

## The Bamboo Joint

あしたのことをいうとてんじょうのねずみがわらう

*“If you speak of the future the rats in the roof will laugh”.*

Japanese proverb

三人行必有我师

*“When three people walk together, one must be my teacher”*

Confucius

I've been trying for a long time to write something about Zen and what it has meant to me during my life, I have so far failed at each attempt. My father was a historian but towards the end of his life, as he became more and more involved in the peace movement, he started writing about the problems of civilization in a more direct and personal style. I was recently watching an old video of an interview with him and he talked about finding a new way of writing “beyond the schools”. I realised that this is what I have been trying to do. I don't want to write a scholarly paper packed with quotes and footnotes. The problem is that inevitably this means being subjective, and this kind of writing all too often tends to become an “apologia pro vita sua”. All I can say is that I hope that's not what I am trying to do, I think what I am trying to do is to make a contribution to the debate about the problems of modern civilisation and the limits of traditional politics in the current state of said civilisation and the role that Buddhist schools and Zen influenced schools might play, or fail to play, in dealing with the problems we face.

My parents were historians, intellectuals and long time peace campaigners. My paternal grandfather had pulled himself out of poverty and become a missionary in India where he became disillusioned with his mission and developed an interest in Buddhism. He wrote a highly romantic fictionalised biography of the Buddha called “The Youngest Disciple”. He knew Tagore and was the first translator of his works, and he became involved in the campaign for Indian independence where he got to know Nehru and Gandhi. When the family moved back to Boar's Hill in Oxfordshire, Gandhi came to visit and my father remembered the old man setting up a spinning wheel in the corner of a room and spinning cotton.

My parents lived through the Second World War, my father was at the Battle of Casino. My father's older brother Frank was an SOE officer executed by fascists in Bulgaria and buried at Litakovo. My mother had three brothers, all of whom died either during the war or not long after the war. They, like most of their generation, were profoundly influenced and shaken by the war. But after the war, England entered into a very positive phase. We elected a Labour government who introduced a proper National Health Service. It was a cohesive and optimistic period.

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So I was brought up in the household of intellectuals. There were always interesting people around. Until 1956 my parents were members of the Communist Party and I used to help them deliver “The Daily Worker” and often got to visit fetes and bazaars, or conferences at Wortley Hall. We spent most of the school holidays in North Wales where my parents rented a holiday cottage at a peppercorn rent, which had been arranged through a friend of my father's who, having taken classes at Cambridge with Wittgenstein, had been persuaded by that fine thinker that he should abandon philosophy and take up farming sheep. We got lots of interesting intellectual visitors there too. In those days there was a real sense of a coherent intellectual life in England, they all knew each other, not everyone was a communist naturally, but people weren't so dogmatic in those days. I don't get the feeling that there is a coherent intellectual community in England now, but that may be my

problem, perhaps it's there and I just don't see it. But my parents were close to a whole generation of scholars and political and cultural activists, off the top of my head I could list a few, Doris Lessing, Eric Hobsbawm, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stewart Hall, Iris Murdoch, Trevor Griffiths, C Wright-Mills, Ralph Milliband (whose sons went on to fight each other for leadership of the Labour Party). I'm listing them because I want to come to the point that some of the people who influenced my parents most strongly were *not* famous names.

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So my parents belonged to a generation which came out of the war traumatised, but with the belief that the system which caused two disastrous world wars needed to be overhauled, and with the will and the optimism that they could do it. Amongst their contemporaries was a man called Randall Swingler, who is now known mainly as a poet and not highly rated by the literary establishment, but at that time was very highly regarded by his peers, including the group of intellectuals which included my father. In 1956 when Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary and my father and a lot of his contemporaries left the Communist Party, Randall Swingler was deputed by the party to bully them back into shape. Not long afterwards he left the Party himself and confessed himself ashamed of the way he had behaved.

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So coming from a family of intellectuals, but not being an intellectual myself, I followed the expectation of my parents that I would go to university and wound up at the University of Essex, with no clue as to what I was doing there, really. At that time, Zen was becoming a very fashionable topic of interest and I think this probably came from a feeling that Communism as such hadn't quite worked out and Zen was another approach to building a harmonious communal life. There was one big difference, though, in that communists and left activists generally always organised, but the Zennists stayed aloof, the best Zennist was the one who didn't even declare himself a Zennist, the object was to set high standards for yourself and stick to them come Hell or high water. We had a Black Mountain poet there (Edward Dorn), who was writing a long poem called "Gunslinger". He used to stride around the campus in black bell-bottomed jeans with silver buttons down the side smoking conspicuously large joints and always surrounded by hordes of adoring (mostly female) literature grad students. The reading list for his seminars was "all the Zane Greys you can get your hands on". It was he who first told me there was a gunslinger with the same name as me, Ben Thompson of Knottingley. I didn't get very close to Dorn at that time but later I wrote to him about my poetry and he wrote me a helpful letter and gave me some good advice.

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So I started to get interested in Zen probably in my second year at university, but actually I did have one prior encounter with Zen. When I was 18 I went to Greece on a tour with my father and grandmother and the tour guide was a leading exponent of Ikebana and had published a book on it. His name as I remember was John March-Penney. Around that time I remember being told that in Japan most people approached Zen through the study of one of the "arts of satori" because to study it directly was not so much difficult as virtually impossible and fraught with dangers and pitfalls. These arts of satori included various martial arts, kendo, archery, flower arrangement, tea ceremony, sumi painting and so on.

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"There are correspondences in nature that can't be understood. The spider dances her web without knowing that there are flies that will get caught in it. The fly, dancing nonchalantly

on a sunbeam, gets caught in the net without knowing what lies in store. But they are both united in this dance. So, too, the archer hits the target without having aimed—more I cannot say.” - Herrigel “Zen in the Art of Archery”

So, at university I became interested in Zen and Zen ideas. It might seem strange to talk about Zen ideas when Zen is supposed to be all about practice, but there were a few central ideals that came across to us and which attracted us. One could probably summarise them quite simply as being the idea of simplicity in life, a Spartan lifestyle, closeness with nature but also a sense of being a part of a larger mystery than any of us can individually understand. I read around the subject, the two most interesting books were Herrigel's book and DT Suzuki's “The Zen Doctrine of No-mind” which I must have read a dozen times. We didn't do any zazen, we did some karate for which I got teased by my more politically minded friends.

## Geraldine Swingler (nee Peppin)

Sometime during my first year I tried LSD which was going around then, and it had a bad effect on me. I fell apart completely. I suddenly didn't know any longer who I was or what I was doing at university and I became plagued by anxiety attacks. I tried talking to my friends, but nothing helped, I tried talking to my personal tutor, a really sweet man who got so involved in the discussion that he walked into a lamp post and banged his head quite badly, but that didn't help either.

I remembered that my parents had a friend living nearby, a concert pianist who I had met once briefly in my teens when we went to hear her and her twin sister give a broadcast for BBC Radio. I drove over to see her one snowy night, freaked out of my mind. She invited me into her little cottage and for the first time I had the feeling that someone understood what was happening to me and could make the pain go away.

Here we come back to Randall Swingler, who had been her husband and had died a year before we (properly) met. Randall had had a terrible war. He had refused a commission on the grounds that he didn't want any special treatment on account of his upper middle class background and he joined as an ordinary soldier and repeatedly refused a commission. He was involved in a disastrous action in which everyone in his company was killed and he had to be dug out from underneath a mountain of corpses. Later he wrote about it in a poem sequence called "The Raising of Lazarus".

On the hither bank of battle  
He made a deal with Death, to take away  
The aching pack of Fear should he gainsay  
All hope, all expectation, all regret.  
Death signed, and kept his pledge.  
The soldier laughed and sang in the sweat of hell,  
And by sheer accident defaulted on his debt,  
Emerged bewildered on life's further edge.  
Haunted, returning to the source of hate,  
He kicks the dust of ruin which he made  
But finds no key ; and is not justified.  
He owes a debt to death and has not paid.  
How will he ever expiate  
The guilt of being alive?

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When Randall came back from the war, he and Geraldine bought a cottage in Pebmarsh, Essex for £50. They cut down the tree which was growing in the living room and put up a new thatched roof. When I went over to Geraldine's that night the cottage probably still hadn't changed much since then. There was no electricity, sewerage or gas. There was an Elsan or you could go out and pee in the orchard (preferred). There was a low tongue and groove painted timber ceiling with sooty rings on it above the little table where the Aladdin lamp burned with a cool white flame. I spent many hours in that cottage. There was a narrow wooden staircase with a little bedroom at the top by which I staggered up to bed with a candle after an evening of drinking wine and eating mandarin oranges in front of her coke stove, which burned all winter with a soft glow, day and night. Aside from the political people that my parents knew, Geraldine and Randall had a lot of friends who were artists and musicians and composers. Some of Randall's words had been set by Benjamin Britten,

and WH Auden and Dylan Thomas had visited the cottage. Bernard Stevens was a neighbour and I helped him write his piece "The Bramble Briar" for solo guitar. Geraldine also knew Alan Rawsthorne, who died shortly after I got to know her, but Rawsthorne's widow, Isabel, was still alive. She was a painter and had been painted by Francis Bacon as Isabel Lambert. Shortly after the war she had been briefly married to a local farmer called Sefton Delmer and I once had the uncanny experience of giving a guitar recital at his son's farm, there was a bronze bust on the mantelpiece in the room in which I was warming up by practicing Alan Rawsthorne's Elegy for guitar. I asked who it was, it was Isabel Rawsthorne.

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Geraldine really taught me everything I know about listening to music, and responding to music and for that I am very grateful. I think there were some problems in our relationship on a personal level, as I was fairly mad and she was widowed and going as ungently as possible into that dark night, I probably leaned on her emotionally more than I should have and she perhaps wanted things from me that I couldn't give her. As I grow old myself I understand these things and I try if I can to give to others as generously as she gave to me.

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About a year after that LSD induced anxiety attack I had a powerful series of illuminations. I had a huge crush on a flamboyant lady poet who had moved into Wivenhoe with her young son. I woke up in the middle of the night, in my grandmother's house in Bromley, with the absolute conviction that she loved me and that I had to go to her immediately. The universe filled with golden light and a magnificent perfume seemed to fill the air around me. I picked up a guitar and a suitcase and set off immediately for Essex. After walking about half a mile I decided I didn't need the suitcase or the guitar so I left them in an alley (remarkably someone handed them to the police and I got them back!) I had no money on me, I remember I took a taxi and wrote a cheque for the driver and told him to hold on to it because "one day it will be worth a lot of money" (what was I thinking!) I took a train and when I got to the ticket barrier I offered the man at the barrier a necklace I was wearing as payment, he just waved me through. Somehow I arrived at this lady's house where my plan was that she would open her door, I would shout "Gillian, I've been an idiot" and she would throw herself into my arms and we would live happily ever after, something like a sort of literary Johnny Dankworth and Clio Lane. I don't know why I thought of those two, but I just did. My plan went fine up to the opening of the door but the throwing herself into my arms bit did not go according to plan at all. In fact the door was opened by a large biker called Dave with whom she had, unbeknown to me, shacked up. In my over-excited state I couldn't accept that this as a setback, I therefore interpreted it as another twist in the divine plan. Dave, I decided, was not actually real, he was an hallucination sent to test my willpower in the face of adverse destiny, a barrier I had to overcome. If I attacked him, I was convinced he would vanish like a popped bubble, so I charged at him and kicked him in the groin. He did groan and fall over, but he didn't vanish, though, and this was a bit worrying. I don't recall everything after that, I remember I was got out of the house somehow, I think Gillian and Dave also left and went somewhere safer. I went back to the house the next evening and tried to get in, I went up the backs of the houses until I saw a house with a pushchair in the garden, which I decided must be the right house so I kicked down the back door and went in. When I got inside, though, it didn't seem to be the right house but in my over-excited state houses refurbishing themselves seemed not at all an unlikely sort of thing, so I continued up

the stairs where I found a woman I had never met, sitting in her bed, looking very frightened. “Who are you, what do you want?” she said. This seemed like a pretty good question so I pondered it for a while. It was December, so the answer was obvious. “Don't be alarmed”, I said, “I'm Father Christmas”. Then somehow I made my way downstairs and into the house I had been intending to visit in the first place. Needless to say I was not there long before there was a knock on the door from the local constable and I was soon removed to Severall's Hospital where I stayed a few days until my father rescued me. After about a week the delusions receded but I still felt some of the golden glow for weeks or even months afterwards. I dropped out of university and spent some time playing guitar in folk clubs and trying to establish myself as a singer songwriter, but that didn't work out.

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After that I went back to university to start my second year again. I still visited Pebmarsh often. James Gibb was a frequent visitor to Geraldine's cottage, he was then head of the piano department at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. One evening they were having a discussion about Chopin's Nocturnes and he said “Oh, you mean this one?” and he took a score off the top of the piano and played the Nocturne number 9. I suddenly understood how expressive classical music could be, something I had never realised before. As a student it would have been hard for me to get to a piano regularly but I was a good pop guitarist so I took up classical guitar, Geraldine helped me get into the Guildhall as a part time student, and later persuaded the late Hector Quine to take me on for a few lessons. So I spent most of my remaining time at university practicing guitar several hours a day, and emerged with a second class literature degree and an LRAM.

## **Nigel Henderson**

At the time when I went back to redo my second year at Essex I went to live for a while in a place called Thorpe-le-Soken. My landlord there was an artist called Nigel Henderson who lived in an old wooden pub called The King's Arms which was gradually sliding into the sea. There were a few cottages and I rented one of them with a couple of friends. The end cottage was occupied by a famous sculptor, I don't think I ever actually saw him in person, but if you went out at night there was always a ghostly blue flicker coming from his workshop where he continually welded sheet metal into large garbage skips and then cut them up again.

At that time I used to do yoga and sometimes sit cross legged and watch a stick of incense burn down and call that meditation. I got talking to Nigel about Zen. He said his first introduction to Zen had been through Marcel Duchamp. He said "He had a very magnetic personality but he was very careful not to draw me into it". He must have been a child when he knew Duchamp in Paris, because he said he helped Duchamp work on The Large Glass. He also talked about a time when William Empson had rounded on him in a discussion and severely embarrassed him. But, he said, he had been grateful for it later. Obviously though I couldn't see it at the time this was a veiled warning.

I admired Nigel and he seemed very genuine to me and this is important in the light of what happened between us. One night, after I had been meditating I woke up in a state of sheer bliss. I was in Paradise. The sound of birdsong was the most delicious music, the sight of a tree wrapped in morning mist seemed suddenly more solid and real than anything I had ever seen since childhood. There were fields behind us and the sea before us, it really did seem as though I had landed in Paradise. I thought I had really broken through to something, I felt very pleased indeed. Although it was early I headed over to Nigel's place and found him in his dressing gown making coffee. I started babbling about Zen. Nigel said "You're taking a great risk, you know, I don't know who I am today yet". I ignored him and told him some Zen story or other. Nigel said "I like the one about the young monk, on his first day in the monastery, he hot-footed over to the master's house and said 'master, master, teach me' and the master said 'have you had breakfast yet?', 'Yes', 'then go clean out your bowls!'"

The moment he said that, Paradise slammed shut for me. After a couple of days I started having illuminations again, but this time very dark illuminations. I went back to my parents' house where I developed a delusion that we were under nuclear attack and that only by slowing down time till it stopped and by running up and down stairs making everyone drink endless glasses of water could I prevent us all going up in smoke. I narrowly managed to avoid the hospital that time, but I did go and see a psychiatrist privately, he asked me how I was and I said depressed, he said "Life's a depressing business, isn't it, Ben" and gave me some pills which I probably didn't take. Again this crisis passed quite quickly and I was able to go back to university.

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What Henderson did was incredibly dangerous for both of us, because if someone poses you an existential challenge like that you cannot hide from it or push it away. If you do it will fester in your subconscious and probably destroy you. Anyway, I couldn't let it go, obviously he had exposed a structural weakness in my life which I had to deal with. In my last year at university I came into an inheritance and bought a tumbledown cottage for £2,000 (ah, those were the days!) I lived there on

my own for a couple of years. Having a second class literature degree didn't qualify a person for any profession in those days, and the LRAM wasn't much use in those parts either. I got offered a job teaching liberal studies at a technical college and accepted it but then had a crisis of conscience about it. How could I teach people when I myself had never lived? Wouldn't that just consolidate the structural deficiencies that Henderson had exposed? I sat up all night one night wrestling with the problem while the lightbulbs in the house popped one by one. Then I wrote an apology and withdrew. I noticed around that time that when the dustbin men came every week I always hid so they wouldn't see me, because, strange as it might sound, I had no idea how to say hello to a dustbin man. I had no idea how to deal with working people at all. You could smile and say "jolly good", or something but that would come over as weird. I carried on thinking about this stuff and trying to figure out if the paradise that Henderson had slammed shut for me could every be reopened, every so often I would go through some kind of shift of perspective and I would write little poems which were often so frightening to me that I would have to shove them in a drawer immediately and only look at them two weeks later. I did yoga and walked around the lanes, every day the same walk, steady as Kant. After a couple of years I got a lady friend and she moved in then she had a baby. When my money ran out I decided that a spot of manual work would be good for me, it would help me learn how to get on with different people. I answered an advert "Men and boys wanted for tree work in Essex". I did that for three months or so, driving their van and lugging firewood. Then I had another rest, then I worked on a building site for a while, and so on, then I was a loom cleaner in a textiles mill, there were a variety of jobs. At first I always felt as though I was play acting when I was with working people, I would put on a coarse Essex accent and pretend three days beard was five-o-clock shadow, but later I worked for nine months in a pressed steel shop and about that time I found I no longer felt nervous around labouring people.

I often used to sit out in the evenings in a straw chair under the stars, and one evening I was sitting out there and I had a feeling that the whole universe smiled and became one thing and I knew I was free from Henderson's "curse". I hadn't solved anything, or if I had, it was only myself. I wrote a little poem about it, there are a series of little poems from that period that I published myself but nobody is very interested in them, so perhaps they were therapeutic rather than literary, I don't know.

## **The squats, END**

I didn't want to go on doing odd jobs forever and I had no way of making a living, I wrote around looking for music teaching work but nobody replied. I visited Throssel Hole at that time, perhaps looking for some moral support, but it seemed to be going through a turbulent patch and I didn't feel attracted by the idea of going to stay there. I think I got some energy from it, but I went off with my energy to London and became a squatter for five years. That suited my need for a period of communal life and I got to know all kinds of people in the squats, it was well worth doing. During that time I did become a peripatetic music teacher for a while, and taught in the Working Men's College in Camden Town.

Most of the squats have been closed now, though, which is a shame. Like the artists' communities in Essex and Suffolk, they have been squeezed out of existence by the surge in property prices. When I was a child I remember learning that some weedkillers worked by making the plant grow so fast it keeled over and died. In my opinion "economic progress" has had that effect on the UK, it has killed off any idea of a relaxed or alternative lifestyle and made everyone run on the treadmill of money, which treadmill they run to a chant of "we've never had it so good, we've never had it so good!". The film maker Kurosawa said the the spurt of economic growth in Japan in the 90s had had a bad effect on Japanese and that now nobody has any time to enjoy life. That was what I felt when I stayed in Tokyo in 2015. That's what I feel when I go to London now. Ireland had an economic crash, which everyone foams at the mouth about, but for me it makes it a much more pleasant place to live. Houses are cheap and people have recently been chastened. I find the richer people are the nastier they become.

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Although my parents were very political I don't think I myself am very political, at least not in an organised way. Perhaps I am a fellow traveller. I am not anti-politics and I can certainly get interested in particular issues, but I don't feel the need to have a "line" on everything. I worked for three and a half years for the peace movement, mostly because the day Peggy Duff gave END an office there were three people supposed to go and help her and only I turned up. I did mostly administrative things, sending out appeals, doing the PAYE and keeping the accounts. Then I went to Italy for a conference and fell in love with Italy and became a sort of de-facto link person between CND and the Italian peace movement. The high point of that involvement was a ten day hunger strike in Comiso. We stayed in a little Franciscan Monastery in the middle of Comiso, because we needed a quiet place to sleep and the monks could bear witness to the fact that we weren't secretly pigging ourselves (which Italian hunger strikers have been sometimes known to do). The abbot was an elegant old gentleman in a beret who interviewed us before we went in, and I remember he said "We cannot take part in politics, either of the right or of the left, but we want peace". The monastery had a strange serenity about it, there was a courtyard in the middle of it with a tiny orange tree in it, and sometimes being there you felt as though an invisible spirit descended and time stopped breathing for a moment. Lately I've found myself recalling that feeling, sometimes, in the forest where I live now in Ireland.

Perhaps the best thing about this part of my life was knowing Peggy Duff. Her husband was killed during World War 2 after which Peggy devoted herself to the peace movement. She was the first general secretary of CND, and thereafter she ran an organisation called ICDP which campaigned

against the Vietnam war and published a newsletter about it. She gave one of her rooms to END when we started, and helped me to keep the books. She was very ill at that time with bone cancer I believe, and I used to go and collect her pension for her and do a bit of shopping from time to time. When she went into hospital I used to go over there most days with a folder full of contributions from END supporters which we would enter together into the END ledger. I knew she liked whisky, and one day, when she looked at the folder I'd brought and said "what have you got there?" instead of the ledger I took out a half bottle of whiskey. "Put it in the cupboard, quick, before the nurses see it!" she said. The next day I heard she had died, perhaps I helped her on her way.

I was a good enough workhorse for END but I never went for the job of political organiser. I am the world's worst organiser, I once organised an international peace youth summer camp in a place called Tent City. Not a single person came, and I think it was at that moment that I decided my future was not in political organisation. (In fact it was very fortunate because imagine if one person had come, how would I have explained why the field of empty tents they saw was supposed to be fun?)

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I programmed computers and raised a family for eighteen years, and then I went to China and learned Mandarin and lived there for twelve years. Naturally this influenced my ideas about Zen.

## Shaolin Temple

When I first arrived in China to do a language course I stayed in a hotel. There was a TV in my room and at that time there was a popular comedy series called “Fang Shi Yu”, about a renegade monk in the Shaolin Temple around the time when the Ming was replaced by the Qing. I didn't understand a word of the dialogue, of course, but I was captivated by the movement, the colour, the life and the humour. The series was obviously very popular because it was being shown on five or six channels at once. Through this series I first became aware of the importance of the Shaolin Temple in Chinese popular culture and in the mind of Chinese people. This doesn't necessarily refer to the actual temple itself, as it is presently organised, or perhaps I should say it doesn't only refer to the temple itself, because the temple is certainly an important site and receives a lot of visitors. But the importance of the temple is also symbolic, going back through history. It exemplifies for the Chinese a certain kind of spirit and bravery and unselfish martial prowess.

I became very interested in the Shaolin Temple and by a process of part intention part serendipity I went there two days before my 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday and stayed for 2 months. I've written about that elsewhere, but naturally it was a very powerful and educational experience for me. Before I went there I hadn't thought much about what kind of temple it was, in fact it hadn't even occurred to me that it was a Zen monastery, but when I got there I found that it was the first Zen monastery in Asia, and supposedly the site where Bodhidharma brought Buddhism to China and taught Chan to the monks. There was a cave on the hillside where Bodhidharma was supposed to have lived and one of the disciplines that the kung-fu kids were subjected to was to be made to regularly run up the stone stairs to this cave and then come back down headfirst using their hands.

By some accounts Bodhidharma taught kung-fu to the monks, by other accounts his physical training knowledge was merged with theirs, as with all this kind of religious history myths and fairytales abound, but one thing I did notice when I read an account of Shaolin qigong was that the basic qigong was pretty much exactly actually yoga pranayama, even including alternate nostril breathing. But then, they might have picked that up later from somewhere else, so it doesn't really prove anything.

So I stayed in this temple which after all was a Buddhist Temple (and by the way, they don't say “Zen Buddhist” in China, Zen means sitting meditation, Buddhism is a religion, they don't understand the term “Zen Buddhism” as referring to a religion). Nobody tried to convert me to Buddhism, nobody even discussed Buddhism with me. We talked about what was under our noses and about the problems of everyday life (such as that all the water in the Temple was frozen and the kung-fu kids had to go out and bring it back in buckets).

There were about a dozen kids living in the temple itself in the kung-fu school inside the temple. They were aged from 5 to 18, but around the temple there were dozens of schools and probably thousands of students. I used to hear them in the morning running past the gate, a river of life, chanting “right right right right, left left left left, gongfu practice means hard work”.

There were various rules in the temple, you weren't supposed to drink or have sex, women weren't allowed to live there, though they could come by day and train there (an exception was made for the hairdresser's wife but she was beyond the age where she might have been a danger to monks). People walked around smoking cigarettes, even the 5 year old kid, and nobody cared. But the main rule was that you had to work as hard as you could. When I turned up there, they asked what I

wanted to study and I opted for kung-fu forms, but there were other people there learning weapons forms and taichi and a man from Hong Kong learning qigong. The only rule was that you had to push yourself as hard as you could. You weren't supposed to damage yourself, though, it was hard work, not flagellation.

I had the impression that the Shaolin Temple served as a source of energy and inspiration for the Chinese. We hear a lot in the west about how repressive the Chinese political system is, and probably some of that is true, but the overall impression I got living in China for 12 years was that Chinese people are predominantly positive, energetic, stoical and by and large compassionate and sensitive. Of course you get all kinds of people everywhere and there are crooks and bullies, but they're a minority. Young people go to the Shaolin Temple and study there for a couple of years and get a kung-fu teaching diploma then they go into the villages or towns and teach classes rather in the way that peripatetic music teachers work in the west. The kids I met in the temple were intensely proud of their capacity for training and endurance, their faces shone with energy and life.

I recently read Murakami's book about running, "What I talk about when I talk about running". I think Murakami has the Shaolin spirit.

## Wei Lang's Bicycle

I've never lost my interest in Zen, and I've always tried to live simply and to allow nature to interpenetrate my life. Sometimes I've done sitting meditation and other times not, I've done yoga exercises for most of my life and that's helped me a lot. After I came back from China I decided to look for a comfortable house to retire in, but when I got back to Ireland my fingers started itching to do some building work and I found an old house in a forest. The first time I went to see the house the door opened and two donkeys walked out. At that moment I knew that the house was telling me stories, I had to buy it. Then there were problems because the people who owned the forest wanted a right of way to move timber out. I didn't want wagons rolling past my door so I made them an absurdly low offer for the whole lot and to my astonishment they accepted it. There's a lot of work to do on the house, but every year I do a bit more. I got a well drilled and built a composting toilet and put wood burners in. I doubt if many westerners would feel it is inhabitable, but compared to most of the places I lived in in China it's a palace. So now I can spend the last few years of my life surrounded by trees and interesting wildlife, deer, pine martens, red squirrels, frogs, foxes. The only flaw in the plan is that I am supposed to die but after 3 years of this I haven't so it sometimes gets boring.

One of the things I did when I got back here was to get out an old novel I once tried to write, and to rewrite it. The novel is called Wei Lang's Bicycle and it is an attempt to describe a sort of ideal Zen monastery in a European country as I would like a Zen monastery to be. I have finally given up on the novel, but I still have some ideas about what a Zen monastery might be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The reason I am still interested in the idea of the Zen monastery is because I think it's just what the modern world needs. It needs a monastery which is open to everybody where anybody can go and have a spell of quiet reflection and live in a different way, close to nature, away from electronic noise, away from politics, away from the multiple distractions that we usually bounce between like balls in a pinball machine. However, most of the Buddhist communities which I see springing up today are either based on the Japanese model, or too heavily focused on a particular style of meditation, or both. I don't believe there is any form of yoga or meditation that in itself can lead a person to a deep understanding of truth, I think truth is like oxygen, you can breathe it anywhere but no-one can teach you how to breath except yourself. The value of the monastery is the environment it provides, not the meditation practices it teaches. Those things may have some value in themselves, depending on the individual and their needs at the time, but what we really need now is a place which sets itself up in cultural and aesthetic opposition to the trivial and degrading and materialistic place that our world has become. This isn't a political opposition, it's a cultural opposition.

I'm not apolitical, in a complex post-industrial society such as the one we live in politics is essential maintenance. If we want to live in this kind of society we need to discuss questions such as taxation and provision of healthcare, just as if we drive a car we need to put oil in the sump and air in the tyres, but it seems that we are approaching a state where we can no longer solve all our problems politically. Aside from the political problem of how we distribute resources, there is also an aesthetic and philosophical problem of whether we need to use so many resources and how we ought to relate to nature and to the vast scheme in which we find ourselves embedded, there is the question of *who we are*.

The monastery should be like a revolving door, people come in, stay a while and leave refreshed or otherwise changed in some way. The Japanese style monasteries that have been set up in the UK and elsewhere don't seem to have achieved this, naturally they've enrolled some followers but they have always remained a somewhat obscure, minority interest. And one can't help wondering why people are setting up Japanese style monasteries in the west when the Japanese themselves are deserting them in droves. For me, intellectually there are two big problems I think, transmission and jukai. I know there has been a lot of discussion in Japan about whether transmission is outdated and ought to be discontinued. It seems to be a throwback to an authoritarian society and, really, why is it necessary. The other thing that puts me off going to a place like that is jukai. There's a feeling that until you have been through jukai you are somehow an aspirant making kowtow outside the inner sanctum. I don't think it's appropriate in the modern world, I think it might have made more sense in the time when the monasteries were first established and before there was universal access to education, but in the modern world it seems demeaning. We used to have a dog who chased sheep, so we sent him to a special school where they taught him not to chase sheep, but if I find myself chasing sheep, I don't send myself to that school, I just stop chasing sheep. If someone wants to behave well, they can behave well. And of course we know very well that there have been countless instances of people who have taken jukai and then, apparently without a murmur in their conscience, broken each and every precept they have taken.

The old religions are riddled with hypocrisy, as we know. Maybe this is inevitable given their history but we should not be actively establishing new forms of hypocrisy.

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Truth is not the private property of any school, sect, philosopher, scientist or economist. Truth is the common on which we all graze, the oxygen we all breathe. There are aspects of truth which require that we research, debate, demonstrate and sometimes even take up arms and fight. But there are also aspects of truth that require detachment from economic activity, silence and introspection. The problem is that at the moment the noise is winning and the spaces where silence can be heard are shrinking everywhere.

There's nothing to stop people setting up any kind of monastery, cult, sect or practice in the modern democracies of the west. There are people practicing Japanese Tea Ceremony, I attended one once in London and it was very well done. There are people practicing Ikebana and martial arts with kiu and dan grades as used in Japan. But these things are of necessity a minority interest. There's nothing to stop people setting up pucker Japanese Zen temples with transmission and jukai and elaborate robes and degrees of the priesthood, but again these things will always be a minority interest, even though at times that minority might be substantial. It also needs to be recognised that even though foreigners find certain aspects of Japanese culture superficially attractive, there's a lot in Japanese culture that is very different from European and American culture, Japanese culture is very hierarchichal, even the language you use has to vary according to whether the person you are talking to is a friend or a stranger, is a year younger or a year older, is a teacher or a pupil, and people really can take offense if you get the language wrong. This hierarchical system including exaggerated respect for the teacher runs through all the institutions in Japan naturally including the Zen training system. Marina Abramovic said "I use to teach in Japan a lot, and the problem is that when you're a professor or an artist, they think you are a god - you say jump out of a fifth-floor window, and they'll jump". And don't forget that at the centre of the their culture is Seppuku.

My ideal monastery would be like a revolving door, people would come to it for a while, maybe days or weeks, maybe months or years, according to what they felt they needed. There would be no rigid hierarchy, no priesthood, no fancy robes (though perhaps people would wear some kind of comfortable monk's robe when they were not outdoors working). There would need to be some staff living there taking care of the place, but I would see their role as more like that of a librarian. Nobody objects in a library if the librarian points out the rules and asks you to obey them, just as nobody except a hooligan objects if they are on a demonstration and a steward asks them to line up in a certain place.

The problem I had in my brief encounter with a Zen training center in England was that it seemed more like a funnel spider web than a revolving door. There was this funnel which was the system of jukai and transmission, certain people had gone through the funnel but I hadn't. I had the feeling that the way the thing was set up carried the implication that those of us who were visiting for the first time were ipso facto aspirants and that there was a kind of pyramid there in which the priests were in some way assumed to be enlightened and we were assumed to be unenlightened. I don't think that's how the world works, actually. Intelligent people never assume that they know better than everyone else. Confucius said "When three people walk together, one of them is my teacher".

In my ideal modern monastery the medieval baggage such as jukai and transmission would be abandoned. The emphasis would be on silent retreat (not absolute silence like the Trappists, but respect for other people's silences). There would be no claim that any one particular yogic practice could lead to "enlightenment", but there would probably be some communal meditation sessions. (Personally I very much enjoyed the three morning sittings at Throssel Hole and I kept up that habit for quite a while after I left). There would be some manual labour perhaps, maybe some skills like martial arts, taichi or yoga or even weiqi or languages and calligraphy might be taught, but no religious dogma or history or politics. There might be a library or there might not, but if there was it wouldn't be full of devotional literature but would have a good collection including western classics and philosophy and physical science and so on. There are a lot of possibilities and I am sure that nobody else's ideal monastery would be exactly the same as mine.

The reason I originally got interested in Zen was because it seemed as though it might contain some of the answers to the problems facing the modern world. It seems as though political solutions are increasingly limited in the scope of what they can accomplish. There are too many powerful vested interests, both on the left and on the right. At the same time the quality of our human life is being degraded by the proliferation of electronic toys, internet addiction, the encroachment of concrete upon green spaces, mass extinctions, overcrowding (and not just physical overcrowding, overcrowding of the professions and of every kind of aspirational space). But to me, and I felt this particularly strongly after coming back from China, one of the worst dangers we face is the fact that having lived a couple of generations in relative comfort, without experiencing hunger or cold or homelessness, a lot of us are becoming complacent and soft and we are lapsing into a sense of diminished reality. Along with that goes the collapse of communal spirit, greed, materialism, and a complete lack of empathy for people in countries which are less rich than our own, to the extent that a former US Secretary of State could say that the deaths of up to half a million children during the period of sanctions on Iraq was "worth it". We put up with these things not because we enjoy murder but because we have become anaesthetized by easy living. The end result of this process is likely to be some kind of catastrophic collapse, either through war or through economic collapse and large scale social disorder. Again, it's very hard to cure these cultural diseases through a

political process. One of the results of this spiritual aridity, of course, is that our kids go off and join cults like Scientology or even Isis.

But – if there was a modern monastery, a place that didn't present itself as a conduit for the transmission of obscure, arcane and ancient doctrines but as a lung where people could go and breathe the oxygen of truth, not in the sense of any profound realisation of the meaning of life (though they might have such a realisation as indeed any of us might, anywhere), but just a place where they can seek refuge from trivial pursuits and revert to a more basic human lifestyle, where they could feel themselves to be both a part of nature and surrounded by natural things, and simultaneously perhaps a part of something bigger than nature which we can only dimly comprehend. There would be rules, but the rules would belong to the place and not to the people who stayed there. No alcoholic drink or sex or iPhones or unnecessary noise would probably be among the rules I'd vote for. But there would be no swearing solemn vows to abstain from this that or the other for the rest of one's life. As we know, people don't keep those kinds of vows so why make them?

I think a monastery like that, if it was made beautiful and if it was honestly done, might stand at least some chance of becoming to us what the Shaolin Temple is to the Chinese, a place that anyone can visit and which could embody a spirit which expresses the best of what we are or what we could become. It might help to ameliorate the spiritual crises which has descended upon us. It might even become an engine which allowed us to renew ourselves without passing through the funnel of another military or economic catastrophe.

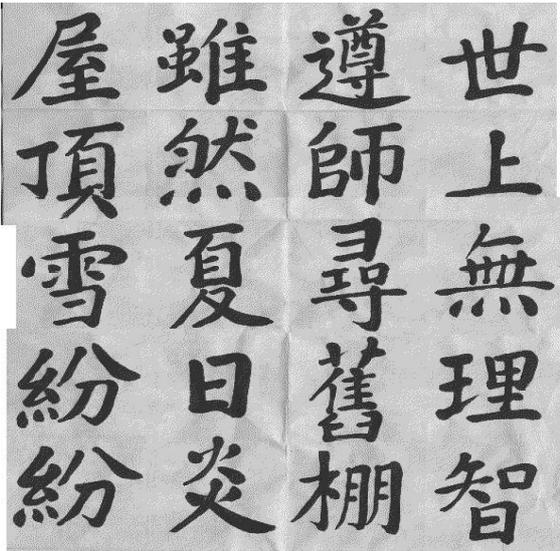
## After the Chinese

Seeing no sense in the world

I find an old hut to follow the steps of my teacher

Even on a hot summers day

Yards of snow fly off the roof



(Chinese translation by Joseph Yen)

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There's a fuller account of my experiences in the Shaolin Temple which can be downloaded from the writing section on my website: [www.tufsoft.com](http://www.tufsoft.com)

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