

Chan 禪 Magazine

Spring 2011



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“I often tell my students that cultivation will surely lead to enlightenment, but if one seeks enlightenment at the start of one’s training, then this seeking will become instead an obstacle to enlightenment. One should just till the land but not be concerned about the harvest. The harvest will definitely go to the diligent tiller.”

–Chan Master Sheng Yen
from Chan Magazine,
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*Cover and table of contents photos courtesy of
Suzanne Goldstein*

From the Editor

I am loved. I got an iPhone for Valentine's Day.

When my friends, who think of me as the Old Luddite—he who won't text, who doesn't have a Facebook account, who won't even use PayPal—first heard me express an interest in the iPhone, they were openly abusive: "What're you gonna do? Share music and videos? Hahahaha."

I deserved it—I have, I believe, the last cell phone in America without a camera, and I haven't even mastered its three or four features. Nevertheless, the truth is that it was Apple that eased me into the 21st century, transforming my fear and loathing of all things digital with its entirely human approach to technical support, and I will now follow them almost anywhere, even if still from the back of the pack.

I haven't even opened the box. I'm preparing the ground, as it were, reading through the "features" articles on the web site one at a time, trying to imagine myself making the magic with only my fingertips, and not making a mess. And following the various links, I found my way to the app store, where I discovered, using the search term "Buddhism," the Mother Lode—a whopping 226 Buddhist apps.

Now, to be fair, about three out of five of them are books, the "app" part being the cleverness with which the printed page is adapted to the little screen. And some of them are actual

tools: *DiamondMala* puts the virtual beads of your choice on your screen, which you can count and move with a flick of your thumb not at all unlike a real flick with a real bead; *Personal Om*, with 75 visualizations (pictures, evidently), promises to "make meditation a breeze"; *iSamadhi* leads a field of meditation timers, which will start, stop or punctuate your sittings with a dizzying choice of ring tones (we'll leave aside the irony of appending the "i" to the "samadhi.")

Then there's the Games category, starting with *Worship*. The current version of *Worship* has received ten good reviews. Four and five stars. "Very relaxing app!" writes Sea Wolf. Ahnt gives five stars to *Buddha Belly*: "Quite intense action which becomes insanely fast!"

But my personal favorite app, from the Healthcare and Fitness category, is *Meditation for Everyday Living*. There are, unfortunately, "no reviews for the current version of this application," but there hardly need to be, given the nearly naked practitioner on the cover. She sits erect, back to us, a flimsy white towel loosely draped around her hips, perfect blond ponytail bisecting her bare, bronzed, well-muscled back...she is motionless, but she has evidently heard me enter the hall, for as I approach she beckons me, with the subtlest of nods, to the empty cushion in front of her... Oh! Was I having wandering thoughts?

I'm not actually a Luddite—I'm a big fan of science and of the technology it produces. (I am at this moment wearing a pair of Bose

noise-cancelling headphones, which my wife and I got so we could sleep on trans-Atlantic flights, but which today are saving me from the jackhammers at work on the street outside my apartment window—a little techno-miracle.) What I'm not a fan of is what seems to be our tendency to use technology to do every bloody thing it can with no reasonable consideration of whether it should, or of whether technology's gain might come at our loss. We have already largely given up the abilities, purchased through millennia of natural selection, to do arithmetic and remember phone numbers—do we really want to become the species who took the gift of the opposable thumb and consigned it to the pushing of virtual buttons?

What is a Buddhist app anyway? What could a Buddhist app possibly be? Counting the breath is a Buddhist app, but it's an app for people, not for iPhone, and in fact it doesn't work if the iPhone does it, only if the person does. Methods are the Buddhist apps, just as doctrine is the Buddhist owner's manual, and unlike those clever tools that can tell you where the nearest coffee shop is, the Buddhist apps only work if the human mind is running them. Buddhism is an inherently low-tech enterprise, the lowest, the lower the better, and

there's almost no imaginable use of high technology that could facilitate its agenda.

Body and mind—those are the tools of Buddhism. And beyond them, tools that are the simplest possible extensions of body and mind: Brush, ink and paper; a wooden staff; a clay pot, some dry leaves and hot water; a bow, a string, an arrow; colored sand. These are the kinds of technologies with which body and mind can practice and realize themselves, and through which realization can express itself.

And that is why, I think, I have friends who think of me as an enemy of technology. All these years of practicing to have no preferences have evidently given me some preferences: for the homemade over the mass-produced, for the artisanal over the virtual, for the hand tool over the app. And even if my practice doesn't result in enlightenment, I'm hoping it will result in the ability to chop real wood and carry real water when the server crashes and the automated systems fail.

So most of the capabilities of my new iPhone will probably be wasted on me. But I will very much enjoy that it looks like the person who made it was paying attention.



Photo: Kaifen Hu

In Retrospect:

Early Lectures of Master Sheng Yen in America, Part 3

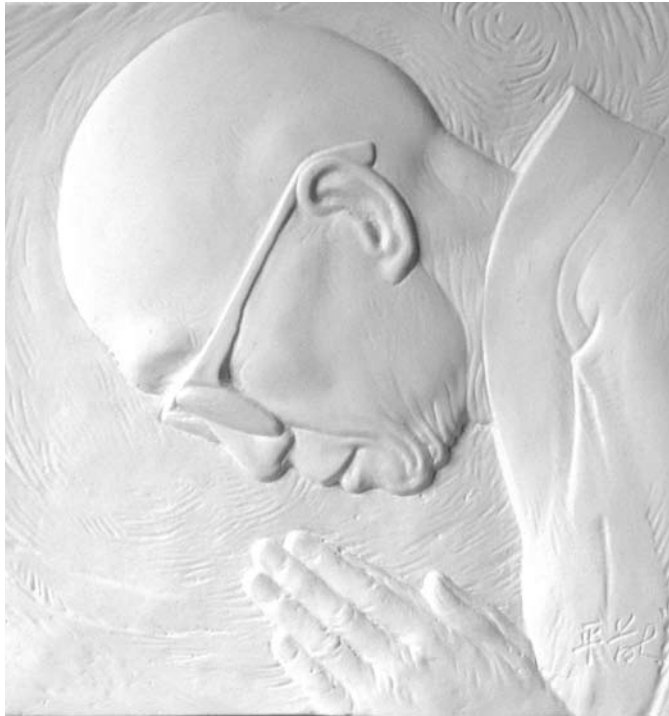


Photo by Ernest Heau of sculpture by Tommy Yang

In this issue of Chan Magazine, we present Part Three of a retrospective selection of some of the 120-plus lectures by Master Sheng Yen that fronted each issue of Chan Newsletter between its first issue (November 1977) and its last (August, 1997). Part One and Part Two were published in the Summer 2010 and in the Autumn 2010 issues of this journal. Most of these lectures were given in an informal assembly, though some of them come from 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. 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).

Tea Words

(From Chan Newsletter No. 7, July, 1980)

Some people like strong tea, some like weak tea, and some prefer water. Strong tea stimulates and excites, weak tea quenches thirst, and water replenishes the body's fluids. Strong tea is like the scorching summer sun and loud thunder at the same time; weak tea is like the autumn moon; water is neither sun, nor moon, nor rain but it has extreme clarity and brightness. Some people drink strong tea to combat sleepiness or tiredness, most people prefer weak tea, and those who drink only water are few.

Drinking tea in the meditation hall can be a ritual, but it is most important to listen to the master's words. In fact, a talk like this is called "tea words." These words are like different strengths of tea, as the methods we teach vary according to a student's level of experience. Some methods are poisonously strong, some are lighter, and some have no particular meaning.

Strong tea is called "bitter tea." Those who have just begun to practice are not ready to drink this tea. After they have gained some benefit from practice but are still not clear how to settle their mind, they should drink bitter tea. Like being baked by a hot sun or startled by thunder, this bitter tea gives them no chance to get lazy. They wouldn't dare fall asleep or indulge in scattered mind. This bitter tea will arouse them to "angry determination" to practice hard. This is why masters of the Linji sect used to beat and shout. Such methods are bitter tea to be given only to people who are already practicing hard. If a master

beat or shouted at students who were not diligent, they might think it was very strange or even get scared away.

One type of student who may be given weak tea is the beginner who thirsts for practice but is not ready for bitter tea. To students of this type I will speak words of comfort and encouragement to make them feel happy to practice. The other type is those who have drunk bitter tea but are in danger of losing their resolve to practice. To them I will give weak tea as an expedient means. It's like telling someone just setting out on a journey, "There is a place over the horizon that is really idyllic, with trees, birds, and a beautiful landscape. If you just keep on going you will definitely get there."

One of the sutras tells about a man who yells at his ox, saying, "You are stupid and useless! Why can't you go faster with such a light load? Don't you see all the other oxen in front of us speeding along?" Whereupon the ox stopped dead in its tracks and refused to move, thinking, "Since I am useless, why should I move?" So the man, very upset, asked the other men in front, "How do you get your ox to go so fast?" They replied that they deceived their animals, saying sweet words to them, like, "You are so good and energetic. Without you, I would be nowhere. Awhile back you climbed that hill like it was nothing. Now that the road is flat, you should really be able to speed along." So the oxen are very happy to go fast. Like humans, animals also need to be comforted and encouraged.

Water has "tasteless" taste; it should be given only to those who have practiced extremely

well but have not yet entered the door of Chan, that is to say, have not had some realization. They have already drunk bitter and weak tea and are attached to the flavor, meaning they tend to think too much and cannot stop their minds. They also cannot put their method down and may be attached to a goal of getting enlightened. They are burdened by their experience and intellect. To them I will give a flavorless method. For example, Master Zhaozhou of the Tang dynasty used phrases that seemed to have no meaning, such as: "The 10,000 dharmas return to one; to where does the one return?" Or, "When I was in Qingzhou I made a robe weighing seven pounds." Or, "What did Bodhidharma bring from the West?" Or, "In the garden there are cypress trees." These are examples of "water" words that can induce a practitioner to give up all attachments, throw everything away, and reach the highest goal of enlightenment. But there are also people who can suddenly put down all their attachments with bitter tea. It works by giving them a shock. One can even attain this by drinking weak tea, but it can only be a very gradual enlightenment.

Who here has had the taste of water, where there is no sun, no moon and no rain, neither night nor day? Yes, but was it crystal-clear? When it is crystal-clear it has brightness in which all things exist, but there is no discriminating mind, no taste. So subjectively, in this state, the person does not exist. If a person in this state were out in the burning sun, he wouldn't consider that he was in the sun, but everything would still be very clear. With bitter or weak tea, the mind is still there, but crystal-clear water is like the state of no-mind. Bitter and weak tea can help you towards no-mind, but eventually one needs to drink clear water.

Emptiness and Loneliness

(From Chan Newsletter No. 12, March, 1981)

Do mind and matter genuinely exist? If we were to analyze them thoroughly, we would see that their existence is only temporary. But does this mean that mind and matter do not actually exist? If we were to break time down into all its separate moments, we would see that actually time does not exist. This is also true of space. If we kept cutting it up into smaller and smaller parts, we would not find the actual existence of space. But on the other hand, the connection between different moments in time does exist and spatial relationships between objects also exist.

Therefore, people who do not understand Buddhadharma may have one of two false ideas about emptiness. The first, emptiness from a temporal point of view, is called "the emptiness of termination and extinction." Those who hold this view think that things just arise and vanish spontaneously, without events in the past causing results in the present and without events in the present causing results in the future. This is emptiness of temporal relationship. The other kind of false idea of emptiness can be called "the weird sense of emptiness." This is emptiness from a spatial point of view: one sees phenomena as completely illusory, therefore not to be taken seriously. It is very likely that people who hold either of these two false conceptions will have moral or ethical problems, and may lack a central focus in their lives.

From the point of view of Buddhadharma, emptiness is much different. Buddhism believes that whatever was done in the past caused a result in the present, and whatever is done in the present will cause a result

in the future. But if we split time into its many segments, then existence can only be true for that segment. It is not real in that sense. And since time is constantly changing, causes are changing, and the effects are also changing. There isn't any certain unchanging consequence, nor is there any certain unchanging cause. Therefore it is void, but cause and effect are still there.

Question: In Buddhist works they say that nirvana is not an effect that can be attained through some kind of cause. If nirvana is supposed to be the state of true reality, it seems that someone who reaches this state is exempt from cause and effect. Is this so?

Sheng Yen: Nirvana is not a thing; nirvana is when you personally experience, and you understand, and recognize that everything is void, or empty. Through the practice, you gradually come to experience that there is no real space or time that you can hold on to. So you can say that nirvana is the result of practice, but it is not a result of something changing into something else. If certain things happen, we cannot say that these things didn't happen. If we simply ignore the fact that these things happened, then we fall into the view called "the weird sense of emptiness." But on the other hand we also realize that whatever happens

is not something eternal or unchanging. So there is no need to take it too seriously or to be attached to it. If we are attached to it, that is a vexation.

If you hold on to the false views of emptiness and if you deny the law of cause and effect (karma), then you are in a very dangerous position. You may think that all phenomena are unreal and you don't have to practice

"IF YOU HOLD ON TO THE FALSE VIEWS OF EMPTINESS AND IF YOU DENY THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT (KARMA), THEN YOU ARE IN A VERY DANGEROUS POSITION. YOU MAY THINK THAT ALL PHENOMENA ARE UNREAL AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO PRACTICE MORALITY. YOU WILL CREATE A LOT OF EVIL KARMA AND YOU WILL SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES."

morality. With this lack of responsibility, you will create a lot of evil karma and you will suffer the consequences. Being attached to existence will give you vexations, but being attached to the false views of emptiness will give you even greater problems. If, seeking to avoid the attachment to existence, you fall into the trap of the false views of emptiness, then that is like being afraid of getting drowned and jumping into the fire. From the

Buddhist point of view, we take the Middle Way: that is, in emptiness there is existence, and existence itself is empty.

Question: Does a practitioner necessarily have to go through times when he has the two false conceptions of emptiness?

Sheng Yen: Not necessarily. It depends on whether he or she gets proper guidance. It may

happen, especially to people without a good foundation in Buddhism. One student, after returning home after her first retreat, felt that life was very gloomy and meaningless. She felt like giving away everything, breaking all contacts with the world, and just practicing by herself. Later, she borrowed and read many books from the Chan Center, and by the third retreat, her attitude changed and she really opened up to life and the world. Others have gone through a similar stage. The reason is that through hard practice these people experienced a deep feeling of emptiness without, however, having enough understanding of Buddhism as a basis.

Question: Where does the feeling of a deep sense of loneliness come from?

Sheng Yen: People who cannot connect themselves with the outside world in terms of space and time, who do not understand cause and effect, and causes and conditions, will feel lonely. When I was in solitary retreat, I knew that I was together with all sentient beings in innumerable worlds. Even though I seemed to be alone in a small, enclosed room, actually I was in company with many ants who found their way inside, and insects outside of the hut created all kinds of sounds in the evening. When I opened the sutras, people thousands of years in the past were speaking to me. How could I feel lonely? Some people think that I must feel lonely being a monk without any wife or children; not at all. I have the five precepts and the ten virtuous deeds as my wife, and my children are all the people with whom I have developed a karmic affinity, and who call me Shifu (Teacher). It is only people who isolate themselves and cannot establish a relationship with the outside world who feel lonely. If you keep yourself enclosed, even if

you live among thousands of people you will still feel very lonely. However, if you keep yourself open, then even if you are living alone, you will still have a very full life. So, open your mind and treat everyone you meet as your intimate, virtuous friend.

Opening up to Nature

(From Chan Newsletter No. 16, Sep., 1981)

(Informal talk spoken by Master

Sheng Yen during an outdoor picnic.)

Within the confines of your own home you may feel you are the master, but if many others live there, the sense of being in your own space begins to diminish. When you go into the country, the expanse of sky and the earth form one big universal house and you can feel very small. At the same time, in that great open space you might feel that all nature is yours, and even with other people there, you still feel a sense of spaciousness. Therefore, after a period of staying indoors, people should go outside and experience, on the one hand, the smallness of themselves, and on the other, the largeness of themselves. In reality, our sense of largeness or smallness is entirely relative to how we see our surroundings.

Hanshan, a famous poet of the Tang dynasty, wrote that the clouds were his blanket, a rock was his pillow, and the earth was his bed. Because of his spacious attitude, though he owned nothing, there was also nothing that was not his. Such a person can live very freely and easily, without vexations.

Since people might feel a bit lonely coming out into nature by themselves, they tend to go out in groups. But often they just transplant their own little world out into the big world, and they still feel separation: "I'm with these

people, not with those.” We should not be like a snail that carries its house on its back and shrinks back into it when another creature comes along. It is better not to put people into categories based on your social distance from them, whether or not you know them. It is also good to feel intimate with creatures around you—the birds, butterflies, and so on. Just as smoke from a chimney disperses into the air, we should disperse our sense of “group” or “family” and truly participate in the life around us.

If we come out here and just talk about the same things we talk about all the time, we may as well have stayed at home. When we visit nature we should put down everyday small-talk, subjective mental activity, judging and discrimination, and just open up and observe nature. Starting from the time of the Buddha, it was almost always the custom for those who had left home life to spend some time practicing in the mountains. Generally the hut they lived in was made so that it could be put up and dismantled very quickly so that the person could move on to another place. The purpose was to live a life that would not foster a group mentality, but rather to cultivate a holistic attitude where one would feel at one with all lives and the universe. Originally Shakyamuni Buddha did not set out to form a defined group or stay in any one place, because that would promote exclusive thinking, distinguishing between inside and outside, big and small, yours and mine.

So, on this outing we should experience the greatness of nature. If we can truly open up to nature and nature accepts us, then, like the poet Hanshan, we will be as spacious as nature itself. When we first arrived at this spot, one little boy was afraid of all the gypsy

moths crawling on the ground. They do have a rather strange and scary look about them, being all furry and everything, and they eat the leaves off the trees. But when you think about it, human beings are nothing but big bugs themselves. We are also hairy and eat vegetation only it’s made into sandwiches. People tend to see themselves as exceptional compared to others and to nature, as if they were the crown of creation—an attitude that derives from our ability to reason and acquire knowledge. But actually, nature itself makes no distinction between intelligent and stupid.

The Amitabha Sutra says that in the Pure Land, the grass and trees are all very pure and majestic, and the breeze and the birds all speak the Buddhadharma. If people can cast off self-centeredness and just see themselves as part of nature, then when the wind blows and the birds sing, they will hear the Buddhadharma. With a pure and equanimous mind, there is no place that is not the Pure Land.

Emptiness and Existence

(From Chan Newsletter No. 20, March, 1982)

How we perceive “existence” and “emptiness” can reveal how shallow or deep our practice is. We need to understand this to avoid getting stuck and to be able to make progress. Before we have gained some real benefit from practice, we perceive phenomena as real and existent. In this ordinary state of mind, the “self” is still deeply embedded in things: “my” body, “my” house, “my” friends, and so on. After practicing well, we may reach a state of concentration where there are only a few thoughts in our mind. At this time, the sense of self is lessened, and we may feel that we have finally cast away the world and every-



Photo: Kaifen Hu

thing in it. “I have thrown off all thinking.” “I am enjoying the bliss of liberation.” “I feel so carefree and light.” Dwelling on feelings of liberation and happiness like this only means that one’s perception of “emptiness” is false and one still sees phenomena as existent.

When one reaches the state of only one thought, or one-mind, one may feel unified with the universe and that one’s powers are unlimited. One also feels great sympathy and compassion for all sentient beings. At this point one is at the stage of “double affirmation,” or a deeper level of existence. Although there is an expanded sense of self, this sense

is not selfish, but rather one feels a sense of energy and responsibility. The degree of mental power depends on the strength of one’s previous practice. One who is not backed up by a strong practice can still reach one-mind but will not have as great a sense of energy and responsibility—will not likely give rise to the feeling of being a savior. Therefore great religious leaders are a rare occurrence in human history.

At the next stage of no-thought, or no-mind, one is said to be in the state of “double negation” in that one takes emptiness itself as empty. If a person is attached to emptiness (as in stage two), it is called “stubborn emptiness” or “illusory emptiness.” But at the stage of no-mind one actually recognizes that even this emptiness is empty. Since one has emptied out emptiness, then existence is re-asserted, but it is an existence of non-attachment. One will definitely not feel that the world is meaningless, nor, if asked, “How is your practice doing?” will one give a reply like “Oh, It doesn’t really matter if I practice or not.”

We usually feel something “exists” when we have strong feelings about it. If emptiness is also based on feelings and emotions, then it is not true emptiness. It is only when, not bound by feelings and emotional attachments, one genuinely experiences things as existing just as they are, that is, at the same time genuinely existent and also genuinely empty. For practitioners, only this can be considered the first level of entering the door of Chan.

Question: Can progress in practice be described as a series of negating one’s previous stage of attainment and affirming something new?

Sheng Yen: In actual fact the previous stage and what you are affirming now are not two different things. We say that vexations are just bodhi—that is, they are not two separate things. So “negation” is not saying that you have to detest or get rid of vexations before you give rise to wisdom. You cannot achieve nirvana by negating samsara—they are one thing. It is only that in the process of the practice one’s perception of it varies according to one’s experience.

The Other Side

(From Chan Magazine No. 22, June, 1982)

Once when I was on solitary retreat in the mountains in Taiwan, I was walking down the steps of my hut when suddenly my mind was filled with doubt. “Who was it that just walked down the steps?” It was me. “Who is standing here now?” It is also me. Then, was the “me” who walked downstairs the same as the “me” standing here now? Am I two different people? I became so wrapped up in these questions that I did not eat that day. This is an example of a situation where the doubt sensation arises spontaneously. There is a lot of power in that natural doubt. However, most people on retreat cannot come up with the doubt sensation spontaneously. Therefore, we give them a method such as the question, “Who am I?” to help arouse the doubt.

Of course, if you are not practicing hard at the time, this sort of question would not be very useful. Once on retreat in Taiwan I asked a student, “What is your name?” He replied, “Chen.” Pointing to a name card pasted on the wall, I said, “That’s wrong. Chen is over there!” He said, “What am I doing over there?” At that moment he couldn’t figure out who he was. For over twenty years he had identified

himself by his name. But now he realized his name had nothing to do with him. So who was he? From that time on, the doubt sensation arose in his mind. It’s like being in a pitch-black room or inside an iron ball. You cannot see anything clearly at all but you know there must be some brightness outside and you really want to know what it is.

Once there was a baby who was born in prison. His father was related to the emperor of the previous dynasty, and when the new dynasty took over, they imprisoned the family members of the old dynasty. So this infant prince was doomed to spend his whole life behind bars and he didn’t know of anything different. He thought that life was just like this and he never suspected there was anything outside. One day an old man got sentenced to life in prison and was thrown in the same jail.

He said to the young prince, “Since I was sentenced to life, I am thinking of escaping. Why don’t you come along? We can either try to get out ourselves, or we can wait for someone to save us.”

The boy said, “Don’t be crazy. Here we have plenty of food, and clothes to wear. It’s really pretty good in here. You’re so old already, what do you want to go out there for?”

The old man answered, “You don’t understand, son. To lose your freedom is a painful thing.”

The boy asked, “What’s freedom?”

“Outside of this prison is freedom.”

Surprised, the boy said, “Do you mean I’m not free now?”

Everyday, this old man constantly thought about getting out. One day, after he finished eating, he broke his bowl and used the chips to start digging a hole.

The prince stood there laughing at him. "What are you doing that for? You're so old, by the time you dig your way out, you'll be dead. Besides, if the guards find out, they'll give you a terrible beating. So what's the point? It's so comfortable here."

In fact, the boy even told the guards, "This crazy old man is planning to escape."

After that they beat up the old man and locked him up for a few days without food. The prince was disturbed by that and he felt sorry for him. But as soon as he got out, the old man started digging again.

The prince thought, "This man must be obsessed." So he asked the old man, "What is it out there that tempts you so much?"

The old man said, "You just don't know. Out there is freedom and in here is just a place to punish criminals. I prefer to live outside for one hour than die here in this jail."

When he heard that, the boy was strangely moved. He thought, "Maybe there is something to what the old man says. It must be better out there; otherwise he would not be willing to keep on digging after all the beating and starvation." So he started helping the old man. But the boy was only a child after all. After digging for a while, he gave up and threw aside the chip. He said, "This is not fun anymore. What's so good out there anyway?" So the prince just watched the old man digging and digging. This went on for over a

year, with the old man constantly working at it. The young prince would sometimes help him out, and then he would give up and rest. Then the old man would speak some words of encouragement and the boy would be moved and pick up the tile again. Eventually, the old man finally got through the hole, and escaped with the prince.

When he got outside, the boy exclaimed, "The world is so big! Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

The old man said, "I've been telling you all along how wonderful it was out here, but you wouldn't believe me."

"Yes, but the way you described it is nothing like what I see now!"

In terms of practicing Chan, you could say that the old man represents someone who has already had a glimpse of his own buddha-nature. He knows how good it is on the other side. So he is willing to practice with unceasing effort. Most people don't believe in their own buddha-nature or they don't believe it strongly enough. Thus, they may be moved to practice, but their lack of faith keeps them from practicing hard. Similarly, before you are able to give rise to a strong doubt sensation that will keep you practicing hard, you must first have attained some result from the practice. Otherwise, even if you use a method such as huatou, it will not bring up a doubt. It will only be the same as reciting a mantra over and over again. At most it might bring you to a state of deep concentration, or samadhi. But if you wish to use the huatou to attain enlightenment, you must first have a strong foundation of meditation practice.

Letting Go

(From Chan Magazine No. 24, Sep., 1982)

Ming dynasty Chan Master Hanshan Deqing (1546-1623) [not to be confused with Hanshan (ca. 800-900 CE), the Tang dynasty poet] taught people to practice by letting go of thoughts as they arose in the mind. Whenever a thought arises, immediately let it go. This does not mean resisting or rejecting the thought, it just means not letting it affect you. So, if you are not getting anywhere in your meditation, the reason is probably that you are unable to let go of your thoughts. Even when you are paying very close attention to your method, stray thoughts may appear. This is very common, especially in the beginning. But rather than letting it disturb you let it be a cause of your working harder on the method.

The problem with stray thoughts is that the more you try to reject them, the more they will surface, because the effort to reject them is itself a stray thought. Like flies hovering around a plate of sweets, if you shoo them away, they will be back the moment you take your attention off the plate. The best way to deal with this is simply to ignore the wandering thoughts, and eventually they will go away, just like the flies.

The second problem is not being aware that you are having stray thoughts. By the time you become aware, you are already following a whole new train of thoughts rather than the method. This is like dozing while riding a horse that leaves the path to go grazing. By the time you wake up, you are already off the path. This type of wandering thought is most likely to happen when you are mentally or physically tired.

When you realize you have wandering thoughts, don't get upset. Anxiety will just cause more thoughts to appear. Instead of regretting that you were immersed in wandering thoughts, just let them go; relax your mind and go back to your method. To practice letting go, first let go of the past and future and just be in the present. That is not as easy as it sounds, since stray thoughts usually are connected with the past or the future. But even if you are able to let go of the past and the future, at some point, you must also let go of the present. Letting go of the present has two aspects: the external, meaning the environment, and the internal, which consists of your body and mind.

First we must give up the outer environment because contact with it through our senses will lead to sense impressions, which can lead to thoughts. If we weren't aware of anything outside it would be impossible for thoughts to even arise. The temperature, cars, birds, wind, people walking, light or darkness, the sound of someone breathing, all influence you to give rise to stray thoughts. Since it is normally impossible to meditate where there are no outside impressions, the best thing is to let go of sensations coming from the environment. Until you reach the point of concentrating only on your mind and your body, you will hear noises from outside, but just drop them as they arise.

After letting go of the environment, let go of yourself beginning with the body. Long ago, there was a Chan practitioner who always fell asleep while meditating. To cure the problem, he placed his meditation seat on a rock at the edge of a cliff. He knew that if he dozed off he would fall into the ravine. A person like this will practice very well because he is pre-

pared to die if he does not practice well. So, if you're always worried about all kinds of bodily discomfort—being hot or cold, pain in the legs, itching, and so on—and indulging your body at every turn, then you will never enter a good condition of meditation. Some people may think it easier to let go of the body than the environment, but it is extremely difficult not to pay attention to your body. When you itch, it seems the longer you try to endure it, the worse it gets. So you think that if you just scratch it, the itch will go away. But once you give in and scratch, another part of your body will itch. If you can just ignore it, the itch will eventually go away. Similarly, to deal with pain you should not tense up as that will

make your whole body painful. Just relax and isolate the pain and think, "It's just my knee that's hurting; that has nothing to do with the rest of me." Better, just observe the pain with the attitude of tolerant non-concern with your body. Observing your pain may make it seem more painful, but eventually it will disappear. After doing this, you will be able to return to your method with better concentration. If you just keep single-mindedly on the method, eventually you will forget even the existence of your body. When there is neither environment nor body, there is still one thought left, awareness of the self. The final step is to let go of even that, and that will be letting go of the mind.



Master Sheng Yen (center, light robe) at Nung Chan Monastery, Taiwan...

Memories from the Associate Editor

The Chan Meditation Center recently re-designed their website, and it looks very nice. The new page for our Chan Magazine has downloadable files of recent issues. Right now every issue back to 2003 is available, and we keep working backwards to get them all posted. In honor of the new webpage I decided to go back to the beginning, and offer the first four issues. They should be available on the website by the time this current issue goes to print.

The first issue of Chan Magazine came out in March 1977. I was the editor, along with my

then partner, Dan Wota. Rikki Asher provided most of the artwork. The magazine looked very different than it does today. The size is the same, but the look was not so professional. We were very happy to have the use of an IBM Selectric typewriter, which was state-of-the-art then. The letters were all on a little metal ball, rather than individual bars like standard typewriters. The resulting type was beautifully even. But today it looks primitive next to electronically published text. Since it was manually typed, “justifying” the text (making the right margin even) was too labor-intensive to consider. For this reason I



...and at the Temple of Great Enlightenment, Bronx, NY, 1976. Photo by Buffe Laffey.

composed the text in a single column, feeling that two columns with ragged right margins would look messy.

Obviously this was before computers. The process was offset printing, for which I would prepare camera-ready "mechanicals". These were sheets of paper the exact size of the finished magazine, which had been "pasted up" with typewritten text and ink drawings. (We couldn't afford the cost for the sort of printing that would include photos.) I still have those mechanicals stored in my attic.

In those early days we presented the word "Ch'an" with an apostrophe. The logo of our magazine, the Chinese character for "Chan",

is original calligraphy by Chan Master Sheng Yen. I was there when he made it. I had travelled up to the Bronx on my day off to use that Selectric typewriter and lay out the first issue. He painted a few versions of the character on the back of a discarded sheet of typing. Then he asked me to select the best one. Both he and I agreed that the first one was the best. He cut it out and gave it to me. I made some photocopies of it, and then framed it. (I wasn't about to paste the Master's originally calligraphy onto a mechanical).

One of the meditation methods Master Sheng Yen taught us back then was called "Cat and Mouse". (The cat represents the meditator, who sits and watches for thoughts as the



cat would sit and watch a mouse hole. The mouse, representing a thought, withdraws immediately upon seeing the cat. Similarly, a thought will cease the moment the meditator is aware of it.) Rikki Asher did a lovely rice-paper ink painting of a cat and a mouse for the first issue. Of course I didn't paste this onto a mechanical. The painting was very slightly larger than the cover size. When I brought it to the printers I asked them whether they could photocopy the image and reduce it a bit to make it fit. No problem, they said. But when I went to pick up the printed magazines, they had actually TAKEN SCISSORS TO THE PAINTING and cut out the cat, in order to move it closer to the mouse! I was dumbfounded. I sputtered a bit about "destroying original artwork" but my partner Dan hustled me out of there before I could get into full shouting Jersey mode. I was also heartbroken for Rikki. The painting was lovely, and Master Sheng Yen had highly praised it, which of course made it extra special to her. She was devastated when I told her, but quite magnanimous. I told her I thought I could repair it by framing it under glass and she let me keep it so I could try.

I never was able to frame it properly. But today I have a scanner, and graphics software, and I've produced the repaired version that you can see here. I expect that the original intent was for it to be a wrap-around cover, with the bamboo on the back. I don't remember why we didn't use the whole painting. Maybe because the printing method couldn't handle gray-scale so well; in the published copies the mouse is very dark and his eyes are lost.

I don't think Master Sheng Yen anticipated the opportunities the internet would provide for reaching a wider audience. Clearly he believed that the printed word was a most important means of spreading the Dharma, not only through his own scholarly talks, but through the personal experiences of practitioners. He always encouraged his students to write reports of their experiences, and those early issues are filled with such reports. He said, "[These reports] may help others who are interested in Ch'an but have not had the chance to practice it." He established Chan Magazine as soon as he had students who could produce it. It has continued to be published, four times a year, to this day.

In this issue we reprint the talk Master Sheng Yen gave us to publish as the leading article in the first issue of Chan Magazine. His audience was the Board of Trustees of the American Buddhist Association, and the friends and relatives of his first ten students in America. The second semester of his special meditation class had recently concluded and the ten students had been asked to give reports on what they'd learned. It also happened to be the one-year anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's arrival at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx. In presenting his students to his sponsors, the Master is giving his own progress report. In publishing the talk, he is introducing himself to the English-speaking world.

Bufte Laffey
January 31, 2011

Beginnings

(From Chan Magazine, Volume 1, Number 1)

If one follows the traditional way of classifying Buddhist monks, I must be regarded as primarily a scholar monk specializing in Buddhist doctrines. Ever since I entered the sangha, I have always been engaged in the study of the Tripitaka scriptures. Moreover, I later studied Buddhism in Japan and received a D. Litt. Degree in Buddhism. Thus I have often propagated the Dharma through the medium of words. However, thirty years ago, I came across by accident the writings of Master Ou-i Chih-hsu of the late Ming dynasty and his criticism of the sangha of his own day made a deep impression on me. He said that those monks who called themselves specialists of scriptural teachings often did not comprehend Buddhist doctrine, those monks who called themselves Ch'an Buddhists often did not know the essence of Ch'an, while those monks who called themselves upholders of the Vinaya often did not know what was permitted and what was prohibited by the Vinaya rules, nor the difference between maintaining them and transgressing against them. Ch'an, Doctrine and Vinaya are three essential pillars of Buddhism and cannot be isolated from each other. Therefore, even though I am firmly grounded in Buddhist scholarship and received high academic honors, I do not regard learning as the totality of a Buddhist's training. In my daily life, I have put special emphasis on the observance of Vinaya. I spent almost three years studying the Vinaya section of the Tripitaka and wrote studies totaling some three hundred thousand words on the subject of Vinaya.

Later on when I was in Japan, I was in contact with the methods of meditation practiced by

the Rinzai and Soto sects of Japanese Zen. I also tried the Shingon method of meditation. Japanese Buddhists apply scientific methods to the study of scriptures, while also making use of scientific method—those of biology and psychology—to explain the techniques of spiritual cultivation. Most importantly, they searched for methods of cultivation among the sutras and instructions of early masters, then added to these a modern interpretation and application. In this way they created a flexible, step by step method of cultivation.

My purpose in coming to the United States was to study English in order to spread the Buddha Dharma to the West. I did not come here to teach Ch'an meditation. Moreover, the type of Ch'an meditation that I teach now is different from both that which is taught in Japanese Zendo and that which is practiced in Chinese monasteries in recent times. I call it Ch'an simply to conform to the current American customary use of the term, but in fact I am here transmitting the method of cultivation taught by the Buddha. This is the Mahayana Dharma gate that enables a person to become enlightened to the wisdom of the Buddha. Just like the Lotus Sutra, which combines the three vehicles into the One Vehicle, the method that I now teach is accommodated to the mental faculties and spiritual capabilities of people belonging to all the five vehicles. Therefore, when a person comes to me, regardless of his capability, I will accept him as my student as long as he is sincere in his desire to seek the Dharma. Moreover, within a few months I will be able to transform his mind and improve his body.

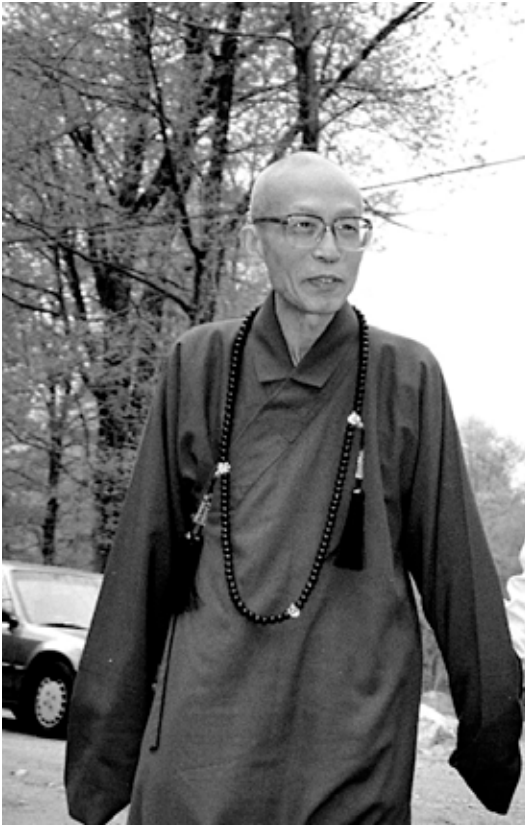
My specialty does not lie in what is generally known as the Ch'an method of cultivation. What I teach now is based on my own



Back row, from left: Dan Wota, Dan Stevenson, Er Chang Fashi, Shifu, Ming Yee Wang, Paul Kennedy
Front row from left: Buffe Laffey, Rikki Asher, Aranka Golgaci

personal experience and is a skillful means to help others. If someone, after having learned just my method, should go out to teach others in the same way, he would surely do both himself and others a serious disservice. My emphasis to my students is the correction and guidance I can offer when they reflect on the physical and psychological changes they experience while practicing meditation. In the beginning of our class, a student once asked me if I was enlightened. What he meant

was: if the teacher was not enlightened, how could he help his students to reach enlightenment? I told him that if a person broadcasts his enlightenment to the world, even if he were enlightened, it must surely be a very shallow enlightenment. Therefore, I often tell my students that cultivation will surely lead to enlightenment, but if one seeks enlightenment at the start of one's training, then this seeking will become instead an obstacle to enlightenment. One should just



till the land but not be concerned about the harvest. The harvest will definitely go to the diligent tiller.

I arrived in the United States on December 10th, 1975 and came to the Temple of Great Enlightenment in New York City on the 16th of the same month. With the support of Reverend Jen-chun (the Reverend Min-chih was in Hong Kong at that time) and Upasaka C.T. Shen and others, I started to train four youths in Ch'an meditation on May 3rd. Since then, the number of students has increased from four to ten and then twenty-one. Among them, six are Chinese, the rest are Americans,

French, Burmese and Hungarian. They include high school students, bachelors, masters and PhD's. The youngest is seventeen and the oldest is sixty-eight. Some have practiced Ch'an meditation for over fifteen years, while others are beginners. Every fourteen weeks constitutes a semester. On December 11, 1976 the second fourteen-week semester came to a conclusion and we invited all the members of the Board of Trustees of the American Buddhist Association to attend the meeting at which the ten students reported on their experiences in Ch'an meditation. Each person was asked to limit the remarks to five minutes. Their reports were recorded by Trustee Upasaka Kuo-ch'uan Woo and were later transcribed by Mrs. Hsing-yuan Shen Wang. Since the reports were very well received, we believe that they can be of wider use. They may help others who are interested in Ch'an but have not had the chance to practice it.

Most of these students came from different religions. In just a few months, their understanding of Buddhism is of course still quite limited. But I am happy to report that with the sole exception of Professor Chun-fang Yu, who could not continue her training because of her impending trip to Asia, all the rest wanted to study more and asked to be accepted into the next semester. I feel that if they have really learned something, they should be thankful for their own efforts as well as the graciousness of the Three Treasures.

December 16, 1976

You can read the student reports in the electronic version of the 1977 issues of Chan Magazine, at our website:

<http://chancenter.org/cmc/publications/chan-magazines/>

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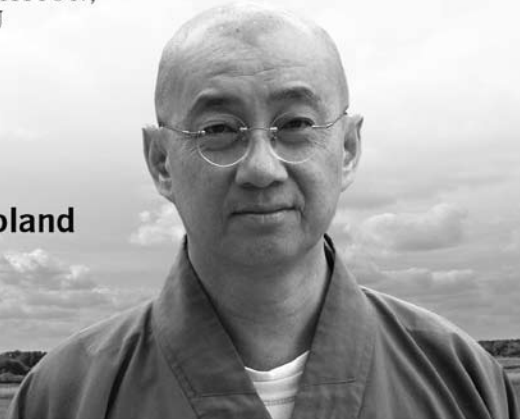
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Difficult Practice

by

Venerable Guo Ru

Guo Ru Fashi was one of the earliest monastic disciples of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen, receiving Dharma transmission from the Master in 2005. He gave the following talk on June 20, 2009, on the evening of the first full day of a ten-day Huatou retreat. It was translated live by Guogu (Jimmy Yu) and transcribed and edited by Buffe Laffey.

Real, Concrete and Unordinary

The first day has not finished yet but I believe that all of you have gotten a taste of something real, concrete and unordinary. Something that's perhaps unbearable. Maybe you want to leave because you feel exhausted. You doubt whether you have what it takes to continue the retreat. But there is one thing you must understand: the hardship and suffering that you feel is actually building up your stamina, refining your skills and establishing a very good foundation for genuine practice.

Why? Because in everyday life we disguise the fact that existence is suffering. Encountering difficulties, we turn the other way, making sure that every aspect of our life is comfortable and worry free. We put all our efforts into avoiding the fact that suffering is always just around the corner. Yet the Buddha said that the First Noble Truth is the noble truth of suffering. This is indeed the nature of unenlightened existence; difficulties are always going to be there. Maybe, though, you have good merit. Maybe you are blessed with many good things in life and this has shielded you from



confronting the noble truth of suffering. But coming here to the retreat, the veil is lifted.

Only you can pull yourself out of your current state. Only you yourself can walk on this path and advance in your practice. This takes a lot. There is hardship, fatigue, tiresome problems to overcome, particularly with the body. It is not something ordinary. For this reason I've said the day hasn't ended yet but you have already experienced something unordinary.

Difficulties Become Favorable Conditions

You should know that this inability to control and utilize your body and your mind is quite natural. We don't recognize it because we don't face this fact in daily life. When we encounter difficulties our first reaction is to give rise to vexations and complain. When hardship comes we think it's the fault of others. We become annoyed and are caught up in this circle of vexations without really reflecting on the center of the circle. This is self-grasping.

Now, on the retreat, there is nowhere to hide. You yourself can't control your own mind, can't focus because your body is aching and painful. You're confronted with this reality, this fact: existence is suffering. It's hard. It's difficult. But you can turn these difficulties around to push you forward, so that you can practice even harder. Then these will become favorable conditions that support your practice. Because in reality the more hardship we experience in the course of practice the stronger we will be, the more resourceful we will be. These experiences will build a very solid foundation for the future. So it is actually a good thing from the perspective of practice. As

long as you do not give rise to vexations, then you can see through your old patterned way of behaving and stick to the method no matter what you encounter. Then the more you press forward through suffering, the stronger you will be, the more in alignment with the Dharma.

Early Years of Training with Shifu

If you think this practice is hard, it cannot compare to how Shifu trained his students in the early years. The Chan Hall that we had in Taiwan was less than half this size. We would do retreats in the heat of the summer and there was no such concern as we have here with ventilation. We closed off all the windows with black cloth, so not only was there no sunlight, it was extremely stuffy in there. In such hot, muggy conditions the mind is very agitated, and the body is all aches and pains. But you are not allowed to move; one movement and the incense stick will come down.

Everyone had to sit at the very least in half lotus. Better, full lotus. Each period was 45 minutes, and if Shifu felt like it he would not ring the bell for an hour, or an hour and a half. That was quite common. Before you even covered your legs with the towel (trying to get away with an easier posture) he had to check everyone's legs. After he checked your posture, half lotus or full lotus, then you could cover it up.

So in the heat of the summer we used to do this kind of retreat—in excruciating pain, unable to use the method. You're not allowed to move to wipe the sweat. Meanwhile of course there are mosquitoes biting you because you're full

of steam and all the blood is quite delicious. All you can do is pray for the ringing of the bell. But with such a grandmotherly heart as Shifu had, very often he would not ring the bell. We would just sit there, unbearable, unable to use the method, day after day.

Walking on Hot Sharp Pebbles

Walking meditation was also very difficult because the Chan Hall at the Chung Hwa Institute was so small we had to walk outside, on cement. We weren't allowed to wear shoes. In the heat of July when the sun is beaming down the cement is like a wok cooking your feet. So everyone's feet were red. Perhaps the Americans don't know, the Chinese eat duck feet and they have a saying that the duck feet taste best when fried with extremely hot oil; all the blood rushes to the feet. So imagine, our feet were extremely hot from putting them on this cement. But that's not all, because what follows slow walking meditation is fast walking, on this cement with little sharp pebbles like walking on spikes. Shifu led us with his shoes on, doing very fast walking and we were supposed to chase after him. Because he was so tall his one step was equal to my three steps. So I had to walk fast in excruciating pain. The first round, the pebbles would get stuck in the soles of the feet and you couldn't stop, because if you stopped he'd smack you. So the sharp concrete pieces would dig deeper and deeper into the soles. By the end of the fast walking your feet would be bloody and bruised. This was how it was, day in and day out.

By the fourth day, after the meditation sitting period would end I would not dare to move. Not because I was sitting well, but because if I moved one inch all the pain would come

out in a rush. Sometimes I had to move because this was my only chance to go to the bathroom or relax. But as soon as I would put myself out of the lotus position the pain was so excruciating that I felt like I would faint. I dared not massage the leg muscles because just to touch them would be painful.

But the break was very short. I had to get from here to the bathroom and most times I simply couldn't get up to walk. So I would typically crawl to the bathroom. When I got closer the feelings would come back to my leg and I'd stand up and walk to the bathroom. At that time no one was allowed to lie down during the day, or you would be hit. You couldn't sit down on the sofa or the chairs. So people would lean against the wall for a short while. If you were extremely tired you did prostrations.

The Most Difficult Training Days in My Life

Such suffering is not meaningless even for those people who have very little understanding of Buddhist teaching. There would be 10 or 20 people on the retreat and no matter what experience they'd had or lacked, by the fifth day people would reach a very good state where they could really get into the practice despite the pain, the bruises, and the very harsh environment.

Speaking of the environment, July in Taiwan and China is the month when people perform funeral ceremonies. The ceremonies are usually not environmentally friendly, to say the least, very loud in our neighborhood. They would have professional wailing over loudspeakers, and a host of different opera chant-



ing, these kinds of folkloric traditions, popular religion mixed in with Buddhist practices. It's hot inside and you have to hear all these noisy clanging chanting rituals. It's like a living hell. Those days were the most difficult training days in my life. More memorable than anything else I have experienced, worse than the tumor in the back of my neck which caused half of my body to be paralyzed. I had to use a stick to hit myself and get sensations back; this is how I used to treat myself with this paralysis. Worse than anything that I've experienced.

Yet, towards the end of the retreat everyone would be able to deepen their practice. Their body and mind, all of the karmic obstacles, the patterned habits, all of them would be dissolved. What would be left was the ability to really get into using the method very well. Typically in those old days one third of

the practitioners would have some experience by the end of the retreat. They would either know how to use the method very well or would have had some insight.

Dissolving Obstructions

So those were the good old days. The point is, it is through challenges in practice that we can build a very solid foundation for the future. My very presence here as retreat master is due to how I was trained. So even though at that time it was extremely difficult, it is something that I'm extremely grateful for, Shifu's teaching and his kindness in training his disciples. Back then there was basically one disciple, me. I had to go into the retreat (even though I tried to escape on several occasions) because he needed assistance for all the lay people present. So there was no way

around it. At that time I resisted but Shifu's compassion had aroused the little compassion that I have. So I would always end up doing a retreat with him, assisting him and following his footsteps; those training days were the best. I use this story to encourage all of you here. The conditions here are actually quite favorably conducive. The difficulties that you encounter, you should not see them as being that hard.

I remember one summer we had four consecutive seven-day retreats. It was extremely difficult, particularly for me because of the tumor on the back of my neck. I said before, half of my body was paralyzed, I had no feeling and my blood circulation was extremely bad. For me those retreats had an extra level of suffering. I couldn't sit very well, so I would always have a lot of difficulty with sitting meditation. Until one night I felt excruciating pain rising from the legs; a wave of heat, energy or qi rising up from the lower tan t'ien. When it went past my heart I could hear my heartbeat, fast, like a machine gun. I felt like dying. Because I didn't know what was going on, I had a fear of what was about to happen. Then I thought of Shifu's words. He said that this skin bag of ours is nothing worth cherishing. Better to die while practicing than die when you're not.

Shifu was sitting next to me. I thought, if I was going to die, at least he's going to take care of me. At least I would die practicing. So I just let it happen. Sure enough, when it went to my head I actually heard a popping sound and the heat and the pain went all the way to the crown of my head. When it reached there all of a sudden I had feeling on the right side of my face. I felt warmth that kind of welled up and came down the two sides of my body,

enveloping me. At that moment all the blockages, the channels opened up and I had no more pain.

Transformed By the Unified State

Ever since then I was able to sit continuously for two or three periods; mind you that these periods were quite long. We are talking about three or four hours and it would feel like five minutes without much difficulty. Not only during seated meditation—the experience of walking meditation completely changed as well. The ground felt agitating and painful before; now during fast walking it was like stepping on cotton. The pebbles were not jabbing but merely stuck to one's soles. As for the sun, it was still beaming hot, but the subjective experience was as if a cloud was above you protecting you from the heat. In such a state of samadhi, even in motion all difficulties are transformed. The body is no longer agitated. On the contrary it is quite stable and at ease. The sounds one hears, it's as if celestial maidens create a beautiful kind of music. The body, which had seemed a stinking flesh bag causing impediments to practice, is unified.

Before experiencing the unified state you might feel a kind of pleasantness in seeing the distant mountains and forest, but still these scenes are something outside of you. After the experience of the unified state, all of these scenes become so intimate with you, even a blade of grass or a leaf. The life you experience is connected with the life of the leaf—dynamic, intimate, as if finding a close friend that you have not seen for thousands of years. Immediately recognizing it and becoming so close that you are one with this

piece of leaf, breathing, alive. Without words or language, there is communication and interaction.

All the difficulties in practice are actually opportunities to grind away our habits, refining our practice. If we can bear to go through it, then we can actually transform these difficulties into favorable conditions. Such is the life of the practitioner. Without experiencing difficulties, it is very difficult to advance.

Wouldn't you like to experience this transformed life? Do you have confidence that you too can experience this? To practitioners what I've described is actually a very shallow beginning state in the long course of transforming the body and mind. However for ordinary people it is indeed a pity because they do not know how to experience the mysteries of existence, the full potential that lies within the body and mind, the meaning of life. Only through practice, using methods and overcoming difficulties, will a practitioner experience this.

Illusory Pleasure

For most people the happiness of life comes from satiating the desires of the senses. These kinds of pleasurable experiences are extremely shallow; moreover they are illusory. These people do not know the profundity of the body and mind—the potential to transform and reveal the true depth of a life that is transcendent, purified from desire, reaching a state of unification and true harmony. This is quite pitiable, that ordinary people don't practice but instead are pulled left and right by their own insatiable desires.

As for all of you, on the one hand I feel that I must enforce hardship on you. On the other hand I feel sympathy at creating difficulties for you guys. So starting tomorrow the evening Dharma talk will be held in the dining hall, so you can at least sit down on chairs to listen. Maybe you will feel a little bit better. In the old days when Shifu used to give Dharma talks, that used to be the happiest time during the retreat. We had good Buddhadharmas to listen to and enjoy, and we didn't have to sit in the meditation posture. So tomorrow you will sit in the dining hall for the evening Dharma talk.

What is Wu?

In the early years Shifu taught many different types of huatou: *Who is dragging this corpse around?*, *Who is reciting the Buddha's name?*, *What is my original face before my parents gave birth to me?* etc. Sometimes we may feel more of an affinity with, and think that we can derive power from, some other huatou. In fact what is actually happening is that you have some psychological association or emotional attachment with these critical questions. You feel a flavor when using these other huatou, but actually you're engaging in subtle discursive thoughts and generating different tones of emotions. This leads you nowhere because you are involved in the discriminating mind.

The best huatou is one that offers nothing for your reasoning mind to hold onto. The simpler, the better, so that when you use the huatou there's no further elaboration. *What is Wu?* (meaning "no" or "nothingness") is the best example of this kind of huatou. It is short, concise, condensed, and impenetrable.

For this reason Shifu decided to encourage practitioners to use this particular huatou, asking *What is Wu?*

But when bringing forth the huatou, after some time questioning it, you may feel bored precisely because there is no handle for you to hold on to. Or you may feel there is no flavor. But it is precisely these moments when you should continue to bring forth the huatou.

First Stage: Reciting the Huatou

The first stage is reciting the huatou. In Chinese the word “recite” has the connotation of threading and binding together. What is actually meant here is not merely your mouth or your mind repeating *What is Wu What is Wu What is Wu*. Rather it is a kind of identification—binding your whole being together with this critical phrase. This is the meaning of reciting the huatou.

For now, when using the huatou in this first stage, the single most important thing is for you to continuously bring to mind this question: *What is Wu?* Even though during walking meditation the supervisor or monitor may ask you some other questions, essentially the flavor of the questioning is the same. If you can thoroughly understand this huatou you will be able to respond to their questioning. So for you it doesn't matter what they ask. Do not be led astray, but return to your huatou, *What is Wu?*

This first stage is a kind of threading together your whole being with the huatou, establishing an inseparable bond so that not even for an instant are you away from the huatou. The Buddhist sutras say that when one is prac-

ting one should not allow the five desires stemming from the five sense organs to arise even for an instant. Moment to moment, it doesn't matter what activity you are engaged in, the huatou is always with you. This is the true meaning of reciting the huatou.

In the Surangama Sutra, the chapter on the bodhisattva of strength Mahasthamaprapta's method of perfect penetration talks about how to truly recite the Buddha's name. The bodhisattva gives the metaphor of a mother longing for her child, and the child longing for its mother. The maternal instinct of wanting to be with one's child is quite natural. We can use this analogy for reciting the huatou. This is how one should use the method—holding onto the huatou dearly so you don't lose it.



In this analogy the child is the method, very much dependent on the mother. But not only do you have a longing for this *What is Wu?* feeling inseparable from it like your own flesh, the method also has the same kind of dependency on you. You are part of the huatou and the huatou is integrated with you. So this is what it means to recite the huatou.

Stage 2: Questioning the Huatou

When you are reciting the huatou you have to couple with the next stage, which is questioning the huatou. Even while you are reciting, being inseparable from the huatou, you are generating a sense of questioning, of wonderment: *What is Wu? What could it be? Why is it that emptiness or nothingness is supposedly the ultimate truth? Why is it that I do not know?* This urgent need to know must be present. You must exert all of your efforts into this questioning. In this process all sorts of answers will come out, despite the fact that you're not allowed to entertain logical thinking or reason it out.

Allow all of the answers, the different experiences, to exhaust themselves. Allow your body and mind to also exhaust themselves, until you reach a place where living is not an option, dying is also not an option. Not knowing how to advance or retreat, not knowing how to continue to live, let alone how to die. Putting yourself in a situation where mountains and rivers have exhausted themselves, you're at the very threshold of living. All of your wit, all your resources are gone. You're fatigued, you have not penetrated it. The urgency continues on and yet you don't know what to do. Sometimes you may go through states of complete oblivion. Oblivious to the

external environment, oblivious to states of your body and mind, there's only this irresolvable, impenetrable problem: *What is Wu?*

Stage 3: Investigating the Huatou

When you reach a point where you have exhausted your whole being, faced with this impenetrable question, oblivious to everything, engulfed by this sense of wonderment, this sense of not knowing, *then* you have reached the stage of investigating the huatou. Walking, sitting, lying, standing, you actually don't know where you are. There is only this impenetrable doubt of wanting to know what is this *Wu?* It can be wordless but the flavor is present.

So, reciting the huatou does not mean that you rest in that state, being stagnant. If you are merely being one with the huatou, you can achieve that by counting the breath, or following the breath, or doing methods of clarity in the process of cultivating Silent Illumination. Simultaneously as you are reciting you must generate and nurture a sense of wonderment, a sense of wanting to know and not knowing.

Now as for the subtle shifts and turns of using the questioning stage to reach the stage of investigating the huatou, this is a topic that will be discussed tomorrow. Most people have not gone through these stages so they are unclear as to the psycho-physiological reactions that can arise when practicing the huatou method. Only those people who have experienced it will know clearly the different changing states of body and mind in the course of investigating the huatou. We will go into that tomorrow; tonight we will end here.

The Past

News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide



Venerable Jen Chun 1919-2011

Ven. Jen Chun, founder of Bodhi Monastery and the Yin Shun Foundation, former president of the Buddhist Association of the United States, and longtime Dharma friend and associate of Chan Master Sheng Yen, passed away in Taiwan on February 9. He was 91.

Ven. Jen Chun became a novice monk at the age of seven. In 1949 he left the mainland for Hong Kong and became the student of Master Yinshun, author of *The Way to Bud-*

dhahood and one of the leading Buddhist scholar-monks of the twentieth century. The Venerable moved to New York in 1973 where he was invited to become Abbot of the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, where Master Sheng Yen first taught when he arrived in New York in 1975.

Buffe Laffey, Associate Editor of Chan Magazine and an early student of Master Sheng Yen, remembers: *I met Ven. Jen Chun in the early days of our training at the Temple of Great Enlightenment. His demeanor had that aura of deep and settled practice, just like Master Sheng Yen (Shifu). It was clear that Shifu had great respect for him; between the two of them we had excellent role models. We students didn't speak with him often, but he was very aware of us. One day Shifu told me that Ven. Jen Chun had noticed some of us doing volunteer work at the temple, moving things up and down the stairs. He had asked Shifu, "Are those your students? They work very quietly." And Shifu had proudly told him, "All my students are quiet." Of course I was swelled with pride to have made my teacher proud. I hadn't thought about quietness being a virtue, but from that moment on I became very mindful of being gentle and quiet in my actions. To this day, whenever I am aware of moving quietly, I remember having impressed Ven. Jen Chun.*

Dharmapala Annual Meeting 2010

Dharmapala North America held its annual meeting from October 28-31, 2010 at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in upstate New York. Dharmapala is the association of Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association (DDMBA) chapters in North America; the word Dharmapala means “Dharma Protector”. At the meeting three new DDMBA chapter presidents were announced: Carol Fong in New York, Panqing He in Seattle, and Susan Lincke of Chicago (a milestone, Susan Lincke is the first westerner to be elected chapter president.) Alan Chang was introduced as the newly appointed President of Dharmapala North America.

DDMBA's membership base in North America has grown significantly over the years, thanks to devoted efforts by followers at various chapters and branches. From 1992-2007 each chapter had its own version of bylaws, and this worked because the organizations used to be small, where a few people could meet and talk in person. Now that membership is growing into the thousands, more structured



DDRC Abbot Ven. Guo Xing and
DDM Abbot President Guo Dong

rules are needed. To this end, a committee of Dharmapala advisors and officers worked for more than a year to produce a new standardized version of its bylaws, and will now go on to produce a set of standard operation guidelines. Similarly, an urgent task that now faces the Dharmapala is to come to consensus on a systematic “roadmap” of training to be followed at all chapters. Thus the primary topic of this year's Annual Meeting was: “Followers' Education: How to Continue the Legacy of Shifu's Teaching”.

In his opening speech the Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong urged us to generate collective strength and unity, to display the great life force that comes from what Shifu has established, and to repay Shifu's kindness by sharing the Dharma. Venerable Guo Jian (Director of DDM Sangha International Development Department) reminded us of Shifu's direction for spreading Chan to the world, with programs that are youth-based and informational. The members divided into several groups and used “world café” conversational processes to analyze the needs and propose solutions, with these words of Shifu for guidance:

If you are not asked for an opinion, don't give an opinion.

If you are asked for an opinion, be sure to give an opinion.

Don't expect people to agree with you.

Here in the US there are not enough monastics available to teach at the many DDMBA chapters more than once or twice a year. The chapters need timekeeper training to facilitate their weekly sitting groups. They need people who can teach beginner's meditation and give Dharma lectures. Anticipating this

need, in the late 1990's Shifu invited several of his senior lay disciples to undertake a formal training program (Dharma Teachers in Training – DTT's) to become certified as meditation instructors and Dharma lecturers. Dr. Jimmy Yu took over this program from 2003-2008, and it is now led by Venerable Guo Xing. Thanks to this program there are now a handful of lay disciples qualified to teach beginner's meditation classes, give Dharma talks, and even lead short retreats. However, these people are all located on the east coast; there are still not enough to meet the needs of all the chapters.

In each of the various DDMBA chapters across North American there are members who have the heart and the potential to become teachers. They would like to have their own DTT programs. The challenge facing Dharmapala is how to replicate what has already been

done in New York. The original DDTs were hand-picked by Shifu and had studied with him for many years. They were able to meet weekly with Shifu over many months. When Dr. Jimmy Yu took over the program the DDTs attended weekend retreats each month for a year. Some of these retreats focused in depth on a particular meditation method as taught by Shifu; others were open to the public and allowed the DDTs to have hands-on training in retreat assistantship. How can this depth of training be carried out to the various chapters?

In their brainstorming sessions the members came up with some innovative suggestions for overcoming the problem of geography, such as using online interactive training, or mentorship programs. The training path should include what teachers need to learn (train-the-trainer courses) and what teachers



need to teach (a Teacher's Guide). Some training guides already exist in both English and Chinese; there needs to be consensus on the contents to formalize these trainings. There also needs to be consensus on teacher qualifications for certification. By the end of the meeting a new committee was established to examine the suggestions and concerns of the members and develop the training programs. The committee members are Abbot Venerable Guo Xing, Venerable Chang Wen, Venerable Chang Hwa, Gilbert Gutierrez, Jimmy Yu, Rebecca Li and Alan Chang.

Venerable Chang Hwa spent eight months planning this meeting. It was well-organized and productive with a good balance of hard work and fun. For icebreaking activities there were improvisational exercises which had everyone laughing and feeling connected. There were musical performances, including traditional Chinese dance. In one very moving presentation, the video of Shifu as the "Old Drummer" was played, and Shifu's drumming at the end of the film segued into real drumming by Dharmapala members, a beautiful symbol of carrying on Shifu's legacy. There was a beautiful ceremony where lay followers lit their candles from the flames of monastic's candles, then all circumambulated to the Ancestor Hall, made a personal vow before Shifu's photo, and then returned to set their candles on the Buddha Altar.

In his closing remarks the Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong thanked the group for their spirit of coming together to build on the past to continue the systematic approach established by Shifu. He urged us to take our time, walking step-by-step, steadily and sincerely. He said, "We are not in the shadow of Shifu; we are Shifu's shadow."

Wedding Vows

On January 15, 75 couples gathered at the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education to exchange wedding vows and commit to raising families on Buddhist principles. The couples made their vows before the Buddha statues and in the presence of more than one hundred family members and friends, including the Venerable Guo Dong, who presided over a Refuge-Taking ceremony prior to the wedding rites.

Venerable Guo Dong said that, having taken their vows, each couple should strive to live a happy married life as a Buddhist family and follow the Dharma teachings to cultivate inner wisdom. He also counseled them to use the Dharma as a guide to resolve conflicts and problems in their daily lives.

The late Venerable Master Sheng Yen once said, "Building a pure land on earth starts with building a happy Buddhist family." Since 1995, 824 couples have tied the knot at the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education.

Baoyun Monastery Groundbreaking

On January 9 a groundbreaking ceremony for Baoyun Monastery was held, attended by Venerable Guo Dong and Mr. Jason Hu, Mayor of Taichung.

Venerable Guo Dong thanked the government and community of Taichung for their strong support for the project, noting that the decision to rebuild the existing Taichung Monastery into the new Baoyun Monastery supports a vision of offering professional services and better programs for the citizens of Taichung. "In the future, Baoyun Monastery will con-

tinue to focus on educating the public in the areas of Chan meditation, the Six Ethics of the Mind and Spiritual Environmentalism," he concluded.

Mayor Hu voiced his sentiment that the new monastery will be a "pure land" for Taichung, enabling the people of central Taiwan to get a taste of Dharma while learning to purify the mind.

After the groundbreaking, volunteers slowly circled the City Hall carrying three Buddha statues to convey blessings to the city of Taichung. The event ended with a Refuge-Taking ceremony, where over five hundred people took refuge in the three jewels.

The inauguration of Baoyun Monastery is scheduled to take place in three years.

A Moveable Feast

Starting on December 11 at Nung Chan Monastery, a series of celebrations began to unfold at monasteries across Taiwan for over a month of festivities, primarily devoted to recipients of DDM's long-term charitable care and assistance. At most parties a film was shown of Master Sheng Yen, followed by the 8-form moving meditation and the chanting of sutras. Each event concluded with a distribution of "Care Packages" consisting of staples such as rice, salt and cooking oil for needy families, as well as some financial assistance for registered recipients.

Next it was the turn of Zhaiming Monastery on December 25, serving the districts of Daxi, Zhongli and Xinchu. Over 1,000 people showed up for the celebration, where the theme was the Six Ethics of the Mind. Then on

January 2, the Nantou County Peace of Mind Relief Station threw a party for the people of Tsaotun, Zhongliao and Mingjian, which was attended by more than two hundred people. Finally, on January 23, Ziyun Monastery in Kaohsiung City stepped up with a party for more than 130 registered recipients of assistance. In all, more than 2,800 needy and elderly people who live alone benefited from the celebrations.

The annual event has been a longstanding holiday tradition of DDM, carried out in collaboration with government departments and with the help of volunteers.

Disaster Relief Follow-up

New Ambulance in Sri Lanka

Last October 29, SWCF dispatched its ninth medical team to Sri Lanka, still working in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The 29-member team spent 14 days in the northern districts of Kaddaiddaiparichchan, Paddalipuram and Polonaruwa. In addition, the team donated an ambulance to Ambalantota Hospital to improve medical care in the area.

Financial Aid in Indonesia

SWCF has given scholarship assistance for two years to 41 needy students in Aceh Province, where continuing efforts are underway to recover from the 2004 Tsunami. This follows the completion of SWCF's 5-year relief plan in the region, which has included the construction of orphanages, school campuses, activity centers and kindergartens. The 6-member relief team inaugurating the scholarship program in November also sponsored gatherings to introduce Spiritual Environmentalism at

local orphanages and schools, with the help of local volunteers.

New Housing in Taiwan

On January 10, SWCF broke ground on new permanent housing units for people left homeless by flooding in August of 2009 in Zhan-gu, Huashan, and Kuken in central Taiwan's Yunlin County.

Children's Camp in Taiwan

On December 11th and 12th, volunteers from Dharma Drum Mountain Social Welfare and Charity Foundation (SWCF) hosted a two-day Camp at Xialin Primary School in Miaoli County. 36 students and their parents signed up for the event, aimed at providing 2009 flood victims with a range of challenging and fun activities, including tree climbing, outdoor cooking and kite flying. They also visited Baoyun Monastery in Taichung, where they were cordially welcomed by Abbot Venerable Guo Yun and introduced to Buddhist etiquette and Spiritual Environmentalism.

Celebration of Spiritual Environmentalism in Szechuan

Since the 2008 earthquake that leveled remote areas in China's Szechuan Province, SWCF has conducted extensive relief efforts in the region. In early December Minxin High School in Xiushi Township was the site of the first "Week of Spiritual Environmentalism and Art." Programs included painting, Chinese calligraphy and writing, making use of "108 Adages – the Wisdom of Venerable Master Sheng Yen," as a source of inspiration. Students were encouraged to enter competitions, and prizes were awarded to 126 of the

1290 participants. On the evening of December 9, students gathered around a campfire on the athletic field to sing, dance and write down words of gratitude on blank posters to express their appreciation for SWCF's ongoing efforts to help.



Master Sheng Yen circa 1979

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

Website: 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

Three-Day Young People's Retreat

Led by Chang Wen Fashi

Friday - Sunday, April 8 - 10

One-Day Retreats

Saturdays, April 16; May 14; June 11

Ten-Day Intensive Silent Illumination Retreat

Led by Abbot Guo Xing Fashi

Friday - Sunday, May 20 - 29

Ten-Day Intensive Huatou Retreat

Led by Abbot Guo Xing Fashi

Friday - Sunday, June 17 - 26

Ten-Day Intensive Chan Retreat

Led by Chi Chern Fashi, Dharma heir of
Chan Master Sheng Yen

Friday - Sunday, July 15 - 24

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.

Free Special Events

Gardening Weekend

Led by DDRC Residents

Saturday - Sunday, April 23 - 24

Hiking Trip

Led by DDRC Residents

Saturday, May 21

Chan Meditation Center Elmhurst, Queens, NY

Phone: (718) 592-6593
E-mail: ddmbaus@yahoo.com
Websites: www.chancenter.org,
www.ddmba.org

Retreats

Monthly One-Day Retreats

Last Saturday of each month: April 30; May 28; June 25, 9 am - 5 pm (8:45 arrival) \$25

Classes

Beginner's Meditation, Parts 1 and 2

Saturdays, April 9 & 16, 9:30 am - noon: \$40

Intermediate Meditation

Saturday, April 23, 9:30 am - 3: \$40

Saturday Night Movie and Mind

Saturdays, Apr 9, May 14, 6:30 - 9 pm

Led by Lindley Hanlon

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

(Check website for film titles)

(Pre-registration advised for all classes.)

Regular Weekly Activities

Monday Night Chanting

7:30 - 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, walking meditation, Dharma discussions, 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 am - 11 am: Meditation

11 am - 12:30 pm: Dharma lectures

12:30 - 1 pm: Lunch offerings

1 - 2 pm: Vegetarian lunch

2 - 4 pm: Chanting and recitation

1st Sunday: Chanting Guan Yin's name

2nd Sunday: Great Compassion Repentance

3rd Sunday: Bodhisattva Earth Store Sutra

Last Sunday: Renewal of the Bodhisattva

Precept Vows

(Please note: If there are five Sundays in the month, there will be chanting of Guan Yin's name on the 4th Sunday.)

On the 2nd and 4th Sundays, 1:45 - 3, an English-language Dharma Study Group will be conducted by Dharma teachers-in-training

Special Events

Recitation of Earth Store (Ksitigarbha)

Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows

Saturday, April 2, 9:30 am - 4 pm

Buddha's Birthday Celebration

Sunday, May 15

Chanting, bathing of the baby Buddha, Dharma talk, vegetarian feast, entertainment

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.

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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

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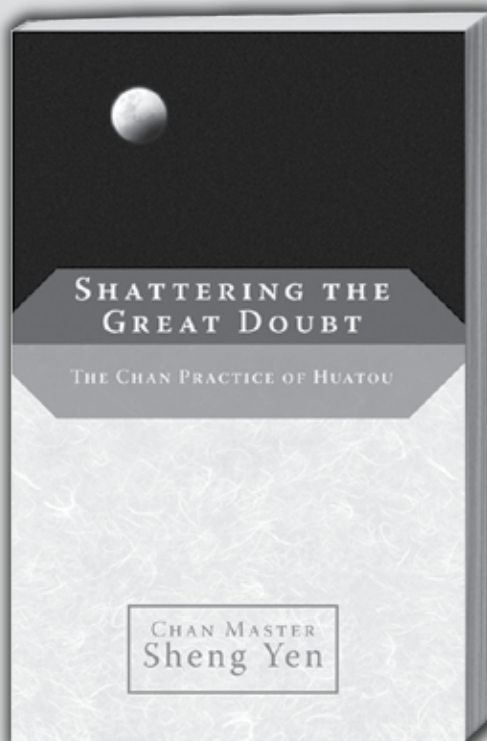
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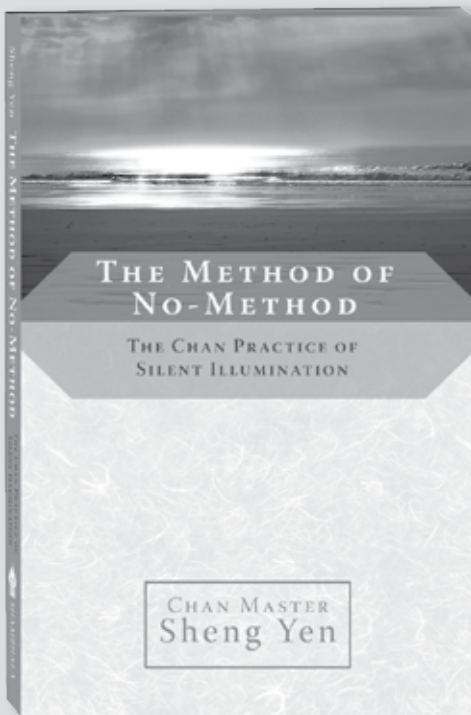
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