



What is this?

*Ancient questions
for modern minds*

Martine and
Stephen Batchelor

TUWHIRI

Wellington

Aotearoa New Zealand



Saturday evening

WELCOME

Entering the retreat

Stephen Batchelor

Welcome to Gaia House for the yearly Sōn retreat. I realise that many of you have travelled a long way to get here, and suspect most of us – like myself – have had a busy week as well. We are all likely to be tired. The mad rush of tying up the loose ends of our lives before setting off for a week of quiet, solitary reflection can be exhausting. We'll keep this opening session short and to the point so everyone can have a good night's sleep.

Martine and I have been leading these retreats once a year since we returned from Songgwang Sa monastery in Korea to Devon in 1985, which would make this retreat the thirtieth – well, actually, the twenty-ninth, since one year we offered this slot to the Chinese Chan master Sheng-yen¹.

First and foremost, this is a retreat: a time of conscious withdrawal from the routines and duties of our everyday existence in order to reflect on what really matters for us. We step back into the solitude and silence offered by Gaia House in order to take stock of ourselves. I imagine many of you will have arrived here with questions or issues that are concerning you. These might have to do with your career, your marriage, your children, or with more personal psychological or spiritual matters. Or it may have to do with the loss of a loved one, a recent diagnosis of sickness, some turning point in your life, or simply your own process of getting older. Or maybe you are here for completely different reasons. It doesn't really matter. What matters is allowing your life to become a question for yourself and being willing to dwell with and deepen that question.

In the old days, coming to Gaia House effectively cut you off from the rest of your life. But with the advent of smartphones, iPads, wifi and the like it is increasingly difficult to do this. Our devices keep us connected with the world no matter where we are. Fortunately, mobile phone reception is very patchy in West Oghwell and we certainly are not going to give you the Gaia House wifi password, so that might help. But the temptation to find a place where you can get a signal and check for or send a text message can be overwhelming at times. I would strongly encourage you to switch your devices off for the duration of this retreat. Or put your tablet on flight mode if you need it to take notes. If you are worried about someone who may need to contact you urgently, then before you go to bed tonight make sure they have the centre's phone number and email address. Then switch your device off. Be assured that the coordinators will let you know as soon as they hear from anyone who needs to contact you.

The silence in which we conduct this retreat is to support the cultivation of a solitude and silence of the mind. We won't be

talking except during the discussion periods and interviews with the teachers. If you haven't spent time in silence before, you might at first find this challenging. But with familiarity you will realise that rather than inhibiting communication with others, silence allows us to communicate in a different way. The way we move our bodies, the way we present ourselves through our expression and dress, whether we keep the space around us tidy or messy, small gestures of kindness during the work period or while queuing for meals, glances exchanged when we meet a fellow meditator during a walk in the fields: these are all ways of getting to know each other. I trust that during our days here together we will gradually create a sense of being a temporary sangha, or community.

After a while it may dawn on us that much of what we say to each other in the course of an average day is really not that necessary. Our chatter may be little more than noise to banish the awkwardness of silence. The camaraderie of sharing the joys and hardships of this retreat, of mutually supporting each other's practice in a spirit of generosity, will hopefully become more and more palpable. Although we do not know another person's name or much, if anything, about them, this does not mean we cannot come to cherish their presence. We might also find out at the end of the retreat that all the stories and fantasies we have built up about someone in the room turn out to have had no basis whatsoever. So, be open to one another in a heartfelt way but don't give too much weight to the stories you conjure up around them.

Gaia House is the only place we run a Sōn retreat. We do it as a way of paying homage to our training in Korea under our teacher Kusan Sunim, as well as of honouring the Imje Sōn (Rinzai Zen in Japanese) tradition that has developed there. In particular, we are indebted to the work of the twelfth century monk Chinul, who not only founded Songgwang Sa monastery but is one of the key figures in the founding of the Korean Sōn tradition².

Those of you who have been here at Gaia House on other retreats will notice that the room is laid out differently than usual. Like in Sŏn monasteries in Korea, we will be sitting and walking inside the hall. So we have placed you in four rows, divided into two blocks. Those on the outer rows of the two blocks will sit looking at the wall, while those on the inside rows will be looking at the centre of the room facing the others in the opposite row. We will sit in sessions of between thirty to forty minutes, then stand up and walk anticlockwise around the two blocks of cushions for ten or so minutes. If you haven't done this before, it might sound a bit confusing, but you will soon get the hang of it.

Rather than a nice sonorous bell, the periods of sitting and walking will be marked by this wooden clapper called a *djukpi*. We're not going to hit you with it. It's just a piece of bamboo split down the middle that when struck on the palm makes a sharp cracking sound like this: *klak! klak! klak!* It will serve to mark the beginning and end of all practice periods.

The *djukpi* is also used for the morning and evening ceremony when we offer three bows to the Buddha. Again, this reflects how things are done in Korean Sŏn halls. Before the first sit in both the morning and evening, we will offer a bowl of water, a stick of incense and a candle to the Buddha, then bow three times as the *djukpi* strikes. We are not bowing to the Buddha statue behind me as though it were some sacred object, but simply affirming a commitment to what that image stands for: the condition of being awake, which each person, Buddhist or not, is capable of aspiring to and experiencing. I know this sort of thing might seem incongruous if you have come here expecting a secular Buddhist approach, but – hey – we can't always be consistent. If you have any religious or other objections to doing this, then please do not participate.

We will also be conducting fifteen-minute personal interviews every afternoon. With the number we have on this retreat,

this means that each person will only have one formal interview. Your turn will follow the order in which you are seated in the two blocks of cushions. Those in the two rows on my side of the hall will see me, and those in the two rows on Martine's side will see her. This will be an opportunity to discuss anything that has come up in your meditation or other questions related to your practice that you would like to explore in private. The interviews will take place in the library, which is just before you get to the circular staircase on the ground floor. If you need to see either of us at any other time, just leave a note on the board or come up to us at the end of the practice sessions. We are here for you. Don't hesitate if you need to talk to either of us about anything.

As a way of kicking this retreat off, I'd like to offer some words of the eighth century Chinese teacher Mazu Daoyi. He said:

*All of you should realise that your own mind is Buddha, that is, this mind is Buddha's mind. Those who seek for the truth should realise that there is nothing to seek. There is no Buddha but mind; there is no mind but Buddha.*³

Mazu's point is very simple. He is saying that whatever we seek to achieve in meditation is already right here before our very eyes. As soon as we use words like 'Buddha' or 'enlightenment' or 'truth' we tend to imagine something that is far away from the condition in which we find ourselves now. Mazu, however, tells us that these things are only ever experienced in the very midst of what it means to be human in this moment. There is no other realm or place where they are to be found. Nor is he saying that they are hidden somewhere in the unconscious depths of our psyche, or in some hitherto undiscovered dimension of consciousness. No, they are right here in the messiness, confusion, darkness and anxiety of the very mind that is listening to these words. And, one could add,

the body of the Buddha is nothing but the very body that is sitting on the cushion, its heart beating, its lungs drawing and exhaling each breath, its knees aching from sitting cross-legged. I urge you to stop making a difference between who you think you are and who you think the Buddha is.

Mazu was once asked: 'What is the meaning of Buddhism?' He retorted with another question: 'What is the meaning of this moment?'⁴ As we go into this retreat together, it would be a good idea to drop every single notion you have formed about the Buddha and Buddhism. Get rid of any thought you might have of enlightenment. Instead, just sit still in this room, pay attention to what you experience here and now, and let yourself be drawn into the mystery of simply being human, the puzzle of being here at all.



Sunday morning

INSTRUCTIONS

The basis of meditation

Martine Batchelor

Today I want to look at the basics of meditation. We're embarking on a Sōn-style retreat in which we pose the question, 'What is this?' I would like to start with this observation: in Buddhist traditions, meditation practice is based on two fundamental elements – *anchoring* and *experiential inquiry*.

The various Buddhist traditions approach these elements in different ways. For example, in the *vipassanā* tradition, the anchor can be the breath or the body. In the Tibetan tradition, you might use a mantra, a visualisation, or a theme. If you look at Japanese Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen, bear in mind that they come from the Chan tradition in China, where two currents predominated: the Lin-Chi/Rinzai current, which uses koans or questions as focuses;

and the Tsao-Tung current – later known as Soto in Japan. Soto Zen taught ‘just sitting’, a meditation practice also called ‘silent illumination’. In the Korean Sōn tradition, the anchor is a question like: ‘What is this?’.

There are different ways to anchor. We can focus on something in the moment, as in the vipassanā tradition, or settle on a question as in the Korean Sōn tradition. We can also cultivate experiential enquiry in different ways. Vipassanā practitioners, for example, do it by being aware of change. In the Korean Sōn tradition, we focus on questioning and experiential inquiry. In any tradition, anchoring and inquiry are developed together to become creative awareness or creative mindfulness. We might practise them in different ways, but these two aspects remain the essential components of the practice. So when we’re sitting in meditation, we’re basically cultivating these two elements together.

Rather than use the term ‘concentration’, I’d prefer to use the word ‘anchoring’, because we have an unhelpful relationship to ‘concentration’. If somebody tells us, ‘Concentrate!’, generally we tense up and try to narrow our focus. Anchoring is a better image, because it brings to mind anchoring a boat. We have the anchor, we have the boat, and thanks to the anchor the boat is not going to drift away. The boat isn’t stationary – it shifts a little according to the current and wind – but it’s not going very far.

So we see that the anchor – the breath, the body, sound, or a question – actually helps us to be with our experience. As Stephen said, the aim is to be with our life in this moment, in an open and stable way. In the Sōn tradition, we come back to the question, ‘What is this?’. The crucial aspect of anchoring – whether we’re coming back to the breath, or coming back to the question ‘What is this?’ – is that we come back to the whole experience of this moment.

When we’re sitting here with nothing to do but cultivate

meditation – anchoring and questioning – we might notice that a lot of the time we’re somewhere else. Just as we can’t stop ourselves hearing, we can’t stop ourselves thinking. Rather, we’re creating space so we’re not *too* lost in thoughts. What we might notice as we sit is that, yes, we’re going to have thoughts, and a lot of the time the thoughts are going to be fairly repetitive. Maybe from time to time, we’ll have a new thought, and sometimes we might think creative thoughts, but most of the time it’s repetitive. It’s the same with sounds. As we go through the day sounds repeat: the sounds of birds, the sounds of cars, the sounds outside. It’s the same with sensations in the body: some will come again and again.

Repetition is part of life, but we don’t want to become stuck in it. From time to time, we have thoughts we’ve never had before, just as from time to time we hear sounds we’ve never heard before. As we anchor, the point is not to stop the functioning of the organism. We think, we see, we hear, we taste, we smell, we experience sensations, we have thoughts. This is just the organism functioning. Anchoring helps us to open up some space, so it’s not so relentless – not so repetitive and automatic. Thus we can experience some freedom, some creativity and spaciousness. We can exercise choice. Do I want to continue to think these thoughts? Do I want to continue to be with these sensations?

When we focus on inquiry, our anchoring consists in returning again and again to the question, and to notice that when we’re lost in thoughts, we’re not totally here with this multi-perspectival experience. Rather, we’re caught in just one aspect of it, which often references the past or the future. In returning to the question we train ourselves to be here, bringing creative awareness – creative *engagement* – to this moment. And we can only do this by accessing our experience in each moment.

It is very important to see that when we anchor – when we focus – we don’t hold onto the breath for dear life. Nor do we hold

onto the question tensely. Instead, we use them as an anchor in our experience. We come back to them again and again, and cultivate choice: do I continue with this, or do I return to the question? That's the choice we have: we can continue with a certain thought, or come back to our whole experience via the anchor.

When we come back to the question or to the breath, four things are going to happen. Firstly, we're not going to feed the repetition. Secondly, we weaken the power of the repetition. Thirdly, we bring our attention back to the whole moment. And finally, we bring ourself back to our creative functioning, which to me is an important part of the practice. This can help us become calmer, more spacious and stable.

The other aspect of the practice, which is just as important, is experiential inquiry. We can be aware of change – sounds, breath, changing sensations – or we can just ask the question: 'What is this?'. In this way we question our tendency to fixate, to identify: 'I am like this', or 'This is like that'. And by cultivating questioning – asking 'What is this?' – we generate more openness. We learn to be with uncertainty, which sensitises us to change. Thus we can experience change through questioning, or we can experience change through looking directly at change.

We can cultivate mindfulness either directly or indirectly, just as we can cultivate awareness of change directly or indirectly. I realised this as a nun in Korea where, for ten years, I just practised asking the question 'What is this?' in meditation, and nothing else. Through doing this I quickly became more aware, more compassionate, and more conscious of change. In this way I became more alert to conditions.

What works best for you is the important thing. Does it make more sense to cultivate mindfulness and awareness of change directly? Or do you use a method such as returning to the question 'What is this?'. You will still be cultivating awareness of change,

but in another way. For someone who is used to Sōn practice this will be obvious, while others may want to see how they can bring these two approaches together.

Personally, I undertook the Sōn questioning first, then explored awareness practice, and I find they complement each other very well. This is an issue we can explore together during this week. For those not familiar with questioning, I will now introduce the method, and Stephen will talk more about its history later.



If we're using the question when we're sitting, we just ask (inwardly, silently), 'What is this?'. But we need to note that this practice is about questioning; it's not a practice of answering. The Japanese Zen tradition developed something else later; but within the Sōn tradition we're trying to cultivate a sensation of questioning in the whole body and mind. The anchor is the question, and we come back to the question again and again. You'll notice that if you come back to the question, you come back to the whole experience of the moment.

The other aspect of the practice is experiential enquiry, which means we're not repeating the question like a mantra. We're not sitting there silently chanting *What-is-this?-What-is-this?-What-is-this?* The most important part of the question is the question mark itself. You might say, 'But what is this?'. You might think that this question is a little vague, and wonder what, precisely, you're asking about. We're not asking about anything in particular. When you ask 'What is this?' you're throwing the question into the moment, which gives you direct access to being in the moment. We ask 'What is this?' not as a way to define the experience of the moment, nor to fix it, but just as a way to open to it. So it's important to see that the aim is to open to the moment without defining anything.

If you're used to practising vipassanā or mindfulness med-

itation, you can use it in what I would call a modern way. You might be sitting there, then a thought arises, and you might ask ‘What is this?’ to gain a different relationship to it. Traditionally, we just ask the question with no reference points, it’s a totally open-ended question. At this level it’s not an analysis; we’re not engaging in psychological or philosophical research. We’re not delving into the meaning of the universe! Rather, we’re deploying a method whereby we can cultivate anchoring and inquiry together.

Crucially, *we’re trying to balance the elements of calmness and brightness*. I will talk more about this aspect later. If you’re used to meditating on the breath, and if you think the question is attracting lots of thoughts or is agitating you, you can always come back to the breath or the body – something that is calming. If you feel a little sleepy, and you’re used to watching the breath which can be calming and a little sleep-inducing, then ask the question ‘What is this?’. It could help to wake you up.

There are many different ways to put the question. I recommend two main ways. First up, we can synchronise it with the breath, as one teacher in Korea presented it. You breathe in, and as you breathe out you ask, ‘What is this?’. You breathe in, and as you breathe out you ask, ‘What is this?’ again. Try that a little, if you like. But be careful not to let the practice lead you into controlling the breath in any way. This is not a yoga exercise. You let the breath come in, and when it naturally leaves the body you ask the question.

Alternatively you can ask the question and stay with the sensation of questioning – the unknowing – while it’s there; and when that sensation subsides, you can go back to the silent wording of the question ‘What is this?’. Above all, don’t ask the question with the head. You really don’t want to do this because it’ll give you a headache! Draw the question down and ask it from the belly. Ask it from a feeling of the belly: ‘What is this?’. Try to pose it with the

whole body and mind, without tensing around it. This is important, because sometimes when we meditate we try to focus or question with the body in a tense way. Or we might try to force it with the body, scrunching the head for example. In our practice here we sit in a relaxed, upright posture, and then try to bring the question down to the belly: ‘What is this?’.

Like any method, this one might not work for everybody. During the week, try to see what is more helpful for you, because we’ll also talk about the breath, and about sounds.

Some people really take to this practice, and that’s fine. But some people may find themselves sitting there asking, ‘What is this... what is that... why am I asking this stupid question?’. If that’s the way you feel, don’t persist with this approach. No method is sacred. The breath, the body, sound, loving kindness, just sitting, questioning – they’re all just tools, techniques, so just try it out lightly, with no obligation. Does it work, or not? Can you combine it with something else, or not? This is for you to see.

Some people focus on the question and it seems to provoke thoughts. If that happens, try reverting to mindfulness of the breath, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of sound, and just from time to time – maybe once or twice in a thirty minute meditation session – you can drop in the question. But not too much if it has a thought-generating effect.

Some people feel a little anxious when they ask the question. If that’s what happens for you, go back to mindfulness of the breath, body or sound, and from time to time introduce the question. We’re trying to cultivate quietness and clarity together. So see which element can help you here. Questioning can definitely help us with clarity, and for some people it’s a very good anchoring element. Others might choose to use the body or the breath as an anchoring element.

Then you can play a little with what I call the foreground

and the background. Remember, the question opens up a broad and deep focus. We're not asking 'What is this? What is this?' to shut everything out – that's not the idea! Rather, we're asking 'What is this?' in the *foreground*, while in the *background* we have a wide open awareness, where we have thoughts, sensations, hear sounds, and notice feelings that arise and pass away. So put the question in the foreground, and everything else in the background. At times, though, you could have sound in the foreground, or the breath, possibly with the question in the background, or no question at all. Then introduce it again from time to time, and see how it works.

Sometimes you might have the question in the foreground, then a bit of sound in the background, then everything else. See how it works with foreground and background. Sometimes something might move to the foreground, at which point what was at first in the foreground will now move to the background. This is early in our week together, so we want to try things out.

Another factor is posture. As this is a Sōn practice there'll be a lot of sitting, like Chan style – Bodhidharma style. We're going to sit for thirty minutes and then walk in the room for ten minutes, so when we sit on the first day we're trying the practice out. If you sit on the floor, try with a cushion or a bench. Ask yourself: do I need a cushion under my knees? Do I need to be a little bit higher so I can tilt forward a little more? Is it better to sit on a bench? If you sit on a bench you might have less back problems, but more knee problems. So choose which to go for, experiment a little. If after sitting for five minutes you're in agony, try sitting on a chair. But if you sit for twenty minutes and only then, towards the end of the sit, it's a little uncomfortable, you know that in ten minutes you're going to walk. At that point it's okay to persist. If the discomfort subsides after you've been standing and walking for two minutes, then go back to your posture. But if the pain continues through the day, consider sitting on a chair, or find a different posture.

If you sit on a chair, I would recommend sitting in the middle of the chair the way I do so that you can hold your back upright yourself. But if you have pain in the back and you need to sit at the back of the chair, I'd recommend finding a way to still sit relatively straight-backed, perhaps with a cushion or a folded blanket between the back of the chair and your back. This way you won't slouch, which in turn will make it easier for you to remain alert.



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