WINTER 2025 NO.68

NEW CHAN FORUM

BUDDHIST JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN CHAN FELLOWSHIP

禪 Western Chan Fellowship

CONTENTS

Guiding Teacher: Dr. Simon Child • Editor: Sarah Bird
Contributions for future issues (articles, poems, artwork) welcomed. Please send to editor@westernchanfellowship.org.
If possible, please send as .doc documents.
Cover Image: Unsplash. Design: Rob Bowden

Western Chan Fellowship

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

SARAH BIRD

Welcome to Issue 68 of *New Chan Forum*.

This edition has a focus on practice.

It starts with interviews that Simon and Fiona gave to Dharma Drum's *Humanity Magazine* – both give quite an insight into their personal practice and history. We then hear from Eddy Street, with his thoughtful analysis of how our practices have changed over the centuries. Jos Hadfield offers a fascinating exploration of her long-established practice of t'ai chi through the lens of the Satipatthana Sutta. Jake Lyne, through his examination of Mihu's koan, asks what can be done about falling into the secondary, and facing the world in which we live?

We are also offered the treat of poems from Diana Warner, Martin Treacy and Hugh Carroll and an illuminating(!) account of a Silent Illumination retreat in Shawbottom in 2024.

Happy reading, and thank you for connecting the circuit – without readers, all the words in this issue won't have a chance of hitting their mark.

The theme for NCF 69 will be creativity – so please do email me on editor@westernchanfellowship.org with your contributions of essays, poems or images.

The deadline is January 31 2025.

HUMANITY MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

SIMON CHILD & FIONA NUTTALL

In 2024, Simon Child and Fiona Nuttall were interviewed for Humanity Magazine*, the official magazine of Dharma Drum Mountain, first published in 1949. They were invited to contribute to honour the 15th Anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's passing – he used to edit the magazine when he was a young monk – and to share their personal experiences and thoughts on practice with the largely Chinese and Taiwanese readership of the magazine. Below are lightly edited versions of these interviews.*

Interview with Simon

1. After receiving transmission, how do you deepen your personal practice?

My principal practice is the cultivation of ongoing awareness during my life, my activities and my interactions, the continuation of Silent Illumination practice off the cushion. Of course I also practise on the cushion, though not as intensively as in the past.

Practising off the cushion has several powerful advantages. Firstly, there is the sheer number of hours available to do it! Except during very intensive retreats, everyone has more hours off the cushion than on it, and all of those hours are available for practice.

Practice in everyday life is live, in-the-moment practice, experiencing your actual reactions and interactions as they happen, offering an opportunity to catch yourself about to follow habitual tendencies which may be deeply ingrained but inappropriate or harmful in the current interaction. In formal sitting practice we may recognise some of our bad behaviours and vow not to repeat them. Our behaviour during the hours

after we get off the cushion is both the true measure of the effects of our practice and also the only opportunity that we have to put such vows into effect.

Practice must and will continue forever. Even if I ever imagined that my mind had become completely clear and awake, how could I be certain that it would not relapse from that state, perhaps getting caught and attached to some phenomenon arising only a minute later or a year later? Shifu used to tell stories against himself in order to dispel any ideas that his practice was complete, such as how he dreams, how he fell asleep in meditation (when suffering from severe jet lag!), and how he once dropped a bell during a service. We all need to practise with that degree of humility.

2. What do you consider the key factors in the transmission of Chan teachings?

There are several strands to transmission of Chan Dharma. Just as a rope operates at full strength only when all its strands are intact, it is the same with transmission of Chan Dharma, we must attend to many strands.

1. Attracting people to explore Chan and its practices. Modern society with its extensive and rapid communications creates a huge marketplace of different spiritualities, in many cases with active and expensive marketing. Somehow Chan needs to be chosen for exploration by someone browsing for a spiritual practice. Personal contact and recommendation is important.
2. Transmission to the next generation requires education about the Dharma. This is particularly important in Western society where Buddhadharma is not well known and even less well understood.

3. External forms need to be shared, and culturally appropriate new forms need to be developed.
4. Methods of practice need to be taught, at beginner level and also at intermediate and advanced level, with support for practitioners to enable them to enter and develop deeper practice. This includes both formal sitting meditation practice, and meditation in activity, whether that be the formal movement of walking meditation or the maintenance of practice during interaction with others at work and in the family.
5. Transmission of insight, the so-called "Mind-to-mind" transmission, is what is often considered as the actual transmission of Dharma. It is of critical importance for the continuation into the future of deep true Dharma, but alone it may not have a wide impact. The other aspects above are all necessary in spreading the Dharma effectively to benefit many people.

To enable and facilitate all the above, an environment for teaching and practice needs to be cultivated, people need to be attracted to and take an interest in the Dharma and its practice, and gathering places and a supporting institution need to be available.

3. In the context of passing down the lineage in the West, how can the orthodox nature of the Dharma Drum Chan be preserved to prevent it from dilution or loss over generations?

It was very early in his monastic career that Shifu realised the importance of correct understanding of the teachings. Thereafter, throughout his life, he worked to improve people's understanding and practice of Buddhadharma. He did this through his early writings for Humanity magazine, through his extensive personal studies, and throughout his lifetime

of teaching. He worked to clarify which applications of teachings were based on correct understanding of Dharma, and which were misapplications or misunderstandings such as superstitious practices misrepresented as Dharma.

As one of his Dharma successors, it is natural that I hope to continue this mission. But I am not Shifu, nor a clone of Shifu, and my personal history and life situation is very different. I live and teach in a different culture, and the people that I teach are from a different culture to the majority audience for Shifu's teachings. The problems faced in the West are different to the problems for which Shifu needed solutions. For example, superstitious attachment to pseudo-Buddhist rituals is not a major issue in the West. However, confusion between Buddhism and "New Age" traditions and practices is common, and we need to be able to present the Dharma as being clearly a major tradition in its own right, with its own long history and practices which nevertheless are still of relevance today.

In receiving the transmission to spread the Dharma in my own culture I hope to transmit orthodox insight and enlightenment. This is accessible to any culture if they can receive, practise, and fulfil the teachings. What I cannot even attempt to do is to preserve all the external forms used by Shifu and designed primarily for Chinese culture. I do not speak or read Chinese, I have not learned the Chinese rituals and other forms, and even if I had mastered all of those, I would probably find some of them unhelpful and not well-received by my audience.

For these reasons, I would look to Dharma Drum itself to preserve the specific DDM Chan forms and structure passed on to them by Shifu. Yet even these must not be fossilised. They need to be respected and

preserved to some extent, but it may also be appropriate to change and develop them, depending on the causes and conditions that arise in the future. The form of Buddhism has changed as it has migrated around the world and encountered different cultures. In the UK, we need to make some changes to external forms to engage people in the UK. Similarly, the "East" is not a fixed environment, and it may be that changes in society mean that older forms become less effective and newer forms may be more effective.

For most people, the pace of life is faster nowadays, with constant demands placed on them by additional modes of communication such as SMS, instant messaging and email, and consequent inability to hide from employers, friends and family who expect and demand an instant response. In turn, their concentration is frequently interrupted, and their capacity for sustained attention may be harmed. There is a need to some extent to adapt to this situation, for example offering the Dharma online and in shorter presentations. But if this is all we offer, then it risks becoming a superficial presentation and the Dharma is lost. We need to insist on also engaging in more traditional training such as intensive residential silent retreats so as not to lose the depth of the Dharma.

5. What are the distinctive features of the Western Chan Fellowship (WCF)? Who are the main members, and how do you introduce and promote Zen practice to contemporary individuals?

John Crook felt a heavy responsibility for the transmission passed to him by Shifu. He had the foresight to create the Western Chan Fellowship (WCF) as a vehicle for sustaining the teachings into the future even beyond John's own lifetime. In 1997, the Western Chan Fellowship

MEDITATION HALL AT SHAWBOTTOM FARM

(WCF) was created as a formal legal organisation, as a registered charity. This was at John's initiative and with the support of people who had been practising with him for many years, many of whom had also attended one or more of the retreats led by Shifu in the UK in 1989, 1992, and 1995. The WCF is still very active now, nearly 15 years after John's passing in July 2011.

We are a lay organisation with our members, and others who practice with us, coming from a wide range of lifestyles. Most are working to support themselves and their families, and a wide range of occupations and professions are represented. Many are parents, some being stay-at-home parents. Some are not able to work for reasons of long-term health issues, or caring responsibilities for family members, and some are retired either with good health or with age-related disabilities.

As a Dharma heir of Shifu, I was available to take over as Guiding Teacher of the WCF following John Crook's passing. Subsequently, I appointed Fiona Nuttall as my first Dharma heir and she also supports the WCF.

WCF holds intensive residential meditation retreats approximately once per month for 10-20 participants. Typically, we will rotate retreats between 7-night Silent Illumination, 7-night Huatou and Gongan retreats, and our 5-night Western Zen Retreat. Occasionally, we may have different type of retreats, or longer retreats such as nine or ten nights.

We recognise that arranging to attend retreat can be difficult for people because of work and family commitments. It takes them away from caring responsibilities, and it also uses some of their limited annual leave from their employment. The cost of retreat attendance, together with the cost of travel to a retreat, can also be difficult for them. As a chari-

table organisation, we have a support fund to allow reduced retreat fees for those who need such support.

There are several other Buddhist organisations in the UK, and so it is common that people attending our events for the first time have already been taught meditation of some sort. We also have people attending retreat who have never learned meditation. We advise them it is best to attend the shorter Western Zen Retreat as their first retreat, but we may also accept them on the longer retreats and give them extra support and instruction at the beginning of the retreat.

We also have about 15 meditation groups around different parts of the UK where a local WCF member, trained and approved by WCF to lead groups and instruct in meditation, organises group meditation and discussion, typically once per week for a couple of hours, and sometimes also half-day and day retreats. These groups may also offer Dharma teaching, discussion groups, social and other activities, which vary according to the interests of the members and the skills and knowledge of the leaders.

We emphasise the importance of daily life practice, both because it is important and also because it is available even to people who cannot find opportunity to attend retreats or meditation groups. I call it "23.5 hour Zen" to counter the tendency of some practitioners to regard their daily 30 minutes on their cushion as their total practice.

We are pleased to attract newcomers, especially younger people, because that is essential in spreading the Dharma and continuing it to future generations, though like many organisations our average age is increasing.

6. How do you view issues related to loneliness and various problems faced by the elderly? How can Chan Buddhism contribute to addressing these challenges

There are issues with loneliness. The elderly, especially after the death of one of a couple, may live alone because family units are not as tight in the UK as in some other cultures. It might be that some elderly move in with their children, but often not, and if they do it may mean leaving the area where they have lived all their life, separating them from their friends, as families are often dispersed around the UK (or abroad).

It isn't only the elderly. People of any age who have illnesses or disabilities, or who have no work or low paid work may be lonely if they are struggling to survive on a low income and are unable to spare money for travel or for socialising.

Being alone does not necessarily lead to loneliness – some people are happy to live alone so long as they can manage the practicalities of their lives. But certainly many people can find isolation from others very difficult.

There can be a tendency for Chan practitioners in the West to prioritise their own practice and enlightenment ahead of others, and to some extent to isolate themselves from others. This is natural given the individualism of Westerners, the lack of understanding and support for their practice amongst their family and friends, the lower level of Dharma knowledge in those who have not made the effort to study, and the tendency to need to isolate themselves to support their formal practice (e.g. to create a quiet space in their house to meditate, or to go away on retreat).

This being so, there is the risk that they may not give attention to and support those around them who are lonely or in need of help in some

other way. This is one of the reasons that I often encourage them to take their practice into their everyday lives and to notice their responses to those around them, and why I often include mention of Bodhisattva aspiration in my Dharma talks, to try to help them give rise to bodhicitta. But I don't want to paint too negative a picture here. Many of our members are very compassionate and involved in their communities. For some, this may reflect the religion of their upbringing as Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all strongly community focused, and these values are held in our culture though not always as strongly as in Eastern cultures.

7. Finally, is there anything specific you would like to convey to the Dharma Drum Sangha?

When I was training with John Crook to lead retreats, I realised that I was not, and could not become, a clone of John. My task was not to turn into John but rather to find skilful approaches to teaching from within my own resources. I would inevitably fall short of John in some areas, but perhaps in finding my own voice and style, I could make up for any such "deficiencies". Hopefully, I have been doing that effectively, remaining true to the Dharma passed down to me by Shifu and John, while presenting it as from myself and not pretending to be or imagining myself to be either Shifu or John.

DDM finds itself in an analogous though not identical situation following the loss of Shifu. It would be natural to seek to recreate or "replace'" Shifu, but in reality, Shifu will not return and will not be replaced like-for-like by a clone. All attachments, even attachments to great teachers, must be let go of.

DDM can nevertheless honour Shifu's legacy. A great institution such as DDM can continue to present the Dharma in the spirit of Shifu, which for me means to transmit clearly the points he considered important: the usefulness of Buddhadharma to humanity; the importance of study and right understanding of Buddhadharma; the avoidance of superstitious practices; the importance of teaching and supporting deep personal transformation and insight through meditation and other practices; with all this set in a context of cultivation of compassion and harmonisation. If DDM can achieve this, then Shifu would feel that his life's work is continuing beyond his passing.

Interview with Fiona

In the 1990s, I attended Buddhist classes in a number of traditions. I found that I enjoyed the silence of meditation and listening to teachings, but many of the events I attended did not give the level of silence that I sought. I instinctively knew that there was more, though I didn't know what that meant.

A work colleague told me that she had found a Zen class locally, so we decided to give it a try. We went to a community centre one Friday evening, where I learned that we would be sitting twice for 30 minutes a time and doing walking meditation in between. Interestingly, it was the walking meditation that I found intriguing. I also discovered that the class was not Zen, but Chan, and the person running the group was Simon Child. I knew at a very visceral level that I had found something important. And I carried on attending that class for years.

I talked to Simon about going on a retreat. He suggested a Western Zen Retreat with John Crook. Again, I had no real idea what I was going to, but turned up one dark October night at Maenllwyd, a retreat centre in rural Wales. There was no electricity, just lamplight and torchlight.

As I got out of the car, a man came out into the yard to welcome me. I knew it was John even before he introduced himself. I don't know how I knew, I'd never seen him before, but there was a direct connection. The place was unusual but it was delightful at the same time. And it was a place where we did literally "chop wood and carry water". Sitting for eight hours a day was a struggle physically, but it was my mind that caused me most difficulties.

I discovered that John was astute and approachable in interviews. I thoroughly enjoyed his talks which set out the day for us. John was bright, intelligent, charismatic and a great raconteur. This gave him an ability to address Dharma issues in ways that seemed intelligible and that turned my practice around. Again, I knew that I had found something precious and continued to attend retreats regularly.

Between retreats, I went to the weekly Chan group and spent time with Simon. Simon was an embodiment of compassion. He was quiet and solidly dependable and he too had a deep understanding of the Dharma in everyday life. I remember the day that he told me that he had been given transmission and feeling a joy that he would carry on the tradition and lead retreats independently. He is a very different character to John, and I began to see that each person has to project the Dharma in his or her own way from his or her own heart. Later, I met Master Sheng Yen. Here was another very different person with yet another way of being and expressing Dharma.

From all these people, I learnt a great deal. John had a great capacity for taking Dharma and making it accessible to Westerners with their

particular histories, personalities and cultural backgrounds. Simon has a great ability to set up systems for maintaining an institution within which Chan can flourish and where people can come and learn Dharma safely. He has a kindness in his nature that embodies compassion. Master Sheng Yen had a vision to take Dharma outside China and to oversee its adaptation into new cultures. All three men were and are astute and with incisive insight. They could see through samskaras to the humanity behind.

Over time, I became more involved in Dharma myself. I discovered things about myself and I wanted to help. I cooked for the retreats. I learnt to time-keep. I became a guestmaster. I made cakes for day retreats in my home town. I began to assist and then lead retreats. It felt like a real privilege to help out. I enjoyed seeing people make their own discoveries about themselves and their communities and the wider world.

Buddhism is still in a process of assimilation into Western society. It is still changing to accommodate the cultures and mores of the European and American mind. It is working its way around secular worlds and high degrees of individualism. Mistakes have been made and will continue to be made in this process. We need not worry too much about the mistakes, so long as we continue to learn from them. There is great value in maintaining tradition because that tradition comes from centuries of learning. Buddhism has changed every time it has moved to a new culture and it will continue that process.

I suspect that part of the job of current and future teachers in the West is to be able to hold the fundamentals of Dharma and let it shapeshift into a form where it finds true expression in whatever culture and society it finds itself, and to be able to discern what that true expression is. The world has a desperate need for wisdom and compassion which Buddhism can lead us towards. That is the work.

PHOTO: AVA SIMMONDS

KENT CHAN GROUP DAY RETREAT

PRACTICE – PAST AND PRESENT

EDDY STREET

When I think about the retreats I have sat, my mind sometimes goes to the darkness before dawn and the group chanting "Buddham Saranam Gachamin" and then as the sun appears the verse arises… "With cupped hands filled with our limited understanding…" The first chant is in Pali and is from the time of the Buddha 2500 years ago. The second was written by John Crook probably sometime in the 1970s. These two chants cover the time that Buddhism has been practised and they are among my favourites simply because they express the historical links of our practice. I am sure we have all heard it said that Buddhism has adapted itself and altered as it has moved through different times and cultures and I am also sure that in nodding our heads at this, we have accepted it without thinking through our articulation of Buddhism here today as lay European practitioners. It is therefore worthwhile considering the way our practices have changed or adapted over time from what originally began on the Ganges plain in India and what we now do amongst the hills, valleys and cities of the UK.

The author David McMahan in his study of the past and present in Buddhist practice[1] reminds us of the Buddha's original teaching on Mindfulness in the Sattipathana Sutta[2] (often known as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness) and he points out how our focus on this has changed over time. In this text the Buddha lays out the four contemplations of the body, sensations, mind and of mental objects. This is simply the process of meditation with different foci. But looking closely at the

sutra we find instructions on reflecting on "the repulsiveness of the body" in which the Buddha taught his followers to contemplate what we are made of: "the contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, puss, sweat, solid fat, tears, fat dissolved, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine.". This focus continues in the nine cemetery contemplations, which involve looking at dead bodies in graveyards "if a monk sees a body there 1, 2, or 3 days; swollen, blue and festering, thrown in the charnel ground he then applies this perception to his own body". Reflecting on the repulsiveness and decomposition of the body was an essential element in the practice of understanding impermanence and was considered a powerful method for countering attachment to sensual pleasure and desire and hence was a central foundational meditation practice. So, we clearly can discern the change over time as contemplating repulsiveness is no longer such an essential element of how we currently construct our thinking and practicalities of meditation and mindfulness.

Following this theme, we can also turn to the matter of Samsara, for in the original teaching it is referred to as the cycle of birth, life and death that continues over many rebirths with Nirvana being the escape from that cyclical suffering. In modern conceptions, rebirths do not happen and both Samsara and Nirvana are conceived of being moments of suffering and enlightenment occurring within the one life that we have. McMahan also offers us an illustrative example of how there has been a change in the Buddhist conception of experience. We are all familiar with the story of the man who is chased by a beast and falls over a cliff, at the bottom of which there is another wild beast waiting to devour him; he holds onto a vine which is being gnawed at by mice but then on the vine he sees a strawberry. How should he respond to this dilemma

of life-and-death? The modern interpretation is based on "Aahh, the taste of strawberry" – an appreciation of life as it is in that moment, regardless and including all that is going on around us. Yet if we look at more ancient teaching in the Lalitavistara Sutra in which there are drops of honey rather than a strawberry the Buddha clearly indicates that we should not be "slaves to our desires", as wanting to taste the sweetness is just another craving.[3] Another important example of this change over time is found with the Precepts, as the presentation of them has shifted from the prohibition of their original form through to bearing witness[4] and onto a more positive declaration of aspiration.[5]

Clearly there have been movements away from early conceptions of central components of Buddhist thinking and even if there are elements of the original teaching that are still present, the overall formulation of our teaching also contains modern conceptual presentations. In considering these movements McMahan argues that particular ideas from Buddhism have been filtered out and relegated, with those strands that are left combining with ideas from Western philosophy to produce a practice designed for our life at this cultural and historical moment. In the examples from above there is the relegation of classical Buddhist themes such as the foulness of the body, rebirth and its cyclical link to Samsara, as these have little foundation in our modern western understanding of life and death. Instead, we find that significant themes relevant to our time become central, for instance the importance of interdependence and being present in the moment. McMahan argues that ideas such as 'self' and 'no self' have also altered throughout the history of Buddhism and more recently have been influenced by current western psychological/philosophical thinking. Relevant to this have been the notions of

identity, authenticity, autonomy and freedom which have become amplified in Buddhist thinking and are derived from their modern meanings. Every culture and historical era is seen to reinterpret and repurpose Buddhist practice to make it relevant to its place and time.

It is simply a myth that our practice today has straightforwardly been handed down in a timeless manner from the age of Buddha. McMahan argues "that meditation is more social and cultural than it is often represented, and that it is always embedded in a social and cultural context with a variety of ideals, concepts, and values that shape meditative experiences as well as the purposes to which meditative practices are put." [6] Indeed, Alan Watts warned Western practitioners about this influence and about how they need to appreciate it fully. "…the Westerner who is attracted by Zen and who would understand it deeply must have one indispensable qualification: he must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously." [7]

In his discussion McMahan points to an essential feature of lay practice by drawing on the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who emphasised the way there has been an historical and philosophical rise in the "affirmation of ordinary life" – that is the daily life of our relationships, our work and play, together with the ethics and morals that arise within this. In this philosophical approach a more realistic understanding of the 'self' recognises the social background against which life choices gain meaning and prominence. Hence, as westerners, 'self-reflection' has become very much a part of our understanding providing the sense of meaning we ascribe to our own worlds. In this view, the ordinary person is seen to have a value and dignity in and of themselves and in the way they live their life and there is nothing that is beyond or

separate from this, or indeed superimposed on it. Clearly, we can see how these ideas become linked with lay Buddhist practice and their manifestation is seen in the elucidation of "everyday Zen".

Of course, one of the things that can happen with any historical and cultural movement is that there can be a separation of ideas from their source and notions can be taken to an endpoint which appear culturally logical but which are significantly disconnected from their origin. This undoubtedly has occurred with meditation and mindfulness as some modern models have removed them from spirituality and religious practice. A consumer orientated quick-fit approach has arisen which has been termed McMindfulness[8] (see spelling below, as of McDonalds). Mindfulness for schools, for corporate organisations and even for military organisations have developed. Here we have activities labelled as mindfulness but which have been divorced from their original Buddhist roots. In such cases, the question that arises is whether this should still be called 'mindfulness', or whether in some of its recent interventional forms, it has turned into "attention-based psychological techniques".[9] We can see that the language and direction of meditation instruction is made to integrate with contemporary psychological principles. In making this move problems can be observed with mindfulness being divorced from ethics and a 'two-headed' cognitive focus of seeking Mind with the discriminating mind. As always in seeking to address one form of ego, it is easy to fall into the trap of creating another. Approaching mindfulness as if it is a 'thing' that can be grasped, examined, evaluated and judged for its usefulness is antithetical to Chan. This criticism focuses on the absurdity of divorcing mindfulness from its Buddhist ethical foundations and basis of wisdom. Authentic mindfulness practice should

incorporate an ethical component and should seek to abandon an attachment to an independent permanent self. These modern practices always seem to involve the return to the ego and its comfort. It is good to be honest about your self – but if that self is empty, where does the honesty settle?

Undoubtedly, there is an important interface between modern psychology and Buddhist practice but there are some things that mark out a difference between the two and this needs to be recognised rather than assuming that the lines are continually blurred. A good case in point is from the WCF's own history: we have the Western Zen Retreat whose shape and form originated in a New Age process known as the 'Enlightenment Intensive'. This in itself was a very Western psychological endeavour that emphasised co-counselling processes in a group experience resting on a traditional koan retreat format. The New Age approach to spirituality is undoubtedly a smorgasbord of techniques and elements and one that is more interested in self-comfort than self-investigation. It was John Crook's vision that re-placed the WZR back into its Buddhist context and it was Master Sheng Yen's intervention on insisting that the taking of the precepts be a part of the protocol that completed its full re-placement.

Our experience with the Western Zen retreat is that there is a value in introducing psychological elements into Chan in a manner that rebalances itself from ancient Asian forms. The original monastic form was one in which there was a stress on everyone doing the same thing at the same time and through this process acquiring knowledge of the self. However, in many ways the repetitiveness and uniformity of this practice is not something that the Western lay practitioner can emulate. Indeed,

it can be argued that the middle way needs to be found between sameness, which is emphasised historically, and difference, which is more of a conception of modernity.

There is now some evidence from studies that disconnecting mindfulness from its Buddhist roots by stripping it down to just a technique could result in adverse effects on the psychological well-being for particular groups of people. There is a suggestion that incorporating other aspects of Buddhist practice – contemplation of interdependence and an understanding of ethics – work against these adverse effects. Indeed, recent developments within mindfulness-based interventions have moved towards those that more closely incorporate techniques and practices that are pursued by Buddhist traditions. These involve ethical awareness, an understanding of impermanence, compassion and loving kindness and some insight into the nature of 'emptiness' and are now described as 'second-generation' mindfulness programmes.[10] There is some scientific evidence that these approaches are more successful than the stripped down McMindfulness models and that incorporating ethical principles and an understanding of the self is beneficial and practices undertaken which neglect these features are now seen as being not as helpful as once thought.

So where does this leave us now? In her discussion of how story conceptions change through time Karen Armstrong states "as our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring about their timeless truths."[11] Our timeless truths can be found in our disciplined meditation practice, the Four Noble truths, the Eightfold Path and, however they are conceived, the morality and ethics of the Precepts. Then, holding onto these and with our compassion for our-

selves and others who are following this path, we just need to take Linji's 'timeless' advice, "followers of the way, it requires no special efforts. You have only to lead your everyday life without seeking anything more – get dressed, eat rice, and lie down when you are tired."[12]

NOTES

1. David McMahan. 2003 *Rethinking Meditation.* Oxford University Press. Oxford.
2. *Satipatthana Sutta: The Foundations of Mindfulness* translated by Nyanasatta Thera https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html
3. David McMahan. *Strawberries and the Ethic of Appreciation*. Tricycle summer 2023. https://tricycle.org/article/ethics-of-appreciation/
4. Bernie Glassman 1998 *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace* Harmony/Bell Tower New York.
5. John Crook 2010 *Preceptual Truth*. http://w-c-f.org/Q372-62
6. David McMahan *op. cit.* p154
7. Alan Watts 1996 *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*. https://www.wisdom2be.com/essays-insights-wisdomwritings-spirituality/beat-zen-square-zen-and-zen-by-alan-watts
8. Ronald Purser 2019 *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality.* Repeater Books. London.
9. Van Gordon, W., Shonin, E., Lomas, T., & Griffiths, M. D. 2016. Corporate use of mindfulness and authentic spiritual transmission: competing or compatible ideals? *Mindfulness and Compassion*, 1, 75–83.
10. Van Gordon W & Shonin E. 2020 Mindfulness Second-Generation Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Toward More Authentic Mindfulness Practice and Teaching. *Mindfulness* 11:1–4 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01252-1

11. Karen Armstrong 2005 *A Short History of Myth*. Canongate Books. Edinburgh. p11.
12. Addis, S., Lombardo, S., and Roitman, J. 2008. *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*. Indianapolis. Hacket p48 https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/Zen-sourcebook.pdf

MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY: T'AI CHI THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SATIPATTHANA SUTTA

JOS HADFIELD

The Satipatthana Sutta is an early Buddhist text, recalled from a talk the Buddha gave at Kammassadhama, a market town of the Kuru people. This pragmatic map of practice in present moment awareness has now been much popularised across many disciplines and groups – in varying degrees of depth and authenticity!

Such is its profound and comprehensive approach, that there are many accompanying texts and learned talks to help us better understand this core Buddhist teaching. I have only tapped into a very small number of them here. What strikes me as most important is that the Buddha wished us to find out for ourselves, to apply all that he explains to our own experience.

So what does the sutta mean for me; how do I work with it, and how does it relate to my practice of t'ai chi? How do mindfulness and t'ai chi overlap, and how they can be applied with the same discriminating ardour?

> One of the central dimensions of satipatthana meditation to be brought into being is balance.[1]

These words from Bikkhu Analayo could just as easily be describing t'ai chi practice.

Sharon Salzberg and others have described mindfulness as a dynamic practice; I have long thought that my own t'ai chi training is a moving meditation that echoes all the teaching in this sutta.

In Analayo's diagrammatic metaphor of the wheel of Satipatthana (*see figure 1 below*) I found an amazing overlay with the yin/yang symbol. The component parts of the ever-rotating cycle making up the whole circle, which continues to turn as we tread the path of awakening. Just as yin and yang of the taiji are the inherent components of wuchi – the state of nothingness from which everything manifests.

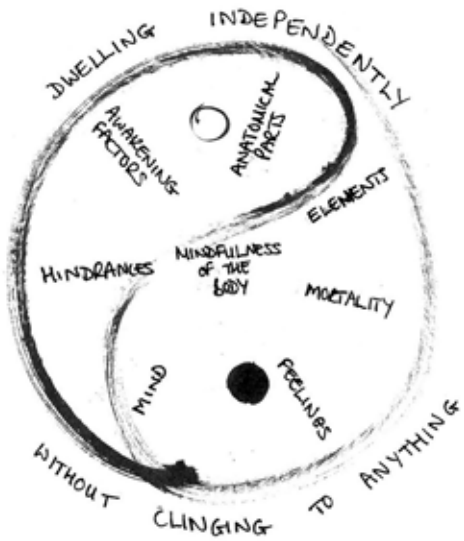

FIGURE 1

In his book *Symbolism and Myth in the Art of Taiji*, Tew Bunnag writes:

> The binary dynamic between yin and yang is not fixed and polarized but is in a constant continuum of changing textures and shades… an ever changing flow of energy and moments of pause and return to the source, the Wu.[2]

The whole point of any practice is to keep doing something, repeat-

edly – in this case, staying in present moment awareness, all the time. But most of us get lost somewhere along the way and this sutta offers a map to guide us back. Similarly, I find practising t'ai chi gives me a valuable means to return and notice what is going on, using my body as the anchor, the tethering point. It stops my intellectualising and pins me into my physicality, helping me see where my actions are coming from.

The Satipatthana Sutta outlines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of the mind, of objects of the mind.

It starts with mindfulness of the body. Joseph Goldstein writes, 'Through mindfulness of the body we learn to inhabit the body and be fully with it, such that it can become a foundation and reference point for the continuity of mindfulness.'[3]

I was once told that this sutta is about remembering – and I thought then, how it brings us back to all the members of our body, right here now.

Using the body as our focus, we practise meditation as we trace and maintain (or not) our full awareness of what is arising. Similarly in the t'ai chi form we are connecting with our physical body to keep centred in order to fully experience what is going on. It is a meditation practice of unbroken awareness and full attention.

As Tew Bunnag says:

> At the heart of the art of t'ai chi is the development of awareness. The 'internal' aspect of the practice stems from this. 'Slowing down' and 'sinking' provide the atmosphere whereby the capacity of awareness can be awakened and explored.[4]

We go through a repeated sequence (the form) to keep us returning to this moment - we come back to wu chi, holding the space, not moving, and sensing what is an appropriate response.

In the Satipatthana Sutta there is a repeated refrain that occurs thirteen times following each of the specific meditation instructions for the four foundations of mindfulness.

> In this way, in regard to the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] one abides contemplating the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] internally, or one abides contemplating externally, or one abides contemplating both internally and externally. One abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body [feelings, mind, dhammas]…. the nature of passing away in…… or the nature of both arising and passing away in. Mindfulness that 'there is a body' [feelings, mind, dhammas] is established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.[5]

We keep coming back to this anchoring point of balanced presence. In meditation as in t'ai chi – Tew Bennag again:

> Our aim in the form is to fully connect with our breath and harmonise our moves with the in (yin) and the out (yang), to respond appropriately to where we are. We develop our capacity to be fully attentive and to keep centred in the body so that the tai chi emerges from, and returns to, stillness and silence.[6]

One of the first of the pragmatic teachings in the Sutta is to focus on our breathing and how/where we feel it in the body. The instruction is to pay attention to our breath as a way of steadying the mind, so we can see

more clearly what is really going on. Becoming aware of our breath, we can then follow it and slowly become one with body and mind. Thus the three elements of breath, body and mind become calm and become one.

Similarly at the opening of the t'ai chi form we connect to the three levels, harmonising the three tantiens (centres) of awareness in the belly, heart and mind.

> The hsin (heart/mind)
> mobilises the ch'i (breath).
>
> Make the ch'i sink calmly,
> then it gathers
> and permeates the bones.
>
> The ch'i mobilises the body.
>
> Make it move smoothly
> then it easily follows
> (the direction of) the hsin.
>
> *Wu Yu-hsiang*

Once this is established (and maintained!) we can widen our focus of awareness to incorporate our actions, our every bodily move. We navigate each activity, in each moment. Thus we feel for the right amount of yang and yin in the body/heart/mind as we do the form, and our dance with life.

The sutta leads us into knowing the visceral quality of this physical body and its inherent empty nature, as our component elements change and finally decompose.

Through the t'ai chi form we also connect with the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. How much more restorative and alive the t'ai chi becomes when we truly connect with these elemental forces that underpin our seasonal pattern - these same elements that dissolve as our life force recedes when we die.

Part of the martial code of t'ai chi is to be ready to face death at any moment – to be equanimous with this and to imbue our practice with all four qualities of the Brahma Viharas (metta, karuna, mudita, ubekkha – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity). Touching in to our own, and universal, vulnerability as we work through these qualities is essential preparation for any warrior. Accepting that all is interconnected and all will change is part of this warrior training.

Just as the t'ai chi warrior trains to not only face, but to lean into whatever is presenting, so the Buddha encourages us to fully look at the elements of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. If we can simply experience things clearly as they are, not desire or cling to them, we can fully experience the joy of letting go of these patterns of agitation, desire and hatred. Without attachment to any outcome, both the Buddhist meditator and the t'ai chi practitioner can simply be at ease in breath, body and mind, just as it is.

Having said this, t'ai chi practice can be relatively easy in the anonymity of a large group or being outdoors on a fine day. But what happens when the conditions change making it less conducive to train? When our feelings start to jump up and down and nudge how we react? Can we press the pause button before we get involved with it being a pleasant, unpleasant or uninspiringly neutral situation? This plays out

particularly when we start applying t'ai chi in partner work and our sense of joyful wellbeing is disturbed by an unexpected push that takes us off balance. Is there the necessary awareness to trace back to the root of this particular feeling, and to see how transient it is? Without this pause, we could just push straight back and experience the ensuing fallout. But when we can acknowledge and rest in the joy of being fully aware of the rise and fall of each moment, the practice itself can encourage us to persevere.

In the third foundation of mindfulness the emphasis is on noticing the general quality of the mind as it is influenced by different mind states, moods and emotions. The instruction is to notice when these states are present, and equally when they are not. How they arise and how they pass.

Alongside the wide-ranging mental formations that we call feelings, (which are so pervasive that they make up the whole second foundation of mindfulness), the sutta identifies 28 more mental phenomena – great opportunities for noticing! Desire, anger, ignorance, disturbance, narrowness, limitedness, lack of concentration, lack of freedom, dullness and drowsiness, agitation and remorse, doubt – and their opposites. In mindfulness, we try to practise with bare attention, seeing everything and knowing when these phenomena are present, and equally when they are not.

In the t'ai chi practice, if we become preoccupied and narrowly focussed, we can literally be swept off balance by these feelings and the corresponding move we make may be completely inappropriate. With the clarity of bare awareness we can respond more skilfully, and not get caught up in an escalation of the situation.

> All the feelings of grief and joy, elation and anger are reactions to external things. But reacting to external things puts the emotions into motion, and they are really a disturbance in the regulation of the qi [chi] which in turn causes a disturbance to the heart. This is why we have to act according to form and cultivate the art of the heart.[7]

Desire and anger are particularly useful to work with. When we try too hard, wishing for something other, or when we puff out with simmering rage we so easily overextend our base and become imbalanced – literally uprooting ourselves and falling flat on our face. Similarly when we are contracted with fear or are easily distracted, we simply do not notice what is actually happening. By coming back to being fully present in the wu chi of the form, by re-membering, we can pull back from being stuck in extremes of yin and yang.

When it comes to evaluating feelings as pleasant or unpleasant, I find it helpful to consider them in terms of yin and yang. They are simply energy that will change moment by moment to a lesser or greater degree. We try not to react, or overreact, simply noting their quality of expression with equanimity. Keeping in our centre of open awareness.

The fourth and last foundation of mindfulness is a comprehensive list of the basic organising principles of the Buddha's teaching; the hindrances, the aggregates, the sense spheres, the factors of awakening, the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path. And again, there is the encouragement to be aware of all of these arising and passing away, as well as the conditions which allow or inhibit this passing. They offer us several schemas to develop greater insight into the way the mind works, gradually refining our awareness to an increasing depth of understanding.

Contemplating the five hindrances we might be able to notice what is preventing us from seeing clearly. Considering the five aggregates shows us what we hold on to in our sense of self, our sense of identity. Having clarity of intention, to keep coming back to being aware of what is happening, is really important. Similarly, in t'ai chi, where our intention goes, the energy will follow. Where we look is where the energy can be directed.

The sutta posits our investigation fully in the body when we turn our attention to the six sense gates and their corresponding objects (eyes/form, ears/sound, nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/touch, mind/objects of mind). From these stimuli we might trace the feelings that so quickly arise in reaction and lead to a consequent unskilful action. We might not need to act at all, but simply stay in the wu chi, neither yin nor yang, receiving or giving.

> Our awareness and sensibilities, our experience of our physical body as well as the emotional and spiritual levels of our being are constantly being shaped and transformed by the practice (of t'ai chi).[8]

The seven factors of awakening offer us positive qualities to encourage our discerning investigation - offering us tools to keep us assiduously exploring what is presenting in the mind. These could be seen as 'anti-hindrance' tools – with the proviso that they be used appropriately, with awareness and skill.

Similarly there is the path which has 8 ennobling factors to guide us. I have found it really helpful to feel how I might apply my physical response in a t'ai chi move in order to better understand a chain of reaction triggered by my mind.

When we begin to learn t'ai chi we start off very slowly in order to better understand what is going on. It is a widely held misconception that t'ai chi is never done at more than a snail's pace. However, once we have learnt the fundamentals, at the slow pace we call earth, we can then explore the faster rhythms of water and fire and their creative, and destructive, qualities. We can go fast – but not be hurried or off-centre. The skill arises always in clearly seeing what is going on.

As we repeat the sequences of the form we endeavour to maintain full awareness of what is going on both within us and all around us. Our senses are open to receive the stimuli sufficient to inform our bare awareness. We keep our warrior code of applying skilful amounts of yang and yin in every situation, treating each moment as if it is the only one and not bringing in any automatic reaction conditioned by a previous pleasant or unpleasant time.

When I first learnt the t'ai chi form I was told I was just at the beginning of a long journey of discovery. We all have to start with the outer form, with the step by step learning of each move in a choreographed sequence. But then my real learning began as I penetrated deeper into the inherent qualities of this somatic practice and to find my own authentic understanding of each step along the path. It is not that we never lose balance or focus, but that we know when we have, and how to come back to our sense of full awareness.

No matter how wonderfully my teachers have explained and inspired me, it is I who has had to bring patient attention to the stance, the moves and the essence of t'ai chi. I have had to practice, diligently and ardently. And still must. There are times when I do the t'ai chi, and there are times when there is t'ai chi. I am 'barely' there – simply doing the practice with

no craving, nor repressing; dancing the joy of the moment. I am looking deeply, seeing the nature of all dharmas, as they reveal themselves.

As I write this I am also reminded of the end of the sutta which says we can realise the fruits of mindfulness practice over a long period of time or merely in this very minute. We must start, and we must continue.

NOTES

1. Bhikku Analayo, 2018, *Satipatthana Meditation: A Practice Guide*, Windhorse Publications
2. Tew Bunnag, 2020, *Symbolism and Myth in the Art of Taiji*, Todos tus Libros
3. Joseph Goldstein, 2016, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Sounds True Inc.
4. Tew Bunnag, 1988, *The Art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan*, The Buddha Vipassana Trust
5. Joseph Goldstein, ibid
6. Tew Bunnag, 2020, ibid
7. Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee. 2006, *A Study of Qi in Classical Texts,* Monkey Press
8. Tew Bunnag, 2020, ibid

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT FALLING INTO THE SECONDARY?

JAKE LYNE

A Koan:

> Mihu had a monk ask Yangshan, "Do people these days need enlightenment or not?"
> Yangshan said, "It's not that there is no enlightenment, but what can be done about falling into the secondary?"
> The monk went back and reported this to Mihu.
> He deeply agreed with this.

This koan plays with primary and secondary. The first (primary) teacher sends the student to a second teacher, with whom the first teacher turns out to be in agreement. No argument is made for the utility of enlightenment because enlightenment needs no apology, definition or explanation.

The secondary is the domain in which utility is relevant, and in which we encounter uncertainty, or too much certainty and all the manifestations of our ego. On retreat the normal starting point is the secondary, it is where we endeavour to meet ourselves as we really are, without flinching.

People go on retreat for many reasons: personal difficulties such as relationship problems, loss, or mental health issues; to rediscover experiences they have had in the past (which turns out to be a blind alley); to reconnect with or deepen practice; out of a sense of curiosity and enquiry; or to 'get' enlightened. The latter may be quite a common motivation, but generally people are coy about mentioning it because it can sound presumptuous.

At the start we should address this presumption. Chan Buddhism is a Mahayana tradition, which emphasises the bodhisattva path. The four great vows of a bodhisattva are translated in various ways in English. In the WCF:

> I vow to deliver innumerable beings
> I vow to cut off endless vexations
> I vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma
> I vow to attain supreme Buddhahood

In the last of these caution is set aside, the vow of supreme Buddhahood is boldly asserted. Yet to want enlightenment is a problem of the grasping mind and therefore a contradiction. However, there is a world of difference between a vow, or dedicating oneself to the path in a spirit of giving, and a desire, or wanting a form of status in order to enhance or secure the self. The fact that these vows are unattainable makes them suitable as vows for a lifetime of practice, but remember…"it's not that there is no enlightenment."

One of the joys of retreat is silence, disconnection from all forms of media, especially social media and smart phones and from reading, writing and speaking. But we are social beings and when we are not talking to someone else, most of us talk to ourselves. Since we are freed from our normal routines, habits and responsibilities, 'I' can become a central theme. How am I doing? Thoughts arise about how I am feeling, the pain in my knees, how everyone else seems to be doing in comparison to me, what people think of me, what I think of them, what I think

of the food, how tired I am, how good/bad a meditator I am. How am I supposed to meditate, am I doing it right? What someone said to me, what I should have said to them etc. etc.

Maybe this I-centricity gets noticed and if so it is a bit of a breakthrough, there is the possibility of some perspective. From only being subject, the mind might also become object and may begin to settle down.

People's experiences of retreat are quite different from each other. Some people experience great difficulty, while others encounter very little hardship. And it can vary from one retreat to the next. How people approach a retreat also varies greatly. I remember when I started to train as a retreat interviewer, I was surprised at how different each person was in interview. I had presumed that most people approached meditation interviews the way that I did.

There are many blind alleys that the mind can get lost in. One of the reasons that some people are qualified to lead retreats is that through experience, they have fallen into many of the traps themselves and so are able to detect practice problems in others and be able to offer guidance based on empathy.

Rebecca Li, author of 'Illumination: The Buddhist Method of No Method' calls these traps 'modes'. They include harshness to self, perfectionism, craving for enlightenment, getting into trance, aversion to practice, intellectualising, quietism and 'forgetting emptiness' which means having fixed ideas about a final destination of practice. Roughly, these can be grouped as avoidant modes, hypercritical modes and grasping modes (the three poisons). These tendencies are revealed on retreat, but manifest in myriad contexts in everyday life. Retreat is a microcosm

in which unhelpful habits of mind become easier to see. Paradoxically, in retreating we bring ourselves into clearer view.

Experiences on retreat are common, especially as the 'modes' recede from view. Anyone who has read about Zen will have read about experiences of expansiveness, oneness, wonder, joy and, more rarely, seeing the nature (enlightenment). On five day Western Zen Retreats we usually recite 'On pursuing that which has no tracks', a liturgy that was written by John Crook and is based on Dogen's Fukazazengi. In one line it says 'There is no point in sifting and searching for another's insights.' Retreat is intensely personal and people see what they need to see, not what someone else has seen (necessarily), nor what they have seen themselves previously.

If people practise sincerely, and most retreat participants do, some shifts in mind state come about purely by virtue of the intensity of meditation practice, withdrawal from normal habits and the ongoing attempt to be present. These shifts may not always be obvious, it might even seem that the retreat is 'going badly', but that is merely a judgement. In reality, mind states shift and the experience often turns out to be pleasant. But the shifts are not permanent, they slip away after the retreat is over. Letting them go gracefully is another practice, akin to the practice of gratitude. Letting good experiences go gracefully is a training in letting go of grasping and embracing freedom. It also makes it easier to pick up the practice of retreat in the future.

But do people these days need enlightenment or not? Many people who come on retreat are deeply troubled by the horrors and cruelty of war, by the harm being done by climate change and overconsumption to people, forests, other animals, fish, birds and insects, and the threat

of nuclear extinction. These concerns are not so often raised on retreat, though there are retreats that make the direct connection, for example the Triratna Earth Sangha retreats and the Zen Peacemakers Auschwitz-Birkenau Bearing Witness Retreat.

These realities are part of the background to 'do people these days need enlightenment or not?' This question is one side of a profound dialogue between Mihu and Yangshan, embedded in the koan of the monk.

'There is no problem with enlightenment' is the response, an echo of the question.

What is the meaning? To answer Mihu's question with yes, no or both yes and no would be superficial, a failure of empathy.

The koan raises profound and unsettling questions for all of us, and for the practices and ways of Buddhism in general. What is the relationship between retreat, our practice, our empathy and kindness, and a world in crisis?

What can be done about falling into the secondary and facing the world in which we live?

Let your mind stop, pay attention and in this moment you can enter the inquiry of retreat without going anywhere.

A version of this article was first published in the European Buddhist Union Magazine, No. 13, Winter 2024 p. 26. This version is slightly amended from the original.

POEM

DIANA WARNER, ON WRITING RETREAT AT TŶ LOTTYN

> Knowing where you should put yourself is silence.
> Very clearly knowing this while engaged in work is illumination.
> *Master Sheng Yen*

Where is the mind?
What is it?
Registering the call of cuckoo
Crows wheeling and cawing overhead / under / in the lighted sky
Words no more than droplets flowing with the river.
Stitchwort flowers with elegant daisy faces last for three days
On this stem shared with petals not unfurled and tiny bells full of new-formed seeds.
White sky gives way to blue, gives way to grey;
Leaves become receptacles of light, then darken.
Rowan is dusted with clumps of white blossom
See the honeysuckle buds, anticipate the honeysuckle smell at evening.
Mind appreciates but cannot store these moments.

After a dip in the river cold on the skin does not last forever, even encapsulated on this page
But I think of the pain of children in Gaza
And think perhaps their pain is permanent.
That heart-thought lingers and seems to linger longer
But it too will change.

ORION

HUGH CARROLL

hanging over the neighbour's roof
Orion
winter's a-comin then
his glittering belt of nebulae
solid proof
of magic

as I gawp
and try to remember
the old names
I twiddle my beard
other hand on hip
and wonder
if some far distant ancestor
had ever done
this exact same thing

just before an Autumn dawn
not sleeping
his dog
having a pee

there!
Menkalinan
Aldebaran
Bellatrix
and just behind the tree
wow!
Rigel!
all a-glitter

maybe too low
to see Sirius
one of the hunter's dogs
only a bazillion miles
the other side
of the shed

the unthinkable reaches
of aeons
of light years
the immeasurable heaven
of Laniakea
all that space
all that time
apparently

the same thing

what a trick!

my tea
will have brewed by now
me and the dog
go back in
he's a pain
but I can't help but love him
lil' Bernie boo
here at the centre
of the cosmos

THE THROWN STONE

MARTIN TREACY

Stillness. Ice.
The frozen pond echoes as
Thrown stone skitters
Across icy surface.

Blue sky with flecks of cloud,
No-one else present.

A goose cries:
Frozen landscape's
Vast presence.

I sit, meditating, present.
Thoughts, feelings come and go
In stillness of calm centre.
The geese do not disturb
The blueness of sky.

Time vanishes – only ever-present Now
Reverberates in song of ice and sky.
Even "I" vanish;
No-one left.
Just dance of presence
In winter stillness.

PHOTO: MARTIN TREACY

RETREAT REPORT, AUGUST 2024

SILENT ILLUMINATION WITH SIMON CHILD, SHAWBOTTOM FARM

The sensation of time passing on a week-long silent retreat is a curious one. On this occasion, as with others, I needed an initial landing-phase of at least two days to settle – I'd had a busy and stressful week leading-up – then a further three days to get into the routine and finally arrive at a comfortable sitting posture. Only by day five was I really getting started in some respects, only to then notice, of course, that the whole thing was drawing towards a close. It was a helpful time to practice more deeply with meditation but also learn more about the tradition of Chan, to connect with this through the rituals, liturgy and services. Also to better understand Silent Illumination in its historical context and to recall and give thanks to the great teachers of the past.

I dispelled my confusion about assuming that I should be reaching for a 'silent' mind in the Silent Illumination practice. What I found instead – and with the teacher's important clarifications, guidance and support – was that I could encounter the flow of my experiences as they unfold without judging or assessing the content. The silence I thus encountered was an experience of noticing the judging and evaluating aspects of mind then receding into the background of activity. But surely I knew already that I was able to do this? Perhaps I had just forgotten and needed reminding? How easily, it seems, that the mind can habitually get drawn in, time after time – and even after some years of practising – into all of the dramas and the evaluations that it naturally proceeds with. I heard this week about mind training, and also Shifu's rather wonderful metaphor about mind being like a wayward puppy: that you have to pull it back repeatedly on the lead so as to make it settle and then start again – lest it runs off once more or starts chewing the curtains! Little reminders and anecdotes are just so valuable.

As I progressed through the week, I let go of this desire for a 'silent' mind. Instead, I simply sat with my experience, noticing the silence in the room, the activity in my mind, and the sensations of my body. But above all I noticed that there was continuous movement in all of the experiences flowing in my awareness. And it's all just experience. Then I noticed that there was also a silence, a quality of stillness arising, and this settled and calmed me. At the same time this happened I noticed a greater clarity: I could see more, there was a vividness in my awareness, I could take more in from my surroundings.

I recall John Crook's three-part recommendation to trainees of letting thoughts through, letting thoughts be, and then letting thoughts go….such a useful aid to the technique, I feel. Simon referred to Silent Illumination as the 'portable practice', and this was also really helpful for me when noticing, as the week progressed, that I could indeed maintain an ongoing state of more open awareness within the setting of the retreat, as I moved from the cushion, to the breakfast table, into work period, and even into break times and resting. It also importantly highlighted for me that this practice is something I can take into my everyday experience. How useful then, the reminder when interviewed by Simon, of my tendency to split off the spiritual aspects of my life from the 'active' me in the world. Practice is not the thing that I do in a quiet corner, almost as if to escape the pressures of the outside world.

I was reminded of the metaphor of the dark cave – that place of presumed refuge, safety and serenity – and yet also so often where some other horrid, hidden aspect of self is also lurking in the shadows. And it's clearer to me now that of course this will happen; for in continuing my practice in this way, I am not bringing my whole self into the world at all, and thus there will always be something left tucked away out of sight, unresolved and unexplored. So important then that this was a retreat that emphasised that the practice continues both after I leave the Chan Hall and walk out into the yard outside, take a cup of tea or go and take a shower, but also as I head out back into the everyday. And so now into the everyday I head once more - with all of its challenges and rich experiences - and with a feeling of being refreshed and having a far clearer understanding of what my practice is, and what it's for.

禪 Western Chan Fellowship

About Us

Chan is the Chinese ancestor of Zen Buddhism. The Western Chan Fellowship is an association of non-monastic practitioners – a lay sangha – based in the UK and with contacts elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. Our Zen retreats and other activities are open equally to Buddhists and non-Buddhists, and we welcome everyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, class or disability. Our new retreat and meditation centre in central England includes accessible accommodation. (see below for new retreat programme)

Visit our Website

www.westernchanfellowship.org
This includes:

- introductory articles on Chan, Zen, Buddhism and meditation
- talks by Chan masters
- reports by participants at our retreats
- details of activities and events, including our retreat programme
- back-issues of this journal
- contacts for local meditation groups

Contacting Us

To contact any of the Officers of the WCF please go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/contacts/committee-and-officers

To contact any of our UK Groups and affiliates go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups

To contact our overseas Groups and overseas contacts go to:
www.westernchanfellowship.org/chan-meditation-groups/overseas-groups

Contributing to New Chan Forum

We are always delighted to receive articles, artwork, photographs, poetry etc. If possible please send as .doc documents, to the Editor, Sarah Bird, at editor@westernchanfellowship.org. 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.

Forthcoming Residential Retreats

We will also be offering our programme of residential retreats at Shawbottom Farm, our beautiful new retreat centre near Leek in Derbyshire. Shawbottom is a simple and very comfortable centre, with such mod cons as underfloor heating and electric lights! It includes accommodation for a wheelchair user and helper, and is accessible by public transport.

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

14 to 19 February 2026
Leader: Jake Lyne & Alysun Jones

SILENT ILLUMINATION RETREAT

28 March to 4 April 2026
Leader: Simon Child

ZEN KOAN RETREAT

25 April to 2 May 2026
Leader: Fiona Nuttall

EVERYDAY ZEN SILENT MEDITATION RETREAT

23 to 28 May 2026
Leader: Alysun Jones & Juliet Hackney

SILENT ILLUMINATION ZEN RETREAT

4 to 11 July 2026
Leader: Rebecca Li

WESTERN ZEN RETREAT

1 August to 6 August 2026
Leader: Simon Child

NEW CHAN FORUM
Published by Western Chan Fellowship Charitable Incorporated Organisation (registered charity no 1166162)
Correspondence address: New Chan Forum, 22 Lilymead Avenue, Bristol BS4 2BX. Design: Rob Bowden

The vast flood rolls onward
Yield yourself and it floats you upon it.

IKKYU

Western
Chan
Fellowship