



*The Empty Chair
Teaching Foundation*

The Teaching not the Teacher.



The Teaching not the Teacher is a concept that has been dear to me for a long time:-

The title, the Empty Chair, comes from a Buddhist concept. During his lifetime the Buddha asked his followers not to make images in his memory. For quite a number of years, this wish was followed but gradually, such is the all-too-human need to have an object of love, rather than transforming oneself into Love itself (this is, in fact being the end purpose of his teachings) that gradually the chair or the pair of sandals or the symbol, which were first used to mark his teachings, were replaced by statues, with results that are now obvious everywhere.

Many Buddhists still recognise that the statues represent, as a mirror, the essential expression of evolved human life but many others and certainly very many non-Buddhists, see the statue itself as being an object of worship.

It seemed to me that the image of an Empty Chair represented very well the Buddha's teaching and that such an image was the essence of all teaching on Spirituality. Daoists might rephrase this and say that what counts is the Teaching not the Teacher. The truth of this kind of teaching rests in its affects, the transformation that it may bring to the listener, rather than in the personality of the teacher.

The teaching itself, is perennial, taking appropriate form in different times, places and cultures. The teacher is mortal, impermanent and more or less ego-bound. These two statements are not necessarily conflicting; it is possible for the teacher to get sufficiently out of the way, sufficiently unencumbered for the moment, by his or her own ego, that the teaching can flow out un-impeded. Then, the teacher and the students can all learn.

In 2008 my wife, Barbara gave me a sturdy, rough hewn, wooden chair, made in a West Sussex forest and the title of this book became obvious. The chair is pictured on the cover. It is an amazingly comfortable place of refuge. This chair now sits beside a beautiful 10 acre lake in woodlands at our new centre in northern France.

This work is not about Buddhism; at least certainly not Buddhism as a dogma; but rather, it tries to follow, rather erratically at times, how Buddhism has expressed itself, in the 21st century, through the work of a group of people whose only point of communality, is that they are people whose lives have crossed around the particular fulcrum of their teacher.

It is truly a joint practice and one in which I hope the reader will also engage by undertaking a similar journey, in her own time, place, cultural background and form.

In this writing, I would like to come from a place of Intelligence, which I call Spirituality rather than make Spirituality an object of the Intellect. There will, hopefully be several examples of the Spirit in action and this will invite the reader to make his/her own interpretations, if he so wishes. It might be best though, if the reader could just reflect or contemplate without the interpretation as that will, inevitably be a limitation, circumscribed by her own undigested, life experience.

Gender is not a factor in this work, although the Masculine and Feminine principles, whether manifesting in man or woman, may well be important and these will be discussed in a chapter on the subject, in due course. Generally, to avoid the clumsy composite pronoun his/her, I will rather arbitrarily sometimes use one and sometimes the other. On all occasions one should be taken to embrace the other. That seems a rather nice way of putting it.

These writings arise partly out of my search for meaning in my own Insecurity, a substantial gold mine of material; and partly out of interaction with several hundreds of students with whom, over the last ten-fifteen years, I have shared and explored my Insecurity and theirs.

We have discovered that transformation comes, not from engaging Insecurity in a war, that only serves to feed it the energy of attention but rather, from accepting it as a blessing that keeps us forever in the intimate and eternal present. Only in the present can we be truly proactive: to be anything other than in the present means to be re-active. To be constantly in the present is to be truly alive.

Whatever our lifespan, the one aspect of ourselves that is continually present is the body. I do not just mean the muscles and the bones and the organs of digestion and circulation: all sensory mechanisms by which we accomplish any thought, word or deed are part of what makes up the body. The body is not just a thing that tends to wear out and give us problems; it is also the awareness of that. The great message, surely of Jesus and of the Buddha, is that they were embodied: as are we!

The first half of my life was spent (probably the right word), in being a soldier and a business-man. That is not the direct concern of this work, other than it is from that compost that the second half reveals itself. We tend to want to bury or throw away those parts of our life that no longer fit but the parts we want do not exist without the parts we do not want. The secret is to **be** fully, not to be in denial.

This, second phase, has fewer targets and I am content that it should reveal itself, largely in response to the work that is going on through interaction with a widening group of students in many countries. Each student brings life experience, that experience is valued, even if uncomfortable, and from the acknowledgement of value comes the ability to digest and move on. This work of valuation requires continuous practice and there is re-inforcement in seeing that the same undervaluing we have of ourselves and our deeds is remarkably similar

to that of everyone else. “We Walk the Path Together” is the apposite title of a book by Fr Brian Pierce OP.

The work then, is about developing a form of practice that works; that, at its best, leads to transformation of insecurities into the gold that the alchemists sought, not the fool’s gold of acquisition and greed, that they were popularly thought to have sought.

Theoretically, this work can be done on one’s own and there are shining examples, throughout history, of lives that testify to that possibility. In an age like the present one, where all success seems to be measured in material accumulations of one kind or another, there are great pitfalls.

We tend not to measure the effect of a teaching by how it touches lives but rather more by how many students it gathers and how much money is raised. It seems more than ever essential to have three ingredients in place; first a yearning to change; second; a teacher who is not dependent for his own fulfilment, on his student’s praise and third, a group or community of other seekers, perhaps with nothing else in common other than the teaching, to share the journey. Without community, and speaking from my own experience, the ego is mighty clever at deluding us as to our progress.

“My teacher is better than your teacher; she is so much more profound. She teaches in thirty countries and has forty thousand students.” This and statements like it are not anything to do with Spirituality, they are expressions of what Chogyam Trungpa called Spiritual Materialism. The facts may be true. The work may be life-enhancing; the statement however, is from the ego.

About thirty-five years ago, on the way out of a mid-life crisis, which is another story but also compost, I started becoming a therapist. Training and then practicing, first as a counsellor/psychotherapist, then an acupuncturist, then a craniosacral therapist, I was moving gradually into the body, discovering en route that the apparently surface levels of being contained the inner and that whatever is innermost is not separate from the external form.

I found that the Cartesian mind/body split (as I understand Descartes) stood up and was valid only from the point of view of an already split off or disembodied intellect. I have experienced that truths of so many kinds are true in one context and then not necessarily true in another context. This has been a big one for me and has probably made me a little more tolerant. “If only I had known when I was twenty what I know now at eighty!” is an expression of that thought.

After tentative toe-dipping in the ocean of experience called teaching, quite happily for several years advertising advanced courses in craniosacral therapy for practitioners, it gradually dawned, first on my students, I think, that I was not teaching techniques in anything. What was arising however, in this joint practice; for that is what it had become; was as exploration of the embodiment of Spirit.

Slowly again, it became apparent that people needed no particular occupational label to be able to do this work; just the yearning to do it. A list of current students would embrace most occupations that you can think of; some apparently, most unlikely. But then you see, I don't teach occupations, I walk the path with people, as best I can.

About twenty years ago, I heard a saying of William Sutherland, a founder of Osteopathy and a great visionary, certainly well before his time, who said, when discussing various rhythms in the body, not associated with the medically accepted rhythms of heart and lungs but nevertheless palpable, "you can rely upon the tide." Once I had taken on board what I thought he meant by this seemingly innocuous statement, I was hooked and spent the next fifteen or so years, studying just these six words and the implications of the existence of Intelligence, not subject to the Intellect. I continue, now with others, to work with these implications. Not just within the field of bodywork-of one kind or another- but extended to life, as we live it.

These writings will expand on all the points touched on above and will explore how we can make the conclusions relevant. There will be some theory, there will be some reported practice and there will be hopefully a lot of work done. You are invited to join the work and to surrender, at least in part, some of the undigested data and re-activity that we all identify with, in return for a revealed truth. Only true because it is embodied and does not remain just a concept of the Intellect.

What I, or anyone else cannot do is tell you how you should be! I cannot possibly know that and a "how to do" primer in Spirituality would be an impertinence. What I hope these conversations will do, is serve as a mirror in which you may see resonance of your own expression of Being and from reflecting on the struggles to a greater level of freedom of others, find a way of letting go of some of the chains that you, we, all of us, carry. My own experience tells me that a degree of immersion in what comes up from within, rather than an analysis of the words, is what is required.

There is no success or failure, there are no silver cups or bonuses, there is only an expansion of awareness. The prize, perhaps the surprise, is to discover the clarity of who you really are and this is beyond price. It certainly passes understanding.

Please join me in this exploration. I believe it to be worthwhile. I hope you will find it so.