods

I know how it is to be myself.

Gazing upwards,

sunlight shines through the leaves above,

layering the blue

shining handprints on the sky

overlapping deep greens and glowing yellows.

And the drop of water falls

with clarity, majesty and grace

to land, softly, on my face



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

GUY: When I began to collect my thoughts for this article and I started to think about the Dharma buddy opportunity, I soon realised that some relationships have naturally evolved and some have been initiated, but all have helped shape, enrich and widen my path.

I can't quite remember when I first heard about the Dharma buddy system but I suspect I was participating in it before I was aware of it. I have a memory of it being mentioned at the end of a Maenllwyd retreat. On the way home from that retreat, while enjoying a deep conversation with my lift-share driver about our experiences that week, I took the plunge and tentatively asked if they would like to be my Dharma buddy. Since then we have had calls every few months and they have evolved from a structured, 5 minutes back and forth sharing session, like a communication exercise on a Western Zen retreat, to an informal chat.

Before this happened, though, I was already frequently discussing the Dharma via WhatsApp with a roommate from my first retreat. We shared a room for a long weekend in silence, each respecting the retreat rules and the other person's space. Once the retreat had finished, we chatted in our room and discussed why we were on a Buddhist retreat and our jobs and lives and practice. The connection seemed evident so we swapped numbers and have been in touch ever since. The WhatsApp debates have led to visits to each other's homes, walks in the countryside and, more recently, Zoom calls. There is always practice discussion alongside the personal catchup as our lives become further entwined. We have swapped information about many authors, book titles and ideas.

My journey into Buddhism and myself has gained a sharper focus within the last five years. On my first retreat, and new to Buddhism and

practice, but being intrigued, I wanted to learn and understand and it seemed natural to ask others: people with more experience who could guide and point me on my way. Being a little shy and fearing rejection, I sometimes had nerves around asking advice but my curiosity was so strong and I kept thinking to myself, ‘These people are Buddhists, what could hurt in asking?’ I am very glad I did.

More recently, my fears lessened, I have enjoyed further Dharma buddy relationships with practitioners who I had listened to and wanted to listen to more: a selfish, simple desire to add to my own understanding but also potentially to offer back whatever I could, even if I just provided a sounding board, or a mirror.

I can’t thank my Dharma Buddies enough for how they have helped me. The sparks they have made, the lightbulb moments, the steering. A hand held on the journey inwards. Allowing the space for an open heart. Each relationship is treasured for its uniqueness but also not clung onto to allow space for fluidity and time for reflection.

Continuing from a confidential retreat scenario, with boundaries set and trust built, the conversations allow for a vulnerability to arise and open, to face what often is ignored or turned away from. These are openings that I do not find in chats with friends and family. I talk and open up with my buddy in a way I don’t with friends where time has worn deep groves of habit. I can’t talk to my mates in the pub about emptiness and the interconnectedness of all things, but I need to discuss this. My curiosity urges me to find like-minded people and chat about this teaching laid before us. A shared path with a Dharma framework gives opportunity to quicken the pace and guide each other.

Our shared path is a process of self-discovery, investigating habits and reactions, questioning some automatic responses, looking where sometimes it's difficult. The support of a Dharma buddy can help and point to this.

STORIES FROM THE ZOOMIVERSE: A VIRTUAL SANGHA IN THE TIME OF COVID

RICHARD SPALDING

THE GUEST HOUSE BY RUMI

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor...
Welcome and entertain them all!
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a
guide from beyond.

Communicating in a group via the Internet during a viral pandemic has been an extraordinary experience. Sealed away in our bubbles, we came together weekly for well over a year. For some reason I wrote notes and this piece is a set of personal reflections on what transpired. There was no plan, no gaffer, no agenda, no minutes, no sense of expectation and only an opportunity to join together in virtual sangha, if we even knew what that was. I certainly didn't.

What emerged for me was a remarkable and wonderful sense of mutually supportive encounters ebbing and flowing with the tides. Someone read a poem or shared a joyful story, someone found out how to use



gallery view, another quoted from the Maenllwyd liturgy, another just sat in their own stillness, another expressed a little of the demon the ‘virus-time’ brought from their heart to their lips. Another seemed to sit in silent distress. Another told of themselves through a personal act. Cats came to sit when they sensed they could create the most havoc. One dark evening a fox looked into my window seemingly wanting to join the sangha. It hasn’t returned thus far. Participants’ children sometimes waved goodnight.

The group often shared respectful and heart-felt silences before another story came to enrich the moment or perhaps enable us to explore the messy nature of relationships. Each of us often seemed to reflect awhile and then perhaps add to the richness through our own experiences and reactions. One of us saw these encounters as providing what they called the ‘after care’ post-retreat that often seems to be lacking in the work of the Western Chan Fellowship. I have tried to investigate human nature and relationships within our new kind of sangha to give an essence of what emerged.

Here is just a little of what I recorded from our collective musings and investigations. The underlined headings are mine as an attempt to capture individual thoughts under themes, many of which were recurrent. The one-liners are the actual words that group members spoke or quoted as accurately as my scribbling allowed.

FEAR, TIREDNESS AND BRAVERY

Tiredness is suppressing something
 Lightening the burden – NO!!! – Let it become so heavy you have to put it down
 Being with an addict is like holding on to the tail of a serpent
 Feeding the demons and using them as ally
 The demon of perfectionism – perfectionism is shame management
 Dying is easy, it’s living that scares me to death - Annie Lennox
 Say ‘boo’ to the demons – say ‘come on in’ – say, ‘I surrender to them’
 Place the fearful mind in the cradle of loving-kindness
 See fear and bravery as one

SUFFERING, TEARS, ANXIETY, LOSS AND ILLNESS

We don’t need to suffer about suffering – just accept that it is part of things
 Accept some of the pain first as part of what comes in naturally
 Old me, new me – people look at you as the old, leaving no space for the new
 I just realised that I am getting in my own way too much
 From inter generational trauma to what may be ‘the original trauma’
 My mind makes this stuff up

ANGER, IMPATIENCE & FRUSTRATION WITH OTHERS & OURSELVES

Blaming Zoom for everything

I angrily drew what looks like an arrow through my heart and wrote 'no access' over it

Below the surface of the aggression we will generally find fear

Lack of talking brings real danger / I am an ex-sulker / sulking is mis-managed anger

'I don't have to be a good boy/girl' is Mary Oliver's version

If I judge my insides by somebody's outside, I am going to come up short

Compare and despair

Keeping myself muddled means I can't tackle things

POWERLESSNESS AND POWERFULNESS

Just admitting powerlessness gives choices

Don't worry – everything is out of control

I'll get it all done and then everything will be all right

JUST NOTICING

The storm is just being itself

With every storm comes new opportunity

Noticing closing down is not a failure, but an important part of the practice

Waterfalls are both wonderful and terrible – life-quenching or drowning

Meditation is just watching what's going on

This too shall pass

JOY AND LOVE

Actually we are beautiful

You will lose everything you love

Love is about trusting people

Love is the ultimate defiance (a remark by John Crook immediately after 9.11)

I don't know how to love

One-to-one interactions are the most important ones

LEARNING TO BE OPEN

Being completely open can leave us vulnerable

We need to honour the bits we find tricky

What's behind the feeling of the feeling?

Be content with not knowing

Start where you are rather than where you think you should be

DUTY

Why does the sense of duty to stay keep coming up and yet I don't approach the fear and joy of possibility?

We have rules in our head that need to be challenged – e.g. If I'm uncomfortable I am doing something wrong:

I might just be uncomfortable at that moment and not always

NOT CLINGING, IMPERMANENCE AND ACCEPTANCE

Transiency – there is no abiding self
 Everything being an equal weight – awe and anxiety/joy and pain
 Get intimate with the ‘split-off’ parts of us
 Be with the ‘blundering about’
 Stop resisting
 The whole notion of right and wrong can stop us from moving forward
 The body keeps the score
 I need to untangle this – I need to be courageous
 You won’t think yourself out of this one
 Not holding on or holding back
 Not longing and hoping
 There is a profound problem – I need to get out of this situation – I
 have been given an opportunity – now take it
 Where is the finishing line?
 ‘No good’ hasn’t evolved into something better
 Habit release may be required
 Approaching myself for authenticity
 Making friends with all parts of ourselves
 Embrace life – the whole shitty freak show
 Don’t ruminate on the same old thing – don’t get stuck in the stories

COMPASSION, COURAGE AND WISDOM

Haruka – the fierce face of compassion
 Widen our circle of compassion
 If only my sleeves were wider they would shelter more people in this
 up and down world
 Investigate and explore
 Suddenly it becomes obvious – suddenly it is worth the courage
 We have to let part of us die to be able to move on
 We all possess super-potential to go ‘off piste’ and be successful
 The courage to step into the void
 Don’t hesitate – Mary Oliver
 The way ahead must be fashioned by ourselves
 Wisdom is forgetting yourself – are we most caring when this is the case?
 In the other maybe we can find ourselves
 Less self-ness
 Accessing split parts of us
 Pay attention: that is our endless and proper work

Ending and beginning

We were curious in this time of lockdowns and seemed to find it in our
 hearts to share and support each other, even though some of us had
 never met face to face. I felt such warmth and compassion that I often
 did not want to leave our encounters.

Our own weekly ‘guest house’ has been full of honesty, only occa-
 sionally disrupted by technical glitch, by my personal frustration when
 I was prevented from logging in, or my own judgemental silence as I

raged as to why someone would bring a particular agenda to the group.

As we approached the last few weeks of our gatherings, I wanted to gain a sense of what others had learned from our meetings. I received this response... “When we meet on Zoom there is a sense that all the participants are with me in my attic room, all of us on the screen. Whilst I don’t want to read too much into this, and the feeling is quite subtle, it is as if we have become one on that screen. This could be threatening, but in our discussions I have more and more come to see us as one unit and not a group of disparate Chan people. The separation between me and you and the other lessens. In Martin Buber’s terminology the conversation moves towards I-Thou rather than I-It.”

So whatever has happened in our own kind of guesthouse, the richness of our new sangha recorded here has been entirely unexpected and largely joyful. Our discussions of our experiences form an interesting compendium of potentially useful ideas deeply rooted in both Buddhist writings and practical strategies for developing and enhancing our practice.

Some of us are about to embark on a weekly offering of continuing virtual sangha alongside traditional face-to-face group practice. It will be interesting to see what arises in the coming months. Already our newly constituted on-line group has thrown up a jewel of real significance to me – a poem of real beauty, simplicity and support to those seeking the courage to take a major step to change their lives. It seems a suitable place to end this short piece.

COME TO THE EDGE BY GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

‘Come to the edge,’ he said.
 ‘We can’t, we’re afraid!’ they responded.
 ‘Come to the edge,’ he said.
 ‘We can’t, we will fall!’ they responded.
 ‘Come to the edge,’ he said.
 And so they came.
 And he pushed them.
 And they flew.

Oh admirable on-line friends, you have enriched my understanding more than I could ever have imagined. Thank you for helping to give me the courage to move forward in my own life.

MAENLLWYD: MOMENTS OF BEING

NIGEL JEFFCOAT

To write about a place which has made such a profound impact on my life, and to do so concisely and effectively, feels like quite a challenge; but one which I feel I must take on – both for myself and as an offering to the community of fellow members, with whom I have shared so many precious hours and days: times which contained the broadest possible range of human emotions – some of which I had no idea existed.

Rather than write a retrospective narrative, I have decided to make extracts from my retreat reports the basis of my account – extracts which have the flavour of my title, ‘moments of being’. The phrase is taken from the title of one of Virginia Woolf’s early short stories¹ and as such, needs no improvement by me.

The four extracts I have chosen each seem to me to distil one of the many qualities, functions or processes which Maenllwyd has represented or embodied for me over the years. In reality, of course, these categories overlap and intertwine in a myriad ways: but at the moments described here, a very specific ‘taste’ (a key word for John Crook) has arisen – and I hope to convey something of each taste to my readers.

1. Containment

My first visit took place in March 1999 for a Western Zen Retreat with John Crook and Simon Child. During this, and on subsequent retreats over the next couple of years, the main function Maenllwyd had for me was as an emotional container: a place where a lifetime of deeply buried

childhood experiences and memories could finally find their expression:

Once we started the communication exercises, the retreat process deepened in ways that I find utterly astonishing, and more moving and beautiful than I can begin to describe. Tears fell frequently; and what a relief it was just to let them drop onto the floor, being watched with care and love by so many varied and beautiful faces – letting all self-consciousness fall away, down, out. Our lives fell off our faces, leaving just facing-ness and gazing-ness.

I returned in September of the same year for a full Chan retreat:

I think it was on the morning of my birthday, when we rose at 4am to see a crystal-clear sky glittering with stars, and watched the moon and Venus rising together across the valley; it was an unforgettable sight.

Towards the end of the March retreat, John had suggested that I take the question, ‘How is life fulfilled?’, away with me at the end of the retreat. As we settled for our first sit of the morning on this retreat, I felt confident enough to allow this question to drop into my calming mind:

I watched and waited, breathing quietly. Within a very short time the phrase ‘I belong here’ floated to the surface. At that point, it was as if a huge dam had burst; tears poured out of me, my body shook with great waves of emotion, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude that I was here, in this hall, on this morning, under these awesome heavens. It was as if I was allowing the universe to wash away all those crabbed, gibbering demons which had been swarming over me earlier in the week. I felt shaken to my very core – cleansed.

After breakfast and the work period, in the bright autumn sunshine, I walked up the steep path which rises sharply from the track outside the gate, and stopped where it flattens into a vantage point:

It was too much to take in. I felt like a blind man whose sight has been miraculously restored. Here I was: here was the world stretched out before me in all its unfathomable, heart-rending beauty. I felt intense joy and gratitude that I had found Maenllwyd – where else could I be?

The opening stanzas of a poem I wrote a couple of years later, after another retreat, seem to me now to encapsulate my first theme:

Returning again
The gift of stillness
Opens around me
A warm mantle
Enfolds me.

All that I am
Is here in this hall
I walk back in here
Letting go.

All the hall holds
I carry within me
Allowing its teachings
To grow.

2. Silence

rising from sitting –
breath startled! – plunged into now
blue sky all there is.

The ‘warm mantle of silence’ I evoke in the opening lines of the poem at the close of my first section is, of course, an external silence, and this silence is a defining condition of all our retreats. But as the retreat proceeds, if we are lucky, an internal silence may gradually arise. We may, as Dainin Katagiri points out, ask “What is this silence? How can I speak of it? Do I just keep my mouth shut?” No, I don't think so. Even if you don't say anything, there is still a problem. Silence – Buddha-nature – is not something apart from your life. It compels you to speak.² In this section, the quotations from my retreat report may convey the flavour of my attempts to speak from such a place.

In April 2006 I attended a Silent Illumination retreat. On the final day of the week, I was blessed with a glimpse of a profound silence: an experience of ‘one mind’, confirmed by John and Simon. The haiku above was written a few months later.

I was sitting in the hall during the first period after lunch, and feeling very stable; I ignored the short break. Near the end of the hour there was a sudden shift in my perception. I described this later as being like the negative of a colour photograph – there was a sort of ‘turning around’ in my body – tears welled up, and I allowed them to flow and subside. Quite suddenly, the tears turned in an instant to delighted laughter, and it became a see-saw between the two.

Everyone had left for the walk. I got up, feeling a bit shaky. I found myself saying ‘What is it?’ over and over again. All seemed both familiar and utterly strange in the same instant.

I walked out into the yard, into the dazzling blue sky and bright sunlight. Everything was bathed in a luminous, intense stillness; all was quietly and intently SO. I sat on the bench, asking ‘What is it? What is it?’ over and over again.

I saw Simon emerge from the house, and beckoned quickly to him. ‘I need to talk to you!’ I cried, and he came over and we went into the library together. We sat and faced each other, as we had so many times before. There he was. Here I was: we were just SO. I kept leaning forward intently, looking at Simon, and there was nothing in the way. I grasped his hands, leaning forward, and said ‘You’re Simon, aren’t you?’ and he replied ‘Yes – just me – no projections’. ‘What is this?’ I asked, and he said ‘You’ve got out of the way’. ‘Is there a name for it?’ I asked, and Simon replied, ‘One Mind’. I remained still, gazing into his face, smiling and crying like an idiot; gasps of wonder kept bursting from me in rapt astonishment. Simon said, ‘You’ve got me going now’, and we stood up and hugged each other.

I spent the next hour or two wandering in the fields and valley below. The dazzling clarity and freshness of my perception continued:

The grass and moss were unutterably grass-y and moss-y: the sheep blinking at me were revealed in all their essential sheep-iness – and I gasped in wonder yet again as I beheld them. (Only ‘I’ was not doing any of this, I guess – hence the sense of unmediated intense clarity, devoid of – or at least, much less coloured by – the normal fog of interpretation, with its attachments and disdains.)

Later, I returned to the library with Simon and Jake, and tried to talk some more about what had happened:

As I did so, I was swept up in great gusts of the most intense, gutsy laughter possible; and reached out to feel the solid presence of the small desk beside me, and my chair. That made me laugh even more: it felt as if the universe was laughing.

3. Flow

While my experience in 2006 was a key moment in my development as a practitioner, insofar as it seemed strong evidence for the Buddha’s exhortation towards pragmatic, moment by moment, enquiry, it also triggered a period of ruminating intellectual questioning. I wanted answers, corroborating evidence from other sources – it didn’t feel enough just to trust my individual experience. So for a few years my practice at home diminished and, although I acted as guestmaster on several retreats, I would define this period as a sort of pause, a treading-the-water phase of my practice.

However, the sudden shock of John’s death in 2011 triggered a re-engagement with practice, and in December 2012 I attended my first Koan retreat; it turned out to be the first of a series, such was the impact of this first retreat.

It didn’t take me long to select my koan on the first day. It leapt straight off the page: it’s the one that begins:

Joshu asked Nansen, ‘What is the Way?’

“Ordinary mind is the Way”, Nansen replied.

“Shall I seek after it?” Joshu asked.

The weather was biting cold, bright and clear for most of the week; deep frosts and rime coated the trees and the fields. I was soon intimately engaged with my koan – such a different ‘taste’ from Silent Illumination:

The stream at Maenllwyd means a lot to me. Many times during my early visits, I would stand beside it, or in it, during a break; and its bubbling, tumbling flow would allow blocked feelings in me to arise and merge with it. I would stand there crying, becoming one with it as it just continued and continued, an unbreakable presence consoling and melting my heart.

On this retreat, early one morning, I went over to the stream once again. Beside and above it elaborate crystals of frost coated the plants and the grass. Among them, each dark, spikey green leaf of a plant was encased in a thick, clear pendant of ice – like the glass of a chandelier. Beautiful. I began to cry. ‘This is the bit of me that wanted to know, to be certain’, I thought to myself: and the Heart Sutra came into my mind – form and emptiness, emptiness and form: ice-as-form, water-as-emptiness; all the myriad forms of water – the ice, the frost, the mist, the clouds – all of them empty, and returning to the original emptiness of the water. The stream had dissolved ‘me’ once again.

In my final interview of the retreat with Simon, I said something to the effect that whatever or whoever was sitting in front of him, a name was not really necessary, since what was there was not an object but a process – a flowing, like the stream. Simon said, ‘Is there any need for Nigel to be here?’ Quite easily, and without thinking about it, I said ‘No’.



MAENLLWYD

4. Energy

It was as if I had been digging to find a source of water in a dry, bare landscape, and had suddenly broken through to release a geyser which punched its way high into the air above me.

The stream was to provide a trigger once again when I attended my fourth Koan retreat in the spring of 2015. I had been retired for a year by this time, and was still in the early stages of adjusting to this big transition. During the year, my partner, Richard, had lost his mother and last surviving aunt within a few months, so mortality was very present for me as I travelled to Wales, and, once again, the koan chose me as I read down the list that Simon had prepared for us:

Kansan Egen saw a monk coming and scolded him. The monk said, 'I came all the way here to meet you concerning the Great Matter of birth-and-death. Why do you scold me?' 'There's no birth-and-death at my place!' answered Kanzan, striking the monk and driving him away.

During Simon's morning talk on the day after we had chosen our koans, and begun to familiarise ourselves with our choices, he spoke about the point in meditation when the intellect has exhausted itself, and we can begin to look into the koan with a clearer, brighter mind. His precise words eluded me by the time I sat down to write my report at home, but they had dived straight inside me:

As we went out into the spring sunshine for the break I knew that I had to go over to the stream. It embodies my deepest feelings about the journey I began 16 years ago. I leant on the fence post and looked down

at the bubbling, chattering water. As if mirroring the flowing water, tears poured out of me in a sudden torrent; an emphatic, unconditional letting-go engulfed me. From that point onwards, for the entire retreat, my experience of myself shifted decisively away from my small, self-concerned identity towards a much larger and energised 'self/mind': I found myself able to engage in practice with an utterly committed, intensely enquiring focus.

On the second or third day whilst looking into the koan, I realised that I had been substituting the word 'here' for Kanzan's 'my place'. I thought 'Well, his place could just as easily be Maenllwyd, couldn't it?' This thought then morphed easily into 'here, inside me'.

At this point there was a surge of energy in my body; it felt as if the koan had come to rest just behind my breast-bone – a palpable presence. Body/mind/koan was one thing – and from that point onwards, nothing mattered but practice. A feeling of intense, open enquiry drove me forward, with nothing at all to fear. Nothing.

I sat as if (in the phrase from the afternoon liturgy) 'my head was aflame'. I sat through the morning service the next day; on another day, I sat through the full morning and lunch as well, without moving. The koan occupied my whole being, and I was gazing into a process over which I had relinquished all control: a steady brightness opened in front of me, seeming to become thinner and more transparent. It felt as if the 'Gateless gate' might be on the verge of revealing itself.

When I talked to Simon about this on the last morning of the retreat, he twinkled and said, 'Well, there you are – swinging back and forth on that gate!' (Back at home later that day, I recalled an exchange we had had a



couple of years before, also at the end of a retreat. I closed my report of that week like this:

As we drove away from the house after everyone had gone, I got out of the car to open the first gate so Simon could drive through. As I closed it again, I realised that I was on the wrong side. I grinned to myself as I climbed back into the car, saying ‘I nearly left myself behind!’ ‘Good’, said Simon.)

Whilst digesting a retreat, and putting it into words on paper, I often look back into the great, challenging texts of the teachers of the past, to see if there is something there which has the ‘taste’, the feel, of what I have experienced in Wales. The following two short extracts from Dogen³ spoke powerfully to me after this retreat:

FROM SHOJI: (BIRTH AND DEATH)

Only when you don’t dislike birth and death or long for them, do you enter buddha’s mind. Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of buddha; then all is done by buddha. When you follow this, you are free from birth and death and become a buddha without calculation. Who then can continue to think?

FROM GENJOKOAN: (MANIFESTING SUCHNESS)

To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening.

I would like to conclude by offering my heartfelt gratitude to Master Sheng Yen, to John Crook, and to Simon Child for creating the conditions which allowed these moments to arise. When I am at Maenlbyrd, I feel complete and that I cover the ground.

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf also uses the phrase ‘moments of being’ in her autobiographical memoir *A Sketch of the Past* which was written in 1939, but remained unpublished until 1976 (Jean Schulkind, Sussex University Press.) There, she distinguishes ‘being’ from ‘non-being’: she characterises non-being as the ‘cotton wool’ of our daily lives, which she sees as being lived largely unconsciously – whereas her own ‘moments of being’ she describes as ‘shocks’, which she intuits as ‘a token of some real thing behind appearances – which I make real by putting it into words’. From this, she reaches ‘what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine: that behind the cotton wool is a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art. ‘Hamlet’ or a Beethoven quartet is a truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God: we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.’
2. Dainin Katagiri: *You Have to Say Something*, Shambhala, 1998.
3. Dogen: *Moon in a Dewdrop* Edited by Kazukai Tanahashi, North Point Press, 1995.

URGYEN DZONG: A POWER PLACE IN THE HIMALAYA

MICHAEL COCKER

Caves are significant features in the sacred geography of the Himalaya. They are often in dramatic locations and form part of a larger mandalic landscape of mountains, lakes, valleys and rivers. Traditionally they are the preferred abode of those seeking contemplative isolation and many are alleged to have been inhabited by renowned tantric adepts such as Padmasambhava or the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa. These remote hermitages are believed to be imbued with the presence and enlightened mind of their original occupants giving them an aura of power and numinous liminality; a conjunction of mind and landscape that supports meditation practice and the attainment of spiritual realisation. Urgyen Dzong, in Western Ladakh, is one such place. Hidden behind a wall of high mountains, and set in cliffs above a hanging valley, the cave is located well away from the usual tourist routes and would be very difficult to find without the help of a local guide. It is associated with Padmasambhava, a historical figure credited with establishing Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and throughout the Himalayas in the eighth century CE. In Tibetan culture he is more commonly known as Guru Rimpoche. Urgyen is another name for Padmasambhava and refers to his place of birth, Uddiyanna, a legendary realm which probably corresponds to the modern-day Swat Valley in Pakistan. The word dzong means fortress or stronghold in Tibetan. Urgyen Dzong, therefore, indicates a fortress of Dharma practice belonging to Padmasambhava. The cave was ‘opened’ by Togden Rim-

poche sometime between 1950 and 1975 when he was guided there in a dream by a Dharma protector.

This ‘opening’ of a sacred site is part of the terma tradition associated with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. It refers to places, artefacts, teachings and other spiritual matters concealed by Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal that are later revealed to spiritually advanced practitioners, known as tertons or treasure revealers, at a time when it is historically appropriate and of benefit to mankind. Togden Rimpoche is a recognised terton and has ‘opened’ several caves and hidden lands in Ladakh and written pilgrims’ guides to these places. He was born in 1939 and is currently the senior lama for all the Tibetan Buddhist lineages in Ladakh. The name Ugyen Dzong will be familiar to those who have read John Crook and James Low’s book *The Yogins of Ladakh*, for it was here, in the summer of 1981, that John was given a Mahamudra text by Khamtag Rimpoche that was subsequently taught for a number of years at Maenllwyed.¹ Khamtag Rimpoche was an incarnate lama from the village of Khamtag near Shigatse, in Tibet. A student of Tipun Padma Chogyal (1887–1958) he escaped from Tibet with Awo Rimpoche in 1959. Arriving in India he wandered through the mountains and eventually reached Ladakh where he joined a gang of Tibetan refugees labouring on the roads. A passing traveller, realising he was an incarnate lama, invited him to stay at his house and subsequently became one of Rimpoche’s main sponsors. Rimpoche spent several years associated with monasteries in Zanskar and later with Hemis monastery, in Ladakh.

Hearing about the cave at Ugyen Dzong he obtained permission from the authorities at Hemis to build a small gompa (monastery) there and minister to the local families in the surrounding villages.² On one

occasion the Rimpoche wrote to the Dalai Lama inviting him to visit Ugyen Dzong during his next tour of Ladakh. Perhaps surprisingly, the Dalai Lama accepted the invitation and spent several hours meditating in the cave before staying a night at the gompa: a visit that no doubt caused considerable consternation to the officers responsible for his security. John Crook first met Khamtag Rimpoche when visiting a family near Leh accompanied by Tsering Shakya, a young Tibetan graduate in anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies, at London University.

Tsering went before me and I was surprised to find him prostrating himself before some person in the shadow at the end of the room. I entered and found myself under the alert and curious gaze of a monk dressed in the robes of a high lama. He invited us to sit and take chang, the local barley beer, with him. [...] We were questioned extensively about our origins and reasons for being in Ladakh. [...] As we were leaving he said “I have a small monastery in the mountains near a little known cave of Guru Rimpoche. it is known as Ugyen Dzong. There is no-one there and, if you come, you will find it peaceful. You will both be most welcome.” Both Tsering and I felt we had been in the presence of an unusual man, ‘one who knew’ was how we put it.

That night I awoke and sat in the window of our room looking at the full moon over the arid hills. I had the strangest impression that my own face had become that of the lama. The feeling lasted for perhaps half an hour. It was very curious and I wondered what sort of man this could be. John and Tsering decided to take up the invitation but before they could arrange it the Rimpoche had left without giving any directions and no one seemed to know the location of Ugyen Dzong.

They eventually discovered it was somewhere in the hills above Mulbekh, in Western Ladakh, and with the addition of Tashi Rabgyas, a Ladakhi scholar, they set off to find it. The party travelled to the road head near Mulbekh and initially had difficulty locating the Rimpoche until they were introduced to a young nun who was able to show them the way to the gumpa. The track led out across a broad valley of fields, streams and trees, where the nun quickly turned off onto a little used path heading straight into the mountain.

We found ourselves in the shade of a limestone cleft some 400 feet high and quickly narrowing to a width of a few yards, a mere crack in the mountainside. We scrambled up over the rounded boulders of dried-up waterfalls, climbing rickety ladders set at the trickiest places. We were ascending a narrow funnel which slowly widened until we emerged into the evening sunlight of a high pasture set within a deep bowl totally ringed by vast snow-crested mountains. The only way in was up the narrow gorge through which we had scrambled; any rainfall would make the place [...] inaccessible except by a frontal assault over the ridges. [...] In the centre of the bowl a low ridge, in the middle of which sat a small temple, ran along to a dilapidated farm building with a tiny brand new gumpa nearby. A monk was harvesting a small field of barley. No-one else was there, the Rimpoche was somewhere off in the hills. We spent several days exploring the bowl. A path leads to small apertures in a limestone crag, the cave of Guru Rimpoche. You creep in through a narrow tunnel which winds upwards to a chamber opening on the cliff face. There were two small stupas inside and a case for images under construction. Nobody came. A little girl drove her herd of sheep and goats up over the ridge every day for pasture. We sent off messages to the local farms enquiring after the Rimpoche.

They were on the point of departing when the Rimpoche suddenly appeared with his assistant and uncle, Aku-La, and the young nun who had shown them the way. That evening they had a meal together and consumed a quantity of chang (barley beer) and arrack (a strong spirit). The Rimpoche, apparently unaffected by the alcohol, revealed some of the details of his life. They also discussed the importance of accurate translations of texts for the use of western students. He showed them a tattered but carefully preserved hand-written notebook and said: 'I want you to copy and translate this. [...] It is one of the only three copies of the Mahamudra instructions of my master Tipun Padma Chogyi'.

The notebook was photographed by John the following morning on the roof of the gumpa, after which they packed up and descended the narrow gorge together.³ They spent two more days with the Rimpoche travelling through the countryside and visiting various farmhouses. 'Rimpoche rarely taught us directly but his presence was somehow inspiring. In his company there was a sort of underground transmission going on for he often made sudden illuminating remarks, answers to unspoken questions or ones that had been raised hours before but not resolved.

Whatever you are looking for [...] whether in Europe or Ladakh, the question is: where at this very moment is your mind?" "The task is to know the natural unborn mind. You must observe all activity whether good or bad, easy or difficult without judgement at all. Simply to see it as it is is the main point. When you do this there is no intellectual elaboration, attachment, rejection or concern. It becomes easy to experience the ground against which, as it were, all images float. Just rest in that without needing to move or reflect intellectually at all. This will lead you

to see the three aspects of Buddhahood – the ultimate, the appearance, and that which is now in your heart – and how they relate to one another.. If you do this you will see what I mean.

As for meditation; if you wish to meditate choose a good place, as remote as possible, peaceful with clean water and wild nature.

John Crook never met Khamtag Rimpoche again. He died in the Markhor valley sometime in the winter of 1985-6. His age was unknown but photographs suggest that he was perhaps around 50 when John met him. *The Yogins of Ladakh* is dedicated to his memory.

In September 2019 I visited Ugyen Dzong with my wife Philippa and friends Juliet, Mike and Sophie. We travelled by jeep from Leh and stayed with a delightful family in the small village of Sergol. A local guide, Palden, and his friend arrived at the house early the next morning. Our driver came along as well, so there were eight in the party. We set off from the house at 7.45 am, crossed a small stream and then climbed steeply upwards for three quarters of an hour to reach a wide barren moorland with a wall of impenetrable-looking cliffs on the far side. A low ridge of loose shale led to the base of the cliffs where we started scrambling up a shallow gully. The terrain became steeper and increasingly exposed as we zig zagged our way upwards. This wasn't the deep narrow cleft that we had been expecting. Our guide explained that we were doing the kora, a clockwise circumambulation, of Ugyen Dzong, and we realised that we were making the 'frontal assault over the ridges'. After thirty minutes scrambling we arrived at Drak Lam La or Pass of the Mountain Path (circa 3650m) and enjoyed a stunning view down into valley below, with the little gompa on a low ridge in the centre.

Encircled by mountains the valley is completely hidden from the surrounding landscape. It had taken around three hours to reach this point. We hung some prayer flags then descended steep shale and limestone slabs to the edge of the valley floor and a cave where two Koreans had recently spent two years in retreat. We continued traversing down and rightwards below steep crags to some juniper trees with prayer flags attached to them. In the cliffs above were a series of caves. Our attention was drawn to some unusual markings on the surrounding rock. This, we were told, was 'Dakini script'. Recognisable images included the head of an antelope, a camel and the Tibetan letter Om. There was also a small hole in the rock which, when your head was placed inside, the distant pulsing sound of 'Padmasambhava's drum' could be heard. All these, we were informed, were rangjung, self-originating forms and phenomena in the rock.⁴ Some steps led steeply up to a narrow entrance and passageway along which one crawled and groped to access the main cave above. This had a fine balcony view across the valley. There are two parts to the cave, a slightly larger lower section which has a shrine with painted clay statues of Padmasambhava, Avalokiteshvara, Green Tara, Shakyamuni Buddha and Manjushri, each about two foot high. Behind these, half hidden, is a stupa.

Further back, at a slightly higher level, is the most sacred part of the cave. The floor was covered in mats and we took our shoes off before stepping up into this area. In one corner was another statue or stupa, so covered in khatas (offering scarves) that you couldn't actually see what was underneath, and a small shrine with a thangka painting on cloth of Padmasambhava. Below the shrine dozens of coins had been pressed onto the rock with butter to hold them in place as offerings.

When we arrived in the cave we found a lady, Tsering Drolma, already there lighting butter lamps. She had walked across from the gompa where she had been staying for a few days supporting her sister who was a nun on a one-month retreat. We sat cross legged on the floor of the upper cave and Sophie led a short puja which the locals seemed to appreciate as much as we did. We then descended a narrow passage to a pitch-dark recess deep inside the cliff below the cave, where we were shown the hand and foot prints of Padmasambhava impressed into the rock.

At the gompa we were introduced to the nun, Tsunma Tsogyel Zangmo, who made us welcome and offered us tea, orange juice and biscuits. I showed her my copy of *The Yogins of Ladakh* and she and her sister both delighted in recognising Khamtag Rinpoche and some others in the photographs. The gompa has a small shrine room with an unusual statue of Padmasambhava, a separate lama room with a throne and a photograph of Khamtag Rinpoche as a young man, a kitchen and a couple of other rooms which, presumably, are for storage or accommodation. Further along the ridge are two stupas and at the far end, about a hundred yards from the gompa, a small temple containing a wrathful image of Padmasambhava.

We spent a couple of hours at the gompa, then descended a steep ridge down to the narrow gorge that John Crook had described. A degree of nimbleness and caution was required to negotiate the rounded boulders and rickety ladders safely. After forty minutes or so we emerged abruptly onto the valley floor and walked back to the village, which we reached around 4.00 pm. John Crook was almost certainly the first westerner to reach Ugyen Dzong. I asked our guide, Palden, how many



VIEW DOWN TO THE HIDDEN VALLEY OF UGYEN DZONG FROM DRAK LAM LA



GROUP PHOTO OUTSIDE THE GOMPA AT URGYEN DZONG

PHOTO: MICHAEL COCKER

foreign visitors he thought had been to Urgyen Dzong and he replied that in recent times one or two groups a year, which means that since John's visit in 1981 there have perhaps been, at most, three hundred foreign visitors to Urgyen Dzong. The remote location, difficult access and absence of any organised infrastructure or commercialisation meant, that for me at least, Urgyen Dzong did feel a very special place. One that was still untainted by the modern world and that retained a timeless atmosphere of transcendental power and liminality; a portal into a more visionary realm where the veils that separate us from other worlds and realities are just a little less opaque.

Regrettably, I never met John Crook but am grateful for his legacy and his fascinating book, *The Yogins of Ladakh*, that took us all to Urgyen Dzong. Sophie, however, knew him well and had been a student of John's since 1993 and was requested by him, before he died, to continue leading retreats based on the Mahamudra text given by Khamtag Rimpoche. Juliet and Mike also knew John through attending retreats at Maenllwyd.

NOTES

All quotes and much of the background information in this article are from:

Crook, John & James Low, 1997, *The Yogins of Ladakh*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

1. In the main text of *The Yogins of Ladakh* John says his visit to Urgyen Dzong was in 1981 but in his commentary on the Mahamudra text the year given is 1980. I'm not sure which is correct.
2. Khamtag Rimpoche had a strong connection with Padmasambhava and was allegedly in possession of his *phurba* (ritual dagger) – John Crook had a copy of a photograph of this ancient artefact.
3. The Mahamudra text was translated by Tashi Rabgyas and James Low and is reproduced in *The Yogins of Ladakh* along with a commentary by John Crook.
4. When I showed a photograph of the 'Dakini script' to a geologist friend back home he thought it was an unusual conglomeration of fossils.

MUSINGS

PAUL GODDARD

There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.

– Donald Rumsfeld. Former US Defence Secretary 2002

I'm thinking about knowing and not knowing.

It's important to know things, isn't it. Things like how to drive or the skills of our profession or, as we get older, the proximity of a nice sit down.

Some knowing involves memory or logic and calculation. I guess a kind of 'linear' knowing because it uses a step by step process to get somewhere. Other forms of knowing such as intuition rely on the body/mind's sense of things. Its less easy to pin down and more amorphous. The body/mind has a strange way of knowing a situation which includes everything in that moment, expressed both to the mind visually and to the body as felt sensations, the subconscious can reveal itself to us in this way.

In Buddhism there is talk about knowing how things really are. A kind of knowledge which underpins our experience of existence. Our true nature, our original face and so on. Zen is fun like that and we can indulge in the many curious stories of monks becoming enlightened: Perhaps a monk awakens upon hearing a stone hitting bamboo, a nun

enlightened by the moons reflection in the puddles of spilled water or someone enlightened when hearing a sutra for the first time.

How wonderful.

These moments of awakening differ from our usual intellectual plodding in that they are a spontaneous and simultaneous seeing and knowing.

There is no time for any reflection, there is just a click of the fingers. Things are seen... Ah, yes. Beneath our usual remembering and calculating is a natural wisdom. Available both through and within a heart and mind which are momentarily open, sensitive and clear.

But this natural wisdom gets covered over or sidelined or bludgeoned into silence. Lives can be increasingly hectic, stressed and weighed with a constant preparation for the next thing. In the end we forget we have this wise source and we reach and grasp onto ideas of what we should have or should be.

I remember going on a retreat so desperate to replicate the one before that I spent the whole week pretending I knew something. I clearly didn't have a scooby-doo. Such a waste of time and so obvious I'm sure to the retreat leader. She was polite and patient of course, less so the guest master, who asked me why I was dragging a corpse around.

So an accumulative knowing becomes as you would expect, heavy and cumbersome. We drag our heavy sack of known knowns around like some kind of hideous trophy who nobody gives a shit about anyway.

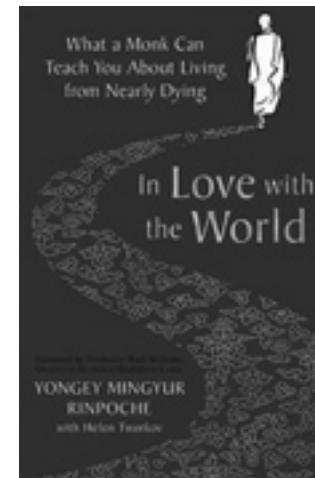
But what of not knowing? What a curious idea. Not knowing is not ignorance but an openness to our experience. Its an acknowledgement that we have a terrible tendency to assume way too much and a letting go of that as best we can. To doubt we have it all sewn up or even need it all sewn up is very healthy indeed.

We all know our stories, but do we see the fabric behind the pictures on our personal tapestry? How the threads are intertwined and held together.

Let us take a moment to acknowledge, not what we have sewn, but how. Our craving and clinging, our becoming this and that. It's no problem. It's OK. Trust your light inherent wisdom. With nothing to carry, we are free to walk barefoot in the long grass and open ourselves to the things we didn't know we didn't know.

BOOK REVIEW: IN LOVE WITH THE WORLD. WHAT A MONK CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT LIVING FROM NEARLY DYING
BY YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE WITH HELEN TWORKOV

HILARY RICHARDS



A friend gave me a copy of this book when I was recovering after an operation. What a brilliant gift and what an engaging book! Far from being a stuffy Buddhist text, it is an adventure story, describing one man's journey towards enlightenment, exploring the mind of pure awareness and finding himself in love with the world. The author, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, was born a Tulku (the recognised incarnation of a spiritual adept) to a devout Buddhist family. Throughout the book he tells of teachings he received from

his father who was an esteemed meditation master:

Just go.

Who are you?

Let it be.

Acknowledge the wave but stay with the ocean.

Watch without getting caught – getting hooked by the story means that we have lost touch with awareness.

These phrases will resonate with Chan practitioners and every chapter offers such gems.

Mingyur Rinpoche became a monk at the age of five and went on to become Abbot of a Tibetan Monastery in Bodh Gaya in Northern India. Leaving his privileged and protected life as an Abbot, he secretly escaped his monastery and his senior responsibilities to experience retreat as a Sadhu, wandering penniless, clothed in a thin loincloth and needing to beg. He finds himself facing all his vexations. Judgement, panic, fear and embarrassment are high on the list of troubles he is up against. He describes the various meditation techniques he uses to help maintain awareness despite many challenges. Just as we are taught, his methods include the body scan, breathing, counting, inquiring, compassion meditation and awareness meditation (a practice similar to direct contemplation). He shows us how he finds freedom alongside stress and anxiety.

The story interweaves Buddhist teaching with the everyday experience of journey and change. In leaving behind, letting go and becoming different, Mingyur Rinpoche explains the bardo as a stage of in between and of becoming. Bardo does not refer just to the time after physical death but is also the space between the passing of the old and whatever comes next, unknown, uncertain and transient. Bardo is the gap, the transition between one moment and the next.

He describes states of mind continuing to move like a revolving door through moments of tranquillity to aversion, dislike and judgement. He becomes dangerously ill and nearly dies. Towards the end of the book, in a breakthrough, he describes how the clarity and luminosity of awareness – beyond concepts, beyond fixed mind – become his sole vehicle of knowing.

On the cover Pema Chodron says this is one of the most inspiring books she has ever read.

And to quote John Crook:

Nothing matters
and everything must go.
Yet love is having the heart touched
in the valleys of suffering.

In Love with the World. What a Monk Can Teach You About Living from Nearly Dying. Yongey Mingyur Rimpoche with Helen Tworkov, 2019, Bluebird ISBN 978-1-5098-9934



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- details of activities and events, including our retreat programme
- back-issues of this journal
- contacts for local meditation groups

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We are always delighted to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. If possible please send as .doc documents, to the Editor, Pat Simmons, at editor@westernchanfellowship.doc. She will also be happy to discuss with you any ideas you may have for contributions. You do not need to be a Buddhist scholar – she would prefer something that springs from your own experience and insight.



RED DEER AT SHAWBOTTOM

Retreats & local meditation groups
We are pleased to announce that we will soon be resuming residential retreats, most likely from June onwards. Keep an eye on the website for the retreat programme, which will be published there when it is ready. The primary reason for the long suspension of the retreat programme has been due to Covid. Even when it began to be possible to once again hold retreats there were difficulties in arranging them because of the Covid precautions which still needed to be taken. Another issue has been difficulties and delays in the works to prepare Shawbottom for holding retreats.

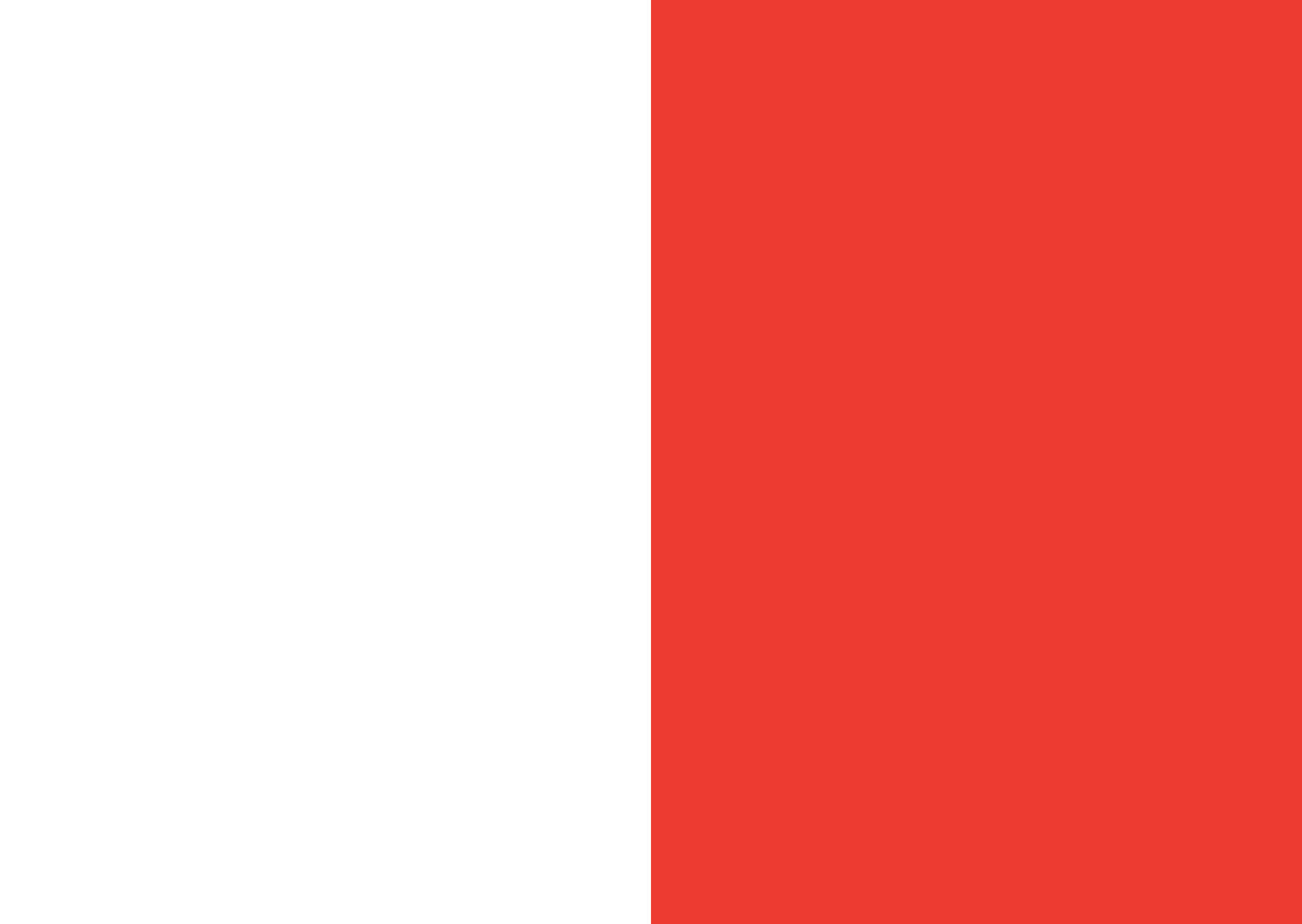
Besides discovering problems with the buildings at Shawbottom, which required extra work, the principal reason for de-

lays in completion of the works is that the building contractors worked far too slowly during the latter part of 2020 and the whole of 2021, and then they went into liquidation just before Christmas 2021. For the last five months I have been employing and supervising subcontractors directly and the work is now almost complete. We look forward to welcoming you back on retreat very soon. The local wildlife are also looking out for your arrival at Shawbottom, as this recent photo above illustrates.

– SIMON CHILD

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*Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.*

THE BUDDHA KALYANA MITTA

