

# Chan 禪 Magazine

Summer 2010



# **Chan Meditation Center**

**Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture**

**90-56 Corona Avenue**

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“Someone told me, ‘I used to drift along not knowing which way to go, but after coming to retreat, I know that the destination is right here. From now on I hope that wherever I am will be the destination.’ When I heard this, I nearly cried. How sad to drift along for such a long time before discovering the way home... In reality, that which does not abide anywhere is everywhere, and there is nowhere that is not a place to pacify your mind.”

From *Attaining the Way*  
by Chan Master Sheng Yen  
Shambhala, 2006

# Chan Magazine

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*Cover and table of contents photos courtesy of  
DDM Culture and Educational Foundation*

# From the Editor

I just threw away a half-dozen solicitations for donations for causes I support—preserving the environment, saving endangered species, fighting for social justice, relief for populations dealing with natural, or man-made, disasters. It seems that everything has gone wrong at once—the earth is suddenly spewing ash from its forehead (Iceland) and oil from its belly (the Gulf) in an uncontrolled and unpredictable efflux reminiscent of food poisoning, and we were nowhere near done addressing the devastations of the hurricanes and earthquakes of recent years. Haiti was the poorest place in the western hemisphere before the hurricane, and its plight will be forgotten by most of us before we even know how much damage we've done to the Gulf of Mexico and all the poor people who live on its shores and try to wrest a living from its now murky waters.

Between the polar bears, the whales, the chimps and the people there are now so many needs that I throw away hundreds of solicitations for every donation I make, and that ratio is made worse by giving, because every organization's first response to receiving a hundred dollars is to ask for a hundred more. (I'm not even including the political solicitations, because American politics has entered a phase of insanity that I can only hope is temporary.) I now actively resent being asked for money, and not because the request is in any way unjust, but because it almost always requires that I feel the wave of ungenerosity that accompanies my saying no.

The vexation is compounded by the need to choose to whom to give. I've done some due diligence—I don't give to those charities that waste lots of money on administrative costs or executive salaries—but to some extent the choice between one good organization and another is emotional, which is to say self-centered. I give to Doctors Without Borders because they do excellent, cost-efficient, irreplaceable work, but I give to the Jane Goodall Institute because I like chimps. And why do I like them? Because they're smart; because I look in their eyes and they remind me of me. Are they the species that most needs to be saved? I have no idea—I wouldn't know how to apply wisdom to the question. I like them, and it offends me that they're being driven to extinction by one of their closest relatives.

I got one solicitation today that I set aside, from an organization that hadn't contacted me in years. In 2004, shortly after Katrina, I helped organize a Slow Food benefit for the farmers and fishers of the Gulf Coast, and we identified Southern Mutual Help Association as an organization on the ground with many years' experience working with exactly the population we wanted to help. We sent half the money we raised to them, and they, a relatively small organization of locals helping locals, seemed almost astonished that a bunch of New Yorkers knew about them, and cared. Their gratitude was not at all corporate; the elderly director of the organization, Lorna Bourg, called me at home to thank us. It was a very moving call.



Only a small percentage of SMHA's clients were really back on their feet when the Horizon Deepwater rig blew up and put their future, especially that of the fishers, at potentially permanent risk. Fishing in the Gulf is now out of the question, and there's no knowing when that might change, whether the food species will survive, whether they'll be able to breed this season, whether a critical population might collapse and cause a cascade right up the food chain, how long the toxicity of the cleanup will persist and what, of that which survives, will still be edible.

And that thought gave rise to one that I find truly vexing: These people, these families, the fishers, shrimpers, and oysters of the Gulf Coast, are engaged in a profession, a venerable tradition, that is a cornerstone of their culture, and that Buddhism doesn't consider to be a Right Livelihood. I don't know what to do with that; it's my vexation, I know, but it offends me that my chosen religion would reject what I see as a noble and endangered way of making a living, and the thought has tipped my scales. As soon as I'm done editing this, I'm writing them a check.

# Chan Magazine Is Going Green

Yes, Chan Magazine is going green. We will be launching an electronic version next year that will have a greater potential to reach many more people all over the world. By doing so, we'll be saving money and manpower, and most importantly, doing our part to be eco-friendly.

Beginning in July of this year, **we are asking our readers to express your preference—a choice to receive either the paper or electronic version of the magazine.** If you are a current subscriber, please select one of the procedures below to express your choice:

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Chan Magazine thanks you all for your loyal support and readership over the years, and we hope to be able to bring you an even more useful, and greener, magazine in years to come.

Metta.

# In Retrospect: Early Lectures of Master Sheng Yen in America



Photo by Ernest Heau of sculpture by Tommy Yang

*In 1976, not long after he arrived in the United States, Master Sheng Yen began teaching Chan meditation to a mixed group of Westerners and Chinese at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York City. In March of 1977, Master Sheng Yen launched this quarterly journal, Chan Magazine. In November 1979, Master Sheng Yen also began the monthly called Chan Newsletter, which, like Chan Magazine, was compiled, edited, and published by his students. Each issue of both periodicals contained news and announcements, but the lead article was almost always a lecture by Master Sheng Yen on*



*Chan practice. For many years, Chan Newsletter was published in parallel with Chan Magazine. In August 1997, as a cost-cutting measure, as well as to cease redundant coverage between the two periodicals, Chan Newsletter published its last issue, No. 124.*

*Beginning with this issue of Chan Magazine, we are pleased to republish a retrospective selection of some of the 120-plus lectures by the Master that fronted each issue of Chan Newsletter. Most of these lectures were given in an informal class environment, though some of them come from formal Chan retreats. Besides their brevity, depth, wisdom and humor, in general they have to do with the attitudes and approaches that serious students of Chan should bring to their practice. Rather than being theoretical and conceptual, virtually all of the lectures share one all-encompassing theme: how to get on with the singular endeavor of becoming enlightened through the practice of Chan (Zen).*

*These lectures were edited for the magazine by Ernest Heau.*

### **Shakyamuni's Great Vow**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 4, April, 1980)*

Practitioners come to retreat hoping to get great benefit and go home a new person. This attitude is very good in itself, but it can also become an obstacle to practice. Harboring this desire will distract you from your method, and the harder you press the greater the obstacle becomes. Expecting to gain something, as well as being afraid of not practicing well, are both incorrect attitudes. But, while having a seeking attitude is counterproductive, you still need vows to keep yourself from faltering on the path.

When he meditated beneath the Bodhi Tree, Shakyamuni vowed to not rise from his seat until he realized supreme enlightenment. By fulfilling this vow he became a fully awakened being, a buddha. So, you should make a strong vow to put your whole self into your meditation and to be concerned only with the practice. Once you know the directions to your destination, just get on with the actual traveling. Even if you cannot yet see the final destination, you need not be doubtful or

anxious. To make a vow is to set the direction and the goal, and the practice is your vehicle. Great vows and diligent practice go together; without both, you will waste time and not receive genuine benefit. At best you may alleviate some karma.

There are many kinds of obstructions in practice and just about everyone has them. On this first day of retreat, some people are already experiencing obstructions. Some are angry with themselves but don't know how to pacify their minds. Great as their hope is to practice well, it is hard to do so. Being eager to practice is good but when one is over-eager for results, it becomes an obstruction. This is an example of how an obstruction manifests. In other cases, the obstructions have not yet manifested but lurk below the surface.

There is a saying that before one is liberated from the cycle of birth and death, one is like an ant in a hot frying pan. Someone who clearly understands the suffering inherent in the cycle of birth and death, and who works hard for liberation, already has the proper urgency towards practice. Indeed, only after one has

glimpsed one's true self-nature is one truly anxious to end transmigration. By contrast, over-anxiety is usually based on an unwholesome attitude, such as envying someone who seems to be practicing well.

Then there are those who are practicing very well, or who think they are practicing well. They see lovely visions or hear beautiful music, or their bodies feel very comfortable, light, and joyous. These are signs that they are practicing well and it is natural to feel elated. But if they cling to these experiences, they become obstacles to progress. When experiencing these things, do not attach to them; just acknowledge them and get on with the practice.

### **The Problem of Death**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 11, Feb. 1981)*

The greatest problem that the ancient Chan masters had was getting their disciples to have an earnest attitude towards death. Without a deep sensitivity to the problem of death, it is very hard to practice Chan well. It is very difficult for young people or those who live in a very sheltered environment to get a feeling for death. I don't know if any of you ever think about death, and if you do, whether you feel it isn't all that serious, that it does not concern you right now. I wonder how sensitive you are to the fact that life is impermanent, and that you are eventually going to die. Probably most young people can't really bring themselves to be moved by the fact of death.

Among practitioners who are moved by the fact of death, there are two kinds of attitudes. Most common is fear, that is, they don't know when they are going to die and they don't

want to die. They may want to cling to the good things in life, or maybe leave a legacy they will be admired for in the future. There is a great deal of self-attachment in this attitude. Another type of attitude is held by people who are practicing well and have no fear of death. They are consciously aware that they are going to die, that death may come at any time, and they don't want to die leaving anything undone. They want to take advantage of all their time to practice hard. Since they still have not attained liberation, they don't know where they're going after death, but they know they are in contact with the Buddhadharma, so they want to use the present life to practice as much as they can. Of course, there is self-attachment here too, but this is necessary for practice. If there were no self-attachment you would not even be here, since it was to solve your problems that you began practicing.

The great masters of the past emphasized that, when practicing, one should put aside all fear of loss and death. In the past, when people left the home life, they told themselves that they were handing their bodies over to the monastery, and their lives over to the spirits that protect the Dharma. Whatever the abbot or Dharma protectors instruct them to do, they will do. They are just going to practice, disregarding body and life. This is a good attitude for those who are not afraid of death, or who have an accepting attitude about it. One can practice well with it. People who are constantly worrying about the body during meditation – I feel a little pain here, a little discomfort there, if I keep on going, maybe something will happen to me – will never be able to practice well. Not only should you not worry about your body dying, but you should not worry about your spirit dying. If there's

any kind of spirit left that could become a buddha, then it would definitely be just a demon or a ghost. If there is anything left there, whether a false or wandering mind, or a so-called true or correct mind, it has to die, or else it's just a ghost. So what do you want to do – become a buddha or a ghost?

Once in China there was a monk who was so adept, he was able to leave his body. One time he left his body sitting there for a week and everyone assumed he had died, so they cremated his body. When this monk came back, he couldn't find his body. So he hovered in the air, calling out, "Where am I? Where am I?" Everybody in the monastery was frightened because for several days straight he was shouting "Where am I?" And now, some of you are also using this method, right? Have you found your body?

Anyway, as it happened, after he was shouting for a few days, the abbot decided to put an end to this. He placed a big tub of water right under where the sound was coming from, and the next time they heard the voice crying, "Where am I?" the abbot yelled, "You're down here!" Upon hearing that, the spirit descended with a splash. Then the abbot called out to him, "You're already dead! All you did was turn yourself into a pitiful ghost. Did you really get liberated? Don't you know that neither the five skandhas nor the four elements that compose the body are you? Where are you now?"

Then this monk realized that his physical body was not the same as himself, and the death of the physical body was not an important issue. If he still thought that he was the water, he would have transformed to a water spirit. So if I put this glass of water there right now, and

if someone were to ask, "Where am I?" and I were to say, "You are here" [pointing to the water], would any of you get enlightened?

### **Right Attitudes Aid Practice**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 17, Nov. 1981)*

When you start practicing meditation, your first goal is to learn your method to the point where body discomforts are not a problem and the mind is fairly well settled. The next phase of practice is to use the method to unify body with mind, and then with self and universe. When body and mind are one, you are comfortable and at ease physically and mentally. If you can go further to where self and environment are one, you will feel that nothing in the world is separate from you, and everybody's well-being is your direct concern. If you have not progressed this far, just continue your regular meditation, but also cultivate wholesome attitudes in your daily life. Realize that your ways of thinking contain great potential, and if you direct your mind correctly and act accordingly, you will achieve your goal easier than with meditation alone.

We should work on our attitudes toward ourselves and towards others. First, we should give up at least some of our selfishness. If we do this, our vexations will lessen and we will be more able to help others. What is selfishness? It means seeking more of what we desire and trying to avoid what we dislike. Both attitudes are self-centered. In fact, the prevailing modern mentality is to be over-concerned with one's own benefit. So although the standard of living today may be high, people are spiritually lacking, unable to find security, tranquility, and happiness.

A good solution is the attitude that whatever comes will come in due time, and whatever goes will go in due course. Whatever you have is yours, but there is no reason to be proud of your successes or remorseful about your failures. There is no use in worrying about possible misfortunes or dreaming about a golden future. Our present situation depends very much upon our family backgrounds, our education, and our own efforts. We can easily recognize these factors because they relate to *this* life, but there are many circumstances that cannot be explained by these factors alone. For instance, two people of the same background and intelligence may not meet with similar fortunes. This is because our karma does not pertain only to this life but has been influenced by countless past lives. Thus, if we meet with misfortune we should view it as repaying a former debt, and we should feel happy that in repaying the debt we now owe less. On the other hand, if we meet with success, this means that we are withdrawing the wealth we have deposited in our past lives, so there is no reason to feel any pride. In fact, the more wealth we take out, the less will remain in the invisible “bank.” So we should take care not to exhaust our deposit, and we must even make an effort to deposit more by engaging in meaningful activities. If we accept the truth of karma, we will not harbor so much resentment and we will be able to take more positive actions in shaping our futures.

As to others, we are often overly critical and expect too much. We are upset if they are less than perfect according to our preconceived ideas of them. If we were more forgiving and compassionate, we would ask ourselves how we would act in a similar position. As a result we would be less vexed, others would find us

easier to befriend, and they might even turn to us for help. There is a saying that fish cannot live in water that is absolutely clear. In other words, we should be satisfied with less than perfection from others.

There is no denying that some people have bad intentions. There are those who will keep their distance when you really need help, and when you are in a good situation they offer you their help, hoping you will reciprocate. But you should not think of them as evil. If people take advantage of you, be thankful for the chance to repay a karmic debt. If you add resentment and revenge to an already difficult situation, the other person will respond in kind, and so it goes in an endless cycle. Rather, move the other with compassion, let the incident go, and the next time, offer your help without reservation. He or she might be touched and become your best friend. There is a common phrase in Buddhism to the effect that “one cannot conceive of all causes and conditions.” What this means is that relationships and situations constantly change, and we cannot predict what may happen even a second from now. If someone deceives you, it is a result of a combination of contributing causes and conditions. They may act differently given a different set of causes and conditions. A proper understanding of this truth will not only dispel aversion or resentment towards something that happens to you, but will allow you to influence others for the good, thus creating a better environment for everyone.

### **Where Is My Master?**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 19, Feb. 1982)*

When Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238-1295) met Chan Master Xueyan Zuqin (1216-1287), the latter asked him: “You’ve

been practicing for so long. At this point, do you have mastery of yourself when you are awake?" What Xueyan meant was, when you are awake, can you not think about things you should not, and can you not do what you should not? Gaofeng immediately replied: "Yes." This is already very good. Only someone who has practiced for a long time would be able to say yes. Xueyan questioned him again: "At night in your dreams, do you have mastery of yourself?" And again Gaofeng answered, "Yes." Xueyan then asked a third question: "When you are sleeping and not dreaming, where is the master then?"

Now Gaofeng had already been working on *wu* for quite a long time, but this question completely stumped him. [The practice of asking a question like, "What is *wu* (emptiness)?" is called *huatou* (Jap., *wato*), and is related to the practice of *gong'an* (Jap., *koan*).] He repeated the question to himself but could not give an answer. So Xueyan told Gaofeng: "From now on, do not study Buddhadharma, do not read sutras or commentaries—just practice. And how does one practice? When you are hungry, eat; when you are sleepy, go to sleep. After sleeping, get up and practice."

From that time onward, when Gaofeng was hungry, he ate, when he felt tired, he slept, and just tried practice hard. And what was his practice? He asked the question, "Where is my master?" Even during his sleep, he continued, "Where is my master?"

There are various stages involved here. The first one is whether we can be our own master when we are awake. What we do not want to think, we will not think; what we do not want to do, we will not do. How many of you can be your own master in this sense? If not,

why not? By answering positively to the first question, Gaofeng showed that he was on a higher level of attainment than an ordinary person.

To be your master in dreams is an even higher attainment. It means that you can control your own behavior in your dreams, and moreover, can control the type and content of the dreams. You will not have random or meaningless dreams, and while dreaming, have a very clear mind. You are actually still practicing while dreaming. You will always maintain right mindfulness or virtuous thoughts, that is, will not do or think anything in the dream that is not considered permissible in daily life. To be your own master in your dreams means continuing the same practice while dreaming as during the day. If you prostrate to the Buddha during the day, then you will continue prostrating in the dream. If you recite Buddha's name, then even in dreams you still recite Buddha's name. If you are delivering sentient beings, then you also deliver sentient beings in your dreams. If you are working on a *huatou* then even in dreams the *huatou* will not leave you.

Not to have dreams at all is on a higher level still, and difficult to accomplish. It is already very good if you can reach the level where you no longer have any confusing or evil dreams, but it is very hard for the ordinary person to not dream at all. Sages have dreamless sleep; they are just in a state of rest. Master Gaofeng had already reached the level where, at least most of the time, he was able to sleep without dreaming. But does that mean that all of his problems had been resolved? Actually, being able to sleep without dreaming only indicates that he had very good samadhi power. It does not necessarily mean he was enlightened.

Therefore the question that Xueyan put to him was very appropriate, and it became a *huatou* for Gaofeng. He just kept asking himself, "Where is my master?" Because asking this question aroused a great doubt in his mind, Gaofeng kept asking this question for five years. However, remember that even before he started on this *huatou*, he had already reached the state where he was his own master when awake as well as when dreaming. So his practice involved a very long process up to this point.

One evening Gaofeng woke up from sleep and reached for his pillow. At that point, the pillow fell to the floor with a thud. At the sound, Gaofeng shouted, "Aha! Now I have found you!" The cloud of doubt was dispelled; the bottom fell from "the barrel of black pitch," and he saw the light. This is an example of one practitioner's path to enlightenment.

### **Bitter Practice**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 21, May, 1982)*

Many of the names by which we know Chan masters are not their family names but Dharma names, bestowed often by followers. Often they were names of mountains where the master settled. These names often reflect the wintry environment of the places where they practiced. Winter, symbolized by falling snow, represents the spirit of Chan, whereas the spirit of summer is quite different. In hot weather it is very easy to feel sleepy and dull-minded, while cold weather, especially in the mountains, is very good for meditation. One master's name was "Snowy Peak," another was named "Snow Cave," then there was "Snow Ravine," and "Snow Cliff." These Chan masters sought out places where there was a lot of snow.

Perhaps someone practicing on a mountain might be sitting poorly and think, "Maybe I will take a break and stroll down the mountain for awhile." But when there is a heavy snowfall, all the roads are blocked off and if you were to venture out you might end up falling off the mountain to your death. At times like that, even if you don't want to meditate, you still have to meditate. And with snow in every direction not only can't you go anywhere else but there is nothing to eat except snow.

Once when Master Ouyi was practicing at Chiu-hwa Mountain there was a tremendous snowstorm. There wasn't much around to eat and having very few clothes on, he was freezing. He noticed a pine tree that had a few nuts on it, but after eating the nuts he was still cold. So he made a fire with the nut shells. Then he started wondering when the snow would stop falling. The prospects didn't look very good and the things available to eat would only keep him alive for another day at most, so he thought: "This is it for me; it's probably my fate to die here." Originally he hoped to get some food into his belly and find some more clothing to relieve the cold, but as soon as he accepted the fact that he would die, he didn't feel like eating anymore and his body no longer felt cold. He just sat there waiting to freeze to death. Then he actually did freeze.

After a number of days some people passed by and saw him sitting there, and said, "Master! What are you doing here? We haven't seen you for a long time!" When he heard the sound of voices, he opened his eyes and said, "That is strange. I haven't died yet!"

Another case of bitter practice was Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud). One time he ran into



a blizzard on the road. He had nothing to eat and his body was sick. Then he came upon a small shack on the side of the road. It had walls but no roof. Nevertheless, he went inside and sat down leaning against the wall where there was a little pile of snow. Like Master Ouyi he sat down preparing to die. The snow piled up higher and higher until he was surrounded completely by snow. But at this point he had already entered into samadhi. Several days later a beggar came by and, brushing the snow out of the way, saw there was someone sitting there. Thereupon he pulled some straw off the walls and made a fire. Then he took out a pot, melted some snow in it and cooked up gruel out of some millet he was carrying. When Xuyun felt that sensation of heat, he revived. He saw somebody making porridge for him to eat and he did not die after all.

At the Chan Center here we have heat in the winter, fans in the summer, and plenty of food in the refrigerator. Nobody need feel that they are about to die here. That kind of feeling would never come up here. In fact, there is no example in the history of the Chan sect of a patriarch who practiced in such comfortable surroundings as we have. If every one of us takes this spirit of patriarchs as a standard, we will always feel ashamed. We would constantly be aware that we are not practicing hard enough and that our resolve is not sufficiently firm.

### **Cultivating Your Own Field**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 23, Aug. 1982)*

The purpose of cultivation is not to seek anything but to discover the faults in our own character and behavior. By opening ourselves to self-investigation, we hope to find out where our problems lie, and if after searching

within ourselves we can see these faults and problems, this is itself the fruit of practice. A woman on retreat told me that the more she thinks about her shortcomings, the more disgusted she is with herself. She said, "Probably I just don't have the ability to practice meditation." As I stood in front of her, the light overhead cast my shadow on the wall. I asked her, "When I am standing still, is my shadow moving?" She said, "No." Then I walked slowly away, and the shadow followed me along. I walked quickly and the shadow kept pace with me. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get rid of it. Like the shadow that sticks to us, wherever there is a self, there will be problems. But if you say, "I want to throw away my 'self'," that "I" who wants to get rid of the self is still there. This amounts to the self trying to throw away the self, which is impossible. It would be like trying to get rid of the shadow while your body is still there.

This being the case, is meditation useful? Of course it is, since we can make progress. Wanting to be rid of one's faults may be a good thing, but practice does not consist in disowning one's faults because the self who owned them would still be there. No, the proper method is to decrease the importance of the self in your life, until it becomes so light that your faults will naturally diminish.

However, you cannot be overly anxious to achieve fast results. According to Buddhaharma, it is possible to become enlightened even in one lifetime. But to completely eliminate afflictions and purify vexations takes three incalculable eons. Since our life is only a few decades long, we cannot expect to attain all that within one lifetime. Perhaps some people may feel: "Well, if I can't attain it in this life, it doesn't really seem worth it to

practice.” Actually, from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment, no one else has attained supreme buddhahood. The rest of us are just following his example, practicing. You should just concentrate on cultivating your own field. Of course you can try to calculate how much fruit you will attain from your labors, but it won’t be accurate, and there’s no need to do that. Just plant the seeds and eventually you will reap the harvest.

What about getting rid of vexations by purposely seeking out suffering and pain? If you have gotten good results from a retreat, that is very good. But even if you just passed the week in pain and suffering, you have still gotten something out of the retreat. At least you are paying off karmic debts. However, I know a practitioner who believed that she could melt away karma by purposely sitting there in pain. She also thought she could melt away other people’s karma by taking on their pain. This is a wrong attitude. Removing karmic obstruction is not done by purposely looking for hardship. Pain will come by itself; to look for it is misguided. This is like standing before a judge who just sentenced you for a crime you committed. If you slapped yourself in the face a few times and told the judge, “No need for a jail sentence, your honor, I just punished myself,” would the judge suspend your sentence? Striking yourself will not get your sentence suspended. You must still receive legal retribution for your misdeed.

Similarly, it is useless to deliberately punish yourself in order to reduce obstructions. The purpose of practice is to train your mind, not to experience suffering. However, in the course of practice, if pain and suffering come of themselves, you should accept them. So, although you should accept suffering as a

form of retribution, you should not seek it out. Otherwise, you may even increase your obstructions instead of melting them away.

### **Practice Is Like Tuning a Harp**

*(From Chan Newsletter No. 25, Nov. 1982)*

There are some people who practice what we call peaceful Chan. Those who practice this way give the impression of being very consistent, practicing all day every day. But such a person might practice for a while then think, “Oh! It’s about lunchtime.” After lunch they will rest for a while and then resume practicing. Suddenly, “It’s about time to do my laundry.” After the laundry they’re a bit fatigued so they take a break. Soon it’s time for dinner. After dinner, their stomach is a bit full so they have to wait a while before continuing to practice for a little while. Before you know it, it’s time for bed. Some practitioners will continue doing this day after day for years and people will regard them as great practitioners. But, in fact, they may still be the same as when they began to practice. If they seem stable and free of vexations, it is because they do very little, perform no serious work, and avoid involvements or contacts.

I once met a monk who told me, “While I was practicing I attained great liberation.” I then asked, “At that time, is it correct that you never had worries about food or clothing, never had to deal with quarrelsome people?” This person answered, “Of course, I was practicing. People gave offerings of food and clothing and nobody ever came to quarrel with me.” I then asked, “And now?” He told me he now had many vexations because the environment was different. I said to him, “If you attained great liberation then, why aren’t you free from vexations now?” Actually, people

like this will never become enlightened, never be a Chan master. They are just wasting their time, wasting their lives, wasting food.

There is yet another type who will work very hard for one or two days as if their life depended on it. But after a couple of days they get very tired, have a headache, their legs and back are sore and their whole body is hurting so that they can't even sit up. At this time they will say, "Maybe enlightenment isn't so easy, I'd better take a good rest. After my strength is built up I'll come back and practice." After their body has recovered and they feel well rested they will come back, in the same manner. However, there is really no difference between these two types of people. Again, people like these are often admired as great practitioners who throw their whole lives into the practice, but actually this kind of practice is of no use.

There is a third type who well remembers the Buddha's words that practice should be like the tuning of a harp. Just as strings of a harp should not be too loose or too tight, so one's practice should not be too loose or too tense. Some people take this to mean that one should practice very hard until tired, rest for a while, and then continue practicing. They believe they are practicing proper meditation. However, this is still useless. It's like climbing up a rope — you climb very energetically for a while, but then you feel tired and take a rest, allowing yourself to slide back to where you started. You can't make progress that way. This third type of person needs the guidance of a good master to tell them when to practice energetically, and when to take a rest, without sliding backwards.

For example, a person meditating who hears the sound of the bell may think, "Ah! Time is up. I should be tired now so I think I'll stretch my legs." At these moments, this person needs a good master to use very strong, even fierce, methods to make that person realize that though capable, their laziness is rendering their practice useless. People tend to easily forgive themselves, but with the strenuous prompting of a master, such a person may develop an "angry determination" in which there is a deep disgust for his or her present state, and a strong determination to practice diligently.

It is very important for the master to recognize whether a practitioner's mind is ready to generate the "great doubt sensation." The master may even tell the disciple to rest before continuing. However, once it is clear that the student has aroused the great doubt sensation, the master will be like someone driving a herd of wild animals, and there can be no stopping. Unless the student has a prior medical condition, once the great doubt has been generated, the body can come to no harm from working very hard. This is because at this stage this person is in complete harmony with the universe. The power of the entire universe is available to the individual. So, at this point the master must push the practitioner to keep going and going in the hope that a world-shattering explosion will take place. If not, perhaps a smaller explosion. Of course, for those with the sharpest karmic roots, like the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, none of this is necessary. Such a person will not need the guidance of a master. But for most people having a good master is needed to persevere and attain some good results.

# Women in the Dharma

An Interview with Master Sheng Yen's Four Female Dharma Heirs

by  
Buffe Laffey

*A few months ago the editor of Chan Magazine received a letter from a longtime reader who was critical of the magazine's "absence of female voices and viewpoints," and who complained that Master Sheng Yen had left behind no female Dharma Heirs. Actually, our Master left four female Dharma Heirs, but our reader can't be faulted for not knowing that—these modest venerables are resident monastics at Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, and few in the US have heard much about them before now.*

*All of these women serve in the highest administrative positions at Dharma Drum Mountain, in addition to teaching at the DDM Sangha University and sometimes leading retreats. They are all very advanced practitioners who are admired, by those who know them, for their ability to maintain their practice in daily life in the midst of extremely busy schedules. They graciously agreed to be interviewed for Chan Magazine, and we presented them with a written list of questions, to which they returned brief written responses. But they also wanted to have a live interview, so that they could give their answers in a natural, interactive way. On March 2, 2010, they gathered together in Taiwan with Venerable Guo Jiann, Prior of the DDM Department of International Relations and Development, who acted as interviewer on our behalf. What follows are highlights from their written answers and that interview, transcribed by Echo Bonner and edited by Buffe Laffey. The photos are courtesy of the Dharma Drum Mountain Culture and Educational Foundation.*

## **Venerable Guo Goang, Provost of Dharma Drum Mountain**

I was born in Nantou County, Taiwan in a village that maintained the old tradition, where everyone is like part of a big family. My father was the village mayor. My mother didn't seek her own career but stayed home instead to take care of the family. She also managed the laborers we hired to work in the fields. I have two older sisters and three younger brothers.

We all lived harmoniously with one another. I was very satisfied with my family life.

My elementary school was in the village. From first to fourth grades, we didn't have to spend extra time after school for study. So school life was full of freedom to play, with very little homework. It was very pleasant. Starting in the fifth grade, we had to do extra study for the examinations to get into junior high school. I was admitted to my first choice, the best junior high school in the area, Shua



Li Junior High School. This school was in another town so I had to take the bus. During my junior high school years, my father, being a village mayor with lots of social affairs, was unfaithful to my mother. So my family was badly influenced by him. Even though both my mother and my teachers wanted me to pursue higher education, I wanted to grow up quickly to help my mother, so I left the village after graduating from Junior High School. I went to Taipei and worked in a hospital. It was there that I encountered Buddhadharmā. Before this, I had witnessed birth, old age, sickness and death. I had thought about questions such as, “Where do people come from?” But working in the hospital and seeing people face death made me more eager to seek the true meaning of life. Through an introduction, I took refuge with Master Sheng Yen and became his disciple in 1978.

During this time, my mind was occupied with two things. One was to pursue higher education; I attended Taipei Industrial and Business School. The other was to spend more time seeking for the true meaning of life. In 1979, I attended the first seven-day retreat Master Sheng Yen gave for the public in Taiwan. On this retreat I had a great discovery; I realized that the answers to my questions were provided by the Buddhadharmā. After that retreat, I spent all my non-working hours on Chan practice. Having gained some deeper understanding of the Buddhadharmā, I was led to the path of leaving home—I realized that only through living the life of a monastic would I be able to walk firmly on the path of unlocking all questions.

Since becoming a nun is a serious matter, I didn't want to treat it lightly. I felt I needed to improve myself, to prepare by transforming my habitual tendencies. For example, one needs to know how to cook three meals. At that point, I didn't know how to take care of others. During that time, I saw the environment of Nung Chan Monastery; there was farming and manual labor to perform. I didn't know how to do anything like that, and needed to learn before entering the monastic life. In 1982, I decided to quit my job and return to my home village. One purpose was to share the Buddhadharmā with my parents. The other purpose was to prepare myself for leaving home; by helping my mother manage the family business, I also could learn farming.

My leaving home was something my parents had never thought of. In their minds, when children grew up, they should get married. To them, leaving home was a harsh situation, something one would do only when there was no other way out. If a girl leaves



home, it means no man wants her. I wanted to change my parents' beliefs and ideas about leaving home. I wanted them to know that it was something sacred and profound. It is not what other people think of it—the last resort of a loser, or something to escape to. After I told my parents my idea of leaving home, they kept trying to change my mind. They wanted me to walk the path of ordinary people (meaning to get married and raise a family.) Even though they respected me, they still wanted to change me. Because my decision was really firm, my mother eventually accepted. She also became a Buddhist, and came to visit me every year. She took the Bodhisattva precepts later on, and attended seven-day Buddha's Name chanting retreats. This made me very happy.

During my years of staying at home, I participated in retreats and made offerings to the Monastery as well as having occasional contacts with Master Sheng Yen. After I had been back at home for six and a half years, the plum field I helped create was filled with blooms. I wrote a letter to Master Sheng Yen and told him I wanted to leave home; he replied by saying come quickly. From my initial thought of wanting to leave home to my actual leaving, was ten years. During this time my intention never wavered. I spent this time learning the things a monastic needs to know. For example, I memorized the entire liturgy of the morning and evening services when I was at home. When I became a monastic, I already knew how to chant certain dharanis that other newcomers needed to spend a long time learning. I studied hard because I wanted to prepare myself to be a nun.

In 1988, I entered Nung Chan Monastery. After I entered the Sangha, I took very naturally

to the activities of the monastery. Because of this, I had few obstacles after leaving home. Actually, all the obstacles one encounters come from one's self. If one does what one is supposed to do, then one will encounter few obstacles. After one year of being a postulant [monastic-in-training], in 1989 I shaved my hair [became a novice nun] and in 1990 I took the full ordination of becoming a nun.

In 1989, the second year of my residency at Nung Chan Monastery, we bought Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM). For the purpose of developing DDM, we established the Hu Fa Heui [Dharma Drum Mountain's General Association of Dharma Upholders], and more disciples joined. Master Sheng Yen's work of expounding the dharma increased. As his monastic disciples, we also became busier. We needed to take care of more people and create more activities and events. Our work then changed from manual labor to office work and this has continued to be the case. This was very different from what I had envisioned—I had thought the life of a monastic would be very easy and free with not much to do. It was quite the opposite.

However, slowly, I came to realize the Mahayana Bodhisattva's practice—one cultivates one's own practice through performing the work of benefiting others. This is a very important concept. Honestly speaking, I knew the concept but knowing and doing are two different things. In the beginning I was more interested in self-realization, self-liberation. But over the years of guidance from Master Sheng Yen, I started transforming myself and working towards benefiting others. I believe it is only in this way that Buddhadharma can continue to flourish.



If one has a deeper experiential understanding of Buddhadharma, in my experience, one likes to stay in quietude. One likes to be with people but dislikes dealing with complicated affairs. For me this continues to be the case. Holding big, complicated jobs is the opposite of my natural inclination [to be left alone and stay in quietude]. I like to live a very simple life with few things to be in charge of. But, soon after I joined Nung Chan Monastery, I started to hold important jobs and had to be involved in many affairs of DDM. I have continued adjusting myself in this area. The way I do this is to tell myself that the path of liberation is the Bodhisattva path. This is my biggest challenge in my current job [Provost of DDM].

I have been a monastic for twenty some years and, through all this time, I continue to adjust myself in this area. Just now, after Master Sheng Yen has passed away, I feel more satisfied with myself in the sense that I can merge the two [practice and administrative work] into one. When I perform administrative duties, I am also practicing. This is easy to understand on a conceptual level, but in practice, it is not easy to do. These two things appear to be in opposition (meaning when you pursue practice, you can't perform administrative duties.) Through continuous cultivation, one can bring the two closer to each other. I am grateful to Master Sheng Yen. He was my example. Before Master Sheng Yen passed away, I often wondered why he did so much and wanted to be involved in so many affairs. After he passed away, I began to understand. This was his great vow coming to this world. This is how the Mahayana Bodhisattva path should be walked, by benefiting others.

When I first began studying with Master Sheng Yen, in retreats he would do interviews by himself. He was also the retreat master. We only took care of the time keeping. When I was a novice, I was assigned to be a teacher in the retreat. After I took full ordination of becoming a nun, I started assisting Master Sheng Yen in retreats in the capacity of interviewer. Ven. Guo Jin and I were the two females in that first group assigned to assist as interviewers in the retreat. Later on, the retreats evolved into using Master Sheng Yen's talks on video. Then I led different levels of retreat—beginners, intermediate, and advanced. For the 49-day retreats, Master Sheng Yen was the leader, but I helped with interviews. Currently, because the Chan Hall rules are that one has to participate in the entire retreat, I spend less time leading retreats.

It is very important that retreat leaders have deep experiential understanding through their own diligent practice. This way, they understand the conditions of the participants. While the techniques of leading the retreat are easy to learn, this diligent practice is endless. However, the leaders have to have deeper understanding of Chan practice. Having interest in Chan practice is the basic requirement, hoping to go deeper and gain understanding through diligent work.

Regarding the Dharma, I believe in past lives. I believe the causes and conditions of my meeting Master Sheng Yen are connected not only through this lifetime, but many previous lifetimes. I believe I had made the vow of seeking a good teacher in my previous lives, so the causes and conditions of my meeting Master Sheng Yen and leaving home have gone smoothly.

## Venerable Guo Jin, Head of Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies

I was born at Tao Yuan, Taiwan. Growing up, I lived in the city, but I always loved the country life. Both my parents were business people. I graduated from a University where I majored in Chinese Literature. After I became a nun, I went to Japan, from 1996 to 2003, to get my Masters in Pure Land Buddhism and my Ph.D. in literature at Bukkyo University.

When I graduated in July of 1983, I thought I might have a career as a teacher, but instead I left home right after graduation. I was not married and did not have a boy friend before I left home to become a nun.

At that time, I had been attending meditation group practice at Nung Chan Monastery every Sunday. The group was mostly university students who had done retreats with Master Sheng Yen. One Sunday afternoon, after the meditation practice, I don't know why, but I didn't want to leave the monastery. I was pacing in the meditation room for a few minutes when all of a sudden Master Sheng Yen showed up in front of me. He asked, "What's the matter with you?" I then formally told Master Sheng Yen that I wanted to find a place to quiet down.

Right away Master Sheng Yen called the Abbess of Pu Kwong Temple in Mao Li County, and made arrangements for me to stay there for a short while. He told me to call the Abbess when I was ready to go. This was the seed planted for my future monastic life. I didn't call the Abbess right away because I had promised my classmate I would attend her wedding in October. Right after the wedding I called the Abbess. I told her that I



hadn't changed my mind; I would come to her temple the day after tomorrow.

For some reason I felt I needed the approval of at least one parent. I called my mother and told her that I needed to leave home for a week to handle some business. I thought she would say yes, because in the past I had gone away for days for mountain climbing, etc. But this time, she said no regardless of how hard I tried to persuade her. A few minutes after I hung up the phone, the phone rang, and my brother answered. After he hung up, he took a chair, put it in front of the exit door and sat there.

Around noon, my father came back from work. When my brother saw my father, without explaining to him the reason, he went back to

his room. A voice came to me and said if I missed this chance I would never have another chance; this voice was very apparent and clear to me. So I lied to my father—I said I needed to return some books to the library, and asked whether I could leave. He said okay. All of a sudden, the desire of wanting to leave evaporated. I didn't want to go. I was overwhelmed with unknown feelings so I decided to lie down. While I was lying on my bed, my father came in and said, "Didn't you want to return books? Go quickly." I thought to myself—I already decided not to leave but you are urging me to leave. Both my mother and younger brother were trying to stop me, but my father accidentally helped me to go.

The true struggle I experienced of leaving home was the moment I stepped out of my house. I actually stood there for a few minutes, one foot in and one foot out. I didn't know whether I should move the inside foot to outside, or move the outside foot to inside. Once I got on the train my mind was overwhelmed with complex feelings. I didn't feel sad but couldn't stop crying all the way from Taipei to Mao Li. I was not aware what was in my mind. When I arrived at Mao Li, as soon as my feet touched the ground, my tears stopped, like a closed faucet, no more water coming out.

The night I arrived at Pu Kwong Temple, the Abbess came to my room and talked about the causes and conditions of how she herself had left home. She didn't stop talking for two or three hours. After she finished she asked me, "Do you want to leave home?" My immediate reply was "Yes." She called Master Sheng Yen; he told her she could shave my hair for him and give me the name Guojin. She was very happy for me. She looked through the

calendar to find a proper day for doing this. We picked the very next day, which was the day when Medicine Buddha attained Buddhahood. She gave me a pair of scissors and told me how I should cut my own hair the next morning; each cut is a vow. The first is to cut off all evils, the second is to cultivate all virtues, and the third is to deliver all sentient beings. In the morning, after I cut my hair, my head was shaved completely by the Abbess and her assistants.

I lived in Pu Kuang Temple for six months. Life was really at ease, living in the deep mountain area. During this time, they taught me how to perform morning and evening chanting services. There were actually four nuns, including me, living there. The temple was very far from the town. We had to go to the deep mountain picking fruit to sell to the local merchants to sustain the temple. This kind of manual labor was quite difficult for me because I'd never done it before. But I didn't feel I was suffering; I really like country living. Besides performing manual labor, we also performed special prayer ceremonies for the families of deceased persons; this was another way of receiving monetary offerings.

There was no Chan practice, no meditation practice, at Pu Kuang temple. After a while, I felt something was missing even though this kind of life style was fine with me. So, I decided to return to Nung Chan Monastery. There, I followed the group. The causes and conditions of my leaving home were unique in that I never went through the process of being a postulant. I shaved my hair first, then moved into Nung Chan Monastery. I took the novice precepts in 1984 and took the full ordination precepts in 1985.

In those early days at Nung Chan Monastery, there were very few assigned jobs or positions, and life was very simple. We would rotate the responsibilities. A person would be in charge of the kitchen for one month, the main hall the next month, outdoor manual labor the month after that, etc. Even the position of Provost was rotated among us at that time. Before I became the Provost, there were three people who had performed this job. One person stayed for 2 months, one for 4 and the longest for 6 months. When I became the Provost I stayed for 8 years.

Today I have many duties at Dharma Drum Mountain. I am a teacher, researcher, administrator and retreat leader. I play many roles. Though physically I feel tired, I have learned a great deal and acquired knowledge and skills from performing these duties. They all are very important to me. I prioritize my work according to its level of urgency and importance. This way, I can do it with ease. I don't require myself to be 100% perfect. I only require myself to pass. It is good enough for me.

### **Venerable Guo Jaw, Vice-President of Dharma Drum Buddhist College**

I was born in 1950 in Yi Nan County, Taiwan. As a child I lived on Taiping Mountain. From the age of fifteen until now, I have been living in Taipei. My father was a forest worker; my mother was a housewife and illiterate. I have a degree in Business Management from Zhong Xin University. I taught for 17 years and currently hold the title of associate professor.

Why did I want to become a nun? This was through causes and conditions of previous

lifetimes. I became a vegetarian when I was six years old. Early on, I decided to spend my whole life as a teacher and not get married. By 1991, I had been a teacher for many years, and I started asking myself, "What is the true meaning of life?" Through this inquiry, my view of life changed. I started asking myself, "Where should I go to find my true self?"

I registered for the Chan Meditation class at Nung Chan Monastery. When I first stepped into the monastery, I felt it was a familiar place. When I saw Master Sheng Yen the first time, certain feelings arose in me, but because I hadn't learned anything about Buddhism, I didn't know what that was all about. After I started to practice Chan at the monastery, I realized that monastics are the true lifetime educators. After attending four periods of



Chan training classes, I returned to my teaching job, but I worked as a volunteer at the monastery every weekend. This was also the time the DDM Foundation was established. I thought that if an organization is to last for a long time, it is very important to maintain its history. There was no file management system yet in place. I was learning computer programming, so I volunteered and became the head of record keeping for the foundation.

During 1992, I took refuge, took the Bodhisattva precepts and attended more than one seven-day retreat. I knew this was the road I ought to follow. At the end of that year, I told Master Sheng Yen that I wanted to leave home. My biggest struggle in leaving home was my mother. My father had passed away, and I had been living with my mother in the same room, on the same bed, for 17 years. Was it the right thing to leave my widowed mother alone? In 1993 I had the opportunity to participate in the tour of Tibet with Master Sheng Yen and others from the monastery; I was a lay person at the time. It was during this trip that I firmly decided that I wanted to become a nun. Prior to this trip, I had spoken to my mother about leaving home, but she didn't let me. During my trip to Tibet, my mother attended a seven-day Buddha's Name chanting retreat. When I returned from the trip, I told her that I wanted to leave. My mother told me, "If Master Sheng Yen says okay then I am okay with it." So, one year after I had asked Master Sheng Yen about leaving home, the causes and conditions were ripened for me to become a nun. I entered Nung Chan Monastery in 1993 as a postulant. In 1994, I shaved my hair and was ordained as a novice under Master Sheng Yen. In 1995, I took the full ordination precepts and became a nun.

Master Sheng Yen often used this analogy: "Be like a piece of wood that stays together as part of a raft floating down a river." Just like this, my training after leaving home was basically following the footsteps of the Sangha, practicing together as a community rather than practicing alone. It was not your traditional ways such as chanting, meditation, etc. It was more a movement on the bodhisattva path, interacting with people as a way of practice. Master Sheng Yen's daily talks were very important sign posts, exploring the differences of mentality between a lay person and a monastic when performing the same task. Because I had to put his words into practice, this provided me with support and clarity to transform my thoughts.

I did have struggles in becoming a nun. At first, I wanted to run away. When I was a lay person, I had a lot of personal time and my life was very easy and free. After I entered the Sangha, I had to work even during the weekends, with no vacation. This wasn't the real struggle; the main one had to do with my ego. I had a high status in my lay life, but in the monastery I did not. When I was a postulant, my job was working with the big burner to prepare the hot water for showers. When my sister and my brother-in-law came to see me, I was covered with black dust. My brother-in-law felt really bad for me—a highly respected professor doing this kind of chore. He had the urge to take me home right then. Another struggle had to do with my mother. Each time I saw her, I asked myself, "Am I doing the right thing for her?" I cried all the time. Another nun told me she had never seen someone my age who cried so much.

My main job became public relations. I had never written news for the media, never used



a fax machine. Now I had to fax stories the night before and then call the reporters and beg them to publish my news. If the news items were published, I could circle them in the papers and show them to Master Sheng Yen. I would be really proud and happy. If not, I would feel the sense of defeat. So every morning I was in agony [waiting to see whether the items were published.] I wondered whether this was really the road I wanted to walk on.

One time I had a chance to take a vacation. I planned to visit other temples to find one where I could start all over again. I would use my elementary diploma and hide my lay person's identity, because I wanted to be a monastic but I didn't want to do the work of public relations. I had planned the whole thing, but, on the day of my vacation, something came up that I needed to handle so this cause and condition was transformed and dissolved. After that, I became more accepting of my fate. The more I walked on the path, the more I realized that many wonders were revealed by going through this kind of process. I reflect back and I understand what Master Sheng Yen had said: practice is the *process* and not the results achieved. I stayed in the Hu Fa Huei Foundation for more than ten years. Now, my attitude has changed. I no longer feel that things are too difficult to handle. At the same time, I believe that there are many Dharma protectors who help us to complete what we need to do.

Today my work as Vice-President of Dharma Drum Buddhist College and Director of Female Students' Affairs at Dharma Drum Sangha University is similar to what I did at the DDM Foundation. I don't feel I am too busy or that I am stressed with too much work. It's not that

I don't face any difficult situations, but I don't seem to have any problem with my schedule. I can even join the activities of the Sangha. However, because of my administrative work, I seldom participate in the intensive group practice. I have to be selective; I do my practice in motion. I have to be very clear with each movement.

Regarding Chan practice, my method is Silent Illumination. I have my own daily routine to calm my mind. I wake up at around 3:00 am. Every morning and evening, I do prostrations. During the normal course of the day, I recite Guan Yin Bodhisattva's name. My practice is not seamless because administrative work is really tedious. But my mind and body are pretty calm.

### **Venerable Guo Yi, Vice Provost of Dharma Drum Mountain Dharma Public Outreach Center**

I was born in 1964 in Taipei, Taiwan and have lived here all my life. My parents were business people; their product was cloth with elaborate embroidery and textile design used for the belts of traditional Japanese kimonos. I have a B.A. degree in Chinese study. After I graduated, I worked in magazine and newspaper publishing. I was very interested in this work, but under capitalism the culture industry tends to cater to the masses and become commercialized. The information the industry provides is not complete and so is of limited benefit to the public. Ultimately, it can't solve the mystery of life.

At a young age, I wanted to know the purpose of life, but I couldn't find the answer. This wanting to know and yet not knowing created



a stifling energy in me. Determined to find the answer I searched through philosophy and religion. When I encountered Buddhism, I realized that Buddhadharma could provide the answers to all my questions, so I naturally became a Buddhist.

During retreats, I experienced the impermanence of suffering and joy. I realized that Chan practice could allow the body and mind to be calm and illuminating. This process made me interested in regulation of the mind, made me believe deeply that Chan method has its function. I wanted to concentrate in this study, hence leaving home to become a nun was the necessary choice. I did not face much opposition from my parents. My family was hesitant to let me go, but very rational and reasonable. They respect me. My Christian brother

gave me his blessing. He thought it was the luckiest thing for someone to find their religion and become a spiritual person.

I was ordained by Master Sheng Yen, in 1996, in Nung Chan Monastery. In those early days the monastic members spent their time primarily on completing their assigned jobs and offering services (to others). As to monastic training, one depended mainly on Master Sheng Yen's morning talk during the meal; this served a great function in training. Other than this, Sangha occasionally arranged some Buddhist classes. But, due to my busy work schedule, I didn't have time to participate. Nowadays I am the Vice Provost of Dharma Drum Mountain Dharma Outreach Center, and I occasionally lead retreats.

*After being interviewed about their personal histories, the four Venerables were asked these specific questions:*

***Q. Do you think Chan practice is more difficult for a lay person?***

**Ven. Guogoang:** Comparing the two, monastics, although they also are very busy, encounter fewer obstacles than lay people. Even if the life of a lay person is not very busy, it is still not the same as the monastic. The differences are in relationships and the types of people encountered such as our parents, siblings and neighbors, etc. All these different relationships are based not on the Buddhadharma, but rather on affection, for example, between parent and child, between friends, etc. For monastics, we relate to each other based on the Buddhadharma. Also, lay people are busy taking care of affairs related to themselves, but monastics are busy benefiting others. They are very different.



**Ven. Guojin:** It is not the case [that practice is more difficult for a lay person]. Monastics and lay people have different points of attachment. Of course, celibacy is a basic requirement for a monastic. Lay people don't have to do this.

**Ven. Guojaw:** One can't generalize this. However, lay people have more outside affairs to handle, while monastics are professional practitioners so they are more concentrated on their practice.

**Ven. Guoyi:** Not really [more difficult for a lay person]. It depends on the individual. If a lay person has correct views and the right conditions (time, space, financial ability, etc.), with diligence, one could see good improvement in Chan practice. But, in general, lay people have more interference from daily life so they face more obstacles to practice. However, if they could make good use of these causes and conditions, through overcoming these obstacles, they could gain wisdom and compassion and reduce vexation.

*Q. Do you think female Chan practitioners face specific obstacles because of their gender?*

**Ven. Guogoang:** I don't think so at all. It all has to do with how to use your mind. You have to practice the method wholeheartedly. You have to put your mind on the method in every minute of the waking period such as walking, resting, eating, etc. It is not whether you are female or male; it has to do with how you use your mind on the method. I also believe both female and male possess this human body which is a vessel of practice. It is not based on whether one is female or male,

rather how many vexations one has and how deeply one penetrates into the Dharma.

**Ven. Guojin:** It is hard to say. Maybe because of the environmental and cultural background, female practitioners find it hard to let go of the family. As to making effort, female practitioners are not worse than male. For male practitioners, on the surface, they seem to be able to let go except in certain areas. From my observation, female practitioners usually outnumber male practitioners in Buddha's Name Chanting groups and retreats. On the other hand, male practitioners usually outnumber the females in Chan meditation groups and retreats. This is very noticeable. But, slowly, the number of female participants is increasing in the Chan meditation groups.

**Ven. Guojaw:** No. One needs to look at the kinds of responsibilities and duties that are developed from the gender. For females, they have to take care of their family; there are many tedious things they can't put down. However, from the point of view of practice, both male and female are the same.

**Ven. Guoyi:** Not in Taiwan. Female Buddhists have great independence and share equal status with male Buddhist, especially in the area of learning. Basically, female and male Buddhists are equal.

*Q. Do you think it would be beneficial to have an all-women retreat?*

**Ven. Guogoang:** I think it is a good idea. Traditionally, women have been treated as less [important] than men. From the point of view of current tradition, even though among all Buddhist organizations in the world, Taiwanese female monastics have great accomplish-

ments, this concept of men being more important than women still exists. Currently in DDM, many retreat activities are led by men because most women retreat leaders are involved in administration. A retreat designed solely for women and led by a female teacher, I think is a very good idea because female teachers would have a better understanding of women's issues. Another point is that women practitioners have less confidence in themselves. This has to do with the tradition [of men being more important]. Women are seen as people with heavy karmic obstructions and unable to succeed in practice. Based on my observation, women practitioners are prone to be stuck on small personal affairs and can't let go. Men practitioners find it easier to let go of small personal affairs. If we call this an obstacle, women in general (not every woman) would have more obstacles than men. In summary, the obstacle of practice does not depend on gender. An all-women retreat would be a good idea. We could consider it. We could help promote their confidence to do more things for the world, to bring world peace.

**Ven. Guojin:** We need to think about Master Sheng Yen's ideas of leading a retreat. Since he had never thought of having a retreat for a single sex, we have never done this. Master Sheng Yen promoted equal status between male and female, and there is no difference between male and female when it comes to practice. Of course, Master Sheng Yen also knew the future trend of development in this area. Personally, I think there are benefits in both single sex and co-ed retreats. In ancient times, females were not allowed to participate in any retreats. Furthermore, I know for a fact many temples in Mainland China don't allow females to enter the Chan Hall.

**Ven. Guojaw:** Of course, there could be a reason to do this. We have many different types of practice camps, such as the teacher's camp and the society leader's camp. The reason for this is so the retreat talks can be tailored towards this particular group. This way we can more accurately offer our teachings to them. As for having a female retreat with female teacher, I am open to the idea. I think female Chan practitioners have a bright future in the West, absolutely. To lead Chan practice, one has to possess inner cultivation. It is not a problem related to gender. Regarding having deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings, I would welcome more females to join, from all parts of the world. I think the path of Buddhist practice is worth walking on lifetime after lifetime. Buddhadharma teaches us to understand the truth of the world. When we understand the truth of the world, our life is more splendid, it is not up to male or female or what kind of role [in society]. I encourage all to grab the opportunity to walk on the path of practice and expound the Buddhadharma. Amitabha!

**Ven. Guoyi:** I don't think there is such special need. During Chan training, participants are living with themselves and facing the common issues that are shared by all sentient beings. There is no need to target female characters as a way to emphasize the differences between male and female. During the retreat, male and female are separated in living and sitting space, it is not necessary to separate them further. There is no special need for the retreat master to be female. As long as he or she has enough ability and compassion, he or she could attract and deliver the participants.

# The Jewel Net of Indra

by  
Ernest Heau

Feeling a bit sorry for myself  
I stopped by the paneteria  
across from the temple  
to comfort myself with a doughnut.

La señorita smiles  
as she hands it to me  
covered with white angel dust.  
I murmur muchos gracias  
as I hand her a wrinkled dollar bill.

As I enter the Chan Center  
a young Chinese woman  
at the reception desk  
is rolling red calligraphy scrolls  
gifts for all who come to  
Sunday's New Year celebration.  
We greet each other smiling  
the way only the Chinese can.

I prostrate three times  
to the Guanyin statue  
who stands in her cage of glass  
hands mercifully extended.

From downstairs  
comes the sound of chanting  
to the beating on a wooden gong  
"Namo Guan Shi Yin Pusa"  
(Hail to the Bodhisattva Guanyin)

In the meditation hall  
aging Chinese women  
all patient bodhisattvas  
mailing a Buddhist journal  
to other bodhisattvas  
in the saha world.

Overhead rows of red paper lanterns  
across the length of the Chan Hall  
hung to celebrate the Chinese  
New Year  
still and serene like patient  
meditators.

Downstairs I go  
to jolt my senses  
with a cup of coffee  
but I see no chanters there

it's just a recording  
looping over and over.

This is how the world works –  
we believe our senses  
never mind the reality.

Into the library for research  
I retrieve volumes of our newsletter  
and opening to a random page  
I see this passage from a sutra:

*Thus all lights of the billion-world  
universe  
merged into one light without any  
distinction.*

The sound of wooden blocks  
announces that lunch is ready  
damn, I just had a doughnut.

Downstairs lined up on either side  
of the folding table  
we say the meal offering  
my eyes moisten even though  
I have done this hundreds of times.

At the table, humble but abundant:  
brown rice, white rice  
diced tofu with green peas

lotus root, mushrooms and broccoli  
Chinese cabbage, more mushrooms  
soup of kabocha pumpkin and pine  
nuts.

Coming late from a meeting  
the monks and nuns arrive  
and the room instantly brightens.

Silently  
we eat our noonday meal  
everything here, inside, outside  
near, far, everywhere  
each thing, object, entity  
living, emergent, dead or dying  
happy, sad, indifferent  
time and space in exquisite embrace  
past, present and future  
meet in the present moment  
in all possible universes  
infinitely small jewels reflecting  
each other  
in the vast nexus of all Becoming:  
the Jewel Net of Indra.

*Thus all lights of the billion-world  
universe  
merged into one light without any  
distinction.*

# The Past

## News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide

### Remembering the Master

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, more than two hundred people gathered at DDM Vancouver to commemorate the anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's death, in conjunction with celebrations of the 2010 New Year.

The event began with the showing of two films, "Chan Mind at Ease – a Profile of Master Sheng Yen," and "Influential Examples of Master Sheng Yen." This was followed by a review of community activities and accomplishments in 2009.

Master Sheng Yen once said, "The purpose of life is to receive karmic results, fulfill old vows, and make new ones." Venerable Guo Shu, Director of DDM Vancouver, encouraged participants to do precisely this, to nurture their hearts and live a good and meaningful life.

In the spirit of such new undertakings, the assembled practitioners were favored with a special premiere performance of Vancouver's new drum ensemble. When in the summer of 2009 two donors generously gave twenty drums to the community, Venerable Guo Shu decided to found the DDM Vancouver Drum Team. Guided by Mrs. Shu-Yu Lee, drum instructor from Taiwan, the team launched into five rigorous months of training with a wholehearted and single-minded attitude

that is characteristic of Chan. The team made its debut at the close of the commemoration, and their hard work paid off with an inspiring performance that brought the audience to its feet in a standing ovation.

\* \* \*

On February 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Dharma Drum Mountain hosted "My Vows Are Eternal," a concert to honor the memory of the late Master Sheng Yen, at Taipei's Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall.

On both nights the concert hall was filled to capacity. Guests from every part of Taiwanese society were in attendance, including Taiwan's Vice President Vincent Siew.

On behalf of the DDM Sangha, the Venerable Guo Dong conveyed gratitude and blessings to all, wishing everyone a happy, healthy and peaceful new year. He also stressed that the first anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's death was the best time to show our gratitude for his teachings and make vows to serve humanity and "build a pure land on earth."

\* \* \*

On February 21<sup>st</sup> Venerable Chang Yan led "The Transmission of the Dharma Lamp" at the practice center in Los Angeles. Seventy people attended to make new vows in remembrance of the late Venerable Master Sheng Yen.



Venerable Chang Yan encouraged every participant to follow the teachings of the Master with gratitude and to keep on making good vows as the best way to honor his memory.

Passing the lamp from one practitioner to another symbolized the continuation of the Dharma and the resolve to carry out the Master's compassionate vows.

Venerable Chang Yan led everyone in prostrating to the Buddha and Venerable Master Sheng Yen. He reminded everyone of Dharma Drum Mountain's aspiration to nurture the seed of virtue in everyone's heart and benefit sentient beings, to "uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth."

### **Sutra of Eight Realizations in San Francisco.**

From January 14<sup>th</sup> to February 17<sup>th</sup> Venerable Guo Che of DDM Taiwan gave a series of eight Dharma talks on the Sutra of Eight Realizations of Great Beings, at DDM's Sunnyvale meditation center in San Francisco. His central point was that the Sutra's rich teachings can inspire sentient beings to strive for enlightenment and transform vexations into happiness. With the help of volunteers, the talks were also broadcast over the internet to reach listeners throughout the world.

### **Baoyun Monastery in Taichung**

On April 4<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup>, DDM hosted the Prayer Ritual and the Liang Emperor's Repentance Ritual to commemorate the establishment of Baoyun Monastery. In addition to honoring the Monastery, the seven-day event at Feng Chia University in central

Taiwan was intended to honor ancestors, and motivate people to pray for inner peace and the elimination of obstructive karma.

As conceived by the late Master Sheng Yen, Baoyun Monastery is meant to provide a center of education in Taichung, and was built to give the people of central Taiwan a place to study Dharma and practice Chan meditation.

### **8th Annual Awakening Camp**

On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 121 people gathered to attend the 8th Annual Awakening Camp in Taiwan. Students from Malaysia, Singapore, Macao and Australia as well as Taiwan gathered at Dharma Drum Sangha University for the nine-day program introducing Chan meditation, Buddhist precepts, etiquette and scripture chanting. Overall, the program gives young people an opportunity to experience briefly the life of a monastic.

### **Library Opens**

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, Dharma Drum University (DDU) Branch Library was formally inaugurated in Taipei's Xizhi District. Library services commenced after Venerable Guo Fang and other monastics conducted a ritual of purification.

DDU President Dr. An-Chi Liu explained that in addition to providing services for residents of Xizhi District, the library could also be used for Chan practice. He offered special thanks for the support of volunteers, including Professors Cheng-Tong Wei and Jin-Gui Hsieh, as well as the Himalaya Foundation, for donating thousands of books, significantly strengthening the institution.

## Scholarships for Flood Victims

Last August, Liugui Township in southern Taiwan was severely stricken by flooding caused by Typhoon Morakot.

In response, DDM Social Welfare and Charity Foundation (SWCF), in collaboration with the Quanta Culture and Education Foundation, has undertaken to provide ongoing support for Liugui's students. Financial assistance is provided at the beginning of each semester.

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, SWCF awarded scholarships to 357 students at Liugui Primary School. Principal Lung-Quan Huang was emphatic in his thanks on behalf of all students.

Venerable Chang Fa, SWCF's Vice Secretary General, expressed his appreciation for the children's performance at the ceremony, and observed that SWCF has been supporting the people of Liugui since the start of their difficulties and, just like family, has no intention of giving up.

## DDBC's Fourth Anniversary

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, Dharma Drum Buddhist College (DDBC) celebrated its fourth anniversary at the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education in Taiwan, underscoring its various achievements in teaching, and inaugurating a "Clean Up the Mountain" campaign to beautify the campus.

Venerable Guo Dong called upon all students and staff to cherish the opportunity to learn together and to keep their vows to cultivate a spirit of Compassion and Respect in society. DDBC President, Venerable Huimin, asked students to remember with gratitude the late

Venerable Master Sheng Yen, who worked to bring about the creation of DDBC for twenty-six years.

## CHIBS Celebrates 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

On April 17<sup>th</sup>, the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (CHIBS) hosted a special seminar to commemorate its thirtieth anniversary. Speaking on behalf of CHIBS alumni, Venerable Guo Shyang acknowledged the significant contributions made by Venerable Guo Dong, Abbot President, Venerable Huimin, President of Dharma Drum Buddhist College, and Venerable Guo Jing, President of CHIBS, that have led to the institution's successful growth over the past thirty years.

Venerable Guo Shyang also expressed the gratitude of all present to the late Venerable Master Sheng Yen, who was passionately involved in the development of CHIBS. He vowed to continue the late Master's efforts to promote Chinese Buddhism for the benefit of society.

Venerable Guo Dong urged students to work diligently at their studies to ensure the continued growth of Chinese Buddhism and to conduct themselves as good role models to pass on the light of the Dharma.

## Towards a Low-Carbon Future

On March 27<sup>th</sup> DDM Buddhist Foundation held a special event at Dharma Drum Degui College to promote the concept of living a "green" life. The event featured talks on the environment, interactive games, an introduction to organic food and energy-efficient lighting, as well as an exhibition of organic cloth.

Local NGO's such as the Homemaker's Union and Foundation, Delta Electronic Foundation and the Plant Protection Foundation of Science and Technology also took part in the event in support of DDM's efforts to disseminate ways to live a low-carbon life.

Most importantly, through specially designed games, DDM sought to plant a seed of environmentalism in the hearts of the children present, contemplating their future leadership in cultivating an environmentally sensible future on this planet.

### **DDM's Environmental Advocacy**

On April 22<sup>nd</sup> DDM's Buddhist Foundation and its Culture and Education Foundation received an award from Taiwan's Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) for long-term achievements in promoting environmentalism.

Venerable Guo Qi, Secretary General of DDM's Social Welfare and Charity Foundation (SWCF), attended the ceremony on behalf of the two foundations. Expressing appreciation for the award, he pledged that DDM will continue to stress the importance of living in harmony with our environment. One instance of a modest adjustment we can make in our lives is to stop burning incense and paper money in commemoration of ancestors, and through an accumulation of similar adjustments, moderate our impact on the environment.

### **DDM Environmental Campaign**

Global warming has a profound impact on animal species all over the world. For example, polar bears are particularly at risk now

because their habitat is increasingly threatened by global warming. If action is not taken quickly, polar bears may vanish from the Earth.

To explore how we can act to prevent such tragedies, on May 2<sup>nd</sup> at Taipei's Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall, Dharma Drum Mountain launched a campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of global warming and to promote sustainable living. Vegetarian stalls and information about waste recycling, solar power panels and wind power technology were all on display. There were also various activities to allow visitors to experience Chan practice, including Tea Chan, Family Chan, Walking Chan holding a bowl of water, Calligraphy Chan and Eight Form Moving Meditation.

Venerable Guo Dong declared that the degradation of our environment is actually caused by human beings' endless desire for material consumption. He suggested that if everyone could change our attitude toward the environment and limit material craving with mindful appreciation, the environment could be restored and global warming could gradually be reversed.

Also in attendance was the Vice President of Taiwan, Mr. Vincent Siew, who came to show his support for DDM's long-term efforts on behalf of the environment. He said that the Earth is like our mother whom we must treat with respect, and called on all concerned to discover the joy of living a life of simplicity in harmony with the environment.

As Venerable Guo Dong has observed on numerous occasions, we must change our mind about nature if the environment that nurtures us all is to flourish.

# The Future

*Retreats, classes and other upcoming events.*

## **Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, NY**

Phone: (845) 744-8114

E-mail: [ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org](mailto:ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org)

Website: [www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org)

*DDRC holds a variety of Chan practice activities, including weekly group meditation, Sunday services, beginner's meditation classes, beginner's retreats and intermediate and intensive Chan retreats. Novices and experienced practitioners are all welcome at DDRC, whether to begin practicing or to deepen their cultivation. Volunteer opportunities are also available.*

*Schedule is subject to change. Please check the website for updated and detailed information, or to register for activities online.*

### **Retreats**

#### **1-Day Chan Retreat**

Saturday, July 10

#### **7, 14-Day Chan Retreat**

(Silent Illumination & Huatou)

Led by Chichern Fashi

Saturday - Saturday, July 17 - 31

#### **10-Day Intro to Silent Illumination Retreat**

Led by Guogu (Prof. Jimmy Yu)

Friday - Sunday, August 13 - 22

#### **Young People's Workshop**

Led by Guochan Fashi & Changji Fashi

Tuesday - Thursday, August 24 - 26

#### **Young People's Chan Retreat**

Led by Changwen Fashi

Friday - Sunday, August 27 - 29

#### **Beginners' Meditation Class**

Part I, Saturday, September 4

Part II, Saturday, September 11

#### **1-Day Retreat**

Saturday, September 25

### **Regular Weekly Activities**

#### **Thursday Evening Meditation**

7:00 - 9:00 pm; Sitting, walking, moving meditation and discussion.

#### **Sunday Service**

9:00 - 11:00 am; Sitting, walking and moving meditation; Dharma talk; chanting.

## **Chan Meditation Center Elmhurst, Queens, NY**

Phone: (718) 592-6593

E-mail: [ddmbaus@yahoo.com](mailto:ddmbaus@yahoo.com)

Website: [www.chancenter.org](http://www.chancenter.org)

### **Retreats**

#### **Monthly One-Day Retreats**

Last Saturday of each month (except Dec.)

9:00 am - 5:00 pm (8:45 am arrival)

Fee: \$25

## Classes

### **Beginner's Meditation, Parts 1 and 2**

Saturdays, July 17 & 24, 9:30 am - Noon

Led by Dr. David Slaymaker; Fee: \$40

### **Intermediate Meditation**

Saturday, July 31, 9:30 am - 3:00 pm

Led by Dr. David Slaymaker; Fee: \$40

### **Dharma 101 (The Four Noble Truths)**

3 sessions, Saturdays, Sep 11, 18, 25,

9:30 am - Noon; Free of charge

### **Saturday Night Movie and Mind**

Saturdays, Sep 11, Oct 9, Nov 13, Dec 11,

6:30 - 9 pm; Led by Lindley Hanlon

Screenings and discussions of movies from a Buddhist perspective, free of charge.

## Regular Weekly Activities

### **Monday Night Chanting**

7:00 - 9:15 pm (On the last Monday of each month there is recitation of the Eighty-eight Buddhas' names and repentance.)

### **Tuesday Night Sitting Group**

7:00 - 9:30 pm: Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation, Dharma discussions, recitation of the Heart Sutra.

### **Thursday Night Taijiquan**

7:30-9:30 pm, ongoing,

Led by David Ngo

\$25 per month, \$80 for 16 classes.

*First class is free for newcomers.*

### **Saturday Sitting Group**

9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation

## Sunday Open House

10:00 - 11:00 am: meditation

11:00 am - 12:30 pm: Dharma lectures

12:30 - 1:00 pm: lunch offerings

1:00 - 2:00 pm: vegetarian lunch

2:00 - 4:00 pm: Chanting

(1st & 5th Sunday: Chanting Guan Yin

2nd Sunday: Great Compassion Repentance

3rd Sunday: Bodhisattva Earth Store Sutra

4th Sunday: Renewal of Bodhisattva Precept Vows.)

*1:45 - 3 pm: English Dharma Study Group, led by Dharma Teachers-in-Training, 2nd and 4th Sundays, except 5/9 & 11/28.*

*Text: Zen Wisdom by Master Sheng Yen.*

## Special Events

### **One-Day Recitations in Chinese**

Saturday, Sep 4, 9:30 am - 8:00 pm

AM: Bodhisattva Earth Store Sutra

PM: Amitabha Buddha Sutra in 3 sessions

### **Family Chan Camp at DDRC**

Thursday - Sunday, Aug 5 - 8

Bonfire, outdoor meditation, family workshops and story-telling.

### **"Slow Living" Meditation Camp**

Thursday - Sunday, Aug 5 - 8

## "Zen & Inner Peace"

Chan Master Sheng Yen's weekly television program now on Crossing TV:

NYC: Time Warner Cable channel 503

Monday - Friday, 11:55 am - 12:05 pm EST

Sacramento, CA: Comcast Cable channel 238

Monday - Friday, 9:55 am - 10:05 pm PT

Sunday, 11:55 am - 12:05 pm PT

# Chan Center Affiliates

*Local organizations affiliated with the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association provide a way to practice with and to learn from other Chan practitioners. Affiliates also provide information about Chan Center schedules and activities, and Dharma Drum publications. If you have questions about Chan, about practice, or about intensive Chan retreats, you may find useful information at an affiliate near you.*

## NORTH AMERICA

### USA

#### USA Headquarters

*Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association (DDMBA); Dharma Drum Publications; Chan Meditation Center:* 90-56 Corona Avenue  
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<http://www.chancenter.org>  
<http://www.ddmba.org>

#### *Dharma Drum Retreat Center*

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V6Y 2V4 Canada  
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Fax: 604-277-1352  
Email: info@ddmropa.ca  
http://www.ddmropa.ca

# Mexico

### *Mar de Jade Oceanfront Retreat Center*

#### *Chacala, Nayarit, Mexico*

Contact: Laura del Valle MD  
USA phone 800-257-0532  
Mexico phone 01-800-505-8005  
Email: info@mardejade.com  
Website: http://www.mardejade.com  
Daily meditation; regular retreats;  
2005 residential period

# EUROPE

## Croatia

### *Dharmaaloka Buddhist Center*

Dordiceva 23  
10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
Tel/Fax: ++385 1 481 00 74  
Email: info@dharmaloka.org  
http://www.dharmaloka.org  
Teacher: Zarko Andricevic  
Ongoing program of study and practice, including courses in Buddhism and Chan meditation, meditation group meetings, and retreats.

## Belgium

### Luxemburg

15, Rue Jean Schaack L-2563  
Bonnevoie GD.DE Luxemburg  
Tel: 352-400080

## Poland

### Warsaw

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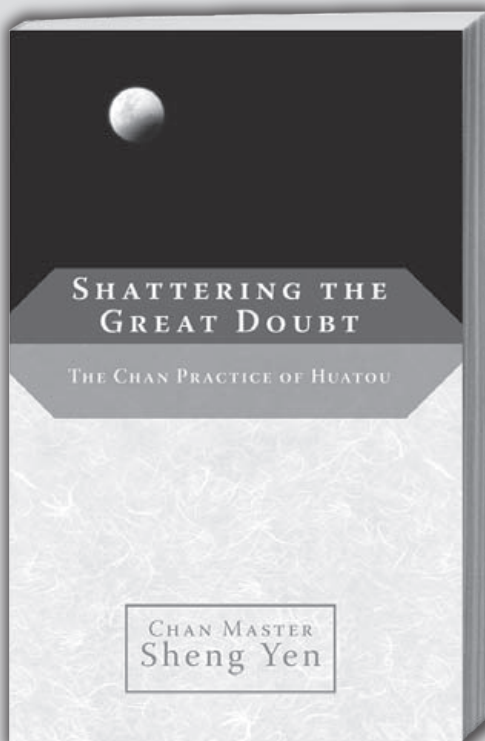
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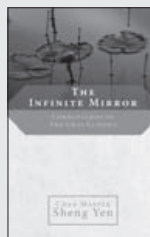
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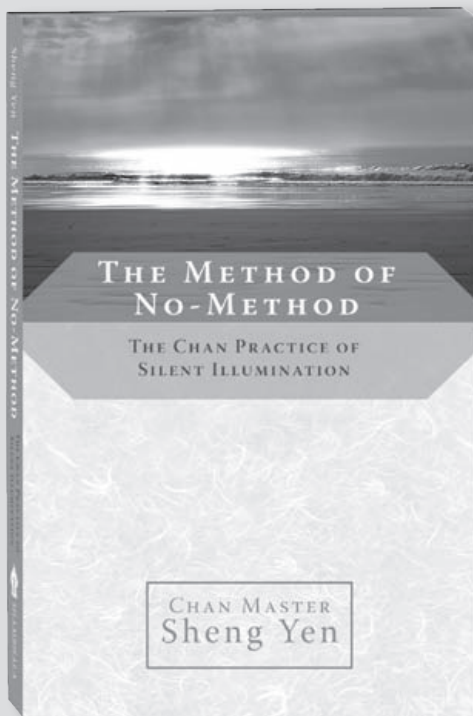
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